

KEY TO HAPPINESS:(My mute devil)

#Chapter 21 - Read KEY TO HAPPINESS:(My mute devil) Chapter 21

Chapter 21: 21

"A game of ice cream," I replied, attempting to mask the thrill that danced along my nerves. The room seemed to shrink around us, the air thick with a heady mix of romance and looming danger.

As I scooped out a spoonful of the frozen dessert, the gentle clink of metal against ceramic echoed in the charged silence. Yet, beneath the innocent act of indulging in ice cream, I couldn't shake the sense that this was just the beginning, that hidden beneath the sweetness was a darker, more enticing mystery.

Carmela watched me with an intensity that sent shivers down my spine, her eyes betraying a deep understanding of the unspoken tension between us. We were caught in a dance of desire and danger, the stakes of this game higher than either of us had ever dared to imagine.

The ice cream tasted bittersweet on my tongue, each spoonful a reminder of the forbidden thrill that pulsed between us. I fought to keep my composure, to hide the whirlwind of emotions threatening to consume me, knowing that Carmela was watching my every move.

As seconds melted into minutes, the suspense in the room became almost palpable, a magnetic force drawing us closer even as it warned of the peril that lay ahead. Every soft sigh, every shared glance seemed to pull us deeper into the web of desire and intrigue.

But then, as suddenly as the tension had risen, it dissipated into a fragile moment of levity. Carmela forced a laugh, the sound like music in the charged air, and reached for her own spoon.

"A game of ice cream," she echoed, her voice steady but her eyes betraying a glimmer of mischief.

"Let's have dinner before we dive into this game," I suggested, my heart pounding with a heady mix of excitement and apprehension. I moved to place the bucket of ice cream aside, but Carmela protested with a playful pout.

"I'm not hungry, let's play the game now!" she insisted, her eyes sparkling with anticipation.

A rush of joy and desire surged through me, my mind already racing with possibilities. I reached out, pulling her close, tracing the curve of her jawline with my thumb.

"Are you sure? Once we begin, there's no turning back," I murmured, the words a whispered promise against her skin.

Carmela met my gaze with unwavering determination, stepping back with a mischievous smile.

"I've never lost a game," she declared with enthusiasm, her eyes alight with playful challenge.

"Alright then," I grinned, unable to resist her infectious energy. "Go change into the t-shirt on the bed. I'll prepare the room for our game."

With a quick peck on her lips, I watched as she disappeared from the dining room, leaving me alone with the charged air and the promise of what was to come.

As I set about arranging the room, my mind raced with anticipation. This was no ordinary game of chance; it was a dance of passion and intrigue, a test of wills and desires.

It was time to focus on my beloved Carmela, and as I awaited her return, I couldn't help but feel a thrill of excitement at the thought of what lay ahead. This game was just beginning, and I was determined to make it a masterpiece of romance and steam's.

As I slid into the oversized t-shirt that draped down to my knees, a curious excitement danced in my chest. What was Mr. Dean planning with this "ice cream game"? The very idea sounded absurd, yet strangely alluring.

"Carmela!" His voice called out, pulling me from my thoughts. I made my way back to the dining room, clad in his t-shirt, feeling its softness against my skin. I entered to find the table empty except for a massive bucket of ice cream, and there was Mr. Dean, leaning casually against the table with his tablet in hand, legs crossed, and arms folded.

"You seem ready," he remarked, his voice a low, almost conspiratorial whisper that sent a shiver down my spine. I shifted uncomfortably, crossing my arms behind my back, my toes tapping nervously against the floor.

"The game is simple," he continued, his eyes locked on mine, "make me finish that entire bucket of ice cream, then you win."

I blinked, dumbfounded. "Make you finish an entire bucket of ice cream?" I repeated, my gaze darting from the bucket to his amused expression. "Mr. Dean, shouldn't you be eating healthy? You can't just devour a whole bucket of ice cream, it's not good for you," I scolded, the concern evident in my voice.

"And who said I was only going to have ice cream?" His voice was smooth, a hint of mischief dancing in his eyes as they stayed locked on mine. "Actually, I want to eat healthy as advised by the doctor, but the food isn't ready to be served."

My curiosity piqued, I couldn't resist teasing back. "And what kind of food is that?"

"You," he said with a smirk that sent a shiver down my spine, leaving me utterly speechless and blushing furiously. His playful demeanor was disarming, making it hard to discern whether he was serious or not.

"Come over here." He beckoned me with a wave, pulling out a bowl of ice cream. "Which flavor do you like?"

"Chocolate," I managed to reply, only to be met with a mischievous glint in his eyes. His smile was unnerving yet strangely captivating, especially since this vacation had revealed a whole new side to him, one I hadn't expected.

"I also love chocolate. Do you want to have a taste before we begin?" His words hung in the air, laden with an invitation that left me both intrigued and unsure. My mind raced as I bit my lower lip, torn between caution and reckless abandon.

After what felt like an eternity of contemplation, I nodded, unable to resist the magnetic pull drawing me closer to him. What happened next took me completely by surprise, leaving my senses reeling and my heart pounding in my chest.

As he spooned another mouthful of ice cream, he leaned in closer, his gaze never leaving mine. And then, in a daring move that left me breathless, he let the creamy sweetness melt on his lips before pressing them against mine.

Time seemed to stand still as I felt the warmth of his mouth against mine, the taste of chocolate mingling with his breath. My eyes widened in astonishment, the realization of what had just transpired hitting me like a wave crashing onto the shore.

But before I could fully comprehend the intensity of the moment, he pulled away, a smug yet tender smile playing on his lips. I was left dazed, my mind a whirlwind of emotions as I tried to make sense of the electric chemistry that crackled between us.

"Why does it taste different? I want another taste," he said, his eyes alight with mischief as he dipped his spoon into the creamy swirl of ice cream. With a grin, he brought it to my lips, and I couldn't resist taking a full, indulgent spoonful.

But then, unexpectedly, he leaned in, his lips crashing against mine. The ice cream melted between us, sweet and cold, as his kiss ignited a fire within me. I melted into him, losing myself in the sensation of his lips on mine, the taste of the ice cream mingling with the salt of the sea.

As if satisfied with the sweet exchange, he pulled back slightly, but his lips didn't leave mine alone. They danced over my skin, nibbling and tasting as if he couldn't get enough.

"Take off the T-shirt," his voice was a low whisper against my ear, sending shivers down my spine. I felt frozen in place, a rush of heat spreading through me at his request. Did I dare? Could I trust him with this vulnerability?

Sensing my hesitation, his strong arms wrapped around my waist, pulling me closer. His breath was hot against my skin, his face inches from mine.

"Beloved," he murmured, his voice filled with raw emotion, "you and I both know I would never do anything to cause you harm. But still, I have to ask... do you trust me?" The question hung in the air, laden with unspoken emotions and history. Did I trust him? Could I trust him, despite everything?

But it wasn't the question I expected, not the one I was prepared to answer. Why did I trust him, this man who had purchased me, who treated me like I was his everything when I knew it couldn't possibly be true? "Beloved," his voice brought me back to the present, and I nodded, a single, trembling motion.

"Yes, I do," the words escaped me, barely a whisper, before his lips captured mine again. This time, there was no holding back, no room for doubt or hesitation. I surrendered to the passion that engulfed us, closing off any escape route to regret or guilt.

His hands roamed my body, undoing buttons with practiced ease, sending waves of desire through me. I tilted my head back as his lips trailed down my neck, a soft moan escaping before I could stop it. "Don't hold back, beloved," his voice was a murmur against my skin, his words igniting a fire within me.

Passion and desire mingled as we moved together, the world outside forgotten. In that moment, there was only us, entwined in a dance of longing and need. I gave myself over to him completely, letting go of any reservations or fears, lost in the intoxicating heat of the moment.

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I felt a cascade of shivers ripple down my spine, my bra slipping down to my feet, and my back meeting the solid surface of the dining table. Crimson warmth flooded my cheeks, unable to hide the rush of shyness overtaking me.

"You look stunning when you blush," his voice, playful and tender, whispered in my ear, deepening the hue of my cheeks. "Since you're so concerned about my well-being, how about you limit me to just this bowl instead of the entire bucket?" His eyes sparkled

mischievously as he presented the bowl to me, and I nodded eagerly, unable to resist the pull of his gaze.

As the cool, sweet ice cream graced my skin, my mind wandered to the possibilities of where this teasing game might lead us, my heart pounding with anticipation. Lost in thoughts of what could unfold between us, I was abruptly brought back to the present by the warmth of Mr. Dean's mouth, trailing the path of the ice cream on my skin.

Closing my eyes, I curled my fingers into a ball, surrendering to the sensation of his tongue dancing across my skin, his lips tender and insistent. Each touch sent sparks of electricity through me, igniting a fire deep within. I gasped as his mouth left my skin, only to be replaced by a deliciously cold sensation as he expertly traced the curves of my cleavage with another spoonful of ice cream.

Every touch, every teasing caress, felt like a promise of something more, something achingly intimate. With the taste of ice cream lingering on my skin and the heat of desire coursing through me, I knew that this game was just the beginning of a tantalizing journey with Mr. Dean,

"Beloved," he whispered, his voice thick with raw emotion, drawing my gaze to meet his eyes where desire burned brightly. "Why do you persist in calling me 'Mr. Dean'? Hasn't our relationship transcended the need for such formality?"

His question left me momentarily speechless, caught between the intimacy of our moments and the ingrained habits of social status and age difference. "I..." I began, but before I could form a coherent response, his lips found my skin once more, sending a jolt of pleasure through me.

His hands explored, seeking out the contours of my chest, and my heart raced in response, a symphony of desire echoing in every beat. I bit my lower lip, a soft moan threatening to escape, feeling his smile against my skin as he teased and tormented.

"Call me by my name, Carmela," he requested, his voice a sultry command that sent shivers down my spine, his hands now tracing a path toward my left breast. The anticipation, the desire, was overwhelming, and I felt my toes curling involuntarily.

"Beloved, call my name," he urged, his tone a potent mix of authority and seduction that I found impossible to resist.

"Nix," I breathed out, the name falling from my lips like a whispered prayer, and I felt his hands cupping my breast, sending a rush of heat and butterflies through me.

"Please don't stop," I moaned, his warm lips dancing across my skin, his touch igniting a fervor within me as he played his teasing game. My heart raced as I surrendered to the sudden flood of emotions, throwing my head back and arching my body. A delightful

bubble of anticipation swirled in my stomach as he trailed kisses over my breast, sending shivers down my spine.

"Nix," I gasped, the intensity of his touch leaving me breathless, my chest heaving with desire. "I... I can't... breathe."

"Already?" His voice, laced with mischief, sent a thrill through me, igniting a fire that burned hotter with each passing moment. "But beloved, we've only just begun."

With a swift motion, he lifted me onto the dining table, his lips capturing mine in a passionate kiss. His tongue explored every crevice of my mouth, sending delicious shivers through me. His hand, bold and unyielding, slipped beneath the fabric of my panties, sending waves of pleasure coursing through my body.

Lost in a haze of desire, I could barely comprehend the sensations overwhelming me. Soft gasps escaped my lips as he entered me, my toes curling in ecstasy. His lips never left mine, his hand never faltered in its rhythmic movements, and time seemed to stand still as I cried out in unbridled desire.

I surrendered to the delicious ache building within me, each cry of pleasure fueling the fire between us. Finally, with a shuddering sigh of release, I felt myself collapse against him, my body trembling with the aftershocks of ecstasy.

I leaned heavily against Mr. Dean, my senses reeling as my mind struggled to process the intensity of our passion.

Carmela's heart raced wildly as she found herself trapped in a sprawling, engulfed house. The crackling flames licked at the walls, sending tendrils of smoke curling around her. Panic seized her chest as she struggled to make sense of the chaos unfolding around her.

The urgent cry of "Carmela!" pierced through the roar of the inferno, drawing her attention to a figure emerging from the billowing smoke. It was a woman, her features obscured by the haze, her form distorted by the bulge of pregnancy. Worry etched deep lines into her face as she stumbled towards Carmela, her eyes wide with fear.

"Mum!" Carmela's voice was a desperate whisper as she reached out towards the woman who had raised her. But try as she might, she couldn't quite see her mother's face, couldn't grasp the familiarity of her presence.

"Camel, don't worry. Mummy will save you, okay?" The woman's voice trembled with emotion, her arms wrapping protectively around Carmela. But even as she sought solace in her mother's embrace, the sense of impending doom loomed ever closer.

"We'll die if we leave. They will shoot at us, they..." Carmela's words trailed off, drowned out by the sudden eruption of gunshots echoing through the burning house. She pressed her hands tightly over her ears, curling into herself as if to shield herself from the onslaught of violence.

Amidst the chaos, she felt the warmth as the arms of the lady she addressed to as her mother enveloped her, offering a fleeting sense of safety and comfort. But the illusion shattered all too soon.

A searing pain tore through Carmela's chest, ripping a horrified scream from her throat. She looked down, her eyes widening in shock and disbelief as she saw her clothes soaked in crimson. Blood.

"Mum!" The word escaped her lips in a choked sob, her hands trembling as she reached out to the fallen figure beside her. She tried to lift her mother, to pull her to safety, but her efforts were futile against the weight of the tragedy unfolding before her.

As she struggled to make sense of the nightmare, Carmela jolted awake, her body drenched in sweat. Gasping for breath, she found herself on the familiar confines of her bed, the harsh reality of the burning house fading into the shadows of her mind.

Nix looked up from his tablet, concern etched into his features as he noticed her distress. "Carmela, are you okay?" he asked, his voice a soothing balm against the lingering echoes of her nightmare.

Unable to give a response, she stared blankly into the air as tears silently trailed down her face. The room felt heavy with a strange, unsettling tension, as if a shadow of fear had crept in unnoticed.

Seeing her suddenly in tears, Nix stood up from where he was seated, his heart pounding with concern. Without a second thought, he enveloped her in his embrace, hoping to comfort her.

"It's okay, it's all a dream," he whispered soothingly, patting her gently on the back. But there was no response from her, just a chilling silence that seemed to echo in the room.

Slowly detaching himself from the hug, Nix studied her face, his heart skipping a beat at the sight. Her eyes, once filled with light and warmth, were now shallow pools of darkness, an emotion he couldn't quite decipher lurking within them.

"What's going on, Carmela?" His voice was barely a whisper, filled with a mix of confusion and fear.

He watched in disbelief as she remained unmoving, a statue in his arms. The sudden change in her aura sent shivers down his spine, as if an invisible force had gripped her tightly.

"Carmela!" His voice was more urgent now, desperation seeping into his words.

Finally, she seemed to snap out of whatever trance had held her captive. "Mr. Dean... what's happening?" Her voice trembled as she touched her tear-stained face, confusion etched into every line of her features. "Why am I crying?"

Nix's mind raced with a hundred questions, each more terrifying than the last. He searched her face, trying to find any hint of what had caused this sudden breakdown.

"Did you have a nightmare?" His voice was barely a whisper, filled with dread.

Carmela's eyes widened in realization, a flicker of fear dancing across her features. "I... I guess I had one," she stammered, her voice barely above a whisper. "But I can't remember... it used to happen to me a lot when I was at the orphanage. Nightmares that I couldn't recall, but the fear... it always lingered."

A chill ran down Nix's spine as he listened to her words, the air in the room growing colder by the second. Something dark and sinister seemed to loom over them, a presence neither of them could ignore.

"It's nothing to worry about," Carmela said, trying to smile through the fear that still clung to her like a second skin.

But Nix couldn't shake the feeling of unease that settled in the pit of his stomach. Something was terribly wrong, and he knew deep down that whatever haunted Carmela's dreams was far from being just a figment of her imagination.

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I stood before the mirror, my reflection staring back at me with a haunted look, while the echoes of my nightmares still lingered in my ears, sending shivers down my spine. Goosebumps danced along my skin, a tangible reminder of the unsettling dreams that had plagued me.

Once, I had yearned to remember my dreams, eager to unravel their mysteries. Now, however, I found myself desperate to forget them. The dream was a puzzle, a twisted fantasy—how could I have seen and conversed with my mother, a woman I had never known since birth?

"Carmela," Mr. Deans' voice broke through my thoughts, and I hastily ended the call, plastering a bright smile on my face to dispel any worry he might feel.

"I certainly made the right choice. You look stunning in black," he remarked, approaching me from behind and placing his hands gently on my shoulders. His tall figure loomed over me as he held a sparkling diamond necklace before my eyes.

"What do you think? Do you like it?" His gaze met mine through the mirror, and I nodded, offering a small smile that seemed to please him. With care, he fastened the necklace around my neck.

I should have felt joy, excitement at being treated with such care and gifted with such elegance. Yet, an unexplainable anger and pain gnawed at me.

"Why do I feel this way?" I wanted to scream, to demand answers from the depths of my soul.

"I know your hands no longer ache, and you're tired of these gloves. But for now, you must bear them," he murmured, guiding me to the bed and helping me into the long gloves. "I cannot bear to see pity in anyone's eyes when they look at you. Let them stare out of envy or hatred, but all I want is respect for you."

He tied the cloth that covered half of my face, a gesture both protective and suffocating. Taking my hand in his, he led me back to the mirror, his gaze unwavering.

"You are Nix Deans' Woman," he whispered in my ear, sending a shiver down my spine. "The world must tremble when you pass, they must bow at your feet with respect. And if they do not... I will make them."

I gazed into his eyes, searching for truth, for sincerity. Was I truly his woman? The question lingered on the tip of my tongue, begging to be asked. Yet, I hesitated, unable to push aside the intoxicating allure of his words.

Deep down, despite the doubts and uncertainties, I found myself believing his promises like a foolish dreamer caught in a web of romance and suspense. The air crackled with tension, and in that moment, I knew my life would never be the same.

Stepping out of the helicopter onto the cold, crisp air that enveloped us, I found myself wrapped in a luxurious black feather jacket. Glancing to my side, I discovered Mr. Dean, his face half-masked like mine, his eyes gleaming with a hint of mischief.

"This side is much colder, beloved. We wouldn't want you catching a chill," he murmured from behind the mask, drawing me closer to his warmth.

The location of our arrival remained a mystery as I surveyed the scene before me. Men dressed in sleek black suits lined up on either side, heads bowed in deference. The air crackled with an aura of power and respect, leaving me to wonder about the magnitude of Mr. Dean's influence.

"Mr. Dean!" A man's voice called out eagerly, hurrying towards us with a wide grin. "The boss has been eagerly awaiting your arrival," he announced, a smile stretching across his face.

"I highly doubt that. If he truly was, he'd be here to greet me himself," Mr. Dean retorted, his voice carrying an air of nonchalance.

"Who says I haven't?" A smooth, melodious voice interjected from behind the man, and I turned to behold a figure that seemed almost ethereal.

Should I call him an angel? His dark hair was meticulously styled, a few errant strands framing his face. His smile was both warm and enigmatic, his presence exuding an easy confidence mingled with an undeniable allure.

"Hello, beautiful," he greeted me, extending his hand in a gesture of greeting. Before I could react, my palm met his with a sharp slap, causing him to recoil in surprise.

"What was that for?" He exclaimed, half in jest, but Mr. Dean seemed unfazed as he whispered something to the man beside us before fixing his gaze on the newcomer.

"You would do well to greet your sister-in-law with a bit more decorum," Mr. Dean remarked, a hint of steel underlying his words.

"You must be joking," the man began, incredulity flashing in his eyes before Mr. Dean's sharp gaze silenced him.

"Aren't you going to show us inside?" Mr. Dean redirected the conversation, taking the lead as if he owned the place, leaving me to ponder the enigmatic dynamic between the two.

Before we could move, the man who had initially greeted us reappeared, presenting a platter with a pair of comfortable slippers. I was caught off guard as Mr. Dean swiftly knelt before me, removing the elegant heels I had been struggling with and replacing them with the soft slippers.

"Go ahead, I have some pressing matters to discuss with Justin," he murmured, pressing a tender kiss to my forehead before striding off purposefully, leaving me bewildered and intrigued.

What had prompted this sudden act of consideration? When had Mr. Dean noticed my discomfort with the heels?

The dimly lit office held a familiar air of darkness as I glanced around Justin's office, finding it unchanged since my last visit. The tension in the room was palpable, swirling like a malevolent mist.

"What's your relationship with the lady outside? You even helped her change her shoes? Is she the daughter of..."

"Not what you're thinking, and yet exactly what you're thinking," I retorted sharply, my hand casually picking up a pen from the cluttered desk.

"You finally serious with a girl, that's a relief. I thought you were going to die single," Justin's voice cut through the heavy silence, earning a sharp glare from me.

"I didn't come here to chitchat with you. Where's what I asked for?" I demanded, my tone brooking no argument. He gestured towards the ominous brown envelope resting on the table.

"Did you offend them to the extent they had to blow up your house?" Justin's voice was cold, the mention of the recent attack on my home sending a chill down my spine. I returned to the papers in front of me, already braced for such reprisals.

"Are you planning on going back to your old ways?" His words hung heavily in the stifling air, the atmosphere suddenly suffocating. I ignored the weight of his question, focusing on the task at hand, though I could sense his frustration mounting.

"Listen, brother. Though I am part of the Dalton family, I never involve myself in their affairs. Especially not after what they did to your betrothed, my little sister," Justin's voice held a bitter edge, the pain of the past echoing in his words.

"I doubt the word 'family' means anything to them, considering how easily they turned a five-year-old into a heartless killing machine..."

"Rumors said she isn't dead," I interjected, and Justin nodded, taking a seat opposite mine.

"So I've heard. I've made my inquiries, but the truth is elusive. Everyone seems to have a story about her. I've watched her grow from afar, and I need to find her," Justin's voice held a note of determination.

"But what if you don't? What if she truly died, as the rumors suggest?" I pressed, watching as Justin fell into deep thought.

"I doubt she's dead. The day she disappeared, the anger in her eyes was unmistakable. When she confronted our grandfather about her father's death, I saw fear in his eyes. She was just a child, yet they feared her," Justin looked up at me, his gaze intense.

"So, where is the human assassin machine, my betrothed, your sister?" I demanded, pushing the file back across the table. "She's gone for good, Justin. Focus on yourself. And if she's not dead, then perhaps one day she'll return, as you say. For now, get me an excuse to meet with your grandfather," I stated firmly.

"It's no use talking to you. There's a family and business party in a month. I'll send you the invitation," Justin sighed, and I stood, ready to leave. But his next words stopped me in my tracks.

"Sofia..."

"How dare you?!" A sudden scream pierced the heavy atmosphere, and I turned to see Sofia, my first uncle's daughter, livid with rage. Beside her stood Carmela, cool and composed, a mask of indifference hiding her true emotions.

"Excuse me? Are you mute or something? You've ruined my dress. How do you plan on compensating me?" Sofia's voice was sharp, filled with entitlement. I held Justin back, eager to see how Carmela would handle the confrontation.

"I'm talking to you!" Sofia roared, her hand raised as if to strike, but it was caught midway by Carmela's firm grip.

"Isn't it obvious that I don't want to speak to you? Why do you insist on crossing boundaries?" Carmela's voice was ice-cold, her grip unwavering as Sofia trembled in her grasp.

"Why don't you all get the message that I'm in no mood to speak? You bumped into me, ruined my clothes, and now you demand compensation?" Carmela's tone dripped with disdain, her eyes boring into Sofia's with a chilling intensity.

"Listen, girl. You shouldn't start what you can't finish. Who knows, I might just be the one to fulfill your dying wish of meeting the man above the skies," Carmela's words hung in the air like a sinister warning, leaving Sofia speechless.

"Why didn't you tell me my sister-in-law could be this scary? You're both a perfect match," Justin quipped, a smirk playing on his lips.

Even I was taken aback by Carmela's steely resolve. My beloved, usually so gentle and quiet, revealed a side of herself I had never seen before—a side as dark and unyielding as the shadows that danced around us.

"I've sent you some photos. Get me every detail you can before I leave," I instructed Justin, my mind already focused on the next steps.

"And when are you leaving?" Justin asked, his voice tinged with concern.

"Tomorrow evening," I replied, my gaze unwavering.

As I made my way out of the office, the darkness seemed to follow, clinging to me like a shroud. The air was heavy with foreboding, the echoes of the confrontation still ringing in my ears.

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I strode away from the unsettling encounter with the lady, her instability leaving me bewildered. A surge of frustration welled within me, a sensation of suffocation enveloping my senses in this stifling atmosphere.

"I wonder what she thinks of herself, just because she arrived with Mr. Dean," a voice whispered, halting my steps. I remained still, a weight settling in the pit of my stomach.

"Well, it doesn't matter what relationship she claims with Mr. Dean. The truth remains—he's betrothed to the daughter of the Dalton family. She's simply wasting her time," another voice chimed in, their words like a dagger to my heart. I struggled to swallow, my throat constricting, denying even the intake of saliva.

"Their words shouldn't hurt," I murmured to myself, fighting back the tears threatening to spill. "We've never been equals; our relationship is that of master and servant," I reminded myself, the bitter truth stinging my heart. But why did the pain cut so deep? Why were my own words failing to console me?

He had called me his woman, promising to ensure the world respected me. I had dared to believe him, to trust his words. Yet now, I felt a sense of betrayal creeping in, suffocating me.

"Miss, allow me to escort you to your room," the young man, introduced to me by Mr. Dean as the butler—approached, breaking through the haze of my thoughts. I could only manage a nod, blinking back tears.

As the elevator doors slid open, we entered, the weight of my turmoil pressing down on me. "You may leave now," Mr. Dean's voice, the source of my turmoil, filled the small space, and I averted my gaze. Peeking from behind, I couldn't deny the truth in what others had said. He was a gentleman of class and standards, while I... I was nothing. His betrothed must surely be of the same ilk, and I was a mere fleeting fancy.

"You must be wondering about this building," his voice pierced the heavy silence, though I wished for nothing more than to drown out the unnecessary information. "Others may call it a hotel, but I prefer to think of it as a guest house, with fewer rooms," he continued, his words falling on deaf ears as I stood there, a statue of pretense.

A sigh of relief escaped my lips as the elevator doors opened, revealing a floor with only three rooms. "Only Justin and I have access to this floor," he explained, swiping his card to open the door. I followed numbly, devoid of the usual thrill of adventure.

Standing in the room, I fought against the surge of emotions threatening to overwhelm me. Mr. Dean's scent surrounded me as his arms enveloped my form, chin resting upon my shoulder. "Are you alright?" his voice, laced with concern, pierced through the walls I had built around myself.

I wanted to scream, to demand answers to the questions tearing through my mind. Was I truly just an object to while away his time, as others had suggested? Was I simply a distraction until his betrothed took her place?

With clenched fists, I stepped away, creating a necessary distance. "I..." the words caught in my throat, a lump forming as tears welled in my eyes. "Bathroom," I managed to choke out before fleeing, the sound of my own sobs echoing in the sterile silence.

At least I hadn't fallen for him, I told myself, seeking solace in the reassurance. I was merely growing accustomed to his presence—a temporary phase I vowed to overcome.

I released a weary sigh, my gaze drifting lazily to the shower, its sole purpose reduced to a mere water source. My feet seemed anchored in place, unwilling to carry me forward, as I pondered the state of my existence.

With a sense of lethargy enveloping me, I made my way towards the door, enveloping myself in the oversized towel that had been idly waiting for me. Standing beneath the stream of water, I wrapped it around my form.

Returning to the room, my eyes fell upon the clothes neatly laid out on the bed, prompting a fleeting thought of whether I truly needed to don them. "You have no choice," I muttered inwardly, reaching for the hair dryer on the dressing table.

I had successfully evaded any contact with Mr. Dean for the past twenty-four hours, and the prospect of continued solitude brought a sense of relief. Observing his busy schedule, I found solace in the knowledge that my recent change in demeanor would likely go unquestioned.

Without delay, I slipped into a black, free-flowing skirt, its hem reaching just above my knees with delicate pleats at the edges. Paired with a white, off-shoulder, body-hugging top, I opted for simplicity, eschewing makeup and instead donning the provided mask along with black boots.

Tucking my already sleek, ironed hair behind my ear, I sauntered out of the room and into the garden, where vibrant flowers bloomed. Though modest in size, the garden exuded a wealth of inspiration, and I couldn't help but envy the autonomy of those delicate blooms.

"They seem to have captured your thoughts," a feminine voice interrupted my reverie. Glancing to my side, I found a woman clad in a fitted white dress and dark shades, an air of sophistication and grace enveloping her.

"Your presence here is new to me," she remarked, extending a hand gracefully. "I'm Ella." I accepted her hand with a polite nod, her perceptive gaze seeming to penetrate beneath my calm exterior.

"Your demeanor exudes tranquility, yet I sense an underlying turmoil," she observed, her eyes tracing the path of the flowers. In that moment, thoughts of Mr. Dean's betrothed flooded my mind, her elegance mirroring that of the lady beside me.

"Could his betrothed possess the same air of class and presence as this lady?" I pondered silently.

"Miss, the boss requests your presence in the car," the butler's interruption brought me back to the present, and I nodded in acknowledgment.

"It was a pleasure meeting you," I managed to say, preparing to take my leave. However, Ella's parting words gave me pause. "I hope our paths cross again, and that we may become good friends," she said warmly, leaving me with a lingering sense of unease.

"I hope to avoid such encounters," I wanted to retort, but kept my words locked within, the reminder of our differing social standings weighing heavily.

"Sister," a familiar voice called out, causing me to halt in my tracks. Turning, I found Justin approaching with a warm smile.

"I apologize for not having the chance to speak with you properly earlier. Nix had me occupied," he explained, presenting a small box. "This is a gift from me to you. Please keep it safe."

I stared blankly at the box in my hand, then back at him, his awkward smile breaking the silence. "Awkward, isn't it? Calling you 'sister-in-law' felt odd, so I've decided to call you 'sister.' I hope that's alright, and..."

"Boss," a voice interrupted, and Justin let out a frustrated sigh. "I'll make sure to visit soon," he assured, patting my hair before departing, leaving me speechless.

Must everyone look down upon me? Why did he pat my head as though I were his blood sister or a pet? Anger simmered within me as I made my way towards the waiting car, with the butler at my side expected

I scoffed upon reading Ken's message, fully expecting the urgent call for a board meeting following news of the old man's plans. Soon, the AN Group would be engulfed in turmoil—a spectacle to witness indeed.

"The helicopter is prepared, and I've instructed the butler to escort her there instead of using the car... Also, here's what you requested," he handed me a small bow containing a tightly sealed vial of yoghurt before I made my way to the rooftop.

Entering the elevator, I took my place beside Carmela, who had been unusually silent during our stay here. "You should have this at least, to ward off any potential stomach

troubles," I offered her the yoghurt, which she accepted without a word, contrary to her usual demeanor.

"What could have caused her to act this way?" I pondered to myself, only to be interrupted by the beep of my phone.

"It's all set," the message read, and a grin spread across my face as I saw the pieces falling into place. I could only hope that all four of my uncles were prepared, for the downfall of the Aron family was imminent.

A twinge of pity for the old man, despite his place in the family, flickered within me. Nevertheless, nothing brought greater satisfaction than watching one's enemies turn against each other. Yet, would it be as straightforward as it seemed?

My encounters with the third and fourth uncles had revealed their incompetence, making me anticipate no retaliation from them. However, the first and last uncles were akin to silent, cunning snakes preferring to lurk in the shadows while others took the blame for their misdeeds.

Chapter 25: 25

The room fell into an uneasy silence as the announcement echoed through the hallowed halls of AN Group's boardroom. Twenty board members, representing decades of dedication to the company, stood aghast as the chairman's words sank in. They couldn't fathom allowing the reins of their beloved business to fall into the hands of an inexperienced upstart.

"We can't let an immature businessman take over!" the sentiment rippled through the room like a wave.

"If you're so keen on having your grandson join the company, why not start him off as an intern?" suggested one board member, the rest nodding in agreement.

"And why not consider Charles, Andrew, Thomas, or Steve for the presidency? They've poured their souls into AN Group," another added, the urgency palpable in the air.

However, before the murmurs could escalate, the heavy door creaked open, and a chill swept through the room like an omen. A figure strode in, exuding an aura of confidence that sent shivers down the spines of the board members. The phones began to beep erratically, and the temperature inexplicably dropped.

"I apologize for my tardiness, esteemed board members. Allow me to introduce myself," the newcomer's voice cut through the tension like a knife. "I am Nix Dean, and as of this moment, your new president."

"Nix Dean... the owner of ND?" one of the board members faltered, disbelief etched on their faces.

Nix's smirk widened, a glint of mischief in his eyes. "Ah, so you've heard of me. Well, consider it a pleasure."

The room remained eerily silent, the weight of the unexpected turn of events settling heavily upon the stunned board members. Nix took a seat beside the aging chairman, his presence casting a shadow over the once bustling room.

"Anyone opposed to my presidency?" Nix's voice cut through the silence, a lazy drawl that held an unspoken challenge.

Four hands rose hesitantly, belonging to Charles, Andrew, Thomas, and Steve—loyal stalwarts of AN Group. The rest of the board members averted their gaze, a collective resignation settling upon them.

"Four against twenty. Majority rules," Nix declared with a half-smile, rising to his feet. "Since I am now the president of AN Group, let us not waste any time. I expect a detailed financial report on my desk by day's end."

With a dismissive wave, he continued, "And as for the rest of you..." His gaze swept the room, assessing each member with cool detachment. "I suggest you start thinking of retirement. The company is in the midst of a financial crisis, and I expect solutions on my desk within the hour. Otherwise, feel free to exit through the company's doors."

Leaving the board members in a stunned silence, Nix made his exit, his purposeful stride echoing in the now-hushed room. The chairman, once a figure of authority, watched in silence as the younger man took charge, a mix of apprehension and resignation clouding his expression.

Outside the boardroom, chaos ensued among the remaining members. Thomas' anger boiled over, Steve maintained a cool façade, and Charles found himself at a loss for words. The once unshakeable foundation of AN Group now trembled under the weight of uncertainty.

"You've heard him, there's no time to waste" The old man's words hung in the air like a heavy fog, chilling the room despite the warmth of the afternoon sun filtering through the windows. As he left the meeting hall, his parting words echoed with an unsettling finality.

"Do you think by making him the president of this company you're doing well to my father's legacy?" Charles's voice cut through the silence, his eyes hard with unresolved tension. "No matter what you do, he'll never be a part of this family."

To Charles's surprise, the old man turned with a sharp laugh, devoid of any warmth. "Do you think I want him to be a part of this toxic gang you call a family?" His words dripped

with a venomous edge, sending a shiver down Charles's spine. "Nix is better off on his own. Worry about yourself, Charles. Who knows, you might be the first target on his list of revenge for the years of turmoil you've caused him."

The weight of the old man's words settled heavily in the room as he strode away, leaving Charles to grapple with the unsettling implications. "Bringing Nix into this company won't only rectify my brother's mistake," the old man muttered to himself, his voice carrying a haunting certainty, "but it will usher in brighter days for AN Group."

Meanwhile, Thomas's anger boiled over, his frustration palpable in the charged atmosphere. "What the hell came over you all? Couldn't you speak up? Oppose him?" His voice reverberated off the walls, but the silence that followed was deafening.

"Stop screaming like a mad dog, Thomas," Steve interjected lazily, rising to his feet. "He's our president now, whether we like it or not. Let's get back to work."

With a heavy heart and a sense of foreboding, Thomas watched as the board members filed out, their footsteps echoing hollowly in the now somber room.

In the president's office, Ken found Nix buried in a sea of paperwork, the intensity of his focus almost palpable. A small smile tugged at Ken's lips, despite the tension that hung thick in the air.

"Pulling an all-nighter already?" Ken quipped, taking a seat opposite Nix. The lack of response from Nix spoke volumes, his attention consumed by the documents before him.

"What about ND? How do you plan on managing both companies?" Ken pressed, his curiosity piqued by the enigmatic situation unfolding before them.

Nix's response was cryptic as ever, his gaze fixed on the papers. "Isn't that why I left you there?"

The air crackled with suspense as Ken ventured further, probing for answers. "What do you plan to do with all this information?"

Nix finally looked up, his eyes gleaming with a hidden purpose. "You'll find out tomorrow. Cross-check those papers," he instructed, a sense of urgency underlying his words.

As Ken sifted through the documents, his mind raced with questions. "I've placed your suit in the hotel. Do you need a refill of your pills?" he asked, concern lacing his tone.

Nix's response was unexpected. "I haven't used the ones you gave me," he replied casually, a playful smile dancing on his lips.

Ken's confusion only deepened. "You mean you've been sleeping without them? Despite the doctor's warning?" he pressed, searching for answers.

"I haven't needed them," Nix retorted, his attention already drifting back to the documents before him.

A teasing smile crossed Ken's lips as he probed further. "Without pills, huh? Must be beside Carmela then?" he teased, trying to lighten the heavy atmosphere.

But Nix's lack of reaction only added to the mystery. "We just had ice cream," he replied, his tone enigmatic.

Ken couldn't help but wonder at the change in his friend. "Ice cream? In the cold north, beside the sea? Are you sure you're okay?" he questioned, his eyebrows raised in concern.

Nix's response was a smirk that sent a chill down Ken's spine. "I don't eat ice cream," he stated cryptically, leaving Ken to ponder the unsettling turn of events.

As the sun set on another day at AN Group, the air was thick with unanswered questions and a sense of impending change. Nix Dean had taken the helm, but what lay ahead for the company remained shrouded in mystery and suspense.

I gazed at the projector, then shifted my attention to the presenter. Curiously, I found every word he uttered oddly amusing. From the onset of the presentation to its conclusion, it seemed as though he was delivering one enormous jest tailored just for me.

"Is that all?" I inquired, my expression unwavering as I observed him visibly tremble before nodding in response.

"So, you're attempting to convey that AN Group has consistently achieved a fifty percent profit margin over the past two years without any losses. How, then, did it suddenly plunge into the financial turmoil it faces today?" The room fell into an eerie silence, with most faces bearing a somber expression, while others seemed utterly perplexed. "I distinctly recall requesting a comprehensive report, encompassing all of the subsidiaries. Is this the extent of it?"

"That's the report you requested. We can't help if you find it unsatisfactory," my first uncle interjected, a mischievous glint dancing in my eyes.

"Unsatisfactory, you say? Very well, let us proceed with the report as presented. According to this, AN Group should not be encountering any difficulties. So, what transpired?" I pressed.

"If you adhere to the laws of business, you'll understand that everything is inherently unpredictable..."

"And yet, these same laws provide remedies for such unforeseen circumstances," I countered, before bending down to retrieve the files I had pored over the entire night. "These documents contain the intricate financial details of AN Group. Anticipating this turn of events, I procured them myself in advance." A smile crept across my face as I turned towards the financial department. "I wager none of you relish your current tasks. Nevertheless, I shall grant you all one final opportunity, being the magnanimous person that I am." Rising from my chair, still smiling, I continued, "I no longer require a detailed financial report. Instead, I demand a comprehensive loss report for all four AN Group subsidiaries on my desk within the next two hours... and take note, any errors or omissions will result in your voluntary departure from these premises."

"You can't threaten the staff in such a manner!" my first uncle exclaimed, his voice bordering on a shout, to which I simply scoffed.

"A threat? Did I threaten? Listen carefully. I expect those reports on my desk within the next 59 minutes. Failure to comply will result in the loss of your jobs, and each of you will face charges of embezzlement... Mr. Charles Aron, this is what a true threat entails. You are all dismissed," I

declared, maintaining an unwavering gaze with him until everyone filed out of the room.

Chapter 26: 26

I watched intently as the old man swirled his glass, the amber liquid inside catching the dim light of the room. With a practiced motion, he brought it to his nose, took a sip, and a victorious smirk crept onto his weathered face.

"You swore never to set foot here," he reminded me, my gaze unwavering as I held his stare, waiting for his response.

"You insisted on signing the papers here," I retorted, not breaking eye contact as he let out a small, wry laugh.

"True, true," he conceded, setting down the glass before reaching for the papers I had brought with me. "Your uncles are about to tear down the house. I doubt I'll have a peaceful night's rest at this rate."

"And I assure you, I wouldn't give them a peaceful day either. What have you and your grandkids been up to?" I inquired casually, picking up the pen beside me. I noticed a subtle stiffness in his posture.

"Um, nothing much. How's Carmela?" he asked, trying to shift the conversation away from any uncomfortable topics.

"She's fine," I replied, my tone cool. "Tell Luna to stop whatever she's doing." I scoffed, the implication hanging in the air, and saw him stare at me with a mix of surprise and concern.

"Telling the media that Carmela is my girlfriend wouldn't ensure her safety, but put her in more trouble," I stated matter-of-factly, picking up the documents that had brought me here. With a nod, I made my way towards the exit, intent on leaving this uncomfortable encounter behind me. Yet fate seemed to have other plans, as I walked straight into my four uncles, or as I preferred to call them, the foolish wolf pack.

"Who do we have here?" my fourth uncle sneered, but I ignored his taunt, focused on making my exit. However, it seemed they weren't keen on letting me leave so easily.

"He swore never to set foot here, yet here he is. I wonder how he plans on ruining AN Group... after all, a son of a driver would always remain the son of a driver— all talk and no action," my so-called uncle mocked, the words cutting through the air like a blade. I halted in my tracks, my temper flaring as I turned to face them.

"A house, you call this?" I challenged, my voice steady despite the anger simmering beneath the surface. "I may be young and inexperienced, as you all claim, but even I know this isn't what a home looks like—crowded and devoid of any real privacy. You should call it what it truly is, a hotel, where you've all decided against having your own roofs, content to live under your father's roof with your families, without an ounce of shame."

"Watch your words, boy," my first uncle growled, his voice low and dangerous.

"A driver's son, you call me?" I continued, feeling the heat of anger coursing through my veins. "Well, this driver's son has achieved more than all four of you combined ever have in your entire lives. So, you better watch your tongues when speaking to me."

"At least you admit to being the son of that gutter rat who stained the legacy of my father by deceiving my sister," my second uncle interjected, his words dripping with venom.

"The same sister you all brutally murdered?" I shot back, my fists clenched at my sides. "I, Nix Dean, would never deny the fact of being the son of Nathan Dean. You call my father a gutter rat, but he is the reason you all still have your heads attached to your bodies." I scoffed coldly, not breaking eye contact with my first uncle.

"What was it you call yourselves? High-class society," I mocked, the bitterness evident in my tone. "You claim to belong to the high-class society, yet you remain ignorant of the true figures of the so-called elite."

The vibration of my phone suddenly interrupted the tense atmosphere, and a brilliant smile spread across my face.

"I'll leave you all to your worthless lives, dear uncles," I declared victoriously, resuming my steps towards the exit. The air crackled with tension as I made my way out, leaving behind the echoes of our heated exchange.

I parked my car at the front of the rusty steel gate, and a rush of unpleasant memories flooded my mind. Memories not truly unpleasant, but reminders of a past I desperately wished to forget. The metal groaned as the gate opened, revealing the warehouse before me, a sight both familiar and haunting.

All twenty members of the prestigious AN group were on their knees, practically begging for my attention. It was almost comical, and I fought the urge to laugh.

"Lieutenant, what shall we do with them?" My right-hand man approached, and I tilted my head, contemplating how to handle these relics of the past. Taking a seat on the worn couch, I gestured towards the board members.

"Remove their blindfolds," I sighed, picking up a pen from my jacket pocket. "Finally, a proper AN group board meeting, wouldn't you agree? I've even provided you all with number badges for our voting on the next AN group president."

Leisurely twirling the pen, I continued, "Should anyone oppose my presidency, please, feel free to object." My hand slipped into my jacket pocket, retrieving a gun that I calmly placed on the table before us.

"Board member eight, choose wisely. Remember, even if you manage to escape me, your father-in-law and wife won't be so forgiving." I flashed them a gentle smile. "Now, those against me, rise."

"I wholeheartedly accept you as our president!" They chorused, relief evident on their faces. A smirk tugged at my lips.

"Truly? Not because I hold your family hostage or threaten your secrets?" I raised an eyebrow, and they shook their heads fervently.

"Very well, in light of my good mood, I'll release you and your families. But remember, never cross me." I warned softly before making my way to the exit.

"Ah, one more thing..." I paused, turning to face my loyal men. "Your services are no longer required." With a swift motion, I dispatched the spy sent by those who had set my house ablaze. The board members trembled, and I reassured them, "As long as you stay in my good graces, you needn't fear."

As I settled into my car, a glance in the rearview mirror revealed a chilling sight—my reflection, grinning back at me. While I looked back at it with a sigh.

"Enjoying yourself?" I asked, meeting the wild gaze of my alter ego.

"Somewhat. Though not as much as before, it's bearable," it replied with a manic grin.

"Did the one I shot notice?" It inquired, exasperated.

"With your verbosity? Undoubtedly. But now, let me be," I retorted just to see him refuse.

"Why?" I raised an eyebrow.

"Since leaving that mental hospital, you've kept me caged. I am a part of you that craves freedom," he whined.

"If you stop driving me to madness at the sight of blood, perhaps I'll consider it," I bargained, our eyes locked in a silent battle of wills.

"Fair enough. I trust you to keep your word. But first, let me see her," he pleaded, a hint of desperation in its voice.

"Who?" I asked warily, dreading the answer.

"Carmela. You've called her beloved, and if I am you and you are me, then she is also my beloved," he explained eagerly.

"Showing her who I truly am would send her running," I cautioned.

"Just a glimpse, then I'll retreat," he promised, eyes shining with longing.

Frustration coursed through me at this side of myself that was revealed in violence and now professed love. Could it be genuine, or was it a trick of the mind?

"She might truly run away if I go besker" I reasoned, starting the engine.

"I'll risk it," it insisted, a fervent hope in its eyes.

As the car roared to life, I wondered what awaited me whether the love

he spoke of, madness, or a precarious balance of both as I navigated the shadows within.

The road stretched out like a dark ribbon, empty, humming beneath the tires. I could almost hear the night breathe.

"She won't sleep tonight," I murmured to the windshield. "Not until I return... and yet, she never really sleeps, does she?"

My fingers tapped the steering wheel, restless. Always waiting. Always watching.

"You think I don't see it, don't you?" I exhaled sharply, eyes fixed ahead. "The way you pull at me. The way you whisper when it's quiet like this."

A laugh escaped me dry, and humorless. "Carmela doesn't know that part of me. Not yet. She thinks I'm just... Nix. But you.." my gaze flicked to the mirror, "you've been here longer than anyone."

The streetlights cut through the dark, one by one, each one feeling like a countdown.

"I wonder," I whispered, "what happens the day she meets you... face to face. Will she stay? Or will she run?"

Silence. Only the hum of the engine and the steady rhythm of my heart.

"She wouldn't understand," I muttered finally, "but maybe... maybe she's the only one who could."

Chapter 27: 27

"Following our recent evaluation, it has been determined that Nix Dean is not yet considered completely stable. However, at this time, he is deemed to be mentally sound." The words echoed in my mind as I read the report for what felt like the hundredth time. My hands trembled, a knot of worry tightening in my chest as I dropped the report onto the table.

Then, I picked up the accompanying letter. "Run! It's either you die at my hands or at the hands of the one you feel the safest with," it ominously warned. A chill ran down my spine, and I unconsciously let the letter slip from my fingers, my heart racing.

I couldn't shake the sense of unease as I stood, suddenly aware of every creak in the house. Making my way towards my bedroom window, I scanned the darkness outside, half-expecting to catch a glimpse of the mysterious messenger. But there was no one, just the quiet of the night.

How had they gotten in? Despite the tight security, my room was a sanctuary high above the ground. It seemed impossible.

"No, it can't be an insider," I muttered to myself, thinking of the fear that seemed to grip everyone in Mr. Dean's presence.

"Carmela! Carmela, come downstairs!" Xavier's voice rang out, a note of urgency piercing through the air. My heart leaped into my throat, and I swallowed hard, my hands trembling as I made my way down the stairs.

"Car... oh, there you are," Xavier said, relief evident in his voice as he pulled me towards the couch. His smile was wide, but it did little to ease the tension that coiled within me.

"Do you remember your painting at the art exhibition?" he asked, raising an eyebrow. I nodded slowly, unsure of where he was going with this.

"Sponsors from Paris have decided to take the owner of the painting under their care," he explained, still smiling. "They'll sponsor the painter until they've earned their degree and offer them a full-time position."

I blinked, the news sinking in slowly. "You still don't get it?" Xavier teased, but before I could respond, Luna swept into the room, holding a large brown envelope.

"Baby, you're going to Paris," she announced with a grin, tapping my cheek affectionately. It took a moment for the words to register, and when they did, time seemed to stand still around me.

"Ahhh!" I screamed, jumping to my feet as the realization hit me like a ton of bricks.

"Yes, girl, you're about to fly higher," Luna said, enveloping me in a hug. But our celebration was short-lived as Mr. Dean entered the room, his expression dark and stormy.

"N..." Xavier began, but Mr. Dean raised a hand, silencing him as he made his way towards the stairs. A chill swept through the room, and I couldn't shake the feeling of foreboding that settled over me.

"He's in a foul mood, someone ruined his car," Ken's voice broke through my thoughts as he entered the room, a smile tugging at his lips. "I heard someone screaming, what's going on?"

Luna rushed to tell him the news, but I found my gaze drawn back to the stairs, wondering what was happening behind the closed door of Mr. Dean's room.

"Congratulations, Carmela, I always knew you were smart," Ken said, pulling me into a warm hug. But my mind was elsewhere, consumed by worry for Mr. Dean.

As we sat down to dinner, my eyes kept flickering towards the stairs, waiting for Mr. Dean to make an appearance.

"He won't come for dinner," Luna said, her voice distant as she focused on her plate. "He never does when he's in a bad mood."

I nodded, my appetite forgotten as I pushed my food around my plate. The worry gnawed at me, growing with each passing minute.

"Carmela, could you please take a glass of milk to Nix when you're done?" Ken asked, breaking the silence. "I would have sent one of the maids, but I doubt they'd be able to get past the door. But I think he'll let you in."

I looked up at him, a question in my eyes.

"I mean, he mentioned something about ice cream," Ken explained, a small smile playing on his lips. "If you were able to convince him to... I mean, never mind if you don't want to."

My cheeks burned at the mention of ice cream, memories flooding back from our time on the yacht. Without a word, I stood and hurried to the kitchen, grabbing a glass of milk before heading towards Mr. Dean's room.

I knocked softly on the partially open door, but there was no response. With a growing sense of unease, I pushed the door open and stepped into the darkened room.

"Mr. Dean?" I called, my voice barely a whisper. Still, there was no response. I fumbled for the light switch, relief flooding through me as the room was bathed in light.

And then I saw him, wrapped tightly in his blankets, shivering uncontrollably. "Mr. Dean," I said, louder this time, reaching out to wake him.

But he didn't stir, lost in a troubled sleep. My heart hammered in my chest as I placed the glass of milk on the bedside table, a sense of dread settling over me.

"What happened to you?" I whispered, the worry and concern weighing heavily on me as I watched him sleep, oblivious to the turmoil that surrounded him.

"Beloved!" His urgent whisper caressed my ear as he swiftly caught hold of my hand, pulling me closer to him. I could feel the warmth of his body as he rested his head on my shoulder, a mixture of romance and worry hanging thick in the air around us.

"I'll..." His voice trailed off, interrupted by a cough that wracked his body. "Just sit like this with me, I'll be fine," he managed to say, his words barely audible yet laced with a plea.

Worry flashed across my face as I glanced up at him, seeing the feverish flush on his cheeks. "Mr. Dean, I don't think..." My protest was cut short as I turned to find him already unconscious, his body limp in my arms. A heavy sigh escaped me, heart pounding with concern.

Not wanting his condition to escalate further, I gently laid him on the bed, the suspense of the moment hanging heavy in the air. With a sense of urgency, I rushed to the kitchen to fetch a bowl of cool water, thankful that no one else was downstairs to witness this scene.

As I nursed Mr. Dean back to consciousness, tenderly wiping his forehead, I couldn't help but wonder what troubles plagued his mind. Tracing the contours of his jawline with my fingertips, a soft smile tugged at the corner of my lips.

Indeed, he was a man of exquisite beauty, a man any woman would go to great lengths to have. But as my grandmother always said, "99% of stories gossiped are lies, and only one percent is the truth."

"What is your truth, Nix Dean?" I whispered softly, my gaze locked on his face, searching for answers in the depths of his features.

"Could the rumors about you be true? Could those scandalous reports truly belong to you?" The questions hung in the air, unanswered, leaving me torn between the romance that enveloped us, the worry for his well-being, and the suspense of the mysteries that surrounded him.

I cupped his hands in mine still wondering what to do about the doubt I had built up but came to the conclusion to neither think nor worry about the rumors

If they were true then I doubt a man of principles like Mr Dean would go out of his way to break his principles.

I went back to wiping his forehead with the wet towel and unconsciously fell into slumber..

"Carmela" I could hear someone faintly call but I felt too lazy to open my eyes

"Carmela" they called again and I opened my eyes to find Mr Dean staring at me but my eyes felt too heavy for me to keep them open

"How are you feeling?" I managed to ask with my eyes closed not expecting an answer before drift away back to dream land.

Chapter 28: 28

The soft glow of dawn filtered through the curtains, casting a gentle light over the room. I slowly opened my eyes, disoriented by the unfamiliar warmth against my forehead. A piece of cloth lay there, making me feel uncomfortable. Attempting to lift my hand to remove it, I found it held firmly by someone else.

Turning to my side, I discovered Carmela, her delicate frame seated on the floor, head nestled against the bed, her hand clasping mine even in slumber. A rush of conflicting emotions swept through me irritated at the intrusion yet I felt warmth at her presence.

"Carmela," I whispered softly, trying to rouse her, but she merely shifted, a faint smile gracing her lips in her sleep. "How are you feeling?" she murmured, her voice filled with sleep.

I smiled, watching her cute reaction, checking the time to find it just past five in the morning, I slowly extracted my hand from hers, helping her settle back on the bed. Ensuring her comfort before rising from the bed, my neck, which had throbbed with pain the day before, now felt surprisingly better. "They actually tried drugging me," I muttered with amusement, remembering the needle's sting as I stepped out of my car in the basement.

Initially, I thought I could manage, but my vision had begun to fade. I staggered back to my car, only to be met with an accident before reaching home. The drugs' effects still lingered, and the pain still crushing through my veins.

Leaning against the bathroom wall, I sighed, the weight of my situation pressing down on me. I wrapped myself in a nearby robe, as I glanced at my reflection in the mirror, my skin marred with intricate, terrifying drawings. "Would she be scared of these?" I wondered, as I resigned back to wearing long sleeves.

As I dressed, the phone beside the bed vibrated, jolting me from my thoughts. "Hello?" I answered, greeted by ominous silence.

"Return it, or I won't just come after you," a voice hissed, sending a shiver down my spine, "but everything you care about."

I scoffed, defiance burning within me. "Go for it, then, if you dare," I challenged, the weight of the threat only fueling my determination. They had awakened a demon, and now they would have to deal with him.

But for now, there was only one priority. Turning to Carmela, serene in her sleep, I climbed back into bed, pulling the blanket around us and I watched as she stirred, instinctively snuggling into my arms.

"I'll send you to a safer zone by any means," I whispered, pressing a soft kiss to her lips, feeling her smile against my own.

"Nix," she murmured, and I could feel my eye smile watching her closed once, as a contented smile danced on her lips. I gently sent back the strands of hair that laid on her face as curiosity piqued by her request.

"Do it again," she implored, her pout playful.

"You mean this?" I teased, leaning in for another kiss, her response a smile that hinted at hidden depths beneath her calm exterior. "Go back to sleep, beloved," my smile not leaving my lips as I watch her every expression. Feeling the weight of exhaustion settle

over me I took the space beside her before slowly drifting into slumber with her warmth beside me.

I knew that as long as she was safe, nothing else mattered. The world could fall into chaos, but I had to protect her with everything I had.

A persistent knocking roused me from sleep, and I groaned, slipping out of bed with care not to disturb Carmela. Opening the door, I found Ken

"You're still asleep?" he exclaimed, and I couldn't help but roll my eyes.

"Why didn't you leave after dropping me off?" I questioned, taking a seat on the couch.

"I did, but I came back early to update you on the meeting details," he explained, a torrent of words spilling forth as I covered my mouth with the back of my palm

"Shh," I hushed him, nodding towards Carmela, still lost in peaceful slumber. "She's resting." I added regaining my composure as he followed me back into my room, he suddenly launched into the day's plans like a programmed robot, but I interrupted, my mind already made up before listening to him "Postpone the local investors' meeting," I instructed firmly, "and the flight. I won't leave until Carmela is on her way to Paris."

Ken stared at me, incredulous, questions swirling in his eyes. "What do you mean, postpone? This project is crucial! And why stay until Carmela leaves? She hasn't even signed.."

I cut him off with a wave of my hand, frustration bubbling beneath the surface. Picking up a pen, I clicked it open and tossed it towards him, the glass shattering as it hit the floor.

"I wish I did hit you" I muttered, standing up decisively. "As for her passport and arrangements, it's all taken care of. Book the earliest flight to Paris."

A moment of silence hung between us before Ken finally nodded, understanding dawning in his eyes. "So, you're her mysterious sponsor?" he ventured, and I met his gaze evenly.

"Please, close the door on your way out," I said, exhaustion tugging at me once more. As he left, I sank back onto the couch.

Waking to the familiar scent enveloping me, I instinctively knew it was him beside me..Mr. Dean. Despite my inner turmoil, there was an undeniable allure in our closeness, a tension that lingered between us like an unspoken secret.

Though our words were few, our silent exchanges spoke volumes, weaving a tapestry of longing and desire that neither of us dared to acknowledge. In the quiet moments, his presence was both comforting and suffocating, a paradox I couldn't unravel.

No matter how much I tried to convince myself otherwise, our paths were destined to diverge, leading to separate destinies that never seemed to align. With a heavy heart, I attempted to slip away from his grasp, unwilling to disturb his peaceful slumber. But his voice shattered the tranquility, sending a shiver down my spine.

"Where do you think you're going?" His inquiry hung in the air, laden with an intensity that rendered me motionless, his eyes boring into mine with unwavering scrutiny.

"I... I..." I stammered, feeling a rush of warmth as he sat up, his gaze locking onto mine with an intensity that made my heart race.

"You?" His voice was a gentle coaxing, pulling me closer until I found myself nestled in his arms, seated on his lap.

"When were you planning to tell me about your trip to Paris?" His fingers lifted my chin, guiding my gaze to meet his, but I couldn't hold his gaze for long, feeling a blush creeping up my cheeks.

Trying to avoid his playful eyes, I was met with a knowing smile that sent a shiver down my spine. With a deft movement, he opened the bedside drawer, retrieving a small box. Without waiting for my response, he turned me around, guiding my back against his chest.

My breath hitched as I felt the warmth of his body enveloping me, sending tingles down my spine. I could hardly form a coherent thought as his fingers delicately grazed my skin, sending electric waves of anticipation through me.

As I sat on the edge of the bed, Mr. Dean knelt before me, taking my left leg in his hand. I closed my eyes, bracing myself for his next move, but my eyes flew open at the sensation of something cold against my skin. His fingers traced the delicate chain, the diamond pendant shimmering in the soft light of the room.

A mischievous grin played on Mr. Dean's lips as he continued to explore the curve of my leg with his fingertips, leaving a trail of goosebumps in his wake. Leaning in, he pressed a gentle kiss against my skin, just above the chain, causing my heart to flutter erratically.

A soft gasp escaped my lips as I felt myself melting under his touch, my pulse racing with anticipation of what was to come. Lost in the moment, I couldn't help but close my eyes, savoring the warmth of his lips against my skin.

"This is my gift to you," his voice was a whisper against my ear, sending a shiver down my spine. "For being such a wonderful investment."

He brought my attention to his hand, revealing an identical chain to the one now adorning my leg. My eyes widened in surprise and delight, feeling a rush of warmth at his thoughtful gesture.

"Your flight to Paris leaves tomorrow," he murmured, his breath warm against my skin. "I'll have Luna help you pack. But for now, why don't you come down from cloud nine and join me for breakfast when you're back on Earth?"

A playful glint danced in his eyes as he pressed a gentle kiss to my forehead, leaving me breathless and wondering if he was indeed playing games with my heart.

Pressing my teeth against my lips, I threw my head backwards as my mind flew back to those reports

"If they are truly yours then I wouldn't argue with their conclusion because you truly are crazy" I said to myself before standing to my feet.

Chapter 29: 29

A journey to Paris had always seemed like a distant dream, but here I stood, ready to embark on a new Chapter of my life. It wasn't just a trip, it was a two year long adventure, studying to become an independent artist with the backing of a generous sponsor. My pulse quickened with anticipation as I gazed at the apartment building that would be my new temporary home.

Luna and Xavier had seen me off at the airport, their warm wishes lingering in my heart. Though I secretly wished Mr. Dean could have been there too, it remained a wish, unspoken and unfulfilled. With a deep breath, I rang the doorbell of my new abode, the handle of my suitcase clutched tightly in my hand.

The door swung open suddenly, revealing a vision of Parisian allure standing before me. He was tall and slim, his effortless grace captivating me from the start. His hair, a soft shade of pink, seemed to catch the light in a mesmerizing dance, styled into an artful bun atop his head. Loose tendrils framed his jawline, softening his angular features.

But it was his eyes that held me captive, a striking blue that seemed to hold the secrets of the city itself. They sparkled with mischief and depth, drawing me in with an irresistible pull.

As he moved, the fabric of his stylish attire clung to his lithe form, accentuating his slender build. The sleeves of his jacket were rolled up, revealing an intricate tattoo on his right arm a masterpiece of art that seemed to tell a story with every line and curve.

Confidence radiated from him, mingling with an approachable charm that left me breathless. A crooked smile played on his lips, hinting at hidden depths and untold adventures.

He spoke in a foreign tongue, his fingers gesturing in fluid motions. "You don't understand French?" he inquired, and I shook my head slowly, my gaze still locked with his.

"Okay, I'll help you with your bag," he said with a warm smile, taking my suitcase from me as he led the way into the apartment. I followed him like one entranced, unable to tear my eyes away from his figure.

"It's a bit messy, I apologize," he explained as we entered. "I haven't been here long, and the school hostel was too crowded, so they moved us here."

"I'm Tom by the way, your housemate for the time being," he introduced himself, and I struggled to find my voice, lost in the allure of his presence.

Finally, he waved a hand toward the room on the left. "That's your room, and this is mine," he said, and I couldn't help but notice the spaciousness of the apartment.

"You can make yourself at home while I do the same," he offered, and I nodded mutely, feeling like I had stumbled into a dream.

Entering my room, I was greeted with a scene straight out of a luxury magazine a sanctuary of comfort and tranquility that beckoned me in.

The centerpiece was a large queen-size bed, adorned with plush pillows and soft, inviting linens. Its presence commanded attention, promising nights of restful slumber beneath the gentle glow of bedside lamps.

Space surrounded the bed, offering freedom of movement and a sense of openness. Natural light filtered through sheer curtains, casting a soft, ethereal glow throughout the room.

A sleek air-conditioning unit hummed quietly in the corner, maintaining the perfect temperature for comfort. Candles dotted the room, their flickering flames casting a warm, inviting light. Each candle emitted a delicate fragrance of lavender, vanilla, and sandalwood that enveloped me in a symphony of scents, soothing my senses and calming my mind.

A spacious bathroom awaited, a luxurious retreat with gleaming fixtures and elegant porcelain sinks. A large mirror reflected the room's soft lighting, creating an illusion of endless space.

But the true marvel lay beyond the bathroom a walk-in wardrobe fit for a fashion connoisseur. Every accessory had its place, creating an organized oasis where getting ready became a pleasure.

Every detail had been carefully considered, creating a space where comfort met elegance, where serenity reigned supreme. It was a room that whispered of indulgence and luxury, a haven of calm and contentment unlike anything I had ever experienced.

As I stood there, taking in the beauty of my new surroundings, I couldn't help but wonder if this was truly meant for students. It felt like a slice of paradise in the heart of Paris, a perfect beginning to my new adventure.

With a contented sigh, I carefully unpacked my bags, sliding into something comfortably casual before venturing out of my dorm room, my trusty tablet by my side. As much as I longed to dial Luna's number and spill the details of my arrival, I hesitated, mindful of the time difference that could wait until later.

Making my way down the hall, I found myself standing in front of Tom's room. The sight of the neatly arranged boxes spurred me to offer a helping hand, but a sudden realization of their weight gave me pause. "Be careful, those boxes are filled with my tools," Tom's voice interrupted my thoughts as he deftly took the burden from me, disappearing into his room before returning to meet me in the corridor.

"I'm in the sculpture department, hence the need for such heavy tools," he explained with a friendly smile, setting the box down. "By the way, what's your name?" I responded by typing out "Carmela" on my tablet, watching as he read it with interest.

"Ah, Carmela, a lovely name indeed. Feeling hungry? There's not much in the way of food at the moment, just some cereal. Will that suffice?" Tom inquired, to which I nodded gratefully. His smile widened, seemingly pleased with my response, and just like that, my art school adventure officially began.

There was something about Tom that hinted at an unconventional friendship, a sense of camaraderie that felt both exciting and unfamiliar. As we settled into conversation, he regaled me with tales of the university the rumored elite cliques to steer clear of, the professors who could discern a student's essence through their artwork. I listened intently, already anticipating the colorful experiences and creative challenges that awaited me in this vibrant artistic community. With Tom as my guide, it seemed my journey through art school would be nothing short of extraordinary.

...

"Carmela!" The call echoed through the courtyard, bouncing off the walls of the school building. I furrowed my brow, scanning the area for the source of the voice.

"Carmela!" The urgency in the voice was unmistakable this time, and I looked up to see Tom waving enthusiastically from the rooftop of the school building.

"What?" I shouted back, wondering what mischief he had gotten himself into now.

"Run!" He yelled, his arm outstretched and pointing urgently to the other side of the school. My heart quickened as I followed his gaze, spotting a group of tough-looking boys making their way toward me. With a resigned sigh, I took off in a sprint, my heart pounding in my chest.

Navigating through the maze of school blocks, I could feel my breath growing shallow. Knowing my tendency to run out of steam quickly, I slowed my pace, allowing the group to close in on me.

"You..." The leader of the pack panted, his voice dripping with malice as he caught up to me. I instinctively took a step back, finding myself surrounded by the menacing figures.

"You're that rascal's sister, aren't you?" He demanded, and I averted my gaze, refusing to meet his eyes.

"I'm talking to you, girl!" He bellowed, his voice echoing in the confined space. In response, I raised my left hand, signaling for a moment as I pulled out my tablet, pretending to jot down notes while stealing glances at their movements.

Seizing the element of surprise, I swiftly launched my tablet at one of the boys, catching him off guard. As he stumbled backward, I deftly pulled out a paintbrush I had tucked into my hair, using it to fashion my unruly locks into a messy bun.

With a burst of agility, I leaped over one of the encroaching boys, using the paintbrush to jab at the leader's throat. I watched as he grappled for breath, his cronies circling him in confusion and concern.

"You'd better get him to a hospital before he suffocates," I retorted coolly, retrieving my tablet from the ground as I turned away. Tom appeared beside me, panting from the exertion of the chase.

"You took care of them already?" He gasped, resting his hands on his knees as he tried to catch his breath. I shot him a withering look, my eyes narrowing.

"They broke my tablet, so you'd better be ready to fix it," I stated firmly, before striding away, leaving him to scramble after me.

"You don't even need the tablet to communicate anymore, so why bother fixing..." Tom's protests trailed off as I halted abruptly, fixing him with a steely gaze.

"Fine, I'll fix it. Why do you have to be so terrifying?" His muttered words followed me as I continued on my way.

It had been seven eventful months since I began studying in Paris and took up residence with Tommy. I had undergone a transformation, not for the worse, but certainly for the better. Constantly mistaken for Tommy's younger sister, I had become a target for pranks and challenges around the university.

In response, I had taken up martial arts, learning to defend myself both physically and mentally. Slowly, I found myself shedding my inhibitions, interacting with others more freely. Sometimes, amidst the chaos and the challenges, I couldn't help but feel that Tommy was a blessing in disguise.

As we walked together, Tom's arm draped casually over my shoulder, I couldn't resist a chuckle at the mischievous glint in his eye.

"Which girl was it this time?" I asked, knowing full well that his antics were far from over.

"You wouldn't believe me if I told you," he replied, his grin widening into a mischievous wink.

Chapter 30: 30

As I wandered onto the university grounds, my mind preoccupied, and I collided with a student who cursed at me in French. Shrugging it off, I couldn't ignore the fleet of cars parked around the campus, something was clearly afoot but then I doubt it concerned me.

"Carmela," Tommy skated towards me, his tone urgent. "Why are you dressed like this? Don't you know the auction is today?" He picked up his skateboard, leaving me bewildered about which auction he meant. "Don't tell me you're clueless," he looked at me with wide eyes raising an eyebrow in disbelief.

He suddenly began lamenting as if he was my father, "I've told you to explore beyond the four pillars of the school gallery, but you never listen. If you had, maybe you'd know that two of your paintings are being auctioned today." He sigh, dropping his skateboard back to the ground. "Wait here for me, okay?" skating away he waved leaving me to decode the words he just said

But how could he expect me to sit idly by after dropping such news about my artwork being auctioned without my knowledge? I had only managed to complete four pieces since starting here, and now they were being put up for auction.

"Be careful," a voice said, arms wrapping around me as I stumbled backward. "Are you okay?" I looked up to be met by a familiar gaze.

"Editor Damian," I called out, recognizing him immediately. He scanned the area before pulling up his face mask, as though hiding. His curly hair had grown longer since we last met.

"What are you doing here?" he asked, a hint of surprise in his voice.

"I actually study here. What about you?"

"I came for the auction... Wait, you study here?" His reply was almost incredulous.

"It's a long story, but here I am. What about my sister? Have you heard from her?" I threw my questions at him not waiting for a response, but he seemed lost in his thoughts. Waving my hands in front of him, as I tried to regain his attention.

"You seem lost," I remarked, watching him awkwardly scratch the back of his head.

"Not really. It's just... it's the first time I've heard you speak so freely," he finally replied, a hint of awkwardness in his tone. Before I could say more, Tommy's call interrupted us.

"I'm sorry, I have to go," I said, following Tommy's insistent pull towards the professor's office. "We'll talk later," I managed to say to Damian before he disappeared from sight.

"Oh, my dear," Professor Henny greeted me warmly as I stepped into her office, and I was taken by surprise of her sudden kind gesture leading me to take a step back from her. "Tom said you weren't aware of the auction. I'm so sorry about that. I've been so busy..." She trailed off, her demeanor suddenly kinder. It finally dawned on me the reason behind her sudden change in personality, her position was at stake if I withdrew my paintings.

"I won't," I assured her, and she pulled me into a sudden hug. "Don't worry. I'll make sure you get your percentage before the rest is sent to charity," she promised. Handing me a list of attendees, she added, "Here's the list of people coming for the auction."

Turning to Tommy with a puzzled look, I found him smirking. "Let's get you prepared for the after-party," was all he said with a suspicious wink, pushing me out of the professor's office. My heart skipped a beat when I saw one name on the list..Nix Dean. It had been seven months since we last met, and the anticipation bubbled within me.

"Why are you smiling suddenly?" Tommy whispered as we headed towards the university gates.

"Come, get me ready," I replied, my mind already racing with possibilities.

I clenched my fists, watching Carmela engage freely with the masked man, and couldn't help but wonder when she started talking to strangers.

"Mr. Dean, the auction has already begun, and Madame has been waiting for you," a woman in corporate attire approached me, leading the way.

Taking my seat at the round table, annoyance simmered within me as I remembered the scene outside.

"The next two paintings belong to the same artist, a recent addition to our school, with exceptional talent," the auctioneer announced, unveiling the artworks. The first was unmistakably the garden from my house, but with added details. Before I could react, someone raised their card, eager to bid. Turning, I realized it was the same man I saw speaking to Carmela outside.

"8 million," I bid, feeling all eyes on me, as though I had invited a challenge. Number 983 raised his card, pushing the bid to 10 million.

"What a childish display," I thought, signaling one of the auction staff, it was already a won battle so why was he trying to compete?

"Number 23 just bid 100 million for both paintings," the auctioneer announced, scanning the room for challengers. As expected, no one was willing to pay such a sum for an unknown artist, no matter how talented.

"A hundred million going once..."

"Two hundred million," number 983 interjected, his gaze fixed firmly on me. What was he trying to prove? Lay claim to what rightfully belonged to me?

"Five hundred million," I declared, my anger boiling over, and I could feel my demeanor turning steely.

"Five hundred million going once, twice... and it's sold," the auctioneer concluded. Rising to my feet, I made my way out of the room, ignoring the applause.

One thing had to be made clear to everyone, Carmela and everything related to her belonged to me.

The air hummed with the mingling scents of perfume and anticipation as Carmela stepped into the after-auction party. She wore a midnight black dress that gracefully reached to her knees, its flowery top delicately covering her chest. Glass heels adorned her feet, adding a touch of elegance to her ensemble. Extensions had been woven into her hair, transforming her flatly ironed hair into a cascade of waves held back by two silver clips at the sides.

True to her distaste for heavy makeup, her face was lightly powdered, a hint of blush highlighting her cheeks. A bold cherry red lipstick adorned her lips, adding a touch of allure to her otherwise understated look.

"If we weren't off-limits," Tommy murmured, brushing his arm lightly against hers, "I'd spend the whole night making you mine."

He held out his arm for her to take, and though Carmela rolled her eyes, her heart thudded a little faster.

"Why didn't you take off the leg chain?" he questioned, noticing the delicate chain around her ankle.

"I promised never to take it off," she replied, a hint of defiance in her voice. Feeling a bit exposed under the gaze of the attendees, she slipped on a jacket, covering her arms as she made her way into the hall, feeling the weight of the stares upon her.

Inside, the murmur of voices and clinking glasses filled the room, but Carmela's attention was fixed on one person, Nix. She spotted him coming from behind and quickly slid her hand out of Tommy's, giving him a polite smile as she excused herself.

"Go ahead, I have to meet someone," she said, watching Tommy nod before disappearing into the lively event hall. Standing at the side, she waited for Nix, her heart racing with a mix of nervousness and excitement.

As he approached, she debated whether to address him as Mr. Dean or simply as Nix. He had always encouraged informality between them, but something about his demeanor tonight made her reconsider.

"Nix," she called out softly, her voice barely above a whisper. To her surprise, he walked past her as if she were invisible, causing her heart to sink. Had her voice betrayed her, becoming lost in the sea of noise around them?

However, just as she began to doubt herself, Nix halted in his steps. A small glimmer of hope lit up her eyes, a tentative smile tugging at her lips. Yet, her hopes were dashed as he spoke, his voice cutting through the buzz of the room.

"Mr. Dean," he corrected her, his tone firm. "Refer to me as Mr. Dean. We might have shared an informal relationship in the past few months, but it's all in the past now."

Carmela felt her heart shatter into a thousand pieces at his words. The sting of tears threatened to spill from the corners of her eyes, the heat of the moment intensifying as the eyes of the guests seemed to bore into her.

She stood frozen in place, feeling as though the ground had shifted beneath her feet. The once familiar warmth between them now replaced with an icy distance that seemed insurmountable.

As the party buzzed around her, Carmela couldn't shake the feeling of being utterly alone in a crowded room, the weight of Nix's dismissal heavy on her heart. With a

forced smile on her lips, she turned away, blinking back the tears that threatened to fall, determined to not let anyone see her vulnerability. But inside, her heart ached with the weight of what could have been, and the harsh reality of what was now.

"Carmela," a familiar voice called out, and she quickly blinked back her tears, putting on a smile as she turned to find Damian dressed formally like the rest of the attendees. Despite her efforts, her chest felt heavy with hurt.

"You..." she managed, her voice catching in her throat.

"I'll be back. Please excuse me, I need to use the restroom," she said, her voice shaking but firm, before making her way towards the ladies' room.

Upon entering, she found no tears left in her eyes, only a simmering anger that threatened to boil over. The urge to smash the mirror crossed her mind, but the realization that she couldn't only fueled her frustration.

"Call me Mr. Dean," she scoffed sarcastically, looking at her reflection in the mirror. "Who was the one who pleaded with me to use their first name, and now you're trying to give me attitude?" she muttered to herself, picking up a tissue to dab at the corners of her eyes.

"They were right all along... I think she's a gold digger given the way she approached Mr Dean" she overheard a group of girls whisper as they entered the restroom. A smirk tugged at the corners of her lips.

"Gold digger?" she echoed, addressing no one in particular as she shrugged off the jacket she was wearing, tossing it into the waste bin. "I've been called all sorts of names since I was a child, but not a gold digger... But you know what? I kind of like this one better."

"If you want to play games with me, then let's play. I'm no longer timid to take up challenges," she declared to her reflection, her eyes flashing with determination.

With a deep breath, she straightened her posture, wiping away the last traces of anger and hurt from her expression. Adjusting her dress, she gathered her composure and stepped out of the restroom, ready to face whatever the night had in store for her.

As she made her way back to the party, Carmela felt a newfound sense of strength coursing through her veins. She was no longer the naive girl who would let others dictate her worth. Tonight, she would show them all that she was a force to be reckoned with.

With a confident stride, she entered the hall once more, her eyes scanning the room until they landed on Nix Dean. The man who had dismissed her, the man who had challenged her.

"Mr. Dean," she said, her voice steady and strong, a glint of defiance in her eyes. "It seems we have unfinished business." She said, narrowing her eyes to the woman he was already entangled with