



HER
Cruel One-Sided
LOVE

An Arranged Marriage for the Mafia Boss

NEW YORK TIMES & USA TODAY BEST SELLING AUTHOR

MARIAN TEE

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He wants my sister...but his family wants me as his bride.

The whole world knows that powerful billionaire *mafia* boss Massimo Marchetti is dating my perfect younger sister Ynez. But **what nobody knows is that I met him first...**and we both wanted each other then.

My terrifyingly cruel and irresistibly gorgeous husband clearly hates me.

But I don't care. I'll do everything *except* give up on us without a fight.

I want Massimo to believe in me despite all of Ynez's lies. I want my husband to realize we're meant to be. **I want my mafia boss to choose me over my sister...but he doesn't.**

Note: This is a fast-paced, instalove standalone romance. HEA guaranteed.

About the Book

"Another reason why our marriage might not work is if you keep comparing me to Ynez."

"Are you *forbidding* me to talk about your sister?"

"How would you feel if I compared you to my ex?"

"You do not have an ex," he pointed out coolly.

How did he know that, too, dammit?

"But I understand your point—"

Ynez had always made it seem Massimo was unreasonable when they had their fights, and so this unexpected admission had Ynez's head jerking up in surprise.

"And I apologize for being insensitive." Ysabel seemed to squirm and color when he mentioned apologizing, and his brows pushed together in a frown. "What is it?"

"Nothing."

Massimo's lips tightened in impatience. "Must I warn you once more about the consequences of lying to me?"

"It's just..." Ysabel could feel her cheeks turning redder as his words forced her to blurt out the truth. "I remembered Ynez stating in an interview that you had the most fantastic way of apologizing."

"Is that so?" Massimo should have expected this, but it was still difficult to keep himself from feeling disillusioned.

"But please don't think I'm implying anything."

And yet you are, Massimo thought coldly. "Have no worries, *signorina*. Before the end of this day, new credit cards will be issued in your name—"

He saw her eyes widen in surprise, and Massimo's jaw clenched. "What is it? Were you hoping for something else?" Surely she did not expect full access to his bank accounts as well? Did she think he was that big of an idiot?

"Um, nothing."

"Stop lying!"

"I'm not lying! I truly wasn't expecting you to talk about credit cards, okay?"

He stared at her, perplexed and frustrated by the way his instincts were absolutely certain that she was telling him the truth—but *not* the whole of it. If she truly did not expect him to apologize with personal greed in mind, then how else did she think he would...

Ah.

Ysabel's cheeks burned even hotter when Massimo's dark gaze suddenly glinted with infernal heat.

There was a time, just that one time, that Massimo had looked at her this very way.

But ever since he and her sister started dating, Ysabel had never allowed herself to think of it again.

Or at least not until...*now*.

A smirk slowly curved over his lips, and this, too, reminded her of *that* night. The sight of it was even more infuriating this time, and before Ysabel realized what she was doing—

Fuck you!

Massimo was more stunned than offended when Ysabel suddenly flipped him the bird. For one second there...for one painful second, her response was an agonizing reminder of the Ynez that he had first met and imagined himself in love with.

But since that side of Ynez had never materialized again after that night, and he had since been ordered to marry another woman—

I'm sorry, Ynez.

It was truly time for him to bury the other woman in his past, and from this moment forward—

Ysabel was starting to panic the longer Massimo stared at her. *I can't believe I flipped him off again.* Five years ago, he hadn't the chance to retaliate since he was too busy having sex with another woman. But now?

The moment he straightened, Ysabel immediately screamed as she tried to escape.

"Help!"

But this only had Massimo chuckling, and the sound - albeit even *more* infuriating than his smirk - also had a noticeably sizzling effect on her flesh.

Oh no.

She wasn't able to get away at all, with Massimo succeeding in imprisoning her against the wall, and a gasp slipped past her lips as his powerfully hard form came into contact with her body.

"W-What do you think you're doing?" Ysabel intended to sound tough as she asked this, but her voice came out shamelessly breathless instead. *Sei senza speranze, Ysa! You're hopeless!*

Dark eyes glinted down on her, and Ysabel's heart began to pound.

"There's nothing for you to be worried of, *signorina*. All I wish to do is...apologize."

Yeah right, Ysabel wished she could snarl out. But since that would only be a waste of time, Ysabel tried taking Massimo by surprise instead as she made a sudden move to shove him away. 'Tried' being the operative word, since Massimo's reflexes were far too swift, and the plan completely backfired as she found herself pinned against the wall, her wrists bound over her head.

Questo non va bene! This is not good!

"Let me—*mmp*h!" Ysabel couldn't say anything else, her brain completely shutting down as Massimo's warm mouth covered hers.

Is this for real?

His tongue stroked past her lips, and fire blazed through her blood.

Real, she realized dazedly. Massimo was truly kissing her, and in the manner that she had forbidden herself to ever dream of.

Her Cruel One-Sided Love



By Marian Tee

An Arranged Marriage for the Mafia Boss Novel

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Part One



One



Ysabel

Something wicked this way comes may be a thing outside the Shining City Upon a Hill, but here in Boston, it's the other way around, and as soon as the sun begins to set on the 30st of October, it's us who are eagerly and quickly heading down Comm Ave for the wickedest - and coolest - place to be.

For almost the entirety of the year, the Marchetti Mansion looms over our city like an untouchable and invincible deity in granite and limestone. It's the only property around here that's large enough to have its driveway and private grounds, and boisterous cheers erupt from the crowd as soon as its towering gates of steel slowly part open.

"Halloween, here we come, *a-woo!*" Julio's loud howl draws a series of laughs, and ever the limelight-loving extrovert, my cousin shamelessly relishes the attention and lets out another howl that has guys at the back howling in return.

The way everyone's acting, it's as if a new tailgating season has started, and it's the same level of excitement you'd expect when the Red Sox seems poised to win the World Series. But this time, instead of baseball caps and jerseys, most of us are wearing dark gray *Boston Says Boo* shirts and matching face masks (all we had to do was click 'yes' on an Eventbrite link, and we get both free of charge).

Halloween is that one time of the year the Marchetti Mansion graciously opens its doors to the public, and even though where we're standing is at least a mile away, what I can see of the sprawling multi-storied home still makes a frighteningly impressive sight.

I've always imagined the place as Hogwarts that's been magically transported to the Conjuring universe; it even has gargoyle sentinels perched on its domed shoulders, and it's the kind that looks terrifyingly capable of snarling into life and flying down at any moment.

Then again, maybe that's just my subconscious thinking.

Growing up, I've always known that our city has *famiglia* secretly ruling over it for years and years, and the knowledge has made me feel I'm being monitored and protected all at the same time.

Toe the line if you know what's good for you—or a gargoyle in suit will snatch you out of bed, and no one's ever gonna hear from you again.

That's what *famiglia* occupying the seat of power mainly comes down to. It's like tough, old-school parenting on a grand scale, but you won't get any complaints from me, since it's also why our crime rate has been at its lowest in modern times.

Well-hidden speakers start playing Blue Oyster Cult's *Don't Fear the Reaper*, and Julio once again gets everyone going as he starts dancing and waving his arms in the air even when we're still in line. Destiny Child's *Say My Name* plays next, and a smile quirks over my lips.

Well, well, well.

Color me freaking impressed—since only another horror buff would have come up with this kind of playlist. The first song was from the Halloween movie franchise. This second song is from *Candyman*, and...*whoa*.

I mentally bow down in worship when Joan Jett and the Blackhearts croon out *Season of the Witch* as the line finally starts moving.

Well freaking played, unseen DJ.

The only witch in our midst is obviously none other than our very own Khaleesi, albeit thrice her age *but* minus the madness, and instead of 'queen', we refer to her as *La Strega* with equal amounts of fear, fondness, and respect. The words translate to 'the witch' in Italian, and the Marchetti matriarch is indeed the baddest witch this city has seen and will ever see.

"PARTY TIME!"

The words, yelled out by a sunglasses-wearing driver of a convertible, takes me away from my thoughts, and I absently watch the guy's red-hot Camaro slow

down to let security inspect his car with metal detectors and bomb-sniffing dogs.

Guests who aren't from around here may think this is overkill, but this is *famiglia* territory, after all, and so security here has always been White-House-levels tight.

'Evening, ma'am,' I overhear security address the other passenger. 'Mind if you open the glove compartment for inspection?'

'Oh, sure.'

My head jerks up at hearing the other passenger speak.

That voice!

I know that voice, and my incredulous gaze flies straight to the brunette seated next to the driver.

That can't be her, can it?

"Julio, look!" I elbow my cousin's side and ignore his grunt of pain as I tiptoe and crane my neck in an effort to get a better look at the other girl. "Isn't that Ynez?"

The car speeds away before Julio can take a peek, and I bite back a groan.

Argh!

"I really think that girl—"

Julio cuts me off with a glare. "Stop it, *cuginetta*. Remember what we came here for?"

"But I really think—"

My cousin cuts me off with a groan. "*Smettila!*" The words translate to 'stop it' in Italian, and I feel slightly guilty after hearing the genuine dismay in Julio's voice.

"Don't you remember your promise, Ysa? Or don't you care anymore about not making your Mama feel guilty for moving on?"

"Of course I care—"

"It's been four years since you last had fun," Julio stresses. "*Four years!*"

I bite back a sigh. Maybe he's right, and I'm worrying too much over Ynez again. "You win."

Julio shakes his head. "Not enough."

I make a face, but my cousin still isn't satisfied.

"I want to hear you promise, *cuginetta*. No more acting like you're Ynez' babysitter. *Capisce?*"

"*Bene, bene.*" *Fine, fine.*

"Still not good enough," Julio retorts. "Give me your word, Ysabel Fiore—"

"Yes, okay, you have my word."

"Good girl."

I slap his hand off when he tries patting my head, but Julio only laughs since we both know getting a rise out of me has always been one of his favorite hobbies.

The guy in front of us suddenly turns to Julio, asking him something about the lineup for tonight's live concert. You can practically see sparks flying between them, and by the time it's Julio and the other guy's turn to have their IDs scanned for entry, I've had the distinctly awkward pleasure of witnessing their first makeout sesh.

Ugh.

"Don't forget, we meet at midnight, *va bene?*" My cousin blows me a kiss before walking away with his arm already curled around his newest squeeze.

Security scans my ID next, and it takes only a moment before I have an admission band strapped around my wrist, and I'm also cleared for entry. Admission to the Marchettis' annual fright fest may be free, but pre-registration is non-negotiable for both residents and invited guests alike.

"Oh my gosh, is that..."

"No way, I can't believe that's..."

"Is that really..."

It's not just the Halloween decor, the refreshments, or the scare actors and the top-notch attractions that the Marchettis go all-out on. No expense is also spared to have A-listers drop by every year, and for good reason, too.

Clueless residents may think this party is Boston's most prominent family's way of practicing *noblesse oblige*, but in reality it's just the Marchettis wanting to have intel on everyone living in their city.

La Strega isn't the all-seeing, all-reaching, and all-powerful weapon of destruction that she is by chance. Nothing happens in the Hub that the Marchetti matriarch doesn't know about, and it's because of her - and *not* our so-called 'awesome' local government that's the reason why no one these days ever gets mugged, raped, or murdered.

Just a matter of luck, I can't help thinking as I absently watch a zombie nurse offer complimentary drinks in blood bags. Some people are lucky to live in a city like this, where *famiglia* with a conscience are in charge. And then there are those who aren't so lucky, like my Papa who...

Non andare lì, Ysabel!

Tonight is all about restarting my life, but I can't do that if I keep going back to the past.

Excited shrieks and cries from other guests give me something new to focus on, and I realize the front act for tonight's concert (also for free, *natch*) is about to start.

"It's really them! It's them!"

The stage setup is at the back of the fountain, and while I'm also a huge fan of the girl group from Korea that's just started singing and dancing in front of the crowd—

I think I need to be alone for now, instead of being lost in a screaming sea of people.

I think I need to go to a place that's a lot more quiet and just think.

I think I need...*that*.

What seems like a massive garage shed has been repurposed and turned into an indoor horror maze...with a twist.

Answer right, and you get out alive.

Answer wrong, and you won't be breathing for long!

Apprehension skitters down my spine as I read the words that have been spelled out with incandescent light bulbs on a signboard right above its doorway. Since this is a *famiglia*-organized event that's held in a *famiglia*-owned property——should I be worried and take that warning literally?

But on the other hand, I did say I want to *think*, so...

Forza, Ysabel!

I march up determinedly to the entrance, and the clown manning the doors looks at me threateningly.

"You sure you're ready for this, little girl?"

"Bring it on, Pennywise with Black Lips."

He almost drops his act by grinning, but Mr. Fake Pennywise quickly recovers and rings the web-covered bells behind him. Its funereal chime seems to serve as a cue, since all sorts of noise follow right after it.

Thunder rumbles, chains rattle, and ghosts moan as the shed doors slowly creak open all on its own, and my heart still races even though I know all of this is make-believe.

"See you on the other side, little girl."

The clown's whisper is the last thing I hear as I enter, and my heart jumps to my throat when the doors abruptly slam shut behind me.

Uh-oh.

I suddenly find myself wondering what I've gotten myself into. There's an exit sign just a few steps away from me, but since it's also labeled *COWARD'S WAY OUT*—

Pride keeps me from being a wimp, and I force myself to move forward to the first room, which is completely dark and empty except for the light bulb glowing inside a fortune-telling machine, and a bald man stares at me with eerily realistic eyes from behind the glass walls of its prison.

"Hello, stranger." Its voice is low and heavy, and more demonic than robotic. "I will ask you a question, and if you answer right, I shall let you pass unharmed. But if you answer wrong, a monster shall come and devour you. Do you agree?"

The cover on the machine's control panel slides open to reveal a wireless keyboard underneath, and it even comes with customized *Yes* and *No* buttons that glow red in the dark.

I click '*Yes*', and Creepy Mr. Bald peels his mouth open with a smile that highlights the viciously sharp edges of his blood-stained teeth.

"Do you know of a 1972 movie that revolves around a Victorian gentleman's obsession in understanding the supernatural phenomenon that only seem to appear in photos of people on death's door? Please type your answer in twenty seconds."

I know this!

"You typed '*The Asphyx*.' That is correct. You may go...for now."

There's just a blackout curtain instead of a door that separates the next room from this, and I've only managed to slide it open a couple of inches when I see...something that immediately has my hands flying up to cover my face.

Oh.

Shit.

A part of me has always been incurably drawn to trouble, and it's that part which prevents me from simply squeezing my eyes shut...even when the spaces between my fingers just so happen to land on areas that allow me to see what I'm absolutely not supposed to see.

Is that Massimo Marchetti, fucking some girl against the wall?

Two

Ysabel

Panic attempts to take over my senses, but lust swiftly spirals up to battle it for control.

The logical side of me wants to get the hell out of here fast, but the crazier side of me is insisting I stay and watch for as long as I can get away with it.

How can this be happening?

All I wanted was some wholesome gruesome fun while answering quiz questions like the horror nerd that I am. All I wanted was to go back to my old troublemaking self—

Oh.

They did say you have to be careful with what you wish for, and since I've always been a magnet for trouble...well, I can't dig a deeper grave than this, can I?

Shit, oh, shit.

I try convincing myself once again to do what's safe and right, which is to leave and forget this ever happened. But instead my gaze remains glued to the couple having sex in the next room.

It's a fact that every one of *La Strega's* four grandsons is as handsome (and fearsome) as a tall, black-haired, black-hearted devil, but since I've always secretly thought of Massimo as being the sexiest...maybe that's the reason why I can't just stop myself from turning into a full-fledged voyeur?

There's just something irresistibly hot about the way he lazily smiles, and while I admit to occasionally daydreaming about catching his eye like virtually every girl of every local *famiglia* is also guilty of—

Seeing him fuck another girl is more than a little TMI even for me, and things get even more out of hand when I catch the briefest and most forbidden of glimpses of Massimo Marchetti's unbelievably enormous cock as he pulls all the way out of his lover's pussy.

My rebellious ways have always had to do with being a rebellious smartass around authority...but I've never gotten in trouble involving the opposite sex. Just the thought of dating freaks me out, while the thought of watching porn embarrasses the shit out of me.

But thanks to the most incredible twist of fate...the first dick I see in real life happens to belong to Massimo Freaking Marchetti...and while he's fucking another woman to boot.

This really can't be happening, but since it is—

Get your ass moving, Ysabel!

I finally snap back to my senses, but before I can scramble to take a step back, Massimo's dark eyes suddenly swing to where I'm standing—

I'm fucked.

His gaze imprisons me in an instant, and my legs feel like they've frozen all at once.

Don't look away.

Dark eyes blaze the words out in a tone so *palpably* commanding, I almost expect the girl he's still fucking to hear it and demand what's going on.

But she doesn't.

Those words are for me alone, and the thought is terrifyingly...alluring.

Shit, oh, shit.

Instead of running away, I find myself actually obeying him like an idiot whose mind has been made completely warped by lust (which I think is exactly what's happening now).

I watch in trembling silence as he suddenly swings his lover back into his arms and sets her down on her feet. She's completely naked while he's fully dressed, and all I can do is swallow as I watch her body writhe while waiting for him to fuck her again.

"Don't look up until I tell you to."

I'm about to do what he says when I realize I'm not the one he's talking to, with Massimo grabbing a fistful of the other girl's hair as he pushes her head back down.

"I'm sorry," she whimpers. "I promise, Master, I won't look up."

That one word nearly makes me stagger back, and my dazed gaze flies back up to the chiseled features of Massimo's gorgeous face even as my suddenly-dry lips part in shock. *Did I hear that right? Did she just call him...Master?*

Massimo pounds his cock back into her all of a sudden, and the force of his thrust is so exquisitely visceral in its savageness that my own body feels penetrated, and when I hear the other girl moan—

"Yes, Master!"

I can only bite my lip against the urge to moan myself.

His dark gaze remains on me as he fucks the other girl harder and harder, and my helpless gaze remains on him as I hear that one word echo in my mind like the serpent in Eden tempting me to sin.

Master. Master. Master.

That one word has roused other parts of me into aching consciousness, and even though I've never had the biggest tits, the way they're swelling so painfully now makes them feel inordinately heavy behind my shirt.

My mind urges me to look away and leave, but I just can't. This man is my most sensual downfall; one look from those dark eyes is enough to chain me in place, and my own flesh is aching in need as I listen to them fuck. There's the erotic slapping sound of their bodies as he drives his cock in and out of her quivering mound. There's the unmistakable squirt of wetness as she

comes closer and closer to the edge of her orgasm. But the point of no return is when I hear her start to pant—

Oh no.

I suddenly can't help it.

Even though I know it's wrong, I'm suddenly imagining myself as her, and everything that's happening to her is happening to me.

Aaaaaaaah.

I know it's crazy and sinful. I know it's not right. But I suddenly can't help feeling that it's my own tits that Massimo Marchetti is squeezing, or that it's my own ass that's feeling the delicious agony of his slap. I can't help but dream it's my pussy that this gorgeous, black-hearted mafia boss is pounding over and over and over...that it's suddenly too much, with the potent force of his sexuality burning all the way to the wettest part of me.

Aaaaaaaaaaah.

His lips curve in a knowing smirk when he sees me cup my hands over my mouth to keep myself from crying out.

You want me to fuck you, too.

I shake my head, violently. *No! I don't!*

Dark eyes gleam at me. *We both fucking know you're lying.*

I glare at him. *It's not a lie!*

His lazy mocking gaze drifts down to my swollen and painfully aching tits, and when I follow the direction of his eyes, I just want to shrink and disappear because of how my shamelessly erect nipples have completely given me away.

Argh!

I force myself to look up and make a face at him despite my now-reddened cheeks. *I may want you, but it stops there!*

I lift my chin. *Got that?*

I'm feeling really, really good after my passionate, and admittedly slightly self-righteous, avowal...until I see his beautiful lips slowly curve into a smirk.

Who do you think you're fooling?

His taunting gaze flicks back to my tits, and I really, really feel like giving myself a mastectomy when I feel my nipples pucker up in response. *O you pink traitorous tips! How many times are you going to betray me?*

Dark eyes reclaim my attention, and my throat tightens when I see him slowly point to his mouth.

Fuck me.

My eyes widen. *Did he just say—*

His lips move again.

Say it.

Understanding dawns, and his eyes gleam.

Say the words, those annoyingly sexy eyes of his seem to challenge me.

Say the fucking words, and I'll fuck you like I want to.

Say it.

The temptation is excruciating and unbelievable.

F-f-f-f-f-fuck you... is what I muster the strength to say as I flip him the bird just before turning away and running out of the shed as fast as I can.

Oh shit, I'm doomed.

I can't believe I just did what I did.

Massimo is a *Marchetti*.

It practically makes him a freaking prince of this city...and I just told him to fuck off!

Three

=====
Massimo

The moment she gives me the middle finger is the moment I make up my mind.

All I usually have to do is look at a woman, and she's mine.

But that girl...

That sweet, hot, infuriatingly stubborn girl...

She's seen me fucking someone else, and even though we both know it's turned her on—

She decides to flip me the bird instead of flipping to her stomach so I can fuck her, too.

She's like no one else, and that's fucking why...

I want her.

And I'll do anything to have her.

But first I need to deal with Ana, and with just a flick on her clit, I already have the other girl cumming with a gasp, and shudders are still rocking her body as I swiftly pull out of her and zip my dick back into my pants.

Ana collapses on the floor, and she's still cumming by the looks of it. My own cock is still aching with unspent desire, but I don't feel the slightest temptation to sink back into her, if only to relieve me of sexual frustration.

"*Master,*" she moans. "Come back inside of me—"

"We're done."

Her eyes start welling up as soon as she hears this, but I also notice how she straightens up in a way that will push her breasts out in a blatant attempt to

seduce me into changing my mind.

"Orazio outside will take care of your fees—"

"B-B-But Master—"

"Quit the theatrics, Ana. You'll get ten times your usual rate tonight, and the same amount next month. Consider it as a parting gift."

This finally does the job, and threat of her tears disappear the moment she realizes how much I'll be paying her. She quickly gets up, the smile breaking over her lips making it clear that she's not at all bothered by her nudity—or the termination of her agreement.

"Oh, thank you so much, Master!"

I've always known money is the only thing she's after, and I would've paid her even more if she hadn't tried the fake-crying route with me.

Orazio raises a questioning brow as soon as I step out, and the older man starts laughing when I impatiently fork over a thousand-dollar bill.

"Always a pleasure doing business with you, *signore*," he says with a smirk.

The two of us had a bet that the next girl to come in would join Ana and me in a threesome, but that obviously wasn't the case.

"You just got lucky, Raz." I'm about to ask him which direction my runaway beauty has taken when I spot her on one of the benches lining the sidewalk. She looks like she has trouble catching her breath, and satisfaction almost has me smiling.

Did I excite you a little too much, ciliegina mia?

She even has a hand on her chest like she can't believe how hard her heart is pounding...and seeing it makes me want to do things that can make her heart race even faster.

After instructing Orazio on how to settle for Ana's services, I start walking towards my prey.

With a black silicone mask covering most of her face, all my mind can obsessively commit to memory is the raven shade of her hair, the delicate frame of her body, and the olive tone of her skin.

She jumps to her feet when she sees me coming, and she quickly walks away when she realizes I have no intention of slowing down.

My pace remains unchanged even as she keeps looking over her shoulder to gauge the distance between us. If I want to, I can get to her before she can even draw her next breath.

But I don't.

Because her nervousness is something I want to savor, and so I bide my time like a predator wanting to lull its target into a false sense of security...before pouncing to devour my prey.

She wants me.

I can practically fucking smell the silken wetness of her womanhood like a goddamn wolf.

This girl wants me as much as I want her, but the fact that she's managed to resist me this long also tells me I need to take extra fucking care.

One threatening misstep from me, and she'll run like hell. The only reason she hasn't yet is because of her pride, and I need to keep it that way.

A swift look around us shows that most of tonight's guests are at the concert.

Good.

With the main driveway of our property mostly empty, the accompanying silence gives me the chance to draw her into a conversation without getting too close.

"What's your name?"

She lifts her shoulders in an *I-don't-know* shrug, and my lips twitch.

"Do you know who I am?"

She shakes her head, and I chuckle. "Liar."

Another shrug, which I assume is her way of telling me to think whatever I want.

"I'm no evil man, *ciliegina mia*—"

She skids to a stop and turns around to glare at me.

Interessante...

"So you think I'm evil?"

She rejects this with an impatient gesture with her hand, and my lips curve.

Ah.

"So you do think I'm evil, but that's not what bothers you. Rather, what you didn't appreciate—is me calling you my little cherry."

Her fingers curls into fists against her sides, but this only makes me want to provoke her even more.

"*Perché?*" *Why?* "Do you doubt that I am the man to pop it?"

Her eyes widen with outrage, but just when she's about to tear her mask off her face to chew me out—

"*Ynez!*"

She breaks into a run without looking back, and *fuck, fuck, fuck!*

I'm fast, but I'm no fucking wolf to track her by scent, and I lose her the moment she joins the sea of girls wearing Boston-Says-Boo shirts and dancing to the main act up on stage.

FUCK!

I waste no time in trekking up to the main house, and Cesare is visibly surprised to see me come barging inside our security room in the basement.

My brother swings around to face me, and behind him is a wall of monitors showing real-time footage of what's taking place outside our property. The cameras installed inside that people see are all dummies; what we do here is our business alone, and even if that means not having video evidence of any instance we're under attack, it's a risk that our famiglia is willing to take.

"È successo qualcosa?" *Did something happen?*

"I'm looking for a girl."

The worry on Cesare's face immediately turns into exasperation, and I shake my head, saying, "This one is different."

"You've never said that about the others, I'll give you that." My brother's tone, however, remains slightly skeptical, but I take no offense since he's only stating the truth. Women are nothing but objects for hire in my life, and for the large part, I know it's the same for all of my brothers...except Giancarlo, of course.

I throw an impatient look at the other guys on duty, asking, "Who's in charge here of admissions?"

Cesare points to a younger man seated at the back, and the latter straightens nervously in his chair. "*Sì, signore?*"

"How many guests named *Ynez* do we have registered?"

His fingers tap furiously on the keyboard. "Just...one, *signore.*"

"Email me everything you have on her."

"*Sì, signore.*"

My phone vibrates in my pocket a moment later, and after just a few clicks, I finally know what my little cherry looks like.

Ciao, ciliegina mia.

Part II



One

Massimo

Five years later...

F Boston's most popular men's club was closed for the evening, but this came as no surprise to virtually any resident of the city.

La Tana, which was Italian for 'the lair', was owned by Potenziana Marchetti, and tomorrow was her grandson Cesare's wedding. Tonight's private function could only be Cesare's bachelor party, but as for what exactly was taking place within La Tana's luxuriously masculine premises...

That was why members of the paparazzi had been hanging outside the club since morning. The only invited guests seemed to be Cesare's brothers...plus a Michelin-starred chef who had flown from Tokyo and headed straight to La Tana from the airport.

The night wore on, and those still waiting outside the club began feeling restless. Any and every attempt to bribe employees into taking photos were completely rejected, and with the club's security armed to the teeth, no one had been foolish or desperate enough to even think of sneaking in.

"Something wonderfully fucked-up must be happening inside," one of the reporters muttered suspiciously, and the others nodded in agreement.

"What do you think it could be?"

The question, albeit absently tossed out by one of the photographers, unexpectedly led to a round of betting.

I'm thinking some of those girls we saw entering the club weren't really employees but strippers in disguise.

Nah, Cesare Marchetti always plays it smart. I'm going to bet they've got strippers performing online, and everything's anonymous.

You all have no fucking imagination. Dude's a billionaire, so strippers are too fucking basic. I'd bet a thousand bucks they're holding a virginity auction inside, and winner gets to do the girl in front of everyone.

The conjectures became increasingly outrageous from that point on, but what no one would ever correctly guess was how all of them were completely wrong.

Rather than being the wildly debauched party that everyone assumed it would be, Cesare's last night was simply a chance for the bridegroom and his half-brothers to talk and catch up, and instead of booze and drugs, the four ruggedly handsome men were seated around a *teppanyaki* table and enjoying the highest grade of *wagyu* that money could buy.

But as for the most eccentric thing that was currently taking place within the heavily guarded walls of La Tana...

"Just get everything off your chest, *fratello*..."

A faint grimace touched Massimo's features at Cesare's blunt invitation for him to bare his soul. Tomorrow would be his very first time to play best man to someone's wedding, just like tonight was his first time to host a bachelor party on his brother's behalf. But be that as it may, even Massimo knew it was not normal at all for the best man - instead of the bridegroom - to get cold fucking feet the night before the wedding.

What the hell was wrong with him?

"There is no one else you can talk to but us," Giancarlo reminded him in his usual mild tone of pragmatism. "It is not as if you can simply book a session with a shrink and tell them things. We are *famiglia*, after all."

While their eldest brother made a fairly good point, Massimo was still reluctant to speak of his complicated relationship with Ynez. But since one of the most important rules in their *famiglia* was to never keep secrets from each other, no matter how inconsequential or, in this case, uncomfortable—

"Ynez has been pressuring me to marry her for some time now."

Cesare frowned. "Do you *not* wish to marry her?"

"Will you still have chosen to marry Penelope right away," Massimo challenged, "if not for the arrangement between our *famiglie*?"

His soon-to-be-married brother looked at him oddly. "*Certo.*" *Of course.*

That the groom-to-be answered him so swiftly and without hesitation had Massimo in disbelief. "*Davvero?*" *Seriously?* He turned to Giancarlo, asking, "And you and Sarica?"

"I would've married her long ago if she were willing," their eldest brother affirmed with a shrug.

"Well, fuck."

Ezio was content to keep quiet, being the only one who had neither a girlfriend nor an arranged bride to disturb his perfectly organized life. He knew his turn to marry for *famiglia* would eventually come, but it would not be for any time soon, hopefully. Women were just too much trouble, and it was simply easier all around to only bed those who were openly after his money.

"What do you have against marriage, Mas?" Giancarlo asked finally.

"Nothing."

"Then it is Ynez you have a problem with?" Cesare's tone was skeptical. "I still remember how you were five years ago, when she was still your mystery girl."

"I remember those days, too," Ezio felt obliged to add. "You described her as if she were the girl of your dreams—"

"I never said she isn't that anymore."

Cesare exchanged looks with his other brothers. The stiffness of Massimo's tone made their brother sound as if he was feeling guilty and unable to accept the truth, rather than feeling offended on his girlfriend's behalf.

Giancarlo looked at his younger brother more closely. "If it is neither marriage nor Ynez that is keeping you from proposing to her, then what exactly is the problem? You cannot be worried about *Nonna*, surely? She has

made it clear that she will not force us to marry another woman if we have already found someone before she's picked a bride."

"*Nonna* has nothing to do with my feelings about marriage. It's something else." Massimo's jaw clenched as he tried to find the words that would not paint his lover in a bad light. "It is as if Ynez has...*changed*, and the girl I met the first time was a complete illusion."

"How you two met was not typical," Giancarlo reminded him. "Might it be possible that you've unfairly placed Ynez on a pedestal because of it?"

Even though Massimo could see the sense in his brother's words, his guts told him that was not the problem entirely between him and Ynez.

While the two of them had dated on and off for years, it had never felt *completely* right between them, the way it had...the first time they had met. But because Ynez was also everything he wanted in a woman (and in Massimo's case, this simply meant Ynez was everything his gold-digging mother was not), he had convinced himself that it would be entirely unrealistic to ask for more.

"Do you think it is possible that something might have happened—some life-changing incident," Ezio suggested, "and that could have caused her to change?"

Fuck.

Only one thing came to mind as soon as he heard his older brother's words. Ynez's childhood, like his, was no walk in the park. Not only had her father died early, also like his, but Ynez had a traumatic incident when she was still in high school...and Massimo could see why such an incident might cause Ynez to act like a completely different person at times.

CESARE AND PENELOPE'S wedding the next day was both a joyous and bittersweet occasion for Massimo to witness. As he and Cesare were of the same age but born to different mothers, the two of them had been pitted constantly against each other, and they had not been the best of friends growing up.

Adulthood, however, had changed all of that. The two of them had become thick as thieves, and no one knew better than Massimo how incredible it was for Cesare to end up falling in love with his arranged bride.

It was after over an hour of dancing that one of the family-owned choppers came to pick up the newlyweds, and since the bride and groom were no longer with them, Massimo was also ready to call it a night.

But just as he was about to get to his feet, *La Strega* came over to the table he shared with his brothers, and the look on her still-lovely face had Massimo knowing right away something was up.

"May we speak in private, Massimo?"

A request from his grandmother was never truly a request, and Massimo obligingly walked the older woman to one of the private balconies circling the ballroom.

"Why do I have a feeling this isn't going to be good?" he asked her teasingly.

"Because you take after me," she answered archly.

"Conscienceless?"

"Intuitive."

A crooked smile touched Massimo's lips as he stepped back from his grandmother. "Since it is not your style to waste time on flattering any of your grandsons—what you're about to command me to do must be something incredibly important."

Since Potenziana saw no point beating around the bush, she simply met her grandson's gaze and said her piece.

"I have found a bride for you."

A muscle started ticking in Massimo's jaw. He had known this day would come sooner or later, but wasn't this a little too soon?

"Her parents and I expect both of you to be married in a fortnight."

"Am I allowed to know who she is before our wedding?"

"You already know her," La Strega answered with a shrug. "Ynez—"

Massimo blinked. *Seriously?*

"She has an older sister, *sì?* Ysabel—"

Massimo stared at his grandmother in disbelief. "Are you fucking—"

"Language, *per favore!*"

"You can't be serious!"

"I am, very."

"Isn't this is a little too much, even for you, *Nonna?*"

"Are you saying you will not obey me on this?"

A moment passed...and then Massimo was inclining his head in mocking assent. "*Certo che no, Nonna.*" *Of course not.* "It will be as you wish, as always."

"If it means anything—Ynez will get over losing you." But Potenziana could not say the same for Ysabel...if this marriage did not work out.

Massimo politely excused himself soon after, but the older woman stayed in the balcony, needing to be alone with her thoughts.

The two sisters were as different as day and night, and truth be told...

Buon Dio, I have indeed turned into a meddling old woman.

She would never have chosen the older girl for Massimo...if she had not accidentally found out about Ysabel's feelings for him.

Now it is your turn, bambina.

Potenziana could only hope Ysabel would succeed in stealing her grandson's heart...or it was the girl's own heart that Massimo would end up breaking instead.

Two

Ysabel

Door chimes jingle as I push the glass doors open, and my boss-slash-step-aunt beams at me from her usual place behind the counter.

"Buongiorno, bella!"

"Buongiorno!"

"Buongiorno!"

Everyone joyfully greets me like I'm hard of hearing, but all of them also cringe when I sing out 'good morning' in response in my usual off-key tone. *Hmph.* Can't they just respect my dedicated effort to being Boston's very own Lana del Rey?

Carlita catches my eyes when a group of schoolgirls enters the diner, and I bite back a sigh. *Mamma mia, here we go again...literally.*

The girls giggle as soon as I come around to their table, and as soon as I flash them my friendliest smile, it's as if the floodgates have opened, and a torrent of questions comes rushing out.

Are you Ynez Ossani's older sister?

Is your sister really dating THE Massimo Marchetti?

How is he in real life?

It's been like this ever since Ynez and Massimo made their relationship public, and I've gotten used to becoming famous by connection. "It's a yes to all of your questions," I say cheerfully, "but you need to give me your orders first before I can answer anything else."

They groan even as they good-naturedly give in, and as I turn away to pass their orders to the kitchen, I overhear one of them saying they'll need to leave

in half an hour to avoid being late for their first class.

Carlita shakes her head in amusement as I hand her the order slip. "*Signore* Massimo is really something, sì? Those girls are—what? *Quindici? Sedici?*"

"They're still in high school, for sure."

Carlita laughs. "*Che incredibile.* I cannot say he is any more or less handsome than his brothers, but there is really something too irresistible about your sister's boyfriend, don't you think?"

"I don't think I'm supposed to say yes to that." My quip makes Carlita laugh, and I manage to grin like it's no big deal even when my heart is still breaking over her words. It's another thing I've gotten used to, thanks to repeatedly hearing people refer to Massimo as my sister's *boyfriend*.

A set of regulars comes in at that moment, and it's the exact kind of distraction that I need. "*Buongiorno, Ric, Alfie.*"

"*Buongiorno, Ysa.*" One-armed Ric used to work as *consigliere* for one of the mafia families in New York while Alfie, well...all we know about him is that he's *famiglia*, and that's all that matters, really.

"Have you heard the news, Ysa?"

"About what?"

Ric lowers his voice, whispering, "Everyone's been saying *La Strega* is on the move again."

"You make it sound so ominous." It's another quip that has someone else laughing while my heart breaks anew, and I only allow my smile to fade once I turn around to hand over their orders to the kitchen.

Bene, ecco qua. There you go, Ysabel.

After five impossibly, tortuously long years, it's finally the beginning of the end.

Three

Massimo

Just as any ruling family would have eyes and ears in every part of their kingdom, so it was as well with the Marchettis in every corner of Boston. There was nothing that went on that they did not - or *could not* - know about, and the power they wielded was such that it now allowed Massimo to subject his future wife's day unfold without her knowledge and from the comfort and privacy of her office. His *famiglia* had 24/7 access to every surveillance camera installed in their territory, and what he saw...he did not like at all.

Why the hell would this woman take a canoe to work, when his city had a perfectly functioning public transit system in place?

Some people might find humor in her actions, but such peculiarities had no appeal to him at all. The woman who gave birth to him had been the queen of "eccentricities", and it was this side of hers that had made Massimo's life hell.

Sheila had delighted in shocking people with her utter lack of morals; it had almost been a matter of pride for her, even when it had caused her own son to be bullied and ridiculed by his peers.

Growing up, Massimo had deliberately shunned any woman who possessed the slightest resemblance to his mother. It was why Ynez, with her coolly refined demeanor and respectable career, had completely appealed to him. Her older sister, on the other hand...

Why the fuck did La Strega want this woman to be his bride?

Like everyone else, he had assumed that his grandmother would arrange marriages that were designed to strengthen their *famiglia's* hold on their city. Cesare's bride was an heiress from a neighboring *famiglia* while Sarica had been promised to his oldest brother Giancarlo to keep the peace between her own *famiglia* and theirs.

The Ossanis, however...

Ynez and Ysabel's family had always only ever existed in the lower rungs of *famiglia* hierarchy, and a part of Massimo had long expected that a day would come when *La Strega* would ask him to break things off with Ynez.

But what he did not see coming at all was for the older woman to choose Ynez's own sister to be his bride.

Massimo's mouth tightened in disapproval as he switched his attention back to the screen, which was now displaying real-time footage of Ysabel humoring a group of high school girls as they asked her intrusive questions about his relationship with Ynez.

Did she not realize how unbecoming her behavior was? Or was she so desperate for attention that she would willingly gossip about her own sister, as long as it meant she would become famous as well?

Massimo's gaze narrowed when he heard Ynez and Ysabel's stepaunt tease the latter about his looks.

'There is really something too irresistible about your sister's boyfriend, don't you think?'

He waited for her to say something distastefully salacious, but all Ysabel did was grin. *'I don't think I'm supposed to say yes to that.'*

A brooding expression darkened Massimo's gorgeous features as he considered her words, which could only be described as impeccably appropriate. The stories Ynez often shared about her sister had led him to imagine a woman who hadn't the slightest idea of what it meant to live a normal and decent life.

It almost made him consider the possibility that Ysabel had turned over a new leaf.

Almost.

But when he remembered how Sheila had repeatedly broken her promise to him about changing—

Non essero stupido. Don't be stupid.

A cold mask had already settled over the chiseled edges of Massimo's handsome face when the door to his office suddenly opened, and his grandmother came in unannounced.

Potenziana forgot about the business deal she wished to discuss with her grandson upon seeing what was being played on the giant wall-mounted screen across Massimo's desk. "I have never pictured you to be a stalker, *bambino*."

"You wound me, *nonna*. Have you not heard of the saying, *keep your friends close, and your enemies closer?*"

The older woman's lips pursed. "You are not convinced I have made the right choice for you?"

"You are not satisfied that I am honoring my duty to *famiglia*?"

Massimo's tone was mocking, but his dark gaze was cryptic, his thoughts entirely unreadable, and that had always been the case with this grandson of hers.

People often assumed it was Cesare, with his merciless and often violent way of dealing with his enemies, whom one should fear the most among her grandsons. But in truth, it was Massimo who deserved such a title, with his heart of stone effectively disguised under seductively deceptive layers of urbane charm.

While Massimo was not an evil man - not one of her grandchildren were, thank God - neither was Potenziana blind about his faults. Massimo took his honor very seriously, and she had long suspected it was because of this that he hadn't been able to shut Ynez out of his life, the moment it became clear to him that things between them were not working.

And as for the rest of the world that had yet to prove their loyalty—

Massimo had cruelly exacting standards for them to meet, and those who earned his wrath or enmity were forever banished from his life.

"I need you to give her a chance, Mas."

Massimo's gaze flicked back to Ynez's older sister, who was now chatting and laughing with two retired members of *famiglia*.

Potenziana was starting to feel uneasy by her grandson's silence. "Is it really that terrible, *bambino*? To be married to the girl I chose for you? I am not asking you to love her—"

"I will marry her, *nonna*. On that, you have my word. And out of respect for you and our *famiglia*, I will keep my vows. But that is all I can promise."

Four

Ysabel

By the time afternoon rolls in, Ynez and Massimo's names have become the top trending hashtags locally, and *Mamma*'s consequently reaps the benefits as we welcome an endless influx of #Masnez shippers. They're all happy to order whatever we recommend, and in exchange...

"Could you please, please, *pleeeeeeaseee* tell us how they fell in love?"

I'd rather poke myself in the eye to be honest, but since the one time I refused to talk about it had quickly reached my sister's ears and caused her to accuse me of being jealous of her happiness—

"It all began when Ynez was still in her third year in university."

The two girls sigh, and the dreamy looks on their faces make it obvious they're busy imagining themselves in my sister's shoes.

"And she was suddenly called out of her class."

"Oh my gosh, oh my gosh."

"It had Ynez worried, since she's always been a straight-A student. She couldn't think of any reason why the university *chancellor* would want to see her."

"And then what?"

"When she went to the chancellor's office, the person she saw instead was...*him*."

Both girls look like they're about ready to swoon, and I'm just about ready to kill myself as well.

"I read in one article that your sister says she was close to fainting on her way to the chancellor's office..."

"Yes, that's right."

"*But...*" The girl who ordered a sundae smiles slyly. "Your sister still ended up passing out, didn't she? But for a whole different reason..."

"Yup." There's really nothing else to say but that, since it's Ynez herself who had shared that naughty little tidbit when she was interviewed by one of New England's most popular lifestyle magazines.

Another group of customers comes in at that moment, and my head starts pounding for real when I hear them whisper *his* name between giggles.

I can't take this anymore.

Carlita looks at me in concern when she catches me taking a break in the locker room. "You don't look too good, *bella*."

"I'm fine——"

My stepaunt shakes her head. "It is not a sin to admit weakness now and then, Ysa." The older woman insists I go home, *immediatamente*, and as shameful as it is to admit, I only put up a token protest even as she ushers me out of the door.

I just need some time and space. I repeat the words over and over in my mind in an effort to convince myself that it's the truth, but the pain in my heart simply refuses to fade.

Maybe...maybe I need more than time and space then?

So what about time and space and...and...a tub of truffle-and-sour-cream-flavored fries? And maybe my favorite grape-flavored soda?

I entertain myself with such thoughts as I head down the Esplanade, and it's only when I've paddled to the other end of Charles River, and I'm on my way home that I belatedly notice how people I walk past are giving me second glances.

Huh?

While it's true that Ynez dating Massimo has made me famous by association in recent years, this level of attention seems a little too much, and unease skitters down my spine. Maybe something's happened between them? Could that be it?

The pain gripping my head worsens, and I'm already exhausted by the mere thought of having to read *more* stuff about the couple.

Ynez is no longer a child (as so many people have taken pains to remind me), and if she does turn out to be the reason why people are *still* gaping at me wherever I go—

Che sera sera.

I end up absently humming this in my head as I make my way up to our fourth floor apartment, and all I want at this point is to just sleep and forget the whole world exists. But then I see our front door slightly ajar...and my steps crash to a stop.

Questo non va bene. This is not good.

Ynez had moved out since graduating from college, and with Mama and Zio Arnoldo not due back from their cruise until tomorrow, it's just been me for over a week now—and I distinctly remember locking this same door before leaving for work.

Shit, shit, shit.

When you're *famiglia*, finding your front door unlocked for no reason is *never* a good thing. I'm about to call 911 when I hear a man groan—and it's *not* the kind of groan that one makes when in pain. Or at least not the *bad* kind of pain.

Che cosa sta succedendo? What's going on?

My heart starts thudding against my chest as I force myself to tiptoe inside...and the first thing I see is Ynez's best friend, Romana, out cold on the sofa, and coke-snorting junk scattered on the coffee table.

Another groan reaches my ears, but this time I realize it's coming straight from...*my bedroom*? The door is slightly ajar—and what I see has me in a daze.

What is it about me and my life that fate seems determined to turn me into a voyeur, but this time of my own sister Ynez...and the man who's holding her legs up in the air while he furiously fucks her on the floor?

Stop. Stop. Stop.

I want to believe that Ynez is being forced against her will, but how can I think she's being raped with the way she's crying out as she digs her nails into his ass?

This can't be real. It can't be. There has to be a reason for this.

I run out of our apartment building in a daze, and I wheeze for air once I'm back out in the street.

How can you be so stupid, Ynez?

Does she not know who she's messing with? I mean, sure, there was that one time I did give Massimo the finger, but his girlfriend cheating on him is a whole new bloody league in itself! How can Ynez not realize that by doing this she's placed not just herself in danger but our entire family as well?

Five

Massimo

Having bodyguards tail members of their *famiglia* had always been a given, and this precaution was extended to anyone else whom the Marchettis considered deserving of their protection.

Ynez, however, had been the sole exception.

As Massimo was aware of the trauma Ynez had gone through in high school because of her older sister, he had wanted her to feel safe and offered his girlfriend a compromise instead. Security would only follow her around if she had work outside Marchetti territory. This arrangement, which had taken effect years ago, was now proving to be a gross oversight on his part, since his girlfriend's uncurtailed freedom had allowed her to nurse her damaged pride in the most irreparable of ways.

'Fuck, yes, baby, you feel so fucking good.'

Massimo disabled his computer from further accessing the security cameras in the Ossinis' apartment. He waited for rage and jealousy to consume him, but even the sight of another man's cock pounding his Ynez's pussy did nothing to break through the icy indifference coating his blood.

He did not even feel betrayed, and it was this, more than anything else, that set him on edge. Had he fooled himself all this time? Was Ynez right after all, when she had sobbed about him not really loving her at all, if he was so readily able to throw her out of his life in the name of duty?

'Just admit it! You never loved me! Never!'

Pride and impatience had made him deny her claims during their last fight, but only now, when it was already too late, that Massimo realized she was right all along. Ynez had intrigued him the first night they had met, and the way thoughts of her had obsessively consumed him led Massimo to mistake his feelings for love.

All he felt now was regret for wasting years of his girlfriend's life. He had known from the start that she had marriage in mind, but he had never taken the time to examine whether it was something he truly wanted as well.

I am sorry, Ynez.

Even though he had already informed her days ago about his arranged marriage, Ynez had refused to acknowledge their breakup. She had been bitter and almost volatile as she lashed out in her pain, and after what he had just witnessed, Massimo knew there was only one way for Ynez to move on.

He had to be ruthless for kindness' sake...with the help of Ynez's own sister and his future bride.

Six

Ysabel

I've completely lost track of time while struggling to wrap my head around what I saw in our apartment.

Ynez is fucking another man while dating Massimo Marchetti.

I think it's only been minutes since I ended up standing outside the convenience store across our apartment building, staring blankly in space.

Or maybe it's been hours, with how the muscles at the back of my legs have started aching a little. I honestly have no idea. The world seems to have stopped making sense, the moment I saw my sister cheating on the man I've been so desperately trying hard to forget.

"Ysabel?"

My head jerks up at the familiar voice, and I'm not sure what to feel when I see it really is Romana standing in front of me, and a pack of beer cradled in her arms.

"What are you doing here? Shouldn't you be at work?"

Romana has been by my sister's side since they were kids, and she never seemed to mind whenever Ynez treats her more like a slave than a best friend. She probably loves Ynez as much as I do, but...

"Hey!" The other girl looks at me in surprise when I suddenly drag her with me to the back of the store, where we're less likely to be heard.

"What's wrong with you?" Romana asks plaintively.

"What's wrong with me?" It's a struggle to keep my voice low, and the only reason I manage to is because I know what it's like to be at the bad side of a powerful *famiglia*—which is the fate that we're all flirting with. "What's wrong with *you*? How can you let Ynez do something so crazy?"

Romana stares at me oddly. "Are you drunk?"

"Are you still high?" I retort. "I saw you, Roms. You were passed out cold in our living room—"

"So?"

"—while Ynez and Jovanni were having sex in my room."

Romance's laugh is obviously forced. "You must be mistaken—"

"I saw them," I hiss under my breath. "I *heard* them. So it's no use lying to me about it. Was it my sister or Jovanni who told you to pretend to be his girlfriend so they could get away with their affair? Can you imagine what Massimo and his family would do to all of us once he finds out Ynez has been cheating—" My voice breaks off when Romana suddenly stalks past me and dumps the entire pack of beer in the garbage bin.

What in the world?

Romana walks away without looking back, and my stomach turns upside down when I see the other girl enter our apartment building.

Shit.

Is she going to tell Ynez I know about her affair? Will my sister then demand that I keep my mouth shut for her sake? Ynez has the tendency to fly into a rage whenever things don't go her way, and I don't even want to think about all the crazy things she could try to do just to have me do her bidding.

Perché, Ynez? Why do you have to cheat on him? Why?

I'm all thumbs as I take my phone out and type #masnez in search of any recent photos that might give a clue about the possible breakdown of their relationship.

Hmm...

Massimo's most recent photos were all of him looking like a tuxedo-clad James Bond while he plays best man in his brother's wedding. This was a week or so ago, and I belatedly remember how Ynez mentioning that she's

gotten a fight with Massimo about it. He had apparently refused to ask Cesare's bride to include her in the entourage, and so she had made him "pay" for his sins by not attending the event.

Surely that couldn't be the reason why she had started cheating on him?

My phone suddenly starts vibrating inside of my pocket.

Ynez.

I bite my lip, unable to make up my mind. Do I answer the call? But what do I say if I do? What if—

"*Signorina* Ossini?"

I jump in shock when I find myself suddenly surrounded by huge, scary-looking guys in dark suits. Where the heck did they even come from? And how did I not hear them coming?

"Our boss would like to speak with you."

My heart thundered against my chest. "Your boss?"

"*Signor* Massimo Marchetti."

Part Three



One

Ysabel *loved* every movie in the *Taken* franchise. She had watched each and every installment again and again, but that was apparently not enough...since panic now made Ynez unable to do as Liam Neeson's character did, when he had been abducted and thrown inside the trunk of a car.

Così stupida, Ysabel!

She wasn't even blindfolded or gagged. Didn't even have her hands bound, although one of Massimo's bodyguards had respectfully asked Ysabel to *temporarily* relinquish her cellphone to his safekeeping.

She had, in other words, every chance to memorize where they were going, but because Ysabel was in such a panic, everything outside the window had turned into a blur.

Dio aiutami! Help me, God!

Ysabel's fear turned into terror when the limousine rolled to a stop, and she realized where they had taken her to.

Oh no.

This was the Marchetti warehouse, and everyone in Boston would always be quick to swear it was *just* a warehouse, even though they all knew it was not. This was where the city's ruling *famiglia* conducted 'interviews', and there were times when the people they interviewed would leave with a missing digit or two...or worse, they would never come out at all.

Ysabel didn't even think of running away as Massimo's bodyguard opened the door to the backseat and helped her out. What was the point, when everywhere around her belonged to the Marchettis?

Once inside the warehouse, Ysabel was stunned to discover that everything was air-conditioned, and all the walls and floors were of glossy, pearl-tinted

marble. Was that to make them easier to get rid of bloody evidence, literally? And what about the air-conditioning? Was it to keep the smell of rotting flesh from leaking out?

"*Signor Marchetti asks that you wait here, signorina.*"

The room she was asked to enter was elegantly appointed. It had a lovely white velvet couch at the center, a glass-topped coffee table, and an area rug that was invitingly and cozily thick. But the lack of windows made Ysabel feel claustrophobic, and the way everything around her - from the furniture to all the paintings on the wall - was so terribly expensive only made her feel more hopeless.

Wealth equated power, and this room effectively drove that point home. If the Marchettis wanted to kill her for Ynez's sins, they could certainly do so without consequence—

The door to the room opened again, and striding in was none other than Massimo Marchetti himself.

"*Voglia scusarmi, signorina.*" *Please accept my apologies.*

His voice was silkily unreadable, and his dark gaze veiled. He was also devastatingly gorgeous as ever, and Ysabel didn't know whether to feel annoyed, amused, or terrified that he was acting like she was here by choice.

"I know this is highly unorthodox—"

It was good for him to admit that at least, Ysabel acknowledged grudgingly.

"But as we are both adults, and more importantly, we are also *famiglia...*"

Ysabel could feel her blood turning cold at his words. Only a stupid person would believe that it was entirely an coincidence that he had her kidnapped at around the same time her sister was having an affair behind his back.

"I will cut right to the point."

Ci siamo, Ysa! This it it!

Cutting to the point meant cutting *her* life short as payment for the sins of her sister, and so he would now kill her—

"You are the next Marchetti bride, *signorina*."

—by making her die laughing?

And in her nervousness, a laugh did crack past Ysabel's lips, albeit somewhat shakenly, the sound of which had Massimo's dark gaze narrowing.

"You think it is a funny matter, *signorina*?"

Ysabel looked at him in confusion. "But you made a joke—"

"I did not."

"But you said I'm the next Marchetti bride—"

"It was what why your sister was calling you."

How did he know Ynez had been calling her?

"But I preferred to tell you myself—"

"And that's why I'm here?"

"Sì."

She tried. She really tried to believe he was not joking, but she just couldn't. This had to be some cruel prank, a way to further torture her—

"Perhaps this would convince you of what I am saying."

Massimo handed her his phone, and Ynez could only stare blankly at its screen. *This had to be—*

"It's not fake."

Then this had to be—

"Nor is it a scheme in any way. It is official, permanent, and binding in every way."

Shit. Shit. Shit!

The first night she and Massimo had met, a part of Ysabel had been shocked at the way he was able to so effectively read her thoughts and communicate his with hers. It had felt as if they had this primal connection between them, and Ysabel didn't know whether to laugh or cry upon realizing that part about him - that part about *both* of them - still hadn't changed.

Can this really be true?

She closed her eyes and took a deep breath before opening them again, just to make sure she wasn't imagining the headlines on Boston's most popular online tabloid.

Signora Potenziana Marchetti is proud and delighted to announce the engagement of her grandson, Massimo Marchetti, to Signorina Ysabel Ossini.

Two

"Could this be a typo?"

Massimo had imagined Ysabel saying a lot of things in response to his grandmother's official announcement of their engagement, but none of it was *that*.

Ysabel tried not to wince at the way Massimo's lip curled in response to her words. "What I mean is...could they have gotten your names switched with Ezio—"

"No, signorina."

Ysabel almost jumped back at the icy bite in Massimo's voice. Why did he sound so mad? Did he have some kind of brother complex for Ezio—or was it just her that he found particularly lacking as a prospective bride for his family?

"Every word you have read is perfectly accurate. *I* am the one my grandmother has chosen to be your groom, not Ezio."

Ysabel could only stare at Massimo as she tried to wrap her head around what he was saying. If every word was accurate, then...

No. Impossible. It can't be.

Massimo couldn't understand why it had pissed him off to hear Ysabel think of himself as a possible bride for his younger brother. *What was wrong with him, dammit?* And when he heard her laugh nervously yet again, he even had the strangest compulsion to punish her with a kiss.

What. The. Hell.

Ysabel waited for Massimo to say he was joking. But all he did was look at her like he was wanting to drag her to his lap to give her a spanking.

Which she would love...to object to, Ysabel mentally hurried to add, just to keep her conscience clear.

Ysabel tried her best to gather her thoughts even as the thought of Massimo spanking her ass refused to leave her. "I think there's some kind of misunderstanding. Because you can't actually be saying that *I'm your bride* —"

"You are."

Another laugh escaped her, and Massimo's lips tightened at the urge to cover her lips with a punishing kiss.

"But Ynez—"

"Your sister was the first one outside my *famiglia* to know of my arranged marriage. She understands that this is my duty as a Marchetti."

Ysabel was starting to remember what had happened earlier. *This was why*, she realized, *so many more people than usual had been staring at her like she was a freak*. It was because they had already read *La Strega's* announcement about her engagement to Massimo, and it seemed she was the only one who hadn't known about it.

Massimo used to trust his instincts as a rule, but his ex-girlfriend's unexpected act of infidelity had changed this. Ynez had warned him long ago about her sister's ability to manipulate and deceive people, and it was this memory that had him grimly observing Ynez's reaction to his words.

"Why are you looking at me like that?" Ysabel asked uneasily.

"Your reaction to my breakup with your sister was rather...lacking." Was she secretly taking pleasure at the fact that Massimo had dumped her sister because of her?

Ysabel struggled to find the safest way to respond to this without lying. "Our relationship isn't...like others."

"Why not?"

"It's just how it is..." Ysabel knew she should be used to this by now, but her heart still ached every time she was forced to confront the reality of her relationship with Ynez.

She had loved her sister from the moment she was born, and Ynez had...*tolerated* Ysabel's presence for the most part. But everything had changed following their father's unexpected death, and since then Ynez hadn't even bothered to hide her disinterest in Ysabel.

"I do not think that is quite true, *signorina*...since I know *exactly* what you did."

"I don't understand—"

"Ynez told me about what happened to her when she was sixteen."

Ysabel's confusion faded. "I see."

Massimo raised a brow at Ysabel's continued silence. "You do not intend to deny it?"

Ysabel couldn't answer right away, with how her heart was still hurting over Ynez's betrayal.

Perché, Ynez?

That should have been just between them, and she still remembered how Ynez had been crying so, so hard when she herself swore not to speak of it to any other living soul. That was, in fact, the only and last time Ynez had hugged her, and even now, Ysabel could not forget how she had been so full of hope, thinking that she and her sister could finally have the kind of bond she had always dreamed of.

"Your silence is good enough, I suppose. You at least know it is best not to lie to me, and I would have known if you were to lie." Massimo saw Ysabel's eyes widen, and a sardonic smile twisted over his lips. "*Sì, signorina*. I was able to obtain a copy of your taped confession to the police, and so I know every detail about the incident."

No wonder, Ysabel thought sickly. No wonder Massimo had always seemed aloof and even contemptuous of her.

Ynez had only been sixteen when a man twice her age had started stalking her. It had eventually culminated with the man being arrested after his failed attempt to kidnap Ynez from school. He had gone berserk as soon as the police had cuffed him behind his back, and he had left everyone in the vicinity in shock as he started shouting and cursing Ynez, blaming her for leading him on with their online relationship.

I gave you all my fucking money, you gold-digging bitch! My family's left me because of you! My company's fucking gone because of you! I will never fucking leave you alone, do you hear me?

Ynez had begged Ysabel to do something, saying that their father's death had made her lose her mind with grief, and in the end, Ysabel had been forced to lie for her sister's sake.

I'm the one to blame. I used Ynez's photo because I know she's prettier than me. I knew men would give her whatever she wanted and I wanted your money. So I lied.

Ysabel could still remember how her heart nearly stopped beating when the man had lunged for her as if wanting to strangle her to death. And in a blink of an eye, Ynez had been made the victim, and later on, Ynez had also painted herself the heroine, as she sweetly persuaded the man to "forgive" Ysabel in exchange of not pressing charges against him.

Please, signore. I understand why you wanted to kidnap me. And I forgive you for it. But please, in return, forgive my sister. She has not been well since our father died.

Ysabel had done her best to forget that time of her life. But it was as if God was teaching her that running away from the truth never solved things, and as much as it killed her to admit this—

Ynez will never love me, and I cannot trust her again.

Three

"I'm not going to deny anything." Ysabel fought against the urge to look away even as Massimo's dark gaze locked onto her like the crosshairs of a gun. "Ynez and I were both different persons back then. We were too young..."

Every word Ysabel uttered was the truth, but she was also leaving it to Massimo to interpret it as he willed. All she knew was that it was best for her to heed his advice, and that was *not* to make the mistake of lying to him in any way.

"What happened before...it was just a year after our father's death."

Massimo's mood turned brooding as he considered Ysabel's words. Her honesty was unexpected but not unwelcomed, and since he had lost his own father early on, he could certainly understand why the passing of Luisito Ossini could've made his eldest daughter act out.

Grief made one do crazy things, and his own grandmother was proof of this.

Losing my husband and son made me mad. I was out of my mind with grief, and I didn't care how many people I had to kill. I didn't care if I had to lose my soul. I know now that I was wrong, but back then all I cared about was avenging their deaths.

Ysabel couldn't help but jerk when Massimo suddenly took a step towards her. The room instantly felt a thousand times smaller, and she found herself backing away as he moved closer and closer and closer...until there was nowhere for her to go, with Ysabel's back hitting the cold, hard marbled wall behind her.

Massimo stared down broodingly at Ynez's older sister—and knew this could be the last time he would think of her in such a way again.

"Both our *famiglie* have come into an agreement for the two of us to marry, and I have been raised to honor my duty without question. You have the right

to refuse your duty, of course, but I think you already know without being told that your decision will come with consequences."

Ysabel could only nod, since those consequences were well-known to anyone who knew of *La Strega's* hold over the entire city. That they could simply be asked to leave and never to return to Boston would already be a blessing. Worst-case scenario, however...wasn't even worth contemplating at all.

"As for our marriage..."

Ysabel could feel her head reeling anew. Massimo's marriage had been everyone's favorite topic today, but at that time everyone had also imagined Ynez to be his bride. It almost seemed unreal that she had become her sister's replacement in a blink of an eye!

"If you wish for it to work, then you must swear that you will always speak the truth to me. That is the only way for you to earn my trust."

Ysabel knew the safest and smartest way to respond to such a demand was to simply say 'yes', but...

"I'll only agree to that if you offer to do the same."

"You are saying I have to earn *your* trust as well?" Massimo asked sharply.

"You dare to question my integrity?"

"Not your integrity, no." Ysabel fought against the urge to back down despite the sight of his anger. "But your fidelity? Yes, I do question it—"

"I have already broken things off with your sister—"

"Then wouldn't it cost you nothing to give me your word?"

"Ynez never challenged me like this—" As soon as the words were out, Massimo knew right away he had said the wrong thing.

Fuck.

He knew he had to apologize for this, but found it impossible to do so. There were so many things that Ynez had told him about her sister, and those things made it difficult for Massimo to completely trust his future wife.

My parents always loved her more. She never spoke or did a single thing to me that I could complain about. She was that good at manipulating other people, and I'm scared that one day, she'd end up stealing you away from me.

Ysabel knew she should just let those words go. This was all new to both of them, after all. But—

"Can I just say something?"

"No."

The swiftness in which Massimo had replied to this made her want to smile and strangle him at the same time—which was a good thing in a way, since this also meant her fear of him was also gradually fading.

"Another reason why our marriage might not work is if you keep comparing me to Ynez."

"Are you *forbidding* me to talk about your sister?"

"How would you feel if I compared you to my ex?"

"You do not have an ex," he pointed out coolly.

How did he know that, too, dammit?

"But I understand your point—"

Ynez had always made it seem Massimo was unreasonable when they had their fights, and so this unexpected admission had Ysabel's head jerking up in surprise.

"And I apologize for being insensitive." His brows pushed together in a frown when he saw her squirm at his words. "What is it?"

"N-Nothing."

Massimo's lips tightened in impatience. "Must I warn you once more about the consequences of lying to me?"

"It's just..." Ysabel could feel her cheeks turning redder as his words forced her to blurt out the truth. "I remembered Ynez stating in an interview that you

had the most fantastic way of apologizing."

"Is that so?" Massimo should have expected this, but it was still difficult to keep himself from feeling disillusioned.

"But please don't think I'm implying anything."

And yet you are, Massimo thought coldly. "Have no worries, *signorina*. Before the end of this day, new credit cards will be issued in your name——" He saw her eyes widen in surprise, and Massimo's lip curled. "Were you hoping for something else?" Surely she did not expect full access to his bank accounts as well? Did she think he was that big of an idiot?

"No, of course not——"

"Don't lie," Massimo snapped.

"I'm not lying! I truly wasn't expecting you to talk about credit cards, okay?"

He stared at her, perplexed and frustrated by the way his instincts were absolutely certain that she was telling him the truth——but *not* the whole of it. If she truly did not expect him to apologize with personal greed in mind, then how else did she think he would...

Ah.

Ysabel's cheeks burned even hotter when Massimo's dark gaze suddenly glinted with infernal heat.

There was a time, just that one time, that Massimo had looked at her this very way.

But ever since he and her sister started dating, Ysabel had never allowed herself to think of it again.

Or at least not until...*now*.

A smirk slowly curved over his lips, and this, too, reminded her of *that* night. The sight of it was even more infuriating this time, and before Ysabel realized what she was doing——

Fuck you!

Massimo was more stunned than offended when Ysabel suddenly flipped him the bird. For one second there...for one painful second, her response was an agonizing reminder of the Ynez that he had first met and imagined himself in love with.

But since that side of Ynez had never materialized again after that night, and he had since been ordered to marry another woman—

I'm sorry, Ynez.

It was truly time for him to bury the other woman in his past, and from this moment forward—

Ysabel was starting to panic the longer Massimo stared at her. *I can't believe I flipped him off again.* Five years ago, he hadn't the chance to retaliate since he was too busy having sex with another woman. But now?

The moment he straightened, Ysabel immediately screamed as she tried to escape.

"Help!"

But this only had Massimo chuckling, and the sound - albeit even *more* infuriating than his smirk - also had a noticeably sizzling effect on her flesh.

Oh no.

She wasn't able to get away at all, with Massimo succeeding in imprisoning her against the wall, and his powerfully virile form pressing against her body.

"W-What do you think you're doing?" Ysabel intended to sound tough as she asked this, but her voice came out shamelessly breathless instead. *Sei senza speranze, Ysa! You're hopeless!*

Dark eyes glinted down on her, and Ysabel's heart began to pound.

"There's nothing for you to be worried of, *signorina*. All I wish to do is...apologize."

Yeah right, Ysabel wished she could snarl out. But since that would only be a waste of time, Ysabel tried taking Massimo by surprise instead as she made a sudden move to shove him away. 'Tried' being the operative word, since Massimo's reflexes were far too swift, and the plan completely backfired as she found herself pinned against the wall, her wrists bound over her head.

Questo non va bene! This is not good!

"Let me—*mmph!*" Ysabel couldn't say anything else, her brain completely shutting down as Massimo's warm mouth covered hers.

Is this for real?

His tongue stroked past her lips, and fire blazed through her blood.

Real, she realized dazedly. Massimo was truly kissing her, and in the manner that she had forbidden herself to ever dream of.

Aaaah.

Her entire body buckled when Massimo suddenly started sucking on her tongue, and Ysabel was mortified to feel her breasts growing heavy with need. Things were happening too, too fast, but she just couldn't find the strength to push him away, with the way his tongue was wreaking havoc on her senses. And when she felt his other hand slowly trailing up from her stomach, his fingers brushing against the underside of her swollen flesh—

Knock, knock, knock.

"I know you're in there, Massimo."

Ysabel could only stare in bemusement when Massimo suddenly sprang away from her, and she wondered dizzily if her face also displayed the same telltale flush that was now darkening Massimo's high-boned cheeks.

"I will give you ten seconds to ensure both of you are decent—"

Ysabel had a hard time focusing on what the person on the other side of the door was saying, and her fingers shook as she touched her own lips. *How was it possible that her first kiss was from Massimo? How?*

"And then you will kindly open this door—"

Ysabel finally had the presence of mind to realize the woman outside the door was still speaking, and the voice sounded weirdly familiar.

"Present your *fidanzata* to your grandmother—"

Comprehension dawned, and Ysabel let out a gasp. *La Strega?!*

"And after which us two women will have somewhere to go."

Four

T*roppe veloce.* Everything was happening too, too fast again, and in what seemed like a mere snap of *La Strega's* fingers, Ysabel found herself inside another vehicle, but face to face this time with Boston's ruling queen.

Khaleesi.

The girl seated next to *La Strega* suddenly coughed, and hers was a familiar face. The world in which *famiglie* operated was small; everyone knew everyone, and if Ysabel wasn't mistaken, the younger woman's name was Cattleya, and she had been working for the Marchetti family since her teenage years.

"*Mi dispiace.*" Cattleya's voice was almost ethereal in its calmness, which was just to be expected from someone working for the likes of *La Strega*, who was also known for displaying nerves of steel even under the most dangerous circumstances.

The thought had Ysabel stealing another look at Massimo's grandmother, and it was a genuine struggle not to appear starstruck in her presence.

The older woman was a picture of refinement with her coiffed silver hair and a string of pearls around her neck. If rumors were to be believed, those shiny expensive orbs were harvested from the same company that designed the pearl-handled revolver *La Strega* had used to kill those who had murdered her husband and only son.

"May I call you Ysabel, *signorina*?"

Ysabel's back shot ramrod straight at suddenly being spoken to by Massimo's grandmother, and she ended up half-stammering in her nervousness. "*Sì, La Strega—*" Horror ate her alive when she realized what she had slipped. "*Mi sculto molto, signora! Chiedo perdono!*" *I'm so sorry, please forgive me!*

Why did her mouth keep getting her into trouble? How could she be so stupid and careless as to call Boston's queen a *witch* to her face, which was what

'*strega*' translated to in English?

Ysabel was ready to be punished on the spot, but the older woman merely cackled while her companion only shook her head.

"*Signora* Marchetti actually takes pride in being called *La Strega*, so please do not worry about it, *signorina*."

Ysabel could only smile weakly, not knowing exactly how to respond. On one hand, it was nice to know that she had not inadvertently insulted Massimo's grandmother. But on the other hand, finding out that *La Strega* took pride in being called a 'witch' only made her more formidable in Ysabel's eyes...and just as with most *famiglia* business, she wasn't quite sure if that was a good thing or not.

"My assistant speaks the truth, Ysabel. I am not easily offended, if that's what you are worried about." The older woman's gaze then turned cunning. "But perhaps I'm wrong, and you are worried about something else? Maybe you are wondering why I chose you over your sister?"

"I know it's not my place to ask—"

"But it bothers you all the same, *sì*?"

"I feel guilty—"

"And that is quite remarkable of you," Potenziana said archly, "considering how your own flesh and blood has stolen my grandson from you five years ago."

Ysabel jerked in her seat. *Stolen?*

"It is unfortunate that I was only made aware of this recently. I would have rectified the situation immediately if I had known—"

Ysabel shook her head in confusion. "I don't understand what you're saying, *signora*."

"Five years ago, Massimo met a girl on Halloween night. He believes that girl...is your sister."

Pain ripped through Ysabel at the older woman's words. There was a part of her that had always suspected this, but she had never allowed such doubts to take root.

"How?" Ysabel whispered.

"I'm afraid that's where I come in, *signorina*." It was Cattleya who spoke, and her calm voice was now tinged with regret. "I was at Mammina's a few months ago—"

"During my shift?"

"Sì."

Her brows furrowed. "But I would've remembered..."

"I have this talent, sometimes a curse, of being really good at blending in." A slight smile touched the other girl's lips, and Ysabel couldn't help but blink as that one smile immediately transformed Cattleya's otherwise serious features into one of quiet charm.

"If you smiled like that more," Ysabel couldn't help saying, "I don't think there's any chance you'd be lost in a crowd."

Cattleya's cheeks turned pink at Ysabel's words, but the blush also gifted Potenziana's young assistant with a radiantly lovely appearance.

Grazie a Dio! Thank God!

Potenziana could now admit to herself that she still had faint stirrings of doubt about her choice, but all of those had immediately been vanquished by the simple exchange of words between Ysabel and Cattleya.

Ysabel's sister had also met Cattleya several times in the past, but Ynez had never taken the time to talk to the other girl, much less notice how Cattleya's quiet demeanor made her presence unobtrusive. In Ynez's eyes, Cattleya was paid help, and thus unworthy of her attention.

Ysabel, however...

This girl was different. This girl had a sense of warmth and empathy that women like Ynez and Massimo's mother patently lacked, and it was those qualities that made Ysabel the perfect match for her grandson.

"I didn't mean to eavesdrop in your conversation," Cattleya was saying apologetically, "but I just couldn't get it out of my mind when I heard you mention about attending the Marchettis' Halloween event five years ago. It is not something Signor Massimo ever spoke of in public, but the whole family knows of how he had first met Ynez in that same event."

"When Cattleya told me about this—" It was *La Strega* now who was speaking. "I decided to investigate the matter myself, and it quickly became evident that your sister has somehow found a way to deceive my grandson about that night. But what gives me absolutely no pleasure to tell you is that she has also made every effort to poison Massimo's mind against *you*."

The silence that followed was strained, and Potenzialiana could see how Ysabel was struggling to find a way to justify her sister's actions to herself.

Ysabel had a hard time thinking straight. Ynez's betrayal cut her deep, and while nothing would ever make her hate or stop loving her sister—

Perché, Ynez?

Why was it so easy for the other girl to keep hurting her?

"You understand then, why I have chosen you?"

Ysabel bit her lip hard. *What was the right thing to do here?* Five years ago, she and Massimo could've had...*something*. But there was no knowing if what they had that time could've led to something *more*.

Ynez and Massimo, however...

The two already had a relationship that went on for years. Was it right for Ysabel to destroy that, just for the sake of 'something' she and Massimo *might* have had in the past?

"Do you love my grandson, Ysabel?"

Ysabel was flustered by the unexpected question. "*Signora...*"

"I need you to answer me truthfully, *per favore*. Are you or are you not in love with Massimo?"

Ysabel had never dared to ask herself these things, and she realized now why that was.

"Yes," she choked out.

Foolish or not, she *had* fallen in love with Massimo that night, and she had stayed in love with him all these years.

"Then take this chance I am giving you to steal his heart *back*."

La Strega's imperious tone almost had her smiling. She might've even responded with a cheeky salute to it under normal circumstances. She could've really, if only those same words didn't make her own heart ache.

The Marchetti matriarch was not one to use words lightly, and so with Massimo's own grandmother saying very clearly that Ysabel was to steal Massimo's heart *back*...

Did that mean it had been the same for him, five years ago?

Had he also fallen in love with her that one night?

"I hope you say yes, *signorina*—"

Ysabel shook her head at Cattleya's show of formality. "Please just call me Ysa."

"I appreciate the offer, *signorina*, but it is not proper to do so."

Potenziana shook her head when she saw Massimo's *fidanzata* open her mouth to argue. "It is no use insisting otherwise with this stubborn child, Ysabel. If I cannot change her mind, no one can."

The grumpiness of the older woman's tone had Ysabel biting back a smile. Who knew someone like *La Strega* could be so...well...*cute*?

Cattleya pursed her lips at being described as stubborn. "May I remind both of you—"

"No, you may not." *La Strega* and Ysabel ended up saying the same thing at the same time, and it was Cattleya's turn to swallow back a laugh when she saw how her employer and Ysabel turned to each other in shock.

La Strega's eyes suddenly started twinkling. "Do you know, *bambina*? Massimo had always been very vocal that his ideal bride was someone who was the opposite of me."

"A coward?"

Cattleya could no longer keep herself from grinning at this while her employer was visibly pleased by Ysabel's words.

"I appreciate the compliment, *bambina*, but actually..." Potenziana sighed as she was forced to remember the past. "I'm sure you have read an article or two about his mother?" She saw Ysabel hesitate and was not surprised by this. "You have, haven't you? And the things you read were entirely unpleasant, *sì*?"

"I don't believe everything I've read—"

"You should do so on this matter, unfortunately. The press usually exaggerates things, *sì*, but in the case of Massimo's mother? She was truly all that and more, and her *eccentricities*, as Massimo himself very sarcastically likes to put it, have scarred her son deeply. He likes to joke about not wanting to marry a woman like his *nonna*, but in truth, our *famiglia* knows that what he is most determined about is not to repeat his father's mistakes. He does not want anyone who has too much personality..."

Like me, in other words, Ysabel realized.

"Massimo has not spoken much about you to our *famiglia*, but in the few times he did, it had become obvious to us that he did not think highly of you at all. The impression we had of you was that you were the black sheep of your *famiglia*..."

"Um..." If *that* was Massimo's reason alone for thinking she was not suitable for him, then Ynez probably didn't even have to lie about her past. Ysabel had been quite the rebel in her high school years, and in those days, her

parents had been frequently called to the principal's office for her many misdemeanors.

"Nothing to say in your defense, *signorina*?"

Ysabel squirmed in her seat. "I was very...*opinionated* back then?"

The answer had Cattleya choking, and when Ysabel looked at her in surprise, Cattleya cleared her throat, saying, "*Mi dispiace, signorina*. I was just wondering what kind of, er, *opinion* you had when you were reported to have punched your teacher?"

"Because she called my classmate's mother a prostitute—" Ysabel stopped speaking. Why was she admitting to all of these in front of Massimo's grandmother of all people?

"It's fine, Ysabel." Potenziana had trouble keeping her face straight. "There is nothing that Cattleya can ask of you that would shock me. I've already read all about it in your file—"

Ysabel winced. "It must've been a pretty thick file."

"The thickest I have most definitely, among all the bridal candidates I've considered for my grandsons."

"*Ouch.*"

Potenziana and Cattleya laughed at this, and Ysabel wondered if she should tell them she wasn't joking, and she was really hurt, *seriously*.

"And while I personally consider your, er, high school adventures rather delightful..." The older woman's smile faded slightly. "Massimo is unlikely to feel the same."

Ysabel was starting to feel disheartened again, and the older woman seemed to have sense this.

"It will truly be alright, Ysabel. My grandson is a one-woman man like his grandfather, and it is the only reason he and your sister have been dating for years. Massimo keeps remembering that one night you made the most

spectacular impression on him, and it is what makes him unable to let go of your sister."

"*Signor* Massimo was so *nice* in those days," Cattleya couldn't help reminiscing with a shake of her head. "It was very creepy, to be honest."

Ysabel had to fight back a smile. Massimo being nice might be creepy to Cattleya, but to her, the idea was kinda...*cute*.

"You stole his heart that night, Ysabel. It was very clear to us all when he first told us about you. But then we also noticed, when he finally met Ynez, he also gradually changed. It did not make sense to us then, but now that Cattleya and I are aware of what happened..." Potenziana released a pained sigh. "I believe Massimo was heartbroken when Ynez did not match his expectations from that night, but he was too proud to admit this."

Ysabel started gnawing on her lip again. What if she ended up disappointing Massimo, too?

"You do not seem confident about your chances," the Marchetti matriarch observed.

"I'm just worried he has this image of me from that night that's unrealistic."

"Let us say it is so—does that mean you will turn this chance down to be married to him? Because you do have that choice, *signorina*. I will allow you to back out of this wedding without any consequences. You have my word on this. If you choose to say no, it shall be so. But if you choose to say yes, I must also warn you that it will not be easy winning Massimo back. It will be difficult and painful even, but not impossible."

Ysabel could barely hear her thoughts over the thunderous pounding of her heart. To marry Massimo was her dream, but it would also mean hurting Ynez. Her sister might have hurt her first, but was that reason enough to hurt Ynez as well?

"What is it to be, Ysabel? Do you wish to marry my grandson or not?"

Five

W*hat the hell happened?*

Massimo found himself brooding while waiting for his grandmother to return his *fidanzata* to his side. While he could now admit to himself that his feelings for Ynez were not what he thought them to be, he had not been attracted to any other woman in all the past years either. No one had tempted him even the slightest bit to stray...until now.

Porca miseria.

He could only imagine Ynez's distress once she found out that he had kissed her sister within minutes of being in her company. He could point out that she had done something worse, of course, but he would not do so.

Her mistake did not negate his own dishonor.

He had kissed Ysabel because he desired her.

Even with everything he knew of her—he had wanted Ysabel.

Still wanted her even, and it was this he did not understand at all.

Hai perso la testa, Massimo? Have you lost your mind?

He struggled to make sense of his attraction towards the one woman that he should have detested above all else. Maybe...maybe this had to do with the fact that he hadn't had sex for so long.

Ynez's many interviews with the press might have suggested the contrary, but the truth was, he had not touched her over a year now, and it was yet another thing that had secretly fucked him up.

There was a time that Ynez had been the girl of his dreams, both literally and figuratively, and it was why Massimo could not understand how he easily he was able to rebuff Ynez's advances, every time she invited him to bed.

The more he thought about his relationship with Ynez, the more he was beginning to realize that it was only his stubbornness and pride that had kept him from breaking things off. He had wanted it to work because he was not used to failing, not realizing that he was only making things worse by ignoring all the red flags about their relationship.

He and Ynez should have been over years ago. But because of his refusal to acknowledge this, he had now ended up hurting Ynez even more, not only with his arranged marriage to her own sister, but more so were she to find out about his own attraction to Ysabel.

Giancarlo was about to walk straight to the front door when he saw one of his younger brothers lounging by the bar. "Massimo?" Giancarlo was slightly puzzled at the other man's presence in the family estate. "Why are you not at the hospital?"

Massimo frowned. "Is anyone in the family sick?"

"Did you not get my text? Security informed me that *Nonna*, along with Cattleya and your *fidanzata*, are at the hospital right now."

Massimo's blood turned cold. It was only a few weeks ago that they all had their medicals, and his grandmother's results showed her to be as healthy as a horse. The same could be said for Cattleya, whose medical records were submitted to the Marchetti family for annual review. And so that only left...

Shit.

Giancarlo was not surprised to hear Massimo abruptly saying he would head over to the hospital as well.

"You can ride with me. My car is already outside waiting."

His brother was visibly tense, and Giancarlo was privately surprised by this. Massimo had rarely mentioned Ysabel Ossini to them, and in the few instances he had, it was usually with a note of disinterest or even subtle disapproval.

This time, however...

Ysabel had clearly made an impact on Massimo, and Giancarlo was all for it. The whole family had never liked Ynez, but they had all been prepared to welcome her, if she was truly the woman Massimo desired to spend the rest of his life with.

It was fortunate that *La Strega* had ultimately decided to interfere, but as for choosing Ynez's own sister to replace her...

Giancarlo was certain there was more to this story, since *La Strega* always had a method to her madness.

The red carpet was immediately rolled out as soon as both brothers arrived at the hospital, and Massimo and Giancarlo exchanged looks when reception directed them to the third floor. Was that not the newly built gynecology department which Cesare had donated, to ensure that Penelope had somewhere safe to go for her future pregnancy?

"I can see your brain working overtime, *fratello*," Giancarlo warned as soon as they were alone, "and I caution you against leaping into conclusions."

"*Ma è possibile, no?*" *But it's possible, is it not?* "Nonna knows all that goes on in our city. Is it not possible that she was just made aware of Ysabel's pregnancy?"

"I have also read her files, Mas. There is no evidence of her dating anyone."

The same could be said for Ynez's affair, Massimo thought grimly, *so was it truly not possible for Ysabel to be pregnant with another man's child?*

When the elevator doors opened to the third floor, it was to see other members of their family also waiting outside Dr. Rivera's clinic.

"Do you not have classes today?" Giancarlo asked his *fidanzata* with a frown.

"*La Strega* never visits the hospital for anything," Sarica answered, also with a frown. "Even I'd be worried about that. Unless, of course—" Sarica looked at Massimo questioningly. "This has something to do with Ysabel Ossini?"

"No fucking idea."

The grimness of Massimo's tone had Ezio looking at Giancarlo with a raised brow, but his oldest brother only shrugged. The last time Ysabel Ossini's name came up in conversation, Massimo had made it clear in not so many words that Ynez's sister was not one he approved of. Did that completely change just because the woman was now his *fidanzata*?

Just as Giancarlo's phone rang, and he had to excuse himself to take Cesare's call, the door to Dr. Rivera's clinic finally opened, and the first to come out was Cattleya, whose steps came into a stunned halt when she saw Ezio Marchetti standing in front of her.

Ysabel, whose head was bowed, immediately bumped into Cattleya's back, and as the other girl stumbled straight into Ezio's chest, a pair of hands suddenly gripped Ysabel's shoulders to swing her around.

A gasp escaped Ysabel when she found herself staring straight into Massimo's dark eyes.

"What did you come here for?" Massimo demanded.

Six

T*his man...could have fallen in love with me five years ago.*

The thought popped out of nowhere as soon as Massimo filled her vision, and Ysabel realized dazedly how such a thought changed *everything*. Guilt still lingered in her heart, and while she would've done anything to keep this arranged marriage from hurting Ynez—

Anything, that was, *except* to give up her last chance to see what could've been.

Massimo's jaw hardened at Ysabel's inability to answer. Her prolonged silence spoke volumes, and it forced him to confront a truth he still found particularly galling.

Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.

What if his earlier suspicions were right? What if she *was* pregnant with someone else's child, and his grandmother saw it as reason enough to cancel their arranged marriage?

That was for the best, was it not? Ysabel was an unnecessary and unwanted complication in his life...regardless of how earth-shatteringly explosive their kiss had been.

Let her go, Marchetti.

It made no sense to feel possessive towards a woman he barely knew, and what he *did* know of her was not at all complimentary. It would be the height of foolishness to still choose to marry her when—

"Why are you all here?" *La Strega* was the last to step out of the clinic, and her exasperated tone drew everyone's attention to her in an instant.

"Are you sick, *signora*?" Sarica, as always, was first to speak, and she had inadvertently answered Potenziana's question as well with her words.

This was all Giancarlo's doing, the older woman realized with a silent sigh. Giancarlo was extremely thorough when it came to the family's safety, and all of their personal bodyguards reported to him directly. He would have known right away of her intention to visit the hospital, and she could see why he would've seen it as a cause for concern.

"Are you here because of Ysabel?"

Massimo's abrupt question had the lady in question turning red, but Potenziana only regarded her grandson with amusement. "Should I be flattered or concerned that you are not worried about my health?"

A flush darkened Massimo's features at his grandmother's words. *Shit*. His grandmother was right. Even though they had all been issued a clean bill of health by the family physician, there was still a chance that it was Potenziana who needed to see Dr. Rivera, and Ysabel being with her was merely a coincidence.

"*Chiedo scusa, nonna—*"

Potenziana smiled. "There is no need for an apology, Massimo. Especially since you *are* right—"

All eyes swung to Ysabel, whose cheeks immediately turned red under everyone's scrutiny.

"We came here because of your *fidanzata*."

"*Signora, per favore!*" Ysabel was dismayed to realize Massimo's entire *famiglia* could soon be privy to the truth behind their visit.

"And according to Dr. Rivera..."

Massimo's handsome face turned impassive. If his suspicions proved to be true, he already knew what he had to do.

"Your *fidanzata* is without a doubt—"

And that was to *not* let go of Ysabel. Regardless of her past, he wanted to...do his duty.

"One hundred percent—"

His duty was what mattered, he thought determinedly. He would stand by her even if she was—

"*Una vergine.*"

A pregnant—*cos'era quello? Cosa ha detto sua nonna? What was that his grandmother said?*

Did she just say his *fidanzata* was a virgin?

The stunned expression that flashed over Massimo's features had his *famiglia* coughing (except for Sarica, of course, who snickered without shame) while his *fidanzata* turned red as a tomato at the matriarch's revelation.

"This was something we had to medically certify," Potenziana relayed briefly, "as it was the only request made by Ysabel's mother. She wishes her daughter to be given the choice to stay pure until her wedding day, and it shall be so...if it is Ysabel's desire as well?"

Ysabel wished the ground could swallow her up. If she said 'yes', would Massimo not think her a prude? But if she said 'no', would he not think of her as easy?

She took a deep breath even though she still had no idea what to say, but just as her lips parted, she heard Massimo drawl—

"The answer to that shall be between my *fidanzata* and me, but you have my word that I will abide by whichever choice Ysabel makes. And now, if you could excuse us..."

Giancarlo returned to his family's side just in time to see Massimo walk away with his *fidanzata*, and worth noting was how his brother's hand was already pressed possessively against Ysabel's back.

"It seems I have missed a lot," he murmured to his own *fidanzata*.

"If you want the TL;DR version—Massimo has numerous cold showers to look forward to, in case Ysabel chooses to keep her V-card before their big day."

A slight smile curved over Giancarlo's lips at her explanation, and the sight immediately had Sarica's hatefully gullible heart skipping a beat. *Grr*. She turned away without a word, intending to hitch a ride back home with Ezio...but this was easier said than done, with strong fingers already cupping her elbow to spin her back into facing her annoyingly gorgeous *fidanzato*.

Just a few months more, Sarica desperately reminded herself. Just a few months more, and then she'd be free.

I AM TO BE HER FIRST. The words were all Massimo could think about as he led Ysabel to his car, which was parked just outside the hospital's basement lobby.

I am to be her first!

It was the craziest thought to have, especially since just seconds ago he had been convinced that she was pregnant with another man's child—and he had been willing to claim her baby as his, if that was what it took for their wedding to push through.

How the hell had he come to this point?

It was as if Ysabel had woven a spell around him, and he would rather face an eternity of torment with her by his side rather than have her leave.

Ysabel glanced warily at Massimo when he opened the car door for her. "Where are we going?"

"I'm driving you home." Massimo's tone was curt. "Unless there is somewhere else you want to go?"

Ysabel shook her head, and once inside, she watched him walk around the car, all the while thinking...*was this truly happening?*

Massimo slid behind the wheel and noticed Ysabel struggling with her seatbelt. "Let me..." He reached across her to help her out, but then he heard Ysabel catch her breath as the side of his arm brushed against her breasts...

Fuck.

The sound of her seatbelt snapping back to the side of the car had Ysabel gasping in surprise, but as soon as her lips parted open, Massimo was already covering her mouth with his, and butterfly wings fluttered like crazy inside her stomach.

Aaah.

The sudden onslaught of Massimo's deep, forceful kiss swept all thoughts out of Ysabel's mind, and all she could do was hold on to his massive shoulders for life as his tongue delved past her lips. The way his fingers gripped her hair as he pulled her head back made her toes curl inside her shoes; his touch was almost savage in its possessiveness, and she *loved* it.

This...

This was what her subconscious mind had secretly and shamefully yearned for.

This was what she had fought against thinking of every waking moment of her life in the past five years.

This was once *forbidden*, but when she remembered what *La Strega* and Cattleya had revealed earlier, and what their words had made her realize—

This man...could have fallen in love with me five years ago.

The thought was instantly liberating, with Ysabel breaking free from every self-imposed restriction she had chained herself to, and before she realized what she was doing, her arms were already winding around his neck, and her body molding against Massimo's lethally muscular form in surrender as her tongue tentatively mated with his.

A rough growl of need escaped Massimo's lips at Ysabel's unexpected response, and he was no longer able to keep his hands to himself. As he kissed her harder and more hungrily, he also became busy acquainting himself with the tantalizing curves of her body, with his hands briefly spanning her waist before moving up once again until his fingers finally claimed one swollen breast.

Ysabel could only whimper against Massimo's lips when he started kneading her breast, and she whimpered again when both of his hands were now in full possession of her aching flesh. Her nipples began to pucker at the way his hands felt so impossibly big and strong, and when Massimo's fingers suddenly tweaked her nipples before pinching them hard—

Aaaaaah!

Disbelief and satisfaction unlike any other roared through Massimo's veins when Ysabel suddenly gasped against her lips, and soft, telltale shudders of release ripped through her body. He was no innocent boy not to know when a woman was faking her orgasm, and the fact that this was real - that he had truly made his *fidanzata* climax with merely his hands on her breasts - turned his world completely outside down.

This, dammit.

This was the kind of explosive chemistry he had thought he would have with Ynez. And the first time he had visited Ynez in her university, what they had shared afterwards was *almost* like this.

Almost.

But after that, it had never been so again, and Massimo had even convinced himself the kind of chemistry he had been hoping for was unrealistic...until now.

Seven

Five years ago
"Ms. Ynez Marchetti, please report to the chancellor's office."

Ynez forced herself to smile even as she started to panic. *What the fuck?* There was nothing she had done recently to merit such a request. Sure, there had been a few girls here and there who might have transferred schools because of her, but why should their weakness be blamed on someone else?

Weak people like her dad always died *first*. Weak people like her dad always got themselves bullied and scammed, and ever since her father's totally *avoidable* death, Ynez had sworn to herself she would *never* be like him.

She would *never* volunteer for a gig that was obviously a suicide mission, and all because her no-good friend had a pregnant wife. She would *never* die when she didn't have to. She would *never* look after anyone else except for herself, and so whatever this was—

I'm going to survive it, Ynez told herself before knocking on the door, squaring her shoulders, and pinning a smile to her lips as she walked inside the chancellor's office.

What the hell?

Instead of an old man with thinning hair and a beer belly, seated in his big leather chair was someone tall, dark, and so damn handsome it had her nipples instantly pouting against the thin fabric of her dress.

He saw this, of course, and wetness coated her inner folds as Ynez saw a smirk slowly unfold over his lips.

"It seems your body is much more honest today, *signorina*."

Since she was no idiot like her dad, Ynez only allowed herself a tiny mysterious smile without betraying the fact that she had absolutely no idea what Massimo Marchetti was saying. All she knew was that one of Boston's

most powerful men had mistaken her for someone else...and she had every intention of keeping it that way.

She slowly walked towards him, and the desire she saw glittering in his dark eyes made her feel heady with power.

This man was hers for now...but why couldn't it be forever?

Her steps slowed to a seductive stop when she was mere inches before him.

"I think you've mistaken me for someone else, *signore*."

Deceit had always been her favorite sin, and there was nothing Ynez loved even more than being able to use the truth to create a lie. And as powerful and ruthless as Massimo Marchetti was rumored to be, he turned out to be just like any other man, with the way his gaze smoldered at her words...just before reaching for her.

"*Oh!*" Ynez feigned a cry of surprise as Massimo suddenly tugged her towards him, and just as she had secretly expected, she ended up falling straight into his lap.

"No more games," the billionaire growled. "Did you really think I wouldn't find you?"

"I really don't remember you..." Her tone was a perfect mixture of evasiveness and breathlessness; it was meant to convey she was trying to hide something while denying her need for him. It was meant to convince him that she knew more than she did, and the billionaire fell for it, hook, line, and sinker.

"Halloween," Massimo supplied thickly as he traced her lips. "You. Me. A funhouse."

"And that's not all, is it?" Ynez made it seem like she knew more even though she was simply fishing for information.

"Another woman then," he acknowledged. "But I never saw her again after that night. Or any other girl for that matter."

"And you expect me to believe you?"

"I don't lie."

Which is a pity, Ynez thought, since she and Massimo would get along so, so much better if he did.

But in the meantime, she would be more than happy to work with what she had, and since they had already talked enough for now—

Ynez wriggled on his lap and laughed when she felt his cock swell and turn hard as she ended up straddling his thighs. Sex was always the answer to everything, and in other cases, sex was also the key when one didn't want to answer anything.

What followed was the most fantastic sex of her life, but as soon as she got home, Ynez was all business, and she came up with a list of girls that Massimo could've met that night—and ended up mistaking her for.

Tanya.

Joy.

Greta.

The other girls bore a certain resemblance to her, but none of them had the personality to mesmerize a man like Massimo. And as much as it irked her to admit this, Massimo had told her just enough this afternoon that she knew she wasn't exaggerating things.

Whoever that girl was, she had in fact mesmerized him to the point that the billionaire had obsessively planned this elaborate way of meeting her.

Someone suddenly knocked on her door, and Ynez's lip automatically curled when she saw it was none other than Ysabel, the family's former black sheep, now a no-fun goody-two-shoes who monitored her every move.

"Ynez? Can we talk?"

She crossed her arms over her chest. "Only if you make it quick."

"Last Halloween..."

What the fuck? Why was Ysabel talking about Halloween as well? Was this a coincidence or something...worse?

"I saw you at the Marchettis' annual event. When you weren't supposed to be even in town."

It was her, Ynez realized with shock. Her own fucking sister...was the girl Massimo had met that night.

Fuck! Fuck! Fuck!

The thought had her shoving Ysabel out of her room, and she didn't give a damn when her older sister looked at her in hurt surprise. "I just want to talk —"

"I'm not in the mood right now," she snapped, "so will you just get out?"

As soon as Ynez slammed the door on Ysabel's face, she threw herself on her bed and screamed into her pillow. *Ysabel! Why the fuck did it have to be her sister? Her goddamn sister, who was so much like their dad—but still ended up stealing everyone and everything Ynez wanted in life?*

Rage had her sitting up, and Ynez spent the rest of the night plotting two things: making Massimo hers...and ruining Ysabel's life in every way she could.

Eight

Ysabel felt like she was floating as her moist folds continued to throb in the aftermath of her release. A secret part of her had always hoped they would be good together, but never had she imagined he could give her an orgasm without even reaching third base.

She felt his grip on her breasts gradually ease, and Ysabel was shocked at how she found herself immediately missing his touch. Her eyes drifted open, and as soon as she saw Massimo staring down at her broodingly—

"Was that meant to convince me to surrender my V-card?"

Massimo's beautiful lips had already curved into a smirk by the time she realized what she had blurted out.

"Sì, signorina."

Oh my goodness, so this was how Massimo sounded when he was purring.

"And there is more of where that came from..."

"Mm..." Ysabel found herself looking at him primly under her lashes. "I'm not quite sure, *signore*. I may need more proof..."

He suddenly leaned close, and Ysabel froze in shock.

Were they going to start on Round 2—

Oh.

Ysabel's cheeks turned red when it turned out that he only meant to finish what he had started earlier, which was to help her with her seatbelt.

And now he was smirking again as he leaned away. "You look like you were expecting someone else."

Massimo expected her to play coy, but when Ysabel only made a face, it hit him then and there that he had expected her to act like Ynez usually did—but she

didn't, and he *liked* her all the more for it.

What. The. Hell.

That he would want her was something Massimo could learn to accept, since he had no control over the urges of his body. But to *like* Ysabel, despite knowing the kind of sister she had been to his ex-girlfriend?

The idea left an ugly taste in his mouth, and even though he strove to remind himself that Ysabel had owed up to her mistakes, and that he also understood why someone out of her mind with grief could do such things...

Ysabel bit her lip as she quickly picked up on the sudden change in Massimo's mood. *Ynez again*, she thought painfully. There was a growing part of her that wanted to give Massimo a good, hard shake and beg him to look at her - *really* look at her - so he would realize the truth.

It's me! It's me! Can't you see it was me five years ago?

Ysabel knew she was being unfair, but she couldn't seem to help it. She knew she should be more furious with her own sister, who had been the one to do the deceiving, but in times like this, all she could feel was hurt and despair.

How could she make herself believe it was her whom Massimo truly wanted...when he had fallen for Ynez's lies all too easily?

MASSIMO AND YSABEL were barely talking by the time he dropped her home, and although he had already made the move to step out and open her door for her, she had simply muttered a goodbye as she fumbled with the latch of her seatbelt.

She heard him curse under his breath, but she didn't let this get to her. All Ysabel wanted was to leave without him seeing her tears, and she struggled to regain control over her feelings as she rushed up the stairs leading to her parents' apartment.

Non comportarti da bambina, Ysa! Stop acting like a baby!

Busy as she was chastising herself as she unlocked the door, Ysabel didn't see her sister already lunging towards her until it was too late.

"You bitch! I knew it! I knew you wouldn't say no!"

Ysabel couldn't make herself retaliate even as her sister clawed any and every part of her that she could reach. And since Ysabel had no desire to hurt the other girl back, all she could do was protect herself as best as she could, and it was only when her mother and *Zio* Arnoldo walked in on them that Ysabel was finally freed of her sister.

Ynez, even when unable to struggle out of her stepfather's hold, did not stop trying to reach for Ysabel.

"Calm down, Ynez," their mother begged.

"Why are you asking me to calm down? Can't you see what she's done?" Ynez screamed. "She's the one who stole Massimo away from me! Can't you see that?"

"It is over between him and you," *Zio* Arnoldo said tautly. "Can you not also see that when *La Strega* makes a decision, we can only obey—"

"Fuck all of you!"

Ynez had always been prone to throwing tantrums, but she had never disrespected their mother and *Zio* Arnoldo this way before, and Ysabel could only stare in shock as Ynez shoved past their stepfather before storming out of the apartment and slamming the door shut behind her.

"I'm so sorry, Mama, *Zio*." Ysabel couldn't think of anything else to say. How could her sister say such words to them? *How?*

"You do not have to apologize on her behalf," her stepfather said grimly.

"Oh, Ysabel." The older woman looked on the verge of tears. "Your face, *bambina*...are you alright?"

"I'm fine." To admit anything else wasn't even an option. "Ynez is the one hurting more—"

"You have always done your best to see your sister in the most positive light," *Zio* Arnoldo cut her off heavily. "And that is why she is still able to manipulate you."

The unusually harsh words stunned Ysabel, and she could only look at her stepfather in dismay. "*Zio...*"

"Your *mama* and I did not make our decision lightly, Ysabel. But we ultimately agreed to the engagement between you and Massimo...since we knew it was only a matter of time before the Marchettis would find out she was cheating on him."

Ysabel jerked in shock. "*Y-you know?*"

They, too, looked at her in shock. "*You are also aware of it?*"

As soon as she explained how she had discovered Ynez's affair, her stepfather was swift to take action and got rid of all the footage recorded by their security cameras.

"I should warn you that *La Strega* also knows about it."

Ysabel paled at her mother's revelation. "Is she going to do something to Ynez?"

"She swore not to...if we were to agree that you become his bride."

"And the only reason we agreed to it," her stepfather clarified, "was because of how she had worded things. She had seemed very confident that you would welcome such an agreement..."

Ysabel hesitated at first, but when she saw how worried her mother and stepfather were about having made the wrong choice—

"It's because *La Strega* also found out that Massimo and I met first. Before he ever met Ynez..."

By the time she finished telling them what had and likely happened five years ago, her mother was truly in tears, and Ysabel found herself crying when her mother pulled her into her arms.

"Oh, Ysa." The older woman's face crumpled anew as she pulled away to look at her. "I can't believe you've suffered all this time without us knowing it. You always put everyone's happiness before you. You're always so selfless. Do you think Arnolando and I are not aware of how hard you tried to get over your Papa's death, to make sure we do not feel guilty about moving on? And with Ynez and Massimo, you have done the same thing again."

Ysabel could only cry harder when her stepfather also took her in his arms.

"No more suffering, *bambina*," her stepfather said gruffly. "Be happy with Massimo. We will support you in every way we can."

Nine

Massimo was having dinner with his family when security alerted them to an unexpected guest. It was Ynez, and she was insisting on seeing him.

He excused himself from his family and was stunned to see his ex-girlfriend in the living room, tears streaking down her cheeks, and her lip bleeding.

Ynez gestured for Massimo to stop when he attempted to approach her. "No." Her voice was tight and full of pain. The one other time he had heard her speak this way was when she had forced herself to confess to him about someone stalking her in the past, and how it had traumatized her for life.

"I didn't come here to ask you back. But I just want you to tell your *f-fiancée* —"

Massimo's jaw clenched at the way Ynez choked at the word.

"Could you please tell her to stop hurting me? She's already won. She has you! Why does she need to have our mother and *Zio Arnaldo* side with her, too?"

Massimo had to force himself to remain still as Ynez shot him a look of despair before turning away to leave. His honor demanded that he go after her, but logic argued against this. Kindness in any form would only make Ynez hope there was still a chance for them, and that had been their problem in the first place.

Massimo's hellish mood was evident when he rejoined his family in the dining room, and it only worsened when *La Strega* pointedly asked if he had given Ynez permission to continue visiting him even when he was now engaged to someone else.

"No, I did not. But she is free to do so if she wishes. Ysabel may soon become my wife, but it does not give her any right to dictate my actions."

Seeing how the words infuriated the Marchetti matriarch, Giancarlo smoothly stepped in to steer the conversation to less volatile waters, and the tension in the room gradually eased.

Their staff had just started serving dessert when Sarica casually asked if she could invite Ysabel for coffee, and Penelope noticed the subtle change in Massimo's mood.

Although Sarica was yet to be married to Giancarlo, she had been with the family for years while Penelope had only known them for several weeks. She was new to the entire family, and perhaps that was why she was the only one among them to realize Massimo's growing displeasure.

The Marchettis' tacit show of approval for Ysabel, as opposed to their equally courteous disinterest in Ynez, had clearly made Massimo feel he was obliged to take his ex-girlfriend's side...since no one else was doing so.

And that wasn't good at all, Penelope thought uneasily, since that might mean Massimo would never be over his guilt for breaking up with Ynez.

TUESDAYS WERE YSABEL'S day off from work, and although she usually still woke up early in the morning despite this, today was different.

So much had happened that she inadvertently ended up sleeping in, and by the time Ysabel woke up, her mother and Zio Arnaldo were already gone. She sleepily shrugged into a bathrobe, but someone started knocking on their door before she could step inside the shower.

What if it was Ynez?

Her sister hadn't returned any of their messages or calls since last night, and Ynez had left her keys in the living room.

Forza, Ysabel.

It wouldn't do her any good to be scared of her own sister, regardless of how violent Ynez tended to be in her rage. She steeled herself for the worst as she opened the door—

Huh?

Massimo stared down at her, his expression volatile, and so were the words he threw at her in a furious growl. "*Porca miseria! Who did this to you?*"

Ysabel belatedly remembered the ugly scratches on her face, but when she tried to instinctively cover them, Massimo reached for her hands to lower back them down. "I asked you a question," he gritted out.

Ysabel avoided his gaze, saying, "Please come in." She didn't see any good in telling him the truth, especially when Massimo still had the tendency to side with Ynez. And while she did understand why that was—his distrust still hurt, and she didn't think she could deal with even more pain at the moment.

Massimo strode past her without another word, and Ysabel felt like laughing and crying again when she felt the way her senses tingled as she caught a whiff of his aftershave. Could her flesh be any more traitorous and shallow?

This guy had already shown her a glimpse of how furious he could get on her sister's behalf. But instead of worrying over his reaction, all her body seemed to care was how beautiful and sexy he was, and her heart even dared to skip a beat as she forced herself to turn and face him. *Why do I want this man so?*

Massimo's teeth clenched as he had a more thorough look at the bright red gashes marking the delicate skin of Ysabel's cheeks. He had come here, intending to demand answers—

Why had she hurt Ynez?

Had she not promised him she had changed?

So why, dammit?

But one look at his *fidanzata's* face, and Massimo had known right away that the truth he sought for was more complicated than he expected.

"You still have not answered my question. Who hurt you, Ysabel?"

She shook her head, and his lips tightened. Ynez had come to him last night, sobbing her sister's name out in accusation. While his *fidanzata*, even with all the ugly red lines marring her her face, refused to say a word.

Ysabel couldn't help trembling as she saw him reach for her face.

His fingers grazed over a swollen bruise on her left cheek, and Massimo swore under his breath when she winced involuntarily at his touch.

"Mi dispiace."

The words had his *fidanzata* opening and closing her mouth, and it became immediately obvious that Ysabel had a one-track mind when it came to apologies.

"It is too easy to read your thoughts, signorina."

His cockiness was just too much that Ysabel couldn't help it. Her hand was already up in the air, but before she could even flip him off—

His reflexes got the better of her once again, and Ysabel could only gasp in shock as Massimo grabbed her wrist, and her finger went straight into his mouth.

Oh!

Wetness pooled between her thighs as Massimo started sucking her finger like it was the most delicious thing he had ever tasted.

She tried pulling her finger away, but her struggles only had his dark eyes gleaming down at her.

"S-Stop..."

And to her shock, he actually did stop.

Huh?

Ysabel was still trying to figure out whether she was more relieved or disappointed when Massimo bent his dark head, and his silky voice slid into her ear like an invisibly seductive caress.

"Never, ciliegina mia."

Ysabel froze, unable to believe what she had just heard. "W-What did you just say?"

Massimo's jaw hardened when he realized what he had let slip. *Shit.*

"What did you call me?"

"Ciliegina mia..."

He had called her that, too...five years ago. Did that mean anything—or were those words something he simply used for every woman he dated?

Massimo could not understand why his chest tightened upon seeing the flash of pain in her eyes. Why was she looking at him as if the words he had uttered could destroy her? Had her sister perhaps told her...about the past?

"It was only that one time."

Ysabel's stunned gaze flew up to Massimo when he suddenly spoke in a rough undertone.

"Just one time that I used those same words for Ynez—"

Ysabel forced herself to smile despite the pain and jealousy clawing at her heart. "I understand."

"Then why do you still look at me like I have stabbed you?"

Because you did.

Ysabel didn't say the words out loud, of course, but the way Massimo's jaw clenched seemed to suggest that he knew what was on her mind.

A part of Massimo rebelled against the idea of having to explain himself, but he just could not get the look of hurt on Ysabel's face out of her mind. He knew, of course, that all of this could be an act, but when he saw her lip start to tremble—

"I want you to know that this has never happened to me before." His pride could go to hell, as long as it meant that his *fidanzata* would stop hurting. "And I know this might not make any difference, but I only used those words to describe your sister on the first night we met. After that, I no longer used those words because for some reason...they no longer seemed *suitable*."

It took a moment for Ysabel to realize what he was saying, and another moment for her to understand what those words implied.

Oh, amore mio!

Ysabel had to bite her lip hard to keep herself from crying the words out, and after so many years of struggling to deny the truth of her feelings—

I love him.

Ysabel knew in her guts that Massimo was telling her the truth, and even though he didn't know it yet—

He loves me, too.

Because that was what his admission amounted to.

Massimo loved her!

And since this changed *everything*, she found herself vigorously shaking her head, which then caused Massimo to stare at her in bemusement.

"I understand."

Massimo's mood turned wary. Were they okay then...just like that? His fights with Ynez were often long and ugly, with his ex-girlfriend sending voice messages to his phone that were full of raging screams and swear words.

"It's not like my sister has a trademark on those words, and besides..."

Her cheeky tone nearly had him smirking, just because.

"It's true, isn't it?"

"What's true?"

"That I'm your little cherry...*duh.*"

This time, Massimo was no longer able to keep the smirk off his lips, which then caused Ysabel to laugh, and the sound of it was...

Fuck!

Massimo knew he should stop comparing the two sisters to each other, but how could he when Ysabel was showing more and more similarities to the girl he had imagined Ynez would be? The girl he had met at the funhouse might have been fiery, but it was also clear to see that she had a sense of humor, just like what Ysabel was showing now...and Ynez never did.

Ysabel suddenly crossed her arms and looked at him challengingly, and Massimo asked, "What?"

"Aren't you going to say anything?" Ysabel asked in her best imitation of *La Strega's* impervious voice. "I already admitted I'm *your* little cherry—"

Massimo suddenly hauled her close, and the rest of what she had to say was replaced with a whimper.

Aaah!

Instead of kissing her as she was already breathlessly waiting for him to do, Massimo's fingers gripped her hair as he pulled her head back...so he could start sucking on her neck.

Oh!

She knew right away he was avoiding kissing her or touching her face because of her wounds and bruises, and his tenderness made her fall for him all over again...even as every part of her body burned in desire.

"Massimo..."

His name slipped past her lips in an aching whisper, and in a blink of an eye, she found herself gasping as he had her pressed against the cold, smooth glass of the windows in their living room.

"No!"

Her parents' apartment might be in the fourth floor, and the windows fully tinted, but Ysabel still felt mortifyingly exposed, and more so when she felt Massimo reach under her robe.

"S-Stop..."

But her protest quickly turned into a moan as his hands cupped the cheeks of her ass before giving them a tight, hard squeeze.

"I...I w-want to stay a virgin!"

The panicky claim was supposed to stop him, but all it did was make Massimo release a soft, lazy laugh that had her bare toes curling against the floor.

"And so you will, ciliegina mia."

Her knees buckled as soon as Massimo purred the words straight into her ears.

"But in the meantime, we can still enjoy each other's flesh...sì?"

She could no longer answer him coherently, with his fingers already tracing her folds over the shamefully soaked fabric of her panties.

Up. Down. Up. Down. Uuuuuuuup. Dooooooooown.

That was just how long she lasted.

That was just how much she wanted him.

And she couldn't even make herself feel angry when she heard Massimo chuckle as her body writhed helplessly in her release.

Yes, yes, yes.

Ysabel felt as if she was floating, and lost as she was in a haze of desire, she couldn't even put up a token of resistance as Massimo guided her to the couch before going down on one knee and cleaning her up with his handkerchief.

Massimo struggled to make sense of his feelings as he gazed down at his *fidanzata*. Ynez had often warned him about Ysabel's ability to fool and manipulate the people around her. *She's so good at pretending to be nice, Mas. I'm just so scared if you let her close, she'll get her claws into you, too.*

It was one of the reasons he had avoided Ynez's sister in the years they had been dating, and it was those words which now taunted him in his mind. Had

he not come here, furious on Ynez's behalf and intent on demanding answers?
So how had it ended this way?

"Massimo?"

He remained on his knee even as her searching gaze collided with his.
"Cos'è?" What is it?

"You never answered my question either. Why did you come here?"

A shuttered expression fell over his features as the uncertainty of her tone threatened to break the walls around his heart.

Because I was furious with you for hurting Ynez.

That was the truth...but as he gazed at the scratches that cut into the soft skin of his *fidanzata's* face, Massimo could feel his anger finding a new target in his ex-girlfriend, and he then heard himself say, "I came here...to make things official."

Ten

Ysabel wasn't surprised to see the horde of reporters waiting outside Mammina's. #MasNez shippers had been up in arms since the public announcement of her upcoming marriage to Massimo, and local media had been more than eager to feed their need for gossip.

Massimo glanced at Ysabel, asking gruffly, "Are you sure you're up for this?"

"Yup."

She did look ready, he considered broodingly, but what if this was merely Ysabel not wanting to show her weakness?

Makeup might have miraculously concealed every scratch on her face, but memories of it were still viciously fresh in his mind. He also remembered how she had involuntarily flinched at his touch, and this had him feeling so fiercely protective Massimo found himself tightening his grip on Ysabel's hand as he helped her out of the car.

Click! Click! Click!

The reporters immediately swarmed close upon seeing them, taking photo after photo.

"How does it feel to steal your sister's boyfriend?"

Ysabel had already prepared herself for such a question, and more importantly, she knew it would be foolish of her to expect Massimo to come to her defense. But just as she opened her mouth to answer the press—

"Ysabel and I dated when she was still in college. A whirlwind romance, if you will."

It was all Ysabel could do to keep her jaw from dropping. *What was Massimo saying?*

"But Ysabel isn't used to being in the limelight, and so only few people knew about our relationship."

"And then you started dating her sister? Isn't that fucked up?"

"I didn't know they were related until Ynez introduced me to her family. When Ysabel and I were dating, a certain *aspect* of our relationship kept us quite busy—"

Ysabel could feel her cheeks burning pink as a few reporters snickered at this.

"And so the topic of getting to know each other's families never came up."

"You really think we'd fall for that crap?"

A cold smile curved over Massimo's lips at the question. "And if you do not? What then? You *really* think *all* of you can still live in my city if so?"

There was one second of stark silence, and in the next second, it was as if the billionaire's words had unleashed a hurricane of fear, and this time, her jaw *did* drop as everyone started mumbling about having something else to do.

It was like watching an infestation of roaches fleeing from their impending doom as everyone scuttled back into their cars and started their engines in a hurry. Car doors slammed shut, tires screeched against the pavement, and then...*silence*.

Just like that, only her and Massimo were left standing outside her step-aunt's restaurant, and it almost seemed as if Ysabel had dreamt the whole thing up.

"Are you alright?"

A dazed laugh escaped Ysabel at Massimo's courteous tone, the sound of which only made things feel even more surreal.

"What you did was...*brutal*."

"But necessary," he answered dismissively. "It would not be in their best interests if they were so foolish again as to forget who owns this city."

"And me?" Ysabel dared to ask. "Are you going to say you own me as well?"

"Do I not?"

"Only if I own you as well." The words were out before Ysabel even realized what she was saying...but how could she take them back, with the way those same words had desire flaring in his gaze?

Another second passed, but just as he took a step towards her, the doors to *Mamma's* suddenly opened, and a beaming Carlita came rushing out.

"È stato incredibile!"

Massimo stiffened as if coming to his senses, and Ysabel bit back a laugh as he glared at her like he was seriously suspecting her of casting a spell. *Oh, amore mio*. How long would it take him to realize that *love* was the only magic she needed to bewitch him?

A smile tugged her lips at the way Carlita was now planting big, fat kisses on both of Massimo's cheeks, and the way Massimo did not dare pull away at such an effusive show of affection was heartbreakingly adorable.

"We all heard what you said, *bambino!* What a grand romance you and Ysabel have! It is like a fairytale..."

Massimo allowed Ysabel's step-aunt to propel him inside while his *fidanzata* obediently followed behind them.

"Since Ysabel did not let you meet us five years ago, we must rectify that immediately, *sì?*"

Massimo could only nod even though a part of him was still in disbelief over the things he had said to the press. Where the hell had those words come from?

"So, I think you have already met Ysabel's *mama* and my brother Arnoldo?"

Massimo expected a change in the older couple's attitude towards him, but both only smiled and greeted him as if it were normal for a man to date one sister...before being engaged to another. Were they not angry with him about hurting Ynez?

It was a question he would seriously like an answer to...*in time*. But for now, there were more people for him to greet, since it was now apparent to him that Ysabel's *famiglia* also included the regulars of *Mamma's*.

A part of Massimo expected them to take advantage of their closeness to his *fidanzata*, the way Ynez's friends had not hesitate to ask favors upon realizing he was a billionaire. But with Ysabel's extended *famiglia*, it was the opposite, and even the same group of high school students he had "seen" the other day, pestering Ysabel with question after question about his relationship with Ynez, was looking at him...like he was the enemy.

They were all truly concerned for Ysabel, and although this could be considered proof that Ynez was telling the truth about her sister's ability to manipulate other people—

Tra il dire e il fare c'è di mezzo il mare. Between saying and doing, there's the sea in between.

His mother of all people had spoken those words to him when he was seven, and her drunken state had made her unusually candid. *In vino veritas. In wine, there is truth*—and so it was, with Sheila bluntly warning her own son at that time *not* to believe everything she said just because she was his mother.

It was a hard lesson to learn, but Massimo had taken her words to heart, and since then, he had only trusted the few people who were able to meet his standards. People like his own *famiglia*, and people like Ynez, who was the opposite of Sheila...on paper.

But then on the other side of the coin, there was Ysabel. She had a college degree that she did not put to use. Preferred to work in her step-aunt's diner with no seeming ambition of her own. Was eccentric to the point of taking a canoe to work. Had no friends except for the regulars in *Mamma's*, all of whom Massimo had originally expected to sing Ysabel praises while dissing her sister.

But none of them did, and when he questioned one-armed Ric bluntly about this, the older man looked at him in surprise, asking, "Why would we say anything bad about Ynez? We have not even met her."

"Are you saying she hasn't come here? Not once?"

"They say it is because of Arnolando. That she never got over her father's death." One-armed Ric shrugged. "But that is all gossip, really. We do not ask, and they do not speak. Life goes on, *sì?*"

The conversation went no further, since Ysabel had already returned to his side to let him know that she had cooked something for him.

"I was told this was your favorite..."

All eyes were on them as Ysabel took Massimo to one of the diner's corner booths, and she presented her masterpiece with flourish. "Clam chowder for starters, and for the entrée, a triple-layered Philly cheesesteak sandwich made of organically sourced wheat bread, vegan cheese, and plant-based meat. Oh, and double scoops of mashed potato on the side. Made from scratch—" Her voice then lowered into a whisper as she revealed her secret. "—using *La Strega's* very own recipe."

The whole diner burst into laughter at Massimo's visible surprise, and they laughed again when it was Ysabel's turn to gasp in surprise, with Massimo suddenly giving his *fidanzata* a little tug that had her tumbling into his lap.

"Let's put it to a test then," Massimo murmured.

"Of course." She tried to get to her feet, but he wouldn't let her leave his lap. She offered him a fork, but he only raised a brow.

"You are not going to feed me?"

"Only if you will feed me back."

"Of course."

Ysabel, having expected him to argue like he always did, was surprised at the swiftness of Massimo's concession, and she looked at him suspiciously. "You promise?"

"You have my word as a Marchetti." He then took the fork from her hand and replaced it with a soup spoon. "Since you're feeding me, we should do this properly..."

Ysabel rolled her eyes but took the soup spoon all the same. "Whatever..."

Massimo's expression turned veiled when he saw her give the spoonful of soup a little blow. Had she forgotten he was from one of America's wealthiest and toughest *famiglie*? So why then was she acting like the mother he never had? Ynez had never displayed such care towards him—*porca miseria!* Why did his brain keep making these pointless comparisons between the two sisters? Was it because Ysabel was more and more becoming like what he imagined Ynez could be?

"Here you go, *Master*." The word had already slipped out before she realized what she was saying, and her heart nearly stopped beating when she saw the way Massimo's gaze suddenly narrowed at her.

"Why did you call me that?"

Because it's what I heard the other girl call you.

And as much as she wanted to say the truth out loud, Ysabel couldn't muster the courage to do so. Today was one of the best days of her life, and she just didn't want to risk ruining it. If another lie would keep Massimo by her side, then so be it.

"Because you're bossy," Ysabel quipped instead, and her heart ached at the way he visibly relaxed. Was he finally starting to suspect the truth?

Massimo finally took a sip of her clam chowder, and she looked at him hopefully. "Well?"

"It's fine."

The dismissive tone had Ysabel bristling. Why was he being unnecessarily rude and hurtful? Would it kill him to—

Oh!

A gasp escaped her when she finally noticed the amusement gleaming in his dark eyes.

"Jerk!"

Massimo sensed everyone's relief when they saw him merely chuckling as Ysabel hit him on the shoulder. Just a second earlier, he had also seen them holding their breath when they heard what his *fidanzata* had called him, and it had seemed they were ready to defend her from his wrath—and die doing so, if that was what it boiled down to.

Could this still be another example of Ysabel's ability to manipulate people...or was it Ysabel being able to win them over simply because she was *nice*?

Ysabel insisted on taking her seat across him as they each had a slice of her sandwich, and it tasted as good as it looked, too. He saw her take her phone out like Ynez usually did, take pictures of the food also like his ex-girlfriend habitually did, but after this—

The phone went back into her bag, and Massimo could not help feeling bemused as he watched her take another huge bite of her sandwich. *That was it?*

Ysabel came back to their table later and saw the way Massimo frowned as she served him coffee. "Are you worried I'm planning to poison you for your wealth?" she asked teasingly.

He tugged her back into his lap before answering, "No."

"I don't believe you—"

"Because you don't have to." Massimo had finally come to a decision. Ynez might have repeatedly warned him against falling for her sister's tricks, and he wanted to believe not everyone was like his mother, who had lied over and over about wanting to change but never did.

"All of mine is yours, Ysabel."

She was about to laugh when she realized he was being serious, and her smile faded. "Don't say that. I don't want it, and I'm willing to sign whatever's needed so that you won't ever have to worry about me being after your money."

"You are entitled—"

"I *really* don't want it," she insisted.

"Why?"

She looked at him as if he had lost his mind. "Um, duh? To prove that I'm not the evil fiancée you think I am." *All thanks to my own flesh and blood*, Ysabel couldn't help thinking, but since she also knew better than to say those words out loud, she could only cup his face and look into his eyes in hopes that he would see the truth in her gaze.

"I want to earn your trust—"

"You already have."

Her heart nearly stopped beating at how swiftly, how *easily* Massimo uttered the words, and her entire body started trembling. "Please don't lie—" Her voice cracked as her eyes started stinging, and her head dropped to his chest.

"Please do not break my trust, Ysabel." His lips brushed over the top of her head as he spoke, and the rawness of his tone had her crying harder. She wrapped her arms tightly around his neck, knowing how much it cost Massimo to say such words.

"I won't," she promised him fiercely. "I promise I won't."

Whether he believed her or not, she didn't really know...since his phone suddenly started ringing, and Ysabel could tell who the caller was just by the way Massimo had stiffened.

Ynez.

And her heart started to ache, even though Massimo was absolutely gentle in the way he pulled her arms down.

"I'm sorry, Ysabel. It is your sister calling," he said heavily.

"I know."

"You understand I have to take this?"

"Of course." She was proud of the way her voice didn't even shake as she answered him, but she was not proud at all with the way her heart sank to her stomach when he walked back to their table minutes later, and she saw the grim look on his face.

"*Mi dispiace*, Ysabel. But I need to go to your sister and explain."

Non farai niente di stupido, she warned herself determinedly. *You will not do anything stupid!*

"She wants an explanation, and I owe it to her—"

Ysabel knew it should be enough that he wasn't lying about it, but instead she heard herself ask, "Can't you just text it?" As soon as the words fell past her lips, she knew right away it was a stupidly shallow thing to say, and she wasn't surprised at the way her question had Massimo's lips tightening in impatience.

"Do you truly think I am the kind of man who would explain these things over text?"

It hurt to sound him so scathing, especially when just earlier he had been so heartbreakingly tender. But what hurt even more was to realize how shamefully desperate she felt. She didn't want him to go to Ynez and have her sister further poison him against her.

"You must learn to trust me, Ysabel. It is over between me and your sister, but she also heard me lie—"

"But it's not a lie," Ysabel blurted out. "Five years ago—"

"Do not say another word," Massimo gritted out.

"Please just let me explain," she begged. "It was Halloween, and—"

The entire diner fell silent, and Massimo bit back a curse at the way everyone was now looking at him like he had committed murder. It was true then, the way Ysabel could have everyone on her side, even though she was exactly the one to blame.

Ysabel mustered the courage to try one last time to have him hear her out. "I know you have every reason to doubt me, but I can prove it to you. My cousin——"

"Your *cousin*, you say?"

Why was Massimo suddenly speaking to her in such a vicious tone?

"It wouldn't happen to be Julio, would it?" A humorless smile twisted over Massimo's lips at Ysabel's visible shock. "I spoke to your cousin years ago, and he warned me about you."

Ysabel couldn't help feeling as if her entire world had turned into a nightmare, and there was no way escaping its horrors. "I d-don't understand ——"

"You told him about reading Ynez's diary, and he warned me about how you may choose to twist the truth to your advantage."

She could only look at him, unable to believe what she was hearing. "You're l-lying. Julio would never——"

"*Just fucking stop!*" Massimo saw her eyes well up with tears at the tone of his voice, and the sight tore him apart even though he knew he had not done anything wrong. "You promised you had changed, dammit."

"Massimo, please——"

This, dammit.

This was the consequence of allowing himself to open up to a woman who had too many similar traits with his mother. But even though this realization should have led him to walking out, Massimo instead heard himself say, "Just admit it."

Her eyes widened.

"Admit that you lied. That you planned to lie. And all will be forgiven."

A part of her wanted to say no. To stand her ground and force him to realize the truth.

But when she thought about how she could risk losing him completely by doing so—

I can't. I'm sorry, God, but I can't.

And so she heard herself choke out, "I'm sorry, Mas. The moment I heard you say you wanted to go to Ynez, I was terrified you'd realize you want her, not me. B-because how can you—" It hurt so, so much to say the next words, but she knew she had to. "How can you want s-someone like *me* when you can have s-someone like Ynez—"

His arms closed around her, and as Ysabel began to weep, she realized that she didn't know what she was crying for.

Was it because she was relieved Massimo had *forgiven* her...or was she crying because it felt as if she had just sold her own honor and integrity for love?

Eleven

Julio: *I'm so sorry, Ysa. I didn't know I was talking about you!*
Ysabel: *How can you not know?!*

Julio: *Ynez told me it was ROMANA I was talking about. But that I shouldn't mention her name because she's got spies all over the place. So, when I was talking to him that day, I just did what Ynez told me, and I told him that someone close to Ynez had read her diary...*

Ysabel: *And of course, he automatically assumed you were talking about me.*

Julio: *I'm so sorry. She paid me to do it, and I figured why not take it since I was just helping her warn her boyfriend about her best friend? I'm so sorry, cuginetta. I'm so, so sorry.*

Ysabel: *It's not your fault. You trusted Ynez...just like I did.*

Julio: *Where's Massimo? I can go to him and explain—*

Ysabel: *No, it's fine. I don't think it would do any good if you go to him. He's just going to think I found a way to convince you to lie for me.*

Julio: *I'm so, so sorry. Sono mortificato, chiedo scusa. If you need me to do anything, like anything, just tell me, and I will do it. OK?*

ALL EYES WERE ON MASSIMO and Ynez as they occupied one of the few available tables in Boston's most popular Italian restaurant. Ynez had wanted him to visit her house, but he had put his foot down about the necessity of meeting in public.

We can meet anywhere else you wish, he had offered by way of compromise, and of course, Ynez had chosen a place where they were sure to be photographed. She had always been the type to get even and retaliate, whenever she didn't get her way. He had actually forgotten that part about her, and being reminded of it left a bad taste in Massimo's mouth.

He might have only known Ysabel for over a day, but he already knew his *fidanzata* was not as vindictive. She was not perfect, *sì*, but the good traits she possessed...were the very ones he had once imagined Ynez to have, only to be disappointed by reality.

And that is more my fault than Ynez's, Massimo thought grimly. Ynez had never asked to be placed on a pedestal, and it was not her fault that their brief but unforgettable encounter in the funhouse had led him to create a false image of her in his mind.

Ynez was struggling to contain her resentment and rage. Massimo had barely said a word in the past hour, not even when she had accused him outright of no longer caring for her. Maybe, it was time to bring out the big guns...

Massimo's jaw clenched when Ynez suddenly started crying. "You're just like them, Mas. You're just like them."

"Do not make this more difficult, Ynez. I already explained I had no choice. Ysabel is now my *fidanzata*, and it is my duty to protect her—"

"But to do so at my expense?" she cried out. "How is that fair?"

"That is why I am here, apologizing—"

"I don't want your apologies, Mas. Can't you see that?" She tried reaching for his hand, and nearly ended up screaming in rage when Massimo drew back as if not wanting her touch. "Why are you acting this way? You're so unfair," she choked out in a sob. "I was with you for five years, and you've known her for what? A fucking matter of hours? Can't you see what she's doing to us? She's evil—"

"Enough, Ynez."

"No! You have to hear the truth—"

Massimo had truly had enough, and he cut her off, saying harshly, "If you insist on speaking the truth, then do not act as if you yourself have not done anything wrong."

A shiver crawled down Ynez's spine at the hardened look on her ex-boyfriend's gorgeous face. He had never looked at her like this. *Never!*

"If...if Ysabel told you something——"

"She did not have to tell me anything, since your best friend Romana had already offered ample evidence about your affair with her boyfriend."

Ynez paled. *Fuck*. So that was why the other woman had been so cold to her lately, and there were also times she had caught Romana looking at her with a catty little smile. *That bitch!*

Her mind raced as she tried to come up with the best possible excuse, but then she saw the steely expression on Massimo's gorgeous face, and she knew him well enough to know there was only way out of this.

"I'm sorry." Ynez's fingers curled into fists as she forced the words out. "I don't know how much she's told you, but...I've been having an affair behind your back since you stopped wanting to have sex with me."

Ynez's confession was unexpected, and Massimo's jaw clenched as his anger faded, and guilt over wasting years of his ex-girlfriend's life once again assaulted his conscience.

"*Perdonami.*" *Forgive me.* "You were right from the start. I was mistaken about my feelings, and I ended up wasting your life."

Ynez lowered her head, but only because she was unable to keep herself from smiling. *Stupid, stupid Mas.* Why were so many people so predictably *stupid*? Truth didn't always set people free. Truth could be just as easily weaponized and turn into a cage...when spoken by the right at the right time and place.

She tried reaching for his hand again, and in his guilt, he allowed her fingers to come into contact with his. "I will never regret those years we had, Mas," she whispered. "Please don't ask that of me."

Massimo had already withdrawn his hand from Ynez's even before she had finished speaking. *Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.* Ynez's touch might have only lasted for seconds, but it should not have lasted in the first place.

He jerked to his feet, saying stiffly, "I truly am sorry this is how it ended between us. From now on—it is best that you only think of me as your brother."

"But what if I can't? I still love you, Mas."

The pain in her eyes whipped his chest. His honor demanded reparation. But his hands were fucking tied, not only by the duty he owed to his *famiglia*...but also by the simple reality that his feelings - or the lack of it - had not changed.

"Perdonami."

It was the only thing he could say before turning his back and walking away from the girl he had convinced himself he was in love with for five years.

Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.

His mind began to taunt him with side-by-side comparisons of his memories of Ynez...and the time he had recently spent with Ysabel. There were moments, just fucking moments that it had seemed to him Ysabel was more like the girl he had met in the funhouse five years ago. But of course that could not be true, and it would do him no good to wish for what was impossible.

When he came back to his apartment, all he wanted was to find some fucking thing to do - maybe hit the treadmill or do weights, anything that would have both his mind and body so exhausted he would be asleep as soon as he hit the bed.

That was the plan...but when he entered the bedroom, and he saw Ysabel waiting for him—

Well, fuck.

Now he knew exactly how to tire himself out.

Twelve

A quick call to ask one little favor from *La Strega* enabled Ysabel to enter her *fidanzato's* apartment and wait for him to come home. Julio's revelation had troubled her greatly; it had made her realize just how far and how well thought out Ynez's plans were when it came to deceiving Massimo. And her sister could've so easily succeeded, if not for divine intervention in the form of Cattleya and *La Strega* playing fairy godmother (and her assistant).

Just one last time, she promised herself.

Ysabel had come here to tell the truth one last time, and if necessary, she would ask for *La Strega* to vouch for her—even if her whole heart was against this. Maybe she was being too much of a foolish and hopeless romantic, but was it really not possible for Massimo to believe she was telling the truth?

Ysabel paced the length of Massimo's bedroom as she tried to rehearse what she would say. *I'm sorry. I know I may be the last person you want to see right now, but could we talk? Please?*

She sat on the floor, and painful memories engulfed her mind as she leaned back against the side of his bed. She remembered the look on his face when she told him about Julio, remembered how he had shouted, and how the entire diner had fallen silent. She remembered, and she started feeling hopeless—

Questo non è da te, Ysa! This is not like you!

She pushed all of the ugly memories away and took her phone out in hopes of distracting herself, but this ended up backfiring when she saw #MasNez trending on all social media platforms—and all because of one photo.

It was of Massimo and Ynez having dinner, and with her sister holding her ex-boyfriend's hand.

Ysabel's first instinct was to run away. If Ynez and Massimo wanted to be together, why should she stand in the way of their happiness? She was so, so tempted to give up, but then she remembered his own grandmother's words

If only you could have seen him in those days, bambina. He was a man in love! He had such high hopes! But when he and Ynez finally started dating, we saw the stars in his eyes slowly fade, and we saw him changing bit by bit until he seemed like a man who had lost all hope, and he had decided to simply...settle.

Ysabel got to her feet and started pacing again. Her sister would indeed win if Ysabel were to let Massimo go without a fight. She was in love with him still, and she was so very sure that he was in love with her, too.

She had to fight for him!

She had to!

And it was while she was giving herself a pep talk that she heard the door open, and when she whirled around, it was to see Massimo standing by the doorway, staring at her.

Oh!

Gone was the anger he had shown her earlier when he believed she had lied to him about changing for the better.

And in its place was *need*. The kind that was both physical and something more. The kind that made her realize how hard he was trying to ignore all of her supposed similarities with his own mother.

Amore mio. Oh, my love.

His torment was almost acutely palpable. She could practically feel his agony, could feel how Massimo was doing his very best to forget all of Ynez's lies and believe that she had really changed. But most of all, she felt his *need*.

Massimo *needed* her so because he *loved* her.

That was so clear to her now, and this had her heart pounding so, so hard.

Forza, Ysabel! You can do this!

Truth once again came to her rescue, and she was indeed beginning to see that with this man, it always had to be the truth, for better or for worse.

That was probably something her sister had also figured out, Ysabel realized uneasily, but she hurriedly pushed the thought away. Instead of worrying over Ynez, she was much better off focusing on her own *fidanzato*, who had just now raised a brow when he saw her lips curve into a little smile.

"Do you care to share the joke, *ciliegina mia*?"

Butterfly wings fluttered inside of her stomach - she just loved it so much when he called her that - and Ysabel couldn't keep her voice from turning breathless as she answered him. "No joke, but it's just something I noticed..."

"About what?"

"The way you look at me." She looked at him under her lashes, and her heart pounded harder when she saw how his nostrils had flared at her words. "It just seems you want..."

"Want *what*?"

Her knees knocked against each other at the roughness of his voice, and she ended up whispering—

"To worship me."

A few moments passed, and she could only swallow hard when a muscle started ticking at his jaw. *Oh no*. Had it been too much? She was really just teasing him, and she didn't think any relationship could work without humor—even if one was led to believe the other was a pathological liar.

Another second passed, and just as Ysabel started gnawing on her lip—

Should she or should she not take the words back?

He was suddenly standing in front of her, and all she could do was gasp and laugh as he swept her off her feet...only to throw her on the bed like one would do with a child.

Her breath caught as she raised herself up on her elbows, and she saw him already getting down to his knees. He slowly parted her legs open, and desire rippled through her body.

Massimo got rid of her jeans swiftly and efficiently, and every inch of her flesh was aching and burning as he slowly pulled her panties down her legs.

I love you, I love you, I love you.

It was all Ysabel could do not to sob the words out as his mouth closed over the swollen nub of her desire, and she clawed helplessly on the bedsheets as he started sucking on her clit. She tried, she tried so, so hard to make it last

—

But just like before, it was simply too much, and his name spilled out in a cry as she started to cum.

"Massimo..."

Thirteen

I cannot get enough of this woman.

There were only three days left until their wedding, and just about every minute of the past two weeks had been spent with Ysabel by his side...or under him or over him, depending on what and where they ended up seducing each other, and always with the most excruciatingly satisfying results.

He had tasted her while she was lying on his office desk, naked from the waist down, and the door unlocked. She had also pleased him on her knees when they were enjoying dinner in a private room at one of Boston's most popular restaurants—but one that also happened to have panoramic *untinted* windows on all sides. The drive to her work from her apartment was only supposed to take ten minutes tops, but every damn day she would arrive at the diner, *barely* making it in time, and all because they had to take a detour along the way.

The same thing had happened tonight, with Massimo and Ysabel on their way to their rehearsal dinner, and they were scheduled to arrive on time as well...until he had caught her staring at him, with stars in her eyes.

"Too handsome for you?"

He had only meant it as a joke, but instead she had shaken her head. "I don't think 'handsome' is going to cut it." And then her voice had gotten a little shy as she admitted, "I think you look *beautiful*—"

And that was it, Massimo thought. He had asked his chauffeur to drive in circles while he rewarded his *fidanzata* with two consecutive orgasms, and he would have gone for a third if not for their incessantly ringing phones, and an exasperated *La Strega* saying she would die of hunger if they were to delay another minute longer.

Life had been really good lately, Massimo conceded somewhat grudgingly. He could not even recall the last time it had been this good, and that was what disturbed him the most.

Had he really not loved Ynez at all, and that was why he could not recall having this good a time with her?

Had he truly been mistaken with everything he imagined her to be?

Sex with Ynez had been good - or at least it had been when they were still doing it. And anytime he had wanted to talk about business, Ynez had been able to converse with him at the same level, and he had liked that about her. It had made her all the more different from his mother.

But when he tried to remember the last time Ynez had made him laugh the way Ysabel often did—his mind drew a totally complete blank.

What the hell?

They had been dating for five fucking years. Surely it was not possible that Ynez had never made him laugh?

"Massimo? What is it?" Ysabel's voice drew him back to the present, and he saw his family seated around him, all of them looking like they had no problem at all with the fact that just weeks ago, it was Ysabel's sister he had been dating.

That, of course, was not Ysabel's fault, but the fact that his family had never liked Ynez only made him feel guiltier about his previous relationship.

"You've been staring at me for some time," Ysabel whispered under her breath. "Do I have something on my face?"

Massimo's entire family could see that there was absolutely nothing on Ysabel's face...and not one of them was surprised to hear the reply of her *fidanzato*.

"Sì, ciliegina mia."

There was nothing Massimo liked more than having an excuse to touch his *fidanzata*, and Massimo's body turned rigid with need as he ran his tongue over an otherwise clean spot next to the corner of her lip. He heard her catch her breath, lifted his head and saw the stars in her eyes—

Too damn adorable.

And so he could not resist doing the same thing all over again.

Cesare and Penelope, who were seated across the engaged couple, exchanged looks at how Massimo was acting towards his *fidanzata*. He had the opportunity to speak with his brother in private last night, and when he had asked Massimo bluntly if he had already fallen in love with Ysabel—

"Just because I am also about to be a married man does not mean I have also lost my heart to my future bride."

His brother's tone had been sardonic, and the smile that had accompanied his words had not reached Massimo's eyes. Cesare had told his wife about it, and she in turn had told him what she observed from the night Ynez had unexpectedly dropped by at the Marchettis' estate.

"I think she loves him, Cesare. And I think he loves her, too. But Ynez..."

"He will never cheat on Ysabel, if that is what you're worried about."

"I believe you when you say he won't. But...there's more than one way for him to hurt her, and that's what worries me."

Penelope could see in the way her husband frowned that both of them were thinking of the same thing. It was also equally obvious that Cesare did not want to think of his brother capable of breaking Ysabel's heart...but such a thing seemed inevitable, with the *famiglia* enjoying their coffee when news suddenly broke out on the Internet about a drunk and wildly sobbing Ynez going live...as she begged for Massimo to come to her and *talk*.

Ysabel could already feel herself paling when she heard Massimo say her name in a low voice. She already knew what he was about to ask of her, and as much as her own heart broke for Ynez—

What do I do, God?

She knew her sister inside and out, and this was not unfortunately Ynez's first attempt at emotional blackmail. In fact, Ynez had virtually done the same thing to get Ysabel to admit to a crime she had never committed, and so of course...of course she understood why it was easy for Massimo to fall for the same trick. But—

"Please don't go."

His gorgeous features hardened the moment she whispered the words, and Ysabel bit back a sob.

"I get that you feel guilty, I really do. But if you know my sister like I do——"

"What are you going to tell me this time, Ysabel?" Massimo bit out. "Will you try to stop me from helping your sister by telling me about her affair?"

Ysabel could only stare at him, stunned. He *knew* of Ynez's affair...and he was still willing to help her sister?

"You told me you changed, dammit." And he had fucking believed her.

But just like how his mother had always lied about wanting to change——

So had Ysabel.

Just like his mother, Ysabel would always be the selfish little bitch who had used her sister's identity to fool around with a married man. Just like his mother, she was bound to disappoint him again and again——and it was time he fucking accepted that.

Ysabel couldn't even say a word as she watched him walk away.

I was wrong.

He was rushing to Ynez's rescue despite knowing about her sister cheating on him, and that could only mean one thing, couldn't it?

Massimo was in love with Ynez...and not her.

Fourteen

What the hell am I doing here?

All eyes were on Massimo as he stood outside Ynez's penthouse apartment, his fingers frozen mid-air. On the other side of this door was his ex-girlfriend, who had publicly begged for him to talk to her. Unspoken but very much obvious to everyone was the possibility that Ynez would harm herself if she did not come...but was that truly reason enough for him to walk out of the rehearsal dinner for his own wedding?

Are you really going to do this, Marchetti?

Ynez might need him still, but Ysabel was the woman he had sworn to marry. More than that, he *wanted* to marry her—but would she still want to marry him, when every time her sister asked for his help, he would feel conscience-bound to offer it—even if doing so was hurting his *fidanzata*?

Ysabel was not perfect. But neither was he. And once he allowed himself to imagine what life would be without Ysabel—

No!

Massimo's blood ran cold, and he knew right away it was not a risk he was willing to take. His heart had already made its choice, and its choice, for better or for worse, was not the one who was the opposite of his mother. His heart chose Ysabel, and he would do anything to make her forgive him and take her back.

Having made up his mind, Massimo started to turn away, but it was then he heard the door open behind him, and Ynez cry his name out.

"Massimo, wait!"

Her arms locked around his waist from behind, and before he knew it—photographers suddenly came out from nowhere, and Massimo realized it was as Ysabel had tried to warn him.

A trap.

This was all a fucking trap, and it was all he could do to control himself from shoving Ynez away.

The fury in Massimo's eyes had Ynez nervously backing up a step even as she looked at him with tearstained eyes. "Please don't be mad at me—"

"You planned this, damn you."

"I just wanted you to be free of her," Ynez whispered. "But I knew you were too honorable—"

"It's over between us, Ynez. And that will never change."

The finality of his voice was just too much, and even though Ynez knew the sensible thing to do was to regroup and find another chance to cause trouble —

Her temper got the better of her like it always did, and she found herself lunging forward to slap Massimo on the face.

"Damn you!"

The photographers she had personally contacted gleefully took pictures as Massimo's face snapped to the side.

"You never really loved me, did you?"

Massimo did his best to control his own temper. "Whether I did or not has nothing to do with your sister—"

"Of course it does, you—" Too late, Ynez realized what she was about to let slip...or had let slip.

Shit, shit, shit!

Her panicky gaze swung wildly to Massimo's, and Ynez felt herself pale at the chilling expression on his hardened features.

"You lied to me, didn't you?"

His murderously soft tone frightened her, and all Ynez could do was shake her head and stammer incoherently. "I—I—"

"Don't fucking lie to me!"

Massimo had never spoken to her like this way before, and she finally understood why even *La Strega* herself described Massimo as the most terrifying among her grandsons.

"It was Ysabel that I met at Halloween five years ago. *Wasn't she?*"

Ynez was so, so tempted to lie, but the moment Massimo took a step towards her as if he were willing to wring her neck if that was what it took to get the truth out—

"Y-Yes." It killed her to admit to her deception and trickery, but Ynez also knew Massimo would make her life hell if she was stupid enough to try lying to him again.

"And you lied to me about other things," Massimo bit out. "Didn't you?"

Ynez desperately racked her brains for something to say that would turn the tables around and have Massimo trust her again. But when she saw Massimo's dark gaze drop to her neck as if trying to gauge whether he could strangle her with just one hand—

"I d-did..."

By the time Ynez finished confessing her every lie, security was already waiting to escort her out of the building, and Massimo didn't even turn her way when she begged for him to forgive her.

"Please, Massimo! I did it for you! I love you! We belong together!"

The sound of her cries only made Massimo want to kill her even more, and the only reason he wasn't punishing her as she deserved because he knew now—just when it was too late, and so much damage had been done...

He now knew exactly what kind of girl his *fidanzata* was, and it was not the type who would ever want to see her sister hurt—even if that same sister had hurt her first.

On his way back to the family estate, Massimo tried calling Ysabel several times, but none of his calls could get through. In his desperation, he decided to call his grandmother, and the older woman answered his call by the first ring.

"Where is she, *nonna*? I need to talk—"

"She's gone, Massimo."

The pain underscoring *La Strega's* voice lashed at his heart...because he knew his grandmother could only be hurting on his *fidanzata's* behalf.

"I could not force her to stay, you understand? She could not even cry when she asked me..."

The first time Massimo had ever heard heard his grandmother's voice crack was when she had to tell him and his brothers that both their grandfather and father were dead. The second time...was now.

"She was in so much pain, bambino."

His heart threatened to collapse at the thought of Ysabel hurting to such an extent, and all because of his blind stupidity.

"It was just too much to bear, and so when she asked me to help her disappear..."

His fingers tightened around his phone. "*Nonna*—"

"*Mi dispiace molto.*" *I'm so very sorry.* "But I had to say yes."

Fifteen

Miami, Florida

Three months. It had been three months since his own *nonna* had helped Ysabel disappear, and even though he had already spent a fortune of his own money in search of his missing *fidanzata*—

Where are you, Ysabel?

It was often whispered about in Boston that there was no one better than *La Strega* at making people...disappear. Most times, that typically meant the person missing was already six feet under. But in his *fidanzata's* case?

Massimo was the one who felt as if he had ceased to exist, the moment he found out that the only way to find the girl he loved was to beat his grandmother at her own game.

Where are you, ciliegina mia?

He had barely slept since she had gone missing, and it was only when he had almost gotten himself run over by a damn school bus that his eldest brother Giancarlo had reluctantly pulled rank and ordered Massimo to choose between two alternatives.

You will end up killing yourself at the rate you're going, and then what? Will you be able to make it up to Ysabel if you are already dead? Do all of us a favor, fratello—either take a fucking break from searching for her or go on a working trip to Miami.

As painful as it was to admit, Massimo knew that every word his brother had uttered was true, and so here he was, playing the role of a billionaire entrepreneur and killing it. He had just closed another multimillion real estate deal for his *famiglia*, but the success meant nothing to him.

Where are you, my love?

Massimo bowed to the group of Japanese investors that had partnered with the Marchettis for a project in Tokyo, but as soon as they stepped out of the private room he had reserved for their meeting, the polite smile completely dropped from his lips.

I miss you, Ysabel. I love you. Where are you?

He was about to leave the restaurant when its manager hurried after him. "Mr. Marchetti? There is a Ms. Ynez Ossini on the phone for you, and she says—"

"Whatever she says, you can bet it's a damn lie."

Those who were near enough to hear his words ended up gasping; the expressions on their faces made it clear that they knew who Ynez was...and just as clear was the fact that none of them intended to keep this incident to themselves.

"I'm so sorry, sir," the restaurant manager stammered. "I was not aware..."

"I have a restraining order against her," Massimo explained curtly. "I appreciate if you'd get the word out about this."

Massimo heard the incessant click of cameras as the other guests hurriedly took photos of him as he walked away. Such invasion of his privacy would have been unheard of in his city, and it was one of the reasons why Massimo rarely traveled out of Boston.

Ysabel was the only reason he had flown around the fucking world *twice* in three months, and now that he was done with his duty here—

Where are you, Ysabel?

He had just walked back into his hotel when a blast of air-conditioning struck him, and with it came the scent of...*cherries?*

His heart slammed against his chest even though he knew he was being fucking fanciful. But all the same, he found himself sending up a desperate prayer to the heavens. *Dio aiutami. Help me, God.*

Ysabel had not stopped loving him in the five years that he had mistaken Ynez for her. Or at least that was what his grandmother had insisted. But either way—Massimo knew he was willing to wait far, far longer than that. If forever was how long it took to find his *fidanzata* and beg for her forgiveness—

I will do anything just to see you, ciliegina mia. Anything.

The scent of cherries refused to disappear, and even though he was convinced it was God punishing him with false hope just as he deserved, Massimo finally looked up—

And it really was...his Ysabel, in a wedding dress.

FORZA, YSABEL! YOU can do this!

Ysabel had promised her newfound friend she would do this, and do it she would...even if it killed her.

So just put on the damn gown and keep your promise!

Her tears started falling as she squeezed herself into the gown, and Ysabel angrily wiped them away. *Big girls don't cry*, she reminded herself, *and most especially not when it involved walking down the aisle in a pretty dress.*

She did her best not to think of anything else as she applied her makeup, but it was only when she sprayed some perfume on herself that she realized too late it smelled of...*cherries*.

The perfume was part of a welcome gift set from hotel management, and Ysabel didn't know whether to laugh or cry as its scent made her remember the one person she had no business remembering.

I don't understand, God.

Three months had already passed, and she had been so, so sure that this time around, she would be able to forget him for good. The past five years, Ysabel hadn't been able to move on because of the countless what-if questions that troubled her soul.

But it was different now. Or at least it *should've* been different, since she had come to realize that she, Cattleya, and his grandmother - all of them were wrong. All of them had assumed Massimo had never been satisfied with Ynez because she wasn't Ysabel.

But they were all wrong, and it was time for Ysabel to accept this.

Her sister might have deceived Massimo about that night, but the two of them were clearly meant to be together. How could she believe anything else, when someone as possessive as Massimo could still rush to her sister's rescue...even when he knew Ynez had been cheating on him?

I know it's over between us, God. I already know that. So why can't I still forget him?

She was about to step out of the hotel when the doors opened, and her steps crashed into a silent halt.

Massimo?

He was so, so much more gorgeous than she had allowed herself to remember. But he had also visibly lost weight, and agony squeezed her heart as she tried to wonder why. Were they fighting again? Had he caught Ynez cheating—*non andare lì, Ysa! Don't go there! Just don't!*

It was over between them, and—

Shit.

Massimo had already looked up, and the moment his dark haunted eyes clashed with hers, it was as if the entire world had stopped, and it was all Ysabel could do not to cry the words that were threatening to rip her apart.

Perché, Massimo? Why? Why can't it be me?

Massimo could feel himself whitening as he stared at *his* Ysabel...but she would not be for long, considering what she was wearing.

"Who is it, Ysabel?" he asked hoarsely.

"I d-don't..."

Was she saying she didn't want to tell him? *Perché*? Because she believed it was no longer his business?

Massimo knew a man much better than him was deserving of her, but *dammit, dammit, dammit*—

"How did you even find me?" Ysabel asked painfully. *La Strega* had told her she would be safe here, and he would never find her. So why was Massimo now standing in front of her?

"I've been looking for you every fucking day, Ysabel."

It hurt to hear the hollowness of his tone, and while she knew he would never lie—what if he was only searching for her out of guilt?

"I was driving everyone crazy because of it, and that's how I ended up here."

Was he saying...he had only bumped into her by coincidence?

"Please don't do this." Massimo could no longer bear staring at his Ysabel dressed like a fucking bride and *not* saying anything about it. "I know I have no right to ask you of this," he admitted tautly, "but *per favore*, Ysabel—give me another chance. *Please*."

"This is about your duty, isn't it?" she asked stiltedly.

"No, dammit. It's about *you* and me—it's always been you and me since Halloween five years ago." He tried to reach for her, but Ysabel stumbled back as if terrified by his touch, and her reaction cut him to the core. "Ysabel —"

"It's over, okay?" she choked out. "And...and now, if you'll excuse me, I...I have somewhere to go."

Did she really think he would let her go just like that?

A gasp escaped her lips when Massimo's arms suddenly wrapped around her from behind in a chain-like embrace.

"Forgive me, Ysabel. Forgive me."

Tears tracked down her cheeks at the rawness of his tone. "There's nothing for me to forgive. You and Ynez—"

"I don't give a damn about Ynez," Massimo bit out. "I never did—"

His face whitened at the way Ysabel tore out of his hold at the words.

"Don't lie, Massimo. Please—" Her voice broke, and his own fucking heart broke at the sound of it. "Just please don't."

"I'm *not* lying," he said fiercely. "I know I was stupid and blind all these five years—"

"But you loved her anyway—"

"I never did, Ysabel. It's why we've stopped having sex for over a year. It's why I've never called her my little cherry after the night I met *you*. I never loved her, and that's why I didn't feel a goddamn thing even when I saw her fucking another man."

Ysabel felt as if her world was spinning too fast for her. All this time, she had thought he had loved Ynez so much he was willing to forgive her sister for anything. But apparently, she was wrong about that, and she could only start crying again as Massimo cupped her cheeks with the most heartbreaking tenderness.

"I'm sorry I didn't realize it was you that night. I'm sorry I wasted five years with the wrong woman, and ended up hurting the one that truly mattered. I'm sorry I believed all of Ynez's lies—"

She paled at his words, but he wouldn't let her pull away when she tried to break free.

"Massimo, when Ynez was in h-high school—"

"I know, *cieligina mia*. I know you took the blame for her—" His jaw clenched. "And the only reason she's still alive, after everything she's done to you is because she's your sister. But if you tell me you will not mind—"

"I totally mind," she said quickly even as she fought back the urge to cry and laugh at the same time. Was this for real? Was Massimo really here saying

—
"I love you, Ysabel."

God. Oh God. Is this really happening?

"I have loved you from the first moment I saw you," Massimo said hoarsely. "And I will always love you. So *please*, please just give me a fucking chance before you marry another man—"

This time, Ysabel did cry, and she did laugh as well. "Oh, Mas."

"I'm fucking serious—"

"So am I."

And then she was taking the hands that were holding his face...and Massimo could only swallow hard as she kissed his knuckles on each hand.

"I missed you so much, Massimo. And I love you even more—"

"Then will you promise to marry me," he asked tautly, "and not be someone else's wife?"

"Oh, Mas."

"I don't fucking know how to interpret that," he grated out.

"It can mean a lot of things," she teased shakily, "but right now it means...I only look like a bride in your eyes because you're biased. But actually...I'm someone else's bridesmaid, and—"

Oh my gosh!

Massimo was stunned when Ysabel suddenly grabbed his hand and swiftly dragged him towards the doors leading to the hotel's largest ballroom. "We have to go, Kayra's *literally* going to kill me if I'm late—"

She stopped speaking when Massimo suddenly whirled her around to face him.

"Are you talking about Kayra...*Petinos*?" Massimo demanded.

Ysabel looked at him in surprise. "You know her, too?"

"Everyone who's *famiglia* knows her," he said flatly

"Why are you looking at me like that?" she asked uncertainly.

His *fidanzata* obviously didn't know this, but Kayra was the kind of woman who made even *La Strega* appear like a saint. Making a person disappear was child's play to the likes of Kayra, and when he thought about how he had been *this* fucking close to losing Ysabel completely if not for divine intervention—

Grazie, Dio.

Ysabel was stunned when Massimo suddenly hauled her towards him, but before she could ask him why, he was already kissing her senseless, and oh, oh, oh...

Oh, Mas.

It was the loveliest and hottest kiss ever, and all because this time, both of them knew the truth. Both of them knew they were in love with each other, and both of them knew their love had started five years ago.

Epilogue

Joe: *Good morning, Boston! Welcome to Coffee with Joe and Jane, everyone's favorite morning show on the radio.*

Jane: *And speaking of favorites, we've got an early bird - well, birdwatcher actually - tweeting a photo of one our city's most beloved couples. We've already uploaded the photo to our socials, and if you check it out now, you'll see it's none other than Massimo Marchetti and his fiancée Ysabel Ossini.*

Joe: *Am I seeing things here? Or are they really on a canoe? At five *bleep* thirty in the morning?*

Jane: *Canoeing is said to be one of the future Mrs. Massimo Marchetti's favorite hobbies, and take this - it's actually how she's been traveling to work for some years now. Her billionaire fiancé think it's 'cute', and I'm quoting Mr. Marchetti verbatim, since he's gone on record several times to say this.*

Joe: *Their love story still confuses the hell out of me.*

Jane: *It's really not confusing at all, or maybe it is to guys. I mean, stories like this would never have happened if it was the other way around. Women's intuition, you know.*

Joe: *As a happily committed bachelor, I'm afraid I'll have to say no, I don't actually know anything about women's intuition—*

Jane: *You're honest about it at least, so that's a start.*

Joe: *Can you give me a rundown of their relationship timeline? Maybe we've got other listeners who've yet to hear the whole story.*

Jane: *Well, okay. Anyone who follows me knows I've never been a #MasNez shipper, and I was Team #MasBel from the start, but...for the sake of objectivity, I'll do my best to outline stuff without bias.*

Joe: *We appreciate that.*

Jane: *So basically, five years ago, Ysabel was one of those who attended the Marchettis' annual Halloween bash.*

Joe: *Love those!*

Jane: *Now, Ysabel and Massimo kinda sorta bumped into each other in the funhouse, but then Ysabel had to do a Cinderella thing and run away when she heard someone call out her sister's name.*

Joe: *The Diabolical Ynez Ossini.*

Jane: *Now who's being biased?*

Joe: *No, seriously. I'm just reading one of the headlines that came up when I googled her name.*

Jane: *Oops. Sorry.*

Joe: *For the record, I'm not lying. The article's legit, and you guys can look it up as well and fact check what I'm saying.*

Jane: *Well, I guess I can see why her actions would seem diabolical? I mean, picking up from where we left off, we have Ysabel who ran away when she heard Ynez's name, and then there was Mr. Marchetti, who saw Ysabel react when the name 'Ynez' was mentioned.*

Joe: *So that's how he ended up mistaking Ysabel for her sister?*

Jane: *She had a face mask on that time, and since the two sisters do look really similar, I get why he'd be mistaken. But - and this is where women's intuition comes in - I really think he should've realized eventually she was nothing like the girl he had met that night, you know?*

Joe: *Well, here's the thing about us men. We hate admitting mistakes.*

Jane: *And again, I love that you're being honest about that. Way to go, Joe.*

Joe: *Thank you, and way to go to Massimo Marchetti and Ysabel Ossini, who have proven that true love will always win in the end...because they did, right?*

Jane: *Oh, absolutely. The last confirmed sighting of Ynez in Boston was like ages ago, and I've read several blind items online that say it's because Ynez has been, you know.*

Joe: *No, really, I don't know.*

Jane: *Excommunicado by everyone in Boston. They say it's tit for tat, and she's expected to stay away for five years, which is the same length of time she's kept the truth hidden from Massimo and Ysabel.*

Joe: *That's brutal, man. If it were true, I mean. But...it could've been worse, right?*

Jane: *Oh, wait! Look, someone's tagged us in another photo, and aww...these two have really been #couplegoals for everyone since they went public. I love how Massimo openly dotes on his fiancée.*

Joe: *We've been tagged in another photo, and err...I think you should use a different hashtag with this one.*

Jane: *Huh?*

Joe: *Think...NSFW, since I think Massimo's doting on her in a very special way!*

Jane: *Oh my goodness! Is he...oh my gosh!*

Joe: *You know how people sometimes talk about men hiding behind their women's skirts like it's a bad thing? Well, I guess it's completely different when they're under it? Or rather inside of it?*

Jane: *And...I think that's our cue to take a short break, here's a song requested by one of our listeners...*

IT WAS THE MOST WICKEDLY beautiful wedding Bostn had ever seen, as well as the most haunting and terrifyingly challenging. For invited guests to enjoy the lavish reception prepared for them, they must first enter a funhouse and answer three questions. A single correct answer would be

enough to have the doors to the ballroom open, but for those who failed all three, well...

"*Did* anyone fail, though?" Ysabel asked curiously as her bridegroom swiftly undid the row of pearl buttons lining the back of her wedding gown.

"You'll have to ask Sarica about that," Massimo said dryly, "since she volunteered to take care of that part of the wedding."

Ysabel couldn't help laughing. "Why am I not even surprised?"

"And why, *ciliegina mia*——" He carefully peeled her gown off her shoulders and allowed it to slowly fall into a pool of silk around her feet. "—-are we spending our wedding night talking about another woman?"

Her breath caught at the way he was staring at her. *This*, she thought dizzily. *This* was exactly how he had been staring at her that night five years ago, and she just wanted to cry, when she thought about how both of them had been so close to losing each other for good.

Need blazed through his veins as he looked his fill of his bride, who was now down to a delicate set of underwear and matching thigh-high stockings held up by the sexiest pair of garter belts. He saw her start to squirm under his gaze, and a smirk slowly unfurled over his lips.

"Am I making you uncomfortable—"

She started to say yes.

"—-or is it more like you're starting to become uncomfortably *wet*?"

But as soon as she heard him say the other word, all she could do was swallow hard. *Gosh, oh gosh*. How was it that Massimo only seemed to get devilishly hotter every day of their lives?

Her heart pounded against her chest as he suddenly swept her off her feet, and she already felt close to losing consciousness by the time he was laying her gently down on his massive bed.

"I love you, Ysabel."

The tenderness underscoring his words was just too much, and she could only choke out a reply. "I love you, Massimo. *So, so much.*"

And then there was nothing else for her to say, with his lips raining her face with kisses before slowly moving down to the side of her neck.

Her arms went around his neck as her body arched up against his, and a moan slipped past her lips as he unhooked the front clasp of her bra.

"You're so gloriously beautiful, Ysabel..."

He saw the way she teared up at the words, and he knew it was because a part of her was still unused to hearing such things from him. How could she, when for five long years he had treated her with aloof contempt and disapproval?

All he could do now was worship her with his mouth, his lips closing around one nipple as his fingers carefully kneaded one pale globe. He suckled her nipple gently at first, and then more deeply and passionately, until she was gripping his head and whimpering his name.

Ysabel was out of her mind with desire by the time he slowly parted her legs open, and all she could do was shudder and moan when he tore her panties off her body with one quick yank. The savage gesture thrilled and frightened her, but as he positioned himself between her legs and loomed over her, his dark gaze filled with love and need—

"I love you, Mas. I love you. I love you."

She just couldn't help it. After so many years of having to deny her feelings even to herself, there were times when she just wanted to savor the freedom she now enjoyed. She wanted to tell him again and again and again, and oh, the way he always looked at her with such fierce possessiveness every time she told him she loved him—

"You are my life, Ysabel," Massimo said roughly. "My love. My everything."

Not even Ysabel could have imagined Massimo being able to say such words, and all she could do was cry as she heard them...and cry some more when she finally felt the head of his manhood slowly rub against her swollen folds.

He was so, so big. *Too* big, really, that she ended up digging her nails into the muscular panes of his back as he slowly penetrated her virginal pussy, inch by careful inch. She couldn't stop herself from clawing his back as her pussy stretched to accommodate his massive length and girth, and *aaaaaaah...*

She had known losing her virginity could hurt, but oh, this pain...it was as excruciating as it was beautiful, knowing that the only man she had ever loved would also be the only man who would possess every inch of her body.

Finally, finally, finally, she was his...

A growl ripped out of his throat as soon as he started thrusting hard and fast inside of his wife's body. *This, dammit.* This was how he had imagined it from the moment he first saw her. *This* was how it should be and would always be, when two people loved each other, and *fuuuuuuuck...*

He tried, dammit.

He tried so damn hard to be gentle, but when he saw her look up at him, her eyes subconsciously begging him to fuck her as hard as he *wanted*—

Ysabel could only gasp and shudder as Massimo suddenly pulled out...just before flipping her around and pulling her up on all fours.

"Massimo!"

She couldn't stop herself from crying his name out as he pounded into her from behind.

Yes, yes, yes.

She could only sob the words out. It still didn't feel real, just didn't feel real at all to have Massimo love her like this and *know* that this was no longer forbidden. Instead, this was right. This was fated. This was her and Massimo loving each other, and *oh, oh, oh Mas!*

They came at the same time, with Ysabel crying his name out one last time while he groaned out hers. She clung to him as a massive tidal wave of pleasure washed over her shuddering body, and she could only sob as

Massimo didn't stop thrusting hard and fast into her even as his cock filled her pussy with his cum.

IT WAS A LONG-STANDING tradition for every Marchetti bride to join the entire *famiglia* for breakfast the morning after her wedding, but what was *not* customary at all was for an outsider to join them on such an occasion.

A crafty smile flashed over *La Strega's* lips when she saw how everyone was struggling to hide their surprise at seeing Cattleya seated on her right.

"I have an announcement to make, and now seems a good time as any to make it."

Giancarlo's expression turned impassive at the way his own *fidanzata* stiffened at his grandmother's words.

"But before anything else, I would like to welcome the newest member of our *famiglia* once again." Potenziana smiled warmly at her newest granddaughter-in-law. "Thank you for making do with my grandson, *bambina*."

"It was a very great sacrifice to make," Ysabel said with a sigh, "but one must always do one's—" The rest of her words disappeared in her husband's kiss, and when Massimo lifted his head, the soft, dreamy look on Ysabel's face made it quite clear that sacrifice was the last thing on her mind where her husband was concerned.

Potenziana cleared her throat. "As for my other announcement..." She nodded at the direction of her personal assistant, saying, "Cattleya here has asked for my permission to become Ezio's bride."

Ezio nearly jerked out of his seat. *What the fuck?*

"And I said yes."

Cattleya's expression remained serene even as she became the subject of everyone's stunned scrutiny.

Ezio's dark, enigmatic eyes focused on Cattleya. "Did I hear *nonna* correctly?" he asked quietly. "Did *you* truly ask her to marry me?"

"Yes."

Gazelle was in absolute awe. The girl sounded so *calm!* She had never imagined Cattleya could do such a thing, but it was definitely inspiring! She could only hope she would be just as...*proactive*, if she were to ever be so lucky to find a man to fall in love with.

Her gaze then switched back to her brother, who was now staring at Cattleya like the other girl was the most infuriating puzzle he had to solve. It was so not like Ezio to reveal his emotions like this, and maybe...maybe it was because of this their *nonna* had agreed to the marriage?

Ezio could not believe that was all Cattleya had to say. Not once had she ever expressed any interest in him, and in the years they had known each other, there were even times when her words and actions seemed to suggest that she did not even *like* him as a person.

So why in hell had Cattleya asked for his grandmother's permission to become his bride—and more importantly, what reason did *La Strega* have for accepting?

What the hell was happening?

The End

Thank you so much for reading Massimo and Ysabel's story. I really hope you enjoyed it, and if you did, it would mean so much if you could also leave even the shortest review. A quick rating would also do. I know I say this again and again, but those reviews and ratings truly mean so, so much to indie authors like me.

The next book in this series will be Ezio and Cattleya's story, which I hope you'll look forward to as well. Please don't forget to [subscribe to my newsletter](#) if you haven't yet. It's the easiest way to stay notified about upcoming works and new release sales.

Last but not the least, for those who are at a crossroad in their personal lives, which is where my husband and I also currently find ourselves in—there's this post I found from [one of the Christian pastors I follow on YouTube](#) that I've started using as a blueprint when I'm faced with so many choices in life.

Look within and find God.

Look around and serve God.

Look back and thank God.

Look forward and trust God.

Whoever you are reading this, I hope and pray you'll find comfort, joy, and peace in these lines as well.

Until our next journey,

Marian Tee

P.S. [Kayra and Drake](#) also has their own book, and of course, there's also the first book in this series, which is [Cesare and Penelope's story](#). If you haven't read either, hope you can check them out as well!