

Lifeline

"Domenic"

The most daunting task lay ahead—sneaking Mariya out of the hotel unnoticed. With her unconscious and securely bound, I cautiously opened the door and peered into the corridor. It was clear. Carefully, I stepped out of Mariya's room and quietly made my way to my own, leaving the door slightly ajar. Crossing the lobby, my eyes scanned for a hotel bell cart. Finally, I spotted one and quickly bribed a janitor for a set of staff clothes in my size. He returned promptly with the garments. I swiftly changed into the disguise, donning a baseball cap to conceal my identity further. Wrapping Mariya in a white bedsheet from her room, I carefully placed her on the bell cart, hiding her amidst housekeeping supplies.

Without attracting any attention, I reached the parking lot and loaded Mariya into the trunk of the car.

I drove to the location specified in the kidnapper's email.

Mariya remained unconscious throughout the journey. As we arrived, I retrieved her from the car's trunk, untying her hands and removing the cloth from her mouth. Cradling her in my arms, I gazed at her innocent face.

"I'm sorry, Miss Leonardi," I whispered, even though she couldn't hear me.

At the entrance of the decrepit building, a group of men awaited our arrival, their guns at the ready. They checked me for weapons and cast a glance at the unconscious Mariya. Once satisfied, one of them guided me further inside to their boss.

And there he sat, in the center of the room. Anger surged within me, but I maintained a composed expression. Gently placing the motionless Mariya on the floor, I prepared to face the son of a b***h.

"Finally, you did it. I'm impressed and pleased," the bastard barked, his vile gaze xated on Mariya. His lthy eyes roamed over her form.

"Where is my son?" I demanded, resisting the urge to shield Mariya from his view.

He pointed to a man who disappeared into a room, reemerging moments later with Nic in his arms. A surge of anger engulfed my heart as I beheld my son's dejected and frail countenance. I rushed to Nic, gathering him into my embrace.

"Nic, are you alright?" I whispered, tenderly stroking his head and planting kisses on his cheeks. But he remained silent.

Nic's eyes were brimming with tears, a testament to the pain he had endured. I glared at the kidnapper, striding back towards him.

"I know it's none of my business, but... I'm curious. Why do you want her?" I inquired, scanning the surroundings. There were only ve men present. He had underestimated me. Good! After all, what could an ex-bodyguard do to him and his henchmen? I observed attentively and noticed several large cylindrical metal containers. It appeared to be an old warehouse.

"That's none of your damn business. Take your son and get out of here," he snarled, his brow furrowed.

Raising my hand in a placating gesture, I assured him I was leaving.

"Whoa, relax, man. I'm going," I said, glancing at Mariya.

She slowly regained consciousness, her tear-lled eyes xed on me with a mixture of hatred and anger as I approached her. With a swift motion, I reached into Mariya's clothing and retrieved the hidden gun. Luckily, they hadn't searched her thoroughly.

Now, it was time to turn the tables.

I aimed the gun at the kidnapper while his men brandished their weapons, ready to shoot me at a moment's notice.

"What the hell are you doing? Do you have a death wish?!" he yelled.

"Why did you kidnap Mariya? Tell me!" I demanded. He scowled.

"Why?! Did you fall in love with her?" he laughed mockingly, and a wave of disgust washed over me.

"Why did you kidnap Mariya?" I repeated, ignoring his attempts to provoke me. My training as a bodyguard taught me to maintain self-control in the face of adversity and not let my emotions overpower me.

"So, I was right. You fell for her charm, and now you're going to die a miserable death for her," he taunted, glancing at Nic. "You don't even care about your own son?!"

"Shut up!" I bellowed, my grip on the gun tightening with his nal words.

Nic was my weakness, but I couldn't leave an innocent girl with that monster. The kidnapper's eyes xated on my weapon.

"Shoot!" he shouted.

I smirked, clutching Nic tightly in my arms as I delivered a swift kick to the container. It rolled, coming to a stop next to another container, strategically blocking Mariya from their sight. Moving with agility, I returned re at one of the goons, the sound of bullets lling the air.

Holding Nic protectively, I leaped, rolled, and slid behind the container for cover.

"Nic, stay right here!" I commanded, planting a kiss on his head. Riya watched me with a mix of shock and curiosity.

"Don't worry, Miss Leonardi. Your bodyguard is here, and no one can harm you," I reassured her, nodding in her direction.

Swiftly, I peered out, taking aim at another assailant. Moving with speed, I sought shelter behind yet another container, exchanging re with the enemy as they relentlessly red back. My eyes bried darted to Mariya and Nic, both safely shielded behind their hiding spot.

I cautiously poked my head out and swiftly eliminated one more adversary.

"Drop the gun!" I warned, using the container as a shield. I glanced out, ring again, successfully taking down all the goons. I scanned the area, searching for the mastermind, but to my dismay, the kidnapper had managed to escape.

Damn it!

My men stormed in, swiftly apprehending the remaining goons outside the warehouse. I had signaled for backup prior to entering, brieng them on the situation and providing the necessary instructions.

My eyes frantically searched for Nic, and my heart raced as I sprinted towards my son, who clung to Mariya as if his entire world depended on her. She held Nic protectively, her arms wrapped tightly around him, shielding him from harm. Seeing them together like this stirred something deep within me.

"Nic, look! Dad's here," I pleaded desperately, dropping to my knees before him.

But he remained silent, his small body trembling in fear. I pulled him into my embrace, holding him tightly against me.

"Nic! What's wrong, buddy? Talk to Dad," I begged, but he offered no response.

"Nic, come to me," Mariya knelt beside me and gently took Nic into her arms.

To my surprise, Nic wrapped his small hands around Mariya's neck as she hugged him. He sobbed, and my heart ached at his pain.

"He's scared after witnessing so much death right before his eyes. He'll be okay, but he needs time and patience to recover from the shock," Mariya whispered to me.

"Hush, my brave boy! See, Dad saved us like a hero, and all those bad men are gone now. Just like in your favorite action movie! They can't hurt anyone anymore, right?!" Mariya coaxed, her voice lled with tenderness as she gently rubbed Nic's back.

God, how did she know how to comfort a child? I still hadn't quite gured it out after ve years.

Nic didn't utter a word, but he nodded, and a wave of relief washed over me as my son responded. Mariya smiled, wiping away the tears from Nic's cheeks and affectionately sweeping his hair back from his face.

"Come on, man. We have to get out of here, and I'm seriously impressed with you, Nic. You were so brave, taking on all those villains by yourself. You're a true hero. Can I have your autograph, please?" she gushed, lifting Nic up in her arms. She mouthed the words while gesturing for me to lead the way.

Finally, Nic and Mariya were safe. But my heart sank knowing that the main culprit had escaped, and I couldn't uncover the mastermind behind this kidnapping or the reason they targeted Mariya.

Suddenly, my phone began ringing, jolting me from my thoughts. It was Knox.

"Dom, how's everything there?" he asked urgently as soon as I answered.

"I managed to save Nic and Riya, but the bastard escaped," I replied, my voice laced with regret.

"Don't worry about him. We'll catch him later. But right now, you have to leave Paris instantly," Knox insisted.

"What are you saying, Knox? I have so many unnished things here," I protested, feeling a surge of frustration.

"Don't worry about anything, Domenic. Our people will handle everything. Just leave right now because Xavier Leonardi's people are coming after you, and you know how cruel and mad he is. He is the devil himself. No one has ever dared to cross paths with him," he warned, his voice lled with concern.

I sighed, my eyes shifting to Mariya, who was still cradling Nic in her arms. Despite the circumstances, she didn't complain or show any signs of fatigue from carrying my son.

The danger still loomed, and I had to bring Nic back to New York to see his doctor.

"And listen, take Riya with you because she's your lifeline. You have to keep her by your side if you want to protect yourself from her father's anger. Hurry up, Dom, our people are waiting at the airport, and the jet is ready," suggested Knox. He was right.

I exhaled deeply. My life was a mess, lled with unexpected complications.

"I'll talk to you later," I said before hanging up the phone.

"Miss Leonardi, umm... listen," I hesitated, whispering and moving closer to her. "We have to leave right now."

"What do you mean?" she frowned.

"Listen, I need to leave Paris immediately, and you have to come with me," I clarified.

"Are you serious?" she snorted, glaring at me.

I glanced at my son in her arms.

"You have to come with me," I emphasized, peering deep into his eyes, my determination unwavering.

"You can't force me," she sounded guarded.

I sighed. "I will if I have to."

She looked hurt and defeated.

"Please, Riya! I have to do this—for Nic," I pleaded, feeling helpless.

She clenched her teeth, narrowed her eyes, and then looked at my son. Her expression softened, and she nodded.

"Alright, only for Nic," she whispered.

"Thanks," I murmured before she walked away.

I was grateful that she hadn't left Nic's side for a moment, and Nic himself wasn't ready to part from her. Somehow, he found comfort and security in Mariya, as if she were his safe haven.

Within an hour, we arrived at the airport. Knox had made all the arrangements, sending more people to assist us. Some would handle matters in Paris, while others would accompany me.

"Is that your private jet?" Mariya asked, her eyes widening in surprise as she glanced at the charter plane.

"No, it belongs to a friend," I lied.

Of course, it was mine.

My security agency's employees were present, greeting me, but I motioned for them to stay silent with a shake of my head. Mariya glanced at me, her nely shaped eyebrows knitting together.

"I've saved countless lives, so they let me use their luxury planes and cars," I boasted. Mariya scowled, rolling her eyes.

"I know how you used to save your clients life," she mocked.

Oh, princess, you are an exception!

"I was helpless, Riya and I have apologized for this already," I muttered lowly with guilt.

She didn't look at me, maintaining a straight face. Nic had fallen asleep in her arms, and she continued to hold him, gently caressing his back.

Nic remained in Mariya's arms, reluctant to leave her side as we passed through security. He said he missed his mom, so I informed Bethany.

I told her that Nic missed her and needed his mother. I informed her that we were coming home. To my surprise, she said she was busy with work and couldn't meet her son this week. I wanted to lash out at her, but I remained calm for Nic's sake.

What had happened to the mother who was ready to le a complaint when she discovered her son was missing? I sighed in disappointment, feeling sorry for my son. He didn't deserve a broken family.

We boarded the private jet, and shortly after taking our seats, the plane took off.

"Nic, come sit with me, and let Mariya have a comfortable seat," I said, trying to coax Nic to my side.

But he held onto Mariya's arm rmly, shaking his head.

"Let him sit with me, please," Mariya insisted.

My gaze shifted between Mariya and Nic. They clung to each other as if they had known each other for ages. I nodded and returned to my seat.

After a while, our meal was served. I attempted to feed Nic, but he refused. I felt utterly helpless. Yet, when I looked up, I saw Mariya watching me intently.

She unbuckled Nic's seat belt, lifted him up, and cradled him in her lap.

"Alright, Nic. We need to eat something and be good, or else we might get sick. Understand?" she cooed in her sweet voice.

But Nic remained unresponsive, his gaze xed on the window. Mariya looked up, her eyes meeting mine. I sensed a mixture of uncertainty and determination in her expression. Furrowing my brow, I held my breath as she picked up a sandwich. I knew how stubborn Nic could be once he had made up his mind.

"Okay, these sandwiches look so delicious. How about taking a small bite?" Mariya enticed, licking her lips and swallowing as if savoring the taste in advance.

My eyes followed the movement of her tongue darting out to moisten her pink, plump lips, and her eyes twinkled as she swallowed. It was...

Ugh! I cleared my throat, shaking my head.

I watched as she gently fed Nic a sandwich, and to my surprise, he opened his mouth and obediently took a big bite. I was astonished and impressed, nally exhaling in relief. She was incredible, and I was certain she possessed some kind of magic.

Moreover, with her around, Nic would feel better.

I needed more reasons to convince her to stay.