

Brutal Love

FORBIDDEN
LOVE

KELLY MYERS

BRUTAL LOVE

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BLURB

I fell head over heels for an Italian man, but every bone in my body told me he was hiding something...

And I was right. Luca was hiding something big.

Tough, rich, and dominating.

Luca had my undivided attention the moment he laid eyes on me.

But my life quickly started falling apart right after.

My sister's murder shattered me to the core.

A part of me died forever.

And another part of me wondered if Luca had anything to do with it.

Luca is running from his past, from being in the mafia.

But he can only run so far before his past catches up to him.

And when that happens, he'll have to be the one to protect me.

Luca has my heart...but can he also save my life?

LUCA GAMBRELLI

My innocent, sleepy, nine-year-old eyes were struggling to process the scene that lay before me. I wiped at them with the back of my hands to get out the remnants of what Mama called Mr. Sandman's special dust, but the confusion before me remained the same.

"Mama? Papa?" I whispered.

They didn't move. Their silence frightened me. My parents remained as still as the store window mannequins I'd seen at the mall when Mama and I went shopping. I called louder, but still no change.

I crept closer to where they were sprawled on the kitchen floor. My father was lying on his back—his eyes open, staring into space. Mama was on her side. It looked like she was sleeping, so I nudged her.

"Mama, wake up."

My bare feet felt warm so I looked down. I was standing in a river of sticky, red liquid. I remembered, then, cutting my foot once on a nail. The wound had bled like crazy. My childhood senses recognized the gloopy substance I was standing in—it was blood.

Suddenly I was slipping and sliding to get away. I looked down when I felt a warm sensation on my inner thighs. I had peed on myself.

Papa's eyes shot open and out of his mouth sounded a primal scream, unlike anything I'd ever heard.

“Run, Luca! Run!”

I tried, but my legs wouldn't move. I was cemented in place. I opened my mouth to scream, but no sound came out. I was trapped. Something bad was about to happen to me. I was...

My eyes shot open, and I sat bolt upright in my king-size bed, drenched in sweat. My body showed all the signs of being in distress—dry mouth, elevated heart rate, racing thoughts. The only way to regain my composure was to remind myself where I was.

I wasn't nine years old. I wasn't standing in my parents' warm blood in our kitchen after they were slaughtered in a home invasion. I wasn't in my birthplace in Italy. But, despite my mental checks, the recurring nightmare left me breathing hard.

The truth was that I was thirty-four, living in The States—a lifetime removed from the trauma that was plaguing my subconscious.

I checked my watch—2 am. Damn it. I was wide awake, so I got up, changed out of my damp PJs, and went downstairs to the kitchen. Mama Ana's go-to elixir had been warm milk. My adoptive mother was old school. She firmly believed that any malady was curable with a glass of heated milk and a bone-crushing bear hug. And, for a traumatized young boy, that was gold.

Ana and Mario Cattaneo adopted me after I'd spent a year or so in the system, having bounced from one orphanage to another. I learned at a tender age that adoption was a fickle tauntress. Babies and toddlers were the first to leave the orphanages. They were cute and fresh, and untouched by the trauma of being grouped together with strangers, exposed to the age-old 'survival of the fittest' principle.

I'd lost count of the instances during which I got the shit kicked out of me by the resident bully. Harsh life lesson notwithstanding, it made me tough as nails. It also taught me to perfect my negotiating skills. I had two choices. Crumble or adapt. I chose the latter.

I grabbed milk from the fridge and poured some into a mug. Then, I set the timer on the microwave and while the milk heated, I pulled out a bottle of my finest whiskey. I was certain that Mama Ann would approve.

Sitting at the kitchen counter, sipping my drink, I wished that I had a dog. Nothing soothed the soul like a good chat with man's best friend. But, I lived in an apartment, albeit the penthouse with a roof garden, and I traveled quite a bit, so it would be unfair to the poor creature.

I checked my watch again and did a quick calculation. It was past 8 am in Italy, so I called my childhood buddy, Angelo. We hadn't spoken in a while. The phone rang a few times before he answered.

"Ciao, Luca. This is a nice surprise. Come va, il Mio Amico?"

"Ciao, Angelo. I'm good. How are you?"

"Off to work. It's late there. Why are you up?"

"I'll sleep when I'm dead. What have I missed?"

"Bad dreams?"

Angelo knew me well. We met in the orphanage. Unlike me, he was never adopted, as he was too old to be considered a cute little bundle. Not that it slowed him down. Angelo was a survivor. He learned how to work the system.

"You know me too well, buddy."

"You wanna talk about it?"

"Not really. Tell me what's happening in your life. How's Sophia?"

"Beautiful as always—and full of shit."

"She needs to be. When is she going to make an honest man out of you?"

Angelo laughed. He and his childhood sweetheart had been engaged for nearly two years. I got the feeling that neither one of them was in a rush to tie the knot. They lived very busy

lives. Besides, a wedding certificate couldn't possibly make them any tighter. They were inseparable. I envied Angelo.

"We'll get there when we get there. Are you seeing anyone?"

"Not since Francesca. I needed a bit of a breather."

"You needed a medal. That woman was high maintenance. I'll never know what you were thinking."

"She wasn't that bad."

"Your taste does run to the more challenging ladies."

"What can I say, Angelo? Nothing like a challenge. It's no fun if they fall down with their legs in the air, now is it?"

"You dog. Anyway, how's business? Are you still tinkering with your classic cars?"

"I am. Business is good. Busy."

I bought my first classic car when I was twenty. She was a beauty. It took me months to restore her, but I made a pretty decent profit when I sold her. My passion had morphed into a very lucrative business.

"You should come across. I'll put you in touch with a dealer I met. He's got a few gems."

"Yeah. I haven't been home in ages."

"No rush, now that your parents have passed on, I guess."

Angelo was referring to Ann and Mario. They were in their early sixties when they adopted me. Ann died first, and honestly, I'm convinced that Mario went so soon after because he missed his wife too much.

My visits home to Italy trickled into inconsequential after that. I did miss Ann and Mario very much.

Angelo and I spoke for a long time, as we usually did, about the past. He was the only one who understood what I'd been through as a kid. He was there for most of it. The Cattaneos took him in during the school holidays and Angelo

spent practically every Christmas with us. He was the closest thing to a brother I'd ever have and I loved him as such.

It was close to 3 am when I crawled back into bed. The milk and whiskey had gone a long way to calming my frayed nerves. My nightmare was all but forgotten when I closed my eyes again and waited for sleep to come. And come, it did. This time there were no haunting images or childhood terrors. Thank God.

MADISON HARRIS

“**Y**ou have no idea how much I’m looking forward to this, La,” I sighed as I lay on the massage table next to my younger sister, Lauren.

“Bliss.”

The smell of essential aromatherapy oils being heated in preparation for our massage enveloped us. I hadn’t had the time to simply veg out and enjoy pampering in far too long. I also hadn’t seen Lauren in almost two weeks, which was ridiculous, as we were joined at the hip as kids.

“Aren’t you sick of studying yet?” I asked Lauren, who was in her final year at university.

“Like you can’t believe. It’s a good thing I graduate this year. I can’t wait to start teaching.”

Lauren was studying to be a special needs teacher. She had the patience of a saint when it came to children and they were nuts about her. I didn’t mind kids, but honestly, I didn’t feel the need to be a mother. My biological clock was turned to mute. Besides, I was only twenty-eight, so no mad rush to procreate.

“When last did Mom spring the marriage and grandchildren speech on you?” Lauren chuckled.

“That woman is like a Ninja. She pounces whenever I least expect it. You’re lucky. She doesn’t put any pressure on you to pop out the next generation.”

“That’s because I’m the baby.”

“Baby, my ass. You’re twenty-four.”

Caroline Harris was a great believer in family. She would have married Lauren and me off long ago if we’d given her half the chance. I suspected it was because she wanted a hoard of grandkids, but she was shit out of luck with me.

The Harris dynasty was jam-packed with breeders. Dad was one of four sons, and to his eternal shame, he only managed to produce two female children. His brothers, on the other hand, were knee deep in sons, making poor Dad the perceived black sheep of his family.

“Hey, it’s bad enough that you were born with a vagina instead of a penis. So, better you get breeding, Maddie. It’s the least you can do to earn your keep.”

“Screw you,” I laughed.

“Speaking of which. Are you currently *not* procreating with someone hot and smitten?”

“I wish. I’m too busy for playthings of the opposite sex. How about you?”

“No one special. You’re too fussy, Maddie.”

“No, I’m not. I simply do not suffer fools easily.”

“I don’t suppose you meet too many deep fellas in your industry.”

“I’ll ignore that stereotypical comment. Not all models are thick as mud.”

“I know. I’m just teasing. It doesn’t help that you’re the boss, I suppose. Sexual harassment and all that *him too* movement stuff,” she grinned.

“Uh-huh. Gone are the good old days where a girl could squeeze a firm buttock without being dragged in front of a judge and flogged,” I smiled back.

“What can I say, Sis? The world has gone to hell in a handbasket.”

The temptation to grab a firm ass every so often was par for the course in my business. Together with my aunt, Bethany

Clarkson, my mom's sister, we owned a top modeling agency. I kind of fell into modeling while I was at university, studying business management. I ended up opening my own agency and the rest was history.

Beth was more of an older sister to Lauren and me than an aunt. She was much younger than Mom and practically grew up with us kids. Beth was the naughty aunt—the one Lauren and I would crash with when we were snort flying drunk in high school. Beth never ratted us out, but she did chew me out on more than one occasion. I loved her dearly.

“What happened to Kyle?” Lauren asked as the masseuses employed their magic fingers on our bodies.

“He's still here and there. He's a bit young for me, though. I'm looking for a real man.”

“Someone who shaves on a regular basis?” Lauren giggled.

“That too. No, I mean a man who isn't afraid to take the lead.”

“Oh, please. As if you'd let a man tell you what to do.”

“Hell, no. That's not what I mean. Just someone who will surprise me. I'm bored with predictable.”

“Yeah, I know what you mean. The whole metro man craze is getting old. I need a cowboy who will take me, hard.”

“Okay, wow! We need to get you laid, La.”

We laughed while the pamper experts got on with the job at hand. I was close to nodding off when the masseuse tapped me on the shoulder. It was time for a rinse-off. Lauren and I moved to the sauna where we sat and chatted before showering off.

“Let's have lunch, Maddie. I'm starving,” she said once we were dressed.

The spa had a Michelin star restaurant to complete the pampering experience. An attractive waiter seated Lauren and me and brought us the wine list.

“Someone in the kitchen better check his tongue,” Lauren grinned when the waiter walked away. “I think he may have stepped on it while he was ogling your ass.”

“I would hope so. I’d hate to think that I put in extra effort into my look for nothing.”

“You’re such a flirt,” said Lauren.

“Says the one wearing the pushup bra,” I replied.

“Touche. So, what are we drinking?”

“I’m in the mood for a cold Chardonnay after the sauna. Shall I get us a bottle?”

“Sounds heavenly. The clam ravioli is to die for, by the way.”

“Oh? When did you have it?” I asked.

“Mom and I were here a while ago. I think you were out of town at the time.”

I nodded. “Great. I’ll try it.”

“Are you and Aunty Beth coming to lunch at the house on Sunday?”

“I don’t think Beth is in town this weekend, but I’ll be there.”

“Mom and Dad are having a few of their friends around too.”

“I hope Niles won’t be coming,” I said and rolled my eyes.

Niles Fairfax was one of Dad’s oldest clients. He was creepy—a lascivious old fart who had clearly grown tired of his raisin-skinned wife. I tried my level best to be at the furthest end of the table, as far away from him as humanly possible whenever we sat down to dine.

Dad was an investment banker—a brilliant, savant-like man when it came to numbers. His applied talent had afforded us a privileged upbringing. Unfortunately, such a skill to create wealth for others attracted, let’s say, ‘colorful’ characters.

Fairfax was one such colorful critter who had insinuated himself into the Harris circle.

Mom wasn't crazy about him either, but she respected Dad's position and Caroline Harris had learned early on in her and Dad's rise in status to deal skillfully with jerks. Mom was a master.

"Probably," Lauren said and rolled her eyes. "Just watch your back and whatever you do, don't let him corner you in the kitchen."

"I'll hide my taser in my g-string," I grinned.

The waiter must have heard me because he was grinning. Lauren and I laughed at his attempts at indifference. We ordered our wine and food and spent the rest of the afternoon drinking, eating, and toying with the waiter.

I went home once Lauren and I had finished. I felt like a million bucks after the relaxing afternoon. I spent the rest of the evening looking through portfolios of prospective models online and made notes on the ones I thought had potential.

Afterward, I had a cup of camomile tea and turned in. It had been a crazy busy week, with galas and shows, so I was a little low on quality sleep. I clocked out as soon as my head hit the pillow. I was lucky that way.

LUCA

It was just after dawn when I spilled out of bed and pulled on my running shoes. I'd slept well after chatting to Angelo, and my legs were itching for a decent run. The mountains close to where I lived were crisscrossed with trail running magic. I'd spend countless hours lost in thought on its scenic routes, and today was as good a day as any, I thought.

I hadn't always been a classic and rare car dealer. In my previous life, I was the early ascender to the leadership circle of a mob organization. Granted, not an arbitrary entry added willy-nilly to one's CV. It turned out that the leadership and negotiating skills I'd mastered as a newbie kid in an orphanage, came in very handy when I stumbled, unwittingly, into the world of organized crime.

It wasn't the kind of life I'd coveted. But, I needed a job when I came to the States, and my roommate at the time worked for an "Italian guy" who needed a skilled driver. I was the perfect candidate for the position as I had raced cars back in Italy. Naturally, I shot to the top of the list.

"Good morning, Luca. Off for a run?"

"Good morning, Mrs. Clark. Perfect day for it. Would you like to come along? I could always use a second."

"Son, if my knees were up to it, I'd whip your butt up that little hill in our backyard."

"I believe you," I smiled.

"Have fun, darling," she giggled and left for her morning chores.

Mrs. Clark lived on the ground floor of the apartment building. She was in her eighties, a hundred pounds wet, white-gray, and sharp as a tack. She reminded me so much of Mama Ann. The spritely woman went for a walk every morning and took the stairs to the basement to where her car was parked. She was a bloody legend.

The summer heat was pushing the thermometer steadily up to a sizzle, so I made my way to the trails before it was too hot to run comfortably. I was drenched with sweat by the time I got to the top of the mountain, but the view of the pale blue ocean was worth every drop of perspiration.

It was close to 8 am when I got back home. I popped into a coolish shower, then got dressed for work in a pair of cotton Bermuda shorts, a button-down shirt, and loafers. I was glad I worked for myself, as I wouldn't have hacked it as a suit and tie nine-to-fiver.

My cellphone rang while I was downstairs in the kitchen, throwing fruit and protein powder into a blender—molto Americano! Mama Ana would have rolled her eyes and shoved a pastry into my hand.

“Hello,” I answered after I turned off the blender.

“Hey, stranger. Are you out there surfing, or what?”

“Hey! Nico. Nope, mountain-goating it. How are you, buddy?”

“What can I say? Living the dream.”

“And what a dream it is. How's Sam?”

“She's well—keeps me on my toes. We were talking about you last night, so I thought I'd give you a call and catch up.”

“Ah, admit it. It's too quiet on that side without me, is it?”

“I like quiet.”

I laughed at the droll tone of Nico's voice.

“Yeah. It beats the alternative,” I sighed.

“Speaking of the alternative. I take it you haven't had any unwanted communications of late?”

“No. Thank God.”

“I know you’re in the ass end of the States, Luca, but you’d best be careful, nonetheless. The mob’s reach is far and wide. But, look who I’m telling.”

“It’s all good, Nico. I’m being careful. Besides, I haven’t made it too easy for them to find me, now that I’m Luca Gambrelli and not Luca Bianchi.”

“I hope you’re right. Can’t lose you after everything we’ve been through, buddy.”

“Okay, I knew you painters were sensitive, artsy types, but don’t go all girly on my ass, brother.”

“Hey, we can’t all be butch grease monkeys like you,” Nico countered with a chuckle.

“True. I miss you guys,” I said with a genuine heartfelt pang.

Nico had pretty much saved my life. After I’d realized that the mob business wasn’t for me, I knew I needed serious help getting out. After all, it wasn’t as if I could write a congenial letter of resignation and pop it onto someone’s desk. Extrapolating oneself out of the business of organized crime was a pipedream to most.

The two most common exits were prison or casket, and I had no intention of traversing either of those two routes. Nico was a hitman when we first met. Long story short, our paths crossed, and fortunately for me, I wasn’t on the business end of his scope.

“I’m sure Sam and I will manage a visit in the not too distant future.”

“That would be great, seeing as I won’t be coming your way anytime soon. For obvious reasons.”

“How’s business?”

“It’s very busy and I’m glad. It keeps me out of my head.”

“Have you met anyone special?”

“I suspect you snatched up the last of those, Nico.”

“Yeah, I think you may be right. Sam is something else.”

“How are the triplets?”

“The boys are good. Between them and their four-legged accomplice, Blue, we haven’t seen a clean house in years. Or a quiet one.”

“You’re a lucky man.”

“You’d better move your ass if you’re planning on being a family man. Trust me. You’re going to need all the energy you can muster. Don’t become a dad after forty-five, as I did. The little shits run you ragged.”

“Three at once was a little over-ambitious, Bud.”

“Who knew my loins were so virile?” Nico laughed.

“Who, indeed?”

Nico and I spoke for a long time. He told me about his gallery and caught me up on the latest mob news. He had his ear to the ground when it came to his and my old lives. He had to. The mob wouldn’t have been impressed with him either if they found out he was instrumental in my liberation.

After our chat, I finished my shake and left for the workshop. My business had come a long way from a one-man show to that of an established enterprise with a large team of specialized mechanics and a booming client list of wealthy car enthusiasts.

I loved my job. It wasn’t often that passion and career came together in perfect unison. I was very content. I’d stumbled upon the perfect formula. Finally, my life was good.

“Hey, Boss.”

“Hi, Sands. What have I missed?”

Sandy Del Cuore was my PA and superstar sleuth. She was like a bloodhound when it came to finding stock. I’d promoted her from motor head to personal assistant when I realized what a fantastic source she was when it came to sniffing out potential stock for the floor.

“Found you a beauty, Boss. It’s in Houston. Belonged to an old geezer who collected cars since he was knee-high to a grasshopper. I sent you a few pics. Check your inbox.”

“Excellent. I’ll have a look. Thanks.”

“Hey, that’s why you pay me the big bucks,” she grinned.

I winked and sat down at my desk to pursue her newest find.

“Pack a bag, girl. Looks like we’re going to Texas,” I told her an hour later.

“Yee-haw. I’ve been dying to get my hands on a cowboy,” Sandy smiled.

MADISON

“We’ll miss you, tonight, Beth. I can’t believe you’re leaving me to fend off horny Nigel’s inappropriate remarks by myself.”

“Sorry, hon. Wish I was there to see you stab him with a fork. Why do I always miss all the fun?”

“Just lucky, I guess. Anyway, see you in a few days.”

Beth was out of town and I was on my way to Mom and Dad’s for dinner. It was around 7 pm but the heat was persistent. I wore a light dress in the hopes of keeping cool.

Mom was an amazing host. She’d laid out the long table in the garden, under the oak trees, with white roses, white table runners, and enough food and wine to sink a battleship. The lanterns were all lit and the scent of flowers carried by the soft breeze made the scene magical.

“Ah, darling,” she said when she saw me approaching. “You look beautiful in that dress. Come over here and give Mama some sugar.”

Mom was born in the south. Her thick drawl made her sound much older than she was. Caroline Harris, né Alden, was a stunning southern belle, with high cheekbones and flawless, creamy skin. Men flocked around her, always had, but Mom only had eyes for her husband.

“Hi, Mama.”

“What, no beau for my beautiful girl?”

“Nope. Flying solo,” I smiled.

Mom sighed.

“Oh well, I’m sure you’ll find your Mr. Right soon enough, Maddiebug.”

“The table looks beautiful, Mama. You’ve outdone yourself.”

“Thank you, Maddiebug.”

“Is La here, yet?”

“Yes, she’s inside with Daddy.”

“Great. I’ll be back in a bit, Mama.”

“Okay, darling,” she said and kissed me on the cheek, then turned to speak to one of her dearest friends.

“Maddie,” I heard a voice from behind me.

“Patrick! What are you doing here?”

“Hey, Cuz. Surprise!”

My cousin threw his arms around me. We hadn’t seen him in a long time. He was always off somewhere exotic. He was in the armed forces, so we rarely knew when he’d be in town.

“Thought I’d check in on my crazy cousins. Still as stunning as always, I see.”

“Does Lauren know you’re here?”

“Yup.”

“She must have gone mental. You know she worships the ground you walk on.”

“It’s an older cousin thing.”

“I think she still hates us for sneaking off to smoke a joint when we were teens and leaving her behind,” I grinned.

“Speaking of which,” Patrick said and patted his pocket.

“You didn’t,” I chuckled.

“For old time’s sake,” he winked.

“We’d better let La in on this one or she’ll never speak to either one of us.”

“Let’s go find her.”

We found Lauren in the living room, chatting with Dad.

“Oh, no,” Dad said and covered his eyes. “The three musketeers.”

“Hey, Dad,” I laughed and gave him a hug.

“Don’t you worry, uncle Mike,” Patrick grinned. “I’ll keep the girls in line.”

“Uh-huh,” Dad frowned. “If I remember correctly, you were up to your neck in it right alongside these two.”

“Sir, I don’t know what you mean.”

“Save it, gunner. I’m onto you.”

“That’s a little rich, coming from you, Dad,” Lauren chirped. “We’ve all heard the stories uncle Charlie has on you.”

“Coming, dear,” Dad called, and winked.

“Yeah, run, Dad. We’re onto you,” I laughed.

“I can’t believe you’re here, Paddy,” Lauren smiled and hugged him.

“Guess what he’s hiding in his pocket,” I whispered.

“No. Stop it. Seriously?”

“Only the finest Chile has to offer,” he said and hauled out a giant joint.

“Finally! You two aren’t going to disappear without me this time, are you?”

“Would we do such a thing?” Patrick asked.

“Yes, you bloody would.”

The three of us took a stroll down to the boathouse where we smoked the joint and chatted about old times. Soon the giggles kicked in and then the munchies took hold.

“I’m starving!” Lauren groaned as we lay on our back, staring up at the stars.

“Mama made a shit load of food, thank goodness,” I answered.

“Let’s go, troops,” Patrick commanded in his army voice.

“No giggling, you,” I said to Lauren. Mom and Dad will blame us for sure for getting her little angel stoned.

She got up and laughed hysterically.

“Yup, this little lightweight is gonna drop us in it for sure,” Patrick chuckled and held onto Lauren to steady her.

“And whose fault is it that I don’t have weed legs?” she asked in an accusatory fashion.

“I think we better stay here, Paddy,” I giggled. “You fill your pockets and meet us back here stat, soldier.”

“Yes, Ma’am.”

Patrick disappeared while Lauren and I sat with our feet dangling off the jetty and into the lake’s warm water.

“I can’t remember when last I’ve laughed so much, sis,” Lauren said.

“Yeah, you’ve been studying hard this year.”

“It’s a pity Beth couldn’t be here tonight. She would have enjoyed this.”

“She’s going to be pissy when I tell her she missed out on the joint of the year.”

Lauren was laughing hysterically.

“What?”

“I just thought of something hilarious.”

“What’s that?”

“Imagine Niles Fairfax stoned off his ass.”

“Ugh. He’d probably be even creepier.”

“Come on,” Lauren said and leaped onto her feet.

“Wait. Where are we going?”

“Let’s go fuck with Niles.”

“La! No. Come back here.”

Crap. I knew there was a good reason Paddy and I left Lauren out of the cannabis circle. She didn’t need any help when it came to being nuts.

I waddled and giggled my way back to the party as I tried to catch up with my loopy sister. Patrick must have seen her coming because he headed her off at the pass. He came walking back toward me holding onto La with one hand and a plate piled with food in the other.

“Lose something?” he said with one raised eyebrow.

“It’s always in the last place you look,” I said and took Lauren by the hand. “Come on, you. We’d better get some food into you before you do something stupid.”

“I caught her before your mom could see.”

“Oooh, pigs in a blanket. Yum!”

“I think you mean Würstchen im Schlafrock, dear,” I chirped. “This is a fancy party, Sis.”

“Of course. My bad,” she said and shoved one onto her mouth, whole. “Whatever it is, it’s divine.”

“What else you got?” I asked.

Patrick pulled a bottle of champagne out of his jacket pocket.

“A little something to wash down the pigs,” he answered.

“You really should visit more often, Cuz.”

“Better not. I don’t know if your Mom can handle it.”

“You just leave her to us,” Lauren said, puff pastry flying out of her mouth in all directions.

Patrick and I laughed from our gut and guided a very stoned Lauren back to the boathouse. Talk about the blind leading the blinder.

We popped the champagne, inhaled the food, and laughed at Lauren. We rejoined the party once we felt secure that Lauren was sober enough not to harass Nigel. Not that he

didn't have it coming. Even so, we didn't dare embarrass our beautiful mother who had once again pulled off the dinner party of the month.

"Where have you three been hiding all night?" she asked with a knowing look once the other guests had gone home.

"Oh, here and there," I said mischievously. "Mostly catching up with Paddy. Amazing food, Mama. You did it again." I grinned.

Mom nodded, giving me the stink eye. "How are you going to find your Mr. Right if you spend all your time laying low with your sister and cousin?"

I winked playfully. "I'll get right on that Mama."

LUCA

I was in my element, surrounded by the sounds of engines roaring to life, and the scent of car oil and exhaust fumes hanging in the air above me. Car shows in my general area and even a few states removed were highlighted in bright colors on my calendar, and this was one of the year's most prestigious. I was in Petrol-Head Heaven.

I smiled when I read the print on the t-shirt of a man walking ahead of me. It read:

I am a
Mekanie
Meehanie
Meehaniek
I fix cars

I was milling about, stopping off to inspect each of the cars that piqued my interest. I was a VIP at the shows because I'd bought so many in the past. A gorgeous model was standing next to a sexy little soft top.

"Hello, Mr. Gambrelli. It's so good to see you, again," she said and whisked the air with her long, designer eyelashes.

"Hi, Maxine. It's good to see you, too."

"Can I offer you a glass of bubbly?" she asked.

"Thanks."

Maxine handed me a glass of champagne and gave me a ‘I’d love to give you a little more than just a drink’ look.

“Anytime,” she cooed and flicked her hair in a telling way.

“I know that look,” Sandy smirked at me when we walked on.

“I bet you do. What do you think?”

“A little obvious, but not too slutty.”

“I meant the car.”

“So did I,” she chuckled.

“You’re a handful, Sands. Now off you go. Find us a bargain.”

“Sure thing, Boss.”

My assistant wandered off while I looked around. The show was heating up. Beautiful cars tended to attract all sorts of odd ducks. The very rare vehicles were cordoned off with rope. The last thing a collector and seller wanted was an endless array of sticky fingerprints all over the new bodywork of a car with value running into six digits.

A little boy with an ice cream the size of his head was standing dangerously close to a silver 1967 Chevy Corvette. The dealer was practically hyperventilating. I thought he was going to have a small stroke when the boy reached out for the car’s side mirror. Fortunately for him, the mother of the child scooped him up just before his messy little mitts reached the sparkly clean mirror.

Something caught my eye so I stopped and took a sip of champagne in the hopes that I wasn’t being too obvious. A woman, whom I guessed to be in her late twenties, was talking to a dealer I’d gotten to know pretty well over the years. She was stunningly beautiful and I couldn’t help but move in a little closer.

She was tall, like a ramp model, with shapely legs, long, jet black hair, and blemish-free olive skin. I was mesmerized by the way she moved her hands while she spoke, and craned her long, elegant neck while she listened intently to what the

dealer was saying. I couldn't remember when last I'd had such a strong physical reaction to a woman.

I waited until she had walked away before I went over to ask the dealer who she was.

"That's Madison Harris," he said with a look of pure desire. "Not too shabby, eh?"

"What does she do?" I asked.

"She owns a modeling agency. Our company is using her models today."

"Do you know anything else about her?"

"My goodness. Are you interested? This is a first."

"I might be."

"Let's see. She's very rich, somewhat aloof, and ultra-picky when it comes to men. Also, a daddy's girl if I'm not mistaken. You've got your work cut out for you with her."

"I see. Thanks, Brad. I owe you one."

"Just buy a car and we'll call it even," he called after me as I walked away.

I gave him the thumbs up and went in search of the enchanting Miss Harris. She was walking arm in arm with a good-looking, older man. The two were friendly, but I didn't get the feeling that they were romantically involved. I assumed him to be her father. Or was that wishful thinking? A woman with that kind of presence was probably already taken.

"Now, that's more your speed, Boss," Sandy chirped when she met up with me a while later and caught me ogling Madison.

"Did you find us a fixer-upper?" I asked, hoping to distract her.

"Nope. Nothing here to write home about. I'm talking strictly about cars, you know."

"That's a pity. And, I'm sure I don't know what you mean."

“Oh, come on, Boss. Why don’t you go over and show her your pretty eyes?” Sandy chuckled.

“That’s enough out of you, cowgirl. If you’re not going to find us a bargain, then you may as well go back to the office and earn your keep.”

“Yup, I agree. She’s a looker. Anyway, I can see my job here is done. I’ll see you at the office on Monday.”

Sandy laughed and left me to my reconnaissance mission. I made my move when Madison was standing on her own, looking at a Ferrari 250 GTO.

“You have good taste in cars,” I said, opening the lines of communication.

“She sure is a beaut,” Madison answered without looking up.

“Stunning.”

When she finally turned and looked at me, her pale blue-gray eyes were alert with intelligence. She was even more stunning up close. She wore very little makeup, which I thought was unusual for an ex-model. But, with perfect skin and rosy lips, I guessed she didn’t have to bother too much with artificial coloring.

“You’re far from home,” she added. “Italy?”

“I didn’t realize my accent was so strong.”

“I adore Italy,” she stated matter-of-factly. “Where in the country are you from?”

“You’re a curious lady.”

“Only when I’m intrigued,” she said and smiled. My spine tingled.

“I don’t know if full disclosure is in my best interest. You could be an Italian spy.”

“Madison Harris,” she said and extended her hand.

“Luca Gambrelli.”

Madison's hand was warm and soft. She had a firm handshake, for a woman. The electricity from our brief touch left me disarmed.

"It's a pleasure. What is it you do, Madison Harris? When you're not grilling foreigners, that is."

"Okay, I'll go first. I own a modeling agency. Now you."

"I've been living in the States since I finished school in Italy."

"And, what do you do, Luca?"

"I buy and sell classic cars."

Madison looked at my hands.

"You don't look like a mechanic. Your hands are too clean."

"I'll take that as a compliment," I laughed. "These days I do more of the buying and selling than the grease monkey bit."

Madison turned back to look at the Ferrari. Her long hair moved like a heavy, lustrous, satin curtain. I stood quietly and admired her form.

"Have you found anything you like, Luca Gambrelli?" Maddison asked while she ran her finger over the hood of the car.

"I believe I may have."

"Rare?"

"Yes."

"Expensive?"

"I think I can stretch the budget."

"Excellent."

Madison turned and faced me.

"It was a pleasure meeting you," she said and smiled. "Perhaps you could take me for a ride sometime," she added, seductively. "When you've decided on your purchase, of course."

“How will I know where to reach you?” I asked, enjoying the stunning woman’s game.

“You look like an industrious sort. I’m sure you’ll manage.”

And, with a cheeky smile, she turned and walked toward the older man she was with.

MADISON

Dad had called the night before and asked if I wanted to go with him to a car show. I told him that I was going to be there anyway as I had a few models who were contracted out to the company putting on the show. We agreed to meet there.

Usually, Lauren and I loved going to car shows with our dad, but Lauren was busy so she couldn't make it. It was a glorious, sunny day. I wore a white, low-cut, cotton jumpsuit, sandals, and a white hat with a black ribbon. White complimented my olive skin. I'd put on mascara and coral red lipstick—nothing too dramatic.

I wasn't in the habit of wearing heels, as I was quite tall. Unless I was trying to intimidate, of course, in which case I wore impossibly high stilettos. It was fun having short male assholes trying to call the shots while I looked down on them from my vantage point in the heavens.

I found Dad chatting with a family friend of ours.

“Hello, boys,” I greeted the two.

“Oh, my goodness, Maddie. You keep getting more and more beautiful.”

“Thank you, Sam,” I smiled and kissed him on the cheek.

Sam and Dad were car show fanatics. He was a lovely man, recently widowed. I adored him.

“Hi, Maddie, my darling. Sam and I were just commenting on the price tags on these beauties.”

“I think we’re getting old, Mike,” Sam said. “Money doesn’t get you what it used to.”

“Oh, nonsense. You two will never get old,” I smiled and kissed Dad.

“Tell the missus she did a good job with this one,” Sam winked at Dad.

“Excuse me. I’d like to think I had some input, too, thank you very much,” Dad said, feigning injury.

“I’ll see you later,” I giggled. “Don’t spend all my inheritance, Dad.”

“What inheritance?” he countered.

One of my models was standing near a gorgeous old powder-blue Buick. I went over to say hello.

“Hi, Trish.”

“Oh, hello, Madison. How gorgeous is this car?”

“Stunning.”

“Hi, Madison,” I heard someone behind me say.

I turned and recognized the dealer.

“Hello, Bradley.”

“Isn’t she stunning?” he said and looked at the Buick.

“Beautiful. Yours?”

“Yes. She’s a new arrival.”

“You’ve done a bang-up job refurbishing her. I’m sure someone is going to snap her up.”

“I don’t suppose I can interest you in her?”

“No, but my father is a sucker for a Buick. I’ll send him across to have a look.”

“Super. Thanks.”

I left Brad and Trish and walked around the showgrounds for a while before I stopped to drool over a Ferrari 250 GTO. A man’s voice interrupted my thoughts. An odd tingle flowed

through my body as he spoke. It must have been his Italian accent. Or was it his chocolaty rich timbre?

My stomach contracted when I turned and saw the man standing behind me. He was, hands down, the sexiest creature I'd ever seen. His hair was dark brown. He wore it long on top and short on the sides. He wiped his fringe away from his face with one hand. His eyes were a curious pale green, almost luminous. It felt as if he was looking into my soul.

I fought to keep a modicum of composure while I spoke to the man who introduced himself as Luca Gambrelli. During the short conversation—I was sure it wasn't more than five minutes—I had the oddest sensation that we'd known each other all of our lives. That didn't happen to me—ever.

Although I was desperate for Luca to ask me out, I wasn't going to make it too easy for him. If he was truly as interesting as I suspected, he'd have to prove it. So, I dropped the proverbial white glove and wandered off. Would Luca pick it up, or was he all talk and no action?

Later that afternoon, Dad, Sam, and I sat down at the bar for a drink. I kept looking around, surreptitiously, of course, to see if my Italian crush was nearby. I felt a bit silly—like a schoolgirl with a crush—but he had made a real impression on me.

“Excuse me for a moment,” I told Dad and went to the bathroom.

“I hope you're not leaving before I have the pleasure of buying you a drink,” I heard when I came out of the restroom.

My stomach went all squishy.

“Hello, again. Luca? Right?” I answered with as little excitement as I could manage.

“Uh-huh.”

“You're in luck. I was thinking of sticking around for a bit.”

“Good. Can I buy you a drink, Madison?”

“Sure.”

I followed Luca to a table under the marquee. He pulled out a chair and I sat down. I took off my hat, placed it on the table, and ran my fingers through my hair. A waitress came to our table.

“What would you like to drink?” Luca asked me.

“Ice cold champagne would be lovely, thanks.”

Luca ordered our drinks from the waitress, who couldn't hide her admiration for the Italian stallion. I grinned when she walked away.

“You're causing quite a stir with the young women,” I said.

He smiled but didn't comment.

“How many of your models are here today?”

“Ten.”

“I don't like to make assumptions, but I gather from your height and the way you carry yourself that you were once a model, too.”

“Yes, I was. I must say, these days I prefer being on the other side of the ramp.”

“More carbs?” Luca grinned.

“Funny guy,” I laughed.

“Occasionally. Was that your father I saw you with earlier?”

Had he been watching me? I turned and looked in the direction where Dad and Sam were chatting.

“Yes, that's my father. Do you have family in the States?”

“No, unfortunately, my parents passed away a few years ago.”

“I'm sorry to hear that. Any siblings?”

“Thanks. No. Just me. Is this the part where we interview each other?” he smiled devilishly. “Because I'm not sure I want to give away all my secrets just yet.”

“Ah, a man of intrigue. Alright. What would you like to talk about?”

“Tell me more about the modeling world. Did it take you off to exotic locations?”

“Okay, that’s a safe topic, I guess,” I conceded. “Let’s see. Milan, Paris, Tokyo, Shanghai, Barcelona, London, Geneva, New York—I think it’s safe to say that I’ve chocked up a few flier miles. Have you traveled much?”

“Not as extensively as you, but yes. I travel quite a bit in search of rare and classic cars.”

“I don’t travel too much anymore. My business partner and I share the load.”

“Good.”

“Good?”

“Yeah, good. I can’t take you out to dinner if you’re on the other side of the globe now, can I?” he smiled and looked intently at me with his luminous eyes.

“Dinner? You have to convince me first that you’re an okay guy. How do I know that you’re not a psycho, or married?” I countered.

“Isn’t finding that out part of the fun?”

Luca was toying with me. I loved every second of it.

“Okay, Luca Gambrelli. I’ll roll the dice. You’d better be worth it.”

He grinned, winked, and poured some more champagne into my glass.

“Si, Signora.”

MADISON

Dinner with Luca. Finally a date I was looking forward to. He was a hell of a lot more interesting than the guys who'd tried to seduce me of late. Not to mention the fact that every inch of him, from what I could see, was delicious perfection.

I couldn't decide what to wear. Lauren had popped in that afternoon and was taunting me.

"This guy must be something. You haven't been this squirrely since high school when Chaz asked you out."

"Don't be ridiculous. I'm just tired of the contents of my wardrobe."

"Bullshit. No one has more or better clothes than you. Admit it. You're nervous."

"Are you going to help me or not?" I said and rolled my eyes.

"I like what you're wearing now."

"Great. Then that's what I'll wear."

"Where are you guys meeting for dinner?"

"Luca suggested we try the restaurant at the new vineyard. I've been meaning to try them out, actually."

"How suave," Lauren said in a pretentious tone. "I think I'll eat my fast food with a napkin tonight."

"Poor baby. Student life is such tough going," I laughed.

I checked my reflection in the mirror. I wore a figure-hugging, silver dress with an open back. The hem was above my knees and I decided to wear heels to accentuate my calves. I was confident that Luca was tall enough to handle it.

I tied my hair up in a chignon bun to highlight the open back of the dress.

“You look stunning, Maddie. I think your date is liable to swallow his tongue.”

“Thanks, Sis.”

“So, how gorgeous is he?”

“Dangerously so.”

“Ooh, gotta have a little peek. What did you say his surname was?”

“Gambrelli.”

Lauren picked up her phone and started typing. I fetched my favorite perfume bottle and dabbed on its floral scent.

“That’s odd,” she said after a few minutes, frowning.

“What’s that?”

“I can’t find him on social media. Luca Gambrelli?”

“Yes.”

“Nope. Nothing. Are you sure this guy is who he says he is, Maddie?”

Strange, but not inherently suspicious. Maybe he was just a more private person, which could be refreshing in this age of sharing every little detail online.

“Not everyone is a fan of social media, La. I know lots of people who are taking a break.”

“Okay. I still think it’s weird. Promise me you’ll be careful. You don’t know anything about this guy.”

I smiled at Lauren and blew her a kiss. She was so sweet.

“I’ll be careful, Sis. Don’t worry.”

“I think I should come too. You won’t even know I’m there,” she said and pulled her shirt up so that only her eyes were visible.

“Don’t even think about it. You’ll make a terrible spy.”

“How do you know?” she said and clicked her tongue in derision.

“You used to spy on me all the time when you were little. Trust me. You suck at it.”

“Oh, for Heaven’s sake. You fall out of one tree and suddenly you’re a klutz,” she sighed.

Lauren and I laughed hysterically. My sister was as hapless as she was kind.

It was 7 pm when I left the house to meet Luca at the vineyard’s restaurant at 7:30. I had butterflies in my stomach at the thought of seeing him again. Lauren was right. I was acting like a kid.

The venue was gorgeous. The vines were hanging low with Chardonnay grapes, and the scent of the rich soil greeted me when I opened my car’s door.

“Good evening, Ma’am,” a young valet greeted me.

“Hello. Thanks.” I gave him the keys and made my way to the entrance to the restaurant, while he parked my car.

The decor was beautifully done. Aged, oak wine barrels, covered in fairy lights, gave the space an authentic vineyard feel. The wallpaper depicted harvest time. It felt as if I was in the middle of the vineyard rows.

“Welcome, Ma’am. Are you joining us for dinner?”

“Hi, yes. I’m meeting someone. Is Luca Gambrelli here yet?”

“Yes, he is. Please, follow me.”

I followed the wine steward through the restaurant and outside. Where was he taking me? I was about to ask when I saw Luca.

He was standing at a table on the edge of the lawn, overlooking the vines. He looked so handsome in long, dark blue chinos and a white dress shirt.

The steward smiled and asked Luca if he could bring our drinks, to which my date nodded. Then Luca and I were alone.

“Hi,” he said and leaned in to kiss my cheeks. “You look sensational.”

His cologne made my knees weak.

“Thank you. I would have worn flats had I known you were going to whisk me away to the outdoors.”

“I’m so glad you didn’t,” he said, stood back a bit, and looked at my legs.

Was I blushing? I hoped not.

“It’s picturesque out here.”

“Isn’t it? I thought it a shame to not take full advantage of the setting. Please, sit.”

Luca pulled out my chair and I sat down. I couldn’t tell if his fingers brushed my naked back accidentally or deliberately, but his mere touch sent shivers through me. A warm, heaviness settled in my pelvis.

“I ordered a bottle of their Methode Cap Classique. I hope you don’t mind.”

“I’m sure it will be delicious.”

“Did you have a good week?” Luca asked me, never taking his eyes off me for a second.

“I did. How about you? Find any old dames in need of a little TLC?”

“I did. A sexy little Mustang Shelby. She’ll be purring like a kitten once we’re done with her.”

“Mustang, hey. Dad will be envious. He loves Mustangs.”

“A man with excellent taste. My first classic car was a Mustang.”

“Dad’s prized possession is a 1961 Ferrari 250 GT California SWB Spider.”

“That’s it. Now I have to make this relationship work,” he grinned.

“You’re going to have to work very hard,” I smiled.

“I’m a quick study.”

The steward brought the champagne and talked Luca and me through the menu. We settled on mezze and soon we were chatting away and enjoying the wonderful venue. After we had finished eating Luca asked me if I wanted to take a stroll.

“Not sure. Have you spotted a runway anywhere?” I smiled and pointed to my shoes.

“Want to hop on my back?” Luca teased.

I laughed and took off my shoes.

“Okay, let’s walk.”

“Let’s hope there’s a vat somewhere we can hop into and press grapes with our naked feet.”

“Ugh. You’re on your own there, thanks. I was hoping we’d stumble upon a rare vintage instead.”

Luca took my hand and looked into my eyes.

“As long as I can stare down at your sexy legs, I don’t care what we do.”

And there it was—an electrical storm erupted in my loins. I followed my handsome date into the vineyards. I knew very little about him, but I didn’t care. That was part of the mystique, right? Besides, something in Luca’s eyes told me I could trust him, and I wasn’t going to argue the point.

He stopped walking when we were amongst the pregnant grapes, turned to me, and pulled me close to him. My heart beat furiously as he came closer still until his lips were almost touching mine.

“May I?” he whispered.

“You may.”

And, he did.

It was a kiss like no other. Passionate, yet tender. Hungry. Our bodies melted together. I was dizzy with desire for the stranger in whose arms I found myself. I was hooked.

LUCA

Madison had invaded my mind and I couldn't get her out no matter how hard I tried. I knew the moment we kissed in the vineyard that I was smitten. It required a Herculean effort not to rugby tackle her right then and there and negotiate her fantastic body out of her dress.

But, I was a gentleman, and my mother raised me right. So, I thanked her instead for a lovely evening and suffered in silence. It was difficult to focus on work. Sandy, ever the bloodhound, picked up on my distracted demeanor.

"I take it she was impressed with your pretty eyes, Boss," she chuckled when we were at work.

"You don't miss anything, do you?"

"Nope. And?"

"Mind your own business, you nosy girl."

"Oh, dear. You've got it bad."

"She's pretty fantastic."

"Good. You deserve nothing less."

"Okay, enough of this sad sack crap. Where's our next beanstalk, Jack?"

"Are you in the mood for a little trip to the Bahamas, Boss?"

"Why the hell not?"

“Shall I book two tickets?” Sandy asked with a wicked smile.

“Get back to work. By the way, Cupid called. He wants his bow back,” I yelled as I made my way to the car. “I’ll be back later.”

I took a drive to Madison’s office on the off chance that she’d be there. Sandy was about as subtle as a train wreck, but her suggestion wasn’t half bad. I stopped at a florist and bought a bouquet of flowers.

Madison was in her office. Her receptionist called her on the internal line and told her that a gentleman was at the front desk asking for her. My raven-haired beauty looked surprised to see me.

“Luca. Hi.”

“Miss Harris,” I smiled and winked.

The receptionist stared in fascination.

“Please, come to my office,” Madison said, so I followed her, my gaze firmly on her perfect ass.

There was a fair amount of gawking at the two of us as we walked through the studio. I imagined I looked a curious sight, following a gorgeous woman while carrying a bunch of flowers. Madison showed me into her office and closed the door behind her.

“Would you take these, please? I’m sure I started an interesting watercooler rumor with them.”

“Oh, of course,” she laughed. “Thank you. They’re beautiful.”

“You’re welcome.”

“So, are you moonlighting as a florist delivery guy, or did you have something on your mind?” she asked with a wicked smile. “My mother taught me to be wary of strangers bearing gifts.”

“Are you in the habit of making out with strangers?”

“Usually, no. But you’d gone to so much trouble at the vineyards, I thought it only right to throw you a bone.”

“Oh, you did, did you?” I said and moved closer to her.

My heart was racing. Madison’s cheeks flushed and her lips grew plumper. I could tell from the movement of her chest that her breathing had accelerated. Good. She was as turned on as I was.

Before she could say anything, I placed the flowers on her desk and pinned her gently between my body and the hardwood desk. Then, I kissed her. I felt her nipples harden beneath her silk blouse as I held her close. I steadied her head with one hand and pulled her hips into me with the other.

I stopped kissing Madison before the point of no return.

“I’ve come with an invitation,” I said.

Madison’s eyes were dreamy.

“What’s that?”

“I’m off to the Bahamas for a few days to view a car. Would you like to come with me? No strings,” I added, just in case.

“Can I think about it?”

“Sure. I’m leaving in two days.”

There was a knock on the door. I moved away from her. Madison straightened her skirt and snapped back into boss mode.

“Come in.”

“Hi,” a woman said, and stopped when she saw me. “Oh, sorry. Am I interrupting?”

“Hi, Beth. Come in. This is Luca Gambrelli. Luca, my aunt and partner, Beth.”

“A pleasure to meet you, Beth,” I said.

“Likewise.”

“I was just leaving, actually. Sorry, Madison. I have to run.”

“Okay. I’ll call you later,” she smiled.

I wondered what the two women spoke about after I left. I hoped Madison would consider my invitation. All I could do was wait.

* * *

“What convinced you to join me?” I asked as Madison and I walked on the moonlit beach after dinner.

“I’ve never been to the Bahamas.”

“Ouch. That’s a blow to the man sack. So, it wasn’t my irresistible charm, then?”

“It played a small part if I’m honest.”

I looked at her. She was grinning. Her face was bathed in moonlight, and the soft breeze was playing with the strands of her loose hair.

“You’re exquisite, Madison Harris.”

She stopped and took my hand. The beautiful woman who could bring me to my knees with just a whisper looked into my eyes.

“And you, Luca Gambrelli, are irresistible.”

Then, she kissed me. Or maybe possessed me was more appropriate. The world around us fell away. I couldn’t think of a single thing I needed at that moment apart from the goddess in my arms.

My fingers explored her satin skin. Her lips were salty from the sea spray—so was her neck. I wanted to taste every inch of her sexy body. I’d given her my word that sex wasn’t expected, but standing there on the beach, our limbs plaited in passion, I wished I’d kept my trap shut on the subject.

“I want you,” she whispered into my ear as her tongue played with my lobe.

“Are you sure?”

“Take me back to your room and I’ll show you how sure I am.”

“I don’t know if I can wait that long,” I teased and pressed my hard-on into her hip.

I gasped when she stuck her hand into my pants and felt for my shaft.

“Oh, this?” she said and stroked my erect cock.

I couldn’t speak. Instead, I tried to steady my breathing.

“The room is way too far away,” I groaned.

I pulled myself away from her touch, and looked around the beach. We were the only two people on that stretch of sand. I had rented an ocean front villa which came with its own private beach.

I pulled my shirt off over my head and stepped out of my pants. Then I pulled off Madison’s dress and panties, stood back and took in her nakedness.

I took her hand and led my lover into the warm ocean. As soon as we were in deep enough, Madison wrapped her legs around my waist. She was weightless. I sucked on one of her nipples before I hoisted her onto my hard cock. I slid into her warmth with ease—her wetness welcomed me in.

We kissed, breathed hard, and rocked until we exploded with orgasmic pleasure.

“Now I’ll take you to my room,” I puffed, and carried the stunning beauty to my bedroom where I ravished her again. Slowly.

MADISON

“Are you here?” Beth said and waved her hand in front of my face.

“Of course I am.”

“Yeah, I think not. I’ve been jabbering on for almost three minutes and you haven’t heard a word I’ve said.”

“I’m sorry. I’m distracted.”

“No kidding. I don’t suppose it has anything to do with a tall, dark Italian with headlights for eyes?”

“Ugh! I hate being a cliché.”

“Girl, I’d happily volunteer for cliché status if I could get my hands on a beautiful man like Luca. Some girls have all the luck.”

“Anton isn’t exactly a leper, Beth.”

“Yeah, I know. He’s yummy, but he’s no Luca.”

“You’re a bad example, aunty Beth,” I said and pulled a face. “Wait til I tell Mom.”

“You forget I have years of dirt on you and your sister,” Beth smirked.

“You’re mean.”

“Come on. I want details. What does he do when he’s not setting loins alight.”

“Okay, that’s just wrong,” I laughed.

“Spill it.”

“He’s a classic and rare car dealer. Born in Italy. No siblings. His parents have passed on. And, that’s all I can tell you I’m afraid. The rest is classified and X-rated.”

Beth laughed.

“You look so happy, Maddie.”

“I am. Luca is amazing. He’s funny, smart, cute as a bug, and crazy about me. What more can a girl ask for in an Italian stallion?”

“Have you introduced him to Lauren and your parents yet?”

“No. Lauren has been so busy at university and I wanted to get to know Luca a bit better before I dragged him before the Spanish Inquisition. You know what Dad is like.”

“I’ll kill you if you leave me out of the meet and greet.”

“Would I do that to my favorite, reprobate aunt?”

“You had better not.”

“I was thinking of asking him over for a barbeque this weekend.”

“Great. I’ll clear my schedule.”

“Bring Anton.”

I called Mom later that day and told her I had someone I wanted her and Dad to meet. She was ecstatic.

“Now, Mom. Can we not have a whole Southern Styled affair, please? Low key is fine,” I said over the phone.

“Maddiebug, I always go all out. You know that.”

“Fine, but no other guests. Okay?”

“Sure sweetie.”

The last thing I needed was for poor Luca to walk into a Southern cookout. He laughed when I told him that I’d warned my mom not to go supernova.

“You forget that I’m Italian. Have you ever been to the Italian version of a barbeque? I’m sure we’d beat the

Southerners, hands down.”

“You haven’t met my mother.”

Mom kept her promise. The picnic table was as regal and jam-packed as always, but she and Dad were relaxed and the house wasn’t a train station of guests.

“Daddy, I’d like you to meet Luca Gambrelli.”

Luca shook Dad’s hand.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, Mr. Harris.”

“Luca. Good to meet you too. Please, call me Mike.”

“Luca, this is my mother, Caroline. Mom, meet Luca.”

“A pleasure to meet you, Caroline.”

“Hello, Luca. Please, sit down. Make yourself at home.”

Lauren and Beth were fashionably late.

“Maddie tells me you have a passion for classic cars, Luca,” Dad dove in.

“I do. Madison tells me you’re a Mustang man.”

“I am,” Dad smiled. “I was hooked the moment I watched Tilly Masterton racing against James Bond in Goldfinger on the silver screen.”

“Grand Prix was one of my father’s favorite movies,” Luca beamed. “Shelby Mustang was my first true love.”

“We may as well check on dessert prep, Mama,” I said with a sigh. “We’re clearly not needed here.”

“Maddiebug, we may as well be invisible,” she said, kissed Dad on the forehead and walked toward the kitchen.

I winked at Luca and followed Mom.

“He is gorgeous,” she buzzed once we were out of earshot. “And that accent. Oh, my.”

I couldn’t help grinning. Luca was all that and more. I was crazy about him. The fact that he and Dad were shooting the breeze over cars was the cherry on top.

“Has Lauren met him yet?”

“No. I haven’t seen much of La. She’s so busy.”

“The poor thing is losing weight, too. I’m going to feed her until she pops today.”

“She’s fine, Mama. I’m surprised Beth isn’t here yet.”

“She called and said she’s waiting for Anton to finish his game of golf.”

“Wow. Must be getting serious between them. Beth doesn’t wait for anyone.”

“I must say, I was as surprised as you when I heard that. They have been together for long enough.”

“Is it weird having a sister who is almost the same age as your daughters, Mama?”

“Sometimes. I must say, I see Beth more as a daughter than a sister.”

“Did I hear my name?” came a holler from somewhere near the kitchen.

“Speak of the devil,” Mom beamed.

“Double trouble,” Lauren’s voice followed.

“Hi, girls,” I hollered back. “We’re in the kitchen.”

“Can I come too?”

Anton popped his head around the kitchen door.

“Hey, you,” Mom answered him. “You’re welcome to, but if it’s testosterone-fuelled car stories you’re after, then outside with the boys might be better.”

“I can’t believe they left the gorgeous women folk unattended. Fools! Not that I mind. More cuddles for me,” Anton chuckled and hugged first Mom and then me.

“I hear you have a new fella, Maddie,” Anton teased.

“Indeed. He and Dad are outside talking Mustangs.”

“I can’t wait to meet him,” Lauren chirped. “He must be something. My sister is head over heels.”

“Let’s all go,” Beth said and marched outside to the barbeque pit.

Mom, Beth, and Anton went ahead. Lauren and I followed close behind.

“H.O.L.Y. shit,” Lauren whispered as we neared Dad and Luca. “He’s gorgeous. I’m so jealous.”

“Back off, shorty. I saw him first,” I whispered back. Lauren tried to subdue a cackle.

Beth surreptitiously caught my attention and made a lewd gesture. I prayed that Luca wouldn’t see it. Honestly, the women in my family were a bunch of estrogen-fuelled reprobates.

After a lively lunch, Dad and I had a chance to catch up, while Anton and Luca were talking about golf, and Mom, Beth, and Lauren were deep in a discussion.

“So? What do you think, Dad?”

“Luca seems very nice.”

“Uh oh. Am I detecting a ‘but’ somewhere in that sentiment?”

“How much do you know about him, Maddie?”

“Enough. Why?”

“He’s not very active on the usual social media channels.”

“Is that a bad thing?”

“Not necessarily.”

“Oh, my goodness, Dad. You sound just like Lauren. Perhaps he is old-school. Not everyone is social media obsessed.”

“I’m sorry, Maddie. I don’t mean to upset you. I only want what’s best for you.”

“I know, Dad. But, I’m fine. Enough with the amateur sleuthing, already.”

“There are a lot of nuts out there, my darling. It’s my job to protect you from them. That’s all I’m saying.”

Was I being careless? Or naive? My dad did have a good instinct about people, so if he was concerned about Luca's background, maybe I should be too. But I wasn't about to admit that to Dad.

I kissed my dad on the cheek. "You're doing a fabulous job, Dad. But, I'm almost thirty years old. I think I can take it from here, Detective Harris."

"Okay. But, if you need anything."

"I know. My Dad is always available to beat up the bad guys."

"I don't know about beating them up. I'm not getting any younger, you know."

"True. But you'll always be my Hulk."

Dad may have been my hero, but I was realizing I needed to do my own detective work to get answers from Luca.

LUCA

There was no doubt that the Harris family knew their way around the barbeque firepit. And, Madison wasn't wrong. They were a lively bunch.

The home was set on a large estate with a tennis court, squash court, Olympic-sized swimming pool, driving range, and a helipad. Impressive by anyone's standards. But, that said, the family seemed to be untainted by their wealth.

Caroline Harris was a beautiful Southern Belle. Blonde, blue-eyed, voluptuous, and very much in charge. Michael Harris was putty in his wife's hands. Tall, olive-skinned, and intelligent. Madison had her father's features. Their eyes were the same.

Lauren took after her mother. Looks-wise anyway. Her personality seemed softer than the rest of the bunch, although I could absolutely see her as a fighter if the situation called for it.

Beth was a hoot. Sassy too. I was fully aware of the fact that the women were checking me out, looking for faults so that they could give me the boyfriend material all clear—or not.

I got the distinct impression, when Madison and her mom disappeared, that Michael was interrogating me. He was subtle, but I recognized a grilling when I saw one. Not that anyone could blame him. I would have done a thorough check on anyone sniffing around my daughter. Especially if she was as gorgeous and wealthy as Madison.

“Where in Italy are you from, Luca?”

I had no reason to deceive the Harris patriarch when it came to my life in Italy. It was my descent into mob madness in The States that I was keeping to myself.

“I was born in Cefalù, in Sicily. Have you been to Italy?”

“I have, yes. But I’m afraid I didn’t see much of the country during my stay. I was in Milan. I did manage to attend a football match while I was there.”

“A religious experience,” I laughed.

“I’d say. I certainly wouldn’t get between an Italian football enthusiast and his game time,” he said.

“Men have died for less,” I grinned. “You have a beautiful place, Michael.”

“Thank you. Most of what you see is thanks to Caroline. The woman can turn a grotto into a palace.”

I laughed.

“So, Luca. Tell me more about yourself.”

“What would you like to know?”

“Your car business. How did you get into it?”

I knew that’s not what he meant, but I had to give him points for attempting to throw me off the scent.

“I’ve always loved cars. I was behind the wheel as soon as my feet reached the pedals. Dad was a mechanic, so I got to spend much of my free time tinkering on engines alongside him.”

“Sounds like the perfect childhood.”

“It was,” I lied.

I loved my adoptive father very much, but, naturally, I loved my biological one more. It was hard for me to adapt to my new normal.

“What drew you to The States?”

“Hollywood,” I grinned. “Your movies do paint a picture.”

“Ah, yes. And? Are you happy here, in the land of the free?” Michael smiled.

“I am, now that Gelato is a thing here,” I said.

“To Mustangs and Gelato,” he said and raised his glass.

“Saluti,” I smiled.

“Come on, Daddy. My turn.”

That was my introduction to Lauren. Curious Lauren. She swooped in, folded her arms around mine, and whisked me away for my second interrogation of the day.

“You’re welcome,” she chuckled when we were out of earshot of her father.

“Why do I get the feeling that this is a ‘good-cop-bad-cop’ scenario?”

“Ahh, so you’ve done this before?”

“Once or twice.”

“Okay, I’ll make it quick. What are your intentions towards my sister, Mr. Gambrelli?”

“The plan is to make her fall madly in love with me and join the fun Harris clan.”

“A solid plan. And how’s that going?”

“Okay, I think. Any advice?”

“You seem to be on track, so far.”

“Good. Can I count on you to point out any potential pitfalls?”

“That depends,” she said.

“On?”

“Which one of your gorgeous classics you’re giving me for Christmas,” she grinned.

“You drive a hard bargain, Lauren Harris.”

“You don’t know the half of it.”

We walked on and chatted. I liked Lauren. It was obvious that she and Madison were very close. I wondered what that was like. Having a sibling with whom to share your thoughts and life. Someone who loved you no matter what.

I found out years after my parents were murdered, that my mother had been three months pregnant. I was about to have a sibling. It was one of the nightmares that haunted me. They never found the men who'd killed Mom and Dad. I did some investigating when I was old enough to move about freely, but, sadly, nothing came of my efforts. Losing a family that way was brutal.

“May I have a turn while poor Luca is still sane? Or am I too late,” Madison called to her sister.

“He’s a tough one. I think he’s going to fit in just fine,” Lauren called back.

“You poor thing,” Madison groaned and put her arms around me once she’d caught up to us.

“You’re just in time,” I sighed. “I’m circling the drain, here.”

“Poor baby,” she said and kissed me.

“That’s my cue. I’ll see you two lovebirds back at the inquisition,” Lauren laughed and left Madison and me.

“Hey,” she whispered and kissed me again.

“Hey.”

“Miss me?”

“Desperately,” I groaned.

Madison looped her arm through mine and we started walking away from the rest of the group. “Can I ask you something?”

“Ah, the inquisition continues. Go ahead.”

“Do you use social media at all?”

I tensed. “No, I prefer my privacy. Why?”

Madison shrugged. "It's a little unusual, that's all. And it makes it harder to uncover your deep, dark secrets," she said with mischief in her eyes.

I played along. "You'll just have to continue getting to know me the old fashioned way."

"But, you really haven't been on social, at all? I'm not going to find—"

"There's nothing to find," I said a little too intensely.

Madison raised her eyebrows.

"It's just not my style," I said more softly.

"Ok, I get it. One other question."

I braced myself for what was coming.

"Want to see Lauren's and my childhood hideaway?"

I exhaled gratefully. "I do."

Madison took me by the hand and led me to a large tree near the edge of the estate.

"A tree house?" I smirked.

"Uh-huh. Wanna make out? It's not the mile-high club or anything, but I'm sure we can use our imaginations."

"You're full of surprises, Madison."

"You ain't seen nothing yet."

Madison started up the ladder. I was thrilled to climb up after her and look up her dress at her perfect ass. I was hard as a rock by the time we reached the landing. The inside of the treehouse was impressive. It wasn't at all what I'd expected. It looked like the inside of a small apartment.

There was a futon, a bookshelf, and a large children's toy box with unicorns embossed on the sides.

"Wow," I said.

My lover smiled. She took off her panties and dangled them from her pinky. I swallowed hard at the thought of her nakedness under her summer dress. Madison moved close

enough to me so that I could reach out and touch her. She was wet with desire for me.

I walked her over to the futon and laid her down gently. Neither of us spoke. I pulled her dress up to her waist and looked down so I could take in her wet, swollen beauty. Then I pried open her legs and went down on her perfect pussy.

Madison moaned as I teased her with my tongue. She tasted so good. I wanted her to cum while I was inside her, so I stopped after a while and unzipped my pants. I freed myself from my pants and underwear and wiggled until they slid to my knees.

I thrust quickly in and out of my excited lover's warm core—Madison gasped and grabbed onto my ass. We made love frantically until we were spent. Afterward, we lay motionless on the futon, breathing hard.

“I don't know how I'm going to get down the ladder,” I said, out of breath. “Not sure if my legs are going to work after this.”

“I could call Mom and tell her we're having a sleepover,” she laughed.

“I think you may have to. Got any food and booze stashed away up here?”

“No, but I think there's a joint hidden in the bookshelf from way back when my cousin and I used to sneak up here and get stoned.”

“Maddie, I may have to marry you.”

MADISON

The results were in. I was officially head over heels in love with Luca. My feelings were strong enough to overpower any doubts about his background. Even Dad, who was cautious at the beginning, thought Luca and I made a great couple.

I was in my office. It was Monday morning, and Beth and I were working on the list of models we were planning on sending to Paris for a photoshoot.

“What about Ryan?” Beth asked and flipped to his portfolio.

“I don’t know. He’s a little too tall for this one. Besides, I think he’s been booked for the runway show in Milan at the end of the week.”

“You think? You’d better check. Your head’s been in the clouds, Maddie. Time to come back down to earth.”

“Thank you, partner. Color me reprimanded.”

Beth rolled her eyes.

“Don’t give me those puppy dog eyes, Missy. I refuse to feel sorry for anyone who is getting it on a regular basis from such a gorgeous man. Lucky duck.”

“Jealousy is an ugly creature, Beth.”

“Oh, shut up, you brat,” she laughed. “Anton thinks he’s the bee’s knees.”

“Yeah, maybe the four of us should have dinner.”

“Great idea. What’s his place like?”

“Very nice. He has a penthouse on Rocky Edge. Beautiful views of the mountains.”

“Great. You spend a lot of time there?”

“We try to share our time between his place and mine. I do find it a bit of a chore.”

“Why don’t you just move in together? You’ve been together for long enough, so why not take the next step?”

“I don’t want to crowd Luca, Beth. I’m sure he’ll drop hints when he’s ready. You know what men are like. Mention the L-word and they break out in a rash and run for the hills.”

“The L-word? You mean love?”

“No, I mean living together.”

“Do you?” Beth asked out of the blue.

“Do I what?”

“Do you love him? Sheesh, woman, I think your head is banging against the headboard too often.”

“Haha. Love is a big word.”

“Yeah, I know that, Maddie.”

“Do you love Anton?”

“Oh, no you don’t. Don’t change the subject.”

“Yeah. I think so.”

My phone rang before Beth had a chance to get all weird on me. It was Luca.

“Hey, handsome. Are your ears burning?”

“Talking about me, are you?”

“Yup. I was just telling Beth how crazy you are about me,” I giggled.

“Shameless.”

“What’s up?”

“Can I steal you away from the office for an hour?”

“Um,” I said and looked at my watch. “Sure. When?”

“I’ll swing by at 11 am. Is that okay?”

“Sure. I’ll see you then.”

“Ciao, gorgeous.”

I wondered what he was up to. He sounded excited.

“It’s a little early for a quickie, isn’t it?”

“Beth, honestly. It’s never too early for a quickie.”

“Everything okay?”

“Yeah. Luca is coming around at eleven.”

Beth looked at her watch. Well, then you and I better get this list done.

* * *

“So, where are you taking me?” I asked Luca when we left the office.

“I wanted to show you something. I need your honest opinion.”

“Sounds serious.”

“It is.”

Luca opened the car door for me and I slid into the passenger seat. I loved the smell of leather seats in a car. Luca started the engine and soon we were heading for Destination Unknown.

Luca stopped in front of a house in the hills after we’d been driving for about fifteen minutes.

“Are we visiting someone?” I asked, confused.

“You’ll see in a minute,” he said, hopped out of the driver’s side, and opened the passenger door for me.

“What are you up to, Luca?”

“I’m thinking of selling my place. I saw this house and I wanted your opinion on it.”

“Oh. Okay. Sure. Why are you selling? I thought you loved your place?”

“It’s fine, but I’ve been wanting to get a dog for a while now and the penthouse won’t work.”

“Okay. The yard seems big enough. Let’s have a look inside.”

Luca unlocked the front door and I followed him inside.

“Oh, wow,” I gasped. “This is fantastic.”

The entire back wall of the home was glass, showcasing the brilliant view of the outdoor area. It was like living in a forest.

“I’m glad you like it. Wait until you see the main bedroom.”

Luca showed me around the property after we’d explored the inside of the beautiful house.

“I love it,” I purred as we stood outside on the large deck.

“Good,” he said. “Wanna live here with me?”

My heart beat double time. So much for subtle hints. “What if I don’t like dogs?”

“We’ll get a parrot,” he grinned. “Or a goldfish. Anything you want.”

“I’d love to,” I smiled and kissed him.

“You do like dogs, don’t you?” he asked once we were on our way back to the office.

“I love dogs.”

* * *

“Good grief, woman! How many shoes do you have?” Luca grunted as he climbed the stairs to the bedroom carrying a large cardboard box.

“Nag, nag, nag. I hope this isn’t an indication of what’s to become of me,” I yelled from the top of the landing. “Nagged to death by my Italian live-in boyfriend.”

Luca dropped the box on the floor, caught me up in his arms, threw me down on the bed, and tickled me. I screamed for mercy through fits of hysterical laughter, but it was no use.

“I can see I’m going to have to employ a firm hand with you, roomie,” he said in a low growl into my neck.

“Okay, okay. I’m sorry.”

Luca let go of me and I rolled off the bed.

“How many more boxes to go?” I asked.

“Not too many.”

“Good, I’m exhausted. Why don’t you go downstairs and find us a bottle of something cold and I’ll run us a bath.”

“That’s better. Looks like you’re teachable after all.”

Luca disappeared and I went to the en-suite to run a bath. I added fragrant bath bombs and lit a few candles.

“It smells good in here,” he said when he came back.

“Oh, good, Champagne. Well done. Bring that over here, handsome. Oh, and lose the clothes.”

“Yes, Ma’am.”

The tub was large enough to comfortably fit both of us. We lay back in the warm water and sipped on our drinks.

“This is Heavenly,” I said and closed my eyes, while the steam played against my face.

“I had no idea that together we’d have so much stuff.”

“I’m glad we moved our own things. Now I know what I can ditch when you’re not home. Like that hideous coffee table you tried to sneak past me.”

“Don’t even think about it,” Luca grinned and put his glass down on the edge of the bath. Then he took mine from me.

“Or what?” I teased and gave him *the* look.

“Or I won’t do this,” he said and pulled me onto his lap.

My wet breasts were at his eye level. Luca leaned in and nudged a nipple with his nose until it went hard. Then he took it into his mouth and sucked.

“Ooh, clean sex,” I giggled.

“Not the way I do it,” Luca said in a husky voice. He lifted me slightly, then slid me onto his awaiting hardon.

The bath water splashed onto the floor as the two of us rocked backward and forward, up and down, until we reached orgasm.

“One down, five to go,” Luca said when he got his breath back.

“What?”

“Rooms. I plan on making love to you in each and every one of them.”

“You’re the best roommate ever.”

LUCA

“**B**abe! Your phone!” I heard Madison calling to me as I stepped out of the pool.

“Answer it please, Maddie.”

I dried my face and hair with a towel as she walked toward me holding my cell phone in her hand.

“It’s Angelo.”

“Thanks, hon.”

Madison walked back to the house and I wrapped the towel around my waist.

“Hey, Angelo. Good to hear from you.”

“Ciao, Luca. I have news.”

“Oh, Yeah? What’s up?”

“Sophia and I are coming to the States.”

“That’s great! When?”

“In two weeks. We were wondering if we could stay with you and Madison for a few days.”

“Of course. You can stay as long as you like. This is such good news. Can’t wait to see you guys.”

“Excellent. Sorry, I have to run. I’ll send you the details later.”

“No problem. Ciao.”

“Ciao, Luca.”

The sun was hanging low in the sky. Madison and I were planning on having dinner out on the deck. We were keen to take advantage of the last few weeks of summer.

Moving in with Madison turned out to be the best thing I could have done. I loved living with her. We got on like a house on fire, no pun intended. We decided to get a puppy—a beagle, Milo. She was adorable and kept Maddie and me on our toes.

Madison and Milo were in the kitchen.

“How’s Angelo?” she asked and stepped past Milo whose nose told her there was a possibility of a stray piece of meat in the offing.

“He and Sophia are coming to visit.”

“Oh, wow. That’s great. You must be so happy.”

“Very. You’re going to love Sophia. She is such a sweetheart.”

“When will they be here?”

“Angelo said he’d let me know soon. Are you okay with them staying with us?”

“Of course.”

I helped carry the food out to the deck. Milo assisted.

* * *

“It’s so good to see you, Angelo,” I said and embraced my oldest friend.

“I was hoping you’d lost your hair and grown a potbelly,” Angelo sighed. “No such luck. You’re still the best-looking guy in the room.”

I laughed and slapped him on the back.

“Come, sit. Beer?”

“I’d love one, thanks.”

Angelo and Sophia had just arrived. Sophia and Madison were out walking Milo, while Angelo and I sat outside by the pool.

“I still can’t believe you’re here,” I said.

“It’s crazy that we see so little of one another, old friend. I don’t know why you don’t come back to Italy. We miss you.”

“I’ve been here for so long now, I guess it’s home. Sophia hasn’t aged a day. She’s such a beautiful woman, Angelo. You’re a lucky man.”

“You’re not exactly suffering yourself, Buddy. Madison is a knockout.”

“I never get tired of looking at her.”

“It’s good to see you so happy, Luca.”

“I am. Maddie is amazing.”

“Do you ever think of your past life?”

“Not if I can help it. But, it does sneak up on me in my nightmares.”

“You never did give me much in the way of detail.”

“It’s not something I wanted to do over the phone, Angelo. It’s a part of my life I’d sooner forget.”

“I gathered. The fact that you changed your name was my first clue. What exactly happened?”

“Antonio Granata happened. The man hates me.”

“I think you mentioned him to me once.”

“The asshole made my life hell. Tried to kill me a few times, but I was always one step ahead of him.”

“At the risk of asking a stupid question, why did he want you dead?”

“Antonio worked for my boss for many years. I think he was convinced that he’d take over the organization one day. But, when the boss was killed, I was voted the successor by a large margin. It was Antonio’s own fault. He’s an asshole and

no one liked him. No loyalty. So, once he realized he was passed over, he left and started his own gang of misfits.”

“You don’t have to answer my question if you don’t want to, Luca, but what were you guys involved in?”

“To be honest, I think I was a little naive until I stepped into power. No one talks about the seedy underbelly. That sort of thing is kept close to the vest. In the beginning, when I took over as boss, I swore to myself that I’d stay out of the murder and mayhem. But, I was kidding myself.”

“Is that why you left?”

“Yeah. I’m not a murderer, Angelo. If a guy deserves it, I’ll consider it, but killing to feather my nest isn’t my style. That world’s not for me.”

“I hear you. That’s why I moved away from Cefalù. Sicily has always been the stronghold of the mob. Abruzzo is safe and beautiful. Sophia and I are very happy there.”

“Yeah, you did get in a little too deep after we left school.”

“Of course, that’s what a young man growing up in Sicily does. It’s easy to fall for the promise of wealth. Let’s be honest, the money is good.”

“Ain’t that the truth.”

“Does Madison know about your past?”

“Hell no. I plan to keep her away from that particular chapter of my life. I’m not proud of it, for a start, and then there’s the safety issue. If Granata finds out I’m still alive, he’ll stop at nothing to get back at me.”

“Which brings me back to my original question. What happened between the two of you?”

“Besides ruining his chances of being the big boss? I beat the snot out of him.”

“Yeah, that will do it. I guess the ass whooping you suffered in the early days at the orphanage came in handy. You certainly learned how to defend yourself against bullies.”

“That I did. Anyway, after that Antonio swore he’d kill me. I wasn’t going to give him a second chance.”

“But how did you manage to walk away? That shit isn’t done.”

“Luckily for me, I had someone close to me who was keen to take over from me. After that, Nico helped me to fake my death, and the rest is history.”

“That’s quite a tale of intrigue, Luca Gambrelli.”

“Isn’t it just?”

“Maybe you should write a book,” he grinned.

“Fuck off,” I smirked.

“Watch out little Luca. I can still whip ya.”

“I wouldn’t dream of offending my erstwhile protector,” I laughed.

“Smart man,” Angelo winked.

“I know Mama Ana was very proud of the man you’ve become, my friend. She used to brag about you all the time when we spoke.”

“I don’t know where I would have ended up were it not for your wonderful parents. Ana and Mario made me believe that I could be anything I set my mind to. They loved you very much, Luca.”

“I miss them so. Thank you for taking care of them after I left. I’ll always be in your debt.”

“Okay, don’t go all soft on me now. Get me another beer and we’ll call it even.”

“Deal.”

I got up and went to the kitchen. Madison and Sophia were back from their walk.

“I am going to steal your Milo, Luca,” Sophia said while she was snuggling a very happy beagle.

“Good luck getting her past Maddie,” I laughed.

“Sophia and I are off to the store, babe. I thought we could have a barbeque for dinner. It’s such a beautiful evening.”

“Excellent idea.”

“You’d better distract Milo while we leave. She’s nuts about Sophia—won’t leave her side.”

“It’s because my clothes smell like Italian Felino,” Sophia laughed. “Angelo smuggled some in his bag. Said that Luca probably hasn’t had real meat in years.”

“He’s not wrong,” I murmured. “Come on, Milo, let’s go outside.”

MADISON

“**Y**ou must be exhausted, Sophia. Jetlag is a bitch.”

“Honestly, the only thing keeping me upright is the espresso I threw back an hour ago.”

“You poor thing. Don’t worry, we’ll make it an early night,” I said and turned up the car’s aircon.

“Angelo and Luca are probably going to talk deep into the night.”

“It’s good to see Luca so happy. He and Angelo must be really close.”

“They used to be inseparable.”

“Did you know Luca when he was a boy?” I asked, hoping to get a better picture of my love’s past. “He doesn’t talk much about Italy.”

“We were at school together—Luca, Angelo, and I. They were like brothers even then.”

“Oh, good. So you can tell me more about young Luca.”

“Oh yes. I have lots of dirt on the boys,” Sophia laughed.

“Well, let’s get you another espresso, then. I want to hear all of it.”

Sophia and I stopped off at a coffee shop after we’d stocked up on groceries. It was a lovely little Italian place, owned by a young married couple. She was Italian and he was American. Sophia and the woman had lots to say to each other.

I picked up a bit here and there, but they spoke too fast for me to keep up.

“What a small world,” Sophia said when the woman left the table. “She grew up in a little village where I used to holiday with my family.”

“That’s crazy. I guess the world has become a village.”

“So,” Sophia started once we had our coffee, “what did you want to know about Luca?”

“What was he like at school?”

“Very clever, quiet—in fact, he only came to Antonio’s and my school when he was twelve years old. Before that he lived in another town.”

“And his family? What were they like?”

“I only met them a few times. They were quite a bit older than my parents. But, very sweet. Angelo spent most of his weekends and holidays with Luca and his parents before he and I started dating.”

“Luca doesn’t talk much about his childhood.”

“I’m not surprised. It wasn’t an easy one. Poor guy. He was so young when his parents died. Oh, I’m sorry. I hope I’m not speaking out of turn.”

“No, Luca told me he was adopted.”

“Oh, good. I’d feel terrible if I gave away the gorgeous Luca Bianchi’s secrets. Angelo will kill me.”

“Bianchi?”

“Yeah. Why?”

“I think you mean Gambrelli.”

“Oh. Silly me. I always get his surname mixed up with one of Angelo’s other friends from school. My bad.”

Sophia tried to play down her mistake. She had an odd look. Then again, she was running on caffeine fumes. Maybe I was being overly analytical.

“So, you own a modeling agency. Wow. That must be fun,” Sophia said and took a sip of her coffee.

“It is.”

“Do you travel much?”

“Not as much as I did when I used to model. I have a partner who adores traveling, so I spend most of my time here, managing the models. What do you do?”

“I run a gallery for a friend.”

“Are you an artist?”

“Yes, I paint some.”

“Do you have pictures on your phone of your work?”

“I do,” Sophia smiled and fished around in her bag for her phone. “Here are a few examples,” she said and handed me the phone.

“Oh, wow. They’re brilliant. You’re very good.”

“Ah, thank you, Madison.”

“I am an expert at drawing stick men. That’s about as far as my artistic flair goes.”

Sophia laughed as I drew a little figure on a paper napkin and gave it to her.

“There you go. One day when I’m famous, you can frame it.”

“I’ll treasure it, always,” she winked and placed it in her bag.

“We’d better get back. I’m sure the boys are dying of hunger.”

“I’m sure Milo can’t wait to have her human salami stick back,” Sophia chuckled.

* * *

The barbecue was done and dusted early. Afterward, the four of us sat around the fire and had a nightcap.

“Okay, I’ve done well,” Sophia sighed after a muffled yawn. “If I don’t go to bed right now, you’re going to have to carry me, Angelo.”

“Yeah, time to call it a night, I think,” Angelo agreed and got up. “Thank you for a lovely meal, Madison.”

“Hey, what about my barbequing skills?” Luca asked.

“Like I said, thanks for a lovely meal, Madison.”

“That’s it. Pasta for you for the rest of your stay,” Luca said, feigning offense.

“Just messing with you, Bud. Great meat.”

“Good night,” I said as Sophia and Angelo went upstairs to bed.

“You tired, babe?” Luca asked once we were alone.

“Not yet. You?”

“I could do with another brandy. Would you like one?”

“Yes, thanks.”

Sophia’s comment at the coffee shop was bugging me. I couldn’t shake the feeling that she had tried too hard to take back a mistake.

“Sophia said something odd today,” I said when Luca gave me the snifter.

“What’s that?”

“She called you Luca Bianchi.”

“That is strange,” he said after a brief silence. “Then again, Sophia was never good with names.”

“I guess. It was just that she said it with such conviction.”

“I do remember another kid at school with that surname. Perhaps she was confused. It is a fairly common surname in Italy. Anyway, how about you run us a bath? I’ll put out the fire and then I’ll join you.”

Was Luca trying to dodge the subject? Or was that really all it was— a simple mixup.

“Okay. Sounds good.”

I went upstairs to the en-suite and filled the tub with bath balls and water. Luca came into the bathroom carrying the bottle of brandy. He set it down on the edge of the bath, got undressed, and slipped into the warm water with me.

“Did you and Angelo have a good catch-up while Sophia and I were out?”

“We did. It’s so good to see him, Maddie. What do you think of Sophia?”

“She’s very sweet. She showed me a few of her paintings. She’s very talented.”

“Sophia was always drawing and painting when we were kids. She was by far the most talented artist I’d ever met.”

“Luca, why don’t you ever talk about home?” I asked abruptly.

“I do.”

“Only when I ask. I’m sorry, I don’t mean to push you, but you seem so guarded.”

“What would you like to know, my love?”

“What happened to your real parents? You talk about your adoptive parents, but never them.”

“I don’t remember much about my parents. I was only nine when they died.”

Ok, so Luca had a tragic past. He probably blocked most of it out, and what he did remember, he didn’t want to dwell on through conversations and online posts. And the Sophia name thing? Just a simple mixup. That’s all there was to it.

“I’m so sorry, Luca. That must have been awful. I can’t even imagine what it must feel like to lose a parent. Especially at such a tender age.”

I turned around and lay my back against Luca's body. He reached down and wrapped his arm around my chest.

"I'm going to love you all better, my darling," I said tenderly.

"You're doing that already, my love," he said softly.

"I could try a little harder," I cooed.

"Oh, goody. Sex!"

"Come here, you."

LUCA

It was past midnight and Madison was fast asleep next to me in bed. I watched her sleep—her chest moved up and down steadily, and every now and again she let out the cutest little moan. The scent of her perfume on my skin wafted up to meet me every time I moved. And, yet, what should have been a feeling of contentment and abject bliss, was marred by foreboding.

I couldn't sleep—not after the bombshell Sophia had accidentally dropped on me. My blood ran cold when my surname rolled off Madison's lips after dinner. I could only hope that she'd bought my explanation. I was so sure that my face had belied my nonchalant response, but, if Maddie noticed, she didn't say.

Milo whined when I rolled over for the umpteenth time. It was only a matter of time before my restlessness would disturb Madison, so I got up very carefully and went downstairs for a glass of milk. Milo followed me, no doubt hoping for a snack.

Was my past ever going to rest? Was I doomed to be on guard for the rest of my life, always on the lookout for signs of trouble ahead? It was disconcerting, but not because I was afraid for myself. I was afraid that Madison would somehow suffer for it.

I guessed it was my own doing. I should have told Maddie about my past and given her the choice to stay or go. I'd convinced myself that I was protecting her. But was I really? Or was I protecting myself instead?

I ran my hands through my hair as I sat at the kitchen counter. The milk was doing little to distract me.

I prayed that Madison wouldn't discuss the incident with her father. Michael Harris was already far too curious where my past was concerned. Naturally, I understood why, but still. He would no doubt find out who I used to be if he searched in the right direction. My surname would lead him where I didn't need him to look.

Oh, balls! What a cock up. I looked at my watch. It was close to 2 am. I couldn't very well sit perched on the kitchen counter chair for the rest of the night, so I went back to bed and lay perfectly still until I drifted off out of sheer exhaustion.

Madison's hand running up and down my back, woke me up.

"Hey, handsome. Sleep well?"

I couldn't think of a pleasant way to say, 'leave me alone, I'm still sleeping', so I opted for something safer.

"Hey, babe. Not too bad. How about you?" I offered.

"Like a baby," she purred and stretched out. "Coffee?"

"You read my mind."

"Nice try. It's your turn. Off you go."

"I never would have moved in with you if I knew you were this mean," I moaned and rolled out of bed.

"It's a good thing I didn't tell you then," she giggled.

"Come on, Milo. Time to whizz and bark at the birds," I said.

Milo leaped off the bed and followed me to the kitchen. I was hopeful that a cup of strong coffee would snap me out of my funk. The smell of freshly ground beans went a long way to realizing my dream of wakefulness.

"Good morning, Luca."

"Hi, Sophia. You're up early."

“Guilty conscience,” she said softly. “I’m so sorry about yesterday. I don’t know what I was thinking. It just slipped out.”

“It’s okay, Soph. I know you won’t do anything to hurt me.”

“How did you get out of it?”

“You’re now officially crappy with remembering names,” I smirked.

“Gotcha.”

Sophia leaned in and gave me a hug. I could never be mad at her.

“Coffee?”

“Oh, yes, please. My body is practically gagging for coffee after all the espresso I had yesterday to stay awake.”

“You got it. Is Angelo up?”

“Oh, please. We’re talking about Old Night Owl. He is still out for the count.”

“I’d be too if Maddie hadn’t woken me up. I didn’t fall asleep until after 2 am.”

“Sorry,” Sophie apologized again.

“It’s not all on you. I guess I have a persistent guilty conscience too,” I smiled.

“Are you ever going to tell her, Luca?”

“I know I should, but I can’t find the words. I keep telling myself it’s for Madison’s protection, but I’m starting to think it’s my own cowardice that’s compelling me to keep my peace.”

“I don’t envy you.”

“How much did Angelo tell you, anyway?”

“Not much. He said that if you wanted me to know you’d tell me.”

“Sounds like something he’d say,” I laughed.

“Like Woody in Toy Story, he is...you know, you got a friend in me, and all that.”

“Yeah. The Italian Cowboy. Lucky us.”

“Hey, where’s my coffee?”

Madison burst into the kitchen with her signatory let’s-kick-this-day’s-ass gusto. She walked over to me and gave me a bear hug.

“Hi, Sophia. Did you sleep well?”

“Hey, Madison. Yup. Love the mattress in our room.”

“I’m glad. What are you and Angelo up to today?” Maddie said, bouncing to the cupboard to fetch cups.

“I’m going to the beach,” Sophia said enthusiastically. “I think Angelo is planning on hanging with Luca. Is that right?” she said and looked at me.

“Yes, I’m taking him to the workshop.”

“Boys and their toys, eh?” Madison said teasingly.

“Uh-huh. And what about girls and their shoes and bags?” I countered.

“He’s got you there, Madison,” Sophia laughed.

“Pour the coffee, smartypants,” Madison winked at me. “I have to go to work today, Sophia. Will you be okay?”

“Are you kidding? I can’t wait to veg out by myself. I’m going to pop into that art supplies shop at the mall we were at yesterday. I’d love to paint our gorgeous Milo.”

“That will be amazing, Soph,” I smiled.

“Have to pay for my keep somehow.”

“Well, enjoy. I’ll make a booking for dinner for the four of us, babe,” I said to Madison before she left for the office.

“Thanks, love. Have a great day,” she said and kissed me long and slow.

“I will now.”

Angelo got up around 9 am.

“Good afternoon,” I said when he stumbled into the kitchen.

“Coffee,” he grinned.

“Help yourself. The machine’s over there.”

“I think the brandy was a bridge too far,” Angelo groaned.

“Have you lost your drinking legs, Bud?”

“Jetlag.”

“Yeah, sure. Admit it. You’ve gone soft.”

“Sophia will disagree with you.”

“You dog.”

“How are you this morning? Sophia feels terrible about yesterday.”

“She apologized earlier on. I told her not to stress about it.”

“What did you tell Madison?”

“I told her Sophia is terrible at remembering names.”

“Just the opposite. My woman has a memory like an elephant. I should know. She still remembers shit I did back in high school.”

“Anyway. Looks like I got away with it. You’d better move your ass. I’m taking you with me to see a car.”

“Yeah, yeah. Gimme twenty minutes,” he sighed. “A quick shit, shower and shave, and I’ll be ready to rock and roll.”

“Cool.”

Half an hour later Angelo and I were on our way to my office.

MADISON

“Beth, I’m off to have lunch with Dad,” I said over the internal line.

“Sure, hon. I’ll see you later.”

I hadn’t seen Dad for a few weeks. Mom and I met for lunch the week before and caught up on the latest gossip. Naturally, Dad felt slighted.

We met at his club.

“Hello, beautiful girl,” he said when I arrived.

“Hi, Dad. Love that shirt.”

“Mom’s dressing me again,” he smirked.

“Of course, she is,” I laughed.

“What will you have to drink, my darling?”

“I’d kill for a G&T.”

“Busy morning?”

“Always. One of my top models is down with the flu. It’s a bloody disaster because she’s supposed to start shooting on a big project today. So I’ve been kissing ass all morning, trying to appease a very pissed off client.”

“Poor angel.”

“Are you mocking me, Mr. Harris?”

“I wouldn’t dream of it.”

“So, what’s news, Dad?”

“I was hoping to rope you and Lauren in to help me plan Mom and my anniversary party. It’s a biggie and I want it to be special.”

“That’s right. Forty years! I take it you’ve arranged some sort of medal for Mom?”

“Ouch! What was that for?” Dad laughed.

“Ooh, I don’t know. All the concerts you wouldn’t let me go to in high school.”

“Are you referring to the ones you snuck out to anyway and then used Beth as an alibi?”

I laughed as Dad gave me the stink eye.

“Yup. The very same.”

“What were you thinking of doing, Dad?”

“You know how much your mother adores parties. I was thinking we should have one at the beach house. But, I don’t want her to know anything about it. I’ll tell her I’m taking her away for the weekend or something.”

“You may as well ask me for a kidney, Dad. You know as well as I do that Mom has second sight when it comes to surprise parties.”

“I didn’t say it was going to be easy.”

“You’re going to owe me big, Michael.”

“I’m good for it.”

“I’ll work on a menu and keep you posted. Guest list ideas?”

“Everybody.”

“Bloody hell. Okay. I’m on it.”

“Thanks, sweetheart.”

“You’d better make it a double gin.”

Dad chuckled and nodded at the waiter who came over immediately. I loved eating at Dad’s club. It was an experience in old-world charm. Dad was on the board, so everyone moved

extra fast when he was there. They needn't have bothered, though. My father was a sweetheart—never rude or discourteous. Unless you went out of your way to fuck with him, of course.

“How are things between you and Luca?”

“Couldn't be better. I'm so happy.”

“That's wonderful. I'm glad to hear it.”

“Friends of his from Italy are here at the moment. Lovely couple. Luca's known them since he was a boy.”

“Oh? Do you like them?”

“I do. Angelo is a hoot and Sophia is a sweetie.”

“What do they do back home?”

“Angelo is in construction and Sophia is an artist. She's so talented. She's painting Milo as a thank you gift for staying with us.”

“Luca must be enjoying the visit.”

“Very much. They switch between Italian and English so seamlessly I struggle to keep up.”

“You'd better brush up on your Italian.”

“I guess so. I'm going to have a salad for lunch. We're taking them out for dinner later.”

Dad and I chatted about this and that during lunch. I went back to the office afterward and called Beth in.

“Dad's given us a job to do,” I said when she sat down.

“What's that?”

“Planning his and Mom's fortieth wedding anniversary.”

“A surprise party?”

“I'm afraid so.”

“Why does he hate me?”

“I'm going to call Lauren and break the good news to her,” I smirked and dialed my sister's phone. I switched to speaker

phone when she answered.

“Hey, hey. Stop brown-nosing your professor and listen up.”

“What is it?” she asked with audible suspicion.

“Hi, La,” Beth said before I could answer.

“Hi, Beth. Uh oh. This is bad isn’t it?”

“It’s not great. Let’s see if you can guess what it is. I’ll give you a clue. I had lunch with Dad. He needs a favor.”

“Ahhh, shit! Not a surprise anniversary party for Mom!” Lauren groaned.

“Wow. That was amazing. Spot on,” Beth laughed.

“Damn it. I hate those,” Lauren said, driving home her irritation.

“Don’t we all. But, it’s a special one so we better suck it up and get cracking,” I said to encourage my team.

“Fine.”

“Okay, gang. Let’s meet at mine next week to hash out the details. I’ll let you know what day and time. Okay?”

“Sure. Sorry, Sis, I gotta run or I’ll be late for a lecture.”

“No problem. Chat soon, La.”

LUCA

It had been one month since Angelo and Sophia's visit, and Madison and I had been together for eight glorious months. We were getting dressed for Caroline and Michael's anniversary party at the family's beach house.

Madison was checking herself in the full-length mirror. She wore a stunning white dress, and I couldn't take my eyes off her.

"You look so beautiful, my love," I cooed as she executed the perfect twirl.

"You charmer, you," she giggled as I kissed her on her neck. "Don't even think about it, Luca. It's taken me forever to get my hair up and do my makeup."

"I wasn't planning on going anywhere near your face or your hair."

"Get off, you horny fool," she laughed and nudged me away playfully.

"You used to be so much fun," I sighed.

"I'm still plenty fun, thank you very much. But, if I don't get to the beach house asap, my sister and aunt may gut me like a fish."

"Fine," I said play-sulking. "But later you're all mine."

Madison wrapped her arms around my neck.

"You can do whatever you like to me after the party," she whispered. "I promise."

* * *

Madison wasn't kidding when she said the party was going to be big. The living room and the outside area was jam-packed with friends and family, all waiting for Michael and Caroline to arrive.

The house looked spectacular. A large marquee had been erected, and underneath it stood long tables covered in white cloth, decorated with white roses, champagne buckets, crystal glasses, delectable hors d'oeuvres, lanterns, and gifts for the guests.

"You've done an amazing job, ladies," I told Lauren, Beth, and Madison.

"I'll feel much better once Mom and Dad arrive," Lauren said. "I'm going to enjoy a stiff drink."

"That makes two of us," Beth smiled.

"Three," Madison added.

The couple of the hour arrived soon after, to great fanfare. Caroline had tears in her eyes when she saw what her girls had managed. Michael was all smiles.

"I can't believe you little sneaks," Caroline cooed. "It's all so gorgeous! Is that...?" She pointed and made an excited noise before rushing off to greet someone.

"Thank you, my darlings," Michael said happily and hugged his daughters and Beth.

"Can I steal you away now?" I asked Madison.

"Absolutely. I'll have that drink now."

"Why don't we get ourselves something and go for a stroll on the beach?"

"Sounds Heavenly," she smiled.

I left her and Lauren and went to the bar to collect a bottle of champagne and two glasses. Anton was there, chatting with Michael.

“Congratulations again, Michael,” I said and shook his hand. “Forty years is impressive.”

“You’re making it difficult for us to follow suit, Mike,” Anton grimaced.

“Oh, come now, boys. The recipe is simple—the woman is always right. Remember that and you’ll live long and happily.”

“Wise words,” I laughed.

“You and Beth have been together for a while, Ant. Any wedding bells on the horizon?” Michael asked a grinning Anton.

“Nope. Beth and I are very happy with the status quo.”

It was time for me to exit the conversation. I grabbed the champagne and glasses and got out of there.

“Come on, gorgeous girl. Let’s go,” I said when I got back to Madison. “Where did Lauren go?”

“She spotted an old family friend.”

“Oh, good. So we’re flying solo,” I smiled.

“Follow me,” Madison said and took my hand. “I’ll show you where Lauren and I used to pick up cute guys in the summer.”

I smacked her on her ass. She laughed and ran towards the beach.

“Hey, slow down. I don’t want to shake the champagne too much.”

Madison laughed out of her gut. She was even more stunning when she was happy and playful. I caught up with her and held on.

“Oh, so you’ve been with horny teenagers, have you?” I growled and nibbled her neck.

“Me? Never. I’m as pure as the driven snow.”

“Uh-huh,” I teased and kissed her sweet lips.

“I know of a secret cove we can go to where we won’t be disturbed,” she whispered, her eyes alight with mischief.

“Lead the way.”

The tide was low, which made it easy to walk on the firm, sandy shore. We took off our shoes and Madison lifted the hem of the dress so it wouldn't drag in the wet sand. I followed as she snaked her way around the cove until we were inside what looked like a cave.

The inside of the space sounded like the inside of a shell when you placed it against your ear. I closed my eyes and took in the scent of ferns and seaweed, mixed together with Madison's perfume.

“It's beautiful, Maddie.”

“Lauren and I used to picnic here all the time when we were kids. It's one of my favorite places in the world.”

“I can see why. It's magical.”

I took off my jacket and laid it down on the sand.

“There you go. Now you don't have to get your dress full of sand.”

“I have a better idea,” she said and took it off.

My heartbeat quickened at the sight of her near-naked body. She wasn't wearing a bra and the thin g-string she had on didn't cover much.

“This is shaping up to be the best cave picnic I've ever been to,” I said in a hoarse voice.

Madison grinned and started to undress me. I held her close once we were naked.

“You smell so good, Maddie.”

“Make love to me.”

I picked up my lover. She wrapped her long legs around my waist. We stood like that for a while, kissing, tasting, lost in each other.

“I want you now,” she whispered into my ear and nibbled on the lobe.

“What do you want, baby? Show me,” I asked breathlessly.

I put Madison down on the sand. She walked to one of the cave walls and stood against it with her arms and legs spread out. I was so hard for her. I knelt down behind her and licked her wet pussy with my tongue. Maddie moaned and gasped.

I straightened up and stood behind her. I reached around to caress her breasts, and then I entered her. She groaned. I stroked her clit with my fingers while I moved inside her with my hardness.

“Is this what you want?” I whispered.

“Yes. Oh, fuck, yes. Harder, baby.”

Her words excited me. I moved faster and drove harder and harder into my lover’s core. Maddie was shuddering—I could feel her tightening around my shaft as she came hard. My orgasm followed shortly after hers.

“I love you, Maddie,” I called out.

“I love you too,” she echoed.

We lay on the sand afterward—naked, sipping on champagne.

“I do, you know,” I said.

“What?”

“Love you.”

“I do too,” she smiled and kissed me gently.

I reached for my jacket and placed it around her shoulders.

“I have something for you,” I said.

“Oh?”

“Yes. It’s inside the left pocket.”

“Oooh, I love surprises.”

She reached into the pocket and pulled out a little bag.

“Open it,” I encouraged her.

Madison opened the bag and slowly pulled out a ring. She stared at it for a beat before the penny dropped.

“Madison Harris, will you marry me?”

“What?!”

She turned it around in her hand a few times as if she wasn't sure what to do with it. Her silence made me nervous, but I waited patiently.

“Yes. Of course, I'll marry you,” she whispered at last.

I slipped the ring onto her finger.

“It's beautiful, Luca,” she cooed.

“Almost as stunning as the woman wearing it, my love.”

“Get dressed,” she said suddenly and leaped to her feet.

“What's the rush?”

“Are you kidding? Mom and Lauren are going to have a cow! Let's go.”

“I guess this is where I start doing as I'm told,” I laughed.

MADISON

“No! Are you serious? Oh, my goodness! It’s gorgeous!”

That was the overall response from across the board back at Mom and Dad’s anniversary party. I strutted about on cloud nine, lapping up the excitement. It wasn’t my first marriage proposal, but it was the first one I’d accepted.

Luca was my perfect man. I couldn’t imagine building a life with anyone else but him. I was so happy. It took me at least two whole days to get the stupid grin off my face. I stared at my ring every time the light caught the diamond just so. What a perfect stone it was. Its clarity was mind-blowing.

Luca and I were lying in bed one evening. He was checking his phone for emails and I was looking at how perfectly the ring fit my hand.

“Should we chat about a date, babe?” I asked.

“Sure, my love. When did you have in mind?”

“Well, I’ve always dreamed of having a wedding in summer. Maybe we can have it at the beach house? What do you think?”

“I don’t mind, Maddie. The beach house is perfect.”

“Great. On the beach, in July it is, then.”

“Sounds perfect,” he said, put down his phone, and snuggled me.

“Are there any friends back in Italy, apart from Angelo and Sophia, you’d like to invite?”

“You’re so sweet, Maddie. No. Only them. I’ve lost touch with everyone else.”

“Okay. Will you give me a list of friends you’d like to invite, please?”

“Sure.”

“The girls and I are going to sneak away for a few days next week. It’s going to be all our wedding planning. Mom wants to take me to the designer who made her dress for her. Can you believe she’s still alive? I hope she’s not going to try and stick me in a post-war-looking dress with frills and bows.”

Luca laughed.

“You’re nuts.”

“Well, yeah. That’s why you love me.”

“Your mom is a stylish woman. I’m sure she won’t steer you wrong.”

“My mother is from the south. That’s all I’m going to say.”

“Okay, well, call me if you need to escape.”

“Don’t worry. I’ve got Lauren and Beth as backup.”

“I’m just saying. You know who to call if you need a burly man to break up a catfight.”

“Who’s the lucky damsel?” I cooed.

“Come here, my little vixen,” Luca said and pulled me closer. “I’m going to miss you.”

“It’s only a few days.”

“A few too many. Milo and I will have to binge on take-out.”

“It’s a good thing I’m not leaving you behind with a house full of kids,” I winked.

“Not yet, anyway.”

* * *

“For the love of Pete, can we please take a break from wedding planning and have a glass of wine or something?” Lauren groaned.

Mom, Beth, Lauren, and I had crisscrossed the highways and byways of Wedding Ville and its imaginary streets all day long and my little sister was as fed up as I was.

“What are you complaining about,” I said with exasperation, “I’m the one poked full of pin holes by a dressmaker whose glasses are a tad too thick for comfort.”

“Oh, my goodness. Settle down, you two,” Mom barked. “Another blow for the instant gratification generation.”

“Preach it, sister,” Beth laughed.

“Oh, please. You’ve been moaning the loudest, little sister,” Mom grinned at her.

“Luca warned me we may turn on each other. Where’s the wine?”

I went to the bar and opened the fridge. The four of us were staying in a villa for a week. It was important to be in a neutral venue so that no one felt obliged to do the hosting. It was brilliant.

“What’s on the menu for tonight, girls?” I asked after my stomach made an embarrassing appeal for food.

“I’m in the mood for seafood. Shall I ask the chef to prepare something?” Mom called from the living room.

“I’d kill for a piece of fresh salmon,” Lauren agreed.

“Okay, I’ll call him,” I confirmed while I grabbed a bottle of ice-cold chardonnay from the bar fridge.

I called the chef and arranged dinner, after which I joined the girls outside on the patio for a drink.

“Does Luca have any family coming to the wedding, darling?” Mom asked.

“No. His parents have passed away and he doesn’t have siblings.”

“How awful,” Lauren commented.

“Yes, it must be a lonely existence without family,” Beth sighed.

“I don’t know what I’d do if I didn’t have you bunch of crazies around,” Mom smiled.

“I’m sure you’d find new peeps to boss around, Mama,” I grinned.

The others laughed.

“That’s awfully cheeky for someone whose kids will be visiting me one day,” Mom smiled. “I hope you know I’m going to spoil them rotten and send them home with bellies full of sugar.”

“Slow down, Mama. No one said anything about kids.”

“Why do you hate me?” Mom sighed and clutched her chest. “La, you’ll give Mama grandkids, won’t you?”

“I have to find a husband first. I must warn you, though, that at this stage, even that is a challenge.”

“I can’t believe you can’t find a man, La,” Beth chimed in. “You’re gorgeous.”

“To be honest, Beth, I’m not breaking myself to find one. I’m way too busy enjoying my life to be tied down to a man.”

“I have no idea what you’re on about, La,” Mom said. “My Mama started working on finding me a husband as soon as she found out she was having a girl.”

“That’s different, Mama. You’re from the South, where family and procreation is practically a religion.”

“You can imagine the scandal when I told my mama I was in love with a Northerner. I thought Pappy would have a full-blown stroke right there on the living room floor. Imagine his shock. A Yankee and a Northerner. Oh, the shame.”

“Mama told that story to everyone who would listen, Caroline. I can’t tell you how many times I heard it while I was growing up,” Beth chimed in.

“I don’t know if Pappy ever completely forgave me.”

“Oh, please. You were forgiven the day Michael bought Pappy a Dodge Charger,” Beth laughed.

“I miss them,” Mom sighed.

“Me too,” Beth added.

“I still can’t believe my sister is getting married,” Lauren said and squeezed my hand.

“I know. It seems so odd.”

“It’s a big step, Maddiebug. I won’t lie and tell you it’s all sunsets and romance. Sometimes I want to choke your father to death. And, it was tough going when you girls were little. Your daddy was away often with work and bringing up two busy little bugs like you girls was a challenge. But, I can honestly say that I would be lost without my family.”

“Ah, Mama. That’s beautiful. I hope Luca will make me as happy as Daddy’s made you.”

“He’d better, or I’ll be all over him,” Mom winked.

“As will I,” Beth chimed in.

“And don’t forget about me,” Lauren said.

Mom raised her glass.

“To family!”

“To family,” we toasted.

“Now drink up,” Mom said. “We’ve got to look at cakes next.”

LUCA

“Hi, Michael. It’s Luca.”

“Hello, Luca. How are you?”

“I’m well, thanks. I have to say, it’s a little quiet here without Madison.”

“You’re telling me. This house is a ghost town without Caroline. Have you heard from them?”

“Madison called me last night to catch me up. It sounds like they’re having a ball.”

“I’m glad. So, what’s happening with you?”

“I was wondering if you’d like to join me tomorrow. I have been invited to attend a rare car viewing. It’s an exclusive event for one of the charities to which I contribute.”

“You had me at rare car. I’d love to. Where shall I meet you?”

“I’ll swing by the house and pick you up at around noon.”

“Great. I look forward to it.”

“See you at noon, Michael.”

“Ciao, Luca.”

I thought it a good idea to spend some one-on-one time with Madison’s dad. He reminded me of my own father—hard-working, smart, ambitious. Also, Michael had a soft side to him that my father too possessed.

Granted, my father wasn't in my life for very long, but the part I did remember was of a man who loved large. I hadn't known it at the time, but my father was onto a good wicket career-wise. He had joined a large accounting company just before he was murdered. I imagined had he and Mom not been slain, I would have lived a privileged life, rather than the orphan one I was destined for.

My mother was a teacher. She was kind but stern. Much like Caroline, she had her own mind. I reckoned Maddie's and my parents would have gotten on well. But, some things weren't meant to be. That was life.

I picked Michael up at his house at exactly noon the following day. I was driving my Mustang.

"Now that's how you make an entrance," he smiled.

"Hi, Michael. Jump in."

"Call me Mike. Michael is too stuffy. Soon you'll be calling me Dad. That's even easier."

"Okay, Mike. Let's go enjoy a few boy's toys."

"She's in good nick," Michael said as he ran his hands over the dashboard.

"Nothing's too good for my princess," I smiled.

"Yeah, but what are you planning for my daughter?" he winked.

"I'd sell my last Mustang for Madison."

"Let's hope it doesn't ever come to that," Mike laughed.

"From your lips to God's ears, Mike," I smirked.

"I don't want you to take this the wrong way, Luca, but you're a quiet one, aren't you?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, you don't put yourself out there much."

"Oh, I see. No. I'm a pretty private person. Why? Does it bother you?"

“No. It’s just that I’d like to know more about the man who’s about to marry my daughter. Not that I’m snooping, mind you.”

“That’s fair. Okay. What would you like to know, Mike?”

“Maddie tells me you were adopted as a child.”

“That’s right. My parents died when I was nine.”

“I’m sorry to hear that, Luca. I can’t imagine how hard that must have been for you.”

“Thank you. Yes, it was very tough. But, my adoptive parents were wonderful, loving people. I grew up loved and I’m grateful for that.”

“How did your parents die, if you don’t mind me asking.”

“They were murdered in a home invasion.”

“Oh, God. No wonder you don’t want to talk about it. I’m sorry, Luca. Forgive me for prying.”

“It’s fine, Mike. It was a lifetime ago.”

“You must be looking forward to starting your own family.”

“Very much. I never thought I’d find the right woman. Maddie is amazing.”

“She’s special, yes.”

We drove the rest of the way to the show in silence. I imagined Michael was digesting my news. I prayed he wouldn’t ask too many questions. I wasn’t averse to sharing my childhood with him. It was my life after Italy I was trying to forget.

“Did Maddie tell you I used to race cars back in Italy?” I asked when we’d arrived at the show.

“No, she didn’t mention it. How did you get into that?”

“My adoptive father, Mario, was a mechanic—the best one in our town. He used to service racing cars, and I got into racing that way. I was pretty good if you don’t mind me saying.”

“Do you still dabble?”

“I take a car around the track every now and again. Have you ever raced?”

“Not much.”

“I’ll let you know the next time I go. You can tag along if you like.”

“Have you ever crashed?”

“Uh-huh.”

“Then you’d better not tell Caroline,” he laughed.

“Tell her what?” I smiled.

“Good man.”

Michael and I enjoyed the car show. There were a few rare beauties I hadn’t seen in years. Micael made a bid on one and asked me if I’d restore it for him. I was happy he’d asked me. It was a good way for us to bond.

After the show, we stopped off at his club for lunch. It was a magnificent establishment. I’d been privy to many a gentleman’s club when I was the head of the mob, but none were as steeped in tradition.

I quickly learned that the Harris name carried weight in those circles. It was both enticing and disconcerting at the same time. I wasn’t too comfortable being thrust into the spotlight as the son-in-law-to-be of the club president. It was a good thing I was far away from the city in which I’d once ruled as Supreme Mobster in the making.

“Are you a member of a gentleman’s club, Luca?”

“I am not.”

“I’m happy to put in a good word for you if you like.”

“That would be very decent of you, Mike.”

“It’s an excellent place to meet fellow car enthusiasts.”

“A compelling reason to join, for sure.”

“You may be a little unpopular at first,” Michael smiled.

“How so?”

“There are more than a few broken hearts around since you took Maddie off the market, you see.”

“Ah. Thanks for the heads up. I’ll watch my back at the urinals.”

“You do that.”

“Now. What’s it going to be? Brandy or whiskey?”

“You choose, Dad.”

“Well played.”

Madison’s dad ordered us drinks, then took me on a quick tour of the club. We had dinner afterward. I dropped Michael off at home at around 9 pm and went home. It had been a very pleasant afternoon.

What I didn’t know at the time, was that someone had been following Michael and me. Someone who wasn’t happy to see me. And that was putting it mildly.

MADISON

Lauren and I were on our way back to her apartment after having dropped off Mama and Beth after the week away.

It was 8 pm and Lauren was keen to get into a warm tub and then into bed.

“I had a great time, Sis,” she said when we pulled up outside her place.

“So did I. We didn’t get much wedding planning done but boy did I enjoy being waited on hand and foot and drinking lots of wine.”

“I’m going to miss having our own personal chef.”

“That was amazing. I can’t wait to see Luca and Milo though,” I said after I’d switched off the car engine.

“I’m sure Luca will give you a large reception,” she grinned.

“You’re a bad girl. But, hell, I hope so. Let me help you carry your bags.”

“No, it’s okay. I’ll manage. You go home to your Italian stud.”

“Thanks,” I laughed and started the engine. “I’ll call you tomorrow.”

“Kisses.”

I was about a five-minute drive from Lauren’s when my phone rang. It was Lauren.

“What’s wrong?”

“You won’t bloody believe this. My apartment is under water.”

“What? What happened?”

“A pipe must have burst. It’s a fucking mess.”

“Ah, shit, man. Okay. I’ll come to get you.”

“I’m sorry, Maddie.”

“Don’t be silly. I’m on my way.”

I made a U-turn and drove back to Lauren’s. She wasn’t kidding. The place was uninhabitable.

“Oh, shit. That smell!” I said when I walked into her apartment.

“It’s great, right?” Lauren said sarcastically.

“Have you called the super?”

“His phone went to voicemail. I left a message.”

“Grab some clean clothes. You can come and stay with Luca and me until this is sorted out.”

“Ugh! Are you sure? Won’t I be in your way?”

“Are you nuts? Of course not.”

“Okay. Give me a few minutes.”

Twenty minutes later we were back on the road. We arrived at my place just before 9 pm. I was so happy to see Luca. Milo went berserk.

“Two for the price of one?” Luca said when he saw Lauren. “What did I miss?”

“Hi, babe,” I said and kissed my gorgeous fiancé. “La’s apartment is under water. It smells like a sewer. She’s gonna stay with us until it’s sorted out. Do you mind?”

“Of course not, my love. Oooh, it’s so good to see you.”

“I’m bushed. Do I smell lasagna?” I asked.

“Yup. I cooked.”

“That’s right. Kick a girl when she’s down,” Lauren sighed. “Not only is my home a toilet, but my sister has snagged the last Italian hero for herself.”

“Bummer,” I teased.

“Why don’t you ladies go freshen up and I’ll set the table?”

“Settle into the spare room, La,” I said.

“Thanks, Maddie.”

“You,” I said to Luca, “come with me.”

“Yay, sex!”

“Better make it a quicky. I’m starving.” I giggled.

“That won’t be a problem. I’m almost done.”

“You are so cute.”

Half an hour later we were having lasagna.

“This is amazing, Luca,” Lauren said through a mouthful of food.

“Thanks. My mother would have been proud. So, tell me, how did the wedding planning go?”

“I, for one, made sure that Maddie chose the perfect maid of honor dress. No bows and ribbons for me,” Lauren announced victoriously.

“La’s a bit of a drama queen, hon.”

“I learned from the best,” she countered and blew me a kiss.

“I can’t believe your apartment is such a mess. It’s going to need a complete makeover, Sis.”

“The timing couldn’t be worse. Damn it. I’ve got projects up the Ying Yang and the first one is due in less than a week.”

“Let me know if there’s anything I can do to help, Lauren,” Luca tried to comfort her.

“Thanks, Luca. Thank you for letting me stay here with you. That’s a big help.”

“I thought it might be better than staying with Mom and Dad, as we are closer to the campus.”

“It’s perfect. Thanks.”

“I’m sure the insurers will get right on it. But, you’re welcome to stay here as long as you like.” Luca smiled.

“I may never leave here if you keep feeding me like this.”

“I’m afraid I’m a bit of a one-trick pony,” Luca smirked. “Lasagna is my signature dish. Also, my only dish.”

“That’s okay, handsome,” I cooed. “You have other redeeming features.”

“Must you?” Lauren said and rolled her eyes.

“Isn’t it past your bedtime, baby sis?” I grinned.

“No, but I think I’d better go to my room. This shameless display of romance is making me queasy.”

Luca laughed. Lauren got up from the table and kissed him on the cheek.

“Thanks for dinner, Bro.”

“My pleasure, Sis,” he winked.

It was so nice seeing the two of them getting along so well.

“Goodnight, La.”

“I think it’s time to tuck me in too, babe,” I said and yawned.

“Come on then, my gorgeous woman.”

I was exhausted. Luca and I lay in bed and chatted for a bit before we turned out the lights.

“What did you get up to while I was away?”

“I took your dad with me to a car show. We had a nice time. Afterward, he took me to his club for lunch.”

“That’s great, babe. What did you boys talk about?”

“All sorts of things.”

“Sounds intriguing. Any state secrets I should know about?”

“Burly men’s stuff,” Luca smiled and nibbled on my earlobe.

“Oh, so, nothing that concerns a dainty, little lady like me?”

“Exactly.”

“Oh, big man, I’m so glad you’ve got such strong, manly arms,” I purred and bit down gently on his nipple.

“Whoa! Easy, tiger.”

“I can’t help myself. I missed your sexy body.”

“Aww, I’m glad to hear that. Any part in particular?”

“Umm, let me think.”

I kissed my lover’s collarbone.

“I missed your chiseled bone structure.”

Next, I ran my tongue around Luca’s nipples.

“Your perky chesticles too.”

I carried on to his taut stomach and kissed his abs.

“Mmm, yummy,” I moaned.

I placed my hand inside Luca’s underwear and caressed his erection.

“Mmm, this is definitely the part I missed the most,” I said and took his hard cock into my mouth.

Luca threw back his head and let out a satisfied grunt.

“Uhhh, welcome home, baby,” he purred and felt for my naked breasts.

We pleased each other for the second time that night before I passed out—insanely happy and utterly spent.

LUCA

“**G**ood morning, my little sex bomb,” I said and stretched out lazily.

“Mmmm, hi, there.”

“I slept like a baby, thanks to your brilliant milking skills,” I said and nuzzled Madison’s neck.

“Pff, that was nothing. You should see me when I’m in top form.”

“You’re going to be the death of me, woman.”

“I don’t suppose you were on your way to the kitchen to make me a cup of coffee, were you?” she smiled sweetly and batted her eyelids.

“Now you’re pushing it.”

“Pleeease.”

“Alright. I guess you earned it.”

“You’re a saint.”

“Remember those words when I forget our anniversary or something.”

“I’ll give you one pass, Luca Gambrelli. Just one.”

“Noted.”

I left Madison and went downstairs to make the coffee. It was Sunday morning, so no need to dash off in a mad rush. If I played my cards right, Madison would make me her famous pancakes with crispy bacon and maple syrup for breakfast.

“Oh, hey,” Lauren’s voice sounded from behind the fridge door.

It was a good thing I wore my dressing gown. Nothing like morning wood to scare off a sister-in-law.

“Hey. You’re up early.”

“Uh-huh. No rest for the weary. I have to get cracking on my projects today or I’m off the Dean’s list.”

“Good luck.”

“Thanks.”

“Can I make you a cup of coffee?”

“That would be fab. I’m going to have some toast and then I’ll be out of your way.”

“You’re not in my way, Lauren. Please, make yourself at home. Just don’t let Milo psych you into giving her your food. Manipulation is her superpower.”

“Okay, I won’t—again.”

“The sneak got you already, didn’t she?”

“I’m not at liberty to say,” she laughed.

I took Madison’s coffee up to her and got back under the covers for a snuggle.

“Lauren’s up early,” I said.

“Yup, she’s an early bird. Did she sleep well?”

“I think so. She seems raring to go.”

“Great.”

“How’s the coffee?”

“Divine. Why? What do you want?”

“Pancakes?”

“How can I say no?”

“Thanks, hon. Listen, I have to go out of town to see a car. I don’t suppose you want to tag along? We haven’t been away together in a while.”

“I don’t know, babe. I’ve been away for a week. I’m sure my desk is a mess.”

“Argh! Career women...”

“Don’t pout. I’ll make it up to you. I promise.”

“You’d better. Pancakes will go a long way to healing the pain in my heart.”

“Oi. There’s only enough room for one drama queen at a time in this house, and right now Lauren’s it.”

“I’ll have extra maple syrup on mine, thanks,” I smiled roguishly. “I’m going to jump into the shower quickly.”

The smell of pancakes welcomed me when I entered the kitchen a while later.

“Yeah, that’s what I’m talking about.”

“I’d love to go to the market after breakfast. Would you like to come?”

“Sure. Let’s bring Milo. She could do with some furry company. She’s crazy about the greengrocer’s retriever.”

“Oh, Ozzy. Yeah, he’s adorable. I’ll ask Lauren if she needs anything.”

After the outing to the market. Madison and I spent the rest of the day relaxing. Lauren joined us for dinner and spoke at length about the project she’d worked on all day. We were a perfect little family.

I felt like a million dollars on Monday morning. I got to the office just after 8 am.

“Hi, Boss. You look refreshed. How was Madison’s week?”

“Sounds like the girls had a good time.”

“I’d have a good time too if I had that much dough,” Sandy sighed wistfully.

“Oh yeah? What would you do with the money?”

“I’d buy more cars and grease,” she grinned.

“You and me both,” I laughed. “Have you booked my flight yet for Wednesday?”

“Yeah. Just one ticket? Or is Madison joining you?”

“No, I’m afraid not. She’s too busy.”

“That’s a shame.”

“Busy little entrepreneur, my Madison,” I winked.

“Not condescending at all.”

“Oh, I’m just kidding. Don’t start that woman’s lib stuff on me. You know I’m not a chauvinist.”

“I know. I wouldn’t be here if you were.”

“I think you mean, I wouldn’t be here.”

“It’s Monday. I wasn’t going to threaten you. Too early in the week.”

“Too early in the morning. Anyway, what have you got for me?”

Sandy and I went through the figures for the month and other admin. I left the office at 4 pm and went for a run. It was 6 pm when I arrived home. The girls were still out, so I ordered Chinese food and waited for the Harris sisters to come home.

* * *

It was 11 am on Wednesday and I was in the queue, about to board the plane when someone pinched my butt. I turned around to see who it was.

“What? What are you doing here?”

“That’s not a very welcoming greeting,” Madison pouted.

“I thought you said you couldn’t come.”

“Hey, I’m the boss. Right? What’s the point of being in charge if I can’t make an executive decision to ignore my responsibilities and run away with a gorgeous Italian stud?”

“Exactly,” I said and kissed her. “I have a feeling you and Sandy were in cahoots. Am I right?”

“What can I say? She’s a gem.”

“I’m so happy you’re here.”

“Ditto.”

* * *

Sandy booked a suite for Madison and me. We went out for dinner after we’d spent the day looking at cars. I couldn’t have asked for a better day. All my favorites.

We were still in bed the next morning when Madison called Lauren.

“Hey, Maddie. How’s the trip going?” I heard her asking over the speaker phone.

“Hi, La. We’re having a lovely time. How are things at home? How’s Milo?”

“Adorable.”

“Hi, Lauren,” I said.

“Oh, hi, Luca.”

“La, Luca, and I are going to stay for another day. The weather is gorgeous and I’d like to visit a wine farm today.”

“That sounds wonderful. Okay, no problem. I’ll see you guys tomorrow then.”

“Okay, Sis. Love you.”

“Love you, guys. Have fun.”

Madison hung up.

“Alrighty, let’s drink wine,” she said, leaped onto me, and kissed me all over.

“Mmm, maybe later.”

* * *

Madison and I were about to board the flight back home.

“Lauren’s still not answering,” she said and frowned.

“She’s probably having a crazy day, babe. You know what student life is like.”

“I suppose so. I hate it when I can’t get hold of her.”

“We’ll try again when we land, Maddie.”

“Okay.”

I took Madison’s hand and walked toward the plane. We’d be home soon enough.

MADISON

I'd had an uneasy feeling all day. By the time we landed, I was convinced that something was wrong.

"Something must have happened to her, Luca. It's not like Lauren to be offline this long."

"Why don't you call your mom?" Luca suggested once we were in the car.

"I think I should."

I dialed Mom's number.

"Hi, Maddiebug. This is a lovely surprise."

"Hi, Mama. Have you spoken to La today?"

"No, my darling. But, we don't talk every day and I know she's been very busy with her projects. Why, love?"

"I've been calling all day, but her phone keeps going to voicemail. I don't know, Mama. Something feels off."

"Where are you, Maddie?"

"Luca and I are on our way home now. The plane landed earlier than expected."

"Will you call me when you get home, sweetheart? Maybe your sister is there. She's probably fast asleep, the poor thing."

"Okay. I'll call you when I get home. Love you, Mama."

"Love you, Maddie."

"We'll be home in fifteen minutes, Maddie. Try and relax," Luca said and held my hand.

I stared out of the window. It was dark outside so the landscape was lit up with colorful, artificial lights. My stomach was in a knot. Where the hell was Lauren?

The drive home felt like an eternity.

“Her car’s here,” Luca said as soon as the driveway came into view.

“Oh, thank goodness. Maybe Mom was right. She’s probably fast asleep.”

Luca opened the automated garage door. Milo came sprinting outside. She was barking and yelping hysterically.

“Hey, baby girl,” I said as she jumped up against me. “Mommy missed you too, my love.”

I put down my bag and picked her up. She was trembling.

“What’s the matter, Milo?” I asked her as if she would answer.

“Milo’s acting all squirrely, babe,” I called to Luca.

As soon as I put her down she sprinted for the road.

“Milo! Come back here, you naughty girl,” I shouted and ran after her.

“I’ll go inside and fetch her ball, Maddie,” Luca shouted. “She’s probably desperate for a run.”

“Okay. Milo! Come here, girl.”

I eventually caught up to her and held onto her collar. I walked her back to the car and waited for Luca. He was taking forever.

“Luca! Hurry up! Milo’s losing her marbles out here. I’ve never seen her this anxious. Luca!”

Luca came outside and stopped at the garage door. He was as white as a ghost. He just stood there, staring at me.

“Where’s the ball? Luca? What’s wrong? What?”

“Oh, Maddie. It’s...”

“What the fuck, Luca?” I called out. “You’re scaring me. What’s wrong?”

“It’s Lauren.”

I let go of Milo’s collar at the mention of Lauren’s name and ran towards the house. I tried to go inside but Luca grabbed onto me.

“What are you doing? Let me go. Where is she? What’s wrong with her?”

“I’m so sorry, Maddie,” was all he could say before I punched him in the solar plexus and pulled myself from his grip while he gasped for air.

“Madison! No! Stop!”

I got as far as the living room before I stopped. I blinked over and over. I couldn’t believe what I was seeing. Lauren was on the floor in front of the TV. She was motionless. She had her silk Pjs on—the pair I’d bought her for her birthday—and her hair was loose. But, she wasn’t blonde anymore. Her hair was red. It was an odd color. Patchy.

At first, I couldn’t understand what I was looking at. Slowly, the image started to make sense.

“Lauren,” I whispered. “La.”

I edged closer, slowly at first and then with great urgency.

“Lauren!” I shouted at the top of my voice.

It had probably been mere seconds from the time I’d escaped Luca’s grasp to when I was kneeling down next to Lauren’s lifeless body. She was cold to the touch. Her eyes were closed. I shook her, expecting her to open her eyes. But she didn’t.

“No, no, no, no...Lauren!”

“She’s gone, Maddie,” I heard Luca’s shaky voice saying somewhere in the distance.

I looked down and saw his hand on my arm.

“No!” I shouted again.

Luca tried to pull me away from my sister but I wouldn't let her go. I clung to her with all my might. I had no concept of time. It was only when a policeman touched me and told me I had to let her go that I came to myself again.

"Miss Harris. Please, come with me. It's okay. We'll take care of your sister. Please, we have to take her now."

"Luca," I whispered and looked around for him.

"I'm here, my love," he said and helped me up from the floor.

"Mama! Did you call Mama?" I asked.

"Yes. Your parents are on their way," Luca said softly.

"Lauren is dead, Luca. She's dead."

"I'm so sorry, Maddie. Oh, God. I'm sorry."

"Who would do this?" I spoke into the air. "Why?"

"I don't know, my love."

Luca walked me outside. My legs were shaky.

"I need to sit down," I whispered.

Luca took me to the lounge and helped me onto it. He sat down next to me and held me. My body was shaking uncontrollably. Everything around me was happening in slow motion. Then I heard my mother's voice. She was wailing.

"Maddie! Where's my Maddie?" she shouted hysterically.

"I'm here, Mama!"

"They won't let me hold her, Maddie," she cried when she saw me. "Where's my baby? They won't let me see my baby."

Dad was deathly pale. He'd aged right there in front of my eyes. I could almost see his hair turning white. Tears rolled down his cheeks but he didn't make a sound. He just stood there, watching the place where Lauren's body had bled out.

I jumped up to run to him, but blackness overpowered me. I was floating into nothingness.

* * *

“Luca!” I shouted as I opened my eyes.

“I’m here, my love.”

I felt his hand on mine. He was squeezing gently.

“Where am I?” I asked and looked around the room.

“You’re at the hospital, Maddie. Try and stay still. You fainted and hit your head pretty hard on the floor.”

I felt for the back of my head and found a huge bump covered with gauze. The site was sensitive to the touch.

“Ouch.”

“Don’t touch it, Maddie. You’ve got stitches,” he said and carefully moved my hand away.

Then I remembered. It came back to me like a tsunami wave about to crash onto a beach. Lauren. My sister was dead. *Oh, God! Please, let it be a mistake. Please, I’ll do anything you ask. Please, Lord.*

“Where’s Mama?”

“Your father took her home. The doctor gave her a sedative. She’s probably sleeping.”

“Where’s La?”

Luca looked quizzically at me.

“Where did they take her body, Luca?”

“The coroner took her away.”

“I need to see her, Luca.”

I started to get up off the bed, but a wave of nausea pulled me down like a dead weight.

“Whoa...”

“Slowly, my love. The doctor says you may have a mild concussion.”

“Oh, F...U...C...K. My head hurts.”

“The nurse gave you a shot. It should start working soon. Here, have a sip of water.”

“Bedpan...quick, pass me that bedpan.”

Luca moved at the speed of light and got the pan to me just in time. Pretty soon my stomach was as empty as my soul.

When there was nothing left to throw up, I lay down on my side and cried myself to sleep.

LUCA

I was grateful when Madison fell asleep. I had to get the hell out of there. I got into my car and drove. I had no specific destination in mind—just away. Away from Madison’s pained eyes, away from Michael and Caroline’s grief-stricken faces. But, especially, away from the place where Lauren lay dead. Because it was all my fucking fault!

I found myself walking up the mountain trail behind my old apartment. I climbed steadily until I reached the apex and looked down at the stunning ocean vista that had always made my heart sing.

But, standing there, shaking and nauseous, there was to be no joy—no euphoria—only guilt and regret.

I reached into my pocket and pulled out the note I’d found lying next to Lauren’s slain body. Her lifeless eyes had stared into my soul while I reached for the bloodstained note and read it.

So, you thought you could run, Luca? I bet you’re sorry you tried, now, aren’t you? It’s a pity you were out when we came calling.

I was going to kill you, but this is so much better. Now you can live with the consequences of your actions.

Your pretty lady friend begged for her life. She pissed herself when she saw the gun. Just thought you’d want to know that.

No one leaves without paying a price, Luca. Not even you.

Warmest Regards

Antonio Granata

I'd never experienced such raw hatred before. I was going to kill Antonio slowly. He'd beg for mercy, but none would be in the offering.

"Maddie. What the fuck have I done to you?" I whispered out loud.

The light breeze carried my words away—I knew there would be no answer in return. No advice. No forgiveness. Our lives had changed in an instant, and I could never go back to where I was with Maddie, the love of my life.

What would she do when she found out that I was responsible for her beloved La's death? Her baby sister was dead because I was stupid enough to think that my past wouldn't catch up with me. I should have known better.

I had to talk to someone. The only person I could think of was Nico. He'd be the only other man on the entire planet who would understand. I took out my cell phone and dialed his number.

"Hey, Luca. Good to hear from you," he answered, upbeat.

"Nico," my voice cracked.

"Luca. What's wrong?"

"Madison's sister is dead, Nico. He killed her," was all I managed.

"What? Who? Who killed her?"

"Antonio. He murdered Lauren. Shot her in the head like she was a rabid dog. Oh, fuck! I don't know what to do, Nico."

"Oh, Lord."

We were silent for a few seconds.

"Are you sure, Luca? How do you know it's Antonio?"

“Because the sadistic son of a bitch left a note next to her body.”

“Bastard! What did it say?”

I read the note to Nico.

“You’re in danger, Luca. You’ve got to get Madison and her family and get the hell out of there. Don’t believe Antonio’s bullshit story about being even. He won’t rest until you’re dead.”

“He won’t risk it now. There’s too much heat on us after the hit. But, I agree. That mother fucker must die.”

“How can I help you, Luca?”

“Keep your ears to the ground, please, Nico. Let me know if you find out anything. I want the name of the shooter. Granata won’t do his own dirty work.”

“Okay. I’ll see what I can dig up. In the meantime, keep your eyes and ears open.”

“I will.”

“Luca,” Nico said before I hung up, “I’m sorry about Lauren.”

“Yeah.”

I sat there for an hour before I had the strength to go back to the doctor’s to fetch Maddie. My heart rate shot up when I saw a cop car in the parking area. The cops weren’t idiots. They’d soon find out that Lauren’s killing wasn’t a robbery gone wrong. I prayed that they wouldn’t say anything to the Harris family. Not yet. Not until I’ve had some time to digest what had happened and come up with a solution.

A cop was talking to Maddie when I got to the room in which the doctor had suggested she stay for an hour or so after she’d arrived. He was worried about her after she’d hit her head so hard when she fainted.

I stood, quietly, at the door. I wanted to hear the conversation between them.

“No! Of course, my sister didn’t have any enemies. She was the sweetest person anyone could ever hope to meet.”

“Okay,” he said calmly, in no way offended by her spirited answer. “Does she have a boyfriend? An ex?”

“No, not really.”

“Why was your sister at your house?”

“Her apartment flooded. She was staying with us until...” Madison’s voice faded as if she was suddenly far away.

“Who knew that she was there?”

“How the hell should I know? Her friends, I guess. Why are you asking me these ridiculous questions, Detective? Shouldn’t you be out there looking for the burglars?”

“I have to ask, Miss Harris. You say that you and your fiancé don’t have any enemies, so I have to ask about Lauren.”

The cop’s expression told me that he wasn’t as sure as Maddie seemed to be that burglary was the motive for the killing.

“I can assure you, Miss Harris, our people are out there doing all they can. These are standard questions in a situation like this.”

“I’m sorry, Detective,” Madison said softly. “I didn’t mean to imply that you weren’t doing your job.”

“It’s alright. I understand this is incredibly difficult for you. But, can you think of anyone who may have wanted to hurt your sister—even if the mere thought of it seems ridiculous.”

“No. I can’t think of any reason why someone would want to...hurt Lauren.”

Clearly, Madison found the word murder too difficult to utter.

“Here’s my card. Please, call me directly if you remember anything.”

“Thank you,” she said and took it from him. “Have you spoken to my parents?”

“I’m going there now.”

“Please, be gentle. My mother is in a terrible state.”

“Of course. Will you ask Mr. Gambrelli to call me, please? I need to ask him a few questions, too. ”

“I will.”

I slipped into the bathroom before the cop could see me. I didn’t want to talk to him. He’d read my guilty face like a cheap novel. I waited a few minutes until I was sure he was gone before I went into Maddie’s room.

“Luca. Where did you go?”

“Hi, Maddie. Sorry, I had to go for a drive to clear my head after the awful shock. You were sleeping.”

“The detective was just here. He wants you to call him. He asked me the most ridiculous questions.”

“Such as?”

“Like, did Lauren have enemies? How fucking ridiculous. He even asked if I knew if someone wanted to harm you or me. It was obviously a burglary gone wrong. There have been a few in our area.”

“I’m sure they have to ask.”

“That’s what *he* said.”

“Has anyone called Beth?”

“Beth! Oh, Luca. I don’t know. I can’t, babe. I just can’t.”

“It’s okay, my love. I’ll call her.”

“Thank you, Luca. I don’t know what I’d do if you weren’t here,” she said and wrapped her arms around my neck.

If guilt were a foul smell, the stench would have repelled Madison instantly. I could barely stand the smell myself.

MADISON

“Are you ready, my love?”

Luca was standing at the bedroom door. I sat at my dresser, staring into the mirror. I'd gotten stuck there, thinking of the times Lauren and I used to sneak into Mama's room and raid her makeup drawer.

For as long as I could remember, Mama kept her perfumed dusting powder in a glass jar on her dresser. Lauren and I would watch in awe as she dabbed on the talcum powder with a fluffy, white applicator that looked like a tiny, round pillow with a silk ribbon.

We'd thought for sure Mama would skin us alive when Lauren dropped the glass jar on the floor once and it shattered into a sea of shiny shards. We were sick with worry until Mama solved the problem of our sticky little fingers by buying Lauren and me our very own powder jars.

“Maddie,” Luca said again and touched my shoulder.

“What?” I answered, still in a daze.

“Are you ready to go? We'll be late.”

“I can't do this, Luca,” I whispered.

“It's Lauren's funeral, my love. I know you won't want to miss it. It's okay. I'll be with you the entire time. I'll hold your hand.”

I wanted to cry, but I had no tears left. Instead, where life used to course through, there was now only a sense of

numbness. I knew Luca was right. I would never forgive myself if I didn't have one more chance to say goodbye to La.

“Okay.”

I didn't wear black often. The only reason I had a black pants suit in my closet was that I'd needed it once for a shoot. Who knew what color was fitting for such an occasion? The thought of placing a vibrant young woman in her twenties into a box and burying her in the ground had no fitting color palette.

I made my way to the car but grabbed a bottle of water from the fridge on my way past. I was starting to feel like a raisin from all the water I'd expelled through tears.

“Fuck it,” I said under my breath.

“What's wrong, Maddie?” Luca asked.

“Remind me to ask Maria to clear out La's food from the fridge. That salad is growing legs.”

“Okay, babe.”

“Right. Let's get this over with.”

Perhaps if I sounded tough and callous, I'd eventually feel the part. What choice did I have? I had to be strong for Mama and Dad.

Luca was quiet. He seemed distant. Death did odd things to the ones who were left behind. I imagined Lauren's sudden and unexpected death triggered childhood memories for him. My poor Luca. The dull pain inside of me throbbed on, thumping louder as the hour to the funeral procession trickled away.

“I'm sorry, Luca,” I said while we were driving to the church.

“Sorry?”

“I'm sure this is painful for you too. Your past and all.”

I could tell I'd hit a nerve. His knuckles grew white as he gripped the steering wheel.

“You have nothing to apologize for, Maddie.”

“I’ve been so immersed in my pain I haven’t considered your feelings, babe. Are you okay?” I asked and placed my hand over his.

Luca glanced at me for a moment. His eyes radiated pain.

“You can talk to me, you know,” I said.

“I’m worried about you, my love. That’s all. I’m fine.”

I wasn’t going to pick away at the scab, so I let it go. We drove the rest of the way in silence.

“So many cars,” I sighed when we drove into the church grounds. “I hope no one talks to me,” I said wistfully, knowing full well I was about to be bombarded.

“Just say the word if it gets too much for you, Maddie. I’ll take over.”

“I love you so much, Luca.”

“I love you more,” he said quietly, then got out of the car.

Beth pulled up next to us and parked. She dabbed her eyes and got out.

“Hi, sweetheart,” she said and hugged me tightly. “Luca.”

“Hi, Beth,” I said and hung onto her warm embrace.

“Ready?” she asked me.

“Not really, but let’s go.”

“Maddie, I’m going to find your dad,” Luca said.

“Okay, babe. I’ll see you inside.”

Luca kissed me and walked away.

“How’s he doing?” Beth asked me once he was out of earshot.

“I think all this has triggered childhood memories for him. He’s quiet.”

“Poor man.”

“Yeah. I don’t know what it must have felt like when he lost both his parents, but I know how I feel now that Lauren is gone. The pain is indescribable.”

“I know. I’m so sorry, Maddie.”

“Thanks, Beth. Mama’s in a trance. She doesn’t speak, she refuses to eat. I’m very worried about her.”

“I’m going to suggest to your dad that I move in with them for a few weeks so I can keep an eye on her. Your poor dad can’t deal with it on his own. He has his own loss to mourn.”

“Thank you, Beth. What a wonderful idea. I’d do it, but…”

“Nonsense. You are struggling as much as she is. Don’t worry about it. I’ve got this.”

“I love you, Aunt Beth,” I said and squeezed her hand.

“I love you too, my angel. Let’s go inside and find your mom.”

“Okay.”

The church pews were packed. The front row was reserved for family, so I made a beeline for it and sat down next to Mama and Dad. Luca was there too. I zoned out while the minister read the eulogy.

I vaguely remembered standing up and saying a few words and the next thing I remembered was standing next to the coffin at the grave site as it was lowered into the earth.

Mama was whimpering softly. Dad was shaking as he cried silently. Beth, Luca, and I were motionless—caught up in an invisible monster’s large hand, suffocating as it squeezed tighter and tighter.

The family had decided to hold the memorial at a venue away from the house. That way, if Mama was tired, she and Dad could leave without worrying about the other mourners. Lauren was so beloved. Her friends from school and university had nothing but amazing things to say about her. All of them were devastated at her sudden loss.

After an hour I asked Luca to take me home—or rather, to the hotel we'd been staying at since Lauren's murder. I couldn't face going back to the house. Once there, I took a sedative and climbed into bed. I was exhausted. I hadn't slept much since the murder, so my body was running on fumes.

I woke up around noon the following day. My head felt thick. I was alone in the hotel suite. I called room service and ordered coffee and toast. Then I called Luca on his cell phone.

“Hi, hon. How are you feeling?”

“Hey, babe. Okay, thanks. Where are you?”

“I was up early, so I went for a run. You were still sleeping when I got back and I didn't want to disturb you, so I came to the office.”

“Oh, okay.”

“Would you like me to fetch you and we'll grab a bite to eat?”

“I ordered some toast from room service. I think I'll hang around here for the rest of the day. If you don't mind.”

“Of course not. It's a sunny day. Why don't you lie by the pool? The sun will do you good.”

“Okay. I'll see you later, my love.”

“Please, call me if you need anything.”

“I will.”

“I love you, Maddie.”

“I love you too.”

LUCA

I couldn't look at Madison without feeling guilty. Everything she said and did was a stab to the heart. Worst of all was that she was feeling sorry for me. For me! The asshole responsible for her sister's murder.

Everything inside of me told me to run—cut my losses before I had to face more collateral damage in my war with the past. What if it had been Madison? The thought sent chills through me. Lauren was bad enough, but I would lose myself to insanity if I'd found Maddie in the state her sister was in when I'd kneeled next to her lifeless body.

I'd felt lower than whale shit on the bottom of the ocean when Caroline thanked me for being there for her Maddiebug. I felt utter shame when Michael shook my hand and called me son. If only they knew how wrong they were about me.

I wanted to go back to the house to look for clues as to the signature of the hitman, but the police were keeping an eye on the place. The last thing I needed was an in-depth investigation into my past.

As it is, I was worried about the fingerprints they'd lifted. Mine were all over the house. I was being ridiculous. I was never arrested, so my fingerprints weren't in CODIS. I thanked God for that. Even so, I had a guilty conscious and fantastical imagination.

All I could do was stay on my toes. I was exhausted. Keeping secrets was a tiring endeavor.

“I was so sorry to hear about Madison’s sister, Boss,” Sandy offered when I’d arrived at the office that morning.

“Thank you, Sandy.”

I was grateful that she’d left the subject alone after that. I needed a break from it. Instead, she and I went through the purchase logs and arranged the delivery of completed cars.

My bank balance was looking healthy. I was tempted to take the cash and Maddie, and leave. Go somewhere no one knew us or would even think to look for us. But, how? How would I explain to Maddie why I wanted to run?

No. I was stuck.

My cell phone rang. It was Nico.

“Hey, Luca. How are you holding up?”

“Barely. Any news?”

“Yeah. Quite a bit. I found your shooter.”

“That was fast. Who is it?”

“A guy Antonio’s been using to settle old scores. Do you remember Pedro? He worked for Antonio back in the day.”

“You mean before he grew too big for his loafers?”

“Yeah.”

“Vaguely. Why?”

“Well, the story goes that Pedro had a thing for Antonio’s girl. The two of them got together and disappeared. They got married and had a couple of kids. Antonio found them recently and had Pedro and the woman whacked. He used the same hitman on Lauren.”

“Son of a bitch. He has no soul. Who’s the guy?”

“A real fucking psycho by the name of Vaughn.”

“No last name?”

“No. The asshole thinks he’s a celebrity, so no last name.”

“Bit of a Madonna, is he?”

“Yeah, apparently so, but without the pointy tits and dancer’s legs.”

“Where can I get my hands on this Vaughn?”

“He’s a nasty piece of work. Lives at Antonio’s. All due respect, Luca, but you’re not a hitman. You can’t take this guy on by yourself. Not without backup.”

“I know. Will you help me, Nico?”

“I’ll talk to Sam. I made her a promise when we got married. You know that. I can’t do it behind her back.”

“I know, Nico. And, believe me, I would never ask you to betray Samantha. I love her too.”

“Okay. I’ll talk to her and get back to you.”

“Thanks, Nico.”

I had to make a move. I couldn’t allow Antonio to get away with what he’d done. I had to make sure he never hurt anyone I cared about again. But, first I had to ensure Madison and her parents’ safety. That part wasn’t going to be easy. I couldn’t tell them why I was worried about their safety—not without giving myself away. Fuck!

I’d have to talk to Maddie about staying with her parents while I went back to deal with Antonio and his henchman, Vaughn. I didn’t foresee any problems in that regard. She would understand my reticence to leave her on her own.

I planned on selling the house; neither one of us wanted to go back there again. It had lost its tranquil allure—it had become a house of death.

My phone rang again.

“Hello,” I answered.

“Mr. Gambrelli, it’s Detective Cross.”

“Hello, Detective. Do you have any news yet? How can I help?”

My voice was easy without being flippant, and stern without sounding panicky. I thought it was the best tone under

the circumstances.

“How is the family doing?”

“Struggling, as I’m sure you can imagine.”

“I don’t suppose you’ve thought of anyone with a motive to hurt Lauren?”

“I thought it was a burglary, Detective?”

“Oh, it probably was, but as I said before, we’re covering all the bases.”

“I see. No. Madison and her parents know of no one.”

“And you?” he asked in a peculiar tone I didn’t much care for.

“Me? Why me?”

“Well, it did take place in your home, Mr. Gambrelli. Not much was taken. Why would someone break in and then steal hardly anything? Unless they didn’t find what or who they were looking for.”

“Detective, I’ve told you this many times. I don’t know who killed Lauren. None of us do.”

“Okay. I’ll call if I have any leads. Thank you.”

Cross hung up. My heart was beating out of my chest. Was he suspicious of me for a reason or was he simply doing his job the way he was taught to? Everyone knows that a murdered woman is usually done in by a spouse or a boyfriend or someone close to her. Random killings are uncommon, statistically speaking.

I needed a drink.

It was 6 pm when I left work. Maddie was in the shower when I got back to the hotel suite. I longed to hold her and make love to her, but her pain and my guilt formed a chasm between us.

“Hi, Maddie. Did you have a restful day, my love?”

“Hey, babe. It was okay. I had a swim and lay by the pool for an hour. You were right. I do feel a bit better.”

“Where would you like to go for dinner?”

“Let’s order in.”

“Are you sure? Don’t you feel like getting out for a bit? You’ve been in here for a week now.”

“Don’t exaggerate. It’s been four days. Besides, I thought you and I could relax and watch a movie.”

Maddie attempted to appear upbeat but I could tell from her eyes that she was sad. She’d crawled into her shell and nothing short of a crane would get her out again until she was ready, so I didn’t push.

“Sounds great. Chinese? Indian? Italian?”

“Pizza. Lots of cheese and pepperoni.”

“You got it, my love.”

MADISON

“I’m not going to break, you know,” I said.

“What do you mean?” Luca replied quizzically.

“We haven’t made love since Lauren’s death.”

“I didn’t want to pressure you, my love.”

“Pressure me? What’s wrong with you, babe? You’re not yourself.”

“Your sister was murdered, Maddie. None of us are ourselves.”

“I get that. But, you’re distant.”

“I don’t know what you want me to say, Madison.”

“Huh. Madison, eh? Okay. I’m sorry I brought it up. Never mind.”

“Why are you angry?”

“I’m not angry. I’m frustrated. I miss the way we used to be. Everything is a fucking mess,” I said with a shaky voice, barely holding it together.

“Don’t cry, Maddie. I’m sorry. You’re right. I’ve been distant. But, I thought that was what you needed—some space.”

“That’s the last thing I need. I feel so raw inside. I miss being close to you. Honestly, it’s the security of us that’s kept me from imploding altogether.”

Luca took me into his arms and held me tightly. His nearness felt like home.

“I miss you, Luca,” I whispered.

“I’m here.”

“Make love to me.”

Luca kissed me tenderly. We made love, and it was the best I’d felt since we’d discovered Lauren’s body. Afterward, I fell asleep while I lay in his strong arms. It was a sweet sleep—one without nightmares.

I woke up and looked at my watch. It was 11 pm. Luca was watching sports.

“Hey you,” he said and kissed my forehead.

“Hey. It feels like I slept for days. I can’t believe it isn’t morning.”

“Yeah, you were out like a light. How are you feeling?”

“Relaxed,” I said and stretched out. “I’m starving.”

“I have that effect on women,” he smirked.

“Ha-ha. I’m going to call downstairs and order a burger. Can I get you anything?”

“I could eat.”

I called room service and ordered two cheeseburgers with fries. I practically inhaled the food when it came.

“Ugh! I’m so full,” I groaned afterward.

“Did you even chew?” Luca chuckled.

“A little,” I shrugged. “You are so cute,” I said and kissed him on the tip of his nose.

“Maddie, I wanted to talk to you about something.”

“Sounds serious. Is everything okay?”

“I know this isn’t the best time, Maddie, but I have to go out of town for a week or so.”

No. I didn’t want to be alone. It was ridiculous, but I felt vulnerable. How was I going to explain that to him without the risk of looking like a child?

“Where are you going?” I asked as I put on my best nonchalant face.

“I have to meet with a very important buyer. I’ve been putting it off, but if I don’t go I’ll lose him.”

“Oh.”

“Will you be okay?”

“I guess.”

“Are you mad?”

“I’m fine.”

“You don’t sound fine, Maddie.”

“What do you want me to say? If I tell you to stay and you lose your client, you’ll resent me. If I tell you to go, I’ll be miserable. I can’t win, can I?”

“I’m sorry, my love. You know I would stay if I could. But I promise I’ll be back as soon as I can.”

“I feel like a bloody child,” I said and sighed.

“Why?”

“I’m whining. I hate whining. And, most of all, I hate feeling like a weakling. I’ve always been strong, Luca. What the hell is wrong with me?”

“You’ve been through something horrible, Maddie. I’d be surprised if you weren’t feeling this way.”

“I guess you’re right.”

“I will feel much better if you stay with your parents while I’m away.”

“I’ll be fine here.”

“Please, Madison. I can’t go if I’m not satisfied that you’re safe.”

“Fine. I’ll call Mama in the morning and tell her.”

“Great. Thank you.”

“Did you call the agent about selling the house?”

“Yeah. Let’s find a new home when I get back. Okay?”

“Okay.”

Luca switched the TV off. We lay together in the dark for a while.

“I’m going to miss you,” I said.

“I’m missing you already,” he sighed.

“Poor Milo must be so confused. Dad says she sits at the door at night, waiting for us.”

“She’s going to be so happy to have you back.”

“I’ve missed her. I miss the way our lives used to be, Luca.”

“I miss us, too.”

I felt a tear spilling from my eye. It ran into my ear.

“I’m so sad all the time, Luca. Does it get better?”

“Time dulls the ache,” he said.

“I hope so because I don’t know if I’m going to survive this pain. It’s overwhelming.”

“I know, my love. I’m so sorry you have to go through this. I wish I could take away your pain.”

“Me too. Goodnight, Luca.”

“Sleep well, my love.”

* * *

I was aware that Luca was kissing my eyes.

“Wakey-wakey, Sleeping Beauty.”

“What time is it?”

“Seventy-thirty. I’ll drive with you to your parents’ place before I hit the road. Did you want to stop by the house and fetch some clean clothes?”

“I don’t want to, but I’d better.”

“It will be okay, Maddie. You don’t have to go through the living room.”

“Thank God.”

“Can I order you a croissant and coffee while you shower?” Luca smiled.

“Yes, please.”

“Okay.”

I ate after my shower and soon Luca and I were on our way to the house. I felt queasy as we pulled up to the driveway. The yellow tape had been taken down. No police cars, flashing lights, or sirens, yet still, I felt nauseous.

Luca switched off the engine and turned to face me.

“Ready?”

I nodded, unwilling to open my mouth, just in case the croissant made a reappearance. Luca and I entered the house through the back door. I moved slowly, on shaky legs toward the bedroom. I was finding it hard to breathe.

“Are you okay, Maddie?”

“Not really. Let’s just get this over with as soon as possible, please.”

“Of course.”

The living room was pulling me toward it like an electromagnet. I didn’t want to go there but it was the place where I’d seen La for the last time—before she looked like some kind of porcelain doll. The makeup artist at the funeral home hadn’t captured my sister’s natural beauty at all. I supposed it was hard to capture life.

“Are you about done?” Luca asked.

“Yeah, just a second.”

I opened my shoe closet, picked out a few pairs, and put them into a bag.

“Ready.”

Luca started in the direction of the back door.

“Wait.”

“What’s wrong?”

“I have to.”

“What?”

“One more time. I have to go there just one more time.”

“I don’t think that’s a good idea, Maddie.”

“It’s a terrible idea. But, I have to.”

“Okay. Would you like me to come with you?”

“Yes, please.”

He took my hand and we made our way to the living room together. The carpet was clean. Luca had replaced it as soon as the CSI was done collecting evidence. The room was spotless. Almost as if the nightmare had never happened.

“I guess this is what they mean when they say that life goes on,” I said sardonically.

Luca didn’t say anything. He simply took me into his arms and held me.

“Are you ready to go?”

“Yes. Let’s get the hell out of here.”

LUCA

Leaving Madison behind while I flew to Nico's was hell. My paranoid mind cooked up an endless array of torturing scenarios—and all of them ended in her death. But, I didn't have a choice. I had to go if I was going to stop Antonio and his murderous minion from wreaking more havoc in our lives.

I decided on a flight that would land at night. At least, under the cover of darkness, I could attempt to go unnoticed. It was a long shot but it made me feel better, nonetheless.

The arrivals lounge was buzzing. Our flight landed early, so I decided to throw back a few shots before meeting Nico, who was on his way to the airport to fetch me. I wore a hat and glasses and blended into the crowd. My cell phone pinged after I'd finished two double whiskeys. It was Nico. He was nearing the pickup zone, so I left the bar to meet him.

After a spell of cloak and dagger headlights flickering, I found his car.

“Jump in, Buddy. I don't want to hang around here for too long. You never know who could be watching,” he said when I opened the door.

“Thanks for picking me up, Nico. Man, it's good to see you.”

“Same here. Wish it weren't under these circumstances.”

“Agreed.”

“How's Madison?”

“Struggling. I’ve never hated myself so much, Nico.”

“Nonsense. You couldn’t have predicted this in a million years, Luca. This is way beyond eye for an eye. Antonio is a sick fuck. It’s not your fault.”

“I wish I could believe that.”

“You’re here now. Let’s see what we can do to make you feel better.”

“There’s only one cure for what I’ve got, Nico and that’s to wipe Antonio and Vaughn off the face of the earth.”

“No arguments here.”

“Did you talk to Sam?”

“Yeah.”

“How’d that go?”

“Not great. I’ll be in the doghouse for years to come, but she understands. It’s crazy how much you mean to her. You’re lucky I’m not the jealous type,” Nico smiled.

“Sam is one in a million. You’re a lucky man.”

“I’m trying to keep it that way. So no heroics, okay? If something happens to either of us, my wife will skin us alive.”

“I’ve missed you guys so much.”

“You’re not gonna break into song are you?”

“Shut up and drive, smartmouth.”

After a succession of twists and turns and an endless array of bushy knolls, the car’s headlights illuminated Nico’s house.

“Your place is as gorgeous as I remember.”

“We love it.”

The front door opened and Sam walked toward the car. She was her stunningly beautiful self as she glided across to us.

“Luca,” she said with a smile. “It’s so good to see you.”

“Hi, Sam.”

We hugged for a while.

“You look well, Sam. Happy.”

“I am. The kids keep me on my toes.”

“And this one?” I said and gestured toward Nico.

“Yeah, that’s what I said. The kids,” she smirked.

“Back to the kitchen, you,” Nico jested.

“Barefoot and pregnant is how they like us,” she said and rolled her eyes. “Are you hungry, Luca?”

“Starving.”

“Come on then. Let’s get you settled in.”

I followed Sam into the house while Nico grabbed my bag from the trunk. The house was quiet.

“Are the kids asleep?” I asked.

“Out like lights. Thank goodness. Gives me time to hear myself thinking,” Sam sighed.

Nico brought in my bag and took it to the spare room.

“Hon, will you open a good bottle of red for us, please, while I warm up the sauce?” Sam asked Nico when he returned to the kitchen.

“Sure, babe. Merlot okay?”

“Great. Thanks. Make yourself at home, Luca.”

“Thanks, Sam. I’ll be right back. I want to freshen up before we eat.”

“You know the room,” Nico said and went to the wine cellar.

“Yeah, thanks.”

“Luca,” Sam said before I left the kitchen.

“Yes?”

“Are you okay?”

“I will be soon.”

The spare room was beautifully decorated. Sam knew her way around a color palette. Her interior design business was famous around the globe. Between her skills as a decorator and Nico's talent as an artist, their home was worthy of any design magazine cover.

I washed my hands and splashed water onto my face. I decided to give Madison a call before dinner. I wanted to let her know that I was safe and most importantly, that I was thinking about her.

"Hey, Maddie," I said when she answered the call.

"Hi, babe. So good to hear from you."

"How are things at home?"

"Okay, I guess. Mama is quiet. Dad's been tinkering with his bikes all day. Beth came around for a late lunch."

"How is she?"

"Amazing. I don't know what Mama would have done without her sister."

Madison's voice crackled slightly when she said the word sister. I changed the subject in the hopes of distracting her.

"The agent called me while I was at the airport."

"Oh?"

"Yeah, she said she has a client who's very interested in buying. He's talking about making an offer."

"Good."

"Anyway, I'm beat from traveling. I'll call you in the morning. Okay?"

"Okay, babe. Sleep well."

"You too, Maddie. I love you."

"Love you too."

I left my phone on the bed and joined Nico and Sam in the kitchen.

“Take a seat at the table, boys,” Sam called. “Dinner’s ready.”

“Smells wonderful,” I said while Nico poured the wine.

“It’s Nico’s special recipe,” Sam grinned. “He lets me borrow it every now and again.”

“Only on special occasions,” Nico added.

“Watch out, the dish is hot,” she said and placed it in the middle of the table.

“Is it as fiery as I remember?” I asked.

“Of course,” Nico answered.

I dished a large portion onto my plate.

“To good friends,” Nico said and held up his glass.

“To family,” Sam added.

“To vengeance,” I offered.

Neither Nico nor Sam commented on my toast.

“How is Madison, Luca?” Sam asked.

“She’s struggling.”

“I can only imagine what she must be going through. I’m so sorry for your loss, Luca,” she said softly and placed her hand over mine.

“I want to thank you, Sam.”

“For?”

“I know how you feel about Nico getting involved in this world again. I am so sorry. I want you to know that I never would have asked for his help if I could manage it on my own.”

“I know that, Luca. Nico is a big boy. He and I have talked it over and I understand that he wants to help you. Promise me you are going to be careful.”

“I promise.”

“Okay. Let’s eat.”

“You and I will talk tomorrow, Luca,” Nico said while we were eating. “Let’s use tonight to catch up.”

“That would be great.”

Dinner was delicious and the conversation flowed. I realized how much I’d missed the pair. There was no substitute for loved ones. I swore to myself that I would protect Nico with my life. I wasn’t about to allow Antonio to destroy another family. Over my dead body.

MADISON

“Good morning, Miss Harris.”

“Hello, Detective.”

“Could you meet me down at the station today? I wanted to talk to you about something.”

“Why? Has there been a development in the case?”

“I don’t have a suspect yet if that’s what you’re asking. But, I did want to run something by you.”

“Okay. What time?”

“Let’s say 10 am.”

“Okay, I’ll see you then.”

“Thank you.”

I wondered why Detective Cross wanted to talk to me. Honestly, I’d given up hope of the cops ever finding Lauren’s killer. They were no closer to making an arrest than they were the day of her murder.

I arrived at the police station at 9:50 and waited for Cross outside his office.

“Thank you for coming,” he said when he opened the door at exactly 10 am.

I sat down at his desk.

“Can I offer you a coffee, Miss Harris?”

“No, thank you, Detective. What is this about?”

I wanted him to get straight to the point.

“We’ve been investigating your sister’s homicide as an intended murder, rather than a burglary gone wrong.”

At first, I didn’t compute what he was saying. Then, slowly, the penny dropped.

“What do you mean?”

“I’m saying that Lauren’s murder has the earmarkings of a hit, rather than one where she may have surprised a would-be burglar.”

“But, why? Who, in God’s name, would want to murder Lauren? It doesn’t make any sense, Detective Cross.”

“Nothing of value was taken from the home. That in itself is a red flag. The house is fairly isolated, so the burglar would have had plenty of time and opportunity to kill Miss Harris and then loot the home of valuables without the fear of being discovered.”

I stared at the cop while he spoke. It was as if my mind had gone into neutral.

“Then, there’s the way in which your sister was killed. I don’t mean to frighten you, Miss Harris, but it was a clean shot. That takes skill.”

“What are you saying?”

“I want you to consider the possibility that your sister was the intended target of a hit.”

“You’ve got to be joking, Detective Cross. Lauren was a university student, not a drug lord. Why the hell would anyone want her dead?”

“That’s what we’re trying to figure out. I was hoping that armed with this information, you would give it some careful thought. Are you certain that there’s no one Lauren had recently met who moves in criminal circles? A new relationship, perhaps, that she’d mentioned in passing but not made too much of?”

“I honestly can’t recall any such scenario.”

“We spoke to a few of Lauren’s university friends. One of them mentioned that she mentioned a new romantic interest. Did she say anything to you about him?”

“Lauren spoke to me about all sorts of people. Do you have a name?”

“I believe it was a fellow student by the name of Chad Bentley. Does the name ring a bell?”

“No, it doesn’t. Who is he?”

“I’m sorry, but I’m not at liberty to discuss him in detail. Not until he is cleared as a suspect.”

“He’s a suspect?”

“Everyone is a potential suspect until cleared, Miss Harris.”

“Fine. Is there anything else, Detective?”

“No. Thank you for coming in. I’ll keep in touch.”

“Thank you.”

My head was spinning when I left the station. I called Dad from my car and told him I wanted to talk to him, away from the house. He suggested we meet at his club, so I drove straight there and waited for him. I sat down in the lounge and ordered a coffee.

“Maddie. Is everything okay?” Dad asked when he got there.

“Hi, Dad. I just had a very disturbing meeting with Detective Cross.”

“What did he say?”

“Apparently, he said they’re not convinced Lauren was killed by a burglar. They’re investigating one of Lauren’s fellow students, Chad Bentley.”

“For what?”

“Cross said the killing looked like a professional hit.”

“That is insane, Maddie.”

“That’s what I said.”

“Who is this Chad guy?”

“I have no idea. Lauren never mentioned him to me.”

“I’ll make a few calls. I’d like to talk to him.”

“So would I.”

“Don’t tell your mother about this, please. She’s in a state as it is.”

“That’s why I asked you here instead of talking to you about it at home.”

“I’ll call my investigator.”

I wasn’t going to wait for Dad’s PI to find dirt on Chad. After our meeting, I headed for the university. If Bentley was a thug, I was going to find out for myself.

The fact that Lauren lived off campus made it easier for her to have secrets. Campus life is pretty much everyone’s business. Lauren had always preferred to have her privacy. My best option was to talk to her closest fellow student, Becky.

I found her at her dorm.

“Madison. What a lovely surprise. I wasn’t expecting to see you,” she smiled.

“Hi, Becky. I’m sorry for showing up unexpectedly. Can I come in?”

Becky looked at her watch.

“Uhh, sure. I’ve got half an hour before I have to leave for class. Come in. Please, take a seat. Can I get you something to drink?”

“No thanks, Becky. I won’t stay long.”

“Okay.”

“Becky, do you know Chad Bentley?”

“Sure. He finished his degree last year. I think he’s doing his Masters at the moment. Why?”

“Did Lauren know him?”

“Yeah. Why? What’s going on?”

“I spoke to the detective on Lauren’s case today, and he seems to think that Chad and Lauren were romantically involved. Is that right?”

“Not that I know of. I know he asked her out a few times, but she told me he wasn’t really her speed. Who would have told the cops about Chad?”

“He said someone from the university mentioned it to him.”

“Well, you know how it goes. Uni is a lot like high school. Lots of gossip. I don’t know who his source is but it’s nonsense.”

“Are you sure, Becky?”

“Of course. Lauren would have told me if Chad, or any other guy for that matter, was bugging her. Besides, she was so busy with her studies, I doubt she had time to scratch her ass, never mind dating.”

“That’s what I thought.”

“Did the cop say why they aren’t investigating it as a burglary gone wrong?”

“Yeah, but I think they’re grasping at straws. I’d like to talk to Chad, anyway. Do you know where I can find him?”

“Sure. He’s one of our professor’s assistants. I’ll get you the schedule.”

“Thanks, Becky.”

“Sure thing, Madison. How are you coping?”

“It’s hard. We miss her so much.”

“Lauren was one of my best friends. Her loss has left a terrible void,” Becky said softly and wiped away a tear.

“I’m sorry, Becky. It’s hard for everyone who knew her.”

“I’ll fetch the schedule for you.”

I left Becky’s place with the schedule in hand. I wasn’t going anywhere until I’d spoken to Chad.

The coffee shop on campus was a festive place. Excitable students gathered in their clicks— much like high school—with the popular ones at the forefront of the chatter. I ordered a coffee and a sandwich and sat down near a large group of noisy students.

I had no idea what I was going to say to Chad Bentley. Cross would probably have a shit fit if he knew what I was about to do. But I didn't care. If Chad had anything, no matter how small, to do with Lauren's death, I would pull it out of him.

And God help him if he had.

LUCA

I snuck out of the house early before anyone was awake. I had to run to clear my head. Nico's property was enormous. I crisscrossed trails for an hour before I arrived back at the house. The kitchen light was on. Nico was making coffee while Sam was preparing the kids' school lunches.

"Good morning," Nico smiled when I came in the back door.

"Hello, Earlybird," Sam said.

"Hi, there."

"Coffee?" Nico offered.

"I'd love one, thanks."

"Dark and bitter. Right?"

"Yup sounds about right," I sighed.

"Better add a double shot of vodka, hon," Sam called from the pantry.

The sounds of paws against a wooden surface distracted me from my pity party.

"Hey, Blue! How are you, my boy?" I said and scratched him behind his ears as he stood up against me.

"Down, Blue," Nico said in a stern voice. Blue capitulated.

"The boys can't be far behind," Sam said.

"They're not going to recognize me," I said with a modicum of regret.

“No, they were babies when you left,” Nico smiled.

“Probably a good thing. It’s safer that way,” I said.

“Ma! Cody’s got my baseball glove. He keeps taking mine because he can’t find his.”

A ten-year-old boy—a dead ringer for his father—in various states of undress, came spilling into the kitchen. He stopped dead in his tracks when he saw me.

“Oh, hello,” he said, ever so politely. “I’m sorry. I didn’t know we had company.”

“Tom, this is Luca, an old friend of ours,” Nico introduced us.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, Sir,” the boy said and reached out to shake my hand.

I raised an eyebrow at Nico before I shook the boy’s hand.

“Private education,” Nico grinned and winked.

“Good to meet you, Tom.”

Cody rushed in next. We repeated the ritual. Then followed Kyle. The triplets were mirror images of each other. I imagined their parents knew them apart, but I was struggling.

“Cereal or eggs?” Sam asked the three busy little people.

All three opted for cereal and after a frenetic breakfast, Sam shipped them off to school. Blue jumped into the SUV along with his accomplices.

“Wow! That was hectic,” I said when they’d gone.

“Welcome to the circus,” Nico chuckled. “Besides the chaos, it’s amazing being a dad. I love it.”

“I can tell. You and Sam are blessed.”

“Indeed. Why don’t you pop into the shower and I’ll get Tony on the line? It’s time we got down to business.”

“Good idea.”

“I’ll make some eggs and toast in the meantime.”

“Thanks, Nico.”

“Sure thing, Buddy.”

* * *

“It’s good to see you, Tony.”

“Likewise, Luca. I’m sorry to hear about your trouble.”

“Thanks. I appreciate your input, Tony. I’m sorry you are being dragged into this.”

“Antonio is scum. He’s had it coming to him for years. I want to help.”

“Have you spoken to anyone in the Barone family yet?” Nico asked me.

“No, not yet. I don’t want to start a war. Besides, I’ve been gone for so long now that I don’t know who I can and can’t trust. I can’t afford to risk someone tipping off Antonio or his assassin.”

“You’re right. Let’s leave them out of it for the meantime,” Tony agreed.

“I’ve been thinking,” Nico announced. “I’ve got a few ideas.”

The three of us spoke in the privacy of Nico’s home office for almost two hours before Tony left. Sam was back by then.

“I have to pop by the gallery for a few hours, Sam. Luca, will you excuse me for a while?”

“Of course.”

“No problem, babe. Luca and I will be fine. Oh, the boys are staying after school for play practice, so they won’t be here for dinner.”

“You mean we get to eat in relative peace tonight?”

“Exciting isn’t it?” she laughed.

Nico left and Sam and I went for a walk.

“I hope we get to meet Madison soon,” she said.

“She’s an amazing woman. You would like her.”

“How old is she?”

“Twenty-eight.”

“Has her sister’s murder put your wedding plans on hold?”

“Yeah. They’ll be off completely if she finds out it’s my fault.”

“You mean you haven’t told her?”

“I can’t do it, not yet.”

“Luca, you can’t build your future with Madison on a lie.”

“I know. But I want to tell her at the right time. I need to get rid of the monsters responsible for her sister’s murder first. Then maybe I can give her some small peace.”

“It’s never going to be a good time. You may have to face the possibility that the truth will push her away. But, rather now, before you have a family. She deserves to know the truth, Luca.”

“You’re probably right. I’ve been wrestling with this mess for weeks now. I’m raw with guilt. Every time I look into Maddie’s eyes or see her parents, I want to jump off a cliff. I know I have to come clean, but I can’t bring myself to tell her.”

“Where is she now?”

“She’s staying with her parents. It’s the safest place for her. Besides, Antonio thinks that Lauren was my girlfriend. If he keeps thinking that way, Maddie will be safe.”

“You’re playing with fire, Luca. Antonio isn’t a fool. He’s a giant asshole, but he’s no fool. He’ll find out sooner or later.”

“He won’t have that chance. I plan on getting rid of him before he can do any more damage.”

“Then you better do it soon. I take it Madison doesn’t know who Nico and I are—our history and all.”

“No. She thinks I’m seeing a buyer. I hate lying to her.”

“Luca, you’re a good guy. You always have been. You’ll do the right thing. I know you will.”

“I don’t know about good guy. I’ve done some pretty shitty things in my life. Loving Maddie has been the best part of my sorry life.”

“It will be okay, Luca. Have faith.”

“You and Nico have a wonderful life. I’m envious.”

“It started off a little rocky, too. But, look who I’m telling,” she smiled.

“Are you kidding? Your success story is what I hold onto when I think I’m about to lose my mind.”

“That’s sweet. What are her parents like? Do you get along?”

“Michael Harris is very protective of his daughters. He’s going to hate me for sure. Caroline is a Southern Belle. I can’t see her hating me any less. Frankly, I think I’m up shit creek without a paddle. Honestly, the best thing I can do at this stage is to kill Antonio and then disappear. That way, the Harris family will be safe.”

“Madison is already heartbroken, Luca. Can you imagine what she’ll feel if you suddenly drop off the face of the planet?”

“It would be better than knowing that her fiancé is the reason for her misery.”

“Better for whom?”

“Touché.”

“There’s no easy way out of this one, Luca.”

“There never is, Sam. There never bloody is.”

“Join the mob, they said. It will be fun, they said.”

“Funny.”

Sam and I went back to the house, where she did her Mom stuff and I mulled over the ideas Nico had presented to Tony and me. I missed Maddie. It was like a dull ache in my gut. I

was worried sick, too. What if Sam was right? What if Antonio found out about Madison before I had the opportunity to kill him?

There was no time to waste. Antonio had to be stopped.

MADISON

It was time to go to the office. I hadn't been there since Lauren's death. Poor Beth was running the show on her own, which wasn't fair as she was equally distraught. Plus, she'd been such amazing support for Mama.

The staff tried their best not to stare at me as if I were a leper. How did one greet someone who'd been the victim of such violence, anyway? Was there even a right way? Nevertheless, I made it to Beth's office without too much interference.

"Maddie," she said with surprise when she saw me.

"Hi, Beth."

"How are you feeling?"

"Like last week's meatloaf warmed up. You?"

"Busy, thankfully."

"I wanted to apologize, Beth."

"Apologize? For what?"

"For turning you into a slave. You've done so much, I don't know how I'm ever going to make it up to you."

"Don't be silly, Maddie. We're family. You'd do the same for me."

"Catch me up. What have I missed?"

"I will in a minute. But before I do, have you heard from Cross again?"

“Not since the wild goose chase into poor Chad Bentley’s possible involvement, no. I have no idea who came up with that bullshit story, but that person should be flogged in public.”

“Probably someone who got a shitty grade from him.”

“Probably.”

“How’s Luca?”

“He’s away for a few days. He made me promise I’d stay with Mama and Dad until he gets back.”

“Good for him. After all that’s happened, I wouldn’t allow you to stay alone either.”

“You guys are carrying on as if I’m a helpless child.”

“I know you’re a strong, independent woman, Maddie. But, until we know who killed La, you’re precious cargo.”

I smiled and squeezed Beth’s hand.

“How are things between you and Luca? This can’t be an easy time for either of you. I mean, a few weeks ago we were planning your wedding.”

“It’s been difficult. Luca is distant at times.”

“I suppose the trauma has unearthed things in his past. Does he ever talk about it?”

“His parents’ death? No. Not really.”

“Poor guy. Don’t worry, Maddie. He loves you. You guys are going to be fine.”

“I hope so. I do love him very much.”

“Of course you do. He’s perfect.”

“I’m worried about Mama, Beth. She is still so withdrawn. She cries herself to sleep practically every night. The doctor says we have to be patient with her and that everyone grieves differently, but I don’t know.”

“I can’t begin to imagine how she must feel. Lauren was her baby. No parent should outlive their child. It’s unnatural.”

I sat down and placed my head in my hands. I was exhausted again. The emotional turmoil had taken more out of my body than I ever could have predicted it would. I found myself unable to focus for long periods of time. I woke up tired and went to bed tired. The smallest challenge seemed like a mountain before me.

I found myself standing in the store the day before, staring at Lauren's favorite candy bar in the chocolate aisle. I had it in my hand to buy, then realized there was no one to buy it for. The girl at the checkout counter must have thought I was high or something.

I couldn't help crying, either. I'd be smiling one moment, and then the next thing I knew I'd be bawling like a baby.

"Maddie. Can I get you a coffee?"

"What? Uhh, no. Thanks, Beth. I'm okay."

"Alright. Enough loafing about like you're on holiday, missy. Time to put that brain of yours to good use," she said in her unmistakably take-charge way.

"Yes ma'am," I said.

"I've got some absolutely delish new male models I'd like you to look at. But, I have to warn you, there will be gushing, so prepare yourself."

I laughed at Beth. She was a pill. The two of us spent the rest of the day working side by side. I even managed another laugh or two.

"I'm beat," I said at 4 pm.

"You did well. Feel like popping out for a drink before going home?"

"Can I take a rain check? I want to spend some time with Mama."

"You've got it. Give her my love. Tell her I'll see her on Saturday."

"Will do. Thanks Beth," I said and hugged my aunt.

"Sure, kiddo. See you tomorrow?"

“Bright and early.”

“Get some rest. I don’t want you falling asleep tomorrow when we interview the new models.”

“No danger of that,” I winked.

“You kiss Luca with that mouth?”

“Amongst other things,” I grinned.

* * *

Luca called when I was all tucked up in bed.

“Hey, babe,” I said. “Brilliant timing. I’m all tucked in.”

“Are you torturing me on purpose?” he groaned.

“Maybe.”

“Missing you madly, Maddie. How was your day?”

“Good. I went to work. Spent the day with Beth.”

“How was it?”

“It felt good to be back to normal. Or whatever my new normal feels like.”

“I’m proud of you.”

“Thanks. How’s your trip going?”

“Good. I’m glad I came. It was needed.”

“I’m sorry I acted like a petulant kid when you told me you were going.”

“Don’t apologize, my love. You’ve been through hell. It’s perfectly understandable.”

“Detective Cross has given up on Chad Bentley as a possible suspect. The poor guy was a ball of nerves when he found out he was a suspect.”

“Wait. Did you talk to him?”

“Yeah.”

“Are you crazy? What if he was some sort of a madman? Promise me you’ll never do that again.”

“I talked to him on campus. In the cafeteria. It wasn’t a dark alley.”

“Even so. I can’t risk you getting hurt, Madison.”

“Okay, I get it. Color me thoroughly chastised.”

“Don’t get cute, woman,” Luca said. I could tell from his tone that I’d been forgiven.

“When are you coming home? I miss you.”

“Just a few more days then I’ll be back.”

“Hurry.”

“I will. You keep out of trouble in the meantime. Okay?”

“Okay. Sleep tight.”

“You too, beautiful. I love you.”

“Love you back.”

I lay in bed and stared at the ceiling. Mama was asleep, thank God. The doctor had come by and checked on her earlier that afternoon. I spoke to him before he left.

“How’s my mother?” I asked him. “I mean how is she really?”

“Her vitals are good, Madison. Your mother is a very healthy woman. Genetics have been kind to her. She’s going to be fine. I’ve suggested she join a support group for families who have lost members to violence. I think you should encourage her to attend a meeting. It’s different for everyone. It may not be a bad idea for you to go along.”

“I don’t know if she’s ready for that, Doc. But, I will mention it to her.”

“Okay. In your own time. How are you coping?”

“I have good days and bad days. What about my dad? How does he seem to you?”

“You know him better than I do. What do you think?”

“He’s been very strong for Mama and me. I’m worried though. He has to crack sooner or later.”

“Well, if he does, I’m here to help.”

“Thank you, Doctor.”

“My pleasure, Madison. Take care of yourself.”

“I will.”

I knew what would make my father feel better and it wasn’t a shot. Not one with a needle anyway. My father would only rest once the man responsible for Lauren’s death was captured. Make that dead and buried.

LUCA

Was that my cell phone? What the hell? I'd put it on vibrate, so as not to disturb anyone. The nightstand was practically doing a jig. I looked through one eye and recognized the number. It was Maddie. My heart stopped for a second.

"Maddie. What's wrong?"

"Luca."

Her voice was shaky. Something was very wrong.

"What is it? Are you okay?" I asked.

"I'm sorry. I know it's late. But, I had to call."

"It's fine, my love. What's happened?"

"I got a package at the office today. I opened it when I got home a little while ago."

I wasn't going to ask her why she got home after midnight. There were more pressing matters by the sounds of it.

"There's a photo inside of the two of us, Luca."

"Okay. And?"

"And a note."

"What does it say?"

"It's freaking me out. It says, '*No mistakes next time.*' What does it mean?"

Fuck! My worst fear was realized. Antonio knew Lauren wasn't my lover. I had no idea how, but he knew. I had to get

Madison out of there in a hurry.

“I don’t know, Maddie,” I lied, “but I don’t like it.”

“Is it possible that someone was trying to kill me instead of Lauren?”

“I’m not taking any chances, Maddie. I’m booking a plane ticket for you right now. Throw a few things in a bag and get to the airport. I’ll call you as soon as I have the flight details.”

“Are you insane? What if my parents are in danger? I can’t just leave here in the middle of the night. Mama is already battling to keep her head above water and God knows how long before Dad breaks down.”

“Madison,” I said sternly, “this is not a suggestion. You may be in danger. I want you to pack a bag and get to the airport. Now, Maddie.”

“What about my parents?”

“I have a friend who owns a security company. I’ll ask him to send someone over to keep an eye on your folks. Okay?”

“Are you sure, Luca?”

“Yes. I’m sure. Please, Maddie. I can’t lose you.”

“Alright. I’ll do it.”

“Thank you, baby. I’ll call you back in a bit.”

I hung up and called the airline and booked the first flight out to me. An hour later Madison was safely on the plane.

I called my connection back home and asked him to send two of his best men to watch over Michael and Caroline. Beth, too. Just in case. Once I was sure that Madison was on the flight, I carefully woke up Nico and told him what had happened. He snuck out of bed so he wouldn’t wake up Sam and the kids.

“So it begins,” he sighed. “Okay, I’ll go fetch Madison at the airport. You stay put. Just in case someone is watching out for Madison’s arrival. We can’t have Antonio finding the two of you together.”

“But what if they follow you?”

“That won’t happen. Not with the webwork of routes I take to get here.”

“Thanks, Nico. I’m sorry to do this to you.”

“It’s okay. Please, tell Sam what’s happening if she wakes up.”

“I will.”

Nico left the house and made his way to the airport. I paced up and down the living room like a caged animal. Blue gave up on me after a few hundred steps and lay down on the rug near the sofa. Twenty minutes later, he disappeared. I assumed he’d gone back to sleep in the boys’ room.

I checked my watch. Where were they? I tried to work out the route in my mind and estimate how long each section would take Nico. Then again, I had no idea which or how many emergency routes he had to ensure that he wasn’t being tailed.

“What’s going on?”

Sam’s sudden voice behind me startled me and I jerked.

“Where’s Nico?”

“Sheesh, you scared me.”

“Sorry.”

“Nico’s gone to fetch Madison from the airport.”

“At this hour? Why? What happened?”

“Antonio found her. He knows he’s killed the wrong woman.”

“Shit. That’s not good.”

“I know.”

“He’s forced your hand. You know that, right?”

“Yeah. I have no choice now. I’m going to have to tell Maddie the truth.”

“I’m sorry, Luca. Damn it. I need coffee. Want some?”

“Yeah, keep it coming, please.”

Sam flipped the switch on the coffee machine and ground some Arabica beans. The smell went a long way to calming me down. I looked at my watch again.

“Nico knows what he’s doing, Luca. Don’t worry. They’ll be back soon.”

“Sorry, I’m a little jumpy.”

“I’m not surprised. So, what exactly happened?”

“Maddie called me shortly after midnight. She received a package at work earlier in the day and opened it at home. Inside was a photo of us and a note.”

“What did it say?”

“In short? Antonio won’t make the same mistake twice.”

“The poor girl must be scared shitless.”

“She is. I feel so guilty, Sam.”

“Just fix it.”

“I’m gonna try. I can’t wait to see her. But, I’m nervous as hell. What if she doesn’t forgive me, Sam? I love this woman.”

“There’s nothing you can do if she can’t forgive you, Luca. That’s the crappy thing about love. You don’t have any control over the object of your affection.”

“You forgave Nico for killing your stepfather. How did you get past it?”

“Well, for a start, my stepfather was an asshole, so no great loss there. But, Mom did love him at one time, so that was difficult for me. Anyway, I realized I couldn’t live without Nico. That’s what true love does, Luca. It forgives and overcomes.”

“In that case, I can only pray that Madison loves me as much as I love her. Because what I’m about to tell her has the potential to kill our love in its tracks. Stone dead.”

It was 4:30 am when I heard the sound of tires on the gravel outside. It felt as if an elephant was sitting on my chest.

My breathing was labored as I walked outside and stood on the deck.

Nico parked the car. I walked toward the car and opened the passenger door for Madison. She got out and threw her arms around my neck. I held onto her with all my might.

“Luca,” she sighed.

“You’re trembling.”

“It’s been a rough night. I’ve missed you, babe.”

“I missed you too. Thank God, you’re safe.”

“What the hell is going on, Luca? Why didn’t you come to the airport?” she asked in a muted tone when we were walking toward the house.

“Come inside. We’ll talk after I get you settled.”

“I smell coffee. I’d kill for a cup.”

“I’ll pour you some. Are you hungry?”

“I can’t eat. My stomach is in a knot.”

Nico kissed Sam when he entered the house through the kitchen door.

“Madison, this is Samantha, Nico’s wife.”

“Hi, Samantha. It’s good to meet you.”

“Hi, Madison. Nice to meet you too.”

“Can someone please tell me what’s going on?” Madison said once she had her coffee. “No disrespect, Nico and Samantha, but who are you?”

And, just like that, I was facing the business end of my nightmare.

MADISON

I was a wreck by the time I sat down in the departure lounge at the airport. I hoped my parents would believe my story about missing Luca and meeting him for a few days. I'd left a note before I left so they wouldn't worry about me.

My mind was spinning with questions. What wasn't Luca telling me? It made sense to me that he wanted to have me with him to protect me, but I couldn't shake the feeling that he knew more about the photo than he was letting on.

Instinct, and my cement mixer churning gut, told me Luca was hiding something, and that scared the shit out of me.

I looked for Luca after we landed and the passengers had disembarked the plane. I grew more and more anxious when I couldn't find him amongst the crowd of people waiting for their friends and loved ones at the arrivals hall. Imagine my shock when a man I'd never seen before approached me and told me he was there to collect me for Luca Gambrelli. What the fuck? Who was he? What if he was a psychopath? I remembered thinking to myself that if he were in fact a psycho, he'd be the first one with angel eyes.

It took some convincing before I got into the car with him. He kept telling me that Luca wasn't feeling well and that he'd explain everything to me when we met up. I had a good mind to kick the shit out of Luca for making me feel like I had no choice, but when he opened the car door for me, all I could think to do was melt into his arms. I'd save the beating for later.

Once I'd inhaled my coffee, I was ready to talk. And, yes, I did feel like a bitch when I asked, impatiently, for answers in front of the couple who were strangers to me. After all, I'd only just met Nico and Samantha and there I was demanding my pound of flesh. But, politeness and decorum be damned.

"Can someone please tell me what's going on? No disrespect, Nico and Samantha, but who are you?" I blurted out when I saw that my subtle cues were falling on deaf ears.

"Nico and Samantha are my very best friends, Maddie."

"Yeah, I've known Luca since before we were married," Samantha agreed.

An ex-girlfriend?

"Luca here is a solid guy, Madison," Nico piped up as if he was attempting to endorse the man sitting next to me at the kitchen counter.

"Yeah, I'm going to need a little more than that, if it's all the same to all of you," I said impatiently.

Right at that moment, two young boys burst into the kitchen as if they were driven by a high-performance energy drink. The two looked identical to one another. They stopped in their tracks, peered at me in confusion, then smiled. If they were momentarily taken aback by my presence, they didn't say anything. Instead, they greeted me politely. I blinked and then there was another carbon copy. This one was accompanied by a beautiful dog, a blue lacy if I wasn't mistaken.

"Triplets," I said and looked over to Samantha.

"Uh-huh. Triple the fun, six times the work," she winked.

Samantha introduced her sons to me.

"Good morning, boys," Luca smiled.

His eyes were soft as if they were tiny little chicks in a mother's nest. He looked so handsome right then.

"Hi, uncle Luca. Would you and Madison like to come and watch us play baseball this afternoon?" the one named Tom asked, all sparkly-eyed.

“Uhhh,” Luca looked at me. “That sounds great, Tom. Let me check with Madison first and if we’re able to, we’ll come along with pleasure.”

“Sick!” he grinned.

“What’s it gonna be for breakfast, boys?” Nico asked the three.

“Cheerios,” the triplets called out in unison.

“Okay, take a seat. I’m on it.”

“Can I talk to you?” I leaned across and whispered to Luca. “Alone.”

“Sure.”

We left the noisy kitchen behind and made our way outside to the wrap around deck.

“Start talking, Luca.”

“What do you want to know?” he asked with a look of dread. He was probably a little shocked at my candor.

“Stop it. I know something’s up. You’ve been different ever since Lauren’s murder. At first, I thought it was because of your childhood trauma. Seeing Lauren’s dead body would have freaked me out too if I’d seen my parents murdered bodies at the age of nine. But, there’s something else going on. You’d better start talking.”

“Different how?”

“Okay, I’ll bite. For starters, why the hell would you send Nico, a perfect stranger, to collect me from the airport? And, don’t give me the ‘I wasn’t feeling well’ bullshit. I didn’t believe it when Nico told me and I still don’t.”

“I’m sorry I didn’t come myself, Maddie. It was better for Nico to fetch you.”

“Can we p-l-e-a-s-e cut the bullshit? What the fuck is going on? You said you were seeing a client. Now you’re here with friends. And why am I getting photos of us delivered to my office? And the cryptic note?”

Luca looked like a deer caught in the headlights. I felt as if I was about to throw up because, even though I demanded answers, I was afraid of what they could be. It wasn't going to be good, that much I knew.

"Not here," he said and took my hand. "Come on. Let's go for a walk."

The sun was rising. Its orange rays rose steadily against the horizon. I looked around at the landscape. The house was on a stunning property. It felt as if we were in a lush park. Luca was holding onto my hand so tightly I was afraid he'd snap it off at the wrist.

"You're right, Maddie," he said, after what seemed to be an eternity.

"I'm listening," I said as we slowed down the walk.

Luca stopped and ran his fingers through his hair. "There's so much I have to tell you. I don't know where to start."

I chose a grassy patch and sat down. My legs were tired from the stress. Plus, I had a feeling that the closer to the ground I was, the safer I'd be. From the look on Luca's face, I wasn't going to like what he was about to say. If he ever managed to get it out.

"Just talk, Luca. You're scaring me. Does it have anything to do with Nico and Samantha?"

"Not directly, no. But, they do know about my, uh, situation."

"Situation? What the fuck are you talking about? Look. If you don't tell me the truth, right now, I'm walking back to the airport and you'll never see me again," I snapped at him.

"Okay! This is hard. I'm trying."

"Well, try harder. And faster for fuck's sake."

"Fine. You want the truth. Here it is," Luca spat out in agitation. "You want to know why Lauren is dead? I'll tell you. It's because of me. It's my fucking fault."

I couldn't speak at first. The earth was spinning too fast.
Bile rose up into my throat.

“What did you just say?”

LUCA

That was not the way I'd imagined explaining my situation to Madison. The last thing I wanted was to blurt it out like that, but she'd pushed me and my pent-up guilt suddenly spilled over onto my lips and gushed out like a volcanic eruption. The molten lava of truth rolled slowly and malevolently towards Madison's heart. I knew that once it reached its target, the ugly truth would burn away every ounce of love she'd ever had for me.

Once Maddie stopped throwing up, she simply sat there, pale, silent. It was as if her eyes were vacant. Her body was there, but her soul was somewhere else. I waited for her to compose herself. I owed her that much.

"I don't understand, Luca," was all she managed.

There was no easy way to explain myself than to start at the beginning.

"When I came to America, I was young and ambitious. Unfortunately, I was ridiculously naive, too. My roommate worked for a guy who was looking for a driver. The pay was great, so I went for it."

Madison said nothing, so I carried on talking.

"Anyway, it turns out my boss was working his way up the mob ladder. I didn't know it at the beginning, and by the time I found out, it was too late to get out of it."

"Mob? As in organized crime?" Madison asked, incredulously.

“Yes. That’s how I met Sam. She was the daughter of the head of the organization. Step-daughter actually. Anyway, one thing led to another and soon I found myself next in line in the ascension. I’ll spare you the details.”

“Are you telling me you’re a gangster, Luca?”

“No. Well, I was. But, I left that world behind me. I started fresh. Or, at least, I thought I did.”

“How does this have bearing on Lauren?”

“I’ve lived, free from the world from which I escaped, for nearly ten years now. I was sure no one knew that I was alive. Until I found Lauren’s body.”

“I’m not following you, Luca. How do you know that Lauren’s killer knows about you?”

I was at a crossroads. There was no turning back once I committed to the path I was about to take. I took in a deep breath before I spoke.

“Because the killer left me a note.”

Madison, who up until that moment was pale, grew red.

“What did you just say?”

“There was a note. I didn’t tell you about it. I’m sorry.”

“You’re sorry? I don’t fucking believe this. You lied to me, and the police, and my parents! And, you’re sorry!”

Madison jumped up. She was clearly livid. Her body was trembling and she clenched her fists. I’d never seen her like that before. It was scary.

“So, you knew!” she went on, her voice teetering dangerously close to pitch-perfect hysteria. “You knew Lauren was murdered and you said nothing. You let me believe that if only I was home, her death could have been avoided. Do you have any idea how much guilt I’ve been dragging around with me? And, all the while you were keeping the truth from me.”

“I know, Madison. Do you know how guilty I feel?”

“Oh, no, you don’t. Don’t you fucking dare make this about yourself. You lied to me, Luca. You kept the truth from me when it could have saved me from drowning in guilt. And, all because you were afraid of coming off looking like an asshole.”

“No! I didn’t want to tell you because I didn’t want to hurt you, Madison! I love you. I can’t imagine spending the rest of my life without you in it. I didn’t tell you about my past because I put it all behind me. I’m not that man anymore, Maddie. I never was. That’s why I left.”

“Really, Luca? I hate to break it to you, but you are *exactly* the man you tried to run from. The man who was responsible for my sister’s death, and said and did nothing about it.”

“That’s not true. Why do you think I’m here?”

“Does it matter, Luca? Lauren is dead. She’s dead! Nothing you do now will change that. Who was it, anyway? Who did it?”

“His name is Antonio.”

“Was he trying to kill me? To get to you?”

“Yes.”

“Oh, God. So, my parents may very well lose both their daughters. Does he know you’re here? Does he know I’m here?”

“No.”

“How can you be sure? You had no idea he knew where you were in the first place, did you?”

“No.”

“My parents. Are they safe?” Madison asked, pale once more.

“Yes, please don’t worry about them, Maddie. I swear to you I’m going to kill the man who hurt you and your family. I swear it.”

“You don’t get it, do you? You’re the man who hurt us—who hurt me.”

I didn't have words. I couldn't think of a single one that would fix what I'd broken. It was too late for words, anyway.

"I'm going back to the house. Don't follow me." Madison glowered at me, turned, and walked away.

"Maddie, please. Wait. I'm so sorry."

She kept on walking. I felt more despair with every step she took. The thing I'd feared for weeks had finally come around and punched me in the gut. I was losing the woman I loved and there wasn't a damn thing I could do to stop it.

I sat down for a while—my mind blank, and my soul empty. Madison was nowhere to be found by the time I got back to the house.

"I take it your discussion didn't go well," Nico said when he heard me entering through the kitchen door.

"Where is she?"

"Sam took her for a drive. Don't worry, Luca. We'll sort it out."

"It's over, Nico. I know it is. And, honestly, it's my own fucking fault."

"No, it isn't. It's Antonio's fault. We're going to fix this."

"Madison doesn't care about that. It won't bring her sister back."

"Give her some space to process. She needs time."

I shook my head, defeated.

"Come on," Nico said. "Let's get out of here for a while. I know a quiet place where we can have some breakfast and talk. Don't worry about Madison. Sam will talk to her."

"I suppose if anyone has an understanding about the world we used to be in, it's Sam."

"Exactly," said Nico.

"I hope you're right. I can't lose her, Nico. Worse still. I can't go on knowing she hates me."

"That's up to her, Luca. Come on. Let's go."

It had turned into a sunny day, but we may as well have been at the North Pole. Inside I was frigid.

MADISON

I stood on the deck and tried to compose myself before going to face a family of strangers. I went inside to find it empty. Luckily, the kids had left for school and I assumed, because Nico wasn't there, he'd taken them.

"Are you okay, Madison?"

Damn it. I didn't want to talk. Especially not to someone from Luca's past. But, Samantha was a genuinely nice person, and she didn't deserve to be treated poorly.

"No, I'm not."

"Can I offer you something to drink?"

"Um," I said with a shaky voice.

I willed myself not to cry but it was no good. The dam wall broke and out flooded all the emotions I'd suppressed since burying my baby sister. Samantha rushed over and put her arms around me.

"Oh, you poor thing. Come here. Sit down, Madison. I'll get you some kleenex."

"I'm sorry," I tried to say through uncontrollable sobs.

"Please, don't apologize, you sweet girl."

"Did you know about everything that's happened, Samantha?"

"Call me Sam. And, yes, Luca told us. I'm so sorry for your loss, Madison."

“I’ve never felt so lost, Sam. I literally don’t know what to do next. Everything I thought I knew about my life with Luca was a lie. I have no idea who he is.”

Sam let me cry and vent. She waited patiently until I was all cried out. I got up to go to my room.

“I can’t be here when Luca comes back. Will you take me to the airport, please, Sam?”

“Please, don’t ask me to do that. I don’t want you to make rash decisions. You can’t go home, right now. It’s not safe.”

“Fine. I’ll call a cab. That way you have no hand in whatever my fate is to be. What’s the address here?”

Samantha took my hands in hers.

“Madison, please. Listen to me. You can’t leave.”

“Sam, I refuse to stay here with Luca,” I scolded.

“Okay, I can understand that. Why don’t we go for a drive? We should talk.”

Her pleading eyes told me that I was safe with her. She clearly cared very much for Luca, and by association, and all appearances, about me too. He must have done something right to warrant such loyalty.

I had no choice but to agree. What was I going to do—hit the road running and hope to find my way back to the airport on foot? I was, officially, shit out of luck.

I didn’t give verbal consent, but I didn’t argue either. Instead, I grabbed my jacket and followed Sam to her car.

“Where are we going?” I asked once we were on the road.

“I don’t know about you, but I think better when I’m at the beach. There’s something spiritual about feeling the sand between my toes. Do you mind?”

“No. I love the beach.”

My mind suddenly drifted to the cove near my parents’ beach house, where Luca had asked me to marry him. No! I

wasn't going to get all sappy and nostalgic. Lauren's memory deserved better.

I opened the window while we drove along the road adjacent to the ocean. The coastal smell was different from the one I was used to. It was probably due to the foliage being different. But, the sound of the waves breaking lazily along the shore was the same no matter which ocean one happened to unload one's sorrows at.

A light mist hung over the water. The scene was picture perfect, like that of a postcard.

"Tell me about the old Luca."

"Okay," Samantha said thoughtfully.

She parked the car near an entrance to the beach and switched off the engine. Then, she opened the car door and looked across at me.

"You coming?" she asked.

"Yeah."

I took off my shoes and rolled up my jeans before I followed her onto the sand. Surfers were playing in the waves, and a man armed with a metal detector moved across the beach in a grid formation. I wondered how many beer cans rather than valuable loot he'd detected since starting his career as a treasure hunter. I could never be that patient.

"I met Luca when he was driving for my stepfather. It's odd, but I always thought he looked out of place."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, the men I was used to were mostly brash and, well, assholes. They're not called gangsters for nothing," she smiled.

"I guess not."

"Luca was polite, respectful, and he could drive a car better than I'd ever seen anyone else do."

"If he was such a gem, why did he become so deeply involved in organized crime?"

“You have to understand, Madison, that once you’re in, you can’t simply tender your resignation when you’ve had enough and hope to live unto a ripe old age. Luca did what any smart guy in his position would do—he worked the system within which had him trapped. Unlike his predecessor, he didn’t kill to get there. By the time his boss died, Luca had earned the respect of the organization’s top dogs. He was asked to take over.”

“Then how did he break away? And who is this Antonio bastard who killed Lauren?”

“Antonio Granata has always hated Luca. They started working for the family around the same time. But, where Luca was loyal and decent, Antonio chose the opposite way of getting the job done. He was convinced that he would take over instead of Luca.”

“So, why is he still pissed off? Surely he was next in line after Luca left?”

“By the time Luca had had enough, Antonio had branched out and established his own little ring of bandits. He’s always blamed, and hated, Luca for missing out on the *big time* as he saw it.”

“So, what exactly is Luca planning on doing now?”

“Now that Antonio knows he’s alive? He has to kill him. He has no other choice. Antonio will never stop until one of them is dead.”

I stopped walking and sat down on the sand. More killing. What if Luca died? I felt sick again.

“I can’t imagine how frightening all this must be for you, Madison. I grew up surrounded by these people, and even I couldn’t stand them. Nico saved me from that world, and then he helped Luca to get out, too. I’d be lost without him. I love him so much. Don’t give up on your love until you are sure it’s not what you want.”

“I loved Luca. But, he isn’t the man I thought he was. I don’t know the man back at your house.”

“Yes, he lied, and that was a mistake. He kept his dark past a secret. But he’s the same guy he’s always been, Madison. What you had together, how he made you feel, it was all real. And I hope you’re able to find your way to forgiveness.”

“My sister is dead! How am I supposed to forgive him?”

“I’m sorry. I wasn’t implying that you aren’t justified in your feelings. You absolutely are. I would just think long and hard about your love for Luca before you act. For your sake. Ask yourself, were you happy with your relationship before? Is that something that can make you happy in the future? And then you can decide if you want to forgive him.”

I watched the waves breaking on the sand. The spray floated on the wind and clung to my skin.

Samantha got up and dusted the sand off her pants.

“There’s a kiosk over there,” Sam motioned with her head. “They make the most incredible fruit smoothies. I’m going to order myself a berry blitz. Would you like one?”

Perhaps a cold shot of berries would settle my stomach.

“Thanks.”

“I’ll be back in a bit,” she said and walked away.

I was grateful for it. Her absence gave me time to take in a deep breath. Was my love for Luca strong enough to survive the shitstorm? And, if it was, would Mama and Dad find it in their hearts to forgive him?

I wouldn’t know how to start explaining it to them. I wasn’t sure I would even if I didn’t stay with him. The truth wouldn’t set them free. It would make it worse. So much worse. Would they blame me?

Dad did tell me there was something odd about Luca’s absence from social media, but I basically ignored him. Fuck! I should have listened to my father. Lauren’s death was my fault too.

There was no easy way out of the hole I’d dug for myself, and it was raining—hard. I was drowning.

LUCA

The diner was fairly new. It had a Mexican vibe which worked for me. I loved Mexican food. Nico and I sat down and ordered coffee and huevos rancheros. The appetizing smell of cilantro and smoked habaneros hung in the air—I was suddenly desperate for a good dose of comfort food.

“Do you want to talk about it?” Nico asked me when we were elbows deep in eggs and refried beans.

“It was a disaster,” I sighed.

“How much did you tell her?”

“Everything. Or, as much as I could stomach all at once.”

“That couldn’t have been easy.”

“It was the hardest thing I’ve ever had to do.”

“She’s in shock, Luca. Give her time.”

“I don’t know if time is going to do it.”

“What other choice do you have?”

“Way to cheer a guy up, Nico.”

“Sorry. Why don’t we change our focus to something we do have control over?”

“Good idea. I take it you’re referring to Antonio and his imminent demise?” I asked before I shoveled more food into my mouth.

“Exactly. I spoke to Tony earlier. He suggested we meet him at his shop.”

“Okay. Does it still hold enough weapons to take down a small army?”

“And then some.”

“Your late wife’s brother is quite the gun lover, for such a peace-loving guy,” I smiled.

“No shit. Too many Cowboys and Indians movies as a kid.”

I smiled at the thought of little Tony hiding around corners, wearing a felt cowboy hat and brandishing a toy gun.

“Shall we go around to him after breakfast?”

“Yeah. He said anytime was good.”

An hour later, Nico and I took a drive to Tony’s and sat down in his office. I was grateful to Nico for not mentioning the fight I’d had with Madison.

“I’ve been talking to a guy,” Tony started. “He knows Antonio’s operation fairly well. He’s given me a few ins and outs. I think I’ve got enough info for us to work with.”

“Great,” I said. “The sooner this is over, the better. I’d like to get back to my life. Or what’s left of it.”

“I’m sure,” Tony replied.

“Okay, so where is Antonio’s weakness?” Nico asked.

“Antonio is married, but he has a mistress. She’s an ex-stripper.”

“No surprises there,” I snorted.

“Yeah. I’m sure he was attracted to her sparkling personality.” Tony continued. “Anyway, Antonio met her in a club about two years ago. He bought her an apartment and they meet there at least twice a week.”

“Where is it?”

Tony took out a map and pointed to the spot.

“Excellent,” Nico said. “That’s an easy place to get to him. I know the area well.”

“I forget you have an unlimited source of information,” I smirked.

“Yup, past life experience,” Nico grinned.

“What about Vaughn?” I asked.

“I say we do them both on the same night. We can’t afford to tip off either of them. Once they go underground it’s going to be nearly impossible to find them,” Nico said.

“Yeah. They turn all cockroach on us,” Tony added.

“Agreed. I have to make a few calls before we do this,” I said. “I need to make sure that Madison and her family are safe before we flick the switch on these assholes.”

“You’d better hurry, Luca,” Nico urged me. “We better get to them asap now that he knows who Maddie is.”

“At least she’s here with you, Luca,” Tony interjected.

That was true. But, after the morning I’d had, I wasn’t sure how long I’d be able to convince Madison that being with me was the safest place for her. I was afraid that she would want to go home after learning the truth about me.

“What do you know about this Vaughn scumbag?” Nico asked Tony.

“He’s a vicious little fucker.”

“Little?” I asked.

“Uh-huh. Short shit syndrome on steroids. The word is he has a very short temper that operates on a hair trigger. He does all Antonio’s dirty work for him.”

“Does he have any vices?” Nico asked.

“Apart from being a cold-blooded killer, you mean?”

“Yeah.”

“He keeps to himself. No girlfriend.”

“Boyfriend?” Nico asked.

“Why? Are you willing to take one for the team?” Tony jested.

“Not even for Luca,” Nico snorted.

“No idea,” Tony continued. “But, we do know that Vaughn follows Antonio around wherever he goes. He’s the man’s proverbial shadow. So, it’s pretty much two for the price of one.”

“That does make it easier. I know it’s probably a stupid question, but do you have everything we need for the job?” I asked Tony.

“You’re right. That was a stupid question,” he grinned.

“What about manpower?”

“Usually, I’d do it alone,” Nico answered. “But, Antonio is no fool. He will be prepared. Now that he’s revealed his hand to you, he’s no doubt waiting for you to come to him. He’ll be ready.”

“We’re going to need help, Luca,” Tony interjected.

“I realize that.”

The last thing I wanted to do was make myself known to the Barones. However, they were the only people I could trust to help me with Antonio. But, the only one who knew I was alive was my successor. Would he risk his own ass, and his people, by helping me? It was a tall order.

“What about the Barones?” Nico asked me as if he were reading my mind.

“I don’t want to, but I guess I don’t have much of a choice.”

“They’d be doing themselves a favor, Luca. Antonio is a thorn in everyone’s side,” Tony sighed.

“I get that. But it’s bound to cause an all-out war between the two families. That’s never a good thing.”

“It’s risky, for sure. But, what other alternative do you have?”

“Okay. Let me see what I can arrange,” I relented.

We spoke for a while. Nico looked at his watch.

“I better get home. If I miss the boys’ baseball match I’m dead meat. You ready to go, Luca?”

“Sure. Thanks for everything, Tony,” I said and shook his hand.

“Of course, Luca. Anything I can do to help.”

Nico and I said our goodbyes and left. It was crazy. I was more nervous about facing Maddie than I was about finding Antonio and Vaughn and killing them. My stomach did a backflip when I saw Sam’s car parked in the driveway.

“You’ll be okay, Buddy,” Nico smiled as if he sensed my dread.

“I hope so.”

“Hello, boys,” Sam smiled when we entered the house. “Babe, are you ready? We have to leave soon.”

“Sure. I just need a minute,” Nico said and disappeared down the hallway.

“Where’s Maddie?” I asked Sam.

“I think she’s asleep. The poor girl is exhausted.”

“Thank you for taking her for a drive, Sam. How did it go?”

“I took her to the beach. We talked.”

“Did you talk about what a fuckup I am?”

“I told her you had potential,” Sam said.

“Thanks, Sam. I owe you.”

“I love you, Luca. It’s my pleasure. I don’t know if I was of any help, but I tried.”

“What more could I hope for?” I said and hugged her.

“Unhand my woman, you fiend,” Nico said when he appeared again.

“My bad.”

“Okay, Nico. Let’s hit the road. Don’t forget your baseball cap. I’ve already packed the giant finger and some snacks for

the locusts. See you later, Luca. Oh, I left some food in the oven for you and Maddie.”

“See you later, Luca,” Nico said and grabbed the car keys.

Before long, the house was silent. Madison was asleep, and Blue and I were chilling in the living room. I must have nodded off because it was dark when I woke up again.

MADISON

I felt a little better after my talk with Sam. The house was empty when she and I got back. I used the time to think about everything that she and I had talked about. I had to make a decision.

The first step was to think about my love for Luca. There was no time for bullshit. Did I really love him, or was I being a hopeless romantic?

I couldn't help thinking about the way I reacted at the beach when Sam told me that Luca was planning on killing Antonio. Was he doing it to save face, to protect himself? Or was he genuinely sorrowful about being responsible for my sister's death? Was he trying to make things right for me?

Fuck! My head was spinning with all the uncertainties of what had truly happened and what lay ahead. I lay down on the bed and before long I fell asleep. The exhaustion had finally overtaken me.

It was dark when I woke up. I checked my watch. 8 pm. Had I really slept the entire day? I got up and splashed water on my face. Where was everyone? It was really quiet. Too quiet. Then I remembered that the boys had a baseball game at school. I assumed Nico and Sam had gone to watch the boys playing. Did Luca go with them?

I walked to the kitchen to find something to eat. Luca was sitting in the living room. He looked up when he saw me.

“Oh,” I said, “you’re here.”

“Hi. Yes, I thought we could talk. How are you feeling?”

“Fuzzy. I hate sleeping during the day.”

“I’m sure you must have been exhausted. Are you hungry? Sam left us something to eat.”

“Yes, That was thoughtful of her. Haven’t you eaten?”

“No. I thought I’d wait for you.”

And there it was. He was being kind and considerate again. Not helpful when I was furious at him.

“Oh. okay.”

“I’ll warm the food,” he said and got up.

“Thanks.”

“Would you like a glass of wine?”

“No thanks.”

“I think I’ll have some,” he said and poured some Cab into a glass.

“Knock yourself out.”

I was being snippy? Perhaps. Monosyllabic? Sure. Hurting like hell? Almost unbearably.

“Sam tells me you guys went for a walk at the beach.”

“Yeah.”

Luca stopped saying much after that. I was the kind of mad that bordered on unreasonable. I wanted him to talk to me but when he did I felt the need to snap at him. It was like wanting someone to extend a hand of reconciliation and then biting it off when it was close enough.

“So, what’s the plan, Luca?” I finally asked when I couldn’t stand the truce any longer.

“What do you mean?”

“I’m begging you, Luca, for your safety and my sanity, stop fucking around. What are you going to do about Antonio?”

“I’m going to kill him.”

There. He said it. There was no going back. I asked and he told me.

“I want to go home.”

“Please, Maddie.”

“I’m not playing your gangster games, Luca. I want to go home. Now.”

“Antonio knows who you are, Madison,” Luca said with an edge in his voice. “He will kill you to get to me. I can’t let you go. I won’t lose you.”

I laughed hysterically. I hadn’t planned on it, it just happened. The laughter quickly turned to tears. Man! My emotions were out of control. Who was this crazy woman who’d taken hold of my body? I barely recognized myself.

“Lose me! It’s a little late for that, don’t you think?”

“I hope not. I love you, Madison.”

“I thought I loved you, too. Imagine my surprise when I learned that I didn’t have a clue who you were. I don’t know you, Luca. Did you think you could reinvent yourself, trick a woman into falling in love with you, and hope that your past wouldn’t catch up with you?”

“I never tricked you. I love you, and that’s never been a lie.”

“Why should I believe you now?”

“Okay. I get it. And, believe it or not, I don’t blame you for distrusting me. But, I swear to you, Maddie, I love you. I will spend the rest of my life loving you. I’m sorry that Lauren is dead. My heart breaks for you and your family every single day. But, please, my love, don’t put yourself in harm’s way because you are angry with me.”

“You don’t get to call me that again. Do you hear me? I’m not your love. Now take me to the airport or I’ll walk.”

I was shaking with rage. I knew I was being pig headed and foolish, but I suspected I was dangerously close to a

nervous breakdown. I wanted to be with the parents and Beth if I was going to lose my shit altogether.

“Fine,” was all Luca said.

He grabbed the keys and walked out to the car, where he waited for me. I collected my bag and got into the car. We didn't say a single word to each other on the way to the airport. The silence was deafening.

As soon as we got to the terminal, I got out of the car. I didn't say a word. I simply walked away and didn't look back. Luca would never see the river of tears streaming down my cheeks as I marched on toward the departure's building.

I cried like a baby all the way to the front of the queue and bought a ticket. I cried while I waited to board. I cried until I sat down in my seat on the plane. And that's when I stopped. No more tears. I had to pull myself together. I was going home to be with my family. I would be there for them.

I took an Uber home. The driver was a quiet sort, thank goodness. It was very late when I got home. I'd kept my apartment. Turned out to be a good move. I would be alone to gather my thoughts. And gathering there was, aplenty.

It was after midnight when I settled down in bed with a cup of chamomile tea. My cell phone buzzed. It was a message from Luca.

Maddie, I'm so sorry about everything. I know you hate me right now, but I want you to know that you are the most important person in my life. I love you so much. I hope that one day you will forgive me. But, until then, I promise to give you your space. Please, be careful. I will do what I can to keep you safe.

Luca

* * *

I had to tell someone. I couldn't keep it in any longer. Not without losing my mind. Beth was the one person who was

closest to me. I couldn't tell my parents. I hoped she wouldn't hate Luca. More importantly, I hoped she didn't hate me.

I called her around 8 am and told her I needed to see her. She came to my apartment around noon. I made us a coffee, sat her down, and unbundled my burden.

Beth was pale once I had finished with the sordid tale of my shocking news. I waited for her to judge and rant, to tell me off about how stupid and naive I had been. But, all she did was put her arms around me and tell me how much she loved me and how sorry she was for everything I was going through.

Not once did she say anything awful about Luca. I was stunned by that. Had I been too harsh with him? Frankly, it would have made it easier for me if my aunt had hated the man I loved. Just when I thought I knew what to do and how to feel, I was back at square one.

LUCA

“**W**hat’s going on?” Nico asked me when he and Sam had finally gotten the boys into bed. “Where’s Madison?”

“I took her to the airport. She wanted to go home.”

“Are you nuts, Luca? Madison can’t go home. It isn’t safe.”

“Don’t you think I know that? I told her over and over. But she wouldn’t listen. I can’t hold her hostage.”

“Bloody stubborn woman,” Nico groaned in frustration.

“Did I hear you right?” Sam asked.

“Yes,” I answered. “Maddie went back home.”

“Shit.”

“I tried, guys. I really did, but she wouldn’t listen. Maddie is like a bull when she’s made up her mind.”

“How does that make her any different from other women?” Nico asked in exasperation.

“Careful, darling husband. Or would you like to sleep on the couch?” Sam commented, drolly.

“Look. It’s late. There isn’t much we can do now. Besides, I called my friend in security and asked him to double up the watch on Maddie and her family.”

“This friend of yours,” Nico asked, “I assume he doesn’t know about your past?”

“No. He’s a good client of mine. He knows me only as Luca, the car dealer.”

“Is he any good?”

“Yes. And he doesn’t ask questions.”

“Good.”

“Sorry, guys, but I’m bushed. I’ll leave you to it. I’m going to bed,” Sam said and kissed Nico on the cheek.

“Good night, Sam. Sleep well.”

“Thanks, Luca. You too. I’ll see you in the morning.”

“I won’t be long, hon,” Nico said and tapped Sam on the butt.

“Not a chance,” she said.

“You marry them, and they no longer want anything to do with you.”

“You guys are such a cute couple,” I smiled.

“You’d better get some sleep, Luca. It’s going to be a hectic few days, starting tomorrow when you meet with the Barones.”

“Indeed.”

“Goodnight, Buddy,” he said and left the kitchen.

“Goodnight.”

I lay in bed and wondered if Madison made it home safely. I could smell her perfume on the pillow where she’d slept a few hours earlier. The room felt painfully empty without her. We’d been living together for almost a year, so her sudden absence left a physical pain inside of me.

It was made worse by the fact that I didn’t know if she’d ever let me near her again. I knew it was late, but I left a message on her phone. She’d probably read it when she got home. Hopefully, she’d let me know that she was safe. But, probably not. Damn it.

* * *

“Good morning, Luca,” Sam said while she was packing the boys’ lunches into their bags. “Did you sleep?”

“Hi, Sam. Yeah, a little. How about you?”

“I was pretty tired so I hit the hay hard. I was out like a light.”

“Is Nico up?”

“Yeah, he’s outside with Blue.”

“Thanks.”

“Oh, hang on. Would you mind taking him his coffee, please? There’s one for you too.”

“Sure.”

Nico threw a stick and Blue dashed after it, scooped it up in his mouth, and then ran back to his master.

“He’d do this all day if I let him,” Nico smiled. “Ooh, coffee. Thanks.”

“Blue’s gorgeous.”

“Yes, he’s getting old now, but he still has the energy of a puppy.”

“I see that.”

“Are you ready for today?”

“As ready as I’ll ever be, I guess.”

“I’m sorry I can’t come with you.”

“Of course not. You’ve done more than enough, already. I don’t want anyone to know you’re involved in this. I wouldn’t dream of putting you and your family in danger, Nico. No. This is my mess.”

“Thanks for understanding.”

“It’s all good. I may have to lean on you for a refresher course in shooting to kill,” I smirked.

“You got it.”

“What time are you meeting with the boys?”

“I haven’t spoken to Paolo yet.”

“He’s gonna have a bit of a shock.”

“Uh-huh. We haven’t spoken in years. I hope he’s still a decent guy. The mob changes people.”

“Don’t I know it.”

“I’ll call him from town.”

“You’re welcome to use my bike. I know you’re used to racing cars, but she hugs the corners nicely in a pinch.”

“That’s very generous of you, Nico. Thanks.”

“Come, I’ll give you the keys. Let’s start her up.”

Nico’s Aprilia RSV4 FW-GP was sex on wheels with an estimated top speed of 211 Mph. Silver with red and lime green trim.

“She’s a looker,” I practically drooled.

“Yeah.”

“I’ll look after her, I promise.”

“I know you’re good for it.”

“You still have that Mustang?”

“I do. Needed a paint job after Sam’s scrape all those years ago,” he winked.

“Women and cars. They cost us a fortune,” I sighed.

“Yup, but both are oodles of fun,” Nico laughed.

“Speaking of fun, I’d better get ready.”

“Keep me posted.”

“Thanks, Nico. Will do.”

* * *

“Luca? Is that you?”

“Hi, Paolo. Yeah, it’s me.”

“I didn’t think I’d ever hear from you again.”

“No offense, but I was hoping to never contact you again. Can we talk?”

“Sure. Are you in town?”

“I am. Where can we meet?”

“Give me a few minutes. I’ll call you back.”

“Sure.”

I rode the bike into town and stopped at an internet café before calling Paolo. I figured everyone had their minds on their iPad screens, so no one would pay much attention to me.

Paolo called me back a few minutes later.

“Meet me at Georgio’s. Use the back entrance.”

“Okay.”

I entered Georgio’s ten minutes later.

“Luca,” Paolo said and stretched out his arms to embrace me.

“Hey, Paolo.”

“You look good. A little older, but good. Sit down. Can I get you a drink?”

“No thanks. I appreciate you meeting me.”

“Of course. I must say, you are the last person I thought I’d be talking to today. What brings you here?”

“Trouble. What else?”

“I see. And by what name does this particular brand of trouble go?”

“Antonio Granata.”

Paolo looked like he’d smelled something bad.

“That fucking guy. What did he do?”

“He found me. And, he murdered my fiancé’s sister.”

“Fuck, man. I’m sorry to hear that, Luca. I truly am.”

“Thanks. I want to rid the world of him, once and for all. But, I can’t do it alone.”

“And, you want me to help you?”

“I wouldn’t ask, Paolo, but I have to do it soon or he’ll do more damage. Your men are good.”

“You should know. You trained most of them.”

“How are the boys?”

“Good.”

“Paolo, I’m sorry to ask. I truly am. But, will you help me?”

“I respect you, Luca. I always have. You went to bat for me when no one else thought I had the balls for the job. Of course, I’ll help you. We have to be careful about it, though. I can’t afford a turf war. Antonio is a sleaze, but his men are loyal.”

“Thank you, old friend. I will pay for the weapons and for your men’s wages. And, yes, I agree. We’ll have to be discreet.”

“Okay. How soon do you want to do this?”

“The sooner the better. Antonio is sniffing around my fiancé’s family. I have hired protection for them, but the longer I give him, the more desperate he’ll be. I want to kill him and his henchman, Vaughn, as soon as possible.”

“How quickly can you get the weapons?”

“It’s ready when you are.”

“Excellent. I’ll talk to the boys and get back to you later this afternoon. Okay?”

“Thank you. Oh, and please, I don’t want anyone to know it’s me they’re working for. I’m going to disappear again as soon as this is all over.”

“You got it. I’ll call you soon.”

I left Paolo to do my bidding. I was confident in his ability.
I trusted him. He owed me.

MADISON

My cell phone rang while I was at home. It had been a long day at work and all I wanted to do was eat, drink wine, and go to bed. And to make matters worse, I was missing Luca.

I looked at the caller ID. Crap. Speak of the devil. I let it ring. I didn't want to talk to him. I didn't trust myself. I was far too tired to make rational decisions, so I let the call go to voicemail.

I sat there on the sofa staring at the phone, like a kid who desperately wanted to steal a cookie from the cookie jar but whose mom was too close for comfort. The voicemail notification beeped. Should I listen? Should I leave it? Ugh!

I needed to know what Luca had to say.

Hi, Maddie, it's me. I wanted to check on you. I hope you're safe and looking after yourself. I wanted you to know that I'm working on taking care of the problem. I know you're angry with me, Madison, but please, I need to know that you're okay. Send me a thumbs up or something. Anything will do.

There was a long pause before he spoke again.

Anyway, Nico and Sam send their regards, oh, and the boys. I don't know when I'll speak to you again. Just know that no matter what happens, I'll always love you. Sleep tight. Bye.

What did he mean by he didn't know if we'd speak again? Was he referring to the fact that I refused to communicate with

him? Or was he implying that things may not go well with Antonio? His words unsettled me, either way.

My phone rang again. No, please Luca, I thought. I can't. I was about to get up and walk to the kitchen when I saw that it was Beth.

"Hi Beth," I said before the call went to voicemail.

"Hey. Are you okay? You sound strange."

"No, I'm shitty."

"What's the matter?"

"I know it's late, but can you come over?"

"Of course, Maddie. See you in a bit."

"Okay."

Half an hour later Beth knocked on the door. She had a bottle of red wine in one hand and a pizza box in the other. What a legend.

"Okay, help is at hand. You grab the glasses and the plates and I'll open the wine."

"You are a doll."

"Yeah, remember that tomorrow morning when you're complaining about a hangover."

"I take full responsibility in advance for any indulgence on my part."

"Noted. Okay, what's happened?" Beth said once we were seated next to each other on the sofa.

"I don't know what to do about Luca, Beth."

"Did he call again?"

"Yes. But I didn't answer."

I played the voicemail back to Beth. She listened attentively and then squeezed my hand.

"He sounds as broken up about all of this as you are, Maddie."

“I don’t doubt that he is. He’d have to be a monster not to. But, he lied to me. And, it was a big lie. One that’s changed my life forever. I don’t know if there’s any way of coming back from this.”

“Oh, Maddie. I’m so sorry, sweetheart. I wish I knew what to say to make it better. But, the truth is that this is your decision to make. No one else can make it for you. I’m mad as hell at Luca, and I’ll probably punch him right in the gut if I see him again. But, I don’t think he ever imagined that his past would circle back and cause Lauren’s death. He just doesn’t seem the type.”

Beth’s words weren’t helping. Not really. I was stuck between a rock and a hard place. If I allowed myself a modicum of honesty, I’d have to admit that I still loved Luca. But, could I afford to compromise myself by turning my back on Lauren’s memory and betraying my parents by lying to them?

“What if Luca is killed during his fight with Antonio, Maddie? Are you ready to face that possibility?”

Beth’s words hit me squarely in the jaw. Of course, I had considered it, but hearing her say the words out loud made me panicky. I took a gulp of wine.

“I’ve changed my mind. You’ve gotta leave,” I said and rolled my eyes.

“Nice try. Well? Have you?”

“Of course, I have. And, it’s freaking me out. That’s why I’m throwing myself at wine and pizza.”

“Fair point.”

“If, and it’s a big if, I decide to forgive Luca, will you forgive me, Beth? Will you ever look at him again the way you did before you knew the truth?”

“I love you, Madison. And, I know you love Luca. Any fool can see that. Lauren is dead, and that breaks my heart. I miss her every single day. But, there’s no point in you living in pain and loss for your one true love for the rest of your life.

That won't make either one of us happy. And I do want happiness for you, Maddie."

"I can never tell Mama and Dad the truth. They won't recover from it."

"I agree. No good can come from telling them."

I didn't expect Beth's words. They took me by surprise.

Did I have it in me to love Luca no matter what? Could I live with myself if I lied to my parents?

"You need to make a decision, Maddie. And you need to make it soon. Before it's too late."

LUCA

It was the morning of the planned attack and I was tired before the day had even begun. My calls and messages to Madison had gone unanswered. A smart man would have given up. Was I a smart man? Or was I a fool who couldn't bring himself to call it a day?

I checked my watch. Did I have the energy to go for a run? Oh, what the hell. It had to be better than lying around feeling sorry for myself. I needed to focus, and sweat out all the cobwebs before I wiped the floor with Vaughn and Antonio's asses.

Blue sat at the kitchen door. He must have sensed that there was an adventure in the offering. His tail waved madly as I reached for the door handle.

"Come on, boy," I whispered.

He darted past me and headed straight for the trail. I followed after and tried to keep up.

"I thought your master said you're getting old," I gasped as I caught up to him.

Blue gave me a few short barks and then dashed off again. I figured he knew which way to go, so I tried my best to keep up. I stopped when we reached a lake. It was beautiful. Blue raced into the water and swam around in circles.

"Good idea, Blue," I smiled and stripped off.

The water was cold enough to cool my core temperature, zippy quick.

“For goodness sake, put that thing away!”

Nico was standing next to the pile of clothes I’d discarded.

“Hey. What are you doing here?” I asked.

“The same thing as you, I suspect. Getting ready to kick ass.”

“I won’t ask how you found me,” I laughed and looked over at Blue who was chasing a panic-stricken frog.

“Yeah. Blue’s bark is a dead giveaway. How are you feeling?”

“I’m awake now. How about you?”

“Good. Shall we head back together?”

“Sure. I’d better get dressed first.”

“That would be an idea,” Nico grinned.

The three of us headed back to the house at a steady running pace.

“Are the kids up?” I asked.

“They will be by the time we get back to the house.”

“I want to apologize to them for not watching their game. Did they win?”

“They did. And, it’s okay. I explained to them that you and Maddie wanted to come but something else came up. They’re cool with it.”

“Thanks, Buddy.”

“Have you spoken to her again?”

“I tried to, but she isn’t answering my calls or texts.”

“She’ll be ok. You’ll see.”

“I hope you’re right.”

I smelled the coffee before I saw the house.

“That’s gonna go down like a homesick mole,” I said.

“Ain’t that the truth. I’m thinking bacon and eggs and all the fixings will come a close second.”

“I’m with you there. I’ll see you in the kitchen after I have a quick shower.”

“Okay.”

* * *

My heart skipped a beat when I saw a message notification on my phone. It was from Maddie. I was afraid to read it.

Hi, Luca. Please be careful.

Maddie.

Okay, so it wasn’t the Gettysburg address, but at least she was talking to me. What did it mean? I didn’t dare read too much into it, though. I couldn’t afford to go into my day pondering my future, or lack thereof, with Maddie.

I showered and went downstairs. I kept the news of the message to myself. The kids were having breakfast and Sam was packing lunches.

“Hey, boys. I hear you gave it to them good last night.”

“We whooped ‘em, uncle Luca,” Cody grinned.

“Yup, Coach said they went home with their tail between their legs,” Kyle added, proudly.

“Duh, that’s because my pitching was awesome,” Tom grinned from ear to ear.

“Okay, you three. More eating, less bragging, please,” Sam smiled.

“Sick!” I said and winked at Nico.

‘Mom’s Taxi’ left in a flurry of activity, leaving the house feeling like a morgue.

“Wow, no wonder you go to bed with the chickens, Nico.”

“Yup, I told you. Life before the boys seems like it never happened.”

“You love it.”

“Damn right, I do. Those little monsters make life worth living. You’ll see for yourself when you take the plunge.”

“Until then, I’ll take notes.”

* * *

“Hi, Paolo.”

“Ciao, Luca. Are you ready for tonight?”

“Yeah, I’ve got enough guns and ammunition to see us through. How are the men?”

“Good to go. They’re actually looking forward to a bit of action. This modern politically correct stuff doesn’t sit well with us thugs,” he laughed. “It doesn’t leave much room for old-fashioned ‘attitude-adjustments’ if you get my meaning.”

“Well, tell them they’re in for a treat.”

“Will do. See you later?”

“Sure. I’ll be wearing a mask, as discussed. Oh, and, I’m sure it goes without saying that Antonio is mine.”

“Of course.”

“Thanks, Paolo.”

“Hey, I’m doing this for myself too. We’re even after this.”

“Agreed.”

“See you at 9 pm.”

I was confident that I could take on Antonio. Paolo’s men were chomping at the bit to take care of Vaughn. I didn’t care about him. He was a mere extension of Antonio’s hand.

When Paolo and I spoke the night before, he’d indicated to me that the Barones made the decision to take out as many of

Antonio's men as possible. They were getting too big for their boots, and that was never a good thing in the mob world.

So, while I took care of their sleazy leader, the Barones would take on the rest of the crew.

It was 8 pm when I left the house with a trunk load of weapons and made my way to the meeting site. Antonio would be at his mistress' place, Vaughn close by, and the crew at their usual hangout.

The street on which the apartment was located was quiet. Residents seemed to have settled in for the evening. I kept my distance from Paolo's men. I couldn't afford to be recognized. It had been nearly ten years, but still.

I watched as Antonio's car arrived at the apartments. His driver parked in the underground parking area. I was hiding in the dark, near a broken lightbulb. Vaughn got out first, looked around, and then Antonio got out.

He'd put on a few pounds. The good life hadn't been kind to his waistline. Fat fuck. Antonio was talking to someone on his cell phone—more yelling and spewing insults than talking. He wasn't doing himself any favors with his less than congenial personality.

I made sure my silencer was secured and waited for Vaughn to get back into the car. I followed closely while my target ranted into the phone's speaker. His ego would prove to be his downfall. The Great Antonio wouldn't have dreamed that I'd be so audacious as to sneak up on him.

Mistake.

The noise behind me was so faint I nearly missed it.

MADISON

My phone rang. It was Beth.

“Madison, switch on the news. Channel 8.”

“Beth? What is it?”

“Just do it.”

“Okay, okay. Hold your horses, girl.”

I switched the TV to Channel 8. The volume was down, but even so, I could tell that the scene was chaotic. I turned up the volume.

The news anchor was pointing to a building behind her. The warehouse was engulfed in flames, raging out of control. Ambulances and cop cars were scattered around the blazing building. A fireman was leaning on a firetruck’s ladder, dousing the flames with the large hose.

“What is it?” I asked Beth.

“Listen to the anchor.”

I focussed on what the woman was saying.

“The fire is said to have been started to cover up the slain bodies of a known local gang. Police aren’t sure yet who the perpetrators are, but investigators are on the scene.”

A cop in uniform walked past the reporter. The reporter stopped him and shoved a microphone under his nose.

“Excuse me, Officer,” she said loudly over the background noise, “can you tell the viewers anything at this stage?”

The cop looked pleased to have his few seconds of television fame.

“Uhm, we can’t give you any concrete details at this stage, Rebecca. The incident does seem to be gang-related, though.”

“Are there any survivors?”

“I’m sorry, that’s all I can tell you for now. Excuse me.”

I looked at the headline at the bottom of the screen. The name of the area moved steadily onscreen, from right to left.

“Oh, fuck,” I whispered and dropped the phone—it bounced on the carpet.

No! No, no, no. I ran to pick it up.

“I’ll call you back,” I said to Beth and ended the call before she could speak.

I dialed Luca’s number. It went straight to voicemail. I tried again. Same result. Fuck! Why hadn’t I saved either Nico or Sam’s numbers? Stupid, stupid me!

“Please. God. Don’t let him be dead,” I whispered as I dialed Beth’s number.

“Maddie! Are you trying to give me a heart attack? Do you think it’s about Luca?” she asked as soon as she answered.

“I don’t know, Beth. He’s not answering his phone.”

“Okay, let’s not panic. We don’t know that Luca’s even involved in this. There are plenty of gang wars out there. Right?”

“The timing seems a little too coincidental, wouldn’t you say?” I said, trying to steady my breathing. I couldn’t afford to hyperventilate. I had to keep my cool.

“What if he’s dead, Beth?” I whispered. “I’m sorry. I can’t talk now.”

I ended the call and sat down on the sofa. My legs were weak, my heart was racing, and a high-pitched ringing noise raged in my ears. Was I about to have a panic attack? I’d never

had one before but I imagined what I was feeling had to be pretty damn close to one.

I tried calling Luca again. Voicemail. Fuck!

“Luca! Where are you?” I shouted.

I waited for hours for him to call me back. Not a peep.

* * *

I struggled to get out of bed. My head was dull and my body was sluggish. All I wanted to do was to hide under the covers and sleep. It had been two days since the incident and still nothing from Luca.

The doorbell rang. Who the hell would bother me so early? I ignored the buzzer. But, whoever it was was determined to see me.

Luca! What if it was Luca? I leaped out of bed, pulled on my dressing gown, and rushed to the door. I didn't care that my hair looked like dreadlocks.

“Miss, Harris,” I heard a voice through the door. “It's Detective Cross.”

My hope fell flat at my feet. What did he want? I opened the door.

“Good morning, Miss Harris. I'm sorry to disturb you so early.”

“Hello, Detective. What can I do for you?”

“I have news about Lauren's murder. May I come in?”

His words took a while to register.

“Uh, sure. Please, come in.”

Cross walked in and stood at the kitchen counter.

“Please, sit down,” I said, suddenly remembering my manners. “Can I get you a coffee?”

“No, thank you.”

We sat down and I waited with bated breath to hear what the cop had to say. I was terrified that he'd found out about Luca. Had he spoken to Mama and Dad yet? Did he tell them what I'd been desperately hiding from them?

"What news do you have?"

"Ballistics have matched a weapon to your sister's shooting."

Stay calm, Maddie. Just breathe.

"I see. Do you know who the gun belongs to?"

"Yes. We've traced it to a known gang member."

I didn't say anything. I thought it best to keep my mouth shut in case I inadvertently stepped in it.

"I don't know if you've been following the news on Channel 8, but the man was from the gang involved in that blazing warehouse fire."

"You're kidding. Who was he?"

"His name is Vaughn Mancini. Or, rather, it was."

"He's dead?"

"Yes."

"I don't understand. Why would a known gangster kill my sister?"

"That we don't know. I'm sorry, but that's, unfortunately, the best I can do. No one knows when it comes to scum like that, Miss Harris. He may have seen her in a club and killed her when she shunned his advances. The truth is, we can speculate all day long. We just can't be sure."

"I see."

I was relieved. At least Cross hadn't linked Luca to the shooter. Not that it made much of a difference, now that Luca was dead too.

The detective spoke about closing the case and other official paperwork stuff, but I didn't hear much. I simply nodded.

So, it was over. The chapter was closed. Cross showed himself out. I remained on the sofa and stared out into space.

* * *

I dodged my parents' questions about where Luca was. I kept to my story that he was away on business, as I couldn't bring myself to tell them the truth. I was sure I'd come up with something appropriate further down the line.

The house where it had all started was sold. I'd arranged with the selling agent to go around and pack up. The new owners bought some of the furniture so it was up to me to pack up the rest of Luca's and my possessions.

I hated being there. Every room I entered was a punch in the gut. Beth had offered to help me, but I wanted to be alone. That way I could say a proper goodbye to both Lauren and Luca.

I started in the kitchen and worked my way steadily to the room I dreaded being in the most—the main bedroom. The sun was setting by the time I got around to it. I opened the closet doors and stared at the empty racks where Luca's clothes used to be. I could still smell his distinctive musky scent. The memories hurt like a son of a bitch.

After a stern word with myself, I folded a box and started packing the few items we'd left behind when we moved to the hotel. Milo was barking up a storm downstairs.

“Milo! Come here, girl!”

The barking grew louder as she ran up the stairs.

“I'm here, sweetie,” I said and heard her panting grow louder.

She was whining.

“What is it?”

I turned around and instantly froze.

“Hi, Maddie.”

“Luca,” I whispered, more to myself than to the man standing in the doorway.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to startle you.”

Startle me? Was he fucking kidding? That was the last word I would have used. How about crushing my soul and scaring the shit out of me?

“I thought you were dead.”

“I know. I’m sorry I had to do it that way. You look beautiful. How are you?”

“What are you doing here?”

“I wanted to see you.”

“What the fuck, Luca! Couldn’t you make a simple phone call? I’ve been sick for days, not knowing if you were dead or alive. How could you do that to me?”

I was yelling at him. Milo lay at the door and whimpered while I carried on like a raving lunatic. Luca bent down and picked her up.

“It’s okay, girl,” he whispered and scratched her behind her ear.

I must have been crying because my face was wet.

Luca put Milo down and walked toward me. I stepped back.

“Don’t.”

“I’m so sorry, Maddie. About everything. I’ve put you through hell. I don’t blame you if you hate me.”

“How big of you,” I snapped and wiped my face with the back of my sleeve.

“Please, Madison. Can we talk?”

“Now you want to talk.”

“Please.”

“Fine. Talk. I’m listening.”

I put the box down and stood with my hands folded across my chest. If body language was a weapon, I would have dropped Luca like a crazed woman wielding an ax. The kind the Vikings used. And it was sharper than a Ninja's.

LUCA

ONE YEAR LATER

“**Y**eah, it’s a gorgeous day out here, Nico.”
“Are you at the beach?”

“Yup. The ocean is so warm this time of year.”

“You deserve a little pampering after the year you’ve had.”

“Ain’t that the truth? How’s Sam?”

“She’s well. She and the boys are visiting her mom. I’ll join them in a few days.”

“Sounds like fun. Where are you going?”

“The boys have been bugging us to go camping. So, we’re taking them to Wai’anapanapa State Park. It’s remote, wild, and has a volcanic coastline with a black sandy beach. Perfect for the lads.”

“It’s in Hawaii, isn’t it?”

“That’s the one. So, what’s it like being back in Italy?”

“It’s like being home.”

“Haha. How’s business?”

“Great. The sale back in The States went through last week. Now I can focus on the new business out here.”

“That’s great. You must be so relieved to be getting on with your life.”

“I am. I have my good days and bad days, but overall, I think I’m going to get through it.”

“Well, the tragedy is still fresh. Time will heal.”

“I hope so. I could do with a good dose of healing. Any news from Tony about Antonio and his guys? What’s the word on the street?”

“It looks like things have died down. Now that the main players are all dead, Antonio’s band of merry men has scattered. They are probably scared shitless that Paolo will finish what he’d started.”

“That’s about the smartest thing they can do.”

“You never did tell me what Antonio said just before you plugged him.”

“He didn’t wax lyrical, I can tell you that much. The little asshole begged me to spare his life. Fucking coward reckoned he could pay me off.”

“You’re kidding. What a dick.”

“Killing him felt so good. I’m not a violent man, Nico, but I’d kill that bastard ten times over if I had to.”

“You’re preaching to the choir, Buddy.”

“True. Look who I’m telling.”

“Anyway, I’d love to shoot the breeze, but I gotta pack. Sam will kill me if I miss my flight.”

“Have fun, Nico. Give my love to the family.”

“Will do. You look after yourself. I’ll call you soon.”

“Ciao, Nico.”

I put down my phone and looked across the ocean. The clear blue water sparkled as kids and teens frolicked around under the Tuscan sun. A lone seagull was working up the courage to snatch a sandwich from a beach bag while its owner was away, swimming.

Time for another dip. My skin was used to the sun, but I’d been indoors for so long that the heat was getting to me. I planned on living life to the fullest after my narrow escape from death.

Were it not for Paolo, I'd be swimming with the fishes, as they say. Vaughn tried to sneak up on me when I was following Antonio to his mistress' apartment. By the time I'd heard him, he was right behind me with a garrote. Paolo had seen him following me and dusted him before he knew what had hit him.

So, now *I* was in Paolo's debt. But, hey, what can you do? I was more than happy to oblige.

MADISON

“Hi, Mama.”

“Maddiebug! How are you, my darling?”

“Great, thanks. How are you?”

“Busy, busy. Missing you.”

“I miss you too, Mama. How’s Dad?”

“Off buying another classic car or something. We’re having the usual suspects over for dinner, so he’d better be on time if he knows what’s good for him.”

“I’m sure he’s way too scared of you to be late, Mama,” I chuckled.

“Wise man. So, what’s news? How’s your holiday?”

“It’s glorious, Mama. I’m as brown as a berry.”

“That’s not too difficult—not with your olive skin. Have you bought any fabulous outfits yet?”

“Far too many.”

“Oh, goodness, I almost forgot. Did Beth call you?”

“Yes! I’m so excited.”

“Can you believe it? My little sister is finally walking down the aisle.”

“It’s about time. I was starting to think Anton would never pull his finger out of his butt and propose. I can’t believe he waited for me to leave before he asked Beth. Remind me to chew him out about that, will you?”

“Beth is so happy, Maddie. You should see how she glows when we talk about her arrangements.”

I was quiet for a moment as I remembered how much fun Mama, Beth, Lauren, and I had when we went away for that weekend to plan my wedding. The one that didn't happen.

“I miss her too, my love,” Mom said softly into the phone.

“Is it ever going to get easier, Mama?”

“I hope so.”

“I'm sorry. I didn't mean to upset you.”

“That's alright.”

“What are you serving for dinner?” I asked quickly, hoping to distract my mother from the painful memory of her daughter who was no more.

She cleared her throat.

“I'm trying out a new recipe. I've been watching back-to-back episodes on the Food channel. Found some fabulous recipes.”

“Please, take some photos when the table is set. And, save me some recipes.”

“Of course, my darling. But you'll see Dad and me soon. You can be my guinea pig. Dad runs a mile when he hears me coming with a spoon.”

“I'm happy to oblige, Mama,” I laughed.

“That's my girl. Okay, gotta run. Have a beautiful day, my sweet girl. Love you bunches.”

“Have fun, Mama. Love you back. Say hi to Dad.”

“I will. Bye-bye.”

I placed the phone back in my bag, sat back, and enjoyed the view.

LUCA

Her hand felt so good in mine. Warm. Soft. A perfect fit.
“Ready for a dip, my love?”

“So ready.”

“How’s your mom?”

“Busy as a bee. Planning dinner. Poor Beth must be at her wits end with Mama getting involved in the wedding plans.”

“Hey, I’m just glad we’re off the hook,” I sighed.

“Yup, glad our wedding is done and dusted. Although, Mama did keep it down to organized chaos.”

“Seriously? I’ve never seen so many flowers in one place,” I laughed. “And, I’m sure we could have fed a small army with the leftovers.”

“I know what you mean. I should suggest to Beth that she and Anton use the leftovers for their wedding. They’ll save a bundle.”

I got up off the sun chair and held onto Maddie’s hand. Together we walked to the ocean. I still couldn’t believe that she was my wife. It was touch and go, though. I thought I’d lost her forever back at the house when I appeared out of nowhere and scared the poor woman half to death.

After a lot of screaming and yelling and a few well-placed punches, she found it in her heart to begin to forgive me. Oh, and of course, a lot of make-up sex.

And now here we were, in Tuscany, married, happy, and enjoying a bit of a holiday before we got our teeth into our new businesses. Maddie agreed that Beth would run the agency in The States, while Maddie would open up a branch in Italy. I sold my dealership to Sandy, who had found an investor, and planned on starting up a new dealership in Italy.

Maddie and I felt we needed a fresh start. The States held too many bad memories for both of us. No one knew us in Tuscany. No one except for Angelo and Sophia, and that suited me just fine.

“What do you reckon?” I asked Maddie as we walked across the warm sand. “Do you think your parents will ever forgive me for stealing you away to Italy?”

“The jury is still out on that one.”

I was so grateful to Maddie, for so many reasons. But, the one thing she gave me that was priceless, was that she’d never told her parents about my past. As far as Michael and Caroline Harris were concerned, I was away on business for a while and the man who killed their Lauren was dead and buried.

I vowed to spend the rest of my life loving and protecting my wife who’d given me so much more than I ever deserved.

“I’m looking forward to dinner with Angelo and Sophia,” she said. “Little Luigi is so adorable. I could eat that kid up.”

“He’s gotten so big. It’s crazy that he was born just the other day, and now he’s walking. Where does the time go?”

“You know what they say. Time flies when you’re wiping up messes and picking up toys,” Maddie giggled.

“Oh, is that what they say?”

“Uh-huh.”

“And what else do they say, Mrs. Gambrelli?”

“They say...last one in is a rotten egg!”

Maddie let go of my hand and ran for the water.

“Hey! You cheat!” I yelled and ran after her.

She was beyond the breakers when I caught up to her.

“I forgot what a good swimmer you are,” I huffed and puffed.

She giggled and wrapped her legs around my waist. I trod water to keep us afloat.

“This cannot end well for you, darling,” I said and nuzzled her neck. “Have you forgotten what happened the last time you did this when we were in the ocean?”

“How could I?”

She kissed me and I went instantly hard. I looked around at the people in the water.

“I’m game if you are.”

“What the hell. Let’s live a little.”

“Ooh, you bad girl.”

I pulled her bikini bottom to the side and slipped into her. Being inside my wife was the best feeling in the world. I never took it for granted. Maddie’s eyes went dreamy as we made love in the ocean. I didn’t care if everyone around us knew what we were doing. I was happy to celebrate my love for her anywhere, anytime.

She threw her head back in ecstasy as she reached orgasm. I was fighting not to drown the both of us so my orgasm was a little trickier to manage. Afterward, I held onto her and kissed her beautiful lips.

“You are so gorgeous, Maddie. I love you so much. Thank you for being my wife.”

“I love you too, Luca. I’m happy to be your wife.”

We floated on our backs under the warm sun until we were covered from head to toe in goosebumps.

“Are you ready to head back to the beach, gorgeous?” I asked.

“In a minute,” she said and floated over to me.

“There’s something else I’m happy to be, babe,” she said and took my hand.

“An Italian citizen?” I chuckled.

“Of course. But there’s something I’m more excited about than living under the Tuscan sun.”

“Oh? And, what’s that?”

“Being the mother of your child.”

MADISON

I thought Luca was going to drown when I told him I was pregnant. The look of shock on his face was precious. It was so adorable. He nearly cracked my ribs, he squeezed so hard when he hugged me.

“I’m gonna be a dad!” he said with a shaky voice.

“Yes, my love. And may I ask that you try your best to be the father and not another kid?”

“Cheeky monkey,” he said and pinched my bottom.

“Have you told anyone else yet?”

“Nope. Just you, baby daddy.”

“We’d better call your folks. And Beth is going to be so jealous. Oh, my goodness, Angelo and Sophia are going to spoil this baby rotten.”

“Slow down, you. Save some of that energy for the baby. You’re on diaper duty for the first few months. I’m in charge of breast milk.”

“Sounds like you’ve thought this through.”

“In wonderfully painful detail,” I grinned.

EPILOGUE

LUCA

“Come on, honey. One more push then we’re there.”
“We?” Maddie growled. “I’m the one giving birth to the biggest baby ever.”

She squeezed my hand so hard I was sure I heard the little bones cracking, but I suffered in silence and kept coaching Maddie.

“Ouch!”

“The baby is crowning,” the nurse said. “One more push and you’re done.”

Maddie bore down and gave one more grunt, and with it came our baby girl.

“Oh, Maddie,” I said once the nurse had wiped away the vernix from our baby’s face. “She’s beautiful. She looks just like you.”

“She’d better, after all this,” Maddie moaned.

The nurse passed the tiny bundle to me while Maddie caught her breath. She had the most adorable little face I’d ever seen. I knew newborns weren’t always the prettiest little creations, but our baby was simply perfect.

I lay our daughter on Maddie’s chest. Mommy stared lovingly into her baby’s eyes.

“She’s so small, Luca.”

“I know. I was so nervous just now. I kept thinking I may drop her.”

“No, you won’t. Hey, Lorena, Daddy will never drop you.”

Maddie looked at me.

“Is that okay, my love?” she asked.

I knew what she was asking. Lorena was Italian for Lauren. Maddie wanted to honor her sister, and I wasn’t going to stand in her way.

“Of course it is, my love. Welcome to the world, little Lorena. Mommy and Daddy love you so much. “

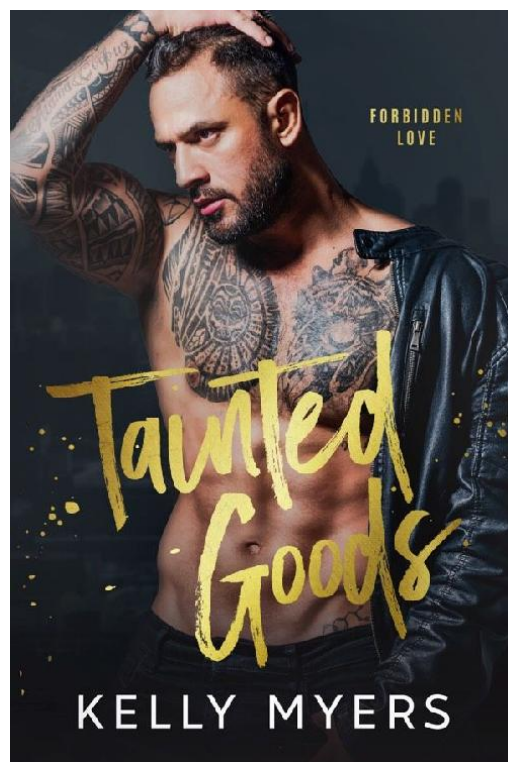
“Thank you, Luca. I love you so much.”

“I love you, Madison. I’d better take a picture and send it to Granny and Grandpa. Say cheese, you gorgeous Gambrelli women.”

Want to know more about Nico and Samantha’s story? Continue the Forbidden Love series with this thrilling revenge to love romance. In the next chapter, I have an excerpt for you.

[Grab your copy of “Tainted Goods” here!](#)

EXCERPT: TAINTED GOODS



I had heard stories about women falling in love with their kidnappers, but didn't think it could happen in real life.

Well, it happened to me... and it wasn't pretty.

Nico killed the man that my mother was married to.

It was unreal to think that I'd ever fall in love with his killer.

Yes, he was a hitman, but he also did the world a favor by ending that man's life.

He didn't deserve to take another breath.

But I deserved to be loved the way that Nico loved me.

I could feel his protection even while we were apart.

It was true that my mother was against our relationship.

I understood why, but my heart would never listen.

Especially when he was the one that showed up when my life was in danger.

Real danger.

And if only I could make it out alive... I'd confess my love for him and never look back.

Chapter One: Nico Amato

My heart rate rose steadily at the feel of the cold steel of the perfectly balanced Para Ordnance pistol hugging my hand. Soon the sulfurous cloud of gunpowder would assault my senses as I meted out long overdue punishment. I caressed the barrel with my trigger finger, preparing myself mentally for the task that lay ahead.

I'd followed the portly man around, unseen, for a week. His daily routine was fairly mundane—all the outward appearances of a caring, family man. But at night, while his wife and two daughters lay asleep, Randolph Zimmerman shifted into another persona—one his loved ones knew nothing about.

I followed at a distance as he cruised the strip, searching for a young piece of ass. Granted, what a man did in his private time was his business. I was no prude but getting off on torturing and murdering young prostitutes was crossing the line. That's when I stepped in. The cops had dropped the ball on the sadist. Procedural fuckups, they claimed. Funny how perps seemed to have more rights than the innocents they preyed upon.

Consequently, when my agent offered me the contract taken out by a heartbroken father of a pummeled seventeen-year-old girl, I accepted. Randolph had beaten the poor girl so severely that she was barely recognizable before he dumped her in an alley next to a garbage bin. It was more than fair to

say that the world would be a better place without Randolph's murderous soul.

I twisted the silencer securely onto the barrel of my gun. Stealth is key to a hitman's survival, and I never took unnecessary chances. Randolph's bald head glistened under the streetlight as he stopped and leaned out of his Mustang's window to talk to a young prostitute. The scantily clad girl couldn't have been older than fifteen, but the streets had already made an ace negotiator out of her.

I'd learned from Randolph's file that he liked them young, and this teen fitted the profile perfectly. I had my reservations about killing him in front of the girl, but Randolph had given me little choice. He was a wealthy man, who surrounded himself with protection wherever he went. Only at night, when he was out on the prowl, did the church-going hypocrite hunt alone.

Perhaps, if I was lucky, the girl would open her eyes to the dangers of living on the streets and go home to her parents. But I wasn't going to hold my breath. She scratched her arm, then opened the passenger door of the Mustang and got in. The young prostitute's drug habit was firmly in charge.

The green Mustang pulled slowly back into the lane and as it did, I saw the girl's head disappearing from sight. No prizes for guessing what Randolph wanted. The bile of anger and disgust rose inside of me as I followed the pair with my lights off. I stayed just out of sight as the car turned down an alley not too far from where the girl got in. I turned off my car's engine once the Mustang came to a stop and waited.

I cracked open the window so I could hear better. The alley smelled like a sewer, which it probably was on account of the homeless who traversed it. A large metal dumpster to the left of where I'd parked was overflowing with uncollected trash. There were about a hundred other places I'd rather be, I thought. What a shit hole.

Had the poor girl's father ever wondered where she was? Had her mother? And, on the off chance that they had, would they do anything about her plight?

My thoughts were interrupted by an escalating argument coming from inside Randolph's car. The girl swore at her *John*, who unceremoniously slapped her across the face. I couldn't wait any longer, as the fight would soon escalate to a full-on assault, leaving the girl in a world of pain and Randolph with a raging hardon for blood.

I made my way as quickly and quietly as I could to the car, yanked the driver's door open, and grabbed Randolph by his collar. In a smooth motion, I jerked him out of the car and threw him down on the dirty curb. Randolph's eyes were as big as saucers, clearly completely surprised by my sudden presence.

The girl screamed, leaped out of the car, and got the hell out of there. She didn't stop to look back.

"What the fuck! Who are you?" he barked at me.

I didn't say a word. There was no point in attempting to rehabilitate a predator like Randolph—he was rotten to the core. I simply pointed my Para Ordnance at his head and pulled the trigger twice. Then I picked up the spent shells and left the scene.

My old friend nausea caught up to me as I drove away. I wasn't nauseous at the sight of Randolph lying bleeding in the alley behind me. It was because I saw Julia's eyes every time I heard the sound of a gunshot ringing in my ears. My innocent, beautiful Julia, was taken too soon. In my mind's eye, I saw her falling to the ground, her lifeless body splayed out in a pool of her own blood.

I willed away nausea and shook my head until I felt the blood that had pooled move again.

'When will you stop this, Nico?' I heard Julia's voice pleading in my mind.

In my head, Julia would always be twenty-one. Her young voice spoke to me often.

"I can't Julia," I said out loud, well aware that I was talking to a ghost.

'Yes, you can.'

“I will never stop, my love,” I said softly. “Never.”

I locked away my weapon once I got home. Then I poured myself a whiskey, downed it, and showered, washing the filth of the alley and Randolph Zimmerman off me. I felt better afterward. I burned Randolph’s file before I went to bed. In my mind, he had never existed. I was the lucky one—the father of the murdered prostitute would never have peace.

I dreamed of Julia. It was our wedding day. My bride wore her pearly white dress and smiled at me the way she used to do when she thought I was being a putz. Julia was holding a bouquet of red roses and I wondered why the petals were falling onto her dress, as the roses were freshly picked.

It wasn’t until I looked closely that I realized the red patches on Julia’s dress weren’t fallen rose petals but bright blood seeping through from her porcelain skin.

I cried out as Julia’s eyes grew glassy, but as fast as I ran, I couldn’t get to her.

“No! Julia!” I heard myself screaming.

I sat up in bed, sweat pouring down my face. It was morning and the sun bathed my bedroom in an orange glow. I was breathing heavily.

It’s okay, Nico. It was just a dream. You’re okay.

“Fuck,” I moaned and wiped the sweat from my forehead.

Blue, my blue lacy, was sitting on the edge of my bed, watching me with his soulful eyes.

“Hey, boy.”

He wagged his tail wildly.

“I don’t know about you, Blue, but I could do with a good breakfast.”

Blue barked in agreement and bounded out of the room, leaving me behind in anticipation of a tasty treat. I got up, went to the bathroom, and splashed my face with cold water before going to the kitchen.

I switched on the television and switched to the news channel. A pretty woman with strawberry blonde hair, a bright smile, and a very long pair of legs was pointing to a map behind her and talking about the cold front moving in from the south. The newsroom banter was centered on the upcoming baseball game, and as she finished her weather report, the woman reminded viewers to wrap up and stay warm.

The music changed and a newsreader came on.

“Family and friends of Mister Randolph Zimmerman are stunned and emotional this morning as the police found the man gunned down in an alley.”

The studio switched to a reporter on the scene. He was holding the microphone while a family friend was commenting.

“We’re heartbroken. Randy was such a wonderful man. I can’t imagine why anyone would want to hurt him. Everyone loved him.”

“Yeah,” I grunted. “Everyone but the poor women he beat the life out of.”

I knew of at least one man who wouldn’t mourn his death. Where were the cameras when his daughter was beaten to death in an alley and discarded like yesterday’s trash?

I gave Blue a fresh hoof to gnaw on. He grabbed it enthusiastically and ran outside to chew it in his favorite spot in the morning sun. I switched on the coffee maker and ground some Arabica coffee beans. I needed a shot of primo caffeine to snap me out of my funk.

“We have launched a manhunt for the killer and hope to have this miscreant in custody soon,” a policeman said into the mic. “The killer will be brought to justice, as I promise the people of this good city.”

“Cry me a fucking river,” I grunted and switched off the TV.

The cops couldn’t find their assholes with a mirror. I put the unsavory business behind me and whipped up three eggs for an omelet. I ate my breakfast outside on the deck and

enjoyed the views of nature. My property was isolated and liked it just fine that way.

The silence gave me plenty of opportunities to pursue my passion. Fine art was my other love—Julia would always be my first.

Chapter Two: Samantha Barone

Mom was sitting in the back of the restaurant, at a corner table. I checked my watch once more as I rushed to meet her.

“Hi, Mom. Sorry, I’m late,” I said and kissed her on the cheek. “Have you been waiting long?”

“Hello, Sam. Not too long. I asked Luca to stop off at the store before he dropped me here.”

Luca was our family’s driver. He was young and fairly new to the organization, but I liked him. He had an open face, which was a rarity in the Barone Family.

“Oh, good. I could use a glass of wine today. Shall I order a bottle of Chardonnay?”

“Sounds good. Why are you so ruffled today, darling?”

“Mia and I have a new client. We’ve been pitching to her for about two weeks, and she finally arranged to see us this morning. Gorgeous woman—a Sheikh’s wife—so this is definitely a celebratory lunch on me.”

“Congratulations, Sam, that’s wonderful.”

“Thanks, Mom.”

“Good afternoon,” a waitress greeted us.

“Hi, Jenna,” I said, having read her name badge. “We’ll have a bottle of Etoile Brut, thanks.”

“Certainly, ma’am.”

I looked at the menu items while the waitress fetched our wine.

“What’s good?” I asked Mom. “I haven’t been here in a while.”

“I had the mussel pot last week. It was divine.”

“I’m all fished out, I’m afraid. Mia’s uncle invited us to dinner last night, and you know how her family is when it comes to fish. I wouldn’t be surprised if Mia had hidden gills.”

“It’s no wonder she has such beautiful skin,” Mom smiled. “I can’t understand why the two of you don’t have boyfriends, Sam. You’re both such gorgeous women.”

“Not all of us need a man to boss us about, Mom,” I snapped. I felt bad afterward, but it was too late. My words were swirling around Mom’s head, punching her in the face.

“Just saying,” she said matter of factly.

“I’m sorry, Mom. That was uncalled for.”

“That’s okay, my love.”

The subject of my stepfather threatened to rear its ugly head. I couldn’t help myself.

“So, how is your husband?”

“You mean, your stepfather.”

“Yes.”

“He’s fine. Busy as always.”

“I won’t ask with what.”

“Sam. Why can’t we just have a nice lunch for once?”

“How can I have a nice lunch with you, Mom, when I know you’re going home to Luigi?”

“He’s not that bad, Sam.”

I opened my mouth to speak, but the waitress appeared with our wine and two glasses. She opened it and poured some into a glass for me to taste.

“It’s fine, thanks,” I said.

“Have you ladies decided on a meal order?” she asked while she poured Mom and me a glass of wine.

“Give us a few minutes, please, dear,” Mom said to the waitress who smiled, nodded, and walked away.

“The ravioli looks promising,” I commented, my head buried in the menu.

“I’ll join you,” Mom smiled.

I placed the menu at the corner of the table and took a sip of wine. I hated the inevitable awkward silence that followed a mention of my stepfather. I hated the man with a passion, but Mom was the loyal sort. I would have kicked his ass to the curb a long time ago.

Or would I? Luigi Barone was the head of a crime family. He hadn’t always been—certainly not when he and my mother were married after my father’s death. But he’d shown his dogged ambition over the years, and the prize was finally in his grasp.

What was that old proverb? Power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely. Luigi was the embodiment of the adage. Luigi would as soon let my mother go as he’d let his empire crumble. Mom was stuck.

[Read the complete story here!](#)

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Kelly Myers writes contemporary romance. She tries to bring that feeling which makes you feel connected to the characters in her books. Her stories have characters that make their partners feel seen, heard, and understood.

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