

Shopping spree gone wrong

“Can we go to the toy shop next?” Sophia asked, her arm still in a sling, looking up at Elizabeth with a cute smile. How could she say no to that?

“Sure,” Elizabeth smiled, gripping Sophia’s hand tightly as they weaved through the other shoppers, their bodyguards following quietly behind them. The mall was enormous, with wide open spaces and a towering glass ceiling that let in natural light. In the middle of the atrium, a huge fountain bubbled peacefully, surrounded by people chatting, children laughing, and the hum of constant activity. Shoppers lingered along the balconies, looking down at the ground oor as crowds passed by below.

The four of them took the escalator to the top oor, where the toy shop was located. Sophia bounced on her heels in excitement, barely able to contain her enthusiasm. She proudly showed her injured hand to everyone she recognized, having bumped into quite a few of her classmates at the mall.

“You should see the other guy!” Sophia declared dramatically, her voice laced with pride. One of the bodyguards, Derick, had encouraged her to say it, and now chuckled every time she repeated the line.

Elizabeth’s heels clacked on the marble tiles as they approached the large toy shop. From the outside, she could see the store was bustling with activity, bright displays of toys drawing in children from all directions.

“Come on, Ellie, I see an Elsa doll!” Sophia exclaimed excitedly, pulling Elizabeth through the crowd and into the store.

Sophia’s eyes widened as she spotted the shelves stocked with her favorite characters. She wasted no time, grabbing a handful of dolls as she struggled to hold them all.

“Can I have this one? And Olaf too?” she asked, her small arms overowing with toys. Elizabeth watched the scene unfold, already thinking about how to talk her out of getting too much.

“Sophia, why don’t we just take the Elsa doll for now? We can get Olaf for a special occasion, maybe your birthday?” Elizabeth crouched down to meet her at eye level, her voice gentle but rm. It wouldn’t benet Sophia in the long run if she was spoiled—though Elizabeth knew Matteo might not entirely agree.

“Okay,” Sophia replied reluctantly, putting Olaf back with a small pout on her face.

“I’m so proud of you,” Elizabeth said softly, causing a smile to light up the little girl’s face once again.

“Can we go for ice cream now?”

“Absolutely.” Elizabeth smiled, taking Sophia’s hand as they made their way toward the ice cream parlor.

Despite the cheerful atmosphere of the mall, Elizabeth couldn’t shake the uneasy feeling creeping up her spine. She felt like someone was watching her. Every few moments, she would glance over her shoulder, scanning the crowds. But with so many people bustling about, it was impossible to pick out anyone in particular.

Maybe it was nothing. She was just being paranoid, right? After all, they had Matteo’s security team with them. They were perfectly safe.

Still, her thoughts kept drifting back to Matteo, and how unusually kind he had been to her lately. Yesterday and this morning, he had even hinted that she could use his card to shop for herself. Not that she had taken him up on the offer—yet. It didn’t feel right, especially since she still hadn’t received her credit card statement. The longer it took, the more nervous she became. She needed to know just how deep in debt she was before she could start guring out how to pay it off.

“Miss Elizabeth, if you’d like to do some shopping, I’d be happy to keep an eye on Sophia,” Derick offered. He was a tall, burly man with arms covered in tattoos, and though his appearance was intimidating, he had a soft spot for Sophia.

“Mister De Luca already asked us to give you some time to yourself.”

Elizabeth hesitated for a moment, but then thought, why not? She hadn’t bought anything for herself in a while.

“Thank you, Derick. I think I will.” She smiled, handing Sophia over to the bodyguards before making her way to the nearby shops.

She bought a few sets of lingerie—hoping Matteo would want her to show it for him—a girl could dream, right?—and a couple of winter dresses, wanting to look nice for the holidays. She was beginning to feel more at ease, enjoying the few moments to herself.

But on her way back to meet up with Sophia, that unsettling feeling of being watched returned. It was stronger this time. Elizabeth stopped and scanned the area around her, but saw no one suspicious. Still, the hairs on the back of her neck stood on end.

Stop being so paranoid, she scolded herself.

When she nally reunited with Sophia and the bodyguards, the little girl was beaming.

“Ellie! Derick and Chad took me to the arcade!” Sophia announced excitedly, jumping up and down.

“Oh, that sounds like fun!” Elizabeth smiled. “Why don’t we head home now? You can tell me all about it during the car ride.”

As they made their way to the underground garage, Elizabeth suddenly realized something was missing.

“Oh darn!” she exclaimed, rummaging through her bag. “I forgot my phone at the last shop I was in.”

“Would you like me to go and get it?” Derick asked.

“No, why don’t you get Sophia strapped into the car? I’ll go grab it myself. I won’t be long.” Elizabeth turned on her heel and hurried back to the elevator.

It was a long walk, the garage stretching out beneath the entire mall. Just as she rounded a corner, someone grabbed her from behind.

“Hey!” she yelled, but before she could react, a bag was pulled over her head, and everything went black.

“Let me go!” she screamed, struggling, but it was no use. She was lifted off the ground and thrown into the back of a van.

The door slid shut, and the engine roared to life as the vehicle sped off.

This was bad.