### Chapter 1 — The Fox in the Vault (Valentina POV)

I press my gloved palm against the cold glass plate of the biometric scanner, willing my racing heart to slow. A thin beam of red light sweeps over my iris, and I hold perfectly still. Dual palm and iris scan, just like the intel said. The machine hums, parsing my counterfeit credentials. Twenty-nine… twenty-eight… The timer in my head counts down the silent alarm buffer: thirty seconds of grace before every covert sensor in this underground vault knows I don’t belong.

A soft chime. Access granted. I exhale, watching the reinforced steel door slide open with a whisper. The air that greets me is dry and cool, tinged with the scent of money and marble polish. My pulse thuds in my ears as I step inside, careful and quiet. Black marble floors reflect the dim security lights, and my silhouette ripples across the glossy surface like a phantom. I allow myself one quick breath of triumph — La Volpe is in.

Rows of safety-deposit boxes stretch out before me, each one a potential treasure trove. But I have only one target tonight. My boots make no sound on the polished floor as I slip between the aisles, counting off numbers engraved in brass. 308… 309… 310. I kneel before box 312, the one I paid dearly to pinpoint. It likely holds the bearer bonds siphoned from my family’s accounts, or documents tying the Morettis to our ruin. Maybe both. My hands are steady as I retrieve the slim electronic lockpick from my belt.

The device hooks into the keypad, spoofing the code in seconds. With a soft click, the small metal door pops open. Inside the narrow compartment sits a leather folio tied with a red ribbon. My throat tightens at the sight. If this contains what I suspect — financial records, deeds, maybe even dirt on the Moretti empire — it’s leverage. Leverage I desperately need.

My father’s life, our freedom, hides behind those pages. I picture Papa’s gaunt face, the hospital bills piling up, the creditors circling like vultures. This folio could be the key to paying them off, to giving him proper care. No more running. No more half-legal restoration jobs barely keeping us afloat. After tonight, the Rossi family might finally have a bargaining chip.

Carefully, I lift the folio out and tuck it into my waterproof pack. Adrenaline whispers that I should hurry, but I force myself to remain methodical. If I rush and trigger something now, it’s all over. A Fox must be sly and controlled, even on the cusp of victory.

I ease the box shut and stand, pulling the pack’s strap securely across my chest. The silent alarm buffer must be nearly up. My window is closing. It’s time to vanish.

Crack.

A sudden noise — loud as a gunshot in the tomb-quiet vault — shatters the hush. I freeze, heart slamming into my ribs. That sounded like… the vault door re-engaging.

I whirl around. The corridor I came from is now sealed by a wall of steel. The vault has locked down.

A chill races up my spine. No. I was so careful. I disabled the alarms… didn’t I? Unless—

Slow, deliberate footfalls echo behind me. I spin toward the sound, instinct wrenching my hand to the small pistol at my thigh. But before I can draw, a low voice scrapes through the darkness.

“Leaving so soon, Volpe?”

That voice — smooth, rich with quiet menace — is impossible to mistake. My stomach plummets even as anger flares hot in my chest. From the shadows between the tall vault shelves steps Dante Moretti, and my every muscle tenses on reflex.

He’s cut from the same darkness that surrounds us, all bespoke black suit and coiled control. A faint gleam catches the sharp line of his jaw as he moves into a pool of pale light. Those famed steel-blue eyes find me, pinning me in place. In his hand hangs an object that glints — a gun, a custom pistol by the look of it, held easy at his side. The source of the gun-oil tang now threading the air.

Blood roars in my ears. I swallow hard, refusing to show the sudden tremor in my chest. If the Principe himself is here, I’ve walked straight into a trap.

I force a cold, cocky smile and lift my chin. “Fancy meeting you here,” I say lightly, masking my dread with bravado. My voice echoes off marble and steel. “Don’t you have better things to do on a Friday night than lurk in vaults, Mr. Moretti?”

His lips curve — not a smile, more a bearing of teeth. “Funny. I could ask the same of you… Miss Rossi.”

A bolt of shock nearly cracks my composure. He isn’t using my alias; he knows my name. Somehow, Dante Moretti has unmasked La Volpe without so much as batting an eye.

My fingers flex at my side, itching closer to my pistol. My mind races through contingencies. He’s alone as far as I can see — no guards visible behind him. But Dante Moretti doesn’t need an entourage to be dangerous. He is danger.

“You must be mistaken,” I drawl, feigning boredom even as my pulse spikes. “I’m afraid you have me confused with someone else.”

He steps closer, Italian leather shoes ghosting over the black marble. The vault’s dim light plays over his broad shoulders, the crisp cut of his suit. I catch a whisper of his scent — something expensive, Chanel Bleu mingled with a darker note of smoked spice. He smells like money and midnight. “I don’t think so,” he murmurs. “No one else has that particular gaze… fox-gray, isn’t it?”

Damn him. Even in near-dark, he picked out the color of my eyes — an unusual shade I once loved, now a liability. So much for my colored contacts plan; Dante clearly came prepared.

I let out a little laugh, edging one step back while keeping him talking. “You certainly did your homework. Should I be flattered, Principe, that you’ve been studying my eyes?” My free hand slides behind me, finger searching for the panic button on my belt — a last resort that would trigger all the alarms at once. If I’m caught, I might as well bring the whole place down and force a messy rescue by Interpol. At least they would arrest me, not execute me.

His gaze drops to note my subtle movement. “I wouldn’t,” Dante says softly. His gun hand lifts, not quite aiming at me, but ready. “That button you’re reaching for… did you think Zürich’s finest would rush in to save an art thief? By the time they arrive, we’ll both be long gone.”

His confidence is unshakeable. The bastard is right; I have no good options here. I grit my teeth. “So what now? You going to shoot me, steal back your little folder of secrets?” My words drip contempt to cover my unease. If he knows who I am and came alone, he has a plan beyond just stopping this theft.

Dante’s eyes flick to the pack slung at my side, and his expression hardens. “Hand it over.”

I curl my fingers tighter around the strap. “Not a chance.” If he wants it, it must hold something truly valuable — more than just money. A bargaining chip. And damned if I’ll just surrender after everything.

In a blink, his composure chills to something lethal. “Valentina,” he warns, voice low. “Don’t test me.”

I swallow. This standoff can’t last. My mind catalogues possibilities, each more desperate than the last. He’s armed; I am too, but if we fire in here, we risk blowing the nitrogen lines or triggering a lethal lockdown. Not to mention he’s likely a better shot.

Maybe… maybe I can use the folio itself. I slide it halfway from my pack. “You want this?” I taunt. “Then you know I have leverage. Perhaps we can make a trade. I walk out of here alive, and you—”

He moves like lightning. Before I can react, Dante lunges forward and knocks my pistol from its holster with a sharp strike. The weapon skitters across the floor. I gasp, swinging the folio at him as a distraction. He twists aside; the heavy leather barely grazes his shoulder.

Strong fingers clamp around my wrist — the one holding the folio — and force it upwards. Pain lances down my arm, making me yelp and release the folio. It falls to the floor between us. In the same breath, Dante pivots, using his leverage on my arm to spin me around. My chest hits the cool metal door of a vault cabinet as he pins me there, arm wrenched behind my back.

I snarl, kicking back with all my might. My heel glances off his shin, not enough to faze him. He presses in, using his weight to immobilize me. I feel the solid wall of his chest against my back and a faint tremor rolls through me — a mix of fury and something else I refuse to name.

“Get off—!” I grit, struggling. But his grip only tightens. His breath is warm at my ear.

“Do you yield?” Dante’s voice is silk over steel, completely in control.

A hot spark of humiliation flares in me. I blink sweat from my eyes, my cheek crushed against metal. Yield? Like hell. My free hand claws at the cabinet, scrabbling for anything — a pen, a loose piece of metal — anything to turn on him. My fingertips brush something small and hard: a broken shard from the lock mechanism I tampered with earlier.

My muscles coil. I snatch the shard and jab backward wildly.

His curse is sharp. Dante releases me abruptly, jerking away an instant before the jagged shard would have sliced his cheek. I spin around, chest heaving. For one charged moment we face each other — both breathing hard, our combined heat warming the cold air. His gun is still in his left hand; my makeshift blade in my right. Blood pounds in my skull.

Dante lifts a hand to his face, checking for injury. I see a thin line beading red just below his right cheekbone. I actually nicked him. Satisfaction surges through me. Not so invincible after all.

He regards the smeared blood on his fingertips with a peculiar expression — more surprise than anger. Then a low chuckle reverberates from his chest. To my astonishment, Dante smiles. A genuine, lupine grin. “Brava, gattina,” he murmurs. “The little fox has claws.”

I blink. That… wasn’t the reaction I expected.

Taking advantage of my surprise, he strikes again. This time he grips both my wrists. In a fluid motion, he spins me away from him, pulling my arms behind me. Before I can twist free, something thin cinches around my wrists, binding them fast. He’s used a zip-tie — one of mine, plucked from my belt.

I thrash, but it’s useless; the more I struggle, the more the plastic digs into my skin. Dante’s chest is at my back again, his breath unsteady now against my hair. “Enough,” he growls. The humor has drained from his tone, leaving only raw command.

I go still, panting. One of his hands remains on my arm; the other braces at my hip, keeping me from pulling away. I’m thoroughly caught. And we both know it.

A beat of silence. My pulse is a wild drum as I stare ahead at the unyielding vault door, trying to ignore the solidity of Dante’s body caging mine. He’s so close I feel the rise and fall of his breathing. Heat rolls off him, a dark counterpoint to the vault’s chill.

He dips his head, voice low near my ear. “If I let you go, will you behave?”

I grit my teeth. The instinct to spit in his face is almost overwhelming. But I force it down. I need to regain some scrap of control here. “Do I have a choice?” I bite off.

His chuckle is a warm rumble at my back. “Not really.”

With a muted click, he holsters his pistol. Then slowly — as if daring me to try something — Dante eases his grip and steps around to face me. I glare daggers up at him, chest still heaving from exertion. He looks infuriatingly composed, only a faint flush on his cheekbones and that thin cut marring his perfection.

My eyes dart to the folio on the floor. He notices. In a swift move, he crouches to retrieve it, then tucks it securely inside his jacket. “I’ll be holding onto that,” he says smoothly.

Damn it. Think, Valentina. There must be something I can use. I test the binds at my wrists — tight. My blade shard lies forgotten on the floor. I’ve got nothing left.

He watches my futile motions, those blue eyes keen. “It’s over,” Dante says, almost gently. “No clever escape this time. No smoke bombs or hidden aces up your sleeve. Just you and me.”

His certainty grates, even if he’s right. “So now what?” I snap. “You drag me to the police? Or maybe just shoot me and save everyone paperwork.”

A crease forms between his dark brows, as if the suggestion annoys him. “If I intended to kill you, cara, we wouldn’t be having this conversation.”

The casual tone of his voice makes my skin prickle. He says it like murder is a mundane option he simply chose not to exercise. I lift my chin, mustering defiance. “Then what do you intend? Perhaps a twisted sense of chivalry — going to ‘rescue’ the poor little thief from the authorities only to lock her up yourself? How gallant.”

Dante’s gaze flickers, a spark of something like amusement in those icy eyes. “Not quite.” He steps closer, looming over me. I refuse to back away, even as my heart rattles in my chest.

“You have something I want, Valentina,” he says softly. “And now I have you.” His fingers reach out to brush a stray lock of hair from my cheek. The gesture is strangely intimate; I flinch at the unexpected gentleness of it. “That puts me in a very... advantageous position, wouldn’t you agree?”

I hold his stare, refusing to let him see the sudden hitch in my breath. He’s entirely too close — the warmth of his body, the subtle spice of his cologne wrapping around my senses. My back is literally against a vault; I can’t retreat. All I can do is fight with words. “The position might be advantageous,” I say through a tight smile, “if you didn’t still need me alive. Which means, in a way, I have you too.”

Dante’s brows lift a fraction. Then he laughs — a quiet, genuine sound of appreciation. “Touché.”

It’s a small victory, but I’ll take it. My mind whirls. He hasn’t summoned any guards, and he’s not calling the cops. Whatever he wants from me, it’s not simply revenge for the break-in. He needs me for something.

We stand there locked in a silent battle of wills. Finally, he breaks the silence. “Walk out of here with me peacefully,” he says, “and I promise no harm will come to you tonight.”

Tonight. That single word carries a world of implication. I notice he doesn’t promise beyond that.

“And if I refuse?” I counter.

His expression hardens. “Don’t.” A beat, then more softly: “Your father doesn’t have much time, does he?”

Ice floods my veins. “What did you say?”

“I know about Alfonso Rossi’s condition.” Dante’s tone is matter-of-fact, but there’s a quiet undertone there. Not quite sympathy — something else. “The mounting medical debt. The treatments he’s skipping because he can’t afford them.” He pauses, eyes boring into mine. “I know everything, Valentina.”

My throat works, suddenly dry. The fact he rattles off Papa’s struggles so clinically ignites a blaze of fury in my chest — fury and fear, a potent mix. “If you’ve hurt him—”

“I haven’t,” Dante cuts in. “His safety — and yours — entirely depends on what you do next.”

I hate how my eyes burn at his words. Damn it. I won’t cry, not here, not in front of him. “You think you can threaten me into compliance by dangling my father’s life?” My voice quavers despite me. “That’s low, even for a Moretti.”

He inclines his head slightly. “No threat. A fact. I’m in a position to ensure your father gets the care he needs… or to let him wither. The choice is yours.”

My hands clench, nails biting into my palms. He has me trapped in every sense. Still, I have to try one last gambit. “And in exchange?” I hiss. “What enormous favor are you expecting in return for this generosity?”

Dante’s eyes glint. “We’ll discuss that on my turf, not here.” His hand comes up to my elbow, firm but almost courteous. “Time’s up. We’re leaving.”

I glance toward the vault’s exit — the one he locked. As if reading my mind, Dante produces a small keycard from his pocket and scans it over the interior panel. With a heavy thunk, the massive door slides open, revealing the corridor beyond.

He turns back to me, that princely mask of his slipping neatly back into place. “After you.”

I stare at the threshold of the vault, freedom just beyond yet entirely out of reach. If I go with him, I’m marching into the serpent’s den. But if I resist, my father pays the price. Dante has maneuvered me into a corner so tight I can barely breathe.

I square my shoulders. Fine. I’ll play along for now. But I’m no willing captive — and I refuse to act like one. Lifting my chin, I stride forward as regally as I can with bound wrists. Dante’s hand remains at my elbow, guiding but not shoving. It almost feels like an escort. The absurdity isn’t lost on me.

We cross the threshold into a private access corridor. A couple of Dante’s men in dark suits stand waiting, tension rippling off them. They eye me warily, but Dante shakes his head in silent command. They fall in step a short distance behind us as we head to a discreet elevator. Clearly, the Principe came prepared for exfiltration.

My mind churns with questions and futile escape plans. Dante Moretti wants something that involves not killing me outright. That means I might have a chance to turn this situation. For Papa’s sake — and my own — I need to stay sharp. The fox got caught, yes, but this game is far from finished.

We reach the elevator, and Dante presses the call button. I catch our reflection in the polished steel doors: him at my side, tall and composed, one hand still on my arm; me disheveled in black tactical gear, chin lifted in defiance despite the restraints. We look a bizarre pair — predator and prey, except I can’t tell which of us is which right now.

The doors slide open. Dante gently propels me inside. The others remain outside; evidently this ride is for just the two of us. The moment the doors close, sealing us in a mirrored box, I feel his grip on my elbow loosen. In the reflection, our eyes meet. There’s a flicker of something unreadable in his gaze — a shadow of conflict behind the cool dominance.

“You won’t get away with this,” I murmur, more to fill the silence than anything. My voice is a rasp; the adrenaline crash is hitting me.

He tilts his head, regarding me for a moment. “I already have.”

My mouth curves in a reflexive, mirthless smile. “The night’s still young.”

To my surprise, that earns a ghost of a grin from him. “Indeed it is.”

The elevator ascends smoothly. In the quiet, I become acutely aware of my pounding heartbeat and the slight tremor in my limbs. The adrenaline leaves a cold sweat on my skin under the Kevlar weave of my suit. Dante stands a foot away, hands now calmly folded in front of him, as if he didn’t just wrestle me into submission. The cut on his face has stopped bleeding; a single drop of red trails towards the starched white collar of his shirt. I wonder if it stings. Part of me hopes it does.

When the doors open at the top level, a rush of cool night air floods in. We’ve emerged in a private garage beneath some unmarked building. A black sedan idles a few paces away, one of his men at the wheel. Dante guides me out, his hand light at my waist now — probably appearing almost gentlemanly to an outside eye. My bound wrists are hidden by my body from the driver’s view.

He opens the back door of the car for me. How chivalrous. I shoot him a glare, sliding into the leather seat with as much dignity as I can muster. He follows, and the door thuds shut, enclosing us together in the back.

As the sedan pulls out smoothly, gliding into the Zurich night, I stare out the window. Streetlights streak golden across my vision. My mind still races but exhaustion tugs at the edges — it’s been a long night. I realize with a pang of anger that my mission has failed spectacularly. Months of planning, risking everything… and here I am, captured by the very man I aimed to undermine.

I turn to Dante, who’s regarding me quietly in the dim interior. “You still haven’t answered my question,” I say, voice softer now.

He arches a dark brow.

“What now?” I ask, unable to keep the bite from my tone. “You have me. You clearly think you hold all the cards. So tell me what the hell you want, Moretti.”

Dante studies me for a moment, his face unreadable in the passing city lights. Then he reaches into his jacket — I tense, but he only pulls out a silk kerchief. Gently, he takes my chin between his thumb and forefinger. I try to jerk away, but he holds me still as he dabs the sweat and a smudge of dirt from my cheek. The unexpected tenderness of it robs me of breath.

“You’ll know soon enough,” he murmurs, releasing my chin. His voice is almost soothing, which oddly infuriates me more.

I swallow, trying to ignore the warmth lingering on my skin where his fingers touched. I despise the confusing mix of fear and curiosity swirling in my stomach. Dante Moretti has plans for me, that much is clear. And until I understand them, I’ll play the role of captive fox. For now.

Silence falls between us as the car speeds into the darkness. He’s watching me with that steady gaze, and I refuse to look away first. I may be bound and at his mercy, but I’m no broken doll. Let him stare; he’ll see I’m not the one who’s afraid of the dark.

In the glass of the window, I catch our reflection again — his broad shoulders and cool composure beside my slimmer form, chin tipped up in quiet rebellion. To an outsider, we might look like a couple in tense silence after a fight. The thought almost makes me laugh.

If this devil prince thinks he’s tamed the fox, he’s in for a surprise. I flex my wrists against the binding, feeling the bite but also the promise of circulation returning if I twist just right. A slow, defiant smile creeps onto my lips as I finally turn to face him fully.

Dante notices the change in my expression. His eyes narrow slightly, as if wondering what I find amusing given my predicament.

I lean my head back against the seat, smirk never faltering. He may have the upper hand now — but he’s just revealed he needs me alive and compliant, and that is a weakness I can exploit. The game is far from over.

Let him think he’s caught me. In the end, a fox in a snare still has teeth.

And I’m already planning where to sink mine next.

### Chapter 2 — Blood-Ink Bargain (Dante POV)

Midnight has long since passed by the time we reach the villa. The great Moretti estate looms against the darkness, its classical façade lit by discreet floodlights. As I escort Valentina Rossi up the marble steps and through the grand foyer, I feel the tension in her body radiating through the light hold I maintain on her arm. She’s quiet now, eyes darting like a cornered animal taking in every detail.

Can’t blame her. It’s a lot to take in: the vaulted ceilings with frescoed arches, the hush of old money that permeates these halls. She’s likely never been inside the Moretti lakeside villa before, and certainly not as an unwilling guest. Outside, through the tall windows, moonlight dances on the surface of the lake — a million rippling reflections that glimmer like fallen stars. But Valentina’s gaze never strays to the view. No, she’s assessing doors, distances, weighing odds of escape. Ever the cunning little fox.

I suppress a wry smile. Even now, captured and outnumbered in my lair, Valentina’s mind is still working overtime for a way out. I admire that grit. It would be a shame to crush it — fortunately for her, that’s not my aim tonight.

A pair of house guards shadow us at a respectful distance as I lead her down the corridor toward my study. With each step on the polished parquet floor, I replay the chaos of the vault in my head: the flash of her eyes in the dark, the sharp sting on my cheek where she dared to cut me. I feel a thrum of residual adrenaline — and something more dangerous — coil low in my gut at the memory. Dio… even bound and furious, Valentina had looked almost beautiful in her defiance.

I push that thought away as we reach the study doors. This is business. Family business. I must not forget why I set this trap in the first place.

I nod to the guards. “Basta. I take it from here.” They bow out, leaving us alone outside the heavy oak door. Valentina shoots a glance back, likely noting that the men position themselves at the end of the hall. There’ll be no easy way out for her.

Good.

I open the door and gently usher her inside with a guiding hand at the small of her back. The contact is brief, yet I’m acutely aware of the warmth of her body through the fabric of her suit. She stiffens, but steps through.

My study is exactly as I left it — low amber lamps casting a golden glow on mahogany shelves lined with leather-bound volumes. The air carries the faint scents of aged paper, cigar smoke, and a whisper of gun oil from the antique rifle mounted above the hearth. Behind my desk, floor-to-ceiling windows offer a view of the moonlit lake. Tonight the water is calm, reflecting silvery light that plays across the Persian carpet.

Valentina pauses just inside the threshold, her gaze sweeping the room. I see her notice the small details: the decanter of Scotch on the sideboard, the unsorted papers on my desk… and the Rossi dagger lying atop them. Ah. Her eyes lock onto the weapon, widening slightly in recognition.

“Where did you get that?” she asks, voice low and tight.

I close the door with a soft click. “That,” I say, “was acquired from the Rossi estate auction years ago.” I don’t add that I made sure to win that lot personally. The ornate stiletto with its subtle serrated edge had caught my eye even then — a piece of the Rossi legacy, picked from the wreckage of their bankruptcy. At the time, I never expected I’d be using it tonight for this purpose.

Valentina turns to face me fully. Without the harsh vault lighting, she looks younger, almost fragile — a deception, I know. Stray tendrils of her auburn hair have come loose, framing a face that’s a touch too pale now. But her chin is lifted in that proud way I’m coming to know well. “My father would never have sold that,” she says, anger coloring her tone.

“Not by choice, I’m sure,” I reply evenly. “But when creditors come calling…” I spread my hands slightly. We both know how the world works for those who falter.

Her jaw clenches. “So the great Dante Moretti makes a habit of buying scraps from his enemies’ estates?”

“They weren’t enemies then,” I say, stepping past her toward my desk. The dagger catches a glint of lamplight as I pick it up. “And this hardly seemed a scrap to me. More like a trophy.”

At that, Valentina’s gray eyes flash. “Trophy,” she repeats in a near whisper. I hear the barely restrained fury there and something else — hurt, perhaps, that her family’s heirloom is reduced to a war prize for a rival.

I exhale quietly. Maybe that was too cruel. Truth is, I never viewed the Rossis as mere prey. And I don’t see her that way now. If circumstances were different… no. Focus.

I set the dagger down again, just in front of an open document that awaits our signatures. The movement draws Valentina’s attention to the papers for the first time. She steps closer to the desk, her bound hands twitching behind her back.

“What is that?” she asks guardedly. She doesn’t yet see the text, only the blank lines at the bottom and a crimson fountain pen beside them.

“This,” I say, rounding the desk slowly, “is an agreement.”

I sink into the high-backed leather chair on my side, then nod toward the matching chair opposite. “Sit.”

For a moment I think she’ll refuse. But after a taut pause, she crosses the room, chin high, and lowers herself into the chair. The soft glow of the lamp falls on her, illuminating the wariness etched on her face.

I interlace my fingers atop the desk, deliberately casual. “I’m going to remove those restraints now.” I open a drawer and pull out a small pair of scissors. Her shoulders tense but she stays still as I lean forward and cut the zip-tie binding her wrists. The plastic falls away, and she immediately brings her hands to her front, rubbing at the raw red band it left on her skin.

“Grazie,” she mutters, voice dripping sarcasm.

I arch a brow. “You’ll want full mobility to sign a contract, yes?”

She shoots me a dark look and says nothing. But I notice her eyes subtly scanning the desktop — noting the heavy crystal paperweight with a brass acorn encased inside, the pen, the dagger. Calculating if any can be turned into a weapon.

I suppress a humorless smile. “Don’t bother. If you’re thinking of using that”—I nod to the dagger inches from her—“know that I’m faster. And I’d hate to damage such a fine blade.”

Her lip curls. “Of course. Can’t have that.”

She flexes her freed fingers, likely debating bolting for the door. But she must realize there’s no point; the guards outside would intercept her before she made two strides. So, with visible effort, she directs her attention to the papers. “What kind of contract is this?”

I take the fountain pen, twirling it idly between my fingers as I consider her. How to begin? The truth, blunt and simple, perhaps.

“A marriage contract,” I say.

Valentina goes very still. Only her eyes move, flicking from my face to the document, as if expecting a punchline that isn’t coming. “…Excuse me?”

“You heard correctly.” I set the pen down on the paper with a quiet click. “This agreement formalizes an alliance between us — in the form of matrimony.”

For a heartbeat, silence. Then she barks a short laugh of disbelief. “Matrimony. You’ve lost your mind.”

I expected that reaction. I remain composed, folding my hands again. “Hardly. This is a well-considered plan. One that benefits us both.”

Her chair scrapes as she half-rises, leaning forward. “Benefits us? Dante, you are certifiably insane if you think I’m going to marry you because you wave a piece of paper in my face.”

I meet the fire in her gaze with calm. “Perhaps not just because of that. But you will marry me, Valentina.”

She slams her palms on the desk, making the pen rattle. “To hell I will! What is this, some kind of twisted joke? You trap me, drag me here in the middle of the night, and expect me to… to sign my life over?!”

Her voice cracks on the last phrase, betraying the panic beneath her fury. She’s breathing hard, chest heaving. I keep my tone measured, hoping to steady her with reason. “Your life as it currently stands is in shambles,” I say plainly. “Your family name is tarnished, your father’s health is failing, and your finances are, to put it lightly, dire. You need help.”

Valentina’s face drains of color. “And you think marrying you is the solution to all my problems?” she spits out. “In what universe, Moretti?”

“In the universe where we have something to offer each other.” I lean forward slightly. “Your skills. My resources. Together, we can accomplish what neither of us can alone.”

She shakes her head, eyes flashing. “This is unbelievable.” She starts pacing a small line in front of the chair, hands clenching and unclenching. “If you need my skills — whatever that means — you could just hire me, or blackmail me, or a hundred other things. Why marriage?”

A fair question. I stand up slowly, rounding the desk to face her directly. My height forces her to tilt her chin up to maintain eye contact. “Because I need more than just your cooperation, Valentina. I need your loyalty. Real loyalty, bound by blood and oath. Anything less, and I’d be a fool to trust that you won’t turn on me the second it suits you.”

She opens her mouth to retort, then closes it, her throat working. She knows I’ve pinpointed the crux. If I simply coerced her by threat, she’d indeed betray me first chance she got. This way, consequences for betrayal go both ways — at least in theory.

I continue, voice steady. “A blood-oath marriage is an unbreakable pact. If either party violates the terms, the retribution from both families is absolute.” I tap the contract on the desk. “It’s all laid out here. Breach of contract invokes vendetta.”

Valentina’s eyes flick to the parchment, and I can see her processing the severity. When she looks up, there’s open incredulity in her expression. “You Morettis and your medieval vendettas,” she mutters. “Do you seriously expect me to believe your clan will hold you accountable if you screw me over?”

A corner of my mouth lifts. “If I break a sacred oath, I won’t be fit to lead. My father would deal with me harshly, I assure you.” I allow a brief grim note to color my words. Il Serpente doesn’t play favorites, not even with his heir. If I fail this, I lose everything.

Her lips press together. She rubs her wrists, looking down at the carpet. I sense the fight in her is warring with a reluctant realization: I’m deadly serious.

I take another tack, gentling my tone. “You asked why marriage. Here’s another reason: it provides cover. Two adversaries suddenly betrothed — people will assume we’ve resolved our differences. It allows us to move together in public without raising suspicion.”

Valentina lets out a harsh scoff, still not meeting my eyes. “Oh sure, nothing odd at all about the heiress of a ruined family marrying the prince of the clan who helped ruin them. Totally aboveboard.”

My jaw tenses. “It’s not that simple and you know it. We’ll craft a narrative—”

“A narrative,” she repeats bitterly. Now she does look at me, and the hurt there is raw. “All my life turned into what, a PR story to further Moretti interests?”

I feel an unexpected twist of guilt. Perhaps it’s the late hour, but her words strike a nerve. “It’s more than that.” I speak quietly now, weighing each word. “This is also about your father. Marry me, and I vow to settle all of Papa Rossi’s debts. He’ll get the best medical care, round-the-clock. No one will dare threaten him under the Moretti protection.”

I see her breath catch. That hit the mark. She blinks rapidly, turning her back to me. Her hands clench at her sides. When she speaks, her voice is unsteady. “All that… in exchange for what? Being your obedient little wife? Hosting parties and warming your bed while you pull my strings?”

Heat flares in me at the mention of my bed, entirely unbidden. I force it down. “In exchange for your partnership,” I correct. “I don’t need a docile bride. I need an equal accomplice. We have a common goal.”

Valentina gives a derisive snort, but I notice she’s still listening. I step closer behind her, continuing. “The Caravaggio.”

She goes rigid. Slowly, she turns her head, looking at me over her shoulder. “Il Tradimento di Pietro,” she says softly, using the painting’s name. Her brows knit in confusion. “That’s what this is about?”

I incline my head. “You know it is. That lost Caravaggio is worth over €100 million and is key to solidifying control of certain… assets.” I pause. “Assets that should belong to me, but could fall into the wrong hands.”

She faces me fully now. “Silvio.” She spits my cousin’s name like a curse. Clever girl — she’s piecing it together.

“Yes,” I confirm. “My dear cousin would love to get that painting first, to embarrass me and curry favor with our associates. I can’t let that happen. And you, Valentina, have the talent to make sure he doesn’t.”

Her eyes narrow. “You expect me to find it for you? I’m a restorer, not a miracle worker. If it were easy to locate, my father would have done it years ago.”

“Perhaps not find the real one,” I concede. “We have leads, but nothing concrete yet. However, you could create a copy so perfect even experts would laud it as genuine… at least long enough to serve our purposes. A forgery.”

Valentina’s mouth falls slightly open. She stares at me as if seeing me anew. “So that’s it. You want me to forge a Caravaggio,” she says in wonder, then lets out a short laugh. “And you think marriage is the way to convince me to commit the art crime of the century on your behalf?”

I meet her gaze steadily. “Yes. Because I’m offering you something in return that you value more than the law or your pride. Your father’s life, your family’s legacy restored. And protection — not only from my enemies, but from your own past mistakes.”

Her nostrils flare. “My past mistakes?”

I step even closer, lowering my voice. “Do you think Interpol will turn a blind eye forever, La Volpe? Inspector Novak is already sniffing at your heels. A Moretti marriage gives you a shield. Diplomatic protections, new identity paperwork… you’d be untouchable in a way no thief ever is.”

I can almost hear her racing heartbeat in the silence that follows. She swallows, looking away to the window. The moon’s reflection casts ghostly patterns across her face. She’s teetering on the edge. Time to tip her over, one way or the other.

I move to the desk, laying a hand on the contract. “In short, Valentina, this is a bargain. One you know is fair. Your skills and cooperation, in exchange for your father’s wellbeing, your family’s redemption, and quite possibly, wealth beyond your wildest dreams when we succeed.”

Her shoulders slump slightly. When she turns back to me, there’s defeat and longing in her expression. I’d rather not see that defeat — I want her compliance, yes, but not her misery.

“You drive a hard bargain, Principe,” she says bitterly. “Practically an offer I can’t refuse.” Her lips twist on the famous mafia film line.

I allow a softer note in my voice. “I’m not forcing you to do anything—”

She cuts me off with a scoff. “No? You hold my father’s fate over my head, you threaten vendetta and jail and who knows what else… don’t pretend I have a real choice.”

I sigh. So be it. “Perhaps there isn’t a choice. Perhaps fate made it for you when you set foot in that vault tonight. However you frame it, this path is the one that keeps your father alive and gives you a fighting chance to secure your future. If swallowing your pride is the price, pay it.”

Tears glimmer in her eyes, though she blinks them back fiercely. Seeing that crack in her armor twists something in my chest. I remind myself this is the only way to ensure both our goals. Still, I can’t resist reaching out. Gently, I take her chin between my thumb and forefinger, guiding her eyes to mine. “Valentina,” I murmur, “I give you my word — you will not regret this in the end. I will make sure of it.”

She inhales shakily at my touch. For a moment, we stand there, face-to-face in the low lamplight, her soft breath fanning over my wrist. There’s that spark again — the awareness of her proximity, the memory of how it felt to pin her body under mine. I release her chin before the thought travels further.

Her eyes drop to the contract on the desk. Silence hangs thick as smoke. Finally, with visible reluctance, she asks, “What are the terms?”

Relief washes through me — she’s moved from outright refusal to negotiation. “Primarily, that you and I will enter into a legally binding marriage within seventy-two hours,” I say, keeping my tone businesslike. “Under that cover, we collaborate to retrieve or replicate the Caravaggio piece. Once the goals are achieved—”

“And what if they’re not?” she interrupts quietly.

My jaw sets. Failure is not an option I entertain. But I answer, “If we haven’t achieved them within a year, there are clauses for reevaluation. But…” I tap the vendetta clause. “Walking away unilaterally isn’t an option for either of us. Not without consequences.”

She closes her eyes briefly. I can almost see her wrestle each stipulation to the ground in her mind. When she opens them again, they are resigned. “Fine.”

It’s barely more than a whisper. Did I hear right? “Fine?”

Valentina squares her shoulders, and though her eyes are wet, her voice comes out clear. “Fine. I’ll do it. I’ll marry you.”

Something in my chest unknots — a tension I didn’t realize was wound so tight. She said yes. The hardest part is over.

“Good,” I say softly. I slide the contract and pen toward her. “Sign.”

She steps up to the desk, picking up the pen with unsteady fingers. I watch as she hovers over the line with her name neatly typed beneath. Valentina E. Rossi. She sniffs quietly, then presses pen to paper. In a fluid script, she signs.

It is done.

I didn’t realize I was holding my breath until she sets the pen down. Our eyes meet across the desk — hers stormy with conflicting emotions, mine, I’m sure, alight with triumph tempered by resolve.

I take the pen next and sign my own name: Dante A. Moretti. Two names now bound on one document. Predator and prey, fox and prince, fates entwined.

Valentina lets out a shuddering exhale. “I can’t believe I just did that,” she whispers, almost to herself. Her hand flexes, as if itching to snatch the paper back and rip it up. But it’s too late for second thoughts.

Before she can spiral, I reach for the Rossi dagger once more. Her eyes widen slightly as I draw the blade. The steel sings softly as I unsheathe it from its ornate leather scabbard.

“This makes it official,” I tell her.

She instinctively takes half a step back from the desk. “What are you—?”

I answer by taking the tip of the dagger to my left thumb. With a swift prick, I draw blood. A bright crimson bead wells up. Maintaining eye contact with her, I press my thumbprint beside my signature, leaving a smear of red on the paper. Her lips part in surprise.

Wordlessly, I extend the hilt toward her. An invitation. Or an order.

Valentina’s throat works. Tentatively, she accepts the dagger. I guide her hand gently, bringing the blade to rest against her thumb. She inhales sharply as the edge nicks her skin. A drop of her blood wells to match mine. Our gazes never break — something passes between us then, a tremor of shared fate and the gravity of what we’ve done. She places her blood-mark beside her name with a trembling hand.

When it’s over, she lets the dagger slip from her fingers onto the desk with a dull thunk. The contract now bears the literal blood of both parties. A proper blood-oath marriage agreement.

For a moment, neither of us speaks. The only sound is our breathing and the distant lapping of lake water against the pier outside. Valentina looks at the twin smears of red, a mixture of revulsion and strange fascination on her face. I take a blotter and gently press it to the page to set the ink and blood.

“It’s done,” I say quietly.

She lifts her head, meeting my eyes. There’s no triumph in her expression, only wariness and a spark of defiance that hasn’t dimmed. Perhaps now that the shock is wearing off, her spine is stiffening again. Good. I prefer her with some fight intact.

I take the dagger and, almost as an afterthought, slide the flat of it under her chin. Slowly, I tilt her head up with it. Her pulse flickers fast at her throat, and I can see it in the hollow of her neck, feel it against the blade’s cool steel. Her lips part, a soft gasp of surprise escaping.

I’m not sure why I did this. Perhaps to underscore that she’s mine now, bound by blood. Perhaps because some dark part of me enjoys the way her breath catches, the way her eyes flare even as she remains very, very still.

“Now you’re truly a Rossi-turned-Moretti,” I murmur, my voice scarcely more than a purr. “Bound by blood and honor… and at my mercy.”

A blush blooms on her cheeks — anger or something more heated, I can’t be certain. She doesn’t flinch; her eyes burn into mine, fearless even with a knife at her throat. “I may be bound, Principe,” she says, the words cutting and soft, “but don’t delude yourself. I’m not broken.”

I let the edge of the dagger graze along the line of her jaw, just enough to send a visible shiver through her. Her pupils dilate; a bead of perspiration trails from her temple down to the pulse point at her neck. I follow it with my eyes, noting how the blade’s reflection dances in the delicate column of her throat.

“I’d never expect you broken,” I murmur. The air between us thickens, charged with something electric and dangerous. For a heartbeat, the atmosphere shifts — this isn’t only intimidation; it’s something taut and intimate. I’m close enough to feel the warmth of her breath on my wrist. My blood thrums, recalling the heat of pinning her in the vault. I wonder if her heart is pounding as hard as mine.

Abruptly, I pull the dagger away and sheath it, breaking the spell. Enough. We’ve sealed our bargain; there’s work to do. I slide the signed contract into a leather binder for safekeeping.

Valentina exhales, a sound that might be relief. A delicate flush remains on her neck. She lifts her hand to wipe that stray bead of sweat away, composing herself. The defiant tilt of her chin returns as she faces me.

“So,” she says, attempting nonchalance though her voice trembles slightly, “what now, Principe?”

### Chapter 3 — Velvet Cage (Valentina POV)

Champagne bubbles burst on my tongue as I force yet another smile. The grand ballroom of the Moretti villa glitters around me — all crystal chandeliers and sweeping silk draperies — but I feel like a prized bird on display in a gilded cage. My velvet gown, a deep crimson chosen by Dante’s personal shopper, clings to my curves and swishes elegantly as I move. It’s beautiful, expensive, and stifling.

Dozens of well-heeled guests mill about under the frescoed ceiling, sipping vintage champagne and trading gossip behind polite smiles. Out on the terrace beyond the open glass doors, the private gardens are strung with fairy lights that reflect in the still lake beyond. The night air is cool and carries the scent of jasmine from the manicured hedges. It should be a magical scene. Instead, it’s suffocating.

I stand beside Dante at the head of the room as he finishes giving a toast. “…to new alliances and the future,” he announces, raising his glass. “Salute!”

“Salute!” echo the gathered elite — family friends, business partners, a scattering of European nobility and art world figures. They applaud, eyes shining with curiosity and envy. I can practically hear their thoughts: Is this match love or strategy? How did the disgraced Rossi girl ensnare the Moretti heir?

My cheeks ache from maintaining a gracious expression. Every bit of this engagement gala has been orchestrated for show. After Dante marched me into that contract, the past 24 hours have been a blur of preparations. A publicist coached me on our “love story” cover: we fell in love secretly, reconnected recently to unite our families. Lies, all of it, wrapped in satin and diamonds.

I glance down at the sizable emerald-and-diamond ring now adorning my finger. It catches the light, sparkling brilliantly — an heirloom from Dante’s grandmother, apparently. When he slid it onto my hand earlier, I felt my stomach knot. To everyone here, it’s a symbol of romance. To me, it’s a shackle, however pretty.

A polite round of laughter rises at something Dante says. I snap back to the present, realizing I missed a joke in his speech. He’s charming them effortlessly, of course. In the days since I’ve known him, I’ve seen Dante play many roles: the cold strategist in the vault, the predatory negotiator in the study, and now, the debonair fiancé enchanting a crowd. The ease with which he dons each mask is unsettling.

He finishes his toast with a graceful nod and steps down from the dais. At once, he’s at my side, placing a possessive hand at the small of my back. The gesture looks tender outwardly, but the pressure of his palm through the thin velvet is a reminder of control. “Smile,” he murmurs softly, his lips barely moving. “They’re watching.”

I tilt my head toward him and curve my lips in what likely passes for a lovestruck smile. My skin prickles where his hand rests. “I am smiling,” I reply through my teeth. “Can I stop now?”

His answering chuckle sounds convincingly affectionate to anyone listening. “Not yet, cara. The night is young.”

I bite back a sigh and allow him to guide me into the throng of guests as the string quartet strikes up a waltz. People approach to congratulate us — men with stiff collars and calculating eyes, women in couture giving me thinly veiled once-overs. Dante handles each greeting with smooth courtesy, introducing me as his “beloved Valentina” with that charming smile of his.

I parrot the scripted lines we practiced, playing the demure, grateful fiancée. All the while, my mind is miles away. Truthfully, I barely register the faces or names. What I do notice is Dante’s hand never leaving me for long. If not at my back, then holding my hand, or curled around my waist. It’s as though he fears I might bolt or crumble if he doesn’t physically anchor me.

He’s not wrong — I have fantasized about escape more than once tonight. But with security crawling over this place and my father’s fate sealed by that contract, running is not an option. So I endure, wrapped in Dante’s arm like a pretty accessory, awaiting my moment. For what, exactly, I’m not sure yet. But the fox inside me is awake, eyes sharp for opportunity.

“Valentina, you remember my cousin, Silvio?” Dante’s voice cuts into my thoughts.

I startle, focusing on the man before us. Silvio Moretti — the Viper, as I’ve heard him called. He’s leaner than Dante, with wavy dark-blond hair and a practiced smile that doesn’t reach his steely eyes. An elaborate serpent tattoo curls up from his collar, peeking out above his crisp suit line.

“We’ve actually not met formally,” I say, extending my hand politely. The last I saw of Silvio was across a ballroom years ago — but that memory is hazy at best. He was just another sycophant clinging to Dante’s orbit then.

Silvio takes my hand and bows over it with exaggerated flair. “An absolute pleasure, Signorina Rossi. Or shall I say Signora Moretti soon?” His lips brush the air above my knuckles. Something about the gesture makes my skin crawl, though outwardly I maintain a gracious facade.

“Thank you for coming,” I say sweetly.

His hazel eyes flick between me and Dante. “I wouldn’t miss welcoming my dear cousin’s bride-to-be to the family. We’re all truly… thrilled.” The words are polite, but I sense an undercurrent. Amusement? Malice? I can’t pin it, but Dante’s hand at my waist tightens slightly.

“How kind,” Dante replies, tone cool. The two men exchange a look that could cut glass. There’s history there, clearly.

Silvio releases my hand and lifts his champagne flute. “To famiglia,” he toasts softly. “Blood is everything, after all.” He downs his drink, then flashes a smile. “Enjoy your evening, lovebirds.” With that, he slips away into the crowd.

I let out a breath I hadn’t realized I was holding. Dante’s fingers flex against my side. When I glance up at him, his jaw is set, eyes tracking Silvio’s departure. For all his calm, I sense tension rolling off Dante like a storm about to break.

“You two seem cozy,” I murmur under my breath. “He hardly looked at you like a man ecstatic for his cousin.”

Dante forces a smile for a passing guest, then mutters, “Silvio is always happy for me. Can’t you tell?” His tone drips sarcasm. Clearly, he doesn’t trust Silvio one bit. That makes two of us.

Before I can respond, the quartet’s melody swells. Dante turns to me and offers his hand, face shifting into an affectionate mask once more. “May I have this dance, amore mio?”

I stare at his outstretched hand. My heart gives an erratic little thump. Of course. The obligatory first dance. “Of course,” I manage, placing my fingers in his. His palm engulfs mine, warm and firm.

He leads me to the center of the marble dance floor as other couples part to give us space. Suddenly all eyes are on us. My pulse accelerates. Performing under scrutiny is hardly new to me — I grew up faking smiles at society events — but this feels different. More perilous. Perhaps because the man twining an arm around my waist now is both my captor and… something else I can’t quite label.

“Try to relax,” Dante whispers as he draws me close. One of his hands clasps mine, the other settles at the small of my back. “We need to look like we’re enjoying this.”

I swallow and force my posture to soften. We begin to move, stepping into the slow waltz. At first, I keep an inch of distance between us, mindful not to let my body meld into his. My nerves are taut as wires. “People are staring,” I mutter through a polite smile.

“Let them stare,” he replies, guiding me in a smooth turn. “They’re just admiring how stunning you look tonight.”

It sounds like a compliment, but I detect genuine appreciation in his voice. Unexpected warmth blooms in my chest. “I feel like a performing seal,” I answer lightly, trying to deflect.

He chuckles softly, the sound vibrating through his chest against my arm. “If so, you’re the most graceful seal I’ve ever seen.” Then his voice drops lower. “You truly are beautiful, Valentina.”

I miss a step, startled both by the compliment and the way he said my name — almost reverently. My stumble presses me closer against him. Instinctively, I glance up. Dante’s face is only inches from mine. In the golden light, his steel-blue eyes appear almost soft, something tender lurking in them that I haven’t seen before. The look sends an unexpected flutter through my stomach. For a moment, the noise of the room fades and I’m acutely aware of our bodies moving together, his strong arm around me, his hand enveloping mine.

He clears his throat, eyes flicking away as if he too realized the moment of unguarded intimacy. Gently, he eases me back into the correct steps, reclaiming the rhythm of the dance. I let out a breath I didn’t know I was holding and focus on anything but the warmth creeping up my neck.

To cover the strange tension, I murmur, “I’m surprised you bothered inviting me to dance. You already caught me; no need to play the gentleman now.” My words are teasing, but tinged with truth.

Dante’s mouth quirks. “Can’t I enjoy a dance with my fiancée?”

“You enjoy having all these people see you enjoy a dance with me,” I counter quietly.

His grip on my waist tightens, pulling me flush against him under the guise of a graceful spin. I gasp softly at the sudden closeness. “I won’t deny optics matter,” he says near my ear. “But maybe I also wanted an excuse to hold you.”

Heat flares in my cheeks. “Dante,” I begin warningly, but I falter as I feel the subtle slide of his hand along the small of my back, fingers splaying against the curve of my spine. It’s a possessive touch, skimming the edge of propriety. If anyone’s watching closely, they might notice how low his hand has drifted.

My heart kicks in my chest. “Careful,” I whisper, trying to sound reprimanding despite the breathiness of my voice.

He gazes down at me, his face the picture of refined affection for any onlooker. But his words come out in a dark purr meant only for me. “Smile and no one will know.”

I arch a brow, my lips still fixed in that practiced smile as we glide through another turn. “Know what, exactly?”

His hand dips daringly lower, brushing the upper swell of my backside. My breath hitches. “Know that you’re in the arms of a wolf, mia bella volpe,” he murmurs. “And that I might not be able to resist tasting my prey.”

A shiver courses through me. The double meaning in his words is unmistakable, and combined with the warmth of his palm through the velvet of my gown, it sends my nerves sparking. “Is this you making good on our public act of love?” I manage to reply lightly, though my pulse is racing.

He doesn’t answer immediately. With the next step, I feel him guiding me subtly toward the edge of the dance floor, nearer to the shadowy colonnade that lines the room. The other couples twirl and sway, oblivious, as Dante maneuvers us just outside the brightest pool of light. Here, partial shadows from the columns and the potted palms provide a semblance of cover.

My skin prickles with anticipation or dread — I’m not sure which. “Dante, we should stay where people can see—”

“Hush,” he breathes, bending his head so that his cheek nearly brushes mine. To anyone watching, it’s a loving nuzzle. To me, it’s a command that reverberates down my spine. “Keep your smile, Valentina. Keep dancing.”

So I do. We step in time to the waltz, my skirt swirling around our legs. Dante’s mouth is at my ear, and I feel his hot breath as he whispers, “You’ve been on edge all night. Let me help you relax.”

I open my mouth to protest that I don’t need his “help,” but the words tangle with a sudden gasp as I feel his hand slide around from my back to my hip… then lower. In one smooth, audacious move, Dante’s palm slips around to the front of my thigh, fingers skimming the high slit of my gown. The velvet parted just enough during our dance to grant him access.

My entire body goes rigid. “What are you—”

“Dancing,” he interrupts softly, spinning me to the music. To outside eyes, it likely looks like a flourish, my red skirts flaring briefly. In that motion, his hand finds the slit and dips inside, gliding along my bare thigh.

I bite down on a gasp. He’s touching far too high — my garter, the lace edge of my panties — oh God. My fingers clutch at his shoulder. “Stop,” I whisper, voice a strained plea. My face is still locked in a smile, but panic and unexpected excitement war within me. We’re in public, surrounded by people. This is insane!

His lips curve against my temple in what surely appears to be a loving smile. “Keep that lovely smile, darling,” he murmurs, fingers teasing along the top band of my thigh-high stocking. The sensation sends a bolt of heat through me. “Unless you want an audience.”

I swallow hard, heart hammering. A passing couple glances our way and I force a broader grin, even as I hiss through it, “You’re a bastard.”

Dante chuckles, the sound warm and utterly incongruous with his illicit actions. “Perhaps.” His hand dips further, fingertips now tracing the sensitive skin beyond the stocking’s edge. I suppress a shudder. “But you’re flushed, cara. Anyone would think you’re enjoying yourself.”

I want to retort, to snap that I’m absolutely not — but it would be a lie. Beneath my mortification and fury, a traitorous ache is unfurling. It’s been so long since anyone touched me like this, and my body responds, heedless of the circumstances. A soft involuntary sigh escapes my lips as his fingers brush the crease where my thigh meets my torso.

Dante hears it. I feel his breath catch. “That’s it,” he whispers, coaxing.

Music swells around us, a sweeping melody, as the quartet crescendos. The room blurs; all I can focus on is the man holding me and the fire his hand is igniting. With each gliding step of the waltz, his fingers venture bolder. They skim over the front of my silk panties, and I nearly stumble. Only his firm arm around my waist keeps me upright.

“Easy,” he soothes, masking my stumble by twirling me elegantly. The motion presses his hand more firmly between my thighs, and I choke back a whimper. The bastard is still smiling pleasantly at our spectators, all while his fingertips begin to rub slow, torturous circles over the damp fabric now clinging to my most private spot.

I’m burning up. My free hand grips onto his shoulder for dear life, nails no doubt digging through his suit jacket. My breath comes in shallow pants that I pray no one else notices over the music. “Dante… please,” I manage, though whether I’m begging him to stop or continue, I truly don’t know.

His face remains the picture of composed happiness, but his eyes… they blaze into mine with unmistakable hunger. “Relax,” he croons, though there’s a roughness edging his voice now. “You’re safe with me.”

Safe. If only I could believe that. And yet, in this moment, I do feel caught in a dizzying spell of safety and danger entwined. The danger of being seen, the safety of his strong arm preventing my collapse, the danger of what his touch is doing to me, the safety of knowing he won’t let me fall.

He increases the pressure between my thighs, and a tiny shock of pleasure bolts through me. My head drops forward, forehead nearly resting on his chest. It’s either that or let my eyes roll back. He’s effectively holding me up as he slowly, methodically strokes me through the now-soaked silk barrier.

“You’re already wet for me,” Dante whispers, voice almost reverent. I want to protest, to deny it, but a quiet moan hitches in my throat as his fingers slide the fabric aside and make contact with my slick flesh.

Madonna. I bite down hard on my lower lip, the only way to silence the gasp that threatens to escape. Dante’s jaw tics; I sense he’s fighting his own composure now. “I could make you come just like this,” he growls under his breath.

The wicked promise in his words unravels me a little more. The waltz carries us further into the shadows; I’m dimly aware of spinning past one of the tall marble columns. Hidden from view for an instant, Dante chooses that moment to push a finger inside me.

A strangled sound, half gasp, half whimper, leaks from my throat before I can stop it. My nails dig into his shoulder. Pleasure, hot and coiling, surges through me. He swallows up my little noise by abruptly capturing my lips in a kiss — our first real kiss, I realize dimly. He presses his mouth to mine as if overcome by desire, and it’s not a gentle meeting of lips meant for the crowd. It’s hungry, demanding. His tongue sweeps against mine, muffling the shocked moan that vibrates from me as his finger curls deep inside, stroking that spot that makes my knees nearly buckle.

The kiss is a perfect cover for my involuntary sounds, but it also overwhelms my senses further. Dante kisses like he does everything else — with calculated skill and barely leashed intensity. I taste champagne on his tongue and inhale the mix of his cologne and the faint tang of my own sweat. It’s intoxicating. I find myself kissing him back, a desperate, needy edge taking hold. My body presses into his of its own accord, silently begging for more.

He answers by adding a second finger. The stretch of it, the fullness, drags a ragged sigh from me against his mouth. “That’s it, bella,” he mutters between kisses, his voice rough. “Let go.”

His thumb finds my clit and begins a teasing circling, sending sparks of white-hot pleasure lancing through me. I break off the kiss, burying my face in his shoulder to stifle a cry. On instinct, I bite down lightly on the fine fabric of his suit jacket there, anything to contain the tidal wave building inside me. Dante emits a low groan at the sensation of my bite, his fingers thrusting a shade faster in response.

We’ve stopped dancing entirely at this point, swaying in place hidden in the shadows as the rest of the party continues obliviously. The music, the laughter, it all sounds distant compared to the blood rushing in my ears. I’m so close — an unfamiliar pressure coils within me, threatening to snap. My mind screams that this is wrong, dangerous, humiliating even. But my body is hurtling toward release with reckless abandon.

Dante’s lips graze my ear. “Come for me, my fox,” he urges in a sinful whisper. “Right here, while I’m holding you.”

His words push me to the brink. My fingers curl into the back of his neck, likely ruining his perfectly kept hair, but he doesn’t seem to care. He’s focused entirely on unraveling me.

I feel myself tipping over the edge. My inner muscles clench around his fingers, and just as the first crashing wave of orgasm is about to hit—

The music abruptly stops. The quartet draws the waltz to a close with a flourish, and applause erupts around us. The sudden change jars me, pulling me back from the precipice by a cruel inch.

My eyes fly open in alarm. Dante still has me partially dipped in a half-swirl, his fingers still buried inside me under my gown. Through the haze of unfulfilled ecstasy, I realize we need to move. People will look for us to finish our dance any second now.

He realizes it too. With a whispered curse, he removes his hand from between my thighs, quickly tugging my dress slit closed to cover me. I swallow a plaintive whimper at the loss of his touch and the agonizing denial of release. My whole body trembles, protesting the interruption.

Dante steadies me, smoothing one arm around my waist as he lifts me upright. We both paste on smiles and join the rest of the guests in clapping for the musicians, our hearts pounding in unison. My knees feel like jelly; I’m grateful for his supporting arm. His other hand discreetly rises to his face, and I catch a glimpse of his fingers glistening with evidence of my arousal before he nonchalantly wipes them with a handkerchief and tucks it away.

Mortification and longing war within me. I can’t believe what I almost did — what we almost did — in front of everyone. My cheeks burn hotter than the summer night outside. Yet, beyond the embarrassment is a sharp pang of frustration, my body screaming at being denied completion. Dante Moretti just brought me to the brink of climax in a room full of our peers and then left me dangling. The arrogant, self-satisfied look I glimpse on his face as he offers me his arm only fuels my ire.

“That was…” I struggle for breath and composure as I loop my arm through his, trying to act natural as the crowd begins to mingle again. “You are utterly insufferable,” I whisper, voice shaky.

He pats my hand where it rests on his arm, guiding me off the dance floor. “And you, mia cara, are utterly intoxicating,” he whispers back. Despite the confident words, I notice he’s breathing hard too, a fine sheen of sweat at his temples. His desire is evident in the tension of his body against mine, and I dare a glance downward. The front of his tailored trousers is distinctively strained. A rush of power — and admittedly, feminine thrill — courses through me at the sight. At least I’m not alone in my torment.

“Don’t think this means anything,” I manage, chin high even as I wobble slightly in my heels. The aftershocks of pleasure still ripple through me, making it hard to stand steadily.

“Oh, I’m well aware of what it means,” he replies, leaning in so his lips brush my earlobe. To an observer, he’s whispering sweet nothings to his fiancée. In truth, his words are far from sweet. “It means that whenever I touch you, your body sings for me. You can deny it all you want, but I just felt how badly you wanted to let go.”

Anger and embarrassment flare, renewing my strength. I plaster a brilliant smile on my face as an acquaintance waves at us, and I respond with a polite nod. Through my teeth, I hiss to Dante, “You are outrageous. I nearly — we nearly —”

“But we didn’t,” he cuts in smoothly, laughter dancing in his voice. “Perhaps I was merciful. Or perhaps I want to draw out our little game.”

Game. Is that what this is to him? Toying with me, proving his power? The lingering throb between my legs suggests it’s a game my own body treacherously engaged in. I need air, distance — and a reality check.

I gently pull my arm from his. “Excuse me, I need a moment,” I say, careful to keep my expression composed. “All the excitement… it’s a bit overwhelming.” That at least isn’t a lie.

Concern flickers in his eyes, genuine or well-feigned. He covers it with a charming smile for the onlookers. “Of course, darling. Shall I come with you?”

“No,” I blurt, then modulate my tone. “No, I’ll be fine. Just a breath of fresh air on the terrace.”

Before he can protest, I sweep away toward the open doors leading outside. He doesn’t follow, likely aware that hounding me would draw more attention than my brief exit alone. And perhaps he’s confident I won’t run — which I won’t, not into the night in full view of his security.

The balmy night air envelops me as I step onto the flagstone terrace. Two older guests are chatting near the balustrade, but otherwise I have some privacy out here. I grip the cool stone railing with both hands, gulping in air and willing my heart to slow. The lake stretches out, an inky mirror reflecting the twinkle of distant city lights and the crescent moon. It’s beautiful and tranquil — a stark contrast to the tumult inside me.

God, what am I becoming? Less than a week ago, Dante Moretti was just a name I cursed when tallying my family’s misfortunes. Now I’m bound to him, and tonight I nearly melted in his arms in front of half of Zurich’s elite. I ought to be plotting vengeance or at least strategy, not… not enjoying whatever that was.

I close my eyes, the cool breeze caressing my flushed face. Calm. I need to calm down and remember who I am. I’m Valentina Rossi. I may be trapped for now, but I’m not powerless. This fox still has her tricks.

My breathing steadies, and as it does, I become aware of something hard and rectangular pressing against my inner thigh, tucked by the garter of my stocking. A spark of triumph lights within me. The keycard.

During that dizzying dance, while Dante was… preoccupied, I had caught a glimpse of the black keycard peeking from his inner jacket pocket. It’s the same one he used in the vault and likely a master key to restricted areas in this villa too. In the haze of passion and daring, I’d managed to slip my hand into his jacket and lift it. He was too focused on unraveling me to notice my fingers stealing something of his for a change.

My own little heist, right under the great Dante Moretti’s nose.

I can’t help the grin that tugs at my lips. It’s genuine and a little feral. Reaching down subtly, I adjust the garter, securing the stolen keycard more tightly against my thigh. The faint bite of its edge against my skin is a welcome reminder that I am not simply a pawn. I have something of his now — something he values, no doubt.

“Valentina, there you are.” Dante’s voice drifts from the doorway, silk over steel. I turn to see him approaching, all concerned fiancé in the low light. The older guests nearby politely drift back inside, giving us privacy.

He steps up to me, eyes searching my face. “Feeling better?”

“Much,” I answer lightly, letting none of my inner triumph show. I slip easily into the role of the gracious partner, looping my arm with his when he offers it. “Sorry, I just needed a moment to catch my breath.”

He brushes a knuckle over my flushed cheek, a tender gesture that might as well brand me given all that preceded it. “No apologies necessary. It’s been an… eventful evening.” The slight smirk tugging at his mouth tells me he’s recalling exactly how eventful.

I force myself to chuckle, a sound that I hope passes for bashful contentment rather than residual desire. Inside, I’m already weighing how and when to use the keycard burning a secret against my leg. Perhaps a midnight exploration of the villa’s secured wing? Recovering that folio he stole from me in the vault would be a good start. My fingers itch with the prospect.

For now, I rest my head lightly against Dante’s shoulder as we gaze out at the moonlit lake, affecting the picture of a loving couple enjoying a quiet moment. He seems pleasantly surprised by the gesture, his arm circling my waist. “Look at that,” he murmurs, nodding toward the dark water where the moon’s reflection shimmers. “Beautiful, isn’t it?”

I hum in agreement, though my mind is elsewhere. He’s right — the view is beautiful. But so is a sly smile hiding a secret, or the feeling of an exit strategy tucked against your skin.

“Thank you, by the way,” he adds softly.

I tilt my head to peek up at him. “For what?”

“For playing your part so well tonight.” His gaze holds mine, genuine gratitude there. “I know this isn’t easy.”

There’s an undercurrent to his tone that pricks at my conscience. Maybe it’s not been easy for him either, orchestrating all this under family pressure. For an instant, we share a strange, mutual understanding under the stars — two people bound by a deal, navigating a web of lies together. The thought is oddly comforting, that he recognizes my hardship.

I offer him a small, real smile of my own, one I don’t have to fake. “It isn’t. But I’m handling it.”

His eyes flicker with something like respect. “Yes. You are.”

We linger a moment in silence, the night wrapping around us. To an outsider, we likely look like any engaged couple stealing a tender moment. But beneath the surface, a thousand unspoken tensions simmer. Desire. Defiance. Secrets.

I turn back toward the party, ready to rejoin and get this night over with. Dante keeps me close as we walk inside, and I play the dutiful fiancée against his side. But inwardly, I’m anything but dutiful.

Because tucked under the lace at my thigh is proof that I’m more than just Dante’s captive or pawn. I’m still a thief, still cunning and daring. Tonight he might have had me at his mercy on that dance floor, but I’ve already begun to tip the scales.

As the orchestra strikes up a new tune and Dante leads me back into the lions’ den of our guests, I bite back a secret smile. The keycard presses into my skin, reassuring and empowering. Dante holds me firmly, thinking he’s got me right where he wants me.

But little does he know — the fox has keys to the cage now. And this game has only just begun.

### Chapter 4 – First Night / Wedding Countdown (Dante POV)

I stand at the head of the long dining table as dusk settles over the Moretti villa, trying to maintain an air of cool control. The crystal chandelier above casts a warm glow on the polished mahogany surface set for three. Beyond the open terrace doors, Lake Zürich reflects the last purpling light of day. The terrace colonnade stands just beyond, its stone pillars draped in climbing ivy swaying gently in the breeze. A gentle summer breeze carries in the faint scent of jasmine from the gardens, but beneath it I catch the sterile hint of antiseptic from the medical wing down the hall—a reminder of our arrangement.

To my right sits Valentina Rossi, now my blood-oath fiancée, her posture poised and back straight despite the day’s events. She wears a simple ivory slip dress one of my staff provided, demure yet elegant against her sun-kissed skin. Her auburn hair is freshly washed and loose around her shoulders, a far cry from the elaborate updo she wore at last night's gala. Even in this dressed-down state, she radiates a quiet self-possession that stirs something unwelcome in me. I force my gaze away from the delicate curve of her neck and focus on our third dinner guest.

At the far end is Alfonso Rossi, Valentina’s father. The older man’s complexion is sallow under the chandelier’s light, and his hand trembles slightly as he lifts a spoonful of broth. The villa’s private doctor has tended to him, per my explicit orders, and a discreet nurse stands just outside the room in case he falters. Alfonso’s presence at this table is as much a part of our deal as the ring that now glints on Valentina’s finger. He clears his throat softly, offering me a polite nod. “Thank you, Dante, for the hospitality... and the medical care. I am in your debt.” His voice wavers with both gratitude and residual pride.

I incline my head in acknowledgment, fingers tightening around the stem of my wine glass. “Think nothing of it. We keep our promises.” The words come out steadier than I feel. The truth is, I insisted on bringing Alfonso here and ensuring he receives premium care, if only to uphold my end of the devil’s bargain I struck with his daughter. My father—Don Emilio—objected vehemently this morning when I informed him of the arrangement. They’re liabilities, Dante, he had hissed, face red with barely restrained contempt. The old man’s medical bills aren’t our problem. Focus on the Caravaggio. It took all my control not to snap back that a promise made under the blood oath isn’t so easily broken. Focus on the Caravaggio. Of course he’d reduce this complex web to the €100 M painting that could secure our dynasty’s grip on the art world. Emilio Moretti—Il Serpente—has never valued compassion or honor if it doesn’t serve power. In his eyes, showing mercy to an enemy’s family is weakness. I felt the weight of his disdain as he finally relented with a dismissive wave of his hand. The tension between us lingers like a cold shadow at the edge of the room, coiled and waiting to strike.

I push those thoughts aside as a servant enters to pour wine into Alfonso’s glass. Valentina immediately covers the rim with her hand. “None for him, please,” she says, a subtle steel in her soft voice. “Just water.” She flashes a small smile at her father. “Doctor’s orders, Papà.” There’s a tenderness in her eyes I haven’t seen before—an openness reserved solely for him.

Alfonso chuckles weakly and pats her hand. “Always looking out for me, stellina.” Little star. He addresses her with such warmth that I feel a strange pang in my chest. Jealousy? Ridiculous. I have no right or desire to covet that familial affection. Yet watching Valentina care for her ailing father stirs a memory of simpler times—dinners where my mother fussed over me with that same devotion, long before power and betrayal poisoned our family meals.

I sip my Barolo, letting its dry complexity ground me back in the present. “Your recovery is in all our interests, Signor Rossi,” I say evenly, meeting the older man’s gaze. My diplomatic tone could be mistaken for concern. In truth, Alfonso’s well-being is leverage—his life the collateral securing Valentina’s cooperation. Still, something about the gratitude in his eyes makes me shift uncomfortably. I remind myself this is exactly what I bargained for: Valentina’s compliance in exchange for her father’s care. Honor among thieves and criminals, as it were.

We eat mostly in silence for a few minutes. Silverware clinks against fine bone china. I catch Valentina darting a glance at me whenever she thinks I’m not looking. Probably assessing my mood, searching for any crack in my façade she can exploit. Little fox, always plotting. If she only knew that every measured breath I take tonight is an effort to restrain myself—from what, I’m not entirely certain. From snapping at her? Kissing her? Both urges simmer dangerously under the surface.

“So,” Alfonso says gently, breaking the quiet, “the wedding... it is soon, yes?” He gives an apologetic smile, as if the subject is a necessary unpleasantness. Valentina’s spine stiffens, and she trains her gaze on her plate.

I set my fork down carefully. “Yes. The day after tomorrow.” My voice remains neutral, but my heart does a slow, hard turn at the thought. Seventy-two hours from the signing of our contract, that was the timeframe I decreed. That deadline now looms. “The chapel in town has been booked. It will be a small ceremony.” I pause, then add, “For obvious reasons.” For the obvious reason that the bride is effectively a hostage and the union is a means to an end. I don’t say that part aloud.

“Of course,” Alfonso murmurs, eyes downcast. He knows better than anyone exactly what bargain his daughter struck. Perhaps he’s picturing the blood-red ink of the contract or the bite of the Rossi dagger that sealed it. He opens his mouth as if to say more, but a sudden coughing fit wracks his frame instead. At once Valentina rises and moves behind him, supporting his shoulders. The servant hovers uncertainly, but she waves him off and rubs her father’s back until the coughing subsides.

“There now,” she soothes in Italian, her voice low and musical. “Piano, Papà. Easy does it.” When the fit passes, she presses a cloth napkin to Alfonso’s lips, wiping away a speck of blood at the corner of his mouth. Her eyes flick to the nurse at the doorway, signaling for the doctor. Concern etches her features, but she masks it quickly. In that moment, Valentina Rossi doesn’t look like the defiant thief who challenged me at knifepoint two nights ago. She simply looks like a daughter worried for her father.

Something twists in my chest. A foreign pang of empathy, quickly smothered. Empathy is a luxury I cannot afford. Not in my position, and certainly not with her.

The doctor appears and quietly gestures that Alfonso should return to bed to rest. The older man begins to protest weakly, but Valentina is already helping him stand. “We’ll finish dinner another time, Papà. Let’s get you comfortable.”

As she guides him out of the dining room with the nurse’s help, Alfonso pauses to catch my eye. “Mi dispiace,” he says hoarsely. I’m sorry. Whether he’s apologizing for cutting the meal short or for the burden his health places on this arrangement, I’m not sure.

I give a tight shake of my head. “No apology necessary. Take care of yourself.” The words come out gruffer than intended.

Valentina murmurs something reassuring to her father as they depart, her arm steady around his frail frame. I watch them retreat down the marble corridor until they vanish around a corner, the soft echo of their footsteps absorbed into the villa’s vast silence.

Left alone in the grand dining hall, I release a breath I hadn’t realized I was holding. I should feel relief that this awkward meal is over. Instead, I feel... unmoored. Off balance. The plan was simple: contain Valentina for a few days, execute the Foxglove Protocol—marry the girl, secure the lost Caravaggio, and present my father with both bride and painting to solidify our family’s power. A straightforward transaction. But nothing has felt straightforward since the moment I laid eyes on Valentina Rossi.

I drain the rest of my wine, savoring the brief burn in my throat. One of the servants hovers near the doorway, awaiting dismissal. “Clear the table,” I instruct coolly. “Dinner is concluded.” My tone invites no questions.

As the staff begin to clear dishes, I stride out onto the terrace for a moment of air. The night breeze coming off the lake is cool, tinged with the metallic smell of impending rain. In the darkened glass of the French doors, I catch my reflection—a tall figure in a tailored charcoal suit, shoulders tense. I hardly recognize the expression on my face. Haunted, yes—that’s the word. I’m haunted by the scene that just unfolded: the tenderness in Valentina’s voice as she cared for her father, the vulnerability in her eyes when she thought no one was watching. And the memory of how, last night in the ballroom, that same woman melted in my arms, her breathy moan in my ear as my hand slipped beneath her gown…

I run a hand through my hair, exhaling sharply. I need to get a grip. Desire is a weapon she could use to undo me, and I nearly handed it to her on a silver platter at the gala. If my cousin Silvio hadn’t interrupted when he did, I might have done something truly stupid in front of half the Zurich underworld—like make Valentina come right there on the dance floor. The thought sends a fresh wave of heat coiling through me. Focus, Dante. You are Principe, heir to the Moretti dynasty. You do not get seduced by a pretty face or swayed by compassion. Control is everything.

I straighten my jacket and re-enter the house, determined to reassert that control tonight. There are still matters to arrange before the wedding. I head for my study down the hall, footsteps echoing over the black-and-white marble floor. The villa is mostly quiet now, the hush of an estate at night. Passing by a tall window, I notice distant storm clouds gathering over the lake, occasionally lit by faint flickers of lightning. A storm approaching—fitting.

Before I reach the study, a figure steps out of the shadows of a columned archway. Valentina. She stands in the corridor, arms wrapped around herself. The soft lighting plays over her form, outlining the elegant lines of her ivory dress. My heart gives a treacherous thump.

“Is your father settled?” I ask, keeping my voice low and even.

She nods. “Sleeping. They gave him something for the cough.” Her gaze skims away, as if unsure of her welcome now that we are alone. Just hours ago we were in each other’s arms in public, yet here in private, an invisible chasm yawns between us.

“Good.” I move to step past her toward the study, but Valentina shifts, subtly blocking my path.

“Dante.” My name on her lips is almost hesitant. It snags my attention; she so rarely uses my first name without it being a weapon. I arch a brow in question.

Valentina draws a slow breath. “About earlier—my father... I appreciate what you’ve done for him. Truly.” The admission seems to cost her some pride, her jaw tightening for a second. She continues before I can respond. “But I need you to know I’m not going to break our deal. You’ve held up your end, and I’ll hold up mine. You’ll get what you want.”

Her eyes meet mine, fox-gray and solemn. The impact is like a punch to the gut, though I can’t say why. Perhaps because it sounds like she’s trying to reassure me when it should be the other way around. Or perhaps because what I want from her feels dangerously unclear right now. The plan says I want the painting and a compliant wife to satisfy vendetta law. My body, however, wants to pin her against the nearest wall and finish what we started on that dance floor. And my heart—damn it, my heart wants things it has no business wanting.

I step closer, unable to resist testing her resolve. The corridor is dim, just a single lamp casting golden light across the alcoves. We’re utterly alone here. “You think I doubt your word, Valentina?” I say softly. “You’ve been a model prisoner today. No escape attempts, no theatrics.” I let a hint of a smirk curve my lips. “Hardly the cunning fox who tried to rob my vault.”

Her chin lifts, a spark returning to her expression at my taunt. “I haven’t had the opportunity,” she replies, voice cool. “Your hounds are always watching.” She flicks a glance toward the end of the hall where I know a guard stands just out of earshot.

I huff a quiet laugh. There she is—the sharp-tongued thief I know. “Opportunities are tricky things,” I murmur, taking another slow step forward. We’re close now; I can just make out the rapid flutter of her pulse at her throat. “Seize the wrong one and you might find yourself in an even worse predicament.”

She doesn’t back away. If anything, she tilts her face up in defiance, eyes flashing. “Believe me, I’m well aware of my predicament, Principe.” The title drips wryly off her tongue. “But as I said, I intend to fulfill my end of our bargain. In two days, you’ll have your blushing bride to show off and whatever... prize it is you’re really after.”

I narrow my eyes. So she suspects there’s more at play—of course she does. Smart girl. She knows this forced marriage isn’t just about mafia tradition or vengeance. We haven’t openly discussed the Caravaggio between us yet; that will come soon enough. For now, I won’t confirm or deny. Instead, I find myself distracted by the way the lamplight catches threads of gold in her irises, the way her chest rises and falls with each measured breath. Is she nervous? Excited? The energy between us crackles like the storm-charged air.

“Good,” I say quietly. “As long as we understand each other.”

Silence falls. Neither of us moves. The tension in this narrow space is a taut wire. Valentina’s tongue darts out to wet her lips—a quick, unconscious motion that draws my gaze like a magnet. My blood surges. I recall the taste of her skin from last night, the heat of her thigh under my palm. Damn it all. I swore to myself I’d keep my distance, and here I am, inches from her, close enough to catch a trace of her scent. Gardenias, tonight. Sweet and light, yet somehow intoxicating.

I should walk away. I should turn on my heel and leave before I do something that undermines every warning my father gave me this morning. But I don’t. Instead, I reach out and gently tuck a loose strand of her auburn hair behind her ear. The gesture is oddly intimate, surprising both of us. Her breath hitches, those storm-gray eyes widening. My fingers linger a beat too long against the soft curve of her ear and cheek. Control yourself, a voice screams in my head.

Valentina’s lips part, words hanging in the air between us. I wonder what she was about to say, but she never says it. In the quiet, all I can hear is my heart pounding and the distant roll of thunder outside. My hand drops away, clenching at my side. “It’s late,” I manage, my voice rough. “You should get some sleep. Tomorrow will be... busy.”

For a moment, disappointment flickers over her face—gone so quickly I might’ve imagined it. She nods, stepping back. “Yes. Busy.” There’s an undertone to her reply I can’t decipher. Hurt? Resignation?

I escort her down the hall toward the guest wing. The walk is brief and silent. Her suite is directly across from her father’s—convenient for her to check on him, and for me to keep an eye on them both. A guard stands at attention outside Alfonso’s door, and he straightens as we approach. I wave him back to his post; all appears quiet within. Valentina’s door is just a few steps further.

At the threshold, she pauses with her hand on the knob and looks up at me. “Good night, Dante,” she says softly.

“Buona notte, Valentina.” I respond in kind, attempting a polite smile that feels awkward on my face. She slips into her room, shutting the door gently. I hear the click of the lock turning—a sensible precaution on her part. It makes me smirk in spite of myself. Locked doors have rarely stopped me, but she doesn’t need to know that.

With a sigh, I lean my back against the wall opposite her room. I should leave. Return to my study, drown myself in work or whiskey—anything except stand here like a lovesick fool. But my feet won’t move. After a minute, I signal to one of my men at the end of the hall. “Give us a moment,” I murmur. The guard nods and dutifully retreats around the corner.

Alone now, I allow myself one indulgence. Fishing a plain brass key from my pocket, I quietly unlock Valentina’s door. I gave her privacy, but not freedom; the locks in this wing answer to me. Easing the door open a crack, I peer inside.

Her room is dimly lit by the faint glow of a single lamp she must have left on. Valentina is already in bed, lying on her side atop the covers. She’s changed out of the ivory dress into a silk camisole and shorts the color of champagne—likely more provided clothes. The ensemble leaves her long legs mostly bare and my throat dry. One arm is tucked under her pillow, the other rests loosely at her side. She looks so small like this, curled up and fast asleep, chest rising and falling in a slow, steady rhythm. Vulnerable. The fierce fox who stared me down in a bank vault now transformed into something almost innocent in slumber.

Lightning flares beyond the gauzy curtains, illuminating her face for a heartbeat. In sleep, the tension she wears like armor has slipped away. Long lashes fan her cheeks. There’s a tiny furrow between her brows, like even in dreams she’s not at peace. I step over the threshold, quiet as a ghost, until I’m at her bedside. I tell myself I’m only checking that she isn’t faking slumber to sneak off—she’s an escape artist, after all. But the truth is, I’m drawn to her. Some magnetic pull I can’t explain.

Rain patters against the windows as the storm finally breaks. I stand there watching Valentina sleep for far too long, waging a war within myself. In this moment, I could do anything. Brush a kiss to her forehead. Run my fingers through that silken hair splayed over the pillow. Slide into bed beside her and feel her warmth against me... I ache with the want of it. It’s maddening.

My hand hovers above her shoulder, not quite touching. What are you doing, Dante? She is to be your wife in name, yes, but she is also a means to an end. You can’t afford to forget that. Emilio’s words from this morning echo again: She’s a tool, nothing more. Don’t lose your head.

I grit my teeth and let my hand fall back to my side. Slowly, I back away from her bed. I force myself to memorize the scene—Valentina safe and cared for under my roof, her father under guard and healing. This is the leverage I need to pull off our scheme. My desire has no place here. I will not be ruled by it.

At the door, I take one last look. “Sleep well, mia bella volpe,” I whisper under my breath, so softly it barely stirs the air. My beautiful fox. She doesn’t hear it.

I slip out into the hall and lock her door from the outside, pocketing the key. The storm rages quietly outside, thunder rolling in the distance. Inside me, a different storm churns. I realize my hands are shaking—tiny tremors that betray the depth of my conflict. Control versus desire. Duty versus something far more dangerous.

As I walk away from Valentina’s door, I wonder which will triumph in the end. In the darkness of the corridor, one question haunts me: How much longer can I play the dutiful son and deny the pull Valentina has on me before everything I’ve built comes crumbling down?

## Chapter 5 – Fox with a Key‑Card (Valentina POV)

I wake in darkness, my heart thudding against my ribs as if my body already knows tonight is the night for action. For a disoriented moment, I lie still in the unfamiliar silk sheets, recalling where I am: the Moretti villa, enemy territory. A faint rumble of thunder rolls in from the lake. By the weak glow of the night lamp, I make out the elegant furnishings of the guest suite Dante has imprisoned me in. Imprisoned—the word snaps my purpose back into focus. I reach under my pillow and my fingers close around the slim plastic key-card I stole from Dante last night. The clock is ticking—barely forty-eight hours remain before I’m meant to stand at an altar as Dante’s unwilling bride. If I’m going to find a way out of this trap, it has to be now, under cover of darkness.

My mind flashes to the look on Dante’s face a few hours ago outside my door—the way his icy composure cracked when he tucked that stray lock of hair behind my ear. The gentleness of the gesture left me stunned. And then… nothing. He pulled away, retreating behind his walls once more. Even now, the memory sends a confusing flush through me. I shouldn’t be dwelling on it, or on the heat that bloomed low in my belly when he came so close. I shouldn’t be thinking about Dante at all, except as a target to be outmaneuvered.

Clenching the key-card in hand, I silently slide out of bed. The cool air raises goosebumps along my bare arms and legs; I’m still dressed in the champagne-colored silk cami and shorts I wore to sleep. Hardly ideal for sneaking around, but better than a flowing gown or noisy fabrics. I slip my feet into soft-soled house slippers I found in the wardrobe—silent on the marble floors.

First hurdle: the door. I pad over and turn the handle gingerly. It doesn’t budge. My suspicion is confirmed—Dante locked me in after escorting me here. For a beat, indignation flares in my chest. The gall of that man, playing the gentleman and then literally locking me up. He likely thinks he’s being clever. But I came prepared.

From the little jewelry box on the vanity, I’d pocketed a spare hairpin earlier. Now I retrieve the thin metal pin from where I hid it under the lampshade base. Old-fashioned tumbler lock… my lips curve in a faint smile. Child’s play. Working the hairpin carefully, I feel for the subtle resistance of the mechanism. A few gentle twists and a soft click rewards me. Dante Moretti, meet La Volpe. There isn’t a lock I can’t pick given enough time and the right tools.

Easing the door open, I peer into the hallway. The villa is dark, illuminated only by recessed floor lights that cast long shadows along the corridor. Directly across, my father’s door is closed; a guard sits dozing in a chair beside it, his chin slumped to his chest. My heart squeezes at the sight of Papà’s protector provided by Dante. At least he’s safe tonight.

I exhale slowly. Time to move. I slip into the hall, hugging the wall as I slide in the opposite direction, away from the sleeping guard. Every instinct is on high alert, muscles tensed for any sound. But the only noises are the distant hum of the central air and the patter of rain against the windows. Somewhere deeper in the estate, I hear muffled thunder.

I make my way through the labyrinthine halls, sticking to the shadows. The Moretti villa is even more eerie at night. Moonlight spills through floor-to-ceiling windows, painting silver pools on the marble. I glide from one patch of darkness to the next, mindful of security cameras. Dante no doubt has eyes everywhere, but I also know how to avoid a CCTV’s gaze. If I recall the layout from earlier tours (limited though they were), the cameras in these corridors sit at the far corners, with blind spots along the opposite wall. I keep close to the walls accordingly, moving with measured, silent steps.

On the ground floor, I pause behind a column to gather my bearings. To my left, faint light spills out from a slightly ajar door of what I remember is Dante’s study. Is he still awake in there? My pulse quickens. I can’t risk running into him. Holding my breath, I inch close enough to peek through the narrow opening. The study is dark and empty; the light is coming from a desk lamp left on, illuminating a mahogany desk and rows of bookshelves. Dante must have been here recently—an empty glass and decanter sit on a side table—but he’s gone now. Probably retired to his bedroom or prowling elsewhere. Either way, I’m relieved.

I consider entering the study to search for the folio I tried to steal—the red-ribbon dossier numbered 312. Dante confiscated it when he caught me. It could be in there. But I decide against it; rummaging through his office could take too long, and time is precious. Besides, I have a more direct approach in mind tonight, courtesy of the key-card burning a hole in my hand.

The electronic master key offers access to places in this villa that a locked study drawer might not. Dante wouldn’t carry it on him if it weren’t crucial. My bet is that it opens the way to a security or surveillance hub—somewhere I can gather real intelligence. If I can get into their systems, maybe I can find out what the Morettis are planning for the Caravaggio, or even dig up leverage to free Papa and me.

Moving on, I find a narrow staircase at the end of the hall that descends toward the back of the house. I’m guessing it leads to the kitchens or servant areas. Sure enough, I emerge into a service corridor—plain beige walls, utility closets, the faint smell of cleaning agent. For an instant, I consider slipping out one of these service doors into the rainy night, disappearing while I have the chance. But I can’t leave Papà behind, nor do I fancy being chased through the dark by Moretti guards. Running without a plan would be suicide. No—I need ammunition first, something I can use to truly free us. Here, a single camera is mounted near an exit sign. I duck my head and swipe Dante’s card at a door marked “Private”. The panel blinks green and the lock releases with a soft beep. My stomach does a little flip of triumph.

I slip through and close the door behind me. The room beyond is small and windowless, illuminated by the glow of multiple monitors mounted on the wall. Bingo. This is the surveillance room. Rows of security feeds flicker in grayscale: empty hallways, the front gate under rain, the garage, and the grand ballroom—the frescoed ceiling lost in shadows, its crystal chandeliers dimmed to dark crowns. For an instant, the image of that empty marble dancefloor sends an unwelcome shiver through me—I can almost feel Dante’s hand tightening around my waist again, his breath hot against my neck in that very room just last night. I shake the memory off. There’s also a bank of servers on a rack and a desk strewn with a mug, a half-eaten sandwich, and a couple of computer terminals.

And thankfully, no personnel—at least not at this second. A chair is pushed back as if someone left in a hurry. I don’t know how much time I have until the guard returns, so I move quickly.

My eyes scan the monitors for any sign of active patrols near me. All clear. I perch at one of the terminals and wiggle the mouse. The machine wakes from sleep mode without requiring a password—sloppy. Then again, perhaps Dante trusts his inner security enough not to expect an intruder within the villa. A grim smile touches my lips. He didn’t account for an enemy on the inside with his own credentials.

On the screen, a surveillance interface is open, along with what looks like file directories. I plug the master key-card into a port on the terminal, hoping it doesn’t trigger some alarm. It likely contains credentials as well; instantly, I see more menu options unlock on the screen. Security Logs, Personnel, Archives... there. Archives. That sounds promising.

I navigate into the archives, fingers flying over the mouse and keyboard. Folders labeled by years and keywords appear. Many are gibberish to me or coded. A quick search for “312” yields nothing obvious. I try “Caravaggio” next—no hits, which means if there are files on it, they’re under a code name.

Biting my lip, I skim the directory names: Foxglove Protocol, says one. My breath catches. Foxglove? Like the poisonous flower. Something about that tickles my memory—wasn’t foxglove also known as digitalis, used carefully it can heal, but too much is lethal? It seems the Morettis have a dramatic flair in naming their schemes. Without hesitation, I click it.

A list of encrypted files populates the screen, each with meaningless alphanumeric titles. My heart kicks at the folder name—Foxglove. The irony of a toxic flower named for a fox isn’t lost on me, considering La Volpe has been forced into this scheme. It’s almost as if the Morettis are mocking me in code. I try opening one, and a prompt asks for a decryption key. Of course they wouldn’t make it easy. I have no time to attempt cracking it here. Instead, I retrieve a micro USB drive tucked in the lining of my silk camisole. It’s wafer-thin and went unnoticed by any frisking—a girl’s best friend, in my line of work. With a quick plug-in, I start copying the entire Foxglove folder to the drive. A progress bar creeps forward on the screen.

Come on, come on... A bead of sweat rolls down my back beneath the silk. Any minute that guard could walk back in. As if on cue, through the door’s frosted glass panel I see the shape of a figure approaching. My heart leaps into my throat. He’s coming back!

I glance at the progress bar—70%. Just a few more seconds. I grit my teeth and mentally will it to move faster. The figure’s shadow pauses just outside the door. I hear the jingle of keys.

80%… 90%… Done! I yank the USB out and slip it into my waistband. At the same instant, the door handle rattles. I lunge away from the computer, ducking behind a tall metal server rack in the corner just as the door swings open.

Through the slats of the rack, I see a burly guard step in—the one likely assigned to monitor the cameras. He’s muttering to himself in Italian, something about “stupid rain” and “bathroom breaks.” My heart is hammering so loudly I’m sure he’ll hear it. I press a hand over my mouth to steady my breathing.

The guard trudges to the desk and takes a swig from the mug, grimacing (cold coffee, I imagine). He hasn’t noticed anything amiss—yet. But then his gaze lands on the monitor I left unlocked. I silently curse myself. He stiffens, leaning in to squint at the screen. My pulse spikes. Did I close the archive window? In my rush, I’m not sure that I did.

The guard mumbles, puzzled, and reaches for the mouse. His back is to me now. If he scrolls through the activity log, he might see the transfer that just occurred. I need a distraction now, or my whole operation’s blown.

As if answering a prayer, a sharp crack of thunder booms directly overhead. The lights flicker, and on the wall of monitors, one of the exterior feeds goes black, then flashes an error. The guard curses and grabs a walkie-talkie. “Sergio, you copy? Yeah, camera 4 is down again. Probably the storm. Go reboot the breaker in the east outbuilding,” he barks, annoyed. A staticky reply comes, and he signs off.

He gets up from the desk in a hurry, clearly intending to fix this new problem. As he strides toward the door, he pulls a ring of keys from his belt and hastily locks the room behind him once he leaves. The moment he’s gone, I allow myself to exhale. That was too close.

I give it another half minute, until the sound of his footsteps fades down the hall, before I pick the lock on the door from the inside (blessedly, it’s similar to my bedroom door and the hairpin still has use). Slipping out, I relock it behind me quietly. The corridor is empty again.

Clutching the precious USB hidden at my waist, I retrace my steps through the service passage and back up the stairs. Adrenaline sings in my veins. I can’t believe I actually pulled that off. A giddy, nervous laugh tries to bubble up, but I bite it back. Not yet. I’m not safe until I’m back behind my own locked door, and even then with Dante sleeping under the same roof, safety is relative.

I ghost through the halls until I reach the guest wing. The guard by my father’s room is still dozing, oblivious. Carefully, I ease back into my bedroom and lock the door behind me. Only then do I sag against it, chest heaving with quiet, relieved breaths.

Phase one complete. I stash Dante’s key-card back under my pillow—he doesn’t seem to realize it’s missing yet, but I’ll still want it for future use. Now for phase two: see what I risked my neck to steal.

I retrieve the USB and grab my phone from its hiding spot beneath the mattress. It’s a basic smartphone—my own, which I’d powered down and secreted in my bra lining when Dante first captured me. Thankfully, no one found it during my initial search; perhaps they assumed the thief La Volpe wouldn’t carry something so traceable. I smirk at that oversight as I boot it up. It only has power for a short while, but it’ll do. Using an adapter, I plug in the USB drive.

A prompt pops up for a password. Of course. These files were encrypted for a reason. But I’m undeterred. This isn’t my first time cracking digital locks. I launch a decryption program—one of my own design—that runs through common cipher keys and Moretti-related terms. As lines of code scroll on the tiny screen, I chew my lower lip, impatient.

Minutes pass. Outside, the storm intensifies; rain lashes at the windows. I pace the room, glancing at the phone on the bed as it methodically attacks the encryption. “Come on…” I whisper. Maybe I should try some educated guesses manually. Foxglove was the folder name… poisonous flower... maybe the key is related. Belladonna? Digitalis? No luck. I try “Moretti”, “Caravaggio”, even “Serpente”. Each returns an error. I rub my temples, forcing myself to think logically. If this Foxglove Protocol is their big secret, what key would they use? Think like a Moretti, Val. Likely something personal yet sly. I try a few of the Moretti clan’s touchstones: their motto, perhaps a date—nothing. "Come on," I whisper urgently to the phone. My fingertips drum anxiously on the mattress.

Then I recall the cultural jargon Dante’s family uses. They have all sorts of theatrical rituals—the blood oath, the acorn of silence token. Foxglove… perhaps it’s referencing something more personal. On a hunch, I type “Giuliana”. That was Dante’s mother’s name, if I recall the tabloids correctly. Wrong—still locked. Damn.

Thunder booms again. I glower at the phone, watching the brute-force script run through variations. Just when I’m about to lose hope, I see the word “Foxglove” appear in the attempt list and the screen freezes, then flashes green. Unbelievable—it was literally “foxglove”. They named the folder and used the same word as a key? The Morettis aren’t as clever as they think.

The folder opens, revealing a handful of files. Most are documents labeled in code, but one is a large image file, a scan of an old photograph. Heart hammering, I open the photo. It slowly renders on the phone’s screen, pixel by pixel.

The image is grainy, clearly taken decades ago, but I’d recognize those faces anywhere. On the right stands a younger Emilio Moretti—Dante’s father. His hair was darker then, but the predatory gleam in his eyes is unmistakable. He’s at a gala or party, dressed in a sharp suit and raising a champagne glass. And beside him, smiling radiantly with her arm threaded through his, is my mother.

I sink onto the bed, knees suddenly weak. My mother looks so vibrant—mid-twenties perhaps, in a satin evening gown I’ve never seen before, her dark curls tumbling elegantly over her bare shoulders. I can scarcely breathe as I take in the sight of her hand resting with easy familiarity on Emilio’s forearm. They look cozy, like intimates sharing a victory.

No. This can’t be what it looks like. Why would my mother be with him, years before I was even born? My mother married my father, Alfonso, and as far as I know had little to do with the Morettis beyond the professional realm. Unless… unless I haven’t been told the full story.

A million questions flood my mind, each like a shard of glass: Was my mother involved with Don Moretti? Had she been leveraged somehow, or was it… an affair? Did Papa know? My mother died when I was only ten—an accident, they said, a senseless car crash on a rainy night. Any memories I have of her are faint and rose-tinted, since Papa rarely speaks of her. The possibility that she had secret dealings—or a relationship—with the Moretti patriarch makes my stomach turn.

My hands tremble as I zoom in on the photo, scrutinizing every detail. There’s a date in the corner: 1998, Zurich. I would have been just a toddler. My mother would have been around the same age I am now. I shut my eyes, trying to recall any snippets of overheard conversations or hidden keepsakes. Nothing concrete—just an unease that now coils in my gut.

Lightning flashes, and in its stark light I catch my reflection in the vanity mirror: wide gray eyes, as stormy as the night outside, and an expression of betrayal. I look like a frightened child. With effort, I steel myself. Panicking won’t give me answers.

Instead, I take a steadying breath and snap a screenshot of the photo, then quickly hide the image and power down my phone. The evidence is safely stored, and I won’t risk leaving it onscreen if someone barges in. I tuck the phone and USB back into their hiding spot.

Sliding down to sit on the plush carpet, I wrap my arms around my knees. My mind is racing too fast to consider sleep now. Outside, the rain continues its relentless drum. I press a hand over my mouth to stifle the mix of anger and anguish threatening to spill out. I feel like the floor has dropped from under me.

Whatever that photograph means, one thing is clear: the Morettis have entangled my family far deeper than I realized. My mother’s secret could be the reason behind everything—the bankruptcy of Rossi Atelier, the vendetta marriage, maybe even Papa’s failing health. It could unravel everything I thought I knew.

Tears prick at my eyes, but I blink them away fiercely. I can’t afford despair. This is information—power, perhaps—that I can use, once I understand it. I think of Dante, of the almost gentle way he watched over me tonight. Does he know about this picture? Is he aware of whatever history lies between our families? Or am I the only one in the dark?

I rise unsteadily to my feet. My reflection in the mirror now is a different woman—one with narrowed eyes and determination hardening her features. I will find out the truth behind that photo. If my mother was betrayed or hurt by Emilio Moretti, I swear I will uncover it.

Lightning illuminates the room once more. In its flash, I imagine Emilio’s serpentine grin next to my mother’s innocent smile. The betrayal cuts deep. I clench my fists until my nails bite into my palms, using the pain to anchor myself.

What other secrets have the Morettis been keeping from me, and how will I use them to bring this dynasty to its knees?

## Chapter 6 – Silvio’s Sting (Dual POV)

(Dante POV)

The rain has stopped by the time our car pulls up to the grand museum steps, but the air is still heavy with storm. I exit first, buttoning my tuxedo jacket, and extend a hand to help Valentina out. She gathers her long skirts and steps down, her fingers barely grazing mine before she withdraws. Cameras flash from a distance—photographers snapping shots of Zurich’s elite arriving for the charity gala. I school my features into a practiced cordial mask.

The Zürich Art Alliance Gala is ostensibly for some children's art fund, but I know better. My cousin Silvio never does anything unless it serves his own agenda. Hosting a high-profile charity event is the perfect cover for his networking and scheming. Silvio plays the benevolent patron, but I know European Syndicate Auctioneers uses gimmicks like “fractional masterpiece shares” to launder blood money. I scan the glittering crowd filtering into the museum’s colonnaded entrance. Sleek luxury cars and town cars line the curb; men in black tie and women in jewel-toned gowns mill about under the ornate portico. Valentina hesitates at my side, and I sense her taking a steadying breath.

“Ready?” I ask quietly, leaning in so only she can hear.

Her profile is calm, almost blank—the smooth porcelain mask of an art restorer who’s attended a hundred high-society galas. But I catch the small tremor of her hand clutching her evening purse. “As I’ll ever be,” she replies. Her voice is cool, but I know courage when I see it. She loops her arm through mine gracefully, playing the role of devoted fiancée. Anyone watching would think we’re just another loving couple braving a night of champagne and schmoozing.

The thought sends an uncomfortable warmth through my chest. I focus on the task at hand. “Stay close to me tonight,” I murmur as I escort her up the steps beneath the carved stone arches. “Silvio will be looking for any opportunity to poke holes in this engagement. Let’s not give him one.”

She tilts her head in a show of affection that doubles as sarcasm. “Afraid I’ll embarrass you, caro?” she purrs sweetly through her smile, for the benefit of onlookers. To anyone listening, it sounds like a lover’s playful jest. But I catch the edge beneath.

I respond with a light squeeze of her arm, leaning down to brush a kiss against her temple. To the cameras, it’s a tender gesture; in truth, it’s an excuse to whisper at her ear. “No. I’m afraid of what he might try. Watch yourself.” My lips linger a half-second longer than necessary, inhaling the subtle floral scent in her hair. Gardenias again. Focus, Dante.

We enter the museum’s atrium, which has been transformed into an opulent ballroom for the event. Marble floors gleam under the chandelier light. Classical statues and abstract art pieces stand guard along the walls, draped with garlands of white roses. The space hums with refined chatter and clinking glasses. I hand off our coats to an attendant and retrieve two champagne flutes from a passing server.

Valentina stands close to my side, her body tense as we plunge into the belly of the soirée. I can’t blame her. This is her first public appearance since the engagement gala, and here we’re surrounded by possibly unfriendly faces. Out of habit, I rest a protective hand at the small of her back. Through the fabric of her emerald-green gown, I can feel the warmth of her skin. She startles slightly at the touch, glancing up at me in surprise. I give her the faintest reassuring nod. It wouldn’t do for either of us to appear uneasy.

Almost immediately, a cluster of well-wishers swarms us—board members, minor aristocrats, all offering congratulations on our upcoming nuptials. We smile, we nod, we endure. Valentina plays her part flawlessly, gracing them with polite laughter and demure answers. I catch glimpses of steel in her eyes whenever someone calls her lucky. If only they knew the truth of this arrangement.

“And here he is, the man of the hour—Principe himself!” A familiar voice slithers through the din. The crowd parts as Silvio Moretti approaches, arms wide in a grand display. My cousin is all charm tonight: lean and handsome, his dark-blond hair artfully tousled, a serpent tattoo just peeking above his collar. He wears a white tuxedo jacket, debonair and a touch ostentatious, which fits him perfectly.

“Silvio.” I greet him with a curt nod. Valentina stiffens slightly beside me, and I feel her gaze flick to Silvio’s tattoo and back. She hasn’t met the Viper up close since the engagement party. I wonder what she makes of him—a snake recognizing another?

Silvio’s pale green eyes sweep over Valentina appraisingly. He takes her free hand in his and bows to brush a kiss just above her knuckles. The gesture is courtly but his lips linger a beat too long. “Valentina Rossi,” he says smoothly, straightening. “La Volpe herself gracing our humble event. That gown is stunning on you, my dear.”

Valentina smiles, but it doesn’t reach her eyes. “You’re too kind, Signor Moretti.” Her tone is respectful, though I detect the effort it costs her to keep it so. She subtly withdraws her hand from his. Good. I hadn’t realized how much I was clenching my jaw until I feel it ease once she’s out of his grasp.

Silvio turns to me, clapping a hand on my shoulder in a show of cousinly affection. “And Dante, I must thank you for coming. I know how busy things are with the wedding preparations.” He flashes a grin that to others might seem genial. To me, it’s a provocation. “I was worried you’d both be too preoccupied to support our little charity, but I’m delighted to be proven wrong.”

“Wouldn’t miss it,” I reply evenly. “Anything for the children.” I let a hint of dry irony lace my words that only Silvio would catch. We both know this gala’s proceeds likely won’t see a single orphan—more likely they’ll fund his latest venture or line some official’s pocket. Silvio’s smile sharpens; he caught my meaning but doesn’t rise to it.

He gestures broadly around the hall. “Please, make yourselves at home. Dance, drink, bid generously on the auction. We have some lovely pieces on the block tonight.” His eyes flick meaningfully to Valentina as he says this. “A few real rarities. Perhaps something might catch your fiancé’s expert eye?”

Valentina inclines her head. “Perhaps,” she says lightly. Only I can hear the tightness beneath. The double-speak isn’t lost on her; Silvio is probing for weakness, referencing her failed heist or her forging expertise in that veiled way.

I step in before he can test further. “We’ll circulate, then,” I say, sliding my arm more securely around Valentina’s waist. It’s a possessive move, and not entirely for show. “If you’ll excuse us, Silvio.”

His gaze drops to where my hand rests at her hip, then flicks back to my face. For a split second something glints in his eyes—annoyance, perhaps—but it’s gone as he executes a shallow bow. “Of course. We’ll talk later. Enjoy the evening, you two.”

He melts away into the crowd, off to greet new arrivals with that same practiced smile. The moment he’s gone, Valentina exhales a breath I hadn’t realized she was holding. I guide her to the edge of the ballroom, near a display of modern sculptures, under pretense of admiring them. “You okay?” I ask under my breath.

She nods once. “I’m fine.” Her eyes track Silvio’s white jacket across the room warily. “He’s very…”

“Intense?” I supply.

“Slippery,” she corrects, managing a faint smirk. “But I expected that.”

Slippery indeed. I take a sip of champagne, my gaze never straying far from Silvio. He’s working the room, laughter and handshakes, ever the consummate performer. It sets my teeth on edge. I lean closer to Valentina. “He’ll try to corner you at some point. If I’m pulled away, find me immediately if he bothers you.”

Valentina bristles subtly, squaring her bare shoulders. “I can handle Silvio.”

The music from the live string orchestra shifts to a waltz, and I catch a few couples venturing onto the dance floor. I angle myself to face her fully. “I don’t doubt that. But you don’t have to do it alone.” The memory of her defiantly standing up to me in that vault and later in my own home flashes through my mind. Valentina has fought every inch of the way; I can’t imagine Silvio easily cowing her. Still, something protective surges in me at the idea of him even trying.

Before she can respond, an elderly patron I vaguely recognize appears at my elbow, beaming and insistent on introducing us to some director of something. The next several minutes, I’m engaged in polite small talk. I keep a hand on Valentina’s arm, anchoring her to me as we smile and nod. I feel her tension through the delicate fabric of her sleeve. She performs flawlessly, though, even charming the old director with a quick quip about avant-garde art.

As the conversation extends, I notice across the room one of my father’s advisers beckoning for my attention. Damn. The last thing I want is to leave Valentina alone right now, but duty calls. “Stay here,” I murmur to her. “I’ll be back soon.”

Her eyes flash with apprehension. “Dante—”

“It’ll be fine,” I assure, squeezing her hand briefly. “I won’t be long.”

Reluctantly, I detach myself and stride toward the adviser, who stands by a side doorway. I throw a final glance over my shoulder at Valentina. She’s stepped back toward the sculpture display, a glass of champagne in hand, looking for all the world like a patient, dutiful fiancée waiting for her partner’s return.

Silvio is nowhere near her at the moment, I note with relief. Still, unease prickles at my neck as I follow my father’s adviser into a quiet alcove. I’ll make this quick.

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(Valentina POV)

Dante leaves my side, and at once the festive hall feels less safe. I chide myself for the thought—I don’t need his protection—yet I can’t deny that having him near was a shield of sorts, especially against the Viper’s gaze. I sip my champagne and feign interest in the strange modern sculpture beside me. It’s a twisted metal figure, all sharp angles and empty space. Fitting, given how hollow I feel at this moment.

In truth, my mind is still reeling from our brief exchange with Silvio. There was something in his tone when he greeted me—a knowing gleam that set me on edge. And the way he said “La Volpe”… as if we share a secret.

I scan the crowd, searching for that white tuxedo. It doesn’t take long to spot him—he’s moved to the center of the ballroom, surrounded by a small circle of admirers or sycophants. He laughs at something a duchess says, but even as he does, his eyes cut across the room… to me. Our gazes lock. My heartbeat kicks up. Silvio smiles and lifts his champagne flute in a subtle toast, then whispers something to the group and slips away, heading in my direction.

Cold caution prickles down my spine. I set my half-empty glass on the base of the sculpture and straighten, smoothing my face into polite neutrality. The fox facing the viper.

“Valentina,” Silvio greets, materializing at my side. Up close, I catch a whiff of expensive cologne, but it doesn’t mask the faint scent of something sharp underneath—gun oil, I realize. Strange. He must notice my slight frown because he flashes that charming smile. “How are you enjoying the gala? I hope my cousin hasn’t abandoned you for too long.”

I adopt the same pleasant tone I used all evening. “Not at all. Dante will return shortly.”

Silvio steps a fraction nearer, ostensibly to let an elderly couple pass by us. In doing so, he enters my personal space, close enough that his sleeve brushes mine. “He’d be a fool to leave a jewel like you alone for even a minute,” he murmurs.

I stiffen, biting back an instinctive retort. His words are ostensibly flattering, but the intimacy with which he speaks sends a chill over my skin. “Dante trusts me to handle myself,” I reply evenly.

“Mm, as he should. You’re a very capable woman.” Silvio picks up my discarded champagne flute from the sculpture pedestal and offers it to me. I hadn’t even realized he saw me set it down. I take it carefully, more to occupy my hands than out of thirst.

Silvio continues, voice light. “I’ve heard so much about your talents. An elite art restorer, a connoisseur of fine paintings… the art world buzzes about the Rossi prodigy. And perhaps other circles whisper of La Volpe’s escapades.”

My stomach does a little flip. Is he implying he knows about my less legitimate talents? His eyes glint with mischief. I decide to play dumb. “Other circles? I’m not sure what you mean, Signor Moretti.”

He chuckles, the sound low. “Come now, we’re practically family. Call me Silvio.” He gently touches my elbow, guiding me with surprising assertiveness a few steps away from the crowd, toward a side hallway lined with paintings. I resist the urge to pull away; causing a scene here would only draw unwanted attention. “I was referring,” he continues smoothly, “to the whispers that Dante has managed to tame the notorious fox of Milan.”

I inhale sharply, nearly choking on a sip of champagne. So he’s laying it out plainly. I angle my body to face him, slipping my arm free of his light hold under pretense of adjusting my shawl. “Tame? I wouldn’t say anyone’s been tamed. I entered this engagement of my own will.”

“Did you?” Silvio’s brows lift in mock surprise. “Of course. A love match, is it?” He steps closer again, and I’m backed nearly against the wall now. To any passerby, it might look like we’re intimately discussing the artwork. But no one can hear the venom beneath his silken words. “Or perhaps Dante found other methods to compel your cooperation.”

I clench my fist around the delicate stem of the champagne flute. He knows. Maybe not everything, but enough to be dangerous. “My reasons for being here are no one’s concern but mine and Dante’s,” I say quietly, steel underlying each syllable.

Silvio hums thoughtfully. “Fair enough.” He lifts his own glass and takes a swallow, regarding the painting. “You know, Dante and I grew up like brothers. We have no secrets between us.”

What a blatant lie. I can’t help a soft scoff. “Is that so?”

He smiles. “Absolutely. He tells me everything.” Those pale green eyes cut to me. “For instance, I know about the Caravaggio.”

A bolt of fear spears through me, tempered by confusion. Does he truly know, or is he fishing? I keep my face impassive. “Caravaggio?”

He leans in, ostensibly admiring the gilded frame of the portrait, but his words are for me alone. “The lost painting your father safeguarded. The one Dante is so eager to possess.”

My blood turns to ice. He does know. How in hell—

Silvio continues before I can recover. “Did you really think Dante swooped in on that vault heist by coincidence? The Foxglove Protocol, my dear.” He says it so casually, yet my heart pounds at the name. Hearing it aloud, from someone else’s lips, feels like being stripped bare. “Charming code name, isn’t it? Foxglove—beautiful and deadly. Rather like you.”

I fight to maintain my composure. So he even knows the internal code name of this twisted marriage-art exchange. That implies he’s privy to Moretti inner dealings. Or perhaps he’s the one who conceived it, given his cunning. Regardless, him flaunting this knowledge is meant to rattle me, and damn if it isn’t working.

“Why are you telling me this?” I ask softly, turning to face him fully. My eyes search his, looking for his angle. “If you and Dante have no secrets, as you claim, then you’re essentially betraying his confidence by speaking to me about these matters.”

Silvio’s grin widens a fraction. “Consider it… friendly advice. I have a soft spot for the Rossi family. And you are soon to be my cousin-in-law, after all. I’d hate to see you—how should I put it—caught unawares.”

My pulse drums in my ears. There’s a warning beneath his words, a promise of ill fate. “Caught unawares by what?”

By now, the music and chatter of the ballroom feel a world away. Silvio sets down his glass on a side table. When he turns back to me, he lifts a hand as if to brush a stray curl from my shoulder—a gesture uncannily similar to what Dante did in the corridor last night. I flinch subtly, and Silvio’s fingers instead toy with the end of my shawl. His voice is gentle, almost pitying. “By the reality of life as a Moretti bride. My uncle can be a… demanding patriarch. And Dante, well, he doesn’t always have as much say as he likes to think. Once the Caravaggio is secured, some might feel your usefulness has run its course.”

Each word drops like a stone into my gut. Usefulness run its course. The implication is clear: once they have what they want, I’m expendable. Is he confirming my worst fear—that Emilio Moretti intends to dispose of me after this is over? I think of the brass acorn token Dante showed me in the study when we signed the contract—a Ghianda, the Moretti calling card for a sanctioned hit. A chill settles in my bones.

I don’t realize my breathing has sped up until Silvio softly tuts and, in an audacious move, lifts a hand to my neck. He brushes the pad of his thumb against the hollow of my throat—right where my pulse is thrumming. I recoil from his touch, but he shushes me quietly. “Easy, bella volpe. I meant no distress.” His green eyes search my face with feigned concern. “It’s simply that I hate to see a beautiful woman left in the dark. If Dante hasn’t told you everything… perhaps you should be asking why.”

My cheeks flare with heat—anger, fear, and yes, doubt colliding. Is he right? Dante certainly hasn’t told me specifics of his plans beyond the broad strokes. But why would he? I’m his pawn, not his confidante. Still… a tiny part of me is wounded by the idea that he might be keeping even more damning secrets that concern my life.

I swallow hard and bat Silvio’s hand away from me at last, my temper beginning to rise. “If you’re trying to turn me against Dante, you’ll have to do better than cryptic threats.”

Silvio chuckles, low in his throat. “Feisty. I like that.” He steps closer again, and I’m backed nearly against the wall. To any passerby, it might look like we’re intimately discussing the artwork. From afar, we likely appear to be two acquaintances examining the portrait in front of us—a genteel painting of a Renaissance maiden. But no one can hear the venom beneath his words. “I’m not your enemy, Valentina. In fact, should you ever find yourself in need of… protection, I hope you’ll remember tonight’s conversation.” He lifts one finger and trails it brazenly along my bare shoulder, making my skin crawl. “You’d find me a far more accommodating partner than my rigid cousin. I know how to treat a lady.”

Before I can slap his hand away—or better yet, drive the stiletto heel of my shoe onto his instep—a new voice interrupts, tight with barely controlled fury. “Is there a problem here?”

Dante. He’s suddenly at my side, looming behind Silvio with eyes blazing ice. I’ve never been so relieved to see him.

Silvio withdraws his touch from me and turns smoothly, all innocence. “Problem? Not at all. I was just keeping Valentina company while you were occupied.”

Dante’s gaze rakes over me, as if assessing for distress. I realize I’m trembling with barely checked anger and something like relief. My face must be flushed. Dante’s jaw flexes and when he speaks, the dangerous undertone is unmistakable. “She doesn’t need your company. Step away from my fiancée.”

Though his voice is soft, several guests nearby glance over. Silvio notices the attention and raises his hands in a pacifying gesture, smiling as though this is one big misunderstanding. “Easy, cousin. We were only chatting about art.”

Dante isn’t fooled. His arm snakes around my waist, and I gratefully press into his side. I hadn’t realized until this moment that I was holding my breath. Dante’s presence washes over me, a furious comfort. He cuts a glare at Silvio. “I think we’re done here. Take care, Silvio.”

Silvio’s gaze flits between us. For a moment, I catch a flicker of satisfaction in his eyes, like he’s achieved exactly what he set out to. “Of course,” he says, dipping his head. “I’ll leave you two to it. Valentina”—he meets my eyes, and I detect a warning in his—“I trust we’ll speak again soon. Perhaps at the wedding.” He flashes a final serpentine grin. “Can’t wait.”

With that, he turns on his heel and strides back toward the main hall. I let out the breath I was holding. My entire body is tense as a coiled spring. Dante still has an arm locked around me, and he mutters a low curse under his breath. “That bastard. What did he say to you?”

I shake my head. I’m not even sure where to begin. My mind churns with everything Silvio implied—about the Caravaggio, about my mother and being left in the dark, and the ultimate threat hanging in the air. Fear and rage war within me, and under it all, betrayal. Not by Silvio—I expect his treachery—but by the man at my side.

I step out of Dante’s hold, needing space, and put a hand to my temple. The noise of the gala, the swirl of recent revelations, all press in on me. “I… I need air,” I say, my voice coming out unsteady.

Concern flashes in Dante’s eyes. “Valentina—”

“Please,” I manage, already turning toward the grand staircase that leads to the upper levels of the museum. The exhibition floors above are closed to guests tonight; they’ll be quiet. I can breathe for a moment. “I just need a minute.”

Dante doesn’t hesitate. “I’ll come with you.” He signals discreetly to a security staff that we’re fine, just stepping away, and then follows me as I ascend the stairs. His hand hovers protectively near the small of my back but doesn’t quite touch.

We reach the dimly lit second floor landing where the sounds of the party below are muffled. Moonlight filters in through tall windows overlooking the city, painting silver bars across the polished parquet. The corridor here is lined with closed gallery rooms and a few marble busts on pedestals. It’s empty and quiet, save for the distant strains of music from below and the heavy drum of my own heart.

I stride forward, trying to gather my scattered composure. Dante catches up in two long steps and gently clasps my arm, drawing me to a halt beside a marble column. “Talk to me,” he implores in a low voice. “What did Silvio do?”

I turn on him, emotions finally boiling over. “He told me the truth, Dante. Or at least, hints of it.” My voice trembles despite my attempt to sound fierce. “About the Foxglove Protocol. About why you’re really doing all this.”

He blinks, clearly taken aback. “What? What exactly did he say?”

I swallow, recalling Silvio’s veiled threats. “‘Once the Caravaggio is secured, your usefulness has run its course,’” I quote bitterly. “He as much as told me that as soon as you get what you want, I’ll be disposed of. Is that true?”

Dante’s eyes flare wide in shock. “Disposed—? Valentina, no. I gave you my word I wouldn’t hurt you or your father, and I meant it.” He steps closer, hands gripping my upper arms firmly. “Silvio is trying to scare you, turn you against me. Don’t let him.”

I search his face in the pale light. His expression is earnest, almost desperate. Part of me wants to collapse against him in relief. But another part—wounded and wary—holds back. “It’s easy to call him a liar. But what if he’s telling the truth? You haven’t exactly been forthcoming with information.”

He recoils a fraction, hurt flickering across his features. “I haven’t lied to you.”

“Not telling me everything isn’t exactly honesty either,” I snap, voice rising. “Did it ever occur to you I deserve to know the full plan if my life is on the line?”

Dante’s grip on my arms tightens as his temper slips its leash. “My ‘plan,’ as you call it, wouldn’t put your life at risk in the first place if you hadn’t tried to rob me that night.”

His retort strikes deep. I wrench out of his grasp, bristling. “Oh, so it’s my fault I’m in this mess? I only tried to steal what the Morettis stole from my family first!” The old anger surges up—years of resentment at how my father lost everything. “You talk about honesty, Dante? How about the truth of what your father did to mine? To my mother?”

He looks genuinely baffled. “Your mother?”

My throat tightens, emotion choking me. Damn it, I hadn’t meant to bring her up—it was Silvio’s taunt that triggered it. But now the wound is open. “Yes, my mother,” I spit. “Silvio implied that your family had some involvement with her. If you know anything—anything—about that, you owe me the truth.”

Dante’s face goes cold with confusion and frustration. “Valentina, I don’t know what you’re talking about. My father barely ever mentioned your family before this engagement, and certainly nothing about your mother. Is that what Silvio told you? Don Emilio and your mother—?” He breaks off, shaking his head. “It’s absurd. He’s lying to get under your skin.”

I let out a brittle laugh, tears burning at the corners of my eyes. “Funny. He seemed to know exactly which nerve to hit. He knew about the Caravaggio. He knew about Foxglove. If it’s all lies, how did he know, Dante?”

He opens his mouth, then closes it, at a loss. I feel a hot tear escape down my cheek and swipe it away angrily. I hate this: feeling vulnerable, uncertain of what’s true, being caught between two vipers—one in front of me, one who just slithered away.

Dante’s eyes soften as I rub at my cheeks. He lifts a hand as if to touch my face, then hesitates. When he speaks again, his voice is rough but gentle. “I swear, I don’t know what Silvio’s referring to about your mother. And as for the rest—I haven’t told you everything, you’re right. But not because I plan to ‘dispose’ of you. God, Valentina, is that really what you think of me?”

His tone holds a raw note that catches me off guard. I blink up at him. In the half-light, Dante Moretti looks truly wounded. The weight of the night’s emotional turmoil presses on my chest. “I don’t know what to think of you,” I whisper. It’s the truth. He’s shown me cruelty and unexpected kindness. He’s my captor and yet, in this moment, he’s the only person I want to trust—and I’m terrified of that impulse.

Something in my answer breaks the last of his restraint. “Then let me show you,” he mutters.

Before I can ask what he means, Dante’s hands cup my face and he kisses me.

It’s not a soft, tender kiss. It’s a collision—months of tension and conflict and unspoken yearning crashing together. His lips crush against mine, fierce and demanding, and I gasp into his mouth from the suddenness of it. I should shove him away. I should slap him for his audacity. But I don’t. Instead, a lightning bolt of pure need strikes through me, pinning me in place. My hands fly up to his chest, and for a split-second I tell myself I’m going to push him off. Yet my fingers curl, clutching the lapels of his jacket instead.

A low groan rumbles in Dante’s throat as he feels me yield. He presses me back against the marble column, one arm wrapping around my lower back to support me. The marble is cool against my exposed shoulders, but Dante’s heat overwhelms everything. His kiss deepens, tongue sweeping against mine in a way that draws a helpless whimper from me. I’m drowning in the taste of him—whiskey and adrenaline and something darkly sweet.

This is madness. Here we are, practically in public, enemies by circumstance, and I’m kissing him back as though I’ll die if I stop. Maybe I will; right now breathing is secondary to the heat blazing through my body. I fist my hands in his jacket, pulling him closer, pouring all my anger and confusion into the clash of our mouths. Dante responds in kind—there’s a desperation in the way he kisses me, like he’s devouring the very air from my lungs and giving it back to me with his own.

He tears his lips from mine suddenly, both of us panting. I catch a glimpse of his face—eyes stormy with lust, cheeks flushed, hair slightly askew from my fingers. “Valentina,” he rasps, my name like a plea and a curse on his lips.

Before I can form a reply, he’s attacking my throat with hot, open-mouthed kisses. I gasp, my head tilting back against the column to give him better access. The feel of his lips trailing fire along the sensitive skin beneath my jaw unravels me. He grazes the spot where Silvio dared touch moments ago, erasing that vile memory with each brush of his tongue. I let out a shakier moan than I’d like, my hands flying up to tangle in Dante’s thick dark hair.

At that sound, Dante’s control frays entirely. His large hands move to my hips, then slide down and grab hold of my thighs. In one swift motion, he lifts me off the ground. “Hold on to me,” he growls against my neck.

I wrap my legs around his waist without hesitation, ankles locking behind his back. My gown’s skirt hikes up to my mid-thigh, but I couldn’t care less about modesty right now. The column supports my back as Dante presses his body fully against mine. Oh God—there’s no mistaking his hardness now, nestling hot and insistent between my legs even through the layers of fabric. A responding surge of heat floods me, and I bite my lip to stifle a cry.

Dante’s hands roam up my thighs, gathering the silky skirt higher. The cool air hits my bare skin. With a sharp tug, he rucks the dress up around my hips, then slides his palms under my thighs again to hoist me higher. The position grinds me against the rigid bulge in his trousers, and we both gasp. The friction is delicious, but not nearly enough. I’m already achingly wet—I can feel the slickness between my legs and suspect he can too, through the thin lace of my panties.

“Dio, Valentina…” he groans, pressing his forehead to mine for a second. His eyes blaze into me. “Tell me to stop. If you want me to stop—tell me now.”

Stop? If reason had any hold on me, I’d say yes, stop, this is insane. But I lost reason the moment he kissed me. All that’s left is want. Trembling with it, I tighten my legs around him. My answer is to take his hand and guide it boldly between my thighs.

A guttural curse rips from Dante as his fingers find the damp lace covering my sex. I arch against him, silently begging. He hooks the fabric to the side and runs a fingertip through my slick folds. We both shudder. “Merda… you’re so wet,” he whispers, voice ragged with awe.

I bury a moan into his shoulder as he begins to stroke me. The pad of his thumb circles my swollen clit while two fingers slip lower, teasing my entrance but not entering yet. Pleasure sparks through my core, and I cling to him, my nails digging into his shoulders through the fine fabric of his jacket.

He claims my mouth again, swallowing my cries as his fingers finally push inside me—one, then a second, stretching and filling me in the most intimate way. My hips buck instinctively, and he curls his fingers, stroking a spot deep inside that makes me see stars. I break our kiss, gasping aloud. Dante growls appreciatively, then continues pumping his hand slowly, deliberately, coaxing me toward madness.

“Look at me,” he murmurs. I force my heavy lids open and meet his gaze. The intensity in those steel-blue eyes nearly undoes me. “You’re mine, Valentina,” he says, voice taut as a drawn bow. “Tell me you’re mine.”

His demand sends a thrill through me, hitting somewhere between my heart and my core. Pride flares—I don’t want to surrender everything to him so easily. But as his thumb presses just right on my clit while his fingers fill me, my resistance shatters in a cry. “Yes—yes, I’m yours,” I gasp out, scarcely recognizing the needy voice as my own.

Something like triumph flashes in his eyes. He withdraws his hand abruptly, and before I can whine at the loss, he shifts his grip to support me with one arm under my backside. I hear the metallic clink of his belt unbuckling, the rasp of a zipper. My pulse skyrockets. This is really happening.

I cling to his shoulders as Dante frees himself. A moment later, the thick, blunt tip of his cock nudges against my entrance. Even in the shadows, I can feel how large he is. A mix of anticipation and a touch of fear curls through me. It’s been a long time since I’ve done this, and never under such wild circumstances.

As if sensing my nerves, Dante nuzzles my cheek, his breath hot on my ear. “I’ve got you,” he whispers. His free hand grips my thigh firmly. In one slow thrust, he pushes into me, claiming me inch by inch.

My mouth opens in a soundless moan. He stretches me near to the point of pain, but the burn is exquisite, intensified by the sheer rightness of it. My body yields to him, slick and welcoming, drawing him deeper. He’s shaking against me by the time he’s fully sheathed. “Cristo… you feel so—” He bites off the words, lips crashing to mine once more in an almost savage kiss.

For a long, breathless moment, he holds still, buried inside me to the hilt. I pulse around him, adjusting to his size, and a broken whimper escapes my throat. I’ve never been filled like this—completely, overwhelming. The slightest twitch of his hips sends an aftershock of pleasure through me.

“Move,” I beg against his lips, hardly recognizing myself in this desperate creature.

Dante doesn’t need further urging. He withdraws slowly, nearly all the way out, the friction along my inner walls making me shiver, then thrusts back in hard. A cry tears from me at the intense pleasure that follows pain. He swallows it with a fervent kiss and does it again. And again.

Soon he sets a punishing rhythm, pounding me against the marble column with each drive of his hips. The column’s cold hard surface at my back contrasts with Dante’s scorching heat inside me. I cling to him, muffling my cries against his shoulder. The sound of our bodies—skin slapping, ragged breaths, stifled moans—fills the empty corridor. Any moment someone could come up those stairs. The risk only heightens the electric thrill coursing through my veins.

Dante braces one hand above my head on the column, altering his angle, and suddenly he’s hitting that spot deep within on every stroke. My vision whites out. Pleasure gathers hot and tight in my core, winding me up toward an explosive peak.

I can feel Dante’s muscles tensing under my hands, his thrusts growing erratic. He’s close too, holding back by a thread. “Come for me, bella,” he groans against my mouth, voice barely human. “Let go.”

As if I could resist that command—I’m already there, the orgasm crashing over me with blinding force. I bite down on his shoulder through his jacket to stifle my scream as wave after wave of ecstasy wracks me. My walls clench hard around his cock, milking him. Dante curses, a guttural sound, and thrusts twice more before he shudders against me, spilling himself deep inside with a low, raw moan of my name.

We cling together, trembling in the aftermath. My mind floats, blissfully blank for a few seconds, body limp in his arms. Gradually, reality seeps back in—the distant music, the marble digging into my back, the wet warmth between my thighs where our bodies are joined. Dante’s forehead rests against mine, our breath mingling in uneven pants.

For a long moment, neither of us moves or speaks. I close my eyes, trying to imprint this feeling—the strange safety of being in his arms, even as we shake with the enormity of what we’ve done. There’s tenderness now, in the gentle way he strokes a hand along my disheveled hair, in the soft Italian endearments he murmurs against my temple. I realize I’m trembling, and not from the afterglow alone. The emotional storm inside me still churns: desire sated, but fear and confusion rising anew as the haze recedes.

Dante gently eases me down, withdrawing from my body. I stifle a gasp at the loss and the oversensitivity that follows. My legs are unsteady, and he keeps an arm around my waist until I’m sure I can stand. He’s gone quiet, watching me with an expression I can only describe as awed—and perhaps a little uncertain.

Wordlessly, he produces a folded handkerchief from his inner pocket and kneels to tend to the mess between my thighs. It’s such a startlingly intimate gesture that fresh tears prick at my eyes. I place a hand on his shoulder—perhaps to steady myself, perhaps to feel that connection again. He peeks up at me, concern knitting his brow. “Did I hurt you?”

I quickly shake my head. Physically, I feel deliciously wrecked, not hurt. But emotionally… that’s another story. I’m raw, exposed in ways I never intended to be with him. We just crossed a line that can’t be uncrossed, and I have no idea what comes next.

Dante rises, tucking himself back into his trousers and smoothing his disarrayed clothing. I shimmy my gown back down, trying to fix the bodice that’s askew and wrinkled. When I catch a glimpse of us in the glass display case nearby, I flush. I look thoroughly ravished—lips swollen, hair a mess, cheeks flushed. Dante doesn’t fare much better; his bow tie hangs loose and there’s a lipstick smear at the corner of his mouth. I reach instinctively to wipe it, and he catches my wrist gently, holding my hand to his cheek for a beat longer than necessary. The gesture is sweet, heartbreaking even.

His thumb caresses the inside of my wrist where my pulse still gallops. “Valentina,” he begins, voice hoarse, “I—”

Suddenly, the muffled sound of laughter and footsteps drifts up the stairwell. Reality crashes in on us. We’re half-dressed and disheveled in a semi-public space. Dante’s eyes snap to the stairs, then back to me. In a flash, he tugs me into the nearest darkened doorway—an unlocked gallery room.

We press behind the door just as two guests reach the landing, chattering as they head for the balcony at the other end of the floor. We hold our breath, staying utterly still. My heart hammers anew, this time with the fear of being caught. But the guests don’t glance our way; after a minute, their voices fade as they move off.

I release a shaky exhale, and Dante’s shoulders relax. In the quiet that follows, we suddenly become aware of how tightly we’re clutching each other in the darkness of the gallery. Slowly, we separate, stepping into a sliver of moonlight from a high window. Dante fixes his bow tie with trembling fingers, then runs a hand through his hair. I straighten my gown and attempt to finger-comb the tangles from my hair. An awkward silence stretches between us.

The gravity of what we just did hangs in the air. My body still hums with the aftershocks of pleasure, but the concerns that plagued me before are creeping back in. Silvio’s words. The photo of my mother. The uncertain future that awaits after the high of this moment fades. What have we done? Have I just intertwined myself even tighter with a man who could break me?

Dante clears his throat softly. “Valentina…” He reaches out as if to touch my arm, then stops, perhaps unsure of his welcome now.

I bite my lip, searching for something to ground us. My eyes land on a nearby draped canvas—an unfinished painting left in storage. Fitting, how everything between us still feels unresolved, half-concealed. I think of the promises he’s made and the secrets still unspoken.

“Dante,” I whisper, meeting his gaze in the silvery dark. My voice trembles despite me. “What happens now?”

His eyes search mine. I can see conflict there—desire, concern, maybe even something like affection. He opens his mouth, but no answer comes out. Because we both know nothing is truly solved. Outside this little bubble of moonlight, our enemies still lurk, our bargain still looms, and trust between us is as fragile as a glass about to shatter.

Below, a new song begins, the melancholic notes floating up through the floor. Dante takes a step closer, his hand finally settling on my cheek, thumb brushing away a stray tear I hadn’t realized escaped. He looks like he might say something—something that scares him. I hold my breath, waiting.

But no words fall from his lips. Instead, he pulls me into his arms, and I let him. For a brief moment, I bury my face against his chest, listening to the strong, unsteady beat of his heart. We stand there in silence, two people clinging to each other in the dark while the world threatens to tear us apart.

And in that silence, one question thunders in my mind: We’ve crossed this line—what will it cost us when dawn comes, and will either of us survive the fallout?

## Chapter 7 — Forged Truths (Valentina POV)

I stand at the threshold of the villa’s medical wing, staring at the steady rise and fall of Papà’s chest. The small clinic room is awash in morning light, machines softly beeping in rhythm with his heartbeat. Alfonso Rossi—my father—now lies pale and unconscious beneath starched white sheets. His face is gaunt, a stark reminder of why I’m here. Every sacrifice I’ve made, every lie I’ve told, has been to keep him alive. I gently brush a stray gray hair from his forehead. Hold on, Papà, I silently plead. Just a little longer. The smell of antiseptic clings to my clothes as I leave him to rest, my heart hardened with resolve.

Clutched in my hand is the crumpled photograph I found on Dante’s secret drive. The image of my mother—young, elegant, her dark curls tumbling as she smiles—arm-in-arm with Emilio Moretti has burned a hole in my thoughts ever since I discovered it. 1998. I was only a child. Why was my mother with Dante’s father? What happened between them? The questions have festered in me all night, refusing to let me savor even a moment of the illicit passion we shared just hours ago. Any warmth from last night is eclipsed by doubt and anger. If Dante has been keeping this secret, if he knew about my mother’s entanglement with his family and still dragged me into this blood oath... then he’s more of a monster than I imagined.

My heels click sharply on polished marble as I march through the villa’s halls. Above me, the morning sun filters through tall windows, illuminating the frescoed ceilings with soft gold. Painted cherubs and gods peer down as if judging my every move. I clutch the photograph tighter, the glossy paper starting to curl under my fingers. I feel like I’m walking on a knife’s edge between two worlds—one where I’m Dante’s reluctant fiancée who surrendered to his touch, and another where I’m my father’s daughter, determined to uncover the truth and save him at any cost. Each step I take reminds me of that blade’s sharpness.

I find Dante in his mahogany-lined study, standing with his back to the door. Morning light pours in through the panoramic lakefront windows ahead, silhouetting him in a halo of pale gold. Beyond the glass, Lake Zürich sparkles serenely, utterly unaware of the turmoil brewing inside this house. Dante’s posture is tense; one hand rests on the edge of his massive desk as he gazes out at the lake. Above the stone hearth hangs an antique rifle, an heirloom that seems to watch over him like a silent sentry. The scent of rich wood and faint cigar smoke lingers in the air. Usually this room exudes old-world comfort, but today it feels like a pressure cooker.

He doesn’t hear me at first. My soft footsteps are muffled by an ornate Persian rug, and I take a brief moment to study him. Dante Moretti, my captor and would-be husband, still has an aura of control even in repose. Broad shoulders clad in a crisp white shirt carry the weight of his family’s empire. His dark hair is a little disheveled—as if he’s run his fingers through it repeatedly—and when he finally senses my presence and turns, I see faint shadows beneath his eyes. He looks like he barely slept.

“Valentina,” he says quietly, surprise flickering in his voice. Those intense dark eyes of his search my face. Perhaps he expects me to mention last night. There’s a moment, just a beat, where something like vulnerability crosses his expression. But I steel myself; I can’t afford to be swayed by the memory of his gentle touch or the concern he showed me in unguarded moments. Not now.

I hold up the photograph between two fingers, my hand trembling only slightly. “Explain this,” I demand, my voice colder than the alpine lake outside.

Dante’s brows knit in confusion at first. He strides forward into a beam of morning sunlight, and when he realizes what I’m holding, he freezes, his expression utterly still. His gaze flicks from the image to my face, and shock—maybe even a flash of hurt—crosses his eyes.

He takes the photo carefully. His warm fingers brush mine and I recoil, folding my arms tightly. Dante’s throat works as he swallows. He angles the photo to see it better in the light. I catch a glimpse over his shoulder: my mother at some sunlit villa courtyard I don’t recognize, Emilio Moretti standing far too close to her, their arms linked like old friends—or lovers. The date on the border reads May 1998. Dante would have been a teenager then.

“I… I don’t understand,” he says hoarsely. Dante’s infamous poker face has abandoned him; I can almost see the thoughts turning behind those dark eyes. “My father never—” He cuts himself off, one hand curling into a fist at his side. “He never mentioned a woman named Rossi.”

I don’t realize I’ve been holding my breath until I release it. Part of me expected him to brush it off with one of his trademark sardonic quips, or to concoct some lie on the spot. But he looks truly rattled. Dante Moretti, unshakeable prince of the underworld, is shaken.

Still, I can’t let sympathy soften me. Not yet. I step around to face him, forcing him to look me in the eye. “That’s my mother, Dante. Sofia Rossi.” My voice cracks slightly on her name. “And Emilio Moretti had his arm around her like... like they were together.” I can’t keep the bitterness out of my tone. “Why would your father be with her? Did he have something to do with what happened to my family?”

The questions tumble out sharp and fast. “Did he blackmail her? Threaten her? Did you know about this when you forced me into that blood oath?” I blink away furious tears; I will not cry in front of him.

“Valentina.” Dante sets the photo on the desk gingerly, as if it might explode. He takes a hesitant step toward me, palms slightly raised. I realize I’ve been inching backward without noticing, until my shoulder blades press against the mahogany bookshelves lining the wall. Leather-bound volumes rattle slightly as I bump them. Dante stops, giving me a scant foot of space. The air between us crackles with intensity—anger, confusion, and something heartbreakingly like hurt.

“I swear to you, I had no idea,” he says, voice grave. “I’ve never seen this photo before.” He runs a hand through his hair, looking distraught yet earnest. “My father... he kept many secrets, but if he had any dealings with your mother, I was completely unaware.”

I search his face for deceit, for the slightest flicker of the calculating man who might use my mother’s memory as leverage. But there’s only raw honesty there, an almost boyish bewilderment that tugs unexpectedly at my heart. Could Dante truly not know? Could it be that for once, he and I are on the same side of an ugly secret rather than opposing sides?

“My mother died that same year,” I say, my voice softening despite myself. “I was seven, and they told me it was a car accident.”

Dante’s eyes widen. “I’m sorry,” he murmurs. And he looks it—genuinely sorry, not the perfunctory politeness one offers a stranger, but with real empathy that splits me open. He hesitates, then asks quietly, “How\... how did she die?”

“It happened in Tuscany. Papà never spoke of it after.” A hot tear slips free before I can stop it. I dash it away angrily. If there was more to it, no one ever told me. Papà wouldn’t speak of it; he could barely speak at all for months. My nails bite into my palms. “Not long after, your family swooped in on our gallery’s assets,” I add bitterly. “Forgive me if I suspect that’s not a coincidence.”

Dante’s expression flashes with something like guilt, but it’s fleeting. He shakes his head firmly. “My father’s deals with your father were just business. I won’t defend those. But as for this”—he gestures at the photograph—“I’m as in the dark as you.” He steps closer again, cautiously, until he’s within arm’s reach. I don’t move away this time, caught between wanting to push him for answers and a strange relief that he might not have knowingly deceived me about this particular thing. “Valentina,” he continues, voice low and intense. “I would never have used this against you. I didn’t even know it existed.”

The earnestness in his tone chips at my armor. He sounds almost... hurt that I’d think him capable of it. I hug my arms to myself, suddenly exhausted. The adrenaline that carried me here ebbs, leaving a tremor in its wake. “Then why was it in your encrypted files?” I ask quietly. “Filed under something called the Foxglove Protocol. Why keep a secret photograph of my mother at all?”

At that, Dante’s face darkens with frustration. “I don’t know,” he growls softly. He rakes a hand through his hair again. “I didn’t compile those files personally. Foxglove is... it’s a codename for certain sensitive operations and intel. My father started it; I’ve added to it over the years.” His gaze drifts to the photo once more, and his lips press into a hard line. “Someone must have inserted that picture into the Foxglove dossier, but damned if I know who or why.”

I process this, brow furrowed. If he’s truthful, someone within the Moretti ranks knew about my mother and hid the evidence in a file Dante would eventually inherit. Was it meant as a message? Insurance? Mamma, what did you get yourself into? The puzzle only grows more convoluted. I chew the inside of my cheek, considering another angle. “Silvio,” I say suddenly.

Dante’s head snaps up. “What about him?”

“At the gala,” I say, choosing my words carefully, “Silvio confronted me. He hinted he knows I got into Foxglove. He said once the Caravaggio is secured, my ‘usefulness’ ends—and that he would be the one to handle me after.” I shiver at the memory of Silvio’s thinly veiled threat.

A muscle feathers in Dante’s jaw. He looks positively murderous for a moment, eyes flashing with rage on my behalf. “That bastardo,” he snarls, turning away as if to restrain himself from punching something. I flinch at the sudden vehemence in his voice, but I realize it’s not directed at me. He’s furious at Silvio. Dante exhales sharply, then paces a short line in front of the window, the photo now abandoned on the desk. “I knew Silvio was sniffing around things he shouldn’t, but to threaten you...” He trails off, a stream of Italian curses slipping from his lips that I don’t quite catch. The gist is clear: Silvio will pay for that.

“I’m telling you this,” I say, swallowing my pride, “because if Silvio knew about Foxglove and that photo, maybe he knows the story behind it.” As much as I hate to admit it, that snake might have answers. “He seemed very sure of what he was saying.”

Dante stops in his tracks and faces me again. There’s regret etched into his features. “I’m sorry,” he says unexpectedly. “I should have kept you far from Silvio. I should have—”

“Don’t,” I cut him off with a sharp gesture. I can’t bear an apology right now, not when I’m still furious and frightened. If he apologizes too sincerely, I might start forgiving him for everything, and that is dangerous. “This isn’t about whose fault it is that he cornered me. The point is: Silvio might know about our parents’ past. And he all but admitted he plans to double-cross you once he gets what he wants.”

Dante’s features harden into a determined mask. He nods curtly. “He won’t get the chance.” There’s an edge to his words that raises the hairs on my neck. Dante crosses back to the desk and in one swift motion slides the photograph into a drawer, out of sight. My heart lurches, instinctively upset at the evidence being hidden away again, but his eyes catch mine. “I’ll investigate this, Valentina. Quietly, thoroughly. I give you my word.” The intensity of that promise coils between us. For a moment, I almost believe him—almost want to trust that Dante might pursue the truth for both our sakes, not just his own.

But trust is a luxury neither of us can afford. I school my features and nod, not committing to belief either way. “Fine.”

He takes a deep breath. “In the meantime, we have another pressing matter.” Dante’s tone shifts, losing some of its tenderness. Now he sounds like the man who issued ultimatums in that bank vault, the man who always has a plan. “The Caravaggio.”

My pulse picks up for a different reason. Yes. The stolen Caravaggio painting is at the center of this deadly game. The very reason Dante said he needed me. My skills, my reputation as an art restorer—for this. “You still haven’t told me exactly what the plan is,” I say cautiously. “Only that I’m to make a perfect copy.”

He nods. “We suspect it will change hands at a private auction within the next day or two, likely timed with our wedding as cover.” Dante’s fists clench on the desk’s edge. For a heartbeat, I see betrayal in his eyes—a flicker of genuine hurt that his trusted friend might be scheming against him. It’s an emotion I recognize all too well.

I cross my arms and summon a measure of detachment. “Then tell me whatever you do know. I can’t produce a convincing forgery out of thin air.”

Dante meets my gaze, his confidence returning as he shifts into planning mode. “The painting is called The Sacrifice of Isaac. The Camorra stole it from a church in Naples and have been trying to sell it on the black market. We suspect it’ll be within Camorra territory.”

Camorra. My stomach twists at that name—one of the big Italian syndicates. Dante continues, voice steady, “If a sale is happening, it’ll be within the next day or two, likely timed with our wedding as cover.”

I blink. “An auction under cover of the wedding?” That’s brazen. But also cunning. A flurry of speculation whirls in my head. Guests coming in for our nuptials could mask the arrival of black market art buyers, and the Moretti villa would be a perfect glamorous venue to hide criminal dealings in plain sight. Rage bubbles up in me—a sham wedding and a secret art sale all rolled into one? My life truly has become a circus orchestrated by puppet masters.

Dante’s eyes flick to me, gauging my reaction. “I didn’t plan it this way,” he says, almost gentle. “The timing is... not ideal. But I have to act fast. And I need you, La Volpe, to do what you do better than anyone else.” The way he says my old moniker—The Fox—sends a conflicting rush of pride and bitterness through me. Once, I prided myself on being the best art forger in Europe, a title earned in the shadows. Hearing Dante acknowledge that now feels like both a compliment and a reminder that to him I’m a tool to be used.

Still, I tilt my chin up. “You want a perfect fake to swap with the real painting at this auction,” I state, the pieces fitting together. “So that you walk away with the Caravaggio and whoever’s buying gets duped with a forgery.”

“Precisely.” Dante’s mouth curves in a razor-thin smile. “We steal the painting back under the noses of our enemies. No blood, if possible. Just cunning.”

Cunning. Of course he fixated on me for this; I’m the means to his end. The flicker of warmth I felt when he apologized and promised to seek the truth cools once more. I can’t forget that Dante orchestrates everything to his advantage.

He must notice my silence, my stiff posture. Dante steps nearer and, surprisingly, reaches for my hand. I allow it, if only because I’m too emotionally drained to pull away. His fingers wrap around mine, firm and imploring. “Valentina, I know this isn’t what you wanted,” he says quietly. “None of this is. But if we pull this off—if we secure the Caravaggio—I swear to you, your father’s debt is settled and he will remain under my protection. This will all be over.”

I search his face. Protection. The word lingers. Dante has said many things I didn’t believe, but this is the first time he’s spoken of an end to my nightmare beyond the wedding. He’s offering me a deal in his own way: help him win this prize, and my father is safe. It’s the kind of promise I’ve longed to hear, yet my guard immediately spikes. Silvio offered a similar assurance at the gala, albeit laced with threats.

Yet here is Dante, offering an olive branch rather than a gun to my head. For a moment, standing in his study as the morning sun lights the dust motes between us, I can almost pretend we are allies. A team. Perhaps even something more, given the intimacy we’ve tasted.

I hate that I want to believe him. That a treacherous part of me warms at his concern. But if I’ve learned anything, it’s that every promise in this world is conditional.

Still, I am an excellent actress when I need to be. I nod slowly, letting him see what he wants in my eyes—determination, maybe even a hint of gratitude for the supposed hope he’s given. I gently extricate my hand from his. “Then we’d better get to work,” I say, businesslike. “If the auction is as soon as tomorrow, I have a lot of painting to do in a short time.”

Relief flickers across Dante’s face. “Follow me,” he says, already moving past me out of the study. “I’ve had a workspace set up for you.”

Of course he has. Dante is nothing if not prepared. I trail him through a side corridor and down a short flight of steps, my heart thudding with a mixture of resolve and dread. This is it—the moment I start actively playing his game. But I remind myself I’m also playing my own. If forging this Caravaggio gets me one step closer to saving Papà, I’ll do it. Even if it means spending hours close to Dante, feigning cooperation while I wrestle with the urge to both kiss him and kill him.

He leads me into a high-ceilinged studio flooded with morning light. A large blank canvas waits on an easel amid paint-splattered drop cloths, and tables along the walls overflow with paints, pigments, and brushes. The sharp scent of linseed oil and turpentine hangs in the air. For a moment I forget my wariness, my fingers itching to begin.

“You did all this overnight?” I ask, unable to keep the surprise from my voice as I move further in. On one table I spot high-resolution reference photos of The Sacrifice of Isaac, presumably printed from whatever database Dante has. Candlelit figures, dramatic shadows—the hallmark of Caravaggio’s chiaroscuro style. The images send a thrill of both excitement and challenge through me. Creating a copy that can fool an expert in such short time—this is the kind of test I used to live for.

Dante stands by the door, leaning on the frame as if suddenly uncertain of his welcome in this realm of artistry. I catch him watching me with a small, cautious smile, as though pleased he managed to impress me. “I had my staff gather what they could early this morning,” he says. “The Morettis have connections in the art world. I made a few calls.” He clears his throat. “Is everything to your liking?”

I run a hand lightly over a row of fine sable brushes and let a tiny smile touch my lips despite myself. The arsenal of a master forger, laid out like a banquet. “It will do,” I reply, tone almost teasing. I can’t help it; this is the most control I’ve felt in days. Here, in front of a canvas, I am the expert.

Dante steps inside at last, his presence a warm pressure at my back as I examine the pigments. “Anything else you need, just ask,” he says quietly.

I tense slightly as I realize how close he’s gotten; when I turn, he’s right there. We’re nearly chest to chest, the energy between us shifting to something more intimate now that the angry confrontation has abated. His eyes drift over my face, down to a stray curl that has escaped my chignon and fallen by my cheek. Gently, he reaches up and brushes it back behind my ear. The gesture is so unexpected and tender that my breath catches.

Our gazes lock. In the bright morning light of the studio, Dante’s eyes are a deep, warm brown. In them I glimpse not the ruthless prince but the man who, in unguarded moments, makes me feel things I shouldn’t. That side of him is dangerous—because it makes me feel.

I force myself to focus on the present. “I should begin,” I murmur, stepping around him before I do something foolish like lean into his touch.

“Yes, of course.” Dante’s voice sounds a bit rough. He moves aside, giving me space. He doesn’t leave, though. Instead, he follows as I approach the main easel and carefully unroll a reference sketch of the painting to pin beside my canvas.

Next, I mix pigments on a glass palette for Caravaggio’s signature warm tones and shadows. My hands move with practiced ease, already smudged with oil and color as I lose myself in the familiar process. Behind me, I sense Dante’s silent presence. True to his word, he doesn’t interfere. He just watches. I can feel his gaze roam from my focused face to the movement of my arm, to the curve of my back as I lean in. There’s an almost palpable heat at my back where he stands. After a while, I step back to review the rough charcoal sketch I’ve blocked in on the canvas. It’s on point.

I gather my paints and begin layering the underpainting. I’m vaguely aware of how this must look to Dante: me fully in my element, apron smeared with ochre and umber, hair coming loose as I work. It’s been a long time since I’ve had an audience while painting. To my surprise, I don’t mind it as much as I thought I would.

It’s when I reach for a higher shelf to retrieve a vial of powdered silver for some luminous highlights that Dante finally breaks his silence. “Careful,” he murmurs, stepping forward. He’s taller than me by a good bit; he easily grabs the vial before I overextend. He holds it out, his other hand hovering near my waist as if ready to catch me should I stumble off the small step stool I’d used.

I accept the vial from him, climbing down safely. “Thank you,” I say, a bit breathless from that small effort and his sudden closeness.

He doesn’t back away this time. We stand face-to-face amid the smell of oils and chalk. A smudge of dark charcoal dust is on my cheek—Dante’s gaze flicks to it. Gently, he raises his thumb and brushes it along my cheekbone, wiping the smudge away. The pad of his thumb leaves a streak of warmth in its wake on my skin.

I should step back. I should return to painting. But I remain still, caught in the crosscurrent of emotions between us. “It’s been a long time since I’ve watched an artist at work,” Dante says softly, almost conversationally, but there’s tension beneath his words. “My mother used to paint, you know. Landscapes mostly. I’d sit with her in the gardens.”

I blink at this glimpse he’s giving me. Dante rarely speaks of his family in any affectionate way. “I didn’t know that,” I say quietly.

He smiles faintly. “No reason you would.” His thumb, having finished its task, lingers near my cheek, now caressing softly with the barest touch. My breath hitches. “You reminded me of her just now. So focused, so... alive with your art.”

The tender admiration in his voice disarms me completely. I realize with a start that my chest is rising and falling rapidly and that I haven’t responded. Dante tilts my chin up with gentle fingers, compelling me to meet his eyes. “It’s extraordinary,” he whispers, “watching you create beauty. Sei magnifica.”

Heat blooms in my cheeks at both the praise and the intimate tone. My defenses wobble. I part my lips to deflect with some quip, but nothing comes. Dante’s face is inches from mine now, and I see a tiny smear of charcoal on his thumb, smell the subtle spice of his cologne beneath the paint fumes.

This is dangerous. Every rational thought in my head screams to pull away, to remember who he is, who I am. But my traitorous body leans in. “Dante...” I murmur, not even sure if it’s a warning or an invitation.

His name on my lips is apparently all the encouragement he needs. Dante closes the distance, cupping my face with one broad hand, and lowers his head toward mine. I feel my eyes flutter shut as his breath, warm with a hint of coffee, ghosts over my mouth. He pauses, so close I could rise on my toes a mere inch and our lips would meet. He’s giving me the chance to refuse—to turn away.

But I don’t. God help me, I want this. Despite everything—despite the photograph in the desk, despite the lies and half-truths—I ache for the solace I found in his arms last night, however fleeting. Maybe it’s the adrenaline of our confrontation transmuting into another kind of tension; maybe it’s the heady power of creation still thrumming in my blood. Or maybe it’s simply that here, now, Dante is looking at me not as a pawn or a tool, but as a man who desperately desires a woman. And I can’t deny how that makes me feel.

My fingers tighten around the glass vial in my hand. A small, sane corner of my mind screams to be careful—you’re playing with fire. But the rest of me is already burning.

Dante’s hand slides from my cheek to the back of my neck, his touch reverent and possessive at once. I draw a sharp breath at the sensation. Our bodies inch closer, the fabric of his shirt brushing against my apron. I tilt my face up, closing that last gap—

A trill of sound shatters the moment. Dante’s phone, vibrating insistently in his trouser pocket. Loud in the quiet sanctum of the studio. We both jolt back a fraction, reality crashing in. Dante mutters a curse under his breath, his forehead dropping against mine for the briefest second as if he can’t believe the interruption. Our lips never quite met, but I can still feel the phantom impression of what almost was.

He exhales slowly and releases me, though his hand drifts down my arm as if reluctant to break contact entirely. With obvious annoyance, Dante fishes the phone out and glances at the screen. His expression hardens. “It’s Silvio,” he says, voice cool and businesslike again. All traces of the gentle man from moments ago lock away behind the Mafia prince’s steely mask.

My heart, still hammering from our near-kiss, now gives a lurch of dread. Silvio. Of course it would be him. It seems the devil has impeccable timing.

Dante’s eyes meet mine, an unspoken apology in them, and perhaps a promise that we will finish this later. My face flames at the thought, but I nod mutely, stepping back to give him space. I turn away under the pretense of organizing my paints, attempting to steady my breathing and calm the raging cocktail of desire and frustration inside me. I hear Dante accept the call, his tone clipped and dangerous.

“What is it?” he says by way of greeting. A pause. “Now? That’s short notice.” Another pause. I risk a glance over my shoulder. He’s pacing slowly, free hand on his hip, a scowl carving into his handsome face. The sunlight through the skylight casts dramatic shadows, highlighting the tension in his posture. “Fine. Text me the address. I’ll be there in an hour,” Dante bites out, and then he ends the call without so much as a goodbye.

He stands there a moment, head bowed, phone clenched tightly. I swallow, bracing myself. Clearly, duty calls. And from the sound of it, this isn’t a conversation he’s happy about.

“Is everything... alright?” I venture carefully, turning to face him fully.

Dante’s jaw is taut. “That was Silvio. He claims he has urgent information on the Caravaggio’s location—something he couldn’t share over the phone.” His eyes flash with a mix of suspicion and resolve. “He wants to meet, at the docks in Zürich.”

A chill skitters down my spine. The docks? It sounds like a scene from a crime drama—and precisely the kind of place an ambush could be staged. Dante must think the same, because he gives a humorless half-smile. “It could be a trap. In fact, I’d wager it likely is. But I can’t ignore the possibility he’s actually come through with intel. We need to know where that auction is happening.”

My stomach twists. He’s right—we do need to know. But the idea of Dante walking knowingly into a potential trap... I remember Silvio’s threat at the gala, how smug he was that my “usefulness” would end. They are openly at odds now, and this meeting could explode into violence.

I find myself moving toward him before I realize it, closing the gap that had formed when the phone rang. “You can’t go alone,” I say, the words tumbling out more urgently than I intend. The thought of him in danger stirs something fiercely protective in me, surprising us both. “Take guards, an entire squad—”

“Valentina.” He stops me with a steady hand on my shoulder. “I appreciate your concern.”

I feel his thumb brush an unconscious circle against my collarbone through my blouse. A shiver travels through me at the faint touch. He leans in just enough that I catch a whiff of his aftershave. “But I can handle Silvio. If I show up with an army, he’ll bolt and we’ll learn nothing.”

“He could have an army waiting for you,” I counter, my voice hushed but intense. “At least let someone shadow you. Or—or don’t go at all. Send someone else to verify his claims.”

Dante gives a small shake of his head. “This is something I need to handle personally.” A shadow of regret passes over his face. “Silvio was like a brother to me. If he’s truly betrayed me, I’ll confirm it to his face.” The hurt beneath his anger is evident; despite everything, I feel a pang of empathy. It almost makes me forget that I, too, plan to betray Dante. How calmly he speaks of confronting a traitor... how will he react when the traitor is me?

I push that thought away fiercely. Not now. “At least promise me you’ll be careful,” I whisper. My eyes search his, trying to convey what I can’t quite bring myself to say aloud: I don’t want you hurt.

Dante’s tense expression eases just a fraction. He nods. “I’ll be careful.” A ghost of a smile touches his lips. “I have too much waiting for me back here to do anything reckless.” The way he says it, his gaze holding mine, leaves no doubt he’s referring to me. My cheeks warm, and I look down, unable to quite face the earnest affection in his eyes. Damn him for making me feel cared for in this moment. It would be so much easier if he remained the unfeeling captor.

With a gentle but swift motion, Dante lifts my hand and presses a kiss to my knuckles. The old-world gallantry of it stuns me into stillness. His lips are warm against my paint-stained skin. “Finish the forgery. Work your magic, mia volpe,” he says softly. “I’ll return as soon as I can. We’ll solve the rest—together.”

Before I can answer—before I can beg him one more time not to go—he releases my hand and turns to stride out of the studio. The absence of his presence is jarring; the room suddenly feels colder, emptier.

I stand there for a long moment, staring at the open door through which he disappeared, heart heavy with foreboding. The adrenaline of our near-kiss and confrontation has drained away, leaving me slightly shaky. I force myself to inhale deeply. Focus, Valentina. This might be the last reprieve I have before everything goes sideways. Dante is walking into danger, Silvio is clearly playing a deep game, and I... I have decisions of my own to make.

My gaze drifts to the half-primed canvas awaiting me, and the image of Abraham’s knife raised over Isaac in the reference photo. I feel like Isaac on the altar, about to be sacrificed for a cause I never chose. Yet perhaps I’m also Abraham with the knife, poised to strike a lethal blow to someone I care about because duty demands it.

I rub my hands over my face and realize they’re trembling. When did it become so hard to distinguish the betrayals from the blessings? Dante’s vow to protect my father repeats in my mind. He sounded sincere... but can I risk believing him? After all, his father might have had a hand in my mother’s fate. Can I truly trust a Moretti?

My eyes fall to my phone on the supply table, and I notice a tiny red notification light blinking. With a frown, I wipe my hands and pick it up. There’s a single new text on the encrypted messaging app I’ve used for underworld contacts—a holdover from my past life. My blood runs cold the instant I see the number. It’s unrecognized, but the message itself gives the sender away:

“You want your Papà safe? Your freedom? Deliver Dante’s ledger. I’ll arrange your escape. Tick-tock, bella.”

I read it twice, heart pounding harder with each pass. It doesn’t mention Silvio’s name, but it doesn’t need to. Who else would dare? Who else even could promise me that? He must have gotten this number through his network; no doubt he’s been probing for a way to contact me outside of Dante’s surveillance.

My teeth clench. So Silvio’s making his move. Deliver Dante’s ledger—he means the Foxglove data, the encrypted files I stole, the secrets I still hold. He expects me to hand over the trove of Moretti information in exchange for my father and a chance to vanish. It’s what I wanted, isn’t it? A way out for Papà and me, free from the Morettis and their entire brutal world.

Then why does my stomach twist painfully as if I’ve been punched?

I already resolved to betray Dante the moment I realized my father’s life was on the line. This very morning, as I steeled myself to confront Dante with that photo, I promised I wouldn’t fall prey to tender feelings. And after nearly succumbing to Dante’s charm again just minutes ago, I should be grateful for this jolting reminder of reality.

I’m going to betray him.

I close my eyes, the words echoing in my mind like a grim mantra. It was true when I swore it earlier, and it must remain true now. Dante is not my savior; he’s the man who put my father in a hospital bed to bend me to his will. The man who, no matter how gently he kisses me or how fiercely he protects me from others, ultimately seeks to use me.

Silvio’s offer is my chance to turn the tables—a ledger in exchange for Papà’s freedom.

My heart hardens with renewed resolve, even as it cracks a little around the edges. I type a single word in reply: “Deal.” But I don’t hit send just yet. Instead, I delete the word, unsent. Not here, not now. I need to be careful—Dante’s people could be monitoring communications. I’ll find a safer way to signal Silvio when the time comes.

For now, I slide the phone into my pocket and force myself to turn back to the canvas. The blank expanse stares at me, awaiting the strokes that will turn it into a masterpiece of deception. My throat tightens.

In this house of forged truths, what’s one more beautiful lie?

Picking up my brush, I force myself to continue painting even as my vision blurs with unshed tears. Deep inside, beneath all the fear and conflicted feelings, I know exactly what I’m about to do.

I’m going to betray him.

## Chapter 8 — The Double Cross (Dante POV)

I cut the engine of my Maserati and let the darkness settle around me. The warehouse district by Zürich’s industrial docks is silent at this late hour, save for the faint lap of water against pilings and the metallic creak of a loose boat line somewhere in the gloom. Overhead, the moon hides behind thick clouds, giving only a weak glow to outline rows of stacked shipping containers and derelict cranes. It’s a far cry from the glittering halls of the Moretti villa—more fitting for rats and traitors.

My jaw tightens. I step out onto the slick concrete, every sense on high alert. The air smells of cold lake water, diesel, and rusted iron. A fine mist is rolling in off the lake, blurring the distance. I scan the shadows, one hand resting at my side near the pistol concealed under my jacket. Silvio chose the venue and insisted I come alone. I’ve done as he asked—though a smarter man might have brought backup. Perhaps I’m a fool. Or perhaps I simply want to look the devil in the eye myself.

My footsteps echo softly as I approach the edge of a vast loading bay. An old fishing trawler is moored nearby, creaking against its ropes. I pause by a stack of wooden pallets, eyes narrowing. “Silvio?” I call out, voice low but carrying in the emptiness. Only my echo answers.

A sliver of moonlight breaks through the clouds, illuminating the wet concrete and glinting off scattered puddles. I spot a lone figure emerging from behind a shipping container ahead, about twenty meters away. He’s wearing a long coat with the collar up. Silvio. I recognize his lanky silhouette and the jaunty tilt of his fedora. The sight of my old friend—and now enemy—sends a swell of anger through my veins.

“You actually came,” Silvio calls, his tone light, almost mocking, as he steps forward into the open. I can’t yet make out his expression, but I hear the smirk in his voice. “Buonasera, cugino.”

Cugino. Cousin. The word is a knife twisted under these circumstances. I clench my fists. “You said you had information,” I reply evenly, continuing my slow advance. My eyes flick left and right, searching for any hint of an ambush. All I see are looming containers and the black mouth of an alley between warehouses to my right. The silence feels heavier by the second.

Silvio chuckles, the sound bouncing off the corrugated metal walls around us. “Always business first with you, Dante. All right then.” He spreads his hands in a show of goodwill, but I don’t miss the glint of a pistol at his hip. “The Caravaggio. I’ve located the auction. It will be tomorrow night in a private villa outside Naples. Camorra territory.”

Naples. Camorra. My teeth grit. So it’s true—the Camorra syndicate is involved. Before I can respond, Silvio continues, taking a few casual steps closer. “The buyer’s a Spanish cartel boss flying in with cash. Our dear Camorra friends plan to burn the Moretti name by selling it under our noses.”

He’s close enough now that I can discern his face in the dim light—a sneer twisting his lips, eyes gleaming with triumph. My stomach churns with betrayal and fury. “And you?” I ask quietly. “Where do you fit in, Silvio? On which side of this double cross do you land?”

Lightning-quick, emotion flashes in his eyes—something like regret, but it’s drowned by ambition. “I’m taking what should be mine,” he hisses, and the facade of friendly banter drops. “You never saw the bigger picture, Dante. We could have ruled everything together, but you and your father kept me in your shadow. The Camorra made me a better offer.”

My heart pounds. So it’s confirmed: Silvio has thrown in with the Camorra. Rage flares white-hot in my chest. Yet through the anger, I remain dangerously calm. I slip my hand toward my gun. “You betrayed your own family,” I say, barely above a whisper. The word betrayal tastes bitter on my tongue. “For what? Money? Power?”

Silvio barks a short laugh. “Don’t be so sanctimonious. You’re not the only one with family to protect. Or did you think only Morettis have a right to power?” His fingers twitch at his side—closer to that pistol on his belt. I catch the motion and my muscles coil. Across the narrow space between us, years of friendship hang by a fraying thread.

Then I see it: a flicker of movement in my peripheral vision, atop a stack of containers to my left. The mist shifts, revealing the silhouette of a man aiming down at me. Instinct screams through my veins.

“Bastardo!” I snarl, diving to the side an instant before the night erupts in gunfire. CRACK! A muzzle flash blossoms where I spotted the sniper. The high-velocity round whizzes past my ear and punches into the concrete where I’d stood not a heartbeat before, sending up a spray of wet dust. That shot would have taken my head off.

I hit the ground and roll behind the cover of an overturned metal drum. The sharp odor of gunpowder joins the dock’s miasma of salt and oil. My blood sings with adrenaline. The ambush is sprung.

Above, the sniper re-chambers with a metallic clack, preparing to fire again. I grit my teeth and draw my pistol from its holster.

“You always were predictable, Silvio,” I shout from behind the drum, straining to spot him. The reply comes not in words but in a hail of bullets from the opposite side—my right flank. Two, three gunshots flash from that alley between warehouses. The bastards have me in a crossfire.

I flatten myself as slugs ricochet off the steel drum with ear-splitting clangs. One round tears through the drum’s edge, exploding a shower of rust and metal shards over my shoulder. I hiss as a shard slices across my upper arm. Warm blood begins to trickle under my sleeve. The pain sharpens my focus.

Think. I have a sniper above to the left, at least one shooter to the right. Possibly more lurking. Silvio’s nowhere in sight—I wager he ducked out the moment the firing began. Coward.

I pop out for half a second on the right and squeeze off two shots toward the alley muzzle flashes. I’m rewarded with a grunt of pain and a curse in Italian. One of Silvio’s goons is hit.

No time to celebrate. Overhead, another rifle report cracks. A bullet slams into the concrete at my feet, spraying my legs with grit. The sniper has me pinned.

I need to move or I’m dead. Heart pounding, I peek around the drum toward the alley. A dark shape is slumped by the warehouse wall—one gunman down, maybe dead or wounded. Further behind him, I catch a glimpse of another silhouette advancing low. Two on that side.

All right, Dante. Do or die. I draw a breath, then pivot from cover and fire twice up at the sniper’s perch while sprinting toward the stack of pallets to my left. My first shot sparks off metal; the second is answered by a pained shout up high. Got him—at least grazed.

Bullets chase my heels, one whining past my calf so close I feel the heat. I dive behind the pallets just as return fire peppers them, wood splintering above my head. Splinters bite into the back of my neck. I press my spine to the solid pallet stack, panting. A trickle of blood from my arm snakes down to my hand. I shift my grip on the pistol; it’s slick with my own blood.

Silvio’s voice echoes from somewhere unseen, dripping scorn: “It didn’t have to be like this, Dante!”

I ignore him. Talking will only get me killed. Instead, I tilt my head enough to peer through a gap between pallets. The sniper on the container roof is repositioning, silhouetted briefly against the hazy moon. The man I winged in the alley is crouched behind a crate, reloading. Another figure joins him—reinforcements.

Too many angles. I curse under my breath. The car is fifty meters back behind me; making a break for it now would be suicide. My best bet... is the water.

Just beyond these pallets, the concrete wharf ends and Lake Zürich’s black waters begin. If I can get in the lake, I can disappear in the fog. But not before neutralizing at least some of this threat.

Teeth clenched, I inch out and take quick aim at the alley. The two men there have moved forward in a flanking maneuver. I fire twice—bang, bang—and one crumples with a strangled cry, clutching his leg. The other dives for cover.

That’s one more down. But in my periphery I sense motion above—sniper! I throw myself forward just as a rifle cracks. Splinters erupt where I crouched a split second ago, shredding the pallet.

Enough. The sniper has to go. I roll onto one knee with my pistol raised, sighting the roof. The figure adjusts to train on me—too slow. I squeeze the trigger twice. The crack of my .45 echoes. The man atop the container jolts, once in the shoulder, once center mass. He topples from his perch with a chilling scream, disappearing behind the far side of the container stack. A heavy thud follows.

A fierce, grim satisfaction surges through me. But it’s short-lived. A burst of automatic fire tears through the air from that damned alley—must be the last goon with a submachine gun. Bullets chew into the pallet barrier, ripping it to pieces. One round catches my left side with a searing punch just above the hip.

“Ahh!” The cry rips out of me as fiery pain radiates up my ribs. I stagger and almost drop to a knee. Hot blood spills beneath my jacket, soaking my shirt. Bastardo shot me.

Gasping, I hurl myself sideways and over the edge of the wharf without a second thought. The world tilts and cold air whooshes past me for an instant—then I collide with frigid water.

The lake’s icy embrace engulfs me, shock biting into my wound like fangs. I clamp my jaw to stifle a groan as I plunge beneath the surface. Bubbles stream past my face. Instantly, the sounds of gunfire and dockside chaos mute into a dull roar above.

I force my eyes open in the murk. Shafts of moonlight penetrate the water just enough to silhouette the underside of the pier and the distant thrash of a body—must be mine—from where I entered. I kick hard, biting back agony, and propel myself under the pier.

Up on the dock, I distantly make out shouts. I surface quietly under the cover of the wooden slats and draw a careful breath through my nose. My side is on fire; warm blood clouds into the freezing lake around me. With teeth chattering, I press a hand against the wound. It’s bleeding freely, but it feels like a through-and-through graze rather than a bullet lodged inside. Small mercy.

I cling to a slime-slick pier support as footsteps thud overhead. “Did you see him?!” someone yells in Italian. “No—where did he go? Bastardo jumped in the water!”

There’s a flurry of movement. A flashlight beam slices over the lake’s surface, sweeping dangerously close to my hiding spot. I duck lower, just my nose and eyes above water like a damned crocodile.

The beam passes without catching on me. One of the gunmen curses loudly. I recognize Silvio’s voice barking orders: “Fan out along the dock! He’s hit—he can’t have gone far. Finish it, now!”

My fingers curl around the grip of my pistol. It’s miraculously still in my hand, though likely useless wet. I slide it into the back of my waistband and begin a silent sidestroke along the pier, away from the cluster of lights and voices gathering where I went over. Each kick of my legs sends a throb of pure agony through my side. Blood loss and cold are sapping my strength. But I didn’t survive a Moretti upbringing to die here in filthy water by Silvio’s command.

Gradually, yard by yard, I slip away into the deeper darkness. The mist rolling off the lake is my ally now, shrouding me. Behind, I still hear scattered gunshots as Silvio’s men fire blindly into the water and the night. None come near me.

At last, after what feels like an eternity, I allow myself to drift out from under the docks. A couple hundred meters down the shoreline, I claw my way onto a rocky bank out of their line of sight. I collapse to my knees among cattails and mud, chest heaving. The night is deathly quiet here except for my ragged breaths and the gentle lap of the lake at my feet.

It’s only when I try to stand that I fully realize how badly I’m hurt. The gouge in my side burns with each pulse of my heart. My soaked clothes are an iron weight on my body, and my left arm is slick with blood from the shrapnel cut. I grit my teeth and stagger upright. The villa is miles away, but I have to get back. Valentina—God, Valentina. She has to know Silvio is working with the Camorra. And if Silvio suspects she’s onto Foxglove, she could be in danger too.

The Camorra. The name alone sends a wave of fury through me, hot enough to ward off some of the cold. Silvio colluding with those snakes... a new war is on our hands. The thought steels my resolve. I press a hand hard against my bleeding side and limp forward along the shoreline, away from the chaos. Each step is torture, but I welcome the pain—it means I’m alive.

Alive, and filled with vengeance. Silvio thought he could eliminate me tonight. He failed.

A low thunder rumbles in the distance. Perhaps a storm is coming, or perhaps it’s just blood rushing in my ears. I cast one last glance back toward the docks enveloped in fog. Distant flashlights bob futilely. They won’t find me.

Jaw clenched, I turn my back on the scene. “You’ve made a grave mistake, Silvio,” I growl under my breath, tasting blood at the corner of my mouth. My vision wavers for a moment from loss of blood, but I force myself onward. One step, then another.

As I disappear into the darkness, one truth crystallizes through the haze of pain. Silvio didn’t just betray me—he allied with the Camorra to do it. Silvio and the Camorra. The words alone would send my father spinning in his grave. The Morettis have been drawn into a deadly gambit.

I suck in a breath and continue along the lonely road, hand pressed to my wound. This isn’t over. I’ll drag myself home by sheer will if I must. Because come dawn, there will be hell to pay.

Silvio has sold us out to the Camorra.

## Chapter 9 — Vendetta Eve (Valentina POV)

Dawn’s early light creeps through the villa’s lace curtains, painting the marble floors with a pale gray wash. I stand in the foyer, arms wrapped around myself, fighting the gnawing sense that something is wrong. The household is quiet—too quiet after last night’s turmoil. I barely slept, my mind replaying Dante’s parting words and the near-kiss we shared in the studio. He never returned to his room. In fact, he hasn’t been seen since he stormed off to meet Silvio.

Now morning is here, the day before the wedding, and a knot of dread sits heavy in my stomach. I linger near the grand entryway, scanning every shadow as if Dante might emerge from it. Outside the tall windows, Lake Zürich lies under a gauzy mist. No sign of Dante’s car on the drive. No sign of him.

I tell myself he’s fine. Dante Moretti is nearly indestructible—at least he wants everyone to believe that. But I can’t banish the image of his stormy expression as he left, or the raw fear I felt when I realized Silvio intended him harm. You can’t go alone, I had pleaded. Yet he went all the same.

A faint thud echoes beyond the double doors. My heart leaps into my throat. I rush forward and yank one door open.

A figure staggers across the threshold, almost colliding with me. Dante.

“Dio mio—” I gasp. He’s drenched from head to toe, water pooling at his feet on the polished parquet. His black dress shirt clings to him, torn and glistening with... blood. So much blood blooming across his left side and smeared down one arm. Dante’s face is ashen beneath a sheen of lake water and sweat. He looks like a specter dragged from the depths.

His dark eyes find mine, dazed with pain yet still fierce. “Val...entina,” he rasps, my name breaking in the middle. And then his knees buckle.

I lunge, barely catching him under the arms before he hits the floor. The impact drives me to one knee, supporting most of his weight. Dante groans—a sound I’ve never heard from him before, raw and unguarded. It twists something deep in my chest.

“It’s okay, I’ve got you,” I murmur, shifting to sling his arm over my shoulders. He’s shivering violently; his soaked clothes are ice-cold against me. I realize with horror that he’s leaving red smears on my ivory blouse. He’s bleeding anew with every moment.

His lips brush my ear as he tries to speak. “Silvio... the docks...”

“Shh, don’t talk.” I tighten my grip around his waist. Beneath my arm, I feel the wet heat of blood seeping through a gash in his side. My stomach churns. “We need to get you upstairs.”

Dante grimaces and musters a fraction of his will, enough to help me half-drag, half-carry him across the foyer. He’s alarmingly weak; with each step, he leans heavier into me. I grit my teeth and press on, guiding him toward the main floor bathroom just off the hall. It’s closer than the bedrooms and has what I need for first aid.

We nearly crash through the bathroom door. Inside, morning light filters through frosted glass, illuminating the black-and-white tiles and gilt fixtures. I kick the door shut behind us and ease Dante onto the marble bench built into one wall. He slumps, head back against the cool tiles, eyes closed. For a terrifying second I think he’s lost consciousness, but then a ragged breath shudders out of him.

My own heart is thundering. Focus, Valentina. I snatch a plush towel off a rack and kneel beside him. Gently, I press it to his left side, where the dark stain is widest. His shirt is shredded there—did he get shot? My pulse spikes.

Dante hisses at the contact. His eyes snap open, fever-bright and unfocused. “Silvio... Camorra—” he groans, trying to push himself upright.

I plant a firm hand on his shoulder. “Be still,” I say, more sharply than I intend. Panic laces my veins, but I refuse to let it show. “You’ll bleed more.”

He blinks, struggling to obey. For once, Dante doesn’t argue. That frightens me almost as much as seeing him like this. He’s too compliant, too pliant under my hands.

I need supplies. “Stay here,” I whisper. “Press this against the wound.” I guide his trembling hand to hold the towel against his side. He nods weakly. With that, I race to the medicine cabinet.

Years of Moretti family preparedness mean the villa’s bathrooms are stocked for war. I find alcohol, sterile gauze, bandages, and even a sealed suture kit. My throat tightens at the thought of why such things are kept on hand. How many times has Dante needed stitches in the past?

Arms full of supplies, I hurry back to him. He’s slid forward, elbows braced on his thighs as he tries to catch his breath. Water drips from his coal-black hair, and his jaw is clenched in visible agony. Yet as I crouch at his side again, he opens his eyes and manages a strained half-smile. “You... ruin another blouse,” he whispers, gaze flicking to the blood-soaked silk of my top. Even on death’s door, the maddening man notices that.

A watery laugh of relief escapes me—he’s joking, he’s still him. Tears prick at my eyes, but I blink them away. “Hush. This is nothing,” I scold lightly, trying to keep my voice from trembling. “Compared to you, I’m pristine.”

He releases a rasp that might be a laugh, then winces sharply. Enough banter. I have to stop the bleeding.

“Dante, I need to see the wound,” I say, already reaching for his clinging shirt. “This will hurt.”

“Do what you must,” he grits out. With fumbling fingers, he actually tries to help me, but I bat his hands aside.

Between the soaked fabric and his injury, gentleness is impossible. I rip the black dress shirt open, popping buttons. He groans but doesn’t protest. As I peel the material back, I suck in a breath. There’s a deep crease along his left torso, just above his hip—an angry furrow of torn flesh that oozes blood. It looks like a bullet grazed him. An inch deeper and it would have been a fatal shot.

“You absolute idiot,” I breathe, anger and fear warring in my chest. He said he could handle Silvio. Look at him now. My vision blurs, but I force myself to focus. Clean it, stitch it. I’ve done field sutures as part of restoration work on tapestries—how different can flesh be? Don’t think, just do.

I grab the bottle of alcohol. “Bite down on this,” I order, folding a clean washcloth and pressing it to his mouth. Dante’s eyes meet mine; even in agony, he manages a glint of amusement at my bossiness. But he obeys, clamping the cloth between his teeth. Good.

“I’m sorry,” I whisper, then pour the alcohol directly over the wound.

His entire body goes rigid. A muffled snarl rumbles from behind the gag. I know it burns like hellfire, but it will stave off infection. I work quickly, flushing the gash as blood-tinged liquid runs down his flank. Dante’s hands seize around the edge of the bench, veins straining in his forearms. It’s torture to watch, but he doesn’t shove me away.

When it’s done, he spits the cloth out, chest heaving. Sweat beads on his brow from the pain. “Keep... cussing me out,” he pants, trying for humor. “You were... almost there.”

Fury flares through my worry. He would make light of this. Fine. My fear finds its outlet in anger. “You deserve a lot worse than cussing,” I snap, setting the now-red towel aside and threading a suture needle with shaking hands. “What were you thinking, going by yourself? Silvio could have killed you!”

He watches me prep the needle, a shadow passing over his face. “Almost did,” he admits quietly.

That simple concession drains my anger, leaving only raw terror at how close I might have come to losing him. I draw a ragged breath, the needle poised. My fingers hover above his torn flesh, and they’re not steady. Focus. If I botch this...

A warm, bloodstained hand closes over mine. I look up into Dante’s eyes. They’re clearer now, locked on mine, willing me strength. “I trust you,” he murmurs.

My heart lurches. I give a tight nod and begin stitching.

Time blurs as I work. I talk to fill it—to distract both of us. I scold him under my breath in two languages, every curse and rebuke I know. “Testardo. Stubborn fool... could have gotten yourself killed...” My voice wavers once, but I keep going, suturing with as neat a hand as I can manage. Dante endures in grim silence aside from a few grunts when the needle pierces especially tender flesh.

At last, the wound’s edges draw together under neat black stitches. I tie off the thread and sit back on my heels, exhaling shakily. It’s done. The worst is over.

Dante lifts a trembling hand to brush a strand of damp hair off my cheek. I realize I’m sweating too, adrenaline leaving me clammy. “Thank you,” he says, voice rough but heartfelt.

Suddenly I find I can’t breathe. The intimacy of the moment catches up to me—the two of us alone in this tiled sanctuary, the soft morning light, my hands literally holding his guts together. I swallow hard. “Don’t thank me. Just... don’t ever do that again,” I manage, my tone meant to be stern but landing more like a plea.

He gives me a faint smile, the kind that reaches his eyes with warmth despite his exhaustion. “If I promise, you’ll only call me a liar later.”

I huff, about to retort, but Dante shifts, trying to adjust his position on the bench. A low groan escapes him as pain flares anew. Instantly I’m at his side, sliding an arm behind his back to steady him. He’s half shirtless, skin cold and muscles rigid under my touch. “Easy,” I murmur. “Let me wrap it up.” I reach for a fresh bandage roll.

Dante’s face is inches from mine now. As I lean in to wind the bandage around his torso, I feel his gaze on me—intense and unyielding. My fingers brush his bare skin, and a fine tremor runs through him that has nothing to do with pain or cold. The air thickens with a charge I recognize all too well.

“Valentina,” he says softly. There’s a world of emotion packed into those four syllables. Gratitude, anguish, longing.

I secure the bandage snugly around his lean waist. “Yes?” My voice comes out quieter than I intended.

He lifts a hand and grazes the backs of his fingers along my jaw. It’s such a gentle touch from a man who is so brutalized and bleeding—my composure cracks. Before I can think better of it, I reach up and cup his face. “You could have died,” I whisper, barely audible. The admission slips out, raw and trembling.

His dark lashes lower. “But I didn’t,” he murmurs. His palm finds my waist, hesitating as though unsure if it’s welcome. I don’t pull away. “I’m here, cara. In one piece, thanks to you.”

Despite everything, I feel a flush warm my cheeks. My thumb strokes unconsciously across the rough stubble on his cheek. “You scared me,” I confess, the words hitching in my throat.

Dante’s eyes snap back to mine. For a heartbeat, all masks between us fall away. I see vulnerability there—a flicker of remorse, of tenderness. “I know,” he breathes. “When I was out there bleeding... all I could think of was getting back to you.”

My heart feels caught in a vise. Why does he have to say things like that? Why now? I should keep my guard up, remember every reason I can’t afford to fall for him. But with his blood literally on my hands and his life nearly lost, those reasons feel distant and abstract.

We are so close. I can feel his breath, unsteady against my lips. This is madness—I should back away. But I don’t move.

“You’re shivering,” I say instead, realizing he’s still cold. My eyes flit to the glass-enclosed shower a few steps away. Steam from the hot water tap I’d started earlier clouds the enclosure invitingly. Without waiting for permission, I loop an arm around Dante’s back. “Come on. You need to get warm.”

He opens his mouth to protest—pride, no doubt—but a tremor wracks him and he relents. Slowly, I help him to his feet. He leans heavily on me, and together we shuffle the short distance into the shower stall. Warm, misty air envelops us. The rainfall showerhead douses Dante’s bare torso in gentle heat.

He releases a sigh of relief so profound it borders on a groan. I adjust his balance against the marble wall. The water sluices over both of us now, soaking through what’s left of my blouse and skirt. I couldn’t care less.

As blood and lake grime rinse from his skin, Dante braces a hand on the wall. Some color returns to his face. His eyes drift over me and darken with a different heat. Through my clinging blouse, every curve and contour is visible—and we both know it. The lazy path his gaze takes ignites little fires across my body.

“You’ll catch cold yourself,” he rumbles, voice low.

I manage a shaky laugh. “I think we’ve established I can handle a little water.”

Dante’s lips twitch. He reaches out, fingers trailing down my soaked sleeve. “This really is becoming a habit,” he says huskily, recalling the night he pulled me into a fountain. A lifetime ago, it seems.

My breath hitches. The memory of that night—his hands on me, the hungry way he looked at me—sends a wave of heat through my core now. We’ve shed so much since then. There’s no anger or pretense left to shield me from what I feel when he looks at me like this.

I slip my arms around his neck, partly to steady him and partly because I crave the closeness. “Well, you started it,” I tease softly.

His arm encircles my waist in return, pulling me gently against him. The hot water cascades around us, turning the small space into a cocoon of steam. Dante’s bare chest presses to my wet blouse—I feel his heart pounding as wildly as my own. The bandage I applied is protected by a layer of plastic I wrapped around it; a fleeting practical thought in the storm of sensations swirling through me.

“You saved my life,” he whispers, forehead coming to rest against mine. His hand skims up my spine, leaving sparks in its wake despite the soaked fabric between us. “I won’t forget that.”

I search his eyes, which are inches from mine. They’re softer than I’ve ever seen them, molten with emotion. Don’t make me care about you, I plead silently. But it’s far too late.

“Don’t make me save it again,” I whisper back, my fingers unconsciously tangling in the dark hair at his nape.

Dante’s eyes flick down to my lips. “Valentina...”

My name is half warning, half prayer as it spills from him. I answer by closing the rest of the gap, pressing my mouth to his.

We collide with a desperate fervor, the kiss igniting instantly from tender to consuming. Dante groans into my mouth, one hand cradling the back of my head as if I’m something precious, the other tightening around my waist. I gasp and he takes the opportunity to deepen the kiss, his tongue stroking mine in a way that sends a bolt of pure need straight to my core.

I taste salt and copper—his blood? mine? It doesn’t matter. All that matters is Dante—alive, solid, mine—pinning me gently against the shower wall, claiming me with each melding of our lips. The water beats down on us, plasters my skirt to my thighs and his trousers to his legs, but neither of us cares.

“You’re sure?” he rasps against my lips, even as he nips my lower one, drawing a whimper from me. Always the gentleman lurking beneath the brute.

I answer by arching into him, rolling my hips with a needy whine. It’s answer enough. Dante swears softly—Dio, ti voglio—and crushes me to him. His mouth devours mine with renewed hunger. My fingers claw at his shoulders, feeling the play of hard muscle under wet skin. The ache that began in my core intensifies as he presses the evidence of his desire firmly against my belly.

Caution and doubt drown in the downpour and our ragged breaths. I fumble with his belt; he tears at the remaining buttons of my blouse until the ruined garment falls away. The translucent lace of my bra is soaked and clingy, and Dante traces the outline of a taut peak with a reverent finger before ducking his head and taking my nipple into his mouth through the lace.

I cry out, back bowing off the wall at the exquisite sensation of heat and wet and friction. “Oh—Dante...” My hands fly to his hair, fingers curling tight as he alternates gentle sucks with flicks of his tongue. Pleasure spears straight from my breast to the growing ache between my legs.

He groans at my response, like my voice spurs him on. His teeth graze ever so lightly and I nearly combust. “Cazzo,” he growls, releasing my swollen peak and yanking the bra cup down to free it completely. The cool air and his ravenous gaze on my bare skin make me shiver. He meets my eyes briefly, and what I see in his—worship, lust, an almost pained tenderness—melts the last of my resolve.

I guide his hand down, sliding it under the elastic of my panties myself because I can’t wait another second. The moment his fingers slip through my slick folds, both of us moan. “Always so ready for me,” he mutters, sounding half in awe, half feral.

“Only for you,” I gasp, not even caring how it sounds. It’s true; I’ve never wanted anyone the way I want him.

That snaps the leash on his control. Dante’s lips crash back to mine in a searing kiss as he slips one thick finger inside me, then two, pumping slowly. My nails bite into his back—he feels so good. I rock onto his hand shamelessly, chasing the friction, swallowing his groan as I suck on his tongue in desperation.

Suddenly he breaks the kiss. I’m about to protest when I realize he’s grabbing my thigh, urging me to wrap my legs around his waist. I jump up, locking my ankles at his back, and he pins me to the wall with his hips. The new angle grinds the heel of his palm against my throbbing center and I see stars.

Dante’s face is flushed, droplets running down his fierce features. “Valentina, tell me now if you want me to stop,” he pants, voice ragged with restraint even as his fingers move inside me, drawing out a whimper that answers better than words.

“Don’t you dare stop,” I manage, cupping his face between trembling hands and kissing him with every ounce of longing and fear and love I have. Yes—love, I realize in this blinding moment. Somehow, against all sense, I’ve fallen for Dante Moretti. And right or wrong, I’m going to have him one last time.

He answers my kiss with equal fervor, then lowers his head to press our brows together, eyes burning into mine. “Ti adoro, Valentina,” he breathes.

Before I can even process that utterance, he guides himself to my entrance, replacing his fingers with the broad tip of his arousal. My breath hitches. He pushes in slowly, giving my body a chance to yield. The stretch is intense, even with how aroused I am; it’s been days since the museum and he’s not exactly small. My grip on his shoulders tightens, and he pauses, concern flickering.

“Look at me,” he whispers, brushing soaked hair from my cheek. I realize my eyes had screwed shut. I force them open, meeting his dark gaze. Dante eases forward another inch, groaning at the sensation of my walls clinging to him. “Brava, tesoro,” he praises in a strained murmur. “So good for me.”

The pain melts into a delicious pressure. I cling to him, burying a cry into his neck as he seats himself fully with one final thrust. We stay like that, joined, shaking, barely breathing.

“Fuoco mio,” he chokes out, voice reverent against my ear. My fire. Tears prick my eyes—God, everything he says threatens to unravel me.

Then he begins to move, and coherent thought is scorched away. Dante withdraws almost completely before driving back in, setting a slow, measured rhythm that steals the air from my lungs. I bite his shoulder to muffle my sob of pleasure. He growls and rewards me with a harder thrust that scrapes deliciously along a spot inside me that lights up my entire body.

“Ancora,” I beg breathlessly. Again.

He obeys, picking up the pace. The shower’s spray drums around us, blending with the wet slap of our bodies and the symphony of our gasps and moans. I throw my head back, giving myself over to the rising waves of pleasure. Dante doesn’t miss a beat—he latches onto my exposed throat, sucking a mark there that sends a throb straight to where he’s plunging in and out of me.

I can tell he’s trying to be careful, to protect his wounded side from too much strain, but as our control frays that caution slips. He pins me harder, thrusts faster, deeper. The coil in my core tightens unbearably. “Dante... I—I’m going to—”

“I know, amore,” he groans, voice rough with barely-leashed ecstasy. He shifts angle slightly, hitting that magic spot dead-on. My eyes roll back, and with a shattered cry I break, pleasure detonating in hot bursts through every nerve.

Dante curses, a litany of my name and broken Italian praise spilling from him as I clench around him. His rhythm falters. With a strangled moan, he buries himself once more and stills, his release pulsing deep inside me.

For a suspended moment, we cling together under the steamy cascade, hearts pounding as one. I dimly note the water running cold, but Dante’s arms keep me warm, cradling me through the aftershocks.

Gradually, reality seeps back in. Dante eases me down until my feet touch the floor, though he doesn’t let go. We’re both trembling—not just from exertion, I realize as the chill of the bathroom air prickles my skin. The water heater has finally given out, and a shiver racks me.

Dante immediately draws me out of the shower, grabbing a large towel off the hook and wrapping it around both of us. I’m enfolded in heat and the scent of him. I can hardly stand; my legs are jelly. Dante lowers himself to the bench, pulling me onto his lap. He’s mindful of his side—my careful stitches held, thank God.

We sit there tangled, foreheads touching, sharing breath and silence. I don’t know what to say. My heart feels so full it might burst, and yet so heavy I could weep. It’s as if we made love on borrowed time, with ghosts of betrayal hovering at the edges.

“I meant what I said,” Dante murmurs at last, breaking the quiet. He tilts my chin up, eyes searching mine as if trying to see into my soul. “Every word, Valentina.”

I bite my lip. Part of me yearns to echo his confession—that perhaps I adore him too, devil and all. But what good would that do now? Tomorrow we’re supposed to wed under false pretenses. Silvio plots in the shadows. And I...

The secret in my pocket weighs a thousand tons. Dante brushes a thumb over my cheek, waiting tenderly for me to respond. My throat works, but I can’t force out the words. Instead I kiss him, a gentle press of my lips to his that tastes of longing and unshed tears.

He understands. Dante sighs softly against my mouth and pulls me closer, as if he can fuse us into one. For a few precious seconds, I let him. I allow myself to nestle into the haven of his arms and pretend this is something we can keep.

A sharp knock at the bathroom door shatters the fantasy. “Signore? Doctor Moreau is here,” Marco calls, reluctant. “He’s setting up in the study...”

Dante tenses. “I’ll be there in a few minutes,” he responds, authoritative even now.

I stiffen in his lap, reality crashing down with brutal clarity. We scramble to disentangle and dry off properly, the spell thoroughly broken. Dante’s jaw has set back into its familiar hard line—injured or not, he dons the Moretti armor at will. But I saw the vulnerability underneath, and it tugs at me fiercely as I tug on a robe and begin toweling his damp hair like a fussing hen.

“I’ll manage from here,” he says gently, capturing my hands to still them. My eyes dart to his bandaged side, worry gnawing.

“Let the doctor check that wound. And your arm,” I add, nodding at the gash on his bicep from a bullet shard.

He smiles a little, attempting to reassure me. “I will.”

I nod, forcing myself to withdraw my hands from his. This is the last moment we’ll have alone for who knows how long. Neither of us knows what to say. Tentatively, I trace the edge of the fresh bruise on his jaw. “Try not to get into any more trouble today, okay?”

Dante catches my fingertips and brings them to his lips, eyes never leaving mine. “I’ll do my best.” There’s a wealth of emotion simmering under those simple words.

A heavy ache settles in my chest. I force a bright, if shaky, smile. “Go on then. I’ll check on Papà and join you shortly. We don’t want the good doctor thinking the worst.”

Reluctantly, Dante rises. For a man who nearly died a few hours ago, he carries himself regally, towel wrapped around his waist like a king’s mantle. The staff will find dry clothes for him. He cups my cheek one last time. “Valentina...” His voice is rough, so many things unsaid. Then he turns and leaves.

As the door shuts behind him, I sag against the counter, clutching the edge until my knuckles whiten. Every fiber of me wants to run after him, to tell him I adore him, that I’m sorry, that—

That I’m still going to betray him.

A sob claws at my throat, but I choke it down. Instead I move mechanically, dressing myself in fresh clothes and raking a comb through my wet hair. My reflection in the mirror reveals swollen lips, a faint love bite on my neck that will need concealer, and eyes full of devastation. I look like a woman thoroughly loved and about to commit an unforgivable sin.

I press trembling fingers to my lips, remembering how Dante said ti adoro. Remembering how I felt answering his every touch with my body. How can I possibly go through with this charade after what we’ve shared?

Then I picture Papà—frail, bruised, and in Dante’s captivity for weeks. I think of my mother, smiling in that photo beside Emilio Moretti, unaware of the doom to follow. My family’s ruin, orchestrated by this dynasty. And I think of the ledger in my possession, and the promise I made to Silvio in my heart long before I typed “Deal.”

I take a breath and lock down my heart. It’s too late to turn back.

Leaving the bathroom, I head toward the bedroom wing to check on Papà. On the way, I pass by the open door of Dante’s mahogany study. Inside, I hear the murmur of Dr. Moreau fussing at him in French and Dante’s curt responses. I peek inconspicuously. Dante sits shirtless on the leather sofa, fresh stitches gleaming under antiseptic, arm in a sling. The doctor repacks his medical bag, reassuring him that with rest and antibiotics he’ll recover fully. Dante looks impatient, like a caged wolf enduring a tiny dog’s attention.

The corner of my mouth quirks despite everything. At least he’s being taken care of.

I slip away unseen. My father is sleeping when I peek into the medical suite; an attendant assures me he’s stable. That done, I retreat to my room under guise of changing properly for the day.

In truth, I need to prepare for tonight.

I strip off my robe and dig out practical clothes: black trousers, a fitted turtleneck, a slim jacket. The sort of attire I’d wear for a midnight escape. My fingers graze the hidden seam in my suitcase where I’ve stashed the USB drive and Dante’s key card. I hesitate, then tuck both into an inner pocket of my jacket now, keeping them close.

My phone pings—a message from a number only one person could be using. Midnight, boat launch. Bring the ledger. No second chances. My heart slams painfully. Understood.

I type back quickly on the secure app: Understood. Then I delete the app entirely from the phone and pocket it.

A knock at my door jolts me. I whirl, heart in throat, but it’s only a maid. “Signorina, the signore asks for you in the study.”

Dante. Mio principe. The thought of facing him right now feels like torture, but I summon a smile and follow the maid through the halls.

My mask slips back into place as I near the study. Dante and Dr. Moreau look up as I enter. Dante’s face is tired, drawn, but he musters a small smile for me that nearly wrecks me on the spot. “There you are,” he says warmly.

Dr. Moreau bustles over and prattles about Dante’s injuries. I murmur appropriately, hand resting lightly on Dante’s shoulder as the doctor explains care instructions for the stitches. Dante covers my hand with his own, giving a gentle squeeze that the doctor politely pretends not to notice.

After Dr. Moreau departs, Dante pulls me down beside him on the sofa. “I’m fine,” he assures me softly.

I nod, not trusting my voice. He gazes at me with such fondness and contentment that I have to look away, blinking back a sudden burn in my eyes.

“I’m sorry I worried you,” he says, lifting my hand to his lips like he did earlier. The tender gesture just about undoes me. Doesn’t he realize I’m beyond deserving of his apology?

“You should be,” I manage lightly, for both our sakes. I swallow the lump in my throat and pat his knee. “But you came back to me. In one piece, more or less. That’s what matters.”

Something in his expression says we’ll talk later. Perhaps he senses how close to the edge I am. Bless him for sparing me.

A knock interrupts. It’s one of Dante’s lieutenants with an update from the docks. They recovered a body in the water—one of Silvio’s men—but Silvio himself is nowhere to be found. Dante’s face turns to carved ice as he listens. “Tighten security on all fronts,” he orders. “Expect him to strike at the wedding if not sooner.”

The man nods and withdraws.

My stomach clenches. Silvio will strike sooner, all right—tonight with me as his accomplice. Dante shifts, suppressing a wince, and reaches for his phone on the desk.

I place a staying hand on his. “Rest. Please. You’re going to tear those stitches,” I chide gently.

His mouth opens, doubtless to protest some urgent task, but I press two fingers over his lips. “For me?” I add.

Dante’s eyes soften. He acquiesces with a sigh. “For you.”

Oh God. I force a smile, then push to my feet. “I’ll make sure everything is on track for tomorrow. You nap, or read, or brood—whatever requires minimal movement.” I lean down and brush a feather-light kiss to his temple, my excuse to whisper, “Please.”

Dante nuzzles my cheek in response. “As you wish, mia sposa,” he murmurs. My bride.

I straighten quickly, blinking back treacherous moisture for the umpteenth time. If I don’t leave now, I’ll break.

Without another word, I slip out of the study. Once in the hall, I clamp a hand over my trembling mouth and take a moment to gather myself. You can’t afford tears, I scold silently. Do what needs to be done and cry later.

By early evening, the villa is a flurry of wedding preparations. I drift through it like a ghost, making appearances where expected, nodding where needed. My mind is on midnight, on the boat launch by the misty lake, on each step I’ll have to take.

After dinner—eaten in our separate quarters since Dante’s recovery is a convenient excuse not to see guests—I find a moment alone to slip down to the wine cellar. In a dusty corner hidden from CCTV, I stash a small bag with essentials: cash, a change of clothes for Papà, fake passports Silvio’s network provided me weeks ago. I trust nothing to chance.

By eleven, the villa quiets. I visit Papà and gently wake him, telling him to be ready for a secret outing. He’s groggy but cooperative as I bundle him in a warm coat and wheel his chair through the servants’ corridor and out a side door to the garden. The night air is cool and damp. My heart hammers so loud I fear it’ll rouse the whole house.

We reach the lakeside path. Out on the dark water, I spot a single low light—likely Silvio’s boat waiting.

“Almost there, Papà,” I whisper, squeezing his shoulder. He pats my hand, trusting me completely, as he always has. Guilt and love twist painfully inside me.

A familiar voice speaks from the shadows: “It’s a beautiful night for an escape, isn’t it?”

My blood turns to ice. Silvio steps out from behind a willow tree, fedora tipped low and a pistol glinting in his hand. Two burly men flank him—his Camorra friends, no doubt.

I grit my teeth. “You said the boat launch,” I hiss, keeping my body between him and Papà. “Why risk coming up to the house?”

Silvio shrugs, strolling closer down the moonlit path. “To ensure you weren’t followed. And to personally thank you for delivering my prize.” His gaze drifts past me to Papà, and he smiles thinly. “As promised, you and your father are free to go, Valentina—once I have Dante’s ledger.”

My heart slams. This is it. I reach into my jacket and produce the USB drive and key card. Silvio arches a brow, clearly expecting more, but this is what I have.

“It’s all on here,” I say, holding the items out. “Every encrypted file of Foxglove. The key card unlocks everything important in the villa, including Dante’s safe.”

He watches me a beat, assessing. Then he nods to one of his goons, who approaches to take the offered pieces. I swallow hard as they leave my possession. It’s done.

Silvio tucks his pistol away and spreads his arms theatrically. “Well played, la volpe. I have to admit, I doubted you had the stomach for it.”

I glance back toward the dark silhouette of the villa’s rooftop, my chest constricting. Dante’s up there somewhere, likely asleep or still reading, confident I’m just down the hall in my suite waiting for our wedding day. A tear slips before I can stop it. I turn away, bending to adjust the blanket around Papà’s lap under pretense.

Silvio notes it. “Don’t waste tears on him, Valentina. Dante Moretti gave you no such mercy, did he?” His tone is not unkind. It’s almost sympathetic.

I straighten, forcing steel into my spine. “Let’s go,” I say curtly.

Silvio gestures and his men move ahead to the boat. I grip Papà’s wheelchair and begin pushing down the wooden pier behind them. The launch gently rocks with small waves. A figure in the boat reaches to help lift Papà on board.

Suddenly, a thunderous boom splits the night, followed by an orange fireball erupting from the heart of the Moretti villa behind us. I whirl, gasping, as screams pierce the air and flames shoot into the sky. Another explosion rips through the ballroom wing—one, two, three in quick succession. My hands fly to my mouth. The wedding decor... the gas lines... oh God, Dante—

My mind blanks in horror. “Dante!” I shriek before I can think, stumbling a step back toward the inferno that was the villa.

An arm like a vice locks around my waist, hauling me off my feet. “Time to go, bella,” Silvio hisses in my ear, dragging me bodily toward the boat. I thrash against him. “No—Dante—!”

He shoves me into the arms of one of his henchmen, who restrains me as Silvio leaps aboard and the boat’s engine revs to life. “Valentina, stop!” Silvio snaps, grabbing my face with one hand. “It’s too late for him. It was always going to end this way.”

No. No, this isn’t happening. I try to twist free, but the brute behind me holds fast. Ash and sparks rain across the lake as the boat pulls away from the blazing estate. My eyes stay glued to that hellish glow, tears streaming. What have I done?

“Papà—” I sob, looking frantically to my father. He watches the villa burn with silent devastation. At least he’s safe beside me.

Silvio’s grip on my chin forces me to face him. “We had a deal. You delivered, and so did I,” he says coldly, though there’s some twisted attempt at comfort in his gaze. “He would have died eventually anyway, cara. Men like Dante always do.”

I choke on a wail, sagging in the goon’s arms. Fire sirens wail in the distance as the boat gains speed, heading into the open lake. I imagine Dante in his study, perhaps jolted awake by the first blast... then nothing. A fresh sob tears from me.

Silvio signals his man to release me. He does, and I crumple to the deck, hands pressed to my heart as if I could hold the pieces together. Papà’s frail hand finds my shoulder and pats gently, and that only makes me cry harder.

I lift my head one last time to the inferno devouring the home that became my prison and my paradise in equal measure. Somewhere in that blazing ruin, Dante’s promise that he’d protect me and my father dies with him. The bitter irony is that I never truly needed salvation from Dante. In the end, I needed salvation from my own choice.

The villa’s grand spires collapse in on themselves, sending up a fountain of embers. I let out a keening moan, closing my eyes against the unbearable sight. It’s over. It’s all over.

I betrayed him... and now I’ll never even get to tell him I loved him.

## Chapter 10 – The Auction Inferno (Dante POV)

I stand in the moonlit shadow of the Camorra’s cliffside villa, my body pressed against the cold stone wall as I surveil the estate. The Mediterranean breeze carries salt and the faint citrus of lemon groves, an incongruously serene scent given the hell I’m about to unleash. From my vantage point, I can see the glow of elegant lights and hear the distant murmur of conversation – wealthy collectors and criminals mingling over champagne, awaiting the illicit auction of Caravaggio’s The Sacrifice of Isaac. They have no idea that one guest has slipped in uninvited, that the prince they think they killed is alive and stalking among them. They believe Dante Moretti died in flames, buried in the rubble of his own villa, but I’ve risen from those ashes, wounded and wrathful, a ghost at their feast.

My left flank throbs where a bullet grazed me days ago, the wound pulled tight by hastily stitched sutures. Every breath is a jolt of pain, but I welcome it. Pain means I’m alive, alive to make them pay. I adjust the matte-black half mask on my face – a simple piece of molded carbon fiber concealing my features from any security cameras or familiar eyes. The rest of my disguise is more elegant: a tailored tuxedo stolen off a trafficker in Marseille and adjusted to fit, complete with a forged invitation tucked in my breast pocket. Gaining entry to this event required every ounce of my cunning (and a midnight altercation on a train that left one less villain in the world to take his seat), but I’m here. Inside that villa, the Camorra are selling my painting – and I intend to ensure tonight ends in chaos.

Slipping through the service entrance had been almost too easy with the borrowed credentials. Now I walk through opulent halls of travertine marble and vaulted ceilings painted with cherubs, blending in with the stream of late-arriving guests. Crystal chandeliers cast a warm glow over men in Brioni suits and women glittering with jewels. Many of the attendees wear masquerade-style masks – perhaps a thematic flourish by our hosts, or simply prudent anonymity for criminals buying stolen art. I keep my stride measured, confident, as if I belong among these snakes. Beneath the mask, my eyes are scanning, probing for threats and for my target.

A pair of stone-faced Camorra sentries stand at a checkpoint ahead, armed with submachine guns visible under their jackets. Beyond them, a set of reinforced doors – likely biometric scanners on the locks – marks the threshold to the auction salon. I fall in behind a chattering group of bidders and pass through with them, pressing my gloved thumb to the scanner when prompted. For one tense second, I wonder if the forged print on the latex glove will fool the system’s biometric check, but then a green light blinks. The door opens, and I exhale silently.

Inside, the grand auction hall unfolds in a semicircle of tiered seating facing a small stage. It's a luxurious private theater, all gilded molding and rows of velvet chairs. Conversations buzz in hushed tones – French, Arabic, Russian, Mandarin. At least fifty people, all with money blood-stained one way or another. High on the wall, a massive arched window overlooks the moonlit sea outside, but steel shutters have been drawn over it tonight, sealing us in. My hand strays near the pistol tucked at my waist under my jacket – a comfort, though using it now would be suicide. Not yet. Patience.

On stage, displayed on an easel with theatrical lighting, is a large canvas draped in black velvet. Even covered, the shape of it makes my pulse kick. That must be the Caravaggio – the real Sacrifice of Isaac – slated to be unveiled once the auction begins. According to my sources, the painting wasn’t supposed to arrive until later tonight, likely via Silvio’s arrangement. Yet here it stands, early. My jaw clenches. If the original is already here, it means the Camorra either advanced their timeline… or Silvio delivered on his promises faster than I anticipated. Either way, the situation is volatile.

I take a seat near the back, keen to remain unobtrusive while I gather intel. Two seats to my left, a pair of Turkish smugglers discuss the rumored starting bid in low whispers. To my right, an elegantly dressed woman lifts her mask to sip her champagne, her gaze darting about nervously. Everyone here is on edge, and no wonder – the Moretti and Rossi families aren’t the only ones wronged by the Camorra lately. The underworld is rife with whispers of tonight’s sale, of shifting alliances.

My focus returns to the shrouded painting. Valentina’s face flashes in my mind – the way her eyes lit with passion and purpose as she worked in the forge studio to create a perfect copy of that canvas. She spent days painstakingly rendering Caravaggio’s shadows and bloodied knife, preparing to outwit the Camorra with her forgery. The plan was for us to swap the original with her replica, cheating the Camorra’s buyers and undermining their credibility. But that plan went up in flames when Silvio betrayed us all.

My fist tightens on my knee. Silvio – my cousin, my brother-in-arms – now a Judas. He’s the reason I’m here alone instead of with an army at my back. He has my family’s ledger, our secrets, delivered to him by Valentina under duress. And he has her. Or so I thought... No. I force myself to focus. Replaying Silvio’s sins will only stoke the rage smoldering inside me, and I need a cool head.

Movement on stage snaps me back. A heavyset man in an immaculate cream suit has taken the podium – Don Arturo, the Camorra boss hosting tonight. He spreads his arms in welcome and the crowd quiets. I recognize the squat, bald-headed figure from Interpol files. As he launches into a florid greeting (“Friends, colleagues, signore e signori…”), I slip out of my seat. Time to implement the contingency I prepared.

I skirt along the back wall, ducking behind a column. The house lights are dimming for the grand reveal, which gives me cover. According to the floor plans I memorized, a maintenance corridor lies just beyond a side door to my left. If I’m right, it should lead toward the electrical room and the sprinkler controls.

Don Arturo’s voice carries on, extolling the rarity of the piece they’re about to auction. I ease open the side door and slide through, leaving the muffled clapping of guests behind. Instantly I’m in a narrow hallway lit only by red emergency strips along the floor. The roar of blood in my ears competes with the distant thump of music from the hall. I move quickly now, drawing my pistol with a silencer attached. A single guard stands at the end of the corridor, likely posted by the electrical room.

He notices me an instant too late. My arm loops around his neck from behind, my pistol pressed to his ribcage. One muffled phut! and his body goes limp, dragged gently down to the floor. I catch him and ease him into the shadows. The acrid scent of gunpowder tingles in my nose as I retrieve the small hacking device I brought – essentially a military-grade USB loaded with a nasty virus.

The door to the electrical control room is secured by a keypad. I kneel and swipe the guard’s keycard, but a red light flashes – no access. No time for subtlety then. With a grunt of effort, I slam my shoulder into the door. Pain lances through my stitched bicep, white-hot and blinding, but the doorjamb splinters on the second hit. I push inside, breathing hard through clenched teeth.

Rows of circuit breakers and control panels greet me in the gloom. Perfect. I find the main power switch labeled for the auction hall’s lights and security feed. My gloved fingers yank it down. In the distance, I hear a collective gasp as the lights in the villa blink out. Darkness falls like a curtain.

Almost simultaneously, I jam the virus-loaded USB into the sprinkler system’s control slot on the wall. The device’s red LED blinks furiously, scrambling the system logic. Within seconds, I hear it: the whoosh of sprinkler valves opening. An alarm begins to bleat through the building – a shrill, continuous bell that means fire. My virus has fooled every sensor into believing there’s an inferno.

Chaos has just been invited to the party.

I rip the USB out and pocket it, then turn to run back the way I came. Water is already raining down from the ceiling in other rooms – I glimpse the spray through the door. The corridor strobes with red emergency lights as backup generators kick on low power. My polished shoes splash through puddles forming on the marble floor.

Ahead, the auction hall has erupted in shouting. I peer through a crack in the main door: the once-orderly event is now bedlam. Masked guests are scrambling to their feet, slipping on wet marble as they dash for exits. Armed guards shout orders in Italian, trying to secure the painting. In the flicker of emergency lamps, I see one yank the velvet cover off the canvas on stage to whisk it to safety. For one heart-stopping moment I behold the Caravaggio itself – Abraham’s knife raised, Isaac’s face contorted in fear – before a guard starts to carry it off.

Not so fast.

I shoulder through the door and join the fray, moving against the panicked tide of attendees. Ice-cold sprinkler water drenches my hair and suit within seconds, plinking off the marble. A guard rushes past me, likely to check the fire source, and I take the opportunity to slip behind him and up onto the stage. The easel lies abandoned, but my interest is in the side door behind the stage where that guard went with the painting. It leads, I know, to the vault area.

Gunfire echoes somewhere down the hall – perhaps trigger-happy guards firing at shadows. The guests certainly think it’s an attack; their terror is palpable in the screams that bounce off the high ceiling. Good. The more panic, the better my cover.

I race down the corridor toward the vault, adrenaline overriding agony. The hallway tilts downward, sloping into the cliff’s bedrock. I pass smashed display cases and rooms likely cleared earlier of other illicit lots. Sparks fly from a shorting fuse box, illuminating the path in hellish orange bursts. The air smells of wet stone, cordite, and fear.

Up ahead, the vault’s steel door stands ajar, and I catch a glimpse inside: two canvases, identical in size, propped against a table. My heart lurches at the sight of two copies of The Sacrifice of Isaac – the original and a forgery expertly painted by Valentina. Only she could replicate Caravaggio so perfectly. That means she did deliver her fake as planned… and she must be here.

Two figures wrestle in front of the vault entrance. I press myself into an alcove, watching. It’s a guard struggling to subdue someone – a slim figure in a black hoodie. The guard snarls and throws the person against the wall. A hood falls back, revealing a cascade of soaked auburn hair. My heart stops. It’s Valentina.

She’s alive. Alive.

For an instant I simply stare, thunderstruck. A flame from an electrical fire licks up the wall behind her, painting her face in flickering gold. Those high cheekbones, those dark eyes I thought I'd never see again – they’re here, she’s here. My chest constricts painfully. I want to cry out her name, but shock muzzles me.

Valentina wrenches against the guard’s grip, teeth bared in feral defiance. She elbows him hard, freeing herself for a moment. That’s my girl. Without hesitating, I surge forward. The guard is raising his gun at her – no time for subtlety. I fire twice. The suppressed bullets find their mark; the man crumples into the flooded corridor with a splash.

Valentina turns at the sound, wild-eyed. Our gazes lock through the haze of smoke and emergency lights. She whispers my name, a soft, broken gasp that I can barely hear over the alarms. I don’t know if the wet on her face is sprinkler spray or tears shining. The world around us is burning and drowning all at once – alarms wailing, water pouring from the ceilings, fires igniting where electrical sparks meet drapes – but in this moment, everything slows.

Her lips part in astonishment. I feel rooted to the spot, my gun trembling in my hand. Anger, relief, betrayal, yearning – a storm of emotions crashes over me. She’s alive. My Valentina is alive... and here, in the lion’s den.

"Val..." I breathe, voice lost in the cacophony.

Flames crackle between us, reflected in her wide eyes. The hallway lights flicker and die, and for a heartbeat it's just the two of us bathed in the glow of encroaching fire. In that flicker of illumination, I see everything: her guilt, her relief, the fear that I might be just a phantom in the smoke.

I take one step toward her, water sloshing around my shoes. She reaches a hand out, trembling.

"Dante?" she chokes out, disbelief and hope woven into my name.

Before I can answer, a beam from the ceiling collapses nearby with a crash of sparks, separating us with a sudden wall of flame. Heat washes over my face; I hear her cry out. I try to lunge through, but the fire is too fierce. I catch a last glimpse of Valentina through the inferno – her dark silhouette on the other side of the flames, reaching for me as the world burns around us.

## Chapter 11 – Last Dance on the Lake (Valentina POV)

The night air screams past my ears as the speedboat races away from the inferno behind us. But my mind is still on the boat ride from the night before – the moment everything changed. I can still feel the cold spray of Lake Zürich on my skin, smell the smoke and ash from the burning villa as Silvio’s launch cut across the dark water.

On that boat, mere hours ago, I died inside. Dante’s home – his life – exploded in a blossom of fire against the night sky while I watched in horror. The blast flung a cloud of embers high into the air, and in each spark I saw Dante’s face. I was so sure he was gone – killed because of me. I remember collapsing to my knees on the deck, my screams lost to the roar of flames and wind. Papà was slumped in his wheelchair beside me, shouting my name in panic, but I couldn’t respond. I couldn’t breathe. It felt like my heart had been ripped from my chest and thrown into that fire.

Silvio’s strong arms grabbed me before I could hurl myself overboard in despair. “Easy, volpe, easy,” he murmured, using that hated nickname – fox. I struggled against him, sobbing, pounding my fists weakly on his chest until he caught my wrists. “Stop it,” he hissed, a flash of irritation cutting through his false sympathy. “What’s done is done. Dante made his choices. Now we have to survive this.”

His words barely registered through the red haze of grief. Dante was gone. Nothing mattered. For a wild moment, I wanted Silvio to just kill me too and be done with it. Perhaps he saw that in my eyes; his grip on my wrists softened slightly.

Instead of another threat, he tried a different tactic: “Your father needs you, Valentina.” Silvio’s voice was almost gentle, but I knew him too well. Underneath lay steel. “Alfonso is alive because of what you did. Don’t throw that away.”

I hiccupped a breath and looked to Papà. My father’s face was ashen, tears carving tracks through the soot on his cheeks. He was reaching for me with a trembling hand. I broke from Silvio’s hold and fell at Papà’s side, wrapping my arms around his frail frame. He was alive; I had saved him… at the cost of the man I loved. A fresh wave of guilt and sorrow slammed into me, but Papà’s feeble pat on my shoulder anchored me to the moment. I had to stay strong for him.

Silvio crouched down beside us on the rocking boat. I felt the muzzle of his handgun brush the back of my head lightly – a casual reminder of power. “Listen closely,” he said, voice low under the whistle of wind. “The Camorra are expecting their prize tomorrow night in Naples – the Caravaggio and your expertise.”

I lifted my head, meeting his cold, pale eyes. “My… expertise?” I echoed dully.

He nodded. “The forgery, cara. You’re going to help ensure the auction goes off without a hitch. You will convince the buyers it’s authentic, if it comes to that. You will do whatever Don Arturo asks of you tomorrow night.” His tone sharpened. “And if you even think of betraying us, or sabotaging the plan…” He nodded toward Papà, who was clutching my hand in terror. “One pull of a trigger, and your father’s sudden widow becomes a grieving mother as well. Are we clear?”

I swallowed, tasting bile. The night wind burned at my eyes. “Clear,” I whispered. What else could I say? Dante was dead, I had no fight left – only Papà to protect.

Silvio’s lips curved in a thin facsimile of a smile. “Good girl.” He holstered his pistol and straightened. “Don Arturo will be pleased. You deliver the painting, help reel in the big fish, and in return…” He spread his hands as if to say everyone gets what they want. But I knew better. Don Arturo, the Camorra boss, might have promised Silvio power and me and Papà our lives, but the moment my usefulness ended, so would any mercy.

I spent the rest of that cursed journey curled at Papà’s feet, my head in his lap as he stroked my hair and murmured soothing fatherly words in Italian. I was numb. If I wasn’t holding onto Papà’s warm, living hand, I might have let myself slip over the side into the black lake. But I couldn’t leave my father to these wolves. So I closed my eyes and clung to his trembling fingers, silently begging Dante’s ghost for forgiveness.

We reached the far shore and transferred to a private jet arranged by the Camorra. Everything moved so quickly. One minute I was helping Papà into a seat, the next I was stepping out of a car under the Italian stars outside a remote cliffside villa. Naples. They kept Papà and me separated for most of the day – presumably to keep me in line. I only saw him briefly under guard, enough to know he was alive, before they whisked him away. I suspect they hid him off-site to prevent any rescue attempts. My heart twisted knowing he was still effectively a hostage, but at least he wasn’t in immediate danger if I complied.

They kept me under constant watch. By late afternoon, Don Arturo’s men escorted me to the villa’s private vault to verify the paintings. My painting – my forgery – was already there, carefully transported from Zürich. I should have been awed standing in a Camorra vault, surrounded by millions in stolen art and gold. But all I felt was hollow. Still, I played my role. Under the nervous gaze of a Camorra art handler, I inspected The Sacrifice of Isaac that I’d painted, checking for any damage from transit. It was perfect, of course – every brushstroke a mirror of Caravaggio. And right beside it, in chilling twin likeness, stood the genuine Caravaggio itself, fresh delivered by the smugglers Silvio had coordinated with.

My chest hurt as I looked between them. All that work, all Dante’s planning, and now both the original and my replica were in Camorra hands. Silvio intended to have his cake and eat it too: sell one to the highest bidder and keep the other for leverage, perhaps. Or swap them at the last moment to cheat the buyer, I wasn’t sure. He and Don Arturo had spoken in hushed tones I wasn’t privy to. What I did know was that I’d been instructed to stay with the paintings until the auction, ready to authenticate or touch up as needed. A prisoner with a paintbrush.

I remained in that vault room as evening fell, trying not to think of the last time I’d been in a vault with Dante. My eyes kept drifting to the original Caravaggio’s depiction of Abraham’s anguish, the terror in Isaac’s eyes. It felt too personal. I was Isaac, bound on the altar; or perhaps I was Abraham, knife in hand, forced to cut down what I loved to save something dearer. Either way, no angels were coming to save me.

When the auction was about to start, a guard finally ushered me out of the vault, locking the masterpieces safely inside until the winning bid was declared. They stationed me in a small antechamber nearby, with one watchful Camorra thug at the door. I could faintly hear Don Arturo’s voice echoing from the main hall as he welcomed the illustrious guests. My stomach churned. I tried to zone out, focusing on breathing slowly, evenly. It almost worked... until the lights went out.

Sudden darkness. Then the wail of alarms and the roar of overhead sprinklers springing to life. In the antechamber, the guard swore, yanking open the door to peek down the corridor. Dim emergency backlights cast a red glow through the hall. “Stay here!” he barked at me, before stepping out with his gun drawn.

My heart leaps into my throat as I recall that moment. In the chaotic dark, with water streaming from the ceiling, I felt a spark – a wild, impossible spark of hope. Could it be Dante? The rational part of me slammed the idea down; Dante was gone, I’d watched him die. And yet… who else would cut the power and drench the place in water in such a theatrical way? It was almost elegant in its strategy: sight and sound thrown into chaos, panic sown among the guests. It was exactly the kind of cunning disruption Dante excelled at.

I crept to the doorway. Down the corridor, I saw shadowy figures running – guards shouting to each other in Italian about a fire, guests screaming. And then I saw him – a tall silhouette sprinting toward the vault. My breath caught. It was only a glimpse, illuminated by a stuttering flash of sparking electrical wires, but the shape was unmistakable to me. Broad shoulders, athletic grace… and in his hand, the glint of a pistol with a silencer. Dante?

I clung to the doorframe, pulse hammering. I wanted to cry out his name, but doubt and fear strangled me. What if I was wrong? What if it was just some Camorra heavy or a rival thief? But deep in my soul, a flame of certainty ignited. Dante had survived. He had come for revenge, or perhaps for the painting, or… for me.

A guard I recognized – one of Silvio’s personal thugs – stepped out of an alcove behind the running figure, raising an assault rifle. He was aiming at the man I prayed was Dante. I didn’t think, I just moved. Darting into the hall, I shouted hoarsely, “Attento! Behind you!” My voice was drowned in the noise, but my sudden appearance did the job. The gunman whirled toward me in surprise, finger tightening on the trigger. I gasped and dove back as a burst of gunfire chewed into the plaster above my head.

Strong arms seized me roughly before I could scramble away. The Camorra guard had abandoned his first target to subdue the inconvenient witness – me. He shoved me hard against the wall. My skull rang with the impact, stars dancing across my vision. “Stupid bitch,” he growled, pinning me in place with an arm across my throat. Water from the sprinklers ran in rivulets over our faces. I clawed at his sleeve, choking, my feet slipping in the puddles on the floor.

Over the guard’s shoulder, down the hall, I saw the mysterious intruder pause and turn. The emergency lights cast a red halo around him as he raised his pistol. A familiar resolve steadied my heart. It is him. It’s Dante – it has to be.

The guard holding me tensed; he must have spotted Dante too. “He’s here,” the man hissed into the radio on his shoulder, likely alerting Silvio. Panic and exhilaration surged in me simultaneously. Dante was alive. My Dante was alive!

The guard’s forearm pressed harder on my windpipe, cutting off air. I wheezed, struggling. He drew a knife from his belt, bringing the edge to my cheek. “You’re making a big mistake, girl,” he snarled. “Maybe I should cut that pretty face right—”

His threat ended in a wet gurgle. Two silenced gunshots whipped through the air, and suddenly I was stumbling free as the guard’s weight slackened. He crumpled to the floor at my feet, a dark bloom of blood spreading on his chest.

I stagger, coughing and gulping in air. My vision clears in time to see a figure emerge from the haze of smoke and steam. Dante steps forward, gun still raised, eyes blazing even behind the half-mask obscuring part of his face. I can barely process the sight of him. He’s drenched and disheveled, tuxedo jacket torn, an angry burn mark on his temple – but he’s alive. A sob of relief escapes me.

“Dante,” I cry, his name coming out half-choked and unbelieving. I reach a trembling hand toward him, half expecting him to vanish like a mirage.

He lowers the gun, water dripping from his dark hair. “Val,” he rasps, voice filled with so much – astonishment, fury, longing. Hearing that familiar baritone break on my name nearly undoes me.

We don’t have time to even breathe before new figures pound down the corridor – more of Silvio’s men, weapons drawn. Dante is at my side in an instant. He grabs my hand and pulls me behind a concrete column as a hail of bullets sparks off the walls. I feel his body press against mine, shielding me from the gunfire. The smell of cordite and his subtle cologne floods my senses. It’s absurd what details surface in life-or-death moments: even soaked in lake water and sweat, Dante still carries that hint of bergamot and smoke that clings to my happiest memories.

Our eyes lock for one charged moment. His face is inches from mine, and despite the adrenaline coursing through me, I register the pain etched at the corners of his eyes, the betrayal warring with relief in those stormy gray depths. There will be a reckoning between us – I see that clearly – but not now.

“Can you fight?” he shouts over the din, voice husky.

I nod, though my knees are trembling. I’m no soldier, but I’m not leaving his side now that I’ve found him again. “I can.” My answer is raw, but determined.

Dante’s lips twitch in the barest hint of pride or gratitude – I’m not sure which. He shoves a pistol into my hand, the one he took from the first guard he dropped. It feels heavy and foreign in my grip; I’ve never shot a man before. But I swallow my fear. If Silvio’s men catch us, they’ll kill Dante for sure, and likely me as well. I won’t let that happen.

Another burst of gunfire strafes our cover, chips of marble stinging my arm. Dante peers around the column, then ducks back. “Three of them,” he reports grimly. “Silvio with them.” The name sends an icy spike of hate through me. Silvio’s here, personally hunting us. Of course he is.

A booming voice echoes through the corridor, dripping with smugness. “Cousin!” Silvio calls out. “Did you really think you’d sneak into my little gathering unnoticed? That’s the problem with ghosts, Dante – they tend to leave traces when they haunt the living.”

Dante’s jaw clenches. I see his finger twitch on his remaining gun. For a second, I fear he’ll charge out guns blazing in fury. Instead, he surprises me. With a wicked gleam in his eye, he leans close and whispers, “On my signal, run left toward the docks. There’s a service tunnel.”

I blink away water from my lashes and whisper back, “What about you?”

“I’ll be right behind you,” he promises. A muscle in his cheek flexes – he must see the doubt in my eyes. His voice drops lower, meant only for me. “I’m not losing you again, Valentina.”

Before I can respond, he pivots out from cover and fires three quick shots down the hallway. I hear a shout of pain – someone hit. Dante grabs my shoulder and pushes. “Now!”

I sprint left, keeping low. My feet splash through puddles as I dart toward where the corridor slopes upward, praying I remember the way to the docks from the schematics Dante showed me once. Behind me, heavy footfalls and angry shouts signal the pursuit. A bullet zings past my ear and I yelp, ducking instinctively. But I keep running. The red emergency lights blur with tears of effort in my eyes.

Suddenly Silvio himself emerges at the far end of the hall ahead, cutting us off. Dante skids to a halt just behind me, nearly plowing into my back. Silvio stands between us and the exit to the docks, flanked by one bleeding henchman and another unscathed one. He raises a pistol, training it on Dante.

“Stop right there,” Silvio commands, eyes wild and triumphant. His normally neat hair is plastered to his forehead, and a spatter of someone’s blood stains his collar. “Valentina, step away from him.”

I realize I’ve interposed myself slightly in front of Dante. Instinctively, I had moved to shield him in turn. I tighten my grip on the pistol in my hand, though I can barely keep it steady. My body is trembling – with adrenaline, with hatred for the man who destroyed everything.

“No, Silvio,” I shout back, voice echoing down the corridor. “It’s over. I won’t help you anymore!”

Silvio’s face twists in rage. “Ungrateful to the end, eh, volpe?” he sneers. “Fine. If I can’t have your cooperation, I’ll settle for your corpse.” His gun shifts, finger whitening on the trigger.

Before he can shoot, Dante’s arm comes around my waist like a steel band. He yanks me sideways through a doorway – the entrance to the service tunnel – just as Silvio’s shot rings out. The bullet smashes a light fixture where we stood an eye-blink before. Dante hauls me against him and we half-run, half-stumble down a narrow flight of stairs.

Behind us, Silvio’s furious howl echoes: “You can’t hide, Dante! I’ll hunt you both to the ends of the earth!”

Dante slams the metal door at the bottom of the stairwell behind us, buying a precious few seconds. We spill out onto a small loading dock carved into the cliff below the villa. The night air hits my soaked skin like a cold kiss. Below, the black expanse of the Tyrrhenian Sea churns against the rocks. A single speedboat is moored at the dock – likely Silvio’s planned escape craft.

Dante doesn’t hesitate. With a wince of pain (only then do I remember he’s injured), he leaps into the boat and yanks me in after him. Overhead, flames are now licking out of the villa’s upper windows; Dante’s chaos has turned into a true inferno. Silvio’s men will be on us in moments.

“Hold on!” Dante shouts as he slashes the mooring line free. I barely collapse onto a seat before the engine roars to life under his hand. A storm of bullets suddenly pepper the water around us – Silvio’s men have reached the dock and are firing wildly. Dante ducks and guns the throttle. The boat lurches forward with a burst of spray. I cling to the side railing for dear life as we rocket away from the dock, skimming out into the open sea.

The night is a blur of salt spray, engine thunder, and my own hammering heartbeat. I chance a glance backward: the cliffside villa is an orange blaze against the darkness, Silvio’s men mere silhouettes on the dock growing ever smaller. We’re getting away. We actually made it out.

A sob of relief and triumph wells up in my chest. I turn to Dante, ready to rejoice that we survived – that he’s alive. But I find him grim-faced, focused on steering the boat through the choppy waves. Even in the dark, I can see he’s deathly pale beneath his soaked mask. Blood trickles from under the bandage on his left arm and his right side – his old wound – is staining red anew. My elation falters, replaced by worry.

I move without thinking, crawling across the slippery deck to him. “Dante,” I say urgently, placing a hand over his on the throttle. “You’re hurt. Let me see—”

“I’m fine,” he grits out, but his voice wavers. The adrenaline that kept him going is fading, pain crashing back in. I can see him fighting it, refusing to relent.

“You’re not fine,” I argue, gently but firmly pulling his hand off the throttle. The boat is on a straight course out to sea now; we have distance from the villa. “Let me drive for a minute.”

He meets my eyes, stubborn pride warring with obvious agony. Finally, with a shaky exhale, Dante nods. We quickly swap places, him sliding to sit on the passenger bench while I take the wheel. I’m no expert pilot, but I keep us moving steadily away from Naples’ lights. The farther, the better.

The wind has calmed out here. Only the engine’s rumble and the hiss of spray accompany us now. Silence falls between us, heavy with things unsaid. My hands tremble on the wheel as the reality settles in: Dante is here. Alive. And I betrayed him.

I steal a sideways glance. He’s taken the mask off and is slumped back, one hand pressed to his bleeding side. Even injured and exhausted, he has a fierce beauty about him that squeezes my heart. The last time I saw him, I left him to die. Yet he saved me tonight. Why? How can he even stand to look at me?

As if sensing my gaze, Dante opens his eyes and looks at me. The intensity there makes me swallow hard. We stare at each other across the small gap, the space filled with all the words we don’t know how to say yet – apologies, accusations, relief, heartbreak.

I can’t bear it. “Dio, Dante…” I choke out, tears I’ve held at bay for what feels like ages finally spilling over. “I-I thought you were dead.” My voice breaks. “I’m so sorry… for everything.”

His expression crumples for a split second. Then, suddenly, he’s in front of me. I didn’t even see him move, but he’s standing unsteadily at the helm, facing me. “Valentina,” he murmurs, and the way he says my name – equal parts reverence and anguish – sends a shudder through my soul.

Before I can speak again, Dante’s hands come up to cradle my face. His palms are warm, callused, trembling slightly as his thumbs swipe at the tears on my cheeks. I freeze, breath caught. His touch is everything I’ve ached for and everything I fear.

“You’re alive,” he rasps, voice thick. He steps closer, pressing me gently back against the console. I nod wordlessly, my hands coming up to grip his soaked shirt, afraid if I let go he might disappear.

“So are you,” I manage to whisper, tears blending with the seawater on my face. A broken laugh escapes me. “I thought I’d lost you. I thought I—”

He doesn’t let me finish. With a low groan that sounds like my name, Dante kisses me.

It’s not a gentle kiss. It’s a collision of desperation and pain and longing. His lips crush against mine, fierce and demanding, and I answer with all the hunger and guilt and love pent up inside me. I taste salt and copper – blood from a cut on his lip, maybe mine; I don’t care. I fling my arms around his neck, pouring everything I can’t express into that kiss.

Dante growls softly and deepens the kiss, his tongue sliding against mine with a heat that drowns out the cool night air. I gasp into his mouth, my body igniting despite the chill. He’s alive, he’s here. I let my fingers tangle in his wet hair, pulling him even closer, never wanting this moment to end.

His hands leave my face to roam greedily down my back. He grips my waist, the small of my back, as if to assure himself I’m real and whole. When our lips part for breath, he rests his forehead against mine. “I should hate you,” he whispers raggedly, echoing the very fear twisting inside me. His breath is hot on my swollen lips. “After what you did… I should.”

A whimper escapes me. Fresh tears well up, but he kisses them from the corners of my eyes, his mouth gentle now in contrast to his words. I clutch his shoulders, trembling. “Dante, I’m—”

“Don’t,” he husks, and suddenly his mouth is on my neck, trailing fevered kisses along my jaw, my throat. I tilt my head back and a cry slips out as he bites down lightly at the juncture of my neck and shoulder – a mark of possession. My nails dig into his shoulders through the soaked shirt.

“I can’t,” he growls, the sound vibrating against my skin. “I can’t hate you, Valentina. Dio, I’ve tried.” His confession is torn from him like it costs him dearly. My heart lurches.

He pulls back just enough to rip off his drenched tuxedo jacket and toss it aside. His shirt clings to his chest, translucent with water and streaked with blood. In the faint moonlight, I see the bandages I wrapped around his torso back in Zürich, now pink with seeped blood. Guilt flares in me – his wounds reopened during tonight’s ordeal. “You’re bleeding, your stitches—” I begin, reaching toward his side.

But Dante catches my hand. “Later,” he mutters, shaking his head. There’s a wild light in his eyes I’ve never seen before – an almost feral need. “Right now, I need… I need you.”

I realize I’m shaking, adrenaline and longing and love all coiling into a tight knot low in my belly. “Take me,” I whisper, the words escaping before I can think. I press myself up against him. “If you want me, I’m yours, Dante.”

A guttural sound rumbles from his chest – something between a curse and a prayer. Then his mouth crashes down on mine again and we’re lost.

The next moments are a heated blur. Dante’s hands are everywhere at once, skimming under the soaked silk of my blouse, sliding up to cup my breasts. His thumbs tease my hardened nipples through the lace of my bra and I moan, arching into his touch. Fire races across my skin despite the damp cold. I fumble with the buttons of his shirt, desperate to feel him under my fingertips. They slip through my shaking fingers, so I grab the fabric and simply tear. Buttons ping off into the night as his shirt falls open, revealing the hard planes of his torso. My breath catches; even wounded, he is exquisite – all sculpted muscle and scars that tell the story of our last few days.

“Dio, bellissima,” Dante groans as I lean in to press open-mouthed kisses against his chest, tasting sea salt and the copper tang of blood where a bandage has soaked through. He hisses when my lips brush a particularly raw wound on his ribs. I start to pull back, but he tangles one hand in my wet hair, gently tugging. “Don’t stop,” he pleads, voice rough.

His need ignites mine further. I trail my tongue up over his collarbone, relishing the low curse he exhales in Italian. My fingers skim down his abdomen, feeling the tautness of each muscle, until they reach the belt at his waist. I pause, suddenly shy under the intensity of his gaze. It’s not as if we haven’t been close before – we shared that passionate shower – but this is different. There’s no holding back this time; we both know where this is headed.

Dante seems to sense my hesitation. He cups my cheek, guiding my face up to meet his molten gaze. “Ti adoro,” he murmurs, brushing my lower lip with his thumb. Then a softer, almost broken admission: “Ti amo, Valentina.” The words, I love you, slip out in his mother tongue, but I understand perfectly. My heart feels like it might burst.

A sob-laugh bubbles out of me. I cover his hand on my cheek with mine. “I love you too,” I whisper, and it’s like a dam breaking. The truth of it washes over us, erasing everything else for that instant – the betrayals, the guilt, the blood on our hands. Only love remains, fierce and desperate.

His mouth claims mine once more, and I taste the salt of our mingled tears. We shed the rest of our clothes in a frenzy of fevered hands and gasping breaths. My blouse clings stubbornly to my wet skin until Dante yanks it over my head. My bra follows, and Dante makes a low, appreciative growl as my bare breasts press against his chest. The heat of his skin against mine sends sparks shooting through my core. He lifts me easily – in a show of strength that makes my heart flip – and sets me atop the padded engine cover at the back of the boat. The engine has long idled down to a soft rumble, leaving us rocking gently on the dark waves.

I lie back as Dante hovers over me, our bodies illuminated by a single swaying deck light and the distant glow of the burning villa on the horizon. His gaze travels down my naked form with such reverence that I blush under the attention. Water droplets glisten on my skin. His own trousers hang unbuckled and low on his hips, the sharp V of his pelvis drawing my eyes lower to the rigid length of his arousal straining against wet fabric. A pulse of heat and anticipation throbs through me at the sight.

Slowly, Dante hooks his fingers into the waistband of my soaked skirt and panties and peels them down my legs, tossing them aside. I’m laid bare before him, heat pooling between my thighs despite the night’s chill. His eyes darken as he drinks me in. “Sei perfetta,” he says roughly – you’re perfect.

I reach for him, desperate to feel him against me fully. He comes down, covering my body with his own. The weight of him is heaven, skin to skin, the ridges of his muscles pressing into my softer curves. Our mouths find each other again in a slow, devouring kiss that steals the breath from my lungs.

His hand skims down my side, over my hip, and between us. I gasp as his fingers slide through my slick folds, finding how ready I am for him. “Always so wet for me,” Dante mutters, a hint of that cocky tease I remember lighting his tone. I bite his lower lip in playful reprimand and he chuckles, the sound quickly turning into a groan as I wrap my hand around the hardness still trapped in his pants.

“Off,” I whisper against his lips, tugging at the waistband. “I need you… inside me. Now.”

A curse in Italian as he shifts to kick off the last of his clothing. And then there’s nothing between us at all. His arousal, thick and hot, presses against my thigh as he settles himself between my parted legs. I hook one leg around his waist instinctively, urging him closer. My body trembles with anticipation and a touch of nerves – it’s been building to this, and I want it more than my next breath.

Dante meets my eyes, his own blazing with love and something almost like awe. He takes himself in hand and guides the head of his length to my entrance. I suck in a breath at the feel of him poised there, stretching me already. He pauses, a question unspoken on his face even as need beads sweat on his brow.

“Yes,” I answer, rolling my hips up in invitation. “Dante… please.”

With a low groan, he pushes forward, entering me in one slow, exquisite stroke. I cry out, my fingers digging into his back. He’s big, and the sensation borders on pain for a heartbeat as my body adjusts. But he stills, buried only halfway, chest heaving, giving me a moment. He kisses my temple, my cheek, murmuring something soft I can’t make out over the blood rushing in my ears. I wrap both legs around him now, urging him deeper. “It’s okay,” I pant. “More… I need more.”

He swears and slides the rest of the way in. Our bodies join fully, and it’s bliss – a fierce, burning fullness that steals my sanity. I cling to him, lost in the feeling of being completed. Dante’s face is pressed into my neck, his breath ragged against my skin. “Madonna,” he groans, shaking. “You feel… I can’t…”

“Dante,” I breathe, threading my fingers through his hair. “I know. Me too.” I tighten around him experimentally and he shudders.

He pulls back then, just enough to withdraw almost entirely before thrusting back in. We both moan at the sensation. He sets a rhythm, slow at first – each roll of his hips deliberate, grinding, rubbing against the sensitive spot inside me that makes me see stars. I gasp and arch into him, meeting his thrusts eagerly. The boat rocks gently beneath us, as if urging us on.

Water sloshes around our feet on the deck and the night wind chills our wet skin, but none of it matters. All I feel is Dante – his hard body moving against mine, his breath mixing with my own, his low voice murmuring my name like a prayer. He braces on one forearm beside my head, the other hand gripping my thigh to angle me just so, allowing him even deeper. The next thrust hits a spot that has me crying out loud. “Oh God— Dante!”

“Così, amore mio,” he grits out, maintaining that perfect angle. Again and again he plunges into me, faster now, our restraint unraveling with every slap of skin on skin. I rake my nails down his back, not caring if I leave marks, needing him closer still. He growls and captures my lips in a bruising kiss, swallowing my moans as he drives me to the edge.

Pressure builds low in my belly, molten and urgent. I tear my mouth from his to gasp for air. “I’m close,” I manage, voice trembling. My entire body tightens, chasing that peak. “Dante, please—”

“I’ve got you,” he whispers fiercely. His hand moves between us, the pad of his thumb finding my swollen clit and circling in time with his thrusts. The dual sensation is too much. With a keening cry, I shatter. My inner walls clench hard around him as pleasure crashes over me in waves. I cling to his shoulders, calling his name, my mind going white with ecstasy.

Dante curses and pistons into me through my climax, the rhythmic squeezing of my body clearly undoing him. With a hoarse shout, he thrusts deep one final time and stills, buried to the hilt as he finds his release. Heat blossoms inside me as he spills himself, groaning my name like it’s salvation.

We remain tangled together, trembling in the aftermath. My heart feels like it might burst from the sheer emotion coursing through me. Dante rests his forehead against mine, our breaths coming in ragged synchrony. I stroke the back of his head, both of us still joined, unwilling to break this fragile moment of unity.

The world slowly comes back into focus: the gentle lap of water against the hull, the distant crackle of the burning villa on the horizon, and the soft Italian words Dante is whispering into my hair. “Sei mia… ti amo, Valentina, ti amo.” You are mine. I love you.

Tears of happiness and sorrow mix on my cheeks. I hug him tightly, closing my eyes. For the first time since this nightmare began, I feel whole. No matter what lies ahead or what horrors we’ve survived, right now we have each other.

Dante gently lifts his head and gazes down at me. His eyes glisten, vulnerability laid bare in them. He brushes a damp lock of hair from my face. “I’m sorry,” he murmurs, voice cracking.

My brow furrows. “For what?”

“For not protecting you… for making you feel you had to do what you did.” He swallows hard. “I nearly lost you because of it.”

Fresh tears brim. I cup his face between my palms. “It wasn’t your fault. I—” I bite my lip. The conversation we’ve been avoiding hovers on the tip of my tongue, but Dante shakes his head gently.

“Not tonight,” he says softly, reading my thoughts. “We’ll have time for all of it. But not now.”

I nod, throat too tight to speak. He’s right. In this tender, fragile moment, I can’t bear to taint it with the ugliness of my betrayal or Silvio’s schemes. Tonight is for us.

The last of the adrenaline drains away, leaving exhaustion in its wake. Dante eases out of me with a hiss, and I stifle a small whimper at the loss and oversensitivity. He immediately pulls me into his arms, lying beside me on the warm engine cover. I curl into his chest, drawing a leg over his to keep him close. His hand strokes my bare back soothingly.

We drift there under the night sky, two shattered souls clinging together amid the gentle rocking of the boat. Naples’ distant lights twinkle on the horizon ahead; behind us, the Camorra villa burns itself out. In Dante’s embrace, I finally allow my eyes to close, lulled by the steady thump of his heart under my cheek.

Just before sleep takes me, I feel Dante press a tender kiss to the crown of my head. “Rest, amore,” he whispers. I smile weakly, tightening my arm around him.

For the first time in forever, I feel safe. Whatever dawn may bring – wrath, forgiveness, or more blood – we will face it together.

## Chapter 12 – Heiress Apparent (Dual POV)

(Dante POV)

Dawn breaks in hues of soft rose and gold over the isolated island that shelters us, but I find no peace in its beauty. I stand at the edge of a little terrace, staring out at the glittering water of the lake surrounding this safehouse. Somewhere on the horizon, the sun rises over Switzerland – or is it Italy? In truth, I’m not even certain exactly where we are. One of my last loyal associates arranged this refuge in haste: a tiny private island with a single cottage, far from prying eyes. It’s tranquil, remote, the kind of place one might come to heal and forget.

Yet I cannot forget. My chest aches dully, a constant reminder beneath the clean bandages Valentina applied to my wounds. The stillness here is so absolute that I swear I can hear my own heartbeat – and beneath it, the distant echo of explosions and gunfire from nights past. Every time I close my eyes, I see the Moretti villa engulfed in flames. I see Valentina wheeling her father away as everything I knew burned to ash.

I grip the stone balustrade until my knuckles turn white. The physical pain of my injuries is nothing compared to the storm inside me. Betrayal, love, anger, relief – they’ve been warring in me endlessly since last night. Or was it early this morning when we finally escaped? Time blurs. After we fled Naples, we navigated a labyrinthine route – a switch to a private plane, then a car, then a small boat again – to reach this hideout. We hardly spoke during the journey. What was there to say? We’d said it with our bodies instead, in a furious, tender union on that boat in the middle of the night.

My cheeks heat at the memory of how desperately I took her in my arms, how easily I surrendered to the pull between us. Even now I can still taste her on my tongue, feel her nails down my back. I had thought making love to Valentina would banish my rage, seal up the jagged wound her betrayal left in my heart. In the moment, it did. In her embrace, I’d felt whole again.

But morning’s cruel light has a way of unraveling illusions. Here I stand, heart still raw and aching, and I am no closer to reconciliation. I love her – God, I love her more than I thought I could love anyone – and yet I cannot shake the vision of her standing by Silvio’s side as my world collapsed.

Behind me, I hear the creak of the cottage door opening. My spine stiffens. A moment later I sense her approach – I’d know the soft tread of her footsteps anywhere. Valentina stops a few paces behind me. The silence stretches, taut as a drawn wire. I keep my back to her, eyes fixed on the gentle ripples in the lake. I don’t trust myself to look at her just yet.

“Dante?” Her voice is quiet, tentative. The sound of it sends a painful jolt through my chest. How many times had I feared I’d never hear it again?

I draw a slow breath. “You should be resting,” I reply, aiming for an even tone. It comes out cooler than I intend.

She steps closer. In my peripheral vision, I see she’s draped in one of my button-down shirts, the sleeves rolled up. It hangs loosely on her petite frame, revealing a bandage on her forearm where a flying splinter cut her last night. Her dark hair is still damp, curling slightly at the ends. She must have showered and changed while I slipped out here to brood. In this gentle light, she looks like the girl I first met under very different circumstances – all fierce eyes and delicate features. The girl who held a knife to my throat in my vault. The girl who somehow stole my heart.

“I couldn’t sleep,” she says softly. “Not without…” She trails off, and I hear her swallow.

Not without me, she was going to say. Despite everything, a part of me thrills knowing she still finds comfort in my presence. But that same presence is now tinged with hurt.

“How are your wounds?” she asks when I don’t respond. Always concerned for me – even now.

“Manageable,” I reply tersely. In truth, the bullet graze at my side throbs like the devil, and my bicep burns if I move it too quickly. But I won’t admit that. “The bandages will hold.”

She comes to stand beside me at the balustrade, leaving a cautious gap between us. We gaze out at the water together in awkward silence. Early morning mist clings to the lake’s surface like a gossamer veil. Under other circumstances, I might find it peaceful.

“It’s beautiful here,” Valentina ventures after a moment, her voice almost a whisper.

I make a noncommittal sound. Beautiful, yes – but beauty feels irrelevant right now. My family’s ancestral home lies in charred ruins; my organization is scattered; my cousin has allied with our enemies and still holds her father captive. And the woman I… the woman I adore is the one who handed him the means to do it all.

My grip tightens on the stone rail. Valentina notices – of course she does – and finally, she turns to face me fully. “Dante,” she murmurs, “please look at me.”

Reluctantly, I do. Her eyes search mine, and I know she sees the turmoil there, because I see it mirrored in her own. Dark crescents shadow her eyes; guilt and worry have carved them deep.

I sigh, raking a hand through my hair. I’m bone-tired, soul-tired. “What do you want me to say, Valentina?” I ask quietly. “We got away. We’re alive. You should be happy – you got what you wanted.”

Her lips part, shock and hurt flashing across her face. “What I wanted?” she says in a trembling voice.

I let out a harsh breath and push away from the railing, putting a few paces between us. Emotions I’ve tried to bottle up start to leak into my words, hot and caustic. “Enlighten me, then. Because from where I stand, it looks like you made your choice back at the villa. You handed Silvio everything he needed to destroy me. And he did a thorough job, didn’t he?” I gesture vaguely at the distance, toward the memory of flames. “My home, my resources – all gone. I barely crawled out of that blast alive.”

Valentina flinches as if I struck her. “Dante… I–I never wanted any of that,” she pleads, voice breaking. Her eyes shimmer with tears. “I was trying to save my father. You must know that.”

I fold my arms over my chest, swallowing the lump of bitterness. “I know why you did it.” My tone softens, despite myself. “But it doesn’t change what happened. Silvio won. House Moretti is in ruins. Because of us.”

She blinks, tears spilling over now. “I know,” she whispers. “And I will never forgive myself. But please, believe me – I thought I had no other choice.” Her voice rises, edged with desperation. “He made me do it, Dante. He said if I didn’t, Papà… and you… he’d kill you both.”

I clench my jaw. The image of Silvio’s smug face floats in my mind, and hot anger flares. He had this planned all along – maneuvering her like a pawn in his twisted game, leaving her feeling trapped and alone.

A tearful sob hitches in Valentina’s throat. “If I could undo it, I would. Hurting you – hurting us – it’s eating me alive.” She takes a tentative step closer. “I love you, Dante. That was never a lie. Every moment we shared was real to me.” Her hand drifts up like she wants to touch me, then hovers uncertainly.

I stare at her, my heart twisting. To see this proud, brave woman so distraught… it guts me. But the wound of her betrayal still aches. “You should have trusted me,” I say hoarsely. “If you’d just told me—”

“I wanted to!” she cries. “Silvio threatened to detonate the bombs early if I breathed a word. He had failsafes on failsafes. I was terrified.” She swipes at her damp cheeks with frustration. “I thought I could handle it on my own. It was stupid and wrong and I’m sorry. I’m so sorry.”

Silence falls but for the quiet lapping of water below. Valentina’s shoulders shake with barely suppressed sobs. I realize I’m shaking too – with anger, with longing, with sheer exhaustion from carrying this grief.

I cross the distance between us in two strides. She looks up in surprise as I reach out and gently grasp her shoulders. “Valentina,” I say, my voice rough with emotion, “I forgave you the second I saw you alive in that corridor. Maybe even before. I was just… hurt.”

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(Valentina POV)

A tiny sob escapes me, as if I’ve been holding my breath for days. “I… I was hurt too,” I manage to whisper. “Hurting you was the last thing I ever wanted. You have to know that.”

Dante makes a strangled sound and suddenly his arms are around me, pulling me against his chest. I bury my face in his shoulder, clinging to him as if he might vanish. “I’m sorry,” he murmurs into my hair. “I should have protected you – both of you – from all this. I should have seen what Silvio was. I’m so damn sorry, Valentina.”

I tilt my head up to meet his gaze. There’s such anguish and regret in his stormy eyes, it knocks the breath out of me. Even now, after everything, he takes the blame onto himself. My fierce, noble prince. I press a gentle finger to his lips. “It’s not your fault,” I tell him softly. “Silvio fooled us both. He would have found a way no matter what.”

Dante’s brow creases, but he doesn’t argue. He just wraps me tighter in his embrace. I close my eyes, listening to the steady thump of his heart under my ear. For this one blessed moment, the past and future melt away – there is only us, alive and together.

After a long beat, I know what I need to do. I gently ease back, disentangling from his arms though I keep hold of one of his hands. Dante watches me, puzzled and a touch anxious, as I reach up behind my neck. My fingers find the clasp of the fine gold chain I’ve worn for years – my mother’s locket. With a deep breath, I undo it. The locket swings free in my palm, gleaming in the morning light.

“There’s something I need to give you,” I say, my voice wavering only slightly. My fingers tremble as I pry open the tiny locket. Nestled inside on a pinch of cotton is a microSD memory card. I pluck it out and offer it to Dante, my hand outstretched.

He blinks in confusion, not understanding at first. “What’s this?” he asks, eyeing the little chip.

“It’s the original Foxglove ledger,” I say. “The complete, unencrypted files. I made an extra copy in Zürich when I pulled the data from your server.”

Realization and astonishment flare in his eyes. “You… you kept a copy?”

A faint smile touches my lips for the first time in what feels like ages. “I couldn’t let all your family’s leverage fall into Silvio’s hands. I gave him a version, yes – but I encrypted the most sensitive parts behind an extra password only I knew. This—” I nod toward the chip in his palm. “—is the full backup. I always intended for you to have it, Dante. Even when I… when I thought you were gone, I planned to get it back to someone loyal to you. It belongs to you.”

“Valentina…” he breathes, staring at the tiny card like it might vanish. His eyes dart back up to mine, and I see them shining with gratitude and awe. “You brilliant, brilliant woman.”

Relief floods me at his reaction; I hadn’t realized how much I feared he might not want this last piece of our fractured trust. A shaky laugh escapes me. “I’m afraid I’m more devious than brilliant.”

Dante’s lips twitch into the ghost of a smile. He carefully tucks the SD card into his trouser pocket, then turns his attention to the locket and chain still dangling from my fingers. Gently, he closes my hand around them. “Keep this,” he urges. “Your mother would want you to. The ledger’s what matters to me – not the locket.”

For a moment I’m too choked up to respond. I curl my fingers around the delicate piece of jewelry – a small part of Sofia Rossi’s legacy – and nod. “Alright,” I whisper. My throat feels tight with unshed tears, this time not of sorrow, but of gratitude.

Dante raises my closed hand to his lips and presses a tender kiss to my knuckles. The simple gallantry of the gesture makes my heart swell. I realize that the hollow ache inside my chest – the one I’ve carried since the moment I betrayed him – is finally easing. In its place is something new and warm and hopeful.

He draws me close once more, and I go willingly, wrapping my arms around his middle. I feel him rest his chin atop my head as we both gaze out over the serene lake. This could be a new beginning, I think. A chance to rebuild what was broken. But first, I need to say one last thing – the only thing that truly matters now.

I step back and square my shoulders, looking Dante in the eye. My heart is pounding, but with resolve this time, not fear. “Dante,” I say softly. “No more lies. No more personas.” I take a steady breath, reaching up to wipe the dampness from my cheeks. “My name is Valentina Rossi. I am Alfonso Rossi’s daughter… and Sofia Rossi’s daughter.” I lift my chin. “I’m not the Fox anymore. I’m just Valentina Rossi. And I’m with you by my own choice – as your partner.”

Dante’s gray eyes widen, and I see them glisten as my words sink in. A rush of love surges through me, so powerful I feel lightheaded with it. I take both his hands in mine and squeeze, a smile trembling on my lips. In a voice as clear and firm as I can muster, I finish my vow.

“No more fox. Just Valentina Rossi. Your partner. If you’ll have me.”

## Chapter 13 — Rescue of the Father (DANTE POV)

The lake's night air is a cold breath against my skin as I stand on the stone terrace of our island safehouse. Around me, the pines whisper with each gust of alpine wind rolling off the water. In the distance across the ink-dark lake, mountains jaggedly silhouette against a moonlit sky. This tiny wooded island—off every official map—feels like the last secret corner of the world. Here, no cell signal reaches, no curious lights blink: just a rustic cottage, an old stone terrace, and a creaking wooden dock where our boat gently bumps against the pilings. It's quiet, isolated, safe—at least for a moment. But safety is an illusion I can’t afford to indulge.

Behind me through the cottage’s open door, warm lamplight spills onto the terrace. The interior is as promised: rustic-luxury in the middle of nowhere. Worn leather chairs, shelves stocked with canned goods and medical supplies, a stone fireplace quietly crackling. It smells of cedar smoke and strong espresso—the latter courtesy of Valentina, who insisted on brewing a pot not long ago to keep us alert. I hear her footsteps crossing the hardwood floor now, then the soft creak as she pushes open the screen door.

Valentina steps out, wrapping a knit shawl around her against the chill. Her dark hair tumbles loose past her shoulders, and even in low light I can see the worry etched on her face. “Any sign of him yet?” she asks softly. By him, she means Argonaut—my fixer—who signaled earlier he was en route.

I shake my head. “Not yet. But he’ll come.” I glance at my watch, noting the time. Argonaut is never late without cause.

Valentina comes to my side at the stone railing. Together we gaze across the rippling black water. A slender moon reflects on the lake’s surface in broken shards of silver. For a moment, it's just us in the hush of night, two souls catching our breath before the storm. I sense Valentina shiver, whether from the cold or anticipation I can’t tell. Instinctively I slide an arm around her shoulders, drawing her against me. She lets out a slow breath and leans in, her warmth seeping through my shirt.

“We’ll get him back,” I murmur. My voice is low, steady—the voice I must have as a leader, as her strength. Yet inside, a coil of anxiety tightens with each passing minute. The coordinates we found in Dr. Moreau’s message are burning a hole in my pocket. They pinpoint an old sanatorium high in the mountains—a place apparently repurposed into a black-site prison. Alfonso Rossi, Valentina’s papà, is being held there. Knowing our enemy, he’s likely sedated or locked down, a pawn waiting to be sacrificed.

Valentina nods at my reassurance, but her eyes remain fixed on the horizon. The faint starlight catches the sheen of tears she refuses to let fall. “I just… can’t lose him, Dante,” she whispers. “Not after everything.”

Her voice quavers on everything. In that one word lives the nightmare of the last few days: being forced into my world, nearly losing me in the villa explosion, betraying me to save her father, then facing death at the auction—only for us to find each other again in the chaos. And through it all, her father—her only family—dangling in peril.

“You won’t,” I promise, turning to face her fully. I cup her cheek gently, pad of my thumb brushing over the dark smudge beneath her eye. “I swear to you, Valentina. We’ll bring your papà home.”

She presses her cheek into my palm, eyes closing. For a beat, I feel the heat between us, the intimacy forged by fire and trust renewed. Her hand comes up to cover mine, trembling slightly. “Ti adoro,” she breathes, voice shaking on the Italian words for I adore you. She said them to me once before—on a blood-soaked night not long ago—and hearing them now steels my resolve like tempered steel.

Before I can respond in kind, a faint buzz sounds from a walkie on my belt. I click it on. Argonaut’s low voice crackles through: “Principe, inbound. Lights off.”

Principe. My father's old nickname for me—the prince of House Moretti—and now my call sign. Argonaut refuses to call me anything else over comms. But hearing it now sends a pang through me; Emilio is gone, murdered by betrayal, and the weight of the House rests on me alone. I bury that thought; tonight isn't about my crown. It's about Valentina’s father.

“They’re here,” I say softly. I release Valentina and she straightens, swiping away any lingering dampness from her eyes. In a heartbeat, she’s collected—the La Volpe, cunning and controlled, though the worry still simmers beneath.

We hurry to the dock. I untie the mooring line and by the time we climb down, I see the outline of another small boat emerging from darkness. Its engine is cut, the approach silent save for the soft lap of water. A single figure stands at the bow, using a paddle to make the final approach.

Argonaut.

I recognize his broad-shouldered silhouette and the trademark knit cap pulled low on his head. The boat nudges our dock and I reach out to grab the bow, holding it steady as Argonaut hops out. Under the moonlight I catch a glimpse of his face—weathered, with a close-cropped beard and assessing eyes. He’s dressed in dark tactical gear that blends into the night.

Behind him, another figure rises from the boat’s bench, tossing a duffel to the dock before stepping out. A second ally—just as we hoped. This one I do not immediately know. He’s younger than Argonaut by a decade, perhaps early thirties, with a lean build and wary posture. His hair is dark and clipped short, military style. He too wears dark clothing suited for stealth, and as he turns to secure the boat, I note a pistol at his hip and a faint scar along his jaw catching the moonlight.

Argonaut clasps my arm firmly. “Principe,” he greets with a terse nod. His eyes flick to Valentina and for a split second, surprise lights them—he hasn’t seen her since the forced engagement announcement; likely he assumed the worst after the villa explosion. But Argonaut recovers fast, offering a polite incline of his head. “Signorina Rossi.”

Valentina manages a tight smile. “Thank you for coming,” she says, voice formal but sincere.

He releases my arm. “Always. I came as soon as Moreau’s intel dropped. Figured you two would be holed up here.” He gestures with his chin toward the duffel bag. “Brought some toys and tools. We don’t have much time.”

I nod. “Agreed. Let’s go inside and get ready.”

We lug the gear and ourselves up from the dock and into the cottage. The four of us gather around the rough-hewn wooden table in the main room as I quickly introduce the newcomer. “This is Marco,” Argonaut says, clapping the man on the shoulder. “Trusted freelancer. Expert driver and pretty damn good shot. We served together back in the day.”

“Call me Lupo,” the man says quietly—wolf. Likely a nickname from his military days. His Italian accent is faint under flawless English. As he nods to Valentina, I see recognition spark in her eyes at the name. Perhaps she’s heard of him in whispered circles: a getaway specialist known as The Wolf, maybe. If Argonaut vouches for him, I trust him.

Formalities aside, I spread a topographic map across the table. Argonaut switches on a small red-lensed flashlight, preserving our night vision. The narrow beam illuminates the lines of elevation and the circled spot marking our target. “Dr. Moreau left coordinates to this location,” I explain quietly. My finger taps the mark. “A mountaintop sanatorium here, long abandoned. It appears Silvio’s faction repurposed it as a black-site prison. That’s where they took Alfonso Rossi after the auction.”

Valentina hovers at my elbow, intent on the map. I feel the tension radiating from her body—a coiled spring of hope and fear. Lupo crosses his arms, studying the layout. “What do we know about personnel?” he asks.

“Not many details,” Argonaut replies, pulling a small notebook from his pocket. He flips it open to scribbled notes. “Moreau’s message said likely a skeleton crew. Camorra guards, a handful—enough to hold a valuable hostage, not enough to defend against a full assault.” He grimaces. “Then again, a fortress like that doesn’t need an army to hold it if it’s remote. Could be traps or surveillance.”

I recall the grainy satellite photo Moreau had tucked into the message drop—an overhead shot of an isolated compound on a rocky peak. The main structure looked like a long rectangular building with a central courtyard, ringed by a rusted fence. “We can expect some cameras or motion sensors,” I say. “Possibly a gate on the access road.”

“How do we approach?” Valentina asks. One hand rests unconsciously on the table’s edge, fingers white where she grips the wood.

Argonaut exchanges a glance with me. This part of the plan, we already determined. “By water, then on foot,” I answer. “We’ll take the boat across the lake to the base of the mountain. Then we hike up an old service trail that runs behind the sanatorium. It’s steep and overgrown, but unguarded.”

“The front entrance is likely covered and booby-trapped,” Argonaut adds. “But Moreau’s intel says there’s a collapsed section of wall on the north side—here.” He points to a penciled X on the map. “It opens into a lower level, maybe an old maintenance tunnel or storage room. That’s our insertion point.”

Lupo nods, eyes narrowed thoughtfully. “In quiet, out quiet. Ideal.”

Valentina is chewing her lip. She looks between us, then blurts, “I’m coming with you inside.”

The room stills for a moment. I expected this; I know her heart. But I won’t put her in the line of fire if I can help it. “Val—” I start gently.

She lifts her chin defiantly. “He’s my father. I won’t just sit in the boat and wait.”

Argonaut and Lupo both avert their gazes respectfully, leaving it between us. I take Valentina’s hands in mine. They’re cold, trembling slightly, but she meets my stare with fierce determination. “I have to do something,” she insists. “I can help, Dante—my mother taught me how to slip into places unseen. And I won’t freeze. Not when Papà needs me.”

Her plea cuts deep, but I force myself to remain pragmatic. “I know you can handle yourself. But listen.” I pitch my voice low. “We need you to be our eyes and ears from the outside. You can monitor the guards’ rotations through their radio frequency—” I tap the small earpiece resting on the table, one of the gadgets Argonaut brought, “—and warn us of any changes. And if anything goes wrong… you’ll be our lifeline back at the boat, ready to get your father out of here fast.”

Valentina wavers, conflict in her eyes. She wants to be in those halls searching every shadow for her father. But she knows there’s logic in what I say. Slowly, I see her resolve shift. She gives a tight nod. “Okay. I’ll do it.”

Relief and admiration flood me. Even now, she’s willing to do whatever it takes, even if it means fighting her protective instincts. I raise her hands to my lips and press a firm kiss to her knuckles. “Grazie,” I whisper.

Argonaut clears his throat, politely drawing our attention back. “ETA to target is two hours by boat, then an hour hike up. We should move.”

We spring into action. Valentina readies the boat, double-checking the fuel and radio. Argonaut, Lupo, and I divvy up gear: flashbangs, a bolt cutter, suppressed handguns, a compact assault rifle for Argonaut, and one shotgun with breaching rounds in case of locked doors. I strap a tactical knife to my thigh and slip on a lightweight Kevlar vest under my black jacket. At Valentina’s insistence, I also pack a small medical kit—she would have me patched up before I even bleed if she could.

Within minutes, we’re boarding the boat. I take the wheel this time, with Argonaut next to me navigating by a GPS unit with offline maps. Valentina sits behind us by the radio, a headset over her ears to catch any stray transmissions. Lupo perches at the bow, night-vision binoculars in hand to spot any other vessels or patrols. But the vast lake is silent and empty—just an expanse of darkness cradled by looming mountains.

As we motor away from the safehouse island, I glance back at the receding silhouette of the cottage among the trees. It’s strange to leave the one haven we have left—but it’s for the right cause. My gut churns with a mix of anticipation and dread. This rescue has to go right. Failure is not an option; too much blood has been spilled already because of Silvio’s machinations. I feel Valentina’s eyes on me and reach back, finding her knee and squeezing it gently. She covers my hand with hers, understanding flowing in the touch.

The journey across the lake is cold and tense. Spray from the bow’s wake chills my face. At times, I ease up on the throttle to avoid sounding too loud across the water. We run dark, no lights, trusting Argonaut’s GPS and Lupo’s eyes. The minutes stretch; nobody speaks over the engine’s low purr. Instead, we each steel ourselves in our own way. I run through the plan again in my head step by step, mentally rehearsing contingencies for anything that might go wrong.

Argonaut suddenly murmurs, “Cut speed. We’re close.”

I pull back on the throttle. The boat’s engine dips to an idle hum as we coast into a narrow inlet at the lake’s far end. Overhead, the peak looms—a black mass blotting stars. There’s a faint outline of an old dock or pier here, long abandoned and half-sunk. I guide the boat in carefully. Lupo hops out first onto the creaking planks and ties us off.

We unload quickly and as quietly as possible. Valentina’s face is ghost-pale in the dim starlight filtering through thin clouds. I catch her by the arm as Argonaut and Lupo move ahead onto solid ground. “We’ll be back before you know it,” I tell her.

She swallows hard and nods, trying to summon a smile. It barely forms, so instead she steps into me and wraps her arms tightly around my waist. I hug her back, inhaling the scent of her hair—jasmine and fear and resolve. “Bring him home,” she whispers fiercely against my chest. “And come back to me, Dante.”

I tip her chin up and kiss her once, hard and deep, pouring every promise into that kiss. I will, I vow silently. When I break away, her eyes glisten but she blinks the tears back, nodding.

Lupo gives a low whistle—time to go. I gently disengage from Valentina and she lets me, though her fingers trail down my arm until the last second. She climbs back into the boat, position ready by the radio and wheel, pistol also at her side. One of our spare earpieces is clipped in her ear, mic near her lips.

I tap my own earpiece twice. A soft crackle confirms connection. “Comm check,” I whisper.

“Reading you,” comes Valentina’s hushed reply in my ear.

Argonaut and Lupo check in quietly as well. All set.

Then I turn and melt into the treeline with the other two men, leaving Valentina hidden in the shadow of the overgrowth with the boat. We begin our ascent.

The mountain’s flank is unforgiving. What used to be a service road is now mostly reclaimed by nature—a crumbling path zigzagging upward through dense pines and rocky outcroppings. We keep to the side of it, footsteps light on pine needles and stone. Our breathing soon becomes labored in the thin high altitude air. The only other sounds are nocturnal insects and the distant rush of a waterfall or maybe wind through a gorge. Each step upward, my pulse ticks faster with anticipation.

Halfway up, Argonaut raises a fist and we freeze. Ahead, through the trunks, a faint glow is visible—the perimeter lights of the sanatorium. We crouch behind a fallen log. I raise my own binoculars and peer through.

The abandoned sanatorium sprawls on the summit plateau. In its heyday, it was likely a place of healing—now it looks like a shell of ghosts. Under the weak illumination of a few floodlights, I see the main building: an elongated three-story structure of stone and concrete, windows mostly dark or broken. The forest has been cleared around it in a rough circle, probably to give guards a clear line of sight. At the far end of the building’s facade stands a rusted wrought-iron gate and fence section, likely once the grand entrance. Beyond that, a narrow road—no doubt connected to the main highway somewhere far below.

We’re viewing it from the north-northeast side. The note said a collapsed wall section on the north. I scan for it—and there, yes: along the north wing, the fence bows inward where a section of the building has crumbled. Rubble spills out like a stone avalanche. Probably an old explosion or simply decay.

I whisper into comms, “Eyes on breach, ten o’clock from my position. No movement nearby.”

Valentina’s voice comes softly. “Copy that. Hearing faint chatter on the guard frequency—sounds like two units on patrol, call-signs Bravo and Delta. They’re doing perimeter sweeps.”

As if on cue, a flashlight beam sweeps across the front yard of the sanatorium. I duck instinctively, but we’re far enough and shrouded. Through the binoculars, I spot two figures walking along inside the fence line, near the front gate—could be Bravo unit. They carry rifles and each has a flashlight. They’re relaxed, casual even, likely bored out of their minds up here.

“Val, did you catch how many in each unit?” I breathe.

A pause, static crackle. “They mentioned one of them heading back to ‘post’ soon. I think two per unit. So maybe four total outside?”

Four outside. There could be more inside, guarding Alfonso or monitoring cameras.

Argonaut gestures and we silently angle toward the collapsed section, staying under cover. It’s about thirty yards of open ground from the treeline to the rubble. The floodlight coverage there is spotty—one light on the corner of the building, another near the front, leaving a dim pocket by the collapse.

We’ll have to be quick and quiet crossing that gap. I unsling my suppressed pistol and hold it ready. Argonaut shoulders his small rifle. Lupo draws a long combat knife—he’ll handle any close-quarters silently if needed.

I check on the patrol location through the comm. “Valentina, status on Bravo and Delta?”

A moment later: “Bravo is near the front gate still. Delta… I caught something about checking ‘the ridge.’ Maybe behind the building. They might come around the north side soon, be careful.”

Right where we are headed. We need to move.

I signal to go. We break from cover and jog low across the clearing toward the gaping hole in the sanatorium wall. My heart pounds as the open ground passes under my feet. Each step feels too loud. My ears strain for a shout or the cocking of a gun from the darkness. But nothing—only the thud of my pulse and our soft footfalls.

In seconds, we’re at the collapsed wall. It’s a pile of concrete chunks and twisted rebar that forms a sort of ramp into the building’s husk. Lupo scrambles up first, cat-quiet despite his size. Argonaut goes next, then me. The rubble shifts slightly under my boots, sending a couple small pebbles clattering down. I grit my teeth at the sound.

Inside, the collapse leads into a large room that’s half-exposed to the night. It might have been a boiler room or storage once; rusted tanks and pipes loom in shambles. The scent of mold and dust is thick. I lower my night-vision goggles over my eyes—the world turns into an eerie green glow of shapes. Argonaut does the same; Lupo, lacking NVGs, sticks close behind us in shadow.

We creep through the debris, picking a path around a toppled iron beam. The building’s interior is deathly silent except for the drip of water somewhere and distant hum of what could be a generator deeper inside. Every step releases puffs of decades-old dust into the beam of my small LED light (shielded by one finger to dull it).

Valentina’s voice whispers in my ear, “No changes outside yet. You’re clear so far.”

I exhale silently. Good.

We find a doorway out of the ruined chamber and into a hallway. The floor here is cracked tile, and old wheelchairs and gurneys lie like carcasses along the walls. A draft carries the faint scent of antiseptic and decay. My mind flashes to a younger Dante—perhaps I visited a place like this with my father once, touring a charity hospital wing—but I shove the memory aside. Focus.

According to Moreau’s intel, Alfonso was likely kept in or near the old infirmary on the second floor. A makeshift cell perhaps where they can monitor his condition. If they’ve kept any medical equipment operational for him, that’s where.

We move down the corridor. At a junction, faint light spills from an archway to our right—an old stairwell, with electric sconces rigged on the walls. They have some power here. The generator hum is louder now, likely powering minimal lighting and whatever life-support Alfonso might need.

I hold up two fingers, point upward. Argonaut nods and leads into the stairwell. We ascend one flight. The stairs are stone and our steps echo dully despite our care. My grip tightens on my pistol.

Just as we reach the landing for second floor, voices waft down from above.

“...finish my shift, you owe me a smoke,” a man says in Italian, tone bored.

Another chuckles. “Sure, sure. Not like anything ever happens here.”

We flatten against the wall in the shadow beneath the stairwell’s arch. Peering upward, I see two sets of boots descending from the third floor. Likely Delta or some interior rovers coming down. If they hit the landing and turn toward the hall, they’ll see us.

I glance at Argonaut and Lupo. I mouth, “Ambush.”

They nod. Silently, Lupo presses against the wall just behind where the door would swing open, knife poised. Argonaut and I take the other side; I holster my pistol and draw my knife for silence.

The oblivious guards clomp down the last steps. One pushes open the door onto the second-floor hallway. The old hinges protest with a creak. The first guard steps through, muttering, “This place gives me the creeps—”

He doesn’t finish. Lupo moves in a flash, arm looping around the man’s neck as his other hand drives the knife clean into the kidney. The guard jerks with a strangled gasp, but Lupo is a professional—he lowers the body quietly without even a thud.

The second guard is a step behind, registering confusion. He sees the shape of his friend slumping and opens his mouth to yell. I lunge in from the side and slam him against the stairwell’s stone wall. My forearm crushes his windpipe as we impact. He chokes, grabbing at my arm. I feel a hot sting in my bicep—he’s drawn a blade and slashed me. The pain flares, but adrenaline dulls it. I snarl under my breath and retaliate, driving my own knife up under his ribcage. His body spasms against me, breath coming out in a wet wheeze by my ear.

I grimace, clamping a hand over his mouth as life fades from his eyes, then gently let him sink to the step. Warm blood seeps through my sleeve. The cut on my arm is oozing; superficial, I suspect, but it reminds me sharply of my last wound that Valentina stitched up not long ago. Seems I’ve opened another.

Argonaut swiftly drags the first guard’s corpse out of sight behind the stairwell door. Lupo helps me tuck the second one into the corner. We move quickly, knowing another patrol will notice if these two don’t report eventually.

I whisper into the comm, “Second floor landing clear. Two hostiles down.”

Valentina responds, relief in her tone, “Copy. Still no alarm. You’re doing great.”

I exchange a small tight smile with Argonaut. Hearing her voice calms the pulse in my ears.

We slip into the second-floor corridor. The hall stretches in both directions, lit by a single flickering fluorescent tube hung from wires. Doors line the walls—old patient rooms, perhaps. Many are ajar, revealing dark emptiness beyond.

Argonaut motions left, toward what likely was the infirmary or surgery section. We creep that way, senses straining. Ahead, a brighter light spills from a doorway at the end of the hall. Shadows move within. That must be it.

We take positions: Argonaut on one side of the door, Lupo and I on the other. Inside, I hear a low mechanical beeping—medical monitors. My heart leaps: Alfonso.

There’s also a male voice humming tunelessly. I peek a quick mirror around the doorway’s edge (a small tactical mirror from my pocket). The image shows a dingy ward room repurposed as a cell. Alfonso lies on a bed at the center, restrained with medical straps. An IV is in his arm. His eyes are closed—unconscious or asleep. Relief and fury flood me concurrently—seeing Valentina’s beloved father strapped down like a specimen ignites a cold rage in my gut.

A single guard is in the room, sitting in a chair by a portable medical monitor near the bed. He’s the source of the humming. A rifle leans against the wall within his reach. He looks half-asleep himself, legs propped on a crate, a magazine on his lap.

One guard. If we do this clean, Alfonso will be safe and none the wiser until we wake him.

I signal: one guard, pointing to myself to indicate I’ll engage. Argonaut nods and keeps his rifle ready if it goes loud. Lupo readies behind me.

I slip through the door like a shadow. The guard is turned partially away, reading some article by lamplight and still humming. I glide up behind him. In one smooth motion, I clap a hand over his mouth and yank his head back. My blade flashes as I slice a swift arc across his throat. Blood spurts warm over my hand. He jerks violently, knocking the crate with his boots. I ease him down as his life spills out, gurgling softly. The magazine flutters to the floor.

The crate’s clatter was not loud, but it wasn’t nothing either. We all pause, holding breath, listening for any reaction beyond this room.

Nothing immediate. The dead guard lies at my feet, eyes staring at nothing. I exhale. Argonaut moves to quickly disable the monitor’s alarm so if Alfonso flatlines or is disconnected it won’t blare. He seems to know his way around those wires; likely Moreau coached him or he’s done similar.

Lupo carefully withdraws the IV from Alfonso’s arm. I gently peel back the tape securing a sensor on his chest. Alfonso stirs faintly, a moan escaping his lips, but his eyes remain shut. Sedatives.

I lean over him. “Signor Rossi,” I whisper close to his ear, using his name to try to cut through the drug haze. “Alfonso, can you hear me?”

His eyelids flutter. A crack of brown iris shows, glassy and unfocused. “Mm… Val…?” he rasps, voice slurred.

My heart tugs. “She’s safe. We’re here to take you to her,” I say softly. “Try to wake up, sir. We need to move you.”

He groans, head lolling. Not fully conscious. Lupo pats my shoulder. “We carry him,” he murmurs. “No time to wait.”

He’s right. We have to assume our window is limited. I nod. Argonaut takes Alfonso’s other side. Together, we release the straps binding him to the cot. I wince seeing raw red marks on his wrists and ankles—they kept him like a prisoner, even in his state.

We hoist Alfonso up. He’s not a big man, but dead weight with no cooperation is heavy. I grit my teeth and drape his arm over my shoulders while looping my arm around his back. Lupo mimics on the other side. Alfonso’s head slumps forward onto my chest.

“Valentina…?” he mumbles again, voice barely audible.

“She’s waiting for you,” I answer, voice firm but kind. “Hold on, we’re getting you out.”

We shuffle toward the door with our burden. Argonaut leads out, covering front with rifle raised. My wounded arm throbs where the guard nicked me, but I ignore it. The adrenaline will carry me through.

Out in the hallway, we pick up pace as much as possible while half-carrying, half-dragging Alfonso between us. Each step he takes is clumsy; he tries once to move his legs and nearly trips us. Lupo hisses under his breath and adjusts his grip.

Valentina’s voice comes urgently through the earpiece then: “Dante, I think they know something’s off—one of the patrols is trying to radio the guard inside and he’s not answering.”

My gut clenches. The guard we killed had a radio—likely they’re raising him and getting silence. The clock just ran out.

“Understood,” I whisper. “We have him. Heading to extraction now.”

We reach the stairwell. Down is faster but precarious supporting Alfonso’s weight. Argonaut goes first to cover, taking the steps in near silence. Lupo and I all but carry Alfonso, his slippered feet skimming stone. He moans softly but stays limp.

Suddenly, an alarm begins to whoop through the building—short, shrill bursts echoing off the stone walls. Red emergency lights flash on in the corridors.

So much for quiet.

“Alarm triggered!” Valentina’s voice shouts in my ear above the distant klaxon. “Dante, guards are scrambling—move, move!”

No need to tell us twice. We haul Alfonso faster, abandoning stealth for speed. He’s semi-conscious now, eyes half-open as the alarm likely rouses him, but he’s still too groggy to run. I heft him into a fireman’s carry over my shoulder in one smooth motion, growling at the strain on my side. Pain knifes through my healing bullet graze from days before, but I bite it back.

Lupo takes point now, drawing his handgun for close quarters. We pound down the stairs to the first floor.

A guard bursts into the stairwell doorway just as we reach bottom. His rifle is raised, silhouette backlit by red strobes. Lupo is quicker—two suppressed shots phft-phft, and the man drops, his rifle clattering. Without pausing, Lupo kicks the fallen rifle aside and waves us through.

We retrace our path, heading for the collapsed wall. The siren’s wail is relentless, and over it I now hear shouts from outside—someone yelling orders in Italian to sweep the perimeter.

Argonaut covers our six, pausing to shove a heavy rolling bed across the corridor behind us to slow any pursuers.

Through the maintenance room, over the rubble—God, I hope Valentina has that boat ready.

We spill out of the breach into the night. The cool air hitting my face is a relief, but only for a second. As we race toward the tree line, bright beams of flashlights slice through the dark from the front of the sanatorium.

“Over here!” a voice shouts. A trio of guards round the building, drawn by the alarm and probably the dead bodies we left. They spot our moving shadows. Muzzle flashes erupt as they open fire.

“Down!” I bark. Lupo and Argonaut drag me and Alfonso behind the cover of a mossy boulder as bullets chew up the ground around us. Alfonso groans on my shoulder; I try to shield his limp form as best I can, feeling him flinch at the chaos he’s barely aware of.

Argonaut returns fire in controlled bursts, picking off one of the approaching guards with a lucky hit—the man cries out and collapses. The others take cover and pepper us with suppressing fire.

This is bad. We’re pinned, and more will be coming. We need to break away into the woods toward the boat, but carrying Alfonso under this kind of fire is near impossible.

“Valentina,” I bark into the comm, breathing hard. “We need a distraction or cover fire, anything.”

For a heartbeat, no response. Then static and—“On it.”

I don’t know what she can do from there, but I trust her. I shift Alfonso’s weight slightly; he’s semi-conscious, eyes half-open and fearful now as he registers the noise. “It’s okay,” I murmur. “We’ve got you.”

He mouths something—maybe my name, maybe his daughter’s—but it’s lost in the din.

Suddenly, from down the slope toward the lake, a loud explosion thunders. The ground trembles. A bloom of orange light flares against the trees. It’s not near us—but off to the west of the sanatorium. Likely the unused front gate or road.

Valentina… did she?

The gunfire from the guards falters as everyone flinches at the blast. Taking the chance, Lupo and Argonaut unload a few rounds in covering fire. “Go!” Argonaut urges.

I bolt from cover, Alfonso still slung over my shoulder, gritting my teeth against the agony igniting along my left side. Lupo is right behind me, and Argonaut covers our rear as we plunge into the tree line.

In my earpiece, I hear Valentina panting and a little wild with adrenaline: “I found some old fuel canisters by the dock… thought a diversion might help.”

My fierce, brilliant fox. She rowed the boat over and rigged the old dock to blow? Or maybe shot a fuel can? However she did it, she drew attention away at a critical moment.

We barrel down the dark forested slope, stumbling over roots and rocks in the mad dash toward the lake. Branches whip at my face and brambles claw my legs. I nearly slip on a patch of slick pine needles but catch myself—Alfonso’s limp form lurches on my shoulder, and I tighten my grip, refusing to let him fall. My lungs burn with the icy night air and the coppery taste of blood coats my tongue.

Behind us, the alarms at the sanatorium wail like enraged ghosts, and I hear the crash of boots through undergrowth—shouts in Italian growing nearer. They’re giving chase.

A sudden muzzle flash blooms in the trees to my left. Crack! A bullet tears past, splintering bark. Searing pain explodes along my side. I gasp as warmth blooms under my ribs—grazed or worse. My shirt quickly turns wet and hot with my own blood.

“Dante!” Valentina’s distant voice echoes from ahead, thin and urgent over the chaos. Through the haze of pain, I glimpse the glint of moonlight on water between the trees. The boat—she’s there, a dark silhouette at the shore, waving one arm frantically.

I force myself onward. Every muscle screams, and my vision blurs at the edges, but I will not stop. Alfonso’s weight is an anchor on my shoulder—each jarring step sends agony lancing through my wounded flank, but I grit my teeth. Vai, Dante. Go.

Another gunshot whizzes past, too close. I stagger as the ground dips, nearly pitching forward down a small ravine toward the lakeshore. My knees threaten to buckle. For a heartbeat, black spots dance before my eyes. No. Not now.

With a guttural growl, I summon strength from marrow and push off a tree trunk to stabilize. I hoist Alfonso higher across my shoulders and charge down the final stretch of slope. My feet slip-slide on loose rocks, but momentum carries us.

Just ahead, I see Valentina splashing into the shallows, one hand reaching out as if she could pull us to her by will alone. Her other hand raises a pistol, firing back over our heads at our pursuers—covering us.

The piercing alarms, the shouting voices, Valentina’s desperate cries—all of it melds into a cacophony pounding in my skull. I taste blood and sweat. I feel the hot trickle of it down my side. But I also see salvation: a few more strides, and we’ll be at the boat.

Almost there.

I let out a roar of effort and refusal—refusal to fail, to fall, to lose anyone else. My vision tunnels on that boat and the woman standing there, her eyes wide and terrified and fierce. The world narrows to a single task: take one more step. And another.

Behind us, flashlights bob and men curse as they crash through the brush, drawing closer. Bullets hiss past like angry hornets. One slams into a tree trunk inches from me, showering us in splinters.

I hiss through the pain and keep moving. One step. Another. Alfonso moans incoherently, but I cling to him.

The lake is right in front of me now—black water and the bobbing hull of our boat. Valentina lunges forward out of the surf, reaching.

I crash into her embrace at the water’s edge, nearly knocking us both over. Together we haul Alfonso into the boat with the last strength in our bodies. My blood mingles with the icy lake spray as alarms blare on the mountain behind us.

Footsteps and lights explode out of the treeline just as I collapse into the boat beside Valentina and her father. She screams my name, clutching me as fresh blood pours hot between my fingers pressed to my side.

The engine roars to life beneath Argonaut’s hand. Bullets pepper the water around us as the boat speeds away from shore.

The last thing I see before darkness swallows me is Valentina’s face hovering over mine—her eyes wild with concern as she desperately tries to stop the bleeding.

Siren lights spin on the distant slope. The night erupts in chaos behind us.

But we’re beyond their reach now.

And I finally let myself go, bloodied and battered, as the boat carries us all into the safety of the coming dawn.

## Chapter 14 — Mother’s Lies Revealed (VALENTINA POV)

Dawn washes the cottage in a gray hush as I sit on the edge of Dante’s bed, watching him breathe. Each inhale and exhale is steady now, thank God. Only a few hours ago, I wasn’t sure he’d survive our escape—he’d lost so much blood, slumping lifeless in my arms the moment we were safe. But Dante is nothing if not stubborn. We managed to cauterize and bind his side wound with the emergency supplies Argonaut brought, and Dr. Moreau’s stash of antibiotics likely saved him from fever. Now he lies shirtless under a light blanket, torso swathed in clean white bandages. Even injured, his face in repose carries a fierce grace.

He sleeps, but I don’t dare. Every time I close my eyes I’m back in the chaos: the nightmare of gunshots and sirens, Dante collapsing in the boat, Papà unconscious and pale. My heart still hammers from it all.

I gently brush a damp curl of dark hair from Dante’s forehead. His skin is warm but not hot—no infection. Relief softens the tight coil in my chest for a moment. He saved my father. He saved me, again and again. How many times can one man bleed for someone and still survive? A wave of affection and anguish surges inside me. Ti adoro, I had whispered to him on the terrace hours before the mission. It feels inadequate now. I adore him, yes—but I also need him. More than I’ve ever needed anyone.

I stand, my legs shaky, and tiptoe to the adjacent room where we’ve made up a second bed for Papà. The cottage is small, just a few rooms, but Argonaut and I cobbled together enough mattresses and blankets for our unexpected company. Lupo took first watch outside, patrolling the island’s perimeter in case Silvio’s men retaliated. We’re far off any map, yet paranoia still gnaws at me.

Pushing open the door, I find Papà is finally stirring. He’s propped on pillows, a blanket drawn up to his waist. Dawn’s gentle light filters through lace curtains onto his face. For a moment I see not the wan, beleaguered man of recent days but my father as he used to be—robust and smiling over a Sunday breakfast, or humming opera as he painted in our old sunroom. Emotion clogs my throat.

“Papà?” I whisper.

His eyes flutter open. It takes a second for focus to settle, but when it does, his gaze finds me. “Valentina,” he croaks, voice weak but imbued with palpable relief. “Figlia mia...”

I rush to his side and sink to my knees by the bed, taking his hand. “I’m here, Papà. Sei salvo—you’re safe.”

A shuddering breath leaves him and tears pool in his eyes. “I thought... I feared I’d never see you again.” His hand trembles in mine. I lift it to my cheek, soaking in the familiar, comforting feel of his touch.

“I’m sorry it took so long,” I whisper, voice breaking. “They kept us apart, but I—” My words fail as a sob rises. I bow my head to his hand, pressing it against my cheek to hide the hot tears spilling free.

“Oh bella, no, shh.” With surprising strength, Papà pushes himself up a bit and cups my face with his other hand. “You did everything right. You’re safe, we’re together. That’s all that matters.”

I nod, unable to speak for a moment. I should be overjoyed—he’s alive, here in front of me, not a hostage in some cell or a body dumped by Silvio’s brutes. But a heavy pit of questions weighs down that joy. There’s so much I don’t understand, so much hurt swirling inside me, and with dawn’s light I feel them pressing for answers.

I sniff and straighten, gently urging him to lie back against the pillows. “Don’t strain yourself. You’ve been through an ordeal.”

He obeys, easing back with a wince. Only then do I notice the bruising along his arms, the bandage on his temple. My stomach twists—evidence of Silvio’s cruelty or the rough transport here. “Did they hurt you?” I ask, barely keeping my anger in check.

Papà closes his eyes briefly. “No more than my pride could handle,” he says with a tired attempt at humor. “Silvio’s thugs were not gentle, but nothing is broken.” He touches the bandage on his head gingerly. “This was from when they snatched me at the villa... I hit a doorframe, I think.”

I recall that frantic night—how I’d found him drugged in a wheelchair, how Silvio had a gun to his head as I handed over the USB and keycard. Guilt flares inside me, sharp and corrosive. If only I had realized Silvio’s treachery sooner... if only I hadn’t played right into his hands.

I force those thoughts away. Regret can wait; I have my father back.

Papà’s hazel eyes search mine. “Valentina, tell me—” he begins, brow creasing, “Dante... is he...?”

“He’s alive,” I answer quickly, managing a small smile. “Resting in the next room. Wounded, but he’ll be okay.”

Papà’s brow smooths in relief. “Grazie a Dio. He saved us, didn’t he? I remember bits... Dante bursting into that room, carrying me out...”

His voice thickens with gratitude and something like awe. In that moment, I see my father truly regard Dante not as the enemy prince who coerced our family, but as a man risking everything for us.

“He did,” I say softly. “He wouldn’t leave without you.”

Papà closes his eyes, another tear slipping down his cheek as he nods. “I misjudged him,” he whispers. “I thought... so many things. Figlia mia, I thought I’d condemned you to a monster when I agreed to that engagement. But Dante—he’s proven himself.”

I squeeze his hand, heart swelling with pride for Dante. “Yes. He’s... he’s good to me, Papà. Despite everything, Dante has kept me safe.” My cheeks warm recalling just how safe and cherished he made me feel last night before the rescue, how his kisses washed away my doubts in the darkness of that shower days ago, how gently he’s held my heart.

Papà regards me silently, and I think he catches that softness in my expression. He nods faintly. “Your mother would be relieved. She feared...”

He trails off, and the mention of Mamma cuts through the fragile peace of the morning like a knife. I tense, that pit of questions in me rippling.

My mother. Sofia Rossi, the ghost who has hovered between Dante and me in secrets and photographs and half-truths. I found her picture arm-in-arm with Don Emilio Moretti, and that mystery has haunted me ever since. Why was she with him, twenty-seven years ago? What don’t I know about her, about all of this?

And now Papà’s words—She feared… Feared what?

I realize I’m still clutching his hand hard. Gently, I release it and shift to sit on the bedside chair. “Papà,” I begin quietly, pulse picking up, “I need to ask you something. About Mamma.”

He looks at me with a wary tenderness. “Of course, tesoro.”

My throat tightens, unsure how to breach the subject that’s been gnawing at me. I inhale slowly. “Back at the villa... I found a photograph in the Foxglove ledger. A photo of Mamma and Don Emilio. Together. From 1998.”

Papà’s face changes in an instant—eyes widening, a flash of recognition or guilt. He opens his mouth, but no words come.

I forge on, my voice gaining strength as years of confusion and curiosity pour out. “Dante didn’t know about it. Neither did I. Why was her picture there? Why was she with Don Emilio, looking so... so familiar with him?” My voice wavers, remembering the way Sofia smiled in that photo, arm linked with Emilio’s, as if they were dear friends—or more.

Papà’s hand trembles as he lifts it to his mouth. He looks away, eyes shining. “They... they met in 1998, yes.”

“You knew?” I whisper, stomach dropping. He knew and never told me?

He lowers his hand, gripping the blanket now. Shame etches lines around his eyes. “I suspected. I overheard fragments of a conversation once... and your mother eventually confessed some of it to me, later.”

My heart thuds. “Confessed what, exactly?”

He struggles to sit up further, and I instinctively help prop him with another pillow. He takes my hand in both of his now, as if bracing me—or himself—for what comes next. “Valentina, I need you to understand... Your mother loved you. Everything she did, she believed it was for your best.”

Dread coils in my gut. “What did she do?”

A tear escapes Papà’s eye. “She made a pact.”

The room seems to constrict, the air itself pausing. “A pact,” I echo, barely a breath.

He nods, jaw tight with old hurt. “With Don Emilio Moretti.”

My mouth goes dry. I withdraw my hand from his slowly, rising to my feet without even realizing it. “What kind of pact?”

Papà’s gaze follows me. He reaches as if to pull me back, but I stay just out of reach, arms wrapped around myself. I’m not sure I can handle his touch as I hear this.

He bows his head. “The kind made in desperation, figlia mia. Please—sit, I’ll explain.”

“I’d rather stand,” I murmur. My knees feel like water, but some part of me fears if I sit, I’ll be trapped by what he says.

Papà draws a shaky breath. “Very well.” He looks up at me, eyes pleading for understanding. “In 1998, we were living in Milan. You were what—seven, eight? That was when my gallery went bankrupt.”

I frown, trying to recall. I remember overhearing arguments about money, seeing past-due notices on the kitchen counter before Papà swept them away. “I remember things were hard,” I say cautiously. “You sold some paintings... Mamma started taking on restoration work.”

“Yes,” he whispers. “We were drowning in debt. I’d taken a private loan to keep the gallery afloat—a large one. We later found out the money came from Camorra fronts. When I defaulted, they... came after us.” His voice cracks on the last words.

My stomach churns. I never knew the specifics, just that one day we abruptly moved to Tuscany and started fresh. The puzzle pieces click together now with horrifying clarity. “The Camorra threatened you?”

He nods. “Men cornered me outside the gallery, warned that if I didn’t pay up, they would make an example of me—of us. I was terrified.” His eyes grow distant, as if seeing those days play out again. “I didn’t know what to do. We had no money, no allies in that world. I thought of going to the police, but these were dangerous people... We prepared to flee, but—”

He swallows hard, voice dropping. “Sofia wouldn’t run. Not without trying something first. She reached out to an old acquaintance. Someone she said had both money and power and might help.”

My heart is in my throat. “Emilio Moretti.”

Papà closes his eyes in assent. “Yes. I knew nothing of it until after. One day, Emilio came to our house. I wasn’t home—I was out frantically trying to sell whatever assets we had left. But you... you might remember, he arrived when you were there.”

A memory surges up—half-forgotten but now vivid as day. I was a girl, hiding on the stairs with my dolls as a strange man’s deep voice rumbled from the study... That night.

My pulse spikes. “I... I think I do,” I say haltingly. “I heard Mamma talking to someone. I peeked and saw a man in a suit, with gray in his hair. I—” My voice catches. All this time I had assumed that was some creditor or distant cousin. But it was Emilio Moretti himself in our home, when I was a child.

The edges of my vision blur as the memory envelops me:

I’m eight years old again, perched on the staircase where it curves just above the study door. My porcelain doll is clutched to my chest. Downstairs, I hear voices—Mamma’s, urgent and low, and a man’s voice, unfamiliar and commanding.

Curiosity outweighs fear. Ever so quietly, I ease down a few steps until I can peek between the bannister rails into the study.

Mamma stands by her desk, wringing her hands. She looks younger than I’ve ever seen her, almost girlish despite the streaks of silver already in her dark hair. Across from her, leaning casually against the desk’s edge, is a tall man in an elegant charcoal suit. He’s handsome in a stern way, with iron-gray hair at his temples and a neat beard. Though he’s smiling gently, there’s something intimidating about him; he holds a crystal glass of what looks like Papà’s whiskey, like he owns the place.

I suck in a silent breath. The man from the photograph—though I don’t know that yet. To me, he’s just a stranger in my house.

“I appreciate you coming, Emilio,” Sofia says softly. I rarely hear her sound so unsure. My confident mother, the brilliant art historian, sounds... deferential.

The man—Emilio—waves a hand. “Old friends, are we not? Although it’s been years since Paris.”

Mamma smiles faintly. “A lifetime ago. Things... things changed.”

“Yes,” Emilio agrees, swirling the whiskey. “Your marriage, for one. But I harbor no ill will. You followed your heart.”

I tilt my head. They speak as if they knew each other intimately. My child’s mind can’t quite piece it together, but I feel the weight of unspoken words between them.

Mamma’s shoulders straighten. Her tone hardens with resolve. “I won’t beat around the bush. I need your help, Emilio.”

He nods, as if unsurprised. “Money?”

“Not just money. Protection.” She steps closer to him, lowering her voice. I have to strain to hear: “The Camorra are after Alfonso. If we run, they’ll never stop hunting him. Hunting us. I... I need you to intervene. Make them back off.”

Emilio sets his glass down on the desk with a soft thud. “You ask a great deal. The Camorra don’t scare easily, and they won’t drop a vendetta out of charity.”

Mamma’s hands clench in her skirt. I notice now how tired she looks—dark crescents under her eyes, worry etched in her brow. “I know. I’m not asking for charity.” She hesitates, then says, “I’m offering an alliance.”

My little heart flutters. Alliance—that’s a word from Papà’s history books about wars and kingdoms. Why is Mamma talking about alliances?

Emilio’s eyebrows rise. “Go on.”

Mamma lifts her chin, a spark in her eyes that sends a shiver through me. It’s the look she gets when she’s about to do something daring. “In exchange for your protection and clearing Alfonso’s debt, I will promise you something precious.” She pauses, voice quivering slightly. “Our daughter, Valentina... when she comes of age, I will bind her future to your family. To your son.”

My breath catches. Me? I clutch the bannister rail. They’re talking about me.

Emilio looks genuinely startled. He studies Mamma for a long moment. “You’d betroth your daughter to Dante? Sofia, that’s... unexpected.”

Mamma’s eyes shine with tears she’s fighting back. “Your Dante is only a few years older. If we formalize an engagement when they’re of age, our families will be joined. Valentina will bring her talents, her... legacy, to House Moretti. In return, Alfonso is saved from the Camorra’s retaliation now.”

Emilio strokes his beard. He seems to be weighing options. I feel dizzy, understanding only pieces—my future, Dante (that’s a boy’s name, isn’t it?), marriage?—it all sounds like a story not my own.

Finally, Emilio steps forward and takes Mamma’s hand. “Sofia, you were always bold. This is a serious vow you propose. Does your husband know?”

Mamma’s voice drops to a whisper I can barely catch. “No. It would break his heart. This must remain between us. If... if circumstances allow as the years go by, I will guide Valentina toward accepting it when the time is right.”

Guide me? Accept what? My little chest tightens. They’re deciding something enormous about my life, and neither Papà nor I know.

Emilio bows his head. “If I do this, if I solve your Camorra problem and assume your husband’s debt, I expect the pact honored. No games, no backing out when your daughter is grown.”

Sofia straightens, a fierceness emanating from her I’ve never seen directed at me or Papà. “I keep my vows, Emilio. Always.”

He smiles faintly. “That you do.” A beat, then he nods, almost to himself. “Very well. I accept your proposal. House Moretti will protect your family from the Camorra. And when the time comes, Dante and Valentina will unite our bloodlines.”

My heart slams against my ribcage. I don’t fully grasp marriage, but I know it means a forever promise. Like Papà and Mamma. They are saying I have to marry someone I’ve never met—because of the Camorra? Because Mamma asked?

I shuffle backward on the stair, panic rising. The porcelain doll slips from my grip. I lunge to catch her, but she tumbles down the steps. I freeze as the clatter echoes.

In the study below, the voices halt abruptly.

“Did you hear that?” Mamma asks, alarmed.

I don’t wait to hear more. Terror at being caught eavesdropping propels me silently up the stairs to my room, abandoning the doll where she fell. I dive under my covers, heart pounding in my throat.

Moments later, I hear Mamma’s soft steps on the stairs. She picks up the doll—I can recognize the faint jingle of its broken porcelain arm. The study door closes and their voices resume in hushed tones I can no longer decipher.

Under the blankets, tears burn my eyes. I don’t fully understand what I overheard. But I know in my gut that Mamma just traded something dear to her—and to me. I hug my knees, trembling.

The flashback fades, leaving me cold and unsteady on my feet. My arms have wrapped around myself tightly at some point, nails digging into my forearms. I realize I’ve been silently crying; tears drench my cheeks and my breathing is shallow.

“Valentina?” Papà’s voice draws me out of the memory. “Are you alright? Say something, figlia…”

I blink hard, coming back to the present. The safehouse bedroom, dawn light, my father frail in bed. That was real—all of it was real. My mother arranged my marriage to Dante when I was a child. The forced engagement that upended my life weeks ago was no twist of fate—it was the execution of a plan laid decades prior.

Planned by my own mother and Dante’s father.

“Valentina.” Papà struggles to push himself upright, concern etched on his face. “Your face… Tell me what you remember.”

I swipe at my tears angrily. “I was there,” I choke out. “That night. I heard them talk about me—and Dante. You… you knew, at least some of it, didn’t you?”

His shoulders sag. “Not that night. Sofia didn’t tell me immediately. She protected me from the knowledge, perhaps so I wouldn’t protest.” He sighs, grief crossing his features. “Weeks later, after we relocated to Tuscany safely, she confessed. She said Emilio made the Camorra problem disappear. Our debts were paid anonymously. I thought maybe an angel investor—she let me believe that until we were settled. Then she told me the truth of how she bargained for our lives.”

Papà’s voice trembles. “I was furious with her. We fought. I couldn’t fathom binding you to some criminal prince as payment.” His eyes plead with me to understand. “But Sofia… she insisted it was the only way. She believed House Moretti would keep you safe long-term in a way I never could. She said it was inevitable, written in blood.”

I release a shaky laugh, raw and bitter. “Inevitable.” So every step, every choice since I was eight was nudged by an invisible hand toward Dante. Toward this dynasty of blood and vows.

My father reaches for me and this time I don’t pull away when he takes my hand. “Figlia, I wanted to tell you so many times. After your mother died—”

“How did she die, Papà?” I cut in, a sudden dread twisting inside me. “Was it really an accident?” A horrifying thought occurs: if she crossed the Camorra or got involved in mafia dealings, could her death have been retaliation or worse?

Papà’s face crumples. “It was cancer, Valentina. Aggressive. She kept it secret until the final months, didn’t want us to worry. It happened so fast...” Tears slip down his cheeks freely now. “Her last days she made me swear I’d keep you safe, no matter what. And that when the time came, I’d honor her pact with Emilio.”

I sink back into the chair, knees weak. My mind reels. Cancer—I was told it was a sudden illness, but at nineteen I was so devastated I didn’t question it. I hadn’t known she’d known for months. The fact she arranged all this possibly knowing she wouldn’t live to see it... Did she foresee everything?

I bury my face in my hands. My mother’s lies stretch far beyond the grave, entangling me even now. “I just don’t understand,” I whisper through my fingers. “Why not tell me? Why let me grow up in ignorance, thinking I was free to choose my own fate?”

Papà’s voice is gentle, pained. “Because she believed telling you would burden you unnecessarily. Perhaps... perhaps she hoped the feud between our families would ease and you might even welcome the union by the time it happened.” He grimaces. “And frankly, after she passed, I hoped it would never come to pass at all. Emilio went silent on the matter for years. I prayed it died with your mother’s death.”

“But it didn’t,” I say hollowly. “Because Don Emilio invoked it, didn’t he? That night in the bank vault, Dante appeared like he knew exactly what to do—force an engagement as a blood oath. Maybe Dante didn’t know why, but Emilio must have left instructions.”

Thinking back, Dante was insistent from the start that I become his fiancée to quell war. It always felt too specific, too purposeful. Now I see the puppet strings. My stomach churns.

“I suspect so,” Papà says quietly. “Emilio was gravely ill last year—I heard rumors. He may have made arrangements. How else would Dante have come for you at that exact moment? Some part of the pact survived in their family’s knowledge.”

I feel sick to my core. My life was never my own. All the love I had for my mother is now tainted with betrayal. How could she? How could she treat me like a bargaining chip, even if she thought it was to save us?

Hot anger surges up through my sorrow. I jerk to my feet, pacing a few steps because if I stay still I might scream. “So I was sold off like some princess in a mafia fairy tale to buy our family’s safety,” I spit, voice quivering. “And neither of you thought I deserved to know!”

Papà flinches. “It wasn’t like that—”

“Wasn’t it?” I whirl on him. “Mamma groomed me, Papà. Don’t you see? She taught me art and forgery and all those skills not just for my own sake, but because it made me useful to them. Valentina will bring her talents and legacy to House Moretti—those were her exact words to Emilio. I heard her!” My voice cracks.

Papà’s face goes ashen. Clearly, he didn’t know that detail. “Her talents... Dio mio.” He covers his face briefly. “Your art... She wanted to ensure they valued you, perhaps. Sofia always said your gift was extraordinary.”

I choke out a bitter laugh. “Valued me? She delivered me on a silver platter, complete with skills to make me an asset.” My heart rages and aches all at once. I can’t reconcile the warm, loving mother who tucked me in at night with the cold strategist who plotted my marriage and honed me like a tool.

“Valentina.” Papà tries to reach for me again. “She loved you. Please believe that. In her mind, this was securing a powerful future for you. A... a dynasty through you. She envisioned you and Dante ruling an empire together, safe from all rivals.”

A dynasty. The words from the Master Plan Dante had scribbled for our sham wedding echo faintly—Sinister Vow Dynasty. It wasn’t just a dramatic flourish. It was literally my mother’s vow, forged in desperation and secrecy, that created this entire twisted fate.

Tears blur my eyes anew, but these are hot with fury now. “I didn’t ask for a crown or an empire. I would have rather had my mother and father safe and a normal life.”

“I know, bella,” Papà whispers. “I know.”

We both jump at a sudden sound from the doorway—a soft creak.

Dante stands there, pale and swaying slightly, one hand braced on the doorframe. He’s pulled on a shirt and trousers haphazardly over his bandages. Argonaut hovers just behind him, a steadying hand on Dante’s back that the proud man is trying to shrug off.

My heart lurches. “Dante! You shouldn’t be up—” I rush to him, sliding under his arm to support his weight. He’s clammy and winces as he shifts, clearly in pain.

“I’m fine,” he insists through gritted teeth, though he’s clearly not. But his dark eyes bore into mine with worry. “I heard shouting. Are you... alright?” The question is double-edged; he must have overheard enough.

I let him lean on me as I guide him to the foot of Papà’s bed so he can sit. His jaw is clenched, gaze flicking between my father and me. “Most of it,” he admits quietly. “Enough to piece things together.”

Papà clears his throat, wiping his face quickly as if to regain composure. “Dante, son... I owe you my life and my daughter’s. There are no words—”

Dante lifts a hand, stopping him. “You don’t need to thank me.” He grimaces, pain tightening his features briefly. “But I do need to say—I had no knowledge of this pact between our parents. If I had...” He trails off, struggling to find words.

My throat constricts. Dante looks stricken, as though the revelation hurts him almost as much as it does me. I reach for his hand, needing the contact as much to reassure him as myself. Our fingers lace together tightly.

“If you had known?” I prompt softly.

His eyes meet mine, burning with sincerity. “If I had known, I would have told you from the start. I would never keep that from you. And I’d—by God, Valentina, I’d have given you a choice. Not force you into anything under false pretenses.”

Emotion swells in my chest. I know he means it. He’s nothing like the manipulations that birthed our union. Whatever was engineered by others, what we’ve built between us feels true.

“I believe you,” I whisper, squeezing his hand.

He turns to Papà, voice grave. “And sir, I think you deserved a say in it too. Emilio had no right to gamble with your family like that.”

Papà looks down, shame-faced. “I won’t defend my part in it. I should have been honest with both of you long ago. Perhaps then things would have been different.”

For a long moment, the only sound is the soft lapping of lake water against the dock outside and a warbler trilling morning song in a tree. I draw a shaky breath, trying to dispel the heavy cloak of betrayal hanging over me. Mamma is gone. Emilio is gone. The architects of this twisted fate are beyond my fury now.

My eyes drift to the window, toward the rising sun cresting over pine trees. Warm rays cut through the chill, illuminating motes of dust in the air. A strange calm begins to settle in my core—a steely resolve hardening out of the molten anger.

Mother wanted to bind me to House Moretti as some grand design? Fine. But I am not her pawn. Not Emilio’s either. I’m done being a bargaining chip passed between powerful people.

Dante watches me closely, concern etching a line between his brows. “Valentina? What are you thinking?”

I look at him, then at my father. “I’m thinking,” I say slowly, “that this ends now. I won’t be manipulated by ghosts any longer. Mamma and Emilio’s pact, Silvio’s schemes—it all ends with us.”

Dante’s lips press into a thin line. “Silvio,” he mutters the name like a curse.

Papà blinks. “Silvio is...?”

“Alive,” Dante replies. “And rallying his forces as we speak. He tried to kill me, orchestrated all this chaos to seize power. He’s our next threat.”

Papà’s expression darkens with anger I rarely see from him. “That vipera... he held me prisoner. Threatened to kill Valentina if I didn’t urge her to cooperate with him. He boasted that with Don Emilio gone and Dante presumably dead, he’d soon control everything.”

Dante’s hand clenches around mine. I feel the barely restrained fury trembling through him.

I swallow, my decision crystallizing. “Then we need to stop him. Today.”

Argonaut, who had been respectfully quiet by the door, steps forward now. “We intercepted a bit of chatter on Moretti channels. Silvio has called an emergency summit of the remaining capos and Camorra contacts.” He glances at Dante. “It’s happening at Castelvecchio, your family’s old fortress estate, by nightfall.”

Dante nods grimly, unsurprised. “Of course. Our villa’s gone, so he slithers back to the ancestral castle to crown himself in front of the syndicates.”

Papà’s gaze moves between us, worried. “What will you do?”

I square my shoulders. “Confront him. Expose him. Take back Moretti House from that traitor.” The conviction in my voice surprises even me.

Papà’s eyes widen. “Valentina, you just escaped with your life—”

“I know.” I kneel next to his bed, taking his hands between mine. “Papà, this isn’t just revenge. It’s... it’s for Mamma too. Her legacy has been twisted by lies and half-truths. I need to face it head on. Castelvecchio is where Emilio’s legacy lives and where Silvio thinks he’ll cement his. I’m going there to ensure our family’s story isn’t controlled by others anymore.”

Tears shine in Papà’s eyes again. “Figlia... I can’t lose you. And Dante is hurt—”

Dante struggles to his feet, using the bedpost for support. Though unsteady, his voice comes out firm and determined. “I’ll heal later. She’s not going without me.”

I stand as well, heart thumping. “Of course not. We do this together.” My eyes meet Dante’s, and in them I see the shared understanding: manipulated or not, whatever we have now is ours. We reclaimed it through fire and blood. We’ll fight for it together.

He gives me the barest nod—ride or die.

Papà opens his mouth to protest more, but Argonaut interjects gently. “Sir, I’ll stay here to guard you. Lupo too. They won’t be alone out there; Dante has contacts meeting us near the estate to help.”

It’s likely a white lie—there is no time to gather a battalion. But I appreciate Argonaut’s attempt to comfort my father. Papà slowly releases my hand, resignation and pride mingling on his face. “My brave girl,” he whispers. “And you, Dante—bring her back safe, I beg you.”

Dante manages a tight, respectful dip of his head. “With my life, I will.”

A few hours ago I might have flinched at hearing yet another vow on my behalf. But this one, I trust. Because Dante swears it of his own free will, and I know in my bones he means it.

I lean down and kiss Papà’s forehead, smoothing his silver hair. “Rest, Papà. We’ll return by tonight. And when we do, this will all be over.”

He grips my hand once more, fiercely, then lets go. “I believe in you, Valentina. Your mother—she was wrong to hide what she did, but she was right about one thing: you are destined for something great. Go show them who you are.”

A fierce warmth fills me. I kiss his knuckles. “Ti voglio bene,” I murmur—I love you, Papà.

He closes his eyes with a nod, fighting tears.

I turn to Dante, who is already steeling himself for what’s next. His face is drawn, pain and exhaustion evident, but a resolve burns in his eyes that mirrors my own. Neither injuries nor ghosts will hold us back now.

My gaze travels over him and I notice his bandaged arm, the slight sway in his stance. I gently loop my arm through his to support him without making a fuss. He allows it, leaning subtly into me. “We leave within the hour,” he says to Argonaut, who nods and slips out to prepare the boat or whatever transport.

Castelvecchio awaits—an ancient fortress perched in the hills, full of old secrets and new dangers. It’s where Silvio will attempt to steal the crown and where the truth of House Moretti will finally come to light.

Dante takes a careful breath and looks down at me. “Are you certain you want to do this? We could try waiting, regrouping—”

I shake my head. “No more waiting. This ends today.”

His gaze searches mine, then he lifts my hand to his lips and presses a firm kiss there, right over my racing pulse. “By your side, allora.”

Together, we turn toward the door. As we walk out into the crisp morning light, Dante’s arm around me for balance and my shoulder under his to lend strength, I feel strangely clear-headed. The anger and hurt are still there, but they’ve been hammered into a weapon now—one I will use to cut down the web of lies.

I glance once more at the cottage interior as we leave—Papà’s fragile smile as he watches us, the cozy rooms that sheltered truth and lies alike. Then I step onto the stone terrace with Dante, leaving behind the broken pieces of the past.

Ahead lies Castelvecchio, Silvio’s reckoning, and my mother’s final ghost to confront.

Whatever awaits us in those castle halls, Dante and I will face it on our own terms. No more living in the shadows of old vows.

I squeeze Dante’s hand, and he returns it with a fierce, steady pressure.

It’s time to take back our dynasty.

## Chapter 15 — Coup at Castelvecchio (VALENTINA POV)

Twilight settles over Castelvecchio as our car approaches the fortress gates. The old castle looms against the darkening sky—stone ramparts and a square medieval tower jutting upward like a black silhouette. I swallow hard, keeping my posture poised and self-assured in the backseat. On the surface, I am Bianca De Luca, art conservator to the Camorra’s Naples syndicate, summoned here to verify a prized painting. In truth, every nerve in my body is electrified with tension.

Beside me in the car, Dante sits slumped in a hooded cloak, passing as my silent assistant. Under the hood, his face is drawn and pale, but his eyes gleam with lethal focus. Beneath the cloak, he wears a tactical vest and keeps one of Argonaut’s pistols strapped at his side. We’ve done what we can to hide his identity—tonight, no one must recognize the Moretti heir until it’s too late.

At the wheel, Argonaut plays the part of our driver. He slows as we near the wrought-iron gates. Two guards step forward, machine pistols visible. The headlights illuminate their suspicious scowls.

“Who’s this?” one guard barks in Italian, shining a flashlight into the car. It passes over my face. I incline my head with cool impatience.

“Bianca De Luca,” I announce crisply, handing over a laminated identification card through the window. A quick forgery we whipped up en route—courtesy of Foxglove’s data on Camorra contracts and Dante’s photographic memory for detail. The ID bears a photo of me with dyed-black hair and thick glasses, and the alias identifying me as an art restoration specialist.

The guard scrutinizes it. I arch a brow. “I was called from Naples to inspect a painting for Signore Moretti,” I say, adopting a slight Neapolitan accent. “We’re late, thanks to all these roadblocks.” I let irritation lace my tone, as if I’m too important to be delayed by underlings.

The guard grunts, glancing at his comrade. “Yes, we have instructions. Authenticatore d’arte.” He slaps the roof of the car lightly and steps back. “Inside. Park by the courtyard.”

I nod in curt thanks as Argonaut guides the car through. My heart thuds; the first hurdle cleared. Dante’s gloved hand finds mine between us and gives a brief squeeze. I don’t look at him—Bianca would not show familiarity with her “assistant”—but I return the squeeze gratefully. We’re in.

The courtyard of Castelvecchio is ablaze with floodlights. Vehicles are parked in a haphazard row—sleek black sedans and a couple of armored SUVs. Men linger near the cars, smoking or talking in low tones. These must be the capos and Camorra delegates, their bodyguards stationed alertly around the perimeter. I spot at least a dozen armed men. This is no friendly gathering; it’s a guarded summit of vipers.

Argonaut stops the car. One of the attendants opens my door and I step out, smoothing my conservative black skirt. A chilly alpine breeze skims across the courtyard, fluttering the loose tendrils of my blonde wig.

Yes—blonde. On the drive, I exchanged my dark locks for a platinum-blonde wig styled into a tight bun, and donned hazel contact lenses behind thick-framed glasses. With pale powder on my face and a swipe of berry lipstick, I look nothing like the Valentina Rossi that Silvio knows.

I adjust the strap of the leather satchel slung over my shoulder—inside is an array of tools of my trade, both real (swabs, magnifier, solvents) and otherwise (a compact EMP charge courtesy of Argonaut, a tactical knife strapped to my thigh, and a tiny pistol hidden in a false bottom of the bag).

Dante emerges from the other side of the car, keeping his hood low and posture deferential. In this play, he is merely my helper, anonymous and unthreatening.

A stooped older man in a suit approaches, wringing his hands. I recognize him from Foxglove files: Don Tommaso, an influential Camorra broker. He forces a polite smile. “Signora De Luca, so glad you made it. Signore Moretti has been expecting you.”

He eyes my “assistant” briefly but says nothing. I lift my chin, projecting confidence. “Traffic was unkind. I trust I haven’t delayed the proceedings?”

Tommaso shakes his head. “Not at all. The meeting is just about to begin.” He lowers his voice. “They will want you to inspect the artwork as soon as it’s presented. Everything rides on its authenticity, sì?”

I give a thin professional smile. “I understand perfectly.”

He seems relieved. “Follow me.”

We’re led through a pair of heavy oak doors into the castle’s main hall. My pulse spikes as I step inside the fortress I’ve heard so much about. The entry opens into a grand corridor lit by wrought iron sconces. The decor is an incongruous mix of medieval stone walls hung with faded tapestries and modern security cameras perched in corners. Our footfalls click on polished marble floors—likely Emilio’s touch in updating the old castle.

We reach a set of double doors at the end of the hall. Muffled voices emanate from beyond—heated conversation in Italian. I pick out Silvio’s low growl, and another voice with a thick Neapolitan accent—likely one of the Camorra chiefs.

Tommaso pauses with his hand on the door handle and turns to me. “Give it a minute. They’re, ah, settling some... financial disagreements first.”

I incline my head as if disinterested. In truth, my ears strain to catch the words.

Inside, Silvio is saying, “—not trying to cheat anyone. The value has simply decreased given the... unrest. Dante’s dead, but his allies are still a nuisance. The painting’s a riskier asset now, so the price should reflect—”

A smoky female voice cuts him off—Camorra, maybe the Donna from Naples. “Don’t feed us stronzate, Moretti. You’re the one who lost control of your house. We agreed on terms before the fiasco at the auction. We expect our full share.”

“Indeed,” comes a male voice, smooth and deadly. “We didn’t come all this way to renegotiate like fishwives.”

I exchange a quick glance with Dante under his hood. We both read it: Silvio is on the back foot, trying to wiggle out of promises. The Camorra representatives are unimpressed. There’s discord in his grand alliance already.

Tommaso clears his throat and opens the door at last. “Signore Moretti, the authenticator from Naples is here.”

The conversation halts abruptly as we step in. My senses sharpen, taking in every detail.

The castle’s great hall has been repurposed into a conference room of sorts. A long oak table dominates the center, littered with crystal glasses, maps, and a laptop. Silvio stands at the head of it, clad in a crisp charcoal suit, his handsome face drawn with tension. Seeing him again twists anger in my gut—I tamp it down beneath Bianca’s detached facade.

On the table, resting on an easel, is the painting: The Sacrifice of Isaac. Even from a distance, my heart flutters to see the Caravaggio intact—smoke-charred around the edges but the figures of Abraham and Isaac still vibrant in chiaroscuro. They salvaged it. My fingers itch to touch up the damage, to restore its glory. But there’ll be time for that later, I hope.

Arrayed around Silvio are half a dozen figures: two older men in tailored suits (likely syndicate capos loyal to Moretti), one severe-looking woman with a cascade of black hair and fierce eyes (Camorra Donna, I’d guess), and a portly man with a ruddy face (another Camorrista or broker). Behind them stand bodyguards, each armed and watchful.

All eyes turn to me. I immediately dip my head respectfully. “Mi scusi for the interruption. Bianca De Luca, at your service.”

Silvio’s gaze skims over me without recognition, but he waves me forward impatiently. “At last. See to it, then.” He gestures to the painting. Clearly, his patience is thin.

I glide toward the painting, Dante a step behind carrying my satchel as a dutiful aide. My heart hammers as I pass within arm’s length of Silvio. My last memory of him is at the lakeshore—smoke rising from our destroyed home as I believed Dante dead. Fury simmers in me; I long to whip out my knife and sink it into his side right now. But I refrain. Not yet. Stick to the plan.

I set my bag down by the easel and pull on a pair of latex gloves from my pocket. The room falls into tense silence as all parties watch me. I sense Silvio’s restless energy—his entire deal rests on me confirming this canvas is the genuine Caravaggio and not a forgery or a damaged loss. The Camorra want to be sure they’re not being swindled.

Out of the corner of my eye, I catch Silvio subtly checking his watch. He’s anxious to conclude business, likely so he can pivot fully to declaring himself Don. And perhaps he worries about outside threats—if only he knew how valid those worries are.

I clear my throat. “This will only take a moment.” I produce a small flashlight and a jeweler’s loupe from my skirt pocket. Leaning in, I examine the painting’s surface as if searching for telltale brushstroke patterns. Really, I’m also noting the burn damage—mostly superficial on the edges—and signs of our forgery. I nearly smile: the canvas has a tiny tear at the bottom corner, and through it I glimpse the second layer of paint from my copy beneath. The original and my duplicate were stacked when the fire broke, melding slightly. So they did salvage both canvases! Someone, likely in confusion, must have adhered them. Remarkable.

I make a mental note to separate and recover my copy later. Two Caravaggios for the price of one.

Pulling back, I nod with professional gravity. “It’s authentic. I see Michelangelo Merisi’s characteristic layering and the aging is consistent with a 17th-century canvas.” I glance to the Camorra faction. “The fire damage is minimal—mostly the frame and edges. The piece remains in excellent condition for restoration and resale.”

The Camorra Donna arches an eyebrow at Silvio, a slight smirk on her lips. “Fire damage, eh? I hear it was quite the inferno. But the painting survived, and the Moretti golden boy did not. How poetic.”

Silvio’s jaw tightens. “The cause of that fire is still under investigation,” he lies smoothly. “Nevertheless, the painting is intact. We can proceed.”

One of the older Moretti-aligned capos, a gruff man with silver hair, clears his throat. “Proceed to what? We still haven’t agreed how selling this masterpiece benefits House Moretti. Our family bleeds and you want to hawk its treasures—”

Silvio slams a palm on the table, making glasses jump. “Enough, Marco. We’ve been through this. The sale funds will purchase arms and secure alliances to cement our future. Dante is gone. I am the head of this family now and I will do what’s necessary to ensure we don’t fall to vultures.”

A few of the men nod reluctantly. Others exchange wary glances. I can practically smell their doubt. Silvio hasn’t won them all—he’s been trying to, clearly.

I step back from the painting, inclining my head to the room. “If you have no further need of me at this moment, might I examine the piece in different light?” I gesture toward a side alcove where a medieval window filters in the last of dusk’s light. It’s away from the main group, near a wall of electrical panels and antique displays.

Silvio waves a dismissive hand. “Go, do what you need. Just don’t wander far.”

“Grazie.” I beckon Dante to pick up the satchel and follow. Together we move toward the alcove. My pulse quickens—we’re nearing our next objective. The castle’s circuit breakers should be behind that panel on the wall.

As I kneel to fuss with a portable UV lamp from my bag, Dante stands guard behind me, his back to the conference as if idly waiting. Under his hood, he murmurs low in Latin—a line from some prayer or poem. It’s our pre-arranged signal: Everyone’s in place.

If all has gone to plan, Dante and I aren’t alone. Argonaut should be lurking near the rear entrance by now, having parked the car. Perhaps Lupo slipped in with catering staff earlier (we tipped off a catering van on the road and created a spot for him). Dante also mentioned a hidden postern gate he could open from inside if needed, to let in any backup. But I doubt we have many allies physically present. In truth, this might be just us.

I take a steadying breath and glance up at Dante. Through the shadow of his hood, I see his dark eyes fixed on me, his jaw set. Ready when you are, that look says.

I nod subtly and turn my attention to the breaker panel on the wall. It’s secured with a padlock—a modern addition. How quaint, Silvio. I slip a thin tension wrench and pick from inside a lipstick tube in my bag.

Careful to keep my body blocking the view, I work the lock with quick, precise motions. Click. It opens. The voices behind us have risen again in argument over percentages and leadership structures. No one notices as I ease the metal panel door open to reveal a grid of switches and old circuit fuses.

Dante shifts, positioning himself to shield my actions from any guard glancing over. My heart thuds. The next part will set everything in motion.

From my bag, I retrieve the small EMP charge—really more of a directed pulse device Argonaut rigged using a drone battery. It’ll fry the cameras and mics at least, maybe knock out lights temporarily. Combined with flipping the breakers, it should plunge this hall into darkness.

I press the charge against the main junction where wires feed into the panel, securing it with its built-in magnet. A quick twist of its timer knob gives us ten seconds.

I rise, my gloves sweating. With my back to the panel, I pretend to examine the painting under UV one more time, holding the lamp up. I click it on and off twice—the signal to Dante that the countdown is on.

He casually drifts a few steps away from me, closer to the table, positioning near one guard’s shoulder.

I count silently. Tre… due… uno.

Phzzzt! The EMP goes off with a muffled pop. Simultaneously, I yank down the master breaker lever in the panel.

The effect is immediate and total. The room is plunged into pitch black. The overhead lights snuff out, the hum of the HVAC dies, and the projector that was casting a map on the wall sputters off.

Surprised cries erupt. “Che diavolo—!” “The lights!”

“Power outage?” someone shouts.

In the confusion, I kick the circuit panel shut and melt back from the alcove, slipping the now-useless glasses off to free my vision. The moonlight seeping in narrow windows provides scant illumination—just enough to make out shapes.

Silvio’s voice cuts through, sharp and commanding: “Stay calm! Guard the exits—”

His words choke off into a scuffle sound. That would be Dante making his move. A grunt of pain—someone hit or stabbed. Gunshots erupt, muzzle flashes strobing the darkness. A cacophony of shouts follow as everyone plunges into chaos.

My first thought: Dante. I want to rush to him, but we have our roles. I’m to secure the painting and avoid the initial crossfire.

I duck low and feel my way to the table. In a flash of muzzle light, I glimpse Silvio wrestling with a silhouette—Dante’s cloaked form—and a guard swinging his rifle butt toward them.

No time for that now. I find the painting on its easel by touch and drag it down to the floor, out of stray bullet range. Someone nearly trips over me and curses, stumbling away.

There’s a scream—a man’s, raw with agony—and a heavy thud. Another gun discharges, the shot deafening in the stone hall. In the intermittent flashes, I catch glimpses: one of the Camorra delegates sprawled on the ground, clutching a wound; the Donna pressing herself against a pillar, pistol drawn as she tries to assess targets; bodies tussling in primal melee where the head of the table was.

A guard lunges in my direction, sweeping a tactical flashlight that catches me in its beam. My disguise is useless now. He sees a blonde woman crouched by the painting and barks, “Stop!”

I shoot first. The little pistol from my satchel is in my hand and I fire a single shot that catches the guard in the leg. He howls and collapses. I scramble up to kick his dropped rifle far away.

Before he can recover, I slam the butt of my pistol against his temple. His howl cuts off and he goes limp.

From the dais, Silvio’s furious voice: “Valentina?! You treacherous bitch!” He’s finally realized who was behind the glasses.

I whirl towards the sound. In a flicker of gunfire light, I see him: Silvio, bleeding from a cut on his forehead, shoving Dante backward over the oak table. Dante loses balance with a grunt, clearly weakened from his injuries. Silvio draws a pistol from inside his jacket, face contorted in rage. “I’ll kill you both!”

“No!” The cry rips out of me. I raise my own gun and fire at Silvio, but he ducks behind an overturned chair and my shot pings off stone.

He pops up again, aiming at Dante—who’s still on his back on the table trying to get footing. My heart seizes.

But two shapes tackle Silvio from the side before he can shoot. Argonaut and Lupo—where did they come from? They barrel him to the floor in a heap. Silvio’s gun skitters across the floor into darkness.

Dante rolls off the table and drops to a knee beside the collapsed guard he must have taken down. His hood has fallen back—his identity laid bare. “This coup is over!” he roars into the dark, his voice commanding even amid chaos. “Silvio Moretti is a traitor to his blood and his oath. Who stands with the rightful Don of House Moretti?”

Recognition and confusion ripple through the room. “Dante?!” one of the older capos gasps, astonished. Another curses, “Madonna, he’s alive—”

A flashlight beam swings wildly then fixes on Silvio struggling on the ground under Argonaut’s knee. Blood drips from Silvio’s forehead into his eyes as he snarls and bucks.

The face that light reveals—the face of a proven liar and would-be usurper—seems to galvanize the loyalists. Suddenly, one of the Moretti capos barks to his guards, “Stand down! Protect Don Dante!”

At once, an internal shift: two of the armed men pivot to point guns at Silvio and his Camorra allies instead of at Dante. The Camorra Donna, seeing the tide turn, spits out a curse. She and her one remaining bodyguard edge toward the exit.

I move to Dante’s side, out of breath, supporting him as he rises fully. He’s panting, an arm pressed to his side—wet with blood again. I think he tore stitches in the fight. But his gaze is fierce as ever.

Silvio, pinned but still defiant, laughs—a broken, bitter sound. “You’re all fools if you think this ends here! The Camorra will carve up what’s left of Moretti whether it’s Dante or me wearing the crown.” His eyes dart to the Camorra delegates.

The Donna pauses at the doorway, her cold gaze assessing. “Perhaps,” she says. “But not tonight.” With a sharp nod to her guard, she slips out—choosing survival over a lost cause. The other Camorra man—gut-shot and crawling—swears hoarsely and follows as best he can, leaving a smear of blood. It seems the Camorra contingent has had enough.

Silvio’s face blanches as his external allies abandon him. “Aspettate—”

Dante limps forward, shrugging off my attempt to steady him. Argonaut and Lupo haul Silvio up to his knees, forcing him to face Dante.

Most of the room is lit only by wavering flashlights now. The emergency generators still haven’t kicked in—perhaps sabotaged by our EMP longer than expected. In the dim, Dante’s silhouette stands tall and unyielding before his treacherous cousin.

“It’s over, Silvio,” Dante says, voice deathly quiet. “For your crimes against our blood and family, what do you deserve?”

Silvio bares his teeth, chest heaving. He looks to the remaining Moretti capos desperately. “He’s weak! He’d lead you to ruin—”

No one moves to help Silvio now. The older capo, Marco, steps up beside Dante, eyes full of anger. “You nearly destroyed our House. I was blind to trust you. The punishment for treason is death.”

A chorus of murmured assent from the others. Silvio’s fate is sealed.

Dante draws a dagger from Argonaut’s belt—an ornate blade glinting in the dark. It was Emilio’s once, I recall; Argonaut must have carried it for this very purpose.

Silvio’s eyes widen at the sight of the knife. “C-cousin, have mercy—!”

“Like the mercy you showed my father? Or Valentina’s?” Dante’s tone turns to steel. For a heartbeat, I see the true Prince of Moretti—ruthless when necessary.

He plunges the dagger forward. It sinks to the hilt in Silvio’s chest.

Silvio gasps, a wet, horrible sound. Dante grips his cousin by the shoulder, twisting the blade with grim finality. “This is for my father,” he growls, then yanks the knife free and drives it in again lower. “And this—for what you did to my Valentina.”

Silvio shudders, blood bubbling on his lips. Dante pulls the blade out. Silvio slumps from Argonaut’s grasp to the cold floor, twitching once before going still, eyes staring lifeless at the vaulted ceiling.

It’s done. Silvio Moretti is dead.

There’s a collective exhale in the hall. The remaining men lower their weapons. Some cross themselves. Others simply shake their heads as if waking from a bad dream.

Dante sways on his feet as the adrenaline ebbs. I’m at his side in an instant, catching him before he topples. “Easy,” I murmur, slipping an arm around his waist. He’s soaked in sweat and blood, and the sight of it kicks my heart into my throat. He’s hurt, badly.

“I’m alright,” he manages, though he leans heavily into me. The dagger slips from his fingers, clanging to the stone with a note of finality.

Capo Marco clears his throat. “Don Dante… your commands?”

Dante lifts his head, blinking to focus. The flashlights now converging on him reveal a blood-smeared, battle-weary leader, but a leader unmistakably. “Secure the castle,” he says hoarsely. “See to the wounded. And someone get the generator on.”

“Yes, Don.” The men scatter into action, voices barking orders down hallways.

Lupo and Argonaut quietly set about moving Silvio’s corpse out of sight and disarming the remaining conscious guard. Ever efficient.

My job here is technically done—we succeeded. But Dante’s injuries matter more to me than any protocol now.

“Dante, sit,” I urge, guiding him toward a sturdy wooden crate by the wall. He doesn’t argue, practically collapsing onto it. I peel his cloak and jacket aside, grimacing at the dark wet stain on his side. The stitches on his bullet graze indeed tore open; a fresh crimson flow seeps through the bandages beneath.

“You’re bleeding out,” I say, unable to hide the tremor in my voice.

He catches my hand, bloodied fingers curling around mine. Even exhausted, he flashes me a faint, crooked smile. “Merely reopening an old wound, amore mio.”

His attempt at humor falls flat as a tear escapes my eye. I angrily swipe it away, but he sees. “Hey,” he says softly, tugging me closer between his knees. “It’s alright. We did it.”

I exhale a shaky breath. “We did,” I whisper. It feels unreal. In the span of hours, we rescued Papà, confronted the ghosts of our parents, and toppled a traitor. The threat that hung over us since our wedding night is gone. Silvio is gone.

I place my palms on Dante’s shoulders, both for balance and to feel him warm and alive under my touch. “You scared me,” I admit quietly. “When he had you on that table, I thought—” My voice breaks.

Dante’s hand slides up to cup the back of my neck. “I’m sorry,” he murmurs. “I promised I wouldn’t leave you, and I meant it. I’m right here.”

His forehead presses against mine. In the dim flicker of returning emergency lights, I see the sincere fear in his eyes that matches my own. We almost lost everything tonight—again.

I tilt my face and kiss him. Gently at first, just to taste and assure myself he’s here. He answers immediately, lips warm despite his fatigue, moving against mine with a desperation that ignites something deep in me.

He breaks away just enough to murmur against my lips, “Ti amo, Valentina. Con tutto il cuore, ti amo.” His admission sends a thrill coursing through me.

I choke on a half-laugh, half-sob and hold him tight. “Ti amo,” I confess in a broken whisper—the words rising up from the truest part of me. “Dante, I love you. I didn’t realize it fully until I thought—” My voice fails as more tears slip free.

He makes a soft sound—half groan, half sigh of relief—and then his lips are on mine, capturing them in a fervent, possessive kiss. I melt into it, pouring all of my aching love and longing into the way our mouths collide.

We cling to each other desperately, kisses growing urgent. The pent-up fear and fury alchemize rapidly into hunger. My hands fumble under his shirt, needing to feel his skin. He hisses as my fingers brush a tender wound, but then he’s tugging the shirt off over his head entirely, bandages and all, tossing it aside.

The breath whooshes from me. Even marred by purple bruises and streaks of blood and paint, his torso is a masterpiece of lean muscle and sculpted strength. My heart clenches at the sight of the bandage wrapped around his ribs, red seeping through anew. “Your side—” I begin, but he silences me with another kiss, biting at my lower lip gently.

“I’ll live,” he growls, fingers already at the buttons of my blouse. “Right now I need you, Valentina. I need to feel you.”

Heat blooms in my core at his raw words. “Yes,” I breathe. “Yes.”

Buttons scatter as he impatiently parts my blouse. I shrug it off, not caring that it drops in a paint-smeared heap. His warm hands slide over my waist and up to cup my bra-covered breasts. The roughness of his palms against the lace draws a gasp from me.

“You’re so beautiful,” he rasps, looking up at me with hooded eyes. The remaining emergency light casts his face in golden relief—the strong jawline, the flaring heat in his gaze. He slides my bra straps down my shoulders, freeing my breasts into the cool air. Hardened nipples brush his palms and I moan softly.

Dante’s mouth descends to my chest, licking a bold stripe of blue paint off the swell of my right breast. The sight is decadently erotic—his tongue leaving clean skin in its wake. “Mmm,” he hums, tasting me mixed with paint. “Bellissima.”

My head falls back as he takes my nipple into his mouth, swirling and sucking until pleasure spikes through me. I cling to his shoulders, nails digging into slick skin as he lavishes attention on one breast, then the other. Each pull of his lips shoots a direct line of heat to my core.

I can’t get close enough. I hitch up my skirt around my thighs and straddle his lap on the crate bench, knees hugging his hips. He groans as I press against the bulge in his trousers. Even through layers, I feel his hardness and shift to rub along it.

“Dio, Valentina,” he hisses, biting gently at my pebbled peak. His hands slide down to my ass, fingers splaying and squeezing through the thin fabric of my skirt. With a sudden move, he grabs the hem of my skirt and yanks it up to my waist, bunching it there. The cool air caresses my damp panties.

He glances down and lets out a dark, appreciative chuckle. “Even here,” he notes, running a finger along the streak of red paint smeared across my thigh and the edge of my white lace panties. “Such a messy little fox.”

I flush half in embarrassment, half in arousal. The evidence of our chaos is everywhere on us—paint and blood and sweat. It should be uncomfortable, but somehow it makes this more primal, real. We’ve survived hell and wear its colors on our skin.

I smirk and reach for his belt. “Let’s make an even bigger mess, Principe.”

His eyes flash with lustful amusement at my daring. “As you wish.”

I fumble with the belt and zipper, my fingers trembling. He lifts his hips to help me shove his pants down just enough, and then his cock springs free—hot, heavy, and already slick at the tip with desire.

I bite my lip at the sight. A streak of white paint slashes across his lower abdomen, perilously close to where I plan to take him inside me. Without breaking eye contact, I dip my hand and smear that paint down onto his length, mixing with the pre-cum beading there. His breath hitches sharply.

“Madonna,” he groans, grasping my wrist lightly. “You’ll undo me.”

My heartbeat thunders. I guide his slick, paint-smeared cock between my thighs, gliding it along the soaked fabric of my panties. The feeling of him rubbing against my swollen clit through the lace makes me shudder.

He grips my hips, steadying me, pupils blown wide. With a growl of frustration, he hooks a finger under the gusset of my panties and yanks it aside, baring me. Cool air meets my fevered flesh for an instant before he slides his tip through my wet folds.

We both gasp. Even that slight touch is electric. “Please,” I whimper, positioning myself above him. I don’t care that we’re half-dressed in a castle hall, or that anyone could walk in (though Argonaut surely stands guard). All I care about is joining with him, right now, in this ruined, sacred place.

Dante’s hand trembles on my hip. He locks eyes with me. “Take it, amore. It’s yours.”

Our lips crash together as I sink down onto him in one slow, burning stroke. My body yields to his thickness, the stretch intense and perfect. I moan into his mouth as he fills me completely. Paint-slick and needy, he slides in deep.

“Dio... sei cosi stretta,” he chokes out against my lips. You’re so tight. His fingers dig into my ass as he fights not to climax immediately. I feel his thighs quiver beneath me.

I too pause, overwhelmed by the sensation of him seated fully inside me, pulsing. It’s not our first time, but something about this—here, now—feels startlingly new. We cling to each other, breathing as one, letting my body adjust and memorize every inch of him.

Then the urgency takes over. I begin to move, rocking my hips in a slow grind. Pleasure sparks through me, raw and insistent. Dante groans deeply and meets my rhythm, lifting his hips despite what must be pain. His cock rubs right against my inner ache with each thrust.

I ride him harder, driven by weeks of fear and longing transmuted into pure desire. The crate creaks under us, and the painting easel nearby wobbles with our movements, but I don’t care if the whole castle hears.

Dante peppers feverish kisses along my jaw and throat, murmuring hoarse praises: “Brava, cosi... mi senti... you feel so good, anima mia...” His breath is ragged against my ear. I arch my back, sliding my hands through his hair (still damp with sweat and flecked with paint) and holding him close.

He suddenly stands, lifting me with him, still impaled on his shaft. My gasp of surprise turns to delight as he pushes me back against the stone wall, taking control. I wrap my legs around his waist, and he braces me there, his eyes burning into mine.

There’s feral intensity on his face—paint smeared across his cheek, blood on his brow, and total love in his gaze. “Mia,” he growls, punctuating the word with a hard thrust upward.

“Yes, yours,” I cry out, nails digging into his shoulders for purchase. He pounds into me against the wall, each stroke claiming me, shattering me. The rough stone bites into my back through my thin chemise, but I scarcely feel it over the waves of bliss building as he hits deeper, faster.

My release is cresting hard and fast. “Dante—I’m—” I try to warn, but it crashes over me suddenly. My inner muscles spasm around him and I throw my head back with a cry of pure ecstasy. It’s as if every emotion—anger, sorrow, relief—explodes into white-hot pleasure.

He groans as I clench around him. Two, three more thrusts and he slams deep, burying his face in my neck with a guttural shout as he comes. Heat blooms inside me as he pulses, filling me with everything he has.

We shudder together, clinging desperately as the aftershocks ripple through us. My legs tremble around his waist; his arms tremble holding me up. It feels like we might collapse, boneless and spent.

Carefully, Dante staggers back to the crate bench, still sheathed within me, and sinks down, cradling me in his lap. We’re both panting, sweat and paint and tears mingling. I rest my forehead against his, eyes closed, reveling in the closeness and the sense of completion.

For a long moment, neither of us speaks. Our hearts pound in synchrony, gradually slowing. He softens inside me, and I reluctantly shift, easing off of him with a wince as our bodies separate. He makes a soft hiss at the loss, and I quickly adjust my panties back into place, though the evidence of our lovemaking trickles warm between my thighs.

Dante brushes damp hair from my face. He looks thoroughly debauched—my doing—and I smile, brushing a streak of red paint from the corner of his mouth with my thumb. Then I lean in and kiss him softly.

He sighs into the kiss, contentment evident. When we part, he rests his forehead to mine. “Mia moglie,” he murmurs tenderly. My wife. “What did I ever do to deserve you?”

I laugh softly and hold him tight. “Perhaps in another life we saved each other,” I whisper. “And fate decided to entwine us in this one.”

He presses a kiss to my temple, then leans back, his expression turning a bit wry as he glances around at the disheveled hall. “Fate and a fair amount of machination,” he corrects with a rueful smirk.

I follow his gaze. The castle bears the scars of our battle—scorched lights, spilled blood, a toppled throne of sorts. But it’s ours now, reclaimed. The Moretti banner still hangs tattered above, but under it Dante sits rightful, and I by his side.

“Yes, but we’ve outwitted all that,” I say, cupping his cheek. “We turned their schemes into our strength.”

He nuzzles into my palm. “That we have, mia volpe astuta.” My cunning fox.

His eyes drift to the Caravaggio painting propped nearby. “Look—our prize is safe.”

I smile. “And I have half a mind to finish forging the other copy, just to keep everyone guessing.”

He chuckles, low and warm. “Ever the schemer.” Then his tone grows serious. “We’ll need that clever mind, Valentina. The Camorra won’t let this humiliation stand. Not for long.”

I nod, the weight of reality settling. Silvio is gone, but war with the Camorra likely looms on the horizon, as does the challenge of truly uniting House Moretti under Dante’s leadership. Our journey isn’t over—far from it.

But I feel no fear now, only resolve. “Whatever comes, we face it together,” I say firmly, lacing my fingers with his.

He lifts our joined hands and brushes a reverent kiss across my knuckles, right over the smeared gold paint there. “Together,” he echoes.

The distant wail of sirens or alarms rises from beyond the castle walls—perhaps police finally responding to gunfire, or a last echo of Silvio’s short reign. It’s an ominous sound, reminding us of gathering threats.

Dante stands slowly, pulling me up with him. He retrieves his discarded shirt and drapes it around my shoulders before shrugging on his jacket to cover his own bare torso. We’re disheveled and exhausted, but united and unbroken.

Arm in arm, we walk toward the archway that leads out to the courtyard. Argonaut stands there waiting, tactfully silent about our absence.

Dante pauses, turning back for one last glance at the hall—at the fallen traitor’s blood staining ancient stone, at the painting that nearly sundered our alliance but instead brought us here. His arm tightens around my waist.

“Ready, Principe?” I ask softly.

He looks down at me, a slow smile curving his lips despite the grim future ahead. “With you by my side, always.”

We step forward into the night, toward whatever retaliation or reckoning awaits. Around us, Castelvecchio’s battlements are lit with the flashing lights of approaching vehicles and the nervous energy of a House regaining its footing. The war is not over—dark clouds of vengeance no doubt gather beyond these walls.

But Dante and I have weathered every storm so far and emerged stronger. I rest my head against his shoulder as we move across the courtyard, painted and bloodied like warriors crowned in chaos.

Let the Camorra come. Let the whole world try to tear us apart. We are Fox and Principe—cunning and royalty, heart and steel.

Together, we are unstoppable.

## Chapter 16 — Fox & Principe 2.0 (Dante POV)

I stand in the dim glow of emergency lanterns, surveying the aftermath of our coup. The medieval stone walls of Castelvecchio’s great hall — our so-called strategy chamber — are pocked with fresh bullet scars. Splintered chairs and spent casings litter the flagstones around me. The heavy 15th-century tapestry that hid the breaker panel hangs askew, yanked aside during the chaos. In the wavering light, I catch a glimpse of rich red embroidery depicting some ancient battle, now half-draped over an overturned table. Fitting. We’ve just won our own battle here tonight.

My side throbs where the bullet graze has torn open again. Warm blood seeps through my shirt, sticking the fabric to my skin. I grit my teeth against the pain and force myself upright, shoulders squared. I will not show weakness now. Not when the dust has barely settled from Silvio’s betrayal — and his death by my hand. Across the hall, two of my men haul Silvio’s lifeless body away. For a brief moment, I watch as his polished shoes drag across the stones. Silvio Moretti — my cousin, raised like a brother. I remember us as boys racing through these very halls, wooden swords in hand. That boy is long gone. In his place lay the traitor I had to cut down with our grandfather’s dagger. A dull ache tugs at my chest. There’s no time for grief. He chose his fate, and I chose mine.

A cluster of figures gathers at the edges of the hall: the remaining Moretti capos. These men answered Silvio’s summons to a “leadership council” tonight. Instead, they got a shootout and a front-row seat to our blood-soaked power struggle. I scan their faces in the low light — wary eyes, lined with age and anxiety. Most have served House Moretti since my father’s day. They’re seasoned survivors. Tonight they’ll have to decide whose side survival favors.

Slowly, I step over a shattered piece of marble — what used to be a corner of the long conference table — and position myself where Silvio stood earlier. The lantern’s glow stretches my shadow long across the stone floor. I see a few capos exchange glances. They’re noting the blood on my shirt, the way I favor my left side. Let them. A little blood can’t stop what we set in motion.

“Don Moretti,” one finally says, voice echoing in the silence. It’s Carlo Fiore, an iron-haired capo with a scar down his cheek from some bygone war. He was one of my father’s most trusted lieutenants. Carlo steps forward and drops to one knee amidst the debris. “My Principe.” His head bows low.

At his words — Don Moretti — a subtle shift ripples through the others. One by one, they kneel as well, following Carlo’s lead. Relief and triumph mix hot in my chest. They’re acknowledging me, swearing fealty without me even uttering a demand. But I keep my face impassive, chin raised, as if I expected nothing less.

I let the silence hang. The only sound is distant — somewhere beyond the thick castle walls, an engine revs as the last of the Camorra delegation flees into the Verona night. They came in numbers earlier, under a white flag of parley, only to back Silvio’s treachery. Now, humiliated, they retreat through the postern gate. Good. Let them run home to Naples with their tails between their legs. A storm is coming with them, but we’ll be ready.

“Stand,” I command quietly. My voice carries in the cavernous hall. The capos rise to their feet, some stiffly, some with renewed energy. I see resolve settling on their faces now, along with flickers of uncertainty about what comes next.

I lift my chin. “Silvio Moretti was a traitor.” My tone is cold, authoritative. “He conspired with the Camorra to sell out our family’s legacy. To sell us out.” My words echo, and a few men nod grimly — they suspected as much. In truth, some of them likely entertained Silvio’s claims to leadership after my father died and I was presumed gone. But no one speaks that now.

“He paid for his betrayal with his blood, right here.” I gesture to a dark stain on the stones where Silvio fell. Some capos glance at it then away. “House Moretti will remain under Moretti rule. My rule.” I sweep my gaze across them. “If any among you doubt or wish to challenge that, speak now.” The threat underlining my invitation is clear as cut glass.

No one moves. Carlo Fiore steps forward again as a spokesman. “Dante,” he says, quickly correcting himself, “Don Moretti, we are yours to command. We only regret we didn’t see Silvio’s treachery sooner.”

A rumble of assent from the others. A few offer their own muttered apologies, denouncing Silvio. The tension in my shoulders eases a fraction. They’re choosing the winning side, yes — but I also sense genuine loyalty to my father’s bloodline reasserting itself.

I give a single nod. “Loyalty will be rewarded. Treachery…” I don’t need to finish. My dagger still sits unsheathed at my belt, Silvio’s dried blood on the blade catching the lantern light. That says enough.

“Begin securing the fortress,” I continue, businesslike. “Silvio’s mercenaries and any Camorra stragglers might still lurk. Post doubled watches on every entry — especially the postern gate and the vault gallery. Work with Argonaut on an inventory of our remaining arms and assets by morning.” My voice doesn’t waver, even as a wave of dizziness threatens at the edge of my vision. I press a palm discreetly to my bleeding side and keep my stance strong.

The men chorus, “Yes, Don.” Already, two rush off to carry out the orders, relieved to have direction. Others linger, awaiting further instruction or dismissal.

I take a breath, trying not to let it hitch from the pain biting at me. “There will be a formal gathering at dawn to honor my cousin’s… passing.” I choose my words carefully. I won’t glorify Silvio with a hero’s funeral, but we’ll observe appearances for the lower ranks. “Spread the word quietly. And make sure the staff contain any mess.” I glance around at the shattered chamber. Blood, broken antiques, a bullet-riddled Caravaggio print hanging crooked on the wall — ironically not the Caravaggio everyone nearly died over, but a reproduction of another. The symbolism isn’t lost on me.

The capos nod. One of them, a stout man named Ruggiero, steps forward hesitantly. “Don, what of the Camorra? They won’t take this blow lightly.”

I meet his eyes. “We stay alert. They’ll retaliate, no question. But by eliminating Silvio, we’ve cut their inside line. They have no claim on what’s ours.” My free hand unconsciously closes into a fist. “If the Camorra Donna wants a war, we’ll bring it to her doorstep and finish this once and for all.”

My words are bold, and a few capos straighten, steeled by them. Inside, I know the truth — our resources are running thin after Silvio’s scheming, my ranks are wounded and whittled down. But I can’t show that doubt. Confidence is a shield as much as any bulletproof vest.

Satisfied, I dismiss them. “Go. We reconvene at first light.”

They file out swiftly, boots crunching on fallen debris. Carlo is last to turn away, offering me a tight smile of respect. I incline my head, then he too vanishes into the dark corridor beyond the hall.

As soon as they’re gone, I exhale and sag against the nearest upright surface — the carved oak frame of a toppled bookshelf. The movement sends a lance of pain through my right side and I stifle a groan. Dio, I’m lightheaded. The adrenaline that kept me upright is fading fast, leaving me with raw agony and a warm wetness spreading under my jacket.

“Stubborn man,” comes a soft, familiar voice at my elbow. Valentina.

I hadn’t even realized she was so close. In the flurry of asserting dominance, I lost sight of her for a few minutes. But she’s here — my fox, my partner. And she looks concerned.

Valentina steps into the lantern light, her dark hair tumbling loose around her shoulders. There’s a smudge of deep brown paint along her jawline and speckles of it on her neck. Seeing that nearly makes me smile despite everything. Only we would end up covered in Caravaggio pigments after a firefight and a frenzy of… well, reunion. The memory of our fevered coupling in the vault gallery flickers through my mind — her body against mine, the taste of oil paint and adrenaline on her lips, how desperately we needed each other in that moment of victory and relief. It feels like ages ago now, though perhaps only an hour has passed.

“You should have sat down immediately,” Valentina chides gently. She has that tone — half worry, half frustration. The tone she used back in the villa bathroom when she first tended this wound. A lifetime ago.

“I had to handle the capos first,” I reply, trying to shrug it off. But the movement makes me wince. “Appearances matter.”

She huffs, not impressed. “And what good is appearing strong if you collapse from blood loss right after?” Without waiting for permission, Valentina slips an arm around my waist, taking on some of my weight. I start to protest, instinct telling me not to lean on anyone, not even her — but one look at her face stops me. Her eyes burn with fierce care, daring me to object.

I sigh and let her guide me a few steps to where a high-backed chair lies on its side. Valentina rights it with one swift kick and lowers me into it. The world tilts for a second as I sink down. I bite back a groan; my pride has had enough bruising for one night.

Before I can blink, she’s kneeling in front of me, fingers already working at the buttons of my charcoal jacket, peeling it off my shoulders. The castle’s chill air whispers across my sweat-damp shirt. When her hands brush my torso, checking for the wound, I can’t suppress a shiver — partly from cold, partly from the electric awareness of her touch even now.

Her fingers still at my left side, where Silvio’s bullet grazed me earlier in the sanatorium and split open again tonight. The cloth there is soaked. She carefully lifts the hem of my shirt. We both grimace at the sight: a long gash along my ribcage, the stitches she put in days ago torn apart, skin angrily red and weeping blood.

“Diavolo, Dante,” Valentina whispers. “It’s worse than before.” Anguish pinches her features. She pushes the shirt further up, baring more of my abdomen. Her eyes flick over me, taking in other bruises and scrapes from the fight. A bruise blooming purple on my hip where I hit the marble table. A few superficial cuts from flying shrapnel. As if I’m some artwork she’s restoring, she assesses every blemish with focus and concern.

“It looks worse than it is,” I manage to say. The lie is thin; I’m feeling every bit of it right now.

She shoots me a look — one arched brow that says Don’t bullshit me. Then she stands abruptly and shucks off her tailored black blazer. She’s left in her silk camisole, and I see more evidence of our earlier passion: smeared paint in the hollow of her throat, a faint red mark above her collarbone that my mouth left. My pulse kicks up at the sight, pain be damned.

Valentina drapes her jacket over my shoulders like a makeshift blanket. “Stay here,” she orders, voice brooking no argument. “I’m getting the first aid kit. Argonaut left one by the door.”

I nod, leaning back in the chair, and watch her dart across the hall. She moves with limber grace even now, pausing to scoop up a dropped flashlight to light her way. My gaze lingers on her silhouette — the determination in her stride, the stained camisole clinging to her form. This woman. Hours ago, I feared I’d lost her forever to betrayal and lies. Now she’s here, fierce and tender, taking charge of patching me up a second time. It strikes me how fully our fortunes have reversed since that night at the villa.

A faint clatter echoes as she finds the metal first aid box. Meanwhile I breathe slowly, trying to center myself. The hall is quiet now — just the crackle of a single torch one of the capos lit on the wall and my own heartbeat thumping in my ears. The Camorra delegation is gone, my capos are rallying, Valentina is with me. It’s going to be alright. It has to be.

She returns, kit in hand. Setting the flashlight on the floor pointing up, she kneels between my legs and flips open the steel case. Instruments gleam: scissors, sutures, gauze, antiseptic. Her brow knits in concentration as she snaps on a pair of latex gloves.

“This might sting,” she warns softly, reaching to disinfect the wound. I chuckle despite myself.

“First time we did this, you didn’t warn me at all,” I say. I can’t help it — the quip slips out, carrying the weight of that memory. The villa bathroom, her hands on me, the charged air between us… and the explosion that followed.

Valentina’s hand pauses for a split second. Her dark eyes flick up to meet mine. There’s guilt there, and sorrow. “The first time we did this,” she echoes, voice low, “I was too busy pretending I wasn’t utterly terrified.” She resumes cleaning the gash, gently wiping away blood. “I’m sorry, Dante. For everything that happened after that night… I never wanted to hurt you.”

“I know,” I murmur. My gloved hand reaches down to cover hers, stilling the tremble I detect. “We’ve left that behind us.”

She turns her palm to squeeze mine, then goes back to work. I suck a breath through my teeth as she irrigates the wound with alcohol. It burns like hellfire. Instinctively, my free hand darts out and grips her thigh through her slacks, fingers curling. I don’t even realize I’ve done it until I feel the warmth of her flesh and the firmness of muscle beneath. Even in pain, my body responds to hers.

Valentina’s breath catches. I start to move my hand away, but she shifts closer, trapping my fingers between her thighs purposefully. Her own hand presses on my wound, not painfully but enough to keep me focused. “Keep holding on,” she whispers, misunderstanding — or perhaps understanding perfectly — why my hand is there. “Almost done cleaning.”

My throat goes dry. Maledizione, does she know what she’s doing to me? Probably. Even wounded, I’m acutely aware of how near her face is to my bare torso, how the heat of her body radiates through the thin clothes between us. She finishes swabbing the gash and carefully pats it dry.

“You’re doing great,” she soothes, as if I’m some skittish patient. It’s oddly endearing — the famous Valentina Rossi, razor-tongued art thief, cooing gentle encouragement.

I huff a weak laugh. “You’ve gotten… softer,” I tease, managing a grin through clenched teeth. “Where’s the woman who mocked me for wincing last time?”

Valentina smirks without looking up. “She realized the man she was mocking might actually mean something to her.” Now her eyes flick to mine, blazing with emotion. “That he might mean everything to her.”

My chest tightens — and not from pain this time. I slide my hand from her thigh up to her cheek, brushing a stray lock of hair back. “You mean everything to me too, my fox.” The words come out rough, but true. In the low light, I see tears glisten in her eyes for an instant before she blinks them away.

She clears her throat softly, turning back to the task. “Alright,” she says, voice steady again. “Time to stitch you up. And this time, try not to tear my beautiful work open again within 48 hours, hmm?”

I manage a lopsided grin. “No promises. Someone keeps luring me into… strenuous activities.”

Valentina’s cheeks flush a delightful rose. “Strenuous, huh?” Her lips quirk. “Well, you won’t be any use for that if you bleed out. So hold still, Principe.”

The sound of her calling me that — a gentle taunt wrapped in affection — makes me chuckle, then wince as the motion tugs my torn flesh. She threads the needle quickly. I brace myself.

She starts stitching, and agony flares anew with each poke and pull. I focus on her face to stay grounded: the slight furrow of her brow as she concentrates, the determined set of her mouth. She’s so close, I feel the feather-light brush of her breath on my bare skin. Her fingers, stained faintly with paint and Silvio’s blood and now my blood, work methodically.

To distract myself, I murmur, “Did I ever thank you for saving my life that night? The first time?”

Her eyes flick up briefly. “I think you had other things on your mind soon after.” A ghost of a smile passes her lips.

“True.” I breathe out slowly as she ties off one stitch and moves to the next. “Consider it a habit then — saving each other. You saved me in the villa. I saved you at the auction. We saved each other at the lake. Tonight… tonight we ended it together.”

Valentina nods, snipping the suture thread. “Together,” she echoes. “That’s how it has to be now. Fox and Principe… version 2.0, yes?” Her tone lifts, a hint of lightness, but I hear the undercurrent of sincerity.

I reach for her free hand and entwine our fingers. “2.0. Upgraded partnership, full cooperation,” I agree softly. “No more secrets.”

She finishes the final stitch and sits back on her heels, surveying her handiwork. My side is bandaged tightly, the bleeding staunched. Fresh bruises and exhaustion aside, I’ll live to fight another day. I couldn’t say that a few hours ago.

“Hold this here,” Valentina instructs, guiding my hand to press the bandage firmly. She strips off her gloves, tossing them aside, and begins packing up the kit. Her efficiency reminds me of a field medic after battle, trying not to think about the bodies left on the field. Indeed, her eyes keep flickering to the wrapped bundle propped against the far wall — the fused Caravaggio canvases, swaddled in linens and bubble wrap courtesy of Argonaut’s foresight. I know she’s itching to examine them properly, to see how much damage was done by the fire and the fusion of original to forgery.

“We’ll fix it,” I tell her, nodding toward the bundle. I slowly pull my bloodied shirt back down, grimacing. The motion is easier now with the wound closed again. “The painting. We’ll restore it. That’s your specialty, isn’t it?”

She lets out a breath, standing and arching her back to work out the kinks from crouching. “I… I hope so.” A crease of worry lines her brow. “I won’t know how bad it is until I can get proper supplies and light. The heat may have warped the canvas or blended the oils.” She crosses her arms, biting her lip. “I might have to separate them, one fiber at a time.”

Her voice is tinged with both trepidation and resolve — the artist in her awakened by a challenge. I push myself to sit up straighter in the chair. The pain is a dull throb now, manageable. “If anyone can do it, it’s you, Valentina.”

She gives me a grateful, if tight, smile. Carefully, she helps me to my feet. My head spins for a second, but I steady myself on her shoulder. The castle’s chill sneaks under my open jacket and sweat-soaked shirt, making me shudder. Valentina notices. She steps away briefly to grab a discarded wool blanket from a settee that survived the fight, and drapes it around my shoulders in place of her jacket. The scratchy wool carries the faint scent of dust and gunpowder.

“Thanks,” I murmur. She just nods and hovers close as we move toward the long table — or what’s left of it. One end is shattered by gunfire, but the other half is intact. We can lay things out there.

As we limp over, I catch sight of Argonaut standing discreetly at the hall’s entrance. The broad-shouldered fixer has been flitting in and out, coordinating cleanup and security without a word. He’s on the phone — likely a secure satellite line since our EMP knocked out local comms — issuing orders to someone. When his eyes meet mine, he gives a thumbs-up: the perimeter is secure for now. I return a nod of thanks, and he steps back out into the corridor to continue his work, pulling the heavy oak door closed to give us privacy.

Valentina and I reach the table. She gently eases me into a tall chair at its head, then starts gathering up the scattered paperwork strewn across it. These are Silvio’s documents — or rather, our documents now. There are ledgers, financial reports, lists of contacts, all hastily abandoned when the firefight began. Many pages lie singed or bullet-punctured. A laptop sits near the center, its screen black and dead from the EMP blast. That was likely Silvio’s, now just an expensive paperweight.

But amidst the mess, I spot something more familiar: a slim leather-bound notebook stamped with a foxglove flower motif. Valentina’s eyes follow mine and she sucks in a breath. “The Foxglove ledger,” she says quietly, pulling it from under a broken glass tumbler.

I take it from her carefully. It’s actually a cover for a USB drive — a stylish little case her mother designed, apparently. The drive itself is missing (with Silvio, or destroyed, who knows), but we have our own copy in hand. Back at the safe house, we decrypted much of it, enough to reveal the pact between our parents and hints of Camorra dealings. But I suspect it holds more secrets still.

Valentina settles into the chair beside me. The adrenaline of battle is gone, and I see fatigue in the slump of her shoulders. Still, her eyes gleam with purpose as she sifts through the papers, sorting anything useful from ruined scraps. I help as best I can with one hand pressed to my side.

For a few minutes, we work in companionable silence under the flicker of torchlight and lantern glow. Outside, the wind picks up, rattling the high windows of the fortress. Dawn isn’t far off; a thin grayness is just starting to seep into the night sky beyond the arrow-slit windows.

I break the silence. “We should consider our next move carefully. Silvio’s done, but the Camorra…” I trail off, watching Valentina’s face.

She nods, picking up a charred ledger book — Silvio’s accounts likely. “They lost face tonight. Badly. Donna… whoever she is… will strike back hard.” She hesitates, then adds softly, “If I were her, I’d exploit our weaknesses before we regain strength.”

I grimace; she’s not wrong. “What do you see as our weaknesses?” I ask, genuinely curious to hear her analysis.

Valentina sets aside the ledger and ticks points off on her fingers. “Resources, for one. Silvio gutted a lot of the family funds for his schemes and deals. We have assets, but many are literally in ruins.” Her eyes flick up toward the ceiling, alluding to the destroyed Lake Zurich villa. “Manpower is another. Many of your best fighters were lost in that bombing and the subsequent chaos. You have loyalty in these capos, but they’re not an army. Camorra’s got foot-soldiers in the hundreds, if not more.”

Each fact lands like a punch, but I appreciate her candor. “Go on.”

She bites her lip. “Public perception. The Moretti name has been quietly involved in… well, crime, but also legitimate enterprises. Thus far we’ve stayed out of the spotlight of law enforcement by cultivating an image of respectability — patron of the arts, philanthropists, that sort of thing. Silvio’s stunts — the explosion, the auction fire — risk drawing unwanted attention. If the police or Interpol connect those events to House Moretti, it’s another front to worry about.”

I rake a hand through my hair. She’s right on all counts. We’re vulnerable. “So we shore up what we can, quickly. Money, men, and our good name.” I lean forward, feeling a pang in my side but ignoring it. “The painting can help with at least two of those.”

Valentina tilts her head, considering. “Explain.”

“The Caravaggio,” I say, nodding toward the wrapped bundle. “It’s priceless, yeah? We could leverage it for cash or influence. But more importantly, it’s a symbol. Everyone from the underworld to the art world knows it was stolen. If House Moretti miraculously ‘recovers’ it and does something noble like donate it to a museum or church…” I trail off, watching a slow smile curl her lips.

“Our brand gets a halo,” she finishes, catching on. “Dante Moretti, art savior.” A soft laugh. “Headlines will laud you as a cultured hero. Any rumors that you were involved in the theft will be eclipsed by the narrative that you brought it back.”

I smile wryly. “Perhaps not hero, but at least not a villain. And the Camorra certainly won’t be able to publicly admit they had anything to do with it without indicting themselves. It keeps them in the shadows for a bit, playing defense.”

Valentina’s fingers drum thoughtfully on the table. “It does mean giving up the painting itself, potentially. That Caravaggio is… exquisite.” Her voice carries a note of personal loss; as an artist, letting go of such a masterpiece, even to a museum, must sting.

I cover her hand with mine. “I know. But we might not have to give up everything.” My mind is already spinning scenarios. “If we can separate the original from your forgery—”

“—we could keep one and donate the other,” she says, eyes widening.

“Exactly. Donate the forgery, if it’s convincing enough once restored, and quietly keep the original safe. Or vice versa, depending on damage. The world would assume the one on display is authentic. And we maintain possession of a priceless asset in secret.”

Valentina lets out a low whistle. “That’s playing with fire. If anyone discovered the swap—”

“They won’t,” I say confidently. “Not if the forger doing the restoration is a once-in-a-generation talent with intimate knowledge of both paintings.” I arch a brow at her.

She scoffs, blushing faintly at the compliment. “Flatterer. But you’re not wrong. If the copy can be saved, I can touch it up to pass muster, especially if parts of it remain fused with the original’s material. It’ll be tricky, but doable.”

I squeeze her hand. “Your mother didn’t train you for nothing.”

Mention of her mother brings a shadow over Valentina’s face for a moment. Sofia Rossi’s secret pact with my father set so much of this in motion. While that truth is out between us now, I know Valentina still struggles with it.

She changes the subject, gently sliding her hand out from under mine to rifle through the papers again. “We should also think about Foxglove. The ledger data.”

“Agreed.” I rub my temples with a free hand. Exhaustion tugs at me, but my mind refuses to rest yet. “We only scratched the surface of what’s in there. There might be intel on Camorra operations, or names of people on their payroll. Blackmail material we could use.”

Valentina nods, tucking a loose strand of hair behind her ear. “My mother compiled it precisely to have leverage. There could be corrupt officials, bank accounts, alliance treaties… if we parse it, we might find something useful quickly. Something to keep the Donna at bay or bargain with.”

“Or threaten her with,” I add darkly. If that Donna thinks she alone holds power now, she’s mistaken. But I’ll need ammunition to prove it. Foxglove might provide that.

“We’ll need a computer not fried by EMP to read it all,” Valentina muses, glancing at Silvio’s dead laptop. “Argonaut might have spares, or we bring in Lupo from the island with one.”

“There’s also Silvio’s partial copy he had,” I recall. “Maybe stored somewhere here. If we find it, we could see what he focused on.”

Valentina makes a face. “If he was smart, he kept it encrypted too. But worth searching his quarters for any clues come morning.”

I nod. Then I lean back and exhale. The events of the night swirl in my head: the infiltration, the firefight, Silvio’s sneer right before I drove the dagger home, the blaze of rage and justice that burned through me. And afterward, the way Valentina and I clung to each other in the dark, paint and dust on our skin, proving that we’re still alive and together.

I reach out and hook a finger under Valentina’s chin, gently lifting her face to look at me. “We did it,” I say quietly. “We took back my family home. Avenge my father. Saved yours. Got the painting. All of it.”

She smiles, a real smile that reaches her tired eyes. “We did. Together.”

I lower my forehead to hers, closing my eyes for a beat. Her warmth, her scent of rosewater and oil paint, envelops me. For this one heartbeat, I allow myself to just feel the triumph and the tenderness of having her by my side, unequivocally.

A knock at the doorjamb interrupts the moment. Valentina and I both turn, our closeness breaking. Argonaut stands there, looking apologetic for intruding. In his hand is a satellite phone, its antenna extended.

“Don Dante,” he says, voice low and gravelly. “Apologies, but there’s… a situation that needs your attention.”

My muscles tense at once. Valentina’s hand finds mine beneath the table. “What is it?” I ask.

Argonaut steps inside and shuts the door behind him. “We’ve received an encrypted transmission. High-level cipher, one we’ve seen before.” He places the sat phone and a small connected data pad on the table in front of us. The screen of the pad is blinking with a decoded message in plain text. “It’s from Naples. From her.”

My eyes fix on the device. Valentina inhales sharply beside me. Her. The Camorra Donna. I exchange a glance with Valentina, then pick up the pad, drawing it into the lantern light to read.

The message is brief and pointed:

House Moretti,

Your internal feud does not concern the Syndicate, except that it has cost us greatly. We have matters to discuss regarding restitution and the future.

Midnight, two days from now. Glasshouse ruins, Monte Cassino.

Arrive ready to negotiate.

Decline, and war is coming — to your doors, your businesses, your loved ones. I will have what is owed.

Parley… or else.

Below the text is an elegant digital signature: Donna Elisa Marino.

“Elisa Marino,” Valentina murmurs, reading over my shoulder. “So that’s her name.”

My jaw tightens as I reread the threat, especially the part about “loved ones.” A spike of protective anger flares in my gut. My thumb brushes over the screen. The glasshouse ruins at Monte Cassino — a location between Naples and here, more or less neutral ground but historically scarred from WWII bombings. An odd, eerie choice, but symbolically rich. She wants a meeting on the bones of an old war, to potentially start a new one.

Argonaut clears his throat. “We can send word that you need more time, or refuse outright—”

“No,” I say immediately, my voice hard. “If we refuse, she’ll make good on that threat. We’re not ready to face an all-out assault from Naples. Not yet.” And the way she phrased it — I have to consider it might not be a bluff. She could come after our legitimate interests or even try to target people under our protection. Alfonso is safe for now, but for how long? And what about our allies?

Valentina’s grip on my hand has turned vice-like. I glance at her. She looks calm, but I know her well enough now to sense the fear under the surface. Fear for me, for her father, for us.

“She’s giving us two days,” Valentina says softly. Her eyes search mine. “That’s not much… but it’s something. We can prepare, gather intel, set the terms as best we can.”

I nod. “We’ll use every hour. And we’ll go in with our eyes open.” I raise the pad slightly. Parley… or else. The words glare up at me like a dare.

Argonaut shifts. “Do you want me to send a confirmation response, Don?”

I square my shoulders, the pain in my side forgotten for the moment. “Yes. Tell her we accept the parley. Monte Cassino, midnight as specified.” My voice drops into a steely tone. “And make it clear we’re not afraid of her.”

He inclines his head and takes back the pad. “Understood.” In moments, he’s keyed in a secure reply and the message is away. Argonaut then hesitates. “Also… congratulations, Dante. Truly.”

I look up, surprised by the use of my first name. The normally stoic Argonaut gives a faint grin. “Emilio would be proud. And… I am too. We all are.”

Warmth swells in my chest. I dip my head in thanks, and with that, Argonaut exits to carry on the endless duties that await.

The door closes, leaving Valentina and me alone once more in the flickering lantern glow. A long moment of quiet stretches between us as we process what just happened.

She’s the first to break it. “Two days,” she repeats under her breath. “Two days until we stand off with a woman who likely wants us dead or under her heel.” She tries to make it sound wry, but I hear the tremor in her voice.

I take her by the shoulders gently, turning her to face me. “Hey.” I brush a thumb over her cheek, wiping away a speck of dried paint there. “We’ve come through worse.”

She leans into my palm. “Have we? We barely survived the Camorra’s last move.”

“We’ll survive the next too. And the one after.” I speak with confidence I half-feel, because she needs to hear it. Because I need to hear it. “She thinks we’re weak. We’ll prove her wrong.”

Valentina closes her eyes briefly, then opens them with new steel. “Together,” she says. It’s both a question and a promise.

“Together,” I affirm. I gently draw her into my arms, careful of my side. She wraps around me, head against my chest, and I rest my chin atop her crown of dark hair. We hold each other amid the wreckage of battle, drawing strength.

In two days, war or peace will be decided at a negotiating table in a ruined glasshouse. The Camorra Donna has made her move. Now it’s our turn.

For tonight, though, we stand in the dawn’s fragile light, battered but unbroken. Fox and Principe, united and reborn. Ready to face whatever comes next — parley… or else.

## Chapter 17 — Parley at Monte Cassino (Dante POV)

Broken glass glitters under the dying sun as I step through the ruined glasshouse atop Monte Cassino. Shards crunch beneath my leather soles with each deliberate stride. Evening light filters in orange shafts through the skeletal ribs of the long-abandoned conservatory, catching dust motes and the distant silhouette of the ancient abbey. The air is thin up here on the mountain—cool for summer—and carries the faint toll of vespers bells from the monastery beyond. It would almost be peaceful, if not for the tension coiled in my gut.

Valentina walks at my side, matching my pace. I sense her presence like a steady pulse—silent, alert, her hand near the concealed pistol at her hip. Just hours ago she helped bind the bandage around my ribs; now every breath reminds me of that wound’s throb beneath my suit. I square my shoulders against the pain. I cannot afford to show weakness. Not here.

Ahead, at the heart of the shattered glasshouse, a few rusted iron chairs and a table have been arranged on the cracked mosaic floor—a pretense of civility amid decay. A parley, nominally. In truth, it’s a battlefield without guns drawn. Yet.

A crunch of gravel beyond the blown-out doorway announces the arrival of our guest. Donna Elisa Marino appears flanked by four of her Camorra guards. They fan out with disciplined precision, submachine guns slung but visible—a show of force. The Donna herself glides forward, draped in a charcoal wool coat despite the mild evening. She is in her forties, hair iron-gray and tightly coiled in a chignon, her posture erect as a queen’s. Dark sunglasses obscure her eyes even in the dimming light. Two of her men hold back by the entrance, securing her exit route. The other two shadow her to the table.

Valentina and I share a quick sidelong look. In her brown eyes I catch the steel of determination; neither of us has forgotten that Camorra snipers could be nesting out there beyond these glass walls. We’ve taken our own precautions—Lupo is out of sight on overwatch, and Argonaut’s men ring the perimeter, hidden. I incline my head a fraction, and Valentina subtly shifts, distributing her weight. Ready.

Donna Elisa’s lips curl faintly as she approaches, assessing us. Haughty is the word that strikes me. She hasn’t removed her shades; I can see my own reflection in them as she finally stops on the other side of the table.

“Don Moretti,” she says, voice smooth and low. She doesn’t offer a hand. Neither do I.

“Donna Marino.” I incline my head in return. “Thank you for coming.”

She casts a slow glance around the ruins. “A scenic choice for a meeting. Historic ground.” Her Italian accent is Napolitano, vowels clipped. “Monte Cassino has seen many battaglie… and funerals.”

A reminder of how many died here in war. An unsubtle threat wrapped in small talk. I keep my expression neutral. “I thought it appropriate. After all, we’re here to prevent more funerals—if possible.”

One of her bodyguards pulls out a chair for her. She sits with regal poise. Valentina and I remain standing for a beat, intentionally denying her any perceived advantage. Only when I’m satisfied she’s waiting expectantly do I nod and take my seat opposite. Valentina stays just behind my right shoulder, standing guard—my partner, not some docile bride-to-be to be ordered aside. I want Elisa Marino to see that clearly.

The Donna’s gaze flicks to Valentina. “Signorina Rossi,” she says with a polite baring of teeth. “Or do you prefer Moretti now? I hear congratulations are in order on the engagement.”

Valentina’s chin lifts. “Rossi is fine, thank you,” she replies evenly. “And the congratulations are premature. We haven’t set a date.” There’s an edge to Val’s tone at premature. We both know Elisa is prodding at the circumstances of our union.

“Of course,” Elisa murmurs. She removes her sunglasses at last, folding them. Her eyes are sharp hazel, taking Valentina’s measure openly. “Such a pretty arrangement it was—your mother’s idea, wasn’t it? A binding of families for mutual…benefit.”

My teeth clench. Straight to it, then. She’s probing the seams of our alliance, looking for fray. Valentina’s mother Sofia brokered that damned pact decades ago; Elisa wants to remind us who pulled the strings. Before I can respond, Valentina steps forward and rests a hand lightly on my shoulder.

“An arrangement that served its purpose,” Valentina says coolly. “But Dante and I are together now by choice, not by anyone’s design. That’s all you need to know about our engagement.” Her fingers give my shoulder a brief, reassuring squeeze. A united front.

Donna Elisa’s brows rise just a hair. “Choice…how modern.” She steeples her manicured fingers on the table. “Yet the fact remains: without Camorra patronage, House Moretti would have fallen years ago. My predecessors ensured your father’s throne remained secure from outside threats. We invested in your family. And then Silvio Moretti repaid that protection with treachery.” She tuts softly. “Such a mess.”

It’s an effort not to spit at the mention of Silvio. “A mess I have now cleaned up,” I say, voice low. “Silvio is dead by my hand. House Moretti is under my control once more. The question here is whether we continue spilling blood between our organizations, Donna, or find a profitable understanding.”

She regards me for a long moment. In the silence, a breeze whistles through jagged panes overhead. Far off, a raven caws over the valley.

“You speak of profit and understanding,” she says at last. “Yet you executed your own cousin in front of my envoys. Humiliated me and my Camorristi at Castelvecchio. You took back your throne with no consultation, no tribute to Naples. And now you call me here expecting—what? That I’ll simply bless your coup?” Her eyes flash. “You were ours to groom, Dante. A prince only by our favor. Or did you forget the debt your House owes?”

My pulse kicks hot, but I force a tight smile. “I owe nothing for Silvio’s schemes. He violated the pact first, conspiring with you to abduct Valentina’s father and overthrow me. Camorra involvement was never supposed to go that far.”

Donna Elisa shrugs one shoulder, feigning indifference. “Silvio reached out for assistance maintaining order. We obliged, in memory of old alliances. If he exceeded his mandate, that’s regrettable.” The corner of her mouth twitches in a half-smirk. “But you did kill him. Debt paid, if you like.”

A muscle in my jaw ticks. So that’s her game—paint me as the loose cannon who broke ties by shedding Moretti blood, absolving her hand in it. She wants me unstable, illegitimate. I feel Valentina’s hand slide from my shoulder as she moves to my side. Steady, Dante.

I flatten my palms on the dusty table. “Silvio was a traitor. I removed him, and with that done, House Moretti can finally resume a respectful relationship with your organization… as equals.” I let the last words hang.

One of Elisa’s guards shifts his weight. The Donna’s eyes narrow slightly. “Equals,” she repeats. “You propose that the Camorra and the Moretti family stand on equal footing?” A low chuckle. “Ragazzo, you have three dozen men left to your name and a heap of ashes where your villa stood. Your coffers are near empty after your dear cousin’s spending. And you think to dictate terms to me?”

Heat flares in my chest at her condescension. Ragazzo—boy. Next to me, I hear Valentina inhale sharply. I raise a hand slightly to keep her from leaping in. “I’m rebuilding,” I say evenly. “Money can be regained. Allies can be recruited. Naples doesn’t want a war with Verona if it can be avoided. Too costly on both sides. I’m offering a chance to avoid that quagmire.”

Elisa leans forward, her face sliding from shadow into a band of orangey light. “Is that what you think this is? A courtesy call to avoid war?” She shakes her head slowly. “War is already at your doorstep, Don Moretti. The moment you struck down Silvio, you declared one. My soldiers are poised to strike at the first signal. Why shouldn’t I simply snuff out the last of the Morettis and take all your territory as spoils?”

Despite the threat, a small smile touches my lips. This exact scenario, I’ve prepared for. “Because if you could do that easily, I suspect you’d have tried already instead of meeting me here.” I gesture loosely around us. “Perhaps you’re not as confident in the odds as you claim. Perhaps…you know we have resources you don’t.”

She drums her fingers, impatience creeping into the gesture. “Do enlighten me.”

I lean back slightly in the rickety chair, ignoring a stab of pain in my side. “Two resources, primarily. One: a certain Caravaggio.” I pause to gauge her reaction. “Silvio’s little escapade at Lake Como? I now have the original Sacrifice of Isaac painting in my possession—albeit somewhat fire-damaged. The buyers you courted for it must be very disappointed.”

Donna Elisa’s lips thin. Her silence is telling—she was involved in that black-market auction, then. Likely fronting Silvio money or connections to sell the stolen masterpiece.

I continue, “That painting is a national treasure. Your fingerprints on its theft would bring down a hell of legal trouble, not to mention the wrath of certain art-loving… clientele.” I tilt my head. “I’m sure you promised delivery to someone dangerous. How displeased will they be if they learn you lost it?”

Elisa’s jaw sets, a flicker of irritation breaking through. “You intend to threaten me with a painting, Moretti? I have larger concerns.”

“Oh, the Caravaggio’s just the appetizer,” I say lightly. “I’ll happily return it to its rightful owners in exchange for peace. Consider it a gesture of good faith to both the public and to you—keeping your name clean. But the main course is something far juicier.”

I slide a quick glance to Valentina. It’s time.

Without a word, Valentina steps forward and produces a thin black tablet from inside her blazer. She sets it on the table between us. The screen awakens with a touch of her fingertip—a list of documents glows into being. Foxglove is emblazoned as the folder title. My heart pounds with anticipation as we prepare to lay our ace on the table.

Donna Elisa eyes the tablet warily, then looks up at Valentina. “And what is this, tesoro?” she asks, voice dripping with patronizing charm. “Some forgery you whipped up? Don’t waste my time.”

Valentina’s answering smile is razor-sharp. “On the contrary,” she says. “For once, forgery is the one skill I didn’t need. We call this the Foxglove Dossier. Think of it as a slow-acting poison for anyone caught in its grasp.” She taps the screen, scrolling. “Bank ledgers, offshore account numbers…records of every wire transfer and cash drop from Naples to the north over the past twenty years. Payoffs, protection fees, bribes to city officials. Shall I continue?”

Elisa’s face darkens. She tries to hide it, but I see the tension ripple across her brow. “Ridiculous. You have nothing of the sort.”

“Oh, but we do.” Valentina swipes again. Rows of figures and names reflect in Elisa’s eyes. I catch glimpses upside-down: coded transactions, dates. We obtained them only days ago, decrypted from my late father’s hidden files and cross-referenced with Sofia Rossi’s notes. Foxglove—a codename my mother-in-law-to-be had scribbled in her secret ledger, as it turns out, containing her insurance policy on the Camorra. I can almost admire Sofia’s foresight, leaving us this ammo, even if her motives were twisted.

Valentina’s voice never wavers. “Let me draw your attention here…” She enlarges a scanned image of a parchment letter. At the bottom, stamped in red wax, is a distinctive sigil: a coiled viper encircling a foxglove flower. The imprint of the Camorra Naples Donna’s signet ring. Elisa’s signet. “That seal is unique to you, Donna Marino. Unforgeable and indisputable.”

Elisa’s eyes widen ever so slightly. She recognizes it—how could she not, when she likely pressed that wax herself? I see her throat constrict as she swallows. Good.

“Where did you get that?” she demands, voice dropping into a register of barely controlled anger. She reaches for the tablet but Valentina smoothly slides it back out of reach.

“That’s not relevant,” Valentina replies. “What matters is, if anything happens to Dante or me, copies of all of this will be sent to the Italian authorities, Interpol… and perhaps even leaked to certain rival organizations in Naples. Evidence of your personal involvement in high crimes and betrayals. Your own signature on documents authorizing the Moretti takeover, among other things. You’d be finished, Elisa. By bullet or by prison cell, take your pick.”

The Donna’s nostrils flare as she realizes we’ve boxed her in. Her guards shift uneasily, awaiting her cue. For a long moment, the only sound is the wind stirring the weeds that have overtaken the far end of the greenhouse ruins.

I break the silence, folding my hands on the table. “So, as you see, war between us won’t end well for either side. You might manage to kill me, maybe even seize Verona in the short term, but the moment I’m gone, Foxglove is primed to go public. And House Moretti’s remaining loyalists will see to it that Naples burns with us.”

Elisa glares daggers at me. I hold her gaze. This is the razor’s edge—where she must decide if her pride is worth her life.

“You smug little bastardo,” she hisses finally. “Think you can blackmail me like some corrupt senator?”

“I think,” I answer calmly, “that I’m offering you a way out. Accept a new accord with House Moretti. Leave us be—no reprisals, no more interference in our territory. In return, we keep your secrets… and perhaps we all prosper quietly.” My voice hardens. “Or refuse, and we all go down in flames. Your choice, Donna.”

Her hands slowly curl into fists atop the table. I can almost feel the fury radiating off her. Valentina steps back to stand beside me, the tablet tucked under her arm now. We’ve laid our cards out; the next move is hers.

Elisa’s gaze flicks between us—the united front she failed to split. I sense her weighing options, parsing if Foxglove could be a bluff. But the seal was real. She knows. She’s cornered.

Seconds tick by. My muscles are taut, ready for anything. A stray beam of sunlight refracts through a dangling shard above, casting fractured patterns across Elisa’s face. At last, she draws in a long breath through her nose and lets it out. “Fine,” she practically spits. “You want a truce? Terms?”

Relief and triumph war beneath my sternum. But I keep my face neutral. “Mutual non-interference pact. House Moretti remains sovereign in its territories, under my leadership. We’ll pay a nominal tithe to the Camorra for five years—call it repayment of past debts—after which we consider all obligations fulfilled on both sides.” The tithe is a carrot I rehearsed; a way for her to save face and claim something for her troubles.

Donna Elisa’s lips purse. She clearly expected nothing, so the concession surprises her. “Tithe,” she repeats. “And the painting, as you said—returned to Italy.”

“Yes. We’ll handle that through proper channels.” My eyes narrow. “In return, you will formally recognize me as Don of Verona with no further challenges. And you will never again meddle in Moretti family affairs. Agreed?”

Elisa’s tongue touches her cheek. “You presume I can be trusted to keep such a promise.”

“Of course not,” Valentina interjects dryly. “Which is why we’ll keep Foxglove as insurance, indefinitely. If you so much as toe the line, Donna, your secrets go live. So I suggest you do stick to it.”

A dangerous flicker crosses Elisa’s eyes at Valentina’s tone. For a heartbeat I fear she might lash out. But then, unexpectedly, the Camorra boss gives a short, bitter laugh. “Perhaps I underestimated you, both of you.” She stands abruptly, pushing the chair back with a screech. Her guards tense and step closer. Instantly, I rise as well, and Valentina’s hand drops near her sidearm.

Elisa looks between us with something almost like reluctant respect etched into her hard features. “A painter’s daughter outplays me with ledger sheets, and a wounded princeling holds a dagger to my throat with my own signature.” She shakes her head. “It seems the era of Fox and Principe may be dawning after all.”

Valentina’s breath catches at that phrase. Fox and Principe… the moniker sounds strangely apt, though hearing it from Elisa’s lips feels like a curse. I step partially in front of Val, protective, even as the Donna continues speaking.

“Elisio!” she barks suddenly to one of her men by the doorway. “Bring me the case.”

One of the distant guards hustles out to a parked car and returns with a briefcase. Elisa takes it and flips it open on the table. Inside is a document, thick parchment with several signatures and stamps—I glimpse Silvio’s name scrawled on one line. I stiffen; it looks like some formal agreement. Possibly the original Camorra-Moretti pact from years ago, updated with Silvio’s coup.

Elisa produces a pen, then holds both out to me. “You want terms? We sign now,” she declares. “Here is Silvio’s signed accord ceding partial control of Moretti assets to the Camorra. Obviously void now. We will amend it.” Her lips twist. “And I will sign to acknowledge your terms. But know this, Dante Moretti—if you betray me on our peace, no ledger will save you from what comes next.”

“Understood,” I reply quietly. She’s offering to put it in writing—a bit surprising, but likely she thinks a signed treaty might restrain me as much as her. Or more cynically, she’s stalling or planning something…

Valentina steps up to peer at the document. “We’ll add a clause about repercussions if harm comes to either of us or our family—ensuring Foxglove’s use is justified.”

Elisa scoffs. “As if a piece of paper will stop bullets. But write what you will.”

I catch the pen from Elisa’s hand, my side protesting the quick motion. I grit my teeth and begin scribbling our agreed conditions on a blank area beneath the old text. My Italian is precise, formal. Valentina leans in, offering murmured suggestions—phrasing to ensure no loopholes. Elisa watches like a hawk, arms folded, one finger tapping impatiently.

Just as I finish the last line, a sudden glint flashes in the corner of my vision. My head jerks up. Beyond Elisa, high on a distant ruined arch of the conservatory, something reflected the sun—like glass on metal. Scope—!

Before I can react, Valentina lunges forward. “Dante, down!” she cries. In the same split-second, a thunderous crack splits the air. The world shatters.

Pain and shock explode as a heavy weight slams into me from the side. I’m thrown to the ground, glass shards biting into my palms. My ears ring from the gunshot. Dust and shattered fragments rain down. For a heart-stopping moment, I think I’ve been hit—I can’t breathe. But it’s not my blood.

Lupo’s broad back is suddenly above me, his body rigid. He’d barreled out of nowhere to tackle me. Now a dark red bloom spreads across his shoulder, and he collapses onto me with a grunt of pain.

“Sniper!” one of our men hollers from outside. Chaos erupts. Valentina screams my name as Lupo’s weight goes slack against me. I struggle to grip him, adrenaline roaring in my ears. Over Lupo’s shoulder I see Donna Elisa recoil, eyes wide in astonishment—and triumph. She planned this!

Another shot rings out—smaller caliber, from behind us. Return fire. Broken glass rains like deadly confetti. Elisa’s guards shout, scrambling. Valentina has her gun drawn, her face contorted in fury as she aims wildly upward, searching for a target.

My pulse pounds, vision tunneling. Lupo’s blood soaks hot through my shirt. God, no. Not Lupo.

He gasps raggedly, trying to speak, but only blood flecks his lips. I drag in a breath, ignoring the agony in my rib. With a raw shout, I twist, laying Lupo down behind the cover of the fallen table, and rise to a knee. My pistol is in my hand—when did I draw it?

The sniper’s shot came from the direction of the abbey’s ruins behind the glasshouse. Our counter-sniper—Argonaut, by the sound of that rifle pop—must have neutralized the threat, because no further bullets come whizzing. Instead, one of Elisa’s nearer guards seizes the opportunity and raises his weapon toward me, bellowing, “Bastardo—!”

I fire first. Two shots to the chest—pop, pop—and he staggers back, crashing through a vine-tangled metal trellis.

“Enough!” Elisa shrieks, ducking behind one of her remaining men. “Hold your fire!”

Her order seems to freeze everyone in a tableau of pandemonium. Dust, blood, and the echo of gunfire hang in the air. One of my men yells from outside, “Sniper down! We got him!”

My ears ring in the sudden lull. I scramble over to Lupo, pressing my hand hard against the bullet wound high on his chest near the shoulder. Blood seeps through my fingers. He coughs, cursing under his breath in pain.

“Lupo, hold on,” I rasp. My throat is tight. He saved my life—my damn foolish life—and he’s the one bleeding out. “Don’t you dare die on me, Wolf.”

He grimaces, managing a bloody smirk. “J-just… a flesh wound, capo,” he wheezes, even as he grimaces.

Valentina is at my side in an instant, tearing a strip from her blouse to press over the wound. Her hands are shaking but her eyes burn with focused anger. She won’t let him die either.

Donna Elisa slowly straightens, her guard’s pistol still trained loosely in our direction. Two of her men are down now—one by my hand, one possibly by Argonaut’s sniper fire. She has two left, and they’re outnumbered as my own hidden security team finally emerges from the periphery, guns raised.

The Donna lifts her chin, a wild mix of rage and fear in her eyes. This was her treachery: even as she pretended to negotiate, she had a sniper ready to execute me. And Lupo thwarted it at the cost of his own blood. My vision goes red at the edges with fury.

I rise to my feet, leaving Lupo to Valentina’s care for a breath. My pistol is steady in my hand, trained right between Elisa’s eyes. “You bitch,” I spit, voice deadly soft. “You violated parley. You came here under truce and tried to take me out.”

Her remaining guards move as if to step in front of her, but she holds out an arm to stop them. To her credit, Donna Elisa meets my gaze without flinching, though her face is ashen. “And what now, Don Moretti?” she snaps bitterly. “You’re still alive. Finish it. Shoot me, if you think it will end this.”

My finger twitches on the trigger. I want to. God, I want to end her right here for everything—my father’s legacy twisted, my friend bleeding at my feet, Valentina nearly widowed before she’s a bride.

But I catch Valentina’s voice behind me, urgent and low: “Dante… remember why we’re here.”

I do remember. War or peace. If I kill Elisa Marino now, all-out war ignites. The Camorra will not rest until we’re annihilated. Everything we fought for will burn.

I force air into my lungs and raise my voice. “Your sniper is dead. Your men are surrounded. I could kill you this instant.” She knows it. The muzzle of my gun trembles just a hair. “But then your lieutenants in Naples would come seeking vendetta. And Foxglove would hit the news by morning. Nobody wins.”

Her jaw tightens. There’s a beat of silence, then the abbey bells toll loudly over the valley—one, two, three… The sound is haunting among the ruins. All of us remain frozen, listening to the clangor echo against ancient stones.

As the final bell fades, I see some fight drain out of Elisa. Shoulders sagging a notch, she flicks her wrist, signaling her last two guards to lower their weapons. “No one wins,” she echoes my words quietly, bitterness lacing every syllable. “Your terms stand, Moretti. I’ll…sign whatever you want.”

She steps forward slowly, hands visible—one holding that damned pen still. Her gaze goes to the parchment on the ground, miraculously unstained by blood. “May I?” she asks.

I nod curtly, not yet lowering my gun. Valentina comes to my side, supporting me with a light touch at my elbow. I’m suddenly aware of a hot wetness trickling under my own jacket—my abrupt movements have torn my half-healed rib wound open again. A wave of dizziness hits, but I grit through it.

Donna Elisa crouches and retrieves the fallen treaty. With controlled movements, she scribbles her signature beneath my scrawled addendums, next to Silvio’s crossed-out name. It is done.

“It’s done,” she says aloud, echoing my thought. Her voice sounds distant, hollow. She straightens and caps the pen, then tosses the document onto the table in front of me. “A pact written in blood and cowardice. Congratulations, Don Moretti. You have your peace.”

I finally lower my weapon, though I keep it in hand. A shaky exhale leaves me, the adrenaline tapering. My mind already shifts to Lupo—he needs evacuation now. And Valentina—her face is smeared with Lupo’s blood as she cradles his head, but she’s looking at me, concern blazing through her composure.

“This could have gone differently,” I say quietly to Elisa, an undercurrent of regret in my tone. “We didn’t have to spill more blood.”

“No,” she agrees, eyes on Lupo’s prone form and the red-soaked cloth Val presses to his wound. “But what’s done is done. I’ll deal with my dead, and you yours.”

I nod stiffly. Enough. “Take your men and go, Donna Elisa. Our business is concluded. Pray I don’t see you again.”

She meets my eyes one last time. “Likewise.” There is a strange sheen there—defeat, humiliation, and a promise of some distant reckoning. But for now, she turns on her heel and walks away. Her surviving guards close ranks, half-dragging their wounded comrade with them. I watch until they disappear past the shattered doorway into dusk.

The moment they’re gone, I drop to my knees beside Lupo. He’s still conscious, barely. Argonaut and two of our men rush in from the perimeter, a med kit already out.

Valentina presses my hand to Lupo’s shoulder, adding her strength to stanch the bleeding. Blood seeps warm through both our fingers. “We’ve got you, Lupo,” she whispers to him fiercely. “Stay with us. The medevac’s coming.”

He winces a grin. “T-too…dramatic…for me,” he rasps. “Thought my alpine driving was the only thrill—ah!” He breaks off as pain surges.

“Don’t talk,” I order, though my voice wavers. “Save your strength, amico.”

Sirens wail in the distance—Argonaut must have called local emergency services under one of our cover IDs. Risky, but we’ll manage the aftermath. Right now, nothing matters except keeping this loyal man alive.

Valentina’s free hand finds mine, clasping tightly as we hold pressure. Her palm is sticky with Lupo’s blood, but I cling to it as a lifeline. She glances up at me; tears brim in her lashes but don’t fall. We’re both shaking from the adrenaline comedown and the shock of how close we came to disaster.

Our eyes meet, and in her gaze I see everything: relief that I’m alive, horror at what nearly happened, fury at Elisa’s betrayal, and gratitude—immeasurable gratitude—that Lupo stepped in. My chest constricts. By all rights I should be lying there full of lead, not him.

I swallow hard, nodding once to Valentina, sharing that unspoken understanding. We did it. At terrible cost, but we did it. The Camorra has been headed off—for now—and our House Moretti stands, bloodied but unbroken.

As the whine of an approaching ambulance grows louder up the winding mountain road, I allow myself a single shaky exhale of relief. I squeeze Valentina’s hand, feeling the racing of her pulse matching mine.

“È finita,” I whisper. It’s over.

She manages a small smile through the tears in her eyes. “No, amore,” she whispers back so only I can hear, her voice fierce and tender at once. “It’s just the beginning.”

And as I kneel in the shattered glass with my love by my side and our loyal wolf in our arms, I know she’s right.

## Chapter 18 — Empire Forged (Finale / Epilogue)

Dante

Two weeks later, I stand on the balcony of an imposing stone villa in the hills above Verona, watching dawn break golden over our hard-won empire. In my hands I hold a signed agreement—faded parchment bearing both my signature and Donna Elisa Marino’s. The ink is dry; the blood spilled to secure it, long since washed away.

Camorra and Moretti have peace. Real peace, forged in the crucible of Monte Cassino’s ruins and sealed in writing. I run a thumb over the bold strokes of Elisa’s signature. Who would have imagined? House Moretti’s sovereignty, acknowledged at last.

I fold the document carefully and slide it into a leather portfolio. It will be archived alongside our family’s most critical records—a testament to the turning point where our dynasty’s future veered away from destruction.

Behind me, in the half-renovated great room of what will soon be the new Villa Moretti, construction workers start their day. Hammers ring against timber; saws whine through stone. The old villa—my childhood home—was reduced to charred rubble over a month ago during Silvio’s purge. Now its skeleton has been cleared, and from its foundations a grander estate will rise. I’m ensuring of that personally.

“Careful with that arch!” Argonaut’s voice echoes from below as he supervises a pair of builders maneuvering a carved lintel. Ever the quartermaster, he’s been overseeing the reconstruction crew like a hawk—at my request. I want the new villa reinforced, modernized with top security, yet retaining the historic Moretti aesthetic. Argonaut’s the man for such a balance.

Leaning on the balcony’s half-built balustrade, I take a slow breath. Dust from fresh-cut limestone and the scent of wet mortar hang in the morning air. The melody of progress. Each strike of a hammer drives home the reality: we’re rebuilding everything.

My side twinges as I shift—beneath my dress shirt a line of fresh stitches gleams where my reopened wound was properly sutured. It’s healing well now, physically at least. The nightmares of that sniper’s crack and Lupo’s fall wake me some nights, but those too are fading with time. Because we won.

Down in the courtyard, a black town car pulls in. Out steps Dr. Colombo—Lupo’s physician—and Lupo himself, moving gingerly with his arm in a sling. I grin, relief flooding me for the hundredth time. He insisted on checking out of the clinic early to be here for the festivities this week, grumbling that a bullet to the shoulder wouldn’t bench him for long. The man’s as tough as the mountain wolf he’s named for.

I wave down at them. Lupo notices and gives a lopsided salute, a broad smile splitting his rugged face. Even from here I can hear him holler up, “The prince surveying his castle, eh?”

I chuckle. “Just making sure they build my quarters bulletproof!” I call back. He barks a laugh, then winces and rubs his shoulder as the doctor scolds him gently and leads him inside out of view.

My friend—more than just a driver or hired gun now—will be fine. Knowing that eases a weight on my heart. His sacrifice cemented for me what kind of loyalty our house still fosters. I intend to reward that loyalty tenfold in the new era of House Moretti. Lupo already has a promotion waiting as soon as he can shoot straight again.

“Talking to yourself up there, Principe?” a warm voice teases from behind me.

I turn to see Valentina stepping through the half-framed balcony doorway, sunlight catching in her dark hair. She’s dressed casually in slim jeans and one of my button-down shirts rolled at her wrists; even so, she takes my breath away. Every time. My cunning fox. She’s balancing a wooden tray with two mugs and a plate of biscotti.

“Bribing the foreman with coffee, are we?” I reply, smiling.

She hands me a mug and joins me at the balustrade, surveying the worksite below. “Bribery, persuasion… call it what you like. I needed Argonaut in a good mood to finalize the layout for the studio wing.” There’s a playful glint in her eye.

“Ah, the studio.” I slip an arm around her waist. “Tell me again how I allowed myself to be convinced to add an entire artist’s studio to a mafia don’s villa?”

Valentina swats my chest lightly. “This mafia don happens to be marrying a master painter, in case you forgot. A girl needs her space to create. And you need a proper gallery for that Caravaggio once it’s restored.”

Her tone is airy but I catch the undercurrent of pride. She’s nearly finished the restoration; I’ve heard the excitement in her voice each night when she updates me. Last night she swore she’d have a surprise to reveal today.

I give her a gentle squeeze. “How could I forget? Our home won’t be complete without a Rossi original on the walls.” I sip the coffee—sweet and strong—and gaze at the crane lifting a load of bricks. “You know, perhaps the principe of this place should have consulted his principessa on more of the design choices.”

She raises a brow. “Principessa, hm? If I recall, I had plenty to say about the ballroom floorplan and the security system positions.”

True. When she’s not at the restoration lab, Valentina’s been elbow-deep in architectural sketches, ensuring the new villa will be as much hers as mine. Ours. A true partnership.

“I couldn’t do any of this without you,” I say softly, for her ears alone. “You know that, don’t you?”

Her expression gentles. She sets her coffee down and turns to face me fully. “And you should know I’m not going anywhere, Dante. We’re in this together—building it all back up.” She rests a palm lightly over the spot on my shirt beneath which my healing scar lies. “Inheriting a dynasty is one thing… forging one is another. We’ve made it ours now.”

I cover her hand with mine, emotion swelling. She always finds the right words. A dynasty forged, indeed—from heartbreak, betrayal, blood and love. We made it ours.

Argonaut’s voice interrupts us from below, shouting some instruction about a crane angle. We share a chuckle. The day’s work has begun and we both have things to do—Valentina is itching to get to the restoration studio; I have meetings with the capos later to finalize operational details now that the Camorra threat is neutralized. Each remaining captain of House Moretti swore fealty to me after Castelvecchio, and with Elisa’s concession, morale is high and recruitment on the rise. Rebuilding the family’s strength is well underway.

I drain the last of my coffee and set the mug aside. “Before you go,” I say, reaching into my pants pocket, “I have something for you.”

Valentina tilts her head curiously. I produce a small velvet box and pop it open. Inside, nestled on white satin, is an antique diamond ring—one that belonged to my grandmother. I’d retrieved it from the wreckage of the old villa’s vault, cleaned and restored it just in time.

Valentina’s lips part in surprise. “Dante…”

I gently take the ring and slide it onto her finger. “I realized, amidst all the chaos, I never properly gave you a ring or a proposal worthy of you.” I gaze into her eyes, which glisten now. “This was Nonna Moretti’s. It saw fifty years of happy marriage. I hope it will see at least fifty more for us.”

She looks down at the ring—an emerald-cut diamond flanked by foxglove flower motifs etched in platinum. How fitting that detail seems now. A tear spills onto her cheek and she laughs softly, brushing it away. “It’s perfect. You’re perfect. You know that’s not true, but in this moment, hearing her say it, I feel damn close.

I take her hand and kiss the ring where it sits on her finger. “I love you, Valentina Rossi. Marry me. Not for our families, not for some pact—marry me, because I can’t imagine a future without you lighting it up.”

She’s openly crying now, but smiling too—the sun itself. “Sì. Yes, Dante, a thousand times yes. Though technically I already said yes,” she teases through a sniffle.

I chuckle. “Then consider this a renewal of our promise.”

Our lips meet in a tender kiss, cementing this quiet, precious moment amid the dust and noise of new beginnings.

From the road below comes a chorus of car horns and cheering. We break the kiss, leaning over the balcony. A convoy of vehicles is arriving through the gate—family, friends, our people coming in for the weekend’s big event.

“Well, looks like the guests are awake,” Valentina says with a radiant grin. “Ready to trade construction dust for confetti?”

“As ready as I’ll ever be,” I answer, my heart thrumming with anticipation.

Tomorrow is our wedding day. House Moretti and House Rossi will be officially united, not by an old contract scribbled in secret, but by our choice and love. It’s hard to believe how quickly it’s come. After everything, tomorrow we turn a page.

As we head inside, I take one last look at the construction site glowing in the morning sun. The first stones of our new home set firmly in place. Empire forged.

Valentina

Dappled sunlight falls through the stained glass windows of Santa Maria Antiqua, painting the aisle in hues of ruby and gold. The church is centuries old, tucked in Verona’s old quarter, and it feels like stepping into a Renaissance painting—fitting, given my life’s trajectory.

My arm trembles ever so slightly where it’s entwined with Papa’s. He stands tall and proud beside me at the head of the aisle. The music swells—Pachelbel’s Canon echoing off frescoed walls—as all heads turn toward us. My heart hammers against my ribcage. I’ve faced down thugs and gunfire, but nothing compares to the exquisite vulnerability of this moment.

“Ready, figlia mia?” Papa whispers, eyes wet as he looks at me in my ivory gown. He’s been dabbing at tears since the minute he saw me in the bridal room, fussing that I look just like Mama did on their wedding day. That comment was bittersweet for both of us, but we’ve made our peace—for today at least. Mama isn’t here, by her own choice; she sent polite regrets from whatever corner of Europe she fled to after her machinations came to light. It stings, but I refuse to let her absence cast a shadow. Today is about love and the family who are here.

I squeeze Papa’s hand. He feels solid and real—more so than when Dante carried him out of that sanatorium weeks ago. He’s regained his color, his vigor, and the gratitude shining in his face now outshines any lingering pain. “I’m ready,” I whisper back, voice thick with emotion. I give him a teary smile. “Let’s not keep my prince waiting.”

He chuckles and pats my hand on his arm. The organist transitions to the processional. Together we step forward.

I barely notice the gathered crowd of guests; they blur into a warm haze of familiar and friendly faces: the loyal capos of House Moretti and their spouses, a few of my father’s old friends from the art world, even some political allies Dante has courted for legitimacy. But all I see is the man waiting for me at the altar.

Dante stands there in a tailored charcoal suit, more handsome than ever. Broad shoulders confidently squared, hands clasped in front of him—yet I catch how he shifts his weight slightly, the only sign of nerves. When our eyes lock, any lingering tremor in me disappears. The world narrows to that connection. His dark eyes glisten, and the slow smile that curves his lips is meant only for me. I feel its warmth in my very soul.

Step by step, Papa escorts me down the aisle. My silk gown whispers across the stone floor, and I’m acutely aware of the joyful hush that’s fallen. I search Dante’s face for any hint of pain—his wound still healing—but today he looks strong, standing tall without a cane or bandage. The residual ache, he told me this morning, is nothing that will keep him from dancing with his bride tonight.

We reach the altar. The ancient stone is strewn with white foxglove blossoms and red roses entwined—our two family flowers woven together in every decoration. Dante suggested it as a surprise, a silent homage to both our houses. My throat tightens at the sight. In folklore, foxglove symbolizes both poison and protection—how apt for all we’ve endured. Roses for love and new beginnings.

Papa gently lifts my veil. His eyes brim anew as he kisses my cheek. Then, with a dignified nod to Dante, he places my hand in my groom’s. Dante inclines his head in respect and gratitude, a gesture not lost on Papa. I see the unspoken exchange in my father’s eyes: Take care of her. And Dante’s solemn return glance: Always.

Papa steps back to take his seat at the front pew. I notice Lupo there beside him, arm in sling but grinning ear to ear. He gives me a wink and mouths, “Beautiful.” Argonaut is next to Dante as best man, practically glowing with pride (or perhaps from the few drinks he snuck before the ceremony to calm his jitters).

I turn my gaze fully to Dante. We move closer, hand in hand, facing each other in front of the old priest. My heart feels like it might burst with happiness. He mouths, “You’re stunning” so only I can hear. I flush, beaming. I want to respond, but the priest begins speaking the sacred words, and the ceremony carries us along on a gentle tide.

I barely register the formalities; my consciousness swims in the dark warmth of Dante’s eyes and the feel of his thumb caressing the back of my hand. Snippets of the officiant’s voice come and go: “…to have and to hold… for better, for worse…” All I know is Dante’s steady gaze and the promise it holds.

When it’s time for vows, we’ve chosen to add our own. Dante clears his throat softly, and for a moment I see that flicker of vulnerability—the mighty Don before me is also the man who bled and fought and laughed with me, who whispered his fears in the dead of night when we clung to each other. He squeezes my hands, drawing strength.

“Valentina,” he begins, voice resonant and sure so only I can hear the tremor under it, “the first time I met you, I thought you were a thief.” A few guests chuckle softly; indeed, our initial encounter involved a certain stolen painting and a chase. Dante’s lips curve. “I had no idea you would steal not just a painting, but my heart.” I bite back a happy sob as he continues. “We were thrown together by plans not our own. But every day since, we chose each other. You are the artist who colored my world when it was dark. My partner in every scheme, my fierce, clever fox…” His voice thickens, eyes shining. “I vow to protect you, to trust you, and to stand by you as we build a life and legacy together. I am yours, body and soul, from now until my last breath.”

A tear escapes down my cheek. I have to inhale deeply to steady myself for my own vows. “Dante,” I say softly, but the church is silent as a chapel at midnight; everyone hears every word. “You were supposed to be my enemy, once. Instead, you became my safe harbor.” I smile through tears. “You saw me—not just an heiress or a bargaining chip—but the real me, even when I was hiding behind aliases and walls. You are the only person who ever truly understood the girl beneath the paint.” My voice quavers, and Dante’s eyes brim in response. “I vow to stand by you as your equal, your partner. I promise to be the loyal compass at your side when the night is dark, just as you have been my guiding star.” A wet laugh escapes me. “I love you with everything I am. I choose you—today, tomorrow, always.”

Dante’s thumb sweeps a tear from my cheek. There isn’t a dry eye among the guests, I suspect. Even the priest looks moved as he blesses the rings. Dante’s ring for me—a vintage piece he gave me on the balcony days ago—glitters with personal meaning as he slides it onto my finger once more in view of all, sealing our vows. I place a simple gold band on his strong, scarred hand, my fingers steady and certain.

“With the power vested in me,” the priest declares, smiling broadly, “I pronounce you husband and wife. You may kiss—”

Before he finishes the sentence, Dante cups my face and presses his lips to mine. I melt into the kiss, hearing the church erupt in joyful applause and whistles. He kisses me deeply but sweetly, the heat restrained for the moment out of deference to the sacred venue. Still, it’s enough to make my toes curl and my heart flutter wildly.

When we finally part, I’m giddy and breathless. We turn to face our gathered family, hand in hand, united. Fox and Principe, now truly one House. The organist strikes up a triumphant recessional as we stride back down the aisle together, flower petals raining around us like multicolored snow.

I catch sight of Papa standing with Alfonso—no, with my father (old habits; Dante’s father Emilio is gone, but I feel his spirit here too). Papa is clapping while wiping his eyes. Lupo gives us a playful salute. The Moretti capos bow their heads respectfully as we pass, acknowledging me not just as Dante’s wife but as a true Donna in my own right now. I stand taller at that realization. I am family, blood or not.

The sun greets us in a burst of warmth as we exit the church. Dante’s arm wraps snugly around my waist as we pause on the steps, grinning at each other like fools in love—which, undeniably, we are. Confetti and cheers swirl from all sides. Dante surprises me by swooping me up into his arms with a laugh.

“Viva gli sposi!” someone shouts. Long live the bride and groom!

I laugh, resting my head against Dante’s chest as he carries me the last few steps to the waiting limousine. “Careful, my love,” I tease, “your ribs—”

“—are perfectly fine,” he finishes, setting me gently on my feet by the open car door. He lowers his voice just for me as our guests begin to gather around. “Nothing could hurt me today, Mrs. Moretti.”

Mrs. Moretti. Hearing it sends a delightful thrill through me. I will always be Rossi by blood, but I wear the Moretti name now with pride and purpose. “I like the sound of that,” I whisper, kissing him quickly before the crowd closes in to offer congratulations.

We spend the next half hour enveloped by well-wishers. It’s a blur of embraces, backslaps, and happy tears. Argonaut is blubbering something about “never thought I’d live to see this day” while hugging us both. Lupo uses his good arm to sweep us into a careful bear hug, promising us a custom armored car as a wedding gift (which makes me laugh until I realize he’s serious).

Eventually, we steal away for a brief ride around the piazza in the limo, a tradition to have a private moment between ceremony and reception. As the driver takes us on a slow circuit, Dante and I sit close, fingers intertwined, gazing at one another with goofy, disbelieving smiles.

“We did it,” I murmur. “We actually did it.”

He lifts my hand to kiss my knuckles, right above the line of my new ring. “Ti amo, Val. Today we start the rest of our lives.”

I lean into him, closing my eyes as his arm comes around my shoulders. The rest of our lives… If you’d told me a month ago I’d be here—married to Dante Moretti, head of a united family, my father safe and our enemies held at bay—I would have said it’s a forgery too wild to be believed. But here we are, our reality more breathtaking than any fiction I could paint.

The car slows to bring us back to the church square where the guests have gathered to convoy to the reception at Castelvecchio’s grand hall—temporarily repurposed from war room to ballroom for the night. Dante turns my chin towards him, eyes dancing. “Before we rejoin the chaos, Mrs. Moretti—one more kiss?”

I don’t even answer, just tilt up to meet his lips. This kiss is different from the one at the altar—hungrier, with the promise of solitude later. My pulse quickens as his hand cradles the back of my neck, fingers tangling softly in my hair. I taste the sweetness of wine on his breath (he admitted to liquid courage before the vows), and beneath that, the unique flavor that is simply him. My husband.

A rap at the window makes us both jump and break apart, laughing. Argonaut’s grinning face peers in, rosy-cheeked. “Alright you two lovebirds! Time to celebrate with the rest of us or we’ll drink all the prosecco without you!”

“Just one more minute!” Dante calls back, chuckling. Argonaut winks and wanders off.

Dante presses his forehead to mine. “Tonight, after all this, I get you all to myself,” he whispers, mischief and desire in his tone. I shiver pleasantly. We may have consummated our bond well before tonight, but something about this being our wedding night carries its own thrill.

“I can’t wait,” I reply, pecking the corner of his mouth. “Now let’s go greet our dynasty.”

“Our dynasty,” he repeats with a smile, savoring the words. He draws back and straightens his lapels, ready to step back into Don mode for the public.

I gather my skirt and take a bracing breath. Show time for the crowd again. But as long as he’s by my side, it feels effortless.

Hand in hand, we emerge once more to cheers and car horns. Verona’s skyline stretches beyond, golden in the afternoon sun—the city now firmly under Moretti protection and on the brink of a hopeful era.

Champagne corks pop as we join our guests. Laughter, music, the clink of glasses—it all swirls around us in a joyous cacophony. Dante keeps me close amid the revelry, an anchoring arm around my waist or fingers laced with mine, always touching. Whenever our eyes meet, we share a secret smile, the memory of that intimate limo kiss lingering between us.

Eventually, we lead the procession of cars toward Castelvecchio, where feasting and dancing will carry on into the small hours. The night will be full of celebration, and tomorrow… tomorrow we leave for a well-earned honeymoon, a few weeks in the Sicilian countryside far from intrigue. It feels almost surreal to imagine a life of quiet luxury after all the adrenaline and danger. But it’s real—and we’ve earned it.

Before we drive off, I catch a glimpse of Papa shaking Dante’s hand vigorously, then pulling him into an embrace. I hear him say, “Thank you for giving my daughter the happiness she deserves.” Dante’s eyes shine as he replies something earnest and humble. My father then kisses me on both cheeks and whispers, “Your mama would be proud, Valentina.” A bittersweet pang touches me, but I choose to believe him. I am proud, and that’s enough.

As we make our way to our car, a sudden flurry of camera flashes goes off at the edge of the crowd. A few press photographers have snuck in—likely invited by Dante for a bit of positive publicity. I’m not used to being in the public eye like this, but I know why he did it: tomorrow’s papers will show a powerful, respectable union. The Moretti heir and the Rossi heiress, turning a page for both families. A legitimate front to fortify our standing.

Dante notices the cameras and leans down to murmur in my ear, “Ready for our close-up, amore?” I just laugh and loop my arm in his, turning to the photographers with a smile that I hope looks natural. One of them calls out, “Signor Moretti! What are your plans now, after the wedding?”

Dante pauses thoughtfully, then answers loud enough for all to hear, “Our plan is to give back to this beautiful city and country that have given us so much.” He meets my eyes meaningfully, and I pick up the cue.

“We’ll be announcing a joint charitable foundation in the coming weeks,” I add, projecting confidence. “One dedicated to restoring and protecting Italian art and cultural heritage.” I flash a grin and can’t resist a cheeky flourish: “Call it a passion project of an art lover and a devoted patron.”

The cameras capture our exchange eagerly. The reporters shout more questions, but Argonaut and a couple of burly guards expertly usher them back as we slip into our car. I see the headlines already forming: “Fox & Principe Unite for Art Restoration,” perhaps. The mythologized nicknames have circulated quietly in certain circles, and I don’t mind if they catch on publicly in this positive light. Let the world see us as partners in philanthropy. It only strengthens our cover and our cause.

As the driver pulls away, leaving the cheering throng behind, I settle against my husband’s side with a contented sigh. Dante drapes an arm around me and kisses my temple. “Nicely handled, Mrs. Moretti. The foundation press release will go out first thing Monday.”

I smirk. “I learned from the best. Mr. Moretti.” I emphasize his name playfully. He responds by tickling my side, making me squeal and swat at him amid giggles. In this cocoon of tinted glass and leather seats, we’re free to be just a boy and a girl in love for a moment—no titles.

Dante soon grows serious, tilting my chin up so I face him. His voice drops to a tender register. “Valentina… do you remember the first night at the lake house, when I told you about my dream for House Moretti? A dynasty cleansed of the old stains, doing things differently?”

I nod, recalling the hushed midnight conversation where he shared his vision and his doubts, and I fell even deeper for the man beneath the mafioso.

He smiles, eyes full of wonder. “We’re really doing it. Starting with this foundation, with our marriage… I feel like we’ve already changed the course of both our families for generations to come.”

My throat tightens with happiness. “We have. Together. Fox & Principe—we make a hell of a team,” I say softly.

His grin widens at the moniker. He brushes a thumb over my lower lip. “The world won’t know what hit it.”

Outside, Verona’s ancient streets blur past, sun-dappled and alive. The city of Romeo and Juliet welcomes a new story now—not a tragedy, but a tale of two who defied fate and forged their own path.

I glance at Dante, my heart swelling. “So, Principe, where to next? We’ve got an empire at peace, a foundation to launch, a villa to finish building… What will we conquer this afternoon?”

He chuckles and leans in, his voice a low murmur full of promise. “This afternoon, Fox, we conquer the dance floor with our first dance. Tonight…well, I plan to thoroughly conquer my wife in more private celebrations.” He winks roguishly, making heat bloom in my cheeks and belly.

I laugh and nudge him. “Ever the strategic thinker.” Then I rest my head on his shoulder, growing pensive as I watch the scenery. “Whatever comes next, I want to face it together like this. As partners. Nothing hidden between us.”

“Always,” he agrees, and I hear the seriousness beneath the flirtation. “No more secrets.”

No more secrets. Mama’s web of lies is torn down; the Camorra’s blade has been sheathed; Dante and I stand stronger for all of it. I believe him with every fiber of my being.

Our car glides up the winding road toward Castelvecchio, where the setting sun gilds the medieval ramparts in copper hues. Another symbolic fortress from our journey, now transformed into a place of joy instead of violence.

Dante’s hand finds mine again. We fall into a comfortable silence, the weight of the moment drawing us close. The driver announces quietly that we have a few minutes until we arrive.

Dante uses those moments to tilt my face to his and kiss me once more, deeply and languorously. I lose myself in it, the rest of the world forgotten. This is not the end of a story, I realize—it’s the beginning of something far greater.

We pull apart, breathing each other in. I see my reflection in his dark eyes—a woman transformed, no longer afraid of who she is or where she belongs. And in my eyes reflected back at me in his gaze, I see Dante—a leader forged in fire, with a heart that found its light.

He brushes back a loose curl from my forehead. “Whatever lies ahead, Val…thank you. For trusting me. For choosing me.”

My eyes prickle with tears of happiness. “Thank you for giving me the chance to. For letting me be your partner in all this.” I manage a teasing smile, though my voice shakes with emotion. “Who knew a arranged-marriage-to-enemies pipeline could turn out so well?”

He laughs, bright and carefree. “If we wrote that in a novel, no one would believe it.”

“Good thing it’s not fiction,” I whisper, squeezing his hand. “It’s just us.”

The limo slows as we reach the castle gates. Through the window I can see a festive glow inside—our guests awaiting the bride and groom’s grand entrance. But Dante and I linger just a heartbeat longer in the privacy of the car, savoring this perfect sliver of time.

He cups my cheek, eyes shining. “Ready to greet our future, Mrs. Moretti?”

I turn and place one foot out of the car, hearing the buzz of anticipation from the crowd beyond. I look back at him over my shoulder, giving his hand a loving tug. A mischievous, confident grin spreads across my face. “With you, always, my Principe.”

He returns the grin, joining me out on the torch-lit path leading into the castle’s great hall. Side by side, fingers entwined, we step forward to meet our family, our friends, our destiny.

Together, the Fox and the Principe stride into a future of their own making—an empire forged in love and loyalty, with many chapters of their story still to come.