

Chapter 4 No.4

The oppressive silence in the car on the way back to the estate was a living thing thick with unspoken accusations and willful ignorance. They made small talk with Sofia, laughing at her inane stories about a professor she disliked, pointedly excluding me from the conversation. They were creating a new trio, and I was the ghost in the back seat.

As the car pulled up to the gravel driveway of the estate, Sofia didn't wait for the driver. She jumped out, grabbing Luca's hand before the engine even fully cut.

"Show me the rest of the house!" she squealed, looking up at the manor with wide, greedy eyes. "I bet you have a ballroom or something crazy like in the movies."

Matteo laughed, jumping out to join them. "Better," he said, wrapping an arm around her shoulders. "We have a music room with acoustics you wouldn't believe. There's some serious history in there. Come on, I'll show you."

They ran ahead, racing up the stone steps like excited children, leaving me to close the heavy car door myself. They didn't look back to see if I was coming. They didn't care.

By the time I reached the front steps and unlocked the main door, they had already disappeared deep into the house.

I walked into the grand foyer, shaking off the cold. That's when I heard it.

A screeching grating noise drifting from the main drawing room, where the music collection was kept. It sounded like a cat being strangled, a discordant wail that set my teeth on edge.

I pushed open the heavy oak doors.

The sight that greeted me made the blood in my veins turn to ice.

Sofia was holding the violin.

It wasn't just any violin. It was a 17th-century Guarneri, a masterpiece of woodwork and sound, an heirloom passed down through my family. It was my grandfather's last gift to my father, and my father's gift to me upon my eighteenth birthday. It was worth more than the car we had just ridden in. It was worth more than Sofia's entire existence.

And she was holding it like a cheap toy guitar, sawing the priceless bow across the strings with a clumsy, destructive force, producing that soul-shattering noise.

And on the velvet sofa, sipping whiskey, sat Luca and Matteo. They were watching her, amused smiles on their faces, occasionally clapping as if she were a prodigy and not an ape desecrating a holy relic.

"Stop."

My voice wasn't loud, but it was sharp enough to cut glass. It sliced through the room, and the awful noise ceased.

Sofia froze, the bow hovering over the strings. Her eyes widened, but it wasn't with fear. It was with the thrill of being caught.

"Give it to me," I said, holding out a hand that was perfectly steady, betraying none of the volcanic rage building in my chest.

"I just wanted to see what it sounded like," she stammered, clutching the instrument to her chest as if for protection. "I thought it was just a decoration for the house. Like a painting."

"It's an antique," I said, taking a slow, deliberate step forward. Each word was clipped, precise. "Hand it over. Now."

She took a step back, her eyes darting to the boys on the sofa, a silent, practiced plea for rescue. "You're scaring me," she whimpered, her lower lip trembling on cue.

"Elena, back off," Matteo warned, setting his glass down and rising to his feet. He moved to stand slightly in front of Sofia, a human shield. "She didn't mean any harm. It's just a violin."

Just a violin. The casual dismissal of something so precious, so deeply tied to my family, to my grandfather's memory, sent a fresh wave of cold fury through me.

"Give me the violin, Sofia," I repeated, my gaze locked on her, ignoring Matteo completely.

And in that brief, silent standoff, I saw it. It was a tiny, almost imperceptible twitch of her lips. A smirk. A flash of pure, triumphant malice.

Then, she loosened her grip.

Time seemed to warp, slowing down to a thick, syrupy crawl. I saw the polished wood begin to slip from her grasp. I saw the dawning horror on my own face reflected in its varnish. I lunged forward, a desperate, guttural sound tearing from my throat.

But I was too far away.

The Guarneri hit the marble floor. It wasn't a loud noise, but a sickeningly final crack. The elegant, curved neck snapped cleanly from the body. The strings, suddenly released from tension, hummed a discordant, dying note that echoed in the cavernous silence of the room.

"Oops," Sofia whispered, her hand flying to her mouth. But her eyes, wide and innocent, were gleaming with victory. "It slipped."

I looked at the shattered wood, the broken strings, the ruin of a three-hundred-year-old masterpiece lying at my feet. It was the only thing my grandfather had ever given me.

I looked up at Sofia.

The ice inside me didn't just melt. It vaporized. Underneath was pure, boiling rage.

CRACK!

My palm connected with her cheek. The sound was sharp, definitive, like a pistol shot in the silent room.

Sofia stumbled back, clutching her face, a perfectly theatrical gasp escaping her lips. "Elena!"

Click-click.

It was a sound I knew better than my own heartbeat. The distinct, mechanical sound of the safeties on two Glocks being disengaged.

I turned slowly, the blood roaring in my ears, drowning out Sofia's fake sobs.

Luca and Matteo were on their feet.

Their guns were drawn.

The black barrels were half-raised, pointed not at an intruder, not at an enemy, but at me.

Pointed at the girl they had sworn with their own blood to take a bullet for.

The air vanished from the room, sucked out by the sheer gravity of their betrayal. I stared at the two black holes of the barrels, then at their faces. There was no hesitation there. No conflict. Only cold, protective instinct.

And their instinct was to protect her from me.

"You hit her," Luca breathed, his eyes wild, unrecognizable. "You actually hit her."

"She shattered a piece of my family's history," I said, my voice unnervingly steady, though my heart was hammering against my ribs like a trapped bird. "And you drew your weapons on a Vitiello."

Matteo looked down at the gun in his hand, then back at me. His grip tightened. He didn't holster it.

"You're out of control," he said, his voice as cold as the steel in his hand. "Apologize to her."

"What?" A harsh, dry, broken laugh clawed its way out of my throat.

"Apologize to our guest," Luca commanded. He physically stepped between me and Sofia, using his broad chest as a shield. "Now."

Sofia began to sob harder behind him, a jagged, pathetic sound. "I didn't mean to! She scared me and I dropped it! She pushed me!"

"There are cameras," I said, pointing a shaking finger toward the ceiling corner. "Pull the footage. See who pushed whom."

"I don't need footage to see you're a bully," Luca spat, his face contorted with a disgust that was once reserved for our enemies.

"Apologize," Matteo repeated, his voice devoid of every ounce of the warmth I had known my entire life.

I looked at them. Really looked at them. The boys I grew up with, the ones who patched my scraped knees and scared away unworthy suitors, were dead. They had died the moment those safeties clicked off. These were strangers wearing their faces, animated by some poisonous loyalty to a usurper.

"No," I said. The word was quiet, but it was as final as a tombstone.

I turned and walked out of the room.

I felt the laser burn of their eyes on my back. I felt the weight of the guns still pointed in my direction. I waited for the shot.

It never came. But the betrayal had already done more damage than any bullet ever could.