



Italian
Stallions

Naughties
AND NICE

New York Times Bestselling Author

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To the Golden Girls.

We may have started as work colleagues, but that quickly gave way to a true sisterhood. I love knowing you're always up for skinny dipping, wine time, traveling the world, and that you're never more than a text away when I really need you.

This one is for you - Deb (Dorothy), Lisa (Rose), and Nan (Blanche) from Mari (Sophia).

Contents

[Naughty and Nice](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Tempted and Taken](#)

[About the Author](#)

Naughty and Nice

One unforgettable night...with the wrong man.

If there's one thing Liza excels at it's making bad decisions. Which is why she knew it was stupid to invite the guy she'd just started dating to the gala she was hosting. When he gets overly familiar, she asks him to leave. He refuses...

Until sinfully sexy billionaire, Matt Russo, intervenes, leading to Liza's worst decision ever. Because a holiday hook-up with Matt, her family's enemy, would definitely land her on the naughty list for life.

If Matt's past has taught him anything, it's that true love doesn't exist. Then he spies Liza—the only threat to his simple existence—across the hotel ballroom. A slow dance leads to a heated embrace that ends in his hotel room. And for the first time ever, he imagines a very different future for himself.

Unfortunately, it's one he can never have.

Chapter One

Liza Moretti looked across the crowded hotel ballroom and smiled. Months of planning and preparation had come together much better than she could have hoped. As Executive Director of the Philadelphia Initiative—a foundation that worked to increase philanthropic donations in the community—she was no stranger to fundraising, part of which included organizing shindigs like this one.

Tonight, the Initiative was hosting a Snowflake Gala, the proceeds going to support a local shelter, Promise House, that offered a place to live for young people facing homelessness and survivors of sex trafficking. The home was very near and dear to Liza’s heart, and she’d begun volunteering there every weekend since first touring it shortly after her promotion to the executive director position.

She’d put countless hours into planning tonight’s festivities, making sure it was considered a not-to-miss event amongst Philadelphia’s wealthiest. Sometimes she felt like she had dissociative identity disorder as she lived in two very distinct worlds, working with the city’s most troubled and destitute youth at Promise House, while rubbing elbows and hobnobbing with the elite, all in an attempt to get them to open their wallets to help.

The Ritz-Carlton's Grand Ballroom was dripping in twinkle lights and white tulle, looking so elegant, it took her breath away. Her team had been working since yesterday to fashion the romantic atmosphere, creating a true winter wonderland. The soft lighting from the massive chandelier in the center of the room added to the effect, and she had been pleased by the number of astonished—impressed—gasps she'd heard when the guests first arrived.

They'd just completed the three-course dinner, so guests had begun to mill around, some opting to socialize, while others were dancing to the five-piece orchestra that had played throughout the meal. The orchestra's time was winding down. In a little while, she would take the stage to give a presentation about the Promise House. After that, she'd hired an extremely popular local band to liven things up and take the party to the next level.

"Here you go," Davis Taylor said, handing her a glass of champagne.

"Thank you," she said, smiling at her date for the evening.

Ordinarily, she attended work events stag so that she could handle any last-minute problems that might surface. However, when she turned Davis down for a date tonight, due to this work obligation, he'd asked if he could accompany her, reassuring her it wouldn't bother him if she was called away to deal with any emergencies.

This was her sixth official date with Davis, which made him this year's record holder.

No. Liza reconsidered that. That wasn't true. He had the distinct honor of being the record for this year *and* last, the first man in at least the last twenty to make it past her three-strikes-you're-out dating regimen.

Liza, single and thirty, was a professional when it came to weeding out the unsavory candidates in her ever-dwindling dating pool. As such, she had a system. Her dates—found either online, through setups, or even the occasional met-in-line-somewhere—started with the coffee break. If that went well, they moved on to the lunch date, which ensured that if things went south, her pain was limited due to the need to return to the office. After that, they graduated to a proper dinner date.

Davis had soared through the first three dates, and even made a decent showing for the fourth and fifth—both dinners, with the added drinks and dancing at a nightclub afterward.

So tonight, after a two-year dry spell, she was on an honest-to-God sixth date and hopeful that perhaps Davis would clear the next and most important hurdle.

Sex.

Her girl parts were hungry. Starving, in fact.

Liza was anticipating a full-on pussy rebellion if she tried to get herself off with her vibrator one more time. She'd worn out every fantasy in her vast repertoire, struggling to find anything new on porn sites or in erotic romance novels that could get her motor revving. She'd hit the limit on ways to turn herself on.

She needed a man.

Stat.

So, she'd gone ahead and offered Davis the invitation to tonight's gala and, unbeknownst to him, if all went well, she had a room reserved upstairs.

"This is quite an event," Davis said, surveying the room much as she'd just been doing. "You should be very proud,

Liza. Not everyone could pull off something of this magnitude. And with this many big names. Your guest list is a who's who of Philadelphia society.”

“Well, it's for a very good cause. Plus, I've discovered the secret to increasing the number of yes RSVPs is to up the price. At ten thousand dollars a plate, this suddenly became the social event of the season.”

Davis laughed. “You're as brilliant as you are beautiful.”

Liza hoped that wasn't a line. Then she decided she didn't care if it was.

She reached up on tiptoe to give her charming date a kiss on the cheek. They'd shared four good-night kisses so far. The first two were too sweet and short to give her any real insight on his abilities in that area. However, the third and fourth kisses had opened her eyes. They were what had convinced her to reserve the room here. Because Davis had some skill. For which she was very grateful. She'd kissed way too many frogs in her life.

“Would you like to dance?” Davis gestured to the floor. The orchestra was playing a waltz, the tune familiar though she didn't have a clue what the name of the song was. Classical music was not her forte. Instead, her music tastes—much to her rockin' and rollin' family's dismay—began and ended with country. She'd been introduced to it by her college roommate, and she'd been hooked ever since.

She took Davis's proffered hand, then stepped into his embrace once they found an empty space on the dance floor.

She rested her head against Davis's shoulder. He wasn't a tall man, but he was taller than her by a couple inches. They fit physically in a way that wasn't always true of her and other

men. She wasn't particularly tall, rather she considered herself medium height. However, she'd had a couple of dates fall apart when the men—shorter than her—decided they couldn't handle looking up at a woman. Which, in truth, suited her fine because she looked banging in a pair of heels, always willing to suffer for fashion. Flats weren't something she'd ever switch over to, just to soothe some insecure man's pride.

When she looked back on her track record, she figured she could check just about every dating failure box there was, which was why tonight felt steeped in promise. And while Liza was too much of a realist to let herself get carried away, there was no denying that she was genuinely hopeful and happy.

God, please let him be good in bed.

Davis's hand remained firmly on the small of her back. She'd splurged on the deep-red ball gown, knowing the moment she saw it in the shop window she had to have it. It had hurt her bank account a little but given the fact she was a single woman with a good-paying job, and precious little debt, she'd decided to call the dress a Christmas gift to herself.

The A-line style suited her frame and made her feel elegant and sexy. The top was lace with cap sleeves, the full skirt chiffon with a long slit that reached the middle of her right thigh. The back of the dress had an open keyhole that revealed quite a lot of skin and meant she couldn't wear a bra. Not that that was a problem, as it had a bra built into it, and it wasn't like she was overly endowed.

The devil in her wished Davis would lift his hand a little higher to touch her bare back. While he'd proven himself to be a very nice guy, she sure as shit wouldn't complain if he revealed a tiny bit of a bad boy side.

Ugh. She dismissed that thought.

Beggars can't be choosers. He had ticked off every box that mattered, so who cared if he toed the "gentleman" line when it came to politeness and public appropriateness and didn't sneak a touch.

That was her hormones talking.

They swayed together and she let herself sink into his embrace, enjoying the peacefulness of the moment after so many long, stressful hours spent making sure everything about tonight went off without a hitch.

"I can't believe the mayor is here," Davis murmured. "I've been trying to get an appointment with him for the past two weeks, but I can't get past his secretary."

Davis worked in the district attorney's office, though he'd confessed at dinner the other night, he was considering pursuing a career in politics somewhere down the line. Then he'd regaled her for the better part of an hour, discussing some of his more fascinating cases. He was intelligent and witty, two things she was certain would help his political career.

Truthfully, so far, that was the only tick mark in the *meh* column. She wasn't a fan of politics or politicians, but she wasn't ready to call it a deal-breaker. Especially since he was only thinking about it.

Liza gave him a playfully narrowed gaze. "No distracting my guests, Mr. Taylor," she teased him. "Tonight is all about raising money for homeless teens."

He gave her a quick nod and smile. "Of course, of course."

The sound of a woman's loud laugh captured Liza's attention, and she looked toward the source. It took all the strength she had not to roll her eyes.

Patricia Eddington was Philadelphia society's It Girl, though Liza had a hard time understanding why. Obviously, she was beautiful in the typical style of all rich-bitch blonde Barbie dolls. She and Liza were the same age, though their paths had never crossed when they were younger. Liza was public school, Patricia private. Liza was nightclubs; Patricia was country clubs. And while Liza had known who Patricia was, thanks to the local paparazzi and their fascination with the socialite, they hadn't met in person until Liza began working for the Initiative, hosting events like tonight's.

Heiress to a fortune, Patricia had cut a wide swath through the most eligible bachelors on the East Coast over the past decade. She'd also been engaged something like twenty times—Liza was exaggerating, but not by much—though she'd never once made it down the aisle.

Liza figured Patricia might have completed one of those trips if Philadelphia had ever managed to land a *Real Housewives* reality TV show. That kind of shit was right up Patricia's alley as she insisted on being the queen bee no matter where she was, her need to be the center of attention in every single room she occupied borderline obnoxious.

Actually, scratch the borderline.

Patricia's latest billionaire bachelor boyfriend—say that real fast three times—was none other than Liza's arch-nemesis, Matt Russo. Matt served as chairman of the Initiative's board, and he'd managed to be a constant thorn in Liza's side, ruining what was otherwise her dream job.

In addition to their work issues, she and Matt also had a long family history that ensured they would always be on opposite sides of whatever lines formed between them. Matt was a Russo, Liza a Moretti. Two names as infamous in

Philadelphia as the Hatfields and McCoys, the Montagues and the Capulets.

The animosity between the two families had started way back with Liza and Matt's great-grandfathers, and it continued still today, four generations later.

She couldn't begin to guess what Matt—or any man, for that matter—saw in Patricia. Perhaps it was the sizable inheritance she had coming her way, although Matt was already richer than Midas. Or maybe she was just shit-hot in bed; all those men couldn't be wrong. Either reason wouldn't be enough for Liza to spend more than three minutes in her presence.

Of course, it didn't help Patricia's case that she had an annoying habit of treating Liza like she was the hired help.

Matt caught her staring at him and his date, but he offered her nothing—no smile, smirk, or even middle finger. Instead, his eyes held hers for three beats too long before looking away as if he hadn't even seen her at all. It was always that way with him. He'd capture her gaze and...time slowed down. Just the tiniest bit, and it always took her too long to recover.

Liza turned her attention back to Davis as the song came to an end, the musicians rising and carrying their instruments backstage.

"I need to get ready for my speech," she said, as the two of them stepped apart. She'd prepared a special video about the Promise House, featuring interviews with some of the teens living there, for whom they were trying to raise money. She'd also prepared a few words—her pitch, for lack of a better term. "Will you be okay without me for a few minutes?"

She'd put the finishing touches on the video yesterday morning with help from the Initiative's media department, and even though she'd seen the footage a hundred times, she'd still blown through half a dozen tissues as she watched the completed show.

"I'm perfectly capable of entertaining myself. I might go over and say hello to the mayor," he joked, winking at her.

"Talk only about the Promise House." She swatted him playfully on the shoulder as he walked away, giving her the crossed-heart motion.

She walked over to her table to grab her notecards from her clutch.

"Davis Taylor?" a deep voice rumbled from behind her.

She sighed as she turned around.

"You have a problem with that?" she asked, staring Matt Russo down, despite her surprise that he was commenting on her date.

"Do you think that's two last names or two first?" Only Matt Russo could make a joke in such a deadpan voice—and without cracking a smile—that she wasn't even sure if he was trying to be funny.

"Careful, Matt. Someone might mistake that for humor and your reputation as a grumpy bastard would be shattered forever."

Matt's only response was the slightest narrowing of his eyes before his expression flattened out to his typical look—stoic, solemn.

Typically, their conversations were restricted to work. And, for better or worse, most of those discussions became

contentiousness, given the fact Matt viewed her as overly ambitious when it came to her goals for the Initiative, while, in her opinion, he was far too conservative, too slow to act.

During their last meeting, he'd told her she needed to scale back on her planned fundraisers for the upcoming year, claiming that too many philanthropic projects would "wear out" her contributors.

Wear them out.

Those were the words he'd actually used. As if the wealthy had a limited amount of endurance when it came to writing checks and spending money they wouldn't even miss. She'd told him that when the needs of the less fortunate were smaller than the overflowing coffers of the wealthy, she'd slow down. But until then, her project goals would remain the same.

Tonight, he was breaking the pattern by touching on something more personal.

"You never bring dates to work functions, Ms. Moretti."

Ah. And there it was. The connection. The son of a bitch stressed the word *work* like she was breaking some sort of rule or something...which she wasn't. She also didn't appreciate him talking to her like she was his subordinate. She didn't work for him; she worked *with* him, a concept he struggled to grasp.

Plus, it bugged the hell out of her that he always called her Ms. Moretti rather than Liza. What the hell was that about? It made her feel like a naughty schoolgirl, and not in a sexy way.

"Not that it's any of your concern, but I am perfectly capable of handling my duties." She held up her notecards to prove her point. "Now if you'll excuse me, I have to—"

"I'm surprised to see you with him," Matt interjected.

Liza hesitated to reply for a moment, thrown for a loop.

Wait.

Was he pissed that she brought a date to a work function?
Or was he pissed she'd brought a date, period?

“What does that mean?” she finally managed to ask.

“He’s not your type.”

And what the fuck did *that* mean?

As always, Mr. Aloof was impossible to read, so she had no idea if he was insulting her or Davis.

“Thank you so much for that unsolicited opinion,” she replied sarcastically.

And there it was.

The Matt Russo smirk.

The only reaction she ever managed to provoke from the man was that infuriating smirk.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” Charles Dunning, president of the Initiative, announced from the stage. “If you will please take your seats, Liza Moretti, Executive Director of the Philadelphia Initiative and our wonderful hostess for this evening, has a special presentation for you.”

“Shit,” she murmured. That was her cue.

She shot Matt a dirty look, then skirted by him.

The orchestra had packed up and cleared the stage and a screen was being lowered. Once the presentation was over, the band would quickly set up and her responsibilities for the evening would wind down to schmoozing the bigwigs and answering questions, most of the heavy lifting done. In a couple more hours, the guests would be well on their way to

intoxicated and shaking their asses on the dance floor, at which point she could finally begin to relax.

She hurried to the stage, cursing her heels—her feet really did hurt, but she also knew they looked fucking awesome—and pissed as shit at Matt. Of course, the asshole *would* fluster her right before she had to speak.

What the hell was his problem?

Stepping behind the podium, she took a deep breath and looked out across the room as the lights began to dim for the video.

Davis was sitting next to the mayor, grinning from ear to ear as he lifted his glass to her, though she wasn't sure if his silent toast was meant as thanks or encouragement. She caught sight of Matt, reclaiming his spot next to Patricia. He whispered something to his date, then his attention returned to Liza, holding her gaze captive for too many seconds before she managed to escape and turn her eyes back to the crowd.

After delivering her brief address, she stepped off the stage as the video began to play. She remained in the wings, though she didn't watch the show. Instead, keeping her attention on the reactions of everyone in the room. She prayed they'd be as moved by what they were seeing and hearing as she had been. The Promise House was in bad need of repairs, but more than that, Liza hoped to raise enough money for expansion as well. They never had enough beds to meet the need, which meant too many kids were still sleeping on the street.

She watched several women wiping their eyes and saw quite a few people filling out the contribution forms. Thank God.

“Well done, Ms. Moretti.”

Liza turned to see Matt standing next to her.

“My part will be easy. Looks like you’ve already won the crowd over to your cause.” As chairman of the board, he was the next speaker, the one who would ask for the contributions and explain how to donate.

“Our cause,” she corrected, before saying, “thank you,” a little more shortly than she should have. She was still annoyed about his dig at her date.

“You look lovely tonight. Red suits you.”

She stared at him, trying to figure him out. The man had a knack for keeping her on her toes, she had to give him that. Most of the time he looked straight through her. Or, when it came to Initiative business, he managed to push every button she had. But sometimes, on the rare occasion, he would pay her a genuine compliment, looking at her like...

Like she was beautiful.

She didn’t have a chance to respond as the video ended, the lights rose, and Matt took the stage. His deep voice carried as he insisted they had a duty to help these young people, the future of their city, of their community. His speech was short, succinct, and powerful, and Liza was moved, despite the fact it was Matt Russo doing the talking.

With the presentation over, the guests rose, milling around and socializing as the band set up. She was delighted when they began their first set with a wildly popular, upbeat number that had everyone rushing to the floor. Happy people having fun tended to be more generous.

Countless guests came up to Liza, asking questions about the Promise House or about some of the teens interviewed and praising her work for such a worthy cause. She answered

questions and thanked those who promised to help. Once the crowd around her thinned, Davis rejoined her. He had remained true to his word, stepping aside so she could do her job. It was another tick mark in her “Yay, with jazz hands” column.

“You are incredible,” he said, giving her a kiss on the cheek.

“Thank you.”

“Tonight has been a huge success, Liza. You must be very proud.”

“The true proof of my success is yet to be seen. I hope the contributions are enough that the Promise House can add that second wing. It would double the number of beds available, which still wouldn’t be enough. I swear, I don’t think I can rest knowing there are still sixteen- and seventeen-year-olds sleeping on the streets, falling victim to traffickers or gangs or...” She stopped mid-sentence, then joked, “Aaaand thanks so much for coming to my Ted Talk.”

“You are a passionate woman. Never apologize for that. The mayor was quite impressed by your presentation, called you a force to be reckoned with, I believe.”

Liza laughed. “Did he mean that as a compliment?”

Davis nodded. “He did. He said any man would be lucky to call you his wife.”

“Correct me if I’m wrong, but I’m pretty sure the old guy has been married for nearly fifty years.”

“I think he was dropping that hint for me.”

Liza smiled, though she was surprised by his comment, as well as the way he was looking at her. His gaze was suddenly

too intent and way too serious for a sixth date.

“Did you tell him we’d only just started dating?” she asked, hoping to slow his roll.

“Liza,” he continued, grasping her hands in his. “Since the first time we met for coffee, I’ve had this feeling about you.”

“Feeling?”

“Like you and I are two sides of the same coin.”

She had noticed—and tried to discount—Davis’s downright giddiness tonight as they’d rubbed elbows with Philadelphia’s elite, his excitement growing with each introduction she offered. While she considered that part of the job a chore, Davis had looked at her as if she was his golden goose, opening doors to places he wanted to be.

So, despite her better judgment, Liza asked, “How so?”

“We’re both ambitious, driven, and we know how to get what we want from people.”

That didn’t sound horrible on the surface, but Liza’s Spidey-senses were screaming. “Tonight isn’t about *me* getting what *I* want. It’s about encouraging people to support a very worthy cause. The Promise House needs help, and I want to open people’s eyes to that.”

“Of course, you do,” Davis said, though his tone felt a bit too nudge-nudge, wink-wink to be sincere. “All I’m saying is the two of us could go far together. My political ambitions partnered with your connections and fundraising talents... we’d be unstoppable.”

Liza was starting to draw lines between dots she didn’t want to connect. “Unstoppable how?”

“The sky’s the limit,” he responded, wrapping his arm around her shoulders. “The mayor’s office, the governor’s mansion, maybe even the White House.”

“Those sound like your ambitions. What about my career goals?”

“You’d still be using your skills. You’re good with people, with getting them on board and in support of a cause. Why does it matter if you’re working for the Initiative or...for your husband?”

Her eyes widened. “This is our sixth date, Davis,” she reminded him again, wondering how she’d slipped so deeply into the twilight zone.

“I know, and I’m certainly not proposing tonight. I’m simply saying I’ve played the field for enough years that I know what I’m looking for in a woman, in a wife. And, Liza, when I look at you, I see the potential for an amazing future for both of us.”

“It’s way too soon to discuss the future.” She hoped her tone was stern enough to penetrate the idiot’s thick skull. “But you should know, as you’re looking ahead, that I will always work for the Initiative, for those less fortunate.”

“That’s what I’m saying, Liza. You could do that with me. When I’m in office, I’d have the power to affect real change.”

It took Liza a few moments to let the dust settle on his comments. Partly because she was amazed that he would make such a tremendous leap—from dating to marriage talk—and that he would assume she would be fine with abandoning her career to support his.

“Davis, if you knew me better, you’d realize that I have no intention of giving up my job. I love it.”

“You’re not listening to me. I’m not suggesting you quit working completely, at least not until my political career is off the ground.”

She looked around for video cameras because she had to be getting punked.

“Your career would have zero bearing on mine,” she said, trying to use smaller words in hopes that he’d get it.

Davis frowned. “Liza, you and I...we’re the dream team. Surely you see that? Think about how much good you could do for all your pet projects as the wife of the governor.”

“Pet projects?” she said through gritted teeth.

He scowled, as if her anger was unjustified. “That’s not what I meant, and you know it. You’re being overly sensitive. I can see I shouldn’t have brought this up after you’ve had such a busy day.”

Why did it suddenly feel like he was patting her on the head like a cranky child?

“Take a few days to consider what I’ve said and—”

A few days?

“Oh no. I don’t need to consider a damn thing. I think you should leave.” She was suddenly very sorry she’d invited him to this gala. She’d obviously given him a false impression of herself, somehow made him think that she would be perfectly fine propping up some asshole man and making him the center of her motherfucking universe.

Bringing him here had been a mistake of epic proportions because if this conversation was happening in a restaurant versus this place, where she was technically working, she

would toss her drink in his face and storm out. As it was, she was trapped here.

So he was the one who needed to get out. She just wasn't sure he'd do that willingly.

“Leave?”

“Leave,” she repeated. “This date is over. It's *all* over.”

“Don't you think you're overreacting? I wasn't saying we should run out and get married tomorrow.”

“*That's* the part you think—” She stopped talking, aware of the fact her volume was rising. She sucked in a deep breath and counted to ten, even though it went against every grain inside her.

Liza was the youngest of four kids and the only girl. That meant she'd grown up with a bunch of rough-and-tumble brothers. It was the kind of upbringing that ensured she knew how to stand her ground, to never say die. It was that or be run over roughshod by the male contingency. She'd learned to throw a punch about three seconds after taking her first step. Her brother Elio had been a shameless toy hog at four, always wanting whatever she had. And at three years old, she'd managed to correct him of that shortcoming.

“Liza,” Davis started again.

“Davis,” she said, relieved to discover her voice was quieter. “I promise you; I'm not overreacting. If anything, I'm underreacting. You need to leave. *Now.*”

Her temper was close to the surface, but she refused to do anything that would jeopardize all the work she'd done for the shelter. The last thing she was going to do tonight was make a scene.

So, she did something she never did.

She stepped away from the fight.

“Lose my number.” She turned her back, walking in the opposite direction, praying he didn’t follow.

She hadn’t made it more than a half dozen steps when another voice stopped her in her tracks.

“Davis. How are you?” The sound of her date’s name, too close behind her, told her the fucker was giving chase. Or at least, he had been. She glanced over her shoulder, watching as Matt drew the asshole into conversation, deliberately drawing him farther and farther away from her.

Spying an easy escape—thanks to Matt Russo, of all people—she continued her retreat, not stopping until she reached one of the large windows at the back of the ballroom. She considered trying to open the damn thing but dismissed the thought instantly. As it was Philadelphia in December, and cold as fuck outside, people would bitch, even though she was sorely tempted to see if the single digits could cool the furious anger raging red hot inside her.

Placing her forehead against the chilly glass, she blew out a long, slow sigh. She should have known Davis was too good to be true.

God, she hated that she’d let herself hope, even for a second, that he might be the one.

The one.

Yeah, right.

As the years passed, she was genuinely beginning to fear that person didn’t exist for her. Especially as she’d stood on the sidelines, watching her friends Jess, Penny, Gianna, and

Keeley, all fall madly in love and settle down with their perfect matches. She'd never considered herself a particularly jealous person, not the type to covet what others had. But lately, she was so overwhelmed by bone-deep envy, it felt as if it was eating her alive.

“Ms. Moretti.”

Liza closed her eyes wearily. She was too tired for round seven hundred and forty-seven with Matt. Though she supposed she needed to thank him for running interference. His timing with Davis was too perfect to be anything but, which meant...he'd been watching.

She stiffened her spine and turned, glancing over Matt's shoulder to look for Davis.

“He's gone,” Matt said.

“Thank you.”

Matt nodded, his typical lack of expression replaced by something that looked a bit like concern, which was definitely a new one.

He turned away from her briefly, taking two glasses of champagne from a passing waiter, before offering one to her. “Davis's ego is only surpassed by his ambition.”

“I'll drink to that,” she said miserably, taking a sip of the champagne. Then she decided to hell with it. She upended the glass, draining it in one long swig.

For a split second, she thought Matt looked almost amused.

“Did we make a scene?” She was concerned Matt wasn't the only one to notice her altercation with Davis.

Matt shook his head. “No. I happened to be passing by when I heard you ask him to leave.”

“Not one of my better dates,” she muttered. “Of course, it wasn’t one of my worst, either.”

Before he could reply, Patricia stepped next to him.

“All work and no play, Matt.” Patricia pouted. “I’m sure there’s nothing you and Liza have to say to each other that can’t wait until the next board meeting. Come dance with me. I love this song.”

Matt accepted Patricia’s hand, barely sparing Liza a parting glance as he let his girlfriend lead him to the dance floor.

Patricia Eddington had claws. She didn’t like her date paying attention to any woman who wasn’t her.

Not that the socialite had a damn thing to worry about in that regard.

Liza was as likely to date Matt Russo as she was to agree to be Davis Taylor’s First Lady.

Handing her empty glass to a waiter, she helped herself to another, though she only sipped this one. Feeling a bit more fortified, she shook off the disastrous date, put on a fake smile, and went back to work.

Sadly, it was the only part of her life where she didn’t feel like a complete and utter fuck-up.

Chapter Two

Matt murmured “mm-hmm” for the third time, though he didn’t have a clue what Patricia was talking about. The two of them had been on a dozen dates, serving as each other’s plus-one-with-benefits because they both lived in a world where high society events like this were as common as a Monday-morning staff meeting.

He’d originally asked her out because Patricia ran in the same social circles, had expressed an attraction to him, and, in truth, though it made him sound shallow as hell, she was very easy on the eyes.

She ticked off all those columns, as well as the mandatory one.

The one that had to be marked before he asked out *any* woman.

He was in absolutely no danger of falling in love with her.

Patricia had been engaged four times in the last ten years or so, but all those relationships had failed. The reason he’d continued to call her was because she didn’t pressure him for anything more serious than the occasional date and hook-up.

He’d made his feelings about marriage clear from the onset of their association, and she’d commented that after so many failed engagements, she was in no hurry to accept any future

proposals. She insisted the next man she said yes to would be the one. And if that wasn't going to be him, then so be it. She'd promised they could keep it casual and have fun for as long as they wanted.

It had been the perfect response. So, apart from accompanying each other as they attended events like tonight's—all of which ended in sex—he never saw or spoke to her. She didn't even demand a morning-after phone call. It was the best relationship he'd ever had. No muss, no fuss.

Unfortunately, while Patricia didn't want him as a boyfriend, she did want his attention—all of it—whenever they were together, and it was starting to grate against his nerves. Tonight, she'd been uncharacteristically clingy and dropping hints that seemed to indicate perhaps the status quo was changing.

When he added in the fact Patricia was incredibly vain, spoiled, and entitled—all things he noticed before but had managed to ignore—tonight was looking like it was going to be their swan song. Which meant he would be sleeping alone in the penthouse suite he'd reserved in this hotel.

“And that was when I gave the ring back,” Patricia said, retelling him the story of why she dumped the latest in her string of ex-fiancés. He didn't bother to point out he'd already heard this particular tale of woe the last two times they were out, mainly because it meant he didn't have to listen.

“I just realized,” Patricia continued, placing her hand on his arm, leaning toward him in a way that ensured he got an eyeful of her generous cleavage. “I couldn't spend the rest of my life with a man completely incapable of finding my clit... or G-spot. I'm not the type of woman who should have to take care of her own needs. That's what pool boys are for.”

She followed her joke with a laugh that was far too loud, though it had the desired effect. He saw no less than six people nearby lift their heads to look over at them. Patricia covered her mouth with her hand, pretending she hadn't meant to make so much noise, but she was clearly delighted to have so many eyes on her. She preened and he looked away, the act one he'd seen a few too many times lately.

He glanced two tables over at the sound of a much softer laugh. Liza was chatting with Arnold Jackson, the director of Promise House, and his partner, Johnnie, clearly enjoying whatever story the older men were telling her.

Bringing Patricia to this event had been a foolish move on his part because it meant he'd spent too much of the evening comparing his date to Liza Moretti.

Liza.

Moretti.

She was becoming a problem. A big one.

Simply the fact that her last name was Moretti should have ensured his interest in her was limited solely to the disdain he felt for the rest of her enormous blue-collar clan. As a general rule, he gave anyone with the last name Moretti a wide berth.

Or he had.

Until her.

He'd first noticed her a year and a half earlier at his brother Conor's club, Enigma. She'd been out with a couple girlfriends, including his now sister-in-law, Penny. He and his brother, Gage, had been sharing a drink when he'd spied her on the dance floor. He'd known who she was, of course, but he hadn't seen her since she'd been a young girl, still in middle school.

As she was five years younger than him, the two of them hadn't gone through school together, hadn't had a conversation, or even been properly introduced. He'd simply caught glimpses of her when they were younger, her always tagging along with her older brothers or cousins to high school football games and such.

That night...he'd seen her, and he hadn't been able to look away. When she caught him staring, she didn't blush or lower her eyes.

Instead, she met his gaze, held it.

And she'd been holding it ever since.

When he first learned she was being named Executive Director of the Philadelphia Initiative, he'd briefly considered resigning his position on the board, thinking it best to keep a proper distance between his world and hers. Of course, that plan fell apart when he was asked to run for chairman and instead of saying no, he'd foolishly agreed.

"Are you listening to me?" Patricia's eyes narrowed as she looked over at Liza. She'd caught him staring in the other woman's direction one too many times tonight.

Matt turned his attention back to her. "Of course I am."

God help him if she asked him to repeat what she'd just said because he didn't have a clue.

For the next half hour, he forced himself to tune in to Patricia, while making a concerted effort not to turn and look for Liza. He wished he didn't have to try so hard.

It should be a simple matter. He wasn't the type of man to have his head turned by any woman. He'd sworn off serious relationships and marriage a long, long time ago, and he'd held true to that commitment, never once faltering.

Typically, he was better able to keep his wits about him when in Liza's vicinity, but tonight...

God...tonight, in that red gown, she looked like something ripped from his most wicked fantasies, and he was struggling to rein in his baser instincts, the ones screaming at him to march over to her, toss her over his shoulder, and drag her to his lair.

Matt ran a hand through his hair and pushed that unruly desire down deep. Because he would never—*could* never—give in to that impulse.

And not simply because she was a Moretti, and he was a Russo.

But because she didn't tick the mandatory box on his list, and that was a problem.

"I'm surprised your brother Gage didn't come tonight," Patricia said. "Still in the honeymoon phase?"

"Probably," he replied without inflection.

"Where did they go on their honeymoon again?" Patricia had become interested in his brother of late, working Gage's married state into conversation the last couple of times they'd been together. Subtlety was not her strong suit.

"New Zealand," he replied. "Conor called it Penny and Gage's nerd honeymoon. Their first choice was Comic-Con, but since they married in February and the convention is in July, they decided to visit the Shire and went on the Hobbiton tour instead."

Matt was about ninety percent certain Patricia didn't give a shit about anything he'd just said. That was the other thing about her that was getting old. She always talked but never listened.

“I’m sure Gage would take on some of these society chores if you wanted to spend more time at home.”

“In truth, my brother has never attended parties like this. Gage’s interests run more along the lines of dungeons, dragons, and grand theft, the auto variety.”

Patricia tittered, a much quieter laugh that told him this conversation wasn’t one she wanted others to hear. “He’s quite the devoted husband. Do you think that’s a common trait shared by you Russo brothers?”

“Hard to say considering Gage is the only one who’s succumbed.”

Patricia wasn’t swayed. “He’s the only one...so far.”

“Chances are good he’ll be the only one, period. Conor and I are both married to our work.”

Patricia bent even closer, her breasts brushing against his arm. “You don’t have to be.”

“Patricia. I’ve never made any secret about my feelings regarding marriage. You and I have an arrangement—” he started, but, of course, she cut him off.

“And we still do,” she reassured him. “I’m fine with things the way they are. It’s just we get along so well, and you have to admit we’re well-suited in the bedroom. I was thinking...” She paused, studying his face too closely.

“Thinking?” he prodded.

“We should take what we have and expand on it. We’re both rich, beautiful,” she said without an ounce of humility. “And if your reasons for rejecting marriage stem from a lack of desire to be monogamous, I’d be fine with looking the other

way, as long as you're discreet. And, of course, I'd offer the same discretion with my dalliances."

"My reasons for not getting married have nothing to do with monogamy. I simply don't want to tie my life to another person's," he reiterated. "If you're asking to change the details of our arrangement—"

"I'm not," she stressed. "I'm simply pointing out there are things I think you're overlooking."

Matt found his patience wearing thin. "Like what?"

"You and I have so much in common. People look at us and see a true power couple. Together, we would set the standard for the elite in Philadelphia. Can't you feel everyone's eyes on us tonight? Watching us, interested in us, wishing they *were* us."

He'd felt nothing of the sort, but he had come to learn the one thing Patricia prized above everything else in the world—even over her massive wardrobe—was attention. In her mind, money equated power and fame, and she wanted both.

To be honest, she was correct in those beliefs. God knew he'd gotten lots of doors opened for him that remained locked to those without the ability to grease the palms of the greedy bastards with the keys.

"And you're suggesting marriage because...why? You want people looking at us?"

"I know you have no interest in marriage, but perhaps that's because you've been looking at the institution from a romantic perspective. I'll admit that's what I did wrong the first few times I said yes to the ring as well. I've changed my mind. What I'm suggesting would be more of an...alliance."

"I'm not looking for an alliance, either."

Patricia waved his comment away. “We’re well-suited to each other, Matt. Similar lifestyles, common interests. And... we both need heirs.”

“My brother Gage, and perhaps Conor, will continue the family line. Their children will inherit the Russo businesses.”

“Or our children would inherit both the Russo and Eddington fortunes. They would be wealthy beyond compare.”

Matt shook his head, but before he could say no again, she interjected.

“I’m not saying we need decide anything immediately. We have an arrangement that I’m happy with. It works well, and it can stand...for now. However, what I’m proposing is not something you should dismiss out of hand. I’m merely asking you to give it some thought.”

“If you’re happy with the way things are between us, why pursue marriage?”

Patricia grinned. “Because I want more. And you *have* more.”

He wasn’t interested in the deal she was offering, that truth driven home even further by the fact she wanted children. He wasn’t about to bring life into his fucked-up world.

The more she pushed her agenda, the more he was convinced it was time to end things with her.

“Patricia,” he started, trying to decide if he should give her the “this is over” conversation here or wait until they were in private. She was the type of woman who would make a scene, raise her voice, or even use tears to sway him. If she got a sense he was serious in his desire to break things off, she would be certain to make a spectacle of it. The last time she broke off her engagement, several bystanders had recorded it,

posting her tirade—complete with her tossing a quarter of a million-dollar diamond ring into the Schuylkill River.

The video had gone viral on YouTube, Patricia obsessed with the number of views it had received. She was determined to live her life in the spotlight, constantly putting on a show for the local paparazzi. He had no interest in drawing that kind of attention.

Unfortunately, something in his tone must have tipped her off that things weren't going her way because she doubled down, going for distraction.

“We don't have to say anything else tonight. Actually, how long do we have to stay here? I want to open my present. Please tell me it's sparkly and obscenely expensive.”

He'd mentioned earlier that he had a gift waiting for her upstairs. Though, in his mind, it was now less Christmas present and more parting gift.

Before he could reply, Patricia leaned toward him until her lips touched his cheek. “I have a Christmas gift for you too,” she whispered in his ear. “But I can't give it to you here. Because it involves unwrapping...me.”

The tip of her tongue dashed against his earlobe, in what he could only guess she considered a seductive move.

Now that he'd decided to break things off with her, his attraction had cooled to the point that her closeness was off-putting.

“It's still early.” He shifted away to put some space between them. “As chairman of the board, I have a responsibility to stay, to promote the cause.” That wasn't necessarily true, but it gave him a way to start circulating the room rather than continue to sit here with her.

Patricia stuck out her lower lip. “That’s what Liza is paid to do. Make her do it. And you know, as chairman, you should probably talk to her about her bad habit of playing dress-up and pretending she’s one of the guests,” she said, her tone dripping with disdain.

“Dress-up?” Matt repeated, not bothering to mask his anger over her rude comment.

Patricia was either patently oblivious to his tone, or she simply didn’t give a shit. This wasn’t the first time tonight she’d revealed jealousy toward Liza.

Unfortunately, this was the first time they’d attended a function together with Liza present. He mentally kicked his own ass again for putting the two of them in the same room.

Before tonight, Patricia had never had to compete for his unwavering attention, and she wasn’t taking it well.

“She’s an *employee*,” she said, haughtily. “She should dress like one.”

“Let me explain something to you,” Matt began, but before he could call her to task about exactly what Liza’s role was within the Initiative, they were interrupted.

“Patricia, I’ve been trying to get over here to talk to you all night,” Bethany Rogerson said, as she approached the table.

Patricia squealed as she stood up, the two women giving each other those stupid double-cheek air-kisses.

“Oh my God,” Bethany exclaimed. “You look gorgeous. Is that a Thom Browne?”

Apparently, seducing him and insulting Liza took a backseat to fashion as Patricia lit up. “Of course, it is. He

designed it just for me. He said he absolutely loves dressing me.”

“Is it any wonder?” Bethany gushed. “You have a figure to die for.”

Patricia preened, then added, “You look nice too.”

“Oh posh,” Bethany dismissed Patricia’s obviously less-than-sincere compliment. “I’ve just been pea-green with envy as I’ve looked around at all the ball gowns. Juliet Marshall’s pink Carolina Herrera is to die for. And Liza Moretti looks stunning in that red dress.”

Patricia rolled her eyes. “Please. It screams bargain basement. You wouldn’t catch me flitting around in that twenty-dollar off-the-rack rag she’s wearing tonight.”

And that was when Matt hit his official limit of Patricia Eddington. Not just for the evening, but forever.

“If you ladies will excuse me.” Matt rose, grateful for the opportunity to escape. He rarely lost his temper, but Patricia was pushing him to the brink. “I need to have a word with the mayor.”

Bethany and Patricia didn’t spare him a glance, already comparing notes on their latest shopping adventures in New York and Milan.

Matt walked to the open bar. “Scotch and water.”

Once the drink was in hand, he shifted to the opposite side of the room, keeping the crowded dance floor between himself and Patricia, lest she wrap up her conversation too soon and decide to seek him out. He felt strangely out of control tonight, and that feeling didn’t sit easy with him.

“Mr. Russo.” Arnold Jackson stepped next to him, reaching out to shake his hand.

Matt shook the other man’s hand and fought to beat down his scowl. He genuinely liked the director of the Promise House—which wasn’t true of most people in this room—so it wasn’t hard to do. Arnold was an attractive man with thick gray hair, bushy eyebrows, and deeply grooved laugh lines by his eyes due to his permanent smile. In his early sixties, he had the energy of a much younger man, and Matt could only hope to age as well.

“Please, call me Matt. I’m glad you could make it tonight,” Matt said.

“I’m delighted to be here. I wanted to take the opportunity to thank you and the Initiative for all the work you’ve put into this event,” Arnold said. “I can’t begin to express how much good we can do with the money raised tonight.”

“I think that thanks should go to Liza Moretti. She did all the heavy lifting.”

Arnold slapped him on the shoulder. “The best thing the Initiative ever did was hire that girl. She’s a godsend for our community. Never seen anyone work harder. She’s one of our best volunteers.”

Matt tilted his head. “Liza volunteers at the Promise House?”

Arnold nodded. “Every weekend. Never misses. And there’s no job too hard or dirty that she won’t roll up her sleeves to do.”

“I didn’t realize,” Matt mused.

“She’s been a true champion for our cause. And the kids love her.”

Matt wasn't sure what to say to that. It wasn't that he didn't know Liza was an extremely compassionate person. She'd proven that to him time and again when they went toe to toe on the Initiative's goals, always pushing hard to bring real change for the poor, working overtime to help those who needed it the most.

He'd spent most of his life turning a blind eye to those less fortunate. Until he'd met Jess Monroe and heard her story, learning that she and her young son, Jasper, had been forced to stay in homeless shelters and even sleep in their car. She'd been living paycheck to paycheck, barely hanging on, until medical bills delivered the knockout punch, causing her to lose her apartment.

He'd hired her briefly to work at Russo Enterprises, but that ended when she fell in love with Tony Moretti and his roommate, Rhys Beaumont.

It was Jess's situation that led him to volunteer to serve on the Initiative's board. He'd viewed going to the meetings and making financial contributions as him doing his part to improve things in the community...but Liza was giving so much more. Not just talking the talk but walking the walk.

The song changed, and Arnold's eyes lit up. "Better go find my partner. He requested this song."

Matt chuckled when Arnold's partner, Johnnie, danced over to them, inviting Arnold out onto the dance floor with a crook of his finger and a swish of his hips.

Taking a sip of his scotch, Matt surveyed the room once more, not even attempting to lie to himself about whom he was looking for.

Liza was standing near the back of the room, alone, seemingly lost in thought. He'd hated seeing her look so sad earlier, after she'd given her date the heave-ho. She was a million times too good for the likes of Davis Taylor—and he'd been more than happy to let the man know that fact as he'd escorted him out, right after issuing Davis a warning not to contact her again.

Before he could think better of it, he was walking toward her.

She didn't seem surprised or even bothered by the fact he'd sought her out again.

“How much money do you think is out there, swirling on that dance floor?” she asked when he stepped next to her.

“I couldn't begin to estimate how much the attendees spent on their attire.”

“Bet it's enough to keep a small Third World country full of starving children in rice and medicine for six months.”

Matt refused to take his eyes off her to glance around and play the game. Besides, he'd spent the last hour watching the couples dance as the band played, the women in their richly colored designer gowns and ornate, expensive jewelry.

Liza's estimate was too low.

“Two years,” he corrected, and she shook her head.

“Ironic, isn't it?” she asked. “I mean, the whole purpose of this holiday gala is to raise money to expand a homeless shelter for teens. Why can't we just skip the formality of this overdone, expensive party and simply ask them to donate the money they spent on their ticket and their clothing to the cause?”

“The wealthy are only compelled to open their wallets and purses if they can do so while dripping in diamonds and designer suits. It’s no fun giving money if no one sees you doing it.”

“Such a waste,” she murmured. “Speaking of dripping in diamonds, where’s your girlfriend?”

Matt wanted to correct her on the term, but instead he merely gestured toward their table. “Like you, discussing fashion. Comparing price tags.”

Liza surprised him by laughing. “She’s appalled as well?” Her tone made it clear she knew that wasn’t the case.

“Appalled isn’t the word I’d use.”

“Neither of your brothers came tonight,” she pointed out.

Matt casually lifted one shoulder. “They decided a long time ago that I would be the face of Russo Enterprises.”

“They decided for you?” she asked.

“Gage prefers to spend his time with the nerd circle and Conor has no patience for this kind of thing. So...that left me.”

“Oh.” She looked away, and he could see she was trying to extricate herself from their conversation...and him.

“Do you have plans for the holiday?” He was resorting to making small talk simply to keep her next to him.

Mercifully, he’d chosen his subject well because the holidays didn’t appear to be a topic she minded discussing. She grinned widely. “I have *alllll* the plans for the holidays. Tonight is my last official work function before the New Year. Which means I can shift toward the craziness surrounding Christmas Eve with the Morettis.”

“Sounds like a bad rom-com,” he said sarcastically.

“It’s my favorite time of the year.”

“Let me guess,” he said. “You attempt to squeeze all seven hundred of you into someone’s too-tiny house, gorge yourselves on homemade pasta and cases of wine, and,” he paused, “draw names? Or shop for everyone?”

Liza narrowed her eyes, trying to decide if he was making fun of her or not. “We draw names,” she replied at last.

Then, because it was the nature of their relationship, she turned the tables on him. “I suspect you Russos do it much differently.” She tapped her chin with a finger. “A late-night Christmas Eve dinner at some bougie restaurant, the kind that charges a couple hundred dollars a plate for three bites of food. I’m thinking expensive champagne, not wine. And...no gift exchange at all.”

She nailed it in one, and he knew why. “Penny filled you in, I see.”

Liza nodded, her smile fading a bit. “Doesn’t feel very festive, does it?”

Matt didn’t reply. The truth was, he dreaded the holidays every bit as much as she looked forward to it. She probably wouldn’t be surprised if he confessed that more often than not, he spent Christmas Day in his office at work. There were too many sad memories attached to the holiday, so he found it easier to pretend it didn’t exist, treating it like any other day.

Liza must have taken his silence as a signal that their conversation was over, as they both turned their attention back to the room, standing next to each other in silence. The band struck up a slow number, the large groups of dancers dispersing, breaking up into couples.

“Dance with me,” he said, before he could think better of the request.

Liza looked at his hand like it was a snake...but then, she slowly lifted hers, placing her palm in his, allowing him to lead her to the floor.

She stepped into his arms, glancing over her shoulder toward his table.

He followed her gaze and saw Patricia still deep in conversation with Bethany.

“Patricia won’t like you dancing with me,” Liza said. “She strikes me as the jealous type.”

“That doesn’t concern me.”

“Trouble in paradise?”

“No paradise,” he replied. “No girlfriend,” he added, strangely bothered by the fact she thought that’s what Patricia was to him.

“Does *she* know that?” she asked with a cheeky grin. “Because you’re dating a serial fiancée.”

Matt didn’t respond. Primarily because she wasn’t wrong, but also because he couldn’t. Her goddamned red dress was going to be his downfall tonight. He’d failed to take into account the fact it was cut low in the back.

As they spun, his hand shifted, and he found skin.

A gentleman would lower his hand, put some of the silky material of her dress between his palm and her back.

He couldn’t do it. And because he was apparently a masochist, he began to caress her soft skin, his thumb slowly stroking her, up and down, up and down.

Liza lifted her face. He expected her to call him out for his too-familiar touch, but instead, he heard her soft intake of air. And what he saw in her beautiful brown eyes left him struggling to catch his own breath.

Desire.

Now, as she had on that night at Enigma, Liza held his gaze as they moved in time to the music.

The moment felt surreal. It was as if they were the only two people in the room.

Their closeness allowed him to see things he'd never noticed before, like the specks of gold in her eyes, the small beauty mark on her left cheek, the fact she had two piercings in her ears instead of one.

He and his brothers were tall men, all of them well over six feet, but he'd never noticed the difference in his and Liza's heights until this moment, as he held her. The top of her head came to his chin, and she felt small in his arms.

Which seemed wrong. Someone who'd captured and held his attention with such strength and tenacity should have been so much taller.

She'd opted for an elegant updo tonight, and his fingers itched to pull out the pins to watch the thick, chestnut-brown mass of waves fall over her shoulders.

"Why did you ask Davis to leave?" he asked, curious about her failed date.

"A misogynist and a feminist are always going to be a bad combination. Turns out his attraction to me had less to do with who I am and more to do with what I could do for him."

“So he’s still holding on to those grandiose political aspirations.”

She nodded. “Six dates in and he’d planned our whole future. One where I would give up my career to support his, putting my stellar fundraising skills to better use, garnering campaign contributions for him as he shook enough hands and kissed enough babies to land the big gig in the White House.”

Matt had been surprised when Liza walked in with Davis for the very reasons she just espoused. The man was far too full of himself. However, it was the first thing she said that captured his attention and held it. “Six dates?”

She grimaced, clearly annoyed with herself. “Typically, my bullshit meter works better than that.”

“I suspect you figured him out quicker than most women.”

“Careful, Mr. Russo,” she said in a teasing tone. “That’s dangerously close to a compliment.”

He bowed his head. “I’ll tread lightly.”

Unable to resist, Matt ran the tips of his fingers down the center of her back, feeling her response as she shivered, as she lost the ability to focus for just a moment, obsessed with the touch. She was giving herself over to him, letting him lead the dance, control their movements, their direction, and it was heady, intoxicating to have this woman under his command.

It brought needs he’d buried for so long to the surface.

She was so responsive, so sensitive, so in tune with him, that his cock began to thicken. He needed to get a grip or risk embarrassing himself.

Liza swayed closer, but it didn’t feel intentional or premeditated, like the moves Patricia had been putting on him

earlier.

Liza's actions seemed almost instinctual. Like the pull was too strong to resist.

He recognized it because he felt the same. Placing his palm flat on her back, he let his fingers slide lower, until he found the edge of the material that began only a couple inches above her ass. What would he give to slip his fingers beneath the skirt, to stroke all the way down?

Suddenly, he was curious to know what kind of panties she wore. Liza carried the air of a practical, nice girl, but he'd bet every dollar he had, the naughty woman was wearing a thong right now.

He drew a single fingertip along the edge, watched Liza's cheeks flush, her lips part, her gaze holding his with just the hint of dare in them.

They remained there, speaking volumes without saying a word. However, before he could answer her unspoken taunt, the song came to an end, and Matt was forced to let her go.

She released an unsteady breath. And then, he watched as she stiffened her spine, gathered her wits, and took back the control she'd entrusted to him during the dance.

Matt wanted to reject the changes in her, to pull her back into his arms, demand that she submit to him, but that way would only lead to disaster. For both of them.

So they left the dance floor, neither of them touching or speaking until they'd reached the bar. If Matt hadn't been so distracted by her, he would have steered them in a safer direction.

As it was, he guided them both to where Patricia stood.

“You stole my dance partner,” Patricia said to Liza, her tone a bit too loud and laced with accusation.

“Patricia,” Matt said quietly, infusing as much warning as he dared.

“I’ll have to keep a closer eye on you.” She pointedly ignored Liza as she ran her hands over the front of his suit, straightening his bow tie, before stretching up on tiptoe to give him a hard, possessive kiss. “I wouldn’t want you to forget who you’re with tonight.”

Her words chafed, and if he’d harbored an ounce of doubt about ending his association with her, it was gone now.

“Dance with me,” Patricia demanded, grasping his hand in hers and tugging. He wasn’t the type of man to be led around by any woman, but in this instance, he allowed her to do it, simply to get her away from Liza before she made a scene.

He glanced back at Liza...but for the first time, she looked away from him, refusing to hold his gaze.

And he hated it.

Chapter Three

Liza sat watching as the crowd on the dance floor began to thin. Many of the guests had already gone home, calling it a night.

She wished she could do the same.

Glancing over, she saw Matt and Patricia rise, leaving for the night as well. She tried to beat down the ridiculous spark of jealousy she felt when he put his hand on the other woman's lower back, guiding her out of the ballroom.

That jealousy morphed into an even more unwanted annoyance over the fact he hadn't bothered to look back at her. She'd gotten too used to his eyes on her tonight and, fool that she was, she was starting to like it.

"You're an idiot," she murmured under her breath, chastising herself for her behavior. She'd gotten far too carried away during that dance with Matt, fantasizing about things she had no business longing for.

Karma was having a lot of fun at her expense. She'd wished for Davis to be less of a nice guy, hoping for him to reveal some level of bad boy during their dance.

Well, she'd gotten a bad boy.

Only it was the wrong one.

The Russo and Moretti animosity had started decades earlier, generations of Russo men all finding ways to hurt her family, either through affairs or financial ruin. And Matt had added his own sins to those of his father and grandfather.

He and her cousin Tony had been rivals their senior year, competing in sports and clubs. When Tony won the class president election, as well as the position of quarterback on the football team, Matt had retaliated, in true Russo fashion, by having sex with Tony's girlfriend, his first love. Then, he'd taken it one step further by ensuring Tony caught them in the act.

That story had been retold so many times it was practically family legend. Yet, Liza couldn't reconcile that younger Matt with the man she knew today, no matter how many times she tried.

The face Matt projected to the world was cold, impassive, aloof, yet her instincts told her that was nothing more than a mask. She couldn't shake the sense there was a much different man buried deep beneath the layers of...God...she wasn't sure what. Anger? Arrogance? Sadness?

Her feelings, her suspicions, about him were driving her as insane as the man himself. She should be able to resist him, but she couldn't. Maybe it was because every time she looked at him, she saw something no one else seemed able to recognize.

Matt seemed broken.

Wounded.

And every instinct she possessed told her to step closer, to look deeper. But doing so felt too much like baring her throat to the beast.

Liza sighed. It was nearly one a.m. Time to put all thoughts of Matt to bed. Preferably forever.

“Liza,” Charles said, dropping down into the chair next to hers. “There’s no need for you to remain any longer. Go home. I’ll hang around and lock up the store,” he added with a wink.

“Oh, but I feel like I should—”

“There’s nothing else you need to do. The party is as good as over. You did a wonderful job. I can see you’re exhausted, and I’m perfectly capable of entertaining these last few stragglers. There will always be a handful who never want to say die.”

She felt like she should argue, but she didn’t have it in her. “Thanks, Charles. I appreciate it.”

He rose and she followed suit, resisting the urge to wince as she did so. Her shoes were killing her, so much so she was considering ripping them off the second she hit the elevator.

Charles gave her a fatherly hug. “I’m so proud of what you accomplished here tonight, Liza.”

“What *we* accomplished,” she corrected.

“I’ll stop by your office Monday morning, and we can see where we landed on contributions.”

She crossed her fingers, then reached for her clutch. “Good night.”

She slowly dragged her weary body out of the ballroom, and she had just reached the end of the long hallway that led to the hotel’s front foyer when she heard a familiar voice raised in anger, and then a loud slap.

“How dare you end things this way!” Patricia yelled.

Liza caught only a brief glimpse of Matt and Patricia facing off in the foyer of the hotel before she quickly took one huge step to the right, hiding behind a large pillar so she was out of sight of the couple.

She glanced back down the hall and considered returning to the ballroom, but dammit...her feet hurt too much.

Unfortunately, there was no way to pass Matt and Patricia without them seeing her.

She had enough energy to get to the elevator and up to her room and that was it. She had zero desire to have yet another confrontation with Patricia or another...whatever the fuck had been going on between her and Matt.

“Keep your voice down, Patricia. I have no interest in drawing a crowd,” Matt said, so low Liza barely heard him.

“I will *not* keep my voice down. I don’t think it’s unreasonable for me to expect my date to treat me with courtesy. To pay attention to me. I didn’t enjoy watching you staring at her all night.”

Staring at...her?

“She has nothing to do with this,” Matt replied.

Me?

“Bullshit,” Patricia scoffed.

“You’re looking for excuses that don’t exist,” Matt replied wearily.

“Is this because I suggested we get married?” Patricia asked.

Liza sucked in a quiet gasp. *Married?*

“You see a much different future than I do, Patricia.”

Patricia laughed, though there was no humor in the sound. “You’re wrong, Matt. Everything I offered you is exactly what you want, what you need. You’re making the wrong decision. And one day you’re going to realize it. I suggest you figure it out soon because I wait for no one.”

“I’m not asking you to wait,” Matt said softly, though Liza wasn’t sure Patricia heard, considering she’d already started walking away. Liza tracked the angry stomping of the other woman’s heels across the marble floor.

She remained hidden, out of sight, listening for Matt’s retreating steps as well.

Luck was not on her side tonight.

“You can come out now,” he said.

Great. Busted.

She stepped around the pillar. “I didn’t want to interrupt.” As far as excuses went, that was probably the lamest.

And Matt called her on it. “So you opted for eavesdropping instead.” He didn’t sound angry. In truth, he sounded like she felt.

Exhausted.

Numb.

Done.

Just fucking done. With everything.

Liza moved closer, looking at the bright red mark on his cheek, shining out even through his beard.

“She slapped you?” She fought not to roll her eyes at herself. *Of course she did, Captain Obvious.*

“Yes.” Matt didn’t bother to touch his cheek. “I will admit she’s not the first woman to slap me.”

Liza couldn’t resist. “I suspect she won’t be the last, either.”

The edges of Matt’s lips twitched and for a second, she thought she might get a real smile out of him.

It wasn’t that he was a humorless bastard all the time. She’d seen him smile on a few occasions, but it was never directed at her.

“You broke things off?”

Wow. She was batting a thousand on the stupid questions.

Matt nodded.

“Because you were staring at...someone?” If she wasn’t running on fumes, she never would have asked that question. But he’d thrown her for one too many loops tonight. She was off-balance, and she hated it.

“You know I was,” he said, holding her gaze. “Because you were staring back.”

Fuck.

There was no response to that.

“Right,” she said. “Well, I’m going to...”

She started walking, and Matt fell into step next to her. Soon, it became apparent neither of them was headed for the exit, both walking in the direction of the elevator.

“You got a room here for tonight?” she asked.

“I did.”

“Hoping for a romantic interlude?”

Matt shook his head. “Hoping for sex.”

“Oh.” She’d walked into that one.

“You have a room?” he asked.

She nodded.

“Romantic interlude?” he threw back at her.

“Nope,” she replied with a cheeky grin, feeling far too punchy. She was in a reckless mood, which wasn’t a good thing, given the company she was keeping. “I was hoping to get fucked.”

She wasn’t sure why she’d thrown those words at him. Perhaps it was because part of her wondered if she could spark a reaction.

Sadly, she got nothing, and she felt the need to recover the upper hand. “So, I’m resorting to plan B.”

“What’s plan B?” he asked as the elevator doors slid open.

“A long soak in a hot bath.” And then, because she wasn’t finished playing yet, she added, “And self-care.”

She’d really thought that would at least earn her the smirk, but nope. Again. Nothing.

They stepped into the elevator. Matt pulled his key card out, tapping it over a screen she hadn’t noticed earlier today when she was dropping off her overnight bag in the room. Then he pressed the button to the top floor, and she realized he’d sprung for the penthouse suite.

She rolled her eyes at him, then reached out to press the button to the fourth floor, one with a much less impressive view of the city, no doubt.

Before she reached the button, however, Matt's large hand flew out, grasping her wrist to stop her.

She tried to pull it back, but he didn't release her.

Liza twisted toward him to call him out, but Matt was faster. Using his grip on her wrist, he dragged her to him, his lips descending on hers in a kiss that was urgent and hard and rough and...God...*desperate*.

And because all those words matched her needs, Liza didn't waste a second thinking about the wisdom of this. She shook off his grasp on her wrist and lifted her arms to his neck, pulling him closer, deepening the kiss, pressing her breasts to his chest.

Matt's hands slid along her back, those deadly-to-her-libido fingers tracing lines up and down her bare skin, the same way he had on the dance floor. She'd never been so affected by such a simple touch, but her panties had been damp ever since that dance.

Matt shifted the two of them as they continued to kiss, pressing her against the back wall of the elevator. She was vaguely aware it was rising, but everything vanished when Matt pushed her lips open, his tongue invading her mouth.

She stroked hers against his, tasting the Scotch on his breath. She wanted to get drunk on it. His fingers moved even lower, and he captured her gasp with his mouth as his hands gripped her ass, pulling her body tight to his, letting her feel exactly how much this kiss was impacting him.

Her legs parted as he thrust his large, strong thigh between hers, and she grated her pussy against it, wantonly, shamelessly.

They broke apart at the sound of a bell chiming, the elevator doors sliding open. Both of them were breathing so heavily, one might believe they'd just run a marathon.

Liza's gaze drifted to the hallway, relieved to discover it empty. Otherwise, someone would have gotten an eyeful of her dry-humping Matt Russo's leg.

Looking up, she realized they'd taken the elevator all the way to the top.

"I missed my floor," she said, suddenly struggling to face him.

Matt didn't reply. Instead, he stepped off the elevator, stopping just outside the door. When it started to close, he slammed his hand against it, holding it open.

"Have a drink with me."

Liza was shaking her head before he even finished issuing the invitation. "No," she said, forcing herself to look him in the eye. "We both know if I walk into that room with you, it won't end with a drink."

He didn't bother to consider that, replying instantly. "You're right. It won't."

"That would be insane."

"Why?"

She narrowed her eyes. "You know why."

"It's the holidays, Ms. Moretti. A time when people loosen the reins."

She had to get a grip, had to find solid ground again. As it was, she was teetering precariously on shifting sands and one wrong move was going to have her tumbling to her ass. "Now

isn't the time to lower my guard. Santa is watching," she said, hoping humor might cut through the sexual fog threatening to suffocate her.

"I have no interest in those on the nice list."

"But you're interested in me?"

"I am," he replied.

"Are you insinuating I'm naughty?"

Matt shifted closer, pushing a piece of hair that had fallen into her eyes away from her face, tucking it behind her ear. "There was very little insinuation in that statement."

"This is a mistake," she whispered.

"Do it anyway." Matt hit her with that dark, demanding voice that ensured her pussy would win the battle over her brain.

She stood there, her feet rooted to the floor, searching for a way to do the right thing.

In the end, she realized she didn't want to do the right thing, so she made the monumental mistake of stepping off the elevator and following Matt down the hall to the door of his room.

He lifted the key card, but she took a page from his book, gripping his wrist to stop him.

"Just a drink," she said, in one last weakhearted attempt to put the brakes on this runaway train.

Matt didn't even bother to respond to what they both knew was a lie. Not with a nod or a shake of his head. Instead, he tugged his wrist free and unlocked the door.

Stepping aside, he allowed her to walk in first.

Liza's eyes widened as she took in the sheer opulence of the room, catching sight of the Philadelphia nighttime cityscape through the window. "So this is how the other half lives?"

"I'm not sure half is accurate, considering I'm in the one-percent."

She shot him a dirty look over her shoulder. "That's probably not something to brag about."

Matt's lips tipped up in something that could almost be considered a smile. She was making progress.

She walked to the window, anxious to put some distance between them by pretending to look down on the city below, even though she was hyperaware of his presence.

Liza fought to steady her breathing, not quite finished fighting with herself. Maybe there was still a chance she would come to her senses.

Part of her expected Matt to join her at the window, so when she heard him walking around the room, she turned to look.

He took off his tuxedo jacket, hanging it over the back of a chair, and it occurred to her that she'd never seen him without a jacket. Matt was the epitome of corporate America fashion. As such, he was always in a suit. Always. Part of her wouldn't be surprised to discover he slept in his bespoke three-piece suits.

Without the jacket, she had a much better view of his build. She'd clearly given his suits too much credit for his extra bulk, his arms large and muscular. She licked her lips, wishing he'd go one step further and roll up his sleeves.

Shit.

She really had gone too long without a man if she was this ridiculously turned on by the sight of Matt without his jacket.

He caught her staring—she hoped she wasn't drooling—but he didn't call her out, didn't smirk, but his expression was too knowing, too amused for her pride.

So she narrowed her eyes and turned away...briefly. Until Matt headed to the kitchen.

Because, of course, the penthouse suite had a full kitchen that, sadly, rivaled the one in her small apartment. Matt grabbed a corkscrew from the counter, then he held up a bottle of red, looking for her approval.

She nodded and he uncorked it, pouring two glasses. The whole scene felt too familiar and almost domestic.

She accepted when he handed her a glass, tapping his against it. "To a job well done."

"Thank you." Liza took a sip, making a mental note not to consume too much. She'd indulged in at least three glasses of champagne over the course of the night, and while she was far from intoxicated, she needed her wits about her if she was going to maneuver her way safely through this.

Matt gestured toward the couch, and she accepted the invitation to sit, placing her glass on the end table so she could reach down to pull off her shoes with a relieved groan.

He watched her curiously, then, to her surprise, he toed off his own shoes.

"Too long in heels," she explained. "Part of why plan B was the hot bath. My feet are killing me." She wore thigh-high stockings, and she wished she could strip them off as well.

Matt put his glass on the coffee table before sitting down next to her on the couch. Then to her surprise, he lifted her feet onto his lap, his thumbs pressing against the soles.

“Relax,” he urged her, twisting his body so that his back was against the arm of the couch. She assumed the same position, reclining against the opposite cushioned arm. They were mirror images, facing each other. He leaned one leg against the back of the couch, bent at the knee, while the other remained on the floor. He held her feet in his hands between his outstretched thighs. It felt strangely decadent, sitting here while Matt gave her a foot massage.

He dug his thumbs in deeper, hitting a particularly sore spot, and Liza moaned. It felt like bliss, like heaven. Too much more of this and she thought she might actually have an orgasm.

“That feels...amazing.”

“You need more sensible shoes.” He cupped her feet with his large hands, working absolute magic.

She laughed. “But those shoes were so perfect with my new red dress.”

She hadn't meant to draw his attention to her outfit, but now that she had, she realized the slit in the skirt had fallen open, revealing the long expanse of her thigh.

Liza started to pull the material together.

“Leave it,” Matt demanded, and damn if she didn't find herself obeying, dropping the skirt. It fell open once more, revealing most of her right leg, riding high enough to show him the top of one of her thigh-high stockings.

He stared at her leg, but she didn't call him on it, though she *did* make sure to flash him that same knowing look he'd

given her when she checked him out without his jacket.

They remained there on the couch, in quiet solitude for several minutes. His massage was so soothing, and she was so exhausted, she might have expected to fall asleep. Instead, his touch had the opposite effect, waking up all the party places in her body.

At one point, he lowered his grip and one of her heels brushed against the crotch of his pants. She felt the bulge of his erection. Her eyes flew up to his, and she realized his actions had been intentional. He wanted her to feel what she was doing to him.

Slowly, she slipped her feet from his lap, shifting closer, wanting to offer him some measure of comfort as well. Reaching out, she untied his bow tie, slipping it from the collar before unbuttoning the top two buttons on his shirt. Matt watched as she worked, making no move to stop her.

She was tempted to close the distance between them and resume the kiss they'd started in the elevator, but there was still a part of her trying to fight this, to resist him and this unexplainable pull.

It was that determination that had her pushing away, reclaiming her side of the couch, tucking her bare feet beneath her.

“You really don't exchange gifts with your brothers?” she asked, seeking to end the silence.

“We're wealthy men. If we want something, we buy it. A gift exchange just for the sake of observing some holiday tradition is pointless.” He picked up his wineglass from the coffee table and took another sip.

She followed his lead, reaching for her wine as well, hoping it would provide some level of defense. “Gifts aren’t just about buying something the person wants. They’re meant to be meaningful, thoughtful.”

“For example?”

“This fall, I managed to get my brothers and I together in the same place at the same time for a portrait. My mom has wanted it for years, but it’s been impossible to synch our schedules because Bruno always had something with the kids or Aldo was on duty or Elio was on the road with the team.”

While Aldo was still a paid firefighter for the city, Elio had hung up his skates at the end of the last hockey season, returning home to be with Gianna.

“Elio and his wife just had a baby, right?”

Liza smiled. “A little girl. In September. She’s absolutely adorable.”

“You like being an aunt.”

“I loooove being an aunt,” she corrected. “You know, Penny said she and Gage are trying to get pregnant. Are you ready to become Uncle Matt?”

Matt sighed, lifting one shoulder. “I don’t have a lot of experience around small children. Conor can assume the role of fun uncle.”

Liza waited to see if he added a “just kidding” to that comment, but she could see he meant what he said. “So no kids in your future?”

Matt shook his head. “I have no plans to get married or have a family.”

“Oh.” She started to ask why, but Matt seemed to anticipate the question and he shut her down.

“So you’re giving your mom the portrait for Christmas?”

Liza nodded. “Actually, I got two of the pictures framed, and I can’t wait to see her face when she opens them. I bought all of us flannel shirts in coordinating colors. We paired them with blue jeans, and in one we’re doing the usual cheesy smiles, but the second one wasn’t posed.

“Bruno’s a big guy, with a big appetite, and the most obnoxiously long, thick, unruly lumberjack beard. Mom and I have been begging him to shave, but he says his wife Vivian is crazy about it. Anyway, we’re sitting there, waiting for the photographer, when Bruno runs his hand down his beard...and a French fry falls out and lands on Aldo’s shoulder. All of us fell apart laughing, and the photographer snapped a picture of it. It was our favorite of the bunch. We’re pretty sure that’s the one Mom’s going to hang up in the living room for guests to see.”

“You’re close to your parents, to your brothers.”

“Yeah. Very. Mom and I talk on the phone at least three times a week. And my brothers...well, they’re more than brothers. They’re my best friends too. You know how it is. You have Gage and Conor.”

Liza wished she could take back her comment, even though she wasn’t sure what she’d said wrong. The shadows that never completely left his eyes grew darker, and she knew she wasn’t imagining the outright pain that flashed on his face.

Of course, Matt was the master of control, so she only got a glimpse before he schooled his features and turned to put his glass on the coffee table once more.

She'd become very good friends with Gage over the past year, but the subject of Matt wasn't something they discussed much. At least not from Gage's perspective. When she looked back, she realized the only times she and Gage talked about Matt, it was her doing the talking, and by talking, she meant bitching.

She didn't know much about the Russo brothers' relationship other than the fact the three of them ran the family business together. Now...she was curious.

Matt, however, was good at dodging subjects he didn't want to discuss. He shifted closer, taking her glass from her and setting it next to his.

Then he began pulling the pins from her hair.

The familiarity should have felt strange, but like her unbuttoning his shirt, it seemed natural, right.

Once he'd removed the last pin, he ran his fingers through her hair, his fingertips rubbing against her scalp in such a sensual, gentle, hot-as hell way, she closed her eyes and sighed.

"That feels good."

"You have beautiful hair. So thick."

Her eyelids lifted and she watched as he continued to run his fingers through her long tresses. Before she could think better of it, she reached out to draw her hand along his cheek, rough from his beard.

The redness from Patricia's slap had faded, only the slightest tinge of pink remaining.

"Contemplating slapping me?" he joked, always with that deadpan voice.

“Not yet,” she murmured. “But I suspect it’s just a matter of time.”

He chuckled, and she was completely taken aback by it, even though she couldn’t help but notice it wasn’t a wholly happy sound.

There was a tiredness in his eyes that she didn’t think was driven by the late hour. She recognized it because it was the same thing she saw whenever she looked in the mirror.

She was lonely...and there didn’t seem to be an end in sight. So along with the loneliness, she carried around a boatload of resignation.

She wanted off this particular treadmill. And it looked like Matt did too. She was beginning to feel like he might be a kindred spirit, that he was as lonely as she was. But there was something else there as well, something lurking deep beneath the surface.

He was...haunted. It was the only word she could think to describe it.

It called to her in ways she couldn’t explain, couldn’t understand. The only thing she *did* know was...this thing between them...

It was dangerous.

Chapter Four

Liza pushed away again. And he let her go. She was wrestling with a decision.

Sleep with him or walk away.

In truth, he should be facing the same dilemma because she wasn't wrong when she called this a mistake.

Unfortunately, any internal debate ended the moment his lips touched hers in that elevator. Hell, it had probably ended during that dance, when his fingers stroked her smooth, soft back.

He wanted her. More than he'd ever wanted another woman, and he was arrogant enough, cocky enough about his skills as a lover, to know he could seduce her into his bed.

But he didn't want to resort to seduction. He wanted her to come to him willingly, without reservation, so he'd made more small talk, showed her as much of himself as he was able, in hopes that it would be enough to convince her to spend the night with him.

Liza resumed her previous spot, leaning back against the arm of the couch, turned sideways to face him.

"It's late," she mused.

"It is."

“I should be face down in a pillow by now, especially after the week I’ve had, but instead I...”

“Second wind?” he asked.

She nodded. “Yeah.”

He felt the same. His mind kept telling him he should be sleepy, but his body hadn’t gotten the word yet, too focused on the gorgeous brunette sitting next to him.

She was absentmindedly toying with the ribbon on a present he’d stashed on the table behind the couch earlier today. It was meant to be Patricia’s Christmas present, but she hadn’t taken well to his assertion that they should stop seeing each other.

Part of him had been surprised by her response because he didn’t doubt for a moment that she had no feelings for him apart from sexual desire and a strong attraction to his bottom line. If she was a gold digger, perhaps he could understand her losing her shit and slapping him. But Patricia was wealthy in her own right. She didn’t need his money. She just wanted it.

His surprise faded when she mentioned Liza, pointed out the way he’d been staring at her all night. He hadn’t hurt Patricia’s heart; he’d wounded her pride. She demanded the attention and admiration of every man in her vicinity, and because she was beautiful, she was accustomed to receiving it. She’d been livid that Matt had made the cardinal mistake of finding another woman more beautiful.

Once he understood the reason for her fury, the slap made sense, and he’d taken it as his due. Because he *had* been staring at Liza.

Liza suddenly realized what she was doing. She stopped fiddling with the package, picking it up. “Was this for

Patricia?”

“It was.”

“Thought you didn’t do Christmas gifts?” she teased.

“Patricia, like you, is a firm believer in presents. Though her pleasure seems to be derived more from receiving than giving, which is *unlike* you.”

She picked up the small square box, as if testing out the weight. “Well, I hope you can get a refund on whatever it is.”

“Open it,” he said.

Liza shook her head. “No.” She put it back down quickly.

“You’re curious. You want to know what it is. So open the gift.”

For a moment, he thought she might continue to refuse, but Liza’s inquisitive nature was strong. “Fine.” She untied the ribbon, then lifted the lid, gasping. “Holy shit. That must have cost a fortune.”

He shrugged. He didn’t have a clue what it cost because he hadn’t picked it out. He’d sent his personal assistant, Henri, to shop for Patricia.

She placed the box in his hand. “You’re definitely going to want to get your money back on that.”

Matt lifted the diamond tennis bracelet out of the satin-lined box and unfastened the clip, laying the thing over his palm to look at it. Henri had wrapped it as well, so it wasn’t just Liza who’d been curious about the box’s contents. He recalled Henri saying he’d bought a bracelet, but Matt hadn’t cared enough to ask for details about the gift. Instead, he had viewed it as one less thing on his to-do list.

His personal assistant had a great deal of experience when it came to shopping for Matt's lovers, always finding the perfect token, be it something for the holidays, birthdays, the morning after one-night stands, or parting gifts. Knowing his very capable assistant, Henri probably had a chart for every category, complete with price range, what certain flowers or jewels represented, as well as the female's preferences.

Matt reached for and grasped Liza's hand, pulling it toward him, his intent clear.

"Don't put that on me," she said immediately, trying to tug her hand from his grip.

Matt was amused. God knew she was the only woman who had ever rejected diamonds from him. "Humor me." He tightened his grip so that she couldn't pull away. He fastened the bracelet around her wrist, maintaining his hold so he could look at it.

"Whoa," she breathed. "It's beautiful." She admired it for a moment or two longer. "Take it off."

He shook his head, drawing his fingers over the diamonds, noticing the way she shivered lightly when he brushed the pulse point of her wrist.

"It's very pretty," he acknowledged, not bothering to remove it. "But this isn't what I would have bought if I'd been shopping for you."

He didn't bother to point out he hadn't shopped for this. Something told him that if he ever decided to give Liza a gift, he wouldn't send Henri to buy it.

He'd do it himself.

"No diamonds for me?" she asked, attempting a playful tone but falling a bit short.

“No. Diamonds pale next to your skin.”

“Nice line,” she murmured, trying to play off his comment by cheapening it. It annoyed him, even though he knew where her opinions of him came from. She’d formed them based on his past actions, things he’d done to hurt her family, which he couldn’t defend. So he didn’t try to.

“It’s not a line,” he insisted as he shifted closer to her, running the backs of his fingers over her soft cheek. Liza’s skin was tan, despite the fact it was the middle of winter. It betrayed her Italian ancestry, as did the deep brown eyes a man could get lost in, framed by long black lashes.

She wasn’t a classic beauty, unlike Patricia, who fit the more traditional standard for female attractiveness. As such, Patricia was a cookie cutter of every other woman he’d ever dated—blonde hair, blue eyes, a shapely figure, courtesy of time spent with her personal trainer.

Liza’s beauty was unique, exotic. Breathtaking.

His gaze fell to her lips when her tongue darted out to wet them. It was an invitation to kiss her, but he held back, still wanting the next move to be hers.

“If I’d been shopping for you, I would have bought you rubies. I can imagine how the rich, vibrant red hue would shimmer against your skin.” Leaning closer, he placed his lips against her ear. “I’d cover you in rubies. They’d dangle from your ears.” He pulled away. “From your throat.” He placed his open hand at her neck, the touch possessive, perhaps even slightly threatening, though it didn’t provoke that response from her.

Liza’s breathing stuttered, her eyes drifting closed.

“From your wrists,” he continued, listing all the places he’d wrap up in rubies. He took both of her wrists in his hands, lifting them over her head, giving the illusion of holding her captive.

Liza responded with a quiet whimper, though he could tell she was embarrassed by the sound. He hadn’t meant to draw them down this path, but now that he had...he couldn’t stop. Her lowered eyelids, her flushed cheeks, her panting breaths were telling him things about Liza he was going to wish he didn’t know.

He released her wrists, stroking his hands down the inside of her arms, loving the way it took her a few extra seconds before she remembered to lower them.

He wasn’t finished. There were still so many places he’d yet to adorn.

“And I wouldn’t stop with the traditional pieces.” He was aware that he was about to reveal a part of himself he typically guarded closely.

“What do you mean?”

“My rubies would dangle from your nipples,” he whispered, using the backs of his fingers once more, running them over the lace bodice of her dress, over her breasts. He could feel the tautness of her nipples, knew the effect his words were having on her.

“Where else?” she asked, her voice husky with need.

“From the clamp I’d put on your clit.”

He heard her slight intake of breath, desire naked in her big brown eyes.

“But the largest ruby would peek out from the plug I’d put in your ass.”

“God,” she breathed.

After that heated kiss in the elevator, he’d purposely slowed things down, giving Liza time to decide if this was what she wanted.

Now, time was up.

Matt leaned toward her, placing his rough cheek against her smooth one. “You would be my naughty red queen.”

Liza’s response was instant. She grasped his shoulders, placing her lips against his in a kiss that was hard and hungry.

He cupped the back of her head, holding her there, pushing her lips open with his. Kissing wasn’t part of his sexual repertoire. It wasn’t that he didn’t kiss his lovers. He did. But they were glancing touches, a small part of the experience he utilized to increase the woman’s arousal.

Kissing had never done anything for him, never left him gasping for air, desperate for another taste.

He pulled away, fighting to regain control. Tonight was about sex. Nothing more.

It had to be, or he’d lose what was left of his sanity.

“Bedroom,” he said, rising from the couch.

She took the hand he proffered, letting him lead her to the master bedroom. Once they were there, he lifted his finger, gesturing for her to turn around.

Liza presented him with her back, pulling her hair over one shoulder as he unbuttoned the two buttons holding her dress

together at the base of her neck, before lowering the zipper at her lower back.

Liza looked back at him, not a hint of timidity in her gaze. It was one of the first things that had drawn him to her. He had no interest in innocence. He liked her boldness, her confidence. It called to him.

Once the dress was loose, she let the material fall away, stepping out of it as it hit the floor. She kept her back to him, giving him a bird's-eye view of her ass.

Fuck *him*.

He was right. She wore a thong.

Pushing his fingers into the thin elastic, he shoved it down, stroking her ass as he did so. It was round and pert and full and so goddamned perfect.

Liza kicked off the thong, then turned to face him.

She didn't seek to hide her body. Instead, her hands hung loose by her sides, and she let him look his fill.

He took his time, painfully aware that this would be his only night with her. To pursue more would be madness.

Liza was patient with his perusal, up to a point, then she reached for him and finished unbuttoning his shirt. Like him, she touched every place she bared, her fingers sliding along his pecs, down to his stomach. She shoved her hands beneath the material, her hands stroking his arms as she peeled the shirt off completely.

Unsatisfied with just touching, she moved closer, drawing her lips over his chest, her tongue darting out to steal a taste of his skin, and then another, and another.

Gripping the back of her head, he held her lips to his chest, wincing when she sank her teeth into his right pec.

“Do that again,” he demanded, loving her lips on him, her teeth, wanting to wear her mark and to mark her as well.

She bit the left pec, then lifted her face to him. Holding his gaze captive with those dark, expressive eyes, Liza went to work unfastening his belt and pulling it from the loops. The buckle clattered as it hit the floor.

She started to unhook his pants, but Matt stopped her. The second his cock came out this shifted into overdrive. He refused to go too fast.

He was already taking more than he deserved, but he wasn't a good enough man to stop. So he was going to steal every minute, every second, and then pay penance for this night's folly for the rest of his life.

Gripping her wrists in his hands, he lowered his head, kissing her as he slowly pushed her away from the bed. The wall at her back stopped them, so he lifted her hands above her head as he'd done in the living room. Holding her hands against the wall, he gave her the sensation of being held, trapped, bound.

“You're mine,” he murmured, then because it was imperative that he regain some grip on reality, he added, “all night.”

It was a line he needed to draw, a limit he had to place.

Liza's eyes narrowed slightly, but then she nodded. Just one bob of the head.

He tightened his grip on her wrists, and she moaned, losing herself to the sensation, falling headfirst into his possession.

What would he give to tie her to his bed? To keep her beneath him, helpless to do anything more than take what he gave her. He'd withhold her orgasm for hours, demanding her submission, her body, her soul, every fucking thing. He'd touch every inch of her skin, all while making her beg and plead and even cry. He wanted to taste her tears, wanted her to know that he would own those as well.

Matt wasn't a possessive man, but Liza made him want to lock her up in a cage and throw away the keys—forever.

Releasing her arms, he lowered his lips to her neck, cupping her breasts, squeezing them, nipping at the taut buds, giving her the same bite of pain she'd given him. Liza hissed, then groaned, her hands finding their way to his hair. She closed her fists in the strands, pulling it in an attempt to keep him where she wanted.

He wasn't a man who would be commanded. Not outside the bedroom, and sure as fuck not inside it.

He'd lived under another's authority once...just once...and it had destroyed him. He would never give anyone that kind of power over him again.

He drew her hands away from his head, pulling them behind her back, holding them there as he studied her face, saw something he was certain Liza didn't even know she was revealing.

She was a powerhouse, a go-getter, a take-charge, take-no-prisoners woman...but not here. Not with him.

He released her hands before he took this to a place neither of them had any business going. Instead, he forced the tide to turn, to shift to something less dangerous.

He kissed his way down her body, moving lower and lower, not stopping until he was on his knees in front of her.

Liza's eyes widened in surprise, especially when he lifted her right leg and placed it over his shoulder. The wall at her back gave her the support she needed to remain upright on one leg. She still wore her stockings, but as they didn't hinder him from his goal, he left them on.

"Oh my God," she cried out when he gave her a much more intimate kiss. Matt sucked her clit into his mouth roughly, then stroked her slit with his tongue, leaving no part of her untasted. She was so hot and wet, he almost expected to see steam rising.

He teased her clit with the tip of his tongue, holding her open to his assault with his thumbs, until her hips began to gyrate, thrusting toward him in an obvious attempt to steal more.

She was going to get what she wanted, but only on his terms, only when he was ready. He wasn't familiar with Liza's past lovers, but there was something about the way she was holding herself that told him she hadn't chosen wisely.

"Hold still," he demanded.

Liza froze, but only for a second. She wasn't finished trying to take control. Her hands snaked out, gripping his hair once more.

He pulled his head away even as she reached out, trying to bring him back.

"Hold still," he repeated darkly. "Do that again and all of this ends."

"But I..."

He lifted one eyebrow, daring her to finish that statement. She wisely fell silent, and he saw it again, clear as day.

Submissiveness.

If someone had told him this morning that Liza Moretti was a submissive, he would have scoffed.

And he could tell by Liza's face that he wasn't the only one shocked by the discovery. She frowned, and he could almost read the struggle in her eyes, the part of her that couldn't figure out why she was responding to him.

He didn't give her time to think about that too hard. Instead, he lowered his head once more. He sucked and nipped at her clit, adding his fingers to the mix, pushing two inside her wet pussy.

It clenched strongly, greedily grasping his fingers as he thrust them in and out. She was tight, almost too tight.

"How long?" he asked.

She didn't need clarification. "Two years," she confessed. "Maybe a little more."

Matt struggled to make sense of that admission. Liza was sexual, vibrant, beautiful. How could it have been so long? What the hell was wrong with every single man in this city?

He increased the suction on her clit as well as his pace, pushing her hard, taking her to the brink fast. His girl needed an orgasm.

His.

His.

Fuck...no.

“Matt,” she said, her hands digging into his muscular shoulders, her nails scraping the skin there.

God, he loved the sound of his name on her lips.

“I, I...”

He lifted his face, gazed up at her, waiting for her to return it. She looked down.

“You’re going to come for me and you’re not going to hold a goddamned thing back. You try to give me less than everything, I’ll punish you for it.” He placed his mouth back on her, his fingers thrusting harder, and within seconds, she was there.

Liza’s knee began to buckle in the midst of her orgasm, so he lowered her other leg, quickly reaching up to press on her stomach with one hand, holding her steady against the wall as she rode out the storm. With his other hand, he continued stroking her, milking every ounce of pleasure from her clenching pussy.

He’d never seen anything more beautiful than Liza Moretti in the throes of an orgasm.

Her grip on his shoulders tightened as she bent forward, trembling with the force. She called out his name. Just his name. Over and over.

It wasn’t a scream. It was quieter, almost reverent.

Matt rose slowly, retaining his grip on her, his eyes locked on her flushed face so that he saw the moment her wits returned.

Liza’s eyes blinked open, her lashes fluttering. Then she looked him dead in the eye and...smiled.

Matt tried to recall the last time anyone had ever smiled at him like that. Years, he decided. It wasn't the smile that was unusual; women flashed him flirty grins all the time.

No, Liza's smile was something else altogether.

It was genuine happiness and affection and, God help him, even trust.

His chest tightened, and he suddenly found it difficult to draw a deep breath.

Her comment earlier drifted through his brain as the magnitude of what he'd just done struck.

This is a mistake.

He'd known that going in, yet he'd tossed all sense of self-preservation aside, thinking with the wrong head. Now he could see this wasn't just a mistake.

It was a catastrophe, a tsunami, cataclysmic destruction.

Before he could find a way to extract himself from the situation, Liza took the decision away, all hope of escaping before they hit the point of no return vanishing the second she lowered herself to her knees in front of him.

"Fuck," he muttered under his breath, watching as she unfastened his pants, drawing them and his briefs down. He stepped out of them, groaning when Liza reached between his thighs and cupped his balls. He reached out, placing his hands flat against the wall behind her for support.

She glanced up at him briefly, the fucking smile that would be his downfall still on her face, before she turned her attention to his cock.

It was hard as concrete, the head an angry red. This erection had first appeared during their dance, and it had

ridden at half-mast since. He was an unpinned grenade, ready to blow, and Liza was on her knees in front of him.

She wrapped one of her hands around his cock, the fingertips not touching. While his dick was an average length, it was thicker than most, something past lovers had either complained or raved about. Liza didn't appear intimidated as her lips parted and her tongue darted out to steal her first taste.

She tightened her grip around his cock, running her hand up and down his hard flesh as she took the head into her mouth completely.

Matt closed his eyes, gray dots clouding his vision as he sought control. There was nothing like Liza's lips, or the confident way she sucked him in. Her tongue teased the sensitive spot just beneath his head, and he groaned again.

She was pushing him too far, too fast, but nothing was going to stop him from coming inside her sweet, sexy mouth.

He wrapped his fingers in her hair, closing his fists around it, using that grip to tilt her head back, careful to keep his cock lodged inside her mouth.

"I'm going to come," he explained. "And you're going to swallow. All of it."

She nodded just once, the most she could accomplish. She was struggling to keep him in her mouth while also dislodging his grip. Liza, foolishly, still believed she could take the upper hand, thought the power would be hers.

She was wrong.

He pulled her hair, her slight whimper a sign that her scalp stung. He didn't relent.

"This isn't going to be the end of the night."

He saw from Liza's scowl that was exactly her intention. He'd realized it the moment she dropped to her knees.

She still wasn't finished fighting this thing between them. And while he appreciated her efforts, wishing he had her strength, they'd already gone way too far.

"This doesn't end here," he repeated. "You think you don't want me, but you do. So I'm going to bury myself in that wet, tight cunt of yours, and we're going to come again...together."

She stilled for just a moment, and he wondered if she'd pull back, drop his cock, rise, and walk away. He wasn't a hundred percent certain he'd be able to let her go.

"But first..." He prodded, pushing his cock the tiniest bit deeper into her mouth.

Mercifully, she didn't fight him, taking him even deeper, her tongue stroking in a way that had him seeing stars.

He released her hair but kept his hands on her head, cupping the back of it, using that touch to drive his cock deep. She gave herself up to him, whatever internal struggle she'd waged done now.

She relinquished the reins, allowing him to direct her movements as he fucked her mouth, stealing as much as he could from her, all the while knowing...it would never be enough.

He shoved his hips forward, forcing more of his cock inside. She was at her limit, maybe even a touch beyond, but she didn't cower or try to pull away. Instead, it felt as if she was fighting to give him even more.

She flexed her hand around his balls, squeezing gently, the action pushing Matt over the edge.

“Fuck!” he grunted as come spurting from the end of his cock, but Liza didn’t relent. She drew the pleasure out as she kept fucking him with her mouth, her lips, even the tiniest touch of her teeth.

Once his climax passed, he slowly withdrew, watching as Liza swallowed. Her lips were puffy, red, well-used. She ran her fingertips over them, touching the juices that remained there.

He gripped her upper arms, tugging her up from the floor, drawing her into another kiss, needing to taste—her, him, what they’d created together.

Liza’s kisses were going to be his new obsession. He would spend the rest of his life craving them, dreaming of them, addicted to the memory of them.

After minutes, maybe hours, he broke the kiss, cupping her cheek, trying to memorize the way she looked right now, storing it away for all the long, lonely nights to come.

Then he turned them toward the bed, reaching out to pull down the covers.

“Get in.”

Rather than obey, she perched on the edge, slowly stripping away her stockings. He lifted one foot, then the other, stripping off his own socks. They’d been too impatient to remove those earlier. Completely naked, Liza twisted around and crawled across the mattress, his hand itching to reach out and spank that perfect ass.

Then she shifted, sitting in the middle, waiting for him patiently, expectantly.

“You’re mine,” he said, lacing as much warning as he could muster into his tone. “Tonight, you’re all mine.”

Chapter Five

Liza shuddered at Matt's words.

Jesus Christ.

She sat there watching him, waiting for him, fighting like the devil to convince herself that Matt wasn't the greatest lover she'd ever had—and they hadn't even fucked yet.

She tried to tell herself she'd just gone too long without.

She'd had too much champagne.

She was succumbing to that old “want what you can't have” adage. He was forbidden fruit, so she was building this all up much bigger than it was.

Yeah.

Right.

Those were all bold-faced lies. Weak attempts to lessen this, to make it something more manageable, controllable.

Because, God help her, she wanted to be his.

He'd made the comment twice, each time making sure to let her know that possession only lasted until morning. Part of her wanted to test that timeline, to push him on it.

But something told her if she did that, if she pushed for more, he'd walk away from her right now—and she couldn't

let him do that.

Fuck. Hadn't she already taken enough shit from karma tonight?

First the super-sexy dance and now...this.

Clearly, she'd been a serial killer in a past life. It was the only way to explain why the greatest lover she'd ever had would be Matt Russo, a man her family hated, a man who made her professional life difficult, a man she could barely tolerate and who could barely tolerate her.

Matt climbed into bed with her as she mentally patted herself on the back for not drooling. She had never—NEVER—seen such muscular arms on a man. The guy had to be bench-pressing two hundred pounds, his shoulders something she would have attributed to Photoshop if she'd seen him pictured in a magazine. Plus, he was sporting an honest-to-God eight-pack, which she had to admit she assumed was super rare when it came to normal men.

Movie stars, bodybuilders, her brother Elio, the former hockey star, sure...an eight-pack.

Matt Russo, a man who spent his days pushing papers behind his oversized desk?

Wow.

Actually, every second since they'd walked into this bedroom had been one huge wow. She was still trying to figure out if she'd imagined Matt Russo dropping to his knees and going down on her.

Liza couldn't recall the last time a man had done that. It had been a very, very long time ago. Maybe even as far back as college, now that she thought about it.

Matt wasn't the type of man she'd ever thought to see on his knees, not that the position made him less intimidating, less powerful. He was dominance personified, and she was here for it.

She'd never been a passive lover, never let a man take charge in the bedroom. She was a sexual woman with needs and desires, and her past lovers had sadly needed a little—a lot—of instruction on how to get her where she wanted to be.

It felt as if Matt had gotten his hands on her owner manual, and he hadn't just glanced at the thing; he'd read it cover to cover, memorized it, studied it like she was his final exam.

After giving her an orgasm that literally shook her so hard it hurt, he took care to hold her steady, keep her safe, which was a good thing because her bones had melted at some point in the midst of it all.

Of course, the second the last pulses of her orgasm faded away, Liza knew she was in way over her head.

Originally, a blow job seemed like the quickest, easiest way out of the situation. He'd gotten her off, she'd get him off, and then she'd run like the hounds of hell were chasing her all the way back down to her hotel room.

Shared orgasms with Matt were one thing. But more of those incredible kisses...sex...lying in bed with him.

God, she wasn't strong enough to come back from that, and she knew it.

So she'd gone to her knees.

But she'd given herself away. Somehow, he'd known her plan. And he'd called her on it.

In truth, Matt had looked shocked when she'd knelt before him, and that same...awareness...crept in. The feeling that Matt wasn't just lonely.

He was wounded—and she wanted to ease his pain.

That was when she'd been forced to admit she wanted to give Matt a blow job, wanted to be there on her knees in front of him because his pleasure felt tied to hers. She'd gotten seriously turned on when she'd taken his—holy fuck—thick cock in her mouth. She had just had the mother of all orgasms, but as she sucked him, it felt as if she hadn't come in years.

Now...here she was, watching as he crawled across the bed toward her.

“Matt,” she started, though she didn't have a clue what she was going to say after that.

He gripped her ankles, pulling roughly until her back hit the mattress, so that he could cage her beneath him.

Before she was forced to think of something else to say, he lowered his head and kissed her. This kiss, unlike the previous ones, was slower, gentler, but just as dangerous to her sense of self-preservation.

Who the hell taught him to kiss like this?

He held himself above her, his weight resting on his elbows, his body covering hers. His hard-on brushed against her stomach.

He smirked when her eyes widened.

“That's some world-class recovery time.” She was striving for humor, something to minimize what they were doing, to break it down into something she could handle.

“If you want to leave, now is the time. I'm not sure...I...”

He was offering her an out, a chance to escape with her heart still intact.

Because that was what was on the line.

She could offer up a million excuses, a million lies, and none of that would change the fact she could very easily fall in love with Matt Russo.

“Do you want to go?” he asked, his voice gruff when she didn’t reply.

Liza shook her head. A smart woman would walk away, but she’d lived on her own for too many years, watched love strike this friend, then a cousin, her brothers, while missing her time and time again.

If this was it for her, if this was all she got, she was going to take it.

“I don’t want to leave,” she whispered.

Matt’s brow creased, and she got the impression she’d given him the wrong response.

“Do you want me to go?” she asked.

He shook his head. “No. Though...”

“I should,” she finished for him.

“I don’t want you to leave,” he said, though she could tell those words cost him something.

“Kiss me,” she murmured.

It looked like they were both resigned to paying the piper tomorrow.

He lowered his head and gone was the soft lover. Matt’s kisses took on a life of their own, and he laid claim to her lips, her mouth, her tongue. He took and she gave.

And the need for words vanished.

Her back arched when Matt's lips drifted along the side of her throat, sucking and biting in such a way that she was grateful it was winter because she was going to be wearing turtlenecks for a week.

She groaned when his lips found her nipple, drawing it into his mouth roughly. She recalled his comment about dangling rubies from her nipples. She wondered if he'd envisioned clamps or piercings, then she realized she'd wear either for him.

Liza wasn't sure where these desires were coming from, but there was no denying they were genuine. It felt as if she'd finally discovered the woman she was meant to be. No wonder her previous sexual encounters were so lackluster. She'd been a shadow of herself, hiding the truth of who she was and what she needed. Not only from her lovers but from herself.

Matt had reached through all the protective layers, torn down the walls, and dragged out the real her.

How was she going to survive this?

Survive *him*?

A sharp pain pierced her heart.

Liza cried out again when Matt pinched one nipple while biting the other.

"Don't go away," he growled. "Not even in your head."

"I didn't."

"Don't lie," he barked.

"I...won't," she promised, her words soothing him.

“You’re with me,” he said, before adding that hated last word, “tonight. Only me. Put the bullshit away.”

Her only reply was to nod. She ran her fingers through his hair. He was the most intense, serious, even scary man she’d ever known.

He was also the most handsome, and she found it impossible to look away.

Matt held her gaze for only a second longer, his eyes troubled, and that was when she realized he was asking for something from her he wasn’t giving in return.

“You’re with me,” she repeated, adding as much strength to her tone as she could. “Stay with me.”

Matt blinked once, twice, his frown too pronounced. Then, something lifted in his eyes, his face clearing.

“I’m with you,” he promised.

She lifted her face, kissing his cheek, loving the roughness of his beard, then Matt resumed his travels around her body, kissing, licking, nipping at every bare inch of skin. She’d never had a lover take so long simply exploring.

She loved it as much as she hated it.

“I need you,” she gasped, not for the first time. Hell, not for the thousandth time.

“Keep begging,” he said, darkly, not lifting his head. He was currently nipping at a sensitive spot on the inside of her upper thigh.

“Dammit,” she bitched. “Please!”

“More.” His tongue brushed her clit, but it was too light, not enough.

“Sex, *now*,” she demanded, reaching for his arms, trying in vain to drag him where she wanted him. She was convinced the man was made of steel.

“Be more specific.”

“Your dick. My vagina. Like peanut butter and jelly, all smooshed together. Make it happen.”

She was pleasantly surprised when this time—finally—it appeared he was going to give her what she wanted. He lifted his head, amused, his lips slightly lifted at the corners.

“Peanut butter and jelly,” he murmured.

“Please,” she whispered, pride be damned. “Matt... please.”

He reached toward the nightstand, pulling a condom out of the drawer.

“I have an IUD too,” she offered, wanting him to know that they would be doubly protected, as she recalled his vow to never have children.

The package crinkled. Then he put the condom on and pushed her thighs apart before settling between them, lining his cock up with her opening. His cock was way thicker than that of any man she’d ever been with, wide enough that it belatedly occurred to her this could hurt.

Not that she’d needed to worry. Matt seemed cognizant of the need to go slow, so he see-sawed in, then out, in, then out, giving her time to adjust to his girth rather than forcing his dick in with one hard thrust.

Both of them were looking down, watching the process, as his cock slowly disappeared inside her body. She’d never seen anything hotter.

Once he was fully seated, he lifted his face to hers. He cupped her cheek with his hand, offered her a kiss so soft and tender, it almost made her want to cry.

Then, he gave her the world's most wicked grin. "Now," he said in that dark chocolate tone that made her entire body clench with need, "we're getting serious."

"Serious?" she asked breathlessly. She was barely hanging on. And all he'd done was slide in.

"Serious," he repeated. "Hold on."

As far as warnings went, that one fell short—because Matt fucked her like a man possessed, pounding into her body, giving her no quarter, no reprieve, no time to catch her breath.

Within seconds, she was in a freefall, and there wasn't a damn thing tethering her to the mountain.

"God. Fuck!" she yelled.

She was coming again.

How in the hell was she coming again? Her body wasn't wired this way.

Or so she'd thought.

Matt grunted, giving her a somewhat astonished look. "So fast."

She might have taken offense, but the truth was, he was looking at her with...wonder? Awe? He couldn't be that oblivious to the fact he was an amazing lover, could he?

"I..." It was on the tip of her tongue to apologize, which was stupid. Because she wasn't the tiniest bit sorry.

"So tight," he said through gritted teeth, and that was when she realized he was struggling to hold back, just as close as she

was. Matt slowed his thrusts, but he didn't stop moving.

Electricity shimmered along her skin, her spine, lighting up every hot zone she had. At this rate, she could provide enough power to light up New York City.

When the last remnants of the orgasm stilled, Liza went for broke. She wrapped her legs around his waist, tilted her hips, and they groaned in unison as he slid in even deeper. Her fears about pain seemed ridiculous now. Matt filled her to the brink, but it didn't hurt.

God, nothing that felt this incredible could ever hurt.

She lifted her hips in time with his downward thrusts, their actions so rough, so animalistic, they both grunted, clawing, scratching.

“You're going to give me another one,” he demanded.

If she'd had the breath, she might have fought him on that, but she was too close to deny the truth. Especially when Matt's fingers found her clit.

The clever man was too talented with her self-destruct button, and she came again, loudly. Liza had never screamed in bed. Not once in her whole damn life, but this orgasm was too big for silence.

Her body thrashed, the pleasure so intense it hurt. White lights flashed relentlessly behind her closed eyelids.

And Matt, damn him, never missed a beat, fucking her through this orgasm too, drawing it out so long, she feared she'd pass out. Once the tremors subsided, her legs—now jelly—fell to the mattress.

Matt still didn't stop.

Until he did.

He pulled out, too quickly, and she shouted, ready to complain, her masochistic pussy clenching in an attempt to keep him inside. But the sound was cut short when he grasped her hips, twisting her.

“Roll over. I want to spank your ass while I fuck you from behind. And you’re going to come for me again. Another one just like those last two.”

“I’ll die,” she said, even as she struggled to push her knees beneath her, to shove her hips upward.

“You’ll do as I say,” he said, punctuating that comment with a hard slap to her ass. She gasped at the burn. Matt wasn’t holding anything back, wasn’t working her up to his rough touches.

He fucked like he lived—taking what he wanted without apology.

Part of her wanted to hate that, but she couldn’t. Not now when he spanked her ass again, then again, six hard slaps that set her on fire—inside and out.

While she was on her knees, her head was lowered to the mattress, held there by Matt’s palm cupping the back of her neck. She was beginning to feel like his rag doll. He put her where he wanted her, and for reasons she couldn’t explain to herself, she stayed there. Thrilled by his possession, his dominance, his control.

This time, when Matt pushed back inside her, there was no easing in. Just one hard shove, and—oh my God, HOW?—she was there. *Again.*

Her third orgasm took her unaware, and Matt cursed.

“You’re killing me. So fucking good!” His fingers clenched, gripping her hips so tightly, there was no way she

wasn't going to have bruises tomorrow.

Liza cried out, this climax striking fast and fading quicker than the last. Not that it mattered. It still packed one hell of a punch.

Again, Matt continued taking her as if nothing had happened. She'd never been fucked through an orgasm before, never thought she'd want such a thing.

Finally, his motions slowed, though she couldn't understand why. He hadn't come yet.

He reached down, taking a huge handful of her hair in his grip, using it to pull her upper body away from the mattress. Her scalp stung from the tight pull, but it also ramped her arousal even higher.

Liza's sexual fantasies had always leaned toward rough sex, hard fucking, hair pulling, spanking. She'd dreamed of it all and even tried bits and pieces with past lovers, but Matt was the first to act without her asking, to tap into those darker desires without her having to draw him a road map.

He continued to pull her upward until her back was flush with his chest. He retained the grip of her hair with one hand, the other snaking around her to pinch her nipple.

She tried to back away from the pain. Her body was on sensory overload, and every single thing he did to her was amplified a thousand percent.

She loved it.

She hated it.

Matt growled, biting her neck. "Take what I give you."

Liza was too far gone to pretend offense. There was nothing she wouldn't give him, wouldn't offer up freely.

He'd proven himself worthy...capable.

The only man to ever do so.

He pinched her other nipple and this time, she moaned but held steady.

“Good girl,” he whispered.

Why did those two words elicit two very opposite reactions in her?

For one, she liked being good, but the second he said it, she felt the need to be very, very naughty.

Reaching around, she gripped his ass with one of her hands, tightening her hold on his firm, muscular ass cheek, squeezing it in a way that had to hurt.

“Bad boy,” she said, her voice huskier, sexier than she'd ever heard it.

Matt's eyes narrowed, and he frowned. She wondered if she'd gone too far poking Mr. Dom Bear.

Until he murmured, “You're going to be trouble,” so low that she wouldn't have heard him at all if his lips weren't right by her ear.

She liked the idea of being trouble. She wouldn't say she'd been the perfect child like her sister-in-law, Gianna, but she'd been far from the wild child her best friend Keeley had been when she was younger.

It was her sarcastic nature that pushed her closer to the naughty line rather than her actions.

However, before she could consider all the ways she wanted to be bad—with Matt—he wiped those thoughts away, shoving her back down on the mattress. The push was so

sudden, so quick, she just barely got her hands up to catch herself.

Then he was there...fucking her like it was his last night on earth. It was too brutal, too rough, too much after so many orgasms, but at least, mercifully, it was brief.

Matt came loudly, his body slamming into hers once, twice, three times more before he held steady, erupting.

They remained there for several minutes, locked together, neither moving. Liza's head spun as the consequences of what she'd just done began to crash down on her head.

When she was lost in the throes of pleasure, overwhelmed by a bliss so big it was all-encompassing, she could forget all the reasons why being here was a huge fucking mistake.

Matt didn't say anything as he slowly withdrew. Her body betraying her, her pussy gripping him, one last rebellion.

He didn't touch her, didn't ask if she was okay, didn't do anything other than rise from the bed and walk to the bathroom.

She closed her eyelids quickly when he turned the light on, the bright beam shining in her eyes after so long in the dark almost painful.

She listened to his progress. To him throwing the condom away, washing up.

She couldn't continue to lie here. Time to make her escape, regroup, figure out next steps. Throwing her legs over the edge of the mattress, she tried to summon enough energy to get dressed and leave.

Because she had to leave.

Matt's shadow lay across the floor at her feet. She could tell he was leaning on the doorframe between the bedroom and bathroom, but she wasn't ready to face him yet.

His shadow remained where it was, and she wondered if he was struggling to find the right way to end this as well.

Enough, Liza, she chastised herself.

She wasn't a coward, and she wasn't going to start acting like one now. Taking a steadying breath, she forced herself to look at him.

He was a gorgeous, naked silhouette, backlit from the bathroom lights above the mirror. She could just barely make out the features of his face, but she saw enough to see his scowl.

While she was in freak-out mode, Matt looked...angry.

"Lay down," he said in *that* tone. When he'd used it earlier, she'd found herself responding before she could think about her actions.

This time, she managed to hold her ground.

"I need to leave," she said, refusing to look away from him. "Now."

Matt crossed his arms, his frown deepening. "Lay down, Liza."

She hadn't thought there was anything he could say that would make her stay.

But that...

He'd called her by her first name. For the first time ever.

She sighed dramatically, unable to give in with good grace, though she *was* giving in. She dropped down onto the bed on

her back, staring at the ceiling.

Matt turned off the bathroom light and padded to the opposite side of the bed, pulling the duvet down. The mattress dipped as he climbed in. She glanced over and saw he was lying on his back as well.

Liza would have expected this to feel awkward, but it didn't. Then she realized nothing about tonight had felt strange.

Which made this all so much harder.

She twisted to face him, drawing his attention as he turned his head to look at her.

“A mistake,” she said softly, wondering if he would agree or try to argue the point.

He didn't respond to that. Instead, he simply reached out to cup her cheek affectionately as he said, “Go to sleep, Liza.”

Liza wanted to push, but she'd used up her second wind and there was no third coming. Plus, he'd used *that* voice.

So...she closed her eyes and made one last mistake. A whopper.

She fell asleep next to Matt Russo.

Chapter Six

Matt stirred, fighting his way back to consciousness, roused by...movement, a sound. Given the darkness of the room, it was still night, and considering his current level of exhaustion, he'd guess he hadn't been asleep long. Probably not more than an hour or two.

Then he heard another rustle, like the one that had woken him up. He didn't bother to open his eyes. He already knew what—or he should say, who—was making the noise.

He didn't have to reach across the mattress to confirm he was alone in the bed.

Feigning sleep, he listened as Liza made her way around the bedroom. He could chart her progress even without the benefit of sight. He heard her slip her dress back on, the gentle rasp of the zipper, before her footsteps grew softer.

He tracked her progress to the living room, but he remained where he was, not bothering to give chase, even though that desire, that instinct was stronger than he was comfortable with. He didn't want her to leave, hated that she'd escaped the bed they should be sharing until morning.

He'd laid claim to her several times, making it clear that, for tonight, she was his. It was still the goddamn night.

Matt took in a long, slow breath, stilling the voices in his head that told him to stop her, to drag her back to the bed and take her again. His dick began to thicken at the thought. Fucker was destined for disappointment because Matt had no intention of following her.

He simply...couldn't.

After a few minutes more, he heard the hotel door open, then close again.

She was gone.

Opening his eyes, he rubbed them, blinking to clear his vision. They were scratchy from too little sleep, but getting more rest wasn't in the cards for him tonight.

Pushing himself upright, he sat on the edge of the mattress, much like Liza had done when he'd gone to the bathroom earlier.

Jesus, sex with her had been life-altering, amazing. It was as if her body had been made just for him. And her unexpected submissiveness...

Fucking hell.

He'd taken countless lovers to his bed, but none of them—not one—had made him feel so...well, the only word that came to mind was *complete*.

In her arms, he felt whole.

Like he wasn't missing the big chunks of himself he'd learned to function without.

When he'd returned to the bedroom after cleaning up, he had been unsurprised to see that she was ready to run. Her reaction was logical, given who they were to each other and what they'd done.

What hadn't been expected was his visceral reaction to seeing her there, about to leave.

He'd gotten so pissed off that she was trying to cut the night short, he'd demanded she lay back down. And he'd used the tone that—up until then—had gotten him everything he'd wanted from her.

When she failed to move, he took it one step further, calling her Liza.

It was the first time he'd spoken her name—just Liza—aloud to her, though it was what he called her when thinking about her.

Liza.

Liza.

He was tempted to add the word *his* in front of it, but it was time for him to put that foolishness aside.

He'd indulged in one night—a mistake she'd called it, and she was right, though Liza had no idea just how big a mistake it had been, how big the can of worms they'd just opened.

Matt sighed, trying to shake off the heavy thoughts beating inside his head. He'd expected the regret over his actions, been waiting for it.

But he'd underestimated how large, how brutal it would be.

He stood, pacing across the bedroom floor. He pulled on his boxer briefs but nothing else before padding to the living room.

Crossing the room to the bar, he poured himself a glass of Scotch, taking a long sip, the heat of the liquor burning down his throat, a lame attempt at warming him—inside or out.

It didn't work.

He walked to the window, looking down on the cityscape. The streets—decorated with twinkly lights for the holidays—were quiet in the wee hours of morning, as they were still a couple of hours away from sunrise. There was a light dusting of snow on the sidewalks, winter making its first—late—appearance. Typically, Philadelphia's first snow came long before now, but this year, it had held off until mid-December. Looked like they'd get that white Christmas everyone always longed for.

He swallowed hard, fighting to dislodge the lump in his throat that always appeared whenever he thought about the holidays, likening himself to a soldier with PTSD. Only his trauma had nothing to do with war and everything to do with fucking Christmas.

Shoving those unwanted thoughts deep down inside, he imagined Liza returning to her hotel room, stripping off that gorgeous red dress, toeing off the torturous heels. Was she standing in this same spot, too many floors below him, studying the same view?

The urge to get dressed and go after her was powerful.

Too powerful.

So he took another drink of Scotch. And another. Willing it away.

This was why he'd stayed away from her, always watching from afar, keeping his distance. She'd been a threat to him since the first moment he'd laid eyes on her at Enigma. And she was still a threat.

Because while Liza may have run tonight, she wouldn't go far.

She'd begin to play tonight over in her mind, recalling all the things he shouldn't have revealed, and she would come to believe that there could be something between them.

At some point, she'd convince herself that this wasn't a mistake, and she'd come back to him. She was a fighter, and she never said die. He admired that about her as much as he hated it because it was what made her so dangerous to him.

Liza thought he was holding her at bay because of their families' feud, because of long-ago slights and hurts.

But that wasn't the truth, wasn't the reason at all.

His need to stay away from her stemmed from something more, something that—should he ever try to explain to her—would do what he was trying to do now. It would push her away forever.

Those flashes of fondness, of trust that he'd seen tonight would turn dim and sputter out completely if she knew the truth.

Which was why he would never tell her.

Turning away from the window, a flicker caught his eye and he walked over to the coffee table. The diamond bracelet lay on the surface, shining in the moonlight.

Liza had taken it off, left it behind.

God, he was so tempted to race after her, to drag her back to his bed...*where she belonged.*

Picking it up, Matt closed his fist around it, looking at the hotel door, taking two steps toward it before forcing himself to stop.

Chasing her down now would be the action of a fool. And he wasn't a fool.

No. That wasn't quite true because he was most definitely a fool for *her*. God, every second of the evening, from the moment they stepped onto that elevator until they fell asleep next to each other, had felt like a dream.

For the first time in his life, Matt closed his eyes and allowed himself to imagine a different future for himself. One where he didn't live alone, eat alone, sleep alone.

One where he was able to offer love and receive it in return.

One that included Liza.

Matt stopped fighting it, letting the amazing visions play out in his mind.

Liza in a white dress, walking down an aisle as he waited for her.

Liza's stomach round with his baby.

Liza, with streaks of gray in her hair, as they sat side by side, watching their child graduate from high school, then college.

He even let himself picture the proverbial front porch swing, the two of them old and gray in the later years of their lives, slowly rocking back and forth as they reminisced about a life well lived.

Before tonight, he'd never wanted those things, certain they were meant for others—like his brother, Gage—who had revealed himself to be a romantic at heart after falling in love with his now-wife Penny.

Matt had never fallen in love. Not once in his entire life. So here he was at thirty-seven, confident—no, fucking *cocky*

—in the belief that love wasn't an emotion he was capable of feeling. Until...

Liza.

Liza.

He stared at the hotel door, a war raging inside him.

Follow her or let her go?

He knew which was the smart, practical, safe answer.

“Fuck,” he muttered to himself, as he returned to the bedroom, quietly dressing. Sleep *definitely* wasn't happening tonight.

Returning to the living room, he poured a larger glass of Scotch, slowly sipping it as he hardened his heart. He controlled the narrative, controlled the outcome.

Controlled it all.

He couldn't—wouldn't be swayed from his path.

Dropping down to the couch, he did something he never did. Took himself back in time, forced himself to remember exactly why he couldn't have Liza.

Now, as always, the dark memories swallowed him whole.

The constant drip-drip-drip of water.

Dark red blood congealed on the snowy-white tiles.

Before he knew it, two-thirds of the bottle of Scotch was gone, and the sun was well up in the sky.

It was just after eleven o'clock. He should get up, check out, put last night out of his mind, and move on with his life.

He didn't move.

His phone rang, crashing through the silence, and he glanced down at the caller ID, closing his eyes wearily when he saw her name. That didn't take long. He should have known she wouldn't be the type of woman to simply walk away.

Let it go to voicemail.

Let it go to voicemail.

His eyes drifted to the diamond bracelet, and in the end, a sleepless night and liquor made his next poor decision for him.

Picking up his phone, he said, "Hello."

When she spoke, her voice was strong, confident. "I don't like the way last night ended. I shouldn't have left like that. We need to talk. Will you have dinner with me tonight?"

He paused, considering her request, for a long time. Too long. Matt sensed she was ready to begin pleading her case, so he cut her off with just one word.

"Yes."

Don't despair! The rest of Liza and Matt's story will be told in *Tempted and Taken*, releasing Jan. 9, 2024!

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Tempted and Taken

Some mistakes are worth repeating.

Liza knows that cocky billionaire Matt Russo is the wrong man for her. She could make a long list of reasons why she'd be smart to stay away, including his tenacious ex-girlfriend, the fact he's trying to destroy her family, and, oh yeah, did she mention he's a cold, distant bastard? However, after their tempestuous one-night stand, she's finding it hard to hang on to their well-established nemesis routine.

Matt is the master of control—of his life, his emotions, his future. Except, of course, for that night he slipped up...with Liza Moretti. Reassuming his grip on the reins, he's determined it won't happen again. Unfortunately, doing the right thing in regards to the tempting woman fails because doing the wrong things with her—to her—are too alluring to resist.

An impromptu invitation to share his private plane leads to an unexpected break from reality and some very steamy nights in Hawaii. Until real life comes knocking and Matt is forced to face the mistakes of his past. Mistakes that could destroy the one thing he can't control, and the one thing he can no longer live without—Liza.

Preorder [Tempted and Taken](#) today.

About the Author

Virginia native Mari Carr is a New York Times and USA TODAY bestseller of contemporary romance novels. With over three million copies of her books sold, Mari was the winner of the Romance Writers of America's Passionate Plume award for her novella, *Erotic Research*. She has over a hundred published works, including her popular *Wild Irish* and *Italian Stallions* books, along with the *Trinity Masters* series she writes with Lila Dubois.

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