



*One*

# CHANCE

THE MACHELLI FAMILY - BOOK ONE

GABRIELLE LAINE

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BOOK ONE

**GABRIELLE LAINE**

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## CHAPTER

### *One*

The parking lot reminds me of a prison.

Each column supporting the next rung of the multi-story structure cuts through the dull, early morning light. Pillars of inky black that send the sunrise streaking across the concrete. Stripes of harsh contrast. Like bars on a prison window.

I shiver, snuggling deeper into my winter coat. The soft squeak of my sneakers echoes as I pick up the pace, hurrying for my car.

Yesterday evening, the parking lot was full of Carnivale-goers. Vehicles had filled the building and lined the streets. People had swarmed the alleyways and amassed in the palazzo courtyards. Every open space of Palermo had become a rush of color and noise.

Now, at five in the morning, the streets are quiet and the parking lot is empty. So empty, in fact, it's creepy.

The season doesn't help.

It's February. And even Sicily, home of balmy Mediterranean zephyrs and radiant sunshine, grows cold in the dead of winter. Now, the gray light of the rising sun has brought a brother: an eerie breeze that rolls through the seventh floor of the parking lot to sneak beneath my scarf and shoot chills down my spine.

The zip on my coat broke last week so I pull the wool panels tight around my torso and fold my arms to keep the

lapels in place. My gloves are fingerless so I shove my hands up into my armpits to keep them warm.

My camera bag bumps against my hip.

Since leaving the elevator, I'd kept my eyes downcast, my concentration on the concrete. I focused on the sound of my shoes and how my exhales were pluming white in the cold.

As I look up, however, I grind to a sharp halt.

My bag swings wildly. Little pieces of gravel crunch beneath my shoes.

Looking out across the floor, I can see two cars. One is my rented Bianchina, tucked against a pillar on the western side of the building. Pale blue, the light of dawn has bleached it to a bone white. The second car is over in the eastern corner, the other side of a row of pillars. Dark and sleek, I know instinctively that it's excessively expensive.

But, as far as I'm concerned, the car can go hang.

I'm more preoccupied with the dark shape next to it.

*Oh, God...*

I've never seen a dead body before. But I've watched enough TV shows to recognize the sprawled shape of a fallen human being.

I hesitate. I look around the parking lot.

*It's probably just a drunkard, I reason. Someone who partied just a little too hard and has passed out.*

I can't see much of the figure. Just the rumpled, central line of a dark jacket caught over slumped shoulders. And five white specks of upturned fingertips where his arm is caught awkwardly at his side. Otherwise, the body lays in a shaft of darkness, only his smart loafers peeking into the light.

It's the loafers that give it away.

Hardly party footwear.

*Shit.*

Swallowing, I hurry over to my rental. Without central locking, I have to use the key in the door to open it before throwing my equipment onto the back seat. I then stand there, hanging on the wide door and trying to peer through the darkness.

*You can't just leave him there, Harrison. You have to at least check if he's alive...*

*Double shit.*

Swallowing harder, I start to step around the door, pushing it half-closed behind me. Its hinge creaks in the darkness and an echoing noise freezes me in place. I strain my ears against the quiet...

...a shuffle, the jingle of keys, the curse of a deep, male voice.

As a shadow moves over the body on the ground, I hear the unmistakable sound of a gun being cocked.

*Oh, holy—*

*Yeah, no. Definitely time to leave.*

I scurry to get back in the car, practically launching myself into the seat.

*Bang!*

The gunshot rings out through the parking lot, loud and sickeningly hollow.

I scream and scramble for the door handle.

By the time the second shot rips through the air, I've slammed the door shut and plastered my hands over my mouth.

*Shouting: not the best plan!*

*This is how you make headlines, Harrison. "American post-grad, Freya Harrison, goes missing abroad. Last known location, the scene of a fatal shooting."*

I rush to grab my seatbelt as if the thin strap of woven plastic will work as a bullet guard. I drop the clip twice, my



hands are shaking so badly.

*Just get out, my head screams. Just put the car in gear, your foot to the floor, and get the hell out.*

I struggle with the key. I fumble with the gear shift.

It feels like an age before the engine roars to life—

*Thump-thump!*

A pair of hands hit the hood of the car.

I scream and hit the accelerator. Forgetting to release the clutch, the Bianchina roars to life but goes nowhere. The hood rises up like it's bucking against the stranger now planted in its path...

...a stranger I can only half see.

A streak of light crowds in from beyond his left shoulder revealing a dark, matte suit and a silk shirt. His arms bulk beneath the fabric. His chest is a wide expanse of black. The same streak of gray sunlight catches the stranger in the jaw and over the bridge of his nose, turning his profile crooked and menacing. His pallor looks off and sickly. For the rest, I catch only a glint of brown eyes and slanting, ebony brows.

His lips are moving but I miss the words entirely, turned deaf by the roar of the engine.

Some idiotic, automatic response has me easing off the gas so I can hear better and the engine stalls.

‘Shit!’ I mutter.

‘Wait!’ the stranger repeats himself into the sudden quiet. His voice is deep and hoarse with emotion. He practically growls his Italian... ‘Wait, please...’

‘I...’ I stumble for something to say as I fumble inside the car.

*I want no part in this...? I swear I didn't see anything...? I won't tell the police...?*

*Please, don't kill me...?*

Yet something is holding back my tongue, along with my instinct to run. I hesitate to get the car back into gear.

‘Please, I need your help. My brother...’ The stranger glances back over his shoulder; towards the other car... and the body.

‘I’m sorry!’ I call through the windshield, my self-preservation kicking back in as I try to work the shift into first gear.

I like to think I’m a good person. For the most part. I really do.

But there’s playing The Good Samaritan and then there’s playing The Idiot.

And this guy is very possibly—*probably*—a murderer.

And I’m a witness.

Those headlines start rushing through my head again.

*“Freya Harrison was just twenty-eight years old when her parents reported her missing after she failed to catch her flight from Palermo International...”*

When I look back up through the windshield, I’m staring down the barrel of a handgun. I nearly crap myself.

I’d scream if my chest hadn’t spasmed into stillness, air trapped in my lungs.

I ease off the pedals and the car lurches into another stall.

The stranger neatly sidesteps the jolting chassis and reaches to yank open the door.

‘I’m sorry,’ he says, still in Italian. Then says something my phrasebook translation can’t help me with. His gestures are clear though: he wants me out of the car.

Terrified, I struggle with the seatbelt and clamber out of the car.

The next thing I know, a long-fingered hand of iron is wrapping around my arm and dragging me across the parking

lot faster than my feet can manage. I jolt. I stumble. I finally remember to inhale.

‘What—’ I choke on my words, changing my question. ‘Who are you?’

He doesn’t answer. Which is good, I realize belatedly.

*He tells you who he is and suddenly you’re a witness, dummy. Stay quiet. Stay ignorant. Don’t look him in the face... and he might just let you go.*

My heart is thumping in my chest and hammering in my ears.

I almost scream again when the dark stranger pulls me around one of the parking pillars...

...there are now *two* bodies on the ground.

‘Oh, God...’

The one I’d seen first is in the same position he was a few minutes ago. From this approach, I can see his face. His eyes are open and glazed. They stare blankly out at the underside of the pricey car I can now see is a BMW.

I feel the rushing urge to vomit.

‘Here,’ the stranger yanks me away from the corpse, effectively redirecting my thoughts.

I’m pulled down to the floor beside the second body. This one isn’t dead. But he’s not exactly thriving either.

Like the stranger, the man on the ground is wearing a suit. High end with hints of a tuxedo about it. Whilst the stranger is in black on black, his companion—his brother as he claims—is wearing a white shirt and dark bow tie. An unfortunate choice, given the pool of scarlet that’s rapidly blooming across his chest.

Again, my gag reflex starts up and my mouth fills with saliva. I swallow hard and try breathing through my nose.

At least the shock of seeing a shooting victim is effectively distracting me from the fact that I may be about to join him. I

keep my eyes on the man's ragged breathing and away from the gun pointed at my head.

The poor man is staring at me with a handsome face full of fear. Bubbles of blood are pooling at the corners of his mouth.

'We...' my hands dance nervously across the man's chest, before bunching up one of his lapels, ready to press it down upon his wound. 'We have to put pressure on the wound.'

'You are English.'

The stranger says it like a statement, not a question. But I correct him anyway.

'American,' I say, without thinking.

*Good going, Freya. Any other personal information you want to dish out to the homicidal Italian?*

Before I can create a firm enough seal on the wound, the body beneath my hands is jerked upright.

'Wait—' I cry.

'We need to get him to a hospital.' The stranger's English is accented but perfectly clear. 'Get his legs.'

'What are you—?'

*'Get his legs!'*

With his hands under his brother's armpits, the stranger has to angle the barrel of the gun to keep it pointed in my direction, poking from beside the prone man's pectoral.

I hurry to grab his ankles.

At five-five, I'm hardly a short woman, but Stranger is a behemoth of a man and nearly a foot taller still. As high as I can lift him, Tuxedo is still held at a sharp angle between the two of us.

*That's good though, right? I think. Isn't a bleeding wound supposed to be kept elevated?*

Then again, that was about keeping the bleeding above the heart, right?

What was the protocol when the bleeding was *from* the heart?

Something tells me it's not: drag the man around and throw him in the back of a vintage rental.

'You should call for an ambulance,' I puff, out of breath. It has been a while since I did any cardio.

'No phone,' he says, not sounding anywhere near as out of breath as me. 'And we don't have time. The shooter could line up another shot while we waited.'

'The shooter? *You're not the shooter?!'*

Stranger doesn't dignify my stupid outcry with an answer.

The world seems to tilt under my feet and I stumble in my hurry to get back to the other side of the parking level. My head goes on the swivel, looking for another figure in the darkness.

Since seeing the barrel of his weapon leveled at my head, my survival instincts had pinned the man before me as the biggest immediate threat.

I heard a gunshot. I saw a gun. It had been simple math to attach one to the other.

But now, sense is starting to enter back into the equation...

Why would the man shoot his brother and then threaten a complete bystander to help him carry that same man to safety?

It didn't track.

Unless someone *else* was responsible for those gunshots.

And the stranger just happened to be equally armed.

Which doesn't exactly frame Stranger and his brother as complete innocents in all of this.

*Oh my God, this is so how I die.*

*Don't think about it...* I chant to myself. *Just don't think about it.*

'Open the back,' the stranger orders as we reach my car.

I fumble to follow orders, push my camera bag into the footwell and then help to get Tuxedo into the back seat. He's not as tall as his brother but we still have to fold his legs against his chest to shut the door.

*Maybe that's a good thing. Maybe it will help stem the bleeding...?*

I enter autopilot as I jump into the front seat and fire up the engine for the third time.

The stranger reveals a shotgun.

I shudder. Bad choice of words.

'Get us out of here and go left at the exit. Then east on *Via Dante*. Break any and all traffic laws. You obey a speed limit and I'll shoot you.'

My palms slip on the steering wheel, and my nerves set my teeth chattering but I do as I'm told. My foot hits the accelerator, the squeal of tires echoes through the building, and I take the spiral descent down seven sloping flights faster than any driver should.

But I value my head more than I do the rental's wing mirrors.

The Bianchina shoots out onto the street as I spin the wheel to the left. Then we hurtle toward *Via Dante* and out across town.

With the small part of my brain that's not concentrating on my real-life efforts of *Grand Theft Auto*, I wonder why Stranger didn't simply take the driver's seat for himself. But, as I speed away, Stranger peers through the windows with his weapon raised. He trains his gun on the building adjacent to the parking lot as we pass. Then turns in his seat to keep the rear view under surveillance.

Clearly, he feels his talents as a marksman are more necessary than his skills behind the wheel.

Not. Comforting.

Swallowing, I decide I don't want to know any more detail than that and keep my gaze fixed forward.

Only when we're four blocks away from the multi-story does Stranger relax.

And, by "relax", I mean turn all of his tension away from outside threats and redirect it to inside concerns. His gun now leveled on me, he adjusts the rearview mirror so he can watch his brother in the reflection.

As we careen down *Via Dante* and I take a hard left onto *Libertia*, the rising sun hits us full in the windshield. I wince before my co-pilot quickly draws down both visor shades. I glance to my left.

Again, only his lower face is lit now. His jaw, hard and sharply angled, tightens to granite as his stare diverts from the road ahead to his brother in the mirror and back again. A pulse hammers just in front of his ear.

*He's worried... I think. He's worried for his brother.*

When he catches me staring, I snap my attention back to the road.

*Libertia* is a fairly new road with smooth asphalt and clear direction. But the stranger quickly points me down another street, this one old and cobbled. The little Autobianchi barely copes, bouncing over the uneven terrain and setting my teeth on edge. Stranger has to grip the back of my seat to keep from hitting his head on the roof.

I'm tempted to check on the patient behind me, fearing the worst, but it takes all my concentration to direct us around parked cars, old dumpsters, and the occasional abandoned bicycle.

The streets are littered with debris from Carnivale. Streamers, torn pieces of balloons, and food wrappers are scattered over the flagstones.

*Who cares if he's worried?* I grumble in my head, downshifting to navigate a hairpin turn at the end of the street. *This is a man holding you at gunpoint, Harrison!*

'What's your name?'

'What?'

The car swerves a little under my shock before the stranger points me down another back alley. I freak a little when I realize it's a one-way street...

*...and we're going the wrong way down it!*

Thank God the roads are practically empty.

I'm not sure which has surprised me more. The way his low voice seems to fill the little car, turning the air around us hot and oppressive... or his actual question.

'Your *name*...?' he repeats, in a tone that seems to question my intelligence.

I bristle.

*Not everyone operates at their finest when under fire, asshole!*

I consider giving him a false name but what good would that do me? I'm barely holding on to the last of my rationality as it is. Keeping up a ruse on top of that would probably be asking too much of my terror-stricken brain. Besides, there have to be thousands of American girls who share my name, right?

'Freya,' I tell him, pushing bangs of wayward hair back from my face. The wool of my gloves turns the strands static. I feel them shoot off in all directions.

'Pleasure to meet you, Freya,' Stranger growls.

The greeting is so absurd as we bounce haphazardly through the cobbled streets that it makes me snappy.

'Yeah, well. Can't really say the same.'

For one very unsettling moment, I think I catch a smile pulling at the corner of Stranger's mouth.

It makes me braver than it probably should.

'Any chance you're going to tell me *your* name?' I ask, completely forgetting my own advice on ignorance.

'Take the next left and then an immediate right,' Stranger said by way of answer. 'The emergency room is at the far end



of the parking lot.’

Emergency Room. Right. *You have a dying man in your back seat, Harrison. Priorities, here. Names can wait.*

To everyone’s surprise, my own most of all, I shoot the Bianchina across the parking lot at high speed and pull into a swerving halt behind an ambulance, right in front of the ER entrance. Patients and staff hovering on the curbside scatter like pigeons out of the way.

Had I been anything but an adrenaline-drained mush pile by now, I might have taken great joy in my action-movie-style landing.

The sun has almost fully risen now, yellow sunshine gleaming off the hood of the car. But the words “*Pronto Soccorso*” over the entrance still glow in red and white neon.

‘I’ll get a nurse,’ I call, slamming on the parking brake and rushing from the car.

I don’t pause to ask permission or check anyone else’s opinion on the matter. I just ran for it.

Bursting through the automatic doors, I suddenly recall that my Italian is rudimentary at best but desperate cries and lots of arm waving bridge the language divide. Two nurses and a paramedic who’d already handed over his latest charge to the hospital staff follow me back out into the rising sun, a gurney pulled in their wake.

Stranger works with the paramedic to get Tuxedo out of my back seat, then rushes alongside the medical staff who hasten to get him inside. His gun has disappeared somewhere and his attention is on his brother. He answers questions in rapid-fire Italian as the gurney rattles through the automatic doors and onto the ward.

Call me an idiot, but I follow.

Looking back, I know that was my one opportunity to run. To just get back into the car and speed back out onto the streets of Palermo. I could have just returned the car to the rental place (sans my deposit with Tuxedo’s blood now all

over the back seats, thank you very much) and disappeared into the tourist population of the city.

But I didn't.

Something human in me pulled me after the gurney, following in their wake.

When I reach the ward, Tuxedo has already been shifted to one of the beds. A nurse is reading out his BP and other stats, another is reeling off the medications he's preparing to put through the IV. A third is standing with the stranger, a chart and pen in hand.

For a moment, I'm struck a little dumb.

Despite staff members rushing left and right, the beeping of machines, and the distraction of crashing trolleys and equipment, it's the first time I've been able to truly look at the man in front of me.

My first thought is that I'd been right about the suit.

Matte wool over a shirt of muted silk. All in black. I'm no fashionista but I can recognize the cut as expensive and have seen similar designs in the windows of Gucci and Giorgio Armani. Carting a body around and then riding in a rental not much bigger than a Coney Island bumper car had done nothing to diminish its style.

The stranger wears his designer threads like he wears his own shadow: with a natural indifference that speaks of money. And a lot of it. Which seems only natural considering the rest of him: the shoes are high-end, the two rings on his right hand look like they might be platinum and a titanium watch is peeking from under his cuff.

Even his haircut is upper-crust; his thick, ebony locks trimmed shorter in the back and left a little longer in the front. They might have been styled away from his face earlier in the night but now they hang loose, a little sweaty and disheveled.

Already tall and broad, the thick hair he keeps brushing back from his forehead tops the stranger out at six-foot-four, if he is an inch.

To make matters worse, he's astonishingly good-looking.

His features are so symmetrical, so attractively formed, that they'd have been called pretty if not framed by a sharp jawline, high cheekbones, and a dominant brow. Similarly, his nose is a fine and unyielding detail that balances the femininity; turning sensually curved lips and long eyelashes into something alluringly masculine.

*Screw "good-looking", I correct myself.*

The man is a masturbation fantasy come to life. Latino edition.

I had to hand it to the nurse taking down his details. Despite being confronted with a dark and deadly Hugo Boss model, she is holding to her professionalism. Only the rising blush in her cheeks is giving her away.

I can't exactly blame her. The stranger had held me at gunpoint and even *I* can't deny that he's seriously *fine*.

*Speaking of that gun and all it entails... Why are you still here, Harrison?*

'No...' the stranger is saying to the nurse, with a soft shake of his head.

My rough Italian can work out that she's confirming whether the brother is allergic to penicillin.

'All right, that's everything for now. I just need to know your name and details, sir?'

I had been about to turn away. I swear it. I had felt the inclination building into intention. I had been about to turn away and head for the door.

The nurse's question, instead, has my feet growing roots.

Spotting me standing in the middle of the open hallway, amidst the chaos and hubbub of emergency care, the stranger fixes me with a stare of warmest, russet brown. As he answers, it's like he's answering to me, and only me.

"I am Leon," he says, his eyes burning with a golden edge. 'Leon Giancarlo Averna.'

His stare is magnetic. Potent.

Nothing could have torn me away from it.

Save the harsh and singular tone of Leon's brother... as he flatlined.

## CHAPTER

## *Two*

*S*hit. I'm a masters graduate. I was educated by the finest tutors money could buy. But the height of intelligent thought rolling through my head right now is that one angry little utterance:

*Shit.*

*Shit, shit, and double shit.*

How could everything have gone so wrong?

How could it all have gone so *spectacularly*, fucking *wrong*?

I stare at the linoleum tiles on the floor like *they* have the answer. As if somewhere, trapped in the crevices between the faux marble triangles and pale blue squares, there might be an explanation for how tonight had gotten so royally fucked up.

Hunched in my chair, I interlock my fingers behind my head.

Maybe if I just stare hard enough. If I scrutinize every speck of smeared rubber, every mark of every shoe... the enigmas of fate—bitch that she is—will slowly unravel.

Almost immediately, a cleaner passes by with a mop, scrubbing the lino spotless.

*Well... Fuck you.*

Growling, I change my position. I slump low in the little plastic seat. My head falls back against the wall and I push my

legs out straight. It's rude. My mother would be disappointed. But I don't have the strength to care. Anyone wandering by the waiting room can just go the fuck around me.

The small of my back is stiff and my tailbone aches.

How long have I been sitting here?

*Too long.*

I've been sitting here for too long... doing absolutely nothing.

*Pull yourself together, Averna.*

I exhale long and deliberate, before closing my eyes. I block out the beeping of hospital paraphernalia and the squeak of the nurses' shoes... I ignore the smell of bleach and antiseptic that's trying to crawl its way inside my nose.

I don't have the energy for independent thinking so my neurons retreat to familiar pathways. A mental itinerary of the issues I've covered and those still left unsolved.

*Alexei is dead.*

Pushing aside the wave of emotion skulking in the back of my mind, I try, for the millionth time, to address the issue as a statement of fact. Nothing more.

Alexei, my brother, is dead.

What does that entail?

Well, firstly, *he* needs to be told; the family informed. I'd already begged a few coins from the nurse in reception and used the payphone out by the parking lot. I'd gotten Maurice on the line, which wasn't a surprise. He wasn't sober (equally un-astonishing) but he'd gotten the message loud and clear.

He'd said he would inform the head honcho for the sake of urgency but that others would need to be told in person. Which was only right.

I sigh. Alexei's mother Beatris... Shit. That's going to be a hard conversation. She'd only just gotten over the last... incident.

*I need to check in with Janet*, I add to my mental checklist. Alexei's assistant wouldn't be awake yet, let alone firing on all cylinders. First thing in the morning, Janet is a creaking, inefficient crank but get a couple of espressos in her and she is one of the best. She'll give me access to Alexei's calendar so I can see to his meetings and make sure his obligations are met.

Carlos would be a suitable choice for organizing a funeral and seeing to the collection of Alexei's body. He—*it*—had already been wheeled down to the morgue, so Carlos would just need an appropriate transport and some ID to claim he's next of kin. Not difficult to arrange.

Alexei's phone and wallet are long gone already, along with my own, but I'd lifted Alexei's more... problematic possessions before he was taken away. His different IDs. The little notebook he'd had in his pocket.

His Heckler and Koch pistol, stuffed naked into my waistband, is the primary cause of my back ache.

Along with this fucking chair.

I have to shift my weight again.

The damn thing is lurid orange and as hard as my mother's baking. There's no give in it. And it's at least three sizes too small for any reasonably-sized human being.

*Alexei's car.*

The thought fires off along those neuron pathways.

Another task to be seen to.

The car needs towing from the parking lot. But not before the area has been swept for signs of the sniper. Judging from the trajectory of the shots, they'd been coming from—

*There's hardware in the BMW.*

I feel my back molars clamp down hard.

*Okay...* no waiting to sweep the area, then. I can just imagine some well-intentioned, but nosy, attendant inspecting the abandoned vehicle in his lot. Though hidden well, some

persistent poking around would reveal enough firepower in that car to supply an NRA rally.

And most of it is not exactly legal.

Instinctively, I reach for my phone to make another call but, obviously, my pocket is flat and empty.

*Shit.*

Wasn't *that* just the word of the day?

'Hi...'

My eyes snap open. Slowly, I turn to face a hovering figure to my left.

The fact that I never heard her approach doesn't say much about the stability of my mental state. The fact that I can't help but find the woman pretty says even more.

*So not the time, Leon.*

But it's true that the girl—Freya, she'd said her name was—is a pretty thing. With an average height and a healthy build, there's nothing overtly striking about the American's physique. At least not that I can see beneath her bulky winter coat and wool scarf. But her face is pleasantly shaped, with soft, fine features, skin the color of milk, and an excessive amount of freckling over her nose, cheeks, and temples. Dark blonde eyelashes, wispy like paintbrushes, frame large eyes of icy blue.

Despite the cool color, her stare is warm. Compassionate.

Empathetic for the man who had, not an hour ago, held her at gunpoint.

To any third party, the girl might seem perfectly content in my presence but I'd studied poker at Carlos' knee from the age of six. The set of her shoulders, the way her weight is shifting over her right foot... speaks to tension. The creases in the sleeves of her coat are pulled too taut, her folded arms not a stance of relaxation but of defense.

Shifting in my seat, I keep my actions slow. No sudden moves. As if startling Freya might cause her to evaporate.



Tucked into her side, the polystyrene held against her elbow, is a foam cup. Snaking curls of steam rise from its surface. When she offers it to me, the bittersweet scent of caffeine wafts in my direction. Still, I don't move, surprised by her behavior.

Surprised that she's even *here*.

'It's coffee,' she says.

I glance from the cup to her face, a rue smile tugging at my lips.

'I can see that,' I say, reaching for the cup.

'Don't worry, though...' She offers a smile that flickers nervously. But only for a second. 'It's the crappy, hospital kind of coffee.'

Her tone amuses me. As if she's pleasantly surprised to find the machines in the ward offering low-grade sludge.

'I thought it would be something fancier,' she explains, with a wave of her now free hand. 'Italians and their coffee, you know? I figured the hospital would also... But it's just the shitty kind we have in the hospitals back home.'

I snort softly. With my lips sealed, it's barely a noise. Just a puff of air passing through my nose.

'That's supposed to make me feel better?' I ask, wondering why bad coffee was something to *not* worry about.

I notice that Freya's lips are a little too full to be traditionally pretty. And unbalanced. The lower lip was thicker. But as she pulls them back into an awkward and empathetic grimace, I spot a dimple in either cheek.

*Cute.*

'I doubt there's a whole lot that would make you feel better, right now,' she mumbles softly. One of her sneakers braces itself on top of the other, pressing down onto her own toes. More tells of nervousness.

I try not to make that tension worse by staring.

I'm holding the coffee loosely between my knees and take the opportunity to stare into it. As disgusting as it probably is, the cup at least *smells* of coffee. And, as a Sicilian, there aren't many aromas as familiar and comforting as *caffè*.

Not wanting to acknowledge her empathy, I change the subject.

'I thought you left,' I say.

She had disappeared whilst Alexei had been flatlining. I'd rushed to my brother's side and tried to take his hand before one of the nurses pushed me out of the way to perform compressions. When all efforts to save Alexei had been made and his death pronounced, I'd looked up to find the girl gone.

I'd assumed she'd taken the chance to run from the crazy siblings who had hijacked her life.

'I had to move the car,' Freya says.

Simple yet uninformative. That might explain where she had gone but not why she hadn't kept running.

'Speaking of which, you owe me four euros for the ticket.'

'I'll have to owe it you,' I say, taking an automatic sip from the polystyrene cup (instant regret). 'No wallet,' I add, swallowing all the same.

There's the soft brush of fabric on plastic as Freya takes a nearby seat. There's a whole space between us but I still feel a sensation of warmth pass over my left shoulder now that she's closer.

'No phone,' she recalls from the parking lot. 'No wallet...?' I don't need to look at her to know she's raising her eyebrows at me incredulously.

'We were mugged.'

'Mugged.' She states the word with a listless tone of disbelief.

'Yes.'

'*Then* shot at.'

‘Uh-huh.’

*If she wraps her arms any tighter around her torso, she’s going to snap, I think. I can hear her swallowing.*

‘You,’ she eventually says, ‘have had a very bad day.’

I laugh. I can’t help it.

Maybe it’s the grief I’ve been keeping locked in the back of my head. Maybe it’s the release of tension now that there’s nothing more I can do about my brother. Maybe it’s just a lunatic reaction to my complete lack of control over... well, *anything*... tonight.

Heck, maybe it’s just that Freya is funny.

But I laugh. A heavy chuckle that sits solidly in my chest warms my throat and has heat rising in my face.

It feels good.

‘Yeah,’ I finally manage, with a nod of my head. I drill a hand through my hair, tugging at the locks. ‘Yeah, I guess you could say that.’

‘I don’t know anyone unlucky enough to be robbed and shot at on the same night.’

I snort again.

‘Luck had nothing to do with it,’ I admit. ‘It was orchestrated.’

‘Orchestrated?’

Though family business is never to be discussed with outsiders, the crimes being related are hardly state secrets. It’ll all be going into the police record anyway.

*The police.* I add it to my mental checklist.

Thank God for the hour. Were we at a reasonable time of day, I’d have been rushing to cover more of my bases: the family’s *and* my own. But at six in the morning, I have a little time. And Maurice is already on top of the urgent stuff.

‘Yeah,’ I brace myself to take another sip of the drink she’d fetched me. Despite the forewarned lack of quality, it

had been a sweet gesture on her part. ‘Four guys were waiting in the lot, ready to hit my brother and I. I took one of them out but the other two were like ghosts. Disappeared with our phones and wallets.’ I grind my teeth. ‘The sniper took their shot only a few minutes later.’

‘That was the er... the other body in the lot? One of the muggers?’

I turn to meet her stare. When she stiffens, I know what she’s seen. A total and complete lack of remorse.

Taking a life is no short order. It should never be disregarded as trivial. But I’ve been forced into enough scenarios to know that, when you and your enemy are both holding a weapon, you need to be the first to pull the trigger. Else... well, you won’t be doing much of anything, anymore.

And I’ll not ever apologize, or feel remorseful, for fighting to live.

Freya’s quiet for a moment, as if she can read my thoughts about the killing and is slowly processing their impact. Eventually, she comes to some conclusion of her own and continues:

‘You think the mugging was to confirm you as targets?’

She’d caught on quickly for (I assume) a law-abiding citizen.

I nod.

‘Or to slow us down, put us into position. It takes more time than you’d think to set up a sniper’s sight and angle.’

Instead of shivering or looking fearful, Freya watches me with a polite, intelligent interest. Whether she’s naturally courageous or our escapades through the city have just numbed her out to fear, I don’t know. But something in my gut suspects the former.

Pretty and brave. An unusual combination.

In my experience, women blessed with preferential looks tend to get the easy route in life. Not used to hardship, the slightest challenge sends them into a panic. A few years back,

I dated a model who burst into tears when her faucet stopped working. As it turned out, she hadn't paid her water bill because she'd thought the water came free with the house.

No matter how skilled she was in... other areas... the relationship hadn't lasted long after that.

Leaning forward, I brace my elbows on my knees and curve a look around my shoulder at Freya.

'I apologized,' I explain.

'What?' She blinks at me.

'Back in the parking lot. It was in Italian so I'm not sure if you understood. But when you got out of your car, I apologized for threatening you with the gun.'

*I wouldn't have shot you.*

That would be the appropriate thing to say but I can't get the words out because they wouldn't be honest. I've killed before. And to protect my family and our business, I will kill again. Had Freya turned out to be just such a threat, I'd have done what was necessary.

But the apology, at least, is fair and true. I can't say she wasn't in real danger but I can admit that I hadn't *wanted* to put her in that same danger.

'I just needed...' I look for the right words.

'Needed to get your brother help,' she finishes.

My eyes widen in surprise. Her tone is one of simple, friendly acceptance. She unfolds her arms, her hands entangling in her lap. She's wearing fingerless gloves and picks a little at her thumbnail.

'It's not a crime,' she says, 'to be desperate in your need to help another.'

When her gaze snaps up, her eyes are burning with the cool fire of resolve.

'That being said,' she suddenly corrects, pointing a finger in my direction. 'You do that again and we're going to have issues. Waving a...'—she lowers her voice like she's

whispering a dirty word—'gun... around is not a healthy solution to your problems.'

'This, coming from an American?' I challenge.

'A *smart* American,' she quips back.

I smile. Thus far, I can't argue with that.

'All I'm saying,' she adds, 'is that you might want to consider some kinder methods of communication.'

I chuckle again.

The fact that I'm likely to never see this girl after today is adding a certain levity to the conversation. A devil-may-care disregard that's allowing us both to joke around.

'I can promise you,' I say, 'that I'll never again wave a gun at you.'

'Unless there's a lion.'

I blink. She's lost me.

'Pardon?'

'I mean, if there's a lion right behind me that's about to eat me, that would be an acceptable moment to wave your gun my way, you know?'

'All right,' I laugh. 'Barring lions or any other immediate threat of death or dismemberment, I'll not aim my gun at you.'

'Promise?'

I'm not sure who's more surprised—me or her—when I naturally reach up to draw a cross over my heart.

I've not done that in years.

For a few minutes, we fall into a not uncomfortable silence.

'Why is it a good thing?' I finally ask, now staring into the dregs of my polystyrene cup. 'That the coffee sucks, I mean?'

'Oh...'

This time, it's Freya who turns to stare out from her chair, giving me her profile view. Her sneakers squeak on the lino

and she's backlit by one of the fluorescent lamps in the corner. She has a particularly straight and elegant nose and that bottom lip of hers is... deliciously defiant.

'I just meant that... Well, I remember when my grandpa passed.'

*Mind on the matter at hand, Leon...*

'Recently?'

'Oh no. I was a kid.' The memory might have been old but the tension at the corner of her eye tells me it's still emotional for her to recall. 'And he was really old. It wasn't some grand tragedy or anything...' She glances at me nervously as if fearing I'll think to compare her experience to mine.

'Loss is loss,' I assure her, again ignoring the dark and furious wave swirling in the back of my head.

She smiles softly at my encouragement.

'Anyway... my grandpa. He was passing. We were in the hospital saying goodbye. And after he... well, just *after*... my mom gets us something to eat. I was never allowed chocolate on a weekday but she comes back with this bag of fruit chews for my brother and M&Ms for me. They were my favorite. She was probably trying to cheer me up a little.'

Freya has an expressive face. I watch as her nose wrinkles and her eyes narrow... How those dimples flash in and out. She's feeling her story as much as she's telling it.

'And I remember thinking,' she continues, 'that I'm not allowed these M&Ms, right, because it's Wednesday? But Mom is smiling at me kind of wobbly like she's given me this treat and she wants me to be happy even though she just lost her dad and is heartbroken herself. So, I eat the M&Ms. I just take a whole handful'—she makes a fist like she's scooping the sweets out of thin air—'and I stuff them in my mouth. And... *God*, they tasted like shit.'

I can't help laughing softly.

Freya is smiling.

‘Right? Like... just really sweet and sickening, you know? I don’t know if it was the fact that my head was telling me I wasn’t allowed to have them, or because I already felt sick over my grandpa, or because I felt so guilty over not being able to enjoy this special thing my mom had done for me but I just... I couldn’t eat them. I nearly threw up that first mouthful.’

Freya falls quiet. Swallowing, she seems suddenly embarrassed about sharing something so personal, color flushing her cheeks.

‘I’m sorry.’ There’s not a lot I can say, but what I can offer is at least honest. ‘That must have been hard.’

‘Yeah...’ Freya sighs heavily. ‘Never could eat M&Ms again.’

I press my lips together. I hold my amusement in.

One look from Freya and we’re both letting loose, laughing like a pair of lunatics in the emergency waiting room.

‘So,’ I gasp as our laughter dies down. ‘You were somehow worried that my opinion of *caffè* would be forever damaged by association if I had the decent sort, right now?’

Freya grins sheepishly and rubs a hand over her head. Her hair, dark blonde and kind of fuzzy, smooths beneath her palm and then fluffs back up.

‘Something like that,’ she admits. ‘I figure if it’s crappy hospital coffee from the start, you’re not losing anything. I’d hate to think I’d turned an Italian off of coffee, of all things.’

‘Sicilian.’

‘Is there a difference?’

I consider some of the dirtier compliments that have been whispered to me under the blanket of night. I can’t help the smile that curls across my features or the way my gaze is drawn to Freya’s throat. I can see the pulsing of her heartbeat just beneath her ear.

‘I’ve been reliably informed,’ I say, my voice rough with sensual memory, ‘that there *is*.’



## CHAPTER

### *Three*

Oh, wow...

If I didn't already know this guy was deadly, I'd be well and truly informed now. Heat is rising in my face and my skin is tingling beneath my coat. South of my navel, my insides are coiling, swirling... tightening.

*He hasn't even touched you, Harrison.*

*This is what you get for going too long without a date.*

But I can't take all the blame, surely?

This guy has to know what he's doing when he says stuff like that... When he *looks at me* like that...

Men who look like Leon just don't grow up unaware of the effect they have on the opposite hetero sex. At least, in my very limited experience, they've always seemed well aware that their attractive symmetry bestows them with a superpower: the power to see potential bedfellows drop their panties at a hundred paces.

Looking at him now, his body is tight with an innate, raw strength and his eyes burn with what I can only describe as... *hunger*.

It's as if Leon's projecting himself onto me, up close and personal.

Despite the full seat between us, I feel as if I already know the texture of his skin. As if I know the tensile stress on his shirt collar as it pulls taut over the side of his neck. I know the

undulation of the tendons in the back of his hand rising and falling where he braces it on his knee...

The way he's sitting, chest forward and knees spread wide, is blatantly confident, broadcasting the ease with which Leon exists inside his own skin. Not to mention how in tune he must be when it comes to anything physical. *Especially* anything physical.

Everything more than three inches outside of our orbit suddenly feels miles away. My skin has shrunk to a size too small. My breath hitches in my chest. There's an... an urgency in the way I'm shifting in my seat.

It's like I can feel a millennia of evolutionary instinct heating beneath my skin, desperately urging me to reach for this alpha male.

No, I decide, he *has* to know...

Leon can't be ignorant of the vibes he puts out just by existing. How he's turned a hospital waiting room, with all the sensuality of a sterile vacuum, into an intimate, sexually-charged cocoon.

Which poses the question of *why*. Why turn his superpower on me?

Not that I'm some sort of mutant.

I'm decent-looking and, in a large enough crowd, I'd go so far as to describe myself as above average, *thank you very much*.

But there's above average and then there's... well, off the damn chart entirely. The kind of attractive that can make the most unmaternal woman want to hop aboard and start breeding just to keep those looks in the human gene pool.

Those sorts of men do not congress with women who are merely "above average".

Suddenly nervous with a bucket load of self-consciousness thrown in for good measure, I look away from Leon and try to survey the room with a cool reserve. I pretend not to notice

when he scoots closer across the plastic chairs, one thigh now on the seat between us.

I can feel my foot vibrating against the lino flooring, my knee bouncing up and down.

‘Are you waiting for someone?’ he asks, his sensual growl still turning that deep voice of his into something that should be reserved for private bedrooms...

‘Yea—I mean, no.’

*Shit.*

I’d spoken without thinking. Too distracted by that sexy timbre, I’d just let the truth roll off my tongue. It had been halfway out of my mouth before I even realized what I was saying and now...

The sensual bubble has popped. Leon is suddenly sitting bolt upright, his chest turning to face me and his eyes like daggers.

‘What?’ he demands.

It’s clear he hadn’t actually expected an answer. Perhaps he’d been teasing me for focusing on anything but him. Perhaps it had been a subtle way of finding out if I’m romantically attached to anyone (ha!).

But he clearly hadn’t expected me to say that I was, in fact, waiting for someone.

Or to backtrack so quickly. *And obviously!*

I swallow.

*Shit, shit, shit.*

I can feel myself wincing in guilt. I’ve never had a poker face. Never. It had always been funny when Dad had tried to pull me into a game of cards every Christmas. But now...

Now it doesn’t seem so funny anymore.

‘I... I said no,’ I stammer.

‘I don’t believe you.’

Well, he’d be a moron if he did.

*Okay—I swallow—there’s no getting out of this one now. Stop denying and start on damage control...*

Glancing around the waiting room again, I spy a nurse coming back from break and settling behind her desk at reception. Whilst subtly trying to catch her eye, I raise both my hands at Leon, the naked tips of my fingers up and out in a gesture of surrender. Or mercy.

‘Look, I didn’t mean to step on toes or cause any issues. But put yourself in my shoes... There was a shooting. Your brother, he...’ *Let’s not set him off emotionally, Harrison.* ‘I mean... there’s a dead body still back in that parking lot!’

Leon’s face has turned very, *very* still.

But at least he hasn’t reached for a weapon.

I don’t know what Leon does for a living. I don’t know why he would be running around dodging sniper bullets, getting mugged, and carrying a hefty piece of his own. But add up his fancy suit, the dominant, angry way in which he carries himself, and the fact that someone was trying to kill him and his brother... and there are a few obvious conclusions that jump out.

Crooked politician. Drug smuggler. Mobster.

None of them would want the police called on their ass.

Some small voice in the back of my head is telling me that this is when I need to run. It reminds me that I’ve had several opportunities already but this... *this* is the moment that I need to spring to my feet and rush for the nearest exit or I’m going to seriously regret it.

But my ass stays planted in the plastic chair.

If I’m ever confronted with that lion I mentioned before... I think I’d do the same thing. Freeze in place and take up praying.

Because some deep survival instinct is telling me that running is the number one way to draw in a predator.

A predator like Leon...

‘Freya...’ his voice is dark. A pure and lethal warning. ‘Tell me you didn’t...?’

Completely irrationally, I can feel my eyes brimming with tears. I feel like I’m being accused of betrayal or idiocy and neither label is fair!

I’m an American citizen, traveling in Sicily on a temporary VISA. What am I supposed to do? Let the crime go unreported until the man back in the parking lot starts to smell? What would happen if I’m then identified on CCTV or something? I’d have been a witness who failed to come forward. I’d be an accomplice.

But all the rationalizing in the world isn’t making *this* moment any easier.

Leon just continues to stare me down, his gaze hard and cold.

I feel like someone has dropped an ice cube down my spine. My toes curl into the soles of my shoes. I can feel my fight-or-flight response kicking into high gear.

And still, I don’t budge. I’m glued in place.

‘Freya...’ he growls again. ‘Did you call the police?’

I don’t answer but he sees the truth in my eyes all the same. He knows I grabbed my cell phone and called the authorities whilst I was moving the car.

For a moment, Leon doesn’t react. He just closes his eyes and curls those long fingers into a fist. Like he’s struggling to hold onto his last shred of control.

Which makes sense, I can’t help but think in a moment of zany empathy. The guy’s had a hard night.

‘Leon, look, I know that—’

I don’t get to finish.

His lids pop open, his hand shoots out.

Suddenly, I’m being grabbed by the arm and pulled to standing.

‘Ow! Hey, what—?’ I lose control over my tongue. It just kind of lolls there in my mouth, unsure what to do in the face of... well... in the face of *Leon*.

He’s holding me upright. Upright and very, *very* close. His hand is hot on my arm, even through the thickness of my sleeve. I’m drawn in further until the lapels of my coat are brushing the front of his suit. Leon looms down from above, his back to the ceiling lights and the contours of his face deepening in shadow.

‘What the *hell* were you thinking?’ he snarls, eyes flashing with rage. A pulse is trembling in his temple.

‘I...’

I don’t know what to say. I’m shivering all over. My body doesn’t know whether to flash cold with terror or hot with... well, with something I really shouldn’t be feeling for Mr. Tall, Dark, and Dangerous. Not that my body is getting that message. Warning signals are zipping all along my nerve endings, even as my blood is heating to a warm and delicious simmer.

I swallow. I feel my lip tremble.

Leon’s gaze drops to my mouth. His eyes grow darker still, the bittersweet brandy consumed by endless pitch.

I can’t breathe.

My arms itch.

For one (okay, maybe two) insane moment, I want to reach up and lock myself around Leon. My arms around his neck, my legs around his waist. I want to pull his body flush against mine. I want to know if the tempting ideas I have in my head about the feel of his skin are true...

Before I can make my second—third?—horrendous mistake of the night, however, Leon is shifting his hold on my arm. One minute, he’s holding me up vertically. The next, he’s towing me forward. Not into his arms as my libido might have hoped but across the waiting room and out towards the corridor.

‘Hey! Wha—wait!’ I cast a panicked glance toward the nurse at the reception. She watches us with a startled expression on her face. I try to throw a beseeching look in her direction but a crowd of nurses with a gurney pass between us and then we’re out into the hallway, gone and out of sight.

*Well, this is it...* I can’t help but mope in my head, as I’m yanked down the corridor, desperately trying not to trip over my sneakers. *This is how I die.*

I run into a mobster or crooked cop or whatever Leon is, in a darkened parking lot, practically witness his brother’s murder, and then have a golden opportunity to run for the hills... And, instead, I call the police and then *stick around* said mobster-crook-person because... Well... I don’t have an ending to that sentence.

Wait, yes I do.

Because... *I’m an idiot.* There, that seems about right.

‘What...’ I gasp, more than a little breathless. It’s been a long night and I’m not sure my feet, nor my brain, are keeping up. ‘What are you doing? Where are you taking me?’

*To some back alley? To silence me, execution-style?*

Suddenly screaming my head off doesn’t feel like too extreme a course of action.

My fear ratchets up another notch when Leon doesn’t respond.

‘Where,’ I try again, pulling on my arm, ‘*are you taking me?*’

‘Somewhere safe.’

Er... *come again?*

This time, I actually *do* trip over my own feet. Leon has to stop, grab a handful of my coat at the waist, and set me back on balance before he can drag me forward again.

‘What do you mean, *safe?*’ I demand, practically panting now. I can spy the signs whizzing past us. *Cardiology, X-Ray, Wards, Short-Stay Visitation, Emergency.* Some of them are

easy to translate. Others, I'm guessing. 'Look, I know you and the authorities probably don't get on but—'

'This isn't about the authorities,' Leon growls, his pace escalating as we reach the Emergency Department. I can see the door we originally came in through up ahead.

'It's not?' Color me confused.

Before I can work out where to go next with my questions, the world turns lopsided.

A nurse has just come out of a locked supply closet and, before the steel door can fall back into its frame, Leon has grabbed it, yanked me inside after him, and then thrown the door closed. My back hits a case of aluminum shelving. My head knocks against something fluffy—spare pillows, perhaps?—and something rattles around my ankles. The wheels of the shelving unit squeak under my weight.

'Ow, hey, I am not a ragdoll you kn—'

Again, my words dry up. Like the thread of thought linking brain to lips has simply snapped under Leon's blazing eyes. He's looming again. But this time... Oh, this time, there is *far* more contact.

I gasp when his body knocks hard against mine, his legs muscling their way between my thighs, his chest coming up firm against my breasts.

It's like my bulky winter coat is the thinnest of tissue paper, just disintegrating under Leon's strength. As if he's flush with my very skin.

'Oh my—'

'Ssh,' Leon hisses, glancing to his left. There's a window in the door. A window he's only out of sight of if he's as close to my side of the little cupboard as he can get.

*Ah.*

So, this is about subterfuge, not seduction. *That* makes more sense.



Only, a few key spots on my body are a little slow in getting that update. Go figure.

‘Freya...’

I swallow as I look up into Leon’s face. The light in the cupboard isn’t automatic and I can only make out the hard edges of his cheekbones and jawline. His eyes flash in the dim glow from the hallway and I’m reminded of that poem everyone has to study in school...

*Tiger, tiger, burning bright...*

‘Y-yes...?’

‘What is it that you think I do?’ Leon asks.

‘Pardon?’

‘For a living. What is it that you think I do?’

‘Er...’

Is this a test? Am I supposed to come up with a lie to prove I can keep my mouth shut? Or am I supposed to show I’m trustworthy by being honest? I go with the latter just because it feels less complicated; I’m less likely to fuck it up.

‘At the moment...’ I whisper slowly. ‘I’m leaning towards... mob boss or highly successful gigolo who knows too much about something he shouldn’t...’

I think I see the corner of his mouth lift at my humor. Thank God. A little of my tension starts to ease.

‘I’m *not* a gigolo,’ he growls with significance.

Oh. *Oh.*

*Aaand* the tension’s back.

*Shit.*

*Well done, Freya. Of all the people you could stumble across and then drool over. Of all the people in Sicily you might have picked up in your car... You managed to hit on “mob boss”.*

‘Look, I’m not trying to be a problem for you.’ My words are rapid-fire as I try to reassure him.

It strikes me that a closet such as this could be a very useful spot for a kill. A silencer and a quick pull of the trigger would be all he needs. Leon could then just disappear into the rush of the emergency room, letting the door lock behind him and hiding my lifeless body until someone runs out of tongue depressors. Brilliant.

I am *so* screwed.

‘Freya—’

‘Really,’ I add, talking over him in desperation. ‘I’m not here to make trouble. I only called the police because it was... well, it was sort of instinct. And I couldn’t just leave a body out there unreported—’

‘Freya...’

‘—and I knew you weren’t exactly Mr. Right Side of the Law, but I hadn’t meant for you to know it was *me* that did it. Called them, I mean. Hospitals always call in shooting victims. At least they do back home—’

‘*Freya—!*’

‘—I figured I could just give my statement, you could give yours. It didn’t have to be the truth and then I could just—*Mmm!*’

Leon had given up trying to get my attention. At least with words.

Instead, he’d taken a more direct route.

There was no preamble. No tentative touches.

Leon had just slanted his head to the perfect angle and come down on my mouth fully and completely.

Without delicacy and without mercy.

One moment, I’m babbling apologies and excuses. The next, I can barely catch my breath, air paralyzed in my chest and my mouth sealed under the heat of Leon’s.

*Oh, God...*

Mouths fuse, kisses cling. Leon claims my lips with a mastery that has me shivering down to my bones.

Thick, long fingers plow into my hair, burning a path along my scalp. His other hand is burrowing beneath my scarf, reaching for my neck.

*'Ah...'* I gasp when Leon breaks the kiss long enough to seek another angle. I have no idea why. The kiss is burning me to ash, cooling me to trembles. What better angle could there possibly be for this—

*Oh my God...*

*'Mmph...'*

I sigh into Leon's kiss again, surrendering to him completely, forgetting the reality around me, and dispensing with whatever the hell I was talking about a second ago...

All I can think about is Leon's taste. Leon's feel... And the way he smells of burnt coffee and expensive aftershave.

This time, Leon takes the kiss deeper. He finds a moment where I'm somehow open to him and makes full use of the opportunity. His tongue pushes past my lips and dives deep. He's hot. Hot and wet and ever invasive as he explores the inside of my mouth.

Admitting that I've probably lost my mind entirely, I dare to be bold in return. My tongue brushes his. We meet... cling... entangle.

There's a soft moan in the air and I have no idea which of us is making the noise. But Leon's hand tightens on my neck and there's a delicious pressure on my throat. His fingers tug at my hair.

I burn hotter.

*'Leon...'* His name is just a passing breath on my tongue, a groan of desire. I can feel a damp need in my core, a melting heat in my belly...

Then he breaks the kiss.

Just like that.

It takes a moment for the neural pathways in my brain to start firing again. Initially, all they can do is pout and moan as Leon pulls himself back.

I don't remember throwing my arms around his neck but they now fall from his shoulders to his arms. He keeps his hands on my hips. Mine rest against his biceps. His suit is fancy and thin enough that I can feel the hard bulge of his muscles beneath.

And it's not the only hard bulge I can feel pressed against me.

*Well—I swallow. I try to breathe and reach awkwardly for the hot nape of my neck—*isn't that *flattering?*

My feminine ego preens even further as I watch Leon visibly trying to get a hold of himself. I spy his Adam's apple sinking and rising in a heavy swallow. I feel the rush of air as he takes a long and steadying inhale. He was the one to initiate the kiss but I'm pleased to note his surprise. He clearly hadn't expected it to be quite so...

*...explosive?*

Leon clears his throat.

'Do I have your attention now, *carina?*'

Admitting that, right now, he can have whatever he wants from me, attention or otherwise—that I'd happily hit the hospital tile and let him have at it—seems a touch TMI, so I simply nod.

He speaks slowly, like he knows my head needs a moment to catch up with reality.

'Do I look, Freya, like my family isn't good at what it does?'

*"Family..."*

*Yeah, definitely a mobster.*

And, barring the death of his brother in recent hours, the honest answer to his question is "no". The titanium watch. The Gucci suit. The raw power with which he holds himself...

*The fact that he can kiss a woman into oblivion and have absolute confidence she won't nail his ass for harassment.*

It all smacks of a man whose world is built on success and power and certainty.

I shake my head.

‘And do you think it likely...’ Leon whispers in the dark, his breath fanning over my cheeks. ‘That a family as successful as mine. In our chosen... *profession*... wouldn't have eyes and ears in certain spheres of authority?’

It takes me a second to cotton on.

When I do...

*Oh no.*

Leon's being careful not to say something he shouldn't. To not commit the words verbally. I assume it's a habit from years of keeping secrets and avoiding being recorded. But I can read between the lines.

Leon is a mobster of some kind. A member of a mafia family. A family who have spies in the police force and who will have heard my report of the shooting. They'll have my name, my personal information... and they'll know I'm a witness to whatever that happened back at the parking lot.

‘You...’ I stumble over my words and have to swallow. *Is it getting hot in this closet?* ‘When you said “somewhere safe”... You didn't mean safe from the *police*, did you?’

Leon's expression turns grim. Grim enough that I can read the tension on his face, clear as day, despite the limited light.

‘No,’ he says. ‘No, I didn't.’

‘So... they're going to come after me? Your family?’

‘I suspect they're going to come after both of us.’

*That gives me pause for thought.*

Why would Leon's own family come after him? He was the one who'd tried to save his brother, Alexei.

‘Why would they—?’

‘Enough of this,’ Leon hisses. ‘We’ve wasted enough time.’

The feminine pride that had been stretching awake somewhere in my nether regions gets its hackles up. Poor timing or no poor timing, that kiss had *not* been a waste of—

‘I’ve only told you this much because I don’t intend to drag you all over the city. I’d prefer you to carry your own weight,’ Leon explains.

I can feel my hair being patted back into place and a tug of wool around my neck. He’s setting me back to rights, cleaning up my appearance so I don’t attract notice. There’s something oddly sweet in the gesture. Then he hits me with those tiger eyes of his and the warm flutter in my chest stops cold.

‘You follow my lead, Freya,’ he orders. ‘Stop fighting me. Just walk where I say and follow in all that I do.’

‘Where are you taking me?’

‘Somewhere safe,’ he repeats. ‘Where you will *stay*’—he nails me with that look again. I feel it down to my toes—‘until I can speak with my father and get you out of whatever crosshairs you might have put yourself in.’

I swallow. Hard.

Just how, precisely, had this become my night?

‘Freya?’

I snap my attention back to our little closet and realize that Leon is waiting for some kind of answer from me. I stammer one.

‘Y-yes,’ I nod. ‘I’ll do whatever you say, Leon.’

‘Where are you parked?’

‘What?’ I blink as his tone shifts on a dime. One second all intense warning and the next friendly query.

His grip tightens on my waist.

‘Your *car*, Freya. Where did you park it?’

‘Oh. Section G.’

He nods.

‘All right. I’m going to open this door and we’re going to head straight for the exit. No diversions. Don’t look up. Don’t catch anyone’s eye. Once we’re outside, you’re going to keep to the left and stay on the western side of the building, in the shadow. Don’t look at your feet. Just look where you’re going. We’ll head around to the ambulance bay, and cut across to G that way. It’ll keep us out of sight.’

Had I any more charge left in my head, I might have wondered how Leon had such a comprehensive knowledge of the hospital and its surrounding area. Right now, though, I just bobblehead my agreement, determined not to ask any more stupid questions.

Apparently, I’ve already proven myself to be a moron tonight and I have no intention of stoking that reputation further.

‘All right,’ I say, before pulling up my hood.

Leon tugs at the lapels of my coat, clearly trying to make them meet in the middle, despite the broken zipper. He then turns to the door and peers through the window for a few minutes before taking my hand.

Looking back at me for a final glance, Leon opens the door and ushers me out in his wake.

The plan for our exit is a good one. Leon clearly knows his stuff.

And I have absolute confidence that, had we gotten out of the hospital building, Leon would have seen us to the old Bianchina without a hiccup.

Instead, we dart out into the hallway and manage ten yards towards the exit before we’re surrounded. Six men detach themselves from the homogenous crowd of patients and family members like ghosts; absent one second and descending upon us the next.

Like half a dozen, six-foot vultures, the men place themselves strategically around me and Leon, their postures cool and nonchalant. But their eyes...

The eyes of these men make me shudder.

*This is it*, I say to myself for the thousandth time tonight.  
*This is definitely how I die.*



## CHAPTER

## *Four*

Between the six of them, I spy a half dozen designer suits, four tattoos peeking from under collars or cuffs, two buzz-cut hair-dos, and a serious pair of aviator shades. Hard shapes beneath their jackets speak to a lot of weaponry on board.

No prizes for guessing who the Sinister Six belong to.

For some reason, I've stopped shaking. It's as if my fear-o-meter has just shifted so far to the right that the needle has broken, stuck in the sector of "scared stiff". I'm now just numb to everything, able to read the men with a clinical detachment.

Somewhere deep down, I think my fear might still be freezing me to my core but my skin no longer seems to notice and I've stopped shivering.

Aviator Shades is the leader of the group. And, compared to the rest, he looks almost normal. The least... mob-like.

Tall as all get out, Shades has impressively broad shoulders but is otherwise slimmer than the others who all look like evil henchmen cut with the same, massive cookie cutter. Shades is, instead, lean and a little bit lanky. His hair is a russet brown and, when he pulls off the shades, he reveals an almost charming face. Sort of boy-next-door. A savage and ugly scar running up his neck and onto his right cheek mars the effect somewhat. But his eyes, a dull forest green, are still friendly under the fluorescent hospital lighting. It's clear from the way he's looking at Leon that these two are not strangers.

And Leon is not the inferior of the two.

A foolish little hope flickers in my chest when Shades addresses Leon in a tone of respect.

‘Sir,’ he greets.

‘Jaime...’

Leon pronounces the name “Jamie” but, given Shades’ olive complexion and his fluent Italian, I assume his name is written the Romanic way.

What follows is a discussion that my Italian cannot keep up with. I pick up words like “death”, “instruction”, “father”, “brother”, and “girl” (the last spoken as Aviator Jaime glances in my direction). But my language skills aren’t strong enough to piece together which verb goes with which individual. Am I to be killed? Is someone’s father? Has someone’s father given orders to kill me? Or ordered to find Alexei’s killer?

The tension radiating off Leon in waves is far from reassuring.

There’s a little back and forth. Leon is clearly trying to stand his ground. Jaime keeps spreading his hands in a helpless gesture, his head tilting in an “aw shucks, mister” gesture...

It becomes clear to me that Jaime has been given instructions to accompany Leon... somewhere... and Leon is resisting.

I feel a strong hand wrap around my wrist as Leon draws me behind his big frame.

Jaime watches the gesture like a hawk, his stare narrowing with the sharpness of a trained observer.

Hmm... *not* so boy next door as it turns out.

I jump when a massive figure appears over my shoulder, blocking the corridor behind us. Leon adjusts, maneuvering me against the wall and keeping his own body as a shield between me and the other men.

‘Don’t make us do this, sir,’ Jaime is saying, hands parted as he inches closer.

‘I’m not making you do anything,’ Leon is saying back. ‘Let the girl go and I’ll...’ The end of the sentence is hard to translate but I suspect he’s offering to go with them without fuss if I’m released first.

Had that chill not already taken a boney grip around my heart, I might have felt something over Leon’s chivalry...

Instead, all I can feel is the fabric of his suit, crushed in my fingers as I hold on to the back of his arm.

When Jaime sighs, my heart stops in my chest.

Leon’s suggestion is not a satisfactory deal.

Which, I quickly realize, puts an end to any and all negotiations.

Jaime raises two fingers. He issues a quick shuck of his chin. And then all hell breaks loose.

---

I TRY NOT to grunt as Jaime pulls me from the car. With my hands hog-tied behind my back, his best purchase is on my shoulder. Which of course tugs the entire left side of my body where I’m fairly sure I have a broken rib. Or two.

I grind my molars together and stay silent but something must give me away.

‘You all right?’ is the first thing Jaime asks once I’m vertical.

I would worry that my supposedly famed stoicism is cracking but Jaime has always been a highly observant bastard. Which serves him well in his role of bodyguard, spy, and all-around dogsbody for the Machelli family head.

Right now, of course, I wish he’d turn those scrutinizing peepers elsewhere.

Call me vain but post-beat-up isn't my favorite picture moment.

I decline to answer his question, even though it's asked in genuine sympathy. Instead, I glance across the shining top of the sedan. On the other side of the car, Damon is lifting a prone body from the back seat. Blonde, wispy strands of hair cling to his jacket as he takes Freya into his arms.

'You care for the girl?' Jaime probes.

I deliberately let go of the tension in my shoulders and muster a careless, half-shrug.

'Only in so much as she's a loose end. And you boys aren't always subtle in handling those.'

Jaime's eyes narrow.

'Worried she won't be as pretty when we're done?'

I swallow back a rising heat in my gut.

'Concerned you'll make a mess that I'll have to clean up once this is all straightened out.'

'Hey, you know me, sir. Just obeying orders here.'

I can't find fault with that as much as I'd like to. Jaime is one of the most devoted of the Machelli inner circle. Practically raised in the family headquarters like me, there's never been so much as a shadow of a rumor against his integrity. Or his loyalty. Only that loyalty has always been reserved for one man and one man only...

'What does he know?' I ask, prodding at my fat lip and trying to keep Damon in my eye line.

There's no need to specify the "he".

I brace my tongue behind my split lip. The pressure stings and shoots little sparks of pain down under my tongue. I feel a wetness in my mouth. Taste the iron of fresh blood.

For a moment, I'm tempted to spit onto the finely catered driveway; a flash of scarlet over the bone-white gravel. But I let the impulse pass. My mother raised me better than that.

‘He knows about Alexei,’ Jaime says, not bothering to keep hold of my arm as we head up the front steps of the Machelli manor. Now that we’re here, there’s little point in resisting. Not with my weapons stripped and my hands cuffed. ‘He knows you invited Alexei out for the evening. That Alexei’s now dead and that you didn’t report it in until at least an hour after the shot was fired.’

Which, of course, was the prime reason for that mugger stealing my phone. There’s little better evidence of guilt than a delayed report.

‘So, in short,’ I sigh, ‘he thinks I killed his son.’

At the top of the steps, I scan over the front of the estate. One floor up and seven windows to the right. That’s his office. The room is dark but I suspect the old man is peering down from the shadows. I can practically feel his eyes on me.

‘You’re his son too.’

I glance at Jaime. Despite the man being ringleader to my recent beat down, there’s respect in his eyes.

Mafia groups might consider themselves ahead of the times when discussing morality and the loopholes of law. But when it comes to inheritance, they’re surprisingly archaic. And my friend now looks at me with the respect due the sole heir to the Machelli organization.

Jaime is loyal to the old man. Without fault. But when that mantel passes, he’ll owe his allegiance to me. The guy he just ordered to be beaten into submission. And, with the old man already heading down the road of poor health, I might inherit that role sooner rather than later.

Which, of course, is why Alexei’s killer has chosen now to make their move. After all, what heartless mobster wouldn’t kill their own brother for a seat at the head of the table?

I almost laugh at Jaime’s reminder of my bloodline. Illegitimate or otherwise.

Blood isn’t going to get me out of this.

In fact, it's my blood that's condemning me. Who else would have so much to gain from Alexei's premature departure than his half-brother? The spare heir, left in the shadows until the boss's firstborn is out of the way?

The Machellis have always operated down a familial line. But only family that they trust.

If I can't prove that I'm not the one who killed Alexei... I'll be joining him real soon. Son or no son.

I glance to my right. Freya's unconscious form is bouncing a little with each of Damon's steps. One of her arms is at an awkward angle, hanging from the cradle of his hold. Her head falls back and I can see the red mark over her temple. My tongue feels dry as I think about that mark turning an ugly purple by the end of the day.

At least it had been quick.

One carefully calibrated punch to the temple and she'd been out for the count. No pain, no mess.

*I'd* taken a little more convincing.

I try not to wince as we step under the winding veranda and mount the last step into the foyer. Considering the state of my ribs, I now wonder if I should have made the point of resisting a little less.

But at least my efforts have so far convinced a few of them that I'm not Alexei's murderer. Or at least planted the idea of it.

Guilty men give up faster than the innocent ones.

'He wants to see you straight away,' Jaime says, with a nod towards the staircase.

'I figured as much.'

'I have to see to some things but Damon will stay with you.'

'Dandy,' I say, letting Jaime melt away into the recesses of the house.

I'm so used to the estate, that I barely notice the majesty of the foyer or the corridor upstairs. I just register swatches of familiar colors. White molding to waist height. A bright, Louis XIV yellow on the ceiling. Flashes of gold for each gilt-framed painting I pass by. The swirling glitter and dove gray in the white marble under my feet. And the regal burgundy of the carpet runner stretching the length of the hallway.

The manor is vast with nine bedrooms, five baths, and enough reception rooms to house every competitor in the World Series. And that's without opening up the grand hall downstairs.

Each room is lavish and decorated in a particular style, from baroque to traditional Sicilian woodwork. French antiques, Brazilian art pieces, and African carpentry. British glass-blown chandeliers and Indian silks.

Growing up here should have been a dream come true. A castle for any adventurous little boy.

But for me, it had been enemy territory.

Every luxurious furnishing, every fine piece of artwork, had felt designed to reinforce one single, clear message.

*You are beneath this. You do not belong.*

My father is nothing if not definitive in his posturing.

I pause at a door leading to one of the guest suites, looking over at Damon.

'You should lay her down in there,' I suggest. I notice the way Freya's eyelids are starting to flicker, how her lips are pulling tight with pain. She's surfacing closer to consciousness. 'And I wouldn't leave her alone,' I add. 'She has a tendency to lash out first, think it through later.'

But Damon is shaking his head.

'Boss says she stays with us.'

I sigh. *Great.*

Just what had this woman gotten herself into? All she had to do was drive Alexei and me to the hospital and then leave.

Why couldn't she have just run the second Alexei hit that gurney, like any *normal* person?

*Because she came to bring you a coffee after your brother died.*

I feel my gut twist.

It's no use. I can't blame Freya. I'm the one who pulled my gun on her when I realized the muggers had slashed up Alexei's tires. *I'm* the one who got her into all of this.

And if the hard tug in my chest is any indication... I feel damn responsible for it.

'All right,' I agree, speeding up, despite the jolt to my ribs. 'Let's get this over with quickly, then.'

If this is all destined to go to shit and I'm about to eat a bullet, at least let it happen before Freya wakes up. Maybe the old man will show mercy and take her out whilst she's still unconscious. She'll never even know it's coming.

Whilst I'm still hoping for an outcome in which we're both still breathing by noon, if we're destined to die here, the unconscious route is definitely best. I've already discovered that Freya isn't at her finest when panicked. In moments of emergency, sure, she pulls it out of the bag and goes Tokyo Drift on cobblestone streets. But once the panic has time to settle? Not so much. She tends to freak.

Not helpful.

Though, rather enjoyable when it comes to bringing her back down again...

Thinking it wouldn't be the smartest move to confront my father at full mast, I try to push aside all thoughts of the kiss we'd shared back at the hospital.

I'm not very successful.

*Dammit, but that kiss...*

I had meant it just to shut Freya up. I'd wanted to startle her, to deliberately set her off balance so she would clam up and listen to my warnings with an open ear.



I'd gotten far more than I'd intended.

Just imagining it... Just lingering on the taste of her mouth for even a second is going to have me...

No! *Not thinking about it!*

When we reach the old man's office, I pause. I learned from a young age not to go barging into any room in the manor without first being invited. And the old man's teaching methods always ensured that his lessons stuck.

A rap of Damon's knuckles on the door is followed by a quiet call to "enter".

Refusing to be escorted like a criminal, I shove my way inside shoulder-first.

The office is the same. The same as when I was last here three days ago. The same as it was when I'd first been presented to my father at eight years old.

Blood red carpet and walls of mahogany bookcases turn the chamber dark and evil-looking beneath the lamplight. Like the lair of a Victorian mastermind, complete with a twirling mustache. Steaming fog from the end of cigars normally sets the room's atmosphere but I smell only stale smoke.

Now at mid-morning, the floor-to-ceiling windows pour bright sunshine over everything. Somehow, it makes the room *more* unsettling, turning royal colors to lurid, near-misses.

In the center of the room sits my father's desk with its contents neat as a pin: blotter, fountain pen, and a tray of disposable cell phones... all sitting at exact right angles. The antique lamp with its green shade and curling bronze neck seems to hang drearily over its surface. Burdened, no doubt, by the violence it's witnessed signed off over that desk.

The two wingback armchairs in forest green leather that flank the desk are empty. My father is, as I suspected, standing by the window with his attention on the other side of the glass.

I try not to notice but it's hard to ignore the familial similarities between us. Especially when you're about to try and convince someone to spare your life. In the face of death,

any sign of connection, of empathy, becomes the mirage of a life-saving rope in the darkness.

Like me, my father is tall. Broad in the shoulder and finely featured. In the memories from my childhood, his face has softer angles than mine but these days illness has stripped the smoother shapes away in favor of a harsh, hollowness. His skin has sallowed and his hair is thinning. The locks he has left are either as dark as my own or tapering out to gray.

As he turns to face me, I'm reminded that to read my father's sickness as a weakness would be a mistake of huge proportions.

Giovanni Carlos Machelli isn't weaker because of his cancer. He's deadlier.

Especially now.

With no true son remaining and no long life in which to sire another, Giovanni Carlos has little left to lose and only satisfaction to gain by nailing his son's murderer to the nearest hard surface.

It takes only a second of our eyes meeting for me to know that Giovanni wholeheartedly believes that murderer to be me...

I stand straight and hold his gaze. Even though it feels like staring directly into the sun.

Sweat rolls down my spine. My heart is thumping slow and hard in my chest. The wrong word at the wrong moment is all it's going to take to seal for myself a nasty end. I wait for Giovanni to approach me.

Luckily, the leader of the Machelli organization is never usually armed. Not personally anyway. Not in his own home. Else, judging by the hatred burning in the old man's stare, I'd have been plugged with holes the second I walked into the room.

Like me, Giovanni's hands are behind his back but, in his case, it's a voluntary gesture. Not the result of quick-tie plastic.

The speed with which one of those hands flies out at me is a testament to the old man's will over his sickness. One second, he's before me, hands at the small of his back. The next, his knuckles are striking me hard across the face, breaking open my lip again and setting off an explosion of twinkling stars across my vision.

'You dare do this to me?' he snarls. For a man so reputed for his deadly calm, Giovanni is practically vibrating with rage. 'To me?! After everything I have done for you, for your mother! *This* is how you repay me?!'

'I didn't—' Another slap cuts me off but this time I see it coming. I rally and brace against the strike. It doesn't throw me as the first did.

'Speak and you lose your tongue, boy. You're not here to peddle your excuses at my feet. I've never had use of you. Even less so, now.'

'I've *always* been of use to you,' I argue, taking my chances on his threat. 'Always.'

I might hate this man. I might hate the way he's resolutely failed to acknowledge me and my mother. And yet even more for his refusal to let us go. For years Giovanni's possessiveness of all he deemed his own kept me within the family business and my mother at the end of a string. Yet, never allowed me the benefit of being acknowledged as his child.

My hatred for his selfish disregard, however, would have gotten me nowhere in life. Wouldn't have opened doors or found me freedom from the family.

I decided long ago that I wasn't about to poison myself for this man.

So, for years, I've ignored my resentment and worked hard in the sphere of influence I've been permitted. I've done everything I was told. Performed every duty without question.

Never once have my results been criticized. Never have I failed to complete an assignment, be it bookkeeping or more deadly undertakings.

For all Jaime's blind devotion, there's only one man in the Machelli organization who's been more faithful still.

*Me.*

And now, one rumor, one moment of ambiguity...

And where has my spotless record, my years of devotion, gone?

Giovanni spits onto the carpet.

I stare at it. A damp, disgusting spot on the Persian rug.

And something inside of me just... turns to stone. Something harsh and cold. Something that once yearned for recognition. For love, perhaps.

Standing there... I feel it die.

'Fuck. You.'

For one glorious moment, Giovanni seems genuinely surprised. And why not? It's the first time I've ever shown him disrespect. The first time I've been anything but a loyal, silent soldier.

'What did you just—?'

'I said fuck you, you old shit,' I repeat, pulling at my plastic binds. 'You're no man. You're a goddamn disgrace. And what's worse is... you've made me in your *fucking image*.' It had always left a foul taste in my mouth to know that this man had infiltrated every piece of my life. Now, I'm enraged to find him invading on my grief. 'I never touched Alexei. Had I been close enough, I'd have taken that fucking bullet *for* him! He was my brother. And, unlike you, family meant something to Alexei. And to me. But right now you make me sick. Because I'm actually glad he's dead. Because, right now, anything that hurts you is worth the fucking price.'

Giovanni glances over my shoulder and I feel Damon shift in my peripheral vision. He's setting Freya down into one of the armchairs, so his hands are free. I hear a gun's hammer being depressed. My father keeps his eyes on me, dark and cold.

‘You’re hanging yourself, boy,’ he warns.

‘I’m a dead man anyway,’ I spit back. ‘I’m only breathing air because you’re a child who likes to play with his food.’

The head of the great Machelli family dismisses me with little more than a curled upper lip. His gaze has turned on Freya. He moves beside the armchair and reaches to stroke a fluffy strand of her hair. The tip of his finger traces over a few of her freckles and she stirs under his touch.

I have to plant my feet hard into the ground. Launching myself across the room at my father is not the smart play, right now.

Instead, I assess Damon. I measure his size. I remember the sparring sessions we’ve meted out in the gym, over and over again, year after year.

Damon’s eyes narrow. His knuckles turn white over the butt of his gun.

He knows what I’m thinking. He can sense it.

‘Pretty little thing...’ my father says, still watching Freya. Pressing the tip of his finger onto her forehead, he turns her face so he can see her better. ‘Shame...’

My chest hollows out.

‘It doesn’t need to be...’ The words are for my father but I find myself talking to Damon. As the only one armed in the room, winning his sympathy might be the only course of action that doesn’t see both Freya and me in the ground. ‘She has nothing to do with this. She saw nothing and she knows nothing.’

‘She was with you. And the family knows this.’ Turning back to me, Giovanni sighs and shakes his head. My stomach curls in distaste. He’s looking at me like I’m a pet dog who, by bringing Freya into the matter, has shit on his perfectly manicured lawn. ‘There’ll be only one version of last night’s events... There *can* be only one.’ he says.

It’s only now that I realize the truth. And I go very, *very* still.

I curse myself for a fool.

I'd known my father was going to kill Freya. As far as he was concerned, she might have seen something in connection to Alexei's death. And, in the matter of his son's death, Giovanni would want to torture every last detail of the past twenty-four hours from her head. Just to be sure. Just to be a hundred percent certain she wasn't holding anything back, even accidentally. And the victims of such merciless interrogations can't be left alive to report them. I had known, as soon as Jaime had appeared in that emergency room, that this was the future awaiting Freya.

But I'd also known that it would take time. That, if I somehow survived the collision with my father, I'd have time to find Freya and to get her out of here...

I'd been wrong.

My father doesn't want to interrogate Freya. In fact, he wants the exact opposite. Freya *can't* be a witness. Of any kind.

Giovanni has decided who the killer was.

And with the entire family now aware that Freya was with me this morning, was there to see Alexei's death... He can't afford to have her bear testament. Neither real testament against someone else whose guilt would prove my innocence, nor fabricated evidence that I might feed her if I'm guilty.

*I am to be Alexei's killer. So that I'm taken out of commission. So that there will be absolutely no possible future in which Giovanni's kingdom will ever pass to me.*

*That is what this is all about.*

It's not grief that has Giovanni so incessantly accusing me of murder. It's legacy.

*He cares more about seeing you blamed for it than he does discovering who really killed his son.*

'You bastard...' I breathe.

The old man's eyes flash at me.

‘No, boy. That is what *you* are.’

Feeling like I’ve just been hollowed out with a hacksaw, I can only blink at the man. Even Damon seems uncomfortable, his jaw hardened and his eyes sympathetic.

*Shit.* Damon’s pity hits me damn harder than Giovanni’s dismissal.

‘You know...’

Everyone freezes in place. The words are soft, sleepy, and feminine. And they draw every head in the room.

‘...you are very rude,’ Freya finishes, rubbing at her eyes like a child disturbed from naptime.

In the bemused quiet that follows, I spot my chance.

Knowing Damon favors his right peripheral, I throw out a kick from his left, aiming for his wrist. He’s a trained fighter so he doesn’t let go of the gun but my strike does throw his arm wide and leaves his chest unguarded.

Following through on my momentum, I tackle him.

Hard.

Without my arms for balance, my center of gravity is shot to all hell anyway so I commit my whole weight to the attack. My shoulder hits Damon’s chest dead center and I carry him off his feet. We smash into one of the bookcases, a messy tangle of limbs, with several of the shelves breaking under our combined weight. A flurry of hardbacks hit me in the back of the head. A heavy, metal trophy ricochets off of something and then catches my shoulder as it falls to the ground. I feel its sharp edge biting through my shirt and then flesh. My shoulder burns.

Fighting with my legs to get out from under Damon’s bulk and back on my feet before he can clock me with his Smith and Wesson, I realize belatedly that Damon is out for the count.

The golfing trophy, now rocking on its side on the rug, is the culprit. Judging by the gash over his eye, the *thing* it had

ricocheted off of was Damon's temple. Poor guy had been knocked out cold.

Wasting no time, I struggle back to my feet...

...only to find my father holding Freya with an arm pinned behind her back. And a knife at her throat.

I freeze in place.

'Foolish move, boy,' my father sighs. In healthier days, he might have looked charismatically bored by my efforts. But with his eyes sunken into his head and his lips pale and tight over his face, he just looks dead before his time. Completely devoid of humanity. And more than a little crazy.

'Another move from you and I slit her throat.'

I glance at the old man's weapon. It's a penknife. One of those Swiss army ones with all the trimmings. The case is bulky enough to hold all its flip-out functions and is decked out in maroon and ivory.

Deliberately, I relax my stance, shift my weight and force a small smile onto my face.

'Go ahead,' I suggest, trying not to flinch when Freya's eyes shoot wide with terror. I glance pointedly at the little knife. 'You'll be there for a while if you plan on cutting anything with a nail file.'

Giovanni pauses. He can't see the knife beneath Freya's chin. He watches me for signs of a lie.

I've convinced Freya. I can see it in the way her shoulders lower in relief.

When one of his polished, Italian loafers shifts nervously on the rug, I know I have Giovanni doubting too.

The moment the old man shifts his hold to check that he opened the right setting on his penknife, Freya doesn't hesitate. She throws her free arm back, her elbow landing square in my father's solar plexus. A second later, her heel slams down onto his instep. As Giovanni staggers and bends double, she scrambles free of his hold and I shelve everything I've ever felt for the man so I can throw a kick to his head.



A heartbeat later there are two unconscious men on the floor, not one.

Freya spots the knife, fallen from Giovanni's flaccid grip.

'Oh my God, it *was* a knife!'

'He's the head of a mafia group, Freya,' I remind her, nudging the penknife toward her with my toe. 'He doesn't make those kinds of mistakes. Now, pick that up and cut me loose of these things.'

Freya is shaking as she scoops up the penknife and bends her attention to my wrists. I can hear her breathing hard.

'Then I guess it's a good thing you can act,' she says, trying to settle her fingers enough for the task at hand.

'Bluff,' I correct.

'What?'

'I'm not an actor. I just play poker,' I explain. 'I can bluff.'

'Shit, this plastic's tight, Leon. I don't know if I can...'

'Just work it between my wrists.'

'I don't want to cut you.'

'Keep the blade straight and the worst you'll do is give me razor burn.' I don't mention that if she *doesn't* keep it straight, she could cut something much more integral back there. She doesn't need more pressure.

There's a second of metal scraping on plastic and then—*snap-ping!*—I'm free.

I turn around to find Freya with the knife held high and her eyes squeezed shut. Like she's yanked back on the thing blind.

'Did you just do that with your *eyes closed?!?*' I cry.

'Shit? Did I?!' She blinks at the knife as if surprised it's still in her hand.

I groan and roll my eyes. Oh, well. I'm not bleeding.

At least not any more than I was a minute ago.

‘Whatever, just keep hold of that thing and wave it at anything that moves that isn’t me.’

I snatch up Damon’s Smith and Wesson and then check his ankle figuring he would still be carrying a—yep, a 9mm.

Dual-wielding the pistols, I nudge my head toward the door.

‘Come on... We have about thirty seconds before someone comes to investigate what’s going on in here.’

‘And you think that’s enough time to get out of this place?’ Freya asks, still looking wobbly on her feet and taking in the scale of the estate for the first time.

I offer what I hope is a reassuring grin.

‘We’re about to find out,’ I tell her.

## CHAPTER

## *Five*

‘*Wait.*’

I barely hear the command. Leon is whispering so low and my heart is pounding so loud in my ears, I’m basically deaf. I only stop because Leon has flattened himself to the wall and thrown out an arm to pin me behind him. I skid into his back, remembering at the last minute to keep the knife in my hand down by my thigh.

Stabbing my only ally (literally) in the back would be an ill-conceived move, at this point.

Especially as Leon is the only one who knows where we’re going.

The manor Leon is leading me through has so many corridors, so many twists and turns, that I’d be lost even if I’d been conscious when first brought here.

*Speaking of...*

My missing time is a gnawing ache in the back of my mind. What the hell happened? Where had we been brought? What *is* this place and why is Leon somehow on my side instead of working with his mobster buddies?

He’d said something about it at the hospital but had never explained...

Not that I’m complaining, exactly. At least, not right *now*.

Right now, I’m ready to take whatever help I can get. Especially with the unknown stretching both ahead and behind me.

The whole situation since the hospital is a messy jumble in my head. With only darkness and the briefest sounds and smells available for me to piece together. And it's not the best time to be playing memory jigsaw puzzles.

Right now, instinct has placed all of that crap into a large box, marked it "For Panicking Later" and stuffed it to the back of my head. In its place is one blazing manifesto.

*Follow Leon.*

Murky reasons be damned, Leon has proven several times over that, so long as we both want the same thing, he'll look out for me.

And right now we both want out.

Pressed against the wall, I wait as instructed. I try to keep calm. I count each hammering beat of my heart against my ribs. I shallow out my breathing to keep it quiet. Which makes me light-headed. So I switch to long and slow inhales instead.

I'm staring at the back of Leon's shirt, trying to block out everything else in the world that's making my heart race and my head ache. I watch the wrinkles and waves in the silk shift as he breathes. When they pull tight, flattening against muscle, I know he's pushing off from the wall and moving forward again. I hurry after him.

Despite an overwhelming need to chatter away my nerves, I stay very, very quiet, keeping as tight to Leon's shadow as I can. My commentary wouldn't be necessary or helpful as he takes me down an east-facing corridor then through one of the less ornate doorways and down a curling stone staircase. Beyond another door is a shorter hallway, this one far more modern. From the cleaning charts and sign-in sheets pinned beside the doorway, I realize this must be a workers' entrance. A half-dozen paces and we take a right-angle turn.

Then we hear footsteps.

Leon plasters us to the wall again but we have no real cover this time. I watch with horror as he draws one of his guns up against his chest to muffle the sound of him cocking the hammer.

My mouth is dry. My palms are damp. I feel my sweaty feet sliding in my shoes. My coat is far too hot. Far too stuffy.

There's a squeak of sneakers on ceramic tile and then a shuffling noise as whoever is just up ahead drifts away in another direction.

I exhale.

Leon nudges the barrel of the gun to indicate which way we're going and I hurry after him.

This time, when we reach a new door, it's heavy and metal. Leon has to punch in a code on a little keypad. A light flickers green...

And suddenly we're in a garage.

A very large and very expensive garage.

My eyes bug out.

I'm no motorhead but, as the daughter of a car salesman, I know enough to be impressed. The triple-fronted garage has at least eight cars sitting in residence. And every single one of them costs more than my folks' mortgage.

'Oh my...'

'Come on,' Leon murmurs, stuffing the smaller of his guns into his waistband so he can take my arm and hurry me along.

Passing a Pagani, a Maserati, a Ferrari, and at least two Lamborghini, I'm almost disappointed when the far end of the garage reveals a Mercedes AMG GT. And the Merc is worth over a hundred grand.

'You could fund a small country with the shit in this garage.'

'Get in,' Leon orders, rushing around to the driver's side of the car.

'I don't have the—'

When he opens the unlocked door, with a pointed look, I hurry to do the same.

Sure. Why not have thousands upon thousands of dollars sitting here with the keys *already in the car?*

*Rich people be crazy*, I decide as I sink into the plush leather of the passenger seat.

‘Er...’ I stare at the roller doors of the garage, currently sealed tight. ‘How are you planning for us to—’

Leon punches what looks like a very expensive doorbell beside the steering wheel. Instantly, the garage doors snap, crackle, and start to roll open.

‘Of course,’ I mutter to myself.

‘The locks are on their own circuit to avoid hacking,’ Leon says, almost to himself. He’s looking for something in the pockets of the door and under the dashboard. ‘I figured they wouldn’t have had time to get down here and close them off manually yet.’

‘And if they had?’ I ask, not sure I want to know the answer.

Leon’s found what he was looking for—a set of sunglasses of all things!

He slips them onto his damn perfect roman nose and flashes his teeth at me.

‘We’d have been a lot bloodier getting into this car.’

I shiver.

*Now isn’t that a lovely thought?*

Leon’s foot is ready on the accelerator and the second the garage rollers are raised enough for the Merc to slip beneath them, he takes full advantage, launching us forward at a breathtaking speed.

The propulsion of the car throws me back against the leather and I scramble to hold onto the edges of the seat.

A shift of gear, a spin of the wheel, and Leon has us on the drag, pivoting to the left. I clamber to hold onto the door this time!

‘Jesus Holy Almighty—!’

Gravel sprays and the engine squeals as Leon throws us in the other direction, having flown out of the garage forecourt and now cutting across the front of the estate.

For the first time, I realize we were being held captive in what could have been an Italian getaway for the King of England! The place is huge and I have a newfound respect for Leon for managing to navigate our way out of it without bumping into anyone.

Up ahead, I can see the main driveway and the gatehouse.

Just when I think my adrenaline can’t spike any higher, I spot a small legion of men running down the front steps of the manor. In the lead is the brunette who had led the charge at the hospital.

‘Oh, shit...’

‘I see them,’ Leon says, spinning the wheel again and sending a plume of gravel dust into the air.

The loudest bang I’ve ever heard has me screaming.

I look up to see a spider web of cracks in the passenger side window.

‘Get down!’

Leon orders, yanking on my arm until I’m more in the footwell than on the seat. Down here, I can feel the engine of the car roaring under my legs, feel it shudder when another bullet hits the bodywork. Then again when the back bumper is clipped.

‘Why aren’t they shooting for the windows?’ I shout over the noise, not expecting much by way of an answer. Bulletproof or not, another shot would probably take out the glass over my head.

‘I think the first was an accident,’ Leon says between gritted teeth. ‘They don’t want to shoot us.’

The engine whines beneath my butt as Leon makes a sharp turn onto the main drive and then roars with acceleration,

speeding for the gates.

‘The bullets,’ I yell over the thunderous rumble, ‘would say otherwise!’”

‘They’re aiming for the tires, not for us.’

Which explains all the turns Leon’s been executing, keeping the wheels of the car a moving target shrouded in dust clouds.

‘Hold on, this is going to be a little rough,’ Leon suddenly warns.

I glance around me.

‘There’s nothing to hold onto down here! What do you expect me to—*Oh my—!*’

The car shakes in hard, harsh judders as it careens through a set of iron gates already halfway to closing. There’s a scraping *per-twang* that I think might be the loss of a wing mirror and then the skid and swing of the car as Leon turns us out onto the main road. The back end of the Merc swings wildly before he pulls it back into line. Then he downshifts, puts his foot to the floor, and sends us hurtling at rocket speed away from the manor.

The man is a lunatic behind the wheel.

The kind of lunatic who might also be considered a visionary. An eccentric, majestic artist of vehicle maneuverability. But still a lunatic.

My stomach is in my throat. My heart must have said a passing hello when they crossed paths because *it* has dropped into my sneakers. My head is dizzy as all get out.

For a minute, I think I’m going to have a panic attack.

Which, given everything Leon and I have survived in the last twelve hours, I find mildly embarrassing.

Focusing instead on Leon, I try to read the expression behind his sunglasses.

‘You can probably come up out of there now,’ he says, abandoning the gearshift in favor of helping me back into the



seat.

Taking his arm, I uncrumple myself from the floor of the car and collapse into the passenger seat like a melted puddle of wool, jeans, and mad, frizzy hair.

I'm a joy to behold, I'm sure.

When I spot Leon repeatedly checking the rearview mirror, I turn in my chair to look out the back window.

'I think we're clear,' I tell him, breathing a shaky exhale. 'Even if they ran for the cars as soon as we got past the gates, they'll be too far back by now to catch us up. They won't know which way we're going.'

'I'm afraid they will,' Leon warns, decidedly stripping the air from my very meagerly bolstered sails. 'This car has a tracker in it.'

'It what—?!'

'All our cars do,' he says, keeping up a speed just a little over the limit so as not to attract too much attention. 'We're not out of this yet.'

---

IN FACT, we weren't "out of it" as Leon said for at least another hour. It took us that long to zig-zag our way through Palermo, discard the car, navigate at least three streets away, out of sight of CCTV cameras, and then steal a new one. Three times, Leon dragged me through the dump-and-rob routine. Until we had effectively traded in a hundred thousand dollars worth of Mercedes for a Fiat Punto.

Even after his elaborate scheme to avoid detection, Leon warns that our reprieve is temporary, pulling the Punto into a curbside parking spot.

'They'll still be able to track us if they look over enough street footage,' he says as he struggles to get his six-foot-four self out of the little car.

'Through the police?'

The idea of a mafia group having its tentacles in law enforcement is an obvious one but it still makes me feel... icky.

‘Yeah,’ Leon sighs, finally managing to get vertical on the pavement. ‘But the way we keep our fingers in so many pots is by using those resources quietly. It’ll take them at least until morning to track us here without raising suspicion.’

Leon grimaces as he stretches out his shoulders and shoves the Fiat’s door shut with more force than necessary. Like he’s giving the little car the cold shoulder.

‘I told you this one was too small,’ I remind him. ‘We should have taken the Volvo.’

Here I am, merrily advocating for a more severe offense of auto theft. But I stopped looking at mine and Leon’s conversations through a rational lens a while ago.

Somewhere around the time we both nearly had our heads taken off by flying bullets. For the second time.

‘The Volvo had a car seat in the back.’

Without a key to the car, Leon is distracted picking the door lock closed so the comment seems completely off-hand. Which probably makes it truthful. I try not to smile.

The fact that mobster-extraordinaire Leon Giancarlo Averna draws the line at stealing from someone with a child encourages me that I’ve picked the right side.

Then again, my bar for decency has hit an all-time low in the last few hours.

Not that I want to be thinking about that.

The only thing holding each trembling, jittery bit of my body together right now is the extreme application of compartmentalizing.

Each time a scary, traumatic thing comes to a semi-close, my brain has been filing it away for later, turning my attention resolutely to the here and now: to the next scary, traumatic thing. So far, it’s been working near enough. My feet, at least, have kept plodding one after another. But I can also sense a

very large and overflowing filing cabinet rattling around somewhere in my hippocampus.

With an unhealthy, but entirely necessary, dose of distraction, I look around the street.

‘Where exactly *are* we?’

I came to Sicily for my postgraduate project nearly eight months ago. Since then, I’ve spent most of that time in Palermo, working on architectural designs. I’ve photographed and sketched across the city, from the elaborate historicism of Albergaria and Old Town to the stark utilitarianism yet elegant lines of Kalsa.

But this area is entirely unfamiliar to me.

I’d been warned of the ZEN district in the north of the city and its associations with the mafia and street crime and given it the recommended wide berth.

But I’m fairly sure we aren’t north of the city anymore. Even with the wild ride we’d been on, hopping, skipping, and jumping all over the place.

With my head on the swivel, I try to place the surrounding area with pictures from my guidebook back in my accommodations. But nothing looks reminiscent of the glossy tourist photographs in the book.

The buildings speak to low-income housing projects, with small, open balconies giving the illusion of luxury. A luxury mostly masked with laundry and bed sheets hanging in the sunshine. Everything is subdued. The brickwork is lacquered beige and the roofs topped in a dusty brown tile. Almost every front door is gray and peeling, with the rare, rebellious green or red. The street itself is thin, with poorly tended roadsides and ugly trash bins.

*If a road could look malnourished*, I think...

The area is like a cage. With irregular slabbing ready to trip you underfoot and electricity lines boxing in the sky over your head.

Still, unattractive as it is, there's a sense of life. A hidden subtext of vitality. Even with only winter sunshine at its disposal, the daylight strokes what hues it can find as bright as they can go, turning a street that would have been merely morose into a cool but vaguely hopeful atmosphere.

*The people who live here haven't given up their ambitions entirely, I decide. They just have a harder time than most materializing them.*

'It's *Villagrazia Falsomiele*,' Leon says. He waves to hurry me out of my reverie.

I join him on the sidewalk, dodge a deep crack in the curbside, and then tense as he throws a heavy arm over my shoulders. When he stuffs his other hand casually into the pocket of his now-ruined slacks, I realize what he's doing. It's nearly midday and though the streets aren't thronging with people, the occasional nosy neighbor might be twitching their curtains.

For all intents and purposes, we might look like a couple out for a midday stroll.

Up close, of course, the illusion of domesticity would instantly shatter. The blood on Leon's lip, the tears in his clothes... I can also feel a fairly heavy bump on my head which is no doubt turning a nice shade of plum.

At least from a distance, we might not arouse suspicion.

Which, I remind myself, is a good method for me to evaluate recent events. *From a distance.*

'Are we meeting someone?' Not used to being out of the loop in my own life, I can't stop the question, even when faced with the solemn set of Leon's brow.

'No,' he says, his sunglasses turning to survey our surroundings as he hurries us down the street. 'I have a place just around the corner.'

'You have a *place*?'

'I'm thirty-six years old...' I notice the corner of Leon's mouth curling upwards. 'It would be a little depressing to still

live with my parents, don't you think?'

His attempt at humor is lost beneath a new, rising worry.

'But... if this is your place, won't they know where to find us?'

'They have no idea I own it. It's not in my name.'

The "it" turned out to be a tiny, one-room apartment in a large building *composed* of tiny one-room apartments. Leon's unit was in the far north corner, accessible only from an internal corridor or a broken, rickety fire escape. I know because we take the fire escape.

By the time Leon is shutting us inside his place, I have another heart-stopping moment of terror and three painful scrapes to add to my trauma list.

'You really know how to treat a girl,' I pant, trying to find a place on my pants clean enough to wipe off my palms. Carrying around bleeding men and then being carted from pillar to post, however, is murder on your laundry.

'You're in one piece. Stop grumbling.'

The criticism is thrown willy-nilly over his shoulder as Leon works strategically around the room. He checks a bunch of alarms and security measures and then begins pulling out little boxes and bags that he throws onto a neatly made-up bed.

I'm not paying attention.

For me, being inside a secure property, away from gun-toting maniacs (I spy the two guns in the waistband of Leon's slacks and correct myself) away from gun-toting maniacs *who are actively trying to kill me...* is like a subliminal code for all the tension in my body to evaporate. The muscles holding onto my bones let go. The tendons holding onto my muscles are left to float in the wind.

Everything just... detaches.

Including me.

I end up in a heap on the floor, held upright by only a wall, with no memory of my getting there.

*Add it to the amnesia pile.*

‘Leon...’

Leon looks up at me as he comes back into the room. Through the open doorway behind him, I can see a whole lot of green tile work. He’s now holding several boxes marked with the Sicilian logo for pharmacy.

‘Leon... What happened at the hospital?’

Leon’s brows drop low, hidden behind his shades. He dumps the drugs onto the bed.

‘What do you mean?’

‘I mean...’ I’m ashamed when my voice cracks. *You’ve held it together this long, Harrison. Don’t embarrass yourself now...* ‘I mean, what *happened*? I don’t remember. I can’t... I can’t remember anything but smells and... There were hands moving me around. I know that’—I hiccup, a definite precursor to tears—‘I know that I still have all my clothes on and everything so they probably didn’t’— I cut that train of thought off short—‘but what *was* that place? Who was the big guy with the gun and the brunette with the scar... And the old man with the knife and... and....’

I’ve run out of steam.

I’m just... *done*. I’m completely done.

Before I can stop the descending spiral, tears are rolling down my cheeks at speed, my voice has reached a pitch appreciated only by canines and the few words that *are* audible aren’t making any sense anyway. My hands are trying to take over, flapping ineffectually in the air. But, as a means of rational communication, flapping is even less useful than babbling.

The next thing I know, I’m being lifted from the ground and into a set of arms that wind around me like the branches of a massive oak. Thick and strong... but gentle.

I’m pulled against a broad and powerful chest and I can hear Leon’s heartbeat against my ear. A heavy, rhythmic thud that seems to permeate my blood and pulse through my body.

The strength of its beat, the way it pounds through the walls of muscle in his chest... It's comforting. Soothing.

I don't have the energy to protest when one of those thick arms suddenly comes under my legs and scoops me completely into Leon's embrace.

He doesn't say anything.

He just nudges some of the boxes on the bedspread out of the way and sits himself up on the bed. He settles me in his lap, curled up like a child.

And there, warm in his arms... I cry.

## CHAPTER

## *Six*

I 'm not sure how much time passes. The only watch I own, a nice white and silver model that Dad gave me for my graduation, is still sitting in its little box back in North Carolina. And my phone is... God knows where my phone is now. In the possession of some mobster. The idea of a dark figure scrolling through my photos does not put me at ease (I have “before” gym shots on that reel!) but in the grand scheme of things, the concern seems petulant and I let it go.

The bottom line is I have no way of knowing if it's minutes or hours before I'm calm again. But, eventually, the tears simmer down. My hulking gasps and sobs dim and my breathing falls back into rhythm.

Leon doesn't let go. He just continues to hold me, even as the room fills with a pregnant, thick quiet.

I can feel the warm expanse of his palm slowly rubbing my back. Each sweep of his hand seems to lull my brain into a hypnotic trance. As he breathes, his chest rises and falls against my cheek.

He doesn't rush me. He just lets me adjust.

Shelving any embarrassment for the moment, I keep my eyes closed and try to do just that. I try to take stock of everything that has happened...

The shooting... the race to the hospital...

*The kiss.*



After that, things start to go blurry. But, as if psychic, it's then that Leon starts to speak, coolly filling in the blanks:

'The man with the scar at the hospital... you may have caught that his name is Jaime. He's a direct errand boy of the head of the Machelli organization: the man who held a knife to your throat.'

I try not to shudder...

'That same man is my father.'

I should feel some kind of shock over *that* revelation but something subconscious in me must have picked up on a connection back at the estate because I'm not wholly surprised. They had even looked a little alike.

Rather than astonishment, I'm filled with an aching sympathy.

I wasn't the only one the Machelli head had threatened to kill.

What it must be like to have such a father, I cannot imagine.

'At the hospital, Jaime's men were quick and efficient. They had to be. We were in a public place. One of them caught you in the temple and you were knocked instantly unconscious. Besides being carried around, you weren't touched after that. Damon was the one who carried you to the car. You were beside me in the back seat. He then carried you again into the manor.'

Leon's hand hasn't stopped passing up and down but it's moved from my back to my shoulder and along my arm. It's warming and pulls me snugly against his body. Each new piece of previously missing information has my next exhale growing longer and calmer.

'Damon isn't a cruel man, *carina*,' Leon continues. 'Were he in a different line of work, you might even call him honorable. He has four younger sisters.'

Leon doesn't need to add the details but he's trying to make me feel better. And I appreciate it. With his

reassurances, the monstrous figure in my head has morphed into an overstuffed teddy bear. I almost feel bad that the poor man was hurt in our bid for freedom.

‘The estate we were taken to, where you woke up, is the Machelli family home. It’s also now the headquarters of the organization as my father is terminally sick and rarely goes out.’

‘I’m sorry,’ I whisper automatically. My voice is muffled by Leon’s shirt.

‘I’m not.’

*Well...* given the last few hours, I suppose I can understand that. Even if the cold detachment in Leon’s voice makes me shiver.

His hand rubs a little faster as if worried I might be cold.

Now that my crying jag has passed, however, I’m anything but cold. In fact, I’m overly hot. Hot and very tired.

But I also feel grounded. Oddly strong.

As if the stress of the last day had been building in me like a helium balloon until my feet could barely hold me to the ground and my insides were stretched so thin it hurt. Now, the bubble has popped and I’ve deflated back to my usual size, less full of the uncomfortable crazies and feeling solid again.

‘When you woke up, you startled my father and Damon and that allowed me the chance to get rid of the only gun in play,’ Leon explained. ‘Then there were those moves you threw at my old man.’

‘Oh my God, I’m so sorr—’

‘Don’t be,’ Leon says, cutting me off. To be fair, I’m not sure why I was apologizing. Except for the fact that... Well, that’s what you do when you admit to beating up someone’s dad.

Somewhere in the back of my head is a voice of decency reminding me that I just helped assault a terminally ill old man.

But, given the situation, I'm finding it hard to hold onto my guilt.

'You saved both our lives,' Leon insists. 'I just thought you should know that.'

Having already left my dignity long behind us, I snort into his shirt front.

*Me? I saved us?*

It's only when I push myself upright, so I can look him in the eye when I correct him and thank him for saving *my* ass, that I fully comprehend our position.

Leon is sitting with his back to the wall, pelvis splayed as one foot remains braced on the floor and his opposing knee is bent up over the bedspread. Like a cover model for a *Playgirl* mag, he looks perfectly content, despite his torn-up clothes and busted lip.

And I'm in a uniquely informative position for telling exactly *how* content, because my butt is settled in the cradle of his lap. And Leon is er... having a very male reaction to it, if the hard and heavy length beneath my bottom is anything to go by.

I won't lie. Given what I must look like right now, having just turned his shirt front into a wet and snotty rag, this is actually very flattering.

But also scary.

Because, even putting aside all the chaos and disaster that awaits us outside this room, I've never done well with bad boys.

Not that I've dated many. In fact, it was just the one. A high school boyfriend who had turned dangerous in college.

But once had definitely been enough.

Once upon a time, Jason had been an exciting adventure. A sinful temptation wrapped in a black leather jacket and a twinkling smile. By the time I'd finally gotten free of him, I was convinced I'd never meet anyone who would frighten me more.

And Jason's greatest crime, on paper, was a few snatch-and-grabs and the occasional bar brawl.

Leon was a whole other level of bad boy.

Which meant he held the potential for a whole other level of violence.

*In fact, I've already seen that violence, haven't I? I realize. It just hasn't been targeted at me yet.*

I wriggle, trying to escape Leon's lap. But his arms, still looped around me, stiffen. His fingers sink into the thickness of my coat.

'Hold on,' he says, lips curling decadently at the edges. 'You might want to wait a minute before hopping down.'

'Why?' I challenge. He's not restraining me too hard. I could easily break out of his hold. But I resent his obstruction all the same. Even more so, my obedience.

He's removed his shades and glances coyly up at me from behind dark lashes. He then shifts his hips pointedly beneath mine.

'You'll save my blushes,' he grins.

*Him?*

*I'm* the one who's blushing! Given the size of what I can feel against the curve of my ass, he has to be mocking me.

'I er... I don't think you have anything to be embarrassed about,' I point out.

This time, Leon's smile shoots full scale, a brilliant flash of white against his tan. Despite spending so many hours close to this man, it strikes me all over again just how handsome he is. The wide brow, the hard jawline, the roman nose...

...the prettily shaped mouth.

And lips that now wrap around his words like a sculptor caresses his craft.

'I've certainly had few complaints,' he purrs.

I swallow, suddenly dry in the mouth and... not so dry in other places.

‘So,’—I have to clear my throat—‘you mentioned before.’

Something about Italians and Sicilians being different in bed...?

For a moment I wonder what he meant by that, back at the hospital. Was he talking about physical endowment? Technique?

...Stamina?

I’m beginning to feel *very* hot under the collar and wish I wasn’t still wearing my coat. But taking it off now would look way too much like an invitation.

Leon’s hands have let me go but I haven’t moved. His fingertips trail down the sleeves of my coat and then under the lapels to rest on my hips. Beneath, I’m wearing a turtleneck, fitted but thickly ribbed. Yet, I can still feel Leon’s gentle touch with such intensity that I wouldn’t be surprised if I could sketch his fingerprints from memory.

Now, those fingerprints are teasing the hem of my shirt, playing with the fabric. I feel the smoothness of one of his nails brushing against my skin.

My breathing stops.

‘Do I make you nervous, Freya?’ he teases.

Does he make me *nervous? Seriously?*

Can’t he *hear* my heart pounding out a staccato in my chest?

When I can’t find the words to answer right away, when I stay silent for a heartbeat too long, Leon’s hands are instantly still. Already barely touching me, he lets go entirely, his hands hovering several inches over my waist.

He adjusts the question, his gaze suddenly serious.

‘Do you fear me?’ he asks.

‘No.’

Despite my earlier worries, my answer is honest. I've been *nervous* around him. I've been fearful of what he and his occupation represent and what dangers he might attract through the door or around the next corner. I've even worried about a possible future in which images of Jason and Leon have blurred together because they both favor the wrong side of the law.

But, when put to the test, when asked directly if I fear *him*—Leon, the *man*—I have to admit that I don't.

We've been through too much already, and he's saved me too many times for me to be truly frightened of him.

*He wouldn't take the car with the car seat.*

'No,' I say again when Leon just looks doubtful. 'No, I'm not afraid of you.'

'Then why are you looking at me like I'm a predator?'

*Because that's what you are, I realize. A predator.*

It's in the way Leon is sitting, in the way that he speaks. It's in the way he carries himself. The man is entirely comfortable with the world and how he's perceived by it. He knows his capabilities and has held life and death in his hands. He knows what he wants when he sees it. And he claims it for his own. Possessing it wholly and completely.

If that's not the definition of a predator, I don't know what is.

Leon is watching me, still waiting for an answer. I scramble for words I can put together. Words that will make sense.

'Because when you look at me, you look...'

When I trail off, Leon's eyes flash. Sensing a favorable answer, his hands have returned to my shirt, pinching the hem between his fingers. Again, the backs of his knuckles brush against my skin and I feel my lungs spasm as other muscles loosen. I can feel myself opening deep inside. As if making space for a man. For *this* man.

For Leon.

‘What...?’ he prompts. One fingertip on either side of my waist has finally found skin and he’s tracing the line of my jeans. ‘How do I look at you, Freya?’

‘Like,’ I gasp, ‘you’re hungry.’

In a whirl, the room spins on its axis. Hot hands are grabbing me behind the knees. I’m lifted off of Leon’s lap and am falling back against the bed.

The debris of items Leon had collected onto the duvet scatter in all directions and, suddenly, Leon is there. Above me. Around me.

On me.

For one glorious moment, Leon’s long, lean, and very taut body is pressing up hard against mine. His hips have found a home between my thighs, his abs are against my belly, and his chest is tickling the tips of my breasts. Teasing... Hovering over me like a promise.

When he shifts his weight, that now familiar length of his hits me dead center, up against my core. White fire shoots from my pelvic floor to my scalp and back again. My toes curl.

‘*Oh m—*’

‘I am...’ Leon growls from above. For a moment, I can’t remember what he’s admitting to.

Despite his size and the way his shoulders are bulking to take the weight of his torso—and even though he looks as if he’s just come from a bare-knuckle brawl—Leon doesn’t loom. His presence isn’t frightening and his arms aren’t a cage. They’re more like a delicious restraint. A seductive entreaty for me to stay right where I am. And a promise of all the sensual rewards I’ll receive, if I obey.

‘I *am* hungry,’ he repeats, his confession stealing the air from my lungs. ‘Whenever I look at you, Freya, I am hungry. Whenever I think of that kiss we shared, I grow so hard that I ache. I sting. I burn.’

Leon moves to lift his lower body away from mine. The soft mewl of protest is beyond my control. It just slips from my lips. But, when it inspires a whole lot of intensity on Leon's face, any embarrassment I might have felt instantly dissolves.

‘And...’ Leon moves onto one arm. His free hand brushes gently down my arm... across my belly... to the button of my jeans. I have no idea what to do with my hands, one reaching to hold onto the wrist beside my head and the other searching to grab hold of the sheets... It doesn't occur to me to push him away. ‘Though it's not my place to tell you how you feel, Freya, I don't think I'm the only one suffering here...’

If by suffering he means hot, feverish, and enduring a sickly hollowness that I'm now desperate to fill, I would have to agree with him...

With a flick of his wrist, Leon has my jeans unbuttoned. The sound of a lowering zipper is barely louder than our breathing.

‘Wh-What are you doing?’ I stammer like an idiot.

*Something wonderful, Harrison. He's doing something wonderful. Now, shut up!*

Leon traces the tips of his fingers, three hot little spots drifting to and fro, along the lace of my underwear. I feel my lower belly clench with anticipation.

With my jeans now unfastened, Leon can sink lower, his support shifting from hand to forearm. Only a whisper of air can now pass between us.

I've planted my feet on the bed, my knees raised on either side of his hips. I'm clutching the bedspread so hard that I fear the fabric might tear.

‘You're tense, sweetheart...’ Leon's voice is a deep rumble. It rolls over my skin in a wave of warmth before seducing its way into my ear.

His whole body is hot. Like, literally hot. As if I'm up close and personal with the sun itself. A sun that smells of coffee, woody aftershave, and fresh sweat.



God, even Leon's *smell* is alpha male. It drills into my mind. It condenses on my tongue.

'I...' I don't know what to say. God yes, I'm tense. But just because I haven't pushed him away yet doesn't mean I want to have sex with this man.

My body... Oh, my *body* wants to have sex.

But I'm not yet sure if *I* do. After all, I don't know Leon. Not really. He's dangerous. A bad boy. And we're on the run for our lives.

'It's natural, Freya. We've been through a lot that would make you tense and spike your adrenaline. Now we're safe for a while and that tension has nowhere to go.

'Let me help...' Leon purrs, that touch of his sneaking beneath the hem of my panties. When he brushes the hair between my legs, it's a sensual tickle over my skin that has my breath catching.

'I'll not make love to you,' he promises. 'I'll not enter you with my body... No matter how much I ache for it. I vow that I won't. Just let me touch you... Let me help you find release.'

I'm gasping at the image in my head. The idea of Leon bringing me to climax with his touch alone. Watching me as I orgasm. Holding me as I come down from my high.

'Wh-Why would you... When we wouldn't...?'

'Freya, look at me.'

I'm not sure when my eyes closed but they pop open now. I instantly flush hot at what I see.

Leon. His face is barely two inches from mine and his gaze is piercing through me with an intensity that feels more intimate than the slowest, most sensual, sex.

His touch disappears from my lower belly, his index finger coming to rest on the bridge of my nose.

'Because you, *carina*,' he says as he traces the lines of my face, 'have the most expressive face I've ever seen. I have seen you surprised. I've seen you confident and fiery. I've had

the misfortune of seeing you afraid and been lucky enough to see you smile. And right now...' His eyes, dark like fired-up whiskey, burn into mine. 'Now, I'd like to see you drunk on pleasure. So high on your own body that you cannot think. So achingly satisfied that you scream my name.'

I'm lost for words as that hand of his leaves my face and goes right back to its exploration beneath my underwear. Leon barely brushes the top of my cleft and my body bucks beneath his, my muscles straining... *Needing*.

'Will you let me do that for you, Freya?' he asks, stroking me again. Again, my hips buck. 'Will you let me make you cum?'

'And that...' I gasp. I swallow. I lick my suddenly dry lips. 'And that would be... enough for you?'

I've never known a man who would be satisfied with just that. With just making his partner reach their peak.

Leon is smiling softly but the heat in his eyes turns the expression from sweet to wickedly cunning.

'Hardly,' he admits. 'But I'm a big boy, *carina*. I can handle that myself later... Right now, I would take great pleasure in watching *you*. If you'll let me...?'

The conversation is too bizarre. Too beyond what I'm used to.

Jason was my only serious boyfriend. The only man I've been intimate with. And he'd certainly never spoken as Leon is speaking to me.

He'd never seduced me with words alone. Never made me hot and aching for him with his whispers.

Never openly praised *my* sexual release as pleasurable to *him*.

I don't have the words to agree. I don't have the sexual wherewithal to smile seductively up at Leon. To tell him he can do whatever he wishes, so long as he leaves me panting for more.

All I can do is nod.

But it's enough.

Leon's eyes darken, his pupils consuming the delicious brown. His lips part on a heavy exhale, his tongue thick in his mouth. He's watching me, his arousal stamped all over his face. Obvious, dominant, and primal.

That's a turn-on, in and of itself. Just knowing that Leon is as tightly wound as I am makes my skin tingle and my blood rush hotter.

Holding my gaze, he slips his hand lower, beneath denim and lace. His hand and wrist are encased between my thighs and the limited give of my jeans. I can feel his little finger against one thigh, his index along the other. There's no stretch. There's no room. It's tight and warm and impossible not to feel every line and tendon of Leon's hand.

Especially when the tip of his longest digit curls to find the crease between my folds.

I gasp.

'Oh...'

My hold on Leon's wrist tightens, my nails finding skin. My hips push up against his hand but it's not as if he can get any closer. My jeans have him flush against my most intimate of places and I wish Leon had pulled them at least to my knees.

Pretty soon, though, I stop thinking about my clothes.

Pretty soon, I stop thinking about *everything*.

Everything except Leon's hand on my body.

With a calm and masterful skill, Leon works the lines of my femininity. He brushes through my folds and strokes along the crevice they protect. His fingers become slick and slippery with my arousal.

Every time, he drifts closer to where I need him. Closer to that sensitive bundle of nerves. But he never fully touches it.

'Mmm...'

I moan, rocking my hips to try and direct him there. 'Leon... You're not... Mmph... Just...'

‘Shush... don’t worry, *carina*,’ Leon growls. ‘I know where it is. We’ll get there, I promise. Right now, I need you to try and relax. Or this is going to be over far sooner than either of us want it to be.’

I stare up at him with a meaningful look.

He wants me to *relax? Now?* Whilst his hand is sending all kinds of delicious ripples—no, *tidal waves*—through my nervous system?

Leon smiles.

‘I mean it,’ he says. ‘Take a deep breath and relax your muscles. The longer you can hold out the better it will be, I promise you. Right now, I put a finger in you and you’re going to cum. I can see it all over that beautiful face of yours. Relax and this will get infinitely better...’

Not entirely sure I believe him, I try to calm down. I take long and slow breaths, let my inner muscles unravel, and try to loosen my abdomen.

‘Good girl... that’s it...’

Leon rewards me by dancing around my entrance, the tip of his long, slick finger pressing against my outer walls. I wriggle beneath him, eager now. Wanton and needy for the sensation of being filled. Filled by him.

But it’s like Leon needs one final seal of permission...

Leaning down, he presses a quick but open kiss to my mouth...

...and pushes a finger deep inside me.

‘Ah!’ I gasp against his lips, my hips rocking, my body tightening back up.

‘I’ve got you...’ Leon murmurs in my ear. ‘Freya... look at me.’

I closed my eyes again. When I meet his gaze this time, he refuses to let me go.

‘Don’t stop looking at me...’ he says, slowly working his finger back and forth. In and out. My breathing hitches, then

falls in sync with his hand. In, *in*. Out, *out*. His breathing begins to match mine. ‘I want you to watch me as I watch you. If I cannot be inside your body, I’m going to be in your eyes, you understand?’

I nod dumbly. My hair is a messy tangle beneath my head. I feel hot around my neck. Dammit, why am I still wearing my scarf?!

*Oh my...*

Leon has altered his angle inside. His finger reaches deeper, curling against my most sensitive walls, sending shivers through my body. I feel the tendons tighten in the back of my hand as I fist the covers.

‘Relax again for me, *carina*...’ he says, his eyes on my mouth. He swallows. He looks half-starved. ‘That’s it... God, you feel amazing. Hot and wet... I need to feel you more...’

A tight, burning pressure fills my core as Leon inserts a second finger. He’s stretching me, pushing me wider and himself deeper. I can’t move my knees, my jeans are too tight. I can only lift my thighs towards my chest, opening myself wantonly, like an animal in heat.

My head falls back, but Leon stays with me. He leans closer to stay inside my jeans, his mouth against my cheek, his breath hot in my ear.

‘Shit, you’re beautiful...’ he breathes.

He somehow brushes my hair back from my temples, watching me with care as his hand works long, slow, and deep.

His thumb finds my clitoris and everything begins to snowball. My thighs tighten, my hips rock up against his hand. Rough sparks shoot from my bud to my nipples.

‘Oh, *mm*...’ I gasp Leon’s name, my gaze on the ceiling but my vision blurred. ‘Shit, it... it feels...’

My nails dig into the thick column of Leon’s arm. Stars are starting to blink behind my eyes. The slippery, crackling sound of wet sex is filling the room, the scent of it saturating the air.

‘How does it feel, *bella*? Tell me...’

‘It feels...’ I can’t catch my breath. I can’t *think*. ‘Ah... Oh God, Leon...’

Leon is increasing the pace, his fingers thrusting faster now. Every pullback sends his thumb over my clit and doubles the sensation. There’s a fire in my belly, curled tight and burning white hot. My inner muscles are so tense they hurt. Flashes of heat so wild they almost feel cold are zipping from my clit to my core.

‘Ah... Ah... Ah!’ I gasp with every thrust of his fingers. Until...

‘Leon,’ I gasp. ‘Leon, I’m going to cum...’

‘Not yet...’ he whispers.

‘Yes... Need to...’

‘Not yet, *carina*. We can shoot higher than this.’

‘Don’t need higher. Want this.’

It’s already the most intense orgasm of my life. The build greater, the peak higher. Leon seems to know exactly when the vibrations in my core are ready to spring loose because he keeps adjusting his pace or his touch, drawing back to keep me on the edge...

Ever on the edge. Never over it.

‘Dammit, Leon. Please...’

My back has arched off the bed, my hips are thrusting up hard against him. I can feel tears in my eyes. I can’t breathe.

I’m desperate. I need it.

Just a few quick thrusts. Hard and heavy. That’s all I need and I’ll tumble over the cliff and into the cool waters below.

I’m split in two. Half needing the release, the other in delicious agony on its precipice.

Suddenly, as my orgasm builds for what feels like the hundredth time again, my insides throbbing, my lungs burning, I feel the deep urge to have something in my mouth. I want to kiss Leon. I want his tongue.

What I have is his neck.

Clinging to his shoulders and rutting against his hand like an animal, my mouth finds Leon's throat. He moans, his head falling back, his hand still working between my legs. I taste salt. I taste man.

Leon slams a third finger inside, stretching me until I sting.

I scream. I buck. I throw my hips hard against his, forcing his fingers so incredibly deep.

Once. Twice.

And finally, it happens.

Leon shifts his hold, curls his fingers, and catches my clit at the same time.

My world floods with white.

With a sharp and sudden rush, it releases deep within and ricochets along my nerve endings. My muscles spasm and my heart skips a beat. I choke on Leon's name.

My only anchor is Leon. My nails in the back of his shirt, my knees pinned to his hips.

For a moment, I think I black out.

By the time I come down, I'm crying again. My clit is so sensitive it's painful. My muscles ache with their workout. I'm trembling. I'm exhausted. I'm a mess.

A delicious, satiated, rocked-to-her-core mess.

Leon discreetly cleans his fingers with a tissue from somewhere and is then there with me, brushing hair back from my face and cleaning tears from my cheeks.

'Sleep, Freya...' he says, his expression one of pure, masculine pride.

*And why not...?* I think as my brain starts to wink offline.  
*Credit where credit is due.*

I'd had no idea my body could do what it just did...

And we didn't even have sex.

‘Sleep...’ he whispers...

Leon is still hard. I can feel his erection pressing against my leg. His skin is hot to the touch and his cheeks are flushed with arousal. But I’m finding it hard not to do as I’m told; to just sink into a satiated coma.

To my surprise I can see a falling darkness out the window.

Just how long had Leon been touching me...?

The last thing I remember before passing out, is Leon removing my sneakers and refastening my jeans, before moving me beneath the blankets and tucking me into bed...



## CHAPTER

## *Seven*

**M**y brain comes back online a piece at a time. First, my sense of touch. The mattress beneath me is thick. The sheets wrapped around me are soft. They smell a little musty, like they've not been used in a while, but the hint of fabric softener is proof that they're clean. A warm and squishy pillow is hugging the contours of my face, flush against my cheek and molding to one side of my nose. I snuggle in deeper.

It's then that I realize I'm still wearing jeans.

Jeans and a heavy, turtleneck sweater.

Now, why would I have worn a full, winter outfit to bed?

Like a cork popping free from a champagne bottle, my memories unlock in a rush.

The shooting, the kidnapping, the escape...

The way Leon had pleased me so thoroughly that I'd passed out into unconsciousness before I could return the favor...

Suddenly too hot for sheets and blankets, I jerk upright. My lower abs ache in protest, a heated reminder of just how I'd spent my last waking hours. My tongue feels thick in my mouth and my breathing is suddenly labored.

Any thoughts of a repeated session, however, die away when I realize I'm alone.

The apartment is dark and shadowy. Everything is reduced to a dim shade of charcoal. But I'm certain that I'm alone in the room.

For the first time, I truly surveyed my surroundings. I shiver, wrap the duvet tight around my torso, and assess the space as if every strip of shadow could be masking an assailant.

The bed is the largest piece of furniture in the room. As a king size, it would have been luxurious with the right styling. But the bland and brown covers are utilitarian and lack any kind of character. The size of the mattress seems relegated to mere practicality. Leon, after all, is a tall man.

The rest of the room is just as basic. A set of drawers to the left by the door looks like it was once flat-pack. The little table against the wall across from the bed has only a pair of small chairs flanking it. Nothing in the room speaks to an owner or their preferences.

The place reminds me of a hotel room. Clean and comfortable but entirely devoid of personality.

Atop the set of drawers is a large, black duffel bag. The items that Leon had been collecting on the bed when we first arrived are now stuffed inside, some of them peeking out through the open zipper. From where I'm sitting, I can spy some clothes, a box of bandages and steri-strips, a bundle of socks, and a long, cylindrical piece of black metal that I think may be the barrel of a long-range gun.

Fear tightens my gut.

*Forgot just how dangerous your travel buddy can be, dincha Harrison?*

A soft curse has me turning to my right where I spy my "dangerous" companion, looking exactly that. Beaten and bruised and highly, *highly* dangerous.

That such a vision is still a turn-on, with my history, is just proof that the last twenty-four hours have screwed with my head.

But screwed or not, I can't help but enjoy the spectacle.

Through the bathroom door, kept at a half-open angle, I can see Leon. Bare-chested, he's turned down the lid of the toilet and is using it as a seat as he inspects his injuries. His

hair is still damp, curling around his neck and ears, and his skin gleams in speckled patches. Droplets of water catch the light as they cling to the lines of his back and shoulders. Clearly, he's fresh from the shower and too impatient to properly apply a towel.

For which I can only be thankful, drinking in the sight of all that virile strength and taut muscle.

Leon is beautifully formed.

Whether natural or achieved from hours at the gym (I suspect an element of both), he's exquisite.

Heavy pads of muscle form his upper chest and rows of raw definition make up his belly. Sharp angles cut from his groin up to his hips and a mirroring V sits in the small of his back. His sides, spine, and shoulder blades are a jigsaw of deep and perfectly symmetrical lines of muscle. They interlock, clenching and flexing in harmony as he moves. His arms are ropes of thickly hewn muscle, drawn on long and powerful lines. I watch one of his biceps bunch up thickly as he lifts his arm to inspect his side.

My arousal dims.

Along Leon's side are the subtle ridges of his ribs. Over which is a heavy and ugly stain of purple. The bruising stretches from just beneath his heart, down along his side, and around his back. As Leon prods at the skin, testing the depth of the damage, the purple flashes whitish green and then darkens to a sickening, inky black.

I'm no doctor, but if I had to guess, I would say Leon's ribs are broken.

And it's not his only injury.

Another bruise and an accompanying gash mar one of his shoulders. The knuckles on both his hands have swollen up red in the heat of the shower. And a greenish tinge marks one of his cheekbones. Like someone tried to sock him in the eye but misjudged their landing. Soft grazes, little cuts, and smudges of black and blue dot the rest of his body. And the split in his lower lip is now an angry-looking scab.

I wince just imagining how Leon must feel.

His low cursing, however, doesn't seem to be from pain. He's now working at the deep slice in his shoulder. From the discarded cotton on the edge of the sink, I can surmise that he's already cleaned the wound. But the bandage is frustrating him. Every time he manages to wrap a strip of clean cloth over the square of gauze resting on his shoulder, he gets only so far before losing his grip on the opposite end. Each time the bandage unravels, his jaw tightens with frustration.

'Do you need some help with that?' I ask.

Leon doesn't jump at the sound of my voice so I can only assume he knew I was awake.

He just looks up and turns to stare at me through the doorway. He seems to consider my offer for a moment.

'Sure,' he eventually says.

My attempts to get out of bed stall when Leon comes to me instead. Uncurling his impressive frame from the toilet, he collects his medical supplies in hand and comes to sit on the edge of the bed.

Moving to sit beside him cross-legged, I take up the gauze and place it carefully over his tender skin.

I wince. He doesn't.

Just how Leon had thought giving me the orgasm of my life was more important than seeing to these injuries sooner, I don't know.

'How long did I sleep for?' I ask him. I figure, just because Leon doesn't *seem* in pain, doesn't mean he wouldn't appreciate a little distraction.

'Not long,' he says. 'A little over an hour. We'll need to leave soon...'

He'd warned me when we first arrived that this was a temporary stop. But he'd also said we'd be safe until morning. Beyond the cheap blinds on the window, I can see a pitch-black sky. Obviously, Leon's taking no chances.

He'll get no argument from me.

Focusing on the task at hand, I take up the length of bandage, pin it in place with a finger and then start to wrap it around Leon's underarm. He turns to watch me work, his face so close that I could count his eyelashes.

I try to ignore so appealing a distraction.

'How is your body?' he whispers to me in the dark.

For a moment, I think he's fishing for a compliment on his efforts. But seeing the way he's watching me, I realize he's being genuine.

He sincerely wants to know that I'm all right after his... attentions.

I feel the question, not to mention the implied care, down to my core. I try not to tremble.

'Fine,' I say primly, before clearing my throat.

I concentrate on keeping the bandage taut as I pass it over his shoulder for the third time and then reach to wind it under his other arm. This puts my mouth way too close to Leon's and I have to wait until I'm upright again before asking in return...

'How's yours?' Surely, his wounds were at least a minor bother?

'A cold shower does wonders,' he purrs.

I flush hot. Trust Leon to turn sincerity into sensuality. And to do it with such effortless.

Not wanting to seem childish in my inexperience, I try to muster the same nonchalance.

'You need them a lot?' I ask.

Leon's lips curl upwards.

'Not usually.'

'So, why...?' I pause, unsure whether to continue. He catches my eye, his stare urging me on. 'So... why limit yourself with me?' I pull the ends of the bandage together and

begin working them into a knot. ‘You must have known I wouldn’t have turned you down?’

Those talented hands of his had worked me into putty. A delicious, shivering, ready-to-beg putty. I’d have said yes to anything. Yet, he’d not demanded any mutual favors.

‘It... didn’t seem appropriate,’ he says after some consideration. Then he eyes me with enough fire in his stare to cause all kinds of mischief in my head. ‘And you seemed in greater need than I.’

‘Is that a comment on my sex life?’ *Or lack thereof.*

‘It’s a comment on your sensuality. And a testament of how much I enjoyed being a part of it. *Grazie*, by the way.’

I feel my face flush scarlet.

‘I feel like I should be the one saying that to *you*,’ I confess, securing the knot in place and testing the hold of the bandage. ‘How’s that?’

Leon rolls his shoulder.

‘It feels good, thanks. And you did, by the way.’

I blink.

‘Did what?’

That restrained smile reappears. This time, it seems oddly sweet.

‘Just before you fell asleep, you thanked me.’

‘Oh.’ Swallowing my embarrassment, I try to laugh off my bizarre moment of manners. ‘Well... at least I was polite.’

Leon watches me with an intensity that has me grounded in place. His stare is so deep it’s like it has its own gravity.

‘Trust me, *carina*,’ he says. ‘You’re far more than just polite.’

I’m left to ponder over *that* little declaration, my mouth no doubt working like a goldfish, as Leon gets up and pads across the room on bare feet. Randomly, I notice that even his toes are attractive. Short and square-tipped.

From the set of drawers by the door, he pulls out a dark sweater to match his jeans. I'm disturbed to realize Leon looks even better in casual attire than in a formal suit. And knowing he's now squeaky clean just makes him seem... edible.

*Let it go, Harrison... Good grief, anyone would think you've never had a decent orgasm before!*

'You should go and shower,' Leon says over his shoulder as he shrugs into the sweater. 'But I wouldn't wash your hair. I've no dryer here and we need to leave soon.'

'All right.'

I shake myself back into the present. Mobsters, kidnappers, guns... The things I *should* be focusing on.

Yet, I can't help but hesitate in the bathroom doorway. I glance back at Leon, watching the way his jeans hug the curve of his ass, how his shoulders shift and pull as he checks the contents of his duffel bag. When he catches me watching him, he frowns.

'I'm not going to jump you,' he says, clearly mistaking my hesitancy for nervousness. 'I don't need to stoop to spying on a woman in the shower.'

'I wasn't thinking that,' I say.

'No?'

'No...' I swallow, feeling yet another blush creeping all over my face. 'I was just wondering that... maybe you were expecting—or *hoping*, not *expecting*—for me to er...' *How to put it delicately?*

'Return the favor?' Leon suggests with a raising of one eyebrow.

I swallow but nod.

*It stood to reason, didn't it?*

After what he'd done for me, most would expect a reversal of the offer, right?

But Leon has frequently surprised me, thus far, and his response is true to pattern. Instead of seeming eager at the

prospect, he almost looks annoyed.

‘Sex isn’t a transaction, Freya,’ he says. ‘It doesn’t come with debt. I did what I did because I wanted to. You let me do it because you equally wanted it. You owe me nothing. End of story.’

““End” as in... never again?” The idea of not touching Leon, of Leon never again touching me, leaves me hollow. Which is probably something I should be addressing.

‘Only if we don’t both want something again.’

‘Would *you* want something again?’

Leon’s exhale sounds almost painful.

‘Freya, I cannot imagine a heterosexual male wanting anything *but* “again” with you. Now stop asking stupid questions and get in the shower. You don’t have to worry about me trying to join you.’

Feeling emboldened by the conversation, my next question pops out before I can stop it.

‘What if I *want* you to join me?’

But Leon is shaking his head.

‘Even then, I wouldn’t. We’re running down our time and need to be out of here within the hour. I join you in there and we’re going to be busy for significantly longer than that. Now hurry up before you test my restraint any further.’

I can’t help it. I skedaddle into the shower with, I suspect, a very large grin on my face.

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AS I PULL the car into the parking lot of the *Corona Bianca*, I resist the urge to pinch the bridge of my nose or curse myself a blue streak.

“*Will you let me do that for you, Freya? Will you let me make you cum?*”



Just what in the *hell* had I been thinking?

Not that I regret the decision, I quickly correct, passing by an over-eager valet and parking the Ferrari myself. At least... not *really*.

The experience had been so intense, so achingly sexy that it would forever be imprinted on my memory banks. I've never taken such physical satisfaction from watching a woman orgasm.

There is no way I could regret such an experience.

But there had been repercussions. Repercussions I really should have anticipated and considered when I'd offered to relieve Freya's... tension.

One is how it would mess with my head.

With the old man hunting us down, and Jaime his choice of bloodhound, a clear and focused head is all that's going to keep us both alive, right now.

And my head is now anything but clear. In fact, it's damn near full to the brim with tempting, seductive visuals that I can't seem to push away.

Freya on her back on my bed. Freya arching into my touch. Freya with her mouth parting on a gasp, her skin flush with arousing heat.

Freya's eyes, dull and fuzzy with a pleasure so intense it's rendering her blind...

Dammit, just thinking about it has me hard again.

Which seems par for the course nowadays. Even since I met the woman currently bundled into my passenger seat, I've spent more time erect, than not.

All it takes is a word or a look...

Only an hour ago it had been the sight of Freya coming out of the shower, her cheeks scrubbed pink and her tiny body swathed in my clothes. The t-shirt and sweatpants she's now wearing are garments I'd barely looked at twice in the past. Just something to cover my skin when going for a run. Seeing

them on Freya has turned the navy blue cloth into something tantalizing and seductive. An invitation to be unwrapped.

To make matters worse, unwrapping Freya would be a genuine revelation. Because, despite having stroked her into a trembling temptation beneath my body, I've still not seen her naked.

I've touched her. I've felt the lines of her shape. I know the rise of her breasts and the dips of her navel. I know the curving inlay of her waist and the narrow flare of her hips. I know the shape of her secrets and the velvety soft skin that hides between her legs.

I know how many freckles she has on her face. And how three new ones appear on her left cheek if she blushes hard enough.

And still, I don't know what she actually looks like beneath her clothes.

When people say a little bit of knowledge is a dangerous thing, I'm not sure this is what they mean but it seems fitting. Knowing the feel of Freya, but not the visuals that go with it, is slowly killing me.

'Is this it?' Freya asks, peering out through the tinted window. I'm reminded of a puppy pressing its nose against the glass.

'This is it,' I assure her.

'Isn't this place a little... flashy?'

Getting out of the car, I consider the hotel ahead of us, trying to see it through Freya's eyes. Sleek, modern architecture meets expensive excess. The *Corona Bianca* is a five-star resort for the wealthiest members of Sicilian high society. Even at night, the hotel is lit up with carefully placed spotlights that never reveal the rooms or their occupants but, instead, set the windows glistening like crystal.

I hurry around the hood of the sports car faster than Freya can work her seatbelt and open her door. Offering her a hand, I feel a surge of protectiveness when she appears nervously

bemused. Like she's unused to being treated with the most basic chivalry.

*Just what kind of assholes has she been dating until now?* I wonder.

Not that *we're* dating.

One tumble over the sheets—however memorable—does not a relationship make. Not to mention anything long-term in the sphere of romance has always been impossible for me.

Even more so under the current circumstances.

No one wants a boyfriend with a bullseye on his forehead.

'I thought we were trying to fly *under* the radar?' Freya asks, returning to the point at hand.

I glance over the regality of the hotel. I understand her reasoning. For people on the run, an extravagant place to stay seems illogical. But instead of the expensive lights and high-class atmosphere, I see CCTV cameras and a code of discretion more impenetrable than steel.

'This place will help us do that,' I assure her. 'Their client privilege is worth more than any threats they might receive.'

'Even from the mafia?'

I nod as I shoulder the duffel bag, lock the car and offer her an arm.

'Never get between a five-star concierge and his guests,' I warn. 'Their loyalty puts even us mobsters to shame.'

'Is that why you needed the Ferrari?' she asks. 'To get into the hotel?'

I shake my head.

'They know me here, regardless of what I'm driving. We needed to ditch the other car anyway and the Ferrari was all Bobby had on hand.'

Headed for *Corona Bianca*, I'd taken us by way of an old friend's place. I used Bobby rarely so they won't trace us through him, but enough that I trust his discretion. I bought the

Ferrari with cash, Bobby had switched the plates, and we'd been on the road again within fifteen minutes.

'Now we have a set of wheels the family can't trace.'

'And a place to stay that won't squeal on us?' Freya finishes as we step through the hotel lobby doors.

'Exactly,' I agree.

At her first impression of the foyer, Freya seems to stumble over her own feet. It's vast and extravagant. A stylish clash of glass modernity and post-modern sculpture, the *Corona Bianca* lives up to its name as a crown jewel of dynamic architectural design. Freya is struck dumb by the visage, so I leave her growing roots in the center of the mosaic floor and head for the reception desk.

As expected, the manager on duty recognizes my face and it takes barely a minute to secure us a room in the fully-booked hotel, two floors down from the penthouse I normally reserve. I pay with a bundle of cash I picked up from the apartment, peeling off several thousand as a hefty bribe for the manager's silence.

'No-one needs to know we're here,' I say, with emphasis. 'No matter who they are.'

'Of course, Mr. Russo,' he says, accepting the tip and smoothly adopting a false name that he then types into the system. 'Is there anything else I can arrange for you?'

I glance back at Freya in my jogging sweats. I have clothes from the apartment but I'd had nothing for a woman. Especially one as petite as the pretty American. But the hotel has a built-in department store full of the latest couture, a food court, a formal dining hall, and a spa. There's not a lot that the *Corona Bianca* cannot provide.

'Some clothes,' I request. 'Night and day wear. A few pairs of shorts and blouses.' Thinking over the body I'd felt but never seen, I rattle off some sizes, trying to ignore the now familiar tightness in my jeans.

Check-in complete, I hurry Freya towards the elevators and we ride up to the twenty-seventh floor. The Madison Suite

is easy enough to find—directly ahead, at the end of the corridor—and it’s a relief to finally shut the door on the world. To exhale a little more freely.

Of course... shutting out the world means shutting myself *in* with Freya.

Which is a whole other sphere of problems.

Thank God I booked a suite with two beds.

*Speaking of which...*

‘Hey, which one do you want?’ Freya is calling to me, spreading her arms to encompass the two mega-king beds. ‘We could flip for it if you like? Actually, screw that, I want the one by the window. It’s closer to the TV.’

The room looks like something out of the American show *Cribz*. All sterling white with gold and bronze detailing. The floors are hardwood polished to a high, almond shine. There’s a Grecian-style statue on the plinth in the corner. And the ceiling has a painted fresco at its center mimicking the origins of man.

And all Freya cares about is the flat screen.

‘You want to watch *TV*?’ I ask, amused.

‘Don’t you?’ she challenges, with her hands planted squarely on those sweet, little hips of hers. ‘After everything we’ve been through in the last two days, don’t you feel the need for some escapism?’

I snort.

‘Whilst I’ll admit that I’m not usually so pointed a target in these things, the last few days haven’t been as out of the norm for me as for—’

I’m interrupted by a loud and unmistakable growl from Freya’s stomach.

Quick as a flash, she wraps her arms around her middle, like she can belatedly suppress the noise.

I smile.

‘Perhaps first, we should think about food,’ I suggest, heading for the spindly little coffee table on which lies the room service menu. ‘What do you want to eat?’

‘Pizza.’ The answer is immediate. ‘Preferably from somewhere cheap and greasy.’

I blink at her.

‘You want a takeaway?’ I clarify, bewildered.

‘Sure, why not?’

‘The chef at this hotel has two Michelin stars,’ I point out.

‘I couldn’t give a flying fudge what he has. I want pizza.’

I take a moment to recalibrate, then shrug and pick up the phone to order something through reception. They would handle the receipt of the food, deliver it up to us, and then charge the room. The fewer people we show our faces to whilst we’re here, the better.

‘I’ll order but it’ll take a minute to get here.’

‘Good, I can wash my hair. This bird’s nest is doing me in.’

I try to look at her with a more objective eye but I can’t see the issue. Her hair is fuzzy and wild around her head. Bits of it are standing on end. It’s adorable.

‘Do what you like. We’re here for the rest of the night.’

But once I finish ordering the pizza and hang up the phone, Freya is still loitering in the middle of the room, looking uncertain.

‘Shouldn’t we be... I dunno, trying to *do* something?’ she asks. ‘To get us out of this situation, I mean? I have a life to get back to, you know.’

‘That’s exactly what we’re going to do. Tomorrow morning. For now, we need to stay here and let Jaime’s goons run themselves in circles. Tomorrow, we’ll go back to where Alexei was shot and start trying to put together a case.’

‘For the police?’

‘For the Machellis,’ I correct.

Freya winces.

‘I hate to break this to you, Leon, but it didn’t look like your father’s going to believe you... No matter what evidence you might have.’

‘That’s why the evidence isn’t *for* him,’ I explain. ‘The Machelli organization is bigger than one family. There are branches, with powerful men at their head who answer only to my father. If we can convince enough of them that I didn’t kill Alexei, then they can pressure my father into lifting the bounty on my head.’

‘And if that doesn’t work?’

‘If it doesn’t work, I’ll be seeing my brother far sooner than I intended.’

I answer on instinct but immediately feel like a heel when Freya pales beneath her freckles.

‘Don’t worry,’ I tell her. ‘Before that happens, you’ll be on a plane to another country with a new identity in your pocket.’

‘I don’t think that’s as comforting as you think it is,’ Freya says, a little wrinkle between her brows.

‘It’s the best I’ve got. Now, go shower or you’re not going to be done before the food gets here. And I’m not saving you any pepperoni.’

Freya gasps as she rushes for the bathroom. And then calls back to me through the open doorway as the doorbell rings...

‘I knew you were a mobster but I didn’t think you were a *monster!*’

When I turn to answer the door to the bellhop holding bags of new clothing, I’m sure there’s a dopey grin on my face.

## CHAPTER

## *Eight*

‘Mmm... I am stuffed,’ I declare, falling back onto the duvet.

The spread and sheets are pure white, like everything else in the room: the curtains, the rugs. Everything.

Even *I’m* snowy white, wrapped in a robe that probably costs more than I made at my internship in New York all last summer. A robe that I’m definitely going to steal when we check out.

Loosening the tie a little to make room for all the pizza I just consumed like a rabid mongrel, I blow out a hard and heavy exhale.

Apparently, I’ve found my coping mechanism for life-threatening danger: food. And lots of it. Preferably smothered in cheese and spicy meat.

Reaching for the remote control like the last survivor of a sea wreck, drained and barely *compos mentis*, I finally have the little oblong in hand.

‘Shall we see what they have on the rentals?’ I ask, flicking on the TV and focusing on the little blinking light as studiously as I can.

I’m trying not to look at the man on the other bed.

Decked out in his own white robe, Leon makes way too good a picture. Now that he’s not on an adrenaline high, watching for the next potential threat, he looks... delightfully snuggly. The intense look in his eye has dimmed to a mild



simmer. His hair is all tousled. He's wearing the hotel robe with the same effortless grace with which he'd donned an Armani suit. Sitting up against the pillows on his bed, his legs—bare from the knee down—are stretched out and his feet crossed at the ankles. His toes keep curling and releasing, like a cat kneading at a blanket.

Which tells me right then and there, that I'm getting in too deep, too quickly with this man. If you're starting to think a man's *toes* are cute, there are some definite attachment issues to be considered.

So, as a means of distraction, I try to stay focused on the TV which is flashing the hotel logo and opening up a menu. Film covers are displayed like books on a shelf, rolling left and right for perusal.

'Come on,' I prompt when I hear nothing from the other bed. I glance over. 'What do you want to watch—What?'

Leon is assessing me in that enigmatic way of his again. Like he's trying to see through my skull and into my head. The look is at once discomfiting and very, *very* intimate.

After the orgasm he gave me just a few hours ago, the implication of intimacy is an unwelcome addition to my weakening sanity.

*"I did what I did because I wanted to. You let me do it because you equally wanted it... End of story."*

Yes, I remind myself. *End of story.* It was an amazing moment that will not be repeated.

*You don't do bad boys, Freya Harrison. You don't want to do bad boys.*

Which is why Leon's very personal stare is particularly unhelpful. I do not need temptations to the contrary, right now.

'Do I have something on my face?' I ask pointedly, trying to keep my own stare firmly fixed on the television.

'No...'

*Don't look at him.*

‘Then what are you staring at?’

*Don't look at him.*

‘I was just wondering over my good fortune.’

Okay, so I look.

Rolling onto my stomach, with my elbows under me and my feet in the air, I twist my brows at him in an expression I hope appropriately conveys my very subtle suggestion that he's lost his freakin' mind.

‘You,’ I tell him slowly, just in case he's forgotten, ‘are currently running for your life... from trained killers.’

Those beautiful lips of his turn up at the corners.

‘True,’ he accepts. ‘But someone deliberately sought to kill Alexei, and my father was just as determined to pin it on me, so luck had little to do with my circumstances. I was thinking more of the random stranger that fate has paired me with in the meantime.’

‘You mean me?’

‘No, I mean Jeff the bellhop,’ he rolls his eyes.

‘Hey, Jeff was very sweet when he delivered the pizza. He even apologized that one of the lids was bent.’

‘Whatever,’ he snorts. ‘You, Freya. I meant you.’

I feel my heart do a little flip-flop in my chest and I have to give it a stern talking to.

‘Had my path crossed with someone less brave than you've been,’ Leon continues, ‘I'd have probably left them at the nearest police station and wished them the best of luck.’

‘No, you wouldn't have.’

Leon had already explained to me that going to the police was the quickest and surest way to end up back in the clutches of the Machellis. And, even though Leon was also a member of that mafia group, I have absolutely no doubt that, right now, he's only playing the role of the bad guy. There's no way the man sitting across from me in a white, fluffy bathrobe would

leave a stranger to fight for their life. No matter how annoying they were.

‘Besides,’ I add, ‘I’m not that brave.’

‘You don’t think so?’ Now, he’s sending *me* the “have you lost your mind?” look.

‘I have been pee-my-pants-terrified this entire time!’ My vehemence has me knocking the remote control with my elbow and the selector jumps to the bottom of the genre options. I frown. ‘What the hell are “*Filmati Personali*”?’

‘You should click and find out,’ Leon quips before getting back to the subject at hand. ‘And you’re only proving my point. Bravery doesn’t mean not feeling afraid. You’ve managed not to fall apart yet, haven’t you?’

‘You’re forgetting about the total and complete crying jag I had yesterday?’ I select the category on the screen as instructed and glance at the clock. It’s officially past midnight, so “yesterday” is appropriate.

‘No,’ Leon says, his voice suddenly dropping a few seductive octaves. ‘Your emotional moment yesterday... and the hours immediately following... are forever seared into my memory. But if I can trade one very enjoyable flip-out for you keeping your head when it’s really necessary, then—like I said—I’ve been fortunate.’

I snort.

‘What about you?’ I challenge. ‘You haven’t cracked a worry line yet.’ I then frown as I try to decipher the Italian titles in the movie list. Half the words, I don’t recognize. The rest seem... odd.

‘I told you, I’m used to this kind of life,’ Leon points out. ‘Don’t confuse familiarity with bravery.’

‘That sounds overly humble to me,’ I grumble, scrolling further down the list.

‘It’s the truth,’ Leon’s words come out with a sarcastic bite. ‘My family trained me well.’

‘Well, how do you know it’s not the same for me?’ I joke, trying to lighten the mood. I don’t like the shadow that’s crept into his eyes. ‘I could come from hardass stock and just be a total pansy. *Then* you wouldn’t be so impressed with my so-called bravery.’

When Leon doesn’t respond right away, I glance back over my shoulder to find him analyzing me with care. Perhaps his English wasn’t up to the snuff of “pansy” and “hardass”? It takes him a moment, but he seems to translate it well enough. Better than I’m managing with the movies, anyway.

‘Are your family secretly spies?’ he asks, playing along. ‘Military Black Ops? Perhaps your father is a Navy Seal?’

I begin to giggle.

‘Hardly! And if either of my parents were a Seal, it would be my mother.’

‘What does she do for a living?’

‘Right now, not a lot. My dad deals in cars and she used to work in administration before we came along. She became a housewife to take care of us but, now that we’re both out of the house, I think she’s looking for a new project.’

‘And *she*’d be the Seal?’

I shake my head in awe of my mother.

‘Don’t underestimate housewives. Any woman who can get Thanksgiving dinner for twenty-six people, eight of whom are under ten, on the table, on time, without killing anyone... can crush an enemy soldier no matter how hard they think they are.’

‘I’ll take your word for it.’

For a moment, I pause. There’s something sorrowful in Leon’s tone. It’s subtle, barely noticeable, but it’s there. Had he never enjoyed a big family meal before? Given the size of the Machelli gang, that seemed... odd. Though perhaps all those gangster movies got it wrong and mobsters weren’t the sort to sit down at a dinner table with wine glasses in hand...?

‘That sounds like a large family. You have siblings?’ Leon asks to divert the subject.

‘A brother.’

‘What’s he like?’

I shrug. It doesn’t occur to me to lie. So many hours running for our lives and... doing what we did back at the apartment... has muddled things in my head. I feel closer to Leon than I have to anyone in a long time, despite only knowing him for just over twenty-four hours. Running around feeling vulnerable and emotionally raw will do that to a person.

‘Tall, dark and annoying,’ I sum up. ‘But I guess most little sisters think their brothers are a pain in the neck.’

‘Is he in sales, like your father?’

‘No, he’s a reporter. I don’t see him much anymore. He’s always flying off somewhere.’

‘War correspondent?’

‘Oh God, no,’ I shake my head. ‘Ma would be a nervous wreck if he were. No, he works the political scene. Attends all those summits and debates.’

‘That sounds... interesting.’ Leon’s wincing betrays his real thoughts.

I laugh. *Points for being polite, Leon.*

‘It sounds dull as all sin. But Evan loves it. He’s real old school too. Has this whole idealist view about the “duty of the press”.’ I make air quotes with my fingers. ‘To hear him talk you’d think mainstream media is the only string of information holding together humanity.’ I catch a glance at Leon’s face. ‘You think he’s an idiot,’ I say, interpreting his expression.

‘Not at all, actually,’ Leon says, resettling himself against his pillows. He catches one of his feet between the big and second toe of the other and fiddles. ‘Were the world re-written, I think I’d side with your brother. As it is, I can’t say that that has been *my* experience of the press.’

‘I’m proud of him for trying to change things,’ I say, ‘but I don’t agree with him either. He’s way too black and white. And the world’s no such thing...

‘Okay’—I change the topic momentarily—‘I can’t make heads or tails of these titles. I *think* they’re romances. Do you know any of them?’

‘Just pick one at random, I don’t care,’ he says with a straight face. ‘I’m more interested to know why you think there’s no black and white in the world.’

I do as I’m told and pick a movie at random, then I look his way with surprise.

‘Surely, you aren’t disagreeing with me that the world is full of gray?’

‘Why not?’ His expression is one of pure innocence.

‘Look at what you do for a living!’ I laugh. ‘Isn’t your business the very *definition* of gray?’

‘According to *whose* definition?’

‘Er... the law’s?’ I suggest as the movie rolls in and the producer logos flash across the screen.

‘And who *makes* the laws?’ Leon argues, ‘Laws don’t always connect fairly with our morality. They can fall out of date. If every nation unanimously decided that all drugs are legal and that all personal property, including any kind of firearm, could pass over borders without restriction... nothing about the Machelli business would have changed but suddenly we’d all be squeaky clean and purest white.’

The film begins properly and the camera pans across some kind of boudoir draped in dark curtains. But I don’t realize my error until a woman walks in with absolutely no acting talent that she more than makes up for with her cup size.

‘Oh my God, did I just...?’

The woman calls seductively for her lover, who appears from the other side of the room, dressed in nothing but leather pants.

‘You most certainly did.’ Leon is grinning from ear to ear and makes a show of leaning back with his hands behind his head, elbows out.

I grab a pillow from my bed and hurl it with all my strength. It hits him in the chest with a *flump*.

‘You *knew* I was in the porno section!’

‘How could you *not* have known you were in the porno section?’

‘My Italian doesn’t stretch that far!’

As the couple on screen start to get into things, I scramble for the remote control looking for the pause button. I hit Mute first to drown out the moaning.

‘There’s no need to be prudish, *carina*. Sex is a perfectly natural thing.’

‘Not the way they do it in those movies, it’s not.’

‘I don’t know...’ Leon muses, turning his head to one side as he watches the now naked couple on the television. ‘I’ve done *that* before...’

*I will not look at the screen. I will not look...*

I look.

I blush.

I try to find something else to talk about.

‘So, er...’ What was it he had been saying before the movie came on? ‘Is er... is *that* what your family deals in, then? Drugs and guns?’

‘Mostly,’ Leon gives a half-shrug, eyes still on the screen but his attention on the thrusting figures is casual at best. ‘There’s some art and jewel trade in there as well. But I’m less interested in that side of the business. Those schemes are just a means of making the rich richer and stealing natural resources from South America.’

‘You prefer to work with *drugs*?’ I ask, surprised.

‘Actually, yes,’ he says, turning everything on its head. ‘The Machellis have nearly a hundred plantations and growth centers around the world and we employ thousands of people, prioritizing those unable to find work elsewhere. Women and children, if necessary.’

I go still, watching him intently now.

‘You use... child labor?’ I’m not sure how I feel about that.

Leon, however, just looks back at me, unapologetic and... sort of honorable.

‘That’s how the world sees it. That would be the gray area you were talking about. But in the areas we employ children, the kids are mostly orphaned and would starve without income.’

‘You could just give them the money?’ I suggest. ‘Like, set up a charity or something?’

‘We have one. A fund we use to help others but also for tax breaks. But it requires unreliable donations to fund guaranteed outgoings. It’s not a stable business model. And an unstable business means missing meals for those it supports. At least when we hire them, it’s guaranteed money that we can then funnel back into salaries that give them guaranteed food. And their working conditions are no worse than what kids do here every day for their allowance. They just do more of it because they have no school hours.’

‘So, they don’t learn?’

‘Actually my father made a sweep hire a few years ago and brought educators into all of our sites where we have children working. They now have several afternoons a week where they learn writing, numbers and English.’

Granted I had met him under poor conditions but the man I’d met yesterday morning—the man who had held a knife to my throat—didn’t seem the sort to spearhead that kind of initiative.

‘I don’t believe you,’ I tell him. ‘*You* set up that scheme, not your father.’



‘The Machellis did it,’ Leon says, waving away any kind of praise for his actions. ‘And it’s just one program of several we’ve set up.’ He shrugs. ‘It’s not pleasant but the reality is that there are parts of the world where illegal goods are the only game in town. For the rest, it’s law-abiding poverty. If these people want to improve their lot in life, maybe save a little money for their old age or afford to send their children into proper secondary education, they can’t do it through legal means. I’d rather help them, working within the framework of what they already have, than stand on a soapbox, preaching a change that’s unlikely to happen in their lifetime. Let the idealists like your brother do that...’

... *Whilst I look after the people who need help now.*

The words weren’t spoken but I hear them in my head. I can sort of understand what Leon was saying earlier now. The Machellis might be a mob group—a gang of organized criminals as far as the law is concerned—but when it comes to morality, if you look at what *exactly* their business allows them to put out into the world, they might be judged differently. But the benevolence of the left hand is overshadowed by the illegal activities of the right. In that sense, it’s not so much that there’s gray in the world; people just refuse to differentiate the black from the white.

Leon is frowning at me.

‘Why are you smiling like that?’ he asks.

‘Because you’re being defensive,’ I say.

‘And that’s a *good* thing?’

I laugh.

‘I find that the people who get defensive over things like this tend to have the most integrity deep down.’

Leon’s frown darkens and he settles back into his cushions again. He folds his arms across his chest.

‘*Very* deep down,’ he grumbles. ‘Don’t forget what I do for a living. I’m not deserving of a halo just yet, Freya.’

Now, *that* was a question that hadn’t yet been answered...

‘What is it exactly that you do for the Machellis?’ I ask, naturally separating him from the mob like he’s a contracted freelancer.

Leon can sense the division and is quick to correct me.

‘I *am* the Machellis, Freya.’

Given that the Machellis are the ones hunting us down with firearms, I find this hard to compute. How Leon can still see himself as one of them is hard to imagine.

‘You don’t have the same surname,’ I point out. He had given his name at the hospital as “Averna”.

‘I take my mother’s name.’

‘Why?’

Leon sighs.

‘Take a guess, Freya.’

Well, there was an obvious answer...

‘You and your brother were born out of wedlock?’

‘Not my brother. Just me. We are—were—half brothers.’

I pause for a moment, not wanting to bring up too painful a subject. Despite his estranged relationship with his father, Leon had made it pretty clear that he’d cared for Alexei.

But if they were actually half brothers, and they had appeared so close in age, then that meant...?

‘Your... your mother was your father’s mistress?’ I guess. When Leon turns a heated glare on me, I have to hurry to correct my tone. ‘I’m not judging! Just... trying to understand.’

We’ve both forgotten about the adult film playing in the background. Leon has turned his gaze that way but it’s clear that he’s not actually watching it. His stare is turned inwards, his thoughts elsewhere.

After a few minutes of silence, I decide he’s not going to tell me anything; that his mother is too personal a topic to blab to a stranger. As he said, this kind of danger happens to him all

the time. Unlike me, who's feeling an intense connection between us, he's not likely to spill his guts to a stranger—

'My mother was an accountant in one of the Machelli laundering projects,' he finally says. 'She was raised without money, with very little education, out in Misilmeri. But she had a head for numbers. When my father visited the site, as he used to do regularly, he saw her'—Leon shrugs—'and he wanted her.'

'You make it sound like she was a possession.'

Again, Leon shrugs.

'To the old man she was. Something beautiful he could possess and keep locked away in a fine house outside of Palermo.'

'And your mother *let* him?' I'm trying to bank my own perceptions, to remember cultural differences and personal biases. But it's hard for me to think of any modern woman allowing herself to be treated like luggage.

Leon, however, has a knack for challenging my views of the world. And, as he turns those whiskey bright eyes on me, I know he's about to do it again.

'What would *you* have done?' he asks. 'A future of little besides bread-line poverty and the high chance of being arrested for fraud, simply because laundering is the only job you can find. Or a life of luxury on the arm of a powerful man you only have to see once every few weeks?'

Whilst it sounded like the life of a high-end, well-kept escort, I had to admit: 'I see your point...'

I ponder for a moment and then ask: 'So, when did your mother leave your father?'

Had *that* been the cause of such disruption between him and his dad?

'She didn't,' Leon says.

'Er... Pardon me?'

Leon seems mildly amused at my surprise.

‘She’s still there,’ he says. ‘Still living in that house. Very comfortably, in fact. She’s basically the matriarch of her own little world and staff team. She’s visited occasionally by a man who romances and satisfies her and is cared for by a son who ensures she wants for nothing.’

When he puts it that way...

‘But... what about your brother’s mother?’ I ask. The poor woman who had just lost her son.

‘She’s a member of the Italian aristocracy,’ Leon explains with a cold and nonchalant shrug. ‘They were an advantageous match on both sides economically but have spent progressively less time together since their wedding. Beatris spends most of her time in Milan now.’

I feel a little dizzy. Like the building blocks of my world—blocks that very clearly read “Love”, “Marriage”, and “Baby Carriage”—have been taken out of order and thrown in a tumble dryer.

‘Is... Is that how you imagine your future?’ I ask before I can stop myself.

Leon blinks at me.

‘Pardon?’

‘Well...’ I can sense myself blushing and the robe is feeling a little snug. I wish almost immediately that I had kept my mouth shut but I’ve opened the can now. No sense trying to put the worms back in. ‘If we prove you didn’t kill your brother, and your father passes away, you’ll be the head of all this, won’t you? Of the Machelli family and business?’

Leon rolls his tongue behind his lips.

‘I may...’ he hedges.

‘So... do you plan on leading a similar family life? Marry someone for advantage then keep a woman on the side for... for...?’

‘For pleasure?’ he suggests with a wicked grin.

I shrug awkwardly, blushing to my roots.

‘Why?’ he asks, now looking very curious indeed. ‘Are you volunteering for the job, *carina*?’

To hide my awkwardness I throw another pillow at him. This time, it smacks him right in his grinning face.

‘Shut up. You know that’s not what I—Oh my God, what is *that*?!’ I stare aghast at the TV screen.

Leon follows my gaze.

‘Freya, if I need to explain to you what that is, you have been single for too long.’

I glare at him.

‘Not *that*. *That*!’ I wave a hand at a long and very thick piece of flesh that’s too close to the camera to be in focus.

Leon has to tilt his head to work it out.

‘It’s an odd angle but I think it’s his arm.’

‘So that’s his wrist?’

‘I think so.’

I start to giggle.

‘Oh thank God, I thought the poor man had some awkward deformity!’

I’ve set Leon giggling now.

‘Who the hell *makes* these movies?’ I ask. ‘I don’t understand how it’s sexy if you can’t work out what they’re even doing...’

‘I think you have to use your imagination,’ Leon chuckles.

His laugh is deep like his voice. Rich and sort of... *full* sounding.

‘But I’m curious now,’ he adds. ‘Turn the sound back on so I know what she’s saying...’

‘I can tell you what she’s saying,’ I assure him. ‘She’s saying, “there’s no way I’ve done enough yoga for this”.’

Leon laughs again and begins to supply his own dialogue.

After a while, we slip into a routine, him taking the male actor, me the female. By the time we're twenty minutes in, what was supposed to be a seductive flick has the both of us in fits of giggles. By the end credits, Leon is holding his side and has a damp glow in his eyes.

'That was,' he finally gasps, 'the best movie I've ever watched. And I don't think it had any intention of being so.'

I can't help but agree, tempted to find another cheap porno for us to rescript.

When I suggest it though, Leon is reaching out a restricting hand.

'Let's save it for another night,' he suggests, getting up to use the bathroom. 'Right now, I think we need to sleep. I want to be up early in the morning to go to the parking lot.'

And just like that, the balmy, joyous bubble in my chest pops. I swallow.

I listen to the toilet flush and the tap run. When Leon comes back into the room, I try to keep the fear from my voice when I ask:

'Are you sure it's safe for us to go back there? Won't your family be expecting it?'

'They will...' he agrees, relieving himself of his robe. Beneath he has on only a pair of black boxer briefs. Despite his second skin of patchy bruising, it's still an impressive sight. 'But that's why we're not going specifically to the parking lot.' Thankfully he slides under the duvet of his bed quickly and the distraction is removed. Still, above the covers, I can see the way his neck curves into the muscle of his shoulder before working into a defined point over his bicep.

*Stop it, Harrison.*

*Not. Doing. Bad boys.*

*Remember?*

'W-where are we going, then?' I ask, trying not to stumble over my lolling tongue.

‘To the building next door. My father’s convinced I killed Alexei in an up-close attack. Which means he’s not looking for what really happened. The sniper who shot Alexei could only have been on the building to the west of the lot. So, I’m going there to try and find some clues as to the real killer.

‘You don’t have to come with me,’ he adds. ‘You’ll be safer here.’

It made sense. I should stay at the hotel. Let him do what he needed to do to prove his innocence. At the end of the day, this all had nothing to do with me.

‘Just... don’t tell anyone about your brother,’ Leon says as if he’s just remembered the warning.

‘Evan?’ How did *he* have anything to do with this? ‘Why?’

‘Because if the family finds out you have a brother in the press...’

I swallow.

*Oh.*

‘They’ll hurt him?’

‘They’ll want to make sure you don’t speak to him about what you do or do not know. Let’s put it that way.’

Okay, screw this having nothing to do with me. If my family was going to be brought into this...

‘Then, I’m coming with you tomorrow.’

Leon just nods, reaching to switch out the light.

In the dark, I quickly stand, shrug out of my robe, and slip into bed.

The nightgown the hotel staff provided is silk and it slithers around me cool as water. In so large and so soft a bed, it all feels sinfully luxurious...

And to think, all I had to do to get into a place like this was witness a murder and hitch my wagon to a gangster.

I restrain a giggle.

Then a loud bang from the corridor has me jerking in bed. Leon's voice is right there in the dark to comfort me.

'It's all right,' he whispers.

'What *was* it?!' I ask, tossing and turning.

'Someone from room service bumping into something, I imagine.'

'It wasn't... gunfire?' Paranoid as it sounded, that's *exactly* what the bang had reminded me of: the noise that bullet had made on the exterior of the Mercedes when we'd made our escape from the Machelli mansion.

'No,' Leon says, swift and sure.

'How can you tell?' I ask.

'Because I know what a gunshot sounds like, Freya. I'm well-versed in the symphony of ballistics. Not to mention there are no firearms permitted in the hotel.'

'You have yours,' I point out.

'But the hotel doesn't know that.'

'Then others could sneak them in too!' I argue, feeling the fear rising.

'Freya... go to sleep. I promise you, there's no-one out there but a clumsy bellboy.'

I try to sleep. I really do. And whilst I trust in Leon and don't *actually* believe there's an assassin waiting in the wings near the Madison Suite, that bang has thrown me for all kinds of loops. I twist and turn, I flip and flop. No matter what I do, I can't seem to drift off.

'Freya...' Leon growls my name in the dark.

'I'm sorry!' I insist. 'I'm trying to sleep.'

'Freya...' he says again.

'What?' I grumble.

'Come here.'



It doesn't occur to me to argue. I just get up like a scared little automaton, push away the covers, and shuffle through the dark until my knees knock against Leon's bed. There's a rustle of sheets and a sweep of light gray in the shadows as he parts the duvet for me.

'Get in,' he orders.

I get in.

With one encompassing gesture, Leon has the duvet over us both and his arm around my waist. His hands nudge me about so my back is to his front and, a heartbeat later, he's surrounding me with the weight and scent of a warm male. He snuggles into my back, pulls his arm tight about my middle, and wraps his warm feet over my frigid toes.

'Better?' he asks.

And, in truth, it is.

With Jason, I had never been much of a snuggler. His limbs all over mine had felt like a prison. Like he was trying to pin me down and hold me to his side. With Leon... his embrace is gentler. Just as consuming, but clearly built with comfort in mind. The warmth around my toes... The way he'd placed himself between me and the door... He had plastered himself to me not as a cage but as a living, breathing shield.

'Yeah...' I whisper in the dark. 'Yeah, this is better.'

'Good,' Leon says, his voice a heavy vibration against my back. 'Then go to sleep.'

And, despite everything, sleep I do.

## CHAPTER

## *Nine*

When I reach the top of the stairs, Freya's panting in frustration.

'What's wrong?' I ask.

'Can't... get it... *open!*' she grumbles, putting her weight into the door.

'Watch out,' I say, encouraging her to stand by the railing.

Twisting the handle as far as it'll go, I build a little momentum on the balls of my feet before throwing myself, shoulder first, into the door. It gives way under my weight and springs open with an unhealthy squeal of rusted hinges.

The shooting pain down my side, I ignore.

After the dimly lit stairwell, I have to hold a hand up against the early morning sunshine as we step out onto the roof.

*Should have brought those shades...*

'Damn, that's bright,' Freya says, having the same problem as she salutes a hand above her eyes and winces in the light. It makes her nose curl up.

With no elevator, we'd had to climb fourteen flights of steps, half of which had been doused in eerie dimness by broken fluorescents. Real sunlight is now a shock to the senses.

Testing the weight of the door, I toe an old brick into place as a doorstep. No sense in us getting stuck up here.

The rooftop is the usual deal for utility buildings: mostly concrete with a little loose gravel and sand worn over the cement, a perimeter wall that only comes to the knee, and several antennae and a satellite dish perched on the northern corner. The door for the stairwell rises up from the roof like a submarine's periscope.

'Your car's gone,' Freya observes.

Standing over on the eastern side of the building, a careful distance back from the low wall, Freya is nodding toward the parking lot across the street.

Where we first met, I think, surprised that it was less than forty-eight hours ago.

Where Alexei died.

She's right. The spot where Alexei's dark SUV had been parked is now empty. Even the smear of his blood has been cleaned off the asphalt.

'It would have been gone within an hour of us leaving the hospital,' I say. 'The family doesn't leave things to chance.'

'What about *my* car?' she asks as if suddenly remembering the Bianchina she'd left back in the emergency room's lot.

'I suspect it's in a scrap pile somewhere,' I say honestly.

'*What?* That beautiful car?!' Freya stares at me, those lips of hers parted, clearly appalled.

Out in the open, as we are, the wind picks up and sends her hair blowing in all directions. She has to release her coat to reach up and tame it behind her ear.

'Beautiful?' I question, unable to restrain my expression. 'That thing was a piece of junk.'

'It was *vintage!*' she growls.

I smile.

'I suspect that's what the hire company told you because it sounded better than "old and broken down".'

'Hey, it got us to the hospital, didn't it?'

I shrug. On that point, I can't argue. Perhaps, for that alone, it hadn't deserved to be crushed into a three-foot by two-foot oblong. Still, there's no doubt in my mind that that's exactly what happened. The Machellis are nothing if not thorough.

'I suppose that's one deposit I'll never get back,' she mumbles to herself.

'I'll pay for it.'

If we survive all this, it's the least I can do. *I'm* the one who got Freya into this mess, after all.

I'm the one who brought her into danger.

*"I have been pee-my-pants-terrified this entire time!"*

God, when she'd said that, last night... The regret had been an actual pain in my gut.

Freya pulls her coat tighter around her body and rubs at her arms.

'*Brr*, how can it be so sunny and so cold at the same time?'

'Welcome to a Mediterranean winter,' I observe, before crab-walking along the roof. Keeping an eye on the parking lot across the street, and trying to assess the angle with an outstretched arm, I take each step with care.

Freya follows me, keeping a careful distance and watching where she stands.

'You looking for the shooter's perch?' she asks.

I nod.

'That's the space the car was parked in, over there,' I say, aligning myself in the right area. 'And judging by where the car was, and where *I* was standing... To hit Alexei without nicking anything or anyone else... the shooter would have to have been...' I plant myself in the most likely spot, then open my arms to enclose about two feet either side of my boots. 'Somewhere here.'

I assess the concrete around me, looking for something out of place. Some evidence of a presence, however temporary.

Freya sidles up behind me and goes onto her toes to peer over my shoulder. Like a ghostly apparition of the killer might still be squatting in the sniper's nest, ready to turn on her.

I don't know whether to be amused by her nervousness or kind of moved that she trusts me enough to be her shield of choice.

I settle for both.

'You see anything?' she asks, her breath warm on the back of my neck. I try not to picture that whisper against my skin in a very different scenario. But it's hard to suppress. Instead, I just have to deal with the Freya-centric erotica floating through my head as I assess the scene.

*And who says men can't multitask?*

Adjusting the duffel on my shoulder and squatting down onto my heels, I stretch out a hand to try and read patterns in the dust.

'There's not much here,' I admit, trying to stare harder. To see beyond the obvious. 'But *this* could be the pattern of a boot.'

'Like a footprint?'

'More like a scuff. Like someone used the ball of their foot to wipe away any indents in the gravel. Like from a tripod or a rifle spotter.'

I sigh softly.

'A shoe scuff doesn't sound like the kind of evidence you were expecting to find...' Freya observes.

I can't fault her there. It's definitely a whole lot less than I'd been hoping for.

'Wait, what's that?'

I follow where Freya is pointing. Tilting my head, I can't see anything that might have caught her notice until I get down on my knees and crouch low.

Along the seam where the wall meets the concrete is a gap serving as a gutter system. Overhung by the brickwork of the

wall, the opening to the gutter line is thinner than my finger. And through said gap... is the smallest glint of bronze. Like the color of a bullet casing.

‘Good eye,’ I murmur impressed.

Fishing out my keys, I flick open a little switchblade keychain and try to pry the casing out. It takes several minutes and a lot of rough handling, but I eventually work it free.

I hold the little piece of copper up to the light.

‘It’s no wonder the shooter left it behind,’ I muse.

It had probably fallen down there by some fluke of physics and it would have taken too long to pry back out. When you’re taking out the son of a mafia boss, you don’t loiter after taking your shot.

‘Though,’ I admit with frustration. ‘I’m not sure if it’ll be able to tell us much, now. It’s pretty battered.’

Freya blows out a heavy puff of air that sends a lock of her hair floating over her head.

‘So, we’re back to square one?’

I look around the rest of the sniper perch, reading a complete lack of human presence.

‘Not necessary,’ I say. ‘A lack of evidence is, in itself, evidence.’

Freya gives me a drowsy, unimpressed look.

‘That’s absolutely *not* how that phrase is used,’ she says.

I grin.

‘Maybe in a court of law. But for a family like mine...? It tells us something.’

‘What does it tell us?’

‘That this was a professional hit.’

Tucking her fingers inside the sleeves of her coat, Freya folds her arms across her front to pin the lapels in place. Why she’s so attached to a coat with a broken zipper is beyond me.

I'd offered to replace it through the hotel, but she'd been adamant.

*"It still does the job," she'd said. "Why would I throw it out?"*

'A professional hit?' Freya asks, frowning. Her eyes follow me as I rise back to standing. 'Didn't you know that already?'

'I suspected,' I nod. 'But there were other options in play.'

'Like?'

I shrug.

'Alexei was a good man where it counted. But he wasn't the straightest of arrows.'

'Really? With his background?' Freya rolls her eyes. 'You shock me.'

'Ha. Ha,' I kid dryly. 'I meant mostly with women. Alexei had a different girl on his arm most nights and they weren't always... *available* to be there. So to speak.'

'You mean they had boyfriends?'

'Or husbands.'

'Husbands angry enough to kill, you mean?'

I nod.

'It would have been foolish not to consider the possibility.' I weigh the little copper casing in my hand. 'But now it's pretty clear that this was a professional hit. So, I can at least be thankful my brother didn't die because of his own idiocy.'

I'm surprised to hear Freya chuckle.

'Oh,' she says, 'because you're Mr. Traditional when it comes to relationships?'

For some reason, the little barb, spoken with such simple jest, hits me right in the chest. Dead center.

'...I'd like to think so,' I say quietly.

Freya's laughter quickly dies away. She's watching me with a speculative curiosity. I resist the urge to fidget under her scrutiny.

'Are you in a relationship now?' she asks.

This time, I'm not at *all* surprised at my reaction. It's anger. Sparking in my gut and rising to burn the southern edges of my heart.

'You think,' I growl, 'that I would have let what happened between us yesterday go ahead if I were in a relationship with someone?'

Freya takes a step back.

'I've offended you,' she says.

'Damn straight!'

I can tell she's instantly contrite.

'I'm sorry, I didn't mean to imply that... that...'

'That I have zero respect for women and have no concept of loyalty?' I suggest.

'Okay, okay,' Freya is raising both her hands, palms out, her face filling with that delicious flush of pink. Those three freckles are making a reappearance.

For a second, I have the ungentlemanly urge to sling her over my shoulder, find the nearest secluded spot, and introduce her to the most deliciously sinful way of forcing an apology out of someone.

The urge only grows when she nervously licks her lips.

'I'm sorry,' she says without persuasion (more's the pity). 'I made a mistake...'

I can tell the moment her awkwardness morphs into teasing. A light catches her eye and it immediately pops the balloon of my anger.

'You just seemed very familiar with sleeping beside a woman last night,' she says.

I narrow my eyes, unsure of what she's getting at.



‘I mean,’ she eyes me mockingly, ‘when I woke up this morning you were copping a pretty good feel, Leon. I figure it must be a habit of yours.’

*Copping a—?* This is a stretch for my English.

‘I was *what?*’

Grinning now, Freya lifts her left hand, palm outwards, and then plasters it over her right breast.

I’d groped her in my *sleep?*

Well, they do say the subconscious knows what the heart wants, even when we’re holding ourselves back in our waking hours.

I try to restrain a laugh.

‘I was holding onto you like that?’

‘Like you were at sea and my boob the last life preserver,’ she says primly. Her hands are on her hips now. All she needs is a pair of finely-rimmed spectacles and she’d be the image of a school matron telling off a rebellious little boy.

Which of course only fires up the imagination of this very grown-up rebellious boy.

I rub my nose to hide my grin.

‘Sorry?’ I offer as a token of goodwill.

‘Oh, sure,’ Freya laughs, ‘you look *so* remorsefu—’

Movement over the door behind Freya has me reaching for my gun!

Instinctively, Freya throws her hands over her head and dodges out of the way. I pull her behind me, my gun halfway into position when a familiar voice has me freezing in place.

‘I wouldn’t do that if I were you, Averno.’

Above the door to the stairwell, laying along the top of the periscope, is a man I know well enough to obey. I recognize the closely cropped hair, the breadth of his shoulders...

...the shining barrel of his assault weapon.

‘Cyrus...’ I call up in greeting.

The only response I get is the safety clicking off on his gun.

Instantly, it’s like I have a spotlight on my forehead and my thoughts shoot in all directions. My back teeth grind down hard.

It’s amazing how being faced with the business end of an assault rifle can send every neural pathway in your head misfiring, right when you need them the most.

‘The old man sent you?’ I call out. I keep my tone cool. Like we’re just chatting over a drink. As we’ve done a thousand times before.

‘Why are you surprised?’ Cyrus calls back. One of his shoulders lifts barely a fraction. It’s as close as the man ever gets to a shrug. ‘I am the best.’

I feel a tug on my windbreaker as Freya latches hold. The scratchy sound of her fingers in the fabric sets my teeth on edge.

‘Do I *want* to know what he’s the best at?’ Freya mutters over my shoulder.

*No, I think. No, you do not.*

Cyrus Alesi is one of the most respected assassins in the world. And certainly one of the—if not *the*—most dangerous in Europe. Once an enforcer for the family, he’d been freelancing now for nearly eight years. And he made a mint doing it.

No one shoots like Cyrus.

Rumor had it he’d once been ordered to issue a warning on Nikolai Caruso. So, he’d shot a pistachio out of his hand with a Barrett M82. From over a mile away.

And I believe it.

The man is literally death walking. A silent wraith who blows away his targets without emotion and without mercy.

*...and almost always from a distance.*

Yet, here he is, close enough for me to talk to...?

‘I’m not surprised he sent you,’ I say to the man. Playing the part, I flatten a hand over my heart. ‘But I’m a little surprised you took the job. Kinda hurt too, if I’m honest.’

Freya has raised a hand in surrender from around my torso. I try to sound confident as I glance back at her.

‘You can put your hands down, Freya. He’s not going to shoot us.’

The cocking of the automatic rings out even over the morning breeze. On its end is a large silencer.

‘I wouldn’t be so sure of that,’ Cyrus warns. He must have his green eye in the scope because it’s the blue one that’s looking down the barrel at me.

Freya tenses at my back.

We’re speaking in English so she can understand every threatening word.

‘Really?’ I challenge, keeping my arms wide and my stance unassuming. ‘After everything we’ve been through? After that crap we had to get out of in Reggio Calabria last year? After Ganzirri? After that shit in Catanzaro? You’re going to sit there now and just’—I pull a face and shake my head—‘shoot me dead?’

Cyrus resettles his hold on his weapon.

‘That’s the order,’ he says. His tone is cold, lifeless, and highly professional.

I consider my chances for a moment. I consider *Freya’s* chances...

I steel my nerves.

Spreading my arms wide, I take a step forward.

‘All right.’ I shout, giving him a clear and easy shot. ‘Go on, then!’

‘Leon!’ Freya cries.

‘Come on, Cy,’ I goad, trying to ignore the fear in her voice. ‘If you were going to shoot me, you’d have done it already. What’s holding you back?’

Cyrus is deadly still atop the doorway but I don’t dare lift my gun any further. He’s lying flat on his stomach, his shoulder and half his face protected by a steam outlet. Given the rest of the rooftop is just open concrete, he’s picked his spot well.

The question is, why hadn’t he just set up his nest a few blocks away and fired from there?

Unless he doesn’t truly want to kill me...?

‘Come on, Cy,’ I taunt again. ‘What’s got your trigger finger in a knot?’

‘Leon!’

‘...Where’d you find the casing?’ Cyrus eventually asks.

Ah. So, *that’s* what’s stalling things. Cyrus must have arrived in time to see me holding the casing but not where I’d picked it up from.

Whether our old friendship is giving him pause or not, I know full well that Cyrus would want to know if Alexei was taken out by a pro; if there’s another player in the game. He would want to know who else is working on his territory.

And, as he hadn’t been there the night Alexei was shot and wouldn’t know exactly where to look, it’ll take him hours to scan the entire roof for a sniper spot.

Unless I tell him where Freya found the casing.

‘I’d love to tell you that, my friend,’ I say, plastering a look of “aw shucks” over my puss. ‘But, given you’re the one with the munitions, I’m not really in a position to be doing you a favor now, am I?’

‘If you lose your weapons and tell me where you picked up the casing, I’ll bring you in alive,’ Cyrus offers.

‘As opposed to?’

‘Me shooting you dead, right here.’

‘Which,’ I say, taking another step forward—Freya is shuffle-dragged in my wake via my jacket—‘we both know you won’t do.’

‘Do we, now?’ Cyrus resettles his gun, the barrel retraining on my forehead.

‘Leon,’ Freya hisses, ‘I really don’t think he’s bluffing.’

‘Okay, Cy,’ I call, raising my hands and taking another step. The stairwell door is only five feet away... ‘How about this? You let the girl go and I’ll tell you whatever you want to know about this thing...’ I toss the casing into the air and catch it with a flick of my wrist. ‘Heck, I’ll even *give* it to you.’

‘Leon...?’

‘No further, Averno,’ Cyrus warns, reading me plain as day. ‘Disarm. Now.’

‘Come on, Cy. Just tell me we have a deal and I’ll drop the gun right here,’ I say, inching another step.

‘Stay where you are!’

‘How can I give you the casing if I’m way over there?’ Another step.

‘Dammit, Averno, I’ll shoot—’

Before Cyrus even finishes his sentence, I have Freya by the arm and am hauling her through the open doorway, before diving after her. The muted but deadly *pew-pew* of that silencer ricochets off the concrete where we were standing.

I’m heavier so I reach Freya in midair and grab hold. I clumsily try and get her head under my arm as we fall out and over the first flight of descending steps.

I hit about a dozen hard surfaces and at least four sharp angles before we tumble into a painful heap on the next landing down.

‘Ow.’ I grunt, fighting to get my weapon up and shooting a few rounds out the open door overhead.

‘Are you okay?’ Freya cries in a panic, patting and slapping at every painful spot on my body.

‘Ow, woman!’ I cry again, fighting her off and encouraging her towards the stairs. Somehow I’d managed to get myself under Freya mid-flight and, upon landing, she’d hit me full in the gut and knocked the wind clean out of me. My voice is reedy at best. ‘I’m fine! Let’s go!’ I cry. ‘Move it!’

I fire two more shots of cover fire out towards the roof.

I calculate my bullets with care. Four down. Eight to go.

I have another two cartridges in my jacket but I’ve no idea when I’ll have a spare moment to reload.

‘Go on! Go on!’ I shout, chasing Freya down the stairs as fast as her feet will carry us. ‘Stay close to the walls.’

The last thing we need is her catching a bullet shot down the stairwell.

Another shot rings out. This one has no silencer. Like mine, it’s an angry, echoing bang that seems to come from all directions.

Freya squeals.

Cyrus has downgraded to his revolver.

I hurry her on.

‘Don’t look back. Just keep going!’

Down and down we go, our shoes clattering over the stairs, our breaths heavy pants in the air. I try to shake off the dizziness as we go down and down, around and around.

It feels like an eternity, like tumbling down Alice’s rabbit hole, before we hit the street.

As we burst out onto the sidewalk, the sun beating down and the wind cutting through us like tissue paper, I have to grab Freya from running in the wrong direction.

‘But the car—!’

‘—is what we came in,’ I finish for her. ‘He could have seen us arrive in it before scoping out the building. We can’t

go back to it now. *This way!*'

Pulling on that damn coat of hers, I shove Freya out in front and angle myself so I'm running at her dead rear. In another block, we'll hit a local shopping district. As much as I doubt Cyrus would fire into an open crowd, I wasn't about to give him an easy line of sight on Freya's back.

Slamming my feet into the pavement, I speed along, quickly running up on her heels.

'Freya, sweetheart, you've got to run faster,' I warn, with as much compassion as I can muster. Freya kicks up her feet but the extra effort doesn't yield much more speed.

'I'm trying!' she gasps.

For a moment, I wonder if I would still be faster than her if I carry her. But we don't have the time to stop and argue about it.

We just run.

Two blocks further south, I call out instructions.

'Up ahead,' I tell her. 'On the left, about a block up. A big archway... You see it?'

'I... I don't... Wait! I see it!' Freya gasps. She's tiring. Her legs aren't striking out the same. She's stumbled twice. But her arms have taken up the slack and are working overtime to propel her forward.

Damn, but she's a trooper.

I don't dare look over my shoulder to see where Cyrus has gone. It would be a wasted effort anyway. The man is a ghost.

He could be right on top of us and I wouldn't know it.

'We're going in that archway. As soon as we're inside and in the crowd, slow down to as quick a walk as you can manage. We need to hurry but also to blend in.'

Freya might have nodded. It's hard to tell with her scarf, coat, and hair all blazing in the wind.

As flustered as she appears, though, Freya executes the maneuver beautifully. Darting to her left, she zips beneath the alcove camouflaged by a large group of tourists holding cameras over their heads.

With my height, I'm forced to go around the group before speeding up to dog Freya's heels again.

'What the—?' Though no doubt shocked out of her wits, Freya has enough appreciation for beauty to be stunned.

The archway is the entry to a glass arcade, several stories high and half a kilometer long. Lined on both sides with old-fashioned restaurants, lavish cafes, and traditional sweet stores, *Il Dolce Miglio* is a bustling thoroughfare of activity. Carnevale decorations are still up and business is booming. Each store has tables and chairs stretching out front, now filled with early luncheon diners. Wanderers in uniforms and aprons offer trays of samples. Tourists meander up and down, either staring into windows or turning their viewfinders up to the ceiling, where vaults of masonry support mosaic glass.

Under any other circumstance, I'd have allowed Freya to admire it all. But right now...?

'Come on, keep moving.'

'Where... where are we going?' Freya pants, working through the crowd like a swimmer fighting the waves of the sea. I slouch low to try and mask my height, feeling like I have a bullseye on the back of my skull.

'We're looking for *Il Caffè dei Tulipani*, up here on the right,' I say, pitching my voice beneath the noise of the crowd.

'The Tulip Cafe?' she translates.

'You got it.'

The little dessert bar is hard to miss, given the very large and very artistic rendering of its namesake over the front window.

'Go inside,' I encourage at Freya's back. 'Head straight through and to the left. There's another door that exits out of the arcade and into a parking lot.'



I hurry her quickly through the cafe. No one but a few waitresses are on their feet in here, making the large front windows an open shot and a serious danger. At any moment, I'm expecting to feel a sudden blaze of pain in the back of my head and then nothing at all. Lights out.

I'm practically running on Freya's heels when we reach the lot out back, reserved for customers and staff.

I quickly throw her behind the nearest model I know how to jimmy. It's a work of a moment to get the driver's door open and I don't waste time with the passenger side.

'Get in!' I tell her, practically throwing Freya over the gearstick and diving for the driver's seat myself. I don't wait for her to settle before I've hot-wired the car and pulled out of the lot at as fast a speed as I dare.

Freya's still scrambling to get upright when I spin us out onto the main road and turn the car south.

Right now, it doesn't matter where we're headed. Only that it's far, *far* away from here...

## CHAPTER

## *Ten*

**A**n hour later, Leon and I are hurtling down a highway I've never seen before. Rolling hills are passing us by to the east. The sun has crested overhead and is beginning to slide down towards the vineyards on our right.

Leon hasn't taken his eyes off the road once. Not even to glance around the interior of the car or to shift his seat, which is clearly in the wrong position for a man of his size. His thighs are like shifting stone as he works the pedals. His knuckles are white on the wheel. The man is a live wire. Hyper-focused and tense as all hell.

The car is hot and smells of Leon. Of heat and adrenaline.

I glance back around my headrest and through the rearview window.

'Do you think he's following us?' I ask, scanning the different lanes. There are only a few cars in our wake, most of them inexpensive and nondescript.

Leon glances in the mirror. He's been checking it religiously every four minutes. Like clockwork.

'I don't think so,' he finally growls from between clenched teeth.

I watch as several beads of sweat on Leon's neck pool together and slide down and back into his collar.

Leon nervous is perhaps the scariest experience I've had in his company. And, given how we've been spending the last few days, that's saying a lot.

*If a situation puts this man on edge, I think, it's definitely worth worrying about.*

My heart hasn't stopped pounding since we left that rooftop.

'Maybe we should slow down a little?' I offer tentatively. 'All well and good to escape the big guy with the big gun but if we're then pulled over for speeding...?'

Checking his mirrors again, Leon begins to slow us down. But I'm unsure if he's following my advice or just adjusting to pull off the highway.

Taking the off-ramp, he navigates us further into the Sicilian countryside, where the fields turn wilder and one side of the car becomes shaded in woodland. The greens are denser here, the shadows darker.

We drive several more miles in silence until Leon takes a side road (apparently at random) and weaves us along a dirt track.

The grit and mud lead us into the woods, twisting between cops of evergreens and bracken as tall as my head. Little stones ping onto the undercarriage of the car.

Under the canopy of the trees, the air drops even cooler and I brave turning the little heater dial on the dashboard over to the right.

Only, Leon pulls over a moment later and cuts the engine.

For a second, we just sit there, staring at a wall of trees out front. We've hit a dead end, but that seems to have been Leon's intention.

It's a small, organic clearing, just large enough for the full-wheel spin necessary for misguided travelers to execute a U-turn and head back to the main road.

Taking several deep breaths, Leon then folds his arms over the wheel and rests his forehead against his wrists. His face is buried in his biceps until all I can make out are the backs of his ears and the wild, thick curls of his hair.

A vein running over the tendon in the side of his neck pulses hard.

I say nothing. Because this is most definitely the time *to* say nothing.

Leon is having a moment.

Why today has hit him so hard—why *this* morning and *this* moment has turned the stoic, unflappable Leon into a living, breathing cable of tension—I have no idea.

Don't get me wrong, *I'm* freaking out.

My foot won't stop bouncing, my hands have still got the shakes and my heart is beating a tattoo onto the inside of my ribs. But Leon...

Leon hasn't cracked yet.

I watch the back of his head for some sign of pain or stress. I assess the rise and fall of his shoulders as he breathes. He seems to be inhaling long and slow. Very calm. Very deliberate.

'Leon...?'

I reach out to place a hand on his shoulder. I might as well have been touching the statue of David.

'Do you... wanna talk?' I offer. 'Who was that guy back there?'

*Other than the assassin your father has sent to kill us. Because I totally got that part.*

For a while, Leon doesn't answer. When he does, his voice is muffled by his arms and a little echoey through the console behind the wheel.

'Cyrus,' he says. 'Cyrus Alesi.'

I wait but he gives no further details.

'He's a er... he's a killer?'

'A mercenary, yeah,' Leon sighs, finally sitting up.

He leans back in his chair, subconsciously adjusting it so his hair isn't brushing the ceiling anymore and his feet have

space. His hands find the wheel but they just take a loose and casual hold on the molded leather.

Whatever Leon had needed to take care of in his head, whatever demon he'd had to put back inside its box, he's done it.

Instead of looking tense or nervous, he now just seems... tired. Very tired.

'And er... is he really the best at what he does?' I ask with, I hope, a hint of humor. 'Or was that all just bluster and ego on his part?'

'Oh, he's definitely the best.'

His reply is instant. And, at that point, I think I would have really appreciated a little hesitation.

Leon's not looking at me. He's just staring straight out the front window into the treeline beyond.

'Cyrus,' Leon says before rubbing his eyes. He pinches the bridge of his nose. '...used to work for the group a while back. His father was one of us. He grew up in the life, like me. We'd use him to send warnings, to enforce family rules...'

'...to kill people?' I supply.

'We call it "removing an obstacle",' Leon corrects. I shudder. 'And Cyrus was the best at it. Until he quit.'

'He quit?'

Leon nods.

'And disappeared for a few years. Never heard from him. Never found him. Until he came back with a new arrangement. He wanted the same job but with freelancer rights. Now he does business with whomever he pleases, always on the hunt for his next target. It takes him all over Europe now.'

'How very glamorous for him,' I grumble, feeling a shiver working its way slowly down my spine.

I remember their conversation on the rooftop.

I remember the sound of gunfire.

‘You... er... you didn’t think he was going to shoot us?’

I try to word the question carefully. Leon has been doing nothing but saving my backside for the last thirty-six hours. I don’t want to sound critical of his efforts. The last thing anyone needs when they’re under the pressure of Europe’s finest assassin is a bad performance review.

‘No...’ Leon murmurs to himself. He seems in a daze. ‘No... I didn’t think that he would.’ He runs a heavy hand over his face like he’s trying to scrub a faulty perspective from his vision.

His sigh is harder this time. Deeper.

He stares into nothing before he finally murmurs, softly and sadly:

‘He was my friend...’

I don’t know what to say to that. I just sit there, the words going round and around in my head.

*“He was my friend...”*

Like Jaime was his friend...

And how he had cared for his brother...

And now his father is trying to kill him. (Hell, they probably hadn’t had the best of relationships before now but at least it hadn’t been homicidal.)

Just how many people was Leon destined to lose from his life, over all this?

Instinctively, I reach out and pry his fingers from the steering wheel. They’re cold. Squeezing his hand in mine, I try to will some of my heat into him.

For a moment, he just sits there without reacting. Until he turns his head to look lazily over at me... and squeezes back. The ghost of a smile flickers across his face and his chest rises in a heavy, steady inhale.

As if the touch has grounded him, Leon seems to come back to life a little. Rather than looking drained, he becomes fired up. He takes back his hand to drive his fingers through

his hair, tugs at the locks, and growls a frustrated warcry at the universe.

‘Argh! This is all such a fucking mess!’

‘We have the casing now though, right?’ I say, trying to find a silver lining thick enough to hold on to. ‘Even if it’s scratched up, it might still be useful...?’

‘True,’ he nods. ‘But there’s no way we can run it through my connections with the police.’

‘Don’t you know anyone else? Someone outside of the authorities?’ Wasn’t that one of the major benefits of running a criminal enterprise like the Machelli’s? Connections and networks inaccessible to the law-abiding citizen?

‘No,’ he growls. ‘The last guy we had on roll was an old friend of my—no, wait! I *do* know someone.’ Leon looks at his wrist for a watch he’s not wearing and then has to search for the clock on the dashboard. He winces. ‘Shit, it’s nearly four. And he lives down in Syracuse.’

‘How long will it take to get there?’ I ask.

‘Just over three hours.’ Leon is shaking his head. ‘It’ll be dark before we arrive. Too late to disturb him.’

‘Too late for a life and death situation?’ I challenge. Seven in the evening doesn’t seem too much of an imposition to me.

Leon’s features twist into an awkward grimace.

‘He’s er... kind of temperamental,’ he explains. ‘We disturb him during the day and you’ll get a cup of coffee and a slice of carrot cake. We disturb him after dark and you’ll be greeted with the business end of a shotgun.’

I blink at him.

‘Tomorrow sounds good,’ I say, pretty damn quick. I’ve had enough of being shot at for today, thank you very much.

Leon chuckles.

‘All right, give me a minute to... decompress... and we’ll head for Syracuse.’

It sounded like a plan. And having a plan, at least, is good.

Ma always says that, even if the world is sinking around you, if you have a plan or a list, you have all the lifeboat you need.

‘I know you probably have to associate with some... interesting... people for your job,’ I say, trying to bring the conversation to a more normal grounding. ‘But maybe after all this is over, you should make some friends less eager to kill you.’

Leon chuckles again.

‘You think?’ he asks with one sardonic eyebrow inching up his brow.

‘Yeah,’ I laugh. ‘*I. Think.*’ I roll my eyes. ‘So far, I’d have to say you hang out with some serious maniacs.’

‘Oh, I don’t know...’ Leon says with a deliberate drawl. He’s watching me again now, his head back against the headrest, and his face turned my way. He catches my eye and holds it. His voice is sexy and slumberous as he says: ‘A few of them are all right...’

*All right.*

It’s not an overly flattering adjective and hardly a decorative compliment. But, somehow, it warms me down to my toes. I feel that all-too-ready blush rising in my cheeks and I’m suddenly very hot under my coat.

What is it about this man’s stare that has every atom in my body set permanently to a low hum?

‘Freya...’

Determinedly, I meet his gaze. He’s watching me with a sincerity so intense, that the hum vibrates faster and breathing becomes an issue.

‘Yeah?’ I exhale.

‘I’m truly sorry that I forced you into all this.’

I blink in surprise. An apology was decidedly *not* what I was expecting.



‘You didn’t *force* me into—’

‘I held you at gunpoint to coerce you into taking my brother to the hospital,’ Leon reminds me. ‘That’s pretty much the *definition* of force.’

As he goes to rake his hand through his hair again, I snatch hold of it midair. This time, instead of heat, I wish I could transfer guilt through our tangled fingers. Just absorb it right out of him, throw it out the window, and leave it here on the forest floor.

‘Leon...’ I begin, deliberately. ‘I hate to ruin the whole villain image you’ve got going on here, but I’d have probably taken you to the hospital that night, anyway. Regardless of what you did.’ I tilt my head back and forth consideringly. ‘You know, once I calmed down from the whole someone-just-got-shot thing, I mean. The gun didn’t change my path, it just expedited it a bit.’

‘Not that it did Alexei any good.’ Leon whispers.

Ever since Alexei’s death, the mere mention of him has brought a shadow to Leon’s face. Whilst his dealing with the grief had clearly been banked for a more useful time, the grief itself had always been there.

But now... now I see something else in Leon’s face. Something that’s part of the whole grief process but which has never seemed to touch him before.

I see sorrow.

For the first time since I’d met him, Leon looks as if he might cry.

‘I won’t judge, you know...’ I tell him.

‘Hmm?’ Leon blinks at me, his gaze just a little too bright. He’s swallowing.

‘I won’t judge if you want to cry.’

It was, apparently, the exact right (or wrong, depending on how you look at it) thing to say, because Leon shifts from aching sadness to awkwardly amused in the blink of an eye.

He laughs. He sweeps a hand over his face. He rubs at his eyes and clears his throat.

‘I don’t want to cry, *carina*,’ he says, apparently suffering from the giggles now. They bubble up from his chest as if the very idea of him having a good sob tickles him.

‘All right...’ It’s his grief. It’s his to do with as he wishes. ‘Then... what *can* I do to help?’ I ask. ‘What *do* you want to do?’

Again, he seems to choke on a laugh. It’s stifled for a moment, before breaking free on a soft moan.

‘I’m not sure you want me to answer that, Freya...’

‘Why not? Come on, Leon. What do you need? What do you want?’

He’s leaning back in his chair, his eyes trained on the roof of the car.

‘Honestly?’ he swallows. ‘I want *you*...’

A pregnant quiet falls over the car.

Leon moans again, like he’s letting go of his restraint.

‘If you want the God’s honest truth,’ he says, ‘I really, *really* want to fuck you.’

I almost balk at his coarse language but, as he keeps talking, I realize that Leon’s not being crude. He’s being *specific*.

‘Ever since you let me touch you like that... I’ve hungered for you. I’ve wanted to *kiss* you, wanted to *touch* you. Wanted to be inside your body with mine. Not just my fingers but *me*; my body buried lusciously in yours. Just the idea of it has been *constant*... But, right now...’ His mouth is open, his lips trying to wrap around the right words: ‘Right now... I’m not interested in sex with you. Not with loving you slow or tender. Right now I’m so... Shit, I’m so goddamn *on edge* that what I *want* is to fuck you. *Hard*. I want to have you in bed, I want to have you standing up, I want you in this freakin’ car! I want to touch your body as *I* decide. To come together as *I* choose. I want to have you aching and needing. I crave you writhing

under me. Dammit, yeah, definitely *under* me. I want to drive into you so hard, you forget we're two bodies. I want to send you so high that you don't moan, you scream. And I want it all on *my* terms because I... I just need to...'

He stammers to a close, his eyes squeezed shut and his breathing heavy. He doesn't seem to know how to finish. But I think I do.

*Because you need to be in control of something.*

I'm no Dr. Phil but, in the last two days, Leon has seen every piece of his life disintegrate into poisonous ash and fall away. Now, he needs something he can control. Something he can drown in.

Some people in his position might choose the bottom of a whiskey bottle. For me, it would be a very large tub of Ben & Jerry's and the underside of my duvet spread.

But for Leon... for Leon, it's sex.

He wants to lose himself in *me*. To control and dominate *me*.

*Well, doesn't that make a girl feel special?*

Not to mention hot and shivery all over.

Because instead of scaring me away, instead of frightening me with his explicit desires, Leon's descriptions have only stoked my imagination. Not to mention my libido.

Archaic as it sounds, the idea of being thrown onto my back and fucked until I see stars, until I scream with pleasure, until I beg for more... It's raw... it's vivid... it's visceral...

And I want it.

Besides... not a day ago, *I'd* been the one to fall apart. *I* had needed something to hold on to, someone safe with whom to let go. And Leon had given that to me.

It's just good manners to return favors... no?

A little nervous, I unclip my seatbelt and begin to clamber over the gearstick.

Almost instantly, Leon's eyes pop open and he stares at me in shock.

'Freya, what are you—? Freya, I didn't mean—'

'I know,' I assure him as I scramble to his side of the car.

His confession hadn't been an order. And I'm not obeying. It's my choice as I arrange a knee on either side of his hips and settle myself in his lap.

My mind reeling, my chest pounding, I pause there, suddenly finding myself in uncharted waters.

Leon is staring up at me with a look that says I've either just made a terrible mistake or the best decision of my life.

I smile awkwardly.

'Hi,' I say, wiggling nervously in place.

Leon seems to bite back a groan and settles into his chair. Like a big cat basking in the summer heat. And I'm his sun.

His hands fall to my thighs, the tips of his fingers stroking along their outer edges.

I shiver.

'Hi,' he returns, his gaze trailing admiringly over my torso. His lips are parted and his breathing is heavy. 'Now what?' he asks, tempting me with his eyes.

I swallow. Hard.

'Now...' I say in the most confident tone I can muster. 'You *watch*...'

Willing my fingers to stop shaking, I unwind my scarf from my neck and toss it into the passenger seat. With a quick shrug and wriggle, my coat quickly joins it, crushing the wool under its weight. Beneath the outerwear, I'm wearing the clothes Leon ordered from the hotel. A pair of slim-leg jeans, and a long-sleeved sweater with a rounded neckline.

When I first put them on, I tried not to ponder too hard on how Leon had nailed the sizes so accurately.

Fitted or not, the clothes have obviously met with their purchaser's approval. Leon is eyeing me with a heavy-lidded hunger. His lips are parted and his breathing is heavy.

He'd shrugged out of his windbreaker halfway down the motorway, uncovering a simple, but no doubt deceptively expensive, shirt in charcoal gray. At his open collar, I can see his pulse skittering beneath a thick wedge of healthy, tanned skin. His sleeves, rolled to the elbows, show off his forearms; a series of bold tendons and ligaments shifting back and forth as he trails his fingers down my legs and strokes his nails over the tops of my thighs.

*Screw hunger*, I think, as Leon meets my eyes again, his irises shooting from a deep, whisky brown to hot amber. The man looks half-starved.

*Big mistake... or best decision*, I remember...

Steeling my resolve, I reach for the hem of my top and, in one swift motion, pull it up and over my head. In the same movement, before my nerves can have me plastering the cotton to my chest, I toss the sweater across the car... leaving myself in only my bra.

I don't have time to be anxious. I don't have time to feel awkward or wonder what to do with my arms. I don't have time to think.

The second my shirt is off, Leon is touching me.

His hands shoot from my thighs to my hips, then around to the small of my back and up along my spine. He spreads his fingers wide, a hot net across my back. It feels like the most natural thing in the world to lean against him. To feel those hands supporting my weight and to turn my chest out and my head up.

As if we'd rehearsed it, Leon immediately takes what I've blindly offered, his mouth coming to my breasts, his lips parting right over the silk of my bra. Over and around my nipple, he rolls his tongue until the silk is wet enough to cling to the hard little peak. A peak he takes between his lips and sucks on. Hard.

‘Oh...’ I gasp, leaning harder against his hands, my knees tightening around his hips. ‘Leon... That feels... Mmm...’

‘Shh...’ He murmurs around my nipple, the sound vibrating through my breast and down to my core. ‘Take a little more...’

Leon sucks down harder, in regular, tugging pulls, before offering a pausing relief by swirling his tongue around the tip... only to repeat the pattern on an even more sensitive nipple.

To double the sensation, he takes my weight with one hand and moves to clasp my other breast, pinching, stroking, and then palming its hot tip against the flat of his palm.

My chest is hot. The heat is swirling down into my belly. My skin is flush.

‘Leon,’ I gasp, ‘I...’

Without a moment’s pause, Leon reverses his hold, his mouth now on my other breast, my bra wet on both sides.

‘I want these,’ Leon says as he pinches one of my nipples. I gasp and jerk in his hold. ‘I want these in my mouth. Without anything in the way. Will you let me, *carina*...? Will you let me see you?’

‘Yes...’

‘Take it off for me.’

I blink my eyes open, Leon’s beautiful, dominant face taking focus. He’s watching me with such possession, such desire...

‘Take it off for me,’ he says again.

I reach for the fastener at the back, suddenly all thumbs. I flush scarlet as my breasts jiggle and my hair falls down around my face. But Leon just stares at me, captivated by every inch of my heated skin...

When the hooks slip free and I remove the bra, Leon seems transfixed.

It's hard not to feel like the sexiest creature in the world when a man who looks like Leon can't drag his gaze from your bare breasts.

To me, they've always seemed fairly normal. Perhaps a little on the large side for someone as short as me. But a pretty shape, with soft pink nipples.

Apparently, they're far more impressive to Leon, who growls something in Italian and then goes right back to what he was doing.

Only, this time, there's no barrier.

Without the thin silk of my bra, Leon's mouth is flush against my skin. His tongue is wet against my nipple. The pulls of his mouth are hot and aching. His fingers stroke at the globes of my breasts, whilst his mouth worships at their center. Everything inside of me is responding and heading down south. Muscles tighten, skin itches, and blood pounds.

Leon trails open-mouth kisses along my chest before sucking and teasing at my collarbone. He strokes the tip of his finger over my navel, to make me jump. He grips down hard on my hips as if warning me of the wild ride still to come.

Over and again, he returns to my breasts, never leaving them for longer than a minute. Like he's addicted to their taste.

When he groans around one of my nipples, the vibrations are so strong, they tickle at my core and, for a second, I think I'm about to cum.

I squeal and still. Leon pauses, smiling around the pink little tip.

'Leon...' I moan. 'I need...'

'What do you need, *carina*?' His voice is deep and sexy and so completely teasing...

'I need... to remember...' I gasp.

'Remember what?'

'Your... your kiss. I want it. I want your tongue. My... my mouth... it feels so empty...'

Cursing something in Italian, Leon's touch is no longer tender. One hand has me by the hip, the other cups around the back of my neck. Leon's mouth smashes into mine, his tongue shooting hard and deep.

This time, I *do* cum.

I don't expect it, I'm not prepared. It just rips straight through me like a heavy ocean wave. I shake and I jerk.

The kiss is over before it's barely begun and as I come down from my high, Leon is grinning.

'Was that what I think it was...?' he asks.

If I could blush any harder, I would.

'I... I'm sorry.' It seems an odd thing to apologize for but they're the first words that cut through the satiated fog in my head and tumble from my lips.

Leon traces a finger over my mouth, his thumb pressing down against my lower lip.

'Never a need for sorry, sweetheart. Your pleasure is intoxicating...'

And, to prove it, he kisses me again.

He gives me no mercy from the shockwaves that have literally just rocked through me. His kiss is hot. It's intense. Both of his hands come around to hold my head under the onslaught.

He nips and nibbles. He teases and licks. He delves and he plunders.

I kiss him back. My lips molding, my tongue touching, tangling, clinging. But I barely keep up with him.

Leon's kiss is ever-changing, ever-tempting. He kisses me like it's a marking. A brand that I am his woman and he, my lover.

He kisses me like it's a permanent reminder of all he can do and all that's still to come...



When Leon strikes up a heavy rhythm with his tongue, it's impossible not to think of those "still to come" moments. As he invades my mouth, I want him invading my body. As he deepens the kiss, I want him deep between my legs. My mouth, which was so painfully empty, so achingly hollow, is now filled with heat and desire... and Leon.

And I need that in *me*.

I need to be filled. Now. At my core. In my most sensitive of places.

I need Leon's thick, hard flesh filling me so completely that I stretch. Until I'm achingly complete.

Our kiss turns messy and desperate as Leon palms my breast in one hand and starts to slip the other into my jeans. I'm racing him there.

I have his belt in hand, the buckle clinking as I work free the thick strap of leather.

I'm breathless. I'm aching.

I know that if I can just get inside his pants, if I can free that thick, heavy staff of his, I can just wriggle out of my jeans and place it right between my legs.

My fingers tremble as I work at his fly...

...until Leon stops me.

His hands, no longer on my body, are wrapping loosely around my wrists, chaining me sweetly...

...and keeping me from his pants.

'Wait,' he whispers, his voice so rough it sounds like he's been chewing on gravel. 'Wait a second...'

'You don't want this?' I ask, surprised. The very impressive bulge beneath the black denim would say otherwise.

Leon gives a pained moan.

'*Carina*, I want this so much, I'm about to release in my pants.'

I renew my efforts to get beyond his belt buckle.

‘Then let me just...’

But he restrains me again.

I sit back with a pout. It’s ridiculous but I almost feel like I want to cry. I’m not saying I’m a siren or anything, but I’ve never been rejected at this late stage of the game.

‘Sweetheart, it’s not that I don’t want to,’ Leon promises. ‘I’d just like this to be... *right*.’

“Right?” I repeat, confused.

‘Like, on a bed.’

I don’t believe it. He really *is* saying no. Not just, wait for a second, but wait for a change of *venue*?

‘W-what about what you just said?’ I stammer kind of desperately. The heat that had been rushing through every vein and limb is starting to cool. And I want it back, dammit! ‘About what you want to do... to me, I mean...?’

Leon smiles wickedly.

‘The fucking?’ he asks. ‘So, you’re all right with the little rough handling but I have a moment of remembered civility and you’re disappointed?’

‘No, I...’ I hedge, not sure what I want. My hormones are saying one thing and my heart another. Right now, all of my rational thinking feels significantly overpowered. ‘I just... that’s... that’s very *decent* of you.’

‘You make it sound like that’s a bad thing?’

Sitting up, I abruptly feel awkward in my nudity. I bring my arms up to cover the front of my body. My nipples are hard and sensitive against my forearms and the tips are still damp from Leon’s kisses.

‘I don’t want a relationship with you,’ I blurt.

For his part, Leon looks totally startled.

*And why wouldn’t he?* It wasn’t exactly a natural segue.

*Delivered with absolutely zero tact, Harrison, but at least it's out there, now.*

‘I don’t remember asking you to be in one with me...?’ Leon points out delicately.

I swallow, thoroughly embarrassed. He has a fair point.

‘No, I know... It’s just...’ I blow out a sobering exhale. My hair, which I pulled into a ponytail this morning, is now completely loose. It’s falling around my shoulders in a tangle as messy as my handling of this conversation...

*You’re practically naked on his lap, girl. Can’t make this any more awkward... Just keep to the cold, hard facts.*

‘I had a boyfriend,’ I finally explain. ‘A few years ago. We were together for a while and he was... Well, let’s just say, since him, I don’t date men I consider to be “bad boys”...’ Keeping my elbows together to protect my breasts from view, I make the air quotes with my fingers.

“Bad boys”...’ Leon repeats, slowly. He’s watching me with an intelligent perception that, at any other time, I would find attractive but, right now, I resent the hell out of. His expression has also gone dark.

Very dark.

‘Did this man hurt you, Freya?’

*Not as badly as some men hurt women, I think. But bad enough.*

‘I don’t want to talk about it.’

Leon begins to growl. Literally. Like an animal. He’s shifting in his seat, trying to get up from under me, like he’s ready to fight the man, here and now.

‘Freya, if he hurt you—’

*I said no, Leon.*

Leon shuts up. He holds for a moment, tension in every line of his body. But something in my stare must have been clear because he eventually calms and deflates. Instead of forcing the subject, he lets his aggression loose on his molars,

grinding his teeth with vehemence. I can see his jaw popping back and forth.

‘Anyway...’ I brush a lock of hair behind my ear awkwardly. ‘I only mentioned it to explain... that I don’t date guys like that anymore.’

A muscle under Leon’s eye twitches. His voice is deadly calm.

‘You think I would hurt you?’

‘Not intentionally,’ I promise. ‘I meant what I said yesterday. I don’t fear you, Leon. But you have to admit your world is... it’s not...’ I sigh, trying to find the right words. ‘You have to admit that, given everything you’ve got going on, you are not the sort of man a mother would be glad to have her daughter bring home.’

Leon’s lips have paled. The corners of his eyes are tight.

It takes him a minute but he seems to shake himself out of whatever he’s thinking.

‘I wouldn’t know,’ he says with a new, brisk peppiness in his tone. ‘Not really doing relationships myself, I’ve never been taken home to meet the parents.’

‘Which sort of proves my point, don’t you think?’ I say.

With that, we both sit quietly, our moment of passion an almost forgotten simmer in the air.

*Well done, Harrison. Way to kill the mood.*

‘I didn’t mean to insult you,’ I finally brave.

‘I’m not insulted,’ Leon denies.

I’m not sure I believe him. But before I can assess him too thoroughly, Leon pushes aside whatever thoughts are rolling around in his head and looks up to meet my gaze head-on.

‘What you’re saying makes sense and is completely your choice,’ he vows. ‘Like I said before. No debt and no promises. If you want something physical with me... If you want it only once, if you want it more, if you want nothing at all... you just say. It is your choice. *You* set the rules.’

‘Really?’

‘*Really*,’ Leon vows, his smile warm and his gaze heated. ‘I’m happy to fulfill whatever fantasies you’re entertaining, *carina*. Whether they involve nudity or not.’

With that particular matter settled, and our histories packed and delivered back to the past where they belong, the air between us is thickening again. Leon’s hands, running up and down my back, are at once coaxing me into a soft and satiated calm... and stoking something darker, fiercer, in my lower belly.

I lick my lips.

He watches me do it.

In a few moments, the rushing maelstrom of desire we’d stepped away from is swirling around us again. Stronger and angrier for its banishment to the sidelines.

‘I want *you*,’ I breathe.

‘Good,’ Leon says, his confidence returning in full force.

‘I want you as many times as I can have you,’ I confess.

‘All right,’ he agrees.

‘But...’ I swallow. ‘Just until this is over. When all of this is done with... when it’s safe for me to go home... I go back to my life...’

‘...and you’ll not hear from me again,’ he finishes.

His promise sets off a painful little ache in my chest, but I staunchly refuse to pay it notice. Instead, I go back to Leon’s jeans, seeking what was denied me last time...

But his hands get in the way again.

‘On one condition,’ he says, as I practically pant all over him, ready to scream.

‘What?’ I growl.

‘The first time I get to have you, it’s going to be on a bed. Where it doesn’t smell of years-old car freshener. And...’ He leans in to nibble at the sensitive dip of my neck and then

whispers into the shell of my ear: ‘...where I get to have my full range of motion and reach.’

‘Well,’ I murmur, more than a little breathless. ‘When you put it like that... I’m not going to argue.’

## CHAPTER

### *Eleven*

“I ‘m not going to argue.”

Freya’s words have been ringing in my head for nearly three hours. And they echo again as I negotiate the little Toyota off the E45 and onto the SS124 sign-posted for Syracuse.

I wish she *had* argued. I wish she hadn’t listened to my moment of idiocy back in that clearing.

It had seemed like a solid plan, at the time.

The idea of having Freya so completely to myself, behind a closed door, and without needing to make room for a gearshift, had been too tempting. And I had let it run away with me.

And I’ve now had three hours to regret it. Three awkward, painful, and very *hard* hours.

Biting down on my molars, I shift in my seat again as I indicate the next right-hand turn.

I should have damn well kept her where she was, I decide.

I should have kept her on my lap, the erection that’s now a deep and painful hunger in my lap framed between her thighs. Her glorious, naked body rising over me.

God, she’d looked like a fucking queen. A beautiful, sensual... and delicious queen.

Even when she’d first taken off her shirt, bearing those beautiful, rounded breasts and her milky pale skin, she’d been

stunning. Her nervousness had been obvious but her refusal to bury her desire behind a shield of shyness had been horrendously sexy.

Who knew courage could be such a turn-on?

I glance over at the passenger seat as we head toward the center of town. An irrational spurt of frustration hits me clean in the chest and then shoots down behind my belt buckle. Whilst I've spent the last few hours in my private little hell, the same cannot be said for my companion.

Freya, in fact, is asleep.

With the sun already set, each street light we pass flickers over Freya's features, turning her pale skin to a gilded yellow and her hair to spun white-gold. She's bundled herself up in that coat of hers, the scarf and chunky collar keeping half her face in shadow. Her eyelashes shoot long, wheeling shadows over her face with each sweeping pass of the lights. Her lips are parted in sleep but I've already spotted them occasionally drawing and pouting together before falling softly open again.

We're only a few minutes from our destination but the urge to swing the car over onto the hard shoulder, reach for Freya and wake her with a kiss so deep it borders on barbaric, is almost too attractive.

I snap my gaze back to the road ahead.

*Almost there... I comfort myself.*

Almost there and then I can touch her.

Almost there and I can see her truly naked.

At this point, it just feels like a cosmic joke that I have yet to see the woman entirely nude.

And after her confession earlier...

*"I want you... I want you as many times as I can have you..."*

Just remembering that admission... how she looked sitting over me, how her hair tumbled around her shoulders... How her breasts glowed in the sunshine...



My jeans instantly feel three sizes too small and I have to start breathing shallowly through my nose.

The next eight minutes feel like an entire epoch but we finally pull into a run-down motel off the *Viale Ermocrate*. Cyrus had traced us easily enough to a high-end hotel so, I've pivoted in the other direction this time.

Giving Freya a few more minutes of sleep, I park up and get out alone, scanning the lot. No one would necessarily jump to the conclusion that we'd headed for Syracuse. And I'd been watching for a nonexistent tail the entire journey. There's little chance of danger at all, in fact, but old habits die hard and I quickly assess the CCTV cameras across the lot, the wire mesh embossed into the motel windows, and the mechanized barrier over the entrance to the parking lot. A discreet sign to its left reads in Italian: "Last Free Entry: Midnight. Contact Reception for After Hours Admission."

The motel itself is of standard design, fashioned similarly to an American model. The rooms are laid out side by side with their doors all facing the front lot. A short overhang turns the path running along their front into a shared porch. A blockier building at the end of the row bears the moniker "*Accoglienza*".

As I already booked a room under a false name on the way here, the collection of keys at the *accoglienza* is quick and easy. I keep the hood of my windbreaker up over my head during the exchange and make sure to avoid looking directly at the camera above the reception desk.

By the time I get back to the car, Freya is stirring into wakefulness and I'm mildly disappointed. Something primal in me had been looking forward to carrying her to our room.

'Are we here?' she asks, blinking through the windshield. It's starting to rain and moisture on the glass is turning the world beyond crooked.

'We're here,' I confirm, moving to the passenger side door and jimmying the lock so she can get out her side. 'We'll visit my associate first thing in the morning.'

After several hours curled up in the Toyota, Freya is a little clumsy getting out of the car and finding her balance again. She brushes back the soft fuzz of her hair under the drizzle.

‘We’re staying here?’ she asks, still half asleep as she surveys the place.

I wait for her to look at me before I reply.

‘Yes...’ I tell her, with as much implication as possible. I hold her gaze. ‘Yes, we are...’

I must have been successful in my subtext because Freya instantly flushes scarlet. The blue of her eyes flashes like crystal. Her mouth works but no words come out.

I don’t wait for her synapses to catch up. Instead, I grab my duffel from the back seat, shut the car door, and take a handful of her coat to steer her toward our room.

I keep my height as a shield between Freya and the camera at the other end of the lot. She doesn’t notice. Instead, she seems hyper-focused on her shoes. Her cheeks are still flushing red and her breath is a heavy, warm mist with every exhale.

Quick with the key, I encourage Freya in out of the rain and give the room the barest of glances. Like the hotel in Palermo, it boasts two double beds but that’s the only similarity. Instead of five-star accommodations, everything here is well worn. The television is old and boxy. The kettle, flanked with sachets of instant coffee, looks like something out of a camping kit.

I bolt the door, flick on the overhead lights, and quickly pull the blinds.

‘Are we safe here?’

I glance at Freya as I tug the last curtain into place. She’s hovering by the door as if fearful to step further into the unknown.

My heart goes out to her.

The last few days have rattled *me* and I’m by far the more experienced party when it comes to death and violence. I

meant what I said back at the hotel about her bravery. How she hasn't entirely broken down yet is beyond me.

Moving close, I trace the shape of Freya's temple and the curve of her cheek with my fingertip. I'm gratified when she trembles under my touch. Her skin is soft and warm.

She smells of heat. And of the strawberry gummies she'd wanted from the gas station a hundred miles back.

'Only thing you need to worry about here,' I tell her with a taunting half-smile, 'is *me*...'

I feel Freya's cheek heat beneath my fingerprint.

'I don't,' she says, licking her lips. 'Worry, I mean. I trust you.'

A soft warmth spreads through my chest. Like someone's struck a candle alight behind my ribs.

Of course, the smart thing to do would be to snuff it out. Freya has made it more than clear that she wants nothing to do with me after this whole ordeal.

*And who can blame her?*

Getting wrapped up in a bunch of feelings I'm not equipped to handle, therefore, helps neither of us right now.

And yet, whenever this woman says she trusts me, the urge to protect rises in my gut. To protect and to possess. Because, if she's mine, I have a right to shield her from harm.

*Or something like that...*

*"I had a boyfriend... since him, I don't date men I consider to be "bad boys"..."*

Those urges blazed hotter when Freya admitted to *that* little detail. The very idea that a man—*any* man—especially *her* man—had hurt her...?

Forget the candle, it felt like someone was going to town with a fucking blowtorch in my chest cavity. My hands had itched with the need to strike back at the man who'd hurt her.

They still do. They ache to maim.

To kill.

Dodging around me, Freya moves to inspect the room and, for a minute, I give her space. I need a second just to corral the darkness, to reign in the aggression.

I am *not* very successful.

Inside, everything is a jumbled mess: the urge for revenge, the need for sex. My grief for Alexei and the growing fear for my mother's safety...

The turning of friend after friend...

Not to mention, the burning need to see Freya naked. The craving to touch her skin.

Pinching the bridge of my nose, I try not to watch Freya like a hunter watches his prey, but it's hard. Literally.

*Need her. Want her.*

*Crave her.*

Memories start to tumble in my head, like a slide projector on fast forward. The images are in aching detail. Freya on her back at my apartment, crying out my name... Her straddling my hips with her bare breasts and flushed cheeks... The feel of her breath on my cheek in the hospital supply closet...

The softness in her eyes when she handed me that coffee after Alexei passed...

*I want her. Now.*

On her back. Under me. Writhing, thrashing, and screaming in ecstasy. An ecstasy *I* built. A crazed passion that *I* control.

I'm so hard I can barely see straight.

'This is nice...' Freya says, paying far more attention to the bland watercolor on the wall than the painting deserves.

'Uh-huh...' I grunt, my tongue thick in my mouth.

I begin to approach her, causing her to glance at the beds nervously.

'I like the sheets...' she says.

‘Okay...’ I say, not listening.

‘I wonder if the—’

‘Freya...’

She swallows as she finally looks at me. Whatever expression is on my face, it sends her eyes wide and the pulse at the base of her neck skittering.

‘Have you forgotten our agreement?’ I ask.

‘No...’ she whispers.

‘Do you regret it? You can still take it back...?’

I’ve never, nor *would* I ever, force a woman to lie with me. But, truth be told, if she turns me down now, I might have a coronary.

‘I... don’t want to take it back,’ she says.

‘You’re sure?’ I check, stalking closer. I come behind her, my hands finding her hips. ‘You don’t sound certain...’

I can hear her breathing and see the rush of warmth on her face. It’s almost like I can sense her heartbeat, hear it thundering to the same pace as mine.

‘I’m just... nervous. I know that you don’t want to...’ She has to clear her throat. ‘That you won’t be gentle.’

*“I’m not interested in sex with you... I’m so goddamn on edge that what I want is to fuck you. Hard... I want to send you so high that you don’t moan, you scream. And I want it all on my terms...”*

God, I had said those words in a moment of candid emotion. And yet here Freya is, uneasy yet trembling with the desire to see them carried out. Allowing me to sate a desire so powerful it’s practically turning me violent.

Not that I would ever hurt Freya. Not truly. Truth be told, the guys I’ve met who are into the kink of pain have always weirded me out. It’s not Freya’s pain I’m seeking. But her wild ecstasy.

Turning Freya around to face me, I place a hand flat against her belly and walk her backward. Her back hits the wall with a gentle *thud* and her eyes grow even larger. Doe-like and innocent. But they're darkening with a lust that's far from innocent. Pure sky blue, deepening to naughty aquamarine.

'If I do anything you don't like, you tell me,' I say. 'I vow to you that I'll stop.'

'I don't want you to stop...'

Carefully, still testing the waters despite her reassurances, I lower my head to hers and kiss her. Her lips are soft and pliant beneath mine. And, at first, they yield, molding to the contours of my mouth. But, after only a second, she's kissing me back. Claiming the kiss and turning it into her own power.

Freya consumes me. Lingering, stroking... She kisses me with the same hunger I feel, immediately fraying the last few threads of my self-control. When her lips part in invitation, I deepen the kiss and find her tongue eager for mine.

We turn carnal.

My hands are in her hair. Hers hold fast to my back. Every desperate breath between us is a moan for more.

Pressing a hand up beneath Freya's chin, I trail kisses down the exposed column of her neck. Beneath the ridge of her collarbone is her fluttering pulse. It trembles against my lips.

My chin hits the thick wool of her scarf and I yank it away, the length of yarn tangling at our feet.

'I need you naked...' I groan, tugging at that damn coat of hers.

'Yes...' she breathes.

'Hot, wet, and bare...'

There's none of the earlier hesitation that Freya displayed in the car. I fight to get her clothes off as quickly as I can and her hands are right there with mine, working toward the same goal. With every inch of exposed skin, I have another place to

worship with my lips, my tongue. I kiss my way down Freya's body, reveling in her softness... the delicious scent of her skin... until I'm on my knees, slipping off her shoes, socks, and jeans.

I stroke a finger down one of her bare toes and smile as they curl into the carpet.

I steel myself before looking up but the vision of her still hits me like a sucker punch between the eyes.

The smooth lines of her calves, the gentle curves of her thighs... Her belly, mostly flat but with a softness beneath her navel and a healthy swell of hips on either side...

Her breasts are gloriously rounded, tipped in the most adorable, delicious buds of pink. A pink that now flushes over her chest and up her neck to warm her cheeks and bring out her freckles.

*God, I want to taste each and every one of them.*

From this angle, the soft blonde of her hair gleams platinum under the lights and curly wisps fall around her face and shoulders.

Those frayed strands of my restraint pull taut, ready to snap at a moment's notice.

Freya's lower lip, swollen from our kisses, trembles nervously.

'What...?' The line of her throat swells as she swallows. 'What are you staring at?'

I smile.

'Perfection.'

One word and that pink blush is scarlet all over again.

Her sensitivity is utterly charming.

As I stand, I let my fingertips trail over the backs of Freya's legs, her thighs, and along the curve of her bottom. Her hands rest naturally on my chest as I come back to full height and I realize that I'm panting.

‘I... I don’t think I can hold back...’ I warn her.

Despite the blushes, the shivers, and the bashful shyness... the smile Freya gives me is one of pure sin.

‘I thought we established that you didn’t have to?’ she says.

*Snap!*

Gone is my control. Lost is my restraint. This time, when I take Freya into my arms, it’s with a determination to never let go. My kiss is a rough and wild assault, my hands are gripping her ass with a possessiveness I have no right to show.

And yet, Freya is right there with me. Her hands are in my hair. Her tongue is in my mouth.

As she naturally lifts a leg to curve around my hips, I shift my hold, anchoring my elbow beneath her knee.

She gasps and I press her up hard against the wall.

She sighs and I reach a hand between her legs.

She cries out and I push two fingers deep inside her.

‘Oh God...’ she mewes, her suspended foot flexing, then curling. ‘Shit, *Leon...*’

I work my hand back and forth, my fingers sliding deep, my thumb rubbing against that most sensitive of knots with every stroke.

‘Oh *shit...* Oh God...’

I grin as I work her harder... push her further.

‘Cum for me, Freya...’

As she splinters apart there against the wall, her inner walls clamping down on my fingers and pulling them deeper, I wonder if I’ll ever get tired of watching this woman find her release.

Every time Freya abandons herself to the sensations, her head falls back, her mouth parts on a silent scream, and her body strains as it rides the waves of her high.

Just watching is addictive.



And yet... this time I want more. *Need* more.

This time, I crave experiencing that release from the inside out. I need to know what it feels like to have that beautiful body—to have *Freya*—come undone whilst I'm buried deep inside her.

So I take hold of Freya's still trembling frame and do what I've been fantasizing about doing for three days...

I take her to bed.

---

LEON DOESN'T EXACTLY *THROW* me onto the bed but he deposits me there with enough force that I bounce a little over the sheets. One look at his face tells me why.

The gentleman in him, the chivalrous protector, has gone. In his place is a virile and raw male. A male driven to the edge of need and burning with hunger.

I can see the change in his eyes. And it makes me shudder with anticipation.

The very idea that I could bring a man like Leon to the shaky edge of his self-control has my heart jackrabbiting in my chest and my skin shrinking tight.

I'm so ready to have him. To open myself to this man. To take him deep inside and keep him there, all the way inside my core.

It's been so long since I've had a man and longer still since I've desired one so intensely.

I've never wanted as I want Leon.

But, for a moment, Leon pauses. He just stands there a few feet from the bed, his eyes tracing every line of my body. I feel a rush of wetness between my legs in response. An itchy heat in my breasts as they beg to be touched.

'So beautiful...' he murmurs as if to himself.

*Touch me... my body calls. Claim me... Come inside and send me to oblivion.*

In any other situation, I might have reached for the sheets, might have tried to shield myself. But when a man looks at you as Leon is me, you don't *want* to hide. You want to stretch and to preen. Even under the crappy lighting of a run-down motel, the right man can have you feeling like a goddess.

I reach my hands over my head and lift a foot to the mattress. I let my knee fall to one side, daringly exposed.

'Are you just going to stand there...?' I tease with a tilt of my head.

I'm almost disappointed when Leon cusses in Italian and immediately reaches for the buttons of his shirt. I had been looking forward to undressing him with the same attention he'd given me. But, as soon as he shrugs out of the black silk, my complaints are forgotten and I suddenly understand his fascination with watching.

For Leon, I'm reminded, is spectacularly built. All sharply hewn muscle and clean definition. Wrapped in a delicious olive complexion.

The white of the bandage I wrapped around his chest is luminous under the fluorescents. And, for a moment, I worry over his injury. But it doesn't seem to bother Leon any as he frees the leather of his belt and pushes down his waistband. Nor does the bruising over his ribs, now turning a sickly shade of green.

His lip and face have healed well, bringing him nearly back to his gorgeous perfection.

I'm distracted from Leon's face, however, as he kicks out of his pants to reveal a powerful set of legs heavy in the thighs and toned through the knees down. Thick tendons stretch down over his feet and a sharp V-line of muscle darts from his hips to under a pair of boxer briefs. And beneath the Calvin Klein is an impressive sight...

My mouth feels funny. Like it's unsure whether to water or to dry up entirely. Restless, I stare transfixed as Leon hooks

his thumbs beneath the waistband of his boxers and strips himself nude.

*Oh, Holy...*

*Well, at least now I know where Leon gets his confidence from...*

I've not been with a lot of men, so it's entirely possible my meter for comparison is off-kilter but something tells me I'm bang on the money when I say that Leon is beyond large. Long and thick and so rigidly hard that his head is sticking defiantly out from his body.

For a moment, fear spikes.

Just how is he supposed to... How am *I* supposed to...?

Jesus, the question sounds corny, even in my head, but would he even *fit*?

The hot and damp rush between my legs says I'm more than willing to try but I still feel a moment of trepidation as Leon fishes a foil package from his jeans and then stalks towards the bed. He moves with the grace and power of a predator. A hunter.

I shift backward, leaning on my elbows, to give him room but Leon manacles one of my ankles with his fingers and drags me back close. His gaze burns and his lips part hungrily.

With a flick of his wrist, he spins me onto my belly.

I squeak in surprise but the sound shifts into a warming purr as his weight comes down over me. His chest is against my back, his hips squeezed up against my rear.

I gasp when Leon's heavy length presses against the crease of my ass. I hyperventilate when I hear the sound of tearing foil. My heart hammers as his large, masculine hands take control of my waist and pull my hips up from the mattress.

'Oh my...' I lose my balance a little, face-planting the sheets before I can brace myself on my arms.

Steady again, I quiver with anticipation. I part my knees for a stronger base against what I instinctively know will be

the sexual ride of my life...

I jolt with surprise when it's not Leon's member pushing up against my folds... but his tongue.

'Mmm...' I sigh, throwing my hips higher and baring myself to his mouth. 'Leon... that's... Oh my God...'

He's buried his face against my core, his tongue licking directly up my center. He parts my folds, my most intimate lips... then darts down to circle that bud of nerves before sucking down on my clit.

'Oh *shit*... Oh God... Leon...'

I push my hips back, thrusting up against his tongue. The bed creaks beneath my knees. My back curves.

'Do you like this, *carina*...?' Leon asks, his words a hot stroke against my most sensitive skin.

'Yes...' I gasp. 'Oh God, yes...'

I groan, guttural and loud, then crush my mouth into the linens, trying to stifle the noise.

'Don't...' he growls against my inner thigh. 'Don't do that. I want to hear you.'

'But what if people—*ah!*' He's sucking on my clit again, the soft tug of his mouth sending sparks through my bloodstream. I feel my second orgasm coiling up fast inside me.

'I couldn't care less, *carina*,' he says almost cheerily when he pauses for air. 'I want to hear you cry out. I want to hear you scream.'

He continues to torment me. One of his fingers circles my entrance. His tongue follows the same path. Neither breech my body. Neither plunge deep. Deep where I need him to go.

'Mmm... Please... *please* Leon I need you to—*mmm*...'

'What do you need?' he asks but I'm lost in a moan as he continues to tongue me, working my core like it's his favorite dessert. 'Freya?' he prompts again. 'What do I get if I give you more?'

‘Everything...’ I gasp.

‘Everything?’ he asks, a finger poised over my opening.

‘Yes,’ I breathe. ‘Everything. Anything. Please God, just... just do it, Leon...’

‘Do what?’

*Fuck me. Please God, fuck me. Hard and without mercy.*

‘Shit,’ Leon growls against my folds, already on the brink himself. ‘Sweetheart, you’re so wet. Drenched. You’re practically dripping, *carina*. I don’t think I can wait anymore...’

‘Yes...’ *Thank God.*

‘I need to be inside you.’

*Yes!*

I wanted to scream in victory at the sound of the condom being ripped open, the impulse dying on my tongue when that huge head of his pushes up hard against my core.

*Oh, Jesus...*

I try to relax. I try to breathe. I push back against his shaft in one final, glaring flag of consent.

And Leon takes it.

At first, it stings. His size, my years of abstinence, the tightness of my inner muscles... together it makes his first invasion of my body all-consuming and a little painful.

‘Shit...’ Leon groans, sinking another inch. ‘Sweetheart, you’re so tight. God, it feels... shit, it feels amazing. Are you all right?’

I breathe deeply, shift my stance, and tilt my ass in answer. The pressure eases a little and he slides deeper.

Leon moves slowly, clearly aware that my body needs time to adjust.

‘God, you’re like a vice around me. I don’t want to hurt you. Breathe, *carina*...’

I sense myself growing fuller, growing tighter. The deeper he goes, the less hollow I feel. The more complete. The more satisfied.

My muscles are starting to relax a little, adjusting to his girth and clinging to his shaft. My body becomes as eager as I am to swallow this man whole.

‘Are you...’ I have to pause, to catch my breath, before asking... ‘Are you all the way in?’

‘About half way, baby...’

*Half way?!*

*I’m going to die, I think. He’s going to tear me apart and leave me a trembling mess.*

*But what a way to fucking go.*

One of Leon’s hands is resting on the small of my back to keep me steady but the other reaches around my front. I’m stretched so tight, my nerves so delicate, that the second he touches my clit, I cry out. My inner muscles loosen in delight, my body opens further and Leon thrusts the rest of the way in with a single, powerful stroke.

I immediately cum.

‘Oh, my—*Leon!*’

But he doesn’t let up. Doesn’t give me time to adjust or come down. He slides back out several inches before thrusting forward again, drilling me down onto the mattress, mid-orgasm.

‘*Shit!*’ I cry, ‘Oh my God, *yes!*’

Again, he hammers me. And again. Over and over, Leon builds a rhythm.

His hips work like machinery. Like pistons designed to strike deep and to strike hard. Never altering pace, never giving relief.

Totally unrelenting.

‘*Leon!*’ I cry out under the onslaught, scrambling to grab at the sheets, bracing my knees as the bed frame shudders and creaks.

I have no idea when one orgasm ends and the other begins to build. All I know is my releases have taken on a life of their own. Stoked by every relentless thrust. With each shift of his hips, every deep stroke, Leon rubs against the front of my inner walls, sending sparks across my vision.

‘Oh God, not again...’ I moan as I reach another peak. I’m not ready. I don’t want to release again. I want it to last...

‘Again, *carina,*’ Leon pants above me. His hand comes down over one of mine, bracing his weight above me and tangling our fingers. My nails cut into the sheets. ‘Cum again, for me.’

I have no choice. My body instantly obeys his command. My limbs shake. My muscles tremble.

Leon doesn’t let up. His hips drive me through my orgasm without mercy.

This time, it doesn’t ease. The sensation of release doesn’t go away. Instead, there’s a sharp and itchy sensation working deep within my body. Like a cold edge to an otherwise white-hot existence.

‘Shit, Leon...’ I gasp.

‘I feel it too...’

No, no he couldn’t. Because I can’t put it into words. Can’t work out what this sharp, keening urge in my deepest spot might be. All I know is... I need it. I need to race for it. To fight for it.

Finally, *finally*, Leon begins to speed up. His control starts to weaken and his machine-like efficiency gives way to wild, jerking thrusts.

The bed now screeches with every jerk of our bodies. The frame keeps hitting the wall. The wet, slapping sounds of sex fill the room. My breasts keep swaying. My belly keeps tightening. At one point, I feel a tug at my hair.

And all the while that sensation between my legs builds. That aching, itching need, so persistent, so savage that I'm almost frightened.

'Ah, Leon...'

'Again,' he growls in my ear, his chest hot against my back. 'Say my name again.'

'Leon!'

'Again!' he pants. 'Scream it. My name. Only my name...'

'Ah! *Leon!* God, I think I'm going to... I don't know... it's so intense, I can't...!'

Leon has other ideas.

Suddenly, the world is spinning and my insides shake and twist. That hot, potent shaft of his disappears, leaving me cold and empty. One moment I'm on my knees with my head to the sheets and the next I'm on my back. Leon pulls my legs around his hips and slams straight back inside me. My head falls back and a shout of surprise dies on my tongue.

And then he's kissing me. Leon's tongue is in my mouth, claiming my throat as his sex claims my body. The sharp, keening sensation is back and there are tears in my eyes.

Leon breaks the kiss, panting from exertion, his body still working like a steam train, still drilling me down into the bed.

'Shit, Freya, you feel amazing.' he grunts, his words punctuating every thrusting dive. 'So... Fucking... Good...'

I cry out as he shifts his angle, pushing deeper again with every strike.

'So wet,' he gasps.

'So hard,' I tell him, fingers in his hair.

'So tight...' He bites my lip.

'So big...' I claw my nails into his back.

From then on it's not love-making. It's not even fucking. It's animal. It's wild. It's beyond anything I've ever experienced.



I grip his hips until my knees hurt. His fingers tangle and pull in my hair.

He shoves himself deep inside me. I thrust up hard against him.

Each of us is shooting for our own peak. Our own answers.

‘Faster,’ I urge him as my strength starts to wane.

‘Baby, if I move faster I’m going to cum.’

‘Yes... Want...’

‘No...’ Leon’s shaking his head. Flecks of sweat fall onto my chest. ‘Feels too good. Need more.’

I bite at his lip.

‘Cum,’ I tell him, on the desperate edge of my own release. ‘Cum *now*.’

With a growl of frustration, Leon takes hold of my thighs and throws me around onto all fours again. With a roar, he takes me hard from behind. Ruttng faster as demanded.

I cry out. I scream his name.

Instead of forcing me onto the covers, Leon lifts me up against his chest. His hands mold my breasts and pluck at my nipples as we rut like animals.

One of his palms stays with my breasts as the other shoots for my clit.

All the while, he never slows his pace. In fact, he keeps speeding up.

My muscles are stinging, my core is deliciously bruised.

And that sharp edging is so tight, so *close...!*

I reach back to hold onto Leon’s neck. I beg him to finish me.

That sting just keeps building. It’s like an orgasm but bigger.

*Shit, what the hell is—?*

‘Leon... Leon, I’m going to—’

‘Not yet, baby. I’m almost there. I want you with me.’

It keeps winding. Tighter and tighter.

‘I need to—’ I beg.

‘Not yet—’

‘Need to. *Must!*’ Tears run down my face.

Leon thrusts hard and deep once. Twice. And then three times in quick succession.

And everything explodes.

Leon shakes inside me. My name is a tortured cry in my ear.

My entire body is set with tremors, my limbs lose all strength. There’s a startling rush of liquid between my legs and over my thighs. I can’t breathe.

I think I black out for a moment.

When I come back down to earth, I’m trembling from head to toe, panting for air, and have absolutely no strength.

The pair of us collapse onto the sheets, Leon still buried in my core and my brain still trying to compute what just happened. His arms are locked around me which is a good job because, without them, I fear I might melt like jello.

‘What...’ I pause to breathe. ‘What the *hell* was that?’

It takes a few seconds for Leon to respond. I’m gratified when he sounds as shaken as I feel.

‘That...’ he finally says. ‘Was the very definition of fantastic sex.’

I moan as Leon eases out of my body and tries to push up from the bed. Despite being all kinds of shaky myself, I feel like a goddamn sex queen when I notice Leon’s a little unsteady on his pins.

As I test that all my limbs still work, I’m surprised to find a wet patch on the sheets, given Leon was dressed for the occasion.

‘What the—? Did you—?’

Leon distracts me, his mouth finding mine and setting off exhausted but delicious sparks of arousal under my skin.

‘That wasn’t me, *carina*,’ he says, between kisses. ‘It was you. And it was amazing...’

I feel my cheeks turn crimson. I’ve never squirted in my life. But I’m quickly diverted again by Leon and those talented lips of his.

‘No need for chagrin, sweetheart,’ he says. ‘It was sexy as hell. And, if I can, I’ll get you to do it again...’

Leon has stood up and is working at disposing of the condom before I register his words. I stare at his naked ass.

‘*Again?*’ I ask, a little light in the head.

Leon glances back over his shoulder with a sinful expression on his face.

‘Of course...’ he says, headed for the bathroom. ‘Give me five minutes and we’ll be good for round two.’

I stare at him dumbfounded.

‘I can’t do that again, Leon!’

He only grins as he disappears into the bathroom. And five minutes later, as promised, he comes back to the bed to prove just how wrong I am.

Twice.

## CHAPTER

## *Twelve*

The room is still dark when I wake up.

The light seeping in beneath the curtains tells me it's morning but, without an alarm clock or my phone, I have no idea how late it is. For a second, I have that manic moment of anxiety, fearing I'm late for an appointment, for class, for life in general. There's still more confusion when the sheets around me feel warm but foreign.

Shifting a little beneath the covers, telltale aches remind me of exactly where I am. And how I spent the last few hours.

Flushing hot, I press my face into the pillow and try to breathe through the memory so I don't bid Leon good morning with the face of a woman reduced to a shivery, trembling puddle of hormones.

I shift onto my stomach. I curl my toes. Every muscle hurts. Every tendon feels weak. Between my legs aches like a bruise.

And yet... I've never felt better. The little sparks of pain are like a glowing heat in my muscles. My skin feels like it's shining...

It's as if my brain has split in two. One registers the physical discomfort whilst the other luxuriates in the workout that caused it.

And boy had it been a workout. I blush harder into the cotton.

Leon's stamina puts a damn Duracell bunny to shame. And his libido is insatiable.

It had been a delicious surprise to discover that my own is just as voracious. A fact I'd been completely unaware of until last night.

But perhaps it had just taken the right man to draw it out of me. The right man... the right technique... the right body...?

Just imagining Leon naked has my fingers itching for another touch and my core warming with an excited heat. My mouth dries and my cheeks burn.

Some innate instinct has me finally turning from the pillow to reach across the bed beneath the covers...

...only to discover a cool and empty bed sheet.

I frown.

The space is so small that there's no need to sit up. A small shift of my head and a flattening of the duvet and I can see the rest of the room. Despite being full of fuzzy shadows and cast in shades of gray, it's easy to spot Leon's tall and inky black figure looming by the chest of drawers.

Snuggling deeper into the bedding and relaxing on a sigh, I wait for Leon to come back to bed.

He doesn't. Frowning again, I notice that he's clothed.

'Leon?' There's only the two of us in the room but I feel the need to whisper all the same. 'What's the time? Is everything all right?'

The thought that it might be time to visit his friend in the city is an unwelcome injection of reality. If I use my head, I know it's important to get this whole ordeal over with sooner rather than later. But every cell I possess below the eyebrows has alternative priorities.

Priorities that involve more than one of us being naked.

Sitting upright, I secure the sheets around my bust and try not to imagine the bedhead locks likely sprouting from my skull. It never takes much to see me waking up like Medusa in

the mornings. And Leon enjoyed my hair a lot last night... Running his fingers through it, fisting it... In one tender and fleeting moment, he had watched the strands falling between his fingers, shimmering silver in the darkness.

It's a woman's prerogative to enjoy every second of her wild love-making and still crave a hairbrush first thing in the morning.

*Fucking, I correct myself. Not love-making. It had just been sex. That's the agreement.*

'Leon?' I ask again, rubbing at my face with the heel of my hand. At least I hadn't been wearing makeup yesterday. Else the racoon-Medusa combination would have been a true horror. Turning men to stone wouldn't have been my issue.

Then again, Leon seems to react just fine, no matter the state I'm in. Which, I confess, is a turn-on, in and of itself.

When Leon still stands there silently, only offering me his back, I brace a hand on the mattress and inch my butt toward the end of the bed.

My fingers catch something thin and crinkly. A paper note left atop the bedding.

My heart recognizes what my head is slow to digest. It picks up speed, clattering against my ribs. I pick up the note and peer at it in the dark. My eyes adjust and the bold cursive distinguishes itself from the motel letterhead. The words are blurry but legible.

*Gone for breakfast. Don't leave the room. Stay away from the windows. Be back soon.*

I take a deep breath but it feels ineffective. Like my lungs are refusing to accept any of the received oxygen. My palms are clammy, my sore muscles are tensing.

As I stare at the figure across the room, I try to subtly twist and tug the sheets around my body. The cotton would do little

against a bullet or a knife but, for some reason, my being naked feels like the most pertinent issue right now.

Second, is getting out.

‘L-Leon, what are you er... what are you looking for?’ I ask, attempting to sound natural as I slide myself to the far edge of the bed. The door’s only a few feet away. If I keep acting naturally...

What else would I be saying in this situation?

‘It still looks dark outside. Why don’t you—’ I cough a little to cover my wince ‘—er, come back to bed?’

‘Miss Harrison, you can dispense with the charade.’

I freeze in place, my legs over the side of the mattress, the sheets pulled up to my chest. I look back over my shoulder at the stranger... only to discover he’s not a stranger at all. As he turns to face me, the dim light catches a pair of razor-sharp cheekbones, buzzcut hair and mismatched eyes.

‘Cyrus...’ I breathe.

‘I see that Averno has told you more than he should have.’

I immediately bite my tongue. Partially to stop me from spilling further information and partially to grind my teeth into submission. They’d begun to chatter the second I recognized Cyrus’ profile.

The echo of gunshots, the dead look in his eye... Images of the previous day flood my bloodstream with an icy chill.

Heedless of the terror he’s inspiring in me, Cyrus leans the flat of his butt against the set of drawers. He folds his arms across his chest but not an inch of him appears defensive. He stands as if his pose is merely the most comfortable choice. Easy and nonchalant.

He would have seemed perfectly likable, if not for the air around him. Something in his manner seems to deaden it. To cast it with a hollow and echoing cold.

The mark of a trained killer.

‘I don’t particularly like my identity being known to anyone outside of my client list, Miss Harrison,’ he explains, sending my heart diving for my toes and my head spinning. I feel a bubble of hysterical nausea fighting its way up my throat. The kind that could erupt in either vomit or a scream. ‘But I’m on the job and I have orders. Your death would be in direct contradiction to those orders.’

For a second, I can exhale again. My heart, however, does not slow its galloping pace.

‘Then, why are you here?’ I ask.

‘I’m playing messenger.’

I frown into the darkness.

‘You... don’t seem the sort to play the errand boy.’

For a moment, I think I see Cyrus’ eyes flash in the darkness. A streak of ice ricochets down my spine.

‘I’m not,’ he agrees. ‘But neither do I enjoy playing executioner to those I call friend.’

‘You didn’t seem very trigger shy yesterday. You nearly shot us.’

“‘Nearly’ being the operative word.’

‘So, you missed us,’ I sneer, unsure exactly where this wave of foolish courage has come from. ‘You don’t get brownie points just because you happened to have an off day.’

Cyrus’s lips twist into an expression so frigid that I feel it in my toes.

‘Do you really...’ he begins, ‘...think me the sort to miss my target?’

The corner of Cyrus’ mouth darkens in what might have been a half-smile... if it had reached his eyes.

I can almost hear the *plink!* of the penny dropping in the back of my head.

‘You missed us deliberately,’ I say. ‘You had no intention of shooting Leon.’



Leon had been right. His friend *hadn't* been trying to kill him.

'I would *prefer* not to,' Cyrus adjusts before taking a menacing step toward me. 'The instruction is to bring him in, alive or otherwise. I would prefer alive. Which is where *you* come in, Miss Harrison.'

'*Me?*' I squeak.

Cyrus' tone turns staid, almost bored. It's clear that the conversation has now come around to the message he was entrusted with; the words he's being paid to recite. And he does so with all the enthusiasm of a gallows man.

'The Machellis want nothing to do with you, Miss Harrison. You are a young, attractive, and female American citizen. The publicity of your disappearance would bring more attention than the Machellis are willing to deal with. To be blunt: you aren't worth the fortune it would take to cover up your demise.'

In a moment of bizarre ambivalence, I don't know whether to be pleased or insulted. So, I just stay silent.

My teeth are still chattering anyway and I like the tip of my tongue where it is.

'Which is why my contact with the Machelli family is willing to offer you a deal...' Cyrus continues. In the dark, he takes something from his pocket and holds it at chest height. From where I'm sitting on the bed, it looks like a charging box for a set of earphones. 'This is a tracker. The family's request is simple. The next time you're driving down a main road away from the public, ask Averna to pull over. Somewhere quiet and out of the way.'

'How do I do that?'

It's hard to tell in the shadows but I think Cyrus rolls his eyes. There's an annoyed set to his shoulders. I tense.

'Claim a moment of sickness,' he suggests. 'Tell him you need to piss. Use womanly excuses... I don't care.'

*Womanly excuses?*

The idea that Cyrus might not be able to use the term “menstrual cramps” takes his scary quotient down a few notches. But the reprieve is short-lived. Because, in the next moment, the dim rays from around the curtains catch upon the barrel of a gun.

My heart jackknives into my throat and my palms start to sweat.

‘As soon as you’re stationary and in a quiet place,’ Cyrus says, toying with the weapon between his fingers. ‘You hit the button on the top of this tracker. I’ll be there soon after. I’ll apprehend Averna and you’ll be taken to the nearest airport. Your passport, phone and possessions will be waiting for you.’

‘But I—’

‘You’ll leave Sicily for the States,’ he interrupts, ‘and you won’t come back.’

I swallow and try to emit some kind of bravado. Or at least dignity. Which is hard to do when wearing only bed linen.

‘And... if I refuse?’ So much for bravado. My voice is thin and reedy.

‘You have far less use than Averna,’ Cyrus explains. ‘And whether *he’ll* be spared is still up for debate.’

Short answer: I leave or I die.

Cyrus lifts the little tracker box, wiggles it between his fingers, and then tosses it onto the bedclothes. It lands a few inches from my left hand.

‘You have sixteen hours to activate the tracker. After which, this offer is null and void.’

The barrel of Cyrus’ pistol gleams again as he shifts it from one hand to the other. Apparently, Cyrus is just as capable with either hand.

*Not* a comforting thought.

As the assassin moves towards the front door, I’m frozen in place. My skin has plastered down hard over my muscles

and my muscles are like vices on my bones. The bed sheets are a condensed tangle in my hand, pressed against my collarbone.

Every inch of me craves Cyrus' absence. Every nerve is waiting for him to leave so I can unclench. But still, I say—

‘Why?’

Cyrus pauses. He looks back, his face expressionless.

‘Why what?’

‘Why do you need me to do this? You found us well enough here without any tracker. Why not do it again?’

Hell, why not cuff me to the radiator with a sock in my mouth and hide behind the door until Leon gets back? The classics are classics for a reason...

Not that I want to give the guy ideas...

For a moment, Cyrus looks at me. Really *looks* at me. It's as if his gaze somehow... sharpens. The colors of his irises seem to deepen. The angles of his lids turn keener. Even his eyelashes seem more pointed.

His stare is an intense scrutiny, under which I suppress the urge to fidget.

‘Take the deal, Miss Harrison,’ Cyrus says, avoiding my question entirely. ‘It won't be offered again.’

And then he's gone.

Not in a puff of smoke like some ghoulish cartoon villain—I assume he used the front door—but, for all the noise he made in his exit, Cyrus might as well have evaporated.

And he took all of my resilience with him.

With the immediate threat passed, my body slips into a state of overcompensation. I start to panic. I hyperventilate and my heart rate goes through the roof, pumping frigid, sluggish blood to numb extremities. There's nothing I can do to fight the reaction. I just turn into a giant shaking blob on the edge of the mattress.

*A shivering blob of ice cream, wrapped in wafer sheeting, I think a little hysterically.*

As I start to lose feeling in my fingers and toes, I lurch upright, clutching the sheet in place, and rush for the bathroom. I stumble once and stub my toe twice. I almost fall into the bath itself when my knees hit the porcelain rim.

I reach over to crank the shower tap marked “H” all the way to the left and only drop the bedclothes when I’m ready to jump immediately under the spray. I barely register the flash of cold before I’m doused in a stream hot enough to strip the dollar store paint from the walls.

When a slither of cool breeze teases my shoulder blades, I realize I’ve left the door to the bedroom open but I’m not brave enough to abandon the shower to shut it. I just huddle closer to the tile, deeper into the spray.

I’m not sure how long I stand under the stream but, by the time a voice calls from the doorway, the bathroom is almost opaque with hot mist...

...and I’m *still* shivering.

‘Freya?’

Fear has me on overdrive and I spin toward the voice. My hands come up defensively and I almost slip over in the tub. A hand reaches out to steady me and the black sleeve above the wrist is instantly drenched. The rest of the arm and shoulder follows. And, suddenly, he’s here.

‘Leon...’

The only solid and reliable thing in my world, Leon stands before me, half under the shower head. The longer strands of his hair at the front catch the stream and stick to his forehead. Water runs along his brows and turns his long eyelashes into dark curling spikes. They remind me of the strands of torn silk.

Beneath, his eyes burn with an intensity that’s more warming than any shower.

Heedless of the fact that he’s fully clothed, Leon has his hands on my shoulders and is shaking me until my teeth

chatter.

‘Freya! What’s going on?’ I read fear in his eyes and worry in his brow. I notice he’s still wearing his socks, now soaked in the bottom of the tub. The front of his shirt is plastering to his skin. ‘*Carina*, your skin is raw pink and your lips are blue. Talk to me. What’s wrong?’

I can’t speak. I can barely garble. Instead, I just reach for him, locking my arms around his neck and my legs around his waist. Leon throws a hand out against the tiled wall to support us but the other wraps tight around my back.

His breath is a calming whisper in my ear and his body heat seeps through my skin. I cinch my limbs tighter. I don’t care that I’m wearing only my skin. I don’t care that Leon’s designer clothes are being ruined under a grimy motel shower.

I don’t care that I’m probably in some kind of shock.

The only thought in my head is to get closer. To his skin. To his warmth.

To relive that feeling of blissful escape from last night.

My lips seek his blindly and a second later Leon has me against the wall. His hands are everywhere, his mouth is hot and wild against mine.

He pauses only long enough to ask—‘What is this?’—the question barely a purr against my lips.

‘This is... me needing you...’ I gasp, desperate for the oblivion we create so beautifully.

Leon takes no further convincing...

There’s no foreplay. No gentle strokes and soft loving. There’s only the soft clink of his belt, the sound of a zipper, and then his hands cupping my bottom. In one motion, Leon has me sitting higher around his waist and his shaft sitting right against my core. As soon as his head pushes between my folds, I thrust down hard.

We both groan as I take him to the hilt. My whole body riots at the sensation, heat flowing in every direction.

The spray of the shower head batters us from above, making everything hot and slippery, be it clothes, skin, or man. The steam makes it hard to breathe. The tile squeaks against my back.

Neither of us seems to care.

We come together in a frenzy, the experience different from last night. Last night was about power and control. It was about marking me. Dominating me. Making the ecstasy last so long and burn so hot that I couldn't see, couldn't breathe, couldn't *think*.

This time, it's not an endurance race but a sprint. A sprint we're in together. We cling to one another, nails in skin, teeth in lips. We thrust with a speed designed to bring us both to climax in a rush of crazed endorphins and passionate release.

And the entire time, Leon watches me. He doesn't kiss me. Doesn't turn the sex loving. He just keeps his eyes firmly on mine. Staring into my soul the entire time.

And, by God, there's nothing sexier than watching a man look at you with that kind of ravenous hunger. To witness his eyes dilating, his face contorting in the pleasure-pain of ecstasy.

And to know he's seeing exactly the same expression on your face.

The connection is so intimate that, for a few moments in the mist, I forget we're two separate beings. In this time and this place, we're simply one. One writhing, moaning animal desperate to be pushed over its primal edge and into a sea of stars. Into the hot trembling euphoria of a pleasure so intense it borders on madness.

## CHAPTER

### *Thirteen*

**D** *avide and Sons Watchmakers* was established in 1878 but it's hard to tell, upon entering, if it looks its age.

The walls are hidden, the ceiling masked, and the floors reduced to narrow crevices through which customers must navigate to reach the service desk at the back of the store. Clocks steal the remaining surfaces, space, and air. Tall grandfather cabinets jostle for their place over large hanging dials. Mantelpiece timers are stacked three or four deep from the walls, atop boxes and old filing units. The little huts of cuckoo clocks cluster into miniature towns about one's feet and their inhabitants—colorful wooden canaries, robins, and bluejays—hang from the ceiling like an overcast of aviaries.

It's a testament to the skill of Francois Davide that every single dial in the store is in working order but only one unified ticking noise echoes around the room.

It's a testament to his wife that there's not a speck of dust as far as the eye can see.

At over six feet, I'm unused to feeling crowded. Usually, when I walk into a room, my height enforces the space I need from others; be they things or people. But here, in the little watchmakers on the corner of *Via del Corso* and *Via Guila*, carefully carved wings dance around my temples and I feel at constant risk of tripping over a clock stand or knocking into a display tower of watch straps.

Freya is more lithe. Despite her gaze anchored firmly upwards, transfixed by the flock of colors across the ceiling, some innate sense of her surroundings sees Freya's hips sway

naturally around a large grandfather clock and her body shifting to avoid a stone sundial.

From one blink to the next, I watch the same movement, the same graceful lines of her body, without the hindrance of clothing.

Having seen the woman naked, and committing every damn detail of it to memory, I can envision her now as she was just a few hours ago... smooth, glistening, and flushed a pretty pink. Painfully soft and achingly delicious.

For what feels like the millionth time this morning, I have to refocus my attention so I can direct Freya around a stack of wood samples and toward the back of the store. My misbehaving libido is almost surprising, given how I spent most of last night...

...and this morning in the shower.

Eating an enormous feast can reduce one's appetite to nothing. Too much water and a human can drown. Sex, on the other hand, apparently follows different rules.

The more I have Freya—the more I taste her skin and sip from those gorgeous lips—the more I want her. Both after the fact and in the moment. Last night for example...

The hungrier and harder I claimed her, the more I wanted to soothe and love her with a slow and deliberate gentility. And yet, the softer I kissed her, the deeper my need to mark would burn.

Nothing I did was passionate enough. Nothing I said was meaningful enough. Everything soft, I wanted hard. Everything rough, I wanted slow...

Still, I was never dissatisfied. Never left disappointed.

Every moan, every thrust, and every kiss that Freya had surrendered felt like a victory won. I wouldn't have sacrificed a single moment of it. The whole experience had simply made me crave more. From moment to moment at the time and now here, hours later. Standing to attention in an old man's watchmaker store.



The real question, of course, is *why*...

Whether this new-found addiction is a result of the jaded abstinence on my part over the last few months... or if my symptoms can be blamed on Freya in particular.

My instincts say the latter. Which means that the woman in front of me, skirting an antique suitcase with that pert little bottom of hers, is becoming far more special to me than either of us can afford right now.

I curse under my breath.

Freya glances back over her shoulder with a raised eyebrow.

‘Everything all right?’ she asks puzzled.

‘Fine,’ I say, trying to give her a smile. But even I can feel its tightness, pressing unnaturally into my cheeks.

Her eyes narrow.

‘You sure? You look...’ She seems to assess me for a moment before deciding on: ‘...tense.’

I almost choke on a laugh.

Yeah, “tense” is one word for it. “Fucked” would be another. Because, after all this madness is said and done... Freya will leave or I’ll be dead.

Either way, the withdrawals are going to be a bitch.

When we reach the service desk at the back of the old store, we discover another couple speaking with the proprietor, Francois Davide. A middle-aged pair consisting of a softly-spoken wife, a balding husband, and a pair of matching plastic anoraks in different shades of navy. I watch for suggestive shapes beneath their arms or the small of their backs. There’s no catch in their jeans where an ankle holster might disrupt the denim.

My sweeping assessment is more habit than any real concern as the couple seem normal enough, discussing a mantle clock gifted by the husband’s aunt. The minute hand no longer turns.

Still... better to be cautious, I decide, before nudging Freya over to a couple of fold-out chairs fitted snugly between a framed medieval map and a cabinet of past sales records. The Davides' answer to a waiting room.

From here, my observation of Francois and his customers can be one-sided.

'Are you sure you're all right, Leon?' Freya whispers again as we squeeze in, side by side. Neither of us is particularly large but her entire right side is flush with my left before we're both fully in the seats. 'Are you still angry with me?'

My heart squeezes in my chest.

'I'm not angry at you,' I promise her. Surprisingly, throughout this entire ordeal, Freya has been the last person to get on my nerves.

'You were this morning...'

I try not to notice the soft tremble in her voice. It's small and she controls it well. But, for just a second, it's there. And it cuts me to the quick. Shame makes me hot under the collar and I clear my throat.

'No,' I reassure her. 'I...'

But I cut myself off. Just how to put into words what I shouldn't be feeling?

When I left to find food this morning, it was a calculated risk. Or so I thought.

I was certain we hadn't been followed to Syracuse, let alone to the motel. We'd checked in under false names. I'd hidden our faces from the surveillance cameras. My family didn't know the make or model of our current car... I was sure that Freya would be safe for the ten minutes I needed to run to the nearest convenience store and pick up something for breakfast. I prioritized her sleep over what felt like unnecessary caution.

I was wrong.

And her life was almost the cost of that mistake.

Worse still, when I returned to the motel and found Freya near-drowned in the bathroom, I let myself be swayed. She was trembling with her arms wrapped tight across her belly. Like she might shake completely apart if she were to let go. She seemed cold to the touch, despite the shower head belching out heat and steam. Something was obviously wrong but, instead of pausing to question her fear or her desperate eagerness for physical intimacy, I was swayed into taking what was offered without thought. I simply sunk into the steamy clutch of that shower and the soft grip of her thighs. Just held on and thrust into the tight slickness of her femininity until we were both panting for release, worries forgotten.

Only then did Freya tell me about Cyrus.

Sitting in the watchmakers, I feel the same chill that had taken hold of me then burn through my veins like ice. Ashamed to notice a tremble in my fingers, I stuff both my hands into the pockets of my overcoat.

Nothing could have cut so swiftly through the fog of sex than those words:

*‘When I woke up... Cyrus was here. He had a gun.’*

My heart had ground to a halt. My skin instantly wizened to sandpaper. My tongue dried out and died in my mouth.

The idea that the most talented killer on the Machelli’s payroll had been mere feet from Freya as she slept, undefended and unprotected. Because I had thought it more important to slip out and pick her up a *fucking pastry*...

That bites deep. And it bites hard.

‘I wasn’t mad at you.’ I lean over so that only Freya might hear me. My breath tickles some of the curls in her hair which, in turn, flutter and stroke over my nose. ‘How could I be? You told me what Cyrus wanted you to do.’

The tracker. It had been the first thing Freya had shown me as I’d stormed from the shower and rushed to find dry clothes. I’d wanted us out of that motel room as soon as possible and only her hand on my arm, the tracker held up on her palm, had slowed me down.

*'Cyrus wasn't here to kill me. Or you,' she said. 'He wanted to give me this.'*

She had then repeated her conversation with the assassin as verbatim as she could remember. But not one word of it had calmed the near-homicidal rage that had taken control of my muscles. I still bundled her up, still packed up our shit, and still rushed her to the car. All within six minutes of leaving that bathroom.

It's hard to say whether I was fuelled, in those moments, by self-flagellating fury for leaving Freya so vulnerable or by something else... something deeper...

To say I'm fine now, the other side of only a fifteen-minute drive, might have been an exaggeration, but the eerie shade of red has at least left my vision and the neurons in my brain are now firing with a semblance of rationality. Enough, at least, that I can recognize the significance of Cyrus' visit.

The man had lined up an easy kill. It would have been the work of a moment to take out Freya and then wait for my return.

Two bullets. One paycheck. On to the next assignment...

And yet, he'd orchestrated a deal through which Freya might be saved in all this. Through which she could be given the credit for bringing me in and place the Machellis in her debt. A debt repaid with her freedom.

I rub a palm over my face and try to calm my knee which has begun bouncing anxiously. My shoulders are tense and I can feel a migraine burning behind my eyes.

Ever since the hospital, I've felt as if Freya and I are only alive through a little luck. But it's more than that.

We're alive because of the friendships I've built over the years. Jaime was slow to react to our escape back at my father's estate. Damon was easier to take down than he should have been. Cyrus has been pulling his punches...

None of them want to see me dead. But eventually...

Eventually, those old friendships are going to be worn down under my father's impatience. Excuses are going to wear thin and delays will become unacceptable.

Freya and I are running on thin ice. Ice already cracked and fractured under my friends' torn loyalties. Every second we spend on its surface, every second we spend running, risks those fissures tearing wider and us falling through...

'You don't seem too happy about it,' Freya whispers back to me. 'That I told you about the tracker, I mean...'

'To be honest, I'm not,' I admit. 'I'm not angry *at* you, but I *am* angry that you didn't take Cyrus' deal.'

'You're *what?!*' As her voice shoots up in volume, Freya slaps a hand over her mouth. She stares at me with wide eyes over her fingers. When she lowers them again, the hiss of her murmuring has taken on a serpentine edge. 'You can't be *serious?* He wanted me to help him catch you!'

'I know,' I say.

'And if they catch you, they're going to pull you up in front of your father and... God knows what they'll do. Something awful...'

I nod.

'Probably,' I agree.

But my being caught is becoming more of a foregone conclusion the longer we spend on the proverbial ice. At least, if she'd played me with that tracker, one of us might have been thrown a lifeline.

Freya continues to stare at me dumbfounded.

'So, why would you—?'

'Leon!' a soft voice calls out, interrupting Freya's venomous hissing.

Despite the thick timbre of Francois Davide's voice, his words sound dulled around the edges. An odd but common phenomenon in old buildings, it's as if his voice is being hushed by the air itself, muted into timidity by the staring gaze

of clock faces and the towering menace of merchandise. They wind their way to where we sit and have us both looking up and around a stack of old newspapers.

Francois has bid goodbye to his customers and is looking us over with a twinkling stare of astute consideration.

‘What precisely,’ the old man asks with a thick, gray brow ascending past the horned rim of his glasses, ‘brings you here?’

Getting to my feet and avoiding Freya’s look of warning (‘We’re not done with this conversation...’ it promises), I smile at the old man’s tone. There’s nothing unfriendly in Francois’s carriage or expression but I know him too well to mistake his pleasantries for pure welcome. He’s pleased to see me on a personal level. But fearful of what my presence might mean for the safety of his family. Which I can respect.

Luckily, he’s not the shotgun-wielding grump that we need. And the protective hardness in his stare tells me that Francois is more than aware of it.

‘I’ve come to see Cisco,’ I say, using English for Freya’s benefit. ‘If he’s here?’

Freya looks at me with surprise. Francois doesn’t.

‘You sure there’s nothing *I* can do to help?’ the old man asks, understandably guarded around his son.

Reaching the desk, I spread my hands wide on its surface and offer an empathetic smile and a firm tone.

‘I’m afraid not.’

Francois is a talented man. A skilled watchmaker and, back in his day with the *Polizia Stradale*, a wizard with the inner workings of munitions and the triggers for explosive devices. But it’s not his expertise that can help us with our bullet. It’s Cisco’s.

I can read a worried tightness in Francois’ jawline. I watch as he folds his arms across a chest that’s surprisingly firm for a man of his age. Even at half a foot shorter than me and wiry in

build, Francois cuts an imposing figure. His personal affront and paternal devotion adds bulk to his frame.

‘Is he having a bad day?’ I ask carefully, switching to Italian.

Francois wrinkles his nose, his glasses and mustache adjusting to accommodate.

‘No,’ he admits in the same language. ‘Much the same as any other.’

‘It’s a small thing,’ I assure the man. ‘We won’t upset him.’

Francois’ gaze flickers toward Freya.

‘And the girl?’

‘A friend,’ I say simply. ‘No-one he should be worried about.’

In my peripheral, I catch Freya offering a sweet smile and a quiet hello. Even if she has no idea what we’re talking about, she has enough Italian and intuition to know when to turn on the charm.

In the end, Francois can do nothing to bar me from Cisco. The old man has no standing with the Machellis anymore but past bedfellows carry many tales. And, for all he knows, I’m still their number one fixer. If I want to see Cisco, there’s nothing he can do to stop me.

Giving in with a soft nod, Francois unhooks a section of the service desk and lifts it so we can pass through. We follow him to the very back of the store that’s reserved as a workshop. We pass dismantled, half-fixed clocks and machines for all manner of work, blunt and detailed alike. In the eastern corner is an external door that Francois opens with a simple four-digit code.

Beyond the door is an alley open to the public but evidently rarely used. Its only occupants are a few dumpsters and a locked gate at one end. Around to the left, is an iron staircase up to the second floor and another locked door.

Freya is tense beside me and I shoot her a smile, watching the way the wind catches against her eyelashes.

I try to communicate, through my gaze alone, that there's nothing to worry about. Though dangerous, Cisco is hardly an animal needing to be kept behind locked doors. As far as I've been able to piece together over the years, he simply has a habit of leaving home without his key. Forcing him to use one to leave makes him more likely to take it with him.

After I turn an entirely different expression in Francois' direction, the old man reads our need for privacy, nods politely, and then, after unlocking the door, heads back downstairs.

I lead the way inside, holding the door open behind me for Freya.

The second floor is much the same as Francois' workshop downstairs, only upgraded. The space is just as cluttered with equipment but everything is high-tech. Instead of roughly hewn workbenches, slick and sterile tables run along the walls and form an island in the center of the room. Instead of heavy machinery with cogs and levers... light-up screens, computers, microscopes, and all manner of scientific gizmos litter the surfaces.

Everything sparkles clean. Everything is positioned at careful right angles. Like a surgical suite prepped and ready for its patient.

The only things haphazard on the entire floor are the books. Piles upon piles are stacked against the far wall, like a library breeding upon itself up and over the white paint.

Soft jazz is playing from somewhere. The subtle pop and crackle suggest vinyl.

The large, metal filing cabinets, monitors, and bookcases that are scattered around the place make it impossible to see clearly from one end of the room to the other. So, I head deeper inside, keeping Freya behind me and my steps calm yet audible.



It's an all-around bad idea to sneak up on a man like Francisco Davide.

'Cisco?' I try calling out his name as we turn a corner marked by a large microscope, then smile as the man comes into view.

Working at a raised desk, Cisco's head is bent over a high-intensity magnifying glass on a retractable arm. One eye and the edge of his cheekbone are blown out of proportion in the glass as he examines what looks like a piece of charred metal. One, giant gray-blue eye turns in my direction as I approach.

Cisco smiles.

'Leon!' he calls with, I think, genuine pleasure. I notice his foot begin to tap nervously against the rung of his stool. 'What brings you here?'

'I have something I need looked at—' but I quickly trail off when I notice that Cisco isn't listening.

That giant eye of his has blinked and spotted Freya at my side. He meerkats up from behind the glass to give her a proper assessment, his gray-blond hair glinting in the overhead light. He whistles appreciatively.

'You replace Damon with a prettier model?' Cisco asks, flashing a grin in Freya's direction that's a little too charming for my liking.

Even conversing in Italian, I don't need to look around to know that Freya is blushing to her hairline. Any sort of compliment and that sweet color rushes to her cheeks. And, language aside, Cisco's grin is highly complimentary.

'Something like that,' I hedge. No need to announce myself on the outs with my own family. 'Only she's not one to handle a weapon.'

The tension in Cisco's shoulders seems to twitch but a blink and it's gone again, replaced with cool friendliness. He sets aside the metal he's analyzing, rubs lingering soot from his fingers with a nearby cloth, and swings his leg down from the stool.

‘In which case,’ he says with another of those white, gleaming smiles shot in Freya’s direction, ‘it’s a pleasure to meet you, *signorina*.’

Freya steps around me and I resist the urge to haul her back into my shadow.

‘The pleasure is all mine, Mr. Davide,’ she greets with an outstretched hand.

It doesn’t surprise me that she’s made the familial connection between Francois and Francisco. Not only do they have a similar leanness to their builds but both have gone prematurely gray. At only thirty-four, Cisco has a gleaming head of dull silver locks. They also share in their eye color and the bold strokes of their brows. Both have the elegant good looks of refined Italian gentlemen. Surmising them as father and son is not difficult.

Cisco grimaces comically at Freya’s words but his eyes have fallen to her hand, watching it like it’s a piranha. He takes a step backward.

‘Oh, please. No, *signorina*.’ Swallowing, Cisco rips his gaze away from her outstretched hand and throws his own into the air to wave away her politeness. The gesture has a manic energy to it. Like he’s trying far too hard to be casual. ‘Mr. Davide is my grandfather. The old man is Francois. *I* am Cisco. Don’t be giving me more airs and graces than I deserve.’

As he speaks, I step closer to Freya and nudge her hand back down to her side.

‘We need your help with some ballistics,’ I say without waiting for a suitable segue. Given the wary, cornered look the attempted handshake has sparked in Cisco’s stare, bringing the conversation back onto stable ground seems the safest course of action.

Even if it does mean bringing up the subject of firearms.

The mere mention of bullets has Cisco’s cool stare turning rock hard but otherwise he shows no negative reaction. In fact,

beneath that stony, defensive wall is the spark of a curious scientist.

‘No problem,’ he says, turning towards a large shooting chamber kept at the back of the room.

Giving us his back reveals the spiky black ink of a tattoo peeking over the neckline of his sweater. The design reaches up from beneath the wool, stopping half an inch from his hairline at the nape of his neck.

‘Just give me the gun,’ he says with an outstretched hand, ‘and I’ll run some tests.’

‘Actually,’ I say, drawing the shell casing from my pocket. ‘I was hoping you could reverse engineer the results.’

Cisco’s brows rise as I hold the casing up between my thumb and forefinger then toss it in his direction. He catches it deftly and then holds it up to the light to assess it himself.

‘You have the casing but not the weapon or the bullet?’ he asks, narrowing his stare upon the copper sheeting.

I nod.

Cisco grimaces, a heavy wrinkle bridging his nose.

‘And you want me to match it to a gun on file?’ Cisco might not be part of the police force anymore, but he hasn’t broken ties with their private databases. Of course, the authorities don’t know that.

‘Do you know how long that’s going to take?’ he asks, astonished.

‘Actually,’ I explain. ‘I don’t need the gun. Just a match to any previous casings or bullets found in professional hit jobs.’

Whilst an identity to my brother’s killer would be preferable—and, one day, very necessary—for now, the aim is simply to prove that the bullet fired from that rooftop is connected to a professional assassin. A professional camping out on that rooftop, within days of my brother’s shooting, and me corroborating that the shots were fired from across the street, might be enough to convince the family of an alternative to my shooting my own brother.

‘An exact ID can come later,’ I repeat. ‘Right now, we’re on a time crunch and I just need to know if the case can be tied to a pro or if it’s a dead end.’

Cisco turns the little object under the light. He purses his lips in thought.

‘That shouldn’t be a problem,’ he says. ‘I can assess the casing and run through most of the records within a few hours?’

‘The sooner the better. You want us to leave whilst you work?’

‘No need.’ Cisco shakes his head before turning toward the other side of the room and a different machine. ‘Feel free to—’

He’s stopped dead as Freya gasps in surprise.

His eyes lock down upon her, harden, and then turn white hot.

Inwardly cursing myself for a fool, I grab hold of Freya’s arm and drag her behind me. I should have warned her in advance. I should have mentioned not to react.

Having known Cisco for years, his appearance is now an omitted detail, his outbursts a more prevalent concern.

Yet, I’d forgotten how one can trigger the other.

When Cisco had turned for the opposite side of the room, the right side of his head had come into full view for the first time. And Freya had reacted as most naturally do.

And in a way guaranteed to set Cisco off.

‘*What are you looking at?*’ he suddenly snarls at Freya.

From one moment to the next, Cisco shifts from human to monster, his steps becoming a calculated prowling and his hands twisting into claws of tension. His eyes are wild and all his friendly charm has evaporated.

‘What the *fuck* are you looking at?!’ he screeches again.

Keeping Freya behind me, my fingers digging hard into her coat, I inch backward, keeping my eyes firmly set upon my

friend.

‘She’s not looking at anything Cisco. It’s *nothing*.’ I say, cutting through an atmosphere that suddenly feels thick with crazy. ‘I tell you what... we’ll just head over to that cafe across the street until you’re done with the casing. How about that? Then we’re not bothering you?’

I watch with a simmering panic as Cisco’s upper lip begins to twitch. His shoulders have bunched up like an animal ready to attack. I glance around, thankful that his favorite shotgun is nowhere in sight.

Stepping back again, I push Freya towards the exit.

‘Cisco...’ My tone is steady but, when that sparks no change, I get up in his field of vision and try a sharper barking command. ‘Cisco!’

My friend blinks, balks, and then opens his mouth on something like a silent scream. His hands, already claw-like and mangled, reach to scratch at his head and rake at his hair.

‘She was looking!’ he finally cries out. His eyes are darting left and right like he’s talking to a room full of people. People who aren’t there. ‘She was *looking!*’

‘She’s not looking now, Cisco.’ It would do no good to just deny him. The man’s paranoia would only spike and I’d be cast in the role of liar. Then we’d have an even bigger problem. ‘No-one is looking now.’

‘Always looking, always *staring*,’ Cisco begins to ramble, his head bent and pinned between his palms, his eyes staring wide and at nothing. ‘Just staring, right *there!* Right down the barrel. Down the barrel it goes. Where it stops no-one knows. *No! Everyone* knows. Everyone knows where the bullet stops. It stops with me.’ He slams a hand into the side of his head. The other has begun scratching at his chest. ‘It stops here. Stops with me. Makes me hurt. God, it *always* hurts. Why does it *still* hurt?!’

*Shit.*

My friend is disappearing quickly. Sliding down the slippery slope paved with PTSD and a handful of other

medical abbreviations. In his place is a rambling lunatic. A lunatic in pain and likely to lash out.

‘Freya,’ I shoot over my shoulder. ‘Go and wait for me outside.’

I feel her fingers dig into my overcoat.

‘What? And leave you alone with—?’

‘—with my *friend*.’ I emphasize for the benefit of all present and to cut her off from saying something Cisco might not take kindly to. He’s already inching toward one of the larger pieces of torn metal he’d been examining. It has a sharp and jagged edge.

‘I can talk to him,’ I say again, pushing her back with my elbows. ‘But you need to leave.’

Cisco lunges for the metal shard.

*Fuck!*

‘Now, Freya!’

‘But—’

*Now!*

## CHAPTER

## *Fourteen*

**T**hough unwilling to let go of Leon's jacket, I have little choice but to run when he throws out a heavy hand. With his attention on his friend, the gesture is blind and he catches me in the shoulder, pushing me clumsily towards the exit.

I turn. I stumble.

*Just what the hell is going on?*

What had I done to set Cisco spinning on a dime like this?

Ignoring the door, I rush for one of the wider tables, topped with a hulking device with a flare of sci-fi about it. I dart behind the machine and try to stay out of sight. Between its square, plastic belly and an in-tray overflowing with statistical paperwork, I can see Cisco. Now armed with an angry, jagged piece of metal, he starts to spin, peering into the corners of the room. He looks caged. Threatened. As if he fears an ambush around every stack of books, every piece of equipment. The light catches his head again and I press a hand to my mouth.

I hadn't meant to upset Leon's friend. Hadn't meant to offend him. But some reactions are hard to temper.

Along the right side of Cisco's head is a scar. Running from the very edge of his temple, almost to the back of his head, is a thick gash of scar tissue. Like the kind left by a skin graft. Though clearly old, sections of the graft appear puckered and angry. Several forks of smoother, pearlescent white spiral

out and towards the crown of his head. Like little lightning bolts, they twist the skin and mutilate his hairline.

The erratic little edges remind me of the spider web effect left in the car window by that bullet, whilst Leon and I had been rushing to escape his father's men.

My flimsy Italian is no match for Cisco's heated ramblings but the darker corners of my mind are piecing together a story. A horrific one.

Dread settles in my stomach.

I have no way of knowing for sure but I have a sudden sense of certainty... that Francisco Davide had been shot in the head.

Nauseated at the very thought, my heart breaking for the man, I watch the two friends for what feels like an age. It takes at least ten minutes for Leon to get close enough to disarm Cisco. Another fifteen before Cisco's yammerings run out of steam and he's breathing normally once more.

By the time I come out from hiding, Cisco is trembling with the aftermath of adrenaline and his face is coated in a fine film of sweat. But he seems more himself.

Perched on the stool we first found him on, the man spies me under Leon's arm. Our eyes lock and I'm thankful that his gaze is a little more human.

For a moment, those eyes had turned... abnormal. Devoid of empathy and lost in a maze of confusion. An angry, violent confusion.

Now, his cool stare is more gentle. More real. The emotions within are more complex. I can read very clear regret, contrition... and shame.

My heart aches.

Something about the man holds my attention long after Cisco looks away. When he rubs at his face, his head in his hands, I spy a tattoo on the back of his neck. As he mutters to Leon in Italian, one of his sleeves falls back to reveal more ink on his wrist.



Marks of a life lived.

A life from before the head wound. Before an injury started controlling his actions. Unlike the scar on his head, Cisco's tattoos are permanent choices he made for himself. Something about that catches me. I don't know why. But it holds on somewhere in the back of my mind and refuses to let go.

Distracted as I am by Cisco's markings and his mysterious past, I barely notice that he and Leon are saying goodbye. Nor do I spot the sudden change in Leon's attitude from calming friend to livid lover before he's grabbing hold of my arm and manhandling me towards the exit.

'Hey!' I cry out, attempting to get my feet back underneath me. 'What do you think you're—?'

'*Shut up!*' Leon barks.

I'm so surprised at the rage in his voice that I do as I'm told and am marched out of the building, down the back stairs, and out through Francois' watchmaker store, silent as a mouse. It's only as we reach the car that Leon lets me go. He shoves me, gently but forcefully, into the passenger seat and I watch him storm around to his side of the car.

'What the hell was that?' I demand with a healthy dose of hostility as he gets in and shuts the door with a heavy thump.

'*That,*' he says with just as much aggression, 'is what *I* want to know.'

Leon turns in his seat to pin me with an accusatory stare. One that heats my blood to boiling and sets my teeth on edge.

'Excuse me?' I demand, prickling further. Leon doesn't scare me. But I dislike people trying to intimidate me.

'I told you to leave!' he cries. 'I told you to get out of there whilst I dealt with Cisco! Why do you never listen?!'

*Oh, hell no.*

For the last three days, I've been through an entire nightmare of calamities. Like a marble in a pinball machine,

I've bounced and rocketed from one near-death experience to another.

And now this big, gorgeous, *infuriating* man is going to criticize? Hell, no.

'Excuse me?!' I screech again, turning in my seat to face Leon head-on. 'I have done nothing *but* listen to you. I've followed *every* order, taken *every* instruction! Don't you bullshit me with this "not listening" crap!'

Whatever bee has flown up Leon's bonnet, it's re-writing his memories. Dramatizing his fears.

'You didn't listen, *today!*' he finally corrects.

I pause for a moment, my own anger banked. I frown, perplexed.

Leon's fury is more than evident but... as we face off over the center console, I start to notice signs of something *else*. A tremble in his hands. The thumping pulse in his neck. There's a wildness in his eyes...

He's not just angry. He's... afraid?

'I told you to get out!' he repeats. 'Do you have any idea how dangerous PTSD can be? Do you know what Cisco might have done? Might have then had to regret?'

Leon isn't afraid for himself. But for me. And for his friend.

But Cisco's volatility is precisely the reason I hadn't wanted to run for the exit, abandoning Leon to his fate.

'I wasn't about to just leave you with—'

'Why the hell not?!' Leon cuts across before he can help himself. 'You're going to, anyway!'

*Wow. Okaaay.*

I blink.

Leon pants.

I'm not sure which of us is more surprised by *that* little outburst. And neither of us seems to know what to do with it.

*“I wasn’t about to leave...”*

*“You’re going to anyway...”*

Something in the vicinity of my chest squeezes down hard and the tips of my fingers begin to tingle. I take several slow, deep breaths.

‘Leon...’ I ask once I’m calm again. ‘What is this about?’

Instead of answering, Leon jerks himself back around. He slams his seatbelt into place

‘It’s nothing,’ he insists, putting the car into gear. ‘Forget it.’

‘It doesn’t seem like—’

‘Put your seatbelt on,’ he orders.

‘Leon—’

‘Seatbelt, *carina!*’ he barks again.

I buckle up and he pulls us out into traffic, turning the car out of town. Deciding I don’t much care where we’re going, I stay quiet for a while. We pass along small-time trade streets, mostly residential areas, and then we’re back on the highway, flying past open countryside and the occasional retail park.

I give us both half an hour to calm down before I break the silence.

‘What happened to him?’ I finally ask.

Leon checks the rearview mirror before responding.

‘To who? Cisco?’

I nod.

‘Did he work for your family?’

It seems logical enough that anyone in Leon’s acquaintance, with a scar like that, had to be in a similar line of work.

‘Actually,’ Leon says, ‘he was on the other side.’

‘Huh?’ I ask, surprised.

‘He was a police officer.’ I know Leon’s anger has calmed when he glances my way, a hint of humor in his eye. ‘Or a “cop” as you Americans like to call them.’

I can only blink in surprise. Cisco was a law enforcement officer?

‘Well,’ Leon corrects, ‘he was a scientist really. Cisco was part of the CSU department. Which is practically laughable given his background.’

‘What do you mean?’

Leon sighs and rubs at the back of his neck.

‘Cisco could have had any job he wanted,’ he explains. ‘The man’s a literal genius. Went to MIT in the States. Interned with some of the biggest industrial companies in the world. He could have worked for NASA, if he’d wanted.’

*Holy crap...*

‘But he became a cop?’ My tone turns the statement into a befuddled question.

Leon nods.

‘I’ve never asked him why,’ he shrugs, ‘But I always assumed it was because his old man was on the force. Whatever the reason, he’d have thought it through a thousand times over. As I said, he was a certified genius before...’

‘Before he got shot?’ I prompt when Leon falls quiet.

‘Yeah... Not that he isn’t one *now*.’ He snorts. ‘In some ways, he’s actually smarter now. He’s more compulsive about things, more devoted to study. His memory was always good yet now he’s practically a computer. But you don’t go through something like that without... side effects.’

‘Like aggression...?’

Leon nods again.

‘Plus paranoia, severe anxiety, and a few compulsive tics thrown in for good measure. He’s never admitted it but I think he’s also fighting a few delusions, half the time.’

*Jesus... The poor man.*

‘You seem to know him well...?’ I point out, fascinated to see Leon opening up. Memories seem to flicker across his face and I’m enjoying watching the twitch of his lips or the softening in his eyes.

‘We went to school together...’ he says.

‘Like college?’ I ask.

‘Grade school.’

It’s hard to envision this huge, powerful man as a little kid. But I smile as I try.

‘I grew up in Carrozziere,’ Leon explains. ‘A little way south of Syracuse. That was back before I was introduced to my father. Afterwards, I lived in Palermo.’

*Introduced?* Who gets *introduced* to their parent? Just what kind of life has Leon been living?

Somehow, I sense this isn’t the time for such personal probing, so I stay on the Cisco tangent.

‘And you stayed friends?’ I ask. ‘Even when you moved away?’

Leon smiles, navigating onto an off-ramp, taking a small roundabout, and heading out north on another highway.

‘Even as I started working for my father and he went into law enforcement, we remained friends. Odd as it seems, we just... stayed away from those areas of our lives and kept in touch about everything else.’

‘Was the—’

I cut myself off.

I can’t ask him if he’s responsible for his friend’s injuries. I remember the last time I’d accidentally stepped on this man’s honor.

‘Ask what you want to ask, Freya,’ Leon prompts. ‘I know what you’re probably thinking. You won’t offend me.’

I flush red with chagrin. *Busted.*

‘I er... I was just wondering if his head injury was... um...’

‘Anything to do with my family?’ he finishes for me.

I nod.

‘It was,’ he admits calmly. ‘But only tangentially. It was Cisco’s own that shot him.’

I blink. *His own?* As in... cops? Cisco had been shot by his own team?

My mind is immediately racing with ideas.

Were they dirty cops? Was *he*? Just what on earth could have happened that would cause someone to—?

I’m distracted when we pass a sign marked for the E-45.

‘Hang on... Where are we going?’ I demand.

‘Back to Palermo.’

‘Wait...’ I push myself upright, hands on the seat, even though I’m in a moving vehicle and have nowhere to go. ‘We’re leaving without the casing?’

‘We won’t need the physical evidence if we have Cisco’s report,’ Leon assures me. ‘And he’ll call me with the results before we make it back.’

‘What if he doesn’t find what you need?’ I ask, my heart suddenly pounding in my chest.

Leon keeps his eyes on the road and his tone deadly calm. He shrugs like we’re discussing something as banal as how we prefer our tea...

‘Then the casing is worth nothing anyway. But I’m pretty sure he’ll find something that can tie the gun to past hits. Assassins this good tend to work with the same equipment a lot.’

‘So, we’re going back to Palermo... so that you can show the report to your father?’

‘Something like that.’

His evasion is annoying. I can feel my blood heating all over again.

‘What do you mean, “something like that”?’ I repeat sharply.

Instead of answering, Leon checks his mirrors, sets off his indicator, and finds an open space to pull up on the hard shoulder. After activating his warning lights, he turns to face me, his seatbelt pulling taut across his chest.

That long tendon in the side of his neck stands stark beneath his skin.

‘Freya,’ he says, drawing my gaze back to his face. ‘I think we need to talk for a second about how to get you back to the States.’

‘What?’ I stumble, thrown for a loop. We’d been talking about his family, not mine. *Hadn’t we?*

Leon holds my gaze, the dark whiskey brown of his eyes burning with a cool and scary heat.

‘We need,’ he begins, in a calm and deliberately steady tone, ‘to address the very real possibility that my father isn’t going to be swayed by a minor piece of evidence and one man’s claims of innocence.’

My heart thumps harder against my ribs. My thoughts whirl like someone has set an egg beater on High and gone to town with my prefrontal cortex.

‘Wait, wait!’ I demand, hands up. ‘You said that we just needed Cisco to prove the bullet came from a professional assassin and then your name would be cleared. You *said* this would *work!*’

Fear has my voice rising in both volume and pitch but, this time, Leon remains infuriatingly calm.

Apparently, it’s only danger to *me* that sets his rage-o-meter off the charts. Discussing his own death is seemingly nothing to get worked up about.

There’s probably a compliment in there somewhere but I’m too rattled to see it.

‘I *said*,’ he emphasizes, ‘that it was our best shot. Not at convincing my father but at turning the attention of his deputies.’ Resettling in his seat to lean a heavy shoulder against the back of his chair, Leon gets illustrative with his hands. ‘If Cisco can find a tie to previous hits in the police records’—he marks the first step of a journey with the side of his palm—‘and I can get a few influential leaders in the Machelli group together,’—he marks the second stage with his other hand—‘then I can present my case. If’—he raises a finger—‘and only if, they believe me... we *then* have a hope of putting enough pressure on my father to lift the bounty on my head.’ Leon pauses, making sure I’ve followed him thus far. ‘If not,’ he warns, ‘Cyrus is going to be on me in a heartbeat.’

‘And,’ he adds before I can interrupt. ‘I don’t want you here when that happens.’

I swallow.

‘But Cyrus said he didn’t *want* to kill you,’ I point out. That was why he left me alive in the motel.

‘He won’t have a choice, Freya,’ he says. Leon’s tone is soft but unyielding. Like he’s trying to explain an unfortunate truth to an innocent. ‘If this goes on much longer, the old man is going to put his foot down all the harder and what is left of my connections with these men—with Cyrus, with Jaime—they’re all going to disintegrate.’

I can feel a tension headache building. Feel the panic swirling. Thick as fog, it’s choking me. The hazard lights, winking their disruptive orange on and off, are starting to make me feel sick.

I know what Leon’s trying to say, what he’s trying to warn me about. But the idea that this whole thing isn’t going to come out right. Just the idea that Leon could die... could be *killed*...

For a minute, I think I really am going to throw up.

Leon’s fingers brush through my hair. They trace the shell of my ear, sending warm shimmers over my skin and down my



neck.

‘I’m not trying to scare you, *carina*,’ Leon whispers softly.

He strokes my ear lobe between his thumb and forefinger. He brushes the back of his fingers over the hollow behind my ear. I close my eyes and lean into his petting.

*So warm...*

‘And I’m not saying that I’m just going to lay down and accept the worst outcome here. I don’t *want* to die.’

‘Good!’ I blurt, eyes popping open.

Leon smiles but its softness fails to reach his eyes.

‘Nevertheless, I need you to understand that there is a very real chance that I won’t be making it out of this mess, despite my best efforts. And’—he continues even as I open my mouth to protest—‘we need to have a plan in place so that you can go home. Because I’ll be damned if I’m dragging you down with me in all this.’

And before my eyes, the infuriating man pulls a small and very familiar object from his pocket.

Cyrus’ tracker.

‘*What the hell?!*’ I shriek. ‘You still *have* that?’

Leon looks me dead in the eye.

‘You are going to use this.’

‘The hell I am!’

There’s no way I’m ratting Leon out. No way I’m going to be responsible for his death. I jerk away from the little black object like it’s a wild beast. Leon takes hold of my wrist and pulls me back towards him. I struggle against his hold but he’s too big, too relentless.

Heat surrounds us as we wriggle and fight for supremacy.

‘*You’re going to use it...*’ Leon finally orders, waving the tracker in my face.

I stare at him, panting.

‘...when I say so,’ he finishes. ‘I’ll be turning myself in to the family anyway to try and get an audience with the right people. If we time it right, it’ll look like you were turning me in, the family will owe you a debt of honor, and Cyrus will get you out of Italy. That way, if I die—’

‘Stop saying that!’ I screech and slap the little piece of plastic out of Leon’s hand. The tracker flies over my knees, hits the dashboard with a *thunk*, and skitters down into the footwell out of sight.

‘Goddammit woman, I’m being realistic!’ Leon warns with infuriating resolve.

I search for an alternative. *Any* alternative.

‘What about *my* testimony?’ I abruptly remember. ‘You need someone to corroborate your story that the bullet came from—’

‘No.’ Leon doesn’t even let me finish. He just shakes his head. ‘You’ll be on a plane by then. My witness will do alone.’

*Oh, hell no!*

‘Leon—’

‘Freya!’ He cuts me off again. ‘I’m serious. I’m not bringing you into this any more than you already have been. You are going to get on that plane, fly home, and live your life.’ He brushes a thumb over my cheek before eyeing me playfully. ‘*Sans* bad boys. Just as you wanted.’

I refuse to laugh.

Nothing about this entire situation is funny. Least of all my dating preferences. Which now seem such a maudlin and selfish concern.

Rather than laughing, I feel ready to cry.

‘Why are you doing this?’ I whisper.

Leon frowns in confusion.

‘What do you mean “*why*”?’

He knows what I mean. I know he does.

Just sitting here, side by side, face to face... I can feel his skin without touching him. I know the taste of his mouth without a kiss. I know the soft thickness of his hair without needing to reach out.

I feel him. I know him.

And I have the terrifying suspicion that he knows me too. That he feels me as intensely as I do him.

And if that's true...

'What were you saying before?' I ask him. 'About me leaving?'

Leon stiffens. He swallows. Breaking away, he turns off the hazard lights and makes ready to drive again.

'It doesn't matter,' he says.

I let him pull out onto the highway and then go right back to my guns...

'I think it does.'

'Well, I'm telling you that it doesn't!'

An angry silence falls between us.

'I really don't like you right now,' I say.

'I really don't care,' he grunts back.

And we fall back into quiet, both of us knowing that we're liars.

It's another hour before Leon glances my way.

'Get some sleep,' he says when I try to suppress a yawn.

'Are you going to be here when I wake up this time?' I grumble.

Leon seems to wince but, a second later, it's gone.

'Absolutely,' he vows.

'You promise?'

He catches me in his peripheral.

'I pinky swear it.'

I roll my eyes and restrain a smile.

‘Don’t try to be cute. I’m still mad at you,’ I warn him.

‘All right,’ he says.

Shivering, I bundle myself up in the passenger seat and try to relax. But Leon’s warnings have been wildly effective. His words play around in my head, scripting visions and howling foreboding. Frightening images of Leon lying cold and broken, with unseeing eyes, swirl around my head.

With much shuffling, a few mind games, and dozens of sheep fully accounted for, the exhaustion of the day finally catches up with me.

I fall asleep with my head turned towards Leon... and my hand resting on his thigh.

## CHAPTER

## *Fifteen*

I wake up groggy and with a crick in my neck.

A large hand is gently nudging my shoulder and I can hear my name, murmured by a deliciously thick voice.

As I blink up at Leon, I smile, then frown. In just a few days, I've become accustomed to waking up on the alert.

'What is it? What's happening?' I ask stupidly.

Leon looks amused and... disappointed? With my door open, he's leaning inside the car, hands poised at my knees and shoulders.

*Was he getting ready to carry me?*

I'm almost sorry I woke up.

'We're here,' he says instead of answering me. Retreating from the car, he stands straight and looks up at the view.

I do the same and, for a moment, wonder if I'm still dreaming.

The car is parked in a patch of unrefined gravel with edges blurred by overgrown thickets of green throngs and winter wildflowers of white and gold. Straight ahead is a high wall of alabaster stone, and a slanting staircase leading up to a building some ten feet above us. I can see the terracotta tiles of the roof, hanging baskets of fuchsia blooms, and a lavender-blue wisteria with too-early flowers winding its way over the upper floor.

*Just where in the hell...?*

Whilst nothing but blue skies flank the front of the house—the view from which must be spectacular—down here, the car is cool beneath the shade of thick elms and willow trees. Only for our grotto of wildflowers do the trees retreat and allow in the fading sunshine.

Twisting to look back through the rear window I can see a dirt track behind us. It winds through pretty woodland lit only by the stray beams of winter sun that breach the canopy.

*Had we gotten here through a freakin' fairy glade?*

‘Come on, *la bella addormentata*,’ Leon croons. ‘You can stop and gape later.’

Flushing, I snap my mouth shut and scramble out of the car. Leon doesn’t bother to lock it. He just leads me to the stairs and up towards the house.

His hand rests on my collar but it doesn’t exactly hold on or direct me. It’s just... *there*. As if Leon is instinctively maintaining a physical connection.

*“You’re going to leave anyway...”*

I try to catch a surreptitious glance at Leon, my thoughts whirling a mile a minute.

Am I looking into his words, his actions, too much?

Would it be taking too much for granted, if I assume he’s getting as attached as I am?

*Does it matter?*

*Aren’t you going home as soon as all of this is over?*

Thinking about “this”, and all the drama attached, has my memory of the last few hours snapping back into place.

The casing. The call.

‘Did Cisco reach out?’ I ask as we mount the stairs.

My question is almost forgotten, however, upon reaching the top of the stairs. Not watching where I step, I’m distracted by a view three times as stunning as I’d imagined.

The large, elegant house sits snug against a sloping hillside. The view beyond its front doors, therefore, stretches *down* as much as it does *out* and the resulting vista is one of those things that has you believing in an all-powerful deity. Because something this beautiful just *has* to have been created with deliberate intent. No accident of natural science could have placed emerald fields, pretty townships, and the open sky in such a spectacular arrangement.

I'm drawn away from the Sicilian countryside by Leon's response as much as his hand, which turns us back towards the house.

'Yes, he called,' he says as a woman steps out of the house to greet us. 'But I'll tell you about it later.'

'But why—'

'Later, *carina*,' he emphasizes, his gaze fixed on the elegant lady in a swirling, wraparound dress of pink and green.

The ground floor of the house has a wrap-around terrace, braced with rounded columns that support the front-facing balcony of the floor above. I have a strong guess as to the lady's identity as soon as she steps out from under the balcony's shadow and into the late afternoon sunshine.

Standing a little taller than I, with hair and eyes of a nondescript brown, the woman might have been overlooked in a crowd if it wasn't for the intense beauty shining through her coloring.

Large eyes, high cheekbones, and a glamorous white smile... Elegant neck, toned limbs, and an hourglass figure perfect enough to make your eyes water. If female perfection could be bottled into one human form, it was in the figure before me.

And, given the pure adoration on her face as she reaches for Leon, I might have been wildly jealous if I hadn't noticed the similarities between the pair. Though she hardly looks old enough to have a grown son—let alone one in his thirties—I can read their connection even before Leon bends to wrap the woman in his embrace.

‘*Mamma...*’ he greets.

‘*Mia gattino...*’ she murmurs back, one hand wrapped around Leon’s waist and the other fluffing his hair as she holds him tight.

I stand awkwardly to one side, a wave of homesickness rushing through me. There’s nothing like a mother’s hug to make the world feel infinitely safer.

Leon’s mother spies me over her son’s shoulder and breaks their embrace to offer out a hand.

‘*Chi è questa bellezza, Leon?*’

I can manage that translation myself and am instantly charmed, taking her hand in mine and giving it a friendly shake. Afterwards, Luisa insists on the traditional kisses to both cheeks.

Leon gestures between the two of us.

‘Freya, this is my mother, Luisa Averna.’

‘It’s nice to meet you, *signora*,’ I attempt in Italian. ‘I’m Freya Harrison.’

‘She is *americana*?’ Leon’s mother shoots him a look layered with all manner of questions before switching on her hostess-mode. ‘Welcome to *Casa Della Natura, cara...*’

Clearly, my Italian is poor enough to leave my roots obvious. And for her to switch to English. I try to take that as politeness over critique.

‘Come in, come in...’ Luisa’s English is just as perfect as Leon’s, only laden with a much thicker accent. ‘You have perfect timing. I was just serving supper.’

The idea of food has my stomach rumbling and I realize I’ve not eaten since breakfast.

It’s cool under the balcony and then warm inside the house. Leon kicks off his shoes in the entryway and I do the same, trying not to grin.

He catches me.



‘What?’ he asks.

‘Nothing,’ I say. ‘It’s just funny to see you doing that.’

Leon glances at his feet.

‘Taking off my shoes?’

‘Obeying the rules of the house,’ I explain. ‘Like a good little boy.’

Leon frowns ferociously but I just think it’s cute. There’s something wildly attractive about a bold, alpha male who will gladly bend the knee to respect his mother.

‘Good little boy?’ he growls. He bends low to murmur in my ear as we enter the house: ‘You’ll pay for that later...’

Shivering under his primal tone, I try to distract myself with interior design...

The first floor of Luisa’s home is mostly open-plan. In a single, wide space is a bright sitting room, a long dining table, and—to the far left—an expansive modern kitchen. Luisa is darting between the counters and the fridge with effortless grace. Despite her age, which has to be at least fifty, her steps are fluid. She moves like water.

I’ve seen the same grace in Leon, I realize. Only, in him, the elegance reads more like a predatory rolling of muscle.

The entire room smells of stewed beef, vegetables, and horseradish. When Luisa opens the oven, crisp roasting potato joins the aroma.

‘That smells amazing, Mrs. Averna...’

My compliment is waved aside.

‘Pah! Luisa, *por favor!*’ she insists. ‘And it is Maria who deserves the credit, not I.’

She waves the both of us to the dining table. I sit but Leon remains standing, quick to relieve his mother of several hot dishes and help to serve the food. At a loss for something to do, I’m thankful when Leon reads my anxiety and hands me a batch of cutlery to lay.

When Luisa said she had been ready to serve food, she hadn't been kidding. Three minutes after leaving the car, I'm sitting before a table dressed with enough food to serve at least six people. A vat of beef stew takes center stage, flanked by dishes of baked potatoes stuffed with cream cheese and horseradish, and a glass bowl of crisp winter salad.

But only three places and three wine glasses are set.

'Are we not waiting for anyone else?' I whisper toward Leon as he takes the seat at the head of the table. His mother, taking the place opposite me, is the one to answer.

'No, *mia bambolina*,' she says, the term lost on me. 'It is just me.'

'So... who's Maria?' I ask as Luisa serves Leon some of the stew.

*Ah, Italy... the land where the husband is king and the son prince of the realm...*

'Oh, Maria is *mia domestica*,' Luisa explains. 'She runs the household but is also a dear friend of mine. She has great talent in the kitchen—something I have never been lucky enough to possess. She returns home to dine with her family but she cooks meals like this that I can eat for several days. Especially in winter. In summer it is too warm for hot things.' As she takes the bowl from in front of me and begins dishing up more stew, Luisa nods towards the salad. 'I had only to add a little more of the vegetables to have enough for guests.'

'So, you live alone?' I ask, a little perplexed. Luisa seems so bright and eager at our presence, it surprises me that she should spend most of her evenings in solitude.

'Only at night. I have Maria and Raul, my gardener, during the day. I have many friends I visit. And, of course, Giovanni who visits me.'

I feel Leon tense over his meal at the sound of his father's name. I suspect Luisa notices too but she says nothing as she hands me the now steaming bowl of stew.

Before I can take it, she hesitates.

‘I forgot to ask. You are not vegetarian? Or one of these girls who is...’ She glances at Leon and says something in Italian. ‘How is it said in English?’

His tension evaporating, Leon is abruptly trying to restrain a smile. And failing. He glances at me with a devilish expression.

“‘Watching your weight’...’ he translates.

I giggle, taking the bowl from Luisa with enthusiasm.

‘I’m not vegetarian, *signora*,’ I assure her. ‘And I could watch my weight all I like, I don’t think it’s going anywhere.’

Leon snorts inelegantly into his stew. His mother shoots him a heated look.

‘*Mia gattino*, stop filling your face and serve the wine. Did I teach you nothing?’

What follows is a meal so enjoyable, so relaxed, that—for a moment—I forget the threat that has loomed over mine and Leon’s heads for the last few days.

I discover that Luisa’s home is just a few miles from Palermo, out on its eastern hillside. Which explained why Leon had chosen to drop in on our way back to the city.

I learn that Luisa has lived in the house for nearly thirty years and that Leon had grown up within its walls after they moved from Carrozziere...

... and that he used to skateboard.

‘You were a *skater*?’ I ask with a high degree of amusement. My joy only escalates when I notice the color rising on Leon’s face.

‘Not *exactly*,’ he argues.

‘*Si*, it was a short-lived career,’ Luisa agrees. ‘The skateboard was a Christmas gift. By Easter, he had broken his arm twice and collarbone once.’

‘So you were a *poor skater*?’ I tease.

Leon is grinning.

‘I was *adventurous*,’ he corrects.

Luisa gives a ladylike snort.

‘Too adventurous for my heart,’ she says. ‘It was a good day for *tua mamma* when you gave up that board.’

Luisa turns a thoughtful gaze on me as she offers me the last of the baked potatoes.

‘Your parents do not worry for you here, *bambolina?*’

Having already eaten two of the potatoes, I’m shocked at my persistent hunger and take the last one with a smile of thanks.

‘No more than usual, I don’t think,’ I say, feeling another pang of that homesickness. ‘I call them every week to check in. They seem all right with my being here.’

*Of course, they also have no idea I’m running for my life, right now...*

‘And what is it you are here for?’ Luisa asks with genuine curiosity.

The conversation goes on.

I explain about my postgraduate Masters in Photography and Marketing and how I decided to go back to school as a mature student. I talk of the buildings I’ve been shooting in Palermo and my interest in architecture. And how I have another year of study back in the States after the summer.

I’m not usually one to chat so openly about my life but Luisa is an avid and friendly listener. She engages. She asks questions. Just talking with her makes me feel more fascinating, more interesting.

By the time I’ve run through her curiosities, we’ve all finished eating and are cradling our wine glasses as we slip slowly into gastro comas.

I can’t remember the last time I ate so well and so contentedly.

‘And how is it,’ Luisa finally asks her son, ‘that you and this pretty photographer came together, *mia gattino?*’

*Oh, and there's the indigestion. Right on cue.*

The air around us becomes suddenly still and Leon chews his last mouthful of salad thoughtfully.

Despite being the lover to the head of the Machelli family, it's become clear to me throughout dinner that Luisa is kept safe and isolated in her hilltop home. She does not take part in the family business, nor does she seem to get the latest announcements within the organization. Her prime source of information appears to be Leon. And he's kept tight-lipped on everything that's happened since we met.

'Alexei,' he finally says. 'Maurice told you he passed?'

The bright light in Luisa's face dims.

'*Si*,' she murmurs. 'I feel for Beatris greatly. To lose a child...' She shakes her head, sorrowfully. 'Alexei was a good man'—she reaches across to take Leon's hand—'and a good brother to you.'

Leon nods. He swallows.

'Freya was there,' he explains. I almost jump at being brought back into the conversation. Like I've popped a private grief bubble. 'She drove us to the hospital after... after it happened.'

I shift awkwardly in my seat when Luisa looks at me with far deeper respect than I deserve.

'*Gracias*,' she says.

The word is simple but feels all the more profound for it.

I fidget and take a sip from my wine glass.

'And that is how you are now together?' Luisa goes on to ask. She smiles. 'You take one look and are unable to part from her, *mia gattino*?'

When her teasing is met with only stilted quiet, Luisa's brows drop and her gaze sharpens. The corners of her mouth tighten and she suddenly adopts a stubborn, no-nonsense attitude.

'Something is wrong,' she states.

‘Nothing is wrong, *Mamma*.’

‘Do not lie to me. I can see it on both of your faces. What has happened?’

Leon switches to Italian as he tries to coerce his mother, but she bites back at him.

‘English, *mia bambino*. You are being rude.’

Nervously, I push my chair back from the table.

‘Freya...’ Leon protests.

‘*Mia bambolina*, you do not need to leave!’

‘No, please,’ I insist, taking up my coat from the back of the chair. ‘You’ve not yet had the chance to catch up in private. If you’ll allow me to enjoy your balcony, *signora*, I’ll leave the two of you to talk? Though,’ I eye the table of empty plates, ‘please do not clear up before calling me back?’

Luisa looks confused for a moment.

‘Washing dishes is the least I can do in thanks for such a delicious meal,’ I explain to her obvious amusement.

She waves that dismissive hand of hers.

‘No, sweet girl. Leon can clear the table. He must occasionally prove himself useful for something.’

I catch Leon’s eye as I shrug into my coat and try to keep my expression straight.

‘Yes,’ I agree, ‘I suppose he must.’

Giving the two of them some privacy, I head for the stairs to the balcony. A prickling on the back of my neck tells me Leon is watching me leave with a fire I feel all the way to my toes.

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OUTSIDE, the view has shifted dramatically. Since our arrival, the sun has set, turning fields of vermillion into expanses of slate gray. The trees over the hillside are towering hands of

ebony with the dark fingers of the deciduous breaking through the thick evergreens. Out to the west is Palermo and two or three little townships speckle the view a little closer to home. Each settlement is brightly lit. A glowing patch of fallen stars in the blanket of the land.

There's a beautiful smell in the air that wasn't here a few hours ago and I remember something about certain species of flowers that only bloom and give scent at night...

I can hear the twittering of birds and the chirp of cicadas.

The night is dark but somehow comforting. The air feels... thick. Soft. Pleasant.

Though the night is cool, hot stew and red wine keep me toasty from the inside out. I have only to wrap my coat tight around my torso and bury my bare hands in its folds to stay warm and snug.

I lose track of time but think it's likely half an hour before there are footsteps behind me. Footsteps too light to be that of a man.

'Is everything all right?' I ask as Luisa approaches. 'Where's Leon?'

'He has gone for a swim to cool off.' Luisa accurately reads the surprise on my face in the dim light from the windows. 'We have a small pool around the side of the property. You're welcome to use it, if you wish.'

I smile.

'I am sorry for causing such an imposition.'

'By using the pool?' she asks, her eyes bright with teasing.

'By coming here,' I say. 'I'm sorry we came and...'

*And what? Interrupted her meal, disturbed her evening, caused an argument with her son?*

*All of the above?*

'You *should* be sorry,' Luisa teases, coming to lean on the balcony wall beside me. 'It took much disturbance and effort to add an extra tomato and half a lettuce to that salad.'

I grin into the darkness, enchanted by Luisa's hospitable nature.

'But you can make it up to me,' she adds, casting a look of shrewd speculation in my direction, 'by telling me about you and my son?'

Luisa had joked at the dinner table about Leon and I keeping company. But this is the first time she's spoken of it with such a serious tone.

Gone is the doting mother. I'm now speaking with a protective parent.

'What er... what about us?' I ask, wondering what Leon might wish his mother to know—or *not* know.

'You expect me to believe you are not sharing a bed with my son?'

*Oh boy.*

My face flames red. I'm sure it can be seen, even in the dark.

'Are you dating?' Luisa persists.

*Dating...* God, how suburban that sounds...

'Not exactly,' I hedge.

'Why not, when you are sleeping together?'

*Oh boy, for the second time.*

'You don't mince your words do you, *signora*?'

'Luisa,' she corrects me again. 'And no, I like to get to the point... What is that look for?'

I try to settle my features into something less obvious. Once again, my lack of a poker face is the issue.

'You're er... not what I was expecting of Leon's mother,' I admit.

'Why? Because I am a kept woman?'

*Wow.*



I'm beginning to realize that Leon might not have inherited his boldness from his father's side.

With me at a clear loss for words, Luisa looks out over the balcony and sighs into the night. After a few minutes, she settles an elbow on the stone and assesses me with a kind gaze.

'Permit an old woman some well-intended advice? You can do with it what you will after.'

It's on the tip of my tongue to ask her where she'll find an "old" woman at this hour but as honest as the comment would have been it feels just as a tad excessive in the flattery department. So, I simply shrug.

'By all means...'

'Life is full of bullshit.'

I choke.

*What a way to start.*

'We're told growing up that, to be happy, we must have many things...' Luisa says, addressing the air more than me. 'We must have a marriage, an attractive home, and many children. We must be wealthy but not selfish, healthy but not shallow, ambitious but also *filantropa*. We build long lists of what life should be like for us to be happy...'

She levels me with a look and says:

'But *I* am happy.

'I have a home I enjoy and an acceptable comfort in my life. I have the freedom to pursue my interests. I have a son I am very proud of and a man to love.'

Something in my expression has Luisa smiling.

'Yes,' she repeats. 'I love him. There are elements of Giovanni that I struggle to respect. Some that I cannot accept at all. But those things are not all of him and I love him for what he is.'

'Isn't love supposed to be built on respect?' I point out.

'I *do* respect him. Pieces of him, at least.'

‘But not all...?’ I say.

Luisa’s smile remains.

‘Needing to love all of someone is more on the bullshit list, *mia bambolina*. If you wait for a man who is all respectable, what you are truly looking for is a man who does no wrong.’ She raises a wise eyebrow. ‘For that, you will be searching a very long time.

‘Instead, find a partner who can give you a life you love. Who can satisfy *your* needs.’

I frown.

‘Doesn’t that sound a little one-sided?’

Luisa lets down her hair to scratch at her scalp. She smiles as the long tresses tumble about her shoulders, then brushes them back from her face. Something in the gesture reminds me of Leon driving his fingers through his hair when he’s frustrated or tired.

‘Not at all,’ Luisa says, apparently enjoying the discussion. ‘When we are content, we can improve the lives of others all the more. I think I give to Giovanni what he needs as much as he does to me.

‘Do you think he would continue to house me, to visit me all these years later, if I did not improve his life?’

*She has a point there...*

‘Only he can decide when I outlive that purpose. And only I can decide when he outlives his,’ Luisa concludes. ‘For now, we express our needs clearly, show our appreciation for one another and each make the other’s life better. Happier.

‘Is that not love?’

Whilst some romantic side of my nature is pouting in the back of my head, I’m having a hard time disagreeing with her.

Surely, what Luisa’s describing is very much love. Though an entirely different set of circumstances, I can easily apply her logic to my parents, who’ve been happily married for

nearly forty years. Neither is a faultless human being and each determines whether they can love beyond those faults.

Somehow, I have always imagined my parents, or other couples, as a single unit. That they work to create a life together. And, if that life isn't perfect or doesn't include all the things Luisa has just described: marriage, children, wealth, it somehow falls short of life's purpose.

It has never occurred to me to look at a relationship not as one existence but two complimentary lives intertwined.

And yet, didn't that sound all the healthier? More complex, more vibrant?

More satisfying?

'I have shocked you, *mia bambolina*?'

*Yes.*

'No,' I say, trying to make my smile reassuring. 'I suppose I'm just trying to imagine the world you live in. Leon's world. I'm not sure I understand it.'

'Is understanding his world necessary to understanding him?'

*Again with the straight to the point...*

'I...' I swallow. 'I'm not sure I understand him either.'

'After three days in his company?' Luisa asks with a healthy dose of sarcasm. 'I am shocked.'

I chuckle and rub at my face, more than a little astray in this conversation. Is Luisa encouraging romance between me and her son or warning me off? And, after that "well-intended advice", what the hell does love even look like to me now?

'What is it you wish to know of Leon?' she finally asks tenderly.

I sigh.

'I don't know... the "how", I guess? How did someone like him end up...' I snort. 'I don't even know what he does for a job. For the Machellis, I mean.'

Luisa is quiet for a moment as if choosing her words with care.

‘The first thing to understand is that being part of the Machelli group is not, for Leon, a job. Nor was it for Alexei. Even those not of the blood, but who have worked in the inner circle for many years, do not see the group as an employer. It is a family. It is a loyalty that goes deeper than tasks and morals. To say you cannot accept the Machellis is to say you cannot accept the color of Leon’s eyes. They are a part of him in much the same way.’

‘But they weren’t always,’ I point out. ‘Not when you lived down near Syracuse?’

‘No,’ she agreed, apparently surprised by my knowledge. ‘For nearly eight years I raised Leon away from the group, from the violence and the danger. I had left Giovanni when I realized I was with child, for that very reason. He did not know.’ Luisa sighed softly. ‘But, when he discovered Leon’s existence, Giovanni made it clear he would not accept a son being raised outside of his influence. Even one he did not wish to have. We were brought back to Palermo and Leon met his *papà* for the first time. Leon was given the finest education; tutors I could not afford alone. His state of living was better. He had an inheritance so large he would want for nothing in life. And I had the man I loved back by my side...’ Luisa’s fingers twist together nervously. ‘But I also watched as my son was trained in fighting and guns. As he was treated as second—as inferior—to his half-brother. Giovanni deemed Leon ready to work for the family at sixteen. I have not had a restful night of sleep since.’

‘Because you fear for his safety...?’ I’m starting to understand what that kind of terror feels like...

‘In part. But I am also kept awake by doubt. Whether I made the right choice all those years ago. Whether the benefits of this life outweigh the bad. Whether I had any choice, at all?’ Luisa looks back towards the house. I can see shadows in her eyes. As if she’s watching her own memories on playback. Perhaps seeing a young Leon running about the house or learning to ride a bike on the veranda.

‘My solace is that Leon insists he enjoys his life. That the family gives him purpose and place.’

‘I’m sure he’s also pleased for *your* happiness,’ I point out.

Luisa smiles.

‘*Si*, I know he would suffer much to see me happy. It is my truest joy and greatest worry.’

I exhale long and slow, trying to see the world as Luisa does. It’s like the conversation I had with Leon in the hotel, all over again. Is the world really gray? Or is it just a hodge-podge of black and white that are hard to separate. And, if so, how much of each do we—do *I*—want, need, or tolerate in my life?

If someone had, a week ago, described to me a beautiful woman who lived as the kept mistress of her mobster lover... who had allowed that mobster to turn their child into a soldier for the mafia, all whilst never accepting him as a true son because of an archaic ideal of illegitimacy...?

I’d have struggled to see that woman as little more than a selfish floozy, the mobster as nothing but a cruel lunatic.

And yet Luisa is no such thing. And I doubt that she would love a man who is any such thing.

*It’s all so complicated...*

‘You see?’ I finally sigh. ‘I knew none of that about Leon’s past. So, how can I say that I know *him*?’

Luisa blinks, smiles, and reaches to rest a hand upon mine on the balcony wall.

‘What you are describing, *mia bambolina*, is *information*. That is all. It is not who he is as a person.’

I wrinkle my nose. Again with the convoluted truth bombs.

‘Information about a person changes with every stage of their lives. And it can be learned by anyone as long as you have time and openness.’ Luisa’s eyes twinkle naughtily in the starlight. ‘A good lover, male or female, is one who is both

teacher and student. They teach about themselves and they are willing to learn about their partner.

‘Rather than question whether or not you know Leon, dear Freya, perhaps you should ask if you *wish* to? And whether or not you think him a good teacher and a willing student?’

‘If these are both true, the understanding and the information you feel you need, will follow.’

I laugh softly.

‘What have I said?’ Luisa asks with equal mirth. ‘I have said something wrong?’

‘No, not at all,’ I assure her with a shake of my head. ‘I just cannot tell if your advice is horribly pragmatic or hopelessly romantic.’

*Regardless, it’s giving me a lot to think on...*

*Do I want to learn about Leon?*

*Yes.*

*Is Leon willing to show himself to me?*

*Hasn’t he already?* Else what was all that about his childhood in the car?

Then again... he was being very cagey about other things. Like how he now feels about us. About me.

*Earth to Harrison... aren’t you hanging out in that same cage?*

And *why?*

‘We both agreed,’ I say out loud. ‘We agreed that we wouldn’t see each other after... after Leon finishes something.’

‘Because?’

*Because Leon might not survive.*

Realization hits me. Like a deep, tolling bell it echoes in my head, heart, and belly. It sends chills through my fingertips, sees my palms slick with sweat, and has my insides coiling like a snake.

Only now do I realize why we're here; why Leon brought us to this house...

*"...there is a very real chance that I won't be making it out of this mess..."*

*Leon wanted to see his mother one last time.*

I feel sick.

'I... I have to find Leon,' I cry, stumbling away from the balcony's edge. Luisa reaches out but I'm halfway to the doors before her voice pulls me up short.

'Freya...'

I skid to a halt, watching the woman who has been so open with me, so kind. For the first time since I met her, she actually looks her age...

'Please...' she pleads, 'tell me?'

For a moment, I'm tempted.

I'm tempted to tell her to call Giovanni Carlos Machelli. To ask the man she loves just what he thinks he's doing putting a bounty on their son.

It would blow up whatever relationship they have but something tells me Luisa would rather see her whole world burn than allow harm to come to her child.

Which, I realize, is exactly why Leon has told her nothing.

'I...' I hesitate, torn between compassion for one Aversa and loyalty to the other. I try to find something comforting to say. Something truthful...

'I won't *let* anything happen to him,' I finally say.

Luisa swallows. I can see that I've not given her the reassurance she was looking for. But it's all I have to offer.

And she knows it.

'Thank you, Freya. *Buona notte.*'

'*Buona notte,* Luisa.'

Back inside, I'm all set to head downstairs and out to the pool when I'm pulled up short by the sound of running water.

Taking the second door from the end of the corridor, I discover a beautiful yet highly masculine space, instantly recognizable as Leon's bedroom.

Whilst the communal rooms downstairs are decorated in warm, earthy tones, this chamber is cooler and deeper in palette.

The furniture is a dark, almost midnight black, wood and the fabrics are platinum white. The floorboards, runners, and doorframes are painted to match and the walls contrast against the snowy brightness with a stylish cool gray. The comforter on the four-poster bed is a rich navy and a woolen blanket of grays, blues, and aquamarines is fitted snugly around the end of its monstrous mattress.

Leon's duffel bag is sitting atop the dresser and the door to an en-suite has been left ajar at the back of the room. I can hear a shower rushing over tile and water sloughing off of a bathing body.

At any other time, the idea of Leon naked, wet, and gleaming would have my brain switching to one lane and one lane only. But right now...?

I can only shut the bedroom door and sink onto the end of the bed.

The idea that Leon had come here to share one final meal with his mother in case he died tomorrow... and had said *nothing* about it...

That he had just sat there at the head of the table, watching the two of us chatting back and forth with that soft smile on his face...

Thinking, the whole time, that he's going to die.

It makes me feel so detached, so isolated, on his behalf.

How did anyone do that—say *nothing*—and just wait for the risk of death? *Alone*.

Damn the man.



Damn his proud, stoic stupidity.

The sound of the shower cuts off. There's a rattle of a curtain being pulled back. Some rough toweling. The sigh of a freshly washed male. And then the door to the en-suite is pulled wide and Leon steps out, wrapped in a black towel and exiting on a backdrop of mist.

The second the door opens I'm off the bed. The moment he steps through it, I'm slamming into him, arms around his neck, lips finding his.

Leon makes an awkward noise of surprise and almost loses his footing but he gets with the program quickly enough. His arms come around me and he leans low so I don't have to stay on my toes.

He breaks away only long enough to smile against my mouth.

'What's this about?' he asks, but I shake my head.

'I just want to kiss you,' I whisper breathlessly.

Leon makes a satisfied purring sound.

'I'll never say *no* to your kiss...'

And we're back to being wrapped around each other.

The kiss is long and languid. Easy and pleasurable. Sweet and seductive.

I pour everything I can into it. I want this kiss to tell Leon that he's not alone. I want him to know that I'm here. I want him to feel my warmth, feel my heartbeat, feel my...

...*my love?*

Pushing the idea away, I lean harder into the moment.

Now is not the time to think of things that will only complicate an already messy situation.

Right now, all I can do for Leon is show him I'm here, through my touch, if not my words.

I work my fingers through his wet hair, I feel the heat of his damp skin. The rough weave of his towel brushes against

my legs.

I tease him with my tongue. He nips at my lower lip. Over and again we play with angle, intensity, and sensation...

The kiss shifts from passionate hunger to gentle reverence. To affection so sweet, so feathery soft, that it brings tears to my eyes.

Unlike other times when our touches have built to an intense fire, white-hot and undeniable... this kiss mellows into an unhurried and infinitely deeper burn.

We're not racing for the sexual finish line. In fact, there's no finish line at all. There's just us. Here. In this moment.

When Leon moves to kiss along my cheek, nibble at my ear, and press his lips against my throat and shoulder, I sigh into the warmth. I keep my arms wrapped around his neck and draw him even closer... until we're just standing together, in a tight and wondrous embrace.

Leon's arms are warm stone around me. His breath is a peaceful ripple through my hair. His chest rises and falls against mine.

The passion is fading, replaced with something gentler but, at its core, far stronger. Something delicate yet concrete.

Something that settles in the foundation of my very soul.

I can feel the muscles in Leon's back, the thick strength of his body. It's like I'm holding a god of virility right here in my arms. And yet, at the same time, I know that a single, well-placed bullet would wipe it all away. Just dissolve Leon into nothing more than a memory, there on the spot.

I tighten my grip. Like I might be able to hold him together myself. Leon responds with the same close hold.

*Please God, I pray, don't let me lose this man.*

## CHAPTER

## *Sixteen*

‘What did Cisco say?’ I finally ask, my voice muffled against Leon’s chest.

Steeling myself for his answer, I breathe in the smell of him. He’s used some kind of earthy, minty soap. And there’s the sweet dampness of his skin. Beneath it all is a hot sensation in my nose that I now identify as the unique scent of Leon.

Leon stiffens at my question but runs a hand up and down my back as if it’s me that needs soothing.

‘He found something,’ he says and I exhale with gusto.

Something is at least... *something*.

Neither of us seems ready to break the hug, simply talking over each other’s shoulders.

‘What did he find? Was it a professional?’

‘Yeah. The casing is a potential match for several unsolved kills. Most in the northern provinces.’

‘Of Sicily?’ I ask. Palermo is fairly “north” as it is.

‘Of Italy,’ he corrects. ‘Several of the homicides are suspected to be tied to a hired gun known as Gabriel.’

‘Gabriel?’

Confused, I lean back in Leon’s arms so I can look him in the eye. His hold doesn’t give and I warm all the way through when the combination presses our lower bodies tight together.

‘Like er...’ I try to remember my train of thought. ‘Like the archangel?’

‘Yeah...’ Leon’s handsome features twist in derision. ‘The messenger of God’s will.’

*Ugh.* I shiver.

‘All right well... whatever his name is, this is a good thing, right? This is something you can show to your family?’

Leon nods.

‘I already called Jaime to set up a meet.’

‘What?!’

Leon smiles.

‘Don’t worry. I used one of the burners I keep here. Then I made sure he couldn’t trace it.’

He nods to a waste paper basket beside the dresser and, under the lamp light, I spy a cluster of plastic pieces, huddled inside the wicker. One of the larger pieces has numbered buttons. Another might have once been a screen.

‘Wh-what did you say to him?’

‘I sent him a message that I have evidence of my innocence and proof of Alexei’s killer. I gave him a list of names. Told him to bring them to my old man’s estate tomorrow at noon. And that I’ll be there to greet them.’

‘And... you think that he will?’

Leon’s eyes turn dark. Like shutters have fallen down behind those beautiful whiskey irises.

‘I’m hoping so,’ is all he says.

I swallow.

*So, either Jaime will honor your friendship and arrange the meet or he’ll follow his orders and turn it into an ambush.*

*And we have no way of knowing which way things will fall.*

‘If... if he *does* get everyone there... Do you think what Cisco has is going to be enough?’

Again, it takes a long time for Leon to answer, his hands now running up and down my arms.

‘I honestly don’t know,’ he says.

Again, I swallow. It’s like I have a tennis ball wedged in my airway. No matter how many times I swallow, I can’t get it to budge. It’s making my eyes water.

‘Then... maybe we should keep running? Wait until you have something more?’

Leon brushes my hair back from my face. It’s a comforting gesture. One that parents use when they’re trying to cushion the blow of bad news.

‘We don’t have the time for that. Cyrus won’t be able to hold off his orders much longer. Our best shot is to get out ahead of this thing with what we have. Slight as it is.’

I shiver.

‘Come on...’ Leon eventually suggests, whisking me out of my coat before I realize what’s happening. ‘There’s nothing more we can do tonight. For now, let’s just go to bed.’

‘I’m not tired,’ I grump like a child. But Leon’s hands are everywhere, stroking my body and nudging me in all the right places. From one heartbeat to the next, I’m practically laying on the comforter.

‘Well, I am,’ Leon argues with a grin. ‘So, how about you just lie down with me and keep the bed warm?’

He tries to manhandle me under the covers fully dressed and I wriggle in half-hearted rebellion. I don’t want to sleep. Somewhere in the back of my head, a timer has begun. A countdown until noon tomorrow. And with so few minutes between now and then, the last thing I want to do is sleep through them. *Any* of them.

Perhaps Leon feels the same way because, after discarding the towel and settling under the sheets naked, he pulls me close and just lays with me. His breath stays even and wakeful. His hands slowly trace the curves of my shoulder and arm.

Neither of us speaks. Neither of us sleeps.

We just lay quietly together in the dark.

After a while, my clothes become too hot, so I strip down to my panties and camisole. But, even then, we do nothing beyond soft strokes and gentle cuddling.

The house settles. I hear footsteps downstairs as Luisa heads to her room on the ground floor. The last of the lights go out.

I hear the irregular drip of the shower head.

‘Leon...?’ I finally ask into the darkness.

‘Hmm...?’ His voice is a rumble beneath my hands.

‘What is it you *do* for your family?’

Leon tenses but I reach out to stroke over one of his pectorals. He relaxes under my touch.

‘A little random?’ he says, dodging the question.

‘Not really,’ I say, sticking to my guns. ‘I asked you before at the hotel. You avoided answering.’

‘I didn’t know if you trusted me yet.’

I glower in the dark.

‘Don’t you mean... you didn’t know if *you* could trust *me* yet?’

Leon resettles against his pillow. I feel him exhale, hot amongst my hair.

‘No. I needed *you* to trust *me*. If you hadn’t followed my instructions the last few days the way you have... Cyrus would have had no excuses to give. He’d have taken us in already. I needed to be sure you would trust me and listen to me.’

‘So, I *am* a good listener?’ I prod at his bare chest.

Leon snorts.

‘Yeah... I didn’t mean what I said before. I was just... you scared me back at Cisco’s. I thought you ran for the door and when I realized you’d been only a few feet away whilst I...’ Leon has to pause for a moment. He clears his throat. ‘If

someone doesn't calm him down, Cisco can be very dangerous and, realizing you were within reach of that, it... it made me livid and I spoke out of turn, I'm sorry.'

I don't need an apology. But I like it all the same.

'So...' I say, bringing it back to my original question. 'You avoided telling me what you do for the Machelli organization because you needed me to trust you?'

Leon nods.

'And it's hard to trust someone you're scared of.'

I try not to tense up.

'Is it scary?'

'You might think so.'

'Try me,' I challenge. When Leon remains quiet, I push a little further. 'My parameters for scary have shifted a fair bit the last few days, Leon. I promise not to run screaming.'

*Lord, let me be able to keep that promise.*

When Leon stays quiet, his mother's voice rings in my head...

*"Is he a good teacher...?"*

'I'm a fixer,' he finally says.

'A what?'

'When the family has an issue, I find the solution.'

'Like... like Cyrus does?' I ask, my blood running a little cooler and my toes starting to numb.

'Not usually,' Leon says, his hands tightening on my arms. 'Killing is effective but it often creates more problems than it solves.'

I exhale.

'So instead you...?'

'Find other means. Sometimes warnings of violence are enough. Sometimes situations are better handled with

blackmail or bribery. Or threats against family and friends. Money and love; the two great motivators.'

I try to absorb this. Leon isn't a killer. Not specifically. But he's threatened others, seen to their pain or torment... all to keep his family's illegal business running...

All because it is a part of him. And because he sees something worthy in it...

*"It is a loyalty that goes deeper than tasks and morals."*

*"...we employ thousands of people, prioritizing those unable to find work elsewhere."*

I have to take a moment to center my thoughts. To connect this new information with the warm, solid man I'm lying beside.

'So... you *don't* kill people...?'

I move so I can see Leon's face. There's only one lamp lit in the room and it casts abstract shadows over his features. Like an oddly handsome Picasso.

'Do you want the truth, *carina*, or the comfort of a lie?'

'The truth.'

*I think.*

'I have killed. More than once. Most often in self-defense. But a few times, it was deliberate and it was calculated.'

I wince.

'Did you... enjoy it?'

The thick fans of Leon's eyelashes flutter down and he sighs, long and hard. Tension pops at the corner of his jaw.

'I've insulted you,' I acknowledge.

'Yes,' he says. 'But I don't blame you for it. With everything else you know of my family, I suppose it's a valid question. No, I did not enjoy it. In fact, I loathed it. I don't see the taking of lives as a game the way people like Cyrus do. I've never been able to shut off that part of my humanity. So, every time I've taken a life, it's been because I convinced



myself that it's the lesser of a poor choice of evils. I'll never apologize for what I have to do but I also do not take joy in it.'

I nod, mostly to myself, as I process this.

'I understand,' I say.

And, surprisingly, I *do*.

Despite his confession—or perhaps because of it—my regard for Leon has not changed.

I do not fear him. I do not doubt him. And, whilst I could never wholly support the idea of murder, my trust in this man has me already painting his past in a light that's somehow justified. As if... killing in those instances *had* to have been the only option. Because, if an alternative existed, the Leon I know would have found it.

Noticing that Leon is still tense as a live wire next to me, I bury an arm under his side and snuggle in closer. He sighs into my embrace and mirrors the hug in return, holding me so tightly that I think I might break into delicious little pieces.

'What does "*gattino*" mean?' I ask.

'Mm?' Leon mumbles sleepily.

'"*Gattino*",' I repeat. 'Your mother calls you "*mia gattino*". I wondered what it meant.'

Leon's chest vibrates with laughter.

'It means "kitten".'

'She calls you "kitten"?' I laugh. Panther maybe. Lion, definitely. But *kitten*?

'It's not an uncommon Italian endearment for parents.'

'Oh no,' I deny. 'It's too late. You can't save your reputation now. The kitten's out of the bag.'

Leon rolls his eyes at me in the dark.

'So, what's "*bambolina*"?' I ask.

Leon grins.

'"Little doll".'

I wrinkle my nose. *Not sure I like that one.*

‘It’s a compliment to your appearance, not an objectification of your worth,’ Leon explains. ‘She thinks you’re a beautiful young woman.’

*Okay, distinctly less offended now.*

‘You don’t want to know what “*carina*” means?’ he asks me.

I flush hot.

‘I already know what it means,’ I confess.

*Carina* is “darling” or “sweetheart”.

We snuggle down together and it’s a while before either of us speaks again. This time, it’s Leon who eventually breaks the silence.

‘Will you answer *me* something now?’ he asks.

*“Is he a willing student...?”*

I smile into Leon’s chest.

‘Fair is fair,’ I offer.

He swallows and I feel the flux of Leon’s throat against my forehead.

‘Your ex,’ he says.

*Uh-oh.*

I stiffen. Leon’s arms tighten.

‘What about him?’ I whisper.

‘What happened with him...?’

I sigh, caught in my own promise of a fair turnabout. I know that it took a lot for Leon to tell me about himself. He deserves the same in return. Yet, the hurt of those particular memories has me instinctively stalling for time.

‘Why do you want to know?’

---

*BECAUSE, right now, I want more of you than you're willing to give? I think.*

*Because, if my life wasn't hanging in the balance, I would want you in it? In my bed every morning, at my table every night...*

*Because, even if we weren't amidst all this chaos, I can't have you anyway because you've decided there's no future for us, based on your past experiences with him?*

Lying there in the dark with Freya, I know that none of those answers are what she wants to hear, however true they may be. So, I work with what I have: avoidance and charm.

'Humor me?' I request, with what I hope to be a winning smile.

It still takes Freya nearly five whole minutes to answer.

To keep myself calm while I wait, I trail my fingertips over her bare arm and down along her thigh. She really has the nicest, softest skin. In the lamplight, she's ghostly pale and I find myself wondering if she'd glow under moonlight.

Just when I think she's not going to answer me at all, Freya opens up. I steel myself for the details but it doesn't help. As she explains her past, rage and jealousy riot through my bloodstream, one after the other, then repeat in a nauseating rinse cycle.

She describes a young man named Jason—a high school boyfriend—who, apparently, ticked every item on the wrong-side-of-the-tracks checklist. The leather jacket, the wayward hair, the motorbike...

'A "bad boy",' I remark as she sets the scene.

She wriggles awkwardly.

'Yes, but it was more than just his clothes... Jason had this... this *confidence* to him. Like the rules of the world weren't for him.'

Given my background, I try not to wince.

Freya describes how she and Jason dated throughout high school. How he was her first lover (I have to keep a tight grip on my expression for that one) and how they continued their relationship into college.

Which is when the trouble started.

‘Jason hadn’t applied to continue in school,’ Freya whispers in the dark. ‘He wanted to work for his uncle as a mechanic. But I don’t think he understood just what that meant for us.’

Freya describes how she grew up in college. How she joined clubs and made new friends. It was there that she developed an interest in photography, despite taking literature as her major.

‘Jason just... couldn’t cope with it. He used to say I was different each time he visited me. That I was changing. He used to make fun of it, talk down to me.’ Freya’s frowning, fiddling with her fingers under the covers. ‘I didn’t really notice what he was doing at first but I started to follow his lead. I stopped seeing friends and gave up a few classes. It wasn’t even him, it was *me*. I was chipping away at my own life. Trying to refine myself into what he wanted. I looked up in my last year of college and realized I had no friends and was midway through an application to leave school. It was like I suddenly woke up to the fact that I was on the wrong path. And that I needed to take a stand before things got too far.’

‘That was very brave of you,’ I say, rubbing at a set of goosebumps that have risen on her skin.

She shivers.

‘Jason didn’t think so...’ She whispers the words. Like she’s afraid the bastard will hear her criticizing him. ‘When I tried to stand up to him, he got angry. Then he got physical.’

The mattress springs creak as my muscles snap tight like corded wire but I try to stay still.

‘It wasn’t true violence like some women suffer...’ she says, pissing me off that her instinct is still to minimize the

experience. Just how far did this asshole crawl inside her head? ‘But... he’d grab my wrist if I tried to leave mid-argument. Or he’d bolt the door when I threatened to walk out.’

I’m starting to twitch but clamp down on the reaction so Freya will keep talking.

‘The sex... got rougher,’ she whispers. My blood runs cold. It just turns to icy sludge, right then and there. I try to breathe. Fail. Try again. At least the twitching has stopped. I can’t move a muscle.

Freya keeps talking...

‘Nothing ever got to the point of injury or bruises but... I could suddenly see what Jason was capable of. How he would eventually treat me, if I let him. So, I broke it off with him.’

My throat feels like sandpaper and my voice is scratchy as I ask:

‘And he just... let you go?’

Freya shudders.

‘No. He stalked me for about a year. Kept turning up at my place, or sending me letters. I’d get texts and emails. I moved twice and had to get a restraining order in the end.’

I rub soothingly up and down her back.

‘Where is he now?’

*An address, I think. All I need is an address and I can hunt him down and return all the fear and turmoil he brought to Freya’s world... ten times over.*

‘I have no idea,’ Freya answers, popping my bubble of vengeance. ‘He hasn’t made contact in nearly six years. Last I heard, he was somewhere in Montana.’

‘And this is why you don’t date men who fit that kind of character?’ I ask.

Freya wriggles in awkward discomfort but instinct has me holding on. Something deep in my gut says that, if I let go now, I let go forever.

‘In the short term, it’s fine,’ she says, talking not to my face but to the dip between my pecs. Her breath is warm and tickles over my skin. ‘But long term... No. I don’t like to date men in who I can see that potential, you know? There were signs right from the beginning that Jason could be controlling but he was also sweet and charming. I ignored one for the other. And I don’t want to make that mistake again. It’s hard to trust that men of... that *sort*... won’t devolve down the same path...’

We grow quiet as I try to absorb what she’s saying. Try to rationalize it. Try to find a loophole in it.

In my gut, I feel the urge to argue. To rebel. Like a lawyer in a courtroom I want to argue my case: to promise her that I am not that man. That I am made of different matter.

But can I honestly say that?

*“There were signs right from the beginning that Jason could be violent and controlling...”*

Hadn’t I just fantasized about hunting down her ex to exert violent justice?

*“The rules of society weren’t for him...”*

Only a moment ago, I confessed to murder...

*“The sex got rougher...”*

I choke on that one. Memories of last night flood my head. Memories I’ve been recalling with glorious passion and sexy intensity...

Now, I feel shame itching to take hold of those moments and twist them into something ugly.

‘Freya...?’

‘Mmm?’

‘Did I...’ I take a calming breath. My toes are numb with fear. ‘Did I scare you last night?’

‘What?’

For the first time since she began her story, Freya leans back to look me in the eye. Avoiding her pull, I keep my own stare fixed over her head.

‘I er...’ I lick my lips nervously. ‘I wasn’t exactly... gentle with you.’

Even in the dark, even in my peripheral, I can catch Freya’s blush.

‘No, but... that was something we agreed to.’

‘I don’t care if you *agreed* to it.’ I snarl. I try to loosen the death grip I suddenly have on her shoulders. ‘You don’t follow through with something frightening just because you agreed to it beforehand—’

‘Wait, wait!’ Freya reaches up around my neck and tries to shake me. I remain rigid with self-hatred. ‘I never *said* I was frightened!’

I swallow and try to keep my eyes on the wall ahead but Freya’s fingers grip my chin and bring my face down to hers. She’s scowling so intensely that it cuts dark shadows across her pretty face.

‘*Nothing* about last night scared me, Leon. It was... well, it was damn amazing if you want the truth. I trusted you every step of the way and you didn’t abuse that trust. *Ever.*’

I exhale. I cough and I clear my throat.

And, like a total sissy, I actually feel my eyes growing damp.

‘That’s good to know,’ I say hoarsely. ‘I just... heard you speak of your ex and him being rough. I know you already see me and him as the same kind of man and the idea that I’d... that you hadn’t *wanted* to... yeah. It’s... it’s just good to know.’

I’m a little perturbed when I notice that Freya’s frown has deepened, not cleared. She’s glowering at me with... intense confusion? Or perhaps baffled speculation?

‘What’s wrong?’ I ask, tucking a strand of her hair back behind her ear. I can’t resist tracing a few of her freckles along

her cheekbone.

‘I was just thinking...’

‘About?’

‘How I wasn’t afraid of you,’ she says. ‘At all.’

*Isn’t that a good thing?*

‘And I was thinking about... *why*. Like *why* would I... and then—the tattoos...’

Okay, now she’s totally lost me. Whose tattoos? I don’t have any and neither does she that I’ve seen...

‘Tattoos?’ I prompt when she falls quiet.

‘Cisco’s tattoos,’ she says.

Okay, *not* where I saw this conversation going...

‘I was thinking something earlier... about which permanencies we choose and which are... How two things can be similar but one chosen, one forced...’ she drifts off again, clearly muddling something through in her head. ‘and then your mom was saying something...’

*Oh, great.*

‘You talked to my *mother*?’

‘Yeah, she was talking about being open and about communicating. Jason was never open with me. We never really talked... Maybe *that’s* what was frightening? Not exactly what he could do if he wanted, but that I knew he wouldn’t hear me if I drew a line? My boundaries meant nothing because he wouldn’t *hear* them. I couldn’t *trust* that he would hear me.’

‘*Carina*, I’ll be honest. I must be more tired than I first thought. You’ve totally lost me here...’

Tired or not, every cell in my body gets hit with lightning when Freya suddenly locks on me with a crystal-clear stare. It knocks the wind out of my lungs, like a sucker punch to the solar plexus.



‘You hear me,’ she declares like it’s the grandest revelation since Darwin.

‘I what?’

‘You hear me,’ she repeats. ‘You *talk* to me.’

I blink.

‘Er... sure.’

*I actually quite enjoy talking to you when I can follow your train of—*

‘I don’t know everything about you,’ she says.

‘Well, no but—’

‘But you would tell me if I asked, wouldn’t you? You *did* tell me...’

Freya’s expression is turning to something akin to wonder.

I’m still completely lost.

‘Again, Freya, you want to translate for the other people in the room?’

Freya’s hands scramble up between us. If I were wearing a shirt I feel certain she’d be grabbing the lapels and pulling me close.

‘Leon, why do you like me?’

I stare at her blankly.

‘Excuse me?’

‘You don’t know everything about me. Just as I don’t about you. But you like me enough to sleep with me. You like me enough to care. *Why?*’

Okay, it’s *my* turn to flush with a little color. I can feel it in my neck and behind my ears.

This is all turning in a direction that cuts a little too close to home; that reveals a little more than I’m sure Freya wants to know...

‘Does it matter?’ I ask, stalling for time.

Freya's eyes flash.

'Humor me,' she says, throwing my own words back at me.

I sigh.

'Honestly?' I ask her.

She nods.

'Always.'

'I don't really see how anyone *couldn't* want you,' I confess.

Her eyes go as round as saucers.

'What?'

I take a breath.

'You're courageous. You're funny. You give back as good as you get because you're strong. And you'll go out of your way to comfort a stranger because you're kind. You'll drive a vintage car like you're auditioning for *Fast and the Furious* despite being terrified the entire time. You're sexy as hell. You orgasm like a fucking queen. And your choice for our first movie night together was porn.'

'Oh my God!' Freya cries, giggling. 'I told you that was a mistake—and *your* fault. Actually you could argue that most of those things are your fault. When I'm not chasing around a handsome mobster, I'm really quite boring...'

I frown at her, trying to assess her objectively.

The wild nature of her hair. The nose that's perhaps a little small by conventional standards. The freckles...

She has an imperfect hairline and a softness to her belly that flies in the face of fitness ads.

She snores.

'Sorry,' I eventually say. 'Can't see it.'

And it's true. I can process information about Freya that says she's not a runway model or a glamazon but... none of it registers as significant.

I simply don't care.

Having her close warms me. Like I've somehow trapped sunshine on the underside of my skin. Watching the sway of her hips or the curve of her mouth has me hard and aching for half the day and night.

I smile every time she smiles.

Though I can never admit it to her, the answer is really quite simple. And I've known it since she ordered takeaway pizza in a five-star hotel.

You don't *see* a person when you're in love. You *feel* them. You *experience* them.

And loving Freya is an experience I never want to let go of.

Even if I have to keep it to myself.

Shifting around under the covers, I brace an elbow on the pillow and wonder at this little revelation.

By all rights, I should be panicking. I should be losing my shit that a woman has reached beneath the jaded walls I've been constructing around my life.

But again, I just don't care.

It's hard to worry about getting burned when you're basking in the gentle glow of sunshine.

Resting my head on my hand and maneuvering Freya into the curve of my body, I start to trace a fingertip along her neck, across her collarbone, and down between her breasts.

I smile as she quivers.

'So...' I whisper, grinning in the dark. 'You think me handsome?'

Freya laughs softly, wriggling as the tip of my finger reaches her waist, circles her little navel through her vest, and continues southward.

'You in need of an ego stroke, Averna?' she chides.

‘Not usually,’ I admit. ‘But I find I quite like your compliments.’

Every time she tells me she trusts me. Each time she praises my character or even something trite like how my face is arranged... That sunshine dial gets turned up from warm to balmy.

Freya reaches to stroke my face and I follow her touch down to brush her lips with feather-soft kisses. We begin to breathe as one.

‘What about my kisses?’ Freya whispers against my mouth. ‘Do you like those?’

*Way too much...*

In fact, I’m liking them so much that I fear I might die if I don’t taste that sweet tongue of hers in the next three seconds. Struggling to keep up the banter for a moment, I lick at her lower lip. I dance my fingertip over the edge of her panties...

‘I adore them,’ I confess. *Just as I adore you.* ‘More than I should.’

‘Oh, *bello,*’ she teases, ‘there’s no such thing...’

The kiss that follows is beautiful. Hauntingly gentle and achingly sweet.

Perhaps our mutual confessions have brought us closer, infusing the physical with something extra. Something otherworldly. Perhaps it’s my revelation—if only to myself—that I love this woman heightening the experience. Perhaps it’s the reality of tomorrow... the risk of so little time together that’s making every moment exceptional.

Whatever the reason, I have never been kissed as Freya kisses me now.

Slow, generous, deep, and kind... it shoots hot sparks straight to my groin and has my heart flipping in my chest. My skin itches and my belly tightens.

We explore one another at a deliciously glacial speed.

I remind myself of the curves in her lips, sample the texture of her tongue, feel the warmth of her thighs... I caress and stroke her all over, determined to memorize the lines of her limbs and the heat of her skin...

The little sounds she makes when her breath catches in her chest...

Before long, the scraps of cotton Freya was still wearing are gone, tossed over the side of the mattress. In their place, I cover her with my skin, fitting us together in beautiful, interlocking harmony.

Quicker than I would like, the aching need to be inside her has me cursing and reaching across the bed for my discarded clothes and the foil packet in the pocket. But Freya's pale hand stops me, drawing me back to lie between her thighs.

'No...' she whispers.

'You don't want to?' I ask, freezing in place.

'No, I do...' she murmurs, with the sweetest most decadent smile I've ever seen.

Reaching down between us, she takes hold of my shaft. She strokes the heavy length, working her hand up, down... and then squeezing to just the right level of constriction.

In seconds, she has me at the edge of orgasm, panting to stay in control.

'I want to,' she repeats as I desperately try to focus on the conversation at hand. 'But I don't want to use one...'

*Use one wha—Oh.*

*She doesn't want to use a condom?*

For a moment, I don't know which is more terrifying.

The idea of getting Freya pregnant right before facing my father's men tomorrow... Or just how much I suddenly yearn to do *precisely* that.

The idea of Freya's body growing full. Swelling, round and lush, with my child...

I've never thought of myself as particularly paternal. Never felt the great urge to procreate. But the image in my head... The idea that I could fill her with *my* seed, have her birth *my* baby...

It's so damn tempting that, for a moment, I risk blowing early in her hand.

'Are... ' I have to swallow back a heavy lump in my throat. 'Are you sure?'

'It's not such a risk this time of the month,' she says, her fingers tracing up the lines of my arm, around to the back of my neck. She leans up to press an open kiss to the pulse at the base of my throat. I feel sweat break out between my shoulder blades and I tremble under her touch. 'And I want to feel all of you. No barriers. Just your skin... Deep inside mine.'

*As my queen commands...*

Forgetting the protection, I turn instead to making Freya feel good. To seducing away every strain and trauma of the last few days. To working her body into a state of blissful nirvana.

Freya's giving nature shows in her eagerness to do the same and I fall for her all over again as we work one another into a slow and loving fit of desire.

As I kiss along the insides of her thighs, she strokes soft fingers through my hair. When I worship her breasts with my tongue, she works the tension from my shoulders and purrs over the lines of my back.

She kisses my jaw and I fondle her nipples. She slides a foot up my leg and I caress the curves of her bottom.

'So beautiful...' I praise against her skin.

'All yours,' she gasps as I suckle on her breast.

*All mine.* I suck down harder on her nipple and feel her gasp all the way to my soul.

'Need you...' Freya eventually moans, widening her hips in an invitation I'd have to be made of stone to ignore...

I meet her stare one final time and see only certainty in her gaze. She wraps her legs trustingly around my waist.

What happens next isn't fucking. It's not even sex.

As I lift Freya's hips and sink slowly inside her, entirely bare, there's only one word to describe the glory of the moment. Only one phrase captures the blissful pants of feeling one another's tight hold, completely naked and entirely genuine.

*Love-making.*

Breathing in unison, we start to move, coming together in long, slow thrusts that feel deeper than anything we've explored before.

Knowing there's nothing between us, able to feel every smooth ridge inside Freya's body, every gasping twitch of her muscles...

I know this to be love.

That I am *making* love to my woman.

And though I know she doesn't love me, there's enough warmth in her touch, joy on her lips, and care in her eyes that I can pretend...

Buried inside her body, her muscles hold me tight to the hilt. As I pull back, they cling—*she* clings—wanting me back and sighing when I sink deep once more.

Every thrust sends her gasping, every retreat stirs a moan.

'Mmm... Leon...' she sighs.

*I love you*, I whisper in my head.

'Ah... feels... feels so good. Don't stop...'

*I love you...*

'Leon?'

I meet her gaze, turned questioning by my silence. I smile.

'I'm right here, *carina*.'

*Always...*

*And if I can't tell you that with my words, I can damn well show you with my body...*

I thrust deeper and she cries out. Tears roll back into her hair. I kiss away their tracks and keep going...

She grips my back and pulls me closer.

She breathes my name and sends me higher.

My skin burns. My muscles ache. My shaft's so hard and my urges are so sharp I think I might cry.

I bite my bottom lip and Freya is there to soothe it with her tongue.

I cry out her name and she pants mine in return...

The entire experience is rewriting me from the soul up. Splintering me apart and placing me back together, only with a new shape. A piece that smells of Freya, that feels like Freya. A piece that is now a part of me as completely as the blood in my veins and prints on my fingers.

Whilst I can only dream of Freya's thoughts as we come together over and over, I can say one thing for certain: neither of us is ready to let the night end. Neither of us is ready to let the other go.

As proof, the bed shifts with the steady, incessant creaking of our joining for hours into the night...



## CHAPTER

## *Seventeen*

I sleep in waves.

At times, so deep in slumber, I fantasize the impossible. At others, I drift so close to wakefulness that I can daydream. I imagine sleeping in a fairy glade. I envision eating dinner back home, across the table from my mother. Odd, given that she habitually sits opposite Evan...

At one point, perhaps most fantastical of all, I conjure gentle fingers stroking along my temple and curling my hair back behind my ear. Firm, beautifully carved lips press against my cheekbone. Longed-for words whisper over my skin...

*'I love you...'*

When I finally wake, my heart is sore. Aching for untouchable illusions in the dark.

I push away the hurting, hollow sensation in my chest. I seek Leon, knowing I can just wrap myself around his heat and let it melt away, my—

*The bed is empty.*

Frowning, I sit up, warm cotton sheets falling from my bare skin.

Grabbing panties and one of Leon's shirts from the floor, I head for the en-suite.

It's dark but I switch on the light anyway, slow to accept the reality around me.

Empty. Cold.

*He's probably getting a glass of water, I try to convince myself. Or grabbing something to eat from downstairs.*

*He'll come back to bed soo—*

It's light outside.

The drapes are thick and they shroud the bedroom in heavy shadow. But light is peeking beneath their hem.

I rush forward and yank back the curtains, cursing when I'm blinded by the midday sun.

*Midday.*

*No.*

'No,' I groan out loud, feeling the earth tilt beneath my feet. 'No, no, *no*...'

Sprinting from the room, I'm heedless of my state of undress. I race down the stairs and across the open lounge. The front door is hanging wide and I fly through it, into the dazzling glare of day.

Luisa is watering pots of greenery around the front patio.

*'Buongiorno, mia bam—is everything all right?'*

Colliding with the alabaster wall, I can only breathe once I spy the car, still sitting in its patch of gravel below.

It's still here.

I exhale, hard enough to cramp my lungs.

*He's still here.*

'If you are looking for Leon, *mia bambolina*,' Luisa calls, 'he left just a few minutes ago.'

My heart stops, jolts, and then sinks to my toes.

'He did *what*?' I squawk weakly.

Luisa glances at me, startled.

'He took my car to pick up something for lunch in town.'

*Oh, God.*

Sprinting back inside, I spin in wild, lost circles until I spot a clock over the stove.

*11:43pm.*

‘He’s not going for lunch,’ I groan to myself. I press my palms to my eyes.

*No, no, no...*

I turn to rush for the car again but quickly squeak to a halt on the tile. *Where am I going?*

*I have no idea!*

Would Luisa know where the Machelli estate is? Would she tell me?

And what *then?*

She’d insist on coming with me. She’d run headlong into danger and Leon would never forgive me.

‘Okay...’ I say aloud, throwing out my arms for emotional equilibrium. ‘Okay, we can work this out, Harrison...’

‘Freya...?’ Luisa calls.

Her voice is now inside the house and rapidly approaching. Like a total coward, I hurry for the stairs and take them two at a time. If I have to resort to telling Luisa everything, I’m determined to at least serve the bad news with some semblance of good.

*I’ll come up with a plan and then explain.*

Back in Leon’s bedroom, I almost cry with relief when I spy a slip of paper on the duvet.

*A note!*

I must have missed it in my mad panic.

As I snatch it up, my nails crease the paper and the corners twitch with every tremor of my fingers.

It takes me a minute to calm down enough to focus...

Freya,

My message to Jaime was not the only one I sent yesterday. I also made contact with Cyrus. He will testify that you aided in my arrival at the estate, whether he hears from you or not. When you wake, take the car to the airport and return home. No one will follow you. You have my word.

I regret that our meeting has caused you so many difficulties. But I cannot regret the meeting itself. If I do not see you again, please remember that you are an exceptional woman, beyond the decisions and wills of others. It has been my privilege to know you. And to love you.

Leon

‘You...’ I struggle for words. Feeling abruptly weightless, I shake the note like there’s something more to be knocked out of the ink. ‘Are you shitting me?!’

Now, he fucking tells me?

Now?!

‘Freya,’ Luisa knocks gently on the door. ‘Is everything all right?’

With trembling hands, I rub away the tears rolling down my cheeks and scrunch up my face against any newcomers.

‘Yes!’ I call out. ‘Yes, it’s fine, Luisa!’

*“...a privilege to love you.”*

What kind of asshole leaves something like that in a *note*?!

Memory returns of a gentle touch in the night... of those same words breathed against my cheek.

*Maybe it wasn’t a dream...?*

*“Cyrus will testify that you aided in my arrival... whether he hears from you or not.”*

*“...whether he hears from you or not.”*

*The tracker!*

Fearing that a moment’s hesitation will mean the difference between Leon’s eternal end and his miraculous escape, I bulldoze past poor Luisa in the hallway and retrace my racing path outside, soles slapping against floorboards and terracotta.

This time, I run all the way *down* the stairs and out to the car.

I barely notice the gravel biting into my bare feet, the cold on my legs, or the way my wrist twinges when I yank open the passenger-side door.

Diving for the footwell, I grope blindly under the seat until I find what I’m seeking. A sleek, rounded cube of black plastic.

Bent double, breathing hard, and frantic with uncertainty, I pause for only a moment, little box in hand.

I wonder what Leon would want me to do.

*“...you are an exceptional woman, beyond the decisions and wills of others.”*

I hit the button on the tracker.

A green light begins to flash.

I exhale. Then... nothing.

The silence of the car becomes a solid mass. The heat from the windshield is stifling. I keep watching the little green light blinking on and off.

Okay... now what?

*Well, you just called a trained assassin to heel by painting a giant bullseye on your back. You might want to be dressed for the occasion, Harrison?*

Right.

This time, when I mount the stairs and hustle inside, I'm distinctly slower. Were I not distracted by life and death drama, I'd have made a mental vow (and not for the first time these last few days) to commit to more cardio.

'Shower,' I say to motivate one foot after the other. 'Shower and clothes.'

There're only so many hours in a day you can run around a stranger's home in your underwear without causing a panic. And, by the look on Luisa's face as she stands ready to catch me at the bottom of the stairs, I've exceeded mine.

'*Cara mia,*' she instructs, hands planted on her hips. 'You will tell me right now what is going on.'

I don't have time for this. The countdown in the back of my head is louder than ever. *Tick tock. Tick tock.*

But I also can't leave Luisa hanging.

Taking a steadying breath, I offer up innocent palms and try to arrange my features into a reassuring smile.

'It's all right, *sig*—Luisa.' I correct myself just in time. 'I just need to find Leon.'

'Then I shall drive you down to the—'

'No!' I cough to mask my sudden panic. 'No, it's fine. I er... I have a way of getting there. I just need to grab a quick shower first.'

'He may be back by then, *bambolina,*' Luisa says.

*Tick tock.*

‘He’ll save me the trip then,’ I smile, sidling past her and heading up the stairs. I keep the tracker hidden in my palm. ‘Either way, I really should wash. I’m sorry for worrying you, Luisa.’

She knows I’m lying. I can see it in her eyes. But having (I think) convinced her that my lies are masking something more innocuous than mortal peril, I hurry back to Leon’s room as fast as my legs will still carry me.

*Leon, we owe your mother the biggest bunch of flowers after all this is over.*

Without knowing how long it’ll take Cyrus to respond to the tracker’s call—or if he’s coming at all—I rush through my ablutions and pull on clothes in record time. The black running leggings and turtleneck sweater I find in Leon’s duffel bag are as badass an outfit as I can manage. But I could be going after him in a full suit of Kevlar and it would still, for all my nerves, feel like crêpe paper.

I fetch my sneakers from the front door, fasten my hair in a knot on the back of my head, and...

...stand in the middle of Leon’s bedroom uncertain what to do next.

What else might I need? What else should I do?

How long do I wait, before I ask Luisa for directions to *Casa Machelli*?

With butterflies swarming my belly, I decide to look again in Leon’s hold-all. Rolling around in the bottom is the little penknife we took from Giovanni back at the estate. I slip it in my pocket.

*And if you meet an enemy who requires a little more than a toothpick, Harrison?*

Strapped along the inside edges of the bag are several handguns. Three black, one silver. Even an amateur like me can recognize the blocky cartridges strapped to the opposite side as munitions.

Faking more confidence than I possess, I take one of the black pistols, solely because it looks small enough for me to hold without wrist ache... and because it matches my outfit.

*Hey, when you have no other rationale, why not?*

I have to try two of the cartridges before I find one that fits into the butt of the gun. I try to click down the hammer. It jams. But I've seen enough movies to know what that means...

'Safety, safety...' I mumble, looking for a switch or a toggle somewhere.

'It's on the right-hand side,' says a voice from behind me.

I jump. I squeal. I whirl around with gun raised, safety or no safety still in place.

Sunlight streams through one of the larger windows—its pane now hangs open—casting shade amongst the drapes. It's from these shadows that Cyrus detaches himself, a waif of smoke twisting free of the smog to take human form.

'Cyrus!' I gasp, heart pounding in my throat and lungs working overtime. When he doesn't slow down, I throw out a protective hand beside the pistol I have uselessly aimed at his chest. 'You... you can't hurt me.' I babble. 'Leon said he... that he—'

'Yes, I got the *memo*,' Cyrus drawls. There's an edge in his voice that tells me just how pleased he is to be fetching and carrying like this.

*And yet, he's here, I realize.*

*Maybe Leon has a point about this friendship thing...*

The only question? Just how far can camaraderie be relied upon?

'I'll be advocating your involvement in Averno's capture,' Cyrus promises. 'You didn't need to use the tracker.'

'Yes, I did,' I swallow, lowering the gun. 'I need you to take me somewhere.'



Cyrus' eyes sharpen to blade-like precision. I can feel them cut me to the quick from across the room.

'I'm not *Uber*, woman.'

'I need you to take me to the Machelli estate. Or at least tell me where it is.'

'Why? You wanna witness the execution up close?'

I shudder.

'I can help...'

'*Can* you?' His tone says he doesn't believe it for a second. Or possibly that he doesn't believe any woman can be of use in his hyper-masculine world.

'Leon is trying to prove he didn't kill his brother; that the shot came from across the street. I can testify to that,' I explain.

'You think a bunch of mobsters are going to listen to some random girl?'

'Woman,' I correct staunchly. 'And no, nothing I say will stand on its own. But nothing about Leon's defense *does*.'

All Leon's hopes had ever rested on was piecing together enough scraps to suggest an alternative, believable scenario. To pressure for further investigation.

'Averna wants you here.'

'He wants me in the States,' I roll my eyes.

'Even better.'

'Well, I'm not a piece of luggage to be shipped off. I want you to take me to the Machelli estate. *Please*, Cyrus. We can't let him fight this alone...'

'There is no "we" in this.'

'If that were true, you wouldn't be here,' I point out.

Cyrus sighs. He rubs the back of his neck.

Something tells me I have a tiger by the tail and that this is a very bad plan. One slip and it's goodbye hands.

‘Look,’ he says, already inching towards the window.

Only loyalty—and perhaps curiosity—saw him answering the tracker’s signal. Now that he knows my reason for “calling”, he’s signing out. I feel my heart race with desperate panic.

‘I’m already risking a hefty client by helping out Aversa behind his old man’s back. Now you want me to double-cross the guy I’m already double-crossing another for? That’s not good business, girly.’

*Tick tock, tick tock.*

‘Then don’t take me,’ I offer, reaching for whatever I can get now. ‘Just tell me where it is. I can get there myself.’

Cyrus shakes his head.

‘Still not worth it.’

*Infuriating man!*

‘I can pay you?’ I suggest feebly.

He has the nerve to grin! To *grin!*

‘You couldn’t afford me.’

*Tick tock.*

He’s already halfway out the window. I scramble for any kind of leverage that will make him stay but I still can’t get the safety off my gun and entering into a shooting showdown with a professional sniper seems a foolish move.

‘Wait!’ I cry, suddenly struck by inspiration. Cyrus pauses, framed in the open window.

‘Isn’t your contract with the Machelli’s kept in better standing if Leon is proven innocent?’ I ask.

Cyrus snorts.

‘Aversa? Innocent?’

‘You know what I mean! Think about it... I can offer witness which could prove Leon didn’t kill his brother. Which means that any bounty on his head will be lifted and *you*

haven't failed to meet your employer's demands: he just changed them before you finished the job.'

Cyrus has stalled. He's quiet but he's not leaving.

'Come on! It makes sense, doesn't it? If I can help prove that it was Gabriel who killed Alexei, Leon will be off the hook and your contract—'

'Who did you just say?' Cyrus cuts in. Silhouetted by the sunlight outside his face is suddenly an angry mask of ebony, glaring back over his shoulder.

'Gabriel,' I repeat. 'Leon didn't tell you?'

'Alexei Machelli was a target of Gabriel?'

'Yes! That's what I'm saying!'

*Dear God, we don't have the time for this!*

'By whose authority?'

'We had an expert check the casing we found on the roof. You were there. You saw us find it. I'm not making this up!'

Cyrus is still for a heartbeat, maybe two. Then he's swinging back into the room with all the stealthy agility of a cat.

A very big cat, I adjust, when he prowls closer. The shady patches in the room seem to retreat from his gait.

This close, I'm forced to look up to meet his mismatched stare. One green, one blue. Both angry as all hell.

Cyrus glances at the bag on the dresser.

'Do you have everything you need?' he asks.

'Wha—' *Wait! He's taking me?!*

I nod hurriedly, snatching up Leon's anorak and following Cyrus out of the house.

Luisa must be out by the pool because she's thankfully absent as the very large, very somber, trained killer stalkers her halls. It's just the two of us as we head out and down to the car, then beyond the little Toyota and into the woods.

Cyrus seems to melt into the shadows of the trees, his dower gray clothes a shapeless camouflage for any environment. Mottled light turns his simple sweater and bare neck into an irregular leopard print. Which, right now, feels scarily appropriate as he leads me further into the darkening thicket.

‘You know... I can just take the car?’ I call out to him gingerly through the trees. ‘And follow you?’

‘You won’t keep up.’

‘I dunno. You should have seen how Leon and I met. I’m a pretty nifty driv—Oh *my*.’

We’ve come to a natural path along the forest bed. Used most often, no doubt, by rabbits, rodents, and Raul the gardener.

Right now, it’s occupied by a different beast entirely. A very large, very impressive motorbike.

*Well...* I correct. *A motorbike-plus.*

The bike is harsh and beautiful all at the same time. Each piece of the construction is little more than a hard angle of muted steel. But together, the panels, joists, and pistons give the illusion of elegant, sexy curves. It’s predatory in shape, sensual in delivery...

...and way too big for me to ride.

‘Er...’ I hesitate. ‘I’m not sure I can...’

‘You’re the interloper here,’ Cyrus says, taking a sleek, gray helmet from beneath the seat and fastening it over his head. ‘You don’t like the way I ride, you’re welcome to stay here.’

‘Do you have another helmet?’ I eye the seat compartment hopefully.

‘No,’ he says. Checking that his own safety accessory is securely fastened and then straddling the metal beast.

‘Chivalry really is dead,’ I grumble.

‘Welcome to the world of equality. Now get on before I change my mind.’

Swallowing back every horror story I’ve ever read about motorcycles and the idiots who die riding them, I have to jump to reach the back of Cyrus’s bike.

Wrapping my arms around his waist, I cuddle in close.

Yesterday, I’d have said nothing could scare me more than Cyrus Alesi. Turns out I was wrong. Falling from the back of his high-powered motorbike is, indeed, scarier.

By the time I realize my eyes are squeezed shut and open them, I’m shocked to discover that we’re already flying through the air!

The bike is electric.

No noise, no roaring of an engine... Just a speed so intense that it shoots my heart up against my tonsils and leaves my stomach several miles behind us.

Spooky and exhilarating, the bike is a wraith on the road: silent but lethal. And utterly terrifying.

*Oh my God*, I chant in my head. *Oh my God, oh my God, ohmyGod...*

In the blink of an eye, we shoot out from beneath the canopy of woodland around *Casa Della Natura* and, seconds later, are hurtling along a highway.

Cyrus is driving at twice the speed of anyone else on the road.

Wind catches between his back and my front and I feel it pushing me toward the back of the bike. One wrong move and I’m going to be thrown onto the tarmac behind us at gale-force speed. I tighten my grip. I bite down on my lip. My eyes stream with the cold. I tuck my head between Cyrus’ shoulder blades and squeeze them shut. A thrumming, whipping noise riots my ears. My fingers are frozen solid around Cyrus’ waist...

His scent, foreign and wrong, fills my nose.

*Just hold on... I tell myself. Just keep holding on and you won't fall to a painful death that sees your bloody carcass smeared across the interstate!*

It's minutes, hours, eons later when the gale around my ears starts to calm and I can brave a glance over Cyrus' shoulder. Up ahead are a pair of roughly hewn gates I'm uncomfortably familiar with.

One was the culprit for whacking off one of the Mercedes' wing mirrors.

*Okay... I swallow, trying to formulate a plan. Now, all we need to do is get inside, look around and—*

We fly right past the gates.

'Hey!' I cry out. 'We missed the—' but there's no way Cyrus can hear me over the wind and his helmet.

I can only seethe in silence as we ride the estate's perimeter at seventy miles an hour before following a steep ascent into the wilds behind the main house.

Cyrus slows the pace, but not by much, taking the winding path between trees and pitfalls at a petrifying speed.

When he finally draws us to a halt and kills the engine, I'm ready to kiss the stony ground for the miraculous landing. Instead, I stare around myself, dead leaves beneath my sneakers and bare branches stretching grotesquely above my head.

'Over there...' Cyrus is pointing to a sharp ridgeline, a rocky hill face rising beyond.

As I look, he takes the pistol from my pocket, removes the safety, and stuffs it into my palm. Despite my choosing the smallest of Leon's weapons, the gun now feels impossibly heavy in my hand.

'There's a small quarry on the other side of that ridge,' Cyrus is saying. 'It's part of the estate but the bike won't get up there. Averno and the rest will be up over there.'

'And you know this, how?'

*Tick tock, tick tock.*

I don't have the time to waste on silly games or random guesses.

Cyrus takes off his helmet and sets me straight with a stare so frosty that it gives *me* the shivers.

'It's where they hold the shindigs most likely to turn bloody,' he explains.

*Oh God, no.*

Spinning on my heel, I waste no time checking to see if Cyrus is following me. I don't stop to consider a plan of attack. I don't circle the area, reconnoiter or, in fact, do anything involving half a brain.

Because I'm not acting with my head.

Right now, my heart has taken control. It tells my legs to run faster and my lungs to work harder. It ignores the pain when I stumble and drives me on through the dirt.

It pumps and it beats. It howls and it shrieks.

My heart knows what's on the other side of this ridge.

It knows what's beyond the crest just a few feet ahead of me.

It knows *he's* there.

And it almost flat lines when every bird in the vicinity is sent skyward... by the piercing sound of a gunshot.

## CHAPTER

## *Eighteen*

‘No!’

The word leaves me in a strangled scream. I clamber on all fours to the top of the ridge. Panic overrides the instinct to pause—to keep my head beneath the parapet—it just sends me careening over the peak without thought.

My foot catches on a root. I fall. I tilt. I half-roll the first few feet down the other side.

Dirt sprays. Small rocks tumble.

I barely hold onto my gun.

Fighting to get my feet under me, I half-run half-slide down the slope on my backside.

Ahead, as promised, is an open quarry bed. Small and long since out of use. But perfect for a private execution ground.

At its center stands a cluster of men, most suited and booted for a board room over a rock quarry.

One—a familiar figure with broad shoulders and gleaming dark hair—is on his knees.

But still upright.

*A warning shot*, I realize, my knees going weak beneath me as I slide another few feet toward the ground. *It had been a warning shot.*

‘I’m growing tired of your tales, Leon Averna,’ Giovanni Carlos stands apart from the group. As both judge and jury in his desolate courtroom.



*Oh no. No, no, no...*

Leon's knees are braced in the gravel and his hands are tied behind his back. His face is turned, not towards his father but, upon the man looming over him.

Jaime.

Jaime with a handgun leveled at his head.

'We've heard enough,' Giovanni orders with a sharp nod to his executioner.

Horror floods my bloodstream as Jaime's weapon tilts, the hammer pulling back into place. It levels on Leon's head.

'No!' I scream again. This time, I'm close enough to be heard.

Heads rise, eyes turn.

I hit the quarry ground and raise my weapon with no finesse whatsoever.

I don't even realize I've pulled the trigger until after it goes off.

The recoil is worse than expected. My arm jack-knifes back and, already sprinting, I nearly pinwheel off my feet.

Beneath the roar of the gun is a grunt of pain and a sudden rush of voices.

'What the hell?'

'Mother fu—'

'Who the hell is *she*?!'

A flurry of guns being cocked echoes around the pit. All of them aimed in my direction. But I have too much momentum to slow down.

'No!' I hear Leon scream. The light catches his face, twisted into a mask of terror. 'She's no one! She's not a threat!'

'Jaime,' Giovanni calls above the noise. Jaime is bent but still on his feet. He has a hand pressed to the side of his head, blood seeping from between his fingers.

He still turns to the call of his master.

‘Do as you’re ordered.’

‘Do it yourself, you coward!’ I roar, rushing headlong toward the group. Someone fires a warning shot at my feet but the bullet pings off the stone in another direction. I don’t slow down. I just close my eyes and keep running, my arms pumping faster.

Before I know it, I’m skidding to my knees at Leon’s side, catching myself on the gravel. Vivid rage is stamped on every line of his beautiful face.

‘Freya, what the *fuck?!*’

‘Give me your hands,’ I gasp, trying to reach for his bindings.

‘Forget that, just get behind me!’

Other voices, angry and confused, rush over us like ocean waves.

‘What the hell is this, Giovanni?’

‘I say again, who’s the girl?’

‘Who the fuck cares? Just shoot her.’

‘*No!*’ Leon shouts. ‘She’s no threat! Freya, put down the gun!’

‘Jaime!’ Giovanni orders.

I scramble to get my pistol up and target Jaime.

‘You shoot him, I shoot you!’ I warn. The barrel of my weapon is shaking but at only two feet it’s hard to miss a six-foot-two mercenary.

‘No, you won’t!’ Leon orders in a panic. ‘Freya, just put the gun down!’

‘It’s okay Leon, I—’

‘Put it down, *now!*’ He turns to the wall of men—and one woman I hadn’t noticed before—drawing in with their weapons raised. ‘She surrenders! She’s no threat!’

‘Tell that to Jaime’s ear...’ Someone has the gall to chuckle.

‘The boy needs dispensing with,’ Giovanni orders over the din. ‘The girl, we’ll question.’

‘You can question me right now: he didn’t do it!’ I shout, trying to keep the gun from Leon. Even bound, he’s trying to knock it from my hands. ‘He didn’t kill his brother!’

Leon smacks me with his shoulder.

‘Shut up!’ he hisses.

‘Fuck you!’ I bite back. Screw Leon and his hero complex.

‘I say let the girl speak,’ says a voice from the crowd. Accented with something Germanic, I wonder fleetingly if he’s the reason everyone’s speaking in English. ‘As I said before, I’m not content with this direction, Giovanni. If Averna is really to blame, I’ll stand by you as you flay him alive. But something in this is not adding up for me. I would like to hear again what your boy has to say.’

‘He’s no boy of mine. He’s a killer.’

‘So you claim. Yet, if this assassin he alludes to is real—’

‘He is!’ I cry. My enthusiasm has me waving my hand—the one holding the pistol—and the whole crowd tenses.

*Okay, maybe Leon has a point on this one...*

I lower the gun pointedly to the gravel but continue to shout:

‘I swear it! It wasn’t Leon! I was there when Alexei was shot. The sound came from across the street! We found a casing there, on the opposite building, in the perfect spot for a sniper!’

‘If an assassin is truly in play,’ says someone else in the group—a shrewd-looking man with an inky black goatee—‘then someone is paying his tab. Rather than killing our own men, we should look into who might turn against us so blatantly—’

‘No-one would,’ Leon’s father growls. ‘Who of our rivals would have the gall to shoot dead my own son? *None* of them!’

‘Caruso might,’ suggested the German.

‘He’s right boss,’ says another. ‘And the Parisis have been growing in numbers.’

‘The Carusos are still braying for leadership,’ Giovanni rebukes.

Another speaks up on his side:

‘And the Parisis wouldn’t have the money for someone like Gabriel.’

‘Gabriel?’ someone asks. ‘Like the angel?’

‘Is this Gabriel so expensive?’ asks the woman in the group.

‘How do we even know he exists?’ calls another. ‘And isn’t just a guilty man’s scapegoat?’

‘Oh, he exists,’ replies a new voice from the back of the crowd.

Bodies part and heads turn as Cyrus wades into the fray like Moses parting the Red Sea.

A really casual Moses with a penchant for white-wash jeans.

‘Cyrus?’ someone calls in shock.

‘Wait, *the* Cyrus? The one they call Ghost?’

‘No, seriously,’ someone at the back says, losing patience, ‘what the *fuck* is going on?’

Cyrus waits out the noise as he waits out his targets. Only when the chatter dims does he speak up.

‘Gabriel’s one of the most exclusive hitmen in middle Europe,’ he says. ‘He’s dropped a lot of bodies through Austria, Poland and the Balkans. He doesn’t do a lot of work this far south.’

‘So, it *is* a lie?’ someone calls out.

Leon tenses and starts trying to nudge me behind him again.

‘Actually, no,’ Cyrus says. ‘I saw the casing they’ve both mentioned. Gabriel appears to be branching out.’

I try not to let my jaw drop at Cyrus’ careful dodging of the truth. He *had* seen the bullet casing. Gabriel *is* branching out. But Cyrus is making it sound as if he personally connected those two pieces of information.

‘Or,’ he continues, glancing around the crowd. ‘He’s been pulled down here by a seductive offer. Probably by someone who wanted the kill as untraceable as possible.’

‘Like a brother, trying to murder his own kin?’ someone asks but their words now practically drip with doubt.

Someone replies in Italian sounding just as uncertain.

‘Don’t you think if I wanted to kill Alexei, I’d have a less complicated way of doing it?’ Leon jumps in, fanning the flames back in his favor.

As the opinion tide starts to turn, I spy Giovanni Carlos looking alone in the storm. His face grows darker with each passing moment and, for a minute, I almost feel sorry for the man who, only days before, held a knife to my throat.

There’s no way the head of the Machelli mafia family isn’t armed, surely? He must have a gun. He must have his own bullets. Point and click and his problem goes away.

And yet... thus far, something’s prevented him from killing Leon outright. He’s sent Cyrus and he’s made orders of Jaime. The *desire* to execute one son for the death of the other is clearly an ever-present burn... But, for the first time, I realize the *will* might not be there.

He’ll order the death of a man he claims to have no ties to... but Giovanni Carlos cannot murder—with his own hands, at least—his own flesh and blood.

*“There are elements of Giovanni that I struggle to respect. Some that I cannot accept at all. But those things are not all of him...”*

‘Then someone is targeting the family,’ one voice declares, rising above the general hubbub. Cyrus’ little announcement has caused all manner of chaos in the group and it doesn’t ease up until the German steps forward.

‘Giovanni,’ he says with empathetic hands. ‘We understand your grief. We all wish to see Alexei’s killer punished. But let us be sure to hang only the responsible party. Leon Averna has been loyal until now. Do you have anything more than circumstantial belief to prove him otherwise?’

Giovanni watches the crowd with an eagle-like stare. Tension in his face says he’s been pushed into a corner.

Another voice—the woman’s—rises:

‘Leon is too great an asset to the family. His record has been beyond criticism. Haven’t you said so before, boss?’

*That must have been before his empire was at risk of being inherited by an illegitimate child.*

Just how had modernity passed this man by?

By chance, I catch Giovanni’s eye as he scans the crowd, assessing his associates. I take the chance to call directly to him.

‘Leon is loyal!’ I promise him.

‘Freya...’ Leon warns cautiously. I shush at him to be quiet.

‘He’s your son! Whether or not you recognize him as such, your men evidently *do*. They treat him with respect! Why deny what everyone else already sees?’

‘Freya!’ Leon hisses.

‘Leon is not an heir for you to be ashamed of!’

A ripple of murmurs runs through the crowd. I see nodding heads and general tones of affirmation.

‘Who the fuck *is* this girl?’ one person comments.

‘I dunno but I like her...’

‘Brave little thing...’

It's Jaime who steps forward in the end. And, as the loyal dog suggests a new order to its master, the entire atmosphere in the quarry seems to shift. If the most loyal of workers can sense a change in the wind, one can hardly ignore the turn.

'Sir,' Jaime entreats, one hand still clasped to the side of his head. 'Allow us to let Leon go. We'll hunt down this Gabriel and bring you justice for Alexei. I'm no strategist but if we are to go to war with the Carusos or whoever murdered your son... killing your best soldier seems a poor first move.'

Anger has set a nerve flickering under Giovanni's left eye. His handsome features, so eerily alike to Leon's, are twisted with inner conflict. But there is also a wisdom there. An exhaustion. A proud General on the edge of accepting surrender.

'Fine,' he grunts. 'Let him go.'

I finally, *finally* exhale.

I race to tug at the binds around Leon's wrists. The heavy-duty zip-ties, of course, barely budge.

'But he is to have nothing more to do with Alexei's murder.' Giovanni warns.

The German guy nods. Others whisper that this seems a wise choice. I ignore them all, too busy breaking a nail on the zip-ties.

'I'll investigate,' volunteers a surprising voice. Once more, all eyes turn on Cyrus.

All eyes save mine. A soft *clatter-thud* has drawn my gaze to the gravel, where a thick penknife now lies in a cradle of stones.

Jaime is surreptitiously tucking a hand back inside his pocket, his stare fixed upon Cyrus.

'You?' Goatee-Man asks the assassin.

I'm equally surprised. Cyrus is a killer, not a detective.

I snatch up the little knife and (belatedly realizing I have one of my own in my pocket) start working through the

bindings on Leon's wrists, I can't help but wonder why on earth the sniper would—

'I don't like other players in my area,' Cyrus states coldly.

*Ah.*

Professional competition.

*Of course.* Couldn't possibly be to help prove a friend's innocence or bring a killer to justice. Cyrus just doesn't like another pro stealing his slice of the damn profit pie.

*And just when I was starting to like you, you creepy bastard.*

And, just like that, with the matter settled, the Machelli mobster high council begins to dissipate. Like office workers shooed away from the water cooler.

If it wasn't supremely unsettling the way they could all just walk away from an almost-execution, it would have been anticlimactic. In reality, my adrenaline is still astronomically high and my heart has been beating against my ribs so hard they feel bruised.

I grunt as I hurriedly try to work the knife through the plastic ties, half expecting one of Giovanni's men to suddenly have a change of mind, spin on their heel high-noon style, and start shooting.

But none of them do.

They all just drift away focused now on their own discussions. A few even pat Leon on the shoulder as they wander by! Like, *hey kid, good job - sorry we almost killed you. Drinks Friday?*

'I suppose it makes sense,' the Goatee-Man is saying. As he heads towards an exit gate north of the quarry, he shoots a cryptic glance at Cyrus' figure disappearing towards the east. 'If you wanna catch a snake, you send a viper.'

'God help that angel,' his companion mutters.

*Unbelievable. Don't mind us and the guy on the ground in shackles.*



Another pair are discussing visiting the shooting range, of all things.

And a particularly rough-looking trio want to know if they can carpool to some event on—

I'm distracted when, with a sudden *pop*, the zip tie finally breaks!

'Well, about time you fu—'

Leon is on me before I can finish.

He cups my face and he drives his fingers into my hair. He takes my shoulders with a grip so tight it hurts.

'What the *fuck* did you think you were doing?!' he cries in between kissing every inch of me he can reach. 'You stupid, *stupid...*'

Clearly giving up on a synonym, he pulls me into a bone-cracking hug.

Which suits me just fine because my fight or flight reaction is finally coming down and everything I've been blocking out for the last hour is flooding in. As if reviewing my performance for idiocy markers, my brain plays back everything I've done and said since that first gunshot. And all the times I could have been killed. Tremors shake me like a damn quake and I'm suddenly very short of breath.

Or, that might be from the death-grip Leon has on me.

'I...' I croak through airless lungs. 'I guess I wasn't really thinking much...'

'Yeah, no shit...' Leon shudders. Pulling me to my feet, he presses his face into my shoulder and inhales deep through my sweater.

He then freezes, fixed on something over my shoulder. I break away to look and spy Giovanni Carlos standing alone.

A king without an empire.

Of his minions, only Jaime remains, hovering beside us.

I wait as father and son lock eyes and stand in silent obstinacy.

Technically, nothing has altered in the last three days. One is still a sickly emperor. The other, his reluctantly appointed successor.

And yet... everything has changed. Giovanni Carlos has shown his true colors by trying to murder his son.

After that... nothing can be the same.

That's what this moment is, I realize, not wanting to break it. That's what's passing between father and son. I can see it in Leon's eyes. I can read it in Giovanni's face.

Neither man concedes. Neither nod or surrender victory. Neither shows a shred of affection for the other.

They just stand there, sharing a moment, even as they acknowledge they will share nothing else. Ever again.

When Giovanni finally turns and walks away, I curl into Leon's chest and try not to burst into tears.

I can hear his heartbeat, strong and steady beneath my ear.

It's over. And Leon is alive.

We're *both* alive.

'I'm sorry,' I whisper against the cotton of his shirt. 'I'm sorry your father...' I run dry.

*"I'm sorry your father tried to kill you"?*

Not sure they make Hallmark cards for that one.

Leon snorts shakily. His hands tremble as he takes hold of my face once more.

'You think I care about that, right now? What made you come running down here like that?! I left you behind for a *reason*, Freya.'

'Hey, sir,' Jaime pipes up. 'You should show the lady a little love. Her distraction pretty much saved your ass.'

'Shut up, asshole,' Leon growls.

‘Not a bad shot either,’ Jamie mumbles to himself. He’s found a handkerchief from somewhere and is dabbing at his cheek. A clean slice, about an inch long, now rides his cheekbone. A matching tear in the edge of his ear is seeping crimson.

‘Oh, God,’ I wince, hand coming to my mouth.

I did that. *I shot him!*

The memory of Cisco’s scar flashes through my mind. Had the angle been slightly different or the recoil less powerful...

I feel sick with regret.

‘I’m so sorry, Jaime. Are you all right?’

I take a step towards him but Leon grabs hold of my arm and pulls me back against his chest.

Jaime watches the protective gesture with amusement.

‘I’ll survive,’ he grunts with a melodramatic eye roll.

‘More importantly, are *you* all right?’ Leon asks, taking my scratched palms in hand with a critical eye. ‘Hurt anywhere else?’

‘No,’ I shake my head. ‘You?’

‘I’m fine.’

‘Good,’ I say. Then I haul back and slug him in the arm.

‘*Ow!* What was that for?!’

‘Don’t you *ever* do that to me again!’ I screech with my best imitation of a banshee.

‘What?’ Leon cries defensively. He snorts again. ‘Try and keep you *safe?*’

‘Safe?!’ I squeak. ‘You left me in the *dark!* Don’t you *ever* leave without saying goodbye again! Don’t you ever leave without giving me the chance to tell you what a *stupid* idea it is!’

‘You wanted me to wake you up so you could yell at me?’ Leon asks dumbfounded.

‘No, you moron! I wanted you to wake me up so I could tell you that I love you!’

Leon turns to stone, right then and there. His voice is quiet, his lips paling out as he asks:

‘What?’

I’m too angry to notice his reaction, riding the wave of all the expelled terror and anger of the last hour.

‘I said you’re a damn idiot for—’

‘No,’ Leon interrupts. ‘Not that. Yes, I’m an idiot. Yes, I’m stupid. Whatever. The last bit. Say the last bit again.’

*Oh.*

I flush to my hairline. My tongue dries up, my stomach does a somersault.

*You ran into what could have been a hail of bullets but now you freeze up, Harrison?*

‘I love you,’ I repeat.

‘Long-term?’ he asks.

I make an exasperated face and thump the side of my fist against his chest.

‘Isn’t that what “I love you” *means*?’

‘Hey, I’m just checking here,’ he says, a beaming grin slowly spreading on his face. ‘You know how painful it is to be in love with a woman who’s sworn off men just like you?’

‘I’ve not sworn off men like you.’

‘You’ve not?’

I shake my head, lips teasing into a smile of my own.

‘Courageous, generous, intuitive, sexy men like you?’ I ask, with a pondering pout. ‘*Never.*’

Last night had changed everything. From Leon’s confessions, to my past, to a love-making so deep I never want to be without it... Each moment had chipped away at the fallacy that Leon is someone to fear, to be cautious of.

Cisco chose his tattoos. But not his scars. Was I going to allow Jason—a scar—to decide my life? Or was I going to choose my own permanencies? Choose what colored my life. And who I share it with...

‘But your—’

‘Listen to me very closely, Leon Averna,’ I say, cutting him off before we go down the wrong track... ‘You are *nothing* like Jason. On paper, perhaps there are a few similarities. But in *here*—I press a palm over his heart—‘where it counts... You are *nothing* alike.’

Scars and tattoos. Apples and oranges.

I reach for his face, brushing a thumb to his lips. He kisses the tip, eyes rapt with attention. He’s hanging on my every word.

‘Besides,’ I tell him. ‘I have a new rule for dating.’

‘About bad boys?’ he asks, with a crooked smile.

‘About everything.’

He frowns.

‘Am I going to like this one?’

‘You tell me. From now on, I’m determined to be a one-man woman.’

That grin of his, so startlingly white, so beautiful, breaks full and wide.

‘Any man in particular?’ he taunts.

‘Sicilian?’

‘Perfect.’

‘*Ugh.*’

I blush when I remember that Jaime’s playing witness to our entire love confession, right there over Leon’s shoulder.

Leon, for his part, groans at the interruption.

‘Are you still here?’ he growls with obvious disdain.

‘Still here,’ Jaime drawls. ‘Still bleeding.’

I wince.

‘We should get something on tha—*Leon!*’ I’m pulled back from Jaime for the second time.

‘He’s fine,’ Leon insists, wrapping me tight against his body. I can sense his form coming alive against me. My own body flashes hot in response. ‘He’s a big boy, he can take care of himself.’

‘*Sir...*’ Jaime growls in warning...

‘Give me a moment.’

Leon’s eyes are back on mine. He strokes my cheek as he did in my dreams; just one fingertip dancing an odd little path.

*He’s chasing my freckles*, I realize, my heart humming.

‘Oh, come on,’ Jaime snorts. ‘It sounds like she’ll be giving you a lifetime of “moments”, sir.’

Leon smiles down at me.

‘Doesn’t make a single one of them any less precious,’ he says.

## Epilogue

I returned to the States. Not immediately but in the summer as I originally planned. Over the next twelve months, Leon built up enough frequent flier miles to never again pay for a vacation. He was there for my graduation. On the same day that UNC gave me my Masters diploma, Leon gave me his mother's engagement ring.

A month later, I flew back to Sicily with Leon to attend his father's funeral. He tried to stop me. Power plays were made and leadership bids were executed. Some obvious, some underhanded. For several weeks, I white-knuckled it through life. But we'd been through dangers before and I refused to leave Leon to face his threats alone. We were a unit. A team. And Leon eventually took charge of the Machelli group.

The following December, I gave birth to our first child. A son named for both of our brothers: Evan Alexei Aversa. His sister, Luisa Francis was born two years later.

Our life at *Casa Della Natura* isn't perfect. Leon's work is difficult, sometimes haunting. I spend most of my day wrestling bureaucratic red tape so we might build economic infrastructures around our profitable drug trade. Not exactly the career I had expected. Both of us come home tired, to a wild household of squealing, joyous children. Some nights, my husband loves me into blissful ecstasy. Others, we both collapse, too exhausted to do more than lay in each other's company. As I said; not romantic perfection. But beautiful in its imperfections.

Leon likes to say the details don't matter. That it's the core of one's life that sets its tone. The core of ours is certainly love. I, on the other hand, say that the details are everything. When Luisa surprises us with homemade cookies (mostly edible). When my son frowns in a perfect imitation of his father. When I find Leon on the couch with our daughter on his chest, both of them sound asleep... Those are the details that make me adore my life.

In the end, it doesn't really matter which of us is right. There's space in our home and our marriage for more than one opinion. More than one life. And more than enough love to see every day full of joyous possibilities...