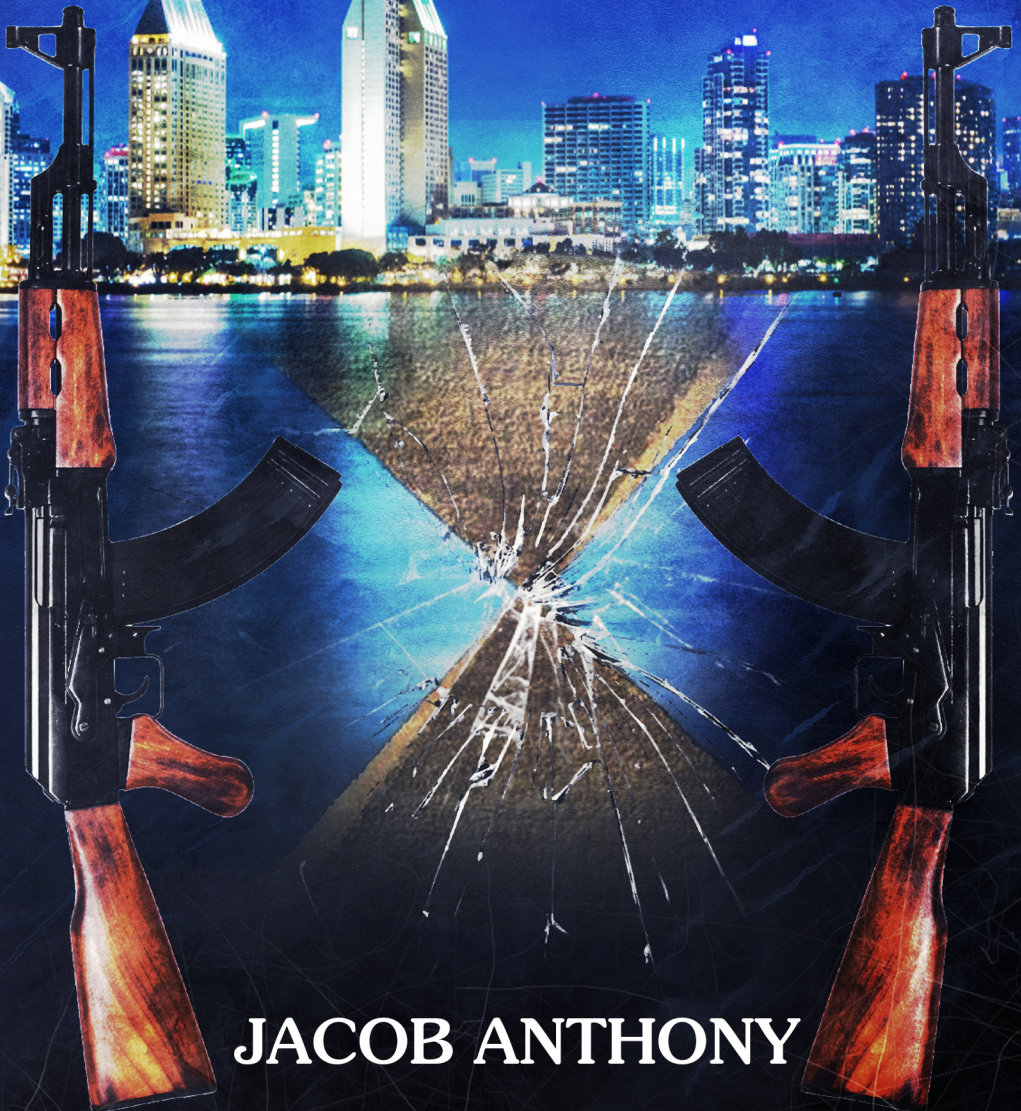


EMPIRE DOWN



JACOB ANTHONY

Empire Down

Jacob Anthony

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ISBN: 9798375961040 (Paperback)

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Book design by Jacob Anthony.

First printing edition February 2023.

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Chapter 1: A Justified Son

Like clockwork, the time sensitive blinds of a rooms window, rose to let rays of sunlight in. A smooth rhythm of R&B music flowed throughout the room, slowly increasing in volume. The silhouette of a young man arose out of his bed. He swiped his phone silent, and then walked into a luxurious bathroom to take a shower. Steam rose around his lean, muscular body and then dissipated. Once the shower had caused the young man to wake up, he pressed a silver button on the wall and the water stopped flowing. He wrapped a towel around his waist as he got out, before stepping in front of the vanity mirror. He paused, with eyes widened as he noticed a grey hair on his head. He sighed as he reached for the tweezers in the top drawer, then quickly pulled it out, feeling a little puzzled by it, as he had only recently turned twenty years of age. With the towel still wrapped around his waist, he went into his walk-in robe and got dressed into freshly pressed chino pants, a black Armani long sleeve shirt, and Armani sneakers. He quickly checked the robe mirror before walking downstairs to make himself some coffee. With a fresh brew now in hand, he switched on the kitchen TV to see an upcoming MMA light-heavyweight fight being advertised. When the preview had finished, he flicked through the channels landing on Bloomberg to check the stock market headlines. Five minutes went by, while sipping on his coffee before he switched it off. "Eva, we got to go!" he called out to his sister who was still preparing in her room upstairs. She was two years younger and not at all concerned about punctuality when it came to school. Nor was she concerned with her grades either, because she knew she would always be taken care of, thanks to her sizable trust fund.

Eva only saw school as an opportunity to socialize; she was more interested in receiving attention from the school's rugby players and prided herself on having half the team wanting to date her. She suddenly appeared at the top of the stairs in a promiscuous green dress, that revealed a little too much for her brother to remain silent. "What the hell are you wearing?" he asked, "Emanuele, I don't need your fashion advice" she replied bluntly, "You're going to attract the wrong kind of attention though" he said shaking his head, "Well if that day ever comes, you know I can handle myself" she replied confidently. She was right; Emanuele had witnessed a rugby player grab her on the ass, as he arrived in his car out the front of her school one afternoon. Before Emanuele could get out to defend his sister's honor, she had turned around, and not recognizing the rugby players face, proceeded to punch him straight in the throat. The poor guy dropped to his knees, holding his neck while her friends who witnessed it began laughing hysterically. "Alright well let's head off," said Emanuele, "It's about time" she replied, sarcastically. They both walked through the dining room past the long 10-seater dining table that was barely used. Then moved through the expansive living room, and out the back, past the pool, to the garage. Automatic lights turned on to reveal five-bays deep of exotic cars. Eva walked over to the black Bentley Continental GT with platinum aftermarket finishings; she looked at her brother, smiling, as she stood by the passenger door. "Not today Eva, I don't want to attract the gawkers... Range Rover today" he said. Emanuele didn't want to draw attention to himself on the first day of his second semester at university. But Eva then walked over to the Aston Martin Vanquish and again, smiled, tilting her head towards it. She knew it would take very little to convince him, as it was his favorite ride. He chuckled, "I suppose there's no point having these cars if you don't drive them... but tomorrow, Range Rover" he said, "Fine by me" she replied with a cheeky grin.

Just as they were about to get in, their mother appeared at the entrance in her bathrobe, “You two have a good day, and Eva, try to actually listen in class today” she said, “We’ll see mom, no promises” replied Eva. “Oh, and Emanuele your father left a message. He wants to see you at his place after training this afternoon” “Okay, thanks mom... and mom, try not to drink too much today” he said before quickly getting into the driver’s seat. Maria was a good mother, and although she had every material possession that one could ever desire, including a six-figure per month allowance, she had lost her zest for life. The problem being was that she was still in love with her husband Dominic, who had left her and moved out of the family home eight months prior. Despite not fulfilling his role in the family unit, Dominic made sure that they had absolutely everything that they could ever need. Especially because Emanuele was the heir, being groomed to take over his position when the time came. Dominic had built up a multi-billion-dollar enterprise called DAC Holdings; it consisted of legitimate businesses that included a real-estate development company, car dealership chain, and travel agency chain. But this wasn’t Dominic’s main source of revenue, nor was it the lion’s share of where the family’s wealth came from. The primary wealth came thanks to a nefarious network that had been built up over multiple decades. His connections to the underworld, spanned both North and South America, with the vision of going international. This empirical-like organization was responsible for the manufacturing and distribution of every mainstream illicit substance, ranging from cocaine and ecstasy for wealthy clientele; speed, weed and acid served the middle class. While the heavy shit like crack, heroin, and ketamine were used by the suckers who fell upon their path of destruction; this was predominantly the low-income demographic, which was ultimately the consequence of becoming a slave to these harder drugs, as it was very rare to see a high functioning crack or heroin addict.

Although Dominic now held a major share of the drug trade in the United States it hadn't caused him to slow down his expansion. His organization held multiple residences through private trusts in major cities across 32 states to house his enforcers, who oversaw distribution. These enforcers were strategically set up as a hierarchy and were each assigned a team of loyal men. Most of the men were ex-soldiers who had been neglected by the welfare state after deployment. These men were put through rigorous training like that of private militias, and recruits were only accepted to be a part of the organization if the chief enforcer of the region signed off. Once accepted, a blood oath was consecrated; a ceremony which was adopted by Dominic's time in the Italian Mafia.

If this oath was ever reneged upon, it would mean immediate execution, and the organization would use every resource to see that end. But unlike other organizations, Dominic used men from various backgrounds and ethnicities. This process ensured that Dominic had a larger pool of competent people to choose from, as his organization grew.

He believed there was no superiority to race, only those who were loyal to the cause, and those that weren't. Loyalty was held in greater regard than any other aspect within the organization and those who became chief enforcer's, became his family.

Despite the organization having its grip inside of 32 states, there was one region Dominic would never contest; the area between Washington and Boston, which is where he had spent his 20's and early 30's inside of the Italian Mafia.

The Russians and Albanians were now the biggest players of this region, and Dominic knew it wasn't in his best interest to interfere. Although he had the resources, he knew that it would be the cause of too much bloodshed and would shine a spotlight on his industry. He had left his past sins of that region behind, and now his focus was to support his son to take what he had built, international.

Local gangs and smaller groups had attempted to break into Dominic's territories in the past but were swatted like flies within days. Dominic had managed to setup the framework of distribution agreements with Mexican gangs, Motorcycle Clubs, and even had political cover from politicians whom he funded when their time came for re-election. When Dominic's chief enforcers turned up to ally organizations, they were given the utmost respect, and were treated as the military does its special operatives. Through his legitimate businesses, Dominic's paper net worth had ballooned to ten-figures, but this paled in comparison to the net value of his Drug Empire. The most difficult part of his expansion had become legitimate expansion. Dominic couldn't invest into real estate or acquire existing businesses fast enough to keep up with the drug profits. Despite being one of the wealthiest men in the world, Dominic was not on any net-worth databases; he was the bogeyman to the rich and famous, and that is how he preferred it. He prided himself on anonymity and even though he lived a lavish lifestyle, it was conservative in contrast to the vast amounts of hidden wealth he had which rivalled even that of oil Sheiks.

Emanuele and Eva sat in the Vanquish while Maria switched open the roller door and waved goodbye, before turning in. Emanuele pushed the start button and began to warm up the engine of the Aston Martin. The roar that came from the exhaust filled the huge garage, as he put his foot down on the accelerator and revved it. The high-pitched growl that the 12-cylinder engine produced brought a smile to his face every time. "Can we go already?" asked Eva impatiently, but just as she did Emanuele put it into drive and launched them up the driveway, and pulled onto the road, taking off down the beachfront street like a 'bat out of hell' as the tires reclaimed their grip in third gear. Emanuele cruised down the main roads and then 'punched it' through the back streets. He knew the Coronado roads well, having travelled them every day.

San Diego had always been home for them, and holidays abroad had become a thing of the past, now that their parents had separated. Their mom hardly even left the house; she was not in a good head space and had even employed someone to do the grocery shopping for her. She would only leave the house on occasion to go to the doctor for prescription medication or to see her massage therapist, but that was only on her good days. Emanuele pulled up out the front of Eva's school - St. Augustine High. A few of her friends and the current rugby player she was flirting with were waiting out front. "Wow, nice car Eva" said one of her girlfriends, "Yeah it's ok, I prefer the Lambo" she replied raising her eyebrows, acting cool as she stepped out. "You should introduce me to your brother sometime" said the same friend, as she admired Emanuele. He smiled at her and then took off; the wheels gave a high pitch screech before gaining traction. He left the school drop off zone and made the drive over to his university.

As he drove into the main car park of the university, Emanuele received gawking stares of awe from some of the students, while others just smiled, including a group of girls that were standing by some football players and their muscle cars. He spotted an empty car space beside them and pulled into it. Even with the show of incredible wealth, Emanuele often had the attention of girls because of his good looks and polite charm. But this attention seemed to piss off Glen; the neanderthal looking footballer standing there. "Nice of you to give daddy's car a run" he said as Emanuele stepped out of the Vanquish. "Does your mother know you borrowed hers?" replied Emanuele, noticing a purple racing stripe on the car Glen was leaning against. The group gave a slight chuckle, except for Glen, this just pissed him off even more. Emanuele then turned to walk towards the main entrance building, "Let's see if the kid can catch" Glen said to his friends, before quickly grabbing his gridiron ball from the back seat of his mother's Chevrolet convertible.

With all his might he hurled it towards Emanuel's head, but Emanuele saw it out of the corner of his eye, and having great concentration and fast reflexes, he turned to snatch the ball from the air, right before it hit him in the face. Then he powerfully threw the ball back in their general direction, but it went right over the top of the group into the other side of the carpark. Emanuele shrugged, "Sorry!" he yelled sarcastically, before continuing towards the university building. Little did the group know, but Emanuele had been a quarterback talent in his junior years, until quitting to solely pursue martial arts. The big footballer saw red as he ran over to Emanuele, "Oi you little prick, go get that or I'll knock you out!" he yelled. Emanuele sized Glen up, guessing he was about 6 foot 4 and about 280lbs, while Emanuele was only 5'11 and 185lbs. He was confident he could take him on though, "Trust me big guy, you don't wanna do this" he stated, calmly shaking his head. Just then, two of the other footballers called out, "Glen, don't worry about him, it's not worth it!" they said, right before a couple of university lecturers walked past, "Classes are starting soon" they said. With clenched jaw and fists, Glen walked away to retrieve his ball. Emanuele nodded politely towards the lecturers and followed them inside the university building. He walked down the hall, then out the other side, through the gardens and to his first class which was a lecture on modern marketing practices.

He looked up the back of the lecture hall and spotted a seat next to a black student named Samuel whom he had met towards the end of his first semester. Although they got along when they initially met, it seemed as if Samuel had been avoiding Emanuele ever since. "Hey, how's it going?" asked Emanuele, softly, as he sat down; Samuel smiled with a semi-nervous look on his face as he continued typing on his laptop. Emanuele pulled his own laptop from his bag and got ready to take notes; he peered over at Samuel's screen and saw him working away on what appeared to be computer coding language.

“What are you hacking?” he asked, tongue in cheek; Samuel just responded with a nervous laugh. Emanuele thought there was something strange about the way he was acting, almost as if he was afraid of something. Samuel was afraid, and rightfully so; he had done some background research into Emanuele’s family over the semester break, which was a typical process he did whenever he met someone new. But Samuel didn’t just do normal research through search engines and social media accounts, he had the skills to access private databases that contained classified information. If that didn’t provide results, he would scour dark web forums without leaving even the hint of an online trail. As it happened, Samuel was a very skilled hacker, in the top half a percent of the entire hackers in the world. But he was also paranoid about who he became friends with because of this. The information that he dug up on Emanuele’s family completely spooked him; he had come to understand just how powerful and dangerous his family was, and Samuel didn’t want to get involved with anyone like that.

Suddenly, the lecturer walked in, “Alright class, today we’ll be learning about modern marketing practices and the ways in which we can use them to generate inflows of traffic to our businesses. Please open your workbooks and start taking notes. Also, write down any of your questions and I will answer them towards the end of the lecture” she said. Samuel didn’t speak a word during class and as soon as it was over, he got up and put his laptop in his bag, “See ya” he said, before quickly walking off. Emanuele wasn’t sure what he had done wrong, or why Samuel was acting off. His family’s involvement to the drug trade didn’t even enter his mind as he had done everything to keep that information private, including being enrolled into his university degree using his mother’s maiden name, ‘Reyes’. Because Emanuele was also very careful about the friends he chose; he consciously avoided becoming ‘popular’ which would draw too much attention to himself.

His future and the inheritance of his father's organization was too important to him, to let it be put in jeopardy over something as trivial as popularity. It hadn't been hard in the past for him to make many friends, but he had gotten tired of the questions that arose surrounding his wealth. For this reason, Emanuele had taken a liking to Samuel, as he also kept to himself and didn't run with the crowd, but best of all, he never asked questions. He never seemed to care that Emanuele wore designer clothes every day or drove exotic cars to university in the short time they had known each other. Emanuele's stomach began to grumble, he didn't usually skip breakfast, but had that day because he wanted to start driving his sister to school regularly from now on. This was because one of his father's men named Carlos had been dropping Eva to school but was now showing an increasing interest in her as well. Emanuele didn't want her near him, not only because Carlos was eleven years her senior, but because Emanuele also knew the unscrupulous shit that he was capable of. Emanuele decided to go and get something to eat from the university's cafeteria, while he had an hour before his next class. As he walked past groups of people already eating their lunch, he caught the eyes of a few pretty girls that all seemed to have other guys competing for their attention. He looked forward pretending not to notice, nor was he interested, but then he spotted one girl who he thought was absolutely gorgeous.

He locked eyes with her, and they smiled at each other for just a moment, 'Wow, she is lovely' Emanuele thought to himself. The beautiful girl walked over to a table that had only one seat left and began talking to the group of people sitting at the table, who were also of Asian ethnicity. Emanuele shook his head a little, snapping himself out of the sudden infatuation haze before walking up to the cafeteria counter. He quickly scanned the menu before ordering, "Yeah, I'll grab the chicken Cesar wrap and a bottle of water, please" he said.

He stood there waiting for a moment, before tapping his card for payment, and receiving his food. Then he decided to go for a walk outside as the food hall inside was too packed for him to find a seat. He spotted a long seat on the grass with someone sitting on it; the guy had headphones on and was typing away on his laptop while eating crisps. There was enough space for him as well, so Emanuele walked over, but as he got closer, he realized the guy sitting there was Samuel. He didn't say anything, but just sat down and put his headphones in that were connected to his phone, listening to some beats as he ate his wrap.

Once his top ten songs had played through, Emanuele looked at his watch, realizing they'd both been sitting on the seat for a good 25 minutes and hadn't said a word to each other. So, Emanuele decided to break the silence and took his headphones off, "Hey!" he yelled.

Samuel slowly took off his headphones as well and looked at Emanuele slightly confused, "What was that?" he asked. "You originally from San Diego?" asked Emanuele, "Nah man, Baltimore... sorry I'm kind of busy" "What too busy to talk for 5 minutes?" asked Emanuele, curiously. "You're a nice dude and all, but I got work to catch up on" replied Samuel, but Emanuele wasn't convinced. He could tell there was something else going on, "You were alright talking to me last semester, what's changed?" he asked. As an introvert, Samuel wasn't used to being confronted like this, and didn't know why he said what he did next, but regretted it the second he did, "Your fathers Dominic Caito, right?" he asked, before gulping. Emanuele's eyes immediately widened; now he was worried, "Ahh, what do you mean?" he asked, faking a smile. At this point, Samuel had become fearful; he quickly tried to scheme up a plausible excuse, but only the truth came to mind. He wanted to just get up and walk away but knew the only way he could continue without aggravating the situation further, was to be honest.

“What the hell are you talking about?” asked Emanuele, impatiently, “You were right... before in class... I am a hacker. It’s how I got the information about you. I do this to everyone I meet though, I swear” Samuel insisted. “Wait, you’re telling me you do a background check on everyone you meet? What are you, homeland security?” asked Emanuele, seeming unconvinced. “No, but I’m very careful about who I become close to” said Samuel looking worried, “Who do you work for then?” asked Emanuele, now staring angrily. Samuel sighed, “I don’t work for anyone I swear. What you saw me doing in class was technically illegal” “Which was?” asked Emanuele, trying to remain calm. “I’ll tell you, but please don’t... don’t share this information with anyone. Do you know what blockchain technology is?” asked Samuel, “I’ve got bitcoin” replied Emanuel, “Okay... since I was 13, all I ever wanted to do was make money on the internet to give my mom a better life. I tried a lot of different things in the beginning, but I didn’t have the persona to become an influencer and so I tried day trading. But I unknowingly joined a scam group and got into credit card debt under my mom’s name. So, for the past 6 years I’ve done nothing but teach myself how to program, to exact revenge on the scammers who took advantage of a young black kids dream of financial freedom. So, listen, three months ago I finally finished a protocol that I’d been developing. It triggers incoming payments on certain crypto assets and diverts a portion of the funds to my randomized wallet addresses. I don’t target innocent investors, I only target scammers on the dark web. It’s why I’m careful about who gets close to me. Call it paranoia, call it whatever. Please, I’m telling you the truth” said Samuel speaking as quickly as possible. Emanuele’s serious, concerned look had changed to one of curiosity, and what he said next caught Samuel by surprise, “Alright, so how much did you manage to get off these scammers then?” he asked. “So far, it’s... it’s millions now” said Samuel, with a convincing facial expression.

“Show me” replied Emanuele, sounding serious as he sat closer to see the laptop screen; he was prepared for hesitation and thought about what his next move would be. But to Emanuele’s surprise, Samuel nodded and immediately he opened a tab and logged on to a Hong Kong banking account that he had set up. Once loaded, Samuel turned the screen which showed the exact balance of \$1,030,540.20 with his name ‘Samuel F. Sherman’ appearing right next to it. “These are just the funds from what I’ve sold on the exchanges, hang on I’ll open up my crypto accounts” he said, proving that his story was authentic. “Hmm, you weren’t lying” said Emanuele, slightly impressed, but also very relieved that he was telling the truth. “Yeah, you wouldn’t believe how much money there is in online lies, I should have a nice amount when my mom and I move overseas,” said Samuel, suddenly regretting the divulgence of his plan to move. “What’s stopping you from going now?” asked Emanuele, before Samuel paused, “I don’t know how long this protocol will last. It’s only been proven for 3 months, and when I move, I want no limits financially. This college thing is just a cover... there’s no way out of poverty when these college loans come due. I’m not gonna be that guy slaving his ass until he’s forty to break even. Besides, I haven’t told my mom yet... but life isn’t worth living as a debt slave, I want to be free... I bet you know what that feels like,” said Samuel, passionately. Emanuele ignored his last remark, “Why can’t you just keep doing what you’re doing overseas?” he asked, “I can, and I will, I’ve just really been grinding the last few months. It’s basically all I do, and I’d have to take time off to move and set up again. I’m just waiting for the right timing to get me and my mom out of here” explained Samuel, “What about your father?” “Don’t know him” replied Samuel, bluntly. “So... if you’re spending all this time doing your thing online, how are you able to keep your grades up in this business degree?” “I’m a genius” replied Samuel. Emanuele chuckled, “Oh, right” he said sarcastically, “No seriously, I was a straight A student in high

school and was invited to join Mensa” “Mensa?” asked Emanuele, “A school for individuals with an incredibly high IQ” replied Samuel. Emanuele just nodded, slightly impressed, then he sat back with ease. “Alright, sorry for the interrogation, I just freaked out when you mentioned my father... but one last question... How did you find out?” he asked. “Alright, this is going to sound sketchy, but here goes... I was bored one evening and I wanted to challenge myself, so I gained access to the DOJ’s private criminal watch list; it had all sorts of allegations about him, I know they’re probably just all made up though” said Samuel, again speaking quickly and nervously. “Okay, but you didn’t fully answer my question” Emanuele interjected, “Oh right, sorry, the watch list had his connections including spouses name and the name of his children on it” replied Samuel.

Upon hearing this, Emanuele now realized he was in a predicament. Was he to request Samuel’s help to get this list and destroy its existence, and was it even possible? Or would it cause the authorities to investigate his father if he was suddenly wiped from their database? These were the questions that immediately entered his mind, but Emanuele knew one thing; he now had to keep a close eye on Samuel. The only way to do this was to befriend him, instead of taking a staunch approach, and Emanuele didn’t want to be the reason for Samuel’s death, upon suspicion. The situation had to be handled with care, so he wasn’t going to make any drastic decisions in the moment; his father had instilled in him not to let his emotions dictate his thought process. “Look, I’ll keep your little online racket confidential, if I can trust you to do the same with what you’ve learnt about me,” he said, “You can trust me man, all I care about is getting this money and going far away. I’m won’t do anything stupid to jeopardize that plan” insisted Samuel.

Emanuele looked at the time on his custom Hublot watch, "I better get to class, I'll catch up with you later" he said as he patted Samuel on the shoulder, trying to put him at ease, "Alright, talk to you later" replied Samuel, nervously. Emanuele smiled at him but clenched his jaw after he had turned to walk away. He wasn't sure how he felt about Samuel knowing who his father was. But tried to take assurance in the fact that Samuel had been so forthright in sharing the critical details explaining everything. Although Emanuele didn't like the thought of it, he also had some solace in knowing that Samuel would be removed if he ever leaked information on Emanuele or his father. Samuel, likewise, felt incredibly uncomfortable with what had been revealed during their intense conversation. He also thought he should maintain friendship with Emanuele from now on, as he knew it would be much safer than trying to avoid him.

As 4pm ticked over, the last classes were finishing up, which soon followed by students exiting the buildings and flocking to their cars or the bus stop. Emanuele was walking towards the carpark when he spotted Samuel walking towards the outside gates, following a small crowd that had started to disperse. He walked quickly towards Samuel dodging people in his way, "Yo, Samuel!" he yelled. Upon hearing his name, Samuel turned and lowered his headphones, "Oh hey what's up?" he asked, looking a little surprised, "How are you getting home?" asked Emanuele, "Oh I usually just catch a bus from down the road" he replied. "Forget that today. Have you ever been in a Vanquish?" asked Emanuele; Samuel just shook his head. "Come on I'll drop you home, you don't live too far, right?" asked Emanuele, "No that's okay man, thanks though" replied Samuel trying to be polite, but still appearing nervous. "Come on its fine man...it's just a lift home" Emanuele insisted, "Ah fine, yeah, okay then" he replied, hesitantly. They both walked over to the matte grey Aston Martin Vanquish sitting there, in pristine condition.

“Hop in” said Emanuele as he opened the driver’s side door and sat inside. Samuel opened the passenger door and carefully placed his bag on the floor, before sitting in the racing seat and putting the bag into his lap. He thought the Alcantara floor was too nice for him to leave his bag sitting on. Samuel looked around at the luxurious interior, admiring it, “Damn, this has to be the most expensive car I’ve been in,” “What’s the second most expensive?” asked Emanuele, “A 2006’ Honda Civic” he replied, feeling embarrassed before they both gave a slight chuckle. “Don’t feel too bad, I’ve never been in one,” said Emanuele, before Samuel rolled his eyes, “Must be nice” he said. Emanuele pushed the start button on the Vanquish and gave it about 10 seconds to warm up. Then he pushed the reverse button before checking the reverse camera to make sure it was all clear. He put it in drive and carefully maneuvered his way towards the exit, as the Vanquish rolled through there were scowls from some of the jealous people that he passed. Some even began yelling, “rich bitch!”, “trust fund baby!”, “daddy’s boy!” which Emanuele just found amusing. “Damn you’ve got more critics than fans in this thing,” said Samuel, “I’ve heard it all before, I don’t normally drive this to college, but my younger sister had to keep up her appearances at school” he said, “Oh right” replied Samuel, raising his eyebrows. They exited the car park as the other cars along that stretch of road began clearing out. Emanuele planted his foot and the Vanquish gave an awesome roar, throwing them both back in their seats as they flew down the road. The huge brakes brought them to a quick stop as the traffic in the distance suddenly appeared right in front of them, in what felt like a split second. Samuel exhaled with a scared look on his face as he squeezed his laptop bag in his arms. “What’s your address?” asked Emanuele, “Just take me onto Clinton Street, I’ll direct you from there” he replied. “Alright” said Emanuele, putting it into the GPS, while maneuvering through the traffic. He then turned a corner onto a long stretch of back road he had travelled frequently.

“Hold on” he said calmly, as he planted his foot to the ground and made the Vanquish scream up the road. They reached a top speed of 140 mph and everything outside of the car began to blur when Emanuele took his foot off the acceleration and then gently applied the brakes. He turned out of the stretch of road and then drove as speed limits demanded. Samuel hadn’t made a peep; this had been his first experience of G force inside a car. “Shit! That was awesome!” he yelled, unable to contain his nervous excitement, as they now sat at the traffic lights. Before long, they turned onto the street Samuel lived on and Emanuele slowed down as he had not been in the neighborhood before. “It’s just coming up, it’s this white one on the left” said Samuel, before they slowed to a halt out the front of it. ‘So, this is how the other half lives’ Emanuele thought to himself as he looked at the small house. It was what he considered ‘tiny’ with faded white paint, no fence, and a porch just big enough to fit one person, standing. “I know what you’re thinking. Is this the smallest house I’ve ever seen?” said Samuel. “Nah man, I was thinking it’s got character” replied Emanuele, disingenuously. “Ha-ha very funny man, humble beginnings alright,” said Samuel, Emanuele just smiled, ‘Very humble’ he thought to himself.

Despite his lot in life, Samuel didn’t have a victim mentality, even though he and his mother had gone through years of a toxic living situation in Baltimore. It had caused them to cross the country to the West Coast in search of ‘The American Dream’ and they were on their way to experiencing it, because of Samuel’s unique skillset which had now paid off incredibly well. “Look, I know the house doesn’t look like much from the front, but why don’t you come in and let me show you my computer lab out the back... you’ll be impressed” said Samuel, “I’ll hold you to that, but another time, I’ve already made plans” replied Emanuele. “Alright man, well I’ll catch you tomorrow then, and thanks for the ride” said Samuel, grinning awkwardly as he got out.

With the engine still running, Emanuele nodded and then took off, driving to Eva's school.

Samuel walked onto the front porch of his small house, unlocked the front door, and walked inside. "Hi mom" he said to his mom Loretta, who was watching the afternoon news, "Hi hon, there's some left-over Barbeque wings in the fridge" she said as she got up from the couch. "Yum" said Samuel sarcastically; it was left over Barbeque for the third night in a row. "I'll be home later I've got another shift," said Loretta, "What?! How can they make you work two shifts in a day?!" asked Samuel, sounding disgusted. "We need the money, hon" she replied before leaving. Samuel had to hold himself back from telling his mom that she no longer needed to work, but he was still trying to work out the details in his mind, especially the part about how he had no intention on finishing college. He grabbed his dinner, heated it up in the microwave, then grabbed a can of soda and walked out the back of the house, to what he liked to call his 'computer lab' which was set up inside an old shipping container. After pulling his keys out of his bag, he then began unlocking the five locks on the lab door, while trying not to drop his food. He was very protective of his set up and had not yet let anyone inside to see it, apart from his mom. Inside on the back wall was a desk the full length of the container with 4, 24" LCD monitors, mounted 2x2. Under the desk were two custom built PC towers, each with the highest performance that Samuel could squeeze into them on his budget. There was a small air-conditioning unit that kept everything cool, and because it was such a small space, it worked quite well. Samuel made sure Loretta had no idea what he was up to once he stepped in; she assumed it was all just to do with his studies. But Samuel was determined when the time was right, with the funds secured, he would reveal it all, dropping his life in San Diego. Then he would book two one-way tickets for he and his mum, to move to Hong Kong.

This suited Samuel because the way in which he was generating money online was fraudulent.

The research into this plan of moving Asia, had been prompted by his mom Loretta, who had become obsessed after seeing a holiday program on TV showcasing Hong Kong. But as he sat staring at the screens in his computer lab, he pondered upon what had been revealed at university that day and thought he may have to pull the trigger on the plan sooner than anticipated.

Emanuele's Vanquish pulled up right where it had dropped Eva off that morning; she was sitting on the stairs waiting for him, and looked pleased to see him as she glanced up from her phone. She quickly grabbed her bag, walked over to the car, and got inside, "Were you waiting long?" asked Emanuele, "No, the rugby team finished their training 10 minutes ago and Denise got picked up just before you arrived" she replied, quietly. She wasn't her chirpy self, like she had been in the morning, "What's wrong?" asked Emanuele, "I broke it off with Thomas, I'm more interested in someone else" she replied. "Eva that's four guys in 3 months! Why do you keep doing this?" he asked, concerned for his sister. He couldn't understand why she craved all the attention, but what he did know was that it had gotten increasingly worse after their parents had separated. As much as Eva tried to deny it, Emanuele could see that it had really affected her. He sighed, "Look Eva, I don't tell you this enough, but I really care about you, and I want what's best for my little sister" he said. Then Eva sighed too, and looked over at her brother in appreciation, "Yeah I guess I'll leave the mind games alone" she replied. Emanuele drove them home thinking about how it wasn't his role to be a father to his sister, but he pondered on how he could be a better brother and do something to cheer her up. After arriving home and pulling into the garage, he now realized that he was late for training. He quickly ran inside, got dressed and grabbed his gym bag, containing his training gear.

Then he ran back to the garage and this time jumped into the Range Rover before speeding over to his trainer's house. When he arrived, he walked down the side of the house and through the back to an outdoor training area, where his trainer was waiting for him. The muscular man in his fifties stood there with arms folded, "30 minutes late, that's 300 push-ups to start you off. You can do them in lots of 100" said Clay, his trainer. He had told Emanuele at the beginning of his training, five years prior, that there would be 10 push-ups done, for every minute that he was late. It seemed a little extreme, but the idea was for Emanuele to take his training seriously. Clay was a hard man and Emanuele's father approved of his tough approach. Emanuele knew he couldn't just call in sick, he genuinely had to be as sick as a dog or else Clay was given permission to drag him to training. So, Emanuele would often leave most prior engagements early to skip the push-ups, or worse, the circuit of hell.

Dominic had put Emanuele into karate at the age of 11 but pulled him out at age 15, when he began beating other kids up on a regular basis. It wasn't his fault that things turned aggressive when he would consistently out strike everyone, including the black belts. He had a natural born talent when it came to hand-to-hand combat and when the other kids' parents started to complain, that's when Dominic knew it was time to move his son into something tougher.

Clay was not just another martial arts instructor. He had grown up harder and tougher than anyone Emanuele knew, and Dominic had some very seasoned enforcers. Clay's father had him in boxing at the age of 6 and trained him until he died of lung cancer when Clay was 13. Clay went on to become a 2-time junior, state boxing champion and 3-time junior, national kick boxing champion in his weight division, by the time he was only 18.

When he was 19, he enrolled into the military, and in the decade that followed had 6 deployments to Iraq, one in Sierra Leone and one in Cambodia, before he finished up his time as a Sergeant First Class. But he came out of retirement to serve one last deployment in Afghanistan at the age of 37, in retaliation to 9/11. He went out of anger, and it was his final military involvement, after he had witnessed too many of his brothers-in-arms die. During his 18 years involvement in the military, Clay had also managed to attain the level of E-3 in Krav Maga, which was influenced by a close friend whom he served with, named Eli. Eli had previously served in the Israel Defense Force which used Krav Maga for hand-to-hand combat, and he was always bragging to Clay about how it was superior to anything else. Eli was killed in action on their second tour together; Clay pursued Krav Maga in honor of him. He had also become a third-degree black belt in Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu, being able to rank so quickly because he was a beast on the mats. When Clay returned to US soil from his last deployment, he got into the underground fighting circuit, which he thought would help to keep him sane from all the bloodshed he had seen overseas. But after winning four fights, all by knockout, he accidentally killed his opponent in his fifth fight. The young man never woke up after Clay had knocked him completely unconscious; and Clay regretted the day he joined. On top of this, he had also become a bookies nightmare because of his reputation, and no one would bet against him, no matter what odds they were offering. He was banned from participating in the illegal circuit and so he got a slower job as a bouncer in a night club called 'Atlantis'. But after only a few months of working there, he had a run in with four juiced up gang bangers, which subsequently led to him beating the shit out of every one of them, to make sure they didn't return. This ordeal, combined with his already less than stellar reputation caused patrons to be fearful, and so the nightclubs profits suffered; he was made redundant, with two weeks' pay.

Two of the gang bangers that Clay had beaten up were connected to Dominic's organization. But instead of taking revenge, Dominic had a meeting set up and found him to be a good match, and with his life experience, Clay was employed on the spot as an enforcer in San Diego. After 10 years of service Clay had made a name for himself and the men looked to him to make the decisions on major deals that were to go down. Dominic had also built a friendship with him and decided to appoint him as one of his personal bodyguard's. A year later Dominic asked him to start training his son in combat and weaponry.

Dominic wanted his son's skillset to be well rounded if he was to take over the organization one day. He needed to be able to handle himself should an extreme occasion arise. Clay also found training Emanuele and sharing his knowledge to be therapeutic compared to everything he had done previously. He was not only Dominic's bodyguard and Emanuele's trainer; he had also become one of only a few of Dominic's most trusted men. So much that Dominic confided in him on his opinion of major deals before executing them.

"Alright E-man, gloves on!" yelled Clay, "You're gonna do some punching drills on the bag to warm up" he continued, "But I'm already warm" replied Emanuele, as he put his 16-ounce boxing gloves on and stood in front of the heavy bag. Clay ignored the remark, "The same drill as yesterday as fast as you can... Go!" he yelled. Emanuele threw the combination of jab, cross, jab, cross, jab, cross, left hook, uppercut, jab, and power cross. Clay had Emanuele do this sequence of punching 150 times until it was engrained into his mind, so that he started doing it without even thinking. After that, he had Emanuele put on some lighter gloves and do pad work; a variation of different combo's that Clay had taught him. His hands were getting so fast that Clay was impressed when Emanuele slipped one past him, "Good, your speed's improving!" he yelled.

They did this pad work for a further 15 minutes before stopping, "Alright that's enough, we'll go through some Krav dismantling techniques now," said Clay. Then they worked on these techniques for 30 minutes, before moving onto Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu submissions and locks which they did for a further 30 minutes. "Alright, sparring time," said Clay, smashing his gloves together. "Sounds good" replied Emanuele, wiping sweat from his brow, as he grinned. They didn't spar every training session, but Emanuele really enjoyed it when they did. His fitness had skyrocketed, and Clay knew that even after everything Emanuele had already done today, he still had enough gas in the tank to go a few rounds.

With mouthguards in, they both walked over and got into the cage that Clay had set up in the shed behind his house. Then they stood facing each other from opposite sides, "Up until now I've had you sparring at 70% intensity, I want you to raise it up, give me everything you've got," said Clay. "Are you sure you're ready for that?" Emanuele joked, "Pride before the fall, alright show me what you got!" yelled Clay. Emanuele ran at Clay throwing a superman punch, flying straight towards his nose. Clay read it well and swiftly dropped to one knee and in one powerful movement picked up Emanuele and dropped him to the canvas. He quickly moved in position for a leg lock, "Come on E-man!" he yelled as Emanuele quickly scrambled, managing to escape it, but Clay leapt, and grabbed him easily putting him in a rear-naked choke. Emanuele quickly tapped, "Let's try that again, never rush your opponent until you know what he's capable of. Instead read his body language, then intercept," said Clay. Emanuele nodded feeling disappointed in himself, he had gotten overconfident and wasn't expecting the ground game to come into play so soon. They continued their sparring standing up, exchanging punches and kicks, checking, blocking, and countering at a slightly less intense pace than when they had started.

Emanuele still had a long way to go to become the caliber of fighter Clay was, but Clay was impressed at the speed with which Emanuele was progressing each session. After 15 minutes of non-stop sparring, they were both drenched in sweat, "Time for cardio" said Clay, smiling like a mad man, "Alright let me catch my breath" replied Emanuele, puffing. They both threw off their sparring gear, then Clay walked over and grabbed two respirators, before handing one to Emanuele, "Let's go E-man, this is what makes or breaks a champion," he said. They both put their respirators on and got onto the treadmills; this was their final lung conditioning and endurance training. Emanuele only managed to stay jogging on the treadmill for 5 minutes while Clay stayed on for 15 minutes. At the end of it, Emanuele was absolutely drained, breathing heavily as he made his way over to the outdoor kitchenette sink. He placed his face under the tap and cooled off while sipping water in between gasps of air. Clay stepped off the treadmill, threw his respirator off and was also puffing heavily. "Good work E-man... tomorrow we'll go to the gym" he said, "Yeah... okay" replied Emanuele still rinsing his face under the tap. "Go in and take a shower, I'll put the gear away," said Clay. Emanuele turned off the tap, flicked the water off his hair with his hands, and walked inside Clay's house to take a shower. He walked into the bathroom and turned only the cold water on; 'a cold shower has never felt this good' he thought to himself. After stepping out and drying himself, he put on some dress pants, dress shoes and a designer polo shirt, before spraying himself with cologne. Then he walked out of the bathroom and into Clay's lounge room where he switched the TV on. A few random ads played before one came on which showed an upcoming local MMA tournament. Clay walked into the lounge room, "What are you still doing here?" he asked, "I reckon you could beat any of these guys Clay" said Emanuele, ignoring the question. "Nah, I'm too old to compete, you could probably take them though" he replied.

“Maybe, hey did you want a lift to my dad’s apartment?” asked Emanuele, “Nah you go ahead, I’ll see you over there. You should go now though; he’s waiting for you” replied Clay. Emanuele got up and walked to the front door, “Thanks for today” he said, feeling the endorphins of training kicking in, “Don’t mention it” replied Clay. Then Emanuele got into his car and quickly sped off in a hurry, to get to his father’s apartment building.

Dominic strategically controlled the Empire from his penthouse which was in the Marina district of San Diego; it was the region he had the most support from political figures and lobbyists, making him virtually untouchable. It was also middle ground between LA where his largest clientele base was, and Tijuana where most of the product was transported from. He had worked from, and owned the penthouse for a decade, but now resided there permanently after separating from Maria.

Upon arriving at the apartment complex, Emanuele decided to park in the designated visitor parking for a change. He got out of the Range Rover and walked towards the entrance before spotting 4 men in a black SUV. He recognized the two seated in front as his father’s men. They were keeping an eye out the front for rival gang members or intelligence agents not on Dominic’s payroll. This wasn’t common practice, as they had many security cameras, but they had received a tip that there might be scouting of the complex going on, and they wanted to be ready to grab anyone they didn’t like the look of. But the men also had to remain inconspicuous as to not scare any of Dominic’s tenants from the other luxury apartments. Emanuele smiled as he approached the SUV.

Suddenly, a young man sitting in the back slid down his window, “What do you want? Get out of here” he said, condescendingly.

The man in the front passenger seat quickly put his window down, "Sorry Emanuele this moron's new, good to see you, it's been a while," said the man. "Good to see you too Percy, I've been hitting the books... anyway, I'll see you up there" replied Emanuele. Percy nodded acknowledging him, before Emanuele headed inside the complex' lobby. Then the two men put their windows back up, "That was your first mistake" said Percy in a serious tone to the new guy seated in the back. "Why, who was that?" he asked, "That was the boss' son. One day he'll be the boss" replied Percy, "Oh shit! I didn't know" said new guy, sounding worried. "You're just lucky he's not like his father... but next time, ask before you run your mouth!" replied Percy.

Once the lift took Emanuele to the Penthouse on the 41st floor, he got out and approached the front door. Standing there, was a very large man of African descent, dressed immaculately in a designer suit, guarding it. He stood up straight, as Emanuele approached, "Good evening, Emanuele" the man said in his deep voice, "Evening Jerry" replied Emanuele, as he was let through into the penthouse. Once he stepped inside, he saw four more men sitting down in the loungeroom by the entrance, one of them was Carlos. He looked up at Emanuele, raising his chin condescendingly. Emanuele's demeanor instantly changed, from pleasant to pissed at the sight of him. Carlos was eight years older than Emanuele, and he oversaw a large portion of the drug production in Mexico, a position which he inherited from his father. He also took care of anyone who stepped out of line or interfered with that production. His father had been a prominent member of one of the Drug Cartels; he did business and was good friends with Dominic.

But Carlos' father died in a shoot-out when an up-and-coming Mexican gang tried to take over his resources; they were soon tracked down and killed by Dominic's men and subsequently had their resources taken instead.

Carlos was only 18 when his father died, so Dominic had taken him under his wing and advanced him through the ranks of production. But this wasn't good enough for Carlos, he was jealous of Emanuele's position and the fact that he was having the Empire handed to him on a gold platter within the next decade. He despised Emanuele for this, especially because he had never seen any 'real action'. The other three men seated, were Carlos' 'boys' who went just about everywhere with him. They were covered in tattoos of tribal Aztec and Catholic symbolism. Two of them were heavy set and the anabolic steroid usage was noticeable. The third man was Javier; the best looking of the group, and the only level-headed one. "Why are you here?" asked Emanuele in frustration, before Carlos leaned forward in his chair while looking at him, "I'm waiting to see Dominic, apparently we've got some shit to do next week, you and me" he said. "What sort of shit?" "You'll find out" replied Carlos' smirking, before sliding back into his seat, as the two juicers chuckled amongst themselves. Suddenly, an official looking man in a suit walked through, exiting the penthouse with a briefcase in his left hand. Right behind him, another man dressed in a suit walked up to Emanuel, "Your father's ready to see you now" the man said kindly, before he too, exited the room. Emanuele walked through to another lounge room where his father was sitting, "Go on" said Dominic, looking over at two beautiful women who quickly left the room at his request. Then he brought his attention back to Emanuele, "Hello son" he said as he got up and walked towards him. Dominic was a tall man of slender build, with strong distinguishing features. He was bald and clean shaven, had piercing eyes and a strong jaw line. He did not look to be sixty years of age, thanks to his genetic mix of Italian and German descent. Placing both hands upon his sons' shoulders, he smiled, "How's your mother doing?" he asked disingenuously about Maria. "She's managing" replied Emanuele, holding himself back from saying something to indicate how he really felt.

But if he could speak freely, he thought to himself he would say something like, 'Why'd you leave?' 'She's depressed' 'She drinks herself to sleep'. But apart from being a pointless point of conversation, he would never disrespect his father, and Dominic already knew these things anyway. He was not a sympathetic man; he could show absolutely no sign of weakness in his position. He led Emanuele out onto the balcony, which had an amazing view of all the dazzling lights across the harbor. "Have a seat" he said, sitting down as he opened a gold portable humididor, which was on the table. Inside it were Cohiba Behike cigars which each had a smoke cost of \$450. One of Dominic's favorites past times was smoking cigars, and these were his regulars. "Is that a new suit?" asked Emanuele, noticing the flashy Kiton K-50 suit worth \$60,000, which was only one of over 400 expensive suits that he owned. Dominic cut the end of a cigar, then lit it up and started puffing on it, "How's university going?" he asked, "Yes, it's going good, I don't know how much of what I'm learning applies to our business though" replied Emanuele. Dominic paused puffing on his cigar, placed it in a holder and rested his hands together, which Emanuele knew he only did when he meant business. So, Emanuele gave his father, his undivided attention. "I wanted you to have a foundation of business knowledge before you learn the particulars of this organization. I want you to have the advantages that I chose not to have. You know I have my advisors, but I alone make the final decisions. Something you will have to do one day, but having business knowledge will help," said Dominic, "Yes, I understand father" said Emanuele, nodding respectfully. "You are of the Caito bloodline, it is a bloodline of authority, and no government, nor gang has ever oppressed us. You know my father, was an immigrant and came to this country with nothing, because he disagreed with Italy's stance during the second world war" said Dominic, before taking another puff of his cigar.

Then he continued, "But he wasn't going to be America's slave. So, he did whatever he had to, and became a made guy. He encouraged me to pursue a legitimate career, and as you know I had to join another family, to prove to him who I really was... and, well you know the rest of the story; the sacrifices I had to make to build this organization. I had to break the mold and form alliances with everyone, no matter how crooked. Some of those alliances I've broken for the betterment of our organization... Your grandfather died when you were just 4 years old. He never wanted us to get into the drug running side of the game, but I saw the potential that he never could. I've built this thing up from nothing, and in time, you will take over and I want you to keep advancing, so that your children never have to experience great poverty like our forefathers did, no matter what the economy does. One day, you will take this international and have alliances in many nations" said Dominic, as Emanuele sat silently and intently, listening to his father. Dominic said these things with the hope that this is what his son desired. Emanuele had never experienced a conversation like this with his father before; he knew just how much it meant to his father that he would eventually take over, but now he was speaking openly about it. "I will make you proud father, I will keep advancing, and building upon what you have built" he said. "I am very glad to hear you say that son" replied Dominic, who then glanced over and nodded to signal the man who was waiting behind the glass door. The man brought out a bottle of chilled Dom Perignon champagne, with two glasses, placing one in front of each of them. He poured champagne into Dominic's glass first, then into Emanuele's glass, and then he left the bottle next to the table in a silver ice bucket, before returning inside. Dominic raised his glass, "To the future of this Empire, may there always be a Caito at the helm" he said, Emanuele raised his glass as well not really sure what to say, "To the future" he said in agreement. Then they both took a sip.

“Let’s admire the view son” said Dominic before they both got up and walked over to the marble handrailing and looked across the harbor. “Father, what is it that you want me to do with Carlos next week?” asked Emanuele, “You’re going to Phoenix on Monday, so you’ll have to take a couple of days off your studies” replied Dominic. “What’s in Phoenix?” he asked, “There’s a couple of suppliers we haven’t heard from in over a week, Carlos’ thinks they might be sampling too much of the product and not subsidizing what they sample. I’m sending you along; it will be a good look for you to get hands on experience in front of the men” replied Dominic. “I’d feel better if Clay came along” “Clay is going to be busy checking on something else for me. I’ve had the house in Phoenix scouted out, and there won’t be any more than 4 people in there. You’ll be with seven other men, and I’ve told Carlos that if anything goes wrong, I’m holding him personally responsible for your safety. I know I haven’t sent you on these jobs before, but it’s a part of the business and you need to be aware of the details for the future, when you run things” said Dominic, “I understand its part of the business. I just don’t trust Carlos looking out for my safety” explained Emanuele. Dominic just smiled as he held his cigar, “If anything happens to you, he’ll have to worry about his own safety” he said, reassuring his son. But Emanuele didn’t feel any assurance; he had never trusted Carlos and for good reason. “Look, I know you’ve always had your differences with Carlos, but you two need to settle them. He is a hard worker and he’s going to be an asset in the future. I also want you to show him that you can handle yourself, so that he learns to respect you,” said Dominic, “I just know he hates the fact that I’ll be his boss someday” replied Emanuele, “He will understand when that day comes” said Dominic before placing a hand on Emanuele’s shoulder.

Emanuele sighed, nodding humbly, before his father continued to speak, "Son, always remember this -Peace within an organization is the most important thing, leave the violence on the streets. This organization will not continue to prosper if there is any division within it" he said, "I understand" replied Emanuele, wanting to remain in his father's good graces, especially after he had opened up to him about taking over. "Good! you will be picked up Monday evening," said Dominic, optimistically. They stood there, looking over the marina and out to sea, as they finished their glasses of champagne. Emanuele took his last sip and then suddenly realized, that the aggravation of Carlos' presence had caused him to completely forget what he had learned at university that day. "Uh, one more thing... do we have any authorities... keeping tabs on us?" asked Emanuele, hesitantly. Then Dominic smiled and patted his son on the back, "We have many people on the inside, but you don't need to be concerned with that now. Come and see me next weekend" replied Dominic before sitting down, continuing to smoke his cigar.

Emanuele knew that his father was a busy man, and this was the subtle signal, that his allotted time was up. "Send out Carlos!" yelled Dominic, to the server who was still waiting by the door. Emanuele didn't fully realize it yet, but he was now officially, heir to the world's largest drug organization.

Chapter 2: The Good Life

It was Friday, which was the last day of university for Emanuele that week. He had been pouring himself a fresh cup of coffee, but suddenly paused, when he heard what sounded like a small piece of glass smashing; the noise had come from the living room. He curiously walked through to see what it was, briefly scanning the room before realizing. His mother Maria had passed out on the lounge the night before, and a wine glass had fallen off the side table, breaking on the tiles. Emanuele walked over to his mom and crouched down to make sure she was okay, and still breathing. She exhaled fumes of wine into his face before she slightly opened her eyes, "Emanuele?" she asked, in her severely hung-over state. "Big night mom?" he asked, "I'm fine, probably just too much wine" she replied. Judging by the two empty bottles sitting next to her prescription anti-depressants packet, he could tell it wasn't just the wine. She got up looking a little shaky, so Emanuele put his arms under her, picking her up and carried her to her bedroom. He placed her on the king-sized bed and cracked open a bottle of water from the room's drinks chiller. But she had already gone back to sleep, so he placed it on her side table, kissed her on the forehead and then walked back into the kitchen to finish his coffee. He sighed, shaking his head, as this was becoming something of a weekly ritual for his mom. Normally, Maria was a socialite and, in the past, had been responsible for organizing grand events for her friends and family, before the split with Dominic had turned her into a middle aged, booze drinking, introvert. Suddenly, there was heavy knocking at the front door; Emanuele assumed it must have been Jarryd, their housekeeper, making an early round to see if they needed anything.

He was responsible for most of the house maintenance, but also made sure the family had everything they needed including food stockpiles, bathroom supplies and other essentials. Emanuele quickly flicked to the CCTV channel on the kitchen TV, and instantly became angry, as he saw Carlos of all people standing at the front door. But upon remembering the meeting with his father, he forced a smile, then went and answered the door. "Carlos, the less I see you, the better off I am" he said, being cheerfully sarcastic. "Funny... I'm here for Eva" replied Carlos, looking unimpressed, "And why is that?" asked Emanuele, "Because I'm taking her to school" he replied firmly. Carlos wasn't the sort of person to back down on anything, especially on instruction from Emanuele, before he had become the boss. Emanuele knew this but couldn't stand the thought of Carlos alone in a car with his sister. "You're not taking her, get in your car and leave," said Emanuele, now unable to fake the smile, but just as he said this, he felt a soft hand on his back. "It's okay Emanuele, I'll just go with Carlos today" said Eva, nodding at her brother to let him know it was 'okay'. Emanuele did not agree with it, but Eva had made the decision to go, so he wasn't going to cause a scene. He closed the door, clenching his jaw as they walked off to Carlos' SUV. Emanuele really would have loved to uppercut Carlos at the door but used every ounce of restraint he had not to. After his parents had split, Carlos had somehow designated himself as Eva's driver, but now that Emanuele's driver's license suspension was over, he had given Carlos plenty of notice that he didn't need to drive Eva anymore. As much as he would have loved to take on Carlos in a fight, he knew he couldn't, because his father had just emphasized 'keep the peace'. But Emanuele and Carlos had a history of getting into punch ups, growing up, which was part of the reason why Emanuele first got into martial arts.

Emanuele had lost all those fights though, because Carlos was very tough; he had grown up on the streets of Tijuana and had been in many street fights as a kid. Also, Emanuele wasn't as big and strong back then, with their last altercation being 3 years prior. But despite Emanuele now being bigger, much stronger, and faster, Carlos was not at all intimidated. All he saw was a spoilt kid fed with a silver spoon, who was getting a twelve-figure inheritance without having to work for it. Even though Carlos was still physically bigger than Emanuele, he didn't know how great of a fighter Emanuele had become, but he would eventually find out.

Eva liked Carlos as a friend, but nothing more. Carlos had no intention of staying in the friend zone though, he was determined to sleep with Eva, and even make her his girl once she turned 18. He didn't think it would take much work, as he'd heard about the easy reputation she had at school. This misinformation was given to him through a side dealer that serviced the kids at her school. Something Dominic had no knowledge of, nor would he ever have allowed. Carlos pulled his SUV up, out the front of St. Augustine High, "Hey Eva, I'm having a party at my place this weekend, you should come and bring some girls" he said, with the party happening, being contingent on her agreeing. "I'm actually going to be spending the weekend with my mom, maybe another time" she said, as she got out of the car.

Carlos smirked, and thought she was just playing games, as he watched her walk away with her friends. Then he sped off thinking to himself that he would change her mind when he returned to pick her up. Carlos had been rough and persuasive with his ex-girlfriends, but he knew he couldn't act like that towards the boss' daughter. Especially if he was ever going to get Dominic's blessing to date her.

Emanuele had been sitting for 30 minutes into his lecture, when suddenly the side door opened; it was Samuel, and he was running late for class this time. He made his way up the back and sat down next to Emanuele. With plenty of empty seats around, he was trying to show that he was trustworthy. "Hey man, how's it going?" asked Emanuele, "Yeah going good, can you fill me in?" asked Samuel. Emanuele saved a copy of his notes to his USB flash drive and gave it to Samuel, "Grab the notes off here" he said, "Thanks" replied Samuel, as the lecturer suddenly looked their way. When the lecture had finished, they grabbed their bags and headed to the cafeteria to grab some lunch. Emanuele grabbed his lunch from the counter and turned to notice the stunningly attractive girl he had seen the day before; she was sitting at the same table with her peers, who were Chinese. She seemed to be Chinese as well, but she completely stood out to him from everyone else. He thought about going over to talk to her, but before he could act, Samuel interrupted after grabbing his food, "Come outside, I've got to tell you something" he said. So, Emanuele followed him outside, and they sat down where they had spoken the day before. "What's up?" asked Emanuele, "Last night I got this email invite to a video conference from a group that had stung me in the past. I really wanted to get these scam rat bastards, and last night I finally did it! They were using a different name, but I knew it was them; it was the same stupid model they used to scam me out of \$500 last time" explained Samuel. "Yeah, good for you man, but what does this have to do with me?" he asked, not sounding very interested, with his mind still distracted by the beautiful girl inside the food hall. But Samuel was way too excited to answer, "I installed a backdoor into their payment protocol and diverted their funds into my crypto account, anyway by that stage I was about ready to log off for the night, right, but then the payments kept rolling in! I thought to myself, 'shit, this might actually be open to everyone who was on that video conference' so anyway, I only got about an hours sleep,

but guess how much I raked off them?!" asked Samuel looking like he was about ready to burst, "How much?" asked Emanuele, "Nine hundred, thousand dollars!" yelled Samuel, before looking around and noticing the students now staring at him; he quickly covered his mouth while trying to contain his laughter. It would have normally taken him at least a couple months to acquire this type of payload, but he managed to pull it off in one night. Samuel needed to vent his excitement, and Emanuele was the only person who knew about what he did. "Wow, nice, you might want to keep it down though" said Emanuele, also noticing that some students were within earshot of their conversation. "Oh, right, yeah" said Samuel, as softly as his euphoric state would allow. They finished their food and then Emanuele stood up "I've got to go take a leak. I'll meet you out in the carpark this afternoon. I want to see this computer set up of yours" he said. "Yeah... yeah, sounds good!" replied Samuel, enthusiastically wide eyed as he also stood up. Emanuele wasn't really going to the bathroom; he wanted to go and introduce himself to the girl he had seen in the cafeteria. He knew it would be slightly awkward, but he just couldn't get her out of his mind and didn't want to miss his opportunity. He made his way through the crowd of students and to her table, but as he approached her, two of the Chinese guys stood up and blocked the way to where she was seated. They were hostile, and didn't look like college students at all, but rather looked like thugs and the girl looked a little worried as they stood up. "What do you want?" they asked, looking ready to throw fists at any moment, "I just came over to introduce myself to..." Emanuele paused as he glanced at the girl. "Ping, her name is Ping" said the man with a shaved head, to his left, "Okay, well yeah Ping, I'm just going to introduce myself to her," said Emanuele. "She's not interested" replied the sleeker, trendier looking man, standing to his right.

“Oh, are you, her boyfriend?” asked Emanuele “No!” the trendy man snapped, “Then why don’t you let her decide for herself?” he asked. “She has decided, keep moving!” said the bald man, angrily. Emanuele noticed that his right hand was now clenched, “Alright take it easy” he said, backing off slightly before they both returned to the table. Emanuele could have taken them both in a fight, but he wasn’t about to cause a huge scene in a fully packed cafeteria and lose any future opportunity he might have to meet the girl. He gave a gentle wave to her as he walked away, and she waved back looking a little confused. “What did he want?” asked the girl in Cantonese, “He wanted to meet you,” replied the trendy Chinese man, “Oh, is that all?” she asked, looking curiously at Emanuele as he walked away. “We can’t be too careful, your father enrolled us here to look after you,” replied the bald man.

At the end of the day all the remaining students made their way out the front of the university, while Emanuele waited at the edge of the car park for Samuel. He had waited for 17 minutes before he began to think that Samuel might have bailed on him. But just as he was ready to leave, Samuel appeared from the main building and walked over to him. “Sorry man, I had to grab some stuff from the head office, they’re saying I’m behind on my study fees” he said, appearing to be annoyed. “You’re making plenty of money what’s the problem?” asked Emanuele, “It’s risky to pay with undeclared funds, but I guess soon I’ll have no other choice” he replied.

They walked over to the far side of the car park, “Where’s your car?” asked Samuel looking around for the Vanquish. Emanuele clicked his key button and the lights on his Range Rover Sport lit up. “Of course, you have one of those” said Samuel, rolling his eyes. “I have to blend in sometimes” replied Emanuele, tongue in cheek as they got into the top-of-the-line Range Rover Sport.

When they pulled up in front of Samuel's house, they looked, a couple of houses down where a woman was screaming at a man as he smashed his beer bottle on the ground and yelled back. "Nice neighborhood" said Emanuele trying not to sound too sarcastic, "Yeah, it's paradise" replied Samuel, full of sarcasm. Then they both got out of the car and walked inside the small house. Despite the size, the inside had been made to feel cozy with its simplistic decor. "You want a soda or something?" asked Samuel as he dropped his bag on the counter, "Nah I'm good man" replied Emanuele as he looked around. It was the smallest house he had ever been in. The sofa was pushed up against the kitchen bench to leave just enough leg room for a coffee table in front of the TV. "I'm going to buy my mom a mansion someday soon, she deserves more than this shoebox," said Samuel. Emanuele smiled, as he didn't know how to reply; he had never had to struggle a day in his life. "So, where's this great computer set up?" he asked, to break the now awkward silence. "Come on" said Samuel as he signaled for Emanuele to follow him through the kitchen. They both walked out the back of the house and to the shipping container, then Samuel unlocked the door and they both walked inside. He switched the light on, revealing the PC towers and displays covering most of the back wall. "I did not expect to see this inside here," said Emanuele, "No one would, considering the house" replied Samuel. He showed Emanuele all the major uses he had for his set up, ranging from how he had set up bots to monitor equities markets, to how he was working on encryption breaking software. Samuel was proud of his custom set up, it had cost him everything he had, and he built it from scratch. He had a deep understanding of hardware, and how base programming codes like C worked, but his expertise tapered off as he got towards front end development. With his skillset, he could have been a world class software engineer.

Emanuele sat back on the sofa that was on the opposite wall to the setup, trying to take in everything Samuel was showing him, "I'm going to set my office up like this" he said. Samuel was taken aback, "Wow, just like that? It must be nice" he said, before going quiet as he looked through the applications running on his screen. "Well, you know money doesn't buy experience... and what you've done here is very impressive" said Emanuele, after realizing that his affluent expression may have been insensitive. They had been sitting in there for an hour and fifteen minutes when Emanuele checked his phone, it was 4:31pm and he had to get to the gym by 5pm to meet Clay and avoid push-ups the following day. "I have to go man, but if you're not doing anything tomorrow maybe we could catch a movie" he said, "Yeah sure, I haven't been to the cinemas for a while" replied Samuel. So, Emanuele gave his phone to Samuel, "Put your digits in, I'll call you tomorrow" he said. Then he took his phone back and opened the door, "There's a side gate, see you tomorrow" said Samuel before returning to his programming. Emanuele nodded and then walked out using the narrow, old, rusted gate beside the house. He walked out to his car and noticed a few teenagers riding their bikes as they scowled at him; he ignored them, then got into his car and left.

As Emanuel pulled into the gym's carpark, he spotted Clay's car out the front. "Oh no, he's already here" he said to himself, feeling frustrated he had let time get away from him, yet again. But to his surprise Clay was still seated inside his car. Emanuele quickly grabbed his gear and got out, "You're lucky I just got here" said Clay as he stepped out of his car as well. Emanuele smiled a cheeky grin as he closed the door and locked his car. They both walked inside, greeting the girl at the front desk, who was also a personal trainer. She smiled with big eyes for Emanuele as he walked through, and he smiled back.

Clay noticed and gave him a tap on the back with his gym bag, "Focus" he said, "Yeah I'll be out soon" replied Emanuele, before opening the door to the bathroom, "I'll meet you at the squat rack in one minute" replied Clay, emphasizing for him to hurry up. He didn't allow any slacking off when they were together, it was all business, as Clay knew his employment was to harden Emanuele for the dark underworld, he would soon join. Emanuele quickly got changed into his gym clothes, and when he came out, Clay was already doing his warmup set with 220lbs on the squat rack. As soon as he had finished, he started unloading a plate, "It's alright I can do this weight" said Emanuele confidently, so Clay put it back on, "Go for it" he replied. Emanuele did a couple of bodyweight squats to check his form, then got under the bar and did 12 slow squats struggling on the last. Then Clay bumped the weight up to 275lbs and pushed out 15 reps with ease. Emanuele stayed at 220lbs and did another 4 sets of 10, while Clay did 275lbs for two more sets of 15 and then one set of 330lbs for 10 reps. He followed up by 400lbs for his last set managing to pump out 6 reps. Clay insisted on not worrying about isolation exercises, but rather focus on compound movements for strength. He signaled for Emanuel to follow him, then they walked over to the bench press, "Why are we training chest with legs?" asked Emanuele, as Clay began to load the bench. He paused and then looked at Emanuele "In battle you must be prepared for anything, do you think the Roman soldiers would have hesitated to swing their swords after running up a mountain? If they had, they would have been slaughtered" he replied, using this analogy as the reason why they were about to train this way. They both warmed up and then got into it, doing the same number of sets with slightly less reps as they did on legs. Clay started with 180lbs and did his last set on 380lbs, while Emanuele started on 155lbs and finished on 275lbs, which he needed Clay to help him with.

Feeling completely drained at the end, Emanuele grabbed his gear and with slightly shaky legs, followed Clay who bought them both a protein drink from the front desk. Then they sat down at a table for a while, drinking them, "I don't usually drink these things, but what the hell. Make sure you eat a big steak or something when you get home" said Clay, "Yeah, this isn't going to cut it, but thanks" replied Emanuele, raising his drink slightly. Once they finished their drinks, and threw the empty bottles in the trash, they returned to their cars. "Listen I know you've got a job to do for your father next week, and so do I, so we won't be training again until Tuesday, just have a rest this weekend" said Clay, to Emanuele's surprise. "Alright I will... and Clay, take care of yourself" he said, "I always do" replied Clay, as he got into his modified 2008 Shelby Mustang, with the bug catcher blowers from the supercharger, poking through the bonnet. After pulling out of the carpark he did a burnout, before taking off; the V8 roar could be heard for a mile as he shot down the road. Emanuele chuckled, as he could hear it scream away from inside of his own car. When he arrived home, he found his mom and sister in the lounge room watching their favorite season of Real Housewives. Eva was eating cookie dough ice cream out of the container and Maria was drinking a glass of champagne. "What's the celebration?" asked Emanuele sarcastically, as he walked into the lounge room. Maria knew what he was implying, "Emanuele I am your mother, you don't need to tell me when and if I can drink, besides the red wine was giving me a headache" she replied. "I'm calling Rosaline up mom, and you're going shopping tomorrow" he said as he took the bottle of Champagne away from her, "Alright... fine I'll call her, it might make me feel better blowing your fathers money on some \$4000 shoes anyway" she replied. "There you go" he said smiling to himself as he walked into the kitchen to grab a bottle of water. Maria was feeling buzzed, but in a good mood, so she grabbed her cell phone from the side table next to her and called up her friend Rosaline. "Rosaline its Maria..."

Yes, I know it's been a while, listen I don't care. Whatever you're doing tomorrow, drop those plans. I'm taking you shopping.... You've got a hen's party on? Well, will you be receiving any Chanel bags or Gucci shoes at this event?... No? That's what I thought, I'll pick you up at 10am tomorrow morning. Okay, okay, bye" she said, before ending the call and taking another sip of her drink, looking quite pleased with herself. After Emanuele had walked back in, he and Eva smiled at each other briefly before the subject abruptly changed. "So, what did Carlos have to say to you today?" asked Emanuele, "He invited me to a party he's having at his place" replied Eva, "Well, what did you say?" asked Emanuele, looking annoyed, "I told him no" "Good, I don't want you hanging out with that boy Eva, he's bad news" said Maria before she turned up the volume on the TV. Emanuele signaled for Eva to come and talk to him, and then they both walked through to the kitchen. "I've got to do something for dad next week, I don't want mom worrying about me. So, I'll be getting Jarryd to take you to school for the days that I'm busy," said Emanuele. "What if Carlos shows up?" asked Eva, "He's going to be away as well, I'll be back on Tuesday" replied Emanuele. "Ok, I'll see you then" said Eva, smiling sarcastically before she walked back into the living room and joined her mom. Emanuele went and opened the fridge and found some fresh T-bone steaks inside. He took them out and cooked them up, adding leftover stir fry vegetables to his plate from the night before.

Majority of the time Emanuele ate relatively healthy but would allow himself a couple of cheat meals each week. He quite easily maintained a muscular but slender physique, like that of a kickboxer, because of his well-rounded diet and training regime. He never ate junk in front of Clay though, or he wouldn't hear the end of it. Clay was extreme about nutrition and insisted on Emanuele putting only the cleanest fuel into his body.

He would often tell Emanuele, the reason that so many Americans were getting sick and dying was because of the giant food conglomerates experimenting with taste by any means necessary, to maximize profits. He was adamant that most consumers were putting 'God knows what' into their bodies, which was an ironic stance working for a drug enterprise. Emanuele was feeling tired from his busy week, so he did an hour of stretching after dinner and then went to bed. His sleep state was deep and long, so long that he slept right through his alarm the next morning. When he got up, he checked his phone which showed the time was 11:02am, it was the longest he had slept in since he could remember. He got up, walked downstairs, and realized that no one else was around; it was the first time in a long time that he'd been home on his own. He ate some bacon and eggs for breakfast, made himself a coffee and then begrudgingly decided to get into some study that he needed to catch up on. After putting in a solid 3 hours of study for his upcoming assessment, he stopped when he knew he couldn't cram any more information in, as he was becoming mentally lethargic. He decided to open his online broker and check his stock portfolio. Dominic had bought him stocks and gold bullion for his 18th Birthday; a million dollars' worth of each. Emanuele checked his stock profile once a week to see how it was trending; it was a separate account from his father, but on occasion Dominic would randomly put in another \$100k, with stock picks for him. His other investment of gold bullion bars was kept in a locker at a storage facility, which only he had access to. Overall, his stock portfolio had appreciated at an average of 0.8% since he last checked it, and the price of gold had remained flat that month. Emanuele also received an allowance from his father of \$10K per week, and whatever he didn't use he saved in his checking account or put into bitcoin.

The checking account balance was \$724,598.55 which he didn't really know what he would spend on, as he recently discovered he would be inheriting a residential property portfolio worth \$210 Million for his 21st Birthday; a sentimental idea given to Dominic by one of his accountants. Dominic's main way of showing affection, was by giving his family material things; it was easy street being the son of a billionaire when it came to finances, the only real cost was that he didn't have a closer relationship with his father. Emanuele pulled his phone out and called Samuel, "Hey Samuel, it's me, you still want to catch that movie?" he asked, "Yeah man, I'm down, just give me an hour" "Alright I'll come by your place at 5" he said before ending the call. He then went and had a shower and got dressed into some jeans, sneakers, with a white tee, and cap. He didn't need to make his new friend feel awkward by wearing a two-thousand-dollar outfit, so he decided to dress down. Then he went out to the garage to decide on which of his five cars he would drive. Three were given to him for birthdays; the Range Rover Sport, Bentley Continental GT, and Porsche 911 GT3. The other two, were his father's older models, and Dominic now had the latest versions of the Aston Martin and Lamborghini. Emanuele decided to take the GT3 for a run; he got in and started the engine up, before clicking the remote to open the garage door, and sped off to Samuel's house. He floored it over the Coronado bridge, taking in the sights of the Navy ships to his right, and the Marina to his left. He loved San Diego; he felt like the prince of this place, with his father being the king.

When he arrived at Samuel's house, Samuel walked up to the Porsche and got in, "Damn man! How many cars do you own?" he asked, being honestly jealous. "A few, hey Samuel, you got your license?" asked Emanuele, changing the subject, "Uh yeah, but I haven't driven for a while" replied Samuel, nervously. "Its auto dude, you just have to take it easy" he said, as he got out.

Seeing that Emanuele wouldn't take no for an answer, Samuel hesitantly got out and walked around to the driver's side, while Emanuele passed him and got into the passenger's side. Samuel then sat in the driver's seat and put it into drive before he slowly put his foot on the accelerator and took off. As he came to the end of the street, he pressed the brakes a bit too hard and jerked them to a sudden stop. "Easy man, those breaks don't need much pressure" said Emanuele, to which Samuel nodded nervously, before taking off again. Getting used to driving again wasn't the problem, Samuel wasn't used to the incredible acceleration and stopping power of the GT3. They managed to make it to the cinemas in one piece and Samuel had four tries at parking, before he finally got it. He was overly careful about not getting too close to any of the other cars. "Too easy" said Emanuele, smiling, "Hah, yeah" replied Samuel, before they both got out and walked over to the cinemas. "What should we see?" asked Emanuele, "Uh, how about The Axe Murderer?" suggested Samuel, "Nah, it's got bad reviews" "Ok, how about Mad Max? It's on in 10 minutes" asked Samuel, "Yeah, that's more like it" replied Emanuele, enthusiastically. Then they lined up to purchase their tickets from the lady at the desk, "You guys are in luck we're almost sold out" she said, before they paid, grabbed their tickets, and headed for cinema 2. They walked inside the cinema which was almost completely packed. Then went up the front to aisle B and had to shimmy past the people who were already seated, to get into their seats. After the film had finished, they walked outside into the mall, "That was actually better than I thought it would be" said Emanuele, "Yeah, thanks for that, well I guess you can drop me home now" replied Samuel. "Sure, or we could go do something else," said Emanuel; Samuel looked a little intrigued, as he wondered what his new friend with unlimited cash would suggest, "Yeah like what?" he asked. "How about we go check out a club?" asked Emanuele, "Hell yeah! Uh... sorry I'm just excited, I haven't been out before" explained Samuel, "I

haven't been out in a while either" replied Emanuel. "I mean... never mind, have you got a fake ID?" asked Samuel, "No, you don't need one of those where we're going" replied Emanuele, smiling. "Yeah? Okay I'll have to go get changed, I can't exactly wear this to a club" said Samuel pulling at his baseball shirt. "Let's go get you some new threads, on me" said Emanuele, "Are you sure? I mean I know you've got plenty of money, but really?" "Yeah, it's a good excuse for me to buy something new as well" replied Emanuele. They then quickly walked to Nordstrom, as there was only 40 minutes left before the mall closed. They both took a quick look around before making their decisions. Samuel chose a button up blue Hugo Boss dress shirt, pants, and leather shoes to match. Emanuele had opted for a uniquely designed, bright red dress shirt. "You happy with those?" he asked, to which Samuel just smiled and nodded, as they both made their way over to a service desk. But before he paid for their outfits, Emanuele quickly walked over to a glass display cabinet, that had watches inside, and spotted a gold Versace watch that he liked the look of. So, he called over the lady who was at the service desk and asked for two of them, one for him and one for Samuel. The lady serving them looked a bit concerned and asked her supervisor for assistance. She had mistakenly judged them; what they were currently wearing led her to believe they wouldn't be able to afford the bill that came to \$7704.60.

But Emanuele pulled out his American Express and when its payment had been accepted, her attitude immediately changed. "Oh, thank you sir, have a lovely evening" she said, Emanuele smiled sarcastically and then gave one of the bags to Samuel. For some reason, Emanuele was suddenly reminded of the job he had with Carlos next week, but he tried not to think about it as he walked with his friend towards the changing rooms. 'At least I can enjoy this night, what could go wrong?' he thought, shaking out any concern from his mind.

The two of them quickly got into individual change rooms and dressed into their new attire, "Damn I feel like a million bucks in this!" said Samuel, checking himself out in the mirror as he stepped out. "You look like a million bucks" replied Emanuele, smiling as he also stepped out. Grabbing their belongings, they left the mall in haste, as everything was being closed. Then they both walked out to the carpark and got into the Porsche 911 GT3, but this time with Emanuele in the driver's seat. "Dude, thanks for these new threads, man they are fresh" said Samuel showing his gratitude. "It's all good man, here's one more piece you need" replied Emanuele, smiling, as he grabbed one of the watches out of his shopping bag and handed it over. "Wait, what?" asked Samuel with a look of shock, as he took the watch case. "Put it on" said Emanuele, before starting the car up and revving it. He drove them into the city and pulled up outside the front of RAZR Nightclub on Fifth Avenue. After beeping his horn, one of the bouncers instantly noticed his car, then rushed down to open the door. Emanuele got out and shook his hand, "Good to see you Emanuele, I'll park it out back," said the bouncer. Emanuele signaled for Samuel, who was in awe of the presence his new friend commanded. The guests in line that led to the entrance looked at the two of them, curiously wondering who they could be. As they approached the entrance, there stood a very large doorman who looked to be 350lbs of pure muscle, "Where do you think you're going!?" he yelled, "Don't make me hurt you" replied Emanuele, dead eyed. Samuel quickly butted in, "Maybe we should just ah...", Suddenly, Emanuele and the big man cracked a smile at each other, then they both began laughing. "Where have you been you little bastard?" asked the bouncer; Emanuele chuckled, "Good to see you Pauly, it's been a while" he said. Then the big bouncer shook Emanuele's hand and patted him on the back, "Go on get in there!" he said, before letting them both through. Samuel followed Emanuele through and some of the people who were waiting in line tried to get in at the same

time, but Paul stopped them, "Woah hold up, we're at capacity!" he yelled at them, "You just let those guys through!" yelled one of the young revelers trying to get in. But Paul just shook his head, pretending not to know what he was talking about. Emanuele and Samuel entered the atmosphere of revelers dancing, drinking, and partying as the trap dance music was blaring and the theatrical stage lights flashed over the heads of the crowd. The club was two stories high with booths around the outsides; there was a main bar to the left, one in the far back right corner and another upstairs against the entrance wall. There were stage dancers wearing next to nothing on two platforms either side of the DJ booth, which was against the back wall of the first floor. In front of Emanuele and Samuel, was a line of people on the inside, waiting to have their IDs scanned. An attractive hostess walked up to Emanuele and gave him a hug before she led the two of them through. They bypassed the ID check and walked into a staff only area which led to a concealed side door that she unlocked. Then she led them through to a staircase and up to the best booth of the club, with a view right above the DJ, and a clear view of the dance floor. The booth was normally charged out at \$1600 for the night and came with two bottles of champagne.

Samuel couldn't believe how great his first experience at a club was, as the two of them sat down in the plush leather booth. "What can I get you honey!?" asked the hostess, as she shouted over the music. "Two bottles of blue Alize, a bottle of Dom Perignon and send up two girls to join us!" he yelled back. When she left, Samuel just looked at his friend in amazement, "Let me guess, this place is your family's?" he asked, "It is" replied Emanuele, bopping his head to the beats. The hostess returned moments later; she had found two girls who were both brunettes and very attractive; she had promised them free drinks all night for going up to the booth.

The girls assumed they would have to keep some old men company that night, but couldn't contain their excitement, when they saw the two young studs sitting there. Emanuele and Samuel, both introduced themselves to the girls and were yelling over the music to each other for only a few moments before two servers joined the hostess. With them, they had the two bottles of blue Alize on ice, a chilled bottle of Dom Perignon, glasses, and a small bucket of ice, which Emanuele had requested.

The two, 20-year-old university students, still underage, sat there as VIPs inside the booming nightclub. They began getting comfortable with the girls while drinking their champagne, and when that ran out, they began to drink the Alize. Emanuele had finished two glasses of Alize when he looked down and spotted a group of people being seated at one of the booths downstairs. He vaguely recognized the group before realizing one of the girls was Ping, the beautiful Chinese girl from his university. He turned to Samuel and the girls, "Two more bottles?" he asked, "Yeah man sure!" replied Samuel ecstatically, "Hurry back!" yelled the girl he'd been talking to, who was now very tipsy. Emanuele got up and was let through the velvet rope by a bouncer, and then he went downstairs to the main bar. The head mixologist noticed him in the line, "Emanuele, over here!" he shouted, and then he quickly turned to the waitress next to him, "Serve him!" he yelled at her, while pointing to Emanuele. She walked over to where he was standing, separated from the crowd of people waiting to be served, "What can I get you?" she asked, holding a tablet PC in anticipation of his order. "Yeah, can I get two bottles of blue Alize and four glasses of ice sent up to booth one?!" he asked. "Sure, that's \$120!" she yelled back to him, "Put it on my tab!" replied Emanuele, smiling. She shook her head slightly confused, thinking that he was just being a 'smart ass'. But the mixologist noticed and quickly walked over, tapping her on the shoulder, and shaking his head, "No charge!" he shouted.

She smiled at Emanuele and then left to get the two bottles on a tray to his booth; being recently employed by the club she was a bit confused as to why Emanuele was the only person who didn't have to pay. With a new round of drinks ordered, Emanuele then walked over to the booth where the group from his university were seated; Ping looked at him and smiled as she remembered him. Sitting right next to her was one of the thugs that hadn't let Emanuele introduce himself the day before. Noticing Emanuele, he got up looking pissed off, but Ping grabbed his arm and spoke to him in Cantonese, "Go get us some drinks, I'll be fine, I've got my friends here with me" she said, referring to the three girls sitting opposite her. So, the young trendy Chinese man, got up and joined the back of the large crowd standing at the main bar. Emanuele walked up to the beautiful girl and signaled politely if he could sit down, which she smiled and nodded to, "That should keep him away for a while!" she said in English, smiling. "Yeah, he isn't your boyfriend, is he!?" asked Emanuele, being cautious, "No, he's just my overprotective cousin!" she replied. "Oh okay, now I understand!" said Emanuele with relief, "Well it's nice to properly meet you, Ping!" he continued, yelling confidently over the music. She began to laugh, as he gave a confused smile. "My name's not Ping, its Leila!" she said, "Oh sorry, that's the name your cousin... never mind" he replied, feeling a bit stupid. The blaring music inside the club shifted to a softer song which meant no more yelling.

"Can I get you something to drink?" he asked, "No, it's okay I sent my cousin to get me something" "He'll be a while, what do you like?" asked Emanuele, picking up the cocktail menu and handing it to her. She briefly skimmed the page and smiled, "How about a Minq Martini?" she asked, expecting him to say 'no' as it was \$78. "Sure" he replied, and then he waved one of the bouncers over who had kept an eye on Emanuele ever since he had approached the booth.

Leila touched Emanuele's arm, "It's ok, I was only joking" she said, but before Emanuele could reply the bouncer walked over to him. "Yeah?" he asked, looking around the club for any disturbances, while listening to Emanuele's request. "Could you get us five Minq Martini's?" asked Emanuele, and to Leila's complete surprise the bouncer nodded his head and then walked over to the bar. Bouncers never took anyone's drink orders, but the man obliged, knowing who Emanuele was. Leila was impressed but looked a little confused, "Oh, he's a friend of mine" said Emanuele smiling, "You didn't have to, I would have settled for a vodka, lime, and soda... my friends were okay to wait as well" she said politely. "You don't have to wait now" said Emanuel, chuckling. He had never acted like this towards any girl before and didn't know why, but he really liked this girl. Leila smiled back, she found him very charming, but consciously kept her guard up as she didn't know him yet. "So, what are you studying at Uni?" he asked. "Economics, I'm moving back to Hong Kong at the end of next year to help my mum with her property firm" she replied. Emanuele was immediately disappointed upon hearing this, although he tried not to show it in his facial expression. "Oh, so who do you live with here?" he asked, "My father, well actually my aunty, so what are you studying?" she asked, quickly changing the subject. Emanuele told her about his business degree, and they continued talking for another few minutes. Just then, their drinks arrived, "Wow, that was fast" said Leila and her three friends thanked Emanuele. "Yes, thank you... uh what was your..." she didn't know his name, yet. Emanuele had been so nervous and excited while trying to play it cool, that he had forgotten to introduce himself properly. "Emanuele, my names Emanuele!" he said quickly, "Well, thank you Emanuele" replied Leila, "So, I'm guessing your 21?" he asked. She giggled a little, "Actually I'm 23, and you?" "Uh, 22" he replied, lying. They both talked and laughed for half an hour and had another Minq Martini each before Leila's cousin

managed to get back, but when he did, Emanuele asked Leila to dance with him, to the disgruntled look of her cousin. She was hesitant, but he reassured her, "Come on Leila, if you don't enjoy yourself within the first minute, I'll bring you straight back", he said. He smiled at her, stretching his hand out to take hers, and then she gave in, taking his hand while smiling at her friends, who were encouraging her to go with him. They made their way to the dance floor, and Emanuele could smell the perfume on her neck as she walked in front of him; he couldn't help but think that such a sweet aroma matched her beauty. They danced together for a few songs and then were gently pushed up against one another by the crowd. They stared deeply into each other's eyes as everything around them seemed to fade away, and Leila couldn't look away as she was captivated by this young man who she did not know, but instantly felt connected to. It was exceptionally uncharacteristic for her, as she had always been a closed off person. Suddenly, the song changed, and she became shy as she realized she was now pressed up against him, with her hands placed on his chest. She quickly glanced down, "I'm going to sit down now" she said, before she gently grabbed his hand, requesting him to go back with her. This made Emanuele feel butterflies, which was an unusual experience he couldn't remember feeling before. They both sat down, sharing one last moment together. Then Leila's cousin looked at her and revealed his phone briefly, she knew it meant that it was time to leave. She looked at Emanuele as it seemed liked the intensity of the music had now returned, "I have to go now!" she yelled, "But it's still early!" replied Emanuele, "I'll see you at Uni!" she said, before giving him a little kiss on the cheek. Then the group stood up and followed her cousin out to the carpark, and Emanuele stood there feeling disappointed that she had left, but now he remembered that he had left Samuel at the booth with the two girls.

When he returned to the VIP booth, his brunette had given up on him and headed to the dance floor, while the other one was sucking Samuel's face off. Samuel looked up at Emanuele, "Hey!! He's back!" he yelled, as they were both clearly drunk. With Leila gone, Emanuele no longer felt like partying, as he sat down in the booth appearing less enthusiastic than he was before he left, "What's with you?" asked Samuel with his hands up, "Nothing, hey where's your friend?" he asked, leaning towards the girl seated next to Samuel. "Downstairs, she went looking for you!" she shouted back at him. Feeling a slight sense of guilt, Emanuele went to look for her, and found her not long after, surrounded by some seedy guys trying to grind on her, on the dance floor. Once she spotted him, she ran up and jumped on him, wrapping her legs around him, "Get me out of here!" she yelled; Emanuele laughed, "Come on, let's get you back upstairs!" he yelled back. After joining the others back in the booth, they all had another drink together. "We can get out of here if you want! I've got an apartment up the road!" yelled Emanuele. Samuel looked at Emanuele puzzled, he shrugged his shoulders and put his hands out towards the girls, "Yes, the girls can come!" he yelled, laughing, "Ahaha let's do it!!!" yelled Samuel, in excitement. Then they all got up and made their way outside; Emanuele slapped his hand on the big doorman's back. Paul turned around ready to knock someone out, but when he saw Emanuele, he just smiled, "Hey buddy leaving already?!" he asked, "Yeah Pauly, going to get a cab down the road" replied Emanuel. Paul gave him a thumbs up as he checked out the girls that were with him. He knew Dominic had an apartment nearby for this very purpose. Paul then yelled at one of his men to hail a cab for them, and almost immediately, one pulled up. "Thanks, Pauly!" yelled Emanuele, before he, Samuel and the two girls got in. When they arrived at the building, they took the elevator up to the apartment; it was about half the size of Dominic's penthouse at the Marina, but to Samuel and the girls it was a mansion in the sky.

“Woah, shit dude, nice place” said Samuel looking around ecstatically. Then they all walked into the lounge room as Emanuele switched a remote which opened the curtains and then he walked towards the bar, while the others sorted out some music on the sound system. He grabbed a bottle of tequila and then poured them all a shot each at the bar. They conversed loudly as the music pumped beats throughout the apartment and after two more shots everyone was completely drunk. Samuel began making out with his girl from the club, right after they had finished drinking. While the other brunette was all over Emanuele as well, “There’s a spare room down the hall on the left, if you two want to stay in there” said Emanuele, slurring his words slightly. Samuel and his girl both got up straight away and ran to the room, laughing and kissing as they made their way along the hallway. “Let’s go” said the other brunette, taking Emanuele’s hand and pulling him off the lounge, “Okay” he replied. They made their way into the room and normally Emanuele would have been enthusiastic about hooking up with a girl this attractive. But even though he was quite drunk, he couldn’t stop thinking about Leila, and wishing it was her that was there with him instead. The brunette quickly undressed and then jumped on the bed, smiling at Emanuele, expecting him to do the same. But as much as he wanted to, he just stood there, stiff. He kept picturing Leila’s face and her beautiful, sparkling dark-brown eyes, “I just have to use the bathroom” he said to the voluptuous brunette, now lying there naked and restless on the bed. He went into the bathroom suite, locked the door, took a leak, and then washed his hands. He sighed as he looked at himself in the mirror, “Come on what’s wrong with you?” he asked himself. He then ran the water, cupped his hands, and washed his face. After this he grabbed the hand towel, dried his hands and face, took his shirt off and walked out of the bathroom. The girl was lying there with her eyes closed, and she appeared to have fallen asleep.

Emanuele was slightly disappointed with himself, but also a little relieved. He grabbed the folded blanket at the end of the bed and carefully covered her, making sure not to wake her. Then he went out and lay down on the couch, switching on the TV, where the old *Romeo & Juliette* from 1968 was playing. He chuckled, hearing them speak in old English, but he couldn't help but notice the way they were looking at each other, it was the same way he and Leila had looked at each other earlier that night on the dancefloor.

Suddenly, his eyes became heavy, and he fell asleep after 10 minutes with the TV still on, in the early hours of the morning. The next morning, the sun shined through the floor to ceiling windows and Emanuele got up at 7am to order breakfast for everyone. After the order had arrived, he placed the bacon and egg bagels and coffee on the kitchen counter. But the others didn't get up until 9am and had to re-heat their breakfast; with sore heads, the three of them struggled to eat for 15 minutes, before Emanuele called the girls a cab and sent them on their way. "How'd you go last night?" asked Emanuele, "Man that chick was a freak, that was the best night of my life, thank you so much bro!" replied Samuel, looking hungover but happy. "So how about your chick?" he asked, "She fell asleep on me" replied Emanuele, trying to make it sound like he was disappointed. "Ohh, oh well, next time" said Samuel, "Well, let's get ready to head off, I've got a few things I have to do" said Emanuele wanting to avoid further conversation about it. After going down to the lobby, Emanuele used a single key to open the mailbox, which had the keys to his Porsche inside. They had been dropped there for him early that morning, along with the GT3, which was now parked out front. "Now that's service! But I shouldn't be surprised at this point," said Samuel. Emanuele pulled a sarcastic smile which made Samuel laugh; he was feeling really hung over but was actually still drunk.

They got into the Porsche GT3 and drove to Samuel's house; on arrival, Samuel sincerely thanked his new friend again and then went inside his house. Emanuele then drove straight home sticking to the speed limit, cruising along, as he too was still feeling a bit under the influence of all the alcohol, he had consumed the night before. When he got home, instead of going straight to bed, like most people would, he jumped straight on the treadmill to try and sweat some of the alcohol out. Once he was done, he went to the kitchen and drank a liter of water, just as Maria walked in. "Are you done exercising?" she asked, "Yeah mom" he replied, "Oh well, I'll train on my own" she said, before leaving the kitchen. It was a good sign; Emanuele hadn't seen his mom go into the home gym for at least a couple months. She suddenly popped her head back around the corner, "I'll have dinner ready by 6, okay?" she said, "Yeah, great" he replied, pleasantly surprised. Maria had gone from cooking 4 nights of the week to cooking around 4 nights of the month since Dominic had left, and she had already cooked once that week. Emanuele nodded, "Hmm" 'things are trending in the right direction' he thought to himself. After showering, Emanuele stepped out of his bathroom, with a towel wrapped around his waist and was feeling refreshed. He quickly went and sat down in front of his laptop, inside the office, and did a search for the student profiles on his university's website.

He was hoping to find Leila's profile, but he couldn't, and Samuel didn't seem to have one either. He sighed, guessing there was no point in having a university profile when everyone just used social media platforms to interact online. But unfortunately for him, he had no profile; he had been encouraged by his father that it was best for him to have no social media presence, which was the same case for the rest of the family. But it hadn't stopped Eva, she was all about social interaction of every kind, and had every platform available to her under a pseudonym.

Emanuele thought about creating a fake account, but instead went and changed into casual clothing, then returned to his laptop to go through some of his study for a few hours, but he struggled to concentrate. He sat back in his chair feeling a little bit anxious about the job in Phoenix next week.

He would have been much more at ease had Clay been going along, but this would be the first time he would see ‘real action’ without him. He looked down and stared at his clenched fists, knowing that if anything should go horribly wrong, they would be his last line of defense. The last job which he was only a spectator on, was 10 months prior. It had been the only time Emanuele had witnessed first-hand, the damage a handgun could do at close range. He could still picture the thick red blood squirting straight out of the man’s chest cavity, with a few droplets’ landing on his shoe as he stood four feet from the man’s front door. The victim was a biker on meth who thought he could reach for his gun faster than Clay, who put him down with incredible speed, like it was nothing. Emanuele hoped he wouldn’t see anything like that again, but he also knew his father’s men would show no mercy. ‘I just need to get through this job and gain the respect of the men’ he thought to himself.

Just then his phone buzzed; he picked it up and read the message, ‘Come down for dinner’ it read. So, he switched off his laptop and went down to the dining room, where his mom and sister were just about to be seated. On the dining table was a traditional Mexican feast. Emanuele couldn’t remember the last time that his mom had gone to this much effort. “Mom this looks amazing” he said, “Where have you been? We’ve been slaving over this meal while you were upstairs,” said Eva, “Pfft, what did you set the table?” asked Emanuele as he sat down. “No, she helped me put the vegetables in the oven” replied Maria, smiling at Eva as if to say ‘you did nothing’ “Now, Emanuele, say grace for us” said Maria, taking both of her children’s hands.

Despite the family's ties to the underworld, they were Roman Catholic, but had drifted from the faith since Dominic left. "Gracias Señor por estos alimentos y bendice las manos que los prepararon. Amén" he said. It was a different prayer to the one Dominic used to say, in an effort not to upset his mother. As soon as he finished, they started to serve themselves. Emanuele sat silently for a moment looking at his mom and sister talk and eat; it was the happiest he had seen them in a long time. It seemed as if things in their lives were returning to normal.

Chapter 3: The First Real Test

Sweat dripped from Emanuele's forehead as he sat up in bed; he hadn't gotten any meaningful sleep that night, with haunting thoughts constantly swirling around in his mind. The theme of these thoughts centering around the Phoenix job and different scenarios repeatedly played out. Rubbing his hands over his sweaty face, he thought about the possibility of not seeing Leila. He wasn't ignorant of the fact that this was not training; he would be stepping into a situation of extreme danger. But he couldn't comprehend how his heart seemed to prioritize Leila over his family, there was something about her; something he now felt that he'd been unconsciously searching for.

He sighed, as he checked the time on his phone, which showed that it was 6am. He quickly got up and took a shower, then got changed into something casual before putting tactical clothing in his black backpack. He then walked over to the side dresser next to his bed, slid it open and took out the bottom drawer. He had a steel safe hidden underneath, which he slid out, unlocked using the 4-digit code, and opened. There were five 10-ounce gold bullion bars inside, as well as 20 thousand in cash and two handguns. One was a Springfield XDm 4.5" and the other was a Glock 17 G4. Dominic had given them to Emanuele to keep in the house as an extreme precaution, although this was completely unnecessary as the house was under 24-hour surveillance by a private security firm. Emanuele pulled out the Glock and tucked it in the back of his jeans, then pulled his shirt over it, which was an unusual feeling for him. He paused for a moment trying to remember the last occasion he'd carried a piece, he shrugged, then grabbed his bag and went downstairs.

He made himself a triple shot of coffee to try and counteract the lack of sleep. Luckily for him Maria hadn't woken up yet, and he would be able to avoid any questions about what he was doing. He knew his ride would be there soon, so he put his coffee in a carry mug and made his way outside. Just as he got out and locked the door behind him, two black SUVs pulled up. The second one opened its back door and Emanuele quickly walked over and got in. "Ask him" said Carlos from the front passenger seat. Then Javier turned to him, "Emanuele, are you packing?" he asked, "Yeah" he replied before taking a sip of coffee, "You won't need it, we've got disposables for this job," said Javier. Emanuele quickly grabbed his piece, took the magazine out and placed both in the bottom of his backpack and then put the backpack by his feet. The SUVs took off swiftly; in the lead SUV were two of Dominic's enforcers and two of Carlos' boys. In the trailing SUV was Carlos, Javier, Emanuele, and Percy, who was an ex-senior enforcer who frequently handled ops on the West Coast. "Hey Percy, you get roped into this thing as well?" asked Emanuele, feeling very relieved to see him. "I'm here for your protection more than anything" replied Percy, "You're here for golden boy's protection, but this is still my job" said Carlos firmly. "I'm also here to make sure your job goes smoothly," replied Percy, bluntly. "I'm gonna shut my eyes until this caffeine kicks in" said Emanuele, before leaning his head back on the headrest and closing his eyes. Carlos just stared straight ahead with a stern look on his face, "I'm gonna bust these junkies' heads" he said. While Javier just sat on his phone for most of the trip, as Percy drove in silence following the other SUV in front of him.

When they got halfway to Fortuna Foothills, they topped up at a gas station and got some snacks, while Emanuele was still resting. As soon as they left the area and were out on the highway again, Carlos put a Hip-Hop mixtape he had purchased in the audio player and cranked the volume right up.

“BOOM! Chik! Che! BOOM! Chik! BOOM! Chik! Che! BOOM! Chik! came blaring out of the speakers as the subwoofer vibrated the back seats. Emanuele immediately woke up with his heart pounding, but after realizing what had happened, he just shook his head in frustration and then stared out the window as they drove along the highway. Carlos laughed hysterically, “Don’t sleep on the job ese’!” he shouted over the music as Javier began laughing as well. “Alright you had your fun, now turn it down” said Percy, adjusting the volume on the steering wheel to a more comfortable level.

After reaching Phoenix, they went to one of the organizations many motels that were scattered across the country. They would wait there and prepare until it was time to head over to the rogue supplier’s house. The motel was a safe distance from the house which was on the outskirts of San Tan Valley. Percy knew the supplier’s had spotters in the region and that it was best they kept their distance, so that the suppliers weren’t tipped off to their presence. Dominic’s men would have called in advance to set up a meeting in the past, but this was different, the time for a sit down had long gone, as this had happened before. Now it was time to send a message throughout the organization, that there was zero tolerance for thievery. Percy paid the fee in full at the front desk of the motel as soon as they got there; the information and names given to the hotel staff were falsified but the appearance of normality remained. There would be no trace of them ever staying in the region. Percy, Emanuele, and the others all left the reception and walked up the stairs to enter their rooms which were numbers 31 and 32. Emanuele was told to go and wait in room 32 with Carlos’ boys, while Carlos went with Percy and the two other enforcers into room 31. One of Carlos’ boys dropped his bag on a bed and walked over to the bathroom, “I’m taking a shit and a shower” he said before entering and locking the door behind him. Another of Carlos’ boys proceeded to raid the mini bar, pulling out all the snacks and putting them on the table.

Then he stuffed all the mini booze bottles into his bag. Javier just sat on the bed and switched on Fox Sports. 'Well, this sucks' Emanuele thought to himself as he sat down on one of the dining chairs, looking around at the refurbished apartment interior. The man hoarding the alcohol threw Emanuele a chocolate bar, "No thanks" he said, before throwing it back to him, "suit yourself" he replied, before tearing it open and wolfing it down. The boys consumed all the snacks that they had purchased from the service station, and the ones from the minibar while they waited, but they were given strict orders not to consume any booze until the job was complete. They had all gotten dressed into their gear for the job and were just waiting around now. "Shouldn't we be in the other room listening to the gameplan?" asked Emanuele, "Nah they'll figure out all the intel and come up with the best strategy for entry. Besides we're just here for back up mostly, not for our brains" replied Javier, subtly glancing at the two other boys who were punching each other in the arms, before smiling at Emanuele. They waited for a further 6 painfully boring hours, and a couple of them fell asleep. But it was an anxious wait for Emanuele as he tried to get his mind off the job by watching TV; he wasn't a hardened criminal like the rest of them. He also couldn't understand how Carlos' boys were so relaxed leading up to the job. Meanwhile in room 31, Carlos, Percy and the other enforcers had made sure they had all the equipment, they tested their earpieces and attached silencers to their handguns. Percy had an aerial picture of the house and schematics of the inside of the house that the drug suppliers were holed up in. This would have been a walk in the park had these just been typical dealers, but the suppliers had hired independent bodyguards. Percy and his men went through all possible scenarios and came up with the best plan of attack, while also allowing Carlos' to say a few words to feed his ego. "Go get them" said Percy to one of the enforcers, who then went to the other room and opened the door, "it's time" he said.

Emanuele and the three others quickly grabbed their bags and followed him next door.

“Sit down” said Percy, to which they all sat down and looked at the two a3 sized drawings that were pinned to the wall.

“This is the layout of the house” said Percy, giving Emanuele a copy of the house plan. Emanuele looked at it briefly and then handed it to the guy sitting next to him. When the last guy looked at the picture he then looked up at the aerial picture of the house and laughed, “What a dump!” he yelled, before Carlos darted an angry look at his boy, “Shut the fuck up and listen!” said Percy angrily.

From that point on, everyone kept quiet and gave him their undivided attention. “Two entry points, one here, and the other at the rear, here” said Percy, circling them with a red marker on the pinned map. “Javier, you and your boys will go through the front with my guys, while Carlos, Emanuele and I will be going through the back” he continued. “How are we getting in? Break the door down?” asked Javier, “I know it looks like a dump, but remember the doors will be fortified, the whole supply of this region is hidden in this house. We had copies of the keys cut, but if they’ve changed the locks, we’ll have to use cordless drills and hope they are either asleep or stoned out of their minds” replied Percy. “And remember, shoot to kill, these stray dogs have betrayed Dominic, but leave the main stray for me” added Carlos.

“Once we locate the supply, my guys will bag it and get back to the cars to wait for us, while we clean-up” said Percy, “We leave in two hours” added Carlos. Emanuele and the others went back to their room, to wait it out for a bit longer. When the time to leave had come, it was 12:33am and Percy knocked on the adjoining wall to let them know.

They all came out together and headed for the service stairs where they wouldn’t be seen. They got into the SUV’s and made their way for the supplier’s house, on the desert outskirts of San Tan Valley, Arizona.

When the two groups of armed men rolled into the supplier's street, the first SUV pulled up two houses down from the house in question, while the other pulled up two houses short. The street was quiet, with no sign of movement, apart from music blaring inside the target's house. As all men exited their vehicles and converged on the house, Percy gave the thumbs up to the group; it was a good sign, because although the house was awake, they were unaware of their arrival. All the men had their tactical gloves on, and Javier's group moved quickly and quietly towards the front door. They couldn't get a view of anyone inside through the front window, as the entry hallway's lights were off, so one of the enforcers signaled to Percy, who then quickly moved through to the right side of the house, where the kitchen window was. Carlos and Emanuele followed closely behind him, as Percy and his second in command communicated through their earpieces. Percy's team had critical experience for these types of situations, from their days in the SAS. Percy turned back and signaled for Carlos and Emanuele to stay low, as he then peered through the kitchen window. He could see the two men in charge of the supply, smoking on a couch and watching TV, which was where the music was coming from. But there were also two large men seated in the kitchen drinking and playing cards. The one on the right was Polish and the one on the left Samoan. Percy hadn't seen them before which meant that they weren't Dominic's men and were fair game. "Four men total, try the key to the door when I say" Percy whispered into his headset, "Copy" replied the enforcer at the front entrance. Then Percy made his way past the kitchen window without being seen and signaled for Emanuele and Carlos to follow from the other side. They all made their way to the back door, but Carlos' head was just above the windowsill which the Polish man spotted. "Oi, there's another crackhead out the back again," he said, referring to a previous incident they had encountered.

Someone had chosen the wrong house to rob a few weeks earlier and had ended up meeting these two-armed guards, who dealt the thief two broken arms, black eyes, and a broken nose. The Polack assumed it was another petty thief, which caused him to make the wrong decision of leaving his SMG at the table. They were also through their second bottle of vodka for the night which added to their ignorance. "Alright I'll go check the front" said the Samoan, doing the smart thing and grabbing his pistol. The young suppliers were too drunk and high to care what was going on and just kept watching music videos. Percy got the key ready and signaled to the other enforcer at the front door to do the same. They both tried the keys, which worked, so they quietly opened the doors and both teams made their way inside. The Polack had heard them enter through the back and was around a corner waiting as Percy crept through, with gun drawn, followed by Emanuele and Carlos. Percy came right in line of sight with the Polack and 'SMACK!', the heavyset man punched Percy in the face with his full force, "Argh!" grunted Percy as he hit the floor with a loud 'thud' putting his elbow through the plasterboard wall and dropping his gun.

This took both Emanuele and Carlos' completely by surprise, just as the Polack was also surprised to see two other men standing there. He quickly turned and went for his SMG on the table, but as he turned back with it, Emanuele's survival instincts took over; he jumped and kicked the side of the gun as hard and fast as he could, which knocked it out of the man's hand. The gun flew across the table and out of reach. Then Carlos' quickly came over the top of Emanuele who was now crouched down and fired 3 rounds into the Polack's chest with his silenced pistol. The Samoan man hurried back to the kitchen after hearing the shots, but now the other team was inside, and Javier's adrenaline was pumping when he spotted the large man. Without thinking, he ran up to him and placed his silencer on the back of his neck.

“Put your gun down” he said, but the Samoan ducked and elbowed him in the head, then quickly turned around with his own gun. Javier quickly ducked and picked him up, spear tackling him to the ground as the Samoan man let off two rounds into the ceiling. Javier grabbed his wrist and forced it to the ground, knocking the pistol out of his hand. Then he threw a right punch as hard as he could, hitting him square in the nose and breaking it. The Samoan man raged and head-butted him in the face almost breaking Javier’s own nose. He then flipped Javier onto his back and started wailing on him, while Javier tried to cover up as best as he could. One of the enforcers swiftly walked up and shot the big man through the back of the head, blood sprayed all over Javier and onto the ground. Javier got up, “What the fuck!” he yelled, wiping the blood and brain matter from his face. “I had the shot” replied the enforcer, completely unfazed at the ordeal which all took place in the space of 20 seconds.

The two suppliers were in shock, when they realized what was going on as the two groups moved in from either end of the house. The young suppliers got up to run, but Carlos quickly put his gun in their direction and fired off a couple of rounds into their stereo system; it crackled, sparked and the music died. “Sit the fuck DOWN!” he yelled at them, as the others pointed their guns on them as well. Both men, totally shaken up, sat back down holding their hands on their heads in fear. Emanuele helped Percy up to his feet; one side of his face was red and swollen, “Are you alright Percy?” he asked, “Aye, I’m fine, that big bastard could hit” he replied as he slowly got up, spitting out blood. “Where is the supply?!” yelled one of the enforcers; the young man who was heavy-set remained silent on the lounge, choked up with fear. While the head supplier who was nerdy looking with glasses wasn’t as phased, “Listen guys, you don’t know who you’re messing with” he said casually.

The evidence of the two traitors taking liberties was right there on the coffee table; one big bong, a kilo of weed and some coke smeared on the coffee table, left over from being snorted next to a couple of straws. "We're here on Dominic's behalf, now where's the supply?" the enforcer asked again. "Under the couch!" replied the nerdy man, who was now instantly stricken with fear, "Get up against the wall!" yelled Carlos. The two enforcers then aimed their guns on the suppliers, while Carlos and Javier pushed the four-seater leather lounge forward. There were four floorboards an inch shorter than the rest; Carlos pulled them up to reveal 16 clear kilo bags of weed and a black duffle bag. He lifted the bag and unzipped it to find \$300,000 in cash. He then zipped the bag back up and threw it to one of his boys, but now he was extremely angry. He put the barrel of his pistol to the young, heavy suppliers' temple, "Where is the fucking coke!?" he screamed, as he dead eyed the nerdy supplier, "In-in-inside!" he stuttered in response as he pointed to the lounge. Carlos then grabbed a switchblade out of his pocket, before making a cut the full length of the back of the leather lounge. Then with Javier's help they ripped it down to reveal 19 kilo bags of cocaine stuffed inside. "Ah, finally" said Carlos appearing to be pleased as he grabbed one of the bags. He made a small cut at the top, then dipped his blade in, put some powder on and was about to snort it. "What are you doing?" asked Percy, "Making sure it's our shit. You don't want to go back to the boss with 19 kilos of baking soda, do you?" replied Carlos, before he proceeded to try it. He licked his gums, nodded, and smiled, "Ok" said Percy. Suddenly, the two enforcers put their guns in the direction of the supplier's heads. "No wait! There must be a mistake, Dominic employed me because of my skill with numbers, and understanding of logistics... I left UCLA for this shit!" yelled the nerd, pleading with the men standing there before him. Carlos turned aside to Percy with his back facing to them, "They shouldn't get off that easy" he said quietly. "Alright" said Percy, nodding reluctantly.

Then Carlos went to the kitchen and switched the light on looking through the drawers for a meat cleaver or large knife. "Bring them over here!" he yelled, as he kept looking. He soon found an industrial grade blender in one of the cupboards, "That'll do" he said plugging it in and taking the lid off. Then he faced the suppliers who had been dragged into the kitchen by his boys. "I'm going to give you your dead men's rights" he said to them with a sinister looking grin. "You decided to dip your hand into the supply, and that happens; I mean we all need a taste every now and then. But! you neglected to give back to the hand that fed you, and for this, you'll lose a hand" he continued, looking relaxed as he rested his arms in front of him, holding his pistol. Then he looked directly at the heavy-set supplier standing to his right, "Left, or right?" he asked. "Wha-Wha-What?" stuttered the young man with his hands raised, "C'mon enough of this sick joke" interjected the nerd. 'BANG!' Carlos shot the young heavy-set man straight through the head, blood spraying out the back before his body dropped to the floor. "Ignorance is not bliss" said Carlos, to a response of cackling from his boys. The nerd looked at his dead friend now on the kitchen floor and screamed, realizing the gravity of the situation. "Come on Carlos, we don't have time for this shit!" said Emanuele feeling disgusted with what he was witnessing. Carlos ignored him, "Oh, maybe I didn't make myself quite clear the first time, you! Are you left or right-handed?" he asked the remaining supplier. "I'm ambidextrous!" he yelled honestly, as Carlos looked slightly puzzled, then turned to Javier, "both" said Javier, casually signaling with his own hands. Carlos smiled at the others who then began to laugh, "Oh shit!" one of them said. "Grab him" he said to his boys who then grabbed the nerd and forced him over to the bench where the blender was. He screamed again and put up a fight, but then Carlos put his silencer to the young man's temple and turned on the blender; "It's either this or your life" he lied.

'Bzzzzzzzzzz!' the serrated blades started spinning around, and then one of Carlos boys put the man in a headlock, while the other grabbed his wrist. "No, Please, Noooooo!!!!" the nerd cried out as Carlos grabbed his elbow and with force pushed his hand down into the blades. 'Bzzzzzzzzbbbbbbb!' the blades slowed down as they sliced off the tops of the man's fingernails, flesh, and bone down to the first knuckle as he cried out in agony. Blood sprayed up the sides of the blender and onto the three of them, as Carlos and one of his boys laughed hysterically. Javier stood back, and Emanuele winced as he looked away. "Ambidextrous huh motherfucker?!" yelled Carlos as he pulled the guys arm out and grabbed his second arm. But then, 'BANG, smash!' Percy had walked over and shot the supplier through the back of the head; the bullet continued through the exit wound of his forehead and went straight through, smashing the kitchen window. The young man's dead body dropped to the ground, and one of Carlos' boys switched off the blender, "Why'd you do that?!" yelled Carlos. "We don't have time for this!" replied Percy, who then walked over to his two men who were bagging the cocaine. "Fuck it... get the money and start pulling out the weed!" said Carlos to his two boys, "Alright hermano" replied one of them, before they both walked over to the lounge room and started pulling out the kilo bags of weed. Carlos threw his shirt off and washed the blood off his face and arms in the kitchen sink. "Emanuele, go get the two jerry cans and pliers out of the car" said Percy handing the keys to Emanuele, who then ran out to the SUV and grabbed the two 5-gallon jerry cans that were full of gasoline with the pliers next to them.

After cleaning up, Carlos then walked into the lounge room, "Dominic only cares about the powder" said Percy, to him. "Keep going!" yelled Carlos, looking at his boys who had paused, then he looked back at Percy. "I got some guys who can offload the green when we get back, the boss knows" he said, before Percy nodded, acknowledging him.

The two enforcers grabbed the 4 duffle bags containing cocaine and quickly took them out to the SUV, while Javier and the two boys with him took the money and weed to the other SUV. "Here" said Emanuele as he placed the two large, red jerry cans on the floor and handed Carlos the pliers. He looked on, feeling unsettled as Percy and Carlos started dragging the four bodies to the dining room. "Emanuele give us a hand," said Percy; Emanuele quickly grabbed the younger suppliers dead body by the legs and began to drag it over by the other bodies; he couldn't believe that he was handling a dead man's body, it was completely surreal to him. But he moved swiftly on pure motivation to be completely removed from the situation. When they were done, Carlos took the pliers and began ripping out one of the dead man's front teeth. "What are you...?" asked Emanuele, "I watch CSI alright... I know what I'm doing" replied Carlos. When he had finished ripping and making a mess of each person, he took the teeth he had gathered to the toilet and flushed them. Emanuele picked up one of the jerry cans with Percy and they started pouring gasoline on the four men. Emanuele couldn't believe his eyes; he felt a strange sense of disregard for human life as his emotional state went numb. Then he gave Percy a hand to pour the fuel throughout the dining and lounge room as well. "Turn the gas on low and then get your ass to the car" said Percy before he and Emanuele went out to the other SUV. Percy started it up and then pulled up out the front of the house to wait. Carlos turned the gas on, threw some cutlery in the microwave and set the timer to 10 minutes before he ran out to the SUV, and jumped inside it, "Hit it!" he yelled, "Let's go" said Percy to the driver in the other SUV through his headset. Then they both took off quickly, and as they got out of the area, driving towards Phoenix, they saw the explosion in their rear-view mirrors. Flames reached 6 meters above the house and a thick black cloud of smoke was blotting out the streetlights as it rose throughout the neighborhood.

The men went dead quiet as they saw the flashing lights and heard the sirens, until two police cars passed them on Ellsworth Rd and didn't turn around. "I'm the man!" yelled Carlos, "Damn I didn't think it would go up like that" said Emanuele full of adrenaline, but still feeling mentally numb. "Alright let's swap these cars and get out of this city" said Percy into his headset. The two SUVs made their way to Avondale where Dominic had a chop shop behind one of his used car dealerships. "Turn right here, it's quicker" said Carlos, "No, we should stay out of the city on our way back, we don't want two suspicious SUVs caught on city surveillance coming from the area of a house explosion" insisted Percy, "Where do you think the cops came from, genius?" Emanuele added, "You want us to pull over and settle this beef right now?!" yelled Carlos, "Bring it!" replied Emanuele feeling the anger rise inside himself, "Sort this shit out when we get back!" Percy interjected. When they pulled up to the car dealership, they drove down the side, where a man in blue oil-stained clothes stood smoking a cigarette; he had been waiting for their arrival. He opened the gate and let them drive through around to the back, where another man began pushing up the roller door to let them in. The two men were brothers from Mexico, and despite being illegal immigrants, they ran the chop shop for Dominic, so they were immune to deportation. The two SUVs drove in and pulled up behind two Mercedes sedans that were there waiting for them. The men jumped out, grabbing their gear and the drugs before switching cars; one of the SUVs would be resprayed and have its plates and VIN numbers changed, while the other would be used for parts. Percy shook the chop shop managers hand, and then got into the driver's seat of one of the sedan's before taking off again. Not more than a few minutes later the roller door was closed, the gate was locked, and the dust from their departure had settled.

On the drive back to San Diego, it was only starting to sink in what Emanuele had been a part of.

He kept a bold face in front of the others as if the job hadn't fazed him, but he had a sick feeling in his stomach. It was only the second time he had witnessed people murdered firsthand, and Carlos torturing the supplier made the ordeal even harder for him to stomach. His adrenaline had worn off after a few hours, and despite the way he felt, he managed not to throw up on the journey home. He had to keep a brave face, hiding any signs of weakness, knowing he would lose the men's respect if they noticed any cracks in him, and most of all he didn't want to let down his father.

The two sedans went their separate ways as they arrived back in the San Diego region early the next morning, with the sunrise lighting up their approach of the city. Emanuele was dropped home, while the other car went to Dominic's complex to wait for the others. Emanuele walked inside his house, managing to avoid his mother and sister. He took everything he was wearing and disposed of it in a trash bag; shoes, and all. Then he showered, scrubbing himself profusely with his soapy scrubber, before going straight to bed and staring at the ceiling as he tried to sleep.

Carlos and his boys drove to a weed dealer they knew in Imperial Beach where they offloaded the weed, and then made their way back to their Tijuana safe house.

Meanwhile, Percy and the two enforcers drove into Dominic's complex, and after passing two of his patrol vehicles, they got out in the private underground car park, before making their way up to the penthouse. Dominic always had a minimum of 12 men patrolling his complex, and 3 in his penthouse, not including big Jerry at the entrance, who was his oldest and most loyal bodyguard from the early days. When Percy and the two enforcers arrived inside the penthouse, they walked past the front lounge room where two enforcers were sitting around, switching their attention between horse racing on TV and two naked women counting stacks from a large pile of money.

Percy and the two others then walked to Dominic's office where another guard was standing in front of the closed door. "He's busy" said the guard, then Percy dropped the bag of money, and his men dropped the heavy bags of cocaine while they waited. Inside the office, Dominic sat behind his desk, while Clay and a young enforcer sat across from him. "How was the flight to San Francisco?" asked Dominic, "Yeah smooth" replied Clay, "Your jet is beautiful boss" the young enforcer added. "I'm glad you enjoyed it Reg, so, how did the Fixers treat you?" asked Dominic, "Like royalty" replied Clay. "They won't be doing business with anyone else from now on. They say our stuff is the purest on the market," said Reg. "Because it is the purest" replied Dominic sounding pleased, "So, what did we net from this?" he continued, directing his focus solely at the young enforcer trying to catch him off guard. "Well boss, considering they're paying us 60 cents on the dollar of their sale price, at 30 keys of Heroin per shipment, minus travel expenses, each shipment of H to San Fran is worth around 1.92 million to you" replied Reg, who had been calculating figures on the flight back and memorizing them in case he was asked. Dominic sat back in his chair looking slightly impressed; Clay raised his eyebrows, "The kid can broker a deal" he said, smiling back. "When do they want their next shipment?" asked Dominic, "They want another shipment in 4 weeks, and they're also looking at getting their MDMA directly through us as well" replied the young enforcer. "Well Reg, I'm going to make you permanent on this monthly run, you seem to have a good handle on the numbers," said Dominic. The young man's face lit up, knowing that this would be a cushy job involving lots of travel, "Boss, I don't know what to say, but thank you" he said, before Dominic stood up, shook his hand, and then gestured for him to step out; Reg then immediately left the office. "Smart kid, he wasn't nervous at the negotiation and well, you were right about him," said Clay, "He's smart but teachable. I need more like him" replied Dominic. Just then

the man guarding the door knocked and opened it, "Percy to see you, boss" he said, "Let him in" replied Dominic. Percy walked in and placed the bag full of money on Dominic's desk. "We picked it up at the house along with the coke," he said. Dominic opened the bag, looked at the money, then zipped it back up and threw it to Percy. "Split it between the men who went" said Dominic as he looked up and saw the other two enforcers holding the bags containing the cocaine. "You made the mistake of bringing that into my home" said Dominic, as he looked at the bags.

Percy suddenly realized it wasn't a very smart idea bringing 19 kilos of coke up to the boss' penthouse. "I apologize Dominic, I just wanted you to see that the trip was successful" replied Percy, "Next time leave it at the warehouse, but now that you've got it here, leave one, I've got clients coming later," said Dominic. Percy took out one of the clear kilo bags and handed it to Dominic, which he then put into the safe under his desk. "What happened to your face? Looks like you came off second best" said Clay, playfully taunting him. "I got hit by a giant" replied Percy before Clay and Dominic both laughed, "How did Emanuele go?" asked Dominic, "Good, he actually saved me and Carlos from becoming Swiss cheese" replied Percy. "Glad to hear it. Did you take care of the house?" asked Dominic, "All taken care of" replied Percy confidently. "Good... hold the coke at your place for now, we'll be letting it go this weekend. I'm hosting a party for some of our biggest clients in the Vegas apartment this weekend. Bring it to the hangar Saturday" said Dominic, and then he signaled for them to leave. Percy and the two enforcers then promptly left and drove to the safe house located an hour north in San Clemente. "Sounds like Emanuele rose to the occasion," said Clay; "He needed to... the men need to know he can lead when he takes the reigns" replied Dominic. "Have a drink with me" said Dominic, as he pulled out a 30-year-old scotch now that business was dealt with for the day.

“I really shouldn’t, I’ve got to train Emanuele later” replied Clay as he looked at Dominic who hadn’t listened as he pulled two classes out of the cabinet next to him. “Ah what the hell, it’s just about 12 on the east coast anyway” he said, giving in to the boss. They clinked glasses and gulped their scotch down, “Ah, that’s a smooth drop,” said Clay. Dominic took his glass and poured them both another before Clay could say anything. Clay took his glass and looking at it swirled the scotch around, not really wanting to drink it as he had been sober, for over a year now, “So, what are you going to do about distribution in Phoenix?” he asked. “I’m going to have to get the Bloodhawk MC to take care of it for me – our net profit will suffer. But it will help with the alliance; they’ve been looking for more cash” replied Dominic. “What about when we set up in Phoenix again?” asked Clay, “We’ll taper them off, listen, don’t worry about it right now, just enjoy your drink” replied Dominic, noticing Clay hadn’t touched his second glass. Clay grabbed his glass and swigged back the scotch, then Dominic opened his safe and pulled out the bag of coke, “How about a sample?” he asked. Clay had a confused smile on his face because Dominic hardly ever did drugs; Clay had only seen him snort coke once in the 12 years of knowing him. “That’s not like you, boss,” said Clay, “Today’s not a normal day” replied Dominic with a forced grin. It was the worst day of the calendar year for Dominic; it was the anniversary of his father’s death, and he had never been sober for it. “Okay if you say so” replied Clay, who hadn’t done coke since his struggle with PTSD as a bouncer. But he knew that when the boss was offering, he had better not refuse. Dominic took out a hunting knife from his desk draw, made a small cut at the top of the bag then dipped the knife in and scooped some onto a decorative square piece of crystal glass in the center of his desk. He separated the coke into four lines then took two 100-dollar bills from a \$100,000 stack that was in his top drawer. He handed one to Clay, and then rolled up his own before snorting the first line, “It’s been

a long time since I've done that" he said. Then Clay rolled his note up and snorted the line closest to him. When they had finished the four lines, Dominic poured them both another glass of whiskey and they sat back sipping their drinks as they waited for the coke to fully kick in. For the first time ever, both men became sentimental in conversation and began sharing about their past, although the subject of their father's was never mentioned. "I don't want Emanuele doing this shit, at least until he's older, so don't mention this to him," said Dominic, "I won't" replied Clay. "Call the girls in" said Dominic, before Clay got up and walked to the front lounge room. He whistled, signaling for the girls to follow him. Then they went into the office where they partook of the fun; snorting, dancing, and drinking with Dominic and Clay. Dominic had to maintain his image of being a super-rich and powerful business magnate, so he never got drunk or high in front of clients or any of his lower enforcers. There were only very rare occasions where he would let loose with one or two people that he completely trusted. He had once gone on a bender with Carlos and Javier in Las Vegas after they had brought in a big client to sell crack to. Another occasion was with Percy in Miami, right after he had left Maria. Dominic didn't realize it yet, but he was developing a dangerous taste for cocaine again.

When his 3pm alarm went off on his phone, Emanuele rolled over and checked it. He also had a message from Samuel that read, 'Where were you today?' so he texted Samuel back, 'Had some shit to do, see you 2moro' read his reply, then he got out of bed and dressed into his workout gear. He was looking forward to the mundane routine of training; he knew it would help take his thoughts off what he had witnessed in the early hours before. He went downstairs and made himself some turkey wings with brown rice, but he couldn't stomach much of it. After clearing his plate, he switched the TV on and began flicking through the channels.

Suddenly, he saw a news update on one of the channels; there was a blonde woman reporting out the front of a burnt down street. Emanuele's heart rate increased as he realized it was the street where he had been. "Last night these houses in San Tan Valley were engulfed in flames, and there is believed to have been four victims inside the house where the gas explosion occurred. But shockingly, each house either side was also burnt to the ground with one family managing to escape, while another family of five have tragically lost their lives. Firefighters were called to the scene at 2:25pm, after an explosion was heard by the surrounding residents in the neighborhood. They worked tirelessly to fight the blaze of the three homes for four hours but were unsuccessful. It is believed those trapped inside the main home were involved in dealing narcotics in the area; the identities of the four men have not yet been revealed by authorities who are still working to determine exactly what caused this tragedy. At this point we are unable to provide the identity of the family that tragically lost their lives, to respect their privacy, but we will update the public as this story unfolds. I'm Sandra Cassidy for eleven eyewitness news," said the reporter. It was a surreal feeling for Emanuele as he watched the report that was something he was partly responsible for. He felt immense guilt for being a part of it, because not only had they killed the suppliers, but also an innocent family. He hung his head in shame as he switched off the TV, then slowly went into the kitchen, grabbed his water, and then walked to the garage, got in the Range Rover, and made his way to Clay's house. It was only 4pm but Emanuele decided getting to Clay's early was best as he didn't feel like doing any extra push-ups that day. When he got around to the back Clay was already standing there hitting the bag. "E-man you ready for sparring?!" yelled Clay, appearing more upbeat than usual. "Uh shouldn't I warm up first?" asked Emanuele "Yeah, right, jump on the other bag and warm up then!" replied Clay quickly, as he kept smashing the heavy bag.

Then Emanuele got his gloves on and started doing combinations on the bag. He noticed Clay was acting a bit off and wasn't his normal calm self, "Is everything alright?" he asked "Yeah, yeah, warm up!" Clay snapped. Emanuele shrugged and started smashing combos on the bag next to him, feeling a little unenthusiastic as he mentally struggled with the news report. They did this, side by side, for about 10 minutes, "Alright sparring time" said Clay, before they both put on their gear and got into the ring. Clay shaped up and then started bouncing around the ring; he came in and stiff jabbed Emanuele in the face. Emanuele bounced back and then threw a fast combination of jab, cross, left hook, which connected. Clay blinked and shook his head angrily before Emanuele came in for another jab which Clay read; he parried the jab and punched Emanuele with almost full force in the nose. Drops of blood came out of Emanuele's nose as he looked down at his glove, which had a droplet on it, so he wiped it on his glove and kept bouncing around the ring. Then Clay came in again and started throwing heavily. Emanuele tried to block the punches, but he got rocked by a couple. When Clay stepped back Emanuele started seeing stars; now he knew something was wrong. Clay came in one more time with a superman punch at full force, but Emanuele read it and ducked out of the way, and then he spat his mouthguard out, "What the hell!?" he yelled. "What?" replied Clay not understanding what was wrong, before he came in swinging again, but Emanuele ducked to his left and uppercut Clay, then threw a sharp hook that caught him good. This only made Clay more aggressive as he leg kicked Emanuele with full force; this hurt Emanuele but he tried to block out the pain. Then Clay came back at Emanuele with a head kick which Emanuele blocked, almost knocking him off his feet. Clay reset his stance, but Emanuele push kicked him in the stomach, hard and fast, Clay managed to grab Emanuele's leg and threw him down before he went over to the side of the ring and vomited outside of it, onto the ground.

After he finished throwing up, he realized that he had been sparring at almost full force, the scotch and cocaine had been the cause of his unnecessary intensity. He turned around to look at Emanuele, who jumped back to his feet, angrily, ready to defend himself. Clay threw his hands up, "I'm drunk... I'm sorry" he said. Emanuele shook his head and stepped out of the ring, taking his gloves off and throwing them into his bag in frustration. Clay took his gloves off and quickly washed his hands and face in the outdoor sink. "Wait!" he yelled as Emanuele began to walk out to his car. He walked over to Emanuele, "E-man I'm sorry, I had drinks with your father, and I had too many, I didn't realize how hard I was going" "Yeah, no shit!" said Emanuele, clearly pissed off. "I'll make it up to you tomorrow" Clay insisted. But Emanuele didn't say another word, he just turned and walked out to his car feeling disappointed. He thought training would make him feel better and put his mind at ease, but it had just made things worse, because he looked up to Clay as his mentor, and this was the first time he had lost trust in him. Clay clenched his fists as he sat down in one of the outdoor chairs, "Damn it Clay!" he said angrily to himself, regretting what he had done. He wasn't worried about anything happening to him, he just knew that he had affected his relationship with Emanuele. He darted an angry look over to his respirator hanging off the handle of his treadmill. He walked over to it, put it on and started running on the treadmill, "I've got to sweat this shit out" he said to himself. He ran as hard as he could for 10 minutes and then his legs buckled as he almost passed out from lack of oxygen when he got off. He was determined to make sure he never got messed up like that ever again, even if he was offered drinks by the boss; he never wanted to do that to Emanuele again.

When Emanuele got home, Maria walked up to him and tried to start a conversation, but Emanuele just kissed her on the cheek and quickly went upstairs, throwing his bag to the ground before getting into a steaming hot shower.

He stood under the water still upset about what had happened before he noticed a small stream of blood going down the drain. He wiped his nose and got dressed after getting out and drying himself. Then he went to Eva's room and knocked on her door, "Come in" she said. He stuck his head in, "I'm taking you tomorrow" "Ok" replied Eva, as she drew her attention back to her laptop. Emanuele rolled his eyes and then went back into his room and collapsed on the bed. There was no way he was letting Carlos drive her again, after what he had witnessed in San Tan Valley.

His thoughts soon turned to Leila, and the fact that he would get to see her at university the next day. He quickly jumped off his bed and walked to the mirror to see if his nose was alright. There was now no sign of bleeding as he turned his face either side; it was red, but thankfully there was no sign of bruising. He walked back to his bed, lay down on it and picked up his phone, which had two messages. The first was from Clay and it read, 'Sorry E man see u soon' Emanuele scoffed as he deleted it, then checked the next one which was from his father, 'Be ready Saturday 10am, we are going to Vegas' it read. Emanuele put his phone down and went downstairs, pulled some left over's out of the fridge, and heated them in the microwave. Then he took his plate back upstairs and ate it while watching custom car builds on the large bedroom TV. When the program had finished, he took the plate and spoon down to the dishwasher. Maria called out to him from the lounge room, so he walked in, "Why didn't you go to college today?" she asked, "No classes today" he replied, "I'm not stupid Emanuele, what's the real reason?" she asked. Still not feeling in the best mood, Emanuele didn't hold back, "Mum you've been sober for a few days, for all you know I could have skipped the last 3 weeks!" he replied in frustration. Maria muted the TV and sat up, "You know what I have been through with your father" she replied, sounding sad.

"I'm sorry mum, but it wasn't good for Eva or me to see you that way. I'm glad you're feeling better, you're looking better as well" he said, calmly, as Maria put her arm out for him to sit down next to her. So, he walked over and sat beside his mom, "I spoke to your Nana today. She told me to say she loves you and misses you" said Maria, speaking about her mother, "How is she?" asked Emanuel a little disingenuously. "She's not getting any younger, why don't you go and visit her with your sister this weekend" asked Maria, "I can't this weekend I've got something on with dad" he replied. Just then, Eva walked in, "You've got what with dad this weekend?" she asked, "Just some business stuff" he replied, "Business stuff where?" "In LA" he replied, lying, as he looked annoyed. "I bet you're going to Malibu!" she said walking away, feeling jealous. Eva had tried to see her father a couple of times that month but hadn't been able to because Dominic was far too busy as per usual.

This made her feel like her father didn't value her and would rather do business than make time for her, which was the case. "Maybe you should ask if she can just go and hang out at the Malibu house for a day" said Maria, "I'll ask, but I don't like the chances. I'm going to bed, goodnight" he said, before kissing his mom on the cheek and walking back up to his room. He grabbed his phone and texted his father, 'Sorry to bother you with this. Eva knows I'm seeing you this weekend. Mom wants to know if she can go' read the message.

Then Emanuele switched his light off and closed his eyes for a moment, 'vrr vrr' his phone vibrated a moment later, so he checked it. His dad had replied, 'Not this weekend' read the message. So, Emanuele texted him back, 'Ok that's what I thought' he replied before putting the phone down and trying to sleep. But only 3 minutes later, 'vrr vrr' Dominic had texted back again, 'I bet your mother doesn't think I can take care of my own kids. She can come' read the message.

Emanuele sighed, and turned his phone off, before rolling over and shutting his eyelids.

Chapter 4: Bittersweet

Emanuele's thoughts drifted momentarily; his muscle memory took over as he gripped the steering wheel, while driving his black Bentley Continental GT towards the university block. He remembered himself worrying a few days earlier about the prospect of never seeing Leila again. But now a spark of joy welled up inside of him as he knew he would soon see her. He pulled into the carpark, where the line-backers and groupies were standing by their muscle cars again. They were there most mornings but not always to attend class. They'd sometimes just meet up there to go to the beach for day drinking, occasionally committing misdemeanor's by harassing people for the fun of it; their assurance being that their affluent parents had great lawyers. Some of the female students showed interest in Emanuele's arrival, while the guys just stared angrily. Even though Glen and his buddies came from wealth they despised Emanuele for being obscenely wealthier. Emanuele got out of his car, ignoring them, and walked up to Samuel, who was waiting out the front of the main entrance for him. The two of them bumped fists, "Good to see you my man" said Samuel, "Yeah you too" "Unfortunately, we got an exam on Friday," said Samuel, "I'll be sure to skip that day" Emanuele joked. They both made their way into class and then got settled into the lecture. Emanuele couldn't pay much attention as he was constantly looking at the clock. They got up and walked to the cafeteria after the lecture had finished; Emanuele was buzzing with anticipation. "I'll catch up with you later" he said, "Where you go-? Oh, I see" said Samuel, realizing that Emanuele was going over to talk to the Asian girl he had seen him with at the club. There was an empty seat across from Leila, so Emanuele sat down in it, "Hey Leila" he said smiling.

“Hey, you” she replied happily; the captivation of her beautiful brown eyes revealing that she was very pleased to see him. One of Leila’s friends who was sitting a few seats down from them had been at the club and waved to Emanuele. Then she smiled, before looking back at Leila with eyebrows raised, as if to portray that they’d been speaking about him beforehand, “Hey” he said, smiling back politely. There was no sign of Leila’s usual guardianship, so Emanuele got straight to the point. “So, listen I really enjoyed spending time with you on Saturday, and I’d like to continue getting to know you. Would you let me take you out for dinner on Friday night?” he asked. Just then, her cousin came over from the cafe and started speaking in Mandarin, “Do you want me to get rid of him?” he asked, “No – go sit somewhere else” Leila replied, sounding displeased with him. “Sorry about that, please give me your phone” she said feeling a little shy about the interruption. Emanuele gladly took his phone out and handed it to her. She then put her phone number in and handed it back to him, “You can pick me up at 7 if you like” she said smiling. Emanuele had a beaming smile as he felt her silky-smooth hand while receiving his phone back. But after realizing how stupid his big grin must have looked, he carefully looked away and put his phone in his pocket. He then gently gazed back into her eyes as he got up, “I’ll speak to you soon” he said.

Then he walked outside to where Samuel was, now absolutely beaming on the inside as he had that foreign feeling of butterflies in his stomach again. ‘So, this is what a crush feels like’ he thought to himself. He had completely forgotten about getting lunch, but he was too happy to care. After he had left the cafeteria, Leila spoke with her friend from the club in Cantonese and they both laughed together, “He’s so cute” said another girl sitting across from her.

“Dude! I got her number; I’m taking her out Friday!” said Emanuel ecstatically. “Nice one man, that brunette girl from Saturday keeps hitting me up” replied Samuel casually, “So take her out!” said Emanuele, but Samuel just looked back at him slightly puzzled. “Take her out in what car, and with what funds?” he asked, rhetorically. “You’re a millionaire!” replied Emanuele before Samuel looked around a little worried. “Not on paper, I can’t access that money right away it’s too risky” he whispered. “Alright you can borrow my Range Rover, and I’ll give you some cash,” said Emanuele, feeling in an incredibly generous mood, “That’ll work” replied Samuel, slightly stunned at the offer. Although he knew it would create a false reality of who he was, he was too excited about the idea of impressing his girl. Noticing that his friend was deep in thought Emanuele couldn’t help but interrupt, “What’s the problem?” he asked, “Oh nothing” said Samuel awkwardly, realizing he had just been sitting there silently in deep thought. Emanuele sat down on the bench next to him, before pulling his laptop out; he then began searching for dining options to show Samuel. “Oh shit, what if she wants to come back to my place afterwards?” asked Samuel, realizing that he couldn’t exactly wine and dine her at a five-star restaurant, and then try to get laid in a shipping container. “Don’t let her!” replied Emanuele, laughing, “Yeah, thanks for the advice” said Samuel, sarcastically. “How about you try going back to hers?” “And if I can’t? I think I’m going to need to borrow some extra cash for a hotel just in case” said Samuel, with a cheesy grin. “Alright” replied Emanuele, pretending to lack enthusiasm, “Thanks, you’re the man!” said Samuel putting his hand up for a high five; Emanuele chuckled and didn’t leave him hanging. He was happy that he could put his limitless resources to good use and help his friend out. After conversing, they headed to their next classes and agreed to meet back at the front of the university in the afternoon.

Meanwhile at Eva's school, Eva was in the middle of flirting with a student named Andrew who happened to be the fullback and star player of the St. Augustine Rugby team. As she did, three of the other players who were also on the team, looked on from down the hall inside the main building. "That little trick, now she's going and messing with Drew's head," said Thomas; the most recent guy to be dumped by Eva. "She's ruining the bond in our team," said Johnsie, "I've got an idea" said Alain, who was the burly prop forward of the rugby team. The other two both looked at him, "Yeah what?" they asked, "Let's give her a little scare after training today. We'll pretend that we're trying to gang rape her" he said, before the three of them suddenly broke into laughter. "Is that all good with you Thomas?" asked Johnsie, "Yeah I don't give a shit, she deserves it" he replied. So, they planned to get her attention and then grab her at the end of the day when no one was around. They all thought this was a great plan, not only would it scare her, but it would also stop her from messing with the team. While getting a bit of revengeful fun in the process for Thomas' sake.

After Emanuele and Samuel's classes had finished, they met up and both walked towards the carpark where the Bentley was. Suddenly, one of the girl's that had been standing with the footballers approached them before they reached the car. "Hey guys, do you two want to come and have some drinks with us?" she asked, knowing the real intentions of the footballers. It was a plot, mainly by Glen, to get Emanuele to go back to their place so they could spike his drink and teach him a lesson for showing them up. He wasn't used to having anyone outdo him and he didn't know any other way to deal with it because he lacked the character to let it go. "Sorry we can't today, thanks for the offer though" replied Emanuele, smiling at the girl. Then she started walking back towards her group, shaking her head. Suddenly, Glen got up and walked towards Emanuele, blocking him from getting into his car.

“What do you think you’re too good for us?!” he yelled in Emanuele’s face. “Take it easy hulk” said Samuel to the angry footballer from the other side of the car, “I’m not talking to you!” shouted Glen, as he pointed at Samuel. “No, I obviously don’t think that, I’ve just got to get home” replied Emanuele, trying to calm the angry footballer. “Obviously?! What are you trying to say that you’re smarter than me or something?!” he yelled, trying to provoke a reaction out of Emanuele. Along with the steroid abuse, the big footballer had been popping too many ecstasy pills and drinking too much alcohol on the weekends, that it was beginning to affect his rational thinking skills. Now Emanuele didn’t care; he had tried to be polite to no avail and wasn’t at all intimidated by the big oath. “I think you’ve suffered one too many knocks to the head on the field” he said, which was all the fuel the big footballer needed. He roared before swinging a right hook which Emanuele ducked under, before standing back with his guard raised up. This just infuriated Glen further, so he slammed his fist on the Bentley’s roof putting a dent in it, as his fist was like a club. Emanuele quickly turned to see the dent and push kicked him in the chest with all his might, knocking the big footballer onto his ass. Glen’s friends who were laughing quickly rushed over to grab him; they were fearful he would beat Emanuele to a pulp, as he had put people in the hospital for less. Glen threw his friends off him and went back at Emanuele throwing a big haymaker which Emanuele again ducked under, before landing a solid punch into Glen’s stomach, followed by a left hook to his jaw. The big guy dropped to his knees, winded and dazed after being hit by Emanuele. “Get in!” shouted Emanuele, anticipating that the other footballers would attack, but they just stood there in shock, seeing their big friend being outdone for the first time ever. After both he and Samuel had jumped into the car, Emanuele quickly started it, and did a burnout as they left the carpark. One of Glen’s friends ran after the car and threw his football helmet at the Bentley, which cracked the rear glass.

"I'm gonna kill that prick!" yelled Glen, spitting bloody saliva on the ground as he stood up. Emanuele thought about turning around, but it wasn't worth it; one big footballer he could deal with, but he didn't like his odds against four. Emanuele just shook his head in frustration as he drove away; even though he was great in hand-to-hand combat he hated being involved in meaningless conflicts, but they always seemed to find him, regardless. "What a bunch of psychos!" yelled Samuel, as the Bentley sped down the road, "Don't worry I've dealt with worse" replied Emanuele assuring his friend that he wasn't too fazed over what had just happened. When they pulled up out the front of Samuel's house, he grabbed his bag and turned to Emanuele, "What will you do about that guy? You know he's not going to leave you alone now" "I'm not too worried I'll drive the Range Rover tomorrow and park away from them, if he tries anything, I'll put him on his ass again" replied Emanuele. "Ok man, but just know that I'm not much of a fighter, so I'm not gonna be able to back you up" said Samuel, a little worried, "Honestly, don't worry about it, he's nothing I can't handle" replied Emanuele, again trying to reassure his friend. "Did you want to come in?" asked Samuel. Emanuele sighed, "Uh, yeah ok, I've got an hour to kill" he said, unable to create an excuse on the spot. As he locked the car, they heard glass smash and dogs barking before people started screaming at each other, "I hate this damn neighborhood" said Samuel, before walking towards his house. They went inside and chilled in the lounge room because Samuel's mom was working late again, otherwise, she would have been watching her afternoon game shows or talking loudly with friends on the phone. Emanuele sat down on the old fake-leather couch in the cramped room, with his knees almost touching the coffee table. Samuel walked over to the fridge and grabbed a couple of beers; he took them into the lounge room and handed one to Emanuele. "Thanks" said Emanuele, accepting the beer, not wanting to offend his friend.

He thought it must have been hard not having a father around to help pay for the bills, "So, where are you thinking of moving to again?" he asked, after taking a sip from his beer can. "Well, I saw a documentary on Hong Kong one night and my mom said she wanted to visit there one day. So, I guess that's where I'll be taking her to live" he replied, "Yeah cool, my family was planning a trip there before my parents split," said Emanuele. The two of them continued talking for 45 minutes about different topics; mainly girls, hacking, and partying. Samuel had 3 more beers, while Emanuele declined to have any more, as he didn't like the taste of cheap, canned beer. He knew he had training later as well and didn't usually drink through the week, if at all. He suddenly noticed the old plastic clock hanging on the wall in the lounge room, "I've got to get going" he said, realizing that Eva would be finished watching the rugby training. "Yeah, no problem it's time to rob some scammers, for me now anyway" said Samuel before they both stood up and shook hands. Then Emanuele was let out of the front door before Samuel headed out back to his computer lab.

When Emanuele had arrived at St. Augustine High, he couldn't see Eva waiting for him, so he pulled his phone out and tried to call her. After two failed attempts to get a hold of her, he decided to call his mom to see if she had gone home with one of her friends. "Hey mom, is Eva at home?" he asked, "No I thought you were bringing her home" replied Maria sounding worried. "Yeah, I am, don't worry she probably hasn't finished watching the rugby training, I'll go in and get her, see you soon" he said, before ending the call. He parked the Bentley in the drop off zone as there weren't many people around. Then he got out of the car, ran up the steps and walked down the path towards the rugby field, but when he arrived there were only two students kicking a ball. "That's weird" he said to himself before trying to call her again.

Suddenly, he heard the eerily familiar ringtone that he had become sick of hearing; it was coming from around a corner and down a flight of stairs. He quickly ran down to find Eva's bag lying on the ground, with her phone and contents spilled out of it. He looked up and what he saw next shocked him; ten meters away on a secluded area of grass he saw two guys holding her down, while another was pulling down her jeans. She was kicking and trying to scream but one of the guys was holding her mouth. As the three of them were engrossed in the act, they weren't made aware of her brother's presence. Emanuele immediately felt adrenaline pulse through his veins and his heart pounded, pumping blood into his legs, as he was instantly fueled with rage. He immediately ran like the sprinter off a starting line, as fast as he could towards the guy who had Eva's jeans around her ankles. He leapt into the air and kicked him with both feet, sending the rugby player flying. Emanuele instantly sprang up off the ground and the biggest guy rushed towards him throwing a punch, which Emanuele side stepped, before throwing a chop straight into his throat. This caused him to drop immediately, coughing and spluttering. A split second after that Emanuele was tackled to the ground by the last guy who had some training of his own; he threw a heavy punch which Emanuele blocked holding his forearms against his head. Suddenly, the pants grabber who had now recovered, ran to kick Emanuele in the head, but Emanuele saw it coming and pulled the guy on top of him in the direction of the big punt kick, which connected with the guy's jaw. There was a loud 'crack' sound as his jaw broke in multiple places. Emanuele jumped up still on fire with adrenaline as the rugby player moaned in pain and grabbed his face. He jumped over the player on the ground, while throwing a superman punch that was avoided by the jawbreaker. Then he faked a left kick which the jaw breaker went to block, allowing Emanuele to quickly scissor kick him in the chin, knocking him out.

Emanuele jumped on top of him ready to start landing bombs on his face when the biggest rugby player grabbed him from behind and put him in a rear naked choke with all his might. Emanuele tucked his chin down and without thinking he rolled to his left side and elbowed him in the ribs as hard as he could, breaking one of them. This caused the remaining guy to loosen his grip, so Emanuele quickly slipped out of the choke, before taking the guys left arm; he then threw his legs over and proceeded to put him in an arm bar. Lifting his pelvis, he pulled the arm down hard and fast, snapping it at the joint. The big prop forward screamed out in pain, as Emanuele threw him off and was ready to continue beating them up, "Stop!" yelled Eva. He looked over at his sister who was sitting there with tears rolling down her face and make-up smeared. The three guys were now lying there on the ground; one knocked out, while the other two wailed in pain. "If you ever touch my sister again, I'll kill all three of you!" he shouted, passionately. Then he walked over to Eva and helped her to her feet; she was shaking, still in shock from the ordeal. Even though she acted easy and flirtatious around guys, it was all just an act, as she was still secretly a virgin. They walked slowly to the car, picking up Eva's bag and phone along the way. Emanuele helped his sister into the passenger seat and put her bag in the back, then he quickly got into the driver's seat and took off towards home. Eva just stared down at her feet; she didn't know what to say. "Are you ok, did they hurt you?" her brother asked, "No, I was just scared" she replied softly. "What happened, why were they-?" "I—I don't know. They kept yelling, saying they were going to run a train on me" she replied. "Those low-life scum" said Emanuele, angrily gritting his teeth, as he thought they had gotten off lightly. "Do you want me and Clay to pay them a visit in hospital?" asked Emanuele, knowing his sister would say 'no' but he asked out of anger anyway. "No— please don't tell anyone what happened. This was my fault" she continued in her soft voice.

“This wasn’t your fault, they’re fucking pigs!” he shouted, before looking over at his sister as more tears started rolling down her cheeks. He sighed, as he stared angrily at the road, and decided to keep quiet for the rest of the drive home. When they entered the garage back at their house Emanuele looked at his sister, “Look I won’t tell anyone about what happened. Maybe you should stay home for the rest of the week and sort out what you want to do” he said softly to her. But Eva didn’t respond, she just closed her eyes and nodded before getting out of the car and going straight to her bedroom, locking the door behind her. She dropped her bag and started sobbing on her bed. Emanuele came up the stairs and heard her; a sadness came over him that he hadn’t felt before, but it quickly turned to anger as he grabbed his gear for training and then left for Clay’s house. When he arrived, Clay was ready for him, “I’m sober as a judge E-man” he said. “Good” replied Emanuele totally focused on the training at hand. Once he was fully geared up, they started doing some bag work and then pad work; Emanuele punched the bag and pads as hard as he could still thinking about the guys that had attacked his sister. Clay noticed the angry look on his face throughout the striking, “You still mad?” he asked referring to their previous session, “No” said Emanuele, quickly dismissing him. After about 20 minutes of pad work, they stopped, “Alright that’s enough – grappling time,” said Clay. Emanuele was still furious, and he walked over to one of the bags and started smashing it as hard as he could with strikes and leg kicks, “Aarghhh!!” he yelled taking his frustration out on it. “Easy man, you’ll kick the bag out of the roof. What’s wrong?” asked Clay as he steadied the bag. “Nothing!” shouted Emanuele as he continued to smash the bag; Clay quickly grabbed one of Emanuele’s arms, “Are you sure this isn’t about me being drunk? You need to get over that shit, I apologized already,” said Clay.

Emanuele shrugged Clay off, took his gloves off and threw them down, "It's not that—just some dickheads trying to mess with me at college" he said. "What happened?" asked Clay sincerely; "Nothing, just some roid munchers looking for a fight" "Well did you take care of them?" "Yeah, one of them," replied Emanuele, now calming down. "So, then what's the problem?" asked Clay, knowing Emanuele couldn't be this upset over something that simple. "Nothing man, don't worry" "Alright, well let's get into this grappling then" replied Clay. After they had finished their workout, they both sat down on the seats outside; Clay grabbed two loaded protein smoothies from the outside fridge that he had prepared earlier. Emanuele took a sip, "This is actually pretty good... thanks" he said, now feeling calm. "What's really going on E-man?" asked Clay curiously, as he'd never seen him like this before. "Just some stuff with Eva, I'm worried about her. She's running with the wrong people at her school" replied Emanuele, "Well make sure you look out for her," said Clay. "Yeah" replied Emanuele, raising his eyebrows; he felt bad for not being more involved in his little sister's life, as he knew it was his unspoken responsibility to take care of her with their father having left the family home. "This weekend should be good. We've got some big clients coming into this party that your father's having in Vegas" said Clay, changing the subject. "Yeah, I guess I should meet these people, I'll be dealing with them in the future" he replied, "There should be plenty of girls your age there too" said Clay nudging Emanuele, in an effort to cheer him up. "Nah... maybe" said Emanuele, slightly cracking a smile, "Woah, don't get too excited" said Clay sarcastically. "You don't get too drunk" replied Emanuele looking serious, but his serious face turned to a smile, letting Clay know that he was only joking. They both chuckled and continued to drink their protein smoothies. "Thanks for this Clay, I needed it" said Emanuele as he got up and grabbed his gear, "I'll see you Saturday" said Clay, nodding.

When he got home Maria was waiting at the stairs, "What's wrong with Eva? Why won't she come out of her room?" she asked, looking a little stressed. "She's not feeling well, must have eaten something bad" replied Emanuele as he headed up to his room; the last thing he wanted to do was tell their mother the truth and cause more drama. Maria wasn't buying it though, she just assumed that her son must not have known anything. After Emanuele had gotten showered and dressed, he went and knocked on Eva's door, "Eva it's me do you want something to eat?" "Not hungry! I'm trying to sleep" she replied from her room, so he left her alone.

The next day Emanuele decided not to go to university, but instead to stay home and look after his sister. He messaged Samuel to let him know he wouldn't be there, then went downstairs and made a jam bagel with orange juice for Eva. He had never made breakfast for his sister before and hoped it would help as he took it upstairs and knocked on her door; but there was no answer. He turned the doorknob which was unlocked, before walking into her room and shaking her gently to wake her up. "Oh, go away Mama" she said drowsily, "It's me" replied Emanuele; to Eva's surprise it wasn't Maria trying to annoy her to get out of bed. "Oh, thanks" she said as Emanuele placed the tray on her bed. "I'm staying home today, to make sure you're ok" he said smiling, "You don't have to do that" she replied. "It's okay I want to. What I witnessed yesterday... I'm not going to let anything like that ever happen to you again" he said. Eva rubbed her eyes, sat up and started to pick at her bagel; she was hungry as she hadn't eaten since the morning of the day before. "Come down when you're ready. We'll just chill and watch movies today if you want to," said Emanuel. Eva nodded and smiled slightly; this was the first time in a long time her brother had really made an effort to spend time with her, mostly because she had always been 'too busy' for him. But Emanuele wanted to try and get her mind off the ordeal from the day before.

Later that morning, Maria appeared at the entrance of the lounge room while Emanuele and Eva were watching a movie, "Why aren't you two at school?" she asked, looking concerned. Emanuele started to fake cough, "sick" he said, before Maria rolled her eyes and went into the kitchen. Emanuele smiled at Eva, they knew their mom wasn't concerned if they missed a few days, they just couldn't make a habit of it. They sat silent for a while as their mom had a habit of listening in on their conversations. But then they both heard the blender being used in the kitchen as Maria made herself a juice, so they knew it was safe to talk. "I don't know what do," said Eva, "About what?" asked Emanuele playing dumb, as he didn't really want to get into it. But he picked up the remote and went back to the streaming service home screen. "C'mon, I don't know whether I should tell someone or not" she replied, "Well it's up to you, but all I know is if mom finds out, then dad will find out and that could get very ugly, and you won't be able to go back to that school" he said. Emanuele also knew that if the students he had beat up tried to press charges, Dominic had an army of lawyers to get him off scot-free. But if he found out that they lay hands on his little girl then those students would soon go 'missing'. Eva sighed, "I'll go to school next week... act like nothing has happened, avoid rugby players and see how it goes" she said, trying to sound convincing to her brother. But he didn't need convincing, he knew it was for the best, and besides Eva didn't want to leave St. Augustine High; all her friends were there, and she was not keen on the thought of having to adjust somewhere else, despite what had happened. Emanuele decided not to prod on the topic any further, and quickly looked for another movie for them to watch. "You'll like this one, it's a classic" he said putting on the movie 'I Am Legend'. "Man, I love that movie" said Emanuele, as the credits began to roll, "Yeah but that ending sucked. Why didn't he just throw the grenade from the vault?" she asked. Emanuele laughed, "There wouldn't have been enough time for him and the others to get inside safely."

He needed the cure to the disease safe with Anna and her son; he wasn't going to risk it all for nothing" replied Emanuele. "Oh well, I guess you're right, what should we watch next?" she asked. He was pleased; watching movies seemed to be keeping his sister at ease. He grabbed the remote and started searching through the titles, and they ended up watching two more films. Afterwards, Maria walked back into the lounge room, "What do you two feel like for dinner?" she asked, "Mexican duhh" replied Eva smiling. Emanuele chuckled; now she really was back to her old self, "Yeah that actually sounds good" he added. Maria then began searching for Mexican food on her phone, "How about Rubio's?" she asked. They both agreed so she dialed the number for Rubio's on her cell phone and began to make the order. "How about, Zombieland?" asked Emanuele, "No, no more disease-ridden people; look for a comedy" replied Eva. He started looking up the recently added comedies, "How about Spy?" he asked, "Have a look at the preview" replied Eva. They both agreed the preview looked hilarious, so Emanuele started it. Part of the way through the movie, Maria came in with the dinner and joined them. They laughed hard, eating, and enjoying each other's company; Emanuele smiled as he looked at his mom and sister. Despite the somewhat traumatic ordeal from the day before, it seemed that they were beginning to move onto a new phase of life, after the separation of his parents. Once the movie had finished Maria suggested that they watch the latest episode of Real Housewives. Emanuele screwed up his face, "And with that, I'm out" he said, as he got up to walk out of the room, but Eva spoke just before he did, "Emanuele... thank you for today" she said, sincerely. Emanuele turned back to his sister, "No problem sis" he replied, smiling. "Aww my two cuties, I love seeing you like this" added Maria. "Goodnight" he said, before quickly going upstairs to his room and collapsing on the bed.

The following morning, Emanuele bounced his feet in anticipation, as he sat in his lecture; he was feeling excited as that night he would be taking Leila out to dinner, and he couldn't wait. He had parked on the other side of campus to avoid the footballers and wasn't going to let anything get in the way of their date. He drove Samuel home again that afternoon, as he enjoyed the conversations and now, ironically, considered Samuel to be his most trustworthy friend outside of the organization. Emanuele's social life was like no other's growing up; his typical friends throughout high school were middle aged gangsters that worked for his father, so for him it was a nice change to associate with someone his own age. When he arrived home after dropping Samuel off, Eva was in the home gym using the treadmill with YouTube blasting on the sound system. While one of the latest diva figures was dancing on the mounted screens. Emanuele walked in and turned down the sound from the control unit near the entrance. "Burning those calories huh?" he asked, "Yeah, I ate way too much last night" she replied, while panting as she kept jogging. Eva was in incredible shape athletically, which was another obsession of hers. "Don't forget to pack your bag for Vegas tonight" said Emanuele, "Yeah? I thought you were going to Malibu with dad" she replied, as she slowed the treadmill down to a walking pace. "Nah, Vegas, and he wants you to come" "I'm there! okay I'll pack" she replied, excitedly. Emanuele nodded and was about to leave but Eva interrupted, "Oh hey, I was thinking I should get you to teach me how to fight" she said. "That's not a bad idea, we could start next week" he replied smiling, "Yeah okay, did you want to watch another movie tonight?" she asked, "Can't... I've got a date" replied Emanuele. "Oh yeah? With your new black friend, you told me about?" she asked sarcastically, "No, and you don't need to know" he replied, smiling sarcastically. "Yeah, well good luck with that!" she shouted, increasing the speed back to a jog on the treadmill.

Emanuele then turned the music back up slightly, although not to the volume Eva had it previously set to, so that it was blaring through the house. He then drove to the gym where he was meeting Clay for some weightlifting and conditioning. "Got a date tonight" said Emanuele, upon arrival, as he walked up to Clay who had just finished drinking from the water fountain. He looked at Emanuele, wiping his face with his towel, "Who's the lucky guy?" he asked, smirking; Emanuele laughed sarcastically, "If you saw her, you'd be jealous Clay" he replied, confidently. "Well, I'll have to meet her to be the judge" said Clay smiling, Emanuele shook his head, "Ain't happening" he said. "Alright, you got your shit ready for Vegas?" "I'll pack tonight" replied Emanuele, "Hey, your fathers having the UFC on the big screen for the guests. We might catch the title fight," said Clay, "I doubt it, I'll probably get called into the conference room to listen in on the deals" replied Emanuele. Just then Emanuele's phone sounded; he took it out and looked at it. There was a text from Leila, 'Looking forward to tonight. My address is 5576 Algin Ave. See you at 7 x' it read. Emanuele's face lit up, "Who's that, the stunner?" asked Clay, "Yeah, she just sent me her address" replied Emanuele happily; he had been waiting for that text all afternoon. The two of them did their usual workout, and then were about to do some cardio, "You mind if I skip this one Clay?" asked Emanuele, looking hopeful. "Alright get out of here.... use protection!" Clay yelled, before laughing; Emanuele turned back and smiled, giving him the finger as he walked out of the gym. Emanuele showered and then got into his favorite YSL white polo shirt, black pants, and a black suede jacket. Then he walked into his wardrobe and looked at his shoe collection; there was over a hundred pairs to choose from sitting on the shelves. He pulled out his brown mid top Air Force One sneakers, put them on, and then walked over to his jewelry cabinet, sliding out the watch drawer. He had 12 watches, collectively worth over \$400k.

He grabbed his favorite black and red, Jacob & Co Automatic Chronograph, putting it on his left wrist, then sprayed himself with D&G the one, for men, checked himself in the mirror and nodded. Emanuele was being meticulous as he got ready; he had never wanted to impress a girl more than that night. Walking over to his dresser, he grabbed three-thousand dollars from one of the drawers and folded it into his platinum money clip. Next to it, was his Platinum Amex card, and he decided to grab it as well, just in case. Emanuele was going to flaunt his financial status; he didn't even care if Leila was a gold-digger as he knew no one else she dated would be on his level. But a worried look suddenly came upon his face, as he realized with the events of that week, he had forgotten to book a restaurant. He quickly grabbed his phone and thought to himself, 'Don't stress, I'll just call up Steve' who was a friend of Dominic's that managed a restaurant called Island Breeze. It was a waterfront restaurant that served some of the best food he'd ever eaten, so Emanuele quickly grabbed his phone and made the call. "Yeah Steve, its Emanuele. Listen I know it's very late, but I need a table for two" he said, as Steve sounded stressed out, ordering the table staff around in the background. "Emanuele for you and only you, I will cancel another booking" he replied, "You are the best. I'll be there at 8" he said, before ending the call. Five-star restaurant reservation, on demand, was just another perk of being the son of a billionaire drug lord.

Emanuele made his way down to the garage, realizing he couldn't take the Bentley, because of the damage it had taken the day before. It was an inconvenience because it would have been the most comfortable for Leila to ride in. He knew the Aston Martin was the only other choice, as the Porsche and Lamborghini were maybe a little too extravagant for a first date, and the SUV was not quite extravagant enough. He got into the driver's seat and typed Leila's address into the GPS, which showed that the trip would take 24 minutes to the destination.

So, he pulled out of the driveway and followed the directions at breakneck speed, while the roads were still familiar to him. When he arrived at her street in Del Cerro, he looked at the numbers on each house and slowed down until he was out the front of the one, he was looking for; it was a big two-story house, about half the size of Emanuele's own home. He overshot the driveway a little, so he backed up slightly and pulled in. After stepping out of his car, he pulled his jacket straight, and walked up to the front door. He felt a little nervous and excited as he stood in front of the big white timber door, then he pushed the gold-plated doorbell. Again, a foreign, but now welcomed feeling of butterflies came into his stomach, as he anticipated seeing Leila. Suddenly, the door opened, and a middle-aged Chinese lady stood in front of him, "Hello, come in" she said with a smile, "Oh, thank you" he replied politely. "Take a seat, she'll be with you in a moment" said the lady as she led him into the lounge room. The two guys from the cafeteria that had been hostile to Emanuele, sat there playing Xbox and drinking Tsingtao beers. One of them was Leila's cousin Mike and the other was his friend Jet; they were friendly and introduced themselves while the lady was there, but as soon as she went upstairs Mike's face became serious. "Listen, if you hurt her, I will hurt you tenfold. Her father is a very powerful man, you do not want to cross him," he said, "Relax, we're just going out for a meal" replied Emanuele, very calmly. The threat didn't intimidate him one bit, because of who he was and who he knew. "Yeah, alright but don't even think about trying to get lucky with her or Jet and I will break you," said Mike, sternly, "I'm not looking to get lucky. On the first night anyway" replied Emanuele. Mike stared angrily at Emanuele, but then they heard Leila with the lady coming down the stairs. The two guys quickly changed their demeanor and went back to playing Xbox, speaking in Mandarin, and laughing to one another.

Emanuele got up and saw Leila; she was wearing a short red dress with golden oriental patterns, and had her hair down, which was a change from her usually tying it up. He stood straight up and stepped towards her, and she walked up to him, and smiled, "Leila you look absolutely beautiful" he said. "Thank you, Emanuele, you look very handsome" she replied with a cute smile. They both said goodbye to the lady, who was now looking at the two of them with a big grin, "Bye, enjoy your night" she said, with her slight Chinese accent. Then they walked outside to Emanuele's car, "Wow, is this yours?" asked Leila; "Yes, it is" replied Emanuele smiling as he walked over to the passenger side to let her in. He wanted to be a gentleman that evening and not come off as some cocky rich boy, which he was, but not to this girl, whom he really liked. He got into the driver's seat and started up the engine, before giving it a slight rev. "Wow that engine sounds cool, V12, right?" asked Leila, surprising him a little, "Yeah it is, do you like cars?" he asked, "I love cars. My mom has a few nice cars. She usually lets me drive her Maserati when I visit her in Hong Kong" she replied. Emanuele was impressed, he didn't know any girls that were into cars the way he was, but he wasn't about to tell her that he had a fleet of cars just yet; he didn't want to come off as arrogant. They pulled out of the driveway and then took off for the harbor. He drove carefully, but accelerated up to the speed limit, showing Leila what his favorite car could do from a stand still. "I love that feeling" she said, "Yeah me too!" he replied, as he could tell that she was used to the speed, and so decided to push the car a little further. "Do you mind if I put some music on?" he asked "No I don't mind" replied Leila, giggling. His phone was connected by Bluetooth, so he played the first song in his favorites mix; it was 'Written in the Stars' by Tinie Tempah featuring Eric Turner. After only 10 seconds of it played, Leila had a surprised look on her face; she put her hand on Emanuele's arm and he looked over at her, "I love this song" she said, "Really?" he asked, surprised.

She just nodded with her cute smile, and Emanuele smiled back. As the song played the second chorus, he listened intently to the lyrics, 'maybe this night is written in the stars?' he thought to himself.

When they got to Island Breeze restaurant, Emanuele zoomed into an empty car space with ease. Then he quickly got out and walked around the back of the car to open Leila's door, "Thank you" she said, as he helped her out. He then walked with her to the entrance, before opening the door of the restaurant. A waiter stood there to greet them, and asked Emanuele for his name. But once the name was given, he couldn't find it on the list. "I booked the table with Steve the manager," said Emanuele, "Steve who?" asked the waiter, being a snob, knowing exactly who Emanuele was talking about. But just as he said that Steve was there next to him, "Emanuele, so good to see you, it's been a while. Oh, and who is this lovely young lady?" he asked, "This is Leila, my beautiful date for the evening" "Wonderful, please come through and I'll show you to your table" replied Steve. As they began to walk through Steve aggressively whispered to the waiter, "If you don't know, just ask!" "Sorr.." said the waiter, but he couldn't get his apology out, as Steve was already walking over to the table that he had set up especially for Emanuele. It had the best view of the San Diego Marina night lights in the whole restaurant. Steve pulled Leila's chair out for her, while Emanuele sat down across from her, "Can I get you some drinks, maybe some wine?" he asked, handing them both a drinks menu, unaware that Emanuele was still only 20 years of age. They both briefly glanced through, "What would you like Leila?" asked Emanuele. She then looked at Steve, "Could I please just get some mineral water with lime?" "Sure, and for you Emanuele?" "I'll have the same, thanks Steve" he replied. "Can I also suggest the Chef tasting menu for your starter? It's our finest selection on the starter menu" said Steve, handing them the menu so they could see what it consisted of.

It was a taster platter of duck, pork belly and scallops. "Do you like the look of that Leila?" asked Emanuele, "Yes I like all of these" she replied, "Okay, we'll get that then, thanks," said Emanuele. Then Steve promptly left and brought back a bottle of Pellegrino and two glasses with sliced lime inside. He poured their drinks and then placed out the main and dessert menus for them to look at. Then he left to give them some time to decide. "So do you bring all the girls here?" asked Leila, Emanuele looked up from his menu a little taken back, "Uh, actually no, and honestly I haven't really dated much, at all" he said truthfully. "Seems a little hard to believe, but okay" she replied, before looking back down at her menu. Emanuele wasn't sure how to convince her, he stared blankly behind the menu for a moment. "So, who was that lady that I met at your place? I remember you saying your mom lives in Hong Kong" he said, trying to break the silence, "Yes, that is my aunty I'm living there with her and her son Mike until I finish my studies" replied Leila, with a well-rehearsed cover story for the real reason. "Oh ok, so is she your mother or father's sister?" "Father's" she replied, before quickly looking back at her menu. "So, what does your father do?" asked Emanuele, "He runs some restaurants in China town, Los Angeles" she replied. "Do you get to see him much?" "No, what about your father, what does he do?" she replied, quickly putting the ball back into his court of conversation. "He runs a few small businesses, car dealerships, travel agencies, that sort of thing. I actually help him run things, and the nice cars are a good excuse for business promotion and tax write-offs," said Emanuele. "So, that's what you'll be doing after college?" she asked, "Yeah, I'll be helping him run things full time after university... So um, would you ever consider going into business with your father, so you could stay here?" asked Emanuele, sounding hopeful, "No" she replied, abruptly. It was a shot to the guts for Emanuele as he felt disappointed by her response, but assumed it was something to do with the relationship she had with her father.

Soon after their starters came out and they began eating and enjoying the food, commenting on how good it was to each other. Emanuele tried a scallop with his fork and some of the sauce dropped on his chin; Leila giggled as he realized before he quickly grabbed a napkin and wiped it off. They shared a few nice moments together at the table, and Leila seemed to let her guard down as the night went on. "I'm already getting full" she said, leaning back on her chair with her chest out, revealing the top portion of her breasts. Emanuele noticed and wondered if they were real, as they seemed to be a bit too symmetrical, but suddenly, his attention turned back to the food as she glanced at him. "Oh well, I guess I'll try some of your main, if that's okay" he said, "Of course you can" she replied. When the mains came out, they started eating and when Leila couldn't eat anymore, she started to feed Emanuele some of hers. She giggled at the painful faces he made, which showed that he was struggling to finish each consecutive mouthful. "Ok I'm stuffed, I can't eat anymore" he said, dropping his knife and fork down on the plate and putting his hands up in playful surrender. Just then, Leila grabbed another piece of meat on her fork and put it towards him and started laughing, "just joking" she said, before putting it back down. They talked together for another half an hour and when they weren't feeling so full decided to go for a walk on the marina. Before they left, Emanuele handed the bill book back to Steve and they both thanked him for the evening. Steve opened the bill which amounted to \$224, but Emanuele had left \$800 cash inside. Steve then showed this to waiter that had been rude to Emanuele, "This is why I will always make room for my top customers" he said. Emanuele and Leila walked along the docks together, looking at the water and lights in the distance, then suddenly, Leila turned to Emanuele.

“Thank you for tonight, I haven’t enjoyed myself this much in a long time” she said, “You’re welcome... you know... I’ve honestly never felt this way about anyone in my life before” replied Emanuele, hoping that his statement wasn’t too forward. But he was immediately given reassurance because as soon as he had finished saying it, Leila smiled and hugged him. Then she pulled back and stared into his eyes for a moment. He took it as his signal, then leaning in, he kissed her gently on the lips, before pulling away slowly. But Leila wanted more, she leaned back in, kissed him and then they both kissed passionately for a few moments. They both pulled away a little surprised at how quickly things had progressed and looking at one another they began to laugh before they continued walking and talking. Together they went down and sat on a seat, looking at the boats on the water as San Diego lit up the night sky in the background. Emanuele put his right arm around Leila and held her close while she rested her head on him. They were both falling hard for each other, even though they had only known one another for a short period of time. They both felt an indescribable connection, and for very good reason as fate had brought them together. But each of them would soon learn that they had much more in common than they knew. Emanuele looked at his expensive watch; it was 11pm. Then he looked back at Leila, “I’d better get you home” he said, as her beautiful smile turned into a look of disappointment. He didn’t want her to go home, but he wanted to be respectful of a dating process he had seen in movies, where one gradually builds into something serious, not go all in at once and ruin things. “Okay” she replied with a similar feeling, also not wanting to come off as being ‘clingy’. They both got up and held hands as they made their way back to the car and got inside. Just as Emanuele was about to start the engine, Leila grabbed his head and started to kiss him again, passionately. Then she pulled away and smiled, “Sorry” she said, “I’m not sorry” he replied with a huge grin on his face.

When the Aston Martin had pulled up into Leila's driveway, Emanuele had a sinking feeling in his stomach as they were about to part ways for the night. "Have you got much planned for the weekend?" he asked curiously, "Nothing worth sharing" she replied. He badly wanted to ask her to join him in Vegas that weekend, but knew he couldn't, as it was strictly business. "Okay, well I guess I'll see you Monday" he said, before they were about to go in for one last kiss, but now had an audience of one. "We better not, I don't want to get you into trouble" said Emanuele, noticing Mike standing out front, staring him down. Leila looked up as well, "Okay you're right, I'll never hear the end of it" she said, as she quickly grabbed her handbag. "Oh, and thank you again, for tonight" she added as she got out of the car, and then walked inside. "You're welcome" said Emanuele to himself, before cranking the music up on the sound system.

He was feeling so pumped and excited as he sped home, singing along to his favorite beats. He could tell Leila was into him just as much as he was into her, and although the night started off shaky, it had turned into a huge success.

Chapter 5: A Party Surprise

When Emanuele had arrived home from his date with Leila, he walked inside still singing the last song that had been playing in the Vanquish, with extra spring in his step. Eva had been in the lounge room watching TV but got up out of curiosity when she heard him arrive. Walking into the kitchen, she then grabbed a bottle of sparkling water from the fridge, before taking a sip while staring at her brother inquisitively. Noticing her, Emanuele began to hum as he put his car keys on the counter and grabbed himself a bottle. "So how was your night?" she asked, "Yeah it was alright" replied Emanuele, casually, trying to downplay his excitement in front of her. "Come on, really how was it?" she asked again; he paused, "What do you want me to say, huh? She's amazing... and not to mention the most beautiful girl I've ever seen" said Emanuele, feeling slightly embarrassed afterwards; he had never opened up like that to his sister before and anticipated the mocking. "I'm happy for you, big brother" she said to his surprise. "Thanks, I'll introduce you to her if things get serious... have you got your things sorted for Vegas?" "Yeah, I can't wait, we haven't been to Vegas in years!" "Ah, yeah, well I've got to pack my bag, goodnight" he replied, cheerfully swiping the car keys back into his hand. He didn't want to tell his sister he had gone to Vegas only 3 months prior. Dominic had taken him to a private function to meet with a few of the organizations key people. The function was held under the premise of being a social event but was really for Emanuele to build relationships within the organization, and for Dominic to introduce his heir to some of the clientele. Dominic had always tried to shelter his daughter from his world as much as possible, and Emanuele was well aware of his reasoning, and therefore never spoke about the particulars of the business in front of her.

“Let’s go Eva!” yelled Emanuele the following morning; he had been waiting in the kitchen when he saw Percy pull up in an SUV out the front of their house, on one of the surveillance monitors. It was 10:01am, the time that they were instructed to be ready by, and Eva had already been preparing herself for 2 hours. “Hang on!” she yelled, as Percy honked the horn outside. A few seconds later, she ran down the stairs with a full face of make up on, in a short dress and high heels. “Adiós mis preciosos!” yelled Maria, as the two of them rushed out the front door and towards the car. Emanuele opened the boot of the car, threw their bags inside and then jumped in after Eva. Percy looked a bit confused, “Does your dad know you’re coming darling?” he asked, “Yes he does” replied Eva, firmly. “Ok, hit it” said Percy to the driver, who then took off for the airport. When they arrived, they went through a secluded security checkpoint, separate from the general public’s terminal. They drove up to Dominic’s hangar and Eva was shocked as she looked at it; she slapped her brother on the shoulder, “This is dad’s?” she asked, “Your father recently acquired it” said Percy, saving Emanuele the explanation as to why she’d never seen it. It was huge and consisted of 2 planes, a Gulfstream G450, and Gulfstream G550. The SUV pulled up alongside the other 4 cars that were already there, with some of Dominic’s people already pulling their luggage out. Soon after, Dominic’s limousine pulled up; two bodyguards stepped out first, and they grabbed the bags out of the trunk. Then Clay stepped out, and walked over to Emanuele and Eva, “Hey Eva” he said, as he gave her a friendly hug. Then he shook Emanuele’s hand looking seriously, before playfully faking a punch as Emanuele pretended to block it. After ending his phone call, Dominic stepped out, and walked over to where everyone else was standing around the cars. Suddenly, everyone became silent, and looked towards him.

There were 31 people present in front of him; the 4 personal pilots, 16 of Dominic's top earners, 3 CEO's, each of an individual corporation that he owned; 2 of his elite attorneys that oversaw a team of 8 lawyers, that looked after his business interests and had never lost him a case; his senior accountant, the two bodyguards, and lastly, Clay, Emanuele, and Eva.

Upon seeing his daughter, Dominic approached Eva, gave her a kiss on the cheek and a hug; showing no sign that he was a little displeased she was there. He then put his hand on Emanuele's shoulder, squeezing it, "Hey son" he said before walking over to stand with Clay, and the two enforcers in front of the G550 steps. "I want to thank you all for coming. You have all made sacrifices and put in the hard work to make our organization as profitable as it has been. To show my gratitude I'm taking you all to Vegas in case you didn't already know" smiled Dominic, before continuing, "Tonight we'll be gathering at my apartment, I would like for you all to attend, but you may come and go as you please, as evening gets on. You'll all be staying at the Bellagio, and all food, drinks, and companionship, will be paid for. As for gambling and anything else, you will all find a package on your seats containing 50 thousand cash. So, best of luck to the gamblers among you. You are the core people of this business, and this repayment is long overdue" he said, just as one of the pilots walked over to Clay, "We're all set" he said. Dominic then looked at Clay who nodded, "Okay, ten of you on that Gulfstream, the rest of you with me" said Dominic, pointing to ten of his people, who were each from different US states. Suddenly, the group began chanting loudly with their fists in the air, "Dominic! -Dominic! -Dominic!" they yelled. Dominic nodded, acknowledging them, and then walked up the stairs, onto the Gulfstream G550 Jet.

Eva looked at the men and couldn't help but burst out laughing; Emanuele nudged her, smiling, as he held himself back from laughing as well. The first group of men boarded the G450, while the others followed Dominic onto the G550, carrying their hand luggage on board. While the pilots did their last checks inside of the cockpits, two very beautiful blonde air hostesses appeared; boarding each plane before they began to serve the passengers. Once it was ready, the G550 made its way from the hangar and out to the waiting strip just before the runway; the G450 followed behind at a regulated distance. "Whiskey, Bravo, Echo, Zero, you are clear for take-off" was heard by the pilots in the cockpit of the G550, coming from the communications tower. Soon after the G550 had taken off, the clearance came from the control tower for the G450 to also take-off for its destination of Las Vegas, Nevada.

During the flight, Dominic was seated in a plush leather seat next to Neil his senior accountant; sitting opposite them were the Barosa brother's, Dominic's elite lawyers. Neil lay down a ledger book on the table, detailing the quarterly figures of Dominic's property portfolio in front of him, "We were able to get new tenants for 18 of your properties in Hollywood and Beverly Hills, but unfortunately your Malibu properties remain empty at this time," said Neil. "That's disappointing--put these two up for sale, they haven't had tenants for 18 months now. I'll use the proceeds to buy more apartments in New York. My source in the governor's office said there will be a rental boom beginning next quarter. Put the Seafield drive house up for 6 million and the Grassfield Ave house up for 13" replied Dominic. "Very good, although I should point out, that is 3 million less, combined, than what you originally paid for them" "I want them sold fast Neil, if they don't sell in 3 months take another 500K off both. If we get this done quickly, I'll make that back within 12 months... Now, how about the other businesses?" asked Dominic.

Neil casually pulled out a folder of documents from his bag and placed them in front of Dominic, "As you can see the total revenue of your 44 Car Dealerships is up 3% compared with last financial year" he said, as Dominic looked pleased. "Good and how about the travel agencies?" he asked, "Unfortunately, that's where it gets bad – down by 16% compared to last year. More people are planning their own holidays online now," replied Neil. "Alright, tomorrow call Martin, have the tech team build something similar to the market leaders' platform. We need a portion of the online market to make up for lost revenue" replied Dominic. Just then the air hostess brought out bottles of champagne and glasses to their table on a silver platter. She poured their drinks and then went to get the next lot of glasses and champagne, before making her way over to the other table where Emanuele and Eva were seated across from Percy and Clay. She placed the champagne tray on their table, poured 4 glasses and left the bottle, not knowing whether Eva was 21 or not. But she didn't want to cause a scene by asking, seeing at it was Eva's father's plane they were all on, and he was paying her normal month's salary for a one-hour job. Eva grabbed her glass as Emanuele looked at her, "You think that's a good idea?" he asked. "You've seen me drink before" she replied, sounding annoyed, "She's a big girl" added Clay, smirking. Emanuele guessed she could probably use a drink with the week that she'd had. "Salute" said Percy, raising his glass, to which all four of them raised theirs, "Salute" they replied. Then once all passengers on board had their champagnes in hand, "Salute!" they all yelled. Percy drank his glass without taking a breath and then grabbed the bottle to pour himself another. "Take it easy Percy, you'll be drunk before we get there" said Clay, "We Scotsmen can handle our booze" replied Percy, confidently. "Can't say the same for all of us" added Emanuele, referring to Clay being drunk at training.

But he quickly deflected, pointing towards his sister, as the two men looked at him and smiled. Eva noticed and was a little annoyed. "So, Clay I was thinking maybe you could teach me how to fight" said Eva, "I thought you wanted me to teach you?" said Emanuele, looking a little surprised. "Well, I just thought I should learn from the best" she replied, smugly at her brother. "Sure, come over with Emanuele anytime, but be careful with what I teach you, we don't want you killing him" said Clay smiling at Emanuele, who replied with a sarcastic eye roll. Percy was pouring his third glass of champagne when he locked eyes with Dominic and immediately remembered that he had important cargo to look after. Nodding inconspicuously, he quickly finished his glass of champagne and didn't drink anything else for the remainder of the flight. When they had arrived at the airport, everyone stepped off the planes where a fleet of Mercedes vans were waiting, with each chauffeur standing beside them. Percy nodded to an enforcer who was sitting at the back of the plane; the man quickly got up and made his way to a concealed compartment where bags of cocaine were. Percy followed him, grabbing two bags, then both men waited until everyone had gotten off the planes and into their respective rides. Once the vans began to leave, they quickly walked to the last one waiting for them and were driven separately to the party convoy over to Dominic's Vegas penthouse. Dominic had his own lifestyle concierge staff who made sure all his personal travel ran smoothly and made special provisions when carrying product. When Percy and his enforcer arrived at the penthouse, they avoided contact with everyone until the bags were securely hidden in a secret meeting room behind Dominic's office. Then they did a thorough sweep of the room to make sure there were no hidden bugs, Wi-Fi, or cellular signals; once inside this private meeting room, no signal was to go in or out.

This was achieved by having the room installed with copper plate in the walls; it acted as a giant faraday cage and was the only room where major deals and macro takeover strategies were discussed. After the sweep was done, Percy and his enforcer walked out to the indoor balcony which overlooked the large living area, inside the penthouse. The party was beginning to come alive, as the guests began mingling, drinking, and socializing. In the center of the party was a five-meter-long grazing table, full of a range of delicacies from all around the world, including 5 different cheese and chocolate fondue fountains and a shrimp tower. Across from it was a bar with a mountain of spirits and eight different beers on tap. It was being serviced by 2 barmen while waiters walked around the huge ballroom sized living area with platters of wine, champagne and tasting food. Out the back there was an al a carte chef and crew producing many different tasting platters inside of the commercial kitchen. On the main wall in the room a projector was showing the latest sport highlights, and would be showing the UFC main event, later that evening. Past the open glass bi-fold doors was a huge balcony that overlooked the famous buildings of Las Vegas and could comfortably accommodate a hundred people. At 6pm more of Dominic's associates and his exclusive guests began arriving, all impeccably dressed in their suits and dresses. The men and women who came alone were directed to a seating area where high class escorts were mingling. They were each identified with a golden 'e' pin for 'escort' and were all paid for the night, regardless of whether a guest requested their company or not. Eight private security guards who had signed NDAs were hired for the evening, on the recommendation of Dominic's event coordinator Deniro, who made sure everything on the evening's agenda ran perfectly as planned. All workers including chef's and servers were paid exceptionally well to always maintain the utmost professionalism, regardless of what debauchery they may witness.

Suddenly, a distracting situation was transpiring at the penthouse entrance. Carlos and Javier had arrived at the penthouse, only to be stopped by three of the guards. They'd caught wind of the event and turned up without invitations. "Guests only, how did you get in here?" asked the largest of the security guards in a deep voice, who had stopped them on suspicion as they weren't wearing formal attire. "We're friends of Dominic's, now fuck off!" said Carlos angrily, "Give us your names and we'll find out" replied another guard, not wanting to escalate the situation. "Carlos and Javier" said Javier quickly, knowing that Carlos wasn't deterred to causing a scene and fighting 3 guards. "Ok wait here," replied the calmer guard, who then walked over to Deniro who was busy organizing the DJ for later that evening. "Sir, we've got some unexpected guests who say they know the host" he said, "If they're not on the guest list, get them out of here" replied Deniro. "Yes sir" replied the guard, before walking back to the entrance. Deniro huffed and then followed to make sure they weren't connected to Dominic in any way. "You gotta go" said the guard when he arrived back to Carlos and Javier; Carlos smiled and then punched the guard closest to him in the throat. The guard dropped to the ground grabbing his neck coughing, uncontrollably. "Hey!" shouted Deniro, as he walked over to them after seeing what had happened. "Who are you... handsome men?" he asked, now looking interested, "We're Dominic's associates" replied Javier calmly, "Now get your dogs off me!" yelled Carlos, who had been pinned up against the wall by the other two guards. "Alright let him go" said Deniro, just as Emanuele was walking through the hallway and spotted the five men standing there in their predicament. He casually walked over to them, "What's going on here?" he asked, "Tell these puto rental cops who we are!" yelled Carlos. "Emanuele do you know these men?" asked Deniro, "Nope, never seen them" replied Emanuele smirking, as he was amused at seeing Carlos being detained.

“You little motherfucker!” yelled Carlos, “Just joking, yeah, I know them. Let them in” he said. The guards looked at Deniro who nodded with a concerned look, and then they let Carlos go, before he slammed both men in the chest with his palms and the two guards staggered back. “I’m really sorry” said Deniro who was pushed out of the way by Carlos as he walked past, “Javier, lets drink!” he yelled as they walked through into the party. “Sorry about that... We weren’t expecting them, but they do work for my father” said Emanuele, as Deniro composed himself and the guards helped their friend up off the ground. Emanuele went to use the bathroom and then he walked back into the party, spotting Carlos hugging Eva. He felt instant regret for letting him in, as he walked over to break them up, “Don’t you think you should tell my father you’re here? He wasn’t expecting you” said Emanuele, coming in between the two of them. Carlos grabbed a glass of champagne from a passing waiter and downed it. “I’ll see you in a bit” he said smiling at Eva, then he tapped Javier on the shoulder, and they made their way upstairs to where Dominic was. “Avoid him” said Emanuele looking seriously at Eva, “I’ll try” she replied insincerely. Carlos opened the door to the upstairs conference room where Dominic, Clay and four others were seated drinking scotch and smoking cigars. “Boss” said Carlos humbly, as he entered the room. Dominic’s smile turned to a stern look as he put his cigar down, “What are you doing here?” he asked, not at all glad to see Carlos. “We came to Vegas for the weekend and were told by...” “Shut up! You were supposed to be looking after the operations, that shipment needs to be ready” said Dominic, sternly interrupting him. “I know boss, but I’ve got Reggie looking after it and we’ll be back there Monday” said Carlos trying to gently be persuasive; but Dominic was never persuaded when it came to business. “You’re on a plane tomorrow morning” said Dominic, “Okay, boss” replied Carlos, respectfully.

Then he and Javier turned to leave the room, "Enjoy your night boys" said Clay sarcastically, before he and a few of the men began laughing. Dominic cracked a smile as he started puffing on his cigar again. "I'm tired of that prick. You know he was recruited after beating up my father's men, and now he's Dominic's right-hand man... it's bullshit!" said Carlos angrily, as he and Javier walked down the stairs. The two of them went down to the bar, took a couple of tequila shots, and grabbed a beer each. They turned around with their backs leaned up against the bar, with beers in hand and surveyed the room for people that they knew. Javier saw a couple of guys he'd met on a job standing around the food table, so he decided to walk over and talk to them, "I'll catch up with you" he said, hitting Carlos lightly on the arm. Carlos got up and looked around for Eva, but he couldn't see her; he spotted Emanuele sitting on a lounge suite talking to some people without her. So, he went walking around the big room looking past the groups of people standing and talking loudly. But he still couldn't see her, so then he made his way out on to the balcony. Scanning around with his eyes, he then finally found her leaning against the railing and looking out at the Vegas lights. One of the guests was trying to chat her up and treating her like an escort. She looked uncomfortable so Carlos quickly walked over and grabbed him by the back of the collar and pulled him out of the way. "Get away from my girlfriend, Puto" he said angrily; the man who was of no real importance instantly apologized and then walked away. "Girlfriend huh?" asked Eva, not sounding too impressed with the title. "I had to say something to get him away from you, without getting physical, you know" replied Carlos, looking pleased with himself, "Yeah... well, thanks" replied Eva, sounding a little upset. She wiped a tear that was slightly building up from her right eye before it hit her make-up. The tipsy guest hitting on her had rehashed some of the emotions she felt from the mock rape at her high school.

She didn't realize the way she portrayed herself was the sole reason for all the unwanted attention from men. Eva had no role models to teach her about self-worth and that she was precious, apart from her mother, but Maria had been emotionally absent since Dominic left.

In the pursuit of a meaningful relationship, Eva had mistakenly thought that the answer was to briefly trial many guys, in order to find the right one.

"What's wrong Eva?" asked Carlos insincerely, "Oh nothing just some nasty girls at school" she replied, concealing the truth. Most people would have known that this wasn't what was going on, but Carlos had absolutely no empathy for others misfortune, due to the way he had grown up. "Just dumb, jealous bitches don't worry about them, they can't hurt you" he said. Eva just stayed silent; she didn't feel much better having Carlos there than she did the man hitting on her. "I'm having that party in a few weeks. You should come, it'll cheer you up, oh, and make sure to bring some girls with you, you know for Javier," said Carlos smiling. "I'll see Carlos, I have to go to the bathroom" she replied and then began to walk away. "Do you want a drink?!" yelled Carlos, but Eva just turned back and shook her head to say no, before going inside while trying to hide her sorrow. "Argghhh!" yelled Carlos, over the balcony, feeling angry for being blown off, yet again. "What!" he asked angrily, to some of the other guests as they pretended not to notice. Then he walked back inside and grabbed Javier, "Let's blow this party, get some hookers, go back to the apartment and do some coke" he said, "They've got hookers here" replied Javier pointing to the escort area, looking a little confused. "Let's go hermano" said Carlos, sounding pissed off; Javier sighed, before hesitantly following him out. They exited with Carlos signaling his middle fingers to the guards that had stopped them, and Javier just shook his head as they walked out.

Meanwhile, a group of people seated on the lounge suite began laughing as Emanuele told a joke about the experience he'd be bringing to the table of the organization. But he reassured them that he wouldn't be making any changes without his father's blessing. "Excuse me" he said, noticing his sister clearly upset as she walked up the stairs to the rooms. When Eva stepped out of the bathroom after fixing her make-up, Emanuele was standing there waiting for her, "What is it?" he asked, "Nothing I just need to forget what happened. I'll go see dad when he's finished his meeting" "He should be finished soon" replied Emanuele. After consoling her, they both went back out to the party and started to socialize. Emanuele introduced his sister to another group that approached them; Eva's persona instantly changed as she put on a mask of charm. One of the lady's named Deborah was nice to her. She asked Eva about her interests and what she wanted to do for a career after school. Eva never would have known that this lady ran a chain of anti-aging therapy and tanning clinics, which sold growth hormone and other steroidal drugs to referred customers. She had many influential people working for her in the fitness industry, targeting new gym goers interested in getting into shape as quickly as possible. Nor would Eva have ever suspected that this nice lady had also given the command to kill 4 problem customers trying to cheat her out of money. As soon as the guests at the party knew that Eva was Dominic's daughter, they had the understanding to keep their mouths shut about the business in front of her. As the final guests started to filter inside, the penthouse became alive and bustling with a total of 155 people there that evening. Dominic, Clay, and the other men made their way out to the party and were greeted with praise and handshakes from the guests. Dominic pulled one of his men aside, "get my son" he said, as he wanted to introduce Emanuele to someone of great importance, who would soon arrive. When Emanuele got the message, he went and stood by his father near the entrance, "Who is it that you

want me to meet?" he asked. "Someone who is our entry into the only untapped market on the West Coast. He's in the lobby, on his way up," replied Dominic.

Eva spotted Emanuele standing with her father and made her way over to talk to her dad. "Not now Eva" said Dominic, insensitively as she approached, and Emanuele just shook his head, looking sympathetically towards her. She didn't say anything, but just turned and walked away with her smile fading; being neglected just made her feel worse.

No longer than 30 seconds later, a Chinese man in his mid-50's who was impeccably dressed in a suit, made his way into the penthouse. He was accompanied by two other large Asian men in suits, who were his personal bodyguards. Following behind them was a small group of others; Emanuele didn't take any notice of them though. He knew that the man standing in front was who his father wanted him to meet. A waiter came over to the group and offered some drinks to the three men, but they ignored the gesture, so the waiter offered the group standing behind some drinks. Dominic and the Chinese man both paused and held stern faces, staring at each other for a moment. Then the Chinese man's stern look turned into a pleasant smile, "Mr Dominic, pleasure to see you again" he said, "Likewise, Mr Zhang" replied Dominic, as the two men shook hands. "I'd like you to meet my son Emanuele" said Dominic, before Mr Zhang and Emanuele shook hands, "Pleased to meet you," said Emanuele, confidently. Mr Zhang then spoke in Mandarin and the two Asian bodyguards left his side as one of the women from the small group stepped forward to stand next to him. To Emanuele's absolute SHOCK, the woman standing in front of him was Leila! "Mr Dominic, Emanuele, my daughter Leila Zhang" he said, "It's my pleasure" said Dominic as he took her hand and shook it softly. Both Leila and Emanuele were in shock as they stared at one another; Leila's jaw dropped a little, but she quickly composed herself as she realized the one person, she could not get out of her mind was standing right in front of her.

This was the last place either of them expected to have seen each other next; the thought of this happening had never even entered their minds. "This is my son Emanuele" said Dominic, noticing the way they were looking at each other, "Do you two know each other?" he asked. "No" replied Leila, stepping forward to shake Emanuele's hand, "You must have one of those familiar faces" she added, straight-faced. Emanuele played along, "Yeah, I get that quite a bit actually" he said putting his hand out and shaking hers. Emanuele felt the tension as questions raced through his mind, 'Why was Leila here? Why didn't she tell him about her father? How did Mr Zhang fit into the picture? How would this encounter affect their relationship?' but he quickly snapped out of it. "Why don't you take Leila to get something to drink?" asked Dominic looking at his son, "Ok, please join me" said Emanuele, politely gesturing for Leila to follow him. As he put his arm out to escort her to the bar, he noticed her cousin Mike was standing in the group, looking directly at Emanuele with a fearful look of shock.

Dominic and Clay accompanied Zhang and his bodyguards up to the secret meeting room to talk business. "Please have a seat... scotch?" asked Dominic as the five men entered the room, "No" replied Zhang. Dominic sat straight across from Zhang while Clay sat to the side in one of the plush, leather armchairs. Zhang's two bodyguards just stood behind their boss looking straight ahead as if they weren't there. Dominic opened the humidor sitting on the coffee table and offered Zhang a cigar. "Ah, yes" Zhang responded, pulling out a Monte Cristo from the humidor and using the cutters on the coffee table to cut the cap off. He then pulled out a gold lighter with dragon patters from his jacket, lit the cigar and then began puffing. "I understand that your organization is run out of both Chinatown LA, and the Asian district in San Diego," said Dominic, getting straight to the point.

He knew that, like him, Zhang wasn't someone for useless small talk, especially being one of Dominic's bigger potential clients for drug distribution. "I also have operations in Chinatown San Francisco, and Sacramento" replied Zhang. Dominic paused, he was after more distribution outlets, and knew that the growth of the Asian communities would have a great impact on his profit margins. But he had just made a deal with the San Francisco Fixers that he wanted to see through, "I'll be honest with you Mr Zhang, I'm interested in supplying to you in LA and Sacramento. But I already have distribution in San Francisco and San Diego," he said. He also had distribution in LA taken care of by his own men but knew that having a deal in place with Zhang would increase his reach and both of their profits. "I appreciate your honesty Mr Dominic, even though it isn't ideal. I've taken into consideration the figures you've given me, and I'm looking for a supplier to keep up with the demand. So, despite only taking on two areas I still believe this will be a very profitable relationship" replied Zhang. "I couldn't agree more," said Dominic, "Although I do need your personal guarantee that you will be able to fulfil product demand" said Zhang, sitting back in his chair, sounding serious. Dominic leaned forward, looking Zhang straight in the eyes, "I tell you this... even if you had people in every major city along the West coast, you wouldn't come close to using up my supply" he said. Zhang smiled at the prideful response, "I'm very pleased to hear that... on another issue how will you be dealing with the crackdown on the borders?" he asked. Dominic sat back in the plush leather chair, rubbing his hand on his cheek, "All due respect, I don't tell anyone my trade secrets apart from my men receiving the orders. My trucks will get the product to you on time, every time" he replied. Mr Zhang leaned forward, and while still puffing on the cigar, reached his hand out; Dominic reached forward and shook Zhang's hand, and just like that, a forty-million-dollar per quarter drug deal was sealed.

“One more thing, Mr Dominic” said Zhang grinning, “Yes, Mr Zhang?” asked Dominic, “How do you feel about Fentanyl?” “I don’t deal in it, I like profits in perpetuity, I’m not trying to kill my customers... right away, that is” replied Dominic. Mr Zhang began laughing as he stood up, “I’ll leave you to your party guests then” “Just a moment please Mr Zhang” replied Dominic, then he looked to Clay, “Get Percy to bring it here” he said. Clay nodded and then went and told Percy, who entered a few short moments later, carrying the bags containing the 18 kilos of cocaine. Dominic pointed to the coffee table and Percy placed the bags in front of Mr Zhang. “What is this?” asked Zhang looking surprised, “A show of good faith” replied Dominic, before Zhang opened one of the bags to reveal the individual bricks of powder, “9 kilos in each, of the highest quality, to do with as you wish” he continued. Zhang was very impressed; he clicked his fingers before one of his bodyguards zipped up and took the two bags. He then shook Dominic’s hand again, smiling and thanking him. While still smoking his cigar, Zhang left the room to join the party downstairs, while his bodyguard carrying the cocaine went out to the cars and waited with the drivers. The other bodyguard spoke in Mandarin as they entered the party, “He said no to our product, what will you do now?” he asked, “Once we have their product, we’ll begin to distribute our own with it” replied Zhang, before giving some of the guests a fake smile. Dominic was no fool; he knew just about every aspect of Zhang’s operations but wanted to come across as though he was putting his trust in Zhang’s ability. The ‘show of good faith’ cost Dominic \$900K in product, but he knew with this new deal in place he would make that back in under a month.

Meanwhile, Emanuele and Leila were sitting on a couple of chairs out on the balcony and had managed to make small talk for a whole minute, before addressing the elephant in the room.

It was impossible to ignore the fact that both their father's knew each other, and they were both in the drug industry. There was no denying it, and now it was clear why Leila had tried to avoid speaking about her father on their date together. "So, I get why you didn't want to talk to me about your father. I face the same thing every time I get asked about mine," said Emanuele. Leila was silent for a moment; she looked straight ahead and then turned to Emanuele, "I don't have anything to do with what my father does. I don't want anything to do with it, and neither did my mother. She filed for divorce when I was fourteen and then she moved back to China" replied Leila, "Why didn't you go with her?" he asked. "I wanted to, but my father threatened my mother that she would never see me again" "I thought you said you were moving back once you finished your degree" said Emanuele, looking concerned. Leila nodded, "Yes, my father doesn't care anymore. He's agreed to let me go live with her once I finish my studies; he realizes that I do not want any part of what he does. He always wanted a son, but now, he's only got me" she said, appearing a little emotional. Emanuele gently took Leila's hand, "Hey, you are the most amazing person I know. I'm so glad you came into my life" he said. Leila tried to remain closed off, but she couldn't help but smile; she felt the same. "I've never told my story to anyone. But you have a kind heart and I feel so close to you already" "I feel the same, I feel connected to you" said Emanuele taking her other hand, but she slowly pulled them away. "Why are you such a beautiful person, you're making it difficult for me to leave... Besides, I don't know where you fit into all of this" she said sounding worried, and then sighed, "You must be a part of the drug trade" she added. Emanuele's mind began racing, 'Shit! I can't tell her the truth. She'll never speak to me again if I tell her the truth' he thought. "No of course not, I get to choose my own destiny. I'm here out of respect to my father, besides I'm studying to have my own business in real estate one day" he said, deceitfully.

Leila smiled at him slightly, but she wasn't convinced; she knew that the life of crime was an extremely difficult thing to escape and had witnessed firsthand the destruction it could cause. Most of her relatives on her father's side were a part of it, and once they got into it, they didn't get out. Leila's mother had only gotten out alive because of her wealthy family in Hong Kong who had made threats against her ex-husband. Emanuele tried to entertain her for the rest of the night, keeping things light and fun, while Leila tried to show him that she was enjoying herself. But Emanuele knew that this relationship he so desperately wanted with her, had just become a whole lot more complicated.

While the party was still in full swing, Eva lay on a bed in one of the spare rooms looking at the ceiling, feeling miserable. Thoughts passed through her mind, and she felt very lonely and worthless as though no one in her life would care if she just disappeared. Suddenly, she thought about Carlos and how he had been kind to her in his own weird way at the party. She felt a little guilty for not being nicer to him, so she quickly wiped the tears from her eyes and then picked up her phone to call him. He was in his apartment with a hooker dancing on his lap, as he swigged from a bottle of tequila. Suddenly, he felt his phone vibrate; he placed the bottle on the side table wiped his mouth and pulled out his phone. To his surprise it was Eva calling him; he quickly pushed the hooker off him, "I need to take this" he said, before standing up. The thick Latina hooker walked off to the kitchen, disgruntled. "Yeah, what's wrong?" he asked, "Oh nothing, I just wanted to say I was sorry for not being social tonight" replied Eva. Carlos rolled his eyes, "Yeah don't worry about it, is that all?" "No, I was thinking I'd like to come to the next party you have" she said. Carlos suddenly perked up, "Oh yeah?" he asked with an evil looking grin, "Yeah" she replied, "Well, I'll be having that gathering in 3 weeks, but how about you let me pick you up from school next week?" he asked.

“Yeah okay, I’m going back Tuesday so I’ll see you then” “Ok, dope, goodbye” said Carlos, before ending the call. Then he yelled at the hooker in Spanish to come back and finish him off. As he took another swig from the tequila bottle, he thought about what he was going to do, to get Eva into his bed.

Eva felt better after the phone call; she knew that Emanuele and her father couldn't find out that she would be going to Carlos' party though, as they would never allow it. But she didn't care this time; if her own father wasn't going to give her any attention, then she wasn't going to abide by his rules anymore.

Chapter 6: Romance Rekindled

“Damn it!” yelled Emanuele, as he threw his cell phone against the wall, cracking the screen on impact. He was frustrated; he had not seen or heard from Leila since the party, despite the 5 texts and 2 voice messages he had left, and she hadn’t shown up to university that day either. The strong feelings he had developed for her were controlling him emotionally, and if she was avoiding him because of everything that had come to light, then he knew that there was nothing he could do. He took a deep breath, trying to calm himself down, then picked up the phone and took his sim card out. He threw the damaged phone in the bin, then took another one out from the collection he had in his side table, and after inserting the sim, he called Clay. “Yeah Clay, I can’t make it today I just found out I’ve got an assignment due in this week” he said, “Alright but you’re gonna have to train your ass off tomorrow” replied Clay, knowing that his study was the priority. “Yeah, I will, see you tomorrow” said Emanuele before ending the call and placing his phone next to him. Now sitting on the edge of his bed, he then collapsed back on it and sighed, staring aimlessly at the ceiling. Even though he did have an assignment due that wasn’t the reason why he couldn’t train. He was feeling completely unmotivated because he hadn’t heard from Leila, and he knew his head wasn’t in the right place for a hard-core training session. He grabbed his phone and swiped through his apps carelessly, then stopped his thumb on the contacts icon, before opening it up to call Samuel. “Hey Samuel, what you up to?” he asked, “Not much bro, you?” “Do you wanna head to the mall for some food?” asked Emanuele, “I got nothing better happening” “Cool, see you in 30” said Emanuele, before ending the call and changing into some casual clothes.

He walked to Eva's room and knocked on her door, "Yeah?" she answered, before Emanuele opened it and stuck his head in, "Going to the mall, do you want to come?" he asked, "Give me 15 minutes to get ready" she replied. Emanuele raised his eyebrows as he closed the door, not expecting her to be ready in 15 minutes, let alone say 'yes' to going. But he was happy enough to take her with him to get her out of the house. To his surprise, his sister appeared after 20 minutes; she then followed her brother to the garage, where they got into the Range Rover. When they arrived in Samuel's suburb Eva looked out the window and saw street kids standing on the corner, drinking from bottles concealed with paper bags. "Where the hell are we?" she asked, "We're picking up a friend of mine, don't worry he's cool" replied Emanuele. Samuel was waiting out the front for the car and recognized it on its approach. Once it had stopped, he opened the door and was surprised to see Eva sitting there, "Oh--Sorry" he said carefully closing the door and then getting in the back. "Hey bro, this is my sister Eva" said Emanuele looking at him in the rear-view mirror. "Uh, hi nice to meet you" replied Samuel as he stuck his hand out to shake hers. Eva turned around and gave a half-forced smile and then awkwardly shook his hand. Arriving at the mall, they all agreed to get food first, then see a movie. The three of them walked around for a while looking at the various food outlets that were available. Eva decided on a chicken Cesar salad, Emanuele got sushi, and so did Samuel on his suggestion. The food court inside the mall was packed, but they managed to find a free table near the entrance. Samuel pulled out Eva's chair for her, "woah, the gentleman" said Emanuele joking, "thanks" said Eva with a forced smile before sitting down. Samuel was acting different in front of her, and it seemed that he was trying to make a good impression. Emanuele was amused by it; he knew the type that his sister went for which was big athletic meat heads, not computer nerds.

Samuel began making small talk with Eva, "So, how was the date?" asked Emanuele, interrupting a minute later. He liked Samuel but there was no way he would let anything develop between him and his sister. Samuel remained silent, not knowing that the question was directed at him, "The date... how was it?" he asked again. Samuel looked up from his food slightly puzzled, now realizing what Emanuele was referring to, "Huh? --Oh ah, yeah it didn't really work out" he said. "Oh really?" said Emanuele with a surprised look on his face before he started eating his sushi again. His intention had succeeded, and there was an awkward silence for a moment while all three of them kept eating. Then suddenly, 'Cough! Cough!' Samuel nearly choked on one of his sushi rolls; Emanuele wacked him slightly on the back, "Are you right buddy?" he asked, slightly chuckling, "Yeah 'cough!' just went down 'cough!' the wrong way" replied Samuel, struggling to form his sentence. Eva was trying to hold her laughter back while this was going on, and Emanuele looked over at her and gave her a funny look while Samuel took a sip of his soda. Samuel was typically only confident in front of women with liquid courage in his system, preferably vodka. The three of them finished their meals without any more choking and left the food court before walking to the cinema and catching a movie about a group of modern-day bank robbers. When the movie had finished, they made their way for the carpark, got into the Range Rover, and began discussing the movie as they drove back to Samuel's house. "The main guy was so hot" said Eva, "He was bad ass" added Samuel, "I know guys like that" said Emanuele before the car went dead silent. "Bank robbers?" asked Samuel, a moment later. Emanuele cleared his throat, not wanting to divulge in front of Eva, "Nah, just some tough dudes like that" he said with a slight chuckle, "and trust me the lines between good and bad are blurred" he added, instantly clenching his jaw afterwards.

He knew he had already said too much in front of his sister and remained silent for the rest of the ride back. On arrival, Samuel politely thanked Emanuele, "It was lovely to meet you Eva" he added, before he went into his house. Emanuele felt a bit of guilt as though he hadn't been very kind to his friend that evening. "What a nerd" said Eva as they drove out of his street, "He's a good guy... better than most of the fake friends I used to have" replied Emanuele. "Are you sure about that? I mean look where he lives" "That has nothing to do with the person he is. Besides he's got an out, he won't be living there much longer" he replied in defense of Samuel, "He doesn't look like the drug dealing type" replied Eva, "He's not a dealer; he's extremely smart when it comes to technology," said Emanuele. Back at home they walked through the living room and could hear laughter coming from the wine cellar. It was Maria and her friend Rosaline who hadn't visited in months, and it seemed like they were a couple of hours deep on the wine. "Great" said Eva sarcastically to her brother; then they walked in and said 'hello' to their mom and her friend. Emanuele kissed his mom on the cheek while Rosaline commented on how handsome Emanuele was becoming. "I've always been this handsome" said Emanuele jokingly, then they both said goodnight at the first opportunity and walked up to their rooms. "Well at least she's not getting drunk on her own" said Emanuele, "Yeah great consolation, but now we get more noise," replied Eva; Emanuele smiled and then said goodnight to his sister and went to his room. He pulled his phone out and texted Samuel; 'sorry if you felt like I was clowning you tonight. I'm very protective of Eva, and my head is all messed up because of this girl I like ghosting me' it read. Moments later he had his reply, 'don't sweat it man, I get it. I was nervous because I didn't want you getting the wrong idea like I was interested in your sister' it read. Emanuele chuckled, now he understood and was at ease about the situation.

The following morning Emanuele woke up late, and through blurred eyes unlocked his phone. He had a new message, and to his absolute delight it was from Leila; his heart almost skipped a beat as he read the message that said 'I'm sorry I haven't been in contact, I'll be in the library all morning. Come and see me xx'. With renewed spirit, he leapt out of bed, had a quick shower, got dressed and jumped into his Porsche. He blasted his favorite beats and sped over the Coronado bridge, overtaking just about every other car; there was no way he was going to miss her. But he knew where to slow down, because he had the knowledge of where police often set up speed traps.

Arriving at university, he ran straight to the library but couldn't find Leila anywhere because he was late, and the first classes had already started. He couldn't believe it; the one day he had slept in was the one day she had asked him to meet her. He sighed in frustration, then went and tried to sneak into his class, but the lecturer noticed, "Mr Reyes, I'll need to see you after class" she said. After class and after a long-winded discussion with his lecturer about a late assignment, Emanuele was eager to go and find Leila. He walked into the cafeteria, which was busy as usual, and then he walked past a few groups of people standing around talking, before spotting Leila across the hall. As he made his way over to her, they noticed each other and locked eyes; she had a beautiful smile that made his heart race. Suddenly, 'Thud' Emanuele felt a big palm hit his chest; stopping him in his path, "You ready to feel pain pretty boy?" asked Glen, still pissed about coming off second best in their last encounter. Emanuele shook his head in disbelief; 'Why do I have to keep dealing with this angry steroid abuser, especially now?' he thought to himself. "Oi!" someone yelled loudly; both Glen and Emanuele looked to see who was yelling; it was Mike and Jet who were suddenly approaching.

“You mess with him, and you’ll deal with us,” said Mike angrily, but Glen just laughed, “I’ll take you two down with him!” he yelled arrogantly. Students in the cafeteria started moving away from the group of them as things became heated. Just then two security guards ran over, one of them was Glen’s friend Colby, “Not here man, deal with this kid another time” he said trying to calm down his big friend. “You’re gonna get what’s coming to you pretty boy” said Glen, then he walked outside to his group of friends who had been watching from the entrance. As the tense encounter passed, the atmosphere inside the cafeteria went back to normal. “Thanks” said Emanuele, “No, thank you... we apologize for being rude to you the other night, we had no idea who you were” replied Mike humbly, “Don’t worry about it” said Emanuele, as the two of them stood back, making space for him to approach Leila. She came up to him, hugged him, then pulled away, “Who was that?” she asked. Emanuele looked at her and shrugged his shoulders, “Just an old friend” he said jokingly. Leila smiled and then grabbed Emanuele’s hand and led him to the library, so that they could speak in peace and quiet. When they got there, they went to the study area at the back of the library which was sparsely populated during lunch. They pulled two seats together, facing each other with their knees touching. “So, I was a bit worried when I didn’t hear back from you and you weren’t here yesterday; I didn’t know what was going on,” said Emanuele. Leila looked down, sighing, and then looked back up, “I guess I was questioning things after the weekend. I don’t know anything about your family, but I know the type of people my father deals with” she said. Emanuele had a slightly confused look on his face, “My father’s a legitimate businessman – yes he may have some involvement with your father dealing in various goods and services, but I don’t see that side of it,” said Emanuele mouthing the words ‘sorry’ afterwards.

He only spoke this way because it was engrained in him never to talk about the organization in a public place; nothing that could be incriminating if recorded. Leila of all people understood this as she had learnt to do the same, when she was old enough to know what her father did. "Okay, look I really like you, and I just want total honesty if we're going to be together" she said. Emanuele smiled calmly, being careful not to show his excitement at what she had just said. He took her hands, "I want the same, I'm willing to do whatever it takes to be with you" he replied. They looked deeply into each other's eyes for a moment, then Emanuele stood up, leading Leila up into his embrace. He hugged her carefully placing one arm around her lower back and the other on the back of her head. She wrapped her arms around him tightly for a few moments and then they pulled away, looking into each other's eyes again. They were about to kiss when a librarian came around the corner, "No canoodling in the library" she said. They both looked at each other and laughed quietly, as she walked away, discarding her comments, they shared a brief kiss. "Hey, do you want get out of here?" asked Emanuele, "Okay, but I should probably tell Mike" "He knows you're with me, I've got a feeling he'll be okay with it" he replied, and after seeing the way that Mike had respected him in the cafeteria Leila agreed. They made their way to the carpark and Emanuele walked over to the Porsche GT3, "You've got a Porsche as well?" she asked, looking surprised. Emanuele shrugged his shoulders, "Yeah?" he replied cheerfully, before opening Leila's door for her. He jumped in the driver's seat, then pulled out his cell phone, 'Sorry can't drive u 2day' he texted Samuel, wasting as little precious time with Leila as possible. Then he connected it to the car sound system, letting Leila choose some music as he pulled out of the carpark. They drove onto the freeway and there was a few hundred meters to the next car, "Do you want to see what this thing can do?" he asked, "Yes!" replied Leila excitedly.

Emanuele smiled at her, then looked forward as he shifted down and planted his foot on the acceleration pedal. The Porsche engine revved loud and hard, the tires gave a slight screech and then gripped, as they shot down the road. Leila squeezed Emanuele's leg until they slowed down, "Oh my god, I love that feeling" she said, "So do I" Emanuele chuckled. "So where are you taking me?" she asked, "I thought we'd go to Fashion Valley for a look" "Oh I like that place" replied Leila happily. Then Emanuele switched the current music playing and put on some Drake. He looked at the car clock which read '1:42pm' so he overtook the car in front of him and then swerved in and out of traffic as best he could to get there as quickly as he could. He wanted Leila to enjoy the day with him as much as possible, but knew he had to be at training with Clay by 5:00pm sharp and sitting in traffic wouldn't allow him to do that; the threat of a speeding fine wasn't going to deter him either. They arrived in Fashion Valley about 5 minutes later and found a park out the front of JC Penny. Leila took her purse out of her bag before stepping out of the car, and they walked inside. As Emanuele took Leila's hand, she gave a little squeeze in excitement, "Do you mind if we have a look in here?" she asked, slightly pulling Emanuele towards the entrance of ZARA, "No, I don't mind" he replied happily. There was no way he was going to let her use that purse though; he was going to buy her anything she wanted that day, unbeknownst to her.

Leila walked over to a black sequin dress that she liked the look of, and upon picking it up, realized that it was her size, "Why don't you try a few things?" asked Emanuele, "I think I will" she replied smiling. Then she handed Emanuele the dress to hold while she picked out a few other tops and skirts. Then they walked to the dressing rooms for her to try them on; Emanuele stopped at the entrance ready to hand her the items, but she grabbed him by the wrist and took him in with her, "I might need some help" she said.

Emanuele felt euphoric; he knew that Leila was all class, but the fact that she was already comfortable enough with him in the dressing room just reinforced how keen she was on him. He put the items that she had picked out up on the hanger for her, and then sat down on the seat in the dressing room. He looked up at Leila as she slid off her clothes, revealing her silky-smooth body, in sexy white lingerie. He quickly looked down at the floor but couldn't help but notice his eyes drift back up to look at her amazing body. Leila knelt next to him, and touching his cheek, she kissed him softly on the lips. Then stood back up to try on her first dress. Once she was wearing it, she asked Emanuele for his opinion, but the words seemed to elude him. He put both thumbs up and got out one word, "Perfect" he said. After she had tried everything on, they were about to leave the dressing room, but suddenly Leila grabbed Emanuele and began kissing him passionately against the dressing room wall. He wrapped his arms around her ass, picking her up as they exchanged saliva for a few moments. Then they began giggling, stopping themselves from going any further, and they fixed themselves up before leaving the dressing room. Leila walked out to pay for her items and Emanuele followed her to the purchase desk; she gave the items to the worker standing there and then opened her purse. But before she could open it Emanuele placed his hand on her hand, kissed her on the cheek and pulled out his money clip. "How much is it?" he asked, "\$389.95" the worker replied. Emanuele pulled out four \$100 bills and handed them to her, "Keep the change" he said, but before she could object and give him his change, he grabbed the bags and walked away with Leila. "You didn't have to do that" she said, looking sweetly at him, "Of course I did" he replied insistently. Then they kept walking through the center and came across Louis Vuitton, "Let's go in here" said Emanuele, gently leading Leila inside to the handbags. "Wow, I love this bag" she said, and then she checked the price tag that read \$11,000, "Uh, I don't think so" she said laughing to herself.

Emanuele smiled, "I'm just going to ask that guy a question, I'll be back in a minute" he said, then quickly walked over to the impeccably dressed man standing at the counter. "Can I help you?" asked the man, "Yeah listen, could you do me a favor. You see that girl over there. I'm going to be buying a few things for her, but she doesn't know yet. Could you just follow behind me and I'll point out what I want?" asked Emanuele. "Hmmm" the man replied, not sounding overly convinced. Emanuele quickly pulled out his platinum American Express card and threw it on the counter, "It's got a hundred-thousand-dollar daily limit" he said, looking a little annoyed. The man grabbed the Amex card, "right away sir" replied the man, enthusiastically. Then Emanuele went back to Leila and the store man followed a few meters behind pretending to do a price check on some items. Leila walked further on from the bags and Emanuele quickly pointed at the bag that she had commented on earlier, 'okay' the store man mouthed silently, picking the bag up and inconspicuously continued following the two of them. Leila picked up an Eyeline Pump heel in the shoe section and admired it, "Do you like these?" asked Emanuele picking up the matching heel. "Yes, I've liked these for a while, they're too expensive though" she said, "Well what's your size? You might get a surprise on Christmas" "Oh no, I wouldn't expect you to get me something that expensive, but I'm a size seven for future reference" she replied, quickly sticking her tongue out, cheekily. Emanuele smiled back at her; he knew from their conversations that Leila's family was well off. But she wasn't at all the typical rich girl; what he had come to realize is that Leila was not spoiled growing up, the same way he was. The only time he felt poor was when he was forced to get a summer job at the age of sixteen for 'retail experience' as his mom put it.

Although Emanuele empathized with Leila's family dynamic, due to his own experience with his parents' divorce, he was also grateful that this dynamic had created such a beautiful, level-headed, and even wise woman, whom he absolutely adored. So, he wanted to treat her the way that he saw her and show her how much he valued her, which in that moment, meant spoiling her. "Let's look at the jewelry" said Emanuele as he gently put his hand on Leila's lower back, to lead her in front of him. Then he turned around, pointed at the shoes she liked, and put his hands up showing seven fingers while mouthing the words "size seven" silently to the store man, who nodded and then went to collect them in that size. Emanuele then quickly re-joined Leila as they walked to a glass cabinet full of sparkling jewelry, "What do you like the look of?" he asked, "They're all so beautiful" "Which one stand's out to you the most?" "Probably that one" replied Leila, pointing to a gold charm bracelet. Suddenly, a lady came over and asked, "Can I help you?" but the store man had returned and interrupted, "I'll look after them, thanks Margaret" he said, placing the Louis Vuitton shopping bag containing the handbag and shoes below the counter, out of sight. "I'll get this one for my sister, it's her birthday soon" said Emanuele to the store man pointing at the yellow gold charm, winking with his left eye as Leila was standing on the right of him. "So that's why you asked me, what a great brother you are" said Leila turning to him, "Sometimes" he replied, raising his eyebrows. The store man understood what was going on, "Come over to this register to pay please sir" "I'll be with you in a minute Leila" said Emanuele before joining the store man at another service desk to pay for the items. The bill came to \$15,800 and the store man was delighted as he thanked Emanuele for his business. Emanuele was pleasantly surprised, not that it mattered to him, but it was significantly less than he had expected to spend.

The store man put the charm bracelet into the large yellow Louis Vuitton shopping bag, along with the other item's before handing it to Emanuele. Then Emanuele re-joined Leila who pulled a face noticing such an unusually large bag for one charm bracelet, "The only bags they had" replied Emanuele, for his excuse. The two of them looked around for another hour, before Emanuele noticed the time on his wristwatch, "I really hate to do this, but I have to go" he said, "Aww really?" asked Leila, appearing very disappointed. "I train with a family friend, I have been for years now and he kind of relies on me... but please let me make it up to you, can I take you to dinner tonight at 8?" "Oh, I don't know about that" replied Leila, smiling cheekily; Emanuele's face dropped as he played along. "Of course, you can!" she replied, now looking at him with great affection. While walking out to the carpark, Emanuele made a conscious effort to conceal the contents of the Luis Vuitton bag, while holding Leila's hand with his free hand. Arriving at the car he quickly unlocked it, opened the bonnet, and stuffed the bag inside before slamming it down. They drove out of the Fashion Valley mall carpark, and soon the Porsche sped along the Mission Valley freeway, towards Leila's home. "Thank you so much for my new dress" said Leila, as they pulled up outside of her house, "I'd love to see you in it tonight" "You just might" she said with a cheeky smile, then she kissed him and went inside her home. Emanuele breathed a sigh of relief now that things with Leila had been completely restored, but then looked at the dash clock, "Oh shit!" he yelled before planting his foot on the accelerator. He quickly swung by his place to grab his training gear before then speeding to Clay's house. "You're late ya bastard!" yelled Clay as Emanuele ran out to the back of Clay's house. "Yeah, sorry I had some stuff to take care of" said Emanuele as he dropped his bag and began doing his push-ups on the mat. "Don't worry about that, I'm gonna be showing you some important techniques today," said Clay.

Emanuele jumped up to his feet, "Oh yeah what sort?" "They're called 'man stoppers', and before you make fun of the name, they're the fastest way to take someone down, whether they're as sober as a judge, or off their heads on crack" replied Clay. He took Emanuele through assessing a situation; getting in the correct neutral stance, and then how to deliver the deadliest strikes possible. Clay then did some drills with Emanuele on the best way to disarm knife and pistol attacks. They had done this before but not as in depth nor intense; this part of the training was done repetitively for one and a half hours, so that it would become engrained into Emanuele's mind. Clay put a lot of emphasis on 'doing something over and over until it became instinct'. "Right, we're going to spar for 30 minutes, no kicks, no rest – just tactical sparring" "in other words, boxing" replied Emanuele with a cheeky grin; Clay just nodded, unamused. They both put their gear on, mouthguards in, and then began moving around inside the ring, sparring at half intensity for the first 10 minutes. The intensity gradually increased in 5-minute increments before they were all out head hunting each other. Clay landed a solid hook; lucky for Emanuele he was able to partially block it, but as he stood back, he had an instant headache. He had to quickly compose himself and keep away from Clay's left hand. So, he waited for Clay to throw it again, then he ducked under, and threw an uppercut followed by a hook to the jaw and a straight cross. Now Clay was the one who had to step back and quickly compose himself after the flurry of punches that had just come at him. "Good!" he yelled, slightly impressed at Emanuele before he went back in with his own flurry of punches which Emanuele tried to avoid as best, he could. But he was caught again, this time with a right hook that made him drop to one knee. "Get back up E-man, only a minute to go!" yelled Clay; Emanuele jumped up and with all his might and took the fight back to Clay. He managed to land a few solid punches on Clay, before suddenly, the beeper went off. "Time!" yelled Clay spitting his

mouthguard out before they both collapsed and sat down in the ring breathing heavily. Emanuele unstrapped the headgear that Clay had told him to use for this session, and he threw it off, with his hair now drenched in sweat.

“Well done E-man, good session” said Clay panting, “Yeah thanks, I didn’t think I’d last after I caught a couple of those last hits” he replied, panting heavily. They both got up and took the remainder of their gear off as they made their way over to sit down on the seats of the outside table. They both sat down in recovery mode, as Clay returned with some sports drinks from the fridge, to replenish their electrolytes, “You know we’re doing tactical training at the base this weekend,” he said, after taking a gulp of his drink. “Oh right, I knew it was coming up” replied Emanuele, “So anyway, who was that hottie I saw you with in Vegas?” asked Clay after a moment of silence. Emanuele’s face lit up, as he couldn’t contain his smile, “That’s my girl, the one I told you about” “I thought you said you met her at college, why was she there?” asked Clay, “Insane coincidence I guess, her father’s a new client” “Coincidence doesn’t exist, but good for you” said Clay, before going back to gulping down his drink. Then they both went silent again, “You better be sharp for this weekend, you don’t want new recruits showing you up on the battlefield” said Clay in a serious tone, Emanuele just looked at him with a serious face and nodded. Then Clay stood up, “I’m gonna cook some steaks, you want some food?” he asked, “Thanks, but I’ve already made plans” replied Emanuele, Clay raised his eyebrows, “The girl, got ya” he said, before walking inside.

Emanuele collected his training gear littered across the training mats and threw them into his bag. Then he opened the back screen door, “I’ll see you at the gym tomorrow at 4!” he yelled, “Yep!” yelled Clay from the kitchen as he prepared to fry his steaks.

Arriving home in high spirits, and full of endorphins, Emanuele quickly got showered and changed into black chino pants, and a green short sleeved designer sweater. Then he did his religious routine; selected his sneakers, chose his watch, sprayed himself with cologne, and perfected his hair. Without hesitation, he quickly made his way outside, past the pool and to the garage. Then without thinking, he jumped into the driver's seat of the Bentley Continental GT, and began calling up restaurants for a reservation, on the drive over to Leila's house, before finally getting a table at an Italian restaurant, located in Little Italy. Then he ended the call, by pushing the end call button on the steering wheel, before looking in the rear-view mirror, and remembering the cracked glass. 'It should be okay for one night' he thought, but then he realized that he had left the bag of gifts for Leila back at home inside the Porsche. He threw the steering wheel around and made a sharp U-turn, cutting off another car at the intersection; the black sedan honked loudly as Emanuele planted his foot on the gas causing the Continental GT to screech as it grabbed traction and flew back towards his house. Emanuele sped into the driveway and once parked inside the garage jumped out switching back to the Porsche GT3. He took the gifts out of the bonnet and then placed them on the floor in the back, throwing a shirt he had left in the car over them. Then he once again left with increased urgency to pick up Leila from her house.

Upon pulling into her driveway, he quickly turned the engine off, jumped out, ran to the front door, and knocked on it. Mike answered, "Hey man she's getting ready, come on in" he said, as if they were old friends. It was a totally different reception this time as he walked into the house; absolutely no hostility from the two guys who were once again in the lounge room playing Xbox. "You played this before?" asked Jet, "No I haven't" replied Emanuele, "Give it a go" said Mike passing his controller to Emanuele.

“Do you want a drink?” asked Jet handing him a Tsing Tao beer, “Thanks, I’m good” replied Emanuele before he began having multiple kills on Battlefield 4. “Dude, I thought you said you hadn’t played this!” said Mike, surprised at how well Emanuele was doing against the other players online. “I enjoy a good shooter now and again” replied Emanuele, focused, as his player ran through the buildings avoiding being shot. “Yo, nice headshot!” yelled Jet, before there was an awkward silence as Emanuele kept carving up online. “Didn’t know you guys could be so friendly” said Emanuele sarcastically, “Mike told me his uncle works with your father, if we had of known we would never have been like that at all” “Actually his father is the top of the top” said Mike looking at his friend seriously, “Oh shit, so...” “It’s alright” said Emanuele, quickly reassuring them he held no grudge. “So, you look like you train... MMA?” asked Mike, “I do a bit of BJJ and Boxing” replied Emanuele casually, “Where do you train? We’re looking for somewhere to do Brazilian Jujitsu” asked Jet. “My friend trains me, I’ll ask him if you can come train with us sometime,” said Emanuele. They both looked at each other very interested after Emanuele said this. But just then, Leila walked down the stairs and Emanuele quickly passed the controller back to Mike as he stood up to greet her. “Have a great night!” yelled Mike as they walked out the door; “I think he’s in love with you now” said Leila giggling. Again, wanting to portray himself to be a gentleman, Emanuele opened the door for Leila, before getting in the driver’s seat and taking off. “I hope you like Italian food” he said, “Mmm, I love it” she replied, “That’s good because I had no back up plan” he said, laughing and feeling relieved. They drove to Little Italy and parked outside of the restaurant, ‘Casa dela mucci’ which theme was of the old country. It just so happened to be the most highly rated authentic Italian restaurant in San Diego but wasn’t fully booked because of the exorbitant prices.

They held hands and walked inside where they were greeted by a short Italian man, "Welcome, my name is Gino, what is your name please?" he asked, "Emanuele" "Emanuele! Surely you are Italian my friend, yes?" "Yes" he replied, not wanting to disappoint the excited man, "You're very lucky my friend, with such a beautiful date" he said looking at Leila, as she blushed a little. "Forgive me, let me show you to your table" said the eccentric little man before he took them through and seated them. He then had a waitress bring them sparkling water, while he took their orders. After some more inquisitive questions the man left them in peace. "Would you like a glass of red wine Leila?" asked Emanuele, "Yes please" she replied, smiling pleasantly. "Ok hopefully he leaves us alone after that" said Emanuele, before he signaled for Gino, who quickly walked back over to see what they requested. "Could we please get a bottle of this?" said Emanuele, pointing to the Tenuta dell'Ornellaia Masseto Toscana, which was \$900 per bottle. Gino's eyes widened as he looked to where Emanuele was pointing, "Are you sure you want this one sir?" he asked, "Yes, I'm sure" replied Emanuele, adamantly. Gino then came back with the bottle and still looking a little unsure, once again asked if Emanuele wanted him to open it. "Please" he said, now appearing a little annoyed, so Gino opened the bottle, uncorked it carefully, and poured it into each wine glass, airing it for 30 seconds with each pour. He didn't even bother asking if they were over 21, as a bottle of Masseto Toscana was rarely uncorked. After quite a long wait, their main meals came out; Leila had the Tortellini which was homemade tortellini stuffed with goats' cheese with aurora sauce & fresh rocket, and Emanuele had the Penne Arrabbiata, which was penne tossed with Italian sausage, garlic, olives, and chilli in tomato sauce. "So how much Italian do you have in you?" asked Leila; Emanuele quickly finished his mouthful to answer, "Half...Half Italian, half Mexican" he said as he wiped his face with a napkin. When they had finished their main meals, they casually conversed while sipping on their

wine. Gino came back a little earlier than expected to see if they wanted to order some desserts. Leila looked at the menu that was handed to her and then looked up at Emanuele, "Are you going to get something?" she asked. "Yeah, I'll probably get some Cannoli's, what would you like?" asked Emanuele, "Could I please get the Tiramisu?" said Leila looking at Gino, "Sure, and how many Cannoli's should I bring you Emanuele?" he asked. "Just three...um actually bring four" replied Emanuele, and then Gino took their menu's and returned to the kitchen. "I got extra in case you want to try. I'll be back in a minute, I just have to use the restroom" he said to Leila, before getting up to make his way to the rest room. He stopped and looked back to see what she was doing, and while she was looking at her phone, he ducked out of a side door to go back to the car. A look of angst came on Gino's face as he noticed, and he quickly followed Emanuele out to the side street, "You're not ditching your date, and your bill I hope" he said. Emanuele just laughed thinking that it must have looked bad, "No of course not, I'm just getting something from my car- don't worry Gino, I'm going to pay my bill" he said, reassuringly. Then he quickly walked over to the GT3 and took Leila's gifts out from the back seat. Upon returning to the table, Leila was still busy with her phone and so Emanuele inconspicuously slid the bag under the table. Leila gave her phone to Emanuele and smiled, "I was just checking my Instagram; doesn't that look amazing?" she asked, handing him her phone which showed pictures of Sicily. "Maybe we'll go one day, but right now I've got something for you" he said, handing her phone back. Then leaning down he pulled the shoebox out of the bag and handed it to her; a look of pleasant surprise came over her. She recognized the box but had no idea that it was the Louis Vuitton heels that she had wanted for so long; her jaw dropped as she took the lid off the box.

“Emanuele, you didn’t have to... Oh my... Thank you” she said, looking completely surprised.

Emanuele smiled, “There’s more” he said as he pulled out the Louis Vuitton handbag and gave it to her. “No way, you shouldn’t have Emanuele” she said, in disbelief, “Here’s the bag for you to put them in. Check inside it first, there might be something else in there” he said. Leila looked down and picked up a small Louis Vuitton box and opened it up to find the charm bracelet that she had pointed out to him earlier that day. Leila’s beautiful brown eyes began to sparkle, and as she looked up at him a tear slid down her left cheek, “Why did you do this?” she asked. “Because you deserve everything you desire” replied Emanuele, leaning out and gently wiping away her tear. Leila was touched; she stood up and put her arms out and then Emanuele stood up and hugged her. Suddenly, Gino came over with the desserts; the two of them ignored him as he placed them on the table.

Suddenly, no one else was in the restaurant, as everything else faded away, while they were in this precious heart to heart moment. After being seated, Leila sniffled and wiped her eyes with a tissue, composing herself before tasting her Tiramisu. “As if this night couldn’t be any more perfect, this has to be the best Tiramisu I’ve ever tasted” she said, happily. “Here try one of these” said Emanuele, holding a cannoli up to her mouth; “Oh is it my turn to be fed?” she asked giggling, “Yes, it is, it’s payback” replied Emanuele smiling.

She put her tongue out and then took a bite while he held it, “Mmmm... oh my god” she said after tasting it. Then she quickly took a spoonful of her dessert and put it up towards him; he opened his mouth, but she smeared some on his cheek and started to giggle. Emanuele smiled back at her affectionately and wiped his cheek with his napkin, “Emanuele, thank you for the gifts. It is the nicest thing anyone has ever done for me” she said, “I just want you to know that you are the most special person to me Leila, and I’ve never felt this way before” he replied.

Leila looked down, "Sorry for getting emotional, but it just feels like you've made up for all of my missed birthdays" "What do you mean gorgeous?" he asked, "Well I haven't been able to celebrate my birthday since I've been in America. My mom always used to make me feel special. I know I shouldn't be upset though it's not in my culture to celebrate every birthday," said Leila. "Really? Well now that you're with me, you will never go without a birthday again" he replied. Emanuele now understood why Leila had become so emotional; she missed her mom. The two of them finished their desserts and Emanuele paid for the bill, giving Gino a huge tip, before they left. The little Italian man looked at Emanuele shocked as he held the thousand-dollar tip, "You're welcome" said Emanuele patting him on the shoulder. Then he and Leila returned to the car and sat down inside it; Emanuele reached into the bag of gifts, pulling out the bracelet box and then carefully put the charm bracelet onto Leila's wrist. "I hope this makes you think of me and how much I care about you whenever you wear it" he said, "I always think about you now, regardless" replied Leila as she touched his face and looked deeply into his eyes, then they shared a passionate kiss. They made out for the next few minutes, but Emanuele didn't want to over play his hand; the night had gone so well, so far, so he respectfully didn't go any further.

Although Emanuele was used to girls throwing themselves at him in the past, it wasn't in his nature to have meaningless sex, as it was for most guys his age. It would have been so easy to drive Leila to one of his father's hotels, but he didn't want to put her in that situation.

So, he took her home knowing that he should wait for the right time to make love to her, when it was clear that she was ready.

They sat in the car out the front of Leila's house talking for hours, and their relationship bloomed as their connection became deeper.

Emanuele walked Leila to her front door at 12:21am, and then she hugged him and thanked him again for the evening. When Emanuele sat back in the driver's seat of the Porsche he was overwhelmed with feelings, he took a deep breath and then started laughing. He couldn't remember the last time he had been this happy and the only thought repeating itself in his mind was 'she is the one'.

Chapter 7: The Empire Runs Deep

Saturday had come, and it was the rostered day that Emanuele would undertake his monthly tactical training with Clay at a military-style training facility that Dominic had built. But Emanuele had slept in until 8:45am and Clay would be there to pick him up at 9am sharp. He had gotten to sleep late from talking to Leila on the phone till the early hours of the morning. She wanted to plan something together for that weekend, but Emanuele had to explain that he would be busy inspecting some properties for his father, so he wouldn't be able to see her until the following week. Although he felt bad for lying to her, he knew that telling her about the military training would certainly raise questions that could jeopardize what they had together. Emanuele had the foresight to know that Leila would eventually find out his role in the organization, but for now he would try to balance their relationship with the responsibilities for his father. He slowly got up and sat on the edge of the bed; yawning, as he checked his phone, then jumped to his feet and did some light shadow boxing in the mirror before taking a cold shower to wake himself up. He grabbed his bag that he had packed the night before, which contained some cargo pants, fitted shirts and training gear. Then running downstairs, he passed his mom in the kitchen, who was chopping up ingredients for a juice, "I've got to go, Clay's going to be here in a sec, love you" he said, grabbing a banana and heading for the front door, "Ok be safe!" yelled Maria as he ran outside. The loud roar of Clay's Shelby Mustang suddenly came into his street, so Emanuele looked at his rugged Casio wristwatch to see that the time was 10:01am. He walked to the curb, and as soon as Clay pulled up, he jumped into the passenger's seat. As quickly as the Shelby Mustang had pulled up, it then took off, waking up anyone in the neighborhood that was still asleep.

“Are you ever late?” asked Emanuele, “No” replied Clay, bluntly, “Being late could mean the difference between life and death” he continued. Emanuele nodded in agreement, then threw his bag on the back seat, and put on his seatbelt to avoid being thrown around by Clay’s aggressive driving. The facility that they were headed to was in an industrial area on the northern outskirts of El Centro, on an 18-acre, private block of land that was guarded 24/7 year-round. Dominic’s men were only let in once they had stated the area they were from and entered in a unique 8-digit code on a keypad. This code was given to each person the night before their allotted training day and represented their area and section of Dominic’s Empire. If you weren’t scheduled to be there, you entered at your own peril. The trip to the facility took two hours and two minutes from Emanuele’s house according to his GPS, but Clay was hauling ass, getting them there in 1 hour and 31 minutes. Upon arrival, the Shelby Mustang pulled into the dirt driveway facing two huge steel gates that were connected to a steel fence which was 16 feet in height and surrounded the property. Clay put down his window, looked up at the security camera and then punched in his unique code on the keypad. The surveillance men instantly recognized Clay’s car and face and were satisfied without the need for voice recognition which was an added security measure taken at their discretion. The diesel motors fired up and opened the big 2-ton steel gates before Clay drove through to the training base. It had two rows of 10 units on each side: forty units in total housing four men in each unit. At the end of the road was an indoor gym and oversized swimming pool for water training. To the left of that, was the food hall with 8 chefs continually working to keep a fresh buffet loaded for breakfast, lunch, and dinner each day. To the right of the gym and indoor pool building was a house, which is where Dominic’s high-ranking enforcers stayed, and it was also where Emanuele and Clay would be staying.

Behind this area was an enclosed 5-acre paintball arena built around old buildings and landscaped with thick foliage. This facility was used to train Dominic's foot soldiers and keep his enforcers skills sharp; it was also the source of a lot of injuries, but Dominic used it to sift out the weak recruits. All personnel were made aware that upon entry of the arena it would be a dog fight until completion by any means necessary, barring only murder. As Clay's Mustang drove past the units there were some guys that Emanuele had met from a previous training camp. He gave them a casual nod, and they waved back as they walked to their units. Clay drove past the parking lot full of black SUV's and pulled up in one of the parking spots inside the carport of the house. They grabbed their bags and took them inside as a gang of new recruits were doing laps past them around the site. "Get ready, we're going to the firing range" said Clay, "I'm good to go" replied Emanuele, as they dropped their bags inside. Then they walked out of the house and made their way over to the food hall. They passed a few men who were seated at tables out the front, some of whom were bruised and battered. Clay and Emanuele could tell that they had just come from the arena. Then they walked inside where 6 senior enforcers were seated eating their lunch. They were known as the 'Wild men of the Mid-West' for holding the highest kill count among any group of enforcers. "Hey fellas" said Clay, "How ya doing Clay?" "Hey Emanuele" said a couple of the men, acknowledging them. Then Clay and Emanuele walked through to the kitchen, past the chefs and into an area in the back, where there was a large industrial freezer. Emanuele followed Clay through into the ice-cold freezer, before walking past four wagyu beef carcasses that were hanging. Then they walked through a sealed door to another cold storage room full of frozen foods. Clay grabbed the side of one of the stainless-steel racks with both hands and pulled it to the side, as it was on tracks. Once removed, it revealed a door with an electronic keypad.

Clay entered his number again, then opened the door; after Emanuele walked through, he closed the door behind them, and they walked down a flight of stairs leading underground. When they reached the bottom, to their left was a surveillance room, but the reason they were there was in front of them. It was a state-of-the-art underground firing range, and tactical training room. They walked through the observation lounge room which was behind bullet proof glass; the range itself was 100 yards long and was divided into two sections by a 4-foot-thick concrete wall. On the right side were normal targets on tracks that moved back and forth, with 10 shooting stalls. On the left side was the tactical running course which simulated a small house; it had self-healing rubber dummies that popped out from the corners, roof, and floor. Clay and Emanuele grabbed their earbuds and military grade protective glasses, then walked through to the armory to select their weapons. There were all sorts of firearms ranging from small pistols up to heavy duty assault rifles. Emanuele walked over to a G36 assault rifle on display and picked it up, "Time to test this bad boy out" he said. "Suit yourself buddy, at least this way it will be fairer" said Clay as he picked up an FN SCAR-H modular assault rifle, then they both grabbed a few magazines each and walked to the entrance of the tactical course. There was a monitor next to the door that had the live feed of the cameras throughout the course and a digital timer to track each person's speed. One assailant went through the course at a time and once the 'start' button was pushed the course was locked at both ends, before the assailant inside had to buzz themselves out once they had completed the course. "You dare to go first?" asked Clay, "elders first" replied Emanuele, smugly. Clay smiled, "We'll see if you're that confident at the end" he said, then he walked inside to the starting position of the course, loaded his weapon, and gave his war cry, "HOOAH!!" he yelled, to amp himself up. Emanuele pushed the 'start' button and then the steel doors closed each entrance; the dummies concealed themselves and the lights

inside went from bright to dim. Three beeps sounded the count-down, then a horn sounded, and Clay was off. He ran through the course swiftly, mowing down dummies as he went; the bullets penetrating each dummy's chest. The last dummy popped out beside Clay, and he knew from experience to melee it, so he smashed it in the head with the butt of his assault rifle, triggering the course timer to stop. Then he buzzed himself out and returned to Emanuele, "Did you learn something?" he asked, "Yeah, don't waste bullets" said Emanuele, laughing. Then Clay pulled the magazine out of his gun, revealing it, and to Emanuele's surprise there were plenty of bullets left. "I never waste ammo... c'mon let's see what you got then," said Clay. So, Emanuele got into position; Clay pushed the 'start button' before Emanuele heard the steel door's close and saw the lights go dim. Then the 3 beeps and horn sounded; Emanuele sprinted off the line as fast as he could, picking the dummies off as they popped out from the corners. When he got to the second last dummy it dropped from the ceiling and he aimed too low, hitting it in the crotch, but the sensor still registered it, so he sprinted to the last dummy and focused his rifle down inside the compartment and shot it in the head even before it had time to fully pop up. When he had finished, he buzzed himself out and returned to Clay who was standing there laughing. "How heartless are you taking his crown jewels?" asked Clay in hysterics, "hey at least it got the job done," replied Emanuele, "A fate worse than death" said Clay before they both reloaded their assault rifles and got serious again. They each had two more runs, trying to outdo each other, each time in speed and accuracy. When they had finished, they had a look to check their times; Emanuele had gotten a best time of 43.6 seconds, but the winner was Clay with a flat 37 second run. "Arghh damn it, I thought I had you this time!" yelled Emanuele, "You'll get there, I've got a few years of training on you bud," replied Clay.

Emanuele shook his head as he couldn't help but smile; he knew that Clay was a hardened war veteran, still in insane physical condition. But he was determined to one-up his mentor one day soon. "Those dummies will need replacing soon" he said, looking at the monitor which showed large chunks in the polyurethane dummies, "Yeah, they are looking a bit worse for wear," replied Clay. The two of them placed their guns and equipment back in the armory, then made their way up to the cafeteria to have some lunch. Clay grabbed two plates and followed Emanuele, loading up on the buffet of roast beef, potato with gravy and vegetables. Emanuele went ahead with his single plate and sports drink in hand, making his way over to a spare table, as he then sat down and began tucking in. Clay approached the table carrying his two mountainous plates loaded mostly with roast beef and gravy. Emanuele just about choked on his food laughing as Clay sat down, "What? Some of us don't have chefs on call, so I'm making the most of it" he said, before he also began chowing down. After a few huge mouthfuls he started explaining to Emanuele some arm and torso conditioning techniques he was thinking of incorporating into their training. Suddenly, a man approached their table; Clay dropped his cutlery in disgust upon his arrival. The man had been Dominic's personal bodyguard until being replaced by Clay, then reassigned to take care of operations in Chicago. "I thought that was you Clay, but you're looking older" he said, taking a seat at the end of their table. "Arron, what are you doing here?" asked Clay, looking uninterested. "I'm training my regions newest recruits" he replied, glancing over to a table where four guys in their early 20's were sitting, talking loudly. Clay looked over at the group and smiled, "You've got your work cut out for you" he said. Clay and Arron were much alike in many ways; they had both served in the military and growing up had both won titles in their respective fighting techniques. Clay in boxing and kickboxing, and Arron in Judo and Wrestling. They were both similar physically, with Arron

being only slightly taller, and they even shared similar mannerisms and training methods. Although they shared these similarities, they did not like each other at all. Arron held resentment because he was replaced by Clay and had to leave his hometown; Clay thought Arron was mentally weak for letting his emotions get the better of him about being replaced. "Doesn't Dominic trust you to train more than one kid at a time? No offense Emanuele" said Arron smugly, "This kid would smash any of your four" said Clay, now very disgruntled about having his meal interrupted. "Is that right? Well let's have us a challenge then. Us five against you two in the arena" he said. Clay smiled, finishing the mouthful of food he had just taken, as he sat back in his chair, "Alright...full contact" he said. Emanuele hid his concern as he heard this, but he knew what it meant, outnumbered fist fights, and rubber bullets. Arron was also a little surprised, but he wouldn't back down, as he had too big of an ego. But he also wasn't going to miss an opportunity to teach Clay the lesson he'd wanted to, since being replaced. "Done" he said, with an angry look on his face before he walked back to his table to tell the recruits. There was a big commotion at the table, and they were all pumping each other up, "We'll kill those bitches!" one of them yelled, having no idea who Clay and Emanuele were or what they were capable of. "Did you have to add the rubber bullets?" asked Emanuele, casually, still hiding his concern. "Don't worry they're new recruits we'll take them down, just remember everything I've taught you. You want real training, this is the closest thing you'll get to real life," replied Clay adamantly.

The blazing summer sun began to set as Clay and Emanuele were gearing up for their battle against Arron and his four recruits. "Here" said Clay as he handed Emanuele full sleeve body armor to go under his black camo attire. Emanuele put the armor on and then put his black camo long sleeve shirt on with rugged black cargo pants, which all fit snug against his physique.

He suddenly noticed that Clay had not put any armor on, "Why aren't you wearing armor?" he asked, Clay smiled, "It'll just slow me down" he replied. Clay was not afraid of a few bloody bruises; he had taken his fair share of flesh wounds in the heat of battle before. On one occasion in Afghanistan, he had been shot in the arm while seeking revenge on a group of Jihadi's that had just killed one of his friends; he stormed their compound to pick all eight of them off with his assault rifle. Another battle in West Africa saw him rescue three of his men from an ambush, one of whom was in critical condition. Clay neutralized enough of the insurgents, allowing them to get away, all while suffering a bullet wound to his thigh and still carrying his wounded soldier buddy 4 miles to safety. By all accords, Clay should have been a decorated war hero, but a dishonorable discharge saw him lose all recognition at the end of his military career. Emanuele took two magazines that were loaded with rubber bullets, attached them to his belt and then picked up his pistol; he turned to Clay and was handed a black face mask made from carbon fiber. Together they exited the house and made the short walk to the entrance of the arena. It was now 6pm, and the sun was lighting up the horizon blood red; waiting at the entrance was Arron with his four recruits suited up in their protective gear. Emanuele and Clay approached, already donning their tactical masks; intimidating a couple of the recruits as they walked by. The other team were wearing heavy dark green body armor, with thick boots and full helmets, whereas Emanuele and Clay had normal running shoes on. "They won't be able to move as fast with those boots" said Clay, turning to Emanuele, now just out of earshot of the group. "You're gonna wish you had more gear on!" yelled one of the recruits before laughing. Another recruit turned to him and wacked him on the back of the helmet, "Shut up!" he told him. "I got a bad feeling about this" said the recruit standing at the back of the group. Clay and Emanuele exuded confidence as they walked into the arena. It was also noticeable that Clay wasn't wearing armor

as his tattooed biceps stuck out of his short-sleeved shirt. The two groups entered separately and found their starting positions at each end inside the arena. "Alright, let's take them out together," said Clay as the flood lights began to slowly increase in brightness inside the arena. The siren sounded, then Clay and Emanuele quickly started moving through the arena; Clay lead and Emanuele followed watching his back. They got to the corner of a small makeshift building and Clay spotted a recruit hiding behind a platform. "Circle back and take him out" he said, quietly to Emanuele; so, Emanuele sprinted across to cover and crept around the back of the platform while Clay casually walked in his line of sight and fired a couple of rounds at him that hit and bounced off his helmet. The recruit panicked and charged at Clay firing off round after round, Clay leapt and rolled to close cover, while Emanuele shot a bullet to the back of each exposed leg. The recruit dropped in pain and threw his hands up, "You got me!" he yelled in agony. Suddenly, two more recruits who were pushing through some scrub heard this, and upon entering the open, they spotted Emanuele and started firing in his direction. Emanuele sprinted and leapt over a dirt mound and into a small trench where Clay was waiting. "Go" said Clay as he pointed to a dark region by the border netting where they could lose them. They both ran over to it and upon crouching down, were now out of sight. Bushes were partially blocking the view of the trench they had come from, so Clay took advantage of this, "When they run to look in, we take them out" whispered Clay, "Got it" replied Emanuele. The two recruits scoped out the area and then while scanning around, carefully walked up to the mound before peering down into the trench.

Suddenly, Clay and Emanuele leapt out from behind them and blasted them with a couple rounds to the chest as they turned. But it didn't seem to affect them, and there were loud 'taps' when the rubber bullets hit their armor.

Clay realized they were wearing hardened plastic chest plates, and he got hit by a bullet to the shoulder, grimacing a little as it hit, while still moving. Then he fired one back hitting a recruit in the groin area; the recruit dropped and grabbed his groin, yelling in pain. The other recruit fired off a few more shots at them while confidently running towards them as he realized the bullets couldn't penetrate his armor. Emanuele ran and slid behind a bunch of sandbags, while Clay sprinted and rolled towards the recruit trying to hit him. He then leapt up and clotheslined the recruit as hard as he could, knocking the young man out cold. He then briefly caught his breath and checked the recruit's pulse to see that he was okay, then rolled him on his side and returned to Emanuele. They both crouched behind the sandbag cover and Clay slid his mask up, "I'll look for Arron, you find the last recruit" he said, before quickly sliding the mask back on. He then got up and ran to the next section of the arena. Emanuele thought it would be best to follow behind in case the last two men were together, but suddenly, he heard something. It was coming from a small, dilapidated brick structure, near where they had taken out the first recruit. He took cover at an entrance and then quickly went in aiming his gun back and forth, as he looked through the narrow walkways to see if the recruit was hiding in there. But there was no sign of the last recruit, so he exited the building to go and re-join Clay. As he walked out the side opening, the last recruit jumped from the bricks, kicking Emanuele in the back, and accidentally dropping his gun as he landed. Upon dropping to his hands and knees, Emanuele quickly turned and lay on his back to face the recruit, firing off a couple of shots at the recruit's helmet which didn't do much at all. Then his gun clicked as he squeezed the trigger to fire off another, but the clip was empty. The recruit realized this and quickly went to pick up his own gun after dropping it. Emanuele lunged as the recruit picked it up and took a shot that missed, then he swiped the gun with one hand, chopping the recruit's wrist with the

other, causing the recruit to lose grip of it. As soon as Emanuele gained possession of the gun he stood back and easily put a couple of bullets on the insides of his arms, where he could see they would penetrate the skin. The recruit dropped and put his hands up, "I'm done!" he yelled in pain. Emanuele took the clip out and threw the gun down, then grabbed his own gun, put the clip in and went to look for Clay. The recruit was relieved and lay down in pain, throwing his helmet off, and panting as he felt where he had been hit. When Emanuele arrived at the far section of the arena, Clay and Arron were punching on, aggressively. Arron threw a big overhand right which Clay ducked under and picked Arron up, spear tackling him into a trench nearby. When the dust had settled, Clay emerged, spotted Emanuele, and started walking over to him, with his mask ripped off and shirt torn. "ARRGHH" yelled Arron as he got up and sprinted towards Clay out of nowhere, tackling him to the ground. Then they both scrambled to their feet and started trading punches again.

Emanuele looked on worried, but thoroughly entertained at the same time, he thought he'd let them settle their differences the only way they knew how to and slid his mask up to better observe the show. Clay landed a solid uppercut on Arron which put him on his ass; he assumed it was all over and again started walking towards Emanuele. Arron went back to regather his pistol, "Look out!" yelled Emanuele; Clay quickly turned around and saw Arron just about pointing the gun at him; he instantly ducked, as the rubber bullet clipped his ear. Then he yelled angrily as he sprinted towards Arron knocking him to the ground with a flying knee to the chest. Arron hit the ground with a hard 'thud' "Arghh, alright, you win" he said in a vulnerable state of surrender, as Clay had his fists ready to land bombs on him. He spat blood on the ground next to Arron's head, then his angry face began to soften as he realized it was all over, and that they weren't enemies.

He exhaled heavily, then got up and stood over Arron who looked up at him, expecting to get a mouthful of abuse. "Come on ya tough bastard" he said as he put his hand out to help Arron to his feet, and then assisted him to walk. Upon noticing that he was limping, Emanuele rushed to Arron's other side and they both helped him out of the arena. When they got to the entrance all four recruits were there, lying on the ground, looking sore and exhausted. "I got it from here" said Arron, letting go of Emanuele and Clay. "Alright you weak pricks, get showered and I'll meet you in the food hall!" he yelled, at his recruits who moaned in pain, "walk it off" he replied. Clay and Arron looked at each other in acknowledgment before departing. Their beef had officially ended.

Emanuele and Clay went back to the house to get cleaned up, and when they got inside, they both couldn't hold in their excitement, as they gave each other a high five. "How the hell did we pull that off?!" exclaimed Emanuele, "I knew we would" replied Clay smiling.

"Did you catch any bullets?" asked Clay, "Nah, luckily this armor held up, how did you pull up?" asked Emanuele, "Yeah good" replied Clay, as he took his shirt off, revealing a few nasty bruises that didn't seem to bother him one bit. Suddenly Clay's phone began to ring, he walked over to it and looked at the incoming number which he didn't recognize. He picked it up off the table, "Hello?" he asked, suspiciously in his deep voice; then he paused, "Yep, we'll be there" he said, before abruptly ending the call. "Who was it?" asked Emanuele, "Pack your stuff we're going to see your father" he replied. They were both showered, changed, packed and ready to go within 15 minutes. Then they got into Clay's car and sped out of the base, catching the attention of a few new recruits, one of whom asked his senior enforcer, "Who are those guys?" "It's above your pay grade" replied the enforcer, sternly.

On the way to their destination Clay pulled into a fast-food drive through, "I know this is shit food, but we can't keep your father waiting" he said, "Yeah, you're right" replied Emanuele. The Shelby Mustang pulled up next to the drive-thru speaker, "Can I get two chicken, and two beef burgers?" asked Clay. "Yes, what soda would you like, we have-?" "Nah no sugar water, just two bottles of normal water" said Clay interrupting, then he pulled up to the window and gave a \$50 note to the girl who was serving the drive-thru. He grabbed the change and food and then he planted his foot doing a huge burnout from the carpark back onto the road. Emanuele cracked up laughing as he looked at the cloud of smoke in the rear-view mirror, "Here, try this dog food" said Clay as he pulled out one of the beef burgers for himself, and handed the bag to Emanuele. They both ate as they drove to the undisclosed location of one of Dominic's many warehouses; the trip down multiple dirt roads took 35 minutes for them to arrive. When they got to the location, there was a huge steel gate set up, the same as the training facility they had just come from; but the security protocols here were automated. Which meant this time Clay had to type in his unique code, state his full name into the microphone for voice recognition and then scan his thumbprint. After he did these things, the big gates were opened, and he drove through onto the property. With the landscape now dark, he switched his high beam lights on his Mustang. They drove for a further half a mile before coming to the large warehouse; the Mustang's headlights lit up the huge warehouse with cars parked out the front. Clay parked between two of the vehicles already there and then switched his car off. They both stepped out and after the Mustang was locked, everything immediately became dark; the only aspect of light were the stars in the night sky, and a crescent moon. Only Clay had been there a few times before, "Follow me" he said, as he switched the light on his phone to light up the path for them.

They walked for 300 yards before coming to a door at the side of the huge warehouse, where a small keypad was. Clay punched in his code as the keypad's numbers lit up blue. The door beeped, unlocked and then he opened it which let a beam of bright light out. They stepped inside closing it behind them, and then outside became dark again as the door sealed. Emanuele looked around once inside, admiring the place; it was yet another facility his father owned that he was seeing for the first time. There were 8 trucks being worked on by fabricators, with welding curtains all around as welding flashes lit up everywhere and loud sparking noises came from the wire arcing as it hit the metal. There was also enough spare space in the warehouse to fit another 6 semi-trailer trucks. An elevated office overlooked the warehouse floor, which Dominic was standing inside as he looked down and saw Clay and Emanuele arrive. He signaled the warehouse supervisor, who then rang the dinner break siren, and all the workers finished off their current welds and steel cuttings. Emanuele and Clay walked up the stairs to join Dominic in the office, "Here they are" said Dominic looking pleased. He got up and shook Clay's hand and then gave Emanuele a hug. Then with his hand placed on Emanuel's shoulder, he looked at Gary, the warehouse supervisor. "This is my son, he'll be taking over when I retire" he said, and then Emanuele shook Gary's hand, "Pleased to meet you," said the supervisor. "I want to show you two something" said Dominic signaling for them to go out to the warehouse. They all descended the stairs, following Gary over to one of the trucks that was being worked on. "Notice anything different about this truck?" asked Gary; Emanuele took a close look around the wheels and under the tray that the shipping containers sat on, "No" he replied. "With the border patrols tightening on the importation of our products, we had to come up with something that can't be detected by their new x-ray machines," said Dominic. "If you'll come over here" said Gary, walking to the back of the truck, as the others followed

and then saw what he was referring to. The tray was 2 inches thicker than normal, 7.5 inches in total and had a section cut out of the middle, 5 feet wide that ran the whole length of the truck's modified tray. "Now I see" said Emanuele, "This modification can fit 100 kilos of product... it's less per truck than before, but undetectable," said Dominic, "So the X-ray machines can't detect this?" asked Clay. "We did some testing in the lab next door with our own X-rays, and they couldn't penetrate further than fifteen inches of steel and lead," said Gary. "The sides of our trays are twenty-four" added Dominic, "Right so the x-ray image shows the tray to be solid," said Gary. "Weld the back on, give it some paint, throw some reflective lights around it, and it looks no different," said Dominic. "So, you grind the back of the tray out once the truck is down south, fill it with product and repeat the process" added Emanuele. "That's right, it's lengthy process, but it keeps us in business, and you may have to come up with something new if they catch on to this when you're running things, son," said Dominic. 'Let's hope they don't then' Emanuele thought to himself. Suddenly, one of the bodyguards standing by answered his phone, and then walked over to Dominic and handed it to him. Dominic took the phone and held it up to his ear, "Yeah... alright, I'll be back in a couple hours we'll sort it out then" he said. Then he ended the call and handed the phone back before he walked over to Gary and shook his hand, "I'll be in contact" he said, "The trucks will be ready for next week's schedule" replied Gary. Dominic nodded and then walked past the trucks and to the back of the warehouse where an exit door was, next to the huge roller door. The two bodyguards walked slightly ahead of him, while Emanuele and Clay followed. As they walked outside a helipad was lit up, where a Euro-copter EC 135 was waiting for Dominic's departure; as soon as the pilot spotted Dominic, he started it up. Clay noticed the annoyed look Dominic had on his face as they walked, "Anything I can help with?" he asked.

“Percy called, a couple of junkies beat up one of our dealers and his girlfriend, put them in the hospital” “We’ve got plenty of guys waiting on the sideline to fill the area” said Clay, trying to reassure him. “That’s not all, they snatched a bag from a fairly sizable deal in LA,” said Dominic. “What was the deal worth?” asked Emanuele, “About half a million in cash and product was taken” replied Dominic. “You want us to take care of them; put today’s training to good use?” asked Clay. Emanuele’s heart rate slightly increased upon hearing this; he was a little excited, but wasn’t keen to go on another house bust, as he thought about the last one that almost went completely wrong. “Percy will get some others to handle it” replied Dominic, “We could come and listen in on the details” said Emanuele trying to show initiative, but also feeling relieved. “Ok but drive fast!” yelled Dominic over the noise of the helicopter’s propeller now spinning at top speed before take-off, he walked over and entered the helicopter with the other two men, as Clay and Emanuele quickly walked back to the car, pulling their phones out for light as it got darker toward the carpark. The helicopter noise interrupted the otherwise peaceful night sky as it flew over them, on its way back to San Diego. They both quickly jumped into the Mustang, and Clay started up the engine, revving it and giving it a quick warmup; he threw it into reverse, maneuvering his way out, and then threw it into drive, before tearing down the dirt road. They approached the entrance and the big gates that they had come through earlier, opened automatically for them. Clay pulled out onto the road planting his foot on the accelerator and did a huge burnout as the tires fought for grip; smoke and the smell of burnt rubber sprayed into the air as they left the property. The tires gripped as the car straightened out and threw them back in their seats before they sped down the otherwise peaceful road at 120Mph. Emanuele enjoyed riding shotgun with Clay, it was always an exciting ride. Clay was more of a rev head than anyone else he knew, especially when he had to be

somewhere in a hurry. They managed to get to Dominic's building in almost half the time it would take the average driver, thanks to Clay's daredevil driving skills; almost emptying a full tank of gas in the process. When they got up to the penthouse apartment, they walked through to the lounge room where Dominic, Percy and another two men were seated on the white leather lounge suite. One of whom was quite small and square looking; he was wearing glasses with a checker button up shirt and would have blended into the crowd of IT students at Emanuele's university. His name was Eli and despite his appearance he was responsible for setting up most of Dominic's mid-range drug deals in California. These mostly consisted of independent deals to the rich and famous and were spur of the moment deals, unlike the constant flow of product to his dealers that served the middle class. The men seated were intently facing Dominic who was at the head of the room, seated on his white leather one seater. Emanuele and Clay quickly sat down to join them, "What did we miss?" asked Clay. "Fill them in" said Dominic with a serious look directed at Percy, who then turned to face them. "Ryan, one of our money runners was out with his girlfriend Monique; they were attacked when returning to their car late last night, 3 kilos of meth and \$600k were the target for the attackers," said Percy. "Why didn't he go straight to you with the cash, and why are you only finding out about this now?" asked Clay, sounding pissed off. Suddenly, the man sitting next to Percy interjected, "He was going to deliver the bag to Percy right after" he explained concerned. "Who are you?" asked Clay, unimpressed, "This is Joel, he works for Eli, and got the call this afternoon" answered Percy, "Ryan's also my childhood friend and I was only contacted by the hospital today once they were both in stable conditions" explained Joel, trying to stress his importance to the situation, as he was about to continue rambling on.

“How about you shut the fuck up and let the adults speak” said Clay, “Are Ryan and his partner ok?” asked Emanuele directing his attention to Percy, “They’re stable but it got messy, luckily no weapons were used,” said Percy, “I’ll take care of all the medical expenses, and other expenses during their recovery” said Dominic looking at Joel, who although worked for him, he’d never met because he was low ranking. “Thank... you Mr Caito” said Joel becoming a little bit emotional. Dominic looked at Eli and nodded sternly to signal for them to leave; Eli stood up and consoled Joel as they both walked out. “How do you want this handled Dominic?” asked Clay, after the two young men had left, “Just deal with it accordingly. I can handle the current media and political circus through my contacts, but don’t put the junkies in the morgue, we don’t need public outcry while we’re upscaling distribution,” said Dominic. “Alright then, Emanuele and I can take care of it,” said Clay, willing to volunteer the two of them, seeing as the job didn’t involve murder. Emanuele felt in an awkward place about it; he was confident in their abilities, but he didn’t have the character required for hurting people the way that their business demanded. But he wanted to please his father, to show Dominic that he could be trusted to run their Empire one day, so he followed the responsibilities that came with being a part of that life. He knew the hardships his father had gone through to build the organization up to where it was, and there was no way he would oppose any orders from his father, especially at a sit down in the company of the other men. “What do you know about the attackers?” asked Dominic, now directing his attention at Percy, “As far as I know they’re just a couple of brothers that are low life crack addicts, but they have a bit of a reputation in their neighborhood and they’ve caused disruptions for us before” replied Percy, “Alright then, two birds, one stone” said Dominic, smiling as he sat back in the plush chair. “We’ll send some men with you for extra protection” said Percy, “Clay and I can handle a couple of

junkies” said Emanuele, now showing his commitment upon his father’s confirmation. Clay faced Dominic, “I agree with Emanuele, we’re going to be more efficient going in and getting this done by ourselves. Besides, what kind of message does it send to others if we need a whole team to teach a couple of junkies a lesson” he said. “Alright, get it done Monday night, Percy will have the address for you in the morning” said Dominic as he stood up, buttoned his blazer closed, and then walked out of the room. They all knew Dominic’s words were final; he wanted the job done and didn’t want to hear about it again after that.

Emanuele and Clay got up and left the penthouse before walking to the carpark, “Did we have to go on this one?” asked Emanuele, as they both approached the Mustang. Clay turned to Emanuele, “What do you mean?” he asked, sternly, “I know you just want to go to beat the shit out of these guys,” replied Emanuele.

Clay walked over to Emanuele and looked him straight in the eyes, “And you don’t?... These two lowlifes nearly killed one of your fathers’ men, and they deserve what’s coming to them” said Clay in a serious tone. “Of course, they deserve it, but why do we have to be the ones to do it?” asked Emanuele, genuinely. “You know I’ve heard a lot of stories from some of the men about how your father used to be on the streets.

You’re taking over one day; you’ve got big shoes to fill” said Clay, before he got into his car. Emanuele sighed as he knew Clay was right, although Emanuele was trained to kill, he had no desire to hurt people. He walked over to the passenger’s side, got in and shut his mouth, feeling slight frustration on the ride over to his house.

Clay and Emanuele both had no idea, that on Monday night, they would be walking into the most dangerous encounter of their lives.

Chapter 8: An Evil Encounter

Emanuele tossed and turned in his bed the following night; the night terrors had come back. He sat up drenched in sweat, frustrated that the parasomnia wouldn't allow him to sleep. This was accompanied again, by the fear of the unknown and being dragged into dangerous situations that should have been delegated to foot soldiers. He rolled over and picked up his phone off the side table; the screen lit his face and showed the time of 2:05am, then he put it back down and sighed. He didn't want to be tired for university that day and he contemplated in his mind whether to go or not. He knew it would be better for him to try to sleep in and be well rested for the job he had that night. But he also wanted to see Leila that day; he clenched his fists, "arghh" he growled in frustration. He wished that he could just get some sleep, but he couldn't stop the thoughts racing through his mind. He sighed again, and then looked out of his window at the night sky, "If you can hear this, I would really appreciate it if you helped me get some sleep right now. 'huff' I'm worried something bad will happen tonight, and I know you don't agree with what I've got to do, but if you allow me to get through this thing alive, I'll go back to Sunday mass" he said, quietly praying for the first time in years. There was silence in Emanuel's room; all that he could hear was the soft blowing noise coming from the air conditioning. He kept looking out his window and reminisced on the times that he had gone to church when he was young, he envisioned himself standing next to his father at the age of 8 in the pews, while his mom held Eva's hand next to them. He thought about how vastly different things had become since those days. It was hard to believe the memories were even real.

He vaguely heard one of the songs they used to sing in his mind, "Let there be peace on earth" were some of the words, which Emanuele thought was ironic; there was anything but peace on earth.

Upon thinking these things, he felt his eyelids become heavy and closed them, as he began to breathe heavily, and then drifted off to sleep.

Emanuele gasped, and then quickly sat up as a flurry of thoughts rushed to his mind revolving around, Leila, university, and the job. He grabbed his phone to check the time; it was 9am. He couldn't believe that he had slept soundly for almost seven hours. He quickly got out of bed and rushed to the toilet, took a piss and then got showered and dressed, before running downstairs to the kitchen where his mom had cooked him and Eva pancakes. "These smell amazing mom, thanks" he said as he sat down at the table next to Eva. "You're welcome sweetheart" replied Maria smiling and putting Emanuele's pancakes in front of him. He scoffed them down, and then washed them down with a hot chocolate. "We've gotta go" he said insistently to Eva, "I'm staying home with mom" "Ok" he said, jumping up from the countertop and taking his plate into the butler's kitchen sink. As he walked out, he looked at his mom hugging Eva, "I don't remember the last time she wanted to spend the day with me" said Maria with a big smile; looking as if she was about to cry. "Yeah, well you two have a good day" he said, quickly grabbing his bag and heading towards the garage. He knew Eva wasn't prepared to return to school yet because of what had happened.

Despite Maria not knowing the real reason she was staying home; Emanuele knew his mother could use the company as there wasn't many things that brought her joy recently.

While Emanuele was focusing on seeing Leila and showing up to his classes, Clay was strategically preparing for the payback that they would be carrying out that night. "They're in Compton, Edward Linn Apartments, it's a ghetto apartment complex" said Percy over the phone. Clay was sitting at his dining table eating a post-workout meal of chicken breast, beans, and rice when he answered the call. "Have you found out anything more about these scum?" he asked, putting down his spoon to listen. "Roy and Jasin Jenkins, their brothers, twins actually; used to run with some white supremacy groups, which doesn't make a lot of sense with them now living in a black neighborhood. But my source says they've done jobs for the small-time dealers in the area that aren't with us, and lastly, they like a fight. They're banned from all bars in the area for frequently inciting violence" said Percy, "Well they won't be dealing with the local drunks tonight, thanks Percy" "Are you sure you don't want me to send a couple of guys with you?" "No, we got this, see ya" said Clay confidently. After ending the call, he took the back off the phone, the sim out and snapped it, before continuing to eat. What Clay and Percy did not know is that these two men were no ordinary brawlers; they were ruthless psychopaths that had never lost a fight, neither in a cage or on the streets. There were only two things the Jenkins twins cared about; the ability to beat anyone that confronted them to a bloody pulp, and drugs. The reason they never lasted longer than a month in any biker gang or white supremacy group was because the twins shared an already short fuse between them. They were also frequently in court, charged of many different crimes, including home invasion, manslaughter, and battery on a regular basis. The twins had become very cunning at getting charges dropped as they knew how to twist the system and had successfully threatened many witnesses and jurors. With their reputation many lawyers had even become too afraid to argue against them, because they feared what the twins would do to their families. Now out of prison, they had been lying

low in a predominantly black neighborhood; Clay and Emanuele had no idea what they would be getting themselves into that night. No one did. "Yo! Emanuele wait up!" yelled Samuel as he saw his friend walking to his car at the end of the day. Emanuele turned, "Yeah?" he replied, as Samuel ran over and caught his breath, "I ain't heard from you in a while, everything alright?" he asked. Emanuele had an agitated look on his face, "Yeah, I'm fine" he said bluntly, "You sure man, you seem pissed about something" "Just family shit" he said, avoiding further conversation. "Ok, well any chance I could get a ride home?" "I can't today man I gotta be somewhere... sorry" replied Emanuele, before abruptly turning and getting into his Range Rover. Samuel had a confused look on his face after being ignored, as he walked to the bus stop. Emanuele placed his hands on the steering wheel and took a deep breath, he was feeling anxious and agitated about what was going to happen that night. He managed to successfully block these thoughts while with Leila, but now they had returned. He started up the Range Rover, left the car park and drove to Clay's house. When he got there, he walked through to the back, dropped his bag, and started hitting one of the boxing bags to try and shake the way he was feeling. The loud thuds and the sound of chain dragging on the steel beam it was attached to caused Clay to quickly walk outside, "What are you doing? Save your energy!" he yelled. "Just a few minutes!" Emanuele yelled back aggressively. Clay walked over and grabbed the bag, but Emanuele kept hitting it. "Enough!" yelled Clay, before Emanuele threw one last punch. Then he walked over and sat down at the outdoor dining table, pulling his water bottle out and taking a drink from it. "You better be ready for tonight" said Clay in a serious tone, "I am ready, I want to get this shit over and done with" snapped Emanuele, "Good, let's go inside and take it easy before we have to get ready" said Clay trying to calm him down.

Emanuele wished he hadn't been so careless in getting involved, he wasn't a hardened war veteran like Clay, or hardened criminal like some of the others. But he knew he couldn't pull out of the job now; it would disappoint his father and destroy his reputation within the organization. He slowly followed Clay inside and sat down in the lounge room, switching on the TV to a show about doomsday bunkers; that very moment he would have preferred to have been bugging out in one. But he quickly changed the channel as he couldn't afford to let his mind drift too much. Clay appeared in the loungeroom with two light weight bullet-proof vests for the job and opened a duffle bag that had two pistols with silencers attached. He removed both clips to make sure they were fully loaded, seeing as he had just purchased these pieces for the job from an arms dealer he knew. "You want one of these?" asked Clay, smiling as he handed Emanuele a stainless-steel knuckle duster. "I'll stick with the gun for protection" replied Emanuele handing it back, then picking up one of the pistols and looking down the sights, with it aimed at the TV. "Suit yourself" said Clay looking pleased as he put the knuckle dusters on his left fist and clenching it. Emanuele looked over at him and could tell that he was looking forward to this; he always seemed to want to be where the violence was. A few hours passed and Emanuele was still sitting on the lounge watching TV when Clay emerged handing him a bowl of rice and satay chicken. "You'll need your energy tonight," he said; Emanuele sat up, grabbing the bowl, and began forcing himself to eat. He hadn't been able to eat since breakfast, and quickly scoffed it down, while blocking any anxious thoughts. "Damn that was good; I didn't know you could cook. You got any more?" asked Emanuele. "My mother taught me to cook, and no you can't have any more, I'm not having you bloated as shit on this job" replied Clay. A couple more hours passed, then they both showered and got dressed into black shirts and cargo pants, loose enough to move in, but with the belts firmly tight. "Come into the kitchen," said Clay; Emanuele got up,

following him through to the kitchen where two glasses of water and a small container with some small orange pills were sitting on the bench. "What are they?" asked Emanuele, "Something to help you stay focused. Airforce pilot's use them on extended missions, a buddy of mine got them for me... trust me they work, no high, just pure focus" replied Clay, as he shook out two pills into Emanuele's hand and then took three for himself. Emanuele was a little hesitant as he had never taken illicit drugs; growing up he was exposed to seeing the disastrous effects they had on people. But he trusted Clay enough that if they used them in the Air force, then they would probably help. "Go for a piss if you need to, you won't get another chance" "I went before" "Alright then let's go, I want to get there by 10 and check the place out before we make our move" said Clay, then he picked up his duffle bag containing their gear and they both walked to the garage. Clay pressed the unlock button on the wireless keys to his silver Cadillac CTS, then he threw the duffle bag in the boot and got into the driver's seat. Emanuele got into the passenger seat and the automatic garage door opened and then closed as they drove away. On the drive out of San Diego, Emanuele looked out at the familiar sights and thought about all the times he had driven on that same road. They had been pleasant memories of him travelling to LA, sometimes just to visit for the day. But this time was different; this time he was making the trip into the face of certain danger. Clay made the drive inconspicuously to the target complex, abiding by the speed limit until they took the exit off the Gardena freeway. Then the Cadillac drove through Compton, passing multiple neighborhoods, and school regions on its way to the target complex. Clay drove through the old ghetto neighborhood, slowing down as he came to a church on the corner. Then they turned past it, and could see the targets apartment block ahead, "This is the dump" said Clay as they drove past the building. They looked at the fenced entrance where 3 men were loitering, and smoking.

One of them stared at Clay as he drove past; so, Clay kept driving and took a left, before parking one block over down a side alley. "We'll have to jump the fence unless those guys have cleared out by the time we get back there," said Clay. Then he pulled out one of the bullet proof vests from his bag, handing it to Emanuele, and then put the other one on himself. "We're gonna stand out in this neighborhood with these on" said Emanuele concerned, "That's why I packed these" replied Clay tossing him a baggy black hoody. Emanuele quickly threw it on, tucking his gun in through one of the straps on his vest, then pulled the hoody back over it. They both got out of the car, and Emanuele could feel his heart racing, but now surprisingly he didn't feel anxious; his mind was clear, and he felt energized. He knew it must have been the pills that Clay had given him earlier, now taking full effect. "Maintain my pace two steps behind me, and don't look anyone in the eyes" said Clay before covering his head with the hood. Emanuele did the same and followed Clay's instructions; they walked quickly to the apartment block, but then slowed down not to arouse suspicion by a few of the local people walking across the street. The two of them walked straight through the open gate and inside, then Clay checked the apartment numbers on the wall, "This way" he said before they both quickly made their way up two flights of stairs to the third floor. There was Heavy metal music playing that became increasingly louder as they made their way towards the end of the hallway. The music was blaring from the last apartment to the right which was apartment 6; the one they were about to enter. They both threw their hoodies off, then, 'Thud!Thud!Thud!' Clay banged on the door with his fist, but the music kept blaring. As he waited for a response he looked down on the door and noticed dodgy patch work and dried blood. An elderly black man from across the hall opened his door slightly to peak out; this surprised Emanuele, and he went for his gun upon seeing him. But the old man opened the door a little further as his eyes widened; he shook his head,

mouth open, with a look of fear. Emanuele's surprised look turned to one of worry as he quickly took his gun out and backed away from door 6. 'Thud!Thud!Thud!' went Clay's fist as he continued to bang on the door, but this time the blaring music stopped. The elderly man quickly shut his door and Emanuele heard 4 locks click from the other side. "WHAT!?" a man yelled intensely from the other side of the door, "I was told to delivery this to a Jasin" replied Clay, being vague about a supposed delivery. Then he quickly pulled out the steel knuckle dusters from his pocket and put them on. The door unlocked and swung open; standing there was a lean bald headed white man, wearing only jeans and boots, his arms were covered in tattoos, but most shocking of all, he stood almost 7 feet tall! Clay looked up at him quickly, "Hi" he said before punching the man in the chest as hard as he could, sending him to the floor back inside the apartment. "You stole from the wrong man!" yelled Clay as he walked inside, but suddenly the man got straight to his feet as though he was possessed. Jasin Jenkins ran at Clay, and Clay tried to use his momentum to tackle him to the ground, but the tall man held on with brute strength as both men smashed into the opposite wall in the hallway, leaving a crater of plasterboard, that revealed some of the timber beams. "Hey!!" yelled Emanuele, pointing his gun at Jasin to try and get his attention, the big man looked at him and started laughing. 'Bang!' Emanuele let off a silenced round that pierced through his shin, "Arghh!" yelled Jasin, but to Emanuele's horror he began laughing again. "Behind you!!!" yelled Clay, but before Emanuele could turn to see what was going on, Roy Jenkins was standing right behind him. Roy was only slightly shorter than his brother but more muscular. He ripped the gun out of Emanuele's hand and then punched him in the face, causing Emanuele to stumble back in pain, as it felt like he'd just been hit by a car. Roy threw the gun inside the apartment, and then picked Emanuele up.

Emanuele elbowed him in the face as hard as he could but was slammed hard and fast onto the timber floor, which hurt his lower back. Clay went ballistic and started wailing on Jasin before stomping him in the face, then running over to help Emanuele who was doing his best to block the punches coming down upon him from the other big twin. Clay leapt at Roy Jenkin and got him in a rear naked choke; he squeezed with all his might but was punched in the back of the head by Jasin who now had blood streaming out of his face and down his chest. This was accompanied by a bloody, fleshy, exit wound to his calf from Emanuele's gunshot. Amazingly, the man had a big bloody grin on his face as Clay turned and started trading punches with him. While this was happening, Emanuele got up and had to quickly slip under a big haymaker from Roy, before throwing a perfectly placed uppercut to his chin, but all this did was bump his head back and made the big man furious. He went back at Emanuele quickly with straight punches and kicks that Emanuele did his best to avoid, but he was hit badly with a left hook to his right eye. He instantly felt the socket crack and the pain was intense, as blood welled up around his eyeball. He couldn't stop to give it any thought though; he suddenly realized this wasn't training anymore, this was life and death, and instinct took over. Roy went back at him with a big side kick, but Emanuele jumped back and knocked it out of the way. Roy threw more punches, and then went for the side kick again, but this time Emanuele saw it coming and grabbed it before shin kicking him powerfully to the groin. "Argghh!" the big man groaned, before clutching at his nuts and bending over slightly, just long enough for Emanuele to quickly, and swiftly follow up with a round house kick that connected him in the head. It nearly toppled the big man, so Emanuele threw four fast punches as hard as he could in an effort to knock him out. But to no avail; the big man went psycho as if possessed and picked Emanuele up by the vest, throwing him up against the wall. He then lifted Emanuele off his feet and started

screaming in his face, spraying saliva like a wild beast. At that exact moment Clay had bested Jasin, again knocking him to the ground and was now standing over him, stomping on his bullet wounded leg. But no matter what Clay did, Jasin wouldn't stop smiling and laughing as if it was all a big joke. Apart from already being the psychopath that he was, he had taken a numbing amount of meth that night and his body wasn't registering the pain. "HAHAHA TRY AGAIN!!!!" he yelled like a maniac, just before Clay booted him in the face as hard as he could, to shut him up. His steel-cap boot sent the man's teeth flying as it broke his jaw, "Not Laughing Now Are Ya!?" yelled Clay; Roy looked over and saw his twin brother semi-unconscious on the ground, "YOU FUCKING BASTARD!!!" he yelled, before kneeling Emanuel in the ribs, and sprinting at Clay. The big twin tried to shoulder charge Clay, but he was ready this time and used his momentum against him. He grabbed Roy and then threw him backwards with all his might, using his legs like loaded springs. 'SMASH!!!' went the window at the end of the hall as Roy Jenkins flew through it, falling from the third level and hitting the cement on the side street, breaking both of his legs. Clay quickly got up and looked out the broken window to make sure he was immobile and that he could finish him on the way out. Jasin Jenkins came too, after being booted in the head, still messed up on drugs and acting like it was all a game. Suddenly, he noticed Roy wasn't in the hallway, and he panicked; upon turning to see the window had been smashed, he ran and looked out. "ROY!!!!!" he screamed, seeing his brother messed up on the pavement below. All of a sudden, he pulled out a small hunting knife from his right boot. He lunged at Clay aiming to strike him in the neck, but Clay moved just in time and was stabbed in the trapezium just above his collar bone. Jasin ripped the knife out and quickly stabbed him again in the torso, but again he was off target and just pierced flesh.

He ripped the knife out again and tried as hard as he could to stab Clay in the eye, but Clay managed to get a hold of his grip and began to fight him off. Out of nowhere Emanuele spear tackled the monster of a man, then Clay quickly stripped the knife from his loose grip and sliced his jugular vein. Blood sprayed out like a burst water balloon just before Clay slammed the knife into his chest, finally stopping the man, who seconds later lay there dead in a pool of his own blood. Both Emanuele and Clay sat there on the floor of the hallway, bloodied, bruised, and panting heavily. Emanuele groaned and clutched at his side, he knew something was wrong and that he would need medical attention. Clay glanced up at him, "Are you ok E-man?" he asked sounding more concerned than ever. "Aw, I think he broke my ribs" said Emanuele grimacing in pain, "Where's your gun?" "Ah, in there" said Emanuele pointing to the twins' apartment. "I'll be right back" said Clay getting to his feet as he felt the stab wound to his trap. He looked at his hand which was now covered in blood and picked up the hoody from the ground that he had thrown off before fighting. He pressed it up against his wound to soak up some of the blood, then threw it back on. He walked over to Jasin's dead body before dragging it into the apartment, and then searched for Emanuele's gun. He found it lying under the kitchen bench then quickly crouched down and picked it up. Before leaving the apartment, he turned the heavy metal back on, locking the door behind him as he stepped back into the hallway. He then walked back to the broken window, "Shit!" he said, as he looked down to the carpark and noticed that Roy Jenkins was not lying there anymore. "Can you walk okay?" he asked, "Yeah, I'll manage" replied Emanuele, slowly getting to his feet. "Good I'll meet you at the car, but first I need to finish off that big oath downstairs" he said, quickly handing Emanuel the car key and gun. "Where's yours?" asked Emanuele; Clay quickly scanned the area for his gun, walking over to the crater in the wall and found it inside the base of the wall. "I've

got it, now go!" he said, "Okay" replied Emanuele realizing that this wasn't over. They both paced to the stairs and descended to the ground floor. They got to the entrance of the building where two men associated with the twins were entering; the men looked at their unfamiliar faces and suddenly realized they were injured, and quickly went for their guns. 'Bang! Bang!' Clay dropped them both, shooting them square in the heads. Emanuele was stunned, but he quickly composed himself and then made his way over to the car, while Clay went out back to search for Roy Jenkins. Emanuele grunted as he ran to the car, while trying to block out the pain in his ribs. He got into the passenger's seat and reclined out of sight, now feeling a great sense of urgency and worry. He had never been this scared for Clay in his life, as the worst-case scenario entered his mind of his mentor and friend being killed. He didn't know what else he could do, "God, please let Clay kill... just get him back safely" he said to himself inside the Cadillac. He hated that death was a big part of his life, and even though he knew some people didn't deserve to live, he had hoped he would never be the one to end a life. Emanuele's thoughts were interrupted as blood seeped into his eye, "argghhh" he groaned as he painfully closed it, while trying to wipe the blood away.

Meanwhile, Clay was scanning the carpark at the back of the building; he could only just make out a small trail of blood droplets lit by the dull streetlights. It was leading down further behind the building, so he followed with gun in hand, confident that it would lead to a crippled Roy Jenkin. But when he had reached the back of the complex, the trail stopped at the back perimeter, where there was nothing but dumpsters and trash lying around. He looked to other end where the entrance gate was; it was quiet, with the only noise being the muffled heavy metal coming out of the apartment, back up on the third floor.

But suddenly, he heard movement coming from one of the dumpsters; he quickly walked over to it and threw up the lid pointing the gun inside, half expecting to see a stray cat. But to his surprise Roy was sitting inside, bloodied, with broken bone protruding from one of his legs, and the other mangled. He looked up at Clay and spat out a mouthful of blood onto himself, "Like I told your brother, you stole from the wrong man," said Clay. Roy breathed heavily, choking slightly, "So kill me, just leave my brother" he said, "He's dead" replied Clay, showing no remorse whatsoever. The big man tried to lunge, but Clay casually stood back out of his reach, firing a round at close range through his forehead. Roy's blood and brains sprayed the inside of the dumpster before Clay closed the lid and made his way back to his Cadillac. To his surprise he could hear sirens in the far-off distance, which he didn't expect as this neighborhood should have been a low priority for the cops, so he picked up the pace. Emanuele was extremely relieved to see Clay approaching in the rear-view mirror, and quickly sat up. "Did you find him?" asked Emanuele a little worried, "I took out the trash" replied Clay aggressively, before he started up his vehicle and took off speeding, to get distance between them and the double homicide. Emanuele grabbed at his side and winced as they drove over a bump, "I know a guy not too far from here, he'll fix us up" said Clay, noticing that Emanuele was in pain. After they had been driving for 40 minutes Emanuele was getting impatient, "I thought you said this place was close" he said, now in more pain that the adrenaline had worn off, "We're almost there" replied Clay, reassuring him. Minutes later, they pulled into a cul-de-sac in southwest Anaheim, stopping in the last houses driveway, before both getting out of the car. "Shit, I'll have to get these seats re-done" said Clay, noticing the blood stains on the seats as they got out. They walked to the front door, Emanuele in agony, but Clay seemingly oblivious to the knife wounds he was carrying. He pressed the doorbell, and then looked at the security camera.

A grey-haired man answered the door; "Doc Andrews, I'm sorry to come so late, but we're pretty banged up," said Clay. The doctor looked at them both, "Come in" he said, quickly rushing them inside. They made their way through the lounge room and downstairs where there was a bed and medical office set up like a general practitioner's room. Dr Andrews was not affiliated with Dominic; he had been seeing Clay for a few years now for basic treatment when Clay had been involved in underground fighting. But he was happy to help anyone injured for a black-market rate, consequently being the reason, he was stripped of his doctorate, besides prescribing anything and everything for profit. But he did have a nice stockpile of drugs from his years as a medical practitioner. "Let's stitch those up" he said, looking at Clay's stab wounds, "No, the kid first" insisted Clay. The doctor had never seen Emanuele and was unaware of who he was or how important he was. "Have a seat" said the doctor, pointing to the bed; Emanuele sat down before the doctor cleaned up his eye. He did some checks and measurements comparing it to his other eye, "Are you having double vision at all?" he asked, "Not really, no" replied Emanuele, "You may have an orbital fracture, but in my experience, it doesn't seem to be severe enough for surgery. You should follow up with your own physician when the swelling goes down" he said. Then he turned and got a small ice pack from the fridge, "Keep this on it for a few hours each day, for at least a week" said the doctor, handing Emanuele the ice pack. "I've also got this" said Emanuele, lifting his shirt to reveal a large softball sized bruise on one side of his torso. "That's a shiner, it reminds me of many I've seen on your friend here" said the doctor smiling at Clay, as he grabbed a larger ice pack, and then started taping it to problem region of Emanuele's torso. Emanuele winced in pain, "You may have a broken rib, just get plenty of rest for the next few weeks and take these for the pain" said the doctor, handing Emanuele a packet of codeine painkillers and a bottle of water.

“Thanks” replied Emanuele, before quickly taking two of them. Then Dr Andrews turned his attention to Clay’s stab wounds, and after disinfecting them he started to stitch them up. “What do the other guys look like?” he asked, “Don’t ask” replied Clay, bluntly. After finishing, the doctor led them both back upstairs to the front door, “Aren’t you forgetting something?” he asked, “I’ll wire you the money” replied Clay. The doctor shook his head, “Alright let me see what I’ve got in the car” said Clay, before both he and Emanuele walked out to the Cadillac CTS. Emanuele got in and lay down on the reclined passenger seat, while Clay looked inside his center console. He had a thousand dollars emergency cash, which he grabbed and then walked back to the front door, handing it to the doctor. “That’s only half” said Dr Andrews, looking at the small roll of bills, “That’s Dominic’s kid” replied Clay, “This is fine” said the doctor, quickly accepting the money from Clay. Although he didn’t know Emanuele, he sure as hell was aware of who Dominic was. Upon returning to the car, Clay pulled out of the driveway and then made the drive back to San Diego. Emanuele closed his eyes on the trip back and tried to block out the pain until the pain killers kicked in.

“Hey, we’re here” said Clay, gently shaking Emanuele’s shoulder to wake him up. Emanuele opened his eyes to see the big familiar Spanish style mansion, “Oh, ok” he said. The arrival seemed so sudden, but he had passed out completely for an hour and a half during drive back. “Just rest, I’ll call you next week to see how you are,” said Clay, as he knew he should have taken a better approach in Compton, but his ego had put them both in danger. Clay saw that Emanuele had drifted back to sleep and gently nudged him again. “Mmhmm” mumbled Emanuele as he slowly got out of the car, and then walked to his front door, holding his tender ribs. He quietly entered using a spare key he had; the entrance light was still on, but both Eva and Maria had already gone to bed.

Emanuele slowly made his way up to his room and carefully collapsed on his bed feeling exhausted, but also numb from the painkillers as he had not developed a tolerance to codeine. In the brief moments of lucidity before drifting to sleep, he couldn't believe how severely wrong the night had gone, and the thought that if Clay hadn't of been there, he would have certainly faced death.

He took a deep breath and then winced slightly, realizing he shouldn't do that, so he took some shallow breaths with his eyes closed, and after feeling a brief sense of gratitude to be alive, he then drifted off to sleep.

Chapter 9: Regal Redemption

“Are you getting up?” asked Maria, as she stood at the door of Emanuele’s room the following morning. Emanuele quickly pulled the blanket over his face, hoping she wouldn’t walk in, “No!” he replied, “Well, you’ve been in bed all day” “Ok, I’ll be up soon” he said, before Maria left and walked back downstairs. Emanuele rolled over to grab his cell phone off the side table; he winced, forgetting that he had likely fractured a rib or two. His phone screen lit up as he checked the time; it was almost 2pm and was the first time he had ever slept into the afternoon. The message icon on his phone showed he had new messages in his inbox; there were 3 from Samuel and 1 from Leila. He opened the first message from Samuel, ‘Bro where are you? Major exams today!!!’ it read. Then he checked the other two messages from Samuel which were much the same. The next one made him sad immediately upon opening it, ‘I can’t wait to see you today handsome xoxo’ it read; Leila had sent it early that morning. Emanuele sighed as he put his phone down, knowing that he wouldn’t be seeing her for a while in his current condition. He got out of bed gingerly, trying not to twist his torso too much, then looked down where he had been lying. There was a damp patch of sweat; he couldn’t tell if it was from night sweats, or if the ice pack that was still strapped to him had been leaking. After walking into his bathroom, he turned on the light and was a little shocked at what he saw in the mirror. His right eye was bloodshot red and had a purplish ring around it. He looked away and shook his head in disgust, and then he carefully undressed himself before unravelling the shrink wrap from his torso. He stepped into the shower and adjusted the water to a comfortable warm temperature, just so that he could tolerate it on his sore body.

After standing there in the light stream of water for almost 15 minutes he had the arduous task of washing, drying, and putting on comfortable clothing. After successfully completing what should have been simple tasks, now made difficult through bouts of pain, he opened one of his cupboards to reveal his large sunglasses collection. He then began trying different pairs on to see which covered his eye the best. Even though they all felt uncomfortable, he settled on a pair of wide style Oakley's before walking out of his wardrobe. He then grabbed the codeine pills from his side table and made his way downstairs. Neither Maria nor his sister were in the kitchen, so he grabbed a glass of water and took two of the pills. His stomach grumbled, and after realizing it probably wasn't a good idea to take the pills on an empty stomach, he quickly made himself a peanut butter sandwich. With the whole meal sandwich now in hand, he heard his sister in the lounge room, so he quietly made his way through the hallway and peered through to see what she was doing. After seeing her sitting there, controller in hand, Emanuele knew she hadn't just skipped school to stay home and watch the fashion channel but was still not ready to return. He wondered whether he should join her or not, but as he stood there finishing the sandwich, he decided to test the sunglasses out. So, he walked in and carefully reclined on the lounge opposite to her, slowly shifting to get as comfortable as possible before engaging in conversation. "No school today?" he asked, "No ride" she replied, fixated on the TV. "I thought Carlos was taking you" he said, "Nope" she replied appearing uninterested. Emanuele was glad to hear this, 'Good, Carlos must be busy with production' he thought to himself. Just then, Maria entered the room, "You two need to stop skipping school" she said in a serious tone, "I had no ride" said Eva turning to face her mom, and now noticing her brother. She started laughing, "Why the hell are you wearing glasses inside?" she asked, "Emanuele did you hear me?" asked Maria, pulling the glasses off his head.

“Ow!” he exclaimed, trying to cover up his eye, “What happened to you!?” yelled Maria, as she walked around to face him, touching his chin while trying to get a better look. Emanuele exhaled and then took his hand away, “I got into a fight at uni” he said, “My Emanuele what for--was it over this new girl!?” asked Maria, before ranting in Spanish. Emanuele darted an angry look at his sister, slightly annoyed that she had told their mum about Leila without his approval. “No, it wasn’t, and I didn’t instigate it” he explained, “Well, you better avoid them from now on okay – I’m going out do you need anything for your eye?” asked Maria. “No mom, I’m fine” “Oh how about some lunch mama?” asked Eva, “I’m going to be out for a while, have Jarryd run you something okay – and Emanuele, have Jarryd take your car in to get the back window fixed, your father only got it for you last year, you wouldn’t want him seeing it like that” she said, “Alright,” replied Emanuel, softly. He had completely forgotten about the cracked glass from when he really had gotten into a fight at university. But right now, he couldn’t remember anything of insignificance, the terror of last night was still fresh in his mind, despite his best efforts to act like nothing major had happened to him. Maria said goodbye and pretended to leave but hid around the corner to listen in on their conversation; she had pretended to believe her son, knowing that he would never divulge the truth to her. “So, what really happened to your eye?” asked Eva, “I had to do a job with Clay... it went very wrong” replied Emanuele, holding back his emotional struggle as he lifted his shirt to show her the huge bruise on his torso. “Ow! Why did you have to go? Dad has more people working for him than Walmart” she said, trying to look facetious, but she was genuinely worried for her brother. Emanuele sighed, “It’s not a joke Eva I could have died, but you know what Clay’s like he wants to do everything to please dad, and I just got dragged into it” “What are you going to do if he asks you to do it again?” she asked, now showing her concern.

“I’m not risking my life like that again. I don’t know what I’m going to tell dad yet, but don’t mention anything to mom, okay. I don’t want her getting worried or confronting dad about it, you know what he’s like when people try to tell him what to do” explained Emanuele. Eva promised her brother not to say anything; meanwhile Maria was shocked and furious upon hearing this; she couldn’t believe that Dominic had put their son in danger like that. But as angry as she was, she knew that she couldn’t say anything to him, and now despite still loving him, the Dominic she once knew was gone. Jarryd the housekeeper and maintenance man took Emanuele’s Bentley Continental GT to the shop for a new rear window, and then took pizzas back to the house. He rang the doorbell upon arrival and Eva answered, “Thanks Jarryd” she said, snatching the two pizzas from him. She was about to close the door, but he stuck his hand out to stop her, “Um, is your mom home?” he asked, “No, she isn’t” replied Eva bluntly. He instantly looked slightly disappointed but then quickly smiled not wanting her to notice, “goodbye” he said, cheerfully and then left. Eva scoffed as she took the pizzas into the lounge room, “I think Jarryd might like mom” she said, placing the pizza boxes onto the oversized coffee table. They both laughed and agreed that their mother would never go for him, he was too timid and nothing like Dominic. They spent the rest of the evening streaming movies, which was becoming a weekly ritual for them. “Alright, goodnight, Eva” said Emanuele, feeling full of comfort pizza after only three slices; his appetite seemed to elude him. “You’re going to bed already? Oh okay, goodnight” she replied, sheepishly, as she watched how much pain her brother was in as he grimaced while getting off the lounge. But as soon as Emanuele had left the room Eva happily turned off the drama film, she had no real interest in, and switched on a fashion program. Emanuele struggled up the stairs, clutching his side, and upon entering his room, he carefully lay down on his bed. He unlocked his phone and then started typing a message, ‘hey man I’m sick.

Will be for the rest of the week. Can you tell our lecturer? I think I'll have to defer some subjects' it read. Then he replied to Leila, 'Hey I'm sorry I couldn't see you today, I'm feeling unwell. I will see you next week. I miss you' read the message. He double checked it and added 'xx' at the end, but then shook his head and took them out before sending it to her. Only a few moments later, the phone lit up and he checked his inbox; there was a reply from Leila, 'Aww no, that's not good. I hope you get better soon. I miss you too xx' it read. Emanuele felt a small butterfly sensation well up inside his stomach as he read it, but soon it was overshadowed by pain. He wished that he didn't have the stupid injuries, and although he had some self-pity, he was also pissed at himself that he hadn't been able to fight harder, thinking that maybe if he had, he would be spending time with Leila that week. He sighed, wondering whether he should reply or not, or whether she was busy, and he also didn't want to come across as desperate. But suddenly his phone lit up again, and to his surprise it was from Leila again, 'Now I don't have anything to look forward to this week ☹' it read. Emanuele quickly replied with a message, 'No, but we can both look forward to next week ☺' it read. This led to the two of them texting each other back and forth for the next hour; Leila sent her last message at 9:43pm, 'Good night. Sweet dreams. Can't wait to see you xxx' it read, which made Emanuele smile as he set his phone down on his side table. After taking two more painkillers he shut his eyes and peacefully drifted off to sleep. But that night Emanuele's mind was void of sweet dreams; he sweated profusely as a nightmare ensued about the ordeal against the Jenkin twins; except this time around the outcome was different. Clay had been killed and the twins were chasing him through the streets of Compton; the bloodlust in their eyes and screams of evil joy, caused his heart to race upon his bed. "Aaaaaghhh!" he yelled waking up, with his eyes wide open, panting heavily, and grimacing in pain as he sat up. Although now feeling groggy, there was no way he

wanted to sleep and slip back into that nightmare. He grabbed his phone and checked the time, it was 3:34am; he looked up and exhaled in frustration, and then slowly sat up at the end of his bed, rubbing his eyes as gently as possible. There was only one thing he instinctively knew would take his mind off the terrifying ordeal, and that was to escape reality inside a virtual world, something he hadn't done since high school. So, he looked to his entertainment unit on the opposite wall to the bed, before switching his 65-inch TV and Playstation on. He entered the post-apocalyptic wasteland of Fallout, and soon he had forgotten all about his nightmare. He became so entrenched in the game that hours quickly passed by, and he only realized how much time had passed when he heard his sister, "Bye mom!" yelled Eva from downstairs, then the front door slammed shut. Emanuele paused his game contemplating whether he should quickly go down but decided against it; the last thing he wanted was to be ridiculed by Carlos in his current condition. After slowly making his way down the stairs, he entered the kitchen where Maria was making herself a juice, "was that Carlos?" he asked, hoping to be wrong, "Yeah, he took Eva to school" replied Maria. "I thought you didn't like him around Eva" "I'm warming up to him he was very polite when I spoke to him, I think he's a nice boy deep down" replied Maria. "Well, he's pulled the friggin' wool over your eyes" said Emanuele under his breath, "Excuse me?" asked Maria, looking pissed as she quickly switched off the juicer. "He's just bad news mama" replied Emanuele, humbly, before exacerbating his limp as he walked over to the cupboard to gain some sympathy. Emanuele knew the truth of who Carlos was; he had seen the horrific things that this man was capable of. But he also couldn't help but shake his head as he questioned, 'Am I becoming like him?' knowing that he had accompanied Clay in murdering the twins. Maria switched the juicer back on which resumed the loud buzzing sound as Emanuele looked in the cupboard for comfort food.

He grabbed two bags of chips, which Clay would have gone ballistic over, had he seen Emanuele holding them. He then went back upstairs, got into bed, took two more codeine pills, and resumed his game. After again becoming entrenched in the virtual worlds for hours on end, thoughts of the ordeal against the Jenkins crept back into the forefront of Emanuele's consciousness. He threw his controller down beside him in frustration and then picked up his phone hoping that he had a message from someone; but there were no new messages. So, he decided to text Samuel, 'Hey how's that douchebag lecturer treating you? Haha' he wrote. Not long after he got a message back, 'Yeah still a pain in the ass' it read; Emanuele chuckled, but stopped himself from the discomfort in his ribs, and then messaged Samuel back. After waiting a few minutes, he didn't receive a reply, and assumed Samuel must have gotten caught up in class, so he decided to order something to eat. He called Jarryd, asking him to swing by the local Chinese restaurant and pick him up some Hokkien noodles, "Thanks just leave them on the kitchen counter" he said, before ending the call. But by the time the noodles had been delivered Emanuele was feeling slightly nauseated, 'Damn, I should have had something more than just chips and painkillers' he thought to himself before downing a glass of water. He now sat down at the head of the large dining table; the huge house was completely quiet with no one around. He sighed, then got stuck into his noodles to try and remove the sickly feeling, but despite his best efforts only finished a third of them. After putting his plate in the dishwasher, he returned to bed, lying there, staring aimlessly at the ceiling, "I feel like absolute shit" he said to himself. He couldn't stand staying in bed all day, being completely void of all productivity, but he also couldn't muster up the energy to do anything in his current condition. He switched on his TV and looked through the selection of movies available to him but started drifting off to sleep before he could decide what to watch.

Emanuele awoke abruptly to the sound of their house sound system blaring mind numbing Hip-Hop; he loved Hip-Hop, but whatever was playing was trash and it hurt his ears. He groaned as he got up to go downstairs to turn the volume down; Eva walked through the hallway towards him. "Are you using the gym?" he asked, "Yeah" she replied before walking through to the home gym. Emanuele walked over to the house's central LCD control console and set the music to the home gym only. He then noticed the garage door open on the security monitor, and assumed it was his mom. Without checking, he walked down the back to see if she needed help with anything, despite knowing he wouldn't be much help. But when he got there, he saw his Bentley Continental GT pulling in, and realized it wasn't his mom, but that Jarryd was bringing it back from the rear window being replaced from the day before. The engine turned off and Jarryd got out of the car a little nervous to see Emanuele standing there waiting for him. "Hey" he said, smiling as he handed over the keys, "Thanks" replied Emanuele, clicking the lock button on the keys. Jarryd stared awkwardly at Emanuele's eye for a moment, "Uh how were your noodles?" he asked trying to break the ice. Emanuele just nodded, "Fine" he said, being a little cold towards him because Jarryd was made known that the lives of this family were none of his business; he had been rigorously vetted by Dominic's people before becoming the housekeeper, but had started to show an interest in Maria, which despite his parents having split, would not turn out well for him. Jarryd asked if he needed anything else, but Emanuele just shook his head, "Okay call me when you do" said Jarryd as he walked out of the garage door and to his pickup truck parked on the road.

Emanuele pushed the garage door switch, briefly looking at the shiny new glass on the Bentley before it closed. He suddenly felt better and went to the kitchen in search of more food.

Upon opening the fridge, he pulled out some left-over pasta and threw it in the microwave, nuking it for 2 minutes. Then with the bowl in hand, he sat up at the kitchen bench on one of the stools and twirled some pasta onto his fork. After he had finished his last mouthful, Eva walked in sweating a little, "Good workout?" he asked, "Yeah" she replied, panting as she grabbed a bottle of water from the fridge. "How was school?" he asked, "Yeah, good" "What about those guys?" "They haven't shown up and Denise said the rugby team lost its first game this year. Must have been because you beat up their star players" said Eva looking amused, before making her way up to her room to take a shower. Emanuele was glad to see his sister in a good mood but was curious as to the real reason why.

Emanuele tossed and turned upon his bed that night; replays of the brutal and violent things he had witnessed swirled around in his mind as he struggled to sleep. The Phoenix job, the fight with the rugby players, but worst of all, the Jenkins twins. All he could hear were the sounds of people yelling in pain and the gun shots going off; he put his hands over his ears as the sounds became louder and louder. No matter what he did to take his mind off these things, nothing seemed to work. He got up furiously, switching his light on, before sitting back on the edge of his bed. He wanted the pain gone from his torso and eye, but above all he was desperate to remove the thoughts and sounds from his mind. He looked at the codeine pills and grabbed them, and then he walked over to his entertainment cabinet and reached up. Sitting on the top shelf of it, were a pair of limited-edition Air Jordan 4 sneakers worth \$25,000, and next to them was a bottle of Johnnie Walker Blue Label Scotch. It had been a gift from Percy for his 20th birthday and was still unopened in the blue box, because Emanuele had been encouraged by his mom to wait for his 21st to drink it. But he couldn't wait; he wanted these traumatic thoughts out of his mind and was desperate enough to drink the scotch.

He grabbed the bottle and opened it up, throwing the box on the floor and downing two more codeine pills while taking a swig from the bottle, quickly followed by a swig of water. He sat back on his bed, turned the TV on and began flicking through channels; the sounds of people screaming out in pain were still ringing in his ears, so he took another swig from the bottle, but this time was a full mouthful. He concentrated, trying not to gag as it burned on the way down. He had never drunk whiskey straight before in his life and now he knew why, but he was determined to keep drinking if it cleared his mind. He sat back in bed placing the bottle without its lid on his side table and stared at the TV. As a documentary about the Amazon jungle came on, he tried to focus on it. A few moments later, the terrifying noises inside his head had started to subside and he was no longer experiencing the flashbacks. The scotch was helping, and so he proceeded to take another big swig from the bottle. But not long after he questioned this decision, as the painkillers had increased the effects of the alcohol. He burped and tasted the scotch on his breath, then groaned before lying down in his bed, closing his eyes, and managing to get an hour's sleep as the TV flickered upon him.

For the next 4 days Emanuele experienced the same thoughts and sounds in his mind and continued to try to solve the issue with less pain medication, but more alcohol. He only ate one post-drunken meal each night, when his sister and mom had gone to sleep, and now he was developing the unhealthy habits of a recluse, not wanting to see anyone or leave the confines of his house.

Despite still being in contact with those close to him, he quickly dismissed any opportunity for them to see him. Emanuele had unknowingly developed post-traumatic-stress-disorder, which had opened him up to psychological demonic attacks each night, something he had absolutely no understanding of.

When Sunday had arrived, he got out of bed at 9:10am and saw that he had almost finished the last of the 1.75-liter bottle of whiskey the night before. He stood up feeling completely hung over and hazy, but also numb; he no longer had pain in his ribs or eye. What was scarily apparent to him was that he moved like a zombie as he made his way down to the kitchen; his physical fitness had dropped significantly. But in that moment, he did not care, he no longer had pain mentally or physically which is all that mattered to him. He took his codeine pills to the kitchen and threw them in the trash deciding they were no longer needed. He drank a glass of water and then walked to the bar which was located on the other side of the food pantry. Opening the cabinets for the first time in over six months, he noticed that most of the spirits were gone, but that there were plenty of bottles of wine which he knew would make him feel sick on an empty stomach. Carefully crouching down, Emanuele noticed a few bottles of spirits tucked at the back that had been forgotten about. There was vodka, brandy, gin, tequila, and a few others, but there wasn't any scotch whiskey, which is what he had become accustomed to, to deal with his problems. He pulled out a bottle of gin and opened the top, immediately disgusted at the smell of it. He thought it must have been his father's old collection, so, not wanting to risk trying anything else he decided he would go and buy some more scotch from the liquor store. After returning to his bedroom, he put on some casual jeans, and a long sleeve black shirt with his gym shoes that were sitting underneath his bed. Then he grabbed the keys to his Range Rover from his side table draw, but suddenly, he paused, realizing he was about to leave the house for the first time in almost a week. Anxiety had crept in, but he didn't know why he felt that way, 'I'm only going down the road' he thought to himself, as the feeling was puzzling to him. He just stood there still for a moment, then slid the top drawer closed, and opened the bottom drawer of the side table, looking at the handguns sitting inside.

He picked up one of the Glocks and checked that it was loaded before tucking it into the back of his jeans. Feeling a little more secure now that he was strapped, he quickly walked down to the garage, unlocked the Range Rover, and got in. Feeling discomfort with the gun digging into his back he grabbed it and put it in the center console, shaking his head in frustration, as he knew he'd grabbed it out of paranoia. He didn't expect to use it but felt better about having some form of protection. He grabbed the remote, opened the garage, turned the sound system down in his car, and then pulled out. After driving out of his street, he drove along Ocean boulevard, looking at the Coronado beach, and all the people enjoying themselves. It was a complete contrast to the way he was feeling. He drove out of his neighborhood and towards a liquor store that he remembered passing a few times at a small shopping village. On the way there he passed by a Catholic church where people were pulling into the car park and entering. There was a sign out the front, 'Morning Service 9:30 Everyone Welcome' it read. Emanuele had no real interest, but for some reason looked at the clock on the LCD dashboard of his car which read, '9:30am' exactly. As he drove away from the church, he thought it was a funny coincidence, but just a coincidence and nothing more. He arrived at the small shopping village with the liquor store and pulled into a parking space out the front, before getting out and walking inside. It was a small store with not a lot of variety and mostly wine; but not wanting to drive anywhere else, he was forced to try a different brand of scotch. Emanuele looked on the shelves for one around the same price point of Johnnie Walker Blue Label, as the attractive lady standing behind the cash register studied him. He felt slightly embarrassed as he noticed her, noticing his bad eye and so he quickly pointed to a \$100 bottle at random, flashed his fake ID and left. On the drive back home, Emanuele looked at the church sign again and on the other side, 'Return to the Lord for He cares for you' it read.

Suddenly, he immediately remembered his prayer the night before he had gone on the job with Clay. He had promised God he would go back to church if he made it out alive, but he kept driving, making excuses not to go in. "I barely made it out alive, and I look like shit!" he said, trying to convince himself not to go, before looking at his eye in the rear-view mirror. "I've got no proper sunglasses anyway" he added, then he reached over and quickly opened the overhead sunglasses storage. A fat pair of sunglasses he had forgotten about suddenly flew out and landed on the passenger seat next to him. He grabbed them, put them on, and continued to drive away from the church. He looked at himself again in the rear-view mirror, and for some unknown reason felt a great inclination in his heart that he should go into that church. Ripping the steering wheel to the side he quickly made a U-turn in frustration, "I'll go in there for 5 minutes, but if it sucks, I'm leaving!" he yelled to himself. He turned left into a car space out the front, 'at least I'll have a quick getaway' he thought to himself. After switching off the car, he looked at himself again to make sure his eye wouldn't be too noticeable. Then he grabbed his keys, and got out of the Range Rover, locking it as he crossed the road and made his way towards the church. He paused, looking at the sign that had grabbed his attention on the drive past. As he stood there in the sunshine of that beautiful day, a gentle wind hit the back of his neck and a strong presence surrounded him. He was about to walk inside, when suddenly, "Creator is with you Emanuele" said a deep but gentle voice that shook him to the core. He turned his head to see a very Regal looking man dressed in a maroon-colored suit, he had piercing blue eyes with long white dreadlocks, held together perfectly with a golden clasp. The man was looking up at the church building, then slowly turned his head down, looked into Emanuele's eyes and smiled. "Who are you, and how do you know my name?" asked Emanuele, wondering whether he should turn and run for his gun, "Don't be afraid young one, I am a

messenger” the man replied, still looking at Emanuele with a gentle smile, “A messenger of what, this church?” he asked skeptically. The man slowly and gently placed his hands on Emanuele’s shoulders; suddenly Emanuele couldn’t move, but strangely, as soon as the man’s hands touched him, he was completely at peace. “Listen young one, religion is a prison of the mind to control man. These prisons are to hold you captive from experiencing the vastness of Creator,” said the Regal man. “Why are you telling me this?” asked Emanuele, now unable to do anything, but converse. “Throughout the earth’s history, Creator has sent messengers to only a select few, to set them on the path, to affect the outcome of the future. Countless numbers of children will be lost if you do not walk the path Creator has for you. You are chosen, your moral compass is true, and you know what you must do,” said the Regal man, then he let Emanuele go and began to walk away.

Suddenly, Emanuele could move his body again, he quickly looked around to see if anyone else had witnessed this encounter, but there was no one there, not even a car had driven past during this brief encounter. “Wait!!” yelled Emanuele, as he looked to where the man was walking, but he was gone. Emanuele ran to the end of the block and looked down either road, but there was no sign of the man. He was completely freaked out, “Oh man what the fuck is going on?!” he yelled as he ran to his car. He sped home, blaring the music, and even taking a swig from his bottle of scotch as he flew down the road back into his neighborhood. He was terrified, as he wondered if this encounter was all a construct of his own imagination and really hoped that he was not losing his mind. When he arrived home, he heard the Regal man’s voice inside his head, ‘Walk away from that life and save your family’ he said, which made Emanuele angry. “How the hell am I supposed to walk away from my life!? Everything my father has built is my inheritance!!” he screamed as he sat inside the Range Rover, before getting out.

He went up to his room and started drinking, heavily. He couldn't deal with everything and just wanted to escape reality again. For the next few days Emanuele continued to become more secluded, drowning his reality out with more virtual worlds and alcohol. He had become completely apathetic, ignoring Samuel's texts, and replying to Leila only once to tell her that he was still sick. Maria became increasingly worried about her son; she had never seen him act this way, as he was always extremely confident and extroverted growing up. On Thursday night Maria walked up the stairs and knocked on his bedroom door before entering, "Son, I've made you some enchiladas would you like to come down and eat with us?" she asked. Emanuele paused his current session of Fallout 4 on Xbox; he had become completely obsessed with the post-apocalyptic world. "No, just save me some please" he replied, avoiding eye contact in his drunken state; his mother noticed the bottle of booze and a small glass sitting on his side table. "You need to cut back on that, okay," said Maria; "You never listened to me when you drank!" he replied feeling annoyed, "I'm sorry mom" he said quietly, after realizing his aggressive tone, but Maria had already closed his door and was walking downstairs. Upon entering the kitchen Eva could see that her mother was visibly upset, but was unsure of what to say, so she just turned her attention back to her phone. Meanwhile, Clay's Ford Shelby GT pulled up out the front of Dominic's building, as the private carpark was full. He was greeted by the valet who always treated him like royalty, as he did all of Dominic's main men. Owning the building had its perks, as Dominic knew he could trust all the security and management staff he had handpicked. Having complete influence also made him the hidden gatekeeper of the building, vetting every guest, and deciding who lived or stayed in the five-star hotel. The valet parked Clay's car in the guest's carpark as Clay made his way through the grand entrance and inside to the elevators. He pressed the 'up' button as he stood in front of the elevator

door, injuries now patched up, and in his best dress shirt, watching the level numbers as the elevator came to the first floor. The doors opened and Clay smiled as three stunning women stepped out; they were in short dresses and high heels, looking ready for a big night. "Oh my god did you see that guy?" "Yeah, too bad he's not coming with us" said one of them to another as they walked through the lobby, which Clay overheard, still smiling as he got into the elevator and watched them leave. When the elevator reached the top floor, the door opened, and Dominic's doorman was standing there waiting. "Hey Jerry" said Clay, shaking the giant man's hand, "Glad you're here Clay, I'm just heading down to the restaurant for a quick feed. Haven't eaten all day" said the big doorman in his deep voice. "Take your time" replied Clay as he was let through, and then Jerry closed and locked the door behind him before making his way into the lift. Clay walked through to the back lounge room where Dominic was seated watching a report on value stocks, he had invested a measly \$5 million into. A 23-year-old girl in skimpy clothing brought him a cheese platter from the kitchen for them to share. "Sorry to bother you Dominic," said Clay; Dominic looked at him "No, come in and sit down" he said, before turning his gaze back to the report. Then he turned to the girl seated to the left of him, "Go in the room and wait for me" he ordered. The girl who was one of Dominic's regulars, left immediately, closing the doors behind her. She knew that it was in her best interest not to get involved with any of his dealings. She had made that mistake in the past, but Dominic was lenient on her as she had been his favorite of the girls he had dated since leaving Maria. "Ahh shit, oh well, only pocket change" said Dominic laughing, as he realized an automotive company wasn't performing the way he thought it was going to. He then switched the TV over to ESPN and muted it, before taking a cracker with salami, provolone cheese and an olive, eating them together.

“So, Percy told me it didn’t go too well” said Dominic after finishing his mouthful; “We had to get rid of them” replied Clay, “Not a problem, how’s my boy?” asked Dominic, pointing to the platter, offering some to Clay. “No thanks, Emanuele copped a bit of a beating, we won’t be able to train for a while,” said Clay. “How bad a beating?” asked Dominic as he grabbed an olive and piece of cheese and threw them in his mouth, “A black eye and a broken rib, it’s my fault I underestimated the job” he said honestly, expecting Dominic to be pissed. But the boss’ attention was drawn away as he turned the sound up on the TV showing NFL highlights. He listened in as he wanted to place large bets, on the next game that weekend. “He’s tough, he’ll bounce back” said Dominic, distracted, but also showing a lack of concern for his son. “I think you should see him for yourself,” said Clay, before Dominic turned the sound on the TV down, “Yeah I’ll get him up here later in the week” he said. Clay exhaled, “One more thing... I couldn’t recover the money or product, I’m sorry Dominic, I fucked up” he said, “Yes you did, but you sent the message, and I suspect no one in LA will interfere again” replied Dominic. Then he got up and went to the kitchen, before coming back with two glasses and a shiny blue box of Jack Daniels Sinatra Century. “This is Jack Daniel’s tribute to Frank Sinatra. The greatest performer that ever lived, loved JD’s so much, he was buried with a bottle of the stuff,” said Dominic.

“I didn’t know that, but shouldn’t you share that with your company?” asked Clay referring to the girl in the other room. Dominic laughed, “I wouldn’t waste this on her, she can wait” he said, before opening the box, pulling out the bottle and pouring them both a glass. “Salute” said the boss, raising a glass to his friend, “Salute” replied Clay casually, as he joined in the toast. They shared a few more glasses of Tennessee Whiskey over some laughs as Dominic enjoyed Clays company. He never kissed his ass and had a lot in common with him, including Italian lineage.

Suddenly, the girl who'd been sent to the room entered, "Dominic, do you want me to go?" she asked politely. Dominic looked at Clay and laughed, nearly spitting out his mouthful of whiskey, "I forgot she was in there" he said, before Clay chuckled. Dominic turned to the girl, "Sorry darling, I'll be in soon I swear!" he assured her, grinning. Then he stood up and shook Clays hand and patted him on the shoulder, "You're a good friend Clay-- having a drink with me," "You're a good boss" "Yes, I am. Listen, have my driver downstairs take you home" "I'll be fine" said Clay, reassuring Dominic that he would be fine behind the wheel. After Clay had left, Dominic ran into the room, picked up the girl who was lying on his bed in skimpy clothing, put her over his shoulder and smacked her on the ass as he took her back to his private lounge. Dominic ripped her clothes off before they conducted debauchery for several hours, followed by a feast prepared by his private chef.

Friday morning Emanuele awoke feeling worse than he had the past week; his throbbing head telling him that the multiple nights of binge drinking had finally caught up to him. There were no more terrifying thoughts or sounds, but now the Regal man's words kept repeating in his mind, 'Leave that life and save your family' was the phrase that bothered him the most. He vaguely knew what it meant but pretended not to. 'I have to become stronger if I am to take over this Empire one day, I can't live in my father's shadow forever' he thought to himself, before slowly getting out of bed. He was pleasantly surprised as he stood up; his ribs weren't hurting as much anymore, as he gave his side a gentle push. It was still tender but seemed to be getting better, which he knew meant no internal damage. He now walked through to the bathroom without pain and switched the light on but was instantly mortified by what he saw as he looked at himself in the mirror. His hair had grown noticeably longer, he had facial stubble, and although his eye looked a little better, he now had dark rings under both eyes from lack of quality sleep.

But worst of all in his mind, the outline of his abs was now gone. Suddenly, he felt sick and vomited into the sink, “eww, that’s tasty” he said, sarcastically, wiping his mouth as he tasted whiskey mixed with last night’s meal. He looked in the mirror again and shook his head, feeling disgusted for giving into his emotional distress and letting himself go. He rinsed his mouth out and cleaned up the sink, and then got into the shower, adjusting the temperature so that it was nice and warm. It felt good as the stream hit his skin, considering how bad he was feeling from all the drinking. ‘I want to see Leila so badly, but I look like crap, well I guess it’ll be a test to see if she still wants me” he thought to himself, begrudgingly. He stepped out, dried himself, shaved the stubble, slicked back his hair, and put on a smart casual outfit, a cream blazer, jeans, and white sneakers. After this he turned to open a glass cabinet and selected a gold Rolex watch from his collection to wear before grabbing his phone off his side table; he was just about ready to step out his door but noticed the bottle of whiskey. He quickly grabbed it and went back into the bathroom, then he opened the lid and poured the rest of it into the toilet before flushing, “No more booze” he said to himself.

Upon entering the kitchen, he threw the empty whiskey bottle into the trash as Maria appeared, “Hey son, are you feeling okay?” she asked. Emanuele turned to her, opened his arms, and gave her a hug, “Sorry for hiding in my room the past week mom, I was feeling a bit depressed, but I’m all good now” he said; Maria’s eyes started to water, “You know you can talk to me about anything son, I love you so much” she said squeezing him. “Argh, yeah love you too” he replied wincing, “What?!” she asked sounding worried, “It’s nothing” he replied. But as he was about to let go to leave Eva walked in, “What is this family bonding time?” she asked sarcastically before Maria pulled her in and held both her children either side of her. “We need to be more open with each other, we are Familia” she said, before kissing them both on the foreheads.

They both agreed in the moment to please their mother, Eva rolling her eyes as her brother kissed his mother on the cheek. He quickly let go, then went and opened the fridge, taking out organic ingredients to make himself a fresh juice. Lemons first, then celery, ginger, some green apples, and a raw beet. Together they made a full glass of dark purple and green mixture; Emanuele looked at it briefly, and then sculled it as fast as he could. It was almost as hard to keep down as his first session of whiskey, but he hoped that it would help the way he was feeling and aid his liver from any damage inflicted from the excessive drinking. After that he rinsed the glass and put it in the dishwasher and grabbed his car keys and wallet, "Ready to go?" he asked, "Huh?" replied Eva, looking up from her phone slightly confused. "For me to drop you, are you ready?" he asked again, "No that's okay, Carlos is picking me up" she replied before looking back at her phone. "Tell him you don't need a lift anymore, c'mon" "No really, it's okay, he's already on his way" she said smiling. Emanuele knew his sister wouldn't change her mind and wasn't interested in an altercation with Carlos, "Okay fine" he said, hiding his frustration before leaving for university in the Range Rover. Moments later, the front doorbell rang; Maria walked over to answer it while Eva grabbed her bag. She opened the door to see Carlos standing there; he was dressed smartly in a long sleeve button up shirt with dress pants and shoes. It was a ploy to impress Eva's mother; he knew the tank top, jeans, and boots that he normally wore wouldn't suffice. "Mrs. Reyes, you're looking lovely today" he said with a crocodile smile, "Thank you Carlos, and you're looking smart" she replied, "Alright, enough of the pleasantries, let's go" said Eva, as she rushed through the doorway. Carlos nodded, accompanying her to his black, heavily modified Mercedes-Benz G63. Carlos started up the car which gave a roar of the v8 engine, through the modified exhaust. Eva noticed he had a big grin on his face, "new car?" she asked, "Yep" he replied, before putting it into drive.

“How are you beautiful?” he asked as they drove off, “Yeah good and you?” “Good, good. Hey about that party this weekend, I can’t do it. I’m busy, so it’s on for next weekend” “Yeah okay sounds good” replied Eva, not showing too much interest as she looked out the window of the car. On the trip over to St. Augustine High, Carlos put his hand on Eva’s leg and slowly slid it up her thigh. She grabbed his hand and pushed it away slowly, “Look Carlos, you’re sweet and all, but we’re not in a relationship... yet” she said. “Yeah, okay, whatever!” he exclaimed, slightly revealing his temper as he pulled up out the front of the high school. “Thanks, I’ll text you tonight” said Eva as she quickly stepped out; Carlos forced a smile, which quickly turned into a frown, “cock tease” he said, after she had shut the door. Carlos put the car into drive as he looked over at Eva with her friends, still scowling. Suddenly he felt someone nudge the back of his car, “FUCK!” he screamed, before putting the car in park and jumping out ready to kill the perpetrator. He walked behind his car; a small white hatchback driven by a learner had parked a little too close.

After seeing the intimidating figure looking at the back of his car, the learner reversed nervously. The young student wearing glasses wound his window down, “I’m so sorry mister, I’m still learning” he said, with a look of horror. Carlos noticed that he had an audience of Eva and her friends, so he gave the driver a forced smile, “No damage done” he said, after being unable to see any significant damage to the back of his new Mercedes G63 Wagon. While still smiling at Eva, he controlled his anger with all his might, got in his car, and drove away.

Meanwhile as Emanuele was pulling into the university car park, he looked to the right and saw that the footballers were standing around in their usual spot, so instinctively he turned left and made his way through to an empty car park close to the staff parking, a safe distance from any possible encounters.

He groaned as he looked at himself in the rear-view mirror; it was still possible to make out that he had a black eye up close. 'At least majority of the swelling has gone down' he thought to himself before getting out the car and inconspicuously making his way into the university building. Upon entering the theatre for his first lecture, he scanned the faces to see if he could spot Samuel anywhere. But he couldn't see him, so he quickly made his way to the back and sat in an empty row, slouching down, with his glasses on. "Alright open up your textbooks to page 158!" yelled the lecturer, straining her voice. Just then, Samuel stepped in and looked up the back, he stared directly at Emanuele and didn't initially recognize him with his glasses on, but once he did, he quickly walked up the steps and sat down next to him. "How can you see with those on? Woah, what happened to you?" he asked, seeing Emanuele's black eye from the side angle once he sat down. "I'll tell you after class" he replied before pulling out his phone and texting Leila, 'Hey I'm here today. Meet me in the library at lunch if you can' read the message. He sent it and within 30 seconds his phone screen lit up. He picked it up, unlocked it and looked at the message which read, 'You're here?! Meet me there now I'll leave my class!' she replied. Emanuele started to text back but before he could send it, "If you're going to text in my class, you can get out!" yelled the lecturer. Emanuele put his phone down and looked up, she was looking at a girl in the front row, "You too!" she yelled again, now looking directly at him. So, without hesitation, and to the lecturer's surprise, he stood straight up and grabbed his stuff, "I'll see you at lunch" he said to Samuel on the way out. Upon exiting his lecture, Emanuele pulled out his phone and began texting, 'Okay I'll go there now x' he wrote, then he walked to the library as fast as he could. When he arrived, Leila wasn't there yet, so he decided to sit at one of the tables in the study area where they had met before. He waited there for 5 minutes which seemed like the longest 5 minutes he'd ever waited, as he thought about what he would say.

His phone vibrated again, and he checked the new message, 'I'm coming now xx' it read. Emanuele had butterflies but at the same time pondered what sort of questions would be provoked at the sight of his eye. He re-adjusted the sunglasses on his nose and sealed them around his eyes as best he could as he sat there waiting for Leila. Suddenly, she had arrived, she quickly spotted him and walked towards him with a big smile on her face. Emanuele got to his feet, "Hey" he said softly; Leila said nothing, she walked straight up to him, putting her arms around him and kissed him on the lips. "I've wanted to do that all week" she said smiling before she pulled away and her smile instantly turned to a look of worry. "What happened to you?" she asked sounding upset, "Someone tried to jack my car" replied Emanuele, feeling filthy at himself for lying to her. "Oh no, are you okay, what happened?" she asked, increasingly appearing upset. Emanuele grabbed her gently and hugged her, "Don't worry, I'm okay" he said trying to comfort her. A few tears started streaming down Leila's face, "I just don't understand how some people are so heartless" she said, trying not to cry as she pulled away slightly and lifted his glasses. Emanuele just stood there looking into the eyes of the most beautiful girl he'd ever seen and felt the tangible compassion that she had for him; he knew it was time, "I love you Leila" he said, sincerely. Leila put her head on his shoulder, "I love you too" she whispered without hesitation as they continued to hold each other. This was the most precious moment they had shared together, and although Emanuele was full of joy, his thoughts turned to that of guilt as he suddenly realized that this beautiful moment was predicated on a lie. The times they had shared together flashed through Emanuele's mind, and then the rut of depression he had just come out of did as well. He felt his heart race slightly and, in that moment, he knew that she was put in his life for a purpose. They left the university together and took a drive in Emanuele's car to the marina where his father's 63-foot Marquis yacht was docked; it was the smallest

of the 3 that Dominic owned, and Emanuele always had access to it. They spent the rest of the day together relaxing in the yacht's lounge room, with blinds down in complete privacy, cuddling and kissing. Only pausing when a late afternoon lunch and dessert was delivered to them. They sat together with their feet in the water as they ate strawberries and ice cream while watching the sun set upon the San Diego marina. Their relationship grew tremendously in this one afternoon, and they had become completely infatuated with each other. When the sun had set for the evening, they returned to the lounge room and held each other kissing passionately as they both knew it would soon be time for their beautiful encounter to end. Leila forced a yawn, "Is there somewhere I can lay down?" she asked, "There's a bedroom downstairs, you can have a rest and I'll drop you home later if you like" he replied. Leila nodded, before following Emanuele down to the bedroom and got into the plush double bed. Emanuele stood there politely as she looked at him seductively, signaling for him to join with her index finger. Emanuele lay down next to her above the covers, and they turned, looking into each other's eyes, smiling and then they began kissing passionately. Leila squeezed Emanuele and he winced slightly but didn't say anything as the moment was too special to him. Suddenly, Leila sat up and removed her shirt to show her very revealing red floral lace bra; to Emanuele's shock and pleasant surprise, she then removed it as well, before continuing to suck on his face. She grabbed his hand and placed it on her left breast and Emanuele fondled it as they continued to kiss. "Take off your clothes" whispered Leila, before sliding her skirt and panties off. Emanuele whipped his shirt straight off, revealing his bruised body; he flexed knowing that he wasn't in his peak physical condition. Leila touched his bruises gently before kissing them, and then Emanuele joined her under the thick covers, removing his pants and underwear as they continued kissing.

He kissed Leila's neck and made his way down kissing her all over her body before she felt that he was as hard as a rock. As he was now in push up position above her, Leila placed both her hands on his face and looked deeply into his eyes, "I want this" she said. "Are you sure?" asked Emanuele, knowing that once this line was crossed their relationship would never be the same. "I want this with all of my heart" she replied, "Okay" he said gently, before he entered her. She gasped as she grabbed the back of his head, and they proceeded to make passionate love for a good portion of the night. Then, feeling completely exhausted, they fell asleep holding each other naked and sleeping through into the next morning.

Emanuele was still fast asleep, when Leila awoke, "Emanuele wake up babe" she pleaded; he opened his eyes and looked at her face, she looked worried. "What's wrong?" he asked, "We slept through" she replied, Emanuele quickly got up, looking at the time on the alarm clock beside the bed which read '6:20am' and then he got up without hesitation. "I'm sorry I'll get you home right now" he said. They quickly got dressed and walked up to the main deck where Emanuele grabbed a bottle of water from the fridge and handed it to Leila, "Could we please go I wasn't supposed to stay out" she said feeling uneasy. "Okay follow me" he said, leading her through to the back dining area, then they both jumped onto the marina berth, briskly walked to the car park, and got into the Range Rover. Emanuele pulled out of the carpark and sped to Leila's house with urgency, "Oh my god, I hope Mike hasn't said anything to my father" said Leila, panicky, as she tried to call him on the drive home. Emanuele overtook a car and planted his foot as the Range Rover revved hard with the whirring scream of the supercharger as it flew down the main road. Emanuele felt no regret, he was speeding because Leila was worrying; 'If anything happens, I'm sure I'll be able to smooth it over with her father' he thought to himself.

As he pulled into her street he then sped toward her house, "Sorry Leila..." he said, but she interrupted "It's okay, wait for me" she replied, as Emanuele pulled into her driveway. He admired her body as she quickly got out and rushed to the front door, with their passionate evening still fresh in his mind, "stop it Emanuele" he said to himself, but he couldn't help it, he was ecstatic. Leila pulled the keys out of her handbag, unlocked the front door, and walked into her house. Emanuele looked at the time, it was '6:51am' and although he wasn't too worried, he hoped that there wouldn't be any trouble for Leila with her aunty or father. Leila carefully walked through the hall and peered into Mike's bedroom; he was still in bed asleep, "Mike, wake up!" she said as she shook his shoulder, "Oh, what!" he groaned before rolling over, "I'm home" she said looking surprised, "Yeah, yeah jet told me he saw you with your boyfriend" he replied, sounding tired. "So, you didn't tell my father I was out?" she asked, "No, why would I cause drama? Let me sleep I'm hungover as shit" he replied, before pulling the covers back over himself and going back to sleep. After leaving Mike's room, Leila closed his door and rested her head on it, closing her eyes and breathing a huge sigh of relief. She suddenly realized Emanuele was still waiting and quickly ran back out to him. When he saw her come out the front door, he stepped out of the car to meet her, "Is everything okay?" he asked, "Yes" she replied, smiling as she walked over to him and gave him a big hug. Emanuele felt relieved for her, "I'm glad you're okay, how about we meet up tomorrow?" he asked. Leila agreed, and then they kissed inconspicuously in case of peering eyes, before Emanuele got back into the Range Rover, waving goodbye as he pulled out of her driveway and made the drove home. Later that day, after Emanuele had done a workout in the home gym, showered, and eaten, he was still in great spirits from his time spent with Leila. He felt that it was now a good time to go and see his father, as he wouldn't show weakness in his current state, which was critical to the optics of being the boss' son.

But suddenly, the Regal man's face flashed into his mind; he had almost forgotten about the encounter outside of the old church. Emanuele scoffed and shook his head, as he didn't see the point of pondering the meaning anymore. "Wanna come see dad?" he asked Eva, standing at her door, "Um, hang on" she replied as she completed the text on her phone. A few seconds later it chimed and then she looked up, "Yeah I'll come" "Okay I'm leaving soon though!" he yelled, as he jogged down the stairs. He decided to check his emails while he waited, knowing that Eva would take some time to get ready. He walked to the office, sat at the PC, and logged on. There was some junk mail on a crypto Ponzi scheme which amused him, but also prompted him to check his own holdings. He had parked \$600K into Bitcoin, from a million dollars given to him to invest on his 18th birthday. He logged into the exchange and the balance still showed 1,174 BTC, at a value negligibly different from what he had purchased it for two years before. He kept scrolling through his emails and stopped at one that was starred; it was a warning letter from his university, which said that he needed to either start attending his classes or defer his study for a year. He rolled his eyes and logged off before heading to the kitchen for a drink; he looked at the time and noticed that he had been sitting on the computer for 12 minutes, "Eva! Hurry up!" he yelled, feeling impatient. Just then, Eva walked through from the hallway, "Let's go" she replied with attitude; He couldn't believe it, she was ready in record time; her make-up was done, and she was wearing a white crop top and mini skirt with ankle boots. Emanuele could not hold his tongue as he looked at his sister, "Who the hell are you trying to impress? We're going to see dad!" he said indignantly, "There might be some hot guys at the hotel!" she replied sarcastically. Emanuele just shook his head as he followed her to the garage. They got into the Aston Martin Vanquish and drove towards Dominic's hotel building; the sun was starting to set, and the streets were bustling, with lots of people on the

sidewalks. The Vanquish pulled up at a set of lights and a loud Mitsubishi Evo 10 pulled up next to them. Emanuele could tell that it wasn't stock when the driver started revving the hell out of it before the turbo hissed loudly; the Evo driver put his window down, "Rev it!!" he yelled. Emanuele looked over, smiled, and started revving the Aston Martin. The guy nodded looking a little impressed after hearing the aftermarket exhaust, but then he pointed, "On green!" he shouted, signaling that he wanted to race when the lights changed. Emanuele nodded and then looked straight forward, "You're not going to race this idiot, are you?" asked Eva, "Of course not there's bound to be cops up ahead, but it doesn't look like he knows that" replied Emanuele, looking back at the driver with his poker face. Eva smiled and then looked over at the driver in the Evo, sticking her tongue out while giving him the finger to stir him up. The driver's smile turned to a look of anger as he then looked straight ahead and started revving the shit out of his engine; Emanuele played along and did the same. Suddenly the lights turned green, and the Evo shot off out in front of the Vanquish, Emanuele put his foot flat to the floor as well, but quickly took it off the accelerator and applied the brakes as soon as he had reached the speed limit. The Evo was still increasing in speed ahead of them, and it had gotten 300 meters down the road, when out of nowhere a police car pulled out from a side street with its lights and sirens on. It flew past the Vanquish and drove right behind the Evo, and then they both pulled over to the side. Emanuele and Eva laughed hysterically as they drove past, "Hahahaha oh that was so good!" yelled Eva, trying to catch her breath. "I literally can't believe that happened!" shouted Emanuele, happy to see his sister joining him in high spirits. After they arrived, and had exited the lift on the penthouse level, Jerry was pleased to see them. When he shook Emanuele's hand his palm was so big in comparison, that it made Emanuele's hand seem like a toddler's.

“Hello Eva, you’re looking lovely this evening” he said, politely in his deep voice, as he crouched down to give her a hug. Jerry was a gentle old giant to those he knew but had been in some major wars for Dominic when the mob had come after him in the early days; he was now semi-retired as the penthouse doorman, living on a comfortable \$300k per year. He let them through, and as they walked into the front room, they were greeted by Carlos who walked right up to Eva and hugged her, to the complete disgust of her brother. Carlos then looked at Emanuele’s eye and started laughing, which attracted the attention of his two cartel boys that were with him. “What, couldn’t you handle a couple of crackheads?” he asked mockingly, “Those crackheads would have killed you and your boys” replied Clay, sternly, as he entered the room, “Pfft yeah sure Clay” replied Carlos, sarcastically. Clay then walked over and put his hand on Carlos’ shoulder, “Trust me, be glad you weren’t called for this one” said Clay sounding serious. “Get the fuck off me!” said Carlos not wanting to look inferior, before throwing his palm out to push Clay, but Clay grabbed his arm and put him in a wrist lock, and then pulled Carlos towards him, as Carlos grabbed his collar. Both men stared aggressively in each other’s face; the tension in the room was palpable. “Don’t mock me boy, you wouldn’t want your little friends to see you cry” said Clay, before pushing him away onto the lounge. Emanuele chuckled slightly while Eva just looked embarrassed for him, as the cartel boys sat in silence. “You’re lucky we’re in Dominic’s house Clay!” warned Carlos. But it was an empty threat, the men understood the hierarchy of the organization, and Clay was above him. If Carlos had of put hands on Clay, especially in Dominic’s house, the right recourse would have been detrimental to the 3 men sitting on that lounge. Clay just smiled, turning to Emanuele and Eva, “Go see your father, he’ll be pleased to see you” he said. The siblings walked through to Dominic’s office; the door was open, and their father sat there reading some documents as he

smoked a Cuban cigar. Emanuele tapped on the door, "come in" said Dominic still focused on the documents. He dropped the documents on his desk as he looked up and saw his two children standing there, "Emanuele, Eva, come here" he said, pleasantly surprised as he stood up and walked over to Eva, gave her a hug, and then shook his son's hand. "I miss you dad; can we do something next week?" she asked, "I can't sweetheart, I'll be in Chicago next week and then the following week I'll be busy with the development in LA. Maybe the week after that. Now could you please step out Eva? I must speak to your brother privately," said Dominic. Eva looked a little confused, as she had just arrived, "Now? okay, bye" she said, feeling rejection from her father, yet again. "I'll meet you in the lobby" she said with a sad face to her brother, as she got up and walked out. A flood of emotions swirled around inside her as she walked through the hallway, and out of spite towards her father, she walked straight up to Carlos, grabbed him, and started kissing him. He grabbed her on the ass and squeezed while kissing her back; his boys began laughing and carrying on in the background. Then she pulled away, "I'll see you next week" she said seductively; "Cool" said Carlos, nodding excitedly. Clay noticed that the kiss was out of character for Eva; he had a suspicious frown on his face when he saw it; like Emanuele, he knew that Carlos was bad news for her. Eva then left abruptly, "What the hell bro? I thought she wasn't into you!" shouted one of Carlos' boys; Carlos just shrugged and sat back down, looking pleased. Meanwhile, Dominic and Emanuele sat in the office, oblivious of what had just taken place in the front lounge room. "You don't look well son" said Dominic casually, "Yeah I haven't been feeling well, but it's probably just because my body's healing" replied Emanuele, trying to save face in front of his father. How he wished he could tell his father what he had been going through mentally, but sadly they never had that type of relationship.

He was brought up to hide his emotions and to be strong no matter the circumstance. "Apart from that you look like you've put on some weight," said Dominic; Emanuele wanted to yell at his father in that moment, 'Everything is because I've been trying to please you! I've been drinking myself to sleep every night because of what I went through!' was the phrase that entered his mind, which was how he really felt. But instead, he held his emotions back, "I'll be back in training next week" he replied, graciously. Dominic sat back in his office chair, reclining slightly with his hands together, "I should not have sent you on that job and risked losing you. The information we gained about the job wasn't complete; we now know that these two men were the brothers that wiped out a portion of my LA control in the late 90's. They went into hiding when we put out a price on their heads, and they changed their identities. I never would have sent you, had I known it was them. But you have proved to me and to all the men that you are dedicated to the organization, and word is spreading across our network about how you and Clay took out the brothers that no-one else could. The men now consider you to be the undisputed successor of this organization" said Dominic, getting up out of his chair with a big smile on his face. He walked over and placed his hands on Emanuele's shoulders, "You know why, I am the way I am son. I could not give you any sympathy. You had to prove yourself to me and to the men, but now nothing will be withheld from you" he said, appearing incredibly proud. Emanuele took a deep breath, "Thank you father" he replied with a brave face; knowing this would mean much more responsibility. "Even though you won't be handling anything on the streets again, I want you to continue your training with Clay. Never ever show weakness son, especially now that you have gained the respect of the men," said Dominic. "What about Carlos? I doubt I will ever gain his respect" "When he understands who you took out, he will respect you. But... if he doesn't, you will have to put him in his place, publicly," said Dominic, before

returning to his chair and cigar. Emanuele nodded trying to hide his excitement as his father had basically just given him the green light to beat up Carlos in front of his peers, should he step out of line. This kind of thing was normally forbidden within the organization. Emanuele left the office feeling extremely good about himself; he had more confidence in himself than ever before with this newfound revelation. Only he and Clay, had accomplished something that all the other men had failed to do. Emanuele ignored the men in the front lounge room as he walked out, not noticing Clay was still there, "Wait up E-man" said Clay, as he joined Emanuele on the way to the carpark.

They both reached the section of 10 car spaces allocated to Dominic's penthouse where Emanuele had parked the Vanquish, Emanuele turned to his mentor, "Clay I just want to say thanks for always looking out for me" he said, "Don't sweat it kid, you're like my little brother and I'll always protect ya" replied Clay, before noticing that Emanuele was holding back his emotion. Emanuele quickly rubbed his good eye, pretending he had something in it, "Thanks man" he said, "Don't get all sappy on me, I'm still gonna kick your ass at training on Monday" "Okay sounds good" said Emanuele, now chuckling. He got into the Vanquish as Clay got into his Shelby Mustang and drove off. Emanuele started the car up and called Eva, "Yeah, I'll be out the front in a minute" he said and then ended the call. He drove to the lobby entrance where Eva was waiting for him, she appeared tipsy as she got in. "How did you get served?" he asked, noticing she was a lot perkier then when she had left their father's office. She scoffed, "It's dad's building, it was just a couple of drinks anyway" she replied, with a sarcastic attitude. Emanuele just shrugged his shoulders as he drove the Vanquish away from the building. When he looked at himself in the rear-view mirror, he wasn't bothered anymore, he now saw his injuries as a badge of honor and knew he would soon be respected as the boss.

Chapter 10: Innocence Taken

The following morning there was a knock at the front door; Maria was in the kitchen, drinking a cup of coffee in her bathrobe while Eva and Emanuele were still asleep in their beds. She sighed, getting up out of the dining chair to go and answer the door. Without much thought she unlocked the two doors and opened them; she was completely shocked to see Dominic standing right there, looking very sharp in his suit. She felt a little embarrassed as she looked like she had just gotten out of bed. "Hello Maria," said Dominic; Maria quickly brushed her hair to one side, "Hi Dom" she said softly. She was panicking; she hadn't seen him in 3 months and desperately hoped that this was the moment she had dreamed of; her husband returning to be with her. Although Maria had men constantly admiring her in public, Dominic didn't care for her anymore. He had more woman than he could handle; majority of which were half his age, and all could have been top models.

"Are Emanuele and Eva awake?" he asked, "Not yet, would you like to come in for some coffee while you wait?" she replied, a little hopeful. "No, I can't stay long" "Oh come on, we'll catch up" said Maria putting her hand on his arm. "Wake them up please" replied Dominic, insensitively; this upset Maria, "Okay hang on" she said, before closing the door halfway and walking upstairs feeling completely deflated after her hope bubble had burst. She knocked on Emanuele's door and then entered the room; he sat up slightly with his eyes still sleepy. "Yeah? What's wrong?" he asked; "Your father's here," she replied. Emanuele had a slightly confused look on his face before fully comprehending what she had said, he immediately jumped up, washed his face, then threw some jeans and a shirt on, while Maria went and woke Eva up.

Emanuele then ran downstairs and opened the door, "There he is the man of the hour" said Dominic enthusiastically; "Hey what's going on?" asked Emanuele, struggling slightly to put his trainers on at the front door. "Come and look at your new car" replied Dominic, throwing a set of keys to Emanuele who just caught them after sliding the second trainer onto his foot. There was a truck and concealed trailer with a ramp that lowered, and the sound of an engine started up. A bright blue Maserati Gran Turismo backed out down the ramp, "Oh hell yeah!" yelled Emanuele excitedly. Just then Eva stepped out while Maria stood at the door looking unenthused, "You got me up to see you buy Emanuele another car?" asked Eva, frustrated as she approached her father. Dominic turned to her, "Why else?" he asked sarcastically. Eva just shook her head in disappointment; her brother was always getting gifts and even though she only had her learner's permit to drive, she never forgot that Emanuele had been given a car before he had attained his learner's permit. Even though she was happy for her brother, she had a defeated look on her face, and couldn't remember the last time her father had done anything like that for her. As Emanuele was checking his new car out, suddenly the sound of another engine came roaring from the trailer. Out came another Maserati Gran Turismo, except this one was pink; Eva's face suddenly changed as she noticed it. She looked at her father expectantly, "An early birthday present darling" said Dominic smiling; "Really its mine?!" she asked, joyfully. Then Dominic pulled out the spare set of keys from his pocket and handed them to her, "Go check it out" he said. Eva swiped the keys, before hugging her father as he patted her on the back, "Go" he said, smiling as he gestured towards the car. Eva ran down to her new car; the delivery guy got out and then she got inside, looking around in amazement. Emanuele got out of his Maserati and walked up to the passenger side of Eva's and got in, "Wanna take it for a spin?" he asked. "Let's see if dad will come with us" replied Eva, happily.

Emanuele agreed, knowing his father wouldn't, but didn't want to rain on his sister's parade. So, they both got out and walked back up to their dad who was talking on his phone, "I'll see you in an hour" said Dominic as he ended the call. "Dad, will you come for a drive with us?" asked Eva; Dominic looked at his Gold Rolex Daytona watch, "Sorry sweetheart I've got a plane to catch, but when I get back from Chicago next weekend I will" he said, "Okay" replied Eva, smiling, but feeling slight disappointment. As much as she loved her new car, she really wanted to spend some time with her dad, something that she rarely got to do. "C'mon sis, I'll supervise you" said Emanuele putting his arm around her, "Don't speed... too much" said Dominic, winking, before walking over to his armored Rolls Royce Phantom parked in front of the truck. One of his bodyguards then opened the back door for him to get in. Emanuele parked his new Maserati in the garage and then ran back out front to join Eva inside of hers. "Ok, now just ease into it" said Emanuele, but Eva planted her foot, and the car took off down the street. "Eva that was a stop sign!" yelled Emanuele as they flew through an intersection, "Whoops!" she yelled playfully. "Don't worry, I've been watching you drive for years" she said; Emanuele assumed Eva had only driven a few times herself, but what he didn't know is that she had often taken his cars out and driven them illegally. Although it was apparent, she wasn't a cautious learner, but rather, drove like a maniac, unbeknownst to her brother she wasn't completely inexperienced. "Slow down!" yelled Emanuele, as they did 20 miles over the speed limit, "You always speed!" "I know how to drive!" he yelled back. Eva then took her foot off the gas, and they started to slow down, "That's better nice and smooth" he said, relieved when they had circled back into their street. "I think we should get you some lessons on the basics with an instructor, but they'll stop the session if you speed like that," said Emanuele; "Yeah I guess so" replied Eva, unenthusied.

After parking in the garage, they went inside to find Maria watching TV, and already halfway through a bottle of wine. It wasn't a good sign, she looked depressed, and the two of them had a pretty good idea as to why. "Keep mom company" said Emanuele before going upstairs to prepare for his date with Leila. He wore shorts and a button up, short sleeve shirt, as the weather forecast was predicting almost 90 degrees that day. Standing ready in his room, he messaged Leila, 'hey I'll come and get you in an hour. Wear something comfy ☺' he wrote, then sent it off. Not a minute later, a reply came back from Leila, 'okay where are we going? Xx' she asked, 'it's a surprise' Emanuele quickly texted back before he went downstairs and said goodbye to his mom, who said nothing, while Eva just sighed and gave an unenthusiastic wave. When Emanuele arrived at Leila's house, she was waiting out front for him; he thought she looked absolutely stunning as soon as he saw her; she had her hair tied up and was wearing shorts with a loose top tied at the front with pink Timberland boots on. She smiled excitedly at him as he pulled into the driveway; he left the car running and quickly got out walking right up to her, "You look absolutely beautiful" he said before kissing her. Then he walked her to the passenger side of the Blue Maserati, opening the door to let her in, "Thankyou" she said, cutely, before getting in. Emanuele closed the door and then ran around and jumped in the driver's seat. "How many cars do you own?" she asked, "Five, as of today" "Oh really, you'll have to show me them some time" "I'll show you my father's collection it's a lot more impressive" he replied before, pulling out, and driving off. Once they got close to their destination, Emanuele told Leila to close her eyes, as not to spoil the little surprise, as the signs along the road would have. "No peeking" he said to Leila as she now had her eyes fully closed, "I won't" she replied with a cute grin on her face. Emanuele then pulled into the carpark of their destination.

“Okay we’re here, you can open your eyes” he said; Leila opened her eyes and looked around and saw that they were in a large carpark. Then she saw a large lion statue, and it instantly made sense, “Zoo... we’re at the zoo?” she asked appearing a little surprised. “Yeah” replied Emanuele, smiling, “Oh” replied Leila with a look of disappointment. Emanuele was worried, “What’s wrong?” he asked, suddenly Leila started laughing, “I’m just joking, I’ve never been here” she replied, before leaning over to kiss him. Emanuele looked to the roof, breathing a sigh of relief, “Oh my gosh, you had me, I actually thought you were really disappointed” he said. Leila quickly got out of the car, “Let’s go” she said, playfully squeezing Emanuele’s arm after he rushed to join her. At the entrance, it was clear to Emanuele that Leila was excited, she was strutting along next to him moving her sexy hips from side to side as she spoke to him in a bubblier fashion, now completely unreserved in his presence. “Two tickets” said Emanuele confidently to the man in the entry box, who then took the cash from Emanuele and handed him two tickets with his change; the ticket man’s eyes followed Leila, as she walked past him, until he was abruptly interrupted by his next customer. Emanuele and Leila walked into the zoo hand in hand; she had an amazed expression on her face as she looked at the animal exhibit options. Emanuele noticed a group on a tour and decided to join, “Can we follow?” he asked the tour guide, “Do you have your tickets?” asked the young man who was gathering everyone for start the tour. “Yeah, they’re right here” said Emanuele handing him \$500 cash; the tour guide quickly looked around a little nervous, “Ok, cool” he said, quickly snatching and pocketing the money. Leila smiled at Emanuele, “My boyfriend’s resourceful” she said, her eyes admiring him. “Boyfriend huh?” asked Emanuele, feeling absolutely thrilled with the title, “Of course” she replied, grabbing his hand, and following the tour group.

They spent precious moments together as they walked through the animal exhibits, holding hands. Leila's face was glowing with joy the whole time, and Emanuele even convinced one of the workers to let her hold a Koala. She had a huge smile on her face, as it brought back a positive memory from when she had done it as a child. Emanuele took a picture with his phone and showed her after the worker had taken the koala. She was filled with emotion as she looked at the photo; it was almost identical to the one of her holding a koala at age 8; it was during a much easier time, when she too had a family that wasn't broken. "My life was empty until you came into it" she said, hugging Emanuele as she quickly wiped a tear from her eye before they let go and smiled at each other. At this point the tour group had gotten too far ahead of them, so they decided to go and get a meal at the Treetop's Bistro. When they arrived, they sat down on the outdoor dining area overlooking the zoo, and both ordered coffee which they began to sip on while waiting for their turkey wraps, "So how's your course going?" asked Emanuele; although he hated small talk, he was happy to converse with his beautiful girlfriend about anything. "It's going really good" replied Leila, "Do you know what you want to do once you complete your degree?" "I'm not sure yet, but I'm going to have to get your help, because, well... I've decided to stay here in San Diego" she replied. Emanuele looked delighted, before casually looking back down at his coffee, "Oh and what changed your mind?" he asked, downplaying his excitement, before sipping some coffee. Just then she looked straight at him, and he looked back and smiled, "Well I think my future is going to be shared with a certain someone in San Diego" she replied. Emanuele was overjoyed, but it was short-lived as the sudden thought of the inevitable conversation that would arise; him being heir to the throne of a Drug Empire. The one thing that Leila detested was a life of crime; Emanuele was stuck between a rock and hard place, mentally.

He couldn't bring himself to tell her in that moment, but he also knew that he didn't want to lie to her anymore, because she would eventually find out. He understood that he had some serious contemplation about how he was going to fulfill his purpose in the organization, without losing the woman that he loved, and as much as he was enjoying his day, now he could feel the melancholy trying to creep in. After finishing their lunch Emanuele decided to drop Leila home because he didn't want to be fighting these feelings in front of her. Although Leila was disappointed the day had to be cut short, she could see that Emanuele's demeanor had changed, "Is something wrong?" she asked as they drove back to her house. "No, nothing's wrong babe, I just forgot that I promised my mom I'd help her out today. I wish I didn't have to, I wanted to stay with you" he replied. Leila put her hand gently on his cheek and admired his side profile, "Don't worry, I'll see you tomorrow" she said, adoringly. Emanuele felt even more disgusted with himself; there he went again, lying right to her face, again. By the time they had pulled into the driveway of her home, the mixed emotions were boiling over, "Leila, I need to tell you something" he said abruptly as he put the car in park; she took her hand off his leg with a look of worry, "What do you need to tell me?" she asked. But as he looked at her worried face, he still couldn't go through with it, "I think we should go on holiday together somewhere" he said changing his facial expression from serious to playful. She slapped him on the arm, "Oh my god don't scare me like that, I thought something was wrong!" "I'm sorry, although I did owe you from this morning" he said, sheepishly, "Well I think that's a great idea, I would love to spend time with you away somewhere. My mom's calling me tomorrow night from Hong Kong, and I'm going to tell her about you and let her know that I'm staying. She'll be upset, but maybe we could have our holiday to go and see her," said Leila.

Emanuele forced a smile and nodded; he could see that she was very excited, and he was glad that he hadn't dropped the bombshell on her in that moment. He felt extremely guilty as they kissed passionately, then Leila got out of the car, walking to the front door of her place. After unlocking the door, she turned around and blew him another kiss before walking inside. Emanuele shook his head in frustration as he drove off; he knew he had to tell her the truth before she made plans with her mother, and now this issue had become time sensitive.

He struggled to sleep that night, turning on his bed as scenes of what could potentially happen kept running through his mind, if he told Leila the truth. He looked at the time on his phone and decided to get up; he had only managed to get a couple hours of sleep. Sitting on the side of his bed, he stared at his phone and sighed; he knew the only thing that would clear his conscious was to do the hard thing and confess to Leila about who he would become. He messaged her asking if she wanted to hang out before their morning classes at a café. His phone lit up as he could see that there was an incoming call from her, "Hey handsome I'd love to go for a coffee with you this morning. I had hardly any sleep, I was so excited for our holiday" "Yeah me too" replied Emanuele, wishing that was also the reason for his sleeplessness. "I'll pick you up in about forty minutes" he said, before ending the call. Emanuele threw his phone down feeling sad, he wasn't naive, he knew the truth would destroy their relationship, but nothing could come in the way of his place at the helm of the Empire, not even love. He got dressed into a smart casual outfit and walked down to the garage, jumped in his Porsche GT3, and made his way over to Leila's house. She messaged him when she heard his car pull into the driveway, 'I'll be out in 2 minutes' it read, so he left the car running as he waited for her.

Less than two minutes later, Leila walked out and got into the GT3 with him. As they kissed, he noticed the familiar sweet scent of perfume on her skin that had always made him feel aroused and excited. The pheromones of this familiar smell had become associated with the feeling of a deep connection of love that his heart held for her. The thought of knowing he may never smell that sweet scent on her skin again, only added to his misery. He put on a brave face and tried to appear as happy as he could, until he would talk to her about what he dreaded she would leave him over. The Porsche pulled up outside a quiet café that had a few people seated inside. They walked in and were both hit by the smell of ground coffee and freshly baked cakes, "Mmm I love that smell" said Leila squeezing Emanuele's hand and kissing him on the cheek as they waited in line. They soon ordered coffees, with a piece of banana bread for Emanuele and a white chocolate, raspberry muffin for Leila. Once they had their order, Emanuele led Leila outside and over to a small table with two seats under an umbrella, where there was no one seated nearby. They sat down opposite each other and began drinking their coffees, while they made small talk. After about 10 minutes into their conversation, Emanuele decided that it was as bad a time as any, to tell Leila what had been on his mind all night, and the truth about who he would become. "Leila... I haven't been completely honest with you," said Emanuele; Leila looked at him surprised after taking a bite of her muffin, "About what?" she asked covering her mouth, "I do work in the organization" he replied. Leila didn't make eye contact with him as she finished her mouthful, "To what capacity?" she asked, now looking at him concerned. Emanuele took a deep breath and then leaned closer to her, "I'll be taking the place of my father" he said. "What?!" yelled Leila, "I'm so sorry for lying to you" he replied bowing his head in shame, "you told me you weren't involved in drugs... Oh, I knew you were too good to be true!" said Leila, in frustration as her defenses immediately came up.

Emanuele took her hands, "Please forgive me, I love you and I'll do anything to make this work" he begged. Leila started to become emotional, "I love you too! But I don't want that life!" she yelled, before sobbing. A couple now seated at another table, began looking over at them curiously, which Emanuele noticed. "I've never had a serious relationship in my life, and you are the only girl I've ever truly fallen for" he said in a quiet voice, "I grew up seeing what happens in that life, it's why my mother left; that life leads to destruction" replied Leila. Growing up all that Emanuele ever wanted was to please his father and take over the organization, but now he had a dilemma and his heart wanted Leila. "Please, we can make this work" he said, "No we can't" replied Leila, pulling her hands away from him. He immediately regretted the next sentence that came out of his mouth, but he had never experienced a position like the one that he now faced, where his heart and mind were at odds with each other. "Fine... I'll take you home and we never have to speak again if that's what you want" he said, expecting Leila to be somewhat apologetic. "Don't bother I'll get picked up, just leave me then" she said, unable to look him in the eyes. "I'm sorry, I'm just... this is so hard for me" "You assume this isn't hard for me! I can't change my mind, I'm sorry, but I can't be with you" she said, now wiping her tears away, wanting to stand firm on her argument. Emanuele didn't know what to do; he couldn't think straight, an extreme torrent of emotions was welling up inside of him; was he to choose Leila or his father. He made the hardest decision of his life yet, and got up out of his seat, then placed \$200 on the table, "just get home safely" he said before walking away. Leila was too upset to respond, she just sat there with tears in her eyes, holding herself back from crying. Emanuele also had tears welling up in his eyes as he walked to his car, but he quickly wiped them away angrily. He drove straight home instead of going to university, then he walked into his house and went straight to the heavy boxing bag inside the home gym.

“AAARRRRGHHHH!!!” he screamed, as he began throwing haymakers as hard as he could, which hurt his side, but he did not care. He stood there throwing fists into the hard bag creating two noticeable indentations, his knuckles were red raw, before he collapsed whimpering on the gym floor. He couldn’t believe that he had just ended things with Leila, but he had to remain loyal to his father. Sitting there with head in hands, he felt so bad for leaving Leila at the café, and he grabbed his phone off the floor to text her and apologize. But he threw it away, ‘What’s the point? What’s been done can’t be undone’ he thought to himself. He sat there fantasizing about an alternate reality where he and Leila privately spent the rest of their lives together, away from their families, escaping it all. But he brought himself back to reality and forced his will upon himself to give everything he had to the decision he had made, and he told himself he would never let another distraction or girl take over. Later, he stepped out of the shower after cleaning himself up; he wrapped a towel around his waist and walked over to his side table to check the time on his phone. There was one message and his heart fluttered as he thought it might be from Leila, but he opened and saw that it was from Samuel, ‘hey dude where you been? Too much time with that girl :P Listen I got all my assignments done. I don’t have to go into university for a few days, we should go to the club tonight’ it read. Emanuele sat back on his bed and pondered momentarily. He decided it could be just the thing needed to get Leila off his mind and so he messaged Samuel back, ‘Yeah ok I could use a night out. Pick you up at 9 but the club will be dead by 12 on a Monday night’ it read. ‘All good, I’m only there to meet the girl anyway’ read Samuel’s reply. Emanuele noticed the time on his phone; it was two hours before he had to go to training at Clay’s house. He went downstairs and had a small bowl of rice and steamed tilapia to give him energy for his grueling return to training. As he ate at the kitchen counter Maria walked in, “Mom, have you ever thought about going back to

Sunday mass?" he asked, "I wouldn't know where to begin my confession, but I have thought about it. Maybe someday" she replied.

After talking to his mom, he quickly finished his bowl of food, grabbed his training gear, and went down to the garage, got in the Range Rover and then drove to Clay's house early. He walked around the back where he found Clay punching one of the heavy bags, "Hey E-man how u going?" he asked, looking happy to see Emanuele, "Yeah going pretty good, you know" replied Emanuele shrugging his shoulders, keeping his heartbreak completely hidden. "Hey c'mon don't give me that. Drop and do 50" said Clay as his demeanor instantly changed from playful to serious. "I'm not late though" said Emanuele, "Yeah and do you want a medal?" asked Clay. Emanuele just rolled his eyes and smiled slightly before he started doing the 50 push-ups; one person he knew he could always rely on to kick his ass while down, was Clay, and for that he was grateful. "You're gonna build your strength back up!" yelled Clay; although Emanuele still hadn't fully recovered, he knew according to Clay's standards, he'd taken too much time off. They did some pad work and fitness but skipped the sparring and conditioning for their first session back. "Alright that's enough" said Clay, to Emanuele's surprise; even though he was in pain he knew he could go a little longer. "I'm not pushing you 100% just yet, I know you're still recovering" "Thanks Clay" replied Emanuele panting, "But don't think it's gonna be this way for long!" yelled Clay, before picking up the gear. Emanuele sat back in one of the chairs and wiped the sweat off his face with his towel and soon after Clay sat down next to him. "We've gotta be stronger for next time" said Clay looking at his student; "There won't be a next time for me. My father's taking me off the streets for good" replied Emanuele. "That may be the case, but you never know when you could be involved in a dangerous situation, you'll have a bigger target on your back as the boss you know," said Clay.

“Yeah thanks” replied Emanuele sarcastically and then took a sip from his water bottle. Then he began packing his gloves and bottle into his bag with a sad look on his face. “Something up?” asked Clay, “Ah it’s nothing really, that girl and I broke up” replied Emanuele, downplaying the way he was feeling. Clay patted him on the back, “Girls will come and go man, don’t get your head caught up in it” he said. Emanuele just nodded, got up, shook Clays hand, and then walked to his car as his eyes began to tear up. As he sat in the driver’s seat, he looked at himself in the rear-view mirror. He couldn’t remember ever seeing himself in that state, “It’s done, get over it!” he yelled in frustration, before starting the car up and driving home. “Hi” he said, quietly, as he entered kitchen where his sister was sitting on one of the bar stools engrossed in her phone, “Hey” she replied, looking up briefly before focusing her attention back on the screen. Emanuele went up to his bedroom got showered and then lay on his bed in his boxer shorts, waiting to go out. He was still sad and was neither in the mood to eat nor go out, but he had already told Samuel he would, so now he felt obligated. He switched on his laptop and checked his investment portfolio; the markets were tracking sideways, then he closed the laptop on the bed and went to his wardrobe to pick out something to wear. He picked out a button up shirt and pants at complete random as he knew he wasn’t trying to impress anyone; the booze would be his company that evening. He left the house without saying goodbye to his mom or sister and drove to Samuel’s in the Range Rover with no music; only silence and misery were with him. But then the silence and misery dissipated; Samuel got into the car and was all amped up about going out. He was wearing the same outfit Emanuele had bought for him the last time they went clubbing. “That girl I’m keen on is going to be there tonight!” he said exuberantly, “Nice!” replied Emanuele, forcing enthusiasm as they pulled away from Samuel’s house. When they arrived on the street of Razz nightclub, Emanuele pulled up short of the club and into one

of the paid parking spots instead of getting someone to park for him. "Aren't we staying in the hotel?" asked Samuel, "I'm driving home tonight" replied Emanuele. "Aw damn man, I can't take the girl back to my crib" said Samuel, looking worried, "I'll set you up with a room, don't worry about it" "You're the man!" yelled Samuel playfully punching Emanuele in the arm. But Emanuele just looked at him a little annoyed, "Oh sorry, sorry" he apologized, "It's alright, let's go have some fun" replied Emanuele, after realizing how sour he was acting. Being a Monday night only half the club was full and there was no line up outside to get in. They went inside and were seated at the same best booth by one of the waitresses that recognized Emanuele. Samuel looked over the balcony into the club and was able to easily spot his girl with her friend. He waved them up and the two stunning girls wearing skimpy mini dresses, walked up the stairs and joined them at the booth. The brunette hugged Samuel and then introduced her friend to them both; she was short and slim with long blonde hair, big fake breasts and she had eyes for Emanuele, which quickly became apparent as she sat down next to him. While Samuel accompanied his girl to the bathroom, the blonde was getting increasingly closer to Emanuele; stroking his face and telling him how good he looked, despite the fact his eye not yet fully recovered. "I bet you beat up the other guy real bad" she said, as she licked her lips. But he removed her hand, and quickly made it known to her that he wasn't interested. So, she left very disappointed, joining the others, and started taking shots before going onto the dancefloor.

Emanuele sat at the booth, looking bored, staring at his phone for majority of the night while the others got drunk and danced until the scene died down.

Samuel, with his girl in tow, approached Emanuele telling him they were ready to go, so he got up and the three of them walked downstairs.

As they walked through the small crowd to the entrance, they spotted the blonde girl talking to a man that aggressively grabbed her on the ass, pulling her towards him, before she slapped him. Emanuele walked up to the heavily tattooed man in his late 30's, "Leave her alone" he said, before grabbing her by the hand. "Fight me prick!" yelled the drunk man as he put his hands up; shaping up to throw a punch. Suddenly, two bouncers ran over and jumped on him before they dragged him out the back and began whaling on him. "C'mon let's go!" yelled Emanuele over the music, which was still playing in the background.

The four of them then left the club, walking to Emanuele's car, and then got in. He drove Samuel and his girl to the apartment complex down the road, and walked into the lobby to sign them in. "Have a good night, just hand these back in the morning" he said, handing the keys to Samuel, who went in for a drunken hug, but Emanuele put his palm on his chest and smiled, "Save that for her" he said, before turning and leaving. Then he went back outside and joined the blonde who was waiting in his Range Rover, "Where do you live?" he asked. She was noticeably drunk as she sat in the passenger's seat next to him, "I live at your house" she said laughing and grabbing his crotch. He quickly grabbed her hands and took them off, "Tell me where!?" he yelled, in frustration, "Aww you're no fun... Just drop me off at Mercado Apartments on Newton avenue" she replied. Emanuele breathed a sigh of relief as it was only about 10 minutes from where he lived. He drove to the street and stopped out front of the gated complex under the Coronado bridge; suddenly she tried kissing him before she got out, but he stopped her. He made sure she entered the complex safely and then he left.

On the drive home he sat there in silence and suddenly heard the words, "Leave the life, and save your family" in the Regal man's voice; he abruptly turned the sound system on and blared Hip-hop until he had arrived home.

For the next few days Emanuele went through the motions of study, training, eating, and sleeping, all while being haunted by the thought that he and Leila were no more. In the evenings at home, he wrestled with the depression that loomed over him and he felt like turning to alcohol to numb the pain. But he knew he didn't want to spiral down into that destructive place again, besides he had to be strong because he would be leading the organization one day soon. Although Leila was constantly on his mind, there was no sign of her, no messages, no phone calls, and he didn't see her anywhere at university either, until Friday. After his morning class he walked into the cafeteria with Samuel and there she was, sitting at her usual table with a couple of friends and her cousin Mike. They locked eyes, "I'll catch up with you" said Emanuele to Samuel before making his way over to the table. Leila noticed him approaching and quickly grabbed her bag and walked away; Mike turned around and noticed Emanuele then he stood up. His face and body language were in a stance of humility and his hands were behind his back as he walked up to Emanuele. "I'm sorry she's just really upset and doesn't want to talk to you right now. But I know I can't stop you from talking to her if you choose to" he said politely. "That's okay could you please just tell her that I said I'm sorry" "I will" replied Mike, nodding before walking back to the table to finish his meal. Emanuele decided that he wasn't hungry anymore; he felt sad seeing Leila's reaction towards him. He slowly walked outside and joined Samuel at the seat they usually ate at. Samuel could tell his friend was feeling down, so he didn't prod, but instead tried some diversional therapy on him. "How about I pay for a movie tonight?" asked Samuel, "No, it's okay" replied Emanuele bluntly; Samuel patted him on the back, "C'mon dude my treat, you look like you could do with a good sci-fi mind fuck" he said chuckling. Emanuele rolled his eyes but was grateful that in that low moment he had someone to cheer him up, even if it was Samuel with his weird humor.

He smiled slightly, "Yeah alright" he said, Samuel grabbed him by the shoulders and shook him "That's what I'm talking about!" he yelled in an effort to brighten the mood. Emanuele shrugged him off, "You're an idiot" he said jokingly before convincing Samuel to ditch his afternoon class. The two of them ended up going to the mall for a quick feed and then caught the movie afterwards.

On the drive home Emanuele pulled into a quiet parking lot he knew of. "What the hell are we doing here?" asked Samuel a little concerned. Suddenly Emanuele planted his foot on the accelerator and ripped the steering wheel to the right. He began doing donuts in his new Maserati to relieve some stress, "Woahh shiiiiittt!!!" yelled Samuel as they went close to hitting the concrete boundary, smoke from the tires burst into the air as the V8 engine roared. Suddenly, some security guards ran out, "That's our cue!" yelled Emanuele before straightening up and doing a burnout through the exit, leaving the guards coughing as they choked in a cloud of smoke. Samuel laughed hysterically as they sped away from the area; in the past he was averse to causing a scene, but now his self-confidence had soared since hanging out with his new best friend.

When Emanuele arrived out the front of Samuel's dingy old house, all the neighbors were eyeing up his new Maserati, "We'll have to do this again bro" said Samuel as he stepped out, "Yeah for sure I'll give you a call next week" replied Emanuele, now feeling in a much brighter mood. He gave Samuel a thumbs up as he left and smiled at some kids on their bikes who were admiring his ride as he left Samuel's Street. On Saturday Emanuele woke up feeling surprisingly well rested and refreshed; it had been the first full night's sleep he had gotten in a while. He had also enjoyed hanging out with Samuel the day before, and even though he missed Leila immensely, knowing how much wealth preservation and responsibility was on his shoulders, mentally helped him to stay focused.

As he sat down at the counter benchtop and ate his breakfast his phone began to ring; Clay's name and number appeared on the screen as he picked it up. He suddenly realized he was in trouble, "You missed training" said Clay as Emanuele put the phone to his ear, "I know, I screwed up" he said knowing that he would pay for it. "You've got one hour to get your ass over here" said Clay before hanging up. With that, Emanuele ditched his breakfast, grabbed his training gear, and rushed over to Clay's house. The intensity of that session increased significantly to the very last minute, as Clay could tell that Emanuele was ready for it, so he added shin and forearm conditioning at the end. After training, Emanuele's breathing was labored because his fitness had dropped, but the endorphins kick was a welcomed feeling. He and Clay took turns showering and then ate a post workout meal as they watched some UFC fight highlights. "See you can fight with your hands down, but if your opponent is faster than you, it'll be your downfall" said Clay as he analyzed the fight, explaining to Emanuele what each fighter did well or not so well. Then Clay brought up the YouTube app on his TV and they watched backyard street brawls for the comedic value. They both laughed as they watched a fight which was separated by at least 3 weight classes; after the first fight Clay grabbed a bottle of whisky and two glasses from the kitchen. "I'm ok" said Emanuele as Clay poured the two glasses, "What did you think one of these was yours?" he asked as he grabbed both glasses and sat back in his seat sipping on one. Emanuele just smiled as he knew this was Clay's weak attempt at pranking him. After watching a few more fights and sharing a few more laughs, Emanuele thanked Clay and left for home at 7:01pm, pulling into his garage at 7:29pm. As he walked up to the living area and into the kitchen Maria was there, "Hey mom" he said as he grabbed a water from the fridge. "Hi darling how was your day?" she asked, "Yeah good just training and chilling with Clay" he replied before taking a sip of water.

Just then Eva stepped into the kitchen, "Do I look alright mom?" she asked, "Oh honey you look absolutely beautiful," replied Maria. Emanuele looked at his sister curiously as she was wearing a black dress with a low-cut front, pink heels, and had her hair and make-up professionally done. "What are you all dressed up for sis?" asked Emanuele, "Just going to a party with Denise" she replied. Not a minute later the doorbell rang, and Eva quickly answered it; it was her friend Denise who was all dressed up as well. Emanuele, still curious, followed his mom to the front door, "Hello Mrs. Reyes" said Denise with a big smile, "Hi sweetie you're looking lovely tonight, don't you think Emanuele?" asked Maria, "Yeah you look really nice" he added. "Oh, thank you Emanuele" said Denise with a cute laugh as she stared at him intrigued; Emanuele had never really noticed her before but thought she looked hot in her blue dress. Eva took a deep, slightly nervous breath, "Well we've got to go!" she said happily before they both made their way down to the car being driven by Denise's mom. "Bye girls have a great night!" yelled Maria before closing the front door, "So who's party, is it?" asked Emanuele, "Just a friend of theirs" replied Maria casually as she walked back through to the kitchen. Emanuele quickly followed behind; he knew she was hiding something, "Mom, who's party?" he asked again, "It's Carlos' party" replied Maria. Emanuele paused for a moment while his mom started walking away, "WHAT!? Do you know the kind of people that psycho hangs out with!?" yelled Emanuele, standing there in disbelief. "Calm down Emanuele! The Carlos you grew up with is different now. Besides he knows that if anything ever happened to Eva, he'd have me to deal with" she said proudly. Emanuele couldn't believe what he was hearing, but Maria just continued through to the lounge room and relaxed on the couch as if she didn't have a care in the world. Emanuele was feeling a little perplexed about this new revelation, but he didn't want to cause a scene and push Eva away from him, they were the closest they had been since

Dominic left. Instead, he begrudgingly went to do some study on his laptop that he knew he needed to catch up on. When Eva and Denise arrived at the address of the party, Denise's mom suddenly became very wary of where she was pulling up. "Are you sure this is the house?" she asked, stopping out the front of a two-story house on the south side of Encanto. The house was old and almost dilapidated but was bustling with people inside and out. There were a lot of thug-looking middle-aged men drinking in the front yard with a few scantily clad girls scattered around, one wearing next to nothing. "Yeah, this is the place" said Eva opening the door, but just as Denise was about to step out her mom grabbed her arm, "Don't go getting pregnant" she said, looking serious. Denise yanked her arm away and then got out, following Eva into the front yard. "Now the party's here!" yelled one man, as some guys started whistling and yelling at Eva and her friend. One drunk guy grabbed his crotch, "I got this for you girls" he said, just as Carlos walked onto the front porch to witness it. Carlos pointed to the guy, and instantly two of his friends grabbed the guy, one smashed a bottle over his head and the other then threw him over the fence and spat on him. Carlos smiled and hugged the girls before walking them inside the house. It was fully packed with guys and girls that all looked to be at least 10 years older than Eva and Denise. But Eva didn't care, she was excited to finally be at a social gathering without anyone telling her how to act or behave. There were stairs on the left side leading up to bedrooms with a few people standing along the stairs talking and drinking. The bulk of the partygoers were mingling and dancing next to the stereo in the front living room, which lead to the kitchen out the back. Carlos took the girls to the kitchen to get some drinks into them.

They walked into the old kitchen that was stocked full of more booze than the average bar; the counters around the walls were chocked full of various bottles of spirits, and 4 fridges lined the back wall full of beer.

“Make them something nice!” yelled Carlos over the music; the guy making the drinks nodded and pulled out two big glasses before throwing in a bunch of ingredients including Vodka, Cointreau, lime, mint leaves, and ice. The two girls’ faces lit up, pleasantly surprised, as neither of them expected anything fancy. They took their drinks, tried them and both looked at each, screwing their faces up before laughing. The cocktails were very strong, but the more they drank, the more they enjoyed them. “Who are these two little hotties?” asked a large Mexican man with a beard, who looked to be about 40. His name was Gallon, a name given to him for successfully drinking a gallon of spirits in one session without passing out. He was a close friend of Carlos’, and the owner of the house. The girls looked at him slightly condescendingly, before Carlos introduced them to him and their moods instantly changed. They both winced slightly, as he gave them both a dirty big kiss on the cheek while he was being introduced, “Make yourselves at home, and if you need anything, I mean anything, you let me know” he said winking. “This is Dominic’s daughter” said Carlos with his hand on Eva’s shoulder, “Oh well in that case I should be asking you for something!” he replied, jokingly. He then returned to the old lounge suite he was sitting on in the living room, lit up his 3-gram blunt, and started smoking it. Although Gallon had heard many stories about Dominic, he had never met nor seen him. “Hey Eva!” said Javier, smiling as he joined the three of them, “Hey Javier, this is my friend Denise!” she replied, Denise was enthralled with Javier as he shook her hand gently and smiled at her. Carlos put his arm around Eva, carefully pulling her aside; speaking into her ear, they left Javier and Denise to get acquainted. As the night carried on Javier and Denise drank and spoke together, developing a close connection with one another as they were seated on the lounge with their legs together. Carlos approached them with his arm around Eva at 9:34pm, smiling mischievously, “Hey you two, follow us!” he said. Javier smiled back, knowing

Carlos had convinced Eva of what they had planned. But Denise looked slightly confused as they both got up and all four of them walked to a bedroom on the left side of the hallway, past the bathroom. Carlos opened the door to the dimly lit room where four young men were sitting, laughing, while drinking and smoking, "Out!" he yelled; the four of them grabbed their belongings and left immediately. Carlos sat down on the old leather lounge and invited them in, as he cleared off the coffee table, seeing that the liquor-stained pornographic magazines and filthy ashtray wasn't very inviting for the girls. Javier sat down opposite him, and the two girls joined their respective male partners. Carlos then pulled out a bag of cocaine from his pocket, revealing it to them, as Javier pulled out a clean tray from under the coffee table he'd stashed earlier. "Oh yes" said Denise looking excited, "Ahh you like?" asked Carlos impressed, "I've only tried it once, but yes I like it" replied Denise giggling. But Eva wasn't convinced, "Um, I've never tried it" she said; Javier glanced at Carlos looking a little worried, "Maybe you shouldn't" he said, "Shut up" replied Carlos, looking pissed at Javier. "Just do as we do" he said calmly, as he set up a few lines on the stainless-steel tray. Then he took out a \$100 dollar note from his pocket, rolled it, and handed it to Denise. "Oh god, me first? Alright here I go" she said, before taking the rolled note and carefully put it to her left nostril, while holding her other nostril pettily. Then she snorted up the line nearest to her; she sniffled and coughed a little, laughing as she handed the note back to Carlos, who went down and snorted the next line up hard and fast with absolute ease. "Woah you did that fast" said Denise surprised; he smiled and winked, "practice" he said as he handed it over to Javier. Javier took his line with relative ease and then handed the note to Eva. There was only one line left, slightly smaller than the others, "a baby line just for you," said Carlos. She nervously looked at them and then bravely leaned down and snorted up the last line slowly.

She covered her mouth as she coughed and handed the note back to Carlos. "Good girl" he said, before setting up four more equal lines and quickly snorted another, followed by the others. Eva didn't like the taste, "It tastes chemically" she said, "just wait till it works" replied Denise laughing. "It's okay Eva" said Javier, about to snort her line for her, but Carlos stopped him, "Don't be so greedy Javier! Go on Eva, just one more" "Okay" she replied hesitantly. Then she closed her eyes and forced herself to snort up another line. She took a deep breath after it and shook her head holding her nose in discomfort. Denise and Carlos laughed while Javier just sat there looking slightly concerned. "Javier! Go get us some more drinks from the kitchen!" yelled Carlos, noticing his facial expression. "Just the same drinks girls?" he asked, as he got up, "Yeah sure!" replied Denise excitedly, while Eva just nodded. Then Carlos snorted another line that was left over, "Wooooo!!!" he shouted aggressively after taking it. When Javier came back with the drinks the coke had kicked in and Eva had become loud and talkative, "Give me that!" she yelled, grabbing her drink off Javier before she began to slurp it down. "I told you she'd be fine" said Carlos to his pal who just shrugged, as the two girls were distracted. The four of them talked among themselves for a little while longer before they went out to the living room to continue drinking and dance together. Carlos and Eva danced next to Denise and Javier, and the two couples became increasingly close as the night went on. Suddenly, Eva began passionately kissing Carlos in her drunken state; Javier witnessed this and tapped Denise on the shoulder, "look!" he yelled over the music as he pointed towards them. Denise looked over at the two of them kissing, then looked back at Javier and began kissing and grinding on him; Javier reciprocated as he grabbed her ass. They kept kissing for what seemed to be a full minute, before Denise looked back to where Carlos and Eva had been dancing, but they had disappeared. The two of them had made their way up the stairs and into one of the bedrooms.

Carlos locked the door behind him as Eva went and sat on the bed, "What are you doing?" she asked, "Just for privacy" he replied, forcing a smile. Then he sat down next to her and set up another two lines of cocaine on the side table next to the bed; he leaned down and snorted one up, before handing Eva the rolled bill. She followed his lead, trying to snort the other line up, but only got halfway through it before stopping; Carlos quickly took the rolled bill back and finished it off for her. By this time Eva had completely succumbed to the effects of the cocaine and alcohol and her inhibitions were completely gone. "You know I've always wanted you" said Carlos looking at her, then grabbing her and throwing her on the bed before they began kissing.

Eva kept kissing him until he became too aggressive with his groping. Eva tried to push him off, but he wouldn't budge. "Errr!" she groaned, as she pushed to get him off her. Carlos was infuriated as he got off her, "What now!?" he yelled; "be gentler please" she replied, before allowing him back on top to kiss her. As he continued to kiss her, Carlos slid his hand under her dress and grabbed at her panties, but she was too drunk and caught up in the kissing to realize. He had slid them down to her ankles and then attempted to take off her bra, but she protested after realizing what he was doing. "No, wait!" she yelled, but this just made him even more determined to get her naked. She then tried to fight him off, but he ripped her dress off, "Stop Carlos!" she yelled. But Carlos could not stop himself in that moment, he had come this far, and had waited this long to be in this position; there was no way he was going to stop now. Eva struggled even further, kicking her legs to get out from underneath him, "Help!!!" she yelled, but no one could hear her. Carlos was now fuming, and in his drunken rage he grabbed a handful of cocaine and shoved it in Eva's mouth. She swallowed a large amount of it before realizing and began coughing as she tried to spit the rest out. Carlos continued to have his way with her; he entered her and began raping her hard and fast.

He was so jumped up on drugs and alcohol that he didn't even realize, that while he was committing this heinous act, Eva had started frothing at the mouth and convulsing. He looked down just as he was about to finish and saw what was happening; shocked, he quickly jumped off her. "Eva, Eva!" he yelled, as he quickly tried to clear her mouth of the froth and shook her. In pure stupidity and now gripped with fear, he started slapping her hard in the face to snap her out of the convulsion. But it was too late, Eva had choked to death, and now her fragile, petite body lay on the bed naked and lifeless. Carlos jumped up panicking as he looked at her dead body lying on the bed, "Oh fuck, fuck, FUCK!!!" he yelled, fearing for his own life. He knew if he was caught out in any way or connected to her death, he would be minced alive and fed to the dogs. He quickly put his pants back on and then opened the door to the room, slightly peering out as everyone was downstairs still partying hard, with the music blaring loudly. No one had heard anything going on in the bedroom, so he quickly stepped out and closed the door, locking it behind him so no one could enter.

Suddenly, a young partygoer stepped out of the toilet down the hallway and headed for the stairs to go back down to the party. Carlos realized this might be his way out, so he grabbed the guy by the back of the shirt, "Hey, what are you doing?!" yelled the guy. Then Carlos threw him over the timber railing from the second floor; he fell on a large group of people that were dancing, knocking them down. Glasses smashed as they dropped, and some girls began screaming, "Grab that motherfucker!!!" yelled Carlos. The music was suddenly turned off and everyone looked up worried; two of Carlos boys rushed over and grabbed the innocent guy as Carlos ran down the stairs. Gallon got up and walked over to Carlos, "What the hell are you doing?!" he asked angrily, "This party is over" replied Carlos looking serious, "Like hell it is" replied Gallon, before ordering that the music be turned back on, and returning to where he was sitting.

The alleged perpetrator was dragged out to the kitchen and then punched several times in the face, receiving a broken nose and cheek bone. He then had his hands zip tied behind his back by one of Carlos' boys; Javier ran over to Carlos, "What's going on bro?" he asked. Carlos grabbed Javier's collar and pulled him in, putting his face close to Javier's with a look of fear; this worried Javier greatly, he had never seen his friend look that afraid. "This... this guy... he killed Eva" replied Carlos, pretending to be in shock. "Oh my god" said Javier, putting his head in his hands, as he really was in a state of shock.

The poor guy that had been accused, cried out, protesting his innocence, "I didn't do anything!" he pleaded, before being booted in the stomach by Carlos. "What are we going to do?" asked Javier, trying to come to terms with the severity of the situation, "I don't know" replied Carlos, "Call Percy, he might know what to do" said one of Carlos' boys.

Carlos paused and pondered for a moment, "Alright, take him out back" he said, and then two of the cartel boys standing next to the accused, grabbed him, opened the back door, and threw him out into the gravel behind the house. Carlos and Javier followed, "Javier, where are you going?" asked Denise as she entered the kitchen, not knowing anything about the situation that was going on, "Just stay inside, I have to make a call okay" he replied, and then he followed Carlos and the others outside. "Make the call" said Carlos, before Javier nervously dialed Percy's number from his cell phone and put it on loudspeaker. "I'm in the middle of something, what do you want?" asked Percy, sounding annoyed on the other end of the line. "Wait, something bad has gone down" replied Javier nervously; Percy sighed, "How bad?" he asked, "Very bad...it concerns Dominic," replied Javier, "What is it?!" asked Percy bluntly, now listening intently.

Suddenly, Carlos grabbed the phone off Javier, "Eva's dead, she OD'd" he said, quickly changing the narrative. There was silence on the other end of the line as they waited for a response, "You guys are dead, dead, do you realize that? Dominic is going to kill you," said Percy adamantly. "We didn't give her anything, I found her in a room with a guy that had done this to her!!" yelled Carlos, pleading his case. "Well, you better get Dominic down there and you explain this to him, because if he hears this from me, this will all be on your head" said Percy, before ending the call abruptly. "FUCK!!!" yelled Carlos; "What are we going to do?" asked Javier, seriously worried. "We have to get Dominic down here or Percy is gonna have us killed" "WHAT... us, we didn't do anything!" yelled Javier, now scared shitless. "I've gotta call Dominic" said Carlos as his hand shook slightly while dialing Dominic's number. One of Carlos' boys turned to the other, "You don't think we'll be in any shit, do you?" he asked, sounding worried, "Nah" replied the other confidently, before looking away fearfully. "Yeah, who's this" asked Dominic as he answered the call, "It's Carlos, something bad has happened" he replied, in a weak effort to soften the blow. "Not now Carlos, I'm with clients" replied Dominic, "Wait, its Eva" he added quickly before Dominic hung up, "What about her?" asked Dominic intensely. Carlos scrunched his face up, "She took some drugs someone gave her, I found her lying on a bed... she's dead" he said, before grinding his teeth together. "Stay, there" replied Dominic, then he ended the call and stood up, "We'll have to reschedule" he said to the four men in suits seated in front of him. Then he abruptly left the hotel room with Clay and two other enforcers following him. He had just walked out on a meeting with potential clients from Canada, one of whom was a high-ranking political official.

The deal would have been 9 figures of profit per year, had it been closed. Dominic gave his phone to one of the enforcers, "Call back and get the address" he said, quickly walking to his car, before the other enforcer opened the back door to the armored Maybach.

He got in and sat down while Clay got in the other side, seated next to him. "What's wrong Dominic?" he asked, noticing his intense facial expression; Dominic just turned to Clay and said, "People will die tonight."

Chapter 11: Consequences

When the Maybach pulled up out the front of the house party, Dominic stepped out in his 50-thousand-dollar suit with a piercing look on his face. Clay and the two enforcers followed him into the front yard of the house. Most of the revelers looked at the four of them with screwed up faces, wondering who they were, and why they were dressed so well. But the few that knew who Dominic was, discreetly left the party as he walked inside the house. Dominic was visibly furious as he looked around, wondering why he had received the call about his daughter, when the music was still blaring, and people were still partying like nothing had happened. Suddenly, Gallon spotted them, "Who the fuck do these guys think they are?" he said to his friend beside him, as they both got up and walked towards the four men, completely unaware of who they were. "What are you doing in my house? GET OUT!!" yelled Gallon, as he grabbed Dominic by the coat and pushed him backwards. But Dominic grabbed a hold of Gallon with his left hand, and with his right he pulled his pistol from his belt and pushed it into the big man's stomach. 'BANG!' went the shot that hit him at close range, then he dropped to the ground, his guts bloodied all over the floor. The whole party immediately ducked, with everyone looking around puzzled at the sound of the gun, as the music kept blaring. Clay pulled his gun out, 'BANG! BANG! BANG!' sounded the shots, as he fired 3 bullets into the roof, "Everybody on the ground NOW!!!" he yelled. Everyone screamed and panicked as they dropped to the floor and the music cut out. The other two enforcers pulled out pistols in both hands and pointed them at the crowd. "That must be Dominic" said Javier after hearing the shots, "I better go see him" said Carlos, clearly spooked.

He opened the back door and walked past the kitchen to see everyone inside on the ground, trembling in fear. As Dominic's attention was focused on Carlos, a man that was on the ground tried to get up and run but one of the enforcers shot him in the leg; everyone screamed, while a few people tried to plead with others to just stay down and keep calm, "Nobody else try that shit!!" yelled the enforcer. "WHERE IS SHE?!" Dominic yelled angrily at Carlos, "I found her upstairs second room on the left" he replied. "Watch him" said Dominic to Clay, who then pointed his gun at Carlos. Dominic ran up the stairs and to the second door on the left, but it was locked when he tried to open it. He slammed it down with his shoulder and was horrified at what he saw; his only daughter lay there naked and lifeless. He walked over to the bed, collapsing next to it and holding her in his arms, "I'm so sorry baby, I'm so sorry Eva" he said as tears rolled down his face and he held her head close to his chest. He then closed her eyelids, kissed her on the forehead and lay her back down. As he got up and wiped his tears; his sorrowful face had now turned to pure rage as he exited the room. He pulled his gun out and walked back down the stairs slowly, before approaching Carlos, "Kneel" he said calmly, "Dominic, I didn't do anything I swear, I just found her!" pleaded Carlos; "GET ON YOUR KNEES!!!" screamed Dominic, with his gun now pointed at Carlos' head. Carlos dropped to his knees and started whimpering with his hands up, "Please Dominic you're like a father to me I would never do anything to hurt you!" yelled Carlos. Dominic cocked his gun angrily as other's including Clay looked on in suspense. "We found the guy he's out the back" said Carlos quietly, losing all hope, before Dominic uncocked his gun. Then he smashed Carlos in the side of the face with the butt of it, "SHE SHOULDN'T HAVE BEEN HERE!!!" he screamed at Carlos, who now lay on the ground with blood streaming out of a large gash on his cheek.

Most of the people in the party had their faces to the ground while a few peered to observe the ordeal. One man looked at Dominic and was quickly booted in the head by one of the enforcers, which caused all the curious onlookers to drop their gaze. "Where is he?!" yelled Clay, "Out back" replied Carlos, holding the side of his face. "Let them go," said Dominic; "Everybody out!!" yelled the two enforcers. Everyone scrambled to their feet and rushed out the front door as quickly as they could. Dominic stormed out the back closely followed by Clay, then he walked up to Carlos' boys, "Stand him up!!" he yelled at them. The two thugs standing either side of the accused man, stood him up and held him firmly by each arm. Before the guy could protest his innocence, 'SMACK!' Dominic threw a solid right hook with all his might, which knocked him out, and then he spat on him as he was still held up, but now unconscious. "Throw him in the trunk!" he said, angrily before the two enforcers went over, took the man, and then carried him to the Maybach out front, throwing him in the trunk. Meanwhile, Javier was out the front talking to Denise about what had happened. She was completely distraught, and Javier held her, trying to comfort her while she bawled uncontrollably. "That piece of shit needs to pay!" yelled Carlos, as Dominic walked back through the house. Dominic ignored him and turned to Clay, "Call our guy at the station, he'll look after this for me" said Dominic with sorrowful face. "I will... I'm so sorry Dominic" replied Clay with a sympathetic look on his face; Dominic just nodded sadly and walked out the front. He noticed Javier comforting Denise who was crying as he walked to his car; "Boss" said Javier, humbly. Dominic turned with an angry face and walked up to him but didn't say anything. Denise shook slightly when Dominic walked up to them, after witnessing what had happened inside. "This is Denise, she was Eva's best friend," said Javier; Dominic looked at her angrily, wishing it had been her instead of Eva.

But he could see the pain in her eyes as she sobbed, so he didn't say anything to her. He looked back at Javier with a piercing stare, "You get her home" he said, before getting in his car. Clay called Dominic's old friend, Carl Asher who was the most Senior Detective in the district, and on his payroll. Carl was shocked to hear what had happened and started the process of covering up the investigation as soon as he heard; he was good at making things disappear and nothing he took charge of ever lead back to Dominic in any way. He would send Eva's body to the coroners with a pre-set report, and then it would be sent to an embalmer to be prepared for a funeral ceremony.

The Maybach drove the four men, and the accused tied up in the trunk, to an old house in the countryside of Alpine. It was just one of many properties that was referred to as a 'pain box' by the organization, of which they had many across the country, for the sole purpose of holding people and getting information out of them by force. Once a 'pain box' had become overused or compromised, it was burnt to the ground, and the locals were none the wiser because of their strategic locations. On the way to the pain box, Dominic called a couple of his men to meet him there. He sat comfortably in the plush back seat as the car drove smoothly along the freeway. He dialed the number of a doctor he had contracted before who was an expert in torture; the doctor had worked for the Department of Defense but was discharged for undertaking unauthorized torture procedures. The phone rang as Dominic held it to his ear, before hearing someone pick up on the other end, but without answering. "It's me, I need you for 3 days. At the old place... 200K" he said, and then the person on the other end pushed a number, which beeped to confirm, before hanging up. Dominic knew his acquaintance couldn't say anything as his phone was likely tapped; agreeing by word of mouth would have been enough for him to be questioned by his old employers.

When the headlights lit up the old house as the men arrived, Dominic turned to Clay, "Help them set up for the doctor" he said. Clay nodded and then got out with the two enforcers, who then grabbed the man out of the boot of the car and dragged him inside. The man who was now conscious, protested, but he couldn't shout as the enforcers had gagged him. When they got into the house it was dark and empty; Clay turned on the lights. The old globes flickered as they struggled to light up the house with old timber flooring and browning wallpaper; a few big rats dispersed as they entered through the hallway and went into a small room. It was in the far-right corner of the house and had boarded up windows to stop light from getting in, and sound from getting out. The two enforcers dragged the man into the room and opened the door to let some light in, and then strapped him to the old steel bed which was bolted to the floor. They closed the door and locked it, before walking out into the kitchen, picking up some old fold up chairs that were leant up against the wall and sitting on them. The two enforcers set up a card game on the small kitchen table while waiting for further instructions, and Clay set up some ropes that were hanging from a pulley bolted to the ceiling.

Back in the Maybach, Dominic sighed as he looked at his old home number on the screen of his phone; then he dialed and waited. Meanwhile Maria was enjoying herself watching Real Housewives in the lounge room, "Pffft your husband ain't rich!" she yelled at the TV, laughing. Then she took the last sip from her wine glass as the home phone rang; she got up quickly and took her glass with her for a refill. "Hello?" she asked, cheerfully answering the phone, "Maria... it's me" said Dominic on the other end of the line. Maria's cheerful expression turned to one of concern; she knew it was something bad, "Someone drugged Eva... She's gone" he said. Maria went into a state of shock, and suddenly she couldn't speak.

“Maria did you hear me?” asked Dominic; “What, wha-, what do you mean... gone, where?” she asked in confusion, “She’s dead!” yelled Dominic insensitively. Suddenly all strength left Maria’s body; she dropped the phone from her left hand and smashed her wine glass on the bench with her right hand, and then started wailing out in pain. She didn’t even notice that she had cut her hand deeply on the wine glass and that it was bleeding profusely. She screamed out, weeping as she dropped to the floor and put her hands in her face, smearing blood on her cheek and forehead. Emanuele heard the crying from his room downstairs as he lay in bed; he quickly jumped up, turned his light on and then ran downstairs to see what was wrong. He was frightened by what he saw; his mom on the ground with blood on her face as she wept. “Mom!” he yelled as he ran over to her and grabbed her to help her up, “Are you okay? What’s wrong?!” he asked. But Maria was so hysterical that she just kept crying and crying. Emanuele noticed that her hand was bleeding from the smashed glass, and he tried to grab it to take it to the sink to wash it. But Maria just pulled away and screamed as she kept crying. “What’s wrong?!” yelled Emanuele; he was extremely worried about his mom and had never seen her this distraught. Through her blubbering, she was able to get out one word “EVA!” she yelled, before continuing to cry. Emanuele’s heart felt like it was about to leap out of his chest, “No, no, no, oh god no, please no” said Emanuele as he remembered Eva was at the party and was seriously hurt or worse. “Where is she now?!” asked Emanuele, panicking; “She’s gone” said Maria as she continued to blubber on the floor. Emanuele hugged his mom as he closed his eyes, wishing this was just a bad dream but hearing the sincerity of his mother’s pain he realized that Eva must be dead. He started to sob a little, as the thoughts of all the good and bad times from that year he’d shared with her came to mind. Immediately after this, a flood of anger filled him, as he realized it was Carlos’ party that his sister had gone to.

He jumped up and ran up to his room, quickly grabbing his phone; he tried to call his father but couldn't get through. He ran back downstairs and saw the house phone lying on the floor, so he quickly ran over to it and checked to see if anyone was still on the line, but there was only dial tone. He hung up the phone and crouched down to his mom, then he grabbed her face and looked at her, "I'm going to find out what happened, I will be back in one hour" he said. Then he got up and ran to the garage, jumped in his Vanquish and sped out of the street, pushing the V12 to redline as it roared through the neighborhood. "C'mon pickup!!" he yelled as he tried to call his father again, but there was still no answer. Then he tried to call Clay, but again no answer, "ARGHH!!" he yelled as he sped through a red light on the way to his father's hotel. Suddenly, in the rear-view mirror he could see the flashing lights of a police car and the sirens going. "Dammit!" he yelled in frustration, pulling over to the side of the road and switching the car off. He waited in disgust as the police officer sat in his police car, before getting out and slowly making his way over to Emanuele. When the officer approached the car and saw Emanuele, he was mad as hell, "Give me your license!" he yelled, before Emanuele revealed his license, already in his hand. The officer snatched it and made sure it was legitimate, "What is the reason for you travelling 25 over the speed limit and running a red light?!" asked the officer. Emanuele tried to stay calm, but he couldn't "It's an emergency!!" he yelled back at the officer. "Well sorry son but no emergency allows you to break the law, that'll be a \$600 fine and a day in court!" said the officer who was noticeably pleased with himself. "Yeah whatever, write the damn ticket already!" replied Emanuele, "Abusive language to a police officer, that's gonna cost you!" replied the officer angrily. "I didn't say anything!" "Do you want to go to jail tonight?" asked the officer, condescendingly. "No sir" replied Emanuele, grinding his teeth as he thought about grabbing the officer and knocking him out.

He had self-control though and took the ticket without saying another word before driving off. He sped into the carpark of his father's hotel and went up to the penthouse; he quickly got out and ran to the entrance, "Hey Emanuele, are you here to wait for your father?" asked Jerry. "He's not here?" replied Emanuele worried; "No he was at a meeting" "I must find him something has happened to Eva" replied Emanuele, urgently, before turning to walk away. "I'll get him to call you when he gets back" replied Jerry, looking concerned.

Emanuele drove to every outpost they had in San Diego to ask Dominic's men where he was, but to no avail. He started to get emotional as he drove back home, he felt hopeless, angry, and confused. When he got back inside, he looked for his mom in the kitchen, but there was only smeared blood on the floor, where she had fallen. She also wasn't in the lounge room where her program was still playing on the TV, so he ran down the hallway to her bedroom. When he opened the door what he saw next shocked him even more; there she was lying on the bedroom floor, passed out with a needle sticking out of her arm. He rushed over to her, quickly took the needle out and checked her pulse; it was very faint. He quickly got his phone out and called an ambulance, "Yes hello, my mother's passed out on the floor I think she may have taken heroin. Please send over an ambulance. I don't care what it costs just send one now!!" he yelled. Emanuele was an emotional wreck; he started crying as he paced around in the bedroom, and in adrenalin fueled rage he punched a hole in the wall, before sliding down the side of it. He cried as he wrapped his arms around his knees, realizing what had become of his family. 'Leave the life and save your family' he thought, now realizing what the Regal man meant, as he buried his face in his forearms, and continued sobbing. Not ten minutes later, there was a knock at the door, Emanuele got straight to his feet, wiped his eyes, and raced to the front door to let the paramedics in.

"She's in here!" he yelled, leading them through to the bedroom. They put an oxygen mask on Maria, and quickly, but carefully transferred her onto a stretcher, after checking her pulse and breathing. They rushed her into the ambulance and Emanuele jumped inside, sitting down beside his mother; the sirens came on and the ambulance quickly made its way to the hospital. Once it had arrived, the paramedics rushed her through emergency and into a room where a doctor hooked her up to a new IV drip, while a nurse cleaned, and bandaged her hand. Emanuele walked through to the front desk, to take care of the details and tried to pay the bill, "We'll sort that out later sir, just have a seat in there please" said the hospital clerk, pointing to the waiting area. He walked in and sat down in a chair; all the long faces staring at him with their ailments. Emanuele hated hospitals, but this was by far the worst visit. A lady and her young son tried smiling at him, but when he noticed them, he just looked down and pulled his phone out before scrolling through his call log. Soon after, the doctor came out and spoke to Emanuele, "Your mother's going to be okay, we'll keep her here overnight and give you a call in the morning" he said. "Thank you, doc," replied Emanuele, feeling relieved, as he got up and walked outside of the hospital to hail down a taxi. When he arrived home, he stepped inside the huge quiet house, with a feeling of despair; he knew that his sister had passed but didn't know how or why it had happened to her. He hadn't even had time to come to terms with that before his mother had just tried to take her own life and now lay in a hospital bed hooked up to machines.

Feeling completely distressed, Emanuele walked over to the liquor cabinet, pulled out a bottle of whiskey and sat at the kitchen bench. Tears streamed down his face as he opened the bottle and began taking swigs from it. He placed the bottle down and stared aimlessly at it as he realized that the Regal man was right, and he hadn't heeded the warning.

In sheer frustration, Emanuele grabbed the bottle of whiskey and threw it as hard as he could across the kitchen; it smashed into a hundred pieces, spraying liquid and glass onto the cupboards and floor. Then he started to weep as he was angry with himself for not listening to the warning. It was crystal clear to him what the warning had meant, but now it was too late. The thought of suicide came to mind, a thought that wasn't his own, so he willfully wiped the thought from his mind, 'I will be here for my mom if nothing else' he thought to himself. He pulled his phone out of his pocket and tried to call his father again, but he still could not get an answer. He knew he shouldn't have, especially in the early hours of the morning, but in his moment of weakness, he called Leila. He needed to hear her voice, so he called her from a private number, "Hello?" she asked, on the other end of the line, "Leila, please don't hang up" said Emanuele, sounding upset. Leila sighed, "I thought we were done when you left me that day" "I know, I'm truly sorry for that, I just need someone to talk to right now" "What's wrong?" she asked sincerely, noticing the sorrow in his speech. "Something bad has happened to my sister, and my mom just tried to end her own life" he said, trying not to, but beginning to whimper. "Oh my god... What happened? How?" asked Leila, "I don't know, I can't get a hold of my father, but she went to a party with this guy that works for him and he's pure evil. Somethings happened, my mom got the call, and she had a meltdown and while I was out looking for answers she overdosed" "I'm so sorry Emanuele... What about your mom now, is she okay?" "I took her to the hospital; she's staying there the night... I'm sorry Leila, I just needed to hear your voice, I have no one else right now" replied Emanuele. There was a brief pause on both ends of the line, before Leila sighed, "I'm coming over, you don't deserve to be alone right now" she said, sympathetically. He gratefully agreed and ended the call feeling surprised, knowing that he deserved nothing less, than to be ignored by her.

Feeling touched by her kindness, he knew in his heart he should never have let her go. When Leila arrived, she messaged him, but didn't receive a reply so went to ring the doorbell but stopped herself in case anyone else was inside the huge house she'd never been to before; she knocked gently on the door instead. Emanuele had just finished cleaning the smashed bottle when he heard the faint knocking and quickly walked to the front door, opening it to let her inside. As the door opened Leila looked at his face and saw the pain in his eyes; she immediately hugged him compassionately, stroking the back of his head. "Thank you for coming, I know you didn't have to" he said softly, "I still love you" "I love you too" he replied, hugging her gently, as he breathed in the sweet familiar aroma of perfume on her neck. He led her through the hallway with his head held low and into the lounge room where they sat down together, "I wish I could have invited you to my house for the first time under better circumstances" he said. She sighed, "This is why I can't be in this life Emanuele; I have seen what it does to people and how much it hurts people. I never told you this... but I had an older brother," said Leila, "Had?" asked Emanuele, figuring it had something to do with the crime life. "He was killed working for my father" she replied, as Emanuele paused his response, "I'm sorry" he replied softly, now with the full understanding of why Leila detested the crime life. The two of them continued to speak to each other about things that were pertinent to the immediate situation, but the conversation did an inevitable circle back to one topic; how Emanuele would get out of the life if he could, but he kept trying to convince Leila that he couldn't.

The conversation became heated as Leila believed Emanuele could get out of the life if he really wanted to. "As long as you're still involved, I can't be with you" she protested; Emanuele shook his head in disbelief, "If I knew how to get out, I would" he conceded.

When the sun began to appear through the windows, Emanuele offered to make her breakfast, but Leila declined and said that she had to go, because she had borrowed her aunt's car without her knowledge. Emanuele walked her to the front door, and stood there looking into Leila's beautiful big eyes, "Please be in my life" he said in humility. Leila just looked at him a little upset, gently touched his cheek with her hand, and then left. Emanuele's heart hurt as he watched her leave, not knowing when he would see her again. He checked the time on his watch, it was 6:14am, so he went back to the hospital to be at his mother's bedside while she recovered. Maria was still asleep when Emanuele arrived at her room, and suddenly his phone started to ring, he quickly walked to an empty waiting room and answered it. "Yeah, dad what happened?!" he asked, worryingly, "I'm sorry I couldn't speak to you last night son, but I'm sure by now your mother has told you that your sister has passed away," replied Dominic. "Yeah, but not how!" he yelled, attracting disgusted looks by a couple of hospital workers passing by. "Someone gave your sister bad drugs at the party," said Dominic, "Carlos, he needs to die!" replied Emanuele angrily, "I know you're upset son, but Carlos isn't the one responsible," "Well whoever did this to her needs to suffer!" "Don't you worry about that right now son... just trust me, they are. Tell your mother the funeral will be held tomorrow," said Dominic. Emanuele paused, closing his eyes for a moment, and sighed, "I don't know if she'll be ready by then. She's in the hospital" "What for?" "She took heroin after hearing that her daughter was dead" replied Emanuele, trying to hold back his emotion. "That selfish cu-! I'll push it back a day but if she's not there it will happen without her. I don't want the press catching wind of this" said Dominic angrily, "Okay, I'll make sure she's there" said Emanuele softly before saying goodbye and staring aimlessly at his phone after ending the call.

He could not believe the way that his father had reacted; it was as if he had no regard for his own family anymore. Emanuele returned to his mother and sat down beside her bed.

He was tired and stressed, as everything felt completely surreal; his sister was gone, his mother almost killed herself, and now his father was someone he no longer recognized. He sat in silence, feeling numb as he pondered upon these things, wondering if his decision to take over, had led to this destructive series of events.

Chapter 12: An Exit Strategy

On Tuesday the 9th of August 2016, Eva Mary Reyes was laid to rest by her parents. Emanuele stood with his father as the minister gave the funeral speech; he wore dark glasses to hide the sorrow in his eyes. Dominic stood next to him; the sun shining down on his stern face which hid the pain he also felt. They both stood to the side of the ceremony in their black suits, with Clay and another 10 of Dominic's armed men standing behind them. Friends and family sat on seats facing the coffin as the minister conducted the service in the cemetery garden. "Proverbs 3:5 tells us to Trust in the Lord with all thine heart and lean not unto thine own understanding. We know that Eva belongs to the Lord, and we can find peace in knowing that she has gone to be with Him. We do not understand why some are taken home before others, but we can trust in the one who gives us peace beyond understanding," said the minister. As soon as this was said, Maria began to cry uncontrollably in her wheelchair and had to be comforted by her mother and sister who had flown in from Mexico. When the service had finished Maria was taken home in a car with some of her family members, while the rest of the guests got up and started talking among themselves before slowly dispersing. A black limousine suddenly drove up to where the group was standing, and Dominic's men stood around him, hands on their weapons, ready to defend him. But then a man that they all recognized stepped out; the men disarmed and stood at ease, making a way for him to approach Dominic. The well-dressed man walked up to Dominic and shook his hand, "What are you doing here?" asked Dominic, "I just wanted to pay my respects and give my condolences," said the man.

Emanuele suddenly recalled seeing this man before, a few times on TV, and once in his father's building. "You didn't need to come down here Bill, but thanks. This is my son Emanuele," said Dominic, turning to his son. The man stretched out his hand, "Bill Chalmers, mayor of San Diego, sorry for your loss," he said. Emanuele forced a smile and shook his hand, "Thanks" he replied, before the mayor turned his attention back to his father. "Well, I won't take up any more of your time, I'll speak to you next week Dominic," said Mayor Chalmers. Then he walked back and got into the limousine as his bodyguard opened the door for him. "How do you know the mayor?" asked Emanuele curiously, "He works for us" replied Dominic casually, before patting Emanuele on the back. Then they both walked to the armored Rolls Royce and sat down together in the back. Despite the feeling of melancholy of that day, Emanuele was impressed that someone as high ranking as the mayor worked for his father, and he wondered who else his father was connected to. "How many politicians are on the payroll?" he asked, brazenly. Up to that point, Dominic had never divulged to his son on the particulars of government officials under his control, but Emanuele had also never asked. He looked at his son curiously, "I suppose now is as good a time as any to tell you... Apart from the mayor, the governor of California, representatives in the house, both Democrat and GOP, all from the state of California. We also have various people in the agencies, detectives in the SDPD, federal agents, and a lot more administrative people... I'll sit down and show you the ledger one night, but not tonight... tonight we remember your sister" replied Dominic. Emanuele just nodded and looked straight ahead; he was dumbfounded by how well connected his father was to the levers of government. Now he understood why their organization was untouchable, and this brief conversation now reinforced his belief that there was absolutely no way he could get out of the life. This newfound understanding also came with emotional pain as he looked

out the window on the drive home. Along with the grave remorse he felt for failing to protect his sister, he now felt void of all hope of being with the only girl he loved. It had been made clear, with no reason to stay in the US, Leila would return to Hong Kong. Later that night at the penthouse, Dominic sat alone in his office drinking, with a glass and bottle of scotch in front of him on his desk. While some of his men had prostitutes with them in the front lounge room, drinking booze and being rowdy. He got up angrily and stormed out to the front room, "Keep it down, I can't hear myself think!!" he yelled at them. "Sorry boss, sorry we'll keep it down" said one of them apologetically, before a couple of the others took their escorts to the bedrooms. He then went back to his office, shut the door, locking it behind him and returned to his glass of scotch; he sculled it down and then poured himself another. But before drinking it he sighed, opening the bottom draw on his desk to pull out an old picture. It was of him, Emanuele and Eva building a sandcastle together when she was just 4 years old. He started to tear up as he looked at it; he had never cried at a loss of a life, not even his own parents, and yet, he now began to as he mourned the death of his only daughter. After a minute passed, he wiped his eyes and placed the picture back in the draw, and then he sculled his scotch; this was the extent of his mourning. He picked up his phone and dialed a number, "Finish it" he said to the torture expert on the other end of the line before ending the call. Then he grabbed a bag of cocaine, walked out to the front room, and received praise from the group of twelve still there, before he started snorting copious amounts of powder with them.

For the next few days Emanuele's Aunt Rose and grandmother stayed with them to look after Maria before returning home to Mexico. After the overdose, Maria had become sick from all the stress and was bed ridden for the rest of the week, so Emanuele stayed home from university to help his mom in any way that he could.

The following Monday he decided to return to university and salvage what was left of his degree. But he struggled, as thoughts and emotions ran wild, it was impossible to retain subject information. When the first lecture had finished, he decided to go and look for Samuel in their usual spot, he figured he could use a friend to talk to. But as he walked through the hallway, he noticed Glen and one of the other footballers leaning over a girl that he had not seen before. He tried to ignore them as he walked past on his way to the cafeteria, but suddenly, Glen picked up the girl and threw her over his shoulder as he and his friend started laughing. The girl screamed as she protested to be put down, although they were being playful, Emanuele didn't know this, and he instantly had flashbacks of the Rugby players attacking Eva. With the emotion of her death being so fresh, he flipped into a blind rage, "LET HER GO!!" he yelled. Glen noticed him and dropped the girl who was smiling playfully but had now become worried when Emanuele yelled at them. His fight or flight instincts had taken over and with the girl now out of the way Emanuele ran and lunge kicked Glen in the chest with both legs, smashing him through a big pane of glass and into the garden outside. Glen's friend grabbed Emanuele and wrestled him on the ground; Emanuele head butted him in the face breaking his nose, then got up and started punching him, before being launched into the opposite wall by Glen who had cuts up his arms from trying to stop himself from falling through the glass. The big footballer ran at Emanuele to shoulder charge him into the wall, but Emanuele threw his elbow straight out like a spear; it connected with Glen's top lip, completely busting it, and his front teeth were knocked out. Glen grabbed his lip as blood started pissing out, and then Emanuele took him to the ground getting him in an arm bar. But just as he was about to break the big footballer's arm, security guards swarmed and pulled Emanuele off him, then they tried to hold onto him until the police arrived. When Emanuele had calmed down, he realized the trouble he could

potentially be in; he socked one of the guards in the throat, managing to escape from their grasp; then he sprinted past some teachers who were too afraid to stop him. He ran outside to the carpark, then got into his car and sped home.

The following morning, Emanuele knowingly answered his front door where two police officers stood. They informed him that he had to take a ride with them to the station, where he would be confronted by Glen's parents and their lawyer, because they wanted to press charges. Emanuele obliged, grabbed his phone and keys, then locked the front door before being escorted into the back of the police car. It was his first time being arrested, and although it was the lowest point of his young life, it paled in comparison to everything he had gone through in those past few weeks. When the two officers escorted Emanuele into the station, Glen sat on one side of a table inside the office room, all busted up with stitches in his lip; his father and lawyer sat either side of him at the table. As they saw Emanuele approaching through the office window Glen's father asked his son if it was worth pressing charges, "Yeah, trust me, this pricks family is loaded," said Glen. Emanuele now handcuffed, was led into a separate room by two police officers. Glen's lawyer then entered the room and offered to make a deal for restitution, but Emanuele wasn't interested in any sort of deal, he adamantly shook his head as the lawyer blasted off a series of threats. In the office room Glen's phone started ringing so he silenced it, but it kept ringing, and he was getting irritated, so he took the call. "What do you want!?" he asked, with a muffled lisp from his busted lip, "Its Colby, listen I heard what happened yesterday at the university. Whatever you do, don't go after the kid that attacked you" he said. "And why the hell not?" asked Glen; "I just found out from a friend he's connected, big time!" replied Colby, "He's just another little shit who might have a few gangster friends, I'm not worried" said Glen, struggling to speak with his swollen lip and missing teeth.

“Trust me it’s not just some friends, he is connected everywhere, if you do this your life will be in danger. Make peace with this kid” pleaded Colby. “Hold up, you better repeat this to my old man” said Glen handing the phone to his father, “What?” he asked angrily, “I was just telling Glen you cannot go after this kid, he is connected” “Who the hell is this?” asked Glens’ father, “I’m a friend of your son’s I work security at the university,” replied Colby. “Yeah, so what about this kid then?” “He’s connected!” yelled Colby, bluntly. “Pfft, what to the mafia?” asked Glen’s dad sarcastically, “Yes! But not just the mafia, to the drug cartels as well, his family is high up. I don’t know how high up, I just know they are!” explained Colby, straining his voice. Glen’s father quickly ended the call looking extremely worried, “We’re not pressing charges” he said as he stood straight up, “What?!” asked Glen, looking dumbfounded with his mouth open. His father then walked out of the office and went to speak to one of the police officers, “Could you please ask my lawyer to come out... right now” he said. The officer nodded, and then knocked on the door to the room Emanuele was held in, “Your client wants to see you” he said. “We’re not pressing charges” said Glen’s father as his lawyer stepped out, “What the hell do you mean?” asked the lawyer, “We’re not pressing charges, alright!” he replied, loud enough so that the police in the room could hear. Then Glen and his father walked straight out of the station, “Just give me a moment please” said their lawyer to one of the officers before he ran after them. They had a shouting match outside the front of the station before the lawyer stuck his head back inside, “They’re not pressing charges” he conceded, before walking back out. One of the police officers walked into the room Emanuele was in and took the handcuffs off him, “You’re free to go kid, somethings got them spooked” said the senior officer, a little puzzled. “Finally,” said Emanuele as he got up and went outside to the parking lot to call a ride. Glen’s father and lawyer were still arguing as he stepped out of the station, and Glen had a

concerned look on his face as he noticed Emanuele standing there as a free man. Emanuele assumed they must have received a threat from the organization, as he couldn't think of any other explanation. When he returned home, he checked on his mom, who was watching TV from bed and drinking OJ with vodka. "Hi mom, are you feeling, okay?" he asked as he entered her room, "Fine" she replied, while pouring more vodka into her glass. "The doctor said you shouldn't drink while you recover mom" said Emanuele sympathetically, "I'm mourning" she replied bluntly, as she turned up the sound of the TV with the remote, "Well let me know if you need anything... I love you mom" he said, before he went up to his room. He lay on his bed and stared up at the ceiling; tears started welling up in his eyes as he thought about his sister. Emanuele struggled with the thought of becoming the leader of an organization whose products killed his sister, and almost took his mom. He spent the next day feeling deep sorrow and stayed in his room, while only going to check on his mom once at around lunch time. She was drunk and requested that Emanuele get her more vodka from the cabinet; he wanted to decline but knew she would just get it herself, and if he tried to hide it, she would drive drunk to the store. He reluctantly took in a new bottle of vodka and a jug of OJ for his mother and then left her to drown her sorrows before returning to his own bedroom. With plenty of vodka now in the kitchen, Emanuele was tempted to do the same, but instead just closed his eyes as he lay on his bed. He was so exhausted from the stress and heartbreak experienced the past month that he just lay there, with everything weighing on him heavily, he fell asleep early that night. He awoke the next day at 5am with a vivid dream still in his mind; the Regal man had appeared, "It's time... leave the life and save your family" he said. Emanuele felt extremely frustrated at this dream, "My family is falling apart!!" he yelled. But what he didn't yet understand is that the Regal man, was not only talking about those left, but also his future generations.

Emanuele's stomach grumbled, which was just enough excuse to briefly take his mind off the dream. He quickly jumped out of bed and eagerly went downstairs to the kitchen, to make himself a feast; he had become undernourished the past two weeks, and now his body was letting him know. It was a somber feeling as he cooked up some bacon, eggs, sausages and toast for him and his mom; he almost expected to see Eva as he glanced at the stairs, but then hung his head in shame, knowing she was gone. After he had finished cooking, he took a plate into his mom's room on a tray and left it on her bedside table; he tapped her on the shoulder, "Mom, breakfast is there when you want it" he said quietly, "Ok honey" she replied drowsily, before rolling over and going back to sleep. Emanuele went back out to the kitchen and ate his breakfast alone, trying to distract himself from the dream with videos on his phone. Then he went up to his bedroom, and as he sat on his bed, he lost a mental battle to his feelings of anguish; he knew he had to try and find the Regal man. Emanuele returned to the place where he had his encounter with the Regal man; the area was eerily quiet again as he stood there looking at the well-maintained Catholic church building. "If you can hear me, I'm here. I need your help" he said, looking around for the Regal man, but there was no answer. He waited there for twelve minutes and sat down on the lawn next to the entrance, looking across the road at the few people that passed in the park, but none of them were the Regal man. He looked at his wristwatch and wondered how long he should wait, "This is bullshit" he said in frustration as he got up and dusted himself off. "Hello Emanuele" said the Regal man, as Emanuele felt a sense of fear and awe, now in his presence. Tears began to stream from Emanuele's eyes, "My sister..." he said, "She's with peace now" replied the Regal man, "I need your help; I don't know what it means... it's all my fault" said Emanuele as he sobbed. The Regal man smiled at him with compassion in his eyes, "Give me your hands, and feel the power of Creator" he said, "Are you Creator?" asked

Emanuele sheepishly. "No! I am simply a messenger, now give me your hands," replied the Regal man. Emanuele placed his hands in front of him, palms facing up, and the Regal man grabbed Emanuele's hands and squeezed them tightly. Suddenly, Emanuele went into an indescribable trance, and in it he saw his future life play out in warp speed before his mind's eye. It was truly captivating and amazing, and he couldn't believe how he had come to the greatest possible outcome he could truly hope for. Less than eight seconds later the Regal man released his hands, and Emanuele dropped to the ground panting heavily, and then laughing joyfully at what he had just witnessed. "Creator wanted to show you that, and now I must leave, you will not see me again" said the Regal man, and with that he disappeared as a beam of light flashed past Emanuele's eyes. As he got to his feet, he instantly felt a surge of energy within himself that he had never felt before. He left the church feeling great, but it was short lived, as suddenly his phone began to ring. It was Clay, "Hey E-man you better get over here, your mom is tearing your dad a new one, hurry!" he said, "I'm on my way" replied Emanuele, as he quickly got into his car. Then he sped over to the penthouse, with the sudden realization that the Regal man hadn't shown him the events that led to his perfect future. When he arrived at the top floor and stepped out of the elevator, he could hear his parents shouting; Jerry had a funny look on his face as he stood there holding the front door open. When Emanuele walked through to the second living area which was adjacent to the dining, he saw Clay sitting at the table with two girls in skimpy clothing, while Maria was standing in front of Dominic who was seated on a lounge chair, with lines of coke on the coffee table in front of him. "Get her the fuck out of here!!" yelled Dominic; Emanuele immediately knew both his father and mother were intoxicated, and that they weren't handling Eva's death as well as they had tried to portray.

He walked over to his mom and grabbed her arm, "See Emanuele this is why your father left me, so he could snort coke with whores!!" yelled Maria. "C'mon mom" he said, trying to calm her down to take her home; knowing things could turn ugly at any moment. Maria yanked her arm away from Emanuele, then went and stood in Dominic's face as she began verbally abusing him. "You piece of shit!! It's your fault my daughter's dead!! I will be childless if you keep sending our son on these fucking errands of yours!!!" she screamed. Just then, Dominic roared and grabbed Maria, throwing her over the coffee table, then he threw it against the wall. Cocaine and glass flew all over the carpet as it smashed. Emanuele did not think before leaping and throwing a punch at his father, which knocked him back onto the floor. Emanuele was in shock, he had never witnessed domestic violence between his parents, and had never, ever, gotten physical with his father. Dominic jumped back to his feet and pulled out his handgun, pressing it to his son's head. "How dare you?! I'm the fucking BOSS!!!" he yelled in Emanuele's face. Clay was next to them at this stage and gently placed his hand on Dominic's shoulder to try and calm him down. "You're supposed to be my dad" replied Emanuele, emotionally, as he looked into his father's eyes. Dominic put his gun down, "Get out, all of you!!" he yelled as he walked into his bedroom and the two girls who were seated with Clay got up and rushed out, looking terrified. Emanuele helped his mom to her feet, and Maria clutched her wrist as they left the penthouse; she had sprained it upon being thrown to the floor. Emanuele was furious on the drive home, although he knew he should have never reacted that way, he was glad he had, because it revealed the true character of his father. If his own father could pull a gun on him, then staying within the organization would be detrimental to his survival. Now he fully grasped the meaning of 'Leave the life and save your family' as he clenched the steering wheel of the Range Rover tightly. "Mom, I'm out of this life, I don't want anything to do with

him anymore, not after everything that has happened!" he said, adamantly, "You can't Emanuele your father will never let you out" replied Maria hopelessly; "Creator will get me out" said Emanuele, with a serious look on his face as he continued driving. Maria just looked over at her son suspiciously, she didn't know what he meant, but was worried by his remarks. Emanuele dedicated the next 2 days to careful planning inside of his room; on the second day he began praying as if he was in church, but soon realized it wasn't working. It hadn't been that type of prayer that had revealed the Regal man, so Emanuele began talking frankly, as if the Regal man was there in the room. But after sitting there in silence, he felt stupid, as if he was talking to himself, aimlessly. So, he went to sleep, but that night he had another dream. In the dream, Creator revealed to him what he had to do, in order to leave the life, he was groomed, but not destined for. The next morning after receiving an apology message from his father, nothing had changed his mind, so he shared with his mom what he was going to do. "If you do this your father will try to kill you!" she said, "I know, but I trust God" replied Emanuele, knowing his mom wouldn't understand who 'Creator' referred to.

He then packed a bag with some clothes, his laptop, and his phone. He opened the bottom drawer of his side table and pulled out \$10,000 in cash, before stuffing it into his bag. He noticed his pistol and picked it up to put in his bag, but he consciously stopped himself as he looked at it, 'I need to stick to the Creator's plan' he thought to himself before putting it back in the drawer. Then he grabbed his bag, walked past the kitchen, to the dining room where Maria was sitting at the large table with a glass of wine and a bottle, looking depressed. "Mom, I must go now, but I'll be back for you when it's safe. Only pack essentials, I'll make sure we have money once we're safe," said Emanuele. "Can't you at least tell me where you'll be staying?" Maria pleaded, "It's safer if you don't know" he replied.

Then he grabbed the glass out of his mom's hand, "Please, I'm begging you... don't take anything while I'm gone" he said in a serious tone. She nodded with tears running down her cheeks as Emanuele hugged her; she squeezed him tightly, trying not to let him go, until he kissed her on the forehead and removed her arms. He grabbed his bag, then went and got into his Range Rover, before driving out of the driveway. He looked back at the large Spanish style mansion he had called home all those years, now with the understanding that he would never return the same man. Emanuele drove around for a while, replaying the plan over again in his mind before pulling into a used car dealership on El Cajon boulevard. It was a small-time operation, which is exactly what Emanuele was looking for. He wanted to make sure he didn't sell back into a dealership held inside his father's business trust, that could tip him off. He parked the Range Rover outside the small office building and then walked inside. A burley salesman in a cheap suit came over to him, "Can I help you, young fella?" he asked, "Yeah you can; the sign says cash for cars" replied Emanuele; the salesman rolled his eyes, "What do ya got?" he asked. "See that Range Rover out there, I want to swap that for something older, plus cash" replied Emanuele. Immediately the salesman perked up, "Ok, ok, what did you have in mind?" he asked, while joining Emanuele on the lot. "Hmmm, let me see" said Emanuele as he looked around at the 13 cars parked out front. "How about that Ford SUV plus 20K for the Range Rover?" "Stop bustin' my balls kid, what do you really want?" asked the salesman, appearing slightly irritated at the 'too good to be true' offer. "Hey that's the deal" replied Emanuele insistently, "C'mon what's wrong with the Rover?" asked the burly salesman becoming increasingly agitated. Emanuele looked him dead in the eyes, "Perfect service history, nothing's wrong with it, I'm trying to make someone's day, take it for a test drive" replied Emanuele, handing him the keys. Suddenly, the man's face lit up, "You got a deal kid!" he said, excitedly shaking

Emanuele's hand, "This thing's gonna be my baby, I've always wanted one" the burly salesman continued, with a cheesy grin. Emanuele followed the ecstatic man back inside and filled out the appropriate paperwork, while a mechanic took a quick look over the Range Rover. After the deal was done, Emanuele walked outside and got into the black 2005 Ford Explorer that smelled of cheap air freshener trying to cover up a musty odor. Surprisingly, the engine turned over first try and Emanuele drove to the nearest regional bank to open a new account that his father couldn't touch.

Upon receiving his new account information, Emanuele drove to a coffee shop down the road, grabbed a coffee, then opened his laptop on one of the small plastic tables and connected to the Wi-Fi. He opened his two trading accounts and began market selling all his shares; he wasn't worried about price slippage; he knew he had to move quickly. After moving everything into cash, he then deposited his combined balances of \$2,215,903.53 into his old bank account, before he could wire the balance to his new one.

Almost immediately his phone started ringing; it was one of the trading companies, 'verifying' what he was doing.

Emanuele was walked through some security measures to show that it was him making the withdrawal and that it was his bank account. Once the security checks for his trading accounts had finished, he called the gold company that was holding his bullion. Emanuele gave them his name, date of birth, address, and passcode to verify his identity, "How can I help you Mr Reyes?" asked the manager, "I want to know if I can sell you back my gold?" "Sure! Let me just check your account" replied the manager as he checked his computer; "Okay you currently have 49 kilos of gold bullion, so with a current spot price of \$1330... the total amount is \$2,298,240, but I'll need you to confirm to lock in that price, the markets have been a bit volatile this week," he continued.

Emanuele knew the vault also held some of his father's bullion, so he tried to push for a remote transfer, "Yeah, sure no problem, I'll just have to give you my new bank details" he said. "Unfortunately, you'll have to come in if you want the funds transferred into an account that isn't on file with us. But don't worry I'll sort it all out for you right away" "Okay I'll be there soon" he agreed, "Great, see you soon Mr Reyes!" replied the manager excitedly before Emanuele ended the call. He knew going to the bullion facility was risky, but he wasn't about to leave 2 million dollars' worth of bullion sitting there, especially knowing he'd soon be cut off from the organization's wealth. Now he just had his daily banking account to take care of, and this account, he knew he would surely lose, with what he was planning to do. So, in an effort to use up the available funds, he searched for a property in Hong Kong to purchase. After finding a small 2-bedroom apartment for \$1.53 million through an online real estate firm, he then contacted the agent and wired the funds to an escrow account. Immediately after that, he booked 3 plane tickets from LAX to Hong Kong, then he shut his laptop down, got into his old car and drove to the bank. After arriving to the closest branch, he withdrew the leftover balance of \$22,301.30 in cash and coins, and then closed the account. Emanuele then promptly left to drive to the bullion facility, and upon his arrival in the old Explorer, he experienced what middle class felt like, entering the facility carpark, being judged with raised eyebrows. Standing out the front, he buzzed the door to be let inside, and after telling them who he was, the security guard who initially ignored him, was told to let him in. "Mr Reyes, come straight through" said the manager, who now welcomed him inside. Emanuele walked through and sat down on a plush chair in a back room by the vault, "Now I just wanted to clarify that you want to sell back all of your gold bullion to us, is that right?" "That's right," he replied. Then the manager showed Emanuele the paperwork for his new banking credentials, and the full amount he would be receiving upon

transfer, which was \$2,298,240 minus a few charges that amounted to \$205.50. "Did you want to come back to the vault and observe the gold before signing?" asked the manager, "No that's okay, I'm well aware of my holdings" replied Emanuele, then he filled in his new bank details and signed in the appropriate places. "The funds will be in your account within 5 business days," "Great, thanks" replied Emanuele, as he got up and was seen out by the manager. An associate who was now standing next to the manager, noticed Emanuele get into his older model Ford Explorer, "Can you believe that guy just sold us back 2 million in gold and that's what he drives?" asked the associate, "Driving a supercar to a vault makes you the perfect target for extortion" replied the manager before walking back to his office, as the associate just stood there with a dumb look on his face. Emanuele drove towards his university as he desperately wanted to see Leila and explain to her what he was about to do. He looked at the time on his phone, it was 12:43pm; the time she would be having lunch. He quickly pulled up her number on his phone and made the call, but it rang out. "C' mon please pick up" he said to himself as he tried calling again. He rang 5 times and then she picked up, "Hey Emanuele I can't really talk right now" she said, "I have something extremely important to tell you, when can we talk?" he asked, Leila sighed, "I'll be finished at 2" "I'll wait for you in the car park, okay?" "Okay" she replied unenthusiastically and then hung up.

Emanuele pulled up in a parking space with shade by a few trees and wound down his windows, while he sat there waiting for Leila. Emanuele felt a little nervous, but excited to tell Leila his plans, so her hour class seemed to drag on a lot longer than normal. Just as he was becoming tired, suddenly, a large group of people exited the buildings, he spotted Leila behind some of them, and he got out of the car smiling as looked upon her. He started walking in her direction, but stopped, as her cousin Mike began walking towards her.

“You ready to go?” he asked her, “I’m actually going to go with Emanuele, he needs to talk to me” “I thought it was over between you two” replied Mike, “It is, but I still care about him” she replied. Mike nodded at Emanuele, as he now approached them; without saying anything he returned to his car before driving off. “Hey” said Emanuele with an affectionate smile towards her, “Hey” she replied, curiously. Emanuele then walked her over to his Ford Explorer, “This seems a bit low key for you” she said as she looked at it, “Yeah it’s a downgrade, but there’s a reason for it” he replied, as they both got into the SUV. Emanuele put the windows up and cranked the air conditioning, “It’s really good to see you” he said, “It’s really good to see you too” conceded Leila, as she couldn’t help but let her guard down. “Are you hungry?” he asked, “No, I’m okay” “Okay, do you mind if we go somewhere to talk, or should we just talk here?” he asked. Leila shrugged her shoulders, “We can go somewhere” she replied, unaware of what he wanted to talk about. So, Emanuele pulled out of the carpark and drove them to a small shopping mall which was just down the road. They walked to a café where Emanuele tried to buy them both fruit smoothies, but Leila insisted that she pay for herself. They sat down and Emanuele started happily sipping on his smoothie, “How was your day?” he asked as if nothing was going on. “Fine, what did you want to talk about?” asked Leila, wanting to get right to the point. Emanuele put his drink down, wiped his mouth with a napkin, and leaned in, “Leila, I’m out” he said with a big grin, “What do you mean?” she asked, slightly puzzled. “I’m not going to work for my father anymore” “Really?” she asked excitedly, but then visibly composed herself from becoming too hopeful, so that Emanuele could explain himself. “Yes completely, I’m done with that life” he said, “What about your father, he won’t just let you out will he?” she asked concerned. “Leila this might sound crazy, but do you believe in a higher power?” “Yeah, I do actually but what does that have to do with anything?” she asked. “Creator...

um, God, has revealed a plan to me on how I get out” replied Emanuele, “How?” she asked, looking skeptical. “He showed me in a dream exactly what I need to do, and when it’s all over I’m moving to Hong Kong to be with you” he said. Leila’s eyes suddenly widened; she couldn’t believe what she was hearing. It was eerie, as the night before, she herself, had dreamed that they would go to Hong Kong together, but had instantly dismissed it as wishful thinking. “Emanuele don’t play with my heart like this” pleaded Leila, as she started to become emotional, “I’m not Leila, I love you” he said convincingly, as he gently touched her cheek. Tears started flowing down her face, “I love you too” she whispered; Emanuele stood up and gave her a hug. He held her in his arms for a minute while she cried quietly, “I have been dreaming about you the past 3 nights and crying every time I wake up” she said, while sobbing. Emanuele felt butterflies as he knew the only girl he’d ever loved was back in his life, and now he was determined to never allow anything to separate them again. When Leila had composed herself, they sat back down, and Emanuele explained his plan to her. “That’s why I think you should leave for Hong Kong tonight” he said, “I will... because my father would never let me go back if he knew this” she replied in agreement, “Okay I’ll take you there tonight, do you have a passport?” “Yes, I applied for a new one without his knowing... he took my other one from me in case I ever ran away” “Will your father come after you if you do this?” asked Emanuele, concerned, “No, he can’t legally enter Hong Kong because of his past, which is why my mother lives there” explained Leila. “Okay, I’ll take you to go get what you need from your house, and then we’ll go to the airport” “I can’t get a bag though, my aunt and cousin will get suspicious, and they’ll tell my father” “Okay forget the bag... Just get the passport, put it in your purse and say you’re going out to dinner. I’ve just got to quickly make a call” replied Emanuele, then he pulled his phone out and called Samuel.

“Hey Samuel, would it be okay if I stayed on your couch tonight, I’m just going through some stuff at home” he asked. “How could I say no, you’ve done a lot for me man” replied Samuel, pleased to hear from his friend who’d been MIA. Then he hung up, disposed of his smoothie, and took Leila to her house to get the passport. When they arrived, Emanuele parked on the road instead of in her driveway, and then Leila got out and made the short walk past a few houses to grab her things. Although it seemed unnecessary, Emanuele didn’t want to arouse any suspicions pulling up in an old car after frequently going there in exotic sports cars. As Leila entered her house, her aunty stood at the entrance looking suspicious, “You shouldn’t let that boy affect your studies, your father won’t be pleased” she said in Mandarin. “It’s okay, we’re just friends now... I’m just going out with him to get something to eat, I won’t be long” she replied, before trying to act casual as she quickly went to her room. Once inside her room, with the door closed and locked behind her, Leila opened her wardrobe and began going through the shoeboxes, to find the passport that she had hidden. After stressfully going through four boxes, she breathed a sigh of relief as she found it in the fifth. She quickly took it out and placed it in her purse, then took off what she was wearing and got into some comfortable clothing for the flight. After tidying up the shoeboxes, she nervously left her room and then walked to the front door, but was stopped by her aunty again, “What? You’re going out wearing that?” she asked in Mandarin, looking confused. “Um, yes aunty, like I said, we’re just friends now” said Leila, laughing nervously as she exited the house. With only her handbag, and a few personal belongings, Leila ran down her street and then got into Emanuele’s Ford Explorer. “We better go, my aunty was looking hella suspicious” she said, and so Emanuele quickly started the car up and sped off, neither of them noticing that Mike had been watching from the window suspiciously.

Emanuele stopped for gas briefly on the way to the airport; he wore a baseball cap a little low on his face, out of slight paranoia as he walked inside to pay. Although the plan had barely begun, he knew how powerful the organization was, and that they had eyes everywhere. After arriving at the airport, he parked in the short-term carpark, then grabbed five thousand dollars from his bag and handed it to Leila. "Take this on the trip with you" he said, "It's okay, my mom will look after me" "It's a long flight, you might need some things on your stopover in London" he said, before kissing her on the forehead. Then they both stepped out of the car, hugged again, and kissed passionately, before they walked inside the terminal. Emanuele held Leila's hand, leading her over to the service desk, "Hi, I called earlier today and purchased a ticket for my girlfriend under the name Emanuele Reyes" he said, "Okay, one moment please" replied the service desk attendant as she checked her computer. Leila looked at him a little stunned, "When did you buy me a ticket, and how did you know I would go?" she asked, smiling. Emanuele smiled back, "I don't know how, but I just knew" he replied. "I have a first-class ticket with British Airways leaving at 8:15pm, could I please have your passport miss?" said the lady, "Oh yes," replied Leila going into her purse and then presenting it to the lady, "Thank you, I'll just change those details right now, for you" she said, before going back to her computer and typing away. Once it was done, she printed the ticket and handed it back, along with the passport and a big grin, "Have a lovely flight Ms. Zhang" she said. Then Leila and Emanuele left the counter and walked together to the lounge area to wait for her flight. Later that evening, the call came, "Calling all passengers on flight 371, please proceed to gate 18" came over the terminal speakers, and now Emanuele's plan had officially been set into motion. It was a bittersweet feeling as Leila and Emanuele got up together and walked to the gate where a large group of people had started lining up 45 minutes early, to board the flight.

Emanuele could see the sadness in Leila's eyes as they stood there holding each other, "I don't want to leave you" she said, fighting to hold the tears back. "I'll be with you again before you know it" replied Emanuele with a forced smile, also trying to hold himself back from becoming emotional. "Please don't get hurt" she urged him, "Don't worry, I finally know what I must do" "I love you" said Leila as she wrapped her arms around him, now unable to contain herself from crying, "I love you too" he replied. They kissed and then Leila quickly wiped her eyes, picked up her handbag and walked over to have her ticket scanned. She looked back at Emanuele for the last time and waved as she still had tears rolling down her cheeks; Emanuele waved back and then Leila turned to board her flight and disappeared through the gate. Emanuele left the airport and walked back towards his car; he immediately felt lovesick and pleaded quietly with Creator, to let him be with her again.

As Emanuele drove out of the airport, his sadness turned into determination. He was not going to let anything stop him from what he had to do; leave the life that had been prepared for him since birth. A life that he knew would consist of more killing and more lives ruined by drugs. He had lost his sister, and he wasn't going to let her death be in vain; he had to save his mother and himself from the same fate and escape the clutches of his father. Emanuele knew that the only way he could escape his father was to first, go directly against him. He had to send the organization into disrepair, and the only person with the skillset to help him, whom he had to now completely trust, was Samuel. Emanuele was not oblivious to the danger this plan placed on his life; he understood that what he was about to do would cause his father's Empire to come after him. Despite this, he found steadfast assurance in knowing that Creator, an entity who held time, space, and matter together, was with him. Emanuele drove past a phone repair store which prompted him to the realization that his phone's movements could be tracked.

So, he drove in, and got out to purchase a cheap prepaid phone with a new sim card. After obtaining the new phone, he walked out of the shop and quickly took down a few contacts that he needed from his smart phone. Then he snapped the old sim and threw it in the trash. Just as he was about to throw his expensive smart phone away, a young homeless boy who was seated nearby asked if he could have it. Emanuele smiled, "sure" he said as he gave the phone to the boy, along with \$500 in cash. The young boy's face lit up, "Thanks man" he said before turning on the phone, jumping off the seat and walking inside the phone repair shop; then Emanuele promptly left the area.

When he arrived at Samuel's house, he parked and messaged to let him know that it was him sitting in the old Ford Explorer out the front. Samuel turned the front porch light on and opened the door as Emanuele locked the car and made his way to the porch. "What's with the bucket?" asked Samuel, referring to his car, "It's not a bucket" "It is for you" "I'll tell you later man, is your mom cool with me staying here?" asked Emanuele. "Yeah, she doesn't care, do you mom?" asked Samuel, as his mom sat on the couch, watching TV, right next to the front door. "Of course not, make yourself comfortable" replied Loretta, warmly, before Emanuele walked inside. "Thanks Mrs..." replied Emanuele, pausing as he was unsure what to call her. "Just call me Loretta, honey... Samuel did you make up a bed for your friend?" she asked, "Yes, mom" replied Samuel, sarcastically rolling his eyes. Then he led Emanuele out back to his computer lab, where he had set up the fold out bed with a blanket and pillow. Emanuele threw his bag on the floor as he stepped inside, "Thanks for this man, really appreciate it" he said. "So... what's wrong with your house?" asked Samuel. Emanuele looked at him with a serious look, "I'm in a messed-up place and I need your help" he said. Samuel looked back at him blankly for a moment, "What do you mean?" he asked.

Emanuele sat down on the small bed feeling emotionally drained, "My sister... is dead" he said, "Woah, what?!!" yelled Samuel in disbelief, "I know we haven't spoken for a while bro, but that's because a lot of bad shit has been happening in my life lately," replied Emanuele. "Your sister... what happened to her?" asked Samuel, still shocked upon learning this. "She went to a party and was drugged" replied Emanuele, trying to hold back the tears. Samuel dropped onto the computer seat next to Emanuele and stared blankly, unsure as to what to say. "I am... so sorry Emanuele, when did it happen?" "Two weeks ago," replied Emanuele with a straight face, but Samuel could tell that he was still in mourning. He put his hand on Emanuele's shoulder, "You're going to get through this brother" he said. Emanuele sat there staring at the ground for a moment; then he looked at Samuel with a serious look, "I need your help" he said, "Anything you need" replied Samuel, assuring him. Emanuele took a deep breath, "I need you to leak documents on my father to the Feds" he said. Samuel paused for a moment then slowly got up out of his seat, before pacing back and forth inside the small computer lab. Samuel cleared his throat and then spoke, "Hell no! I can't man! Look I am really, really, sorry about your predicament but I'm not putting my life and not to mention my mom's life in danger. Why would you ever go against your father like that anyway? I'm sure even you won't be safe if you do this!" he yelled, before rambling on. Emanuele got up and grabbed his friend by the arms to calm him down, "Listen, you don't need to worry because God is with us on this," said Emanuele. Samuel started laughing out of fear, he couldn't believe his friend was going to go through with this, "God, what does God have to do with this, besides how could you possibly know what God wants?!" asked Samuel, emphatically trying to reason with his friend. "This will sound strange, trust me I know that I thought I was crazy until I was shown" replied Emanuele, "Yea-huh-hahah, okay, alright let's hear it" said Samuel, laughing nervously as he sat

back down in his seat. "He calls himself Creator, and he revealed everything to me in a dream. I saw you reacting this way, I saw you helping me, and I saw my father being put on death row" he replied. "You can't be serious, right? Right?!" "Look, you know me, I've never even investigated this stuff before, but I know that I must pull the documents from my father's computer and give them to you, then you're going to use a fake email account, and a fake IP for the DHCP on a VPN to send through the documents. But not before you set up something called a mix-net, and then you'll leak the documents on a dark web server surveilled by the CIA called eight chimps?" "Eightchan!" snapped Samuel, now looking seriously at his friend. "Right, then you must encrypt your local server in case my father's IT team gets a hold of your physical system" explained Emanuele, looking slightly confused as to what he had just tried to explain. "I thought you said you didn't know much about computers" replied Samuel bluntly. "I don't know about any of this shit! Did any of that make sense to you?" asked Emanuele, not understanding what Creator had revealed for him to say. "Yeah! ... Yeah! It made perfect sense!" replied Samuel, looking pissed; Emanuele shrugged his shoulders, with his hands raised, "Okay?" he said, as he really didn't understand what it meant. "Wait, you said in case your father takes my physical system! What the hell man!? I don't want to get killed! Does he know where I live?!" yelled Samuel, suddenly feeling extremely frightened. "Calm down bro! Listen I knew you would be upset, but trust me, he has no idea where you live and I'm driving that car outside to be safe... Look, can I use your desk? I want to show you something," said Emanuele. "Sure, have a seat, it's not like it makes a difference now anyway" said Samuel sarcastically, as he felt helpless.

Emanuele sat down next to Samuel at his desk, opened his email account and then opened an email with the subject, 'Unit 21 Floral court Hotel, Mid-levels West, Hong Kong, Purchase' which showed the property profile of the 2-bedroom, 1 bathroom apartment that had been purchased. "Yeah, that's a nice apartment Emanuele, is that where you're gonna go hide and leave me with all the shit to deal with in this plan of yours?!" asked Samuel in frustration. Emanuele shook his head and turned to his friend smiling, "Nope, this is where you and your mom are going to live, I also purchased two plane tickets for you and your mom to fly to Hong Kong on Sunday" he said. Samuel sat stunned as he tried to come to terms with what was going on, "Man I haven't finished my degree, and I've got everything set up here... but I suppose I could get a new set up once I'm over there. I guess I could do my degree online... I'll have to convince my mom that we're moving, but she won't know how I brought the property... I'll have to tell her that I've kept my online business from her and been saving up money to do this... she's never gonna believe me" said Samuel, talking to himself critically, as he looked back and forth. "Relax, just tell your mom you were saving up for a holiday for the two of you and tell her that you own the place when you get there" suggested Emanuele, "Yeah, alright I'll do this, but I'm not leaking those docs until Sunday!" replied Samuel, still looking panicked. "That's fair enough, but I'm going to need to stay here, it obviously won't be safe for me at home once we do this," said Emanuele. Samuel nodded and then exhaled calmly as he looked at the pictures of the property, "This place is pretty nice" he said. Emanuele laughed "I know it's not much bigger than your house now, but I thought it would at least get you started" he said. Samuel shook his head, "Thanks man" he replied, patting Emanuele on the shoulder, "You won't be seeing that brunette again though," said Emanuele. Samuel leaned back, "I'm gonna learn some Cantonese, I prefer Asian girls anyway" he said with a cheesy grin.

Emanuele laughed a little; he was glad he had Samuel to cheer him up, but even gladder that he had agreed to help. The two of them spoke for another hour about life in Hong Kong, but Emanuele didn't feel that it was the right time to share his own plans about moving there and spook his friend on the prospect of trouble following him. He knew his focus needed to remain solely on the dangerous mission ahead, and the steps taken to get there safely and be reunited with the love of his life.

After Emanuele began showing clear signs of fatigue, Samuel switched his computer system off and left to let his friend get some sleep. Emanuele lay on the small bed, in the tiny room, made from a shipping container, known as a computer lab. This place would now be his unfamiliar 'home' until he had completed the path of no return, to bring the Empire Down.

Chapter 13: Broken Ties & Betrayal

Creator had revealed Emanuele's true destiny to him full of hope and promise, without the death and destruction that came with the crime life; something which he had always struggled with in his heart. Emanuele briefly pondered this after he had woken up, but before he could ponder further, he jumped off the bed and switched the aircon off; the room had become freezing cold without heat from the PC's. He threw on jeans and a polo shirt, and for the first time felt uncomfortable without the ability to complete his morning preparation inside his luxury bathroom. He made his way into the main house where Loretta was putting on her shoes for work, just as Samuel walked out of the bathroom with a towel wrapped around him. "My feet are killing me from standing 12 hours a day" complained Loretta; Emanuele nudged Samuel, "Tell her she doesn't have to work anymore" he said quietly, "What now?" asked Samuel; Emanuele nodded. Then Samuel walked over to his mom who was just about ready to get up and go, "Hey mom, I have to tell you something" he said, "Tell me later, I have to get to work on time or my boss will make me scrub the damn floors again" she replied as she stood up, "Loretta, I think you'll be interested in what your son has to say," Emanuele added. Loretta just looked at Emanuele slightly confused and then sat back on the couch as the two of them stood there in front of her. "Mom, you don't need to work anymore" said Samuel, "What are you talking about Samuel I have bills to pay, and I'm working extra hours to pay for your education" she replied, feeling annoyed. "I know I should have told you, but you never would have believed me or helped pay for the computers if you knew it was for something other than study," said Samuel. "What are you trying to say?" asked Loretta, "Well... mom... I run an online business and we're rich now," replied Samuel, sheepishly.

“Pffft yeah right, and I’m the Queen of England!” yelled Loretta sarcastically as she stood up. “Mom! I’m taking you on a holiday Sunday! Call up your boss and quit!” “I will not forfeit the only income I have because of your delusional behavior!!” yelled Loretta. She had never been financially comfortable and grew up extremely poor; she couldn’t grasp the concept that anyone in her family could be doing better off than she was doing, considering her whole family back on the East coast was on welfare.

Emanuele saw that their argument was going nowhere so he returned to the computer lab and pulled \$20,000 out of his bag then walked back inside. While Samuel was still arguing with his mom, Emanuele walked up to Loretta and handed her the two thick wads of 100-dollar bills. The look on Loretta’s face was priceless as she fell back in her seat, “Your sons not lying Loretta,” he said. Then she jumped straight back up to her feet and slapped Samuel in the face, “Oww! What the hell?!” he yelled, before rubbing his cheek, “What is this? Drug money?!” she yelled. Emanuele laughed, “It’s my money, and no its money from a sale I made. But your son is telling you the truth you have a plane to catch Sunday, and a hotel booked for 3 weeks,” said Emanuele. Loretta sat back down again in disbelief as she looked at the 20K she had in her hands; it was the most money she’d ever held before. “What am I supposed to do with this?” she asked, “Whatever you like mom... but If you don’t tell your boss that you quit then I will!” insisted Samuel. Loretta didn’t say a word she just pulled her phone out and dialed her boss, “Yeah Alan, listen I won’t be coming in today. No, I’m not sick, I just don’t feel like coming in” said Loretta smiling at Emanuele and Samuel. “Oh really?! Well in that case I quit!!” she yelled and then hung up the phone, screaming with excitement. Samuel and Emanuele started clapping to show their support, “I’m proud of you mom, I was just joking about us having money, but good for you,” he said.

Emanuele broke out in laughter as Loretta's happy face turned from joy to shock, horror, then Emanuele playfully punched Samuel in the arm. "Ow! Okay, okay, we're rich, I'll go get my laptop" said Samuel, before going to his room to get dressed. Emanuele sat down in the seat facing Loretta, "I'm really happy for you, your son did what he had to, to give you a better life," he said. Loretta stood up as she became emotional and gave Emanuele a hug; "Thank you for being a good influence on my son, he's been a lot happier since you became his friend" she said. Emanuele just continued hugging her, "It's okay" he said, 'If she knew what I was really doing here she'd hate me' he thought to himself. Just then, Samuel came back out with his laptop in hand and sat next to his mom before showing her the account balances that were opened in a few tabs. Loretta gasped when she saw the balances, and then she punched her son hard in the arm, "OW!" "You told me we were rich; you didn't tell me we had millions you little shit!" exclaimed Loretta, excitedly. Emanuele laughed again, "Why does everyone keep hitting me? I did good, didn't I?" asked Samuel. "Of course, sweetheart momma loves you, but don't ever lie to me again" said Loretta before kissing her son on the cheek, "Arghh cut that out mom!" exclaimed Samuel. Emanuele's smile disappeared as he looked on feeling slight sorrow; it reminded him of the relationship he had with his mom before their family fell apart. "Well, I'm going to take a shower if that's alright?" asked Emanuele, "Of course honey towels are in the cupboard" said Loretta smiling. After Emanuele had showered and dressed, he walked back into the lounge room where Samuel and Loretta were waiting for him. "He won't mind mom," said Samuel, "Mind what?" asked Emanuele, "Honey do you mind taking us to the shopping mall? I just need to get a few things for our trip," said Loretta. "Ah... sure" said Emanuele hesitantly, as he forced a smile, "Great I'll get my things" said Loretta as she got up and went to her room. "Psst, bruh, what are we going to do about the plan?" asked Samuel quietly, but intensely. "I'll get what we

need while you shop; my father has a meeting every second Friday with his brokers and accountants” said Emanuele, “How you gonna get in?” asked Samuel, “Don’t worry, no one knows what’s coming” replied Emanuele. Then Samuel went to his laptop bag and pulled out a USB drive and handed it to Emanuele. “I’ve got one,” said Emanuele; Samuel shook his head “this one’s encrypted, and it will pull the data quicker” he said as he swapped USB drives with Emanuele. “What’s that for?” asked Loretta cheerfully walking into the lounge room, “Ah Emanuele needed some notes from class that he missed,” said Samuel. Loretta shrugged, “Alright, let’s go” she said happily. “Mom, I think you should leave some of the money at home,” said Samuel; “Now why would I want to do that when my son’s a millionaire” she said as she walked out the front door. “Because it’s Emanuele’s money” said Samuel, feeling slightly embarrassed that his mom had forgotten and was now outside in possession of the cash. Emanuele shook his head, “It’s all good, you can pay me back” he said. Samuel nodded, before they all walked out the front of the house, got into the Ford Explorer and Emanuele drove them over to Westfield Horton Plaza. When Emanuele pulled up out the front, Samuel stepped out of the car, “let’s go mom” he said. “Aren’t you coming Emanuele?” asked Loretta, “No I have to go and see my mom, just call me when you’re done, and I’ll pick you up” he replied, happily. Then Loretta got out of the front passenger seat and walked into the shopping mall with her son.

Emanuele quickly drove to his father’s building but parked a street back so that no one saw the Explorer. Walking through the main entrance of the hotel was an unusual feeling; he couldn’t remember the last time he hadn’t used the private elevator or parking facility. He made his way inconspicuously to the elevator and once he was inside there was an elderly couple who were on the 20th floor. Emanuele waited until they had gotten off and then swiped his key card which allowed him access to his father’s penthouse level.

Emanuele's heart began to race as he knew this would be the last time, he ever stepped foot inside his father's penthouse again. After exiting the elevator, he quickly walked to the front door of the penthouse, swiped his key card, and then attempted to open the door. But it wouldn't open; 'What the hell?' he thought to himself, with a worried look as he tried to swipe it again. But it still wouldn't let him inside, so he knocked on the door, but there was no answer. He put his ear close to the door and could hear a lady screaming loudly in pleasure, from the inside. Upon hearing this he began thumping harder on the door. Suddenly, the noise from inside stopped, "Oh shit!" yelled a man in a deep voice. Emanuele couldn't figure out who it was, and so he kept thumping until they answered. Suddenly the door opened; it was Jerry the doorman and he only had his boxers and socks on. "Emanuele, your dad isn't here, right?" asked Jerry, concerned with perspiration on his forehead, as he tried to hide the tent pole in his boxers. Emanuele started cracking up laughing; he had never seen this side of Jerry before, "Not by the looks of it" he replied, now feeling relieved. It was clear to Emanuele that Jerry was just getting some nooky while the boss had stepped out. Just then, a lady wearing a fitted silk dress, holding her heels slipped past Jerry; she was a tall, Eastern European brunette with short hair and had very satisfying curves to the eye. "Bye Jerry, call me sometime" she said in her sexy voice, "Bye beautiful" replied Jerry in his deep bellowing voice. They both waited for her to enter the elevator; when she stepped in and the doors closed, both Emanuele and Jerry were at ease. Emanuele put his hand up, and gave Jerry a fist bump, "She is fine as hell Jerry, where did you meet her?" he asked. "Dunkin' Donuts" replied Jerry, smiling casually, "You're the man, and don't worry I won't tell my father you were having sex on his lounge" said Emanuele, chuckling as he walked inside. "Thanks, I'm gonna take a shower, your father will be back shortly," said Jerry, "Uh hey, did the locks get changed?" asked Emanuele, "Yeah,

I'll have your new key card sent to the house" replied Jerry before going to the bathroom. Emanuele smiled as Jerry walked through the hallway and into the bathroom, then his pleasant facade turned serious; he rushed into his father's office, closing, and locking the door behind him. He sat down at Dominic's desk and moved the mouse which lit up the screen. Then he plugged in the USB drive and opened documents; his eyes quickly scanned through them, and he opened some random files, but he couldn't find the incriminating stuff. He kept looking and looking but all he could find was information pertaining to Dominic's legitimate businesses. He began stressing as the thought of an alternative computer his father had hidden came to mind. He clicked randomly on different folders eventually clicking on 'my pictures' which led to various folders including one named 'family photos' that he decided to click on. Emanuele enlarged the icons and scanned through some of the photos which brought up old memories that had been buried so far down he'd almost forgotten them. There were hundreds of photos, including some scanned pictures of the old days before digital cameras were a thing. Emanuele sighed, quickly scrolling right to the bottom just before closing the window, but just as he was about to give up, he noticed a folder named 'copies' which he clicked on. There were a few more images inside that folder and another folder labelled 'extra' so, Emanuele clicked on it which brought up a small window with a space inside and a flashing cursor. He realized this could be what he was looking for, but he didn't know what the password was. "Dammit" he said to himself as he started trying random passwords; he tried things like his father's favorite quotes, and his favorite sporting teams, but nothing worked. He had tried 15 different password combinations before realizing that it might have something to do with family. So, he started typing combinations of his mother's name, and his grandparent's names, but still nothing worked.

Then he tried his own name with the digits of his birth but that didn't work either. Emanuele realized he had been in there for almost ten minutes now, and that Jerry would be out of the bathroom soon. Feeling panicked, he suddenly thought of an idea to replace his mother's last name with his father's; and so, he typed in 'EmanueleDominicCaito31396' and to his complete surprise, it worked. Once opened, Emanuele couldn't believe what he was seeing. There were photos of Dominic with the mayor and other politicians, email correspondence between Dominic and his suppliers, spreadsheets with detailed income from each drug source. As he scrolled through in fascination, he suddenly came to a folder labelled 'dirt', so he clicked on it. What he saw next made him feel physically sick, there were hundreds of photos of older men and women caught in sexual acts, and the looks on their faces explained that this folder was one thing: blackmail. Emanuele quickly backed out of the 'dirt' folder, highlighted everything, and then copied it to the encrypted USB drive. It took less than a minute to copy, and once it was done, he pulled the drive out and slid it in his pocket; then he quickly hit Alt-F4 to close the window just as Jerry stepped in, to Emanuele's complete surprise. He was the only other person who Dominic trusted with an emergency key card to his office. "What are you doing?" he asked inquisitively, "I know dad has some scotch in here somewhere, oh here it is" said Emanuele, thinking quickly and pulling out a bottle of scotch from the desk's bottom draw. "Bring it out with you, your father doesn't let anyone in here without him" said Jerry sternly. "I'm his son" replied Emanuel, looking annoyed as he got up and walked out, "Look I know you're his son, I'm not trying to be the bad guy here, but it's my responsibility to look after the place when your father's not here" said Jerry in a lighter tone. "It's all good Jerry, I have to get going anyway, mom's cooking an early dinner... here, I wouldn't want you getting in trouble" said Emanuele as he handed him the scotch. "See ya, buddy" said Jerry as Emanuele walked out,

and then got into the lift. He breathed a sigh of relief as he felt the USB drive in his pocket, realizing what he had just done. When he arrived back to his car, he promptly left the area, driving back to the shopping mall to pick up Samuel and Loretta. He took his burner phone out and called his mom during the drive over, "Mom" he said, "Oh honey, are you okay?" asked Maria, sounding worried. "Yes, I'm fine, listen I need you to do something" "What is it?" she asked, "Tomorrow night at midnight I need you to call dad to tell him that I've run away" said Emanuele, "Why do you want him to think that?" asked Maria, worriedly. "Listen carefully mom, I need you to be convincing okay, you need to tell him I've been missing for 2 days and that you don't know where I am, and cry on the phone if you can. You need to do this so that he doesn't have any suspicion of you knowing where I am" explained Emanuele. "Okay, I will son" replied Maria and then Emanuele ended the call. Soon after, he pulled up out the front of the main entrance at Westfield shopping mall. Then he dialed Samuel's number, "Good timing we're just about to come out" said Samuel, "Okay I'm waiting out the front of the main entrance, but I don't know how long I can stay here" replied Emanuele. "Mom, c'mon you've spent 15K and Emanuele's waiting! Alright we'll be there soon" replied Samuel. About five minutes later Samuel and Loretta emerged through the front sliding doors, both carrying five bags each. Emanuele quickly got out and opened the boot for them to put the bags into and then they all got into the car. "Looks like you're both ready for your holiday," said Emanuele pretending to be happy, but he was a little worried. It left a potential trail of questioning for his father's men had they been seen together, but he also wanted to keep Samuel in good spirits; he was the key to pulling this whole thing off. "Only one of those bags is mine bro" replied Samuel, sounding unenthusiased as he sat on the back seat, shaking his head. "Samuel, this was one of the best days of my life.

I bought the things I'd wished for, while window shopping for the past year" said Loretta proudly, as she placed her hand on Emanuele's shoulder. He glanced at her and smiled briefly, before concentrating back on the traffic conditions. Samuel sighed, "Well I'm glad you enjoyed yourself mom" he said. When they arrived back to the house Loretta went into her room and started to pack for their holiday, while Samuel and Emanuele went out back to the computer lab to chill. "Hey thanks for spotting me the cash to take my mom shopping, I'll transfer you the money once I have access to it over there," said Samuel. "Don't worry about it, you helping me with this, is more than enough" replied Emanuele, "I've never seen my mom go mental like that with money, maybe I shouldn't have shown her my balances" said Samuel. Once they were inside the computer lab, Emanuele handed Samuel the USB drive, "Did you get what you needed?" he asked, "Yeah" replied Emanuele looking completely serious, as he knew that once the contents were leaked, there would be no turning back. Emanuele never thought he would ever betray his father; he loved his father but knew that the dad he grew up with as a child, was long gone. This was the only way he could cease the death and destruction, save his mother, and be with Leila, all in one move. The only way to get out unscathed, and bring the Empire Down, was to remove the head. "Woah man, there's enough here to put your old man away for ten lifetimes" said Samuel as he scoured through the contents of the drive, and now Emanuele was dealing with another kind of heartache; the revelation that his actions would bring about his own father's death. Despite this, he also had the understanding that it would bring an end to the largest drug trade in America and save countless lives. Samuel closed the windows of evidence and put his PC to sleep, "How about a movie and some beers?" he asked, "I could definitely use the distraction" replied Emanuele, as he got up and followed Samuel back inside the house. They spent the remainder of the night watching movies, drinking beer and ordered pizzas, all

from the cramped living room. The following midnight, Emanuele sat down in the computer lab beside Samuel, who had just finished putting all his essential data on an external hard drive to be sent to his Hong Kong residence, where he would continue hacking for profit. He unplugged the hard drive and turned to Emanuele, "Are you ready to do this?" he asked, "Yes, I have to" replied Emanuele, dead-eyed. Then Samuel went through the process of getting access to several servers and blog post sites on the dark web that were known to be used by the intelligence community. He did this while using a secure core that showed the location of his IP address in Japan. Once he had these resources, he used a new alias named '8uTCh3r' that he had created specifically to leak all the dirt on Dominic. He compressed the folder of evidence to 390 megabytes, and uploaded it to the cloud, which meant as soon as he provided the link it was accessible to the online world through the dark web. He opened the command prompt on software he had written to broadly access multiple platforms at once, 'Attached is the drug organization of Dominic Caito' he typed along with the URL; then he released it. "It's done," said Samuel as Emanuele sat back in his chair and exhaled heavily, "Now I wait" he said, looking nervous. Then Samuel began frantically packing some of his critical hardware into boxes, "Man I can't believe most of my setup is useless now" he said, after pulling apart the PC towers. "It's for the best, and I'm sure you'll be able to setup in Hong Kong" said Emanuele, "That's the plan I guess" said Samuel as he stood up, looking back and forth at the mess lying on the desk and floor. "I'll dispose of what you don't need, but you should get some rest, your flight leaves early... Oh, and you'll have to take a cab in the morning, I should lay low" said Emanuele, "Okay man, see you in the morning" replied Samuel before walking out of the computer lab and into the house.

Emanuele lay down on the sofa and pulled the covers up to his neck; the old air conditioning unit made a droning sound as the room became freezing, now that the computers were ripped to shreds and provided no heat. But the aircon also provided the only airflow into the lab as it had no windows, so it was either sleep cold or suffocate. Emanuele closed his eyes, prayed silently for protection, and then drifted off to sleep. "Damn man, you must be freezing your ass off" said Samuel as he entered the computer lab the next morning; he quickly walked over to the wall and switched the aircon unit off. "Oh, hey what time is it?" asked Emanuele, still groggy, "Its 8am, our taxi is nearly here I just wanted to say goodbye, and mom's cool with you housesitting... not that she knows we're never coming back," said Samuel. Emanuele got up and gave Samuel a bro hug, "Thanks for helping me out man" he said, "What are friends for? I'll see you over there and give me a message when you touchdown" "Yeah, I will" replied Emanuele, briefly wondering if he would even make it out there alive. Just then Loretta knocked on the door, "The taxi's here" she said, grinning, before Samuel went out the front to help the driver load the bags. "Make yourself at home, and if you need anything, just call" said Loretta, "Yeah, thanks very much" "Well, we'll see you in a few weeks" said Loretta, before hugging and kissing him on the cheek. "Ok, Bye" said Emanuele with eyebrows raised, feeling slightly awkward as Loretta walked out to the taxi. Emanuele sat down on the computer chair, staring aimlessly; he didn't know what he was going to do with himself between now and the time he had confirmation that his father had been taken in. Meanwhile, Dominic woke up lying between two naked women in the master room of his penthouse; he looked over at the digital clock on his side table. Then slapped the girl to his left on the ass as he climbed over her and sat on the edge of the king size bed to snort some cocaine; a habit that had now dug its claws in upon Eva's death.

Suddenly his phone lit up, showing that a private number was calling him. Dominic rubbed his nose, snorted, and then picked up his phone, "Yeah" he answered, bluntly, "We need to talk" said the voice on the other end of the line. Dominic instantly knew who it was because they were the only person that used a voice disguiser. "Meet me at my garage in two hours" he replied, then he ended the call, had a shower, and put a suit on. He walked out to the kitchen where his chef was preparing breakfast, "Make it an Irish cappuccino" he said, before sitting down at the dining table and opening the latest LA Times newspaper. The chef quickly added a shot of Jameson whiskey and a teaspoon of sugar to the cappuccino and then took it over to the table along with Dominic's breakfast. Just as Dominic was finishing his breakfast, Clay walked in, "Have you heard from Emanuele yet?" he asked. Dominic wiped his mouth with a napkin and stood up, "He probably took some girls back to the apartments near the club" replied Dominic, not at all concerned. "I'll go and check on him," said Clay, "No, I need you to come with me this morning" replied Dominic, Clay nodded, "Okay" he said. They both walked through to the front lounge room where two enforcers were suited up and sitting on the couch reading various military magazines. They threw the magazines down and stood up as soon as Dominic entered the room. Clay was the only one not wearing a suit; apart from the fact that he hated wearing suits, he knew that he was more agile in tactical clothing.

All the men were strapped, and the enforcers led the way to the carpark while Dominic followed with Clay next to him. One of the men opened the door to the armored Cadillac Escalade for Dominic, while the driver and Clay got in the other side. Of Dominic's 3 vehicles that he was regularly driven in, the Escalade was the most inconspicuous choice, but also the most formidable. Its upgrades were like that of the president's motorcade fleet, with bulletproof glass, reinforced steel panels and doors.

It was the obvious choice with the call that he had received that morning, as Dominic assumed one of his enemies must be planning something. The men he was going to see were federal agents, and although they secretly worked in the interest of his organization, he didn't completely trust them. Dominic's garage was located on the other side of town and was known to only a small group of his associates. When the Escalade arrived, it pulled up out the front of a large industrial warehouse that had a row of five large roller doors. The roller door closest to the road was attached to an upstairs office; it automatically opened, and the Escalade drove inside. Dominic and his men stepped out and walked up a flight of stairs to a viewing deck that overlooked Dominic's favorite cars, which were lined in two rows to the end of the warehouse. There was a total of 32 cars which consisted of 7 Supercars, 4 SUV's, 12 Sports cars, 4 Japanese imports, and 5 classics from the 1940's and 50's which Dominic's father had left to him. He briefly admired his collection before walking into the office where two security staff were seated. He had four men on a rotating roster whose only roles were to look after this warehouse, along with an almost identical warehouse across the road which was jam packed with another 60 cars that Dominic owned. He was now facing storage issues at this current facility, as he never had to sell any of his cars, nor did he want to. The two security staff were pretending to source car deals and watch the security cameras with Dominic now in the room. But when they were left to their own devices would mostly just play online RPGs, as it was becoming a rare occasion for Dominic to visit. "Step out for an hour" he said as he walked up to them, "Sure thing boss" replied one of them, before they both quickly got up and walked out. "Are you sure you trust those clowns to look after your cars?" asked Clay; "They serve their purpose" replied Dominic as he poured himself a glass of scotch from a crystal decanter. He then sat down in one of the leather chairs and checked the time on his million-dollar wristwatch.

As he looked back up, his two enforcers led a plain clothed federal agent into the office, "Where's agent Morris?" asked Dominic, "He couldn't get out of the office" replied the young agent. Then Dominic signaled for the agent to have a seat, "Why the meet?" he asked. The agent sat in the chair looking nervously at Clay and the other two enforcers that were standing near them. "Information on your organization was leaked to our department" said the agent with a serious look on his face, but with his hands slightly fidgety. Dominic grabbed his glass of scotch and then sculled it down, then held up the glass, "Get me another one" he said before one of the enforcers took his glass, filled it up and brought it back. "So... take care of it" he said, looking pissed at the agent, "It wasn't just us... other departments got their hands on the leak" replied the agent, trying to conceal his nerves. "Where did it come from and what was in it?" asked Dominic seemingly unfazed, as this wasn't the first time someone had tried to expose him. The agent took a quick shallow breath, "The sender at this point remains anonymous, but they were in a hotel in Okinawa Japan, although they were using a VPN, so we don't know their real whereabouts... the leak contained a folder which was labelled 'extras' we don't know the full extent of the contents yet," said the agent. Dominic's eyes widened as he realized the gravity of the situation, "You do what you need to, to make this go away, or your entire family will cease to exist, and that goes for agent Morris as well" said Dominic calmly, but with a furious look on his face. Then he sculled the scotch from his glass "Now get the fuck out!" he yelled. The agent quickly got up and walked out appearing to be visibly disturbed by Dominic's words. Once he had left, Dominic grabbed his glass and threw it against the wall. "FUCK!!!" he screamed as he realized that his private folder containing all his sensitive business dealings had somehow been leaked. Then he composed himself, buttoned his suit jacket, walked downstairs, and stepped back into the Escalade while the others quickly followed him.

The automatic roller door closed behind them as the Escalade sped out, "Drive to the hotel near Razr" said Dominic before pulling out a small container of cocaine and sniffing some. Clay watched suspiciously, as he saw his boss and friend becoming increasingly reliant on the white powder, which he had a bad feeling about. When they arrived at the hotel, Dominic told them to wait while he went inside; he jumped out of the SUV and walked inside to the girl on reception. "How may I help you sir?" she asked, "You can tell me if anyone is staying in my apartment" replied Dominic. "Could I please get your name sir?" "Caito, its room 40, top floor" he replied impatiently. The girl checked the database and then tried to call the apartment, "There doesn't seem to be anyone in there" she said, "I'll check myself, give me my key" "I'm going to need to see some identification Mr Caito" replied the girl, arrogantly. Dominic pulled out his ID and held it up to her face and then put it back in his jacket pocket. The girl on reception very slowly got his key card from the locked cupboard and slowly placed it on the counter. This made Dominic angry, and he quickly swiped it off the counter, "Fucking bitch" he said to the girl, who gasped as he walked off. When he reached the apartment, he quickly walked inside and checked the main bedroom, but it was empty, so he then walked through the other rooms to see if he could see any signs to indicate that his son had been staying there. But there was nothing there, the cleaning staff had gone through, and nothing was out of place. Dominic returned to the lobby and was walking back to his car when the girl on reception piped up, "You need to hand your card back in!" she yelled. Dominic ignored her and returned to the Escalade, and then called Emanuele's phone, but it cut straight to voicemail. "Get a trace on this number" he said adamantly, as he handed his phone to the enforcer seated in front, who then opened his laptop and entered the number into the tracing software. He waited a few moments while the software searched, "Sorry boss I can't get a trace" he said, "Head over to the house" said

Dominic before the driver pulled out and sped quickly to the residence in Coronado. When they pulled up outside the house, Dominic jumped out, then walked up to the front door and began bashing on it, "Maria!!" he yelled. Maria rushed to the door and saw Dominic standing there on the security screen looking mad as hell, so she quickly opened the door up. "Is everything okay? Where's Emanuele?" she asked, "Is he here!?" yelled Dominic, "No, I haven't seen him for two days!" she replied. He pushed Maria to the side and ran up the stairs, opening the door to Emanuele's room, only to find it empty. Maria quickly forced herself to become upset, "I don't know where he is, I tried to call you!" she said, crying, while Dominic walked back down the stairs. "You call me as soon as he comes here!" said Dominic, angrily in her face, showing absolutely no sympathy before he walked outside and slammed the front door closed behind him. Then he got back into the Escalade, "Take me home" he ordered the driver, "I'm sure he'll turn up Dominic" said Clay, trying to reassure him. When they arrived back at Dominic's private parking, they all got out of the Escalade and started walking to the entrance of the lift, "Do you want me to put the squeeze on that fed; make sure he kills the threat?" asked Clay. "Not yet, he knows what's on the line. I'll see you in the morning" replied Dominic, as he stepped inside the lift and went up to his penthouse with his two enforcers in tow. Dominic's angry face told the story as he walked to the entrance of his penthouse, "What's wrong boss?" asked Jerry; he had known Dominic the longest and hadn't seen him this way in a long time. "We've got a real threat, and my son is missing" replied Dominic, "Emanuele? He was here yesterday looking for you," said Jerry. Dominic grabbed the big doorman by the coat and slammed him into the wall, "Why didn't you tell me?!!" he yelled. Jerry had a worried look on his face; even though he could have taken Dominic and the two enforcers down, he was loyal, and Dominic had never been mad at him this way before.

The two enforcers looked worried as they knew Jerry was a hardcore veteran of the streets. "I'm sorry, I didn't know you were looking for him boss, he wasn't here long" replied Jerry, humbly. Dominic let go of him and patted the creases out of his suit jacket, and then sighed, "Do you at least know what he was doing here?" he asked, "No... but he was in your office" replied Jerry. Suddenly, Dominic was exceedingly worried, as the worst-case scenario came into his mind. "Sorry Jerry" he said quietly, his face now completely blank with worry as he walked inside. He slowly walked through to his office, carefully closed the door shut, and then sat down at his computer. He navigated his way through to the 'extras' folder and became increasingly horrified as he saw how much the contents of this folder could ruin everything he had built. But what was worse, was the thought that his only son could have betrayed him. Dominic quickly pulled out a burner phone from his second bottom draw, and then brazenly called agent Morris at the department. "You need to tell me... what was in that folder," he said, as he stared blankly with the phone up to his ear, "Shit, alright, let me call you back in a minute" whispered agent Morris before hanging up. Dominic was stressing out; he grabbed a bottle of whiskey and filled a glass before slamming it down. Then he called agent Morris again, "Why are you calling me at work? I can't do my job for you if I get caught, can I?" said agent Morris, pissed. "I need to know what was in that folder!" yelled Dominic, "Alright, alright, hold on I'm having a look now – there's a dozen photos of you with the mayor and some other people, a list of your revenue streams in a spreadsheet, about a hundred and fifty emails and 4 folders of other documents. It's going to take me a while to get through it all" he said. Dominic listened in horror as everything the agent listed was sitting inside the folder, staring right at him on his computer monitor. "You make this go away, or you can ask your partner what I promised him if you don't" said Dominic, still staring blankly at the screen before ending the call.

Suddenly, he snapped out of it; he threw the phone on the ground and started stomping on it angrily until it was smashed. Then he sat back in his seat breathing heavily, "My own son, my own fucking son!" he said to himself, in disbelief. Dominic drank himself stupid that night; he couldn't believe that his only son whom he had given everything to, could do something like this to him. In his drunken state, he had frequent outbursts about how he had brought a child into the world that would betray him. His two enforcers heard what was going on and realized that the 'rat' was Emanuele, and word quickly spread through the ranks. Dominic passed out on the lounge room floor, with two empty bottles of whiskey and three quarters of another, spilled all over the carpet, along with cocaine smeared all over the coffee table.

The next morning his maid had cleaned up the mess and his chef had made him breakfast. He woke up to the smell of bacon and eggs which made him nauseated; he picked himself up and dragged himself to the dining table, grabbed the glass of orange juice and walked into his room, leaving the rest of his breakfast behind. He pulled his phone out and called Percy, "Percy... my son... ratted me out to the feds" he said, without hesitation, "What the fu-... How could he do this?" asked Percy, "I don't know" replied Dominic, sounding sad, and still drunk. "Can you get your man to fix this?" asked Percy referring to agent Morris; "I think we're past that," replied Dominic, "What do you want me to do Dominic? Just say the word" said Percy, referring to his son's execution. Dominic paused, rubbing his eyes; he still couldn't believe what had happened "I don't know" he said. Percy sensed weakness for what needed to be done, "Look I like your kid a lot. But we have rules, and what he's done, is not forgivable" he said.

Dominic closed his eyes and gritted his teeth, trying not to become emotional, "Take him to the El Rancho warehouse, alive, and keep him there. Put a car at the house and the university. He'll turn up eventually... and one more thing, I'll send Clay to Detroit, he won't agree to this" he said, "I'll get it done" replied Percy. Then Dominic ended the call, and called Clay, "Clay, I need you to help Arron on a job in Detroit, get on a flight tomorrow and I'll have him pick you up" "What's the job?" asked Clay, "Arron will fill you in, on arrival" replied Dominic, before abruptly ending the call.

He sat on the edge of his bed feeling sick, more so from the situation, than the hangover. He quickly called his broker, who had joint access to Emanuele's trading accounts, "Yeah, Gerald, I need you to close a couple trading accounts for me. The one's in my son's name. Yes, now, I'll stay on the line," he insisted.

A few moments later Gerald came back on the line, "You there?" he asked; "Yeah" "The accounts have already been closed," said Gerald, "He's dead" said Dominic, angrily to himself. "Is everything okay?" asked the broker, "Yeah, don't worry about it, listen, I've been looking at this renewable energy company called Afflix, they'll be getting government grants when their new system rolls out," said Dominic, trying to change the subject. "How do you know that for sure?" asked Gerald, "Don't you worry how I know goddammit, just buy 100 thousand shares!!" yelled Dominic angrily, before hanging up.

He was furious that Emanuele had cashed out on the stocks given to him, knowing that he would betray his father. There was only one person that Dominic knew he could speak openly with about this matter: his only living mentor, retired cartel boss, and Maria's father, Vicente Reyes.

Chapter 14: An Old Ally

Dominic boarded his Gulfstream G550 jet the following morning, along with two of his men. He wasn't concerned for extra protection as his allies in Mexico were more numerous and powerful than his enemies. He slept for most of the two-and-a-half-hour flight to Puerto Vallarta as he had been on the phone for the past 12 hours with his political contacts, setting up contingency plans, should his men at the bureau fail to stop the leak. Opening his eyes, he yawned as his personal flight attendant gently touched his shoulder, "Can I get you anything before we begin our descent sir?" she asked, "Yeah coffee, black, thanks" he replied, before yawning once more and pulling out his tablet PC. He checked his position on the newly purchased shares of Afflix; they were already up by 21% thanks to his insider information that the stock would skyrocket after the government grants were announced at a press conference the following week. Which is why he jumped on the opportunity right away, despite everything that was going on. Just then the flight attendant came back with his coffee and put it on the table in front of him with a napkin. "It's hot" she said, Dominic just nodded, then pulled out a Cuban cigar, lit it, and then started puffing on it. When he had finished his cigar and coffee he looked out over the Mexican coastline; it brought back memories of when he had broken away from the mob to build his Empire. But then he also remembered the first time he had brought his son with him, and the sadness began to creep back in. He quickly turned his attention back to the stock profile on his tablet to get his mind off Emanuele. Not long after they had landed, the G550 pulled up into an empty bay for private jets. Then the front stairs were lowered; Dominic stepped out and got into the back passenger seat of a Mercedes Benz G63 Wagon, that was being driven by one of his father-in-law's men.

The two enforcers put his bags and golf clubs in the back and then got in as well. Then they were driven to Vicente Reyes' waterfront home in Nuevo Vallarta. The home was an older Mediterranean style mansion, with white rendered concrete, orange terracotta roof tiles and perfectly manicured gardens. The driver drove up to the front door and parked under the covered entrance. Then they all got out, and the enforcers took the bags inside, "He's waiting for you, please follow me" said the driver, before leading Dominic through to the back deck. There an old man sat under an umbrella looking out at the other houses along the canals. Dominic walked in front of the old man and smiled to greet him. Vicente, looked up at him, "Dominic" he said in his croaky voice before he struggled to his feet, holding onto a walking cane. "Vicente" said Dominic as he helped the old man to his feet before gently hugging and kissing him on either cheek; it had been two and a half years since Dominic had last visited him, and the old man looked to be deteriorating. Vicente sat back in his seat and then pointed to the seat beside him, "please, sit" he croaked. As Dominic sat down, an attractive Mexican girl in her early twenties came up to them, "Señor, can I get you more lemonade?" she asked, "No, bring us tequila" replied the old man in Spanish. Then the girl left and promptly came back with a tray of glasses and Don Julio. She placed the bottle on the small server table in between them with two shot glasses, and then Dominic opened the bottle and filled the shot glasses. "Buena Salud" said Dominic, before clinking shot glasses with Vicente, "Saludo" replied the old man, before they both shot the tequila down. "How is that ungrateful, perra?" asked Vicente, "Maria? She's fine" replied Dominic casually; he did not want to disturb the old man with news of his daughter's attempted suicide, because of his granddaughter's death. The news of his son's betrayal was already enough grief to deal with. "She never speaks to me," said Vicente; an ugly divorce from Maria's mother who now lived on the other side of the country, being the cause. Dominic didn't say anything but

poured them both another shot and took his, quickly. "How's my grandson?" asked Vicente with a big smile on his face; Dominic looked at Vicente with a sad look, "He's no longer my son" he replied. Vicente put down his full shot glass on the table, looking displeased, "What happened?" he asked sincerely. Dominic looked at the ground shaking his head, "Federali's... got to him" he said, not wanting to explain the extent of his son's betrayal. The old man coughed up some phlegm and spat it on the ground in disgust, "Get rid of him" he croaked without hesitation. "I know... I will" replied Dominic with a disgruntled look on his face. "Bring up Carlos," said Vicente; Dominic took a deep breath and nodded his head, "That's what I was thinking" he said. As they approached the bottom of the bottle of tequila, Dominic uncharacteristically became sentimental, "Vicente, do you ever think if you could go back and change things, you would?" he asked. "No!" replied the hard-hearted old man, which made Dominic chuckle slightly, as he expected nothing less. This was a man who had no qualms with killing anyone. The attractive Mexican girl returned as the sun started to set, "Dinner is prepared" she said before helping Vicente to his feet; she then tried to help him walk inside, but he kissed her on the cheek and then pushed her aside before walking in slowly without assistance. Dominic and the girl followed slowly behind him; she smiled at Dominic, who smiled back. "What is your name?" he asked, "My name is Gabriela, I'm Señor Vicente's carer" she replied, "Thank you for looking after him," said Dominic, "You're welcome, and you are his son?" asked Gabriela, "Adopted son" replied Dominic. "That's funny, Señor Vicente said his son was coming all day, does he see you as his blood son?" she asked, smiling. "He does" replied Dominic, smiling back at her, "Excuse me for saying this, but you are very beautiful" he continued, "Oh, thank you" replied Gabriela blushing. "Gabriela, serve us!" yelled Vicente in Spanish, from inside, as the two of them stood there close to one another.

“After you” said Dominic, gently putting his hand on her lower back as she walked in front of him. Dominic sat next to Vicente at the dining table with a feast fit for 10 people in front of them, “tell them to join us,” said Vicente. Dominic waved over his men and pointed at the seats, “sit down” he said. Gabriela and another older lady set places for the two enforcers, before they also joined the dining table for dinner. Throughout the night Dominic and Gabriela kept making eye contact and smiling at each other; Dominic winked at her, and she quickly licked her lips and started giggling when she saw one of the enforcers pretended not to notice the connection between them. Later that night, when everyone had gone to sleep, Dominic lay in his bedroom with his side lamp on, pondering everything that was going on. Suddenly, his door opened slightly, he looked over and saw Gabriela in a lace nightgown. He smiled with a slightly confused look on his face as she carefully closed the door behind her and then slowly walked towards him. She got to his bedside and then undid the lace nightgown revealing her curvaceous naked body; she then quickly turned the lamp off and got into bed with him. Dominic kissed Gabriela passionately and then pulled her on top of him. They had multiple rounds of sex for the next hour before lying there, panting and sweating. Gabriela turned the lamp back on and admired Dominic as he lay there, “You don’t look Mexican” she said. Dominic smiled before putting his arm under Gabriela’s head; she laid her head on his shoulder, looking at him for a response. “I’m Italian; Vicente is my ex-wife’s father,” he said, relaxed, as he’d now been given what he desired. “Oh, um” replied Gabriela, feeling a little guilty as she slid her hand across his chest, “Don’t worry, tell me about you” he said, “There isn’t much to tell... I was born in a very small place called Caltepec and moved here with my mother when I was 14 after my father died” she said. “How did you meet Vicente?” asked Dominic, “My mother was his housekeeper before she became sick and so I took over to pay for her medical bills” replied

Gabriela. "Hold on, is your mother Elyse? She's sick?" asked Dominic, sounding concerned, "Yes, she has emphysema" replied Gabriela, appearing distraught. "I'm really sorry to hear that," said Dominic, "I would do anything for her. I gave up on my dream of being a teacher to support her" she said. Dominic wiped Gabriela's tears from her eyes; it became apparent to him that she had given herself to him in the hope of gaining financial assistance, as he knew the sob story wouldn't have worked on Vicente. He didn't mind though, he decided to do a good deed to make himself feel better about the evil order he would give upon returning home. "I'll pay for your mother's medical needs" he said, "What... Really?" asked Gabriela sniffing, with a surprised look, "Yeah and any other needs you might have. Quit your job here and chase that dream of yours," said Dominic, "What about Señor Vicente?" asked Gabriela, "He'll find someone else, just tell him that I've made the arrangements. You get whatever your family needs, okay. I'll make a deposit of five million pesos into your bank account, and we'll go from there," said Dominic. Gabriela gasped in disbelief and then hugged him, "thank you... thank you" she said, while sobbing on his chest. Dominic lifted her head up to look into her eyes, "On one condition" he said, "Anything" she replied, with tears streaming down her face. "I want to fly down and see you once a month" he said, smiling, "Yes" she said excitedly, before kissing him passionately.

The following morning, Dominic left Gabriela still asleep in his bed. He had arranged to meet Xavier; a close friend of his, who oversaw the sourcing of his cocaine supply in South America. When Dominic exited the G63 wagon he walked over to the man who was standing at the entrance of the Marina golf course.

Xavier had a bodyguard with him and was dressed in a blue polo shirt and shorts, wearing a Panama hat, and smoking a cigar.

He opened his arms as Dominic approached him, "Dominic, it's so good to see you my brother" he said, "You too Xavier" he replied, before giving his friend a half-hearted hug. They got in a golf buggy together and drove to the first tee, followed closely by their protection in another buggy. Xavier got out and placed his golf ball on a tee and then stretched slightly before pulling out his new driver which had a huge head on it. He swung with all his might which resulted in the ball flying 241 yards down the fairway and coming to lie only 40 yards from the green. "Nice shot," said Dominic; Xavier turned and smiled looking very pleased with himself, "Do you mind if I try with that club?" he added, before Xavier graciously handed it to him as he looked onwards. Dominic set his tee and ball and then lined himself up before smashing the ball as hard as he could down the fairway. The ball flew 285 yards and landed on the green; Xavier could not believe it. He fixed his hat looking flustered, before taking his club back, "Wow, you must have been spending a bit of time at the range huh?" he asked. "I went last month" said Dominic casually, before they both got back into their buggy. "How's your phone business going, what was it again, zing something?" asked Dominic, "Zingaa" said Xavier, correcting him. "Right zinga... is it cleaning your money fast enough?" asked Dominic, referring to Xavier's telecommunications business that he laundered his supplier profits through. "We're doing well, so well I'll be able to go legit soon" replied Xavier, sounding hopeful, "I don't know about that" replied Dominic, smiling, passive aggressively, before looking away angrily. Xavier looked slightly concerned before returning his attention to the course, "Ah here we are" he said, pulling up to where his golf ball lie. Suddenly, Dominic's phone began to ring; he quickly pulled it out and answered, while walking away from the buggy, "Yes?" he asked intently, "He's at the house" said an enforcer on the other end of the line, "Call me when you have him at the place" replied Dominic.

Back in San Diego, Emanuele had just pulled up in the Ford Explorer outside of his Coronado house. He had become impatient sitting inside Samuel's tiny home and had gone to pick up his mother to get them both out of the country as quickly as possible. But this was a grave mistake; it went against part of the plan revealed to him, which was to wait for confirmation of the takedown. He sat in the Explorer waiting nervously with the engine on as he looked to the front door of his house, "C'mon, where is she?" he said to himself before quickly pulling out his phone and dialing his mom's number, but there was no answer. Suddenly, the front door swung open, and Maria rushed out rolling a suitcase behind her. Emanuele looked around cautiously before leaping out to help his mom with her luggage, but he hadn't seen the two enforcer's that were scouting the house from down the road. He quickly opened the boot and threw Maria's luggage in. The enforcer's noticed they were about to leave, "Let's go!" yelled one of them, "Take it easy, I got this" replied the driver, turning the engine on. Then as soon as Emanuele and Maria had gotten into the car and were driving away, the enforcer put his truck into drive and sped as fast as he could towards the Explorer, with it now in line to be T-boned. "Hold on!" yelled the driver before they smashed into the side of the Explorer with a heavily modified GMC SUV. 'BOOM!' went the force of impact that flipped the Explorer onto its side and then the momentum onto its roof; it landed on the sidewalk, with all windows smashed.

Maria lay there bleeding and unconscious, while Emanuele was dazed with a mild concussion as the two men scrambled to drag him out. He tried to fight back, but his efforts were inadequate from the state he was in after the crash. "Mom!" he yelled as he realized Maria was lying there not moving, but he couldn't help her, he was thrown into the back of the GMC and restrained with zip ties. The driver went to check on Maria while the other man was about to get back in their vehicle, "What are you doing?!" he yelled.

“The boss wouldn’t want her left like this” replied the driver, before he checked Maria’s pulse and then pulled her out of the wreckage, carrying her into the house. He placed her on the couch in the front room and then sprinted back outside to the SUV and got in before it sped away from the scene. Just then people started to gather out the front of their properties to see what was going on, but it was too late, the grab had been made.

Meanwhile in Chicago, Clay stepped into a Mercedes sedan and sat next to Arron, while two of his men checked their guns and equipment and got into the front seats. Then they pulled out of the private property, following another sedan to make the trip to Detroit. “Listen Clay, I’m sorry about the kid, I know you two were close” said Arron, “I’m not worried about him, he’ll turn up” replied Clay. Arron raised his eyebrows and then contemplated on whether to correct him, “You didn’t hear?” he asked, “Hear what?” replied Clay sounding irritated. “Dominic’s son is the rat,” “What the hell are you talking about?” asked Clay angrily, “The kid leaked that information to the feds.... now Dominic’s gonna have to do something no father should,” replied Arron. Clay looked worried, “Pull over!” he yelled, “Woah, woah what are you doing?” asked Arron as the car slowed down, “He said pull over” replied the driver, looking confused.

“Not you, what are you doing Clay?” asked Arron, “I have to hear this from Dominic” “Arghh shit! You didn’t hear this from me!” yelled Arron as Clay got out. He slammed the door closed and the sedan sped away to regroup with the others. Clay spotted a taxi that had just pulled up across the street, so he sprinted over to it as a man was opening the door. He pushed the man out of the way and jumped inside, “You bastard!” yelled the old man shaking his fist. “Hey buddy he was here first” said the cab driver, “I’ll double your fair, get me to the airport” replied Clay adamantly, “You got it” replied the driver who then turned back to his steering wheel and pulled away.

Clay paid the cab driver in cash, then jumped out and walked into the airport, leaving his duffle bag back at Arron's safe house; he only had his wallet with him. He walked up to the service desk of American Airlines, "Could you please help me? My mothers in the hospital, and I need to get back home to her in San Diego" he said to the service desk attendant. "I'll see what I can do, sir" said the man with a look of concern as Clay stood there and rubbed his eyes in an effort to gain some sympathy. "Could I please get your driver's license sir?" asked the man. Clay pulled his license out and handed it to the man who started typing his details into the computer. "You're all good to go" said the man once he had finished; Clay put his license back into his wallet and went to pull out some cash, "How much do I owe you?" he asked. The man put his hand on Clay's hand, "You just get to your mom, honey, it's all taken care of" said the man smiling and winking as he handed Clay the ticket. "Thanks" said Clay forcing a smile as he walked away, feeling awkward about the man flirting with him. It was the first time a man had ever hit on him, because his mean façade normally caused people avoid him. He looked at the ticket; it was an hour wait before he had to board, so he decided to go and get a triple shot espresso as it was going to be a long night.

The two enforcer's that had snatched Emanuele, smuggled him over the border that evening, and their old SUV pulled up outside of the storage warehouse in El Rancho. They both got out and were surprised to see another car there with its lights on, and two men standing in front of it. They knew it wouldn't be Dominic because they were given direct orders to contact him once they had arrived. They cautiously pulled their pistols out to be ready for anything but holstered them when they recognized the faces. It was Carlos and Javier, "What the hell are you two doing here?" asked one of the enforcer's, "We're here to make sure you don't screw up," replied Carlos.

“Does the boss know you’re here?” asked the other enforcer, “Of course” replied Carlos, lying through his teeth with a big grin on his face. The two enforcers turned and went to the back of their SUV, and after they opened it, they dropped Emanuele in the dirt; he coughed as one of them kicked him in the guts. It was a complete shock to be on the receiving end of the wrath of the organization; he was now considered worse than a stray dog by the men. They dragged him towards the warehouse while Carlos and Javier opened the large steel sliding door and turned on the lights. After Emanuele was dragged inside, along the cement floor, he was placed on a chair and then one of the enforcer’s closed the steel door. Carlos still had the big grin on his face as he walked over to Emanuele, “I should be thanking you, now that you fucked up, I’ll be promoted” he said, arrogantly. Emanuele ignored him, and as he bowed his head, he softly began to pray, apologizing to Creator and asking him for help. Carlos started laughing, “What the hell are you... are you praying?” he asked before laughing hysterically. Emanuele ignored Carlos as he mocked relentlessly, “God can’t save you now... you’re a dead man!” he yelled.

Meanwhile, Dominic walked up the stairs onto his Gulfstream Jet as the engines were starting up; he walked over to his seat and sat down pulling his phone out, and then dialed Percy’s number. “What’s the latest?” he asked, “The two men stationed at the house grabbed him trying to leave with Maria” replied Percy. “That bitch! She must have known the whole time!” said Dominic angrily, “They had to ram the car to extract him, she was knocked out in the process, but still breathing, they left her inside the house” replied Percy. “Okay, what about him, did they take him to the spot?” asked Dominic, “Yes, they called to confirm 20 minutes ago. They also said Carlos was waiting there” replied Percy. Dominic looked slightly confused, “Tell them to keep an eye on him as well, I’ll be there in a few hours” he said, then he ended the call.

The enforcer's entered the plane with the bags and pulled up the stairs, sealing the exit before the plane taxied to its lane, and awaited clearance for take-off. During the 3-hour flight Dominic didn't say a word to either his men or the air hostess; he was still struggling with what he knew he had to do. He loved his son more than anyone else but knew that he could not show mercy; the actions of his son were unforgivable in the eyes of every man and woman within the organization. When his plane had landed, he got straight into his Escalade being driven by an enforcer, accompanied by Percy. He was swiftly driven out of the airport, and they made their way south to the abandoned warehouse. "Stop!" yelled Dominic, "What's wrong boss?" asked Percy, "Take me to see my priest" he replied. "I'm not so sure that's a good idea Dominic," said Percy. "That wasn't a request!" he replied, Percy whacked the enforcer on the shoulder and pointed to a street to turn off up ahead. "There may be no redemption for what I'm about to do" said Dominic to himself, clenching his jaw in emotional agony as he thought about the act of killing his only son. He quickly wiped his eyes as tears started to well up, and then stared out the window. They drove 42 miles to Potrero, just north of the border, where Dominic had attended a small Catholic church on rare occasion, to keep out of the public eye. The priest there was an old friend; his name was Reuben, and he had originated from Mexico where he had witnessed many acts of violence during a 4-year period of ongoing cartel wars, and Dominic was the reason they stopped. Dominic had been introduced to Reuben through Maria's family before Emanuele had even been born. He trusted Reuben and had been receiving confession periodically from him ever since, so Reuben was aware of the life Dominic led. In return for having a priest and friend to confide in that didn't judge him, Dominic pulled strings for him to gain citizenship in the US. They pulled up alongside the small old church that had been built in the late 1800's, where Reuben had now based himself.

Dominic got out of the car, "Stay here" he commanded, before the enforcer had time to get out to guard him. He walked inside the church where an older lady was kneeling in the second row, praying. Dominic made the sign of the cross and then walked through; Reuben was slightly shocked to see him as it had been over 6 months since his last visit. "Dominic it's so good to see you" said father Reuben, who had white hair, and crows' feet as he smiled, "It's good to see you too father" replied Dominic as he forced a smile. "You look troubled son, what is it?" asked father Reuben, putting his hand out for Dominic to take a seat in the pews. Dominic sat down facing forward and father Reuben sat next to him. "Father, I am in a desperate situation... someone that I love has betrayed me" "Go on" replied Reuben as he looked on a little worried. "I know I've always been honest with you father, but I don't know if I can be on this," said Dominic. "We are taught to show forgiveness to one another... you say you love this person; shouldn't that be reason enough to forgive?" asked Reuben, "You know the life I live, there is no forgiveness for betrayal" replied Dominic. "I cannot absolve you for a sin you are planning to commit, son" said Reuben. Dominic stood up and put his hand out, "Well father, I guess this is goodbye" he said, staring angrily at the priest. Father Reuben got up looking worried and hesitantly shook Dominic's hand as he knew he was about to kill someone. Dominic couldn't bring himself to say that it was his son, he was too angry and ashamed. "Take me home I need to think" said Dominic as he got back into the Escalade, "You don't have to do this, let me handle it" said Percy, "No... it has to be me" replied Dominic. When they arrived at Dominic's hotel building, they pulled up in the car park, "I need to be alone, I'll call you when I'm ready" said Dominic before getting out and going up to the penthouse by himself. As he exited the lift and approached the front door, Jerry could see the sorrow in his face, but didn't say a word and just opened the door to let him in. Dominic walked inside and went straight to the bar, grabbing a bottle

of whiskey. He took a big swig before leaving the bottle on the counter and walking into the bathroom. He threw his clothes off and got into the shower, turning on the water and standing under it for a long time, staring blankly at the wall, deep in thought. Suddenly, in an outburst of anger, he began punching the tiled wall in frustration until his knuckles bled.

Meanwhile, Clay's plane was making its descent; he got up out of his seat which was in the 13th row and walked to the front of the plane. "Excuse me sir the seatbelt sign has been turned on, could you please make your way to your seat?" asked the air hostess. Clay turned to the man to his left seated in the first row, "I'll give you a thousand bucks to swap seats with me for the rest of the flight" he said pulling out the cash. The man looked up at him, "Are you sure?" he asked, "I'm in a rush" he replied, with a serious look on his face. "Sure!" said the man, enthusiastically unbuckling his belt and taking the cash, "Thanks, row 13," said Clay.

As soon as the airplane had landed, and the hatch was opened, Clay bolted through the tunnel into the airport and outside to the taxi rank, not caring what anyone thought, but only thinking about Emanuele. There was a line-up of 12 people standing there; he looked over to the short-term parking and spotted an old Chevy C-10 pickup truck. He sprinted over to it and made sure there was no one in the area then he smashed the window, opened the door, and jumped in. He ripped the panel underneath the steering wheel off to reveal the wiring, then he pulled the two cables from the ignition and hotwired it. He floored it out of the carpark and pulled up to a ticket booth, "I lost my ticket, keep the change" he said throwing the operator a \$100 bill. Then he revved the guts out of the old 8-cylinder motor and drove off. As he drove out, the truck started misfiring and Clay knew that it wouldn't make it all the way out to where Emanuele was being held, so he drove towards his house which was only 6 miles from the airport.

The truck died halfway there, so Clay ditched it and sprinted the rest of the way home.

When he arrived, he knew he had left his house keys in Chicago, so he jumped the side fence, and kicked in the side door to his garage which set off the alarm. He quickly walked over to the security keypad and punched in the code which shut it off, then he pressed the button to open up the front roller door of his garage. He ran into the kitchen, grabbed a bottle of water, sculled it, then ran back and grabbed his car keys. He jumped into his Ford GT, started it up and then sped out of his driveway, then launched out of his street, the engine roaring throughout the neighborhood as the wheels struggled to maintain traction. Carlos's boys never shut up about the shipments to the warehouse south of the border, and how it was the perfect place for a hit because they had the local Policia Federal's paid off. Clay knew it was his best bet as Dominic would never spill his own family's blood on US soil. So, he sped there as fast as he could, while being careful not to get pulled over by the cops as he crossed the border.

Meanwhile, Dominic turned the shower off, and slowly stepped out. He looked at his knuckles which were red raw after drying himself and he wrapped the towel around his waist, before staring angrily in the mirror. He turned away and got dressed into a black shirt and jeans, then he called Percy. "I'm ready" he said, "We're waiting for you" replied Percy and then Dominic ended the call.

He went down to the private carpark and stepped inside the Escalade which had pulled up outside the elevator. Then it quickly drove off, with Emanuele's location being the destination.

Chapter 15: The Race of Rescue

The race was on, and the victor would determine whether Emanuele lived or died. Both vehicles made their way out of San Diego and crossed the border; Dominic's vehicle at San Ysidro and Clay's at Otay Mesa. Once they had crossed successfully, both cars individually made their way to the secluded warehouse in El Rancho. At the warehouse Carlos was becoming ever increasingly impatient for 'justice' to be dealt out to Emanuele for what he had done. "Where are they?" he asked the enforcers, "The boss is on his way" replied one of the men who was inspecting a cache of AK47's. The cache was in transit to Guatemala; it was to arm a group of rebels that Dominic was backing to keep the government from shutting down his drug supply channels.

Carlos walked behind Emanuele and crouched down with his mouth close to his right ear, "Don't think for a second your father will show mercy, I've seen what he does to rats" he said, trying to intimidate Emanuele. "C'mon Carlos leave him alone; he knows what's coming" said Javier, feeling sympathy towards Emanuele. Carlos smiled, "The only hope you've got, is that he makes it quick" he said, before walking over to where the others were seated. He lit up a cigarette, pulled an AK47 out of the cache, and admired it while he smoked.

"Crack a window" said one of the enforcer's, "You crack the window, Puto!" he snapped back. So, the enforcer stood up and slid one of the window shutters open.

Moments later they heard a car in the distance, "The boss is here" said one of the enforcers, before they all stood up, waiting for Dominic to enter through the front sliding door.

Not 30 seconds later, they heard a 'click' behind them; they turned to see Clay standing there with a pistol held to the temple of one of the enforcers. The men hadn't deciphered the difference in sound between Clay's Mustang and Dominic's Escalade, because of the lumpy camshaft both engines had. The other enforcer quickly pulled his pistol out and pointed it at Clay, "Do you want your friend's head opened up?" asked Clay, calmly. "Go on do it" said Carlos, laughing, "Drop it!" yelled Clay, placing his finger on the trigger. The enforcer standing by Emanuele, quickly threw his gun to the floor angrily; it landed only a few feet from Carlos who looked like he was about to go for it. "Carlos!!" yelled Javier, before he could get to it; Carlos paused and slowly looked at his friend who had his own pistol aimed straight at him. "Javier, what the fuck are you doing!?" yelled Carlos, in a state of rage. "I can't do this anymore Carlos! I know what you did to Eva, and I'm not gonna let you get us killed!" yelled Javier, angrily. The guilt had been building inside of him, because unbeknownst to everyone else, Javier knew Carlos' was the one who caused Eva's overdose; he stood by while an innocent man was accused and tortured to death because he said nothing. It had been eating him up inside, and now he couldn't conceal it any longer. Emanuele sat in silence as he digested the revelation that Javier had just exposed, as Carlos stood there looking furious. Clay took advantage of the situation and knocked out the enforcer he had hostage, "Untie him!" he yelled pointing his gun at the other, who then walked over and took a knife to the zip ties. As Emanuele's feet were being cut free Javier deflected his concentration for just a moment, and Carlos leapt towards the AK47 he had stashed on the ground behind him. He grabbed it and then emptied half the magazine into Javier's body, as everyone else ducked. Blood sprayed from Javier's torso before he dropped to the ground and started coughing blood and convulsing, dying within a few moments. The enforcer let go of Emanuele and lunged at Clay, while Emanuele quickly jumped from his

chair and ran over to Carlos, booting him in the head. "Urghh!" yelled Carlos before pointing his gun at Emanuele, but by a miracle or complete stroke of luck, the AK47 jammed. Carlos angrily threw it to the ground and jumped to his feet, throwing a flurry of punches in Emanuele's direction. Emanuele blocked the punches and then countered, grabbing Carlos' arm as he threw his final punch. Emanuele threw a spinning back elbow, which connected him in the side of his head; this had Carlos dazed, so Emanuele followed up with a haymaker to the face splatting his nose. Blood pissed out of Carlos' broken nose as he wiped a hand full of blood and then looked up furiously. He ran at Emanuele with a flying knee, but Emanuele ducked and under it, then turned and side-kicked Carlos into the wall, using his momentum. Carlos turned around and shaped up as he walked towards Emanuele, throwing a big left hook. But again, Emanuele ducked under, throwing a counter punch to his ribs as hard as he could. Carlos winced as it connected and winded him, then Emanuele followed with an elbow to the temple which knocked Carlos to the ground. He jumped on top of Carlos and started pounding his face in with his fists, "You killed her!!!" screamed Emanuele, as he continued to bloody Carlos' face, after knocking him unconscious. Clay ran over to Emanuele after he had neutralized the other enforcer. He pulled Emanuele from Carlos, "C'mon E-man it's not worth it!" he yelled, trying to calm him down. "He killed her Clay. I never should have let him near her!!" yelled Emanuele, full of emotion. Clay quickly tried to console Emanuele, "I know you're hurting, but I've got to get you out of here!" he said, pulling Emanuele towards the exit. "Wait" said Emanuele, before walking over to the table to grab his belongings that had been taken from him. Then they left the warehouse and got into Clay's car, before fleeing from the property. Only minutes later, the Escalade pulled up out the front of the warehouse and Dominic got out with his men.

The driver walked over and opened the sliding door to the warehouse; shock came over them as they saw the bloodied mess with everyone lying on the ground, along with the empty chair and cut zip ties. Dominic ran over to Carlos and lifted his bloodied head off the ground, "Get him some water!" he ordered, before one of the enforcer's brought a bottle of water. Dominic took it and rinsed Carlos bloodied face, before helping him take a sip from it, "What happened?" he asked, worriedly. Carlos gasped, "Clay hit us... took Emanuele... killed Javier" he said, slightly wheezing. Dominic turned to Percy, "I thought you took care of Clay!" he said angrily, "He boarded the flight to Chicago, he must have found out" replied Percy. "Get Cole on the phone, tell him I'll pay his team 10 million for both of them," said Dominic, Percy nodded in agreement, before pulling his phone out and calling Cole, who was an Israeli mercenary that was contracted by the world's elite class to take care of their 'problems'. Carlos grabbed at Dominic's shirt, "What is it?" he asked, "I think... he's trying to leave the country... had his passport with him" replied Carlos, before spitting blood out onto the floor. "Percy! Have some men stationed in departures at the international airport," said Dominic. Percy nodded, while on the phone and then made the appropriate calls to station some of his men at the airport. "We've got to get you as far away from here as we can" said Clay as they sped back towards San Diego. "Hong Kong... I'm going to Hong Kong" replied Emanuele, "Fair enough, Hong Kong it is" "But we have to get my mom first" "It's too risky; we need to get you on a flight ASAP, they'll be looking for you... I'll go back for your mom and make sure she gets on another flight" replied Clay. Emanuele sighed, "Alright... but if she's not over there within 48 hours, I'm coming back" "I'll make sure she gets there, you just make sure you contact me when you're over there. I'll update you on her arrival" replied Clay. When they got to the airport Clay pulled up outside of departures, "Will you be alright from here on?" he asked, "Yeah, I'll be alright" replied Emanuele

with sadness in his eyes. "You might wanna get yourself cleaned up before you check in" said Clay pointing to Emanuele's face, which had dry blood going down his cheek. Emanuele noticed his head was hurting a little and there were still small pieces of glass in his hair, with some lodged in his scalp, "Make sure you're on that flight with my mom," he said. But Clay shook his head, "I can't go with you" he replied, "They'll come after you though!" said Emanuele, looking worried. "As long as they're coming for me, they won't be going after you" replied Clay, then he put his hand out to shake Emanuele's, "I'm gonna miss you Clay" said Emanuele, trying to hold back his emotions as he shook his mentor's hand, "I'll miss you too kid" replied Clay, before Emanuele stepped out of the Mustang. Emanuele worried for his mom and friend, "Godspeed, and protection" he said, as he watched the Mustang pull away. He ran his hands through his hair and shook the remaining pieces of glass out. Then he went inside the airport bathroom to clean himself up as best as he could, before going and booking himself the next flight out. Clay drove home to change cars before going to pick up Maria, as he knew Dominic's men would be looking for his Mustang. When he arrived at Maria's house in Coronado, he saw an ambulance and police car out the front. An officer was there questioning Maria, as she was being treated inside the ambulance. After one of the neighbors had failed to get a tow truck all afternoon, they bolstered up the courage to call the police and lay the blame solely on Maria. Knowing whose residence it was, Dominic's officers inside the department roadblocked anyone from going over to the house to question Maria, but as the calls increased an officer finally went over, found her in a bad way and then called an ambulance. As Clay approached the house, he didn't notice a grey Dodge Challenger sedan parked down a side street; it was just out of his peripheral view as he looked at the scene outside of the house. Inside the Challenger were two men from Cole's crew, who were already watching the house.

Clay pulled up just past the house, got out and walked over to Maria who was seated on the back of the ambulance still being attended to by a paramedic, "Are you okay Maria?" he asked. She looked at him worried and then nodded, "Who are you sir?" asked the police officer bluntly. "He's a friend" replied Maria butting in, "What happened here officer?" asked Clay. "It seems that Mrs. Reyes here is the victim of a gutless act of hit and run" replied the police officer before trying to prod Maria for more information. "I've told you everything I remember" she said looking weary, with a bandage over her forehead and her right arm black and blue from bruising. "Look if she's given her statement, let her go inside and rest. We'll contact you if she remembers anything more," said Clay. The disgruntled police officer nodded and then got into his car as the paramedic finished up, and then Clay walked Maria inside the house. "Call it in" said one of the mercenaries watching the house; the other, pulled his phone out and dialed, "Only one target has shown up to the house, no sign of second target. What do you want us to do?" he asked, "Hold your position, keep first target in your sights" replied Cole, on the other end of the line before hanging up. Then the mercenary put his phone down, "We wait" he said to his accomplice.

Back inside the house Maria sat down at the kitchen bench; Clay noticed her hands shaking before she looked at them and tried to hide it. Clay walked over to her and softly put his arm around her shoulder, "Maria I'm going to get you out of here. Your son's already on a plane heading out of the country, and I'm putting you on the next one" he said, trying to assure her that he wasn't there to hurt her. She looked up at him and nodded, breathing jerkily, "Okay" she said, still feeling shaken up. "Okay, where are your things?" asked Clay; "the paramedic put my bag out back" she replied. "Alright, I'm going to take you to my car, and then get you to the airport, okay. I'll get something to cover your injuries first," said Clay; Maria just sat silently and nodded.

When he had returned from going to grab a sweater and hat from Maria's wardrobe, she looked at him a little afraid, "Why are you doing this? You work for my husband" she said, breathing heavily, "I no longer work for him" he replied. But Maria remained cautious; she didn't completely trust any of the men that worked for Dominic; she had grown up inside a cartel family and knew they would do or say anything to have their way. Clay then handed her a bag, summer hat, and sweater, "I haven't worn these in years" she said as she struggled to put on the sweater.

Clay helped her to her feet, then the two of them left the house and walked to his car. He helped Maria into the passenger's seat before running around and throwing her bag in the back as he jumped in the driver's seat. The mercenaries looked on, and quickly called Cole again, "They're leaving the house, still no sign of the second target" said one of them. "Follow them" ordered Cole, before hanging up and calling Percy who had just walked into Dominic's penthouse. "Yeah?" asked Percy, "Let me speak to him" replied Cole as Percy gave the phone to Dominic, who was sitting on his lounge chair drinking again. "It's Cole" "Did you find them?" asked Dominic, "I put two men on the house, Clay turned up and he's leaving with your wife, so my men will follow. No sign of the kid though," replied Cole. "Clay will have sent him to a safe location, make sure your men aren't seen, otherwise you'll never get this done, and you don't want to lose two good men, do you?!" asked Dominic in frustration. "All due respect, we've been doing this for three decades now, my men have taken care of hundreds of targets without fail" "Alright... Where are you now?" asked Dominic calmly, "I'm driving out of LA as we speak, I'll come to your location and correspond with my men from there. My second team will be there in an hour, I'll join them when I arrive" replied Cole, before ending the call. Dominic threw Percy's phone back to him, "Fucking merc's" he said.

Dominic didn't like using mercenaries, not only because they had leverage to negotiate the hit cost, but he had also tried to employ them into his organization in the past, which only led to unnecessary conflicts over money. He knew that having them so close to his organization could potentially become a problem again, as they were difficult to control. But he was desperate, with his son, and now one of his best men having betrayed him.

Meanwhile, Emanuele was seated inside the airport at a café with a burger and drink. He felt famished as he hadn't eaten in the past 2 days, and now that the anxiety of the plan had finally faded, his appetite had returned. He was thoroughly enjoying his beef burger, which he was only halfway through, when he took another bite and looked up to watch the crowd of people. Everyone was rushing through the airport complex with their bags to get to their gates. He finished his mouthful as he looked around inside the busy terminal. But suddenly, he saw a face that he had seen before walking towards him amongst the crowd, and next to it, another familiar face. He dropped his burger as soon as he realized that it was two of his father's men, and that they must have come looking for him. He quickly grabbed his plane ticket, stuffed it in his pocket and jumped out of his seat, crouching down while making his way out of the area and into the crowd of people rushing to their gates. As the crowd walked through the complex Emanuele tried to blend in and then darted into a clothing store; he hid behind one of the displays as he looked out for the two men. As they walked past, he heard one of them ask, "What's he wearing!?" "Black shirt with jeans!" replied the other man, as they walked past the store. "Can I help you?" asked the store clerk; Emanuele casually stood up, "Uh, yeah I'll just get these please" he replied, grabbing the first shirt and hat that were in front of him. After paying, he threw the red button up shirt over the top of his slightly ripped tee and put the baseball cap on. Then he kept walking through the airport, with the two men in his sights.

They were nearing the entrance of the airport before they both turned back around to do another sweep. Emanuele noticed and quickly turned to walk in the same direction, so that they wouldn't see his face, but now they were out of his sight. He spotted a spare seat in the waiting area to his right; it was almost full of travelers. He casually made his way over to it and sat down, pulling his phone out to cover his face. The men walked back through scanning the area, which made Emanuele nervous. A girl seated to his left looked at him and smiled, "Nice shirt" she said, instigating small talk. He looked at her and forced a smile back, "It wasn't a well thought out purchase" he said, before pretending to turn his attention back to his phone, while really keeping an eye out. He breathed a sigh of relief as he saw the men walking away, out of the corner of his eye, and he let them walk on for another 40 yards before he got up and followed again. They stopped at the entrance, pulled their phones out and began making calls on them as Emanuele watched from a distance. Before he knew it, they had left the airport. Emanuele wiped a bead of sweat from his brow and let out a deep sigh of relief. He looked at the time; it was now only an hour and forty minutes before his flight would depart. So, he went and sat down at gate 5 which would take him to his transit city of London. Emanuele sat there holding nothing but his passport, plane ticket, a debit card and his phone containing his login credentials, and private keys, which he would use to access more funds once he had arrived in Hong Kong. These were the only personal effects he would take from his life in San Diego to his new life in Hong Kong; they were all he had on him when being abducted. He carefully studied the crowd in case more men showed up; but luckily no one else came looking. While Emanuele was still sitting at his gate, Clay and Maria arrived at the San Diego International airport as well. They were about to pull up outside of departures, when Clay noticed the two men standing out the front who had been looking for Emanuele.

He pulled back into the fast lane and drove straight through, while still being followed by Cole's men, "What's wrong?" asked Maria, "Dominic's men were out the front" he replied. "Oh no" said Maria as she put her head in her hands, becoming emotional, "Don't worry I'll take you to LAX instead" he said. Cole's men followed at what they thought was a safe distance on the freeway, but by the time they had gotten to Los Angeles, Clay had noticed them, so he made the long drive through LA while being tailed, waiting for them to break off. But even though he continued along the I-5 freeway changing lanes at random and watching his rear-view mirror. He could see that the same grey sedan would slowly, but continually move into the same lane as them. "Maria, stay calm, there's a car following us but I'm going to lose them" he said, before Maria began to whimper in fear. As soon as they had passed the city and were nearing the canyon terrain Clay took off at full speed. He flew past other cars and trucks, overtaking them at will, but when Cole's men realized they were losing him they sped up as well. Clay kept speeding till he reached Castaic before slowing down, but Cole's men had maintained their distance. The mercenary in the passenger seat then received a call from Cole, "I need an update" he said urgently, "They're trying to run," replied the mercenary. "Take them out, we'll find the son later, get it done, now!" said Cole angrily, before hanging up. "What did he say?" asked the driver, "He said to kill them now" replied the other merc. The driver planted his foot and the grey sedan shot off in the direction of Clay's car, weaving through the traffic. Clay could see they were gaining on him at an alarming rate, so he put his pedal to the floor as well and tried to lose them. No matter how hard he tried evasively to get away, they kept gaining over the next 20 miles. "Should have driven my Mustang" he said, "Please don't let them get me, Dominic will kill me" pleaded Maria, "Hey! nothing is going to happen to you, I promise" he replied. Clay's CTS sedan was only a 6-cylinder producing 304 horsepower while the pursuers were

in an 8-cylinder car with 425 horsepower. 'THUD!' Cole's men slammed into the back of them, and Maria started crying while Clay swerved to the right, out in front of a truck that was headed in the same direction. The truck blared its horn as the pursuers swerved out in front, between it and Clay. Both cars went to the very right lane before making their way to the very left lane, half a mile later. Clay looked in his rear-view mirror as Cole's men came closer to slam them again. When they were only a few feet away Clay swerved to the middle lane and tapped on his breaks for a second, this caused Cole's men to fly past momentarily. Clay then dropped down from fifth to third gear using the sports shift; his car screamed as it revved to 6000rpm. Then he quickly shifted to fourth and was gaining on the grey sedan, two seconds later he swerved at them from the middle lane and smashed into the rear right panel of their grey sedan, causing it to flip onto its roof and slide down the freeway. Clay looked in the rear-view mirror before the truck they had passed earlier came around the bend and slammed its breaks on screeching down the road before hitting the grey sedan, causing it to flip three times. Clay slammed on his breaks and pulled onto the center median strip. "Stay here!" he yelled, before jumping out of the car, with pistol in hand and sprinting towards the flipped grey sedan. The truck driver jumped out of his cab, as his truck was now blocking the traffic behind him, "What the hell is wrong with you!!" he yelled; Clay aimed his pistol at the driver, "Get back in your truck!!!" he yelled back at the man, who fearfully jumped back inside his cab. Then Clay walked up to the grey sedan and put a bullet into each mercenary's head, as they slowly tried to get out of the wreckage. Then he sprinted back to his car and immediately drove off. Although it was quiet on the roads that night, Clay had noticed a few cars drive past. Even though the trucks trailer blocked vision of the smashed sedan to anyone behind it, the gunshots were clearly heard by the truck driver who would now have to explain what he had witnessed to the authorities.

He would be heavily interrogated as to the cause of two dead men with bullets in their heads, in a smashed-up car that had been hit by his truck on the freeway. Maria continued to whimper, before Clay softly rubbed her shoulder, "It's okay they're gone" he said. Clay took the next exit that came along, before pulling into a gas station. He looked up and made note of the direction the cameras were pointed, to avoid them as best he could, then he drove around back. He jumped out of the car and opened his boot, lifting the back where his spare tire was. He always kept a set of dummy plates in both of his cars, just in case. He quickly changed the plates, then drove to the front of the service station and filled up the tank. Moments later, they were back on the freeway again, "It's okay, by the time anyone comes looking for us you'll be out of the country, and I'll be at my safe house," said Clay. Maria didn't say anything as she was still pretty shaken up from the ordeal. Clay pulled off the freeway and drove them to a little-known motel that he had used before, "I'll be right back" he said before going to the reception to check them in. He drove his car to unit 9, then grabbed Maria's bag out of the trunk for her. They both walked into the room which had two single beds, a small bathroom, and an outdated television. Maria went and sat on one of the beds while Clay placed her bag at the end of it, "Why don't you just take a shower and try to relax, I'll go get us some dinner and we'll book your plane ticket after that" he said.

Maria just sat there, blankly staring straight ahead before nodding, as Clay opened the door to leave, "How do you do it?" she asked. He stopped and turned back to her, "Do what?" he asked softly, "Act like nothing just happened" she replied.

Clay thought about it for a moment, "I guess nothing really affects me anymore" he said before stepping out and closing the door.

Back at San Diego International Airport, Emanuele made sure he was first in line to board his flight. He had his ticket scanned and then walked through the tunnel to the plane. He sat down in his designated seat, in row 15, seat K, which was a window seat. A moment of panic came over him as he remembered his laptop was still in the Explorer when he was abducted. He quickly pulled his phone out and opened the note's application; he breathed a sigh of relief remembering that he had transferred the private keys and logins from the laptop, and they were now only on his phone. He knew everything else he needed would be stored in his Email accounts, in the cloud. The abduction and prospect of execution had caused him to forget that he had already covered this part of the plan. As the passengers slowly boarded the plane, putting their bags in the overhead lockers and finding their seats, Emanuele closed his eyes and rested. He awoke to feel the plane accelerate upon take-off, and he looked to his left to see an elderly couple seated next to him. Then he looked outside his window; he watched to see the skylights of San Diego, the city he had called home his whole life, disappear into the distance. Sadness came over him as he thought about the possibility of never seeing home again. Then tears rolled down his cheeks as he thought about Eva, and what would become of his father.

Just as Emanuele had these thoughts, a fleet of 4 black sedans and 2 large black vans drove into the entrance of Dominic's building. They continued through the front and stopped at the gate which led to the private parking. Dominic's men that were stationed in the car at the entrance noticed the unusual convoy, "We better call this in" said the driver, appearing worried. "There's a group of unmarked cars and vans that entered the hotel carpark" said Percy, walking into the lounge room, upon answering the call. Dominic's smile from being entertained by one of his comedic enforcers, quickly disappeared.

“Check the surveillance” he said to the enforcer, who then walked through to the surveillance room where 8 LCD displays showed different camera footage from every angle around the hotel at the click of a mouse. Percy was still talking to the men from the entrance on his phone, when he lowered it, “They just entered the lobby Dominic, I’ll call reception and find out who they are” he said. “Send the men inside, I don’t want to take any chances” said Dominic angrily, before taking another swig of his drink. After talking to reception Percy hung up his phone, “There are some businessmen staying here, apparently there’s a logistics expo down the block, maybe they’re staying here for that” said Percy as the enforcer walked back into the lounge room with a worried look on his face. “No that’s not it, they look like feds, and they’re armed” said the enforcer, who had seen the agents step out of their vehicles. “Could be more of Cole’s guys here, how many of them were there?” asked Dominic casually. “30 or 40” replied the enforcer, sounding even more worried now. Dominic stood up straight away, “There’s a kilo of coke in my office, grab it and flush it” he said. The enforcer nodded and started walking away quickly but Dominic grabbed him by the arm, “Wait! When you’ve done that grab the other men in the front room, collect all the laptops, computers, cell phones, and take them into the last room on the left down the hall. Inside the cupboard you’ll find hammers and power drills, destroy everything, put them in bags and throw them down the garbage shoot, and then all of you leave down the service lift” he continued. Then he let go of the enforcer’s arm, and handed his phone over to him, “When you get out of here contact Cole, tell him the change of plans, and Percy make a backup of our files from the vault, I’ll need them once this shit is dealt with” said Dominic. “Why don’t you just leave with us?” asked Percy, “They’ll keep coming after me until I satisfy their questioning, the sooner we squash this, the sooner we can relocate and get on with business. The Barosa brothers have run me through everything I need to do in this scenario,

when you get back to your place, call them, tell them the feds have taken me in for questioning. I won't say a word until they arrive. Worst case, I'll have to grease some palms in the justice department" continued Dominic, calmly. With every sign of evidence within the penthouse now flushed or destroyed, there was now nothing to suggest that it was the tip of the pyramid in America's largest Drug Empire. Percy and the other's left quickly, "You might want to come with us, feds are here to take Dominic in for questioning" said Percy as he walked past Jerry. "No, I'll stay, besides I'm just a doorman" "Suit yourself" said Percy before quickly following the others down the stairs to the service lift.

Moments later, a group of 10 men who were crammed in the main elevator stepped out, as two of them led the group. They appeared to be high ranking as they were wearing suits while the other men had body armor and assault rifles. "I'm agent Stamford, this is agent Myles" said the man on the right, as both men of European descent flashed their badges. Jerry stood there with his arms folded looking unamused, "What do you want?" he asked, "We're not here for you Jeremiah Cornell, we're here to speak with Dominic Caito" replied the other agent. Jerry's expression didn't change; he assumed the feds had a huge file on his criminal past, which Dominic had pulled strings to bury and keep him out of prison. He decided not to give them any reason to take him in, so he turned and then banged three times on the front door of the penthouse, before opening it. Jerry never knocked, anyone who managed to get to the front of the penthouse were either let in by Jerry or disposed of by Jerry. The simple act of his big fist knocking, let everyone know that the situation was out of his control. Just as the first group of ten walked into the penthouse another group of ten stepped out of the elevator, to Jerry's disgust. The two leading agents of the first group, walked quickly through the penthouse looking for Dominic, as their men checked the rooms for possible threats, before re-joining the two agents in the back lounge room.

Now they all stood in front of Dominic, who had been sitting in his chair, smoking a cigar, waiting for them. "Dominic Caito, I'm agent Stamford, this is agent Myles. We're with the CIA. We need you to come with us" said agent Stamford, smugly. Dominic kept casually puffing on his cigar, although he was suspicious as to why CIA was standing in his lounge room instead of the FBI. "What's this in regard to?" he asked, acting a little surprised. "You're not under arrest, we just need to ask you some questions in relation to an ongoing investigation" replied agent Myles. Dominic raised his eyebrows in suspicion, "Why all the back-up then?" he asked, regretting the decision to send away most of his men. "Granted, it is overkill but with a man of your stature, we're just being cautious... If you'll come with us now, we'll have you back before dinner" replied agent Myles. "I want my lawyers present," said Dominic; both agents looked at each other and nodded, then agent Myles handed Dominic a card that had the address to their headquarters on it. He briefly looked at the card and then stood up and walked to the kitchen, with the agents following him. He picked up the secure landline phone and selected contacts on the touch screen LCD, swiped down and dialed the Barosa brothers. "It's Dominic, I'm using the landline, meet me at this address in 25 minutes" he said, flashing the agent's card in front of the camera, before hanging up. Then Dominic put on his suit jacket and followed the men through the penthouse and towards the elevators; he stopped briefly, turning with his back to the agents, with Jerry standing in front of him. "Just stay here, Percy will contact you if he needs you" he said quietly, and then he quickly joined the agents who were staring at him intently by the elevator. They made their way to the car park and then Dominic was courteously led into the back of one of the cars. The two lead agents sat in front, while Dominic sat in the back, between two large CIA operatives. The convoy left the building passing Cole who had just arrived in his car out the front. He slid down in his seat as the

convoy passed and watched the feed from the night vision camera, attached to the front of his car. The first car in the convoy pulled out slowly and then the second; Cole's eyes widened as he recognized the driver. He had crossed paths with agent Stamford before, and quickly pulled out his phone to call Percy, who was now driving towards their bunker near the border of Arizona. "Percy, Dominic's in danger!" he said, "What are you talking about?" asked Percy sounding concerned, "I'm talking about the fact that the CIA has Dominic; he's in the same car with a ruthless son of a bitch, named Stamford" replied Cole. "Shit! How the hell did the CIA get involved?!" "That doesn't matter right now, we need to focus on getting Dominic back. I'll have my men follow me and we'll try to make this clean. But Percy, this is going to cost... I haven't been on the CIA's radar for a long time" said Cole, "Name your price!" replied Percy, angrily. "Forty million, not including the ten once the other job is completed" "Done, I'll have a crew of my men ready to help you" "That won't be necessary" replied Cole smiling to himself, then he ended the call and continued to follow the convoy at a distance. He had long desired to take agent Stamford out, and now finally, he had a price on his head. Meanwhile, Dominic tried to study the familiar landmarks in which he passed, to figure out if he was going in the right direction of the address that he had given to his lawyers. Suddenly, he felt a sharp pain in the side of his arm, he looked to his right and saw that the man sitting next to him, had shoved a syringe into it and was squeezing a solution in. He struggled to pull the syringe out as the big man to his left grabbed his arms and put him in a headlock. After the syringe was pulled out, he got his arms free, then grabbed the man holding it by the throat and began choking him as hard as he could. The man's eyes started rolling back in his head, but suddenly Dominic's grip strength began to fade, and everything became foggy; he gasped for air before passing out.

He had been injected with a high dose of truth serum, which sedated him enough for the man to his left to choke him out. The operative on Dominic's right started to cough, "this bastard nearly choked me out!" he yelled, "He'll get what's coming to him... here" replied agent Myles handing him a black cloth bag and handcuffs. The agent cuffed Dominic and put the bag over his head, "Ah sir, we've got a tail that we picked up when leaving the compound, over" came over the two-way radio from the van at the back of the convoy. Agent Myles picked up the radio and held the push-to-talk button, "maintain speed, wait till we clear the city and then neutralize the tail, over" he replied. Agent's Stamford and Myles had the authority to take out any threats and by any means. Unbeknownst to Dominic, or anyone in the Empire, the CIA had been watching them for a long time. They now had to take assertive action, with the information of the organization being leaked to all the intelligence community. The convoy drove out onto the Kumeyaay highway still being followed by Cole, "Do you see my location on the GPS?" asked Cole, "We're five minutes from your location" replied one of his men over the hands-free speaker in another car. The CIA's convoy increased its speed and Cole accelerated to keep up with them, but suddenly, the doors to the van he was following flung open and road spikes were thrown out. Cole swerved to miss them but felt the bump as his right tires ran over them; he maintained his speed and then pulled his Desert Eagle out. "Run flats!!" yelled the operative that had thrown out the spikes; Cole aimed out the side of his window and fired shots at the man, one hitting him in the chest and knocking him back inside the van. Two other agents quickly closed the doors and checked him; the bullet had hit his bullet-proof chest plate. The two men then quickly flung the doors back open; both were holding M16's set to fully automatic. They sprayed Cole's windshield and grill; Cole ducked, noticing that his bulletproof windshield wouldn't hold up much longer.

He planted his foot on the accelerator, but he seemed to have lost power, as bullets had ripped through the radiator, and white smoke started spewing out as the engine was dying. Cole knew he couldn't pursue any longer, so he pulled to the side of the road and jumped out of his car as he watched the convoy disappear into the distance. "How far are you!!?" he yelled angrily into his phone, "We're closing in on you now, why have you stopped?" asked the incoming mercenary, "My vehicles neutralized, pick me up!" he yelled. But it was too late, the convoy was long gone; it had turned off the highway and headed up into the Arizona Fortuna Foothills. It made its way to a private helipad, where a helicopter was waiting to extract Dominic.

As the convoy pulled up, the two operatives either side of Dominic grabbed him and loaded him into the back of the helicopter, while he was still unconscious. Then agent Stamford and Myles got in and the helicopter left within a few minutes. They flew for two hours to another location on the outskirts of Phoenix, where the agents carried Dominic into another helicopter that was there waiting for them.

Dominic woke up during the second flight; he opened his eyes, but everything was dark from the bag on his head. But he could hear and feel that he was being transported in a helicopter. He tried to move but he was strapped into his seat and cuffed, "Where the fuck are you taking me!!!??" he yelled. Agent Myles pulled the bag off his head, placed a headset on him and then sat back down.

Dominic saw that the two agents were seated across from him inside a large helicopter. "Sorry about that Dominic, we knew you wouldn't be compliant once you saw we were taking you out of San Diego" said agent Stamford, smugly. "What? What the hell do you want with me?!" asked Dominic, "Let's cut the shit! We know all about your operation!" replied agent Stamford.

“It wasn’t until your son leaked everything that we realized just how big of a player you were! Our department couldn’t believe it, when we found out it was your son who sold you out! You must have done something to really piss him off!” screamed agent Myles, before the four agents present, began laughing among themselves. Dominic looked down at the floor, defeated, for a moment, as the agents smirked at each other, realizing that they had gotten to him. Then all of a sudden, Dominic began laughing, starting quietly, which gradually became loud and sarcastic, “So, boys where are you sending me!!!? Memphis, Pensacola!? I’ll have some people make the arrangements!!!” yelled Dominic, sounding like a madman, slurring his words. The two lead agents looked at each other amused, “Maybe we gave him too much” said agent Myles, smirking as he pointed to his own arm, referring to the amount of truth serum they had injected. Dominic continued to act delirious; although he had built up a tolerance to mixing cocaine and alcohol, the shot of truth serum combined with what was already in his system that day, made him act insane. He drifted back to sleep after making a few more outbursts and awoke when the helicopter landed at its destination a couple of hours later; still feeling the effects of the drugs in his system but now he was thinking clearly. He looked down at his wristwatch and started to unscrew the mechanism, cautiously. Suddenly, the left side of the helicopter was opened by another high-ranking agent. Dominic instantly dropped his cuffed hands in between his lap, “So this is the all-powerful Dominic Caito I’ve been hearing about the past three years,” said the agent. “Yeah, we can finally pull down all the surveillance pictures of his ugly mug” replied Myles, jokingly. The new agent then led Dominic out of the helicopter and into an SUV, as agent’s Stamford and Myles followed closely behind.

They were in what seemed like a ghost town on the eastern border of New Mexico and started driving west. All three agents kept their eyes focused on Dominic, and intermittently antagonized him, but he stayed silent. When they failed to get anything out of him, agent Myles piped up, "Enjoy your silence, because when we arrive, you'll be doing a lot of talking" he said, adamantly.

After this, the agents started talking among themselves; Dominic very carefully slid his hand over his watch to continue unscrewing the mechanism until it popped out. He then very gently pulled it out two clicks, and then pushed it back in completely, before screwing it back in. "What was that?!" yelled agent Stamford, noticing Dominic pull his right hand away from the watch, "What was what?" he replied, "Is that a tracker!?" asked Myles, angrily. Dominic shook his head hesitantly, as agent Stamford reached over and pulled the watch off his wrist, while death staring him. Dominic looked at him without any tells on his face, but Stamford put the window down and then threw the watch out, as the car sped along at 70mph. "That wasn't very smart" said senior agent Purser, trying to get a reaction out of Dominic. But Dominic continued to remain silent and thought to himself, 'You're all dead' because what they had no idea, was that Dominic had just set off the tracking chip that was implanted in the fleshy part of his inner right thigh. This would send out an emergency alert, along with his location to all his top enforcers around the country, for this exact situation. It had never been done before, but Dominic knew that his men would stop at nothing to repossess him.

Chapter 16: Contingencies Corrupted

Two days later, Emanuele's plane landed in Hong Kong at 2:45pm, adjusted for the time zone difference. He was tired from the jet lag, but at the same time couldn't wait to see the love of his life. During his layover in London, he had messaged Leila to tell her that he would be arriving the following afternoon. After landing, his final plane taxied to the terminal, and the passengers started to disembark, before slowly filtering in through towards the baggage collection. Emanuele walked straight through to Customs and showed his passport to the nearest Custom's officer, "What is your purpose for travel to Hong Kong today?" asked the officer, "For a holiday" replied Emanuele, smiling. The officer studied Emanuele's face and passport, then stamped it before letting him through. He walked out into the arrivals area, which was completely packed with many Chinese travelers. He pulled his phone out and powered it up before dialing Leila's number, "Emanuele!" shouted a sweet voice from the crowd; he instantly knew it was her. He frantically looked in the direction he had heard her voice and walked quickly passing groups of travelers. Suddenly, people moved to the sides, and there she was standing in front of him, looking stunning in a blue and gold dress with the most mesmerizing smile he had ever seen. He walked up to her and embraced her, and she held him tightly as they both became emotional; kissing and wiping each other's tears, before hugging again. "I was so worried about you, I couldn't sleep," said Leila, "It's ok, I'm here now" replied Emanuele. An impeccably dressed middle aged Chinese lady, wearing a black fur coat stepped forward, "This is my mom," said Leila. "Welcome to Hong Kong, Emanuele" said the lady with a Chinese accent; "It's very nice to meet you" replied Emanuele, carefully shaking her hand.

A bald, well-built Chinese man stepped forward and whispered into Leila's mother's ear. "Let's go" she said to them both, before the four of them made their way outside of the airport. "Didn't you bring anything with you?" asked Leila noticing Emanuele had no luggage; he also felt embarrassingly underdressed. "I didn't have a chance to... I almost didn't make it" he replied. A look of worry came over Leila, "What happened?" she asked, "I'll tell you a little later, I'll need to get some essentials though" "Of course, we'll drop my mom home and then have her driver take us to the mall" said Leila, "Ok, sounds good" replied Emanuele smiling and holding Leila close to him as they exited the airport. The driver opened the back door to a Mercedes-Benz S-Class short stretch limo; Leila's mom entered, and he closed the door behind her. "This way" said Leila, taking Emanuele's hand and then leading him to the other side of the car where the driver now held the door open for them. They got into the luxurious vehicle and sat in the two seats facing Leila's mom, then the driver got in and pulled the car away. "So, Emanuele how long would you like to stay with us?" asked Leila's mother, "Well, Mrs..." "Miss Wu" she said correcting him. "Miss Wu, it will only be for a short while until I buy my own apartment. But I plan to stay in Hong Kong indefinitely" he said, "Do you currently have the means to buy a place of your own?" she asked, judging the clothing he was wearing and the fact that he had no suitcase. "Yes, I do, I just have to open up a bank account here and wire the money from my bank in the United States" he replied. "How much are you looking to spend? I could have one of my real estate agents, help you find something in your price range" "I'd like to try and get a condo for between two and three million" replied Emanuele. Miss Wu started laughing, "You won't find anything for that price in Hong Kong" she said, "Two million US?" asked Emanuele politely, "Oh I see, so about 15 million Hong Kong Dollars then" she replied.

“Yes” said Emanuele smiling, while feeling a bit awkward; he had never been so underestimated by somebody that he wanted to impress so much. But he hoped to build a strong relationship with Miss Wu because he wanted nothing more than to be with her daughter. “Mama, could you ask if there is anything in our building?” asked Leila, “Zhēnguì, there’s nothing in our building under 50 million” replied Miss Wu, “So Emanuele, what do you do for work?” she asked, “Mama!” said Leila, embarrassingly interjecting, “I have a friend that moved here recently, we’ll be running a tech business together” said Emanuele, thinking on his feet. Leila looked at Emanuele a little surprised, “Oh I forgot to tell you, that Samuel guy I studied with back in San Diego, he’s moved over here as well” he said, “Really?” asked Leila. “Yeah, he was helping me with something important back home, and we decided it was best for him to move here as well” said Emanuele, raising his eyebrows and smiling, trying to make Leila understand what he was referring to without arousing any suspicion from Miss Wu. “Oh good” said Leila, nodding when she caught Emanuele’s drift, after an awkward moment of silence. As the car drove over Stonecutters Bridge Leila tapped Emanuele and pointed out the window, “Wow, that’s amazing” he said, as he looked out and saw Hong Kong Island. When they approached the Western Harbor Crossing Toll, Emanuele realized they were about to go through a tunnel under water, “I’ve heard about these underwater tunnels, but I’ve never been through one” he said, trying to downplay his excitement of the sudden realization, that he was now a free man. When they came out through the other side of the tunnel, the surrealness was gone; he marveled, as he took it all in; finally, he was in Hong Kong with the girl of his dreams! He felt so much happiness, that he had to force himself not to obnoxiously laugh out loud. He had made it, and despite all the forces that had come against him leading up to this moment, he had made it. The limo pulled up out the front of a high-rise building in Happy Valley, where Leila and

her mother lived, then the driver opened the door. "We're just going shopping for a little while to get Emanuele some clothes," said Leila, "Be home for dinner, I've got chef Georges coming" replied Miss Wu, before she stepped out. "Where to?" asked the driver, once he was back inside, "Times Square please Bolin" replied Leila; then Bolin the driver, pulled the car away. Leila locked the doors, closed the privacy divider, and jumped on Emanuele, grabbing him, and kissing him passionately. "I'm so glad you're safe, and here with me" she said looking deeply into his eyes, "I am too Zhēngui" he replied smiling. Leila opened her mouth, feeling a little embarrassed, "What does it mean?" asked Emanuele, "It means precious" she replied, "I think I'll just stick with calling you precious" he said, while caressing her. She grabbed him by the back of the neck, and they began kissing him again. When they arrived, the driver pulled up out the front, then they both got out and walked inside Times Square Mall. "Wow, this is definitely the tallest mall I've ever seen" said Emanuele as he looked up into the sky mall, "Let's go!" said Leila, excitedly pulling him by the hand. Meanwhile back in California, Clay rose early that morning and woke up Maria. He had booked her the earliest possible flight out of the country, from Oakland International Airport. "Time to go Maria" he said, giving her a fright as she woke up; she instantly got up and quickly grabbed some clothes, then went into the bathroom and got changed. Clay grabbed their things, put them in the car, then he returned to the room. He checked his phone and saw Dominic's distress signal and location; Clay looked at it strangely, he knew Dominic must have been in serious trouble, as this was only ever to be released as an absolute last resort. "What's wrong?" asked Maria as she stepped out of the bathroom, "Nothing" replied Clay, quickly putting his phone into his pocket. Then they stepped outside, and Clay locked their room's door while Maria got into the car, "Back in a minute" he said before walking to reception to return the key.

When they arrived at Oakland Airport, Clay circled through the drop off zone to make sure no one was there waiting for them. Once he felt that it was safe for Maria, he drove into the daily parking area, and parked. They quickly got out and walked to departures; Maria was again wearing her hat, sunglasses, and a long sleeve shirt to cover up any signs of distress, that would render her 'unfit' to fly. They checked her bag in and then Clay followed her to security, "Have you heard from Emanuele?" asked Maria; "he said he'll call me when he gets over there, he probably had a long layover. I'll give you my number" he replied. Maria quickly pulled her phone out of her bag and handed it to him; Clay then saved his number into her contacts list, "Call me anytime you need to" he said handing her phone back. Maria wrapped her arms around him, giving him a big hug, which Clay wasn't expecting, but he hugged her back. "Thank you, Clay," she said softly with gratitude, then she let him go, before walking through security and to her gate.

Meanwhile, at the secret CIA location in Roswell, New Mexico, agent Myles was getting fed up with the interrogation process, "Just fill in the blanks!!!" he yelled, slamming his fist onto the table that Dominic was seated behind.

They had been harassing him for hours to give them more information without success and decided to change the topic to his political connections. "If you give us what we're asking for, we will make sure you're out of prison by 70" said Agent Stamford, calmly lying. He then turned the video recording device back on, "In what capacity did the mayor work for you?" he asked, "He's a civil servant, he works for everyone" said Dominic, before laughing at the two agents who were becoming increasingly frustrated. The camera was turned off again and then the two agents stepped out to brief each other for a moment.

When they re-entered the room, they both seemed to have smirks on their faces. "Well, Mr Caito, agent Myles and I have come to a resolution" said agent Stamford. "You're going to Delaware to face the death penalty for your inability to cooperate. You've been a thorn in our side for long enough, and your political allies can't protect you any longer" said agent Myles, with a smug look on his face. Then they turned to exit the room, "Wait!" said Dominic; he knew that if he was taken to Delaware his men wouldn't be able to get to him in time, "I'll talk" he said, hesitantly. The two agents nodded at each other; then they closed the door, sat down across from Dominic, and turned the video recording device back on. When they started asking questions again, he warped the truth as much as he could, but his story wasn't corroborating with the information that they already had. Dominic knew that he just needed to buy more time for his men to arrive and deal with the situation. Agent Stamford shook his head, "Dominic, you still seem to think you're all powerful... who exactly do you think set up that meeting with Zhang?" he asked, which completely threw Dominic off guard; he hoped his men were on their way. Back in Hong Kong, Emanuele followed Leila into her mother's expansive Happy Valley apartment; it was contemporary and pristine in cleanliness. "Leila, show Emanuele his room and then come for dinner" said Miss Wu, as her personal chef placed the entrées on the table. Leila walked with Emanuele and showed him to his room; he quickly pulled his cheap airport t-shirt off, then grabbed one of the v neck designer shirts out of the shopping bag. He put his arms through the sleeves, but before he could pull it over his head Leila grabbed him and they started kissing.

Then they stopped to look at each other; he smiled at her, and she let go of him so he could get his shirt on. They hugged each other joyfully and then went out to the dining room to sit at the dinner table.

The chef was standing, waiting at the end of the table for them, "For entrée we have caramelized beetroot and goat's cheese tart... for main we have confit chicken with garlic sauce, parsnip puree and basil cream, and for dessert mini lemon grass cream caramels" he said. "That sounds almost as good as what we had at your friend's restaurant" said Leila to Emanuele, which made him chuckle. The chef was slightly taken aback by her response, "Thank you chef Georges," said Miss Wu. The French chef bowed his head respectfully and then returned to the kitchen. When they had finished the 3-course meal they sat there and made small talk for a short while, "Could I please be excused I have to make a phone call" said Emanuele, "Yes, you may use the phone in your bedroom, but before you go, I just want to say how much I appreciate you getting my daughter back here safely. She told me how you also drove her to the airport and paid for her flight. For that I will always be grateful to you," said Miss Wu. "It was my pleasure" replied Emanuele as he politely smiled and then left the table. He walked back to his room, closed the door, and then quickly grabbed his phone to look up Clay's number. He had completely forgotten to call, with all the excitement of being reunited with Leila. He dialed the calling codes for California and then dialed Clay's cell; it felt like a long wait of anticipation before Clay finally picked up, "Hello?" said Clay, in his deep familiar voice. "Oh, thank God, is my mom, okay?" he asked getting straight to the point, "Yes she will arrive tomorrow at 1915 your time" replied Clay, "So, seven fifteen pm, tomorrow, okay. Thank you, Clay, I don't know how I'll ever repay you," said Emanuele. He had so much gratitude for what Clay had done for him and his mother and knew he would now be constantly on the run from his father's men. "Don't worry about it kid, just look after yourself" he said before hanging up. Emanuele put the phone down, closed his eyes; then he broke down, thanking Creator for allowing his mother to escape.

Meanwhile, Clay put his phone down and continued the ten-hour drive to his safe house, which was in the forest, 15 minutes' drive south of Prescott, Arizona. He made sure to avoid the roads he had previously travelled on before killing the mercenaries. When he pulled up outside of his safe house, he looked at it and sighed; it was totally overgrown with vines and bush scrub. He hadn't been there in years because he had been constantly working for Dominic, and there was no one still alive, who knew about its location. He got out of his car, walked up the front steps of the porch and to the front door. He pulled on a small piece of rope that was lodged in a deep crack in the wall, which had a key attached to the end of it, then he moved the vines hanging over the doorknob to unlock the door. Once he opened it up and walked inside, it was exactly as he had left it, but now had a strong musty smell and was covered in dust. He put his hand on one of the photos on the wall, leaving finger marks in the dust, without looking at it. It was a picture of him with his younger brother when they were leaving for their first deployment in the military. They were not only brothers, but best friends growing up and Clay was never the same after that first deployment; he brought his brother home in a coffin. Next to that, was a picture of the two of them at twelve and thirteen years old, with their father standing behind them; they had just finished a training session with their father, who taught them both how to box. Clay walked over to the kitchen cupboard and pulled out an old bottle of whiskey; he took a swig out of it and stared out the back window into the forest. He now had no family, no friends and no one to work for. He walked over to an old, deteriorated leather couch that had belonged to his parents. As he sat down on it, dust flew up into the air, and he took another swig from the bottle as he looked up at all the old pictures from his past, which were displayed around an old television set from the early 90's.

Suddenly, his cell phone began to ring; he picked it up and looked at the screen. Not recognizing the number, he answered anyway, "Clay its Jerry, before you hang up... I think you did the right thing. I've known Dominic a long time, but I never thought he had the capacity to kill his own boy," said Jerry, "What do you want?" "I need your help; Percy's doubled the hit money to take out Dominic" replied Jerry.

Earlier that day, Percy had called Carlos from his apartment, "Dominic's distress signal has been activated" he said, "What happened!?" asked Carlos, "The CIA has him" replied Percy. Carlos paused, "Chingada Madre... will he talk?" "It's unlikely, but this presents an opportunity" replied Percy, "How!?" yelled Carlos, in aggravation. "I had some people check out the location, it's not a headquarters and it's not a stronghold either... there wouldn't be more than a dozen men holding him there" replied Percy. "Good, good! Let's send in our best men to get him out! I'm still pretty much useless, but my boys could help" said Carlos, enthusiastically. "I've got another idea... how about we use this opportunity to take over ourselves," said Percy; "What, you mean like let the justice system take him in?" "No... we take Dominic out of the equation" replied Percy. Carlos went silent for a moment as he pondered upon the prospect of it, "I don't know if I can do that... he's been like a father to me" he said. "How has he treated you like a son? He treats you more like a pest than a son. He never introduces you to the clients. I mean look at where you are right now, stuck in bed recovering because of his failure to do what needed to be done right away!" said Percy in frustration, while Carlos remained silent. "Look, if you're with me I'll put you in charge of manufacturing, you'll be making ten times what you make now" continued Percy, in an effort to win Carlos over; Percy knew he had great connections inside of Mexico, and it would be next to impossible to revive the Empire without him.

It only took a moment to convince Carlos; the prospect of not having to deal with the Caito family any longer and making far more money than he ever had before, was too good an opportunity to pass up. "You know what Percy, you're right, alright I'm with you, but what about the head enforcers?" he asked, "I'm holding a video conference with them soon, but I've spoken to the one's I trust to join us, and they said they'll get the rest on board" he replied. Then the call was ended, and the Empire's coup had been set in motion. As Jerry explained the situation to Clay over the phone, he mentioned that Arron was one of the head enforcers on the video conference who refused to go against Dominic, which Clay admired, "I'm sorry Jerry, but you're on your own" he said, before hanging up. Jerry was disappointed he didn't have the backup, "I'll do this alone then" he said in his deep voice, as he was determined to get Dominic back. He didn't hesitate to arrange for the charter of one of Dominic's private jets, to try to get to Roswell before Cole's crew did, as they had also received his location. Jerry immediately contacted Dominic's pilot, who told him that he couldn't get there on such short notice. But Jerry explained that the situation was extremely important and convinced him that Dominic would be willing to triple his usual fee. The pilot accepted but told Jerry that the earliest he could get there was in two hours at 8pm. Jerry agreed, "the earlier the better" he said, knowing that he had no other option. He knew he would be cutting it close but was determined to save who he had long considered to be his 'brother in arms', because of the history they shared. Meanwhile, Clay was still sitting on the old leather couch, deliberating in his mind whether to help Jerry or not; he took a shower to try and forget about it. But as he stood there under the water, for the first time in his life, he felt useless. He had become so accustomed to taking lives, but saving Emanuele and his mother, had changed something inside of him. He turned the water off, threw some jeans and a shirt on and walked to his side dresser.

Then he opened the top cupboard and looked at his .500 Smith & Wesson Revolver. He had never taken a life with it, but thought it was time to be used to save his friend. He quickly picked his phone back up and made a phone call, "Bill, I'm calling in that favor... you still got the Beechcraft?" he asked. When Jerry arrived at the airport, he went and opened the hangar which contained Dominic's planes. The pilot met him there at 7:54pm, then they both boarded and left for Roswell.

As soon as they landed and moved off the runway, Jerry jumped out of the hatch even before the stairs were completely down and sprinted to the closest car park. After looking around to see no one was watching, he smashed the window of an old van, then got inside and started hotwiring it. Once he had it started, he drove off following the directions on his phone to Dominic's location. Moments later, he got to the edge of the block, which led to the building that Dominic was being held in. He jumped out of the van, ditching it on the side of the road and sprinted past a series of smaller buildings before he got to the one, he would enter. It was a UFO museum under renovations to keep the public out; Jerry knew this was just cover for what was really going on inside. But he was too late; there were already 3 black vans parked out front, which meant that Cole's crew had already stormed the building. He heard gunshots and then sprinted inside to see one of the mercenary's about to run up the staircase. Jerry sprinted over to the staircase and kicked the merc in the back, knocking him down. Then the merc turned with his assault rifle but Jerry knocked it away with his big palm and kned him in the head, knocking him unconscious. The sound of gunshots fired out from the level above, so he sprinted up the stairs but a merc that had been waiting by the vans entered from behind and shot Jerry in the hamstring. As soon as the bullet pierced his flesh, Jerry spun around pulling his pistol out and shot the merc right in the forehead.

The merc dropped to the floor, dead, as Jerry kept ascending the stairs despite the flesh wound.

When he got to the next level it was a complete firefight; Cole and four of his men had three CIA agents pinned behind a wall on the other side of the office room floor. Twelve agents had already been killed when Cole's team charged in spraying bullets systematically, and now they continued shooting in the direction of the three remaining agents, trying to finish them off. Jerry put his back against the wall of the entrance to the office area and peered past to see one of the mercenaries crouched down, reloading only a few feet from him. He aimed his pistol around the corner and headshot the mercenary through the back of the skull. Suddenly the CIA agents returned fire and Jerry caught a flesh wound to the shoulder. "Fuck!!! Colin's dead!!" yelled another one of the mercenaries, seeing his compatriot lying there with his brains spilled out of his head; "DEAL WITH IT!!!" yelled Cole.

The Mercenary ran around the corner and Jerry ripped the assault rifle from his grasp, throwing it down the stairs, before catching a hard left hook to the face from the merc. Jerry turned back and grabbed him by the back of the head and head-butted him, breaking his nose. The large mercenary picked Jerry up and slammed him into the wall, but Jerry furiously elbowed him in the back, damaging his spinal cord and breaking his rib cage, before choking him out. The big merc dropped and then Jerry picked him up and launched him down the stairs into the wall, headfirst, which broke the merc's neck, killing him on impact. Cole and the two remaining mercenaries fired off more bullets, killing one of the CIA agents who stuck his head out at the wrong time. When they reloaded again, Jerry leaned around the corner, fired his pistol, and successfully killed another one of Coles' mercenaries. Cole dropped his assault rifle and whipped out his own pistol, shooting Jerry in the neck.

Jerry dropped and held his neck, which was leaking out blood, with his right hand. He then ripped his sleeve off his right arm with his left hand and put pressure on the bullet entry with it. Cole and the other mercenary advanced and killed the two remaining CIA agents with ease. Then they continued down the hall to the interrogation room, where agent's Stamford and Myles were waiting behind the door with their pistols drawn. As the floor had now become quiet, they heard footsteps making their way closer to the door; agent Stamford signaled to agent Myles to wait. "I'm in here!!" yelled Dominic thinking it was his men; not a second later Cole and his accomplice laid down fire into the interrogation room spraying bullets into agent's Stamford and Myles, killing them both. Dominic leapt to the floor during the reign of fire, catching a bullet to the shoulder. They opened the door to see the two agents dead, but Dominic still alive. "Check the other rooms, I'm going to speak to Dominic for a minute before I get photo evidence for Percy," said Cole. The mercenary swept the hall, making sure that no one was hiding in any of the other rooms. Meanwhile Jerry still sat in the same spot trying to prop himself up to continue through, but the bullet wounds were making it impossible for him to get to his friend. All of a sudden, he heard someone running up the stairs; he pulled out his gun ready to shoot but breathed a sigh of relief as he noticed the face; It was Clay. Clay ran and crouched down beside the big man, "Are you okay Jerry?" he asked, "I'm fine, save Dominic" replied Jerry, quietly struggling to speak. "Hold on, I'll be back" replied Clay, before pulling his Magnum out and running past the office area that was now littered with dead bodies. He hid behind a corner and peered down the hall, and as he saw the mercenary sweeping the rooms, he snuck into one of rooms behind him. He quietly tucked his magnum into the back of his belt before silently sneaking right up behind the merc, who was now looking through some drawers.

He grabbed the back of the man's head, and chin, then with one swift and powerful movement he twisted and broke the merc's neck, killing him instantly. Then he lowered the dead body to the ground without making any noise.

Inside the interrogation room Cole was wrapping things up with Dominic, "Isn't it funny how things work? Yesterday I was working for you, today I'm killing you" said Cole as he pulled his gun out and pointed it towards Dominic's head. He pulled the hammer back, as Dominic closed his eyes realizing this would be his fate, and then heard, 'BANG!' as glass smashed everywhere, and 'Splat' went Cole's brains all over the walls of the room before his body dropped to the ground. Dominic opened his eyes in shock, seeing Cole lying there, headless; he looked to his right to see Clay of all people, who had shot and killed Cole through the two-way mirror from the adjoining room. Clay jumped through the smashed glass and walked over to Dominic who started breathing heavily, "Percy offer you more money to kill us both, did he?" asked Dominic. Clay said nothing, tucking his .500 magnum back into his belt before helping Dominic to his feet. Then he paused, "I'm just here to make sure an old friend didn't die today," he replied, before walking out of the room.

Dominic was speechless as he followed Clay to the stairwell where Jerry's health was deteriorating, "Oh, my dear old friend" said Dominic, sympathetically as he looked at Jerry struggling to breathe. Then both he and Clay helped Jerry out of the building and into one of the mercenary vans. Then Clay drove them to the plane that was waiting at the Roswell air center; aboard it was medical equipment that Jerry desperately needed. "Speed up!" yelled Dominic, as Jerry lay in the back of the van drifting in and out of consciousness. "Hold on!" yelled Clay, as he pulled the handbrake and drifted the big van through an intersection, narrowly missing oncoming traffic.

They managed to get to the plane within 8 minutes, but it was too late, Jerry had lost too much blood and died right there, in the back of the van.

Dominic sat there in silence, having his oldest and most loyal friend's blood on his hands as the big man lay there, lifeless.

"I'm sorry my brother... you were there for me, even to the end" said Dominic with his hand placed over Jerry's eyes.

"Get out of here Dominic. I'll give him a proper burial," said Clay as Dominic then got out of the car, covered in blood, and boarded his private jet.

"Where's Jerry?" asked the pilot, concerned at the sight of his boss covered in blood, "He's dead, now take off" replied Dominic, before sitting in his seat, as the pilot returned to the cockpit, appearing shaken up. As he sat there, alone, aboard his private jet, Dominic started to weep, knowing that he had lost everything. His only option now was to go into hiding and avoid the fallout that he knew was coming.

Word quickly reached the top Intelligence officials who orchestrated a nationwide manhunt for Dominic. In the months that followed the CIA undertook their largest ever investigation into a criminal organization, working alongside the FBI, and DEA. They shut down many drug outlets and business fronts throughout the country, drained bank accounts and sold off all known properties. But with Percy now taking full control of the Empire, he became even more ruthless than Dominic, and salvaged as much of the organization as possible. Carlos increased production to flood the market with their product, which resulted in an epidemic of drug addicts, and pills became as easy to obtain as alcohol. Despite seeing a 20% haircut to its bottom line, the Empire under Percy's leadership was once again raking in millions per month. Being an election year, the newly elected POTUS vowed to unite the intelligence communities with the military and wage war on the Empire.

The events soon became international news through the media outlets, and Emanuele watched the chaos unfold as he sat in the lounge room of his new apartment with Maria one evening.

He took the controller and switched the TV off, "We never have to worry about that life, ever again" he said as he got up and kissed his mom on the forehead. Then he walked outside and joined Leila on the balcony; together they looked out from Hong Kong Island to the Mainland. Even though it was still foreign to him, Emanuele now called this place home.

He looked at Leila in awe, and she looked back at him with her captivatingly, beautiful, big eyes and gorgeous smile.

Emanuele looked up into the sky and knew that Creator was smiling upon them.

He gave thanks in his heart, unaware that this wasn't the end, but only the beginning.