

Preschool encounter

Elizabeth POV

"Take a seat," Mr. De Luca commanded, his voice low and smooth, carrying an edge that sent a shiver down Elizabeth's spine. Her eyes darted to Johnny, silently begging for some kind of intervention, but the man only smirked—a cocky, knowing grin that set her nerves on re.

Elizabeth plopped down into the chair with a huff, refusing to meet Mr. De Luca's intense gaze. Instead, she focused on her hands, suddenly fascinated by the lines on her palm, though she could feel his eyes drilling into her.

"Is there something you'd like to tell me?" His voice softened, but it carried the weight of unspoken tension, almost daring her to lie.

"I ran into my ex-boyfriend at the mall?" she said, feigning innocence as her heart raced. She knew that wasn't what he meant, but she wasn't about to hand him any ammunition.

Mr. De Luca's lips twitched, a ghost of a smile playing on his face before he straightened, his gaze lingering on her just a second too long. "Ah, the 'thirty-second-vanilla-s*x' man," Johnny chimed in, his grin wide as he leaned casually against the wall.

Elizabeth's cheeks burned, her eyes snapping to Johnny in disbelief. She turned quickly to Mr. De Luca, expecting some sort of reprimand, but instead, his dark eyes gleamed with amusement. His lips twitched again, as if he were giving a smile, but his expression quickly hardened, sending a ripple of heat through her. She hated how he could control the room so effortlessly, pulling her into under his spell, whether she wanted to be there or not.

"Care to tell me why my bookkeeper called about some... irregularities on my credit card bill?" His voice was casual, but his eyes were anything but. They were locked on her, dark and unreadable.

She made mental note not to say anything private in front of the security men anymore, though she shouldn't be surprised. They did work for him.

"I'm not really good with numbers," she shrugged, keeping up her calm demeanor all the while dying inside.

He leaned forward slightly, his gaze sharper now, almost predatory. "Oh, I thought you had a business degree," he countered smoothly.

"Hmm," Elizabeth waved her hand in a dismissive gesture, as if working her butt off for ve years in college had meant nothing.

"I have a very interesting purchase on my bill, want to know what it is?"

"No, not really," she shook her head, all the while digging an even deeper whole for herself.

He raised a brow, his ghost of a smirk returning. "Either you're taking my four-year-old daughter to Victoria's Secret, or you've been shopping for yourself."

Before she could respond, Johnny interrupted with a teasing grin. "Pretty bold move, Ellie. You know Matteo doesn't usually get involved with the help."

A icker of something—anger? jealousy?—passed over Mr. De Luca's face as his gaze snapped to his cousin. The air thickened, and Elizabeth could feel the subtle shift. There was tension between the two men, and not just because of the credit card issue. Mr. De Luca's jaw clenched, and when his eyes returned to her, they were darker, more possessive.

She was guessing neither of those two answers would make him happy, so she did the only thing she could think of...

"It might be Parsley. I mean, I think I saw her wearing one of those bras. Lord knows that woman needs good support." Elizabeth chuckled, while holding out her hands in front of her breasts to emphasize the woman's huge breasts. Johnny snorted next to her. At least someone appreciated her humor.

"Parsley?" De Luca asked, his face turning more and more grim.

"Oh, I mean—um—" she spluttered. What was the woman's real name anyway? Nutmeg? No, that wasn't it... Chives...no...

"Do you mean Rosemary?" Johnny asked. Elizabeth snapped her fingers and pointed at him.

"That's it," The pair chuckle was broken up by Mr. De Luca, who wasn't amused. His hand slammed down on the desk, and the playful atmosphere vanished.

"Ms. Livingston, my patience with you is just about up. We both know that Rosemary wasn't the one shopping for underwear. I didn't want to have to do this, but you leave me no choice. You're —" The dreaded words were leaving his mouth when the door cracked open and Sophia bounced inside. Yes, bounced, that kid was like a ball of energy, I kid you not.

"Ellie! There you are," She beamed a cute little smile, before looking at Matteo.

"Daddy, are you taking me tomorrow?" Sophia asked, her eyes wide and hopeful. The little girl was referring to her first day of preschool. She hadn't talked about anything else these last few days. She was clearly nervous.

"I wouldn't miss it," he said, his features softening as he smiled at his daughter.

"Can Ellie come too? Please?" Sophia pleaded, and Mr. De Luca's eyes icked back to Elizabeth, a icker of something dangerous crossing his face before he exhaled.

"Of course she can," he replied, his voice controlled, but the look he shot Elizabeth was lled with a tension she couldn't quite place.

"Yes, Yes, Yes!" Sophia jumped up and down while cheering. "Come and play with me, Ellie." The little girl took her hand while pulling her along.

Elizabeth didn't dare look behind her, hoping to make a clean escape.

"Elizabeth," his voice was a low murmur, sending a shiver down her spine, "next time, I'll expect you to model your purchases."

Her breath caught in her throat.

"In front of my business associates," he added, his eyes glinting with something dark and dangerous.

If he thought that was a punishment, he clearly didn't know her at all.

The next day, Elizabeth sat on one of the high chairs at the kitchen island, with a very nervous Sophia next to her. Mr. de Luca, she'd learned, had already been up. He'd been training in his inhouse gym, and was now working in his oce. Apparently, he worked out every day. No wonder he was so—

"Who's ready for school?" He entered the kitchen, with a beaming smile on his face. Sophia jumped up, bouncing around excitedly.

"Sophia, come on, two more bites," Elizabeth said, holding her almost untouched sandwich in front of the little girl's mouth.

"Listen to Elizabeth," Mr. De Luca said, causing Elizabeth to nearly fall off her chair. Was he telling his daughter to listen to her? He must be in a very good mood. Sophia took two more small bites, before announcing she was ready.

"Thank you," Elizabeth stuttered when Mr. De Luca helped open the passenger's side door for her, after clicking Sophia into her car seat. She'd sheepishly stood by, watching the scene.

She stared at him as he casually shrugged off his vest, while walking to the driver's side, where he hung it over the back of his seat, before taking off.

During the drive, Sophia had uttered the classic are we there yet? At least a dozen times. But it didn't seem to bother her father, who chuckled every time.

Suddenly, the car made a turn and they drove through a guarded gate. What kind of school was this?

Elizabeth's mouth fell open when their Sedan rolled up the winding driveway. They passed a sign that said CRESTWOOD ACADEMY.

The closer they got to the looming building, the wider Elizabeth's eyes got. The perfectly manicured lawns, the colorful ower gardens... they were nothing compared to the modern school building, with its ivy-covered walls and modern glass facades. It was breathtaking.

Elizabeth only closed her mouth when the valet opened the door for her. Yes, valet! Hoping not to break a leg, she suddenly noticed her surroundings. She'd never seen such a collection of expensive cars either. From BMW's to Mercedes and Porches... they seemed to have it all.

Her eyes moved from the cars to the people surrounding her and was thankful that she'd decided to put on one of her expensive dresses. All the people here were dressed to impress, that was for sure. She was starting to wonder if this was a school or a runway show.

They were ushered inside the large building, greeted by plush armchairs lining the walls while artwork made by students adorned the large space. A large welcome board greeted the newcomers, featuring the little girl's name in bold, cheerful letters. Elizabeth could only imagine how it would feel to attend a school like this.

Sophia stood between her father and her, her tiny hands clutching her new backpack, looking around with a mix of awe and apprehension.

A beautiful brunette who she assumed was the teacher welcomed the new children with a dazzling smile. To her surprise the woman knew every child's name. Wow, they really put that tuition to good use. She called the children into the classroom to look around while some of the parents followed. The teacher suddenly approached them.

"You must be Sophia's father, Mr. De Luca." She smiled, before her eyes landed on Elizabeth. "And you must be her mother." Even before Elizabeth could open her mouth to reply, Mr. De Luca set her straight.

"No, actually, she's just the nanny. She'll be picking her up and dropping her off most of the time." The teacher's face visibly lifted, as she continued talking to him. She was laughing while pushing his arm playfully...and De Luca? He was irting right back! It shouldn't bother her. He was just her employer after all, but she couldn't help but curse herself for not becoming a preschool teacher.

"Don't worry, he's the 'hits and quits' type. Once the thrill of the chase fades, he'll discard her." A heavy Brooklyn accent sounded behind her, kind of reminding her of those mobsters in the Sopranos.

"I'm sorry, what?" Elizabeth asked.

"I was referring to you, looking like a sad sh. Trust me, a beautiful lady like yourself shouldn't ... for the likes of him. He's not worth it." He smiled at her. Elizabeth hadn't heard anything after beautiful lady, completely distracted by this hunk of a man. His deep brown eyes stared into her eyes, as if he was looking into her soul.

"Romano," Mr. De Luca suddenly appeared next to her, interrupting the moment. The man stared at her for another few seconds, before he nally looked at the man who appeared next to her.

"Ah, De Luca, your kid starting school too?" He smirked. The men stared at each other. Elizabeth felt as though she was in some kind of weird standoff, expecting them to get out their members at any moment to compare them in size.

"I didn't know you had a child?" Mr. De Luca asked, not breaking eye contact.

"I don't. Just dropping off my nephew," he said, the smirk rmly plastered on his face. "Anyway, I have to get going. De Luca," He nodded, before his brown eyes moved to her. "Elizabeth, it was a pleasure meeting you."

Elizabeth was both fascinated and a little frightened by the man. How did he know her name?