

## The next morning

Matteo POV

Matteo sat at the breakfast table, his mind far from the conversation, still processing the whirlwind that had been the night before.

"Matteo?" his mother asked sharply, snapping him back to reality.

"Hmm?" He looked up to see Sophia staring at him.

"Where's Ellie?" The little girl questioned, wanting to know where her loving nanny was.

"She's... uh, resting," Matteo replied, his mind drifting back to the sight of Elizabeth stumbling around, trying to take off her clothes.

"Resting?" Francesca raised a brow, clearly suspicious. He knew exactly what his mother was thinking.

Matteo waved it off, signaling a nearby staff member. "Bring up something for Elizabeth. She's... going to need it." The staff nodded, understanding the silent request for hangover remedies.

"She's um—in my room," he added, feeling his mother's eyes on him. After dinner, all of his family members had stayed the night. Including Vittoria.

"Matteo, I thought I'd warned you last night?" his mother scoffed, "women like that are only after money..."

As the conversation continued, Matteo's mind drifted back to the night before, remembering the laughter, the ridiculousness of Rosemary's dress, and—he sighed heavily—the moment Elizabeth had called him "Mr. De-Licious"...

After Elizabeth had left the dinner table with Rosemary, leaving him and his family to serve the rest of the meal themselves, Matteo had gotten into it with his mother—at least as much as he dared.

The De Luca matriarch was not one to be messed with—even her husband feared her.

"Mamma, era davvero necessario?" Matteo asked, his voice tinged with disappointment as he gave his mother a pointed look. Elizabeth had slaved away in the kitchen for hours to make this meal, and now she couldn't even enjoy it herself.

"Matteolino, you know how protective I am of you after what happened with..." Francesca's voice faltered, her gaze dropping as she trailed off, leaving the rest unsaid. But Matteo knew exactly what she was referring to. Sophia's mother.

The silence stretched for a moment, heavy with unspoken memories. His mother's concern came from a place of love, but it always brought him back to that chapter of his life—one he tried not to think about.

"I know, Mamma, but you should apologize to Elizabeth tomorrow." He said, his heart sinking as he thought of her alone in her room. He made a mental note to go check on her as soon as dinner was over. He knew how much family holidays meant to his mother, so he would wait until it was over—but his mind had been absent from the conversation all evening. He couldn't shake the thoughts of the hurt woman who was certainly moping upstairs.

"Yes, I had rooms readied for you guys a few days ago. The same ones you stay in every time," He smiled, saying goodnight to his family.

"Matteo, do you mind if I stay?" Vittoria had cornered him on his way to Elizabeth's room.

"Do you have to push Elizabeth's buttons like that?" He'd snapped.

"Oh, it was just for fun, Matt, you know how I am?" she purred, stepping closer. He felt the familiar heat of her presence, but it didn't ignite the same spark it used to.

"Do whatever you want," he waved her off, moving past her. Vittoria had been his best friend since childhood—a best friend who'd also become something more. They had made an easy deal: both single, both sharing the same tastes, it was convenient. But lately, it didn't feel as simple as it once had. He wasn't sure if she felt the same, but... something was different.

He took a deep breath when he reached Elizabeth's room. He was going to apologize and hoped they would be able to talk about it. Matteo was expecting to find an angry Elizabeth—possibly crying, but he was not ready for the scene he was about to stumble upon.

Matteo had not expected a drunken Elizabeth and when his eyes had locked on his head of housekeeping... she'd looked like the clown from IT, but instead of holding a red balloon, she was wearing this tight red sparkling dress. His jaw had nearly dropped to the floor.

"She's gorgeous, isn't she?" Elizabeth asked, slurring her words—a mix of excitement and glee on her face. "Yep, I did that!" She shouted, pointing at Rosemary—who added that they looked just like twins.

The girls proceeded to fall into fits of giggles, shouting incoherent stuff. Something about Thelma and Rosie. He wasn't sure... but when she had called him Mr. De-licious, with a mixture of frustration and desire in her eyes, Matteo's heart rate had spiked. He started imagining all the things he could bend that frustration to. All the uses they could have for her anger... uses that involved his bed...and desk...but then...

"I mean Mr. De-mommasboy!" She snorted. Never in his adult life, especially after taking over the family business, had anyone dared to speak to him like that. He had a bullet ready for anyone who disrespected him—but with Elizabeth, it was different.

"Okay, that's it!" He's said, throwing her over his shoulder. He'd had enough of her ramblings, and he was beginning to feel concerned about the amount of alcohol she'd digested. He ignored Rosemary's horrid song about them getting married, making a detour to his sister's room to ask her if she would keep an eye on the housekeeper.

"Okay, there you go," He dropped her on his bed. Matteo's c\*\*k hardened when she talked to him in that sultry voice, trying to take off her clothes—but he knew this wasn't the time or place, between her drunken state and his family under the same roof—she would hate him in the morning, and so would he.

"I'm going to kiss you now, Mr. De-licious," She said, pursing her lips. Matteo couldn't help the grin that stretched over his face at this ridiculous scene. The way she'd said Italian Stallion before... it was so unlike her.

"Why are you spinning?" She asked, right before he caught her—saving her from hitting the ground.

He scooped her up bridal style and placed her on his bed. She looked so fragile in the middle of his large bed, but she was anything but that.

Ever since the moment he'd met her in that ice cream parlor, he'd imagined what it would be like to have her in his bed—and this was so unlike his fantasy.

Matteo had taken refuge on the couch, but as soon as his head had hit the pillow, Vittoria had shown up uninvited—trying to sneak herself into his bed.

He hadn't even processed her appearance before Elizabeth, clearly thinking it was him, wrapped herself around Vittoria. Matteo had jumped to his feet, but not fast enough to stop Elizabeth from locking lips with his very stunned—and now very uncomfortable—best friend.

The memory of Vittoria trying to peel Elizabeth off while mouthing a silent scream replayed vividly in Matteo's mind, and he couldn't help but let out a half-laugh, half-groan at the ridiculousness of it all.

"Something funny?" His mother's sharp voice brought him back to the present.

"Hmm, just something I read," He waved off his mother's scrutinizing gaze.

"Doesn't Elizabeth have to work?" His mother continued, emphasizing her name.

"No, I have the day off, so that means so does she." He lied. He'd decided it would be best if he himself took care of his daughter today. It was the least he could do for Elizabeth, considering his family was the one who had caused her to overindulge.

A smile tugged at his lips. He just hoped, for Elizabeth's sake, that she wouldn't remember too much of last night. Otherwise, he might have to start prepping an explanation involving a clown, a sparkly dress, and a very confused Vittoria.