

the resemblance between him and Nico. If I didn't already know, I'd never guess they were half-brothers.

"Martina, nice to see you again," he says, taking my hand and planting a kiss on top. Out of the corner of my eye, I see Nico standing against the wall, talking to a few other men.

*Why am I focusing on him when an attractive guy is standing right in front of me?*

I pull my focus back to Cade and smile politely at him. I turn around and head outside to the patio table, which is beautifully decorated for the lunch my father is hosting. With the warm sun on my face, I take a seat beside Catalina.

"Cat, I'm sorry for what I said in the kitchen, but you have to end it with Michael," I tell her softly, but she ignores me. I glance around the table and realize Nico is sitting across from me.

After some delicious appetizers and watching the men engage in heavy discussions, I suddenly hear my name from the other side of the table. Turning my attention to the conversation, I hear some Russo cousins talking about the *Martina-De-Vito-rumor* —rumors about how I used to be with a guy and lost my virginity to him. I try to ignore it, but when I hear the word 'whore' thrown across the table, I can't stay quiet.

"Excuse me, you mind repeating that, *coglione?*" The silence is deafening, and I feel everyone's eyes on me, especially my father's.

"What did you call me, *Troia?*" he sneers. I hold his stare, refusing to back down.

"You heard me."

Some of the guys try to talk him down, but he strides over to me. I'm ready to turn and leave, but the guy yanks me back by my arm.

"You think we don't hear the rumors, but what happened that night is true. You are a whore!"

I know I shouldn't let his words affect me, and I do the one thing my father has taught me never to do: talk back.

"Is that so? You think your tailored suits and millions in the bank make you tough? That just because you carry a loaded gun, you can say whatever you please to anyone?"

I instantly regret my words as the cold barrel of a gun presses against my

forehead. From the corner of my eye, I see Nico pulling his gun on the guy in front of me.

"Put the gun down, Silvan. Now," Nico says, his voice calm but commanding.

"She disrespected me, and she needs to pay," the guy, now identified as Silvan, says through gritted teeth.

"Didn't you hear me? Put. The. Fucking. Gun. Down."

I hold Silvan's stare as he glares at me.

"Any last words?" he asks me with a grin. The safety clicks off, and I close my eyes. The next thing I hear is a gunshot. I brace for pain, but nothing comes. When I open my eyes, Silvan's body collapses to the ground.

Blood gushes from the hole in his head, staining the pavement a deep red. The warm blood drips down my face.

My heart pounds in my chest, and it feels like the world is moving in slow motion. I see Nico walking away. My father sits shakes his head in disappointment. Catalina grips my arm, asking me if I'm okay, while my mother stares in shock.

I hurry inside, trying to catch up to Nico. Just as I reach him, the door slams shut in my face, and Nico is gone.

I run upstairs, my breathing growing heavier as the shock sets in. My heart races, and my hands tremble as I kick off my heels. I struggle to unzip my dress while silent tears stream down my face. When the dress finally comes off, I step into the shower and scrub at my skin like I'm trying to erase the events of the day.

For the rest of the afternoon, I lay in bed, dressed in sweats, staring out the window at the busy streets in the New York suburbs.

Around dinner time, my sister walks in.

"Hey, Mar, dinner's ready. Are you hungry?"

I don't respond.

"I'm sorry I didn't come up sooner. Dad didn't allow me to check up on you." Every time my siblings and I would get into a fight with either of our parents, we weren't allowed to check up on each other.

"It's fine," I manage to say.

The following day, I stand in front of my father's office. I finally managed to gather enough courage to apologize to him. I got dressed in a beige

skirt with a top-to-down zipper and an oversized white T-shirt tied together on my back. My hair is in a neatly tied ponytail. The sound of my heels clicking on the marble floor echoes as I knock on the door.

"Come in."

I stride across the room and sit down in one of the chairs across from his desk.

"What are you doing here, Martina?"

I inhale sharply, trying to steady myself.

"I came to apologize for my behavior yesterday at lunch." My father simply looks at me with a stern expression.

"I should have never let my emotions get the better of me, and it's not what you taught me," I continue.

"Martina, you almost cost me a business deal yesterday. You with your smart mouth," he says coldly. "I managed to salvage some of it, but I had to accept new terms from Cade and Nico."

"I'm sorry, Dad. I just couldn't take it anymore with the—" I try.

"Martina Elena! Don't you dare finish that sentence in my house," he snaps, raising his voice. I've never seen him this angry before. "You have a chance to make this right, and you will marry Cade Russo."

I freeze, the weight of his words hitting me like a punch to the chest.

"But Dad—"

"Enough!" He interrupts. "Martina, don't you dare talk back to me. You screwed up, so you will do this without contradiction. You will put a smile on that pretty face of yours and do this."

"When?" I whisper, holding back tears.

"Five weeks," he says. "You'll move in with them in a few days."

I want to protest, but he raises his hand, silencing me.

"You may go."

I leave his office, my mind racing. As I reach the hallway, I see Nico entering through the front door. Anger boils over, and the words spill before I can stop them.

"How could you?"

"How could I what?" Nico asks, his tone cold and commanding.

"How could you marry me off to your brother?" I demand, meeting his eyes.