

KEY TO HAPPINESS:(My mute devil)

#Chapter 31 - Read KEY TO HAPPINESS:(My mute devil) Chapter 31

Chapter 31: 31

I took the glass Tommy handed me and downed its contents, feeling the heat slide down my throat, it ignited a fiery courage within me.

"Carmela, that's alcohol," his voice reached me, and I met his gaze, nodding. "I know. I need something to boost my courage... How does this party work?" My eyes scanned the guests, but they remained fixed on Mr. Dean.

"The person who selects your painting seeks you out and asks about the piece. You explain the meaning behind your work to them, your inspiration or what ever just give them an answer to what ever they ask.." Tommy explained.

"Just that?" I interrupted, catching him nod his head. "A lot happens at these parties. Make sure you find yourself a partner before it reaches its peak," he face met with a mischievous grin.

"Things like?" I raised an eyebrow, intrigued.

"You know, those things that happen behind closed doors," he hinted, winking. "I can't wait to see who our next lecturer and student couple will be. There's an inner party at the underground pool. Id advice you go there with a partner to avoid casualties like getting drugged or just stay out of that area would have love to be your plus one but you know I already have plans" he placed a soft peck on my cheek before walking away, leaving me wondering if I should even be here? But that question came last as I was here, and there was no turning back.

"Damian," I called, returning to his side with a coy smile. "I hope you don't mind me being less formal?" I inquired, and he nodded in response.

"Were you able to find what you came for?" I asked, taking his hand in mine, feeling the tension behind between us

"Hmm..actually, no," he sighed, and I nodded, understanding.

Looking around, Mr. Dean was nowhere to be found, leaving me curious about his disappearance.

"Do you have a partner?" Damian suddenly asked, raising my eyebrow at his implication. "There's another party, exclusive to VIP members. I need a partner to attend... Well, I wouldn't have gone, but I have to meet someone," he explained.

"Okay, I'll be your partner," I responded still maintaining my smile, though I could see his hesitation.

"Carmela, this isn't your average party... only VIP members are allowed. We'll have to change our outfits, and..." he trailed off.

"It's okay, I understand. Lead the way," I tugged at him, smiling, though I immediately regretted agreeing when I saw the outfit I was supposed to change into.

"Are you okay?" Damian asked from behind as I studied my reflection.

The skirt, knitted from black cotton wool, barely covered anything, leaving my legs and thigh on full display. The crop top matched, exposing my midriff and barely containing my breasts.

"Are you sure you're comfortable? These were the most decent outfits I could find, considering it's a pool party and everyone is practically naked," he said, concern lacing his voice as he narrowed his eyes at the people outside

"Can I borrow that jacket?" I pointed towards the almost transparent coat laid out on the bed, and he helped me slip it on. The fabric did little to conceal the provocative outfit beneath, but it provided a sense of cover, however illusory.

As we headed towards the exclusive inner party, the thrill of the unknown mingled with the heat of the alcohol, creating an intoxicating blend of excitement and anticipation. Who knew what desires would be unveiled behind those closed doors, where only the daring and privileged were allowed.

With the pulsating beat of the music throbbing through the air, the party seemed to pulse with a life of its own. "I'll get you a drink, wait for me here," Damien's voice was a velvet caress against my ear as he helped me settle into the plush seat. His departure left me alone, surrounded by a sea of bodies that glistened in the dim, sultry light.

Eyes roaming the room, I couldn't help but notice the decadence that unfolded before me. Bodies, partially naked, moved in sinuous rhythms, casting shadows that danced along the walls. Was this really a school event as it was referred to or something darker? Like an underworld meeting?

If I didn't have my contact lens on then I doubt I would have been able to see a thing given the dim lighting in the room

"Oh my goodness," I gasped placing my hand over my mouth, turning to find Tommy, shirtless and utterly captivating, a glass resting lazily in one of his hand and a mischievous glint in his eyes. "I thought you hated such parties," he teased, drawing closer and taking a seat beside me.

"I had a change of heart, and I'm here with someone," I replied, feeling a thrill of excitement at the boldness of my own words. Tommy grinned, a devilish smirk that sent shivers down my spine as he's eyes scanned my outfit. "I'm finally rubbing off on you... Either way, I'm off to enjoy myself. It's seldom we have time to mingle with the high class," he quipped before disappearing into the throng.

Damien returned in no time, handing me a glass of drink, his touch lingering on my skin like a promise. "Is he always hanging around you? If I may ask who is he?" Damien's voice was low, intimate, as he settled beside me "He is like an elder brother," I replied with a coy smile, but beneath the surface, a storm of desire brewed.

As Damien's hand brushed against my flushed cheek, I closed my eyes, reveling in the heat of the party, the intoxicating mix of alcohol and desire swirling around me. Yet, beneath the haze, a sense of unease prickled at my skin. Someone was watching, their gaze like a physical caress that sent shivers down my spine.

A figure caught my eye, familiar yet shrouded in the shadows. His left hand, adorned with intricate tattoos, held the delicate form of a woman, her presence an enigma in the dim light. "Why is he staring?" I wondered, feeling a dizzying rush of excitement and fear.

"How about I help you take off the coat?" Damien's voice cut through the haze, his eyes dark and filled with desire.. which I had no plans fulfilling.

Feeling a surge of heat at his touch as the coat slipped from my shoulders, revealing the curve of my body beneath, I shifted a bit from him trying to create some space between us but it was of no use as anymore movement I would find my ass kissing the floor.

"I'll be back with a glass of ice water, don't go anywhere okay?" I looked up at him and his eyes held mine, I showed him a small smile before nodded and I watched him nod back for take his leave. As he walked away, leaving me alone in the throes of the party, I couldn't shake the feeling of being watched mixed with the surging heat that was crashing through my body as a result of the alcohol.

Standing, I made my way through the crowd, the pulsing beat of the music guiding my steps. Yet, as I sought the sanctuary of the restroom, I locked eyes with the mysterious figure once more. Recognition sparked between us, a flame of desire that threatened to consume us both.

"Nix," I gasped, the name a whisper on my lips as I took in the sight of him. His presence was like a magnetic pull, drawing me closer even as I fought against the tide of desire that threatened to overwhelm me.

"Put your coat back on and cover what's mine," Nix's voice was a low growl, his eyes blazing with possessive intensity. But I was no one's to claim, no possession to be owned.

"Excuse me, do we know each other?" I retorted, defiance flashing in my eyes as I met his gaze head-on. His silence spoke volumes, a description of things unsaid, desires unspoken.

"I'm not a choice, Mr. Dean, neither am I your property to be obsessed over," I declared, my voice strong despite the tremors of desire that coursed through me. But Nix was a force of nature, a fire that threatened to consume everything in its path.

"I'd love to make it a big deal by showing everyone you're mine, right here, right now," Nix's words were a challenge, a dare that sent my pulse racing. But I was no wilting flower, no damsel that needed a knight in shining armor like him

"The lady behind you has been staring at us for a while now. What's your relationship with her?" I countered, refusing to back down even as desire coiled hot and urgent in the pit of my stomach.

Silence hung between us, thick with unspoken desires and simmering tension. But before I could speak again, Nix closed the distance between us, his lips crashing against mine in a fierce, searing kiss.

I gasped against his lips, the taste of him like a drug as desire consumed us both. But even as my body melted against his, I knew I couldn't surrender so easily.

"Thank you for reminding me this.." I murmured against his lips, my voice husky with desire I tried to suppress "I no longer wish to be your slave," I declared, my voice firm. "I'll repay every cent my adoptive family owes you."

Nix tilted his head, a smirk tugging at his lips. "You sure?"

"Six months," I replied. "With interest. If I fail, I'd rather jump off a cliff than live as your property."

His laughter, deep and intoxicating, echoed around us. "No, beloved," he purred, his tone both dangerous and alluring. "I won't let you die so easily." he tucked my hair behind my ear before placing a final, searing kiss on my lips. He left me standing there, breathless and shaken as I tried to regain my composure

"I'll give you till tomorrow, think about it and get back to me" he winked before disappearing into the swirling crowd, I was left alone with the echo of his presence, a promise of something dark and alluring on the horizon. The party around me was lively, but only I was pulsed in time as my mind was consumed with thoughts of Nix and the dangerous game we were about to play.

Chapter 32: 32

The morning sun seeped through the curtains, casting a warm glow on the unfamiliar room. A sickening sensation twisted in my stomach, accompanied by the relentless throb in my head. Confusion swept over me as I pushed myself up, taking in the room that, although foreign, held a sense of belonging.

"Come out for breakfast, dear," Mrs. Nelly's voice, gentle and matronly, drifted in from the doorway. I preferred to think of her as Grandma Nelly, a loving presence that had welcomed me into her home, filling a void left by my own grandmother.

As I shuffled through the house, questions swirled in my mind like leaves caught in a storm. How did I end up here? The dining room greeted me, and I settled into my seat, only to be greeted by a shirtless Tommy emerging from his room.

"Put a shirt on, will you?" I quipped, tossing an apple his way. His response was a mere side-eye before he, too, settled at the table.

"Carmela, the young man who brought you here asked to be called the moment you woke," Grandma Nelly mentioned, placing a steaming bowl of soup before me and a glass of water beside Tommy.

"A guy?" Tommy's eyebrows shot up, a hint of curiosity in his voice. I busied myself with the soup, trying to shake off the haze clouding my memory from the night before.

"Did he mention his name, Aunt?" Tommy's question pierced the air, and I nearly choked on the soup as memories flooded back in.

"He said he was her Editor."

Damian. Dread crept up my spine as flashes of the previous night played out in my mind like a twisted movie reel.

"I'll pay you back in six months, with interest," my own words echoed in my ears, the defiant tone sending shivers down my spine. Mr. Dean's laughter reverberated in my mind, chilling me to the core.

"I'll give you till tomorrow," his voice seemed to linger in the air, taunting me.

With a groan, I realized the gravity of my situation. How could I have been so foolish? I bit my lip, the weight of a hundred and seventy million hanging over me like a dark cloud.

"Carmela, who is Nix Dean, and why do you owe him a hundred and seventy million?" Grandma Nelly's voice cut through the tension, and I felt my entire body tense up. It was as if the secret I dreaded was exposed, making me feel vulnerable.

"What in the world did you do with that kind of money?" Tommy's disbelief was palpable, and I gulped down the water, trying to find my voice.

"Who told you about that?" I deflected, but Tommy narrowed his eyes at me and his expression painted a clear picture of my recklessness.

"Oh no, Editor Damian," the realization hit me like a ton of bricks, and I felt tears beginning to swell up in my eyes as I felt my bottled emotions exposing.

Sitting beside me, Grandma Nelly's comforting presence was a lifeline in the storm. I poured out the whole story, from the orphanage to my grandmother's death, skipping over the intimate moments with Mr. Dean, feeling the weight lift as I shared everything.

"It's okay, dear. We'll figure this out," her soothing words wrapped around me like a warm embrace, and tears streamed down my cheeks.

Tommy, ever the pragmatic one, chimed in, "Don't worry about the money. Your paintings will fetch a good price. We'll make this right."

But then he asked the question that made my blood boil, "But what did you expect him to do after paying so much just to have you by his side and then see you having a fun time with other men..Let you go?"

Anger surged within me, but I pushed it down, focusing on the resolve that burned bright.

"That's why I have you to erase the name slave properly from my name" I retorted with a wink, just to have him roll his eyes "Get ready, Tommy. We have work to do. Grandma, I'll sort this out. Trust me."

With a kiss on Grandma Nelly's cheek, I felt a surge of determination. The drama had unfolded, the suspense hung thick in the air, but I was ready to take control of my fate. My story is far from over, this isn't my last Chapter nor is it the end.

The elegant dining room seemed to lose its luster as my thoughts drifted away from the lavish feast laid before me. Despite the abundance of food, a gnawing hunger gnawed at my soul, restless and unsatisfied.

"You seem dissatisfied, is the dish that bad?" Ella Dalton's voice pierced through my reverie as I mechanically sliced into my steak, barely tasting it. She wasn't the company I desired. My mind yearned for another, my beloved, not the cousin of Justin, the purported heir of the Dalton family. The one with no traceable roots at the moment.

"Why do I feel like you hate spending time with me? Could she be the cause?" Ella's words were like barbs, each one digging deeper as I forced myself to sip from my glass of wine, masking my disquiet.

"The girl you kissed from last night's party?" Her accusation hung heavy in the air, mingling with the aroma of fine wine but I would be lying if I said her words held any effect on me. "Could she be the reason? I could see how possessive you were over her... Either way, frolicking with as many women as you want will only be permitted now, I won't allow that after our wedding."

A scoff escaped me as I set down my glass, wiping my mouth with a napkin. Why did I always find myself entangled with women who lacked the finesse to know when to cease their prattle?

"If we were a match, it would be one made in immoral heaven, not Heaven itself," I retorted, dropping the napkin as tension crackled in the air. "And what marriage are we speaking about? I thought we had an agreement."

"I only agreed to rethink it, not to break the alliance... And if she's the one you want to break up this alliance for, then I'd suggest you rethink," Ella countered, her voice tinged with steel.

"My reasons are none of your business, and I suggested it to you out of courtesy... Let's come down to reality; my betrothed died before my eyes, and you're just a substitute," I stated, rising to my feet, my patience wearing thin. "Whether real or fake, I remain the only legal daughter of the Dalton family, so I beg your pardon..."

Ella's gaze locked with mine, unwavering in its intensity. "Also, my grandfather wishes for your presence, so I hope you know what to do if you don't want to create trouble for yourself," she added, her words a veiled threat that failed to evoke the desired effect.

"Your grandfather knows better than to cause trouble with me... Seems you haven't been given detailed information about me," I replied coolly before taking my leave. But her parting words halted me in my tracks.

"Six months. I'll give you six months to end whatever relationship you have with her and get prepared for our wedding," she declared, her ultimatum hanging in the air like a storm cloud on the horizon.

Six months is a generous timeframe, yet one fraught with uncertainty. As I stepped out, the valet held open the car door, but my attention was drawn elsewhere, to a figure approaching with a grace that belied the turmoil within.

It was Carmela. Her presence was unexpected yet undeniable, alighted from a bicycle, her demeanor confident despite the unconventional mode of transport, she exuded an air of confidence, her posture poised and unyielding. Her skirt, billowing lightly in the breeze, barely grazed her knees, a testament to her audacious spirit. Clad in a form-fitted long-sleeved shirt, she epitomized effortless elegance, her attire a reflection of her unwavering determination.

"Hello, Mr. Dean. Hope I'm not late?" Her smile, though strained, held a hint of defiance as she met my gaze head-on.

"What's the meaning of this?" I demanded, my curiosity piqued by her unexpected appearance.

"You asked, I decided.." she trailed away as her eyes narrowed at something behind me "You thought I won't pay you? You are a joker then and I'd love to remind you that I stand by my words," she declared, her resolve unwavering despite the uncertainty of the situation.

"So, can I have your phone number so I can call you when I'm ready?" she stretched out her hands as her words laced with a subtle challenge.

"I do have your number," I interjected, catching her off guard as a flicker of amusement danced in her eyes.

"Oh, you do... I thought you didn't, and that's why..." she trailed off, her words tinged with a hint of embarrassment before regaining her composure. "Either way, I'll keep wearing this leg chain you got me until the day I pay you off your money, okay?"

Her gaze held mine, a silent acknowledgment of the unspoken bond that tethered us together, before she turned and climbed on the forefront of a bicycle being cycled by a guy with pink hair

Had I made a mistake in sending her away to Paris? And when did my demure darling, Carmela, morph into this daring enigma? As I settled into the plush confines of the car, a smile tugged at the corners of my lips.

"She's surely my girl after all," I mused, the thrill of excitement coursing through my veins as I embraced the intrigue that lay ahead.

Her actions may be uncertain but there's no harm in letting her go astray a bit.

Chapter 33: 33

In the shadows of the dimly lit hallway, the maids darted like specters, their whispers barely audible over the eerie silence that enveloped the mansion. Each footstep against the marble floor seemed to echo like a foreboding omen, amplifying the tension that hung heavily in the air. The young masters, their faces veiled in a mask of simmering rage and frustration, observed the chaos unfolding before them with chilling detachment.

As the maids vanished around the corner, leaving the brothers to confront the aftermath of their deeds, Andrew Aron's voice sliced through the tense atmosphere, dripping with venomous fury. "Eight billion lost, all because of that wretched brat, and you expect me to remain calm?"

Steven, the youngest among them, interjected with a calm demeanor that belied the storm brewing within. "Twenty-two billion lost on my end, but that's inconsequential compared to the whereabouts of Nix. My men lost track of him the moment he stepped out of that hotel. Is such a disappearance even possible?"

Thomas, his voice tinged with resignation, poured himself a drink, his movements heavy with the weight of their predicament. "Paris is Nix's playground. Trying to locate him would be futile, given his cunning nature."

Amidst the chaos, their elder brother Charles remained silent, his stoic facade unwavering. Despite Nix's audacious takeover of AN Group and its subsidiaries, Charles sensed that there was more to the unfolding drama.

"An inexperienced youth, rising from obscurity to build an empire without traditional backing or loans," Charles mused, his gaze fixed on the swirling liquid in his glass. "We must uncover the truth behind Nix's sudden ascent."

Andrew, seeking answers, speculated about a secret benefactor, but Charles dismissed the notion with a wave of his hand. "The true question lies in Nix's past. What led him to amass such wealth with origins shrouded in mystery?"

As Steven mentioned spotting Carmela with Nix, Charles's lips curled into a sardonic smile. "She appears to hold significance to him," he remarked, his eyes glinting with a calculating gleam. "Deal with her as you see fit. The sooner we neutralize Nix, the sooner we stem our losses."

With a final decree, Charles strode purposefully towards the door, leaving his brothers to ponder the dark path ahead.

In the tranquil setting of her garden, Carmela, immersed in her artistic process, sought solace and inspiration through the strokes of her paintbrush. With each dab of color, she delved deeper into her creative realm, driven by an insatiable quest for satisfaction.

"Why choose this serene sanctuary over your studio?" Tom's inquiry pierced through Carmela's focused concentration as he observed the vivid splashes of paint adorning the ground.

Ignoring his query, Carmela seized a brush, determined to refine her creation before the paint dried. Tom, ever the gentleman, offered assistance, handing her the tool she required, silently admiring her artistic prowess.

With meticulous attention to detail, Carmela transformed the chaotic array of colors into a cohesive masterpiece, eliciting a bewildered yet intrigued reaction from Tom. Seeking validation, she eagerly solicited his opinion, only to be met with an unexpectedly optimistic response, prompting a playful chuckle.

Undeterred by his skepticism, Carmela passionately defended her artwork, unraveling its profound symbolism with eloquence and conviction. Yet, Tom's skepticism lingered, prompting Carmela to reevaluate her approach.

Amidst their exchange, Tom seized the opportune moment to present Carmela with a promising opportunity by introducing her to a potential collaborator eager to harness her talent. Entrusted with vital contact information, Carmela's enthusiasm soared, her determination to seize this lifeline evident as she swiftly transitioned from artist to job seeker.

Armed with newfound hope and clad in corporate attire, Carmela embarked on her quest for professional fulfillment, propelled by the promise of a brighter tomorrow.

Nervously, I awaited the arrival of the owner of ND, my heart racing with anticipation. Armed with a list of contacts provided by Tommy, I embarked on a series of inquiries, hopeful that fortune might smile upon me and yield more than one job opportunity. As I surveyed the opulent surroundings of the grand house, I couldn't help but notice the owner's penchant for darker art, a taste that intrigued me.

The sound of approaching footsteps prompted me to rise to my feet, bowing respectfully as I prepared to introduce myself. Yet, as I looked up, my words caught in my throat, disbelief washing over me. Fate seemed to be playing a cruel joke as I found myself face-to-face with an unexpected figure.

"You're the artist I've heard about?" Nix queried, his presence sending a flurry of conflicting emotions coursing through me.

"Are you following me or keeping tabs on me?" I interjected, unable to contain my frustration.

His response, delivered in a chilling tone, only fueled my ire. With a scoff, I made to leave, but his firm grip halted my escape.

"Work for me, and you'll be compensated handsomely," he whispered, his words tempting yet tinged with manipulation.

I recoiled, maintaining my resolve despite the allure of his offer. "Do you expect me to work for you and repay you with your own money?" I retorted, determined to preserve my self-respect.

As I stormed off, his parting words lingered, "I am your only viable option, my beloved. In time, you will come to recognize that," a veiled threat hanging in the air. Brushing off the encounter, I hailed a taxi, my mind racing with uncertainty.

Arriving at my next destination, I presented myself with poise, only to be met with unexpected rejection. Disheartened yet undeterred, I contemplated my next move, contemplating whether to call it a day or press on.

My thoughts swirled, thick and sluggish like the grey clouds gathering above the Parisian skyline. The pain in my chest never really left it only settled, waiting to rise again when I was too weak to fight it. I sat hunched over in the quiet corner of my flat, staring at nothing and everything all at once, until my phone buzzed violently against the wood of the windowsill.

Unknown Caller. The caller ID showed and I hesitated but then I still answered.

"Hello."

The voice on the other end was direct. "Miss Carmela, I'm calling on behalf of the Director of the National Theater. He would like to meet you... tonight, if possible. There's a matter of mutual interest to discuss."

For a moment, I forgot to breathe. My chest loosened.

"I'll be right there," I replied, cutting the call and holding onto the words like a lifeline.

I left the flat with nothing but my coat, a notebook, and hope. The Paris night was already stretching her limbs across the sky, brushing dusky hues over rooftops as the scent of fresh rain teased the air.

Hailing a cab wasn't difficult as this city was always alive. The driver, a grizzled man with tired eyes and jazz humming from the speakers, gave a brief nod as I slid into the backseat.

"Rue Saint-Honoré, s'il vous plaît," I murmured, watching the raindrops race across the window.

The city unfolded like poetry gritty yet romantic. Neon signs flickered to life above flower shops and cafés. A couple kissed under a streetlamp like they were in a film. A

homeless man clutched a soaked blanket, staring blankly into a puddle that reflected the Eiffel Tower in distorted fragments.

Life continued, indifferent. Leaving me to clutch my coat tighter.

When the cab pulled up to the restaurant, my breath hitched. It was upscale too upscale. The kind of place where women wore perfume that smelled like money and men never raised their voices.

Inside, the lighting was warm and intimate, casting long shadows against the ivory walls. A hostess guided me with a practiced smile to a table near the window.

And there he was.

He stood to greet me. Mid-50s, composed, but with a face I recognized from somewhere perhaps a gala, or an article in the arts section. His eyes studied me, not cruelly, but with the weight of someone who'd already made half a decision.

"Carmela," he said, extending his hand. "I've heard quite a lot about you."

"Hopefully good things," I replied, trying to keep the tremble out of my voice.

We sat, and he ordered a red Bordeaux without asking. Confident. In control.

"I've seen your performances," he began, "and I must admit, you leave an impression. There's something... raw about you. Unfiltered. The kind of artist that gets under the skin."

I couldn't help the small smile that crept onto my face. For once, someone wasn't trying to fix me. Just see me.

But then his tone shifted.

He folded his hands. "Still, I have my hesitations."

I leaned in, heart sinking.

He continued, voice low. "I cannot speak of the nature of your relationship with Nix Dean, but I must caution you if you do not address whatever issue exists between you, it may hinder your prospects for employment."

My stomach clenched.

"Mr. Dean has made threats against my business. And his reputation suggests he is not one to make idle promises." He paused, fingers drumming the table. "I suspect others may have received similar calls."

I froze hearing that as the rest of the conversation blurred. I responded where I had to, nodded where I must, but a storm had begun brewing behind my eyes one even the Paris rain couldn't wash away.

Outside, the sky had cracked open.

Rain poured relentlessly, drenching the pavement and my coat. I had no umbrella only the crushing realization that even here, Nix had his claws in everything.

I walked without direction, letting the rain soak through my hair, down to my bones. The streets were quiet save for the splash of passing cars and the occasional murmur of lovers huddled under awnings.

"Why must I suffer such a fate?"

The words tore from my lips before I realized I was speaking. I tilted my head to the sky as if it owed me an answer. But all it gave was more rain.

I pulled my phone from my soaked bag. The screen flickered..Tommy was calling. But the droplets blurred the display, and my trembling hands refused to cooperate.

"Damn it," I whispered, voice cracking.

A flash of headlights suddenly blinded me. Horn blaring.

I stumbled back, slipping on the slick cobblestones, knees scraping against stone. Before I could scream

A handkerchief. White. Drenched. Pressed against my mouth.

Panic erupted in my chest as I thrashed, but the world tilted.

Gunshots followed and then a scream. Tires screeching. Foreign voices French? Arabic? Russian? I couldn't tell what they were saying and my limbs turned to lead. I was lifted and then dragged into another car and handed to another set of people

Then... darkness followed.

Within the confines of a new prison, I found myself bound to a wooden chair, a needle piercing my skin, injecting a heavy lethargy into my veins. As darkness encroached upon my senses, a chilling realization dawned: I had been snatched away, a pawn in a game of shadows where the rules were unknown, and escape seemed an impossible dream.

"Name, Carmela, age: 18 and would turn 19 in a few days' time, a mutism patient who finds joy in painting, was adopted by the sole owner of T&C Construction Group, who

died a few months back, and you were declared the next owner of the company and would only be able to take charge if you're married before the age of twenty-two," a man who looked to be in his early 40s read out before letting out a laugh.

"Do you want to know what I find strange about everything? No one in your adoptive family knew that your adoptive mother was fully loaded and had such a company, and overnight she made you the sole owner of the company and died the next day... well, just three months after you were sold off to Nix because your adoptive siblings couldn't pay off their debt, unknown to them that you're the key to their fortune. Don't you find it strange?" He came closer, raising my face to meet his before dropping it and walking away. Although I couldn't make out much sense of what he was saying, I could vividly remember Mr. Dean asking me to read an article about T&C Construction Group, and the article did say that the owner was anonymous. So what does he mean by grandma is the owner?

"You look confused, my dear, so let me explain..." He took a seat before me. "You see, your adoptive mother or grandmother, as you address her, is the owner of T&C Construction Group, and she made you her heir with the only condition that you get married before the age of 22, unless your inheritance would be auctioned off... I hope that's understood." He picked up the glass beside him before filling it.

"Now let's talk about Nix Dean. Have you ever wondered why he brought you under his care despite the fact that he could have given your adoptive family enough time to pay back? It will be my pleasure to tell you, my dear. You see, knowing you have no knowledge of business, any man that gets married to you would be hitting a jackpot of wealth," he smiled, looking at me, and I looked away, not wanting to believe the garbage he was spilling.

"There's no use not trying to convince yourself otherwise because I know that young man more than you think you do. He never does anything that doesn't profit him, so listen up... seeing you'll be turning nineteen in a few days, he'll surely propose you become his wife," he placed something in my pocket before taking a step backward.

"If what I say turns out to be true, then feed him that because that's the only way you can get your freedom back... and I'm sorry I didn't introduce myself from the start, I'm Steven Aron, Nix's fourth uncle."

Chapter 34: 34

The last thing I remember was the look in Carmela's eyes. It was sharp, stubborn, and distant. The kind of look that said "Don't follow me."*I

And like a fool, I didn't.

I leaned back in my chair, dragging a hand across my face as I exhaled through my nose. When did she get so damn stubborn? Or maybe the better question was when did I stop knowing how to reach her?

I stood, instinct leading me toward my desk, toward my phone. I didn't even know what I was going to say yet. Maybe something soft. Maybe just "Come home." would do

But then the call came in.

And everything in my body went still.

"Boss... she's been taken."

I heard the caller say and silence registered itself in the atmosphere.

"What the hell do you mean taken?" My voice was calm, but sharp enough to cut through stone but I got no response instead the line crackled.

I slammed my palm against the desk. "You better find her before the sun rises. I don't care who you have to drag out of bed or bribe into a coma. If it means setting this whole goddamn city on fire then do it."

I hung up before I could hear them stutter.

My hand went straight to the drawer. The gun I hadn't touched in five years was still there, waiting like it knew this day would come. I stared at it for half a second before grabbing it without a second thought.

No time for doubts. No time for guilt.

I threw on my coat and opened the tracker app. And to my relief there was a blinking signal although faint, but at least she was alive. She still had the leg chain on.

I barked for the car, already moving before they could reply. The driver pulled up, barely breathing.

"Where to, monsieur?"

I turned my phone, showing him the map.

"The abandoned warehouse," I said flatly in French to have him nod "Drive like your life depends on it. Because it might." I added cocking my gun

I didn't say much else on the way there. Just stared out the window as Paris blurred past wet streets, glowing storefronts, empty sidewalks. I didn't let myself imagine what was happening to her as I couldn't afford to.

But deep down, I knew.

This wasn't random. This was personal. And there were only two people bold or rather stupid enough to pull this. Ella Dalton and Steven Aron.

Ella was possessive. Dangerous, sure. But Steven? He was venom wearing a smile. I wouldn't put it past him to tie up his own blood if it meant making a point.

I just hoped Carmela would hold on long enough for me to reach her.

The warehouse was already surrounded by my men by the time we arrived. They stood like shadows in the fog alert, armed, and waiting.

I stepped out and gave the order in a low, quiet voice.

"Kill anyone who gets in your way. But not her. She must walk out untouched."

They nodded with no questions as they proceeded. But as I scanned the warehouse, there were no guards, no noise, no movement making my stomach turn. It was too quiet.

More like a trap.

I turned to my right-hand man. "Three minutes. If I'm not out, level the place." I instructed and could see him hesitating to carrying out my orders

"Boss..if we blow it.."

"I said I'll be fine." My voice left no room for argument.

Inside, the warehouse was cold and dead. The air smelled of rust and wet wood. My boots echoed on the cracked floor as I walked past shattered crates and broken furniture, until I turned a corner..

..and there she was.

Tied to a chair. Her head slumped forward and motionless.

I felt everything and nothing all at once. Rage burned quietly in my chest. But I didn't rush forward.

Because I saw him too

Steven Aron.

Of course.

Sitting beside her like this was tea time in hell.

"What a surprise," I said, stepping into the light. "If I'd known you were coming to Paris, I'd have rolled out the red carpet."

He grinned. "You wouldn't even offer me a motel."

"You're right. This dump suits you."

He shrugged like it didn't matter. "You've grown. Arrogant, but smarter. Still... not smart enough."

I glanced at Carmela, then back at him. "Why her?"

He raised a brow. "Because she's the one thing you can't afford to lose. And I wanted to watch you lose it."

With a flick of his hand, his men stepped out of the shadows guns raised, aimed at me.

"You came alone?" he asked, almost amused.

"Yeah," I said casually. "I wanted to see your face when this ends."

He laughed. Then pulled out a pistol and pressed it to Carmela's temple.

That was it.

My entire world narrowed to that single image.

"Easy," I said, holding up a hand. "You don't want to do this."

He leaned in closer to her. "Your father had that same look. Right before he died."

I froze but he kept going.

"You know why he died, don't you? He tried to kill me. For your mother. That maid he married. The mistress's daughter who somehow got everything. Shares. Power. My father's love. She ruined everything."

He smirked.

"So I corrected that mistake by killing her although they did make a really good couple, a driver and the daughter of a maid

My jaw tightened and I could feel my fingers twitching at my side.

"Then Daddy tried to kill me. And your uncles couldn't have that. So we sent him to her."

He chuckled again.

"And now, it's your turn."

I shook my head, breathing slow. "You should've stayed dead the first time."

My watch buzzed, it was already time up.

I smiled letting out a deep breath "Steven Aron," I whispered, drawing my gun from my pocket, "say hi to the devil for me."

I pulled the trigger.

The shot echoed like thunder and I watched him drop like dead weight.

The room exploded into chaos. His men shouted. Gunfire lit the shadows. I dropped low, elbowed one in the gut, and shot another in the thigh and I reached for Carmela, I cut the ropes used to bond her and caught her as she collapsed into me.

"I've got you," I whispered. "You're safe now. I'm here."

"Boss," Tom said, stepping in carefully. "She's alive. Still out cold, but the doctor is hopeful."

I didn't look up right away.

"Today was my fault," he added. "I should've protected her. I swear it won't happen again." I turned toward him slowly to have a proper view of him

"You know the three things I hate, Tom?"

He stiffened. "Yes, sir."

"Lies. Broken promises. And failure." I watched as he looked down.

"I cut ties with the senior boss for that exact reason," I said, pacing slowly. "But you... you've been with me since the beginning. That's why I trusted you with her. Because I thought even if I couldn't protect her you would."

He swallowed, shoulders square now, as guilt etched in every line of his face.

"She calls you brother, Tom," I said quietly. "You better live up to that. Because this world we live in? It's colder than hell. And right now... she has no one else."

I breathed out and Tom was still standing there, guilt carved into his posture, but I wasn't thinking about him anymore. My mind had already moved on racing ahead, past apologies and past regrets.

"Relying solely on martial arts won't cut it anymore," I muttered more to myself than to him. "If the people I fear are the ones targeting her... then it's time we escalated our measures."

Tom stiffened at the edge of the room but didn't speak.

I turned and walked toward the guest wing where Carmela was being treated. The hallway stretched longer than usual. My boots sounded louder but my heartbeat even louder.

The door creaked softly as I pushed it open.

She lay there. Still and fragile.

The pale-blue glow from the IV monitor made her skin look almost translucent. The Carmela I knew fiery, sarcastic, sharp tongued was gone. Or at least, buried under that paper-thin stillness.

Her lips were slightly parted as she breathed through them, but barely. As an oxygen tube nestled just beneath her nose, pumping air into her lungs that had probably forgotten how to function on their own.

It did something ugly to me, seeing her like that.

Like someone had reached inside me and crushed a part of my chest.

She was too strong for this. Too bright.

Where the hell did that light go?

"Mr. Dean?"

The voice startled me. I turned to see the doctor Dr. Lemoine walking toward me with a clipboard pressed tightly to her chest.

She looked pale. And for a doctor, that was never a good sign.

"I've sent her blood to the hospital for full-spectrum testing," she said quietly, lowering her voice like she didn't want to wake the dead. "The results are... not good."

My throat tightened.

"She was given an overdose of a narcotic fast-acting, heavily concentrated. I've already administered Naloxone to try and reverse the effects and I have also requested supplemental oxygen from the main hospital."

I swallowed hard, working to keep my voice even. "How long until she wakes up?"

"I... I don't know." Her eyes softened, and that scared me more than anything. "It depends on her body's response. There's no guarantee."

I turned back to Carmela, walked slowly to her bedside, and brushed damp strands of hair from her forehead. Her skin was too cold. Her color was wrong. I used to tease her for how flushed she got when she was angry, how animated her eyes became when she argued.

Now she was a ghost in a sick bed.

"Come on, little storm," I murmured under my breath. "Don't go quiet on me now."

"Mr. Dean."

The doctor's voice pulled me back again. She held something in her gloved hands a small plastic container.

"I found this... in her coat pocket."

I took a step forward, eyebrows furrowed.

Inside was a small bottle. I didn't need her to say it, but she did anyway.

"Methamphetamine."

The name alone made my gut twist.

"She had this on her?"

I questioned just to have her nodded solemnly. "Yes. It's a highly potent stimulant. It can cause hallucinations, paranoia, and heart failure. But I'm uncertain if she was administered this or.."

I stared at the container, then at Carmela.

None of this made sense. I exhaled slowly, then looked the doctor square in the eye.

"Put it back in her pocket."

Her eyes widened, surprised. "Sir.."

"And don't mention it. To anyone."

The hesitation in her face lasted only a second before she nodded, tucked the container away, and turned to leave.

The door shut behind her with a soft click

Alone again.

Just me. And her.

And the sickening weight of not knowing who I could trust anymore.

I sat beside the bed and watched her chest rise and fall. Every breath a war. Every second, a countdown.

She'd survived. Barely.

But this wasn't survival.

This was war.

And someone just signed their name in blood.

Chapter 35: 35

The sting of the needle pierced my neck, igniting a wave of pain that threatened to engulf me. Heat surged through my veins, rendering me helpless as tears cascaded down my cheeks. Through the haze of agony, I struggled to open my heavy eyelids, to be greeted by a blinding light that beckoned me to retreat into darkness.

"Are you awake?" I heard a familiar voice ask peeping through my dark curtains like a soothing balm amidst the chaos, when his voice reached my ears, I tried to get a glimpse of him but my vision blurred as exhaustion threatened to drag me under once more. Nix, his presence a lifeline in the sea of uncertainty, wiped away my tears with a tenderness that stirred something deep within me.

As consciousness slowly reclaimed me, I found myself in an unfamiliar room, far removed from the sterile confines of a hospital. Confusion gnawed at my senses as I attempted to piece together the fragments of my fragmented memory. Nix, ever the steadfast companion, slept beside me, his features softened by the glow of moonlight filtering through the window.

"You're finally awake?" His voice, tinged with relief, shattered the silence, but I couldn't help but notice the weariness etched into his features. This wasn't the Nix Dean I once knew; his disheveled appearance hinted at the turmoil lurking beneath the surface.

"You shouldn't scare me like that again," he murmured, his touch a gentle caress against my skin. Yet, beneath the facade of calm, I sensed a storm brewing, threatening to engulf us both in its fury.

"Two hours remain before the end of your birthday. Let's prepare." With gentle hands, he removed the oxygen mask from my face, lifting me with care and settling me into a wheelchair. "I'll summon the maids to assist you." His lips brushed mine in a tender kiss before he departed, leaving me to contemplate in solitude.

I drew in a deep breath, attempting to steady my racing thoughts. Recalling the cryptic words of the man who claimed to be Nix's uncle, uncertainty clouded my mind, leaving me adrift in a sea of doubt.

"Madame," a voice called, breaking through my reverie as a group of ladies entered the room, each carrying various items. Without hesitation, they assisted me in changing my attire, dressing me in a flowing gown that cascaded to the floor, paired with a snug jacket and delicate slippers. My hair was deftly styled and secured with a simple clip, framing my face in soft waves.

As the women silently departed, leaving me alone once more, I turned to find Nix standing at the door, his presence a reassuring anchor amidst the swirling chaos of uncertainty.

"You look beautiful," he murmured, his words a gentle caress that warmed my heart as he lifted me into his arms.

With a quiet determination, Nix guided me through the motions of preparation, his actions a silent testament to his unwavering devotion. As I sat before the dining table, adorned in finery fit for a celebration, I couldn't shake the nagging sense of unease that clung to me like a shadow.

"Make a wish," he urged, his eyes betraying a hint of uncertainty as he watched me blow out the candle. But as the flickering flame extinguished, so too did my resolve, replaced by a wave of doubt that threatened to drown me.

"I won't cut the cake," I declared, my voice steady despite the tumult raging within. "I shouldn't be accepting any more favors from you, Mr. Dean." I asserted, refusing to avert my gaze, longing to decipher his reaction, yet he remained inscrutable, his expression a mask of stoicism.

"Then don't repay," he stated firmly, his eyes unwavering as he placed a small box before me. "Accept my proposal to be my wife for one year, and I'll release you from any debt. Furthermore, I'll provide a billion to help you start anew." His words hung heavy in the air, laden with both promise and peril.

His offer hung between us, a silent plea for absolution amidst the chaos. Yet, beneath his stoic facade, I sensed a vulnerability that mirrored my own. I found myself questioning whether the man standing before me was truly the same individual who had shown me such kindness in my darkest moments. Was he the same person who had been there for me when I awoke, trembling with the aftermath of a near-fatal panic attack? Was he the one who had bestowed upon me a thoughtful gift, offering solace and encouragement when I secured a sponsorship?

As doubt clouded my mind, I instinctively pushed the chair I was seated in away, a silent gesture of defiance. With trembling hands, I reached to remove the chain from my leg, a tangible reminder of the constraints that bound me to him. Yet, before I could free myself, his grip tightened, halting my escape.

"Why are you doing this?" he demanded, his voice tinged with a mixture of frustration and concern.

Caught off guard by his reaction, I hesitated, unsure of how to proceed. With a heavy sigh, I met his gaze, searching for answers in the depths of his eyes. But what I found there only deepened the mystery surrounding him, leaving me to question whether his intentions were truly as noble as they seemed.

"I'm tired, Nix," I confessed, my words a whispered plea for understanding. "I just want a normal life, free from the shackles of obligation and deceit." Seeing the silence that followed, I braced myself before continuing "As I mentioned at the party, I refuse to be treated as anyone's possession. While marriage may seem like a game to you, it holds significant weight for me, especially at my age. So, I'll be direct: Do you harbor genuine feelings for me?"

I met his gaze squarely, only for him to avert his eyes, evading the intensity of the moment. With a nod, I rose unsteadily, relying on the table for support as my legs weakened beneath me.

"When you're ready to provide an honest answer, I'll consider your proposal," I declared, regaining my composure as I retreated to the solitude of the room he provided me, a sense of clarity washed over me, tempered by the weight of newfound purpose. With each passing moment, the lines between truth and deception blurred, leaving me to navigate the treacherous waters of my own desires.

As I slowly made my way back to my phone, a smile tugged at my lips at the sight of the caller's name.

"Hello," I greeted warmly, eager for the familiar voice on the other end.

"I finally caught the birthday girl! How are you?" Tommy's voice radiated warmth and concern, instantly detecting the turmoil beneath my facade. Though I couldn't divulge the truth of my ordeal, I offered a partial confession, craving his comforting presence.

"Listen, whether he has a girlfriend or not shouldn't consume you," I reassured myself as much as him, absorbing Tommy's sage advice. With a nod of determination, I accepted his guidance, recognizing the need to prioritize my own desires over external pressures.

"Alright, once you're done with work, come straight home. It's been too long since we last saw each other, and I have a surprise for you," Tommy's excitement was contagious, coaxing a chuckle from me before we bid farewell.

As the call ended, I turned to face the remnants of my past, the jacket and the drug concealed within its folds. Tommy's words echoed in my mind, grounding me in resolve. It was time to chart my own course, to seize control of my destiny and secure my desires.

With determination coursing through my veins, I set aside the artifacts of my past, ready to forge a new path forward. The journey ahead would be fraught with challenges, but armed with clarity and conviction, I was prepared to face whatever lay ahead.

But little did I know, the path that lay ahead would test the limits of my courage and resilience, leading me down a road fraught with danger and desire. And as the tendrils of fate wove their intricate tapestry, I found myself drawn ever closer to the truth that lay buried beneath layers of deception.

For in the tangled web of love and betrayal, only time would reveal the secrets that lay hidden within the depths of my fractured heart. And as the dawn of a new day beckoned, I knew that the journey had only just begun, with every twist and turn leading me ever closer to the answers I sought.

And as I lay beneath the covers, bathed in the soft glow of moonlight, I resolved to seize control of my own destiny, no matter the cost. As I gazed at the leg chain gifted to me by Nix and the vial of drugs handed to me by his enigmatic uncle, Tommy's words echoed in my mind like a haunting refrain, though in darkness, I glimpsed a flicker of hope, a beacon of light amidst the shadows.

Chapter 36: 36

"Tommy!" I called walking into the house but it was unusually quiet. I made my way to the kitchen dropping the groceries I got from the supermarket before going back to find Tommy. I stood before his room door knocking endlessly but still got no response worrying me

"Why are you knocking on my door?" I jolted hearing Tommy's voice from behind me and hit him on his chest trying to gain my composure "did you have to sneak up on me like that" I rolled my eyes just to find him shrugged, not wanting to prolong the issue I pulled him towards the kitchen showing him the groceries I bought

"Don't tell me you're planning on making breakfast?" Was his comment and I couldn't help but let out a sigh seeing his stern look.

Was my cooking that bad? I tried to judge myself seeing his

"I won't cook, I'll just make toast instead" I sighed watching him nod as he strolled back to his room to freshen up.

With a deep breath, I rushed into my room, the adrenaline from the night still coursing through me. The dim glow of my bedside lamp revealed the chaos of my space, a reflection of my scattered thoughts. As I shed the attire I wore at Nix's place, each garment seemed to carry with it a memory of the evening's excitement. My fingers trembled slightly as I reached for the familiar comfort of my baggy joggers and a soft, white cropped top, the fabric cool against my skin.

With practiced ease, I gathered my hair into my favorite hairstyle: a messy bun, strands escaping in playful rebellion. But as I twisted and pinned, my movements faltered, a sudden sensation arresting my attention. It was subtle at first, a whisper of discomfort at the base of my skull, like the gentle warning of an approaching storm.

Ignoring the unease, I focused on the task at hand, willing my hands to cooperate. Yet, with each tug and twist, the sensation grew, morphing from a whisper to a clamor that echoed through my mind. It was as if my body had become a vessel for an unseen force, a conduit for something beyond my comprehension.

And then it happened. A sharp pang, like lightning striking at the core of my being, sent me staggering backward, my hands flying to the source of the pain. My fingers came away slick with blood, the crimson evidence of a nose bleed staining my skin.

Fear and disbelief collided within me, the reality of what was happening sinking in with a chilling clarity. I had heard of nose bleeds before, whispered rumors from the people around me, but never had I experienced one firsthand. Yet here I stood, confronted with the undeniable truth of my own vulnerability.

"Ah!" I screamed trembling as I sank to the edge of my bed, my mind racing as I tried to make sense of this new reality.

As Tommy rushed to my side, his concern palpable, I couldn't help but feel a pang of gratitude for his swift action. His hands moved with practiced efficiency, snatching up a box of tissues to staunch the flow of blood from my nose. But before I could fully process his assistance, he bolted from the room, leaving me alone with my bewilderment.

Then, like a reassuring beacon in the chaos, Nix's voice cut through the haze of my confusion. "Beloved," he called softly, his presence a soothing balm to my frazzled

nerves. With tears threatening to spill from my eyes, I looked up at him, half-expecting to find the grim specter of death looming over me.

Instead, Nix moved with a calm assurance, deftly taking the ice pack from Tommy's abandoned grasp and applying it to the bridge of my nose. His touch was gentle, his movements practiced, as he wiped away the remaining traces of blood from my face. Despite the gravity of the situation, there was an intimacy to his actions that sent a flutter through my chest.

"Am I dying?" I whispered, the fear evident in my trembling voice as tears streaked down my cheeks. Nix's response was a tender shake of his head, his fingers brushing away the tears with a tenderness that made my heart ache.

"The doctor mentioned potential side effects from the drugs you were injected with," he explained softly, his voice a soothing melody in the midst of my turmoil. "This could be one of them. It will pass with time."

With a nod, I watched as he placed an ice pack on my nose bridge, his touch grounding me in the present moment. "Go change your clothes," he instructed gently, handing me a fresh box of tissues before stepping out of the room.

I followed his directive without question, the adrenaline of the moment still coursing through my veins. In the sanctuary of my closet, I shed my blood-stained clothes with a sense of relief, slipping into an oversized t-shirt with a sigh of gratitude for its comforting embrace.

Returning to the sitting room, I couldn't help but notice the tension that hung in the air between Nix and Tommy, like a taut wire on the verge of snapping. "Do you two know each other?" I ventured, my voice barely a whisper as I sought to unravel the mystery of their connection.

Tommy's response was hesitant, and awkward, leaving me with more questions than answers. But before I could delve deeper, Nix interjected with a simple declaration that sent shockwaves through me.

"I'm her boyfriend," Nix stated matter-of-factly, his gaze never wavering from mine as he claimed me as his own. The words hung heavy in the air, a revelation that left me reeling.

But as I turned to explain to Tommy, to untangle the web of secrets and half-truths that had brought us to this moment, I found myself alone once more. Tommy had vanished without a trace, leaving me to grapple with the dizzying whirlwind of emotions that threatened to overwhelm me.

What the hell had just happened here? The question echoed in my mind, a tantalizing enigma that begged for answers I feared I may never find. With a deep sigh, I made my way towards the kitchen to make myself a toast,

As I stood at the kitchen counter, the aroma of freshly toasted bread filling the air, I couldn't shake the feeling of unease that lingered in the pit of my stomach.

My hands moved mechanically, spreading a generous layer of creamy butter on the warm, golden slices, but my mind was elsewhere, preoccupied.

Just as I reached for the jar of strawberry jam, a sudden warmth enveloped me from behind, causing my heart to leap in my chest. I froze, the jar slipping from my fingers as I felt Nix's presence behind me, his body pressing against mine in an intimate embrace. His touch was electric, sending shivers down my spine as he buried his face in the curve of my neck, his breath sending tingles cascading down my skin.

For a moment, I melted into his embrace, the world falling away as I savored the intoxicating closeness between us. But as quickly as it had come, a wall of resistance surged within me, the weight of my unanswered question pressing down on me like a leaden cloak.

With a determined breath, I squared my shoulders, pushing back against the allure of Nix's touch even as my heart yearned for more. "Nix," I began, my voice trembling with a mixture of longing and apprehension, "we need to talk."

As I turned to face him, my eyes met his, searching for the truth I so desperately sought.

But instead of giving me a direct response, he surprised me by guiding me to sit on the counter before retrieving the leg chain I had left at his place. With gentle movements, he bent down to help me fasten it back around my ankle.

As he worked, his touch was tender, each movement filled with a silent intimacy that left my heart racing. My pulse quickened as he finally stood up, his eyes locking with mine in a silent exchange of unspoken emotions.

"You asked if I had feelings for you," he began, his voice soft yet filled with sincerity. "Ever since the death of my parents, I've closed myself off from emotions and attachments. But being with you has shown me a different side of the world, a side filled with possibility and warmth. Trust me when I say that I've never felt this way for anyone else."

His words hung in the air between us, heavy with meaning and unspoken longing. I felt a flutter in my chest as he took my hand, placing it gently against his chest, allowing me to feel the steady rhythm of his heartbeat.

But before I could respond, he shifted his focus, his gaze piercing mine with unwavering intensity. "I understand where you stand," I murmured, my voice barely above a whisper as I struggled to maintain my composure. "But the world may not see it the same way, especially considering your betrothal."

I crossed my arms defensively, avoiding his gaze as I grappled with my own conflicting emotions. Yet, he refused to let me retreat into the safety of my own thoughts, gently turning my face to meet his gaze once more.

A hint of amusement danced in his eyes as he spoke, teasing me with his words. "Have you been digging up on me?" he asked, his tone playful yet tinged with curiosity.

I bristled at the implication, but before I could respond, he silenced me with a tender gesture, cupping my face in his palm. "Are you jealous?" he whispered, his breath warm against my skin.

I scoffed at the suggestion, but deep down, I knew there was truth in his words. "Jealous?" I echoed, my voice laced with uncertainty.

He nodded knowingly, his gaze never wavering from mine. "You know she's from a wealthy family," he began, but I cut him off, frustration bubbling to the surface.

"Mr. Dean, aside from her family's wealth, what does she have to offer?" I retorted, my tone dripping with disdain. "Beauty? Brains? She has none of it. And despite my own humble origins, I assure you, I am far more capable than she could ever hope to be."

Before I could continue, my words were silenced by his lips, soft yet insistent against mine. I melted into his embrace, the heat of his touch igniting a fire within me that I couldn't ignore.

As we kissed, the world fell away, leaving only the sensation of his lips against mine, the heat of his body pressed close to mine. My fingers tangled in his hair, pulling him closer as the desire between us flared to life.

When he finally pulled away, a smile played at the corners of his lips, his eyes twinkling with mischief. "And that's more reason I want you instead of her," he whispered against my ear, his breath sending shivers down my spine.

Without giving me a chance to regain my composure, he pressed his lips to my neck, gently at first, but then with increasing intensity, sending me into a brief trance. His lips traced a line along my neck while his hand explored my legs, pulling at my underwear before tearing it off. His fingers traced down to my clitoris, eliciting a gasp from me, before delving deeper, exploring my every reaction.

With one final kiss on my lips, he helped me remove my t-shirt, leaving my hardened nipples exposed to the morning breeze. Without waiting for my response, he continued

to kiss down my stomach, pausing at my core, locking eyes with me before diving in with a smirk, his tongue teasing against my most sensitive spot, rendering me speechless.

I tried to stifle my sounds, but soon found it impossible as I threw my head back, feeling his lips against my innermost being. "Nix," I moaned, biting my lower lip, running my hands through his hair. But his next move sent me spiraling into ecstasy, his teeth grazing against my most sensitive area.

As I felt my muscles tense and my toes curl, waves of emotion washed over me, and soon I released, panting deeply. But Nix was far from finished, his lips lingering between my legs, as he continued to lap up every drop of my essence.

Standing up, he brought his lips close to mine, pouring my essence into my mouth with a victorious smirk.

"You taste like chocolate," he winked, causing a flush to spread across my face.

Chapter 37: 37

AN: please note that all action that is carried out here is totally fiction and nothing more.

In the opulent confines of his private jet, Nix reclines in decadence, his gaze fixed upon the delicate parchment that bears witness to the binding contract of his marriage to Carmela. Each intricate stroke of her pen serves as a testament to their union, a union that wields power over others with an ironclad grip.

As the jet descends towards the awaiting tarmac, Nix's countenance shifts subtly, his smirk melting into a mask of solemn anticipation. Stepping onto the solid ground below, he is met by Ken, whose grave expression portends the weightiness of the impending ordeal at the police station. With a silent exchange of understanding, Nix prepares himself to navigate the murky depths of the situation ahead.

Inside the precinct, a palpable tension hangs in the air as Nix is ushered into the interrogation room. The assistant investigator, a man of formidable presence and authority, meets his gaze with a mix of suspicion and curiosity.

"Good morning, sir," the officer begins, his tone laced with a hint of deference. "I apologize for any inconvenience caused, but the lead investigator on this case..."

"It's quite alright. Let's proceed," Nix interjects, a flicker of boredom evident in his voice. He had anticipated this moment ever since his fateful decision to rid himself of his uncle, a move he knew would draw both legal and extralegal scrutiny.

Taking a seat opposite the investigator, Nix preemptively addresses the unspoken accusations hanging in the air. "From the 12th to the 14th, I was in Paris. The murder

occurred between 10 to 11 pm, and during that time, I was at my residence in Paris, reviewing documents. Here's the CCTV footage for verification," he states calmly, producing the evidence from his pocket and placing it on the table with a measured air of confidence.

"And if you have any doubts, perhaps you should question whether I could have committed a crime in the United States while I was in Paris," Nix adds, a wry smile playing upon his lips as he retrieves a pen from his jacket pocket. "Since I've answered your inquiries, I believe my presence here is no longer required."

"But, Mr. Dean, I haven't even begun questioning you," the investigator protests, his confusion evident.

Nix's smile widens, a glint of mischief dancing in his eyes. "True, but I suspect my answers have already addressed your concerns. After all, this isn't my first time in an interrogation room, and it certainly won't be my last," he remarks with a knowing wink before taking his leave, leaving the investigator to ponder the enigmatic figure before him.

...

Confined within the confines of Mr. Dean's opulent bedroom, time seemed to stretch endlessly, each minute dragging on like an eternity. The steady rhythm of the maids' footsteps echoed in the silence, their occasional visits serving as the only reminder of the outside world. Yet, despite their presence, a sense of isolation weighed heavily upon me, casting a pall over my thoughts.

The events that led to my confinement remained shrouded in mystery, a puzzle with no clear solution. Mr. Dean's abrupt summons, coupled with the cryptic phone call that preceded it, left me grasping for answers, my mind swirling with unanswered questions. But amidst the uncertainty, one thing remained constant my unwavering hope that whatever troubles plagued Mr. Dean would soon be resolved.

As I navigated the labyrinthine hallways of his sprawling estate, each turn a maze of uncertainty, my eyes were drawn to a striking portrait that adorned the wall. The figures depicted within its frame seemed hauntingly familiar, their faces etched in my memory like a half-forgotten dream. With a sudden jolt of recognition, I realized they were the same couple I had glimpsed in a photograph in Nix's room an image that had vanished without a trace soon after.

But unlike the photo, the subjects of this painting bore a different aura, their expressions tinged with a sense of melancholy that tugged at my heartstrings. As I studied the intricate brushstrokes, a flood of memories washed over me, transporting me back to a time long forgotten.

It was then that realization struck me like a thunderbolt, knocking the breath from my lungs and leaving me reeling in disbelief. The pieces of the puzzle fell into place with startling clarity, illuminating the dark corners of my mind with newfound understanding.

"That's the young master's parents," the butler stated, his voice carrying a note of reverence as he appeared behind me with a soft smile. "This photo was taken three months after the birth of the young master." He approached the table, where the portrait hung above, and retrieved some photos from behind a flower vase, extending them to me. "Unlike the twins, the young master is very attached to this house, perhaps because he was born and raised here."

The butler's narrative unfolded like delicate lace, each word imbued with a sense of history and intrigue. He spoke of the circumstances surrounding Nix's birth, shrouded in foreboding yet defied by resilience. Despite the ominous whispers and superstitions that surrounded his arrival, Nix emerged as a beacon of vitality, his mother's unwavering belief in him casting aside the shadows of doubt.

"So she named him Nix?" I inquired, drawn into the tale woven by the butler's words, his gentle smile confirming my suspicions.

"Indeed," he affirmed, nodding in acknowledgment. "Despite bearing a striking resemblance to his father, except for his hair color, Nix's parents harbored fears of what might happen if he were to succumb to the same fate. Thus, they poured their love and attention solely into him, eschewing the idea of further children."

As the butler led the way, my curiosity burned bright, eager for the next Chapter in this intricate saga.

"What happened?" I pressed, trailing after him as he guided me through the labyrinthine corridors of the mansion, his footsteps echoing against the polished marble floors.

"The young master never became a spoilt brat like his peer, in fact he hardly associated with others and preferred spending time reading or listening to his mom's poetry." I suddenly began to imagine everything he said and a small smile crept up my lips.

"He would say words like 'I'm too smart to associate myself with those petty spoilt kids' while his parents would laugh behind his back watching him give a grand speech on not wanting to go on a school trip."

I guess he's been a narcissist from the very start. I thought to myself, diligently following the butler from behind.

"When he turned eight..." he continued "the twins came into our lives and everything seemed to be perfect until they came to a dead end" his voice filled with a grief that echoed within the walls as we also came to a dead end.

"Master and his wife were involved in a deadly accident and master's wife uncle came to take the kids away.

Knowing the hatred the madam's brothers had for my master I never dared try to reach out to them for fear of them being mistreated..but after two years the young master showed up in front of my house completely drained in the rain as he held both the twins

He brought me back here and requested I took care of both the twins while he visited sedomly"

"He visited? Where did he leave then?" I questioned just to have him shake his head

"I don't know..but after the twins finished collage, he decided to move back to the united state and started his own company" I felt goosebumps cralwup on my skin after hearing all the butler said and for some reason everything he said felt like it was missing a piece, as I opened my mouth about to voice out another question the ringing of my phone stoped me.

"Artist Carmela?" The caller inquired while I confirmed "I'm calling on behalf of a painting of yours if you don't mind can we meet up and discuss about it in details?" He said and it took me some seconds to digest what he just said.

"Of.. off course" I said, excitement bubbling up inside me. "Great, I'll send you the location. I hope you make it, as this may be the only opportunity I have to meet with you, Miss Carmela," he said before ending the call, leaving me with a lingering sense of anticipation.

Butterflies fluttered in my stomach, and I couldn't resist doing a little happy dance. "Mr. Butler, I'm sorry, but I have to go now. I promise we'll continue when I'm back," I said hastily, dropping the photos he gave me before dashing off to change.

As I stepped out of the sleek black car and onto the cobblestone streets of Paris, I couldn't help but feel a thrill of excitement mixed with a hint of nervousness.

Nicholas Boucher as he had introduced himself is renowned art collector according to the internet.

I couldn't help but tap myself on the shoulder for being able to gain the attention of such a personality. Walking into Le Rouge, an exclusive club in the heart of the city. I was determined to make a deal with him and I feel tonight was my chance to show off to the world.

As I approached the entrance, a stern-looking man in a tailored suit eyed me from head to toe before nodding curtly and stepping aside. The door swung open, revealing a sleek, modern foyer with a gleaming metal detector and a burly security guard who scrutinized me like I were potential threats. I felt a shiver run down my spine as I

handed over my clutch for inspection. The guard's gloved hands rifled through my belongings, his eyes scanning each item with an intensity that made me wonder if he was searching for something specific.

Meanwhile, another guard discreetly frisked me, his hands moving swiftly and efficiently over my body. I felt a flush rise to my cheeks as he lingered for a moment on my sketchbook, tucked away in my bag.

Once I cleared the first hurdle, I was ushered into a luxurious lounge area where a stunning hostess greeted me with a warm smile. But even as I sipped our champagne and nibbled on canapés, I couldn't shake off the feeling of being under surveillance. Discreet cameras watched my every move, and the security personnel seemed to be everywhere and nowhere at the same time.

As I made my way to the VIP area, I noticed a biometric scanner discreetly embedded in the wall. A tiny light flickered as it scanned our faces, and I felt a shiver run down my spine. This was some serious James Bond-level stuff! I wondered if Nicholas Boucher was a member of this elite club, and if so, what secrets he might be hiding.

Finally, I entered the inner sanctum a sumptuous room filled with the crème de la crème of Parisian society. The music pulsed, the lights flashed, and the crowd pulsed with energy. I scanned the room, searching for a glimpse of Nicholas Boucher's distinctive silver hair and piercing blue eyes. And then, suddenly, I spotted him, sipping a drink and chatting with a group of admirers. My heart raced as I made my way towards him, my table and sketchbook clutched tightly in my hand.

"Carmela la peintre"

Chapter 38: 38

"Carmela la peintre," he greeted me with a radiant smile. I mirrored his enthusiasm, but my awkwardness betrayed me. His keen observation caught my discomfort in an instant.

"You don't understand French?" he queried, and with a hesitant nod, I confirmed his suspicion. A chuckle escaped him. "It's okay though... Shall we get down to business?" he continued, prompting me to place my sketchbook and tablet on the table.

"You saw my work at my school audition, so here are some of my other completed works," I explained as I handed him my tablet. He nodded thoughtfully as he swiped through the images. "Truth be told, you're surely a talented painter... but I don't want any of these. Can you paint a portrait of me? I've always wanted a huge portrait of myself, but I've never found the right artist until now. My instincts tell me you're the one for the job," he declared, his smile unwavering as he slid a blank check across the table.

"Can you do it? I'm ready to pay whatever amount you want," he added eagerly. Despite feeling a sense of unease at how smoothly things were progressing, I accepted the offer. "Wonderful. I'll send my PA to you tomorrow to discuss the details. But for now, let's celebrate," he proposed, gesturing for drinks.

"Miss Carmela," he said, offering me a glass, which I politely declined, raising both hands. "I'm sorry, I don't drink," I explained. His brows furrowed. "It's like a final seal to our deal, miss, and it's unprofessional of you to refuse a drink from your client. Haven't you been told that?" he chided. While I had never heard such advice, I knew better than to accept drinks from overly friendly strangers.

"Miss Carmela!" he called out, the tension palpable, until a familiar voice intervened, diffusing the atmosphere. "How about I drink in her place?" Nix interjected, snatching the glass and downing its contents in one swift motion.

"M..mr D..Dean," I heard Nicholas Boucher stutter as he rose shakily to his feet. "Well, I hope this deal comes to an end, Nicholas, as I don't appreciate my woman working with other men... Cheers," Nix declared, raising the glass before smashing it on the table and leading me towards the exit forcefully.

...

The heavy silence within the car pressed against Carmela's chest, each passing moment feeling more suffocating than the last. She stole glances at Nix, his demeanor adding to her discomfort. As he loosened his tie and undid buttons, she observed him retrieve a strip from the cockpit, placing it in his mouth before carefully sealing it in a transparent bag. With a controlled motion, he lowered the car window and handed the bag to someone in the adjacent vehicle before accelerating away.

As the seconds ticked by, Carmela made a decision to shatter the oppressive quiet. Inhaling deeply, she began, "Ni..."

"I've sent you the package, get down to work," Nix interjected abruptly, his tone leaving Carmela bewildered, especially as there was no one else in the car beside them.

"I'm sorry," she finally managed to utter, her gaze fixed on her entwined fingers.

"For?" Nix's voice broke through the tension, his eyes focused on the road ahead.

"Not listening to you, despite the fact that you told me to stay home. I..." Her voice trailed off, laden with uncertainty, she wasn't sure why she was apologizing but still she felt like apologizing which she couldn't wrap her head around.

"You know, for the sake of not becoming an airborne hazard, you might want to... secure yourself"

Carmela finally looks up to find his eyes totally fixed in the road . "Airborne hazard?" She repeated, trying to comprehend what he just said but Nix's expression remained neutral, his gaze fixed on the road ahead. "Just a precautionary measure," he said, his voice devoid of emotion but still sent a shiver down her spine. Without hesitation, she complied, fastening her seatbelt, her instincts on high alert, though she remained in the dark about the unfolding situation.

As Nix navigated the speeding car with precision, Carmela couldn't shake the feeling of impending danger. The tension in the air was suffocating, heightened by the ominous presence of the pursuing vehicles in their wake. She stole a glance behind, only to confirm her worst fears: they were being followed, and not just being followed they were outnumbered.

Fear coiled in her chest as she attempted to grasp the severity of their predicament. Yet, Nix's demeanor betrayed nothing but a sense of unease, his actions speaking louder than words. As he shed his jacket, revealing a restlessness that mirrored her own unease, Carmela's heart raced with unanswered questions that was now popping in her head.

"Are you... okay?" Her voice wavered, barely audible above the rush of wind and the roar of the engine. But Nix's attention was elsewhere, his focus consumed by the cryptic conversation with an unseen figure, leaving Carmela to cling to her seatbelt for dear life as he executed a daring U-turn.

The sudden shift in direction sent shockwaves through her, her grip on reality slipping as they plunged into the night, pursued by unseen threats. With each passing moment, the unknown loomed larger, casting a shadow of uncertainty over their harrowing escape.

As the car came to a stop within the confines of a towering truck, Carmela's breath caught in her throat, the realization of their narrow escape dawning upon her. Yet, relief was short-lived as Nix's urgent command pierced the silence, "Put this on" he urged her tossing his shirt to her

Her fingers trembled as she shed her outer layers, the fabric slipping from her skin like a second skin, leaving her exposed and vulnerable. The weight of Nix's gaze bore down on her, a silent exchange of unspoken truths and unspoken desires, leaving Carmela to question the boundaries of trust and betrayal.

With a heavy heart, she draped herself in his shirt, a symbol of solidarity in the face of adversity, though the distance between them felt insurmountable. As Nix led the way into the unknown direction they were now diving into, Carmela trailed behind, her thoughts consumed

"Hope you still have those panic attacks" the air crackled with tension as Nix's question hung heavy in the air, punctuated by the roar of the motorcycle engine as she claimed

behind him her gaze not departing from the familiar masked figure who handed nix the motorcycle key and two helmets. Carmela's heart skipped a beat as she remembered her past struggles, a knot forming in her stomach as she clung to Nix for dear life.

As they hurtled through the night, the rush of wind against her skin mingled with the adrenaline-fueled fear coursing through her veins. Her mind raced with a flurry of thoughts, each one more terrifying than the last, as the unknown destination loomed closer with every passing moment.

With a sharp turn, her breath caught in her throat, the edge of the road a mere whisper away. Panic threatened to consume her, the urge to scream clawing at the back of her mind as she fought to maintain her grip on reality.

But as the motorcycle veered into the darkness of an abandoned warehouse, a sense of surreal calm washed over her, mingling with the lingering echoes of fear.

"Get off," she heard Nix say, prompting her to release her grip on him before stepping down from the motorbike. As she observed him packing up, Carmela gradually realized the spaciousness and beauty of the building they had entered.

Despite its outward appearance of abandonment, the interior exuded a warmth and coziness that belied its exterior. "Let's go in," Nix suggested, leading the way into what he referred to as his safe house, leaving Carmela speechless.

Her eyes widened as she took in the surroundings, noting a small round bed on one side, opposite to which stood a large screen. A small kitchen adorned the other side of the room, with a long couch at its center. Before she could fully process the scene, the shrill ringing of the telephone shattered the tranquility.

As Carmela hesitated, her eyes scanning the room in search of Nix, the phone vibrated sharply in her hand. She looked to find caller ID, hesitantly, she answered, but said nothing.

The voice on the other end jumped in immediately, clipped and low, laced with tension.

"Boss, it's bad."

Carmela's heart skipped.

"We tested the strip you sent. The drink wasn't clean."

The voice lowered even more. "Class C spike heat trigger, nerve stim, and a secondary agent we haven't identified yet. Someone wanted whoever drank that off balance. Maybe worse."

Carmela's breath hitched.

There was a pause, then the man muttered, "Who the hell's targeting you like this? If you hadn't taken that drink first..."

He trailed off. Carmela's mind reeled. "He drank it. For me"

"You should already be feeling the crash burning up, disoriented, Boss, you need to stay near something cold. We're working on an antidote now, just.."

Carmela didn't wait to hear more. The phone slipped from her ear as she turned.

"Nix!" she shouted, the name bursting from her lips as her legs carried her toward the only door in the room.

"Nix!" she cried again, her voice cracking under the weight of terror. Her fingers fumbled at the doorknob as panic flooded her chest.

She had to find him before the drug did worse.

Carmela burst into the bathroom, panic twisting in her chest. Her gaze locked onto Nix, slumped in the cold bathtub, his skin glistening with sweat that shouldn't have been there. The water was icy, but his body radiated heat like a furnace.

"Nix..." she breathed, rushing to his side. Her hand cupped his face, finding it far too warm. "I need to call the doctor."

She turned to leave, but his hand shot out, gripping her wrist with a strength that defied his condition. With a sudden pull, she fell into the water, landing against his chest in a startled gasp.

"Let's stay like this," he murmured, voice gravelly, strained yet somehow tender.

Normally, his touch made her heart race with unease. But this time, she didn't pull away. Her arms wrapped around his neck on their own. She pressed a gentle kiss to the curve of his jaw, testing the rising courage blooming inside her.

He exhaled sharply, drawing back just enough to meet her gaze. "Don't do that," he warned, his eyes dark with restraint. "I'm already clinging to what little self-control I have left."

Instead of backing off, Carmela raised her chin.

"You promised me three wishes... if I married you," she said softly. "I want to use one now."

His brows knit together. "Carmela..."

"I want you," she whispered, gaze steady. "I chose this. Today. I knew what I was doing."

Without waiting for permission, she shifted into his lap, water rippling around them. She kissed him, slow and deep, as if sealing her vow with more than just words.

For a moment, he didn't move.

Then, with a growl of surrender, his arms wrapped around her, pulling her closer, anchoring her to him like a lifeline. The world around them disappeared, leaving only the sound of water, heartbeats, and the whispered promises neither of them dared speak aloud.

Nix held her close, his lips brushing against her temple as if grounding himself in her presence. The icy water did little to cool the fire pulsing beneath his skin and even less to quiet the storm building between them.

Without breaking their embrace, he rose from the tub, lifting her effortlessly in his arms. Water dripped from their bodies as he carried her back into the room, every step purposeful.

They stopped in front of the full-length mirror, their reflections staring back at them soaked, flushed, and exposed. His gaze didn't leave hers.

"Once I make you mine," he said quietly, "you're never walking away. Contract or not."

Carmela met his eyes. "I already decided that when I came to you."

A flicker of something unreadable passed through his expression, part hunger, part fear, part something deeper.

He leaned in, lips brushing hers. "Then say it. Say you're mine."

She didn't hesitate. "I'm yours."

A tension broke inside him. Not lust, not entirely, but something older, darker, something that had long been chained behind walls only she seemed to reach.

He kissed her then not with desperation, but with certainty. Like sealing a pact.

They sank onto the bed, her body curling into his wet clothes. His hands roamed her sides slowly, carefully, as if memorizing every inch.

"You're burning up," she whispered, brushing the damp hair from his forehead.

"So are you," he murmured back.

The moment stretched, their eyes locked, breath mingling.

She leaned into him again. "Then let's burn together."

Carmela lay beneath him, the cold sheets doing nothing to still the heat blooming across her skin. Nix hovered above her, his damp hair falling over his brow, eyes dark with something deeper than lust something close to reverence.

"This isn't just about tonight," he murmured, tracing the line of her jaw with his knuckles. "If we do this... there's no going back."

Her chest rose and fell rapidly, heart thudding beneath his touch. But her voice came steady, laced with quiet resolve.

"I don't want to go back."

That was all it took.

His lips found hers again, slower this time, coaxing her into the moment. There was no rush, no urgency only the quiet unraveling of the wall between them. His hands slid up her arms, then down her sides, igniting goosebumps in their wake. She arched into him instinctively, nerves and desire warring inside her chest.

Her fingers tangled in his hair, pulling him closer as their kiss deepened. He responded with a low growl that sent heat surging through her. His mouth left hers only to explore her neck, her collarbone, each kiss a silent claim.

"You're beautiful," he said against her skin, as if the words surprised him.

Carmela's breath caught when his hands found the hem of her shirt. She nodded, giving silent permission. Piece by piece, their barriers fell away until they were bare before each other, body and soul.

When he finally entered her, he moved with measured care, watching her face, waiting for the smallest sign of pain. She gasped, her fingers clutching the sheets but not from fear.

He stayed still, brushing her cheek with a thumb. "Tell me if I hurt you."

"You won't," she whispered, meeting his gaze. "Just don't stop."

Their bodies moved together in a rhythm both new and familiar, as though they'd always been meant to find each other at this exact moment. Every kiss, every breath, every whisper felt like a vow carved into the night.

The room faded away, replaced by warmth, by connection, by the quiet sound of her name on his lips and the way she clung to him like he was the only thing keeping her grounded.

And maybe he was.

When the waves finally crashed over them, it wasn't just physical. It was release. Relief. A silent surrender to something they both feared, yet couldn't deny.

He held her close afterward, their legs tangled beneath the sheets, his hand resting against the curve of her waist.

"You've ruined me," he whispered into her hair.

Carmela smiled against his chest, her fingers tracing lazy patterns over his skin.

"Good."

Chapter 39: 39

As I watched Carmela sleep, a soft smile tugged at the side of my lips. I hated the fact I was about to wake her but the bedsheet had to be changed. Scanning the room for somewhere to lay her, my eyes landed on the wide couch at its center. Carefully, I lifted her, cradled her against my chest, and laid her down so the bed could be tended to.

I carried the stained sheet to the laundry basket, then smoothed the fresh linen over the mattress. Still, I felt a low, nagging unease throbbed at the edge of my thoughts, and a pressure I couldn't shake.

"You've surprised me, by how far you've changed. Changing sheets? For a man who buries himself in papers?" The voice cut through the quiet familiar, and yet one I dreaded.

Demons and men interrelating is one blurry line that can never been imagined. In my case, the line between host and parasite became invisible or maybe ...complicated. This thing wasn't the same as the old stories of one being possessed. It was different.. and it lived inside of me, a companion I had learned to coexist beside.

Years of therapists had ended predictably, personality disorder, trauma, a diagnosis I refused to accept and so I dived into exorcisms which failed a number of time after which I decided to stop trying and started coexisting and that was how it changed everything.

I put Carmela back on the bed and headed for the bathroom. The mirror met me with a grin that wasn't mine mischief sparking in its eyes that shined bright despite the dull lighting

"You promised you wouldn't show," I said, trying for firmness.

"Oh? This is how you welcome me? After months of sleep I stir up the house and get no thanks?" it mocked, amusement threading its words.

"It's not that.."

"You swallowed their poison and it woke me.." it scoffed . "Consider yourself lucky to have me, because without me, you'd be long gone, and yet you still have the guts to speak rudely to me"

I almost rolled my eyes seeing it's attitude, but the creature's tone nudged me onward.

"Go see the old man," it suddenly suggested, and a sliver of understanding cut through the fog as I tried to build even more walls

"Which old man?" I asked, though the name was just beyond reach.

"You still haven't found whoever's watching you," it said narrowing his eyes at me . ".. an heir can't be blind."

"I never wanted the throne," I spat back as the truth tasted like ash in my mouth. "My enemies are too many, and the moment I try to keep one in check then another goes haywire " I sighed king

"Will you give up?" it prodded. "What about Carmela? Will you let another claim what's yours?"

My visions began uncoiling as I remember my father, the chauffeur who had carried us through a life of half-truths then disappeared midway, then a stranger who revealed himself as none other than my grandfather. He had been kept from us, a ghost in my father's stories about his true origins, and learning of him shattered whatever normal I'd believed in.

My father had been the scion in name only. He had failed an assignment to kill the Aron matriarch and paid for it with his life. Denied his birthright, betrayed by men who wore the titles of family, he died and is now long forgotten to have even existed. I had been forged by that pain, trained for vengeance. But the old man's plan had never been simple, I was being eased toward a crown I had once run from.

"What if he's behind this?" I asked. "If I can't find the hand pulling the strings, it means it's one of the four families that make up the dynasty."

"The Dean, Dalton, Orlèans, Medici?" It spilled the names effortlessly earning a nod for me.

"Unlikely," it countered. "He holds no grudge against your mother's line. So why target Carmela?"

I looked away remembering Carmela's lineage was a secret I'd die to keep. The weight of my choices settled in my chest. Power would be necessary I agreed, but now the summons the old man had extended what I know as a bait.

...

The sunlight touched my face and Carmela stirred against me, warm and steady. She woke with the soft intimacy of someone who trusted the person beside her. I watched her blink awake, the sight of her more dangerous than any blade.

"Did you stay up all night?" she asked, pouting as she cupped my face. The way her fingers fit against my jaw loosened something inside me.

"I couldn't stop looking," I admitted, low and private. Before she could sink into thought, I kissed her. But it wasn't tentative, it was all the need and restraint I'd been holding folded into one motion.

Our mouths moved with urgency and demand. When her tongue met mine, I sucked and tasted all the chaos and calm that was her. I broke the kiss and shifted her into my lap. She gripped the sleeves of my oversized shirt, the rough of my stubble against her palms grounding us both.

"We don't have to be in love," she whispered, breath hot against my ear. "I don't have to be perfect. But I should be the only woman you belong to until our contract is up."

"My kind of love isn't soft," I murmured back, kissing the hollow of her throat. "It's not easy." I pulled her to lock eyes with her

"Then lock me up and throw away the key," she teased, nudging her nose against mine. "Even if you leave me with nothing when the day fades..."

"That's the kind of love I want," I said, truth as hunger began mixing in my voice.

She looked at me, something fierce and trusting in her eyes, and it startled me, obsessions were harder to break than crowns... and who knew that fact better than I do. My body answered on its own something hardening beneath the cloth and she flushed at the sight. When she tried to look away, I drew her back by a sweep of hair, our mouths colliding again and our tongues forming a connection.

I nipped her lower lip then kissed her deeply while unbuttoning her shirt. Cloth fell away, and I cupped her, tasting and teasing her at the same time. She arched back as, breath hitched, the urge between her legs flaring hotter.

As I slid a finger between her thighs, slow and exacting, I watched her bite down on her lip, muffling a small cry as my mouth worshiped her breasts. She suddenly tightened her muscles curling around me as I entered her with careful force, watching for any flash of pain. But she only gasped, and then adjusted, what could have been sharp, softened into something luminous.

"You should" I rasped near her ear, "ride me."

Her response was instinctive. Her brown eyes met mine as they grew wider but still hollowed only by want and desire. We moved together with a rhythm that felt like recognition and claim. I guided her hands to my shoulders, while my hands found her waist.

I felt the cadence change as she found her own pace. Every shift was private and absolute, but yet with a trail of aggression.

Her fingers clutched at the sheets, nails biting into the fabric as if the tension in her body needed somewhere to escape. A knowing smirk curved my lips as I shifted my rhythm, faster, deeper watching her arch beneath me, her cries spilling into the air like a secret only I was meant to hear. Each sound from her lips fueled me, pulling me further into the storm of her surrender.

Her skin was slick with heat, glistening under the faint glow of the lamp, and every thrust seemed to unravel another thread of her restraint. She begged without words, her body trembling against mine, every shiver and gasp telling me she wanted more. I leaned close, my breath ghosting over her ear, murmuring things I knew would make her shiver harder. My hands mapped her, gripping and caressing with equal hunger, memorizing the curve of her waist, the softness of her thighs, the arch of her neck as she bared it in abandon.

Slowly, we gave ourselves over our two bodies tangled onto one rhythm, one fire. The climax came like a breaking tide, violent yet exquisite, leaving us collapsing into each other, drenched in sweat, breathless and shaking.

When the storm ebbed, I didn't let her go. Our eyes locked, her lips parted as though she wanted to speak but dared not. I traced slow circles on her back, deliberately lingering near the mark I'd left possession disguised as tenderness. She melted against me, her cheek resting on my chest as her breath steadied, drifting toward sleep.

I kissed her forehead, soft but deliberate, and my eyes lingered on the faint bruise, the proof of my claim etched on her body like ink. She thought it was nothing more than passion, but I knew better. That mark was a vow, a brand, a promise she had yet to understand.

She wanted only a year. A neat, fragile contract she could control.

But I already knew, I would never let her go.. even when the year ended

Chapter 40: 40

I stood dumbfounded, staring at my reflection in the mirror. Hickeys adorned my skin like a scandalous map, and even the shirt I wore protested my attempt to appear decent.

"Nix, how about I wait here while you get me a new pair of clothes? I seriously can't go out like this," I said, turning to find him watching me intently.

"Why?" he threw the question so casually staring at me

Did he really just question why I couldn't go out like this when the facts were glaringly obvious?

"Take a look at my body..."

"You look beautiful," he interjected with a playful smile.

"I have no panties on."

"You tore my underwear," I added, exasperated.

"We'll get another pair," he said with an innocent look that made me want to scoff. "Don't you ever take off your leg chain again," he added, his eyes lingering on my ankle.

I looked up at him, wanting to question his obsession with me wearing the leg chain, only to see him show me his hand adorned with the same chain he wore the day he gave me mine.

"It's proof that we're a couple," he said.

"Couple?" I echoed in a small, questioning voice, the word sounding foreign coming from him. He nodded.

"We've been one since I clasped it around your ankle. I even had it customized," he pouted, making me chuckle.

Was this the same Nix I knew? I turned back to the mirror, sighing. No matter how many of his T-shirts I wore, there was no way to hide these hickeys. Not that I really wanted to. After all, I was going to become Mrs Dean..and I need to let a lot of people who talked shit about me know their place.

"Shall we?" he inquired, holding out his hand.

I nodded, taking his hand and feeling a flutter of excitement...

The motorbike came to an abrupt halt in front of the same hotel where I'd confronted Nix about my payment. The sudden stop made me wonder if there was a shopping mall or maybe a supermarket inside.

"Mr. Dean!" Someone called out, hurrying towards his side as I took off my helmet. I watched as he nodded to whatever the person said before flipping through the documents he was holding. With a simple nod, he handed my helmet to the man who approached us before leading the way inside the hotel.

"I thought we were going to the shopping mall?" I asked, hoping to mask my unease as I clenched onto my hand bag.

"Urgent issues came up. How about you wait for me in my room? After that, we'll go shopping," he suggested with a gentle smile. I accepted, not wanting to obstruct his business.

He helped me into the elevator, and handed me his room card, which he sealed with a light peck on my forehead before stepping out. I sighed, seeing it as an opportunity to check my phone since I hadn't been able to do so since last night. Just as I was about to unlock my phone, an incoming call from Editor Damian interrupted me.

"Hello," I answered, waiting for his response, only to be met by silence.

"Carmela, can we meet up?" His voice finally came through, filled with an odd urgency that made me uneasy.

"I'm not home at the.."

"I saw you getting into the elevator. Can you stop at the fifth floor?"

"Hmm," I nodded, pressing the button for the fifth floor.

"Okay, I'll be right there," he said before hanging up. I let out another sigh, wondering why he wanted to meet so urgently. Could something have gone wrong with the manuscript I sent him? Whatever it was, I needed to find out. The bell sound of the elevator caught my attention as a lady in a fitted red dress stepped in.

She exuded an air of elegance, her accessories adorning her neck and fingers. Her wavy dark hair flowed freely, and I smiled, wondering how to capture her graceful presence in a piece of art. A sense of familiarity washed over me.

"You're the new slut?" she spoke, making me look around, wondering who she was referring to.

"You think sleeping around with Nix will make him have feelings for you, but you're wrong, darling. He's already betrothed to me. I hope you know you're just wasting your time," she scoffed, and I bit my lip, remembering where I'd seen her. It was the island, at the pool party she was the so-called betrothed of Mr. Dean.

I scoffed, watching her from behind. She was either clueless about who she was dealing with or foolish. I swiftly made my hair into a messy bun, undoing the first two buttons of my shirt. Silence is surely the best answer to a fool, but some fools need action. Sliding my hand into my purse, I brought out the ring box Nix had given me on my birthday and quickly slid the ring onto my finger.

"You must be the so-called betrothed my husband spoke of," I said firmly, feeling my aura change as I took a step closer to her, showcasing the ring by tucking a few strands of hair behind my ear. "I'll permit you this time for using such foul language on me, but next time you do, you'll be devastated by the outcome." I stated without flinching before making my way out of the elevator. I didn't need to see her face to know she was beyond enraged.

Stepping out of the elevator with a victorious smirk, I was met by a panting Damian, his hands resting on his knees.

"Don't tell me you used the stairs?" I raised an eyebrow, and he nodded.
"Unbelievable."

The sights and smells of the restaurant suddenly made me acutely aware of my hunger.

"Do you want to place an order?" he asked as we settled into our seats. I politely declined.

"So, why did you want to meet with me?" I asked, noticing his eyes lingering on my ring finger. I quickly hid my hand under the table and let my hair down to cover the hickeys on my neck, not wanting to generate unnecessary questions.

"Ahem... that man you were with..what's your relationship with him?" Damian's voice broke the silence.

I met his gaze, raising a brow. "Why do you care?"

"Don't get me wrong," he replied, his tone stern. "But he's dangerous. You shouldn't be involved with him."

"Really?" I leaned back, crossing one leg over the other, feigning indifference.

"Yes, Carmela. Cut off all ties with him," Damian warned, his voice cold and unyielding.

"Well, I appreciate your concern about me, Editor Damian, but I doubt you're in a position to tell me what to do. Yes we do have a professional relationship, and I'd appreciate it if we kept it that way," I said, my tone serious and unwavering.

"Excuse me, sir, madame," a waiter approached us. "We are sorry for the inconvenience but we want you to evacuate the restaurant as the owner needs it for a private matter."

I stood up, seething with frustration. I couldn't believe he actually made me rush here for such nonsense.

"Stay away from the man you were with earlier. He's dangerous," I mimicked sarcastically, my voice dripping with disdain as I headed towards the washroom. Suddenly, bright red blood began to flow from both my nostrils. Concern and discomfort washed over me as I tilted my head forward and pinched the soft part of my nose shut. Grabbing a couple of tissues from the box, I tried to staunch the bleeding. My face turned pale, worry etched into my features as anxiety overwhelmed me. Despite the panic, I tried to remain calm and patient, waiting for the bleeding to subside.

"I don't care if it's the side effects of being drugged. I need medical attention," I muttered.

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As I made my way towards the restaurant, curiosity gnawed at me. What kind of invitation had the manager mentioned? If it was from the old man, it could be both a good and a bad thing for reasons I couldn't yet fathom.

"Mr. Dean, we've asked the guests to evacuate the restaurant," the manager informed me as I stepped out of the elevator. I nodded and glanced up to see Carmela storming out. She abruptly halted at one of the tables, grabbed a handful of tissues from a box, and then headed to the other exit.

"What is she doing here when I asked her to go to the room?" I muttered before making my way to the table where Mr. Ivano was seated.

"Young master," he greeted, standing and bowing respectfully. I waved at him, taking my seat. Mr. Ivano was my grandfather's right-hand man and his advocate, so I had to tread carefully in conversation with him.

"Master Dean asked me to personally hand over this invitation to you, with hopes that you won't reject it," he said, placing the invitation card before me. I picked it up, examining it closely before opening it to see the contents. I understood his concern; I had declined my grandfather's invitations for the past six years.

"I'll come," I said, keeping my expression blank. A smile spread across his face.

"Please do. And bring the young madame as well," he added, his smile reaching his ears. But it vanished quickly as his attention was drawn to something behind me.

I turned to see the Dalton family's daughter struggling with the security personnel outside. I sighed.

"Let her in," I commanded and in the next second, she was at my table, fuming with anger.

"I'll take my leave," Mr. Ivano said, bowing slightly. I nodded, watching him excuse himself.

"I said to solve your illicit relationship with her in the space of six months, but you got married to her?" she raised her voice. I raised an eyebrow, puzzled by her accusation.

"Don't give me that look. She clearly showed off the ring..your mother's ring that you gave her. It was supposed to be mine since I'm your betrothed," she continued. Realizing what she was referring to, a small smirk flickered across my face, but I quickly wiped it away.

I wasn't sure what confrontation she had with Carmela, but I was confident Carmela had handled it well. As for the ring, since when did she start wearing it? I thought she had refused to wear it. Suspense and tension hung in the air, the weight of unspoken words and hidden intentions pressing down on us.

"Hubby!"