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## The Moretti's - A Different Family Dynamic

### Chapter 150

Thursday Just Past Midnight / Morning – Red Hook, Brooklyn - 13 March 2003

The phone call to his eminence by Father Mangini was short, sweet, and to the point. He told the elderly Cardinal that the group tasked with capturing Mario Moretti's youngest daughter had succeeded. To Apollonia's amazement, Father Mangini did not falter or show any signs through his speech that we has hanging on to his life by a thin tread. The call took no more than three minutes. When Father Mangini ended the call, the Cardinal thought that everyone except Mario and Apollonia Moretti were dead. He also understood that Father Mangini and his men would do a partial clean up before they drove to the warehouse in the Red Hook Section of Brooklyn. In the Cardinal's mind, everything had gone as planned.

Apollonia said to Nathan, "Keep him company. He does anything stupid, kill him." She did not wait for an answer as she walked from the breakfast area into the great room. She decided she did not want to climb the steps so she yelled, "Colina, stop what you are doing and come to the great room."

Colina Cathcart finished his international conference call with the heads of the Florence, Naples, Rome, Milan, and the Sicilian sections of the Moretti family. He made a quick note on the piece of paper on the desk in front of him, covered it with a ledger type book, and made his way down to the great room. "Mistress," he said as she stood feet together, hands behind his back, and his head bowed.

"Look at me," said Apollonia.

Colina raised his head and made eye contact with his wife and Mistress.

"Thankfully, they did not do any damage to your face," said Apollonia.

"You have to thank Alessandro for that Mistress. He did not go easily," said Colina. "I'm thinking he knew what would happen to me and did his damndest to make sure I was not punched. They did manhandle me and called me derogatory names. Otherwise, I am good, but worried about the children."

"We all are," said Apollonia. "I need you to do whatever you can in a very short period of time to get me as much information as you can on the Austin, Nichols and Company Warehouse in the Red Hook Section of Brooklyn. I

need the address and whatever architectural information you can find on the Internet. I suspect we have until just before sunrise to get them back before those assholes put them onto the freighter."

"No problem Mistress," he said. "Consider it done." He turned made his way to the staircase he had descended and with a new found energy made his way back to her atelier.

The men from the Moretti security company arrived and Viviano assigned them their duties. To a man, they were bound to the family and were not disturbed by having to help Uncle Gino and his men with the dead Vatican assault team. Uncle Gino arrived with four hearses, body bags, implements needed to affect the decapitation of the dead, ice chests, and enough dry ice to keep the heads from beginning to decay. It took a bit longer than Viviano had wanted, but four teams of twelve men arrived in trucks laden with everything they needed to repair the damage in the four houses. The employees of Moretti Construction knew the family and their licit and illicit activities. Their salary and benefits showed to each man their importance to the family and its endeavors. Viviano spoke to the four supervisors explaining what needed to be done. He also told them to allow other workers that may be in their way to complete their tasks before starting repairs. They were also told that everything had to be finished by the end of the day. The four trucks were backed into the driveway of each house. The truck delayed was the one for the main house. The two sedans had to be moved into the street first.

Apollonia approached Father Mangini. She looked at him, turned to Nathan, and said, "Carry him back out to the patio."

The scream that came from the Father's mouth could have awoken the dead. He couldn't hold his bladder and pissed all over the chair, his thighs, and the floor. His body, although broken, tried to work its way out of the ropes that bound him to the chair. His eyes were wide, the orbs bulging, as his brain tried to cope with the knowledge that his life was about to end even though he made the required phone call to Cardinal DeTomaso.

Nathan stood behind the chair which he placed so the captive could not see back into the main house. He felt Apollonia tap him on his shoulder. He turned his head, saw her take a few steps back, and did the same. Nathan waited for his boss to speak.

"I really want your candid opinion," said Apollonia. "Do not hold anything back when I ask you questions. Or get into a minor debate with you. I need to hear the truth."

"Yes Miss Moretti."

"Do you think he is worth something to us when we go into Brooklyn?"

"He is not an asset. He is a liability. And his physical body is broken."

"Then you're comfortable with his conversation with Cardinal DeTomaso. Do you think he used code words to alert the cardinal?"

"No. His psyche is far too broken to take that chance. Just look what happened when he heard you tell me to bring him out to the patio again. He's afraid of dying."

"Are you?"

"No Miss Moretti. Death is part of the job when you accept the trials and tribulations of black operations. I calmly waited until the doctor was done with Mr. Bruno before I approached him to clean up my flesh wound. I accepted this job with the knowledge that there may be some untoward activities. If I die and you're alive, I hope you bring me back to Columbus Place so I can be buried someplace nice with someone saying some nice words before they lower me to my final resting place. I am not a candidate to be buried in a place like Arlington National Cemetery, but that would be an honor if I was."

"I'm thinking, if we let Father Mangini live, we're leaving ourselves open to retribution. What do you think?"

"On his part? I don't think so. He'd have to make contact with the powers-to-be. Explain why he is alive and the others aren't. If you're asking me, I'd just quietly walk up to him from behind, be kind by not letting him see what is coming, and put two into the back of his head."

"That is the assassin's code. No reason to inflict further pain on the prey. But, I have a problem. My problem stems from my knowledge of the man. See, Father Mangini is the pedophile's pedophile. That sick bastard has done things that no sane individual would do to a child. I want to see the look in his eyes when I place the barrel of my Sig between them. I want to hear him plead and beg for his life. Am I so wrong to in a way avenge all those he's ruined by forcing them to have sex with him. A man that is supposed to bring the voice of God to his congregation; instead, he takes boys and girls and uses them to satisfy his carnal desires."

"I see your point Miss Moretti and I know you'd have no issues with killing the man. You asked me to be honest and forthright. Then, walk away. Take the high road. You're the head of the most powerful family in the world. You have one more difficult job to finish. You need to bring home the children. Then you should put all of this behind you. Use your intelligence to keep the family in your court, but allocate to those you trust the black operations that need to be performed, but not point back to you. When it is at all possible, you have to, no, must keep your hands clean."

Apollonia nodded. She was impressed with the use of the word 'you' instead of the collective 'we'. During their entire conversation, Nathan never stopped looking directly into her eyes. He was doing as she requested – telling the truth as he saw it.

"You're right," said Apollonia as she kept looking into his eyes. The message to Nathan was a plain as the gold flecks that accented the turquoise color of her eyes. She turned and walked back into the house. Just as she stepped through the threshold of the French doors, she heard the silenced spit of his Sig. She knew Father Mangini was dead.

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"Do you want me to give you the information?" asked Colina. "Or, would you like to have the team sit and listen to what I've found?"

Apollonia was amazed at the work that was going on around her. She wanted more than anything to sit at the oak table in the breakfast room, but knew that would be out of the question. She was also amazed at her sissy husband's command of the Internet to search for the information she needed to assault the warehouse.

"The conversation pit in the great room," answered Apollonia. "Gather everyone together for me."

Colina knew who he needed to find. Nathan was standing just outside the French doors. Although Raffaella was working in the kitchen, she was holding an animated conversation with her husband, so he was easy to find. The missing piece was Ming. He went to Nathan and Viviano. They walked to the great room still carrying their weapons. Colina stood, looked around, frowned, as he thought were Ming could have disappeared to. The light went on and he made his way to the basement. He found her sitting against the wall staring off into space.

"Ming," he said gently. "Apollonia needs you in the great room."

Ming broke her stare, but did not say a word.

"Please come with me. We're going to make up the action plan to get back Shen and Lian," said Colina. He knew better than to group all of the children together. She needed to hear only her children's names. Colina offered her his hand.

Ming rose with the help of her lover's sissy husband's hands. He allowed her to exit the basement before him. Colina followed her into the great room where Apollonia, Viviano, and Nathan sat. Ming sat next to her lover and without thinking took the hand next to her into hers. Colina stood with his back the front doors as if he was a college professor getting ready to give a class lecture. He handed out a small packet of 8.5x11 papers to each participant.

"The warehouse is located at 184 Kent Avenue. It is surrounded by buildings on three sides with the fourth backing up to the East River. It is a six story concrete warehouse building that is rectangular in shape with a center courtyard. The building is partially empty, but is being gentrified to have loft apartments and retail space. The main entrance is on Kent Avenue. Why they chose this venue to hold the children is beyond me. The only way they can get the children to the freighter is to use a smaller boat to bring them to meet the freighter in the Lower Bay. Or use a van to drive to the dock where the freighter is or will be docked. There is no way a container cargo ship is going to make it up the East River to the warehouse. There are two overhead doors on the river side and an entrance on Kent Avenue. Please take a look at page three and four. I have printed out pictures of the building from several perspectives. You can see there is construction going on all around the property."

Colina paused as the Moretti assault team looked through the packet of papers. As he was about to start, Nathan looked at Apollonia silently asking her to give his opinion. She nodded her assent.

"We know they are expecting only one car," he said. "We need to bring two. The building is situated such that we cannot drive up without being seen. We don't know what type of security they've setup and if they're outfitted with night vision goggles. I'm going to assume that the operatives are expecting to see their compatriot pull up to the rear of the building, but that does not preclude men guarding the front entrance."

"Seems like an impossible building to assault," said Viviano. "The entire structure is solid cement. It is being proposed to be designated as a New York Historic Site. And, if there are residents in the building, we're kind a fucked."

"Not really," said Nathan. "What it means is anyone guarding the front entrance cannot be armed with more than a semiautomatic pistol in a holster that is not obvious to a civilian. I don't believe they're going to stand by the front door with assault rifles. I will make the following statement and bet my life on it. They have not gone into every inhabited residence and subdued the occupants. The other alternative was to call the residents and tell them some cock 'n bull story to get them to vacate their residence for a few days. Either way, each scenario is too much of a gamble. We can beat them at their own game."

"How?" asked Apollonia.

"We need to change out some of our armament," stated Nathan. "Reload the magazines for the Sigs. Instead of two in reserve, if you have them, each of us should have six. One in the weapon and five in reserve. Then we get rid of the shotguns and the M60E3. If you have M40A3 sniper, that would be great. It is a bolt action seven shot USMC rifle built to their specifications. It has to be suppressed, if not, we'll take our chances. I will carry it. For the three of you, we'll arm you with standard M16 or similar weapon that is suppressed. It is important to maintain our superiority by using silenced weaponry. We'll lose some distance, but if I see it going the way I expect, we'll be shooting in close quarters. Next, if you have them, we need some M84 flash bang grenades. . ."

"Wait a minute," interjected Ming. "Flash bangs, to what purpose?"

"Surprise, Miss Zheng," replied Nathan, using her last name for the first time that day. "I'm hoping the thickness of the cement will mitigate the noise portion within the building. . ."

"But if you toss one into the room where the children are," cried Ming, "you'll deafen them."

"No," continued Nathan. "Yes, they'll have a bit of ringing in their ears, but the grenades are designed to temporarily blind and deafen an individual for a very short period of time. You have to trust me on this."

Ming looked at her lover, then to Viviano. They both showed agreement with Nathan. Ming relaxed and nodded her agreement to using flash bang grenades.

"The only tactical issue will be the area, rooms, or room at the back of the building where the children are being held," said Nathan. "I'm thinking we take out all of the black ops personnel situated on the ground outside the building. We hide their bodies and arms. We then work our way inside via the front door. Since there are two sides to the building we divide and work our way to the back; naturally taking out the bad guys as we see them. No knee shots. We shoot to kill."

Nathan looked for a reaction and saw none, so he knew he was good to go.

"Lastly, if we need, we break the door to their lair, toss in two or three flash bangs, and enter shooting. The children will be low to the floor and most likely bound by their hands and feet. They also may be gagged. If these guys are true assholes, they may have covered the kid's heads with black cotton bags to keep them disoriented. I'm hoping the rear of the building is nothing more than an open space used for inventory and storage. The freight doors seem to tell us that," he said. "Oh, I forgot, we need to do this before daylight. Any questions?"

"Police?" Viviano.

"I'll make a few phone calls," said Apollonia. "We'll pull all the locale sector cars to the opposite end of the precinct. And, I'll do the same for the surrounding precincts."

"Good," said Nathan. "The weaponry?"

Apollonia looked to Viviano, "Take Nathan to the armory. Go across the property. I'll give you the key to the gate and the building. Put back what he doesn't want us to use. Take what he wants. Let him make the choice." Apollonia stood found the two loose keys in her pocket and tossed them to her brother-in-law. "Hurry, we don't have that much time. Use the Town Car to bring the weapons here."

Raffaella walked into the great room, "Appy, Ming are you guys hungry?"

"I'm good," said Ming. "I couldn't eat now if I wanted."

Apollonia shook her head in the negative.

"Would it be ok if I fed daddy?" asked Raffaella as innocent as a new born babe.

Apollonia flew across the room to where her sister stood. She dove for her and wrapped her arms around her sister's midsection. She drove her to the floor. Raffaella was surprised and she fell to the floor with her sister. Apollonia rolled, put her knees under her body, raised her shoulders, and bitch slapped her sister. Again her speed was too much for Raffaella. Apollonia was sitting on her chest and her left hand was wrapped around her throat. Viviano, Nathan, and Colina did not interfere.

"You pledge your allegiance to me," shouted Apollonia, "and in a matter of an hour, you want to feed the pig that made you suck his cock and take it up your ass. Then he gives you to the fuckin' church to abuse you. And, you are showing no stress about his giving your children to the church. He's shown no remorse for this last indignity. You know where they are being taken and how they're going to spend the rest of their lives." She paused, stared hard into her sister's eyes, and yelled at the top of her lungs, "AND YOU WANT TO FEED THE PRICK?"

Raffaella felt her sister's fingers relax so she could answer, "Please Apollonia, I was just trying to feed him. Prisoners get fed. Prisoners of war get fed. I'm sorry if I offended you. I will not go near him. I promise!!!"

Apollonia stood. With a foot on each side of her sister's chest, she said, "He does not eat. All he does is hang by his feet until we return with the children. That motherfucker gave your flesh and blood to the church to save his own fuckin' life. Don't you fuckin' hate him for that? Shit, if I had the time, he'd be dead."

Raffaella broke out in tears. She shook from head to toe. Apollonia took pity on her because she knew the truth of the situation finally hit home. Apollonia moved from above her sister, reached for her hands, and helped her stand. She allowed her sister to take her into her arms and cry on her shoulder. After a few minutes, Apollonia broke the embrace and said, "Get your sit together. You're a Moretti and don't you ever forget it."

Viviano and Nathan collected the shotguns, M60E3, and all the magazines for the Sig Sauer P229s. Just before they left, Nathan approached his employer and asked if there was any clothing and boots that would fit him in the small armory building. Apollonia gave him permission to rummage through all the clothing and boots. If he found any that would fit, he could take for tonight's foray into Brooklyn whatever he needed. Both men laden down with the weapons made their way out of the backdoor of the main house towards the gate at the rear of the property.

Apollonia called to Ming, "Join me for some coffee."

Ming rose from her seat, went to her lover, and wrapped her arms around her waist. She looked up at Apollonia and said, "I'm worried and just a bit scared. They're my life. I don't know what I would do without them."

"They're my life too," said Apollonia. "My promise to you is that we will find them and bring them home before sunrise. I also promise that, God forbid, if the worst thing that could happen to them happens, I will bring you to the Vatican so you can impose upon the Holy Father whatever you see fit for him to pay for his transgressions against your boys. Nothing and no one will deter me."

Apollonia, in the midst of the craziness going on in and around the house, leaned in and kissed her lover. Ming responded, albeit a bit tensely. She felt her lover's hands begin to massage her upper back and shoulders. Like an elixir, her hands soothed the aches and stress of wondering how Shen and Lian were coping with their abduction. She pulled her head back, looked up, and with tears in her eyes said, "I'm so sorry Appy. I'm thinking of the boys and you have Antonio, Carmen, and Alessa to worry about. I'm so sorry for being so self-centered. Please, accept my apology."

"There is nothing to apologize about," said Apollonia. "I haven't pushed a life out of my body, but I do empathize and sympathize with your plight. My heart is aching for the five. I know when we pull up to the building you will put aside the pain you are feeling. You will use it just like you did when we took the battle to them here in our homes. I have all the faith in the world in you and so do Viviano and Nathan. Let's get some coffee."

Apollonia and Ming sat amidst the work and drank hot black coffee. They did not discuss the upcoming assault to free the children. Their minds were just as focused as their eyes – on each other. No words needed to be spoken. Their love transcended everything. What Apollonia didn't see was Alessandro Bruno coming to the doorway from the family into the breakfast area. He paused, thought about breaking their non-verbal communication, and decided against it. Truth be told, he knew if he continued to stay with this dynamic and utterly insane woman, he would always play second fiddle. That was a decision he'd face in the coming hours or days.

The guardhouse phone sounded twenty-three minutes after Viviano and Nathan left the back of the main house for the armory. Raffaella was closest to the phone. She picked it up, "Yes." She listened for a moment and then like a volcano that just exploded, she yelled, "YOU STUPID SON-OF-A-BITCH. VIVIANO IS MY HUSBAND. HE'S TELLING YOU THAT AND YOU DOUBT HIM. OPEN THE FUCKIN' GATE. ASSHOLE!!!"

Apollonia and Ming exchanged glances knowing by the verbal explosion the security guard was being overly cautious. Both chuckled under their breath and returned to drinking their coffee. Something bothered Apollonia. She couldn't put a finger on it, but it gnawed at the back of consciousness. She shrugged her shoulders put the unresolved issue out of her mind. The next few hours were going to be dicey to say the least.

Colina heard the backdoor slam and headed towards the mudroom to help Viviano and Nathan bring in whatever they took from the armory. Apollonia stood and walk around the table to stand in the middle of the room between the table and the entrance to the hallway. Ming sat. She was just beginning to steel her body for the trip to Brooklyn. The gnawing in the back of Apollonia's head was settled when she felt Alessandro come up behind her.

He was gentle when he touched her on the shoulder. He waited for her to react negatively to his putting his hands on her shoulders. When she didn't he asked, "Is there anything I can help with?"

"Oh my," said Apollonia bending her head back and looking up into his face, "you're the gnawing in my brain. I'm just so centered on what we have to do. I don't think you're in any condition to come, but . . ." she turned, looked up at him, and with concern in her eyes, continued, "make sure my sister does not release my father. He is tied up in the basement. He has a hold on her and if she goes to him, he will cajole her into releasing him. You put up a fight and for that I am thankful. I am going to give you four phone numbers. Colina has an additional burner cell with him in the atelier. Ask him for the phone. After we leave, call these numbers at seven minute intervals. Try to disguise your voice and claim there is a major uprising, shootings, or whatever at the addresses below the phone numbers. If they, the police, ask for additional information, hang up. That simple. Do as I ask and it won't be forgotten."

Looking into her dynamic turquoise eyes, Alessandro whispered, "I will watch and make the calls for you." He wanted to end with '*my love*' but thought better than to express it.

Nathan, Viviano, and Colina entered the kitchen with the weapons they would be using to takedown the Vatican black operations team. Each person took six magazines for their Sig Sauer P229s. Viv handed to Apollonia and Ming one each M16A4 and six fully loaded 30 shot magazines. Nathan had a M40A3 and six seven shot magazines. Each of the weapons had suppressors. Hanging from a bandolier were twelve M84 flash bang grenades. Everyone noticed he was dressed in dark green camouflage utilities, dark green jungle boots, and on his head was a Military Type M Jungle Floppy Hat.

Apollonia looked at her watch, prepared herself, and said, "Time to go."

Everyone nodded except for Nathan. "In a minute," he said, "first we make our teams. Each will drive a car to Red Hook. Each will park on the side opposite the building where they are going to do the interior assault. I will take the lead. Do not fuck around on the highway. We are shit out of luck if we get stopped. Our timeline is very tight. Since it seemed to work, Miss Moretti will be with me. Mr. Rossi and Miss Zheng will pair up again. When we get to the warehouse we will split up per the operations plan. Rossi / Zheng will clear the right side from rear to front. Childress / Moretti will do the same on the left. We will meet at the front door. Upon gaining access to the building we will use the stairs to get to the second floor. From front to rear Rossi / Zheng will clear the left and Childress / Moretti will clear the right. Once we know we're good, I will scout the rear to find the room or rooms where the children are kept. We'll decide our attack plan then. Everyone ready?"

Apollonia, Ming, and Viviano all nodded their heads and said, "Yes!!!"

Colina had given Nathan three routes to 184 Kent Avenue. They discussed the routes and decided the shortest and quickest route was a bit of a roundabout, but it did provide for greater that eighty percent of the drive would be on highways. The time of night they were leaving the Van Wyck Expressway, the Long Island Expressway, and I-278 would be devoid of any traffic. The surface streets posed a bit of a problem because they may run into road construction. In New York, all road construction was supposed to be performed from 9:00 PM to 6:00 AM, but the construction companies always bent the law when it came to local streets. They claimed if they worked at night, they would keep the residents up with the noise of their machinery. Nathan agreed with Colina that their travel decision was the right one.

"Ok people," said Nathan, "let's mount up. You have the route. Follow and if you have a problem, flash your high beams twice. I will find the best place to pull over."

The one battle hardened Marine and the three civilians made their way to their respective cars. Weaponry was stowed and covered. The drive to Kent Avenue in the Red Hook Section of Brooklyn would take them no longer than thirty-two minute barring any accidents or asteroids falling from the sky.

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Thirty four minutes after departing Columbus Place in Lawrence, the two cars made their way to the rear of each building on the assigned of 184 Kent Avenue. Viviano and Ming took their weaponry and made their way to the corner of the building opposite 184 Kent Avenue. On the other side, Nathan and Apollonia made their way to same spot only on the other side of the warehouse opposite Viviano and Ming. Nathan from his vantage point and Viviano from his noticed there were two men clad in black clothing casually walking a post between the two freight doors that were in the middle of the structure.

Nathan signaled Viviano to stand down and let him use his M40A3 sniper rifle to take down the men. He hefted the weapon to his shoulder. He pulled his right arm down and in as he placed the butt against his right shoulder. The palm of his left hand supported the stock. He cocked his left elbow underneath the length of the barrel to steady the weapon. He felt the weight of the weapon and knew in a matter of moments two men would fall dead without ever knowing where the bullets that killed them came from.

The M40A3 sniper rifle was built to USMC Quantico specifications. It was built on a Remington Model 700 Short Action. It is chambered in 308Win/7.62 NATO rounds. The stainless barrel is twenty-five inches long by USMC specifications with 1-12 twist, 6 grooves, 1.200 for 4 inch straight taper to .920 at the muzzle. The stock was a McMillan A4 Stock, Sniper Fill, Adjustable Saddle Cheek, and a Spacer System Buttpad. The trigger pull is tuned to 2.5 pounds.

Nathan felt comfortable with the weapon. He dropped it from his firing position for a moment to gaze at the men to see if they were going to change their routine. The men did not. He raised the M40A3, sighted in on the closest man, and pulled the trigger. He reached for the bolt, pulled it back, ejected the spent round, closed the bolt chambering another round, moved his aim, and pulled the trigger.

Viviano, Ming, and Apollonia stood in awe when they saw the two men drop like rocks as their chests exploded from the impact of the 7.62 NATO round. Nathan looked down the street to his left and saw nothing. He tapped his head, bent to pick up the spent cartridges, and then made his way to the downed men. Viviano and Ming made their way to where Nathan and Apollonia stood. Viviano knelt next to the man closest to him and searched his pockets. Nothing was in them. He checked his right ear and as he thought, he pulled out a small communications bud. He had a pistol in a holster around his right ankle. On his belt was a Beretta 9MM semiautomatic. Across his shoulder was the Belgian version of the Colt M16. Viviano gathered the arms from the first man and did the same from the second. He unloaded them and stowed the useless weapons against the side of the building. From an intelligence standpoint, nothing was learned.

"Mr. Rossi," said Nathan, "work your way back and then up the street to the corner. I don't have to tell you to shoot before you speak. It will be sad, but we may have some collateral damage, but hopefully not."

"Understood," said Viv.

The two teams separated and began their slow painstaking walk down the sides of the warehouse. Viv and Ming encountered their next adversary about fifty yards from the Kent Avenue corner. The man came out from between two sport utility vehicles. He turned his head and his body to look down the street. As he did, Ming put two silenced bullets into his chest killing him instantly. Viv nodded in appreciation of her marksmanship. He searched the body and found the same weaponry. He unloaded them all, hid them under one of the SUVs, and dragged the dead body back between them. He chuckled because apparently before his was killed, the guy stood between the vehicles to relieve his bladder. Viv thought, '*At least he felt the satisfaction of emptying his bladder before he died.*'

Nathan and Apollonia encountered nothing as they made their way down the street to the corner of Kent Avenue. Nathan rested the M40A3 against the side of the warehouse. He slipped his Sig from his belt and took his shooter's stance. He counted to three and slowly leaned his head out to see who or what was in front of the building. He was more than surprised to see the sidewalk in front empty all the way to the next intersection. He pulled back, released his shooter's grip, and picked up the M40A3. He looked at Apollonia made a circle with his thumb and index finger indicating there was no one in front of the building. He stepped from the side and carefully made his way to the front door. Both he and Apollonia watched Viviano and Ming approach unmolested.

Nathan held up his hand to stop the other team before they reached the doors. They did as signaled. He turned to Apollonia and said, "Your 16 please." Without a thought she handed him the weapon. Nathan did not shoulder the weapon. He put the butt against his hip, flipped the switch to full automatic, and stepped in front of the doors. For the second time in a matter of moments, Nathan was amazed that there were no men just inside the front doors prepared to defend their position and the captives being held on the second floor. He relaxed as did everyone else. He set the M16 to safe and returned the weapon to Apollonia. He picked up the M40A3 and made his way into the building.

Thankfully no lights came on automatically when he opened the front doors or set off a motion detector when he stepped through the threshold. The lobby was dark except for the street lights eerie yellow light cast into the building. On each side of the lobby were three elevators. In the back corners were stairs to the upper floors. It was an open space design with a small desk area for future security personnel. The lack of a defense by the kidnappers gave him enough time to review the plan he had formulated for the interior activities on the drive from Columbus Place.

Viviano and Ming went to the staircase door on the left. Nathan and Apollonia went to the staircase door on the right. Each gave to the other the thumbs up sign, because if everything went as planned they would not see each other until they reached the back of the warehouse's second floor. Viviano pulled the door open slowly just in case an automatic light came on, but the staircase remained dark. He didn't think anything of it, but Nathan already knew the Vatican Black Ops men had broken all the bulbs. Nathan slung the M40A3 crosswise over his shoulder. He pulled his Sig and with the calmness of a Tibetan monk meditating began to climb the stairs.

Viviano did not count the steps as Nathan did. A typical warehouse staircase would have twelve steps to a small landing where one would turn left or right based upon the location of the staircase and then take another thirteen steps to the next floor landing. The stairwells were pitch black. To their benefit, their opponents were working in the dark as they were. Nathan knew that because the two men taken at the back of the building did not have night vision goggles. Apollonia followed cautiously. She wasn't afraid, but her training taught her to be calm, but on edge. She knew Ming was working the situation as she was. Viviano kept his fear hidden, but all things being equal, he would go to his grave proud that he was part of the team that saved his and Ming's children.

Nathan arrived on the second floor landing. He waited for Apollonia and when she stepped onto the landing he gently pushed her back down two steps. "Excuse me, Miss Moretti," said Nathan, "the doors open into the hallway. I don't want you getting shot because you're in the wrong place at the wrong time. Since the staircase is at the front of the building, I suspect we won't meet a guard until we're closer to the rear. If you hear gunshots, come in with that M16 spitting fire. On the count of three, I will open the door."

"One, two, three," counted Nathan.

He opened the door, stuck his head beyond the vertical line of the jamb, and saw nothing. He pulled back, signaled Apollonia to follow him, and he stepped into the hallway. Apollonia followed. She saw him point to the wall and make a sign that she was to transverse the length of the hallway to the rear against the interior wall. Nathan took the exterior, but he also faced the possibility one of the other three guards could step out from behind a door after he passed. Nathan knew better, but he stepped across the narrow hall and whispered, "Stay a few feet behind me. If someone comes out from behind a door after I pass, shoot to kill."

Apollonia said, "Understood."

Meanwhile on the other side of the building, Viviano and Ming were not so lucky. As soon as Viviano opened the door, bullets ricocheted by his head. He pulled back but did not shut the door. He looked at Ming and whispered, "The asshole has to be a few feet down the hall. We have but one chance to take him. I'm thinking he is hidden behind the fourth door on the exterior wall. I'm going to exit and get myself against the wall. If his door opens out, we're fucked. If it opens in, then we'll have a chance. You stay to the right just inside the hall. Your small size should make it easy for you to keep low and position yourself for the shot."

"Ok," said Ming. "We'll go on a three count."

Viviano nodded and counted, "One, two, three."

He threw his body across the hall. Ming followed suit but to her left, she stayed low, and hugged the wall. She immediately took the prone shooting position. She flipped the safety to full automatic. Her finger rested on the trigger. Viviano hit the wall with a thud. The noise was enough to get the Vatican operative to react. He leaned out of his hiding place which wasn't a doorway, but a little alcove just over one quarter of the way toward the rear of the building. He squeezed off an automatic burst of three rounds aimed at Viviano. Ming saw his silhouette from the flash of his weapon which was not suppressed. That short burst of light was enough for her to take aim and squeeze off two short bursts of automatic fire. Each burst consisted of three rounds. The operative paused when the first round hit the side of his head. He died when the second and third tore through his forehead and blew the rear of his head apart. Ming and Viviano heard his weapon clatter to the marble floor.

Viviano did not need to add insult to injury by putting a few bullets into the operative's head to be sure he was dead. Ming 'Annie Oakley' Zheng was one fuckin' dead shot. They stood for a moment, nodded, and returned to making their way down the hall. Ming had counted four men down. She remembered that Father Mangini had said there were six not including the security guard.

Nathan and Apollonia fared better than their compatriots on the other side of the building. The Vatican operative did not try to hide. Instead he set up a shooting position in the middle of the hall. He go off two shots of semiautomatic fire. Apollonia returned fire releasing two bursts of automatic fire. Nathan watched the operative. He had his Sig ready to fire the next time he rolled his head away from the butt of the rifle to protect himself from being shot. The operative fired three short bursts of automatic fire. Apollonia pushed her body down to the floor and into the corner created by the floor and the wall. She took a chance because she had to raise her head and shoulder s to return fire. She fired four bursts of automatic fire.

Nathan saw the operative move his head in the direction that was counter intuitive to keeping his head safe. He aimed, squeezed off two rounds, and watched as the operative's head exploded sending bits and pieces of his skull and brain in all directions. Nathan counted five down. The last remaining operative had to be with the Cardinal and the children.

Thirteen minutes into the interior operation to free the children, Nathan peered around the corner and down the hall that ran parallel to the rear of the building. Two seconds after, he saw Viviano wave and give him the thumbs up meaning all was well. Nathan took Apollonia's M16 and pointed to the magazine. He pressed the eject button, pulled the partially used magazine out of its receiver, and replaced it with a full one.

Viviano nodded his understanding. He stepped back whispered to Ming, "Reload with a fresh magazine." When she had completed the change he looked around the corner to see Nathan moving along the rear wall to the double doors that were the only doors that gave access to the rear of the building. He saw Apollonia a few steps behind. He signaled Ming to follow. He stepped around the corner and made his way to the double doors. The four rescuers were pressed against the wall on the same side as the doors.

Nathan stepped away for a moment, eyed the doors, and whispered, "They're typical warehouse doors. The glass has been covered with cardboard. We don't know what the interior configuration is." He paused and everyone could see he was thinking about the situation. He nodded more to himself than to them and said, "I'm going to toss two M84s into the room. Cover your ears and close your eyes. Once you hear the flash bangs go off, count to five and follow me in. Set your weapons to semiautomatic. Control your trigger finger. Absentmindedness will result in deaths we do not want. On the count of three."

Nathan pulled two grenades from his bandolier. Pulled the pins on both grenades and with just his right hand kept the spoons from flying off setting off the interior fuse. He nodded to the others.

"One, two, three," he counted.

He used his left hand to open the door. He opened his hand which released the spoons, counted to three, and tossed the grenades into the room. Everyone covered their ears and closed their eyes. The noise of the flash bang had to wake up the residents of the building, if there were any and they were alive. The flash was bright enough to temporarily blind anyone in the room. Five seconds after the grenades exploded Nathan, Apollonia, Viviano, and

Ming entered the room. As the smoke cleared they could see that they were in an anteroom. There were doors on either side which compounded the rescue.

"Damn," said Nathan. "They know someone is here. Mr. Rossi / Ms. Zheng get ready. Two into the room on the right. Make entry like we just did. If the room is empty then you know they're on our side. The same goes for us." He pulled two flash bands from the bandolier and handed one to each.

Viv looked at the M84, wrapped his hand around the grenade, pulled the pin, and waited for Ming. She did the same. They nodded to each other. He mouthed the count and opened the door. They tossed the grenades and covered their ears and eyes. They counted to five and entered the room.

On the other side the same operation took place. Nathan entered the room followed by Apollonia. When the smoke cleared they saw the room was empty. Both spun and made their way out and into the other room. Nathan stopped dead in his tracks. Apollonia followed suit but was seething mad. Standing in front of them was Ming. Viviano was on the floor holding his stomach as blood slowly seeped onto the floor. Across the room in front of the windows were the children – bound, gagged, and their heads covered with black fabric bags. Splayed in the corner was Cardinal DeTomaso frightened, but unhurt. The last remaining operative was holding one of Ming's children off the floor by his waist so his head was in front but slightly to the side of his. He had the clarity of mind to remove the black bag so the intruders could see the face of the boy. Pressed to the child's temple was a 9MM Beretta.

"Drop your weapons or the boy dies," spat the operative not trying to hide his Italian accent. He showed no fear. He did not care about the child and the three individuals that pointed weapons at him at close range. The hand that held the 9MM Beretta was rock solid. Every muscle in his body was prepared to react to anything the three could throw at him. He knew the first move he had to make was to put a round into the child's brain. It didn't take a rocket scientist for him to put two-and-two together. The Asian woman was the mother of the child he held.

No one spoke. Ming held her Sig aimed at the operative's head. Nathan moved to his left and pointed his Sig at the operative's head. Apollonia went to the floor, slid between Nathan and Ming, and pointed her M16 at the operative's abdomen. She knew a single aim change would enable her to take out the Vatican operative's knees.

"Do as I say or he dies," repeated the operative. His voice was calm, because he did not fear dying. "If you think you can take me then do it. Either way the child dies. I really don't care if he does. Knowing where he was headed it would be nice to reflect upon your faces as I screw his tender ass." He stopped for a moment, looked into Ming's eyes and spat, "I'll have fun fucking him as I think about how I fuck your dead body, mom." He waited for a reaction and none was heard or seen, he spat, "Drop your weapons or the boy dies."

The thought of that asshole raping her son added to the level of anger coursing throughout her body. "If you're going to shoot him then do it," said Ming in response to his threat with a cold steely sound to her voice. "Once you pull the trigger, the three us of will fill you with enough lead that the cleanup crew will have to use multiple garbage bags to put the remaining parts of your body into to carry you out of the building."

"Drop the weapon," said Nathan. "The game is over. All of your brothers in arms are dead both here and back at the compound. Give yourself a chance to live."

Cold eyed and determined to make his enemies listen to his demand, the Vatican operative spat a third time, "We are trained and accept death as part of the world we live and operate in. Now, drop your weapons or I will shoot the boy."

Ming did not look at Nathan nor did she look down at Apollonia. She held her position and stared into the operative's eyes. She saw what he saw; a cold determination of will. Nathan had the better angle for the head shot. He decided to test the determination of the operative.

"I have a clear shot," he said with a calm voice that was steely cold. The Vatican operative knew a trained black operations military man when he heard one. He moved his eyes for a moment to look directly at the big black man that pointed a weapon at him as if it was second nature to him.

Before the Vatican operative could move his eyes back to Ming he heard her voice. It was as cold as Nathan's, "Then take it."

The three words uttered by Ming was enough to cause the Vatican operative to flinch. Nathan did not hesitate. He took the shot. The bullet entered the man's right eye and exploded out the left rear of his head. Ming dropped her Sig and flew across the room to grab hold of her son. Apollonia rose and crawled to Viviano. He was hurt bad and she knew he needed a hospital. Nathan showed his human side as he released his hold on the Sig and wiped away the sweat on his brow with his arm.

He looked towards the Cardinal and yelled, "GUN!!!"

Apollonia looked up and saw the elderly cleric holding a small .32 caliber five shot woman's semiautomatic. She laughed and without either of her weapons jumped over to the Cardinal. The man did not have the strength of character or the guts to pull the trigger. She reached down, grabbed his thumb, and bent it backwards. He cried in pain and released the gun.

"Listen you old fuck," growled Apollonia, "you're coming with me. I'm going to show you the present I am sending the Holy Father. You fuckin' say or do anything to piss me off and I am going to shove my arm up your ass to my elbow and rip your insides out;"

Cardinal DeTomaso for the second time pissed his pants in front of his and the church's tormentor.

"We need to move," said Nathan. "Ming, Apollonia untie the kids and get them to the cars. I'll take care of Viviano and the Cardinal." He paused, looked at Apollonia and asked, "what about the Vatican men?"

"I'll make a call," she replied. "I'll be sure to have the building cordoned off so only people I trust will take care of the mess. There is nothing to worry about."

Nothing was said after Apollonia answered Nathan's question. The children had the fabric bags removed and then were untied and un gagged. They seemed relieved, but were still extremely scared. Apollonia looked to Nathan and he pointed to the door. She knew to make a beeline to the cars. The psychological damage done to the children would be taken care of when they were safe at home. Her worry was Viviano.

Nathan leaned down and said, "Let me see,"

Viviano moved his hand exposing the wound. Nathan checked the anterior and then the posterior of Viviano's body. He looked hard at his back before he spoke.

"It's a through and through," said Nathan. "The bullet did not hit an artery. You're in pain and if we don't get you medical attention soon, you could end up with sepsis. Can you stand?"

"I think I can," said Viviano.

"Give it a try," said Nathan. "I'll support you as we exit the building." He turned to Cardinal DeTomaso, "Rise and walk in front of me old man. Even with my left hand I am an excellent shot. Make one false move and you're a dead man."

Apollonia and Ming ran for the cars when Nathan arrived in the lobby with Viviano and the Cardinal. Two minutes later, Apollonia and Ming were putting five very scared children into the back seat of the first car. Apollonia then helped Nathan put her brother-in-law in the backseat of the second car. The Cardinal stood on the sidewalk knowing his gambit to help Mario Moretti regain control of the family was a total failure. He would face the wrath of the Holy Father and the clandestine committee that wanted Apollonia Moretti dead. Apollonia with an amazingly gentle touch guided the frightened elderly cleric to the front seat of the rented car.

"Sit. I'll help you buckle the seatbelt," she said. When he was ready, she turned his face to hers, and said, "I wouldn't worry your Eminence, Nathan won't kill you without my permission. But, you act stupid and he'll have to explain to the car rental company why there are skull fragments, brains, and blood all over the passenger side of the vehicle."

Nathan sat in the driver's seat, started the vehicle, and asked, "To Columbus Place Miss Moretti?"

"Don't break any laws," she replied. "I'll make the calls as we drive there, too. I suggest we keep a good distance between the cars just in case. And, if his Eminence gives you any trouble, two to the temple will do." Before Apollonia shut the passenger door, she looked in the back to see Viviano grimacing while holding his side. "Nathan, fuck the speed limits – get him back to Columbus Place with due speed."

As she closed the door, Nathan was already pressing the accelerator to get the car moving. She made her way to the car with the kids and saw her lover sitting holding her two boys. Breaking up their embrace was not something she was about to do. She got into the driver's seat, started the car, and began the drive back to her home. After ten minutes, she turned to Ming, "Would you call Colina please. First, tell him to have Uncle Gino come to or send men to Brooklyn to clean up the mess the same way he did at Columbus Place. They can deliver the presents on his way home. Make sure Colina understands we need to keep the area secure until we're done. Second, tell him to call the family surgeon we have under retainer. He'll know who to call just by the way you tell him. Please do not tell him who is injured. If he asks, tell him to make the calls and hang up on him."

"I understand," said Ming, "but wouldn't it be nice to let your sister know her children are safe."

Apollonia slapped the front of her head, kept her eyes on the road, and said, "Of course. Tell him that first."

Ming reached around her boy on her left and across the front of the car to touch her lover's face. Apollonia pushed her cheek against her lover's hand, turned her eyes from the road for a moment, looked into Ming's, and said, "What?"

"Thank you."

"No, my love. Thank you. And thank Viviano and Nathan. They're all safe. All we need to do is fix the psychological damage and get medical attention for Viv."

"What are you going to do?"

"About?"

"The Cardinal and. . ." Ming's voice faded because she did not want to say Apollonia's father's name in front of the children.

Apollonia did not answer her lover's implied question. She gazed into Ming's eye for a moment, returned her eyes to the road in a steely stare, squeezed the steering wheel, and stepped on the accelerator.