

## To right a wrong

Matteo POV

While Matteo discussed business with his associate, his thoughts drifted back to yesterday's meeting.

He'd stepped into enemy territory—the rival family's casino. A normal day of negotiations, until he'd walked in on something that made his blood boil. Elizabeth, of all people, was in their hands. Three men, circling her like wolves, hands on her as if she were just another piece of property. A girl like her didn't belong in a place like this.

"What the f\*\*k are your men doing to my daughter's nanny?" His voice had been low, lethal, as he glared at the family's leader across the table. It wasn't a question. It was a warning.

The leader's demeanor completely changed, as they were ushered into a back room. Matteo's mind raced—were they using Elizabeth to get to him? A message sent by force. He had been seconds away from calling in his men, ready to paint the walls red if necessary.

But the leader's calm demeanor had him wondering—was there something he didn't know?

"Your nanny?" Giovanni Moretti, head of the Moretti family asked with astonishment. "No, no, Matteo, there's been a mix-up, I swear. This has nothing to do with you. Those guys you just saw there are in charge of collecting debt."

"Collecting debt?" Matteo asked, scrutinizing Giovanni's every word.

"Yes. She has debt, and you know what they say—debts are like family: they always come back to haunt you." Giovanni chuckled, though Matteo wasn't laughing.

Elizabeth Livingstone had a gambling debt? The extensive background search he'd asked for had come back clean—other than a few questionable ex-lovers. What else was she hiding from him? He thought back to the day he'd offered her a job—she had been eager to accept. This must have been the reason. She needed money to pay off her debt.

Matteo knew what people like Giovanni did with women who owed his family—he'd heard all about the strip clubs.

"How much does she owe you?"

Giovanni leaned back, tapping his ngers on the table. "Seventy grand, give or take."

Matteo's jaw tightened. Seventy thousand? That kind of money would bury someone like Elizabeth. Now it all made sense—her eagerness to take the job, her secrets. She was trapped.

"I'll send someone over with the cash this afternoon. I'd like to have my nanny back before that though—unharmmed." Matteo had a way of commanding people without even raising his voice. It was probably why he was the head of the family, and not one of his cousins.

Giovanni's booming laugh echoed through the room.

"You know we don't hurt women, just, you know—we don't do anything they don't agree with, lets just keep it at that." The man chuckled. Matteo's face remained frozen in the same unreadable expression.

He knew exactly what the Moretti's did to women—that was the problem. He didn't have to imagine what they would do to make the poor women in question agree with what they expected of them.

"So, we have a deal then?" Matteo asked, holding out his hand.

"Sure, you can take the broad home. I have to say, Matteo, I envy you, always surrounding yourself with these gorgeous women. If you ever do get tired of her, let me know," He winked, shaking Matteo's hand. Matteo clenched his jaw, but said nothing. Too much was riding on this alliance he'd been negotiating for all day. The stakes were too high.

The relieved look on Elizabeth's face should've calmed him, but it only fueled his anger. She had no idea how close she'd come to real danger, and that ignorance infuriated him. He'd just saved her, but now she was a liability. His hands itched to throw a punch at Giovanni for that disgusting comment, but too much was riding on this alliance.

As much as it twisted something in his chest to think about it, he knew he couldn't keep her around. Elizabeth's secrets were too dangerous for his daughter. His anger simmered beneath the surface, but the relief of getting her out of this mess wasn't enough to drown out the decision he had already made.

During the silent ride home, Matteo kept replaying every second Elizabeth had been in their lives. The woman had a way of getting herself into the most ridiculous situations. He'd almost think she didn't always think things through—or think at all. She had a knack for nding trouble. But then he would see her with Sophia—He'd had his doubts about her competency, even for a moment suspecting that she hated children, but she was a natural, and his daughter adored her.

When they were in the same room, he could see that the feeling was mutual—but it didn't matter. His daughter's safety was more important than anything in this world. He couldn't have her around someone who could get kidnapped at any moment.

When they had arrived back at the manor, he'd done what he had to do—red her. He knew it was the right thing to do—but why did it feel wrong?

He'd asked her not to tell Sophia anything, and he hoped she would keep her word. This business meeting he had today could make him a lot of money—or cost him a lot, and a sad daughter would only distract him.

"So, what do you think of the plan?" His associate asked him. He suddenly noticed the room had become quiet. Everyone was looking at him.

"It's denitely worth exploring. We should talk more over dinner." Matteo suggested, gesturing to one of the staff to start serving the rst dish.

Matteo was surprised to see that Evita had made an effort today. The older chef was Spanish and usually did what she wanted—food wise at least, but this was a nice surprise.

"Oh, Frittata di Spaghetti, this reminds me of my mother's cooking," The men in the room agreed, complementing the food. The wine owed generously and the men's spirits rose.

By the time dessert was served, the deal had been all but sealed. The men laughed and toasted to their future success, but Matteo's mind was elsewhere. He hadn't seen Elizabeth since their tense ride home, and she should have left by now.

He'd tried not to think about it, the relief he felt earlier was slowly being replaced by doubt. He pushed the thoughts away, focusing on the moment. Business came rst, and this deal was too important to screw up over personal distractions.

But then, as he took a bite of the dessert, something nagged at him. Evita's cooking was good, but it wasn't this good. When he saw Rosemary speaking to one of the staff in the distance, he gestured for her to come over.

"Is there a problem, sir?" She asked softly, making sure the other guests weren't disturbed.

"Who cooked this food?" He asked her, eying the delicious pastry on his plate.

"Is—Is there a problem with it?" Rosemary spluttered. Something was denitely going on. Matteo didn't respond—raising an eyebrow instead. He could see Rosemary shifting from foot to foot under his scrutinizing gaze.

"Evita called in sick and there wasn't time to nd another chef and—" The woman spluttered.

"Who?" Matteo asked, already knowing the answer. But it couldn't be, could it?

"Elizabeth," Rosemary whispered. "I'm sorry sir, I know she had to be gone by now, but she offered and—"

He excused himself to go and nd her. Did he do the right thing by ring her?

"Matteo," his cousin Johnny suddenly called after him. He'd been in the meeting as well, along with a few other family members.

"I just got a call from that guy I know who works for the cops. Turns out that Elizabeth doesn't have a gambling problem. Her ex did, and he made debts in both of their names. You know, Mister-thirty-second-vanilla-s\*x-man," Johnny chuckled.

Damn. Now he had to catch her before she left.

He walked into the foyer from the dining room but paused at the sight in front of him. His daughter was crying and asked Elizabeth if he had asked her to leave.

He waited with bated breath for her reaction. This would be the moment of truth—showing the true colors of her character.

"No, of course not."

She'd lied to his daughter to protect him. Matteo watched the scene as a mixture of emotions coursed through him. He couldn't let this woman go. His daughter adored her, and quite frankly, he'd never hired a nanny who cared more for Sophia than Elizabeth.

He needed to right this wrong.

"Elizabeth, can I see you in my oce?"