

## Conditions

Matteo POV

"I'm sorry I haven't left yet." She stuttered, a tear slipping from her eye.

"Elizabeth,"

"I—I only wanted to help and—"

"Elizabeth," Matteo tried to speak, but she kept rambling, her voice shaky, yet he couldn't stop noticing the delicate curve of her lips as they trembled.

"I didn't expect Sophia to still be awake. I'm sorry that she saw me."

"Elizabeth," he softly spoke, though his eyes ickered to the tear glistening on her cheek.

The urge to wipe it away came on so strong, he clenched his sts at his sides to hold back.

"But that woman is not competent to be Sophia's nanny!" Her demeanor suddenly changed as she pointed a nger at him, with re in her eyes. There was the woman he had hired. There was the re he was drawn to—no matter how much he fought it.

"And she's not going to be." He said, forcing himself to focus on her words and not the way her body moved with every breath, every gesture.

"Then who is? You know what, don't tell me, or I'll probably think about it at night and deprive myself of sleep." She wiped the tears from her face, before standing up. She was trying to act tough, but even now, he could see that she was heartbroken—and the urge to x it welled up inside of him.

"I better get going."

"Elizabeth! Are you going to listen?" He slightly raised his voice, trying to catch her attention, but it was as much to break the tension in his own chest as it was to stop her.

Her head snapped to him, and for a moment, they locked eyes.

"You know what, I don't have to listen to you! You're not my boss anymore!" She deantly spoke, but there was something about the way she stood, the rise and fall of her shoulders, that made his chest tighten. She was right, of course. He wasn't her boss—not at this moment at least. But that wasn't what made his heart pound. No, it was her presence. It lled the room, and though he fought it, every ber of his being was aware of her. Of her nearness. Of how good she smelled. The faint aroma of the food she had prepared still lingered in the air, mixing with something sweet—something purely her. Damn it.

Matteo slowly stood up from behind his desk and approached her. Each footstep deliberate, calculated, like a predator approaching a prey.

"You," he said, standing in front of her. His eyes ickered to her lips, before meeting her eyes once more.

"W—what?" She asked, her brows knitting together.

"You are her nanny."

"I was her nanny. Are you trying to rub it in? Is that what you're doing? I knew you were a jerk, but this is just—"

"Elizabeth," He cut her sentence short, trying to keep her from saying something she would regret—more than she already would.

"I want to rehire you. I—I never should have red you in the rst place." He explained. "I know that it was your ex-boyfriend that created that gambling debt, not you."

"Oh," Elizabeth's cheeks tinged pink—realizing what she'd just said. Matteo quickly changed the subject, thinking back to her delicious food.

"I wanted to thank you for cooking tonight. My business associates loved it, and it denitely helped me seal the deal," A faint smile crossed his features. "I didn't know you were Italian—or is it just the cuisine?" He asked, curious where she'd learned to cook like that—to cook authentic Neapolitan food.

"Thank you," She blushed. She was the kind of girl that was unable to accept a compliment. "I learned most of it from my Nonna. I have an Italian grandmother on my father's side." She explained. They shared a moment of eye contact, before she spoke again.

"How did you get me out of that situation anyway?" She suddenly asked. "Did—did you pay off my debt?" She asked.

"I did," He nodded. An idea suddenly formed in his mind. An idea to test her.

"I want to repay the debt," She said with determination.

"I know of a way you could repay the debt," he said, leaning closer, his voice lower, more deliberate. Her eyes met his, confusion ickering across her face.

"How?" she asked, her brow furrowing.

"You know what I mean," he continued, his gaze dropping momentarily to her lips. "You could sleep with me. One night, and we're even."

The words came out cold, calculated. But inside, Matteo felt a knot twist tighter in his chest. If she said yes, it would mean nothing—just like every other woman—every other woman after Sophia's mother that was. But God, he hoped she said no.

Elizabeth's eyes widened, and then narrowed. She stood straighter, her chin lifting.

"I'm not that kind of girl," she said quietly but rmly. "I thought you knew that."

There it was—the re. He admired it, even as it burned through his defenses. She turned, heading for the door, but not before throwing a nal look over her shoulder.

"If that's what you think of me, maybe you were right to re me."

And then she was gone.

Matteo stood frozen, the door closing behind her with a soft click. The knot in his chest unwound slightly, but there was no relief. Instead, he felt worse. He'd tested her, expecting the worst. But she was different. Better than that.

Damn it.

He snapped out of his thoughts, and raced after her. The woman was fast, she was already out the front door.

"Elizabeth!" He called after her, trying to catch up to her. The car he'd arranged stood waiting for her—the driver already walking towards her to take her bags.

"Could you hurry up—I want to leave," She said with a trembling voice. The man's eyes ickered to Matteo before he nodded.

"Elizabeth!" He called out, striding toward her, but she ignored him. The driver made a move to put the bags in the trunk, but Matteo's voice stopped him.

"You touch those bags, and you're red." He warned. The driver froze.

"Fine!" She huffed in frustration. "I'll just walk then!" She stomped toward her bags, one of her heels slipping away in the gravel of the driveway.

Matteo didn't hesitate to grab her by the arm to steady her.

"I'm ne," She snarled, pulling out of his grip.

"Elizabeth, I'm sorry. I shouldn't have said that." He sighed. He hated apologizing—and he rarely did.

"No, you shouldn't have." She raised her chin in the air, squaring him with a equally deant look.

"Would you come back on as Sophia's nanny—please?" Another word he hated—please.

"I have some conditions," She crossed her arms in front of her.

"Name them," he nodded. God, not many people dared to speak to him like this, and denitely not any of the women he knew.

"Number one. Our relationship will be completely professional. No more testing me or talking about anything other than work." The corner of Matteo's lips quirked up with a ghost of a smile.

"Number two. I want to have more input in how Sophia is raised when I'm with her. If I'm going to help her grow, I need to be treated like more than just 'the help'." Matteo clenched his jaw.

"I'm open to suggestions," he grated out. He'd raised her on her own since she was a baby. The other nannies only did as he told them to do—letting someone else have a say would be a big adjustment for him, but he was willing to give it a try. She was the best, most caring nanny Sophia had ever had.

"Number three. I want," She tapped her chin, causing his gaze to fall on those lips again. Matteo quickly looked elsewhere. This attraction, or whatever it was needed to end. "Two days and three nights per month off."

"Done." He nodded. That was easy. He was almost sure her next condition would be a pay raise, but yet again, she surprised him.

"What? No raise?" Matteo drawled, as Elizabeth tapped her chin, her eyes unfocused as she thought of something else to demand.

"No. We'll keep the original agreement, only now I want you to hold back my wage until I've paid you back." Matteo wasn't expecting that.

"How about I pay you a third per month and keep the rest for the debt?" He asked, knowing she wouldn't agree if he refused.

"Okay, deal." She said, holding out her hand. When Matteo made a move to take it, she pulled back.

"Actually, let's put that in writing," she stated.

Beautiful and smart, he thought, as he led her back into his oce to draw up the papers. The knot in his stomach loosened.

Sophia would be able to keep the nanny she loved, and he—he could admire her from afar, while working on letting go of this silly attraction.