



*Somebody to*  
**LOVE**

*Ever After Series*

**USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR**

**LEA COLL**

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**LOVE**  
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## SOMEBODY TO LOVE

Ever After Series

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# About the Book

## ***Don't sleep with your best friend's brother.***

My best friend, Gia, has a rule for her employees and her friends: No dating her brothers.

But Leo Giovanni is the guy I'd secretly crushed on since high school—who also happens to be Gia's eldest brother.

The Giovannis are the family I never had, and I refuse to do anything to mess that up.

Leo has always had a special relationship with my daughter, but when he starts coming around more, taking us out on dates, building Evie a playhouse, and whispering sweet Italian words to me, I find myself lowering the walls I'd erected around my heart.

He says all the right words and has made it clear he wants both Evie and me, knowing we come as a packaged deal. The only problem is, he wants to keep our relationship a secret.

His parents want him to marry a nice Italian girl, and his sister—my best friend and employer—would feel betrayed if she ever found out. Not to mention, the expansion of his family's restaurant hinges on his parents' approval.

We both have a lot on the line if this goes south, but I refuse to be anybody's dirty little secret.

How can we make a relationship last when everything is so stacked against us?

*One*



**W**e had no business being here. We didn't know the couple getting married, Naomi and Chris, and we weren't there to support them or Naomi's ex, Finn. Gia wanted to scope out Silas Sharpe's resort and wedding business.

I had a bad feeling about this ever since Gia told me we were coming, and it only intensified when I woke up this morning. Gia managed to wrangle invitations, not only for her, but for me and her brother, Leo, too. I tried to talk her out of it, but when Gia set her mind to something, it was almost impossible to convince her otherwise.

Unease pricked my skin as we sat on the bride's side and listened to Finn warm up on his guitar. Paisley, Finn's daughter he shared with Naomi, was the flower girl. I was surprised that Finn got along with his ex.

I had a different experience with exes because my mother had been through so many men. None of them ever stuck around long enough to be considered for a stepdad role. Manny, the father of my little girl, Evie, dropped in and out of our lives, providing neither stability nor support.

Growing up, I lived in an apartment near Gia's family's restaurant and home. I loved how loud and boisterous her family was. They owned a local pizzeria, Giovanni's, where everyone in the family worked, including me. Over the years, Gia's family had essentially adopted me. There was a standing invitation to meals and holidays and, when I was younger, sleepovers when I wanted to avoid my mother's boyfriends.



I'd only recently gotten a full-time job working with Gia as the manager of her wedding planning business, Happily Ever Afters. I still worked part time at the pizzeria for extra income, and Gia's mother, Louisa, babysat Evie for me.

The Giovannis were the family I never had, and I'd never do anything to mess that up, especially lust after Gia's eldest brother, Leo. She had a standing rule that her friends weren't allowed to crush on, much less hook up with, her brothers. When we were teens, one of our best friends made out with her brother, Matteo, and it caused a huge fallout.

I never wanted to lose my friendship with Gia over a guy, and besides, my feelings for Leo were purely physical. When he was near, I got hot all over, and the hair on the back of my neck stood on end. And when he held my daughter or played with her? My heart melted.

I'd crushed on him forever, but he didn't see me as anything more than his younger sister's best friend. Pursuing this attraction wasn't worth losing a lifelong friendship over, or the only family I'd ever known. I didn't have the best track record with men.

I was independent and took care of my daughter. I wouldn't be like my mother and bring men in and out of Evie's life. I would be her constant support, and she'd never have a reason to doubt my love.

Today, Leo was accompanying us, probably to keep an eye on Gia, but I couldn't ignore his presence. He sat next to me on the dainty chairs, his thigh pressed against the length of my leg. I couldn't breathe without imagining what it would feel like for him to touch my bare thigh with his hand. The heat would sink into my skin, sending tingles up my leg and into my core.

I startled when Silas appeared next to his wedding planner, Hannah. She tilted her tablet in his direction, showing him something on the screen, probably the schedule for the wedding, and then he nodded, lifting his head to scan the area.

When he saw Leo, his expression lightened, and he approached us. I stiffened, worried Silas would see Gia and

kick us out. Leo was good friends with Silas, which made this situation even more awkward.

Silas clasped hands with Leo. “I didn’t realize you’d be here.”

“I guess you could say the bride and groom are friends of mine.”

I tensed, waiting for Silas to notice Gia, who was sitting to my right, or to call Leo out on his blatant lie. Even if Silas couldn’t possibly know that we were here under false pretenses, I was sure the deception was written all over my face.

“Are you enjoying yourself?” Silas asked, managing to be attentive to his friend while also keeping one eye on what was going on around him. It was probably the manager in him. He couldn’t turn it off.

Leo inclined his head. “The room and service are top-notch, as usual.”

I assumed Leo spent some time here with his brothers, probably drinking at the bar and boating. They’d been close friends growing up, although Silas had gone to a local private school, and Leo and his siblings went to public schools.

“Let’s grab a drink after the ceremony,” Silas offered, and before Leo could respond, he scanned our row of chairs before his gaze settled on Gia. “What are you doing here?”

His voice barely contained the irritation.

Gia bristled. “I’m a guest at this wedding.”

I wiped my sweaty palms on my dress, wishing I could disappear. I wanted nothing to do with this confrontation. I’d told Gia this was a bad idea. Growing up, she was the leader of our friend group, forever leading us into one crazy adventure after another. Back then, it was thrilling, but now I preferred to avoid drama.

Silas rocked back on his heels as if he was settling in for a discussion and not the verbal sparring I was used to seeing between them. “So, you’re not here to scope out my resort?”

Gia snorted softly. “Why would I need to do that? I’m here to enjoy a friend’s wedding. Nothing more.”

Her voice was light and airy, as if she didn’t have a care in the world, and Silas’s presence hadn’t affected her.

Silas’s lips twitched as he tipped his head toward the altar. “What do you think of Harrison’s arbor? He created it specially for my resort.”

For the first time, Gia’s stoic expression faltered, and her gaze shot toward the wooden arbor on the raised dais, where the happy couple would exchange vows. Harrison Cain owned Cain Rentals and provided all our tables, linens, plates, and silverware. He also created custom arbors and was making a name for himself in the business.

Gia’s smile wavered. “Harrison made the arbor?”

As her manager, I’d seen the contract between her and Cain Rentals. She paid for his priority in providing services but not exclusivity. At the time they made the agreement, Gia’s business wasn’t big enough to support that, so Harrison was free to work with other businesses. But everyone knew how she felt about Silas Sharpe and Chesapeake Resort. She probably assumed Harrison wouldn’t work with him, which was a mistake on her part.

“He works for me now. Or didn’t you know that?” From Silas’s cocky expression, it was clear he already knew the answer to his question and was reveling in throwing Gia off-balance.

Gia’s eyes narrowed on Silas, and his answering smile was self-assured. Gia’s presence might have initially caught him off guard, but he’d recovered quickly. I was sure it was the businessman in him. He didn’t let anyone throw him off his game.

Gia stood, making her way past me and Leo before pausing in front of Silas. Even though she was shorter than him, even in heels, she managed to look down her nose at him. “If you’ll excuse me. I’m here to enjoy the wedding.”

Silas's nostrils flared as he took her in from head to toe. Her hair was pinned in a chignon at the base of her head, and she wore a wraparound dress that accentuated every curve.

Gia brushed past him, moving with purpose down the aisle and into the main building. Silas watched her go, and I wondered if he was following the soft sway of her hips. He waited for a beat and then followed her into the hotel.

I started to get up, intending to follow her, when Leo's hand encircled my wrist. "Let her go. She's fine."

"You don't think I should check on her?" I wanted to make sure Silas wasn't going to hassle her. But Leo might not have realized the level of antagonism between his sister and his best friend.

Leo let go of my wrist and settled his arm on the back of my chair, smiling down at me. He leaned in close to say in a conspiratorial whisper, "You're the only other person I know here."

He was so close I could feel the press of his arm on my shoulders and the scent of his aftershave. He was huge, and his presence was all-consuming. I couldn't stop the heavy beating of my heart when Leo turned on the charm. I didn't think he even noticed his effect on me. Or maybe he assumed that, because I was Gia's friend, I didn't think of him as anything other than a brother.

"I'm worried about her," I said softly, reveling in the weight and warmth of his arm on my shoulder and how protective it felt. If we were here together, I'd feel like I was his. With that dangerous thought, my heart galloped away entirely.

Leo shook his head slightly as he pulled away. "Gia can take care of herself."

I knew her family believed that, and I was sure it was true on some levels, but they didn't see the woman I knew. She yearned for her brothers' respect and her father's approval, even though she didn't work at Giovanni's anymore.

“You don’t believe that?” Leo asked, really looking at me for the first time today.

I shifted on the hard chair under his scrutiny. “She’s strong, but she can be vulnerable too.”

He leaned back in the chair, spreading his legs wide so that his thigh was once again pressed against mine. His sprawl was undeniably sexy. “Gia can handle Silas.”

That’s not exactly what I was worried about. I suspected that Gia was attracted to Silas, and there was no way that could end well. Every time they were near each other, sparks flew. I’m sure her brothers thought it was the competition between them, but it was more than that.

They got under each other’s skin, and there was an undeniable passion simmering just under the surface. I had a feeling they’d implode if they got together, and it wouldn’t be good for any of us. The only way Silas and Gia coexisted was because her business was in Annapolis, and Silas’s was out of town. Silas occasionally showed up to important family events, but otherwise, they didn’t cross paths much.

“What about you, *piccola* Harper?”

I rolled my eyes at the moniker Gia’s brothers gave me when I was younger. “I’m not little anymore. I’m all grown up.” I crossed my legs, shamelessly letting the hem of my dress slide up my bare thighs.

Leo’s gaze tracked the movement, and I felt the heat of his stare. I clenched my thighs together. I’d wanted Leo since we were kids, and he’d never given me any impression he was interested in me as anything more than a family friend. He was tasked with driving me and Gia to and from parties and dates when we were in high school, and his gaze had never lingered; his eyes never darkened with desire as they did now.

He swallowed hard before he finally looked away. “I can see that. You are all grown up, Harper Manning.”

I rocked my foot to keep my mind off how good it sounded to hear my name on his lips. Not my nickname or a silly moniker, *my full name*. A tingle ran through my body.

Was this it? Had he finally seen me for the woman I was? Did he see me as desirable, someone he could see himself with?

The only problem with this crush that I'd had on him forever was that I hadn't gotten past the part where he'd finally notice me. I didn't think he ever would, so I was safe behind my crush. There was no way Gia's older brother would look twice at me, much less stare at me with the heat he just had.

An usher stopped at our aisle, and we stood to allow a couple to move past us to the end of the row, and the intimate moment was gone. Gia returned to her seat before the wedding processional began, and Paisley made her way down the aisle.

Leo didn't look in my direction for the rest of the ceremony, but I felt him. Every time he shifted in his chair, letting his leg relax against mine, and the adjustment when he realized we were touching.

Not for the first time, I wished that he was just some guy I met at the bar. I could have one spectacular night with him, get it out of my system, and then go back to my boring life as a single mom.

Naomi and Chris's ceremony was beautiful. I could feel their love as they allowed Paisley to stand next to them as they exchanged vows. For a few seconds, I imagined myself in the same position. A man by my side, declaring his love, not only for me but for my daughter, too. But it felt false, like it wasn't meant for me.

I'd concluded long ago that I'd never get married, and I thought I was okay with that. None of the men my mother dated loved her enough for that. And my mom was so busy chasing the next guy, she never saw me. That's why I latched on to Gia's family at a young age. I wanted what she had, and maybe that was part of this crush I had on Leo. I wanted to be part of the Giovanni family so badly that I imagined this attraction to him.

I was attached to Gia and her family, not the other way around. They didn't need me as I did them. Mr. G. gave me

my first job when I was fourteen, and Mrs. G. watched Evie so I could work. They protected me. But I was starting to think it was time for me to separate from them.

We stood as the couple made their way back down the aisle, this time to cheers. I was happy for them, even if I didn't know them.

"Are we staying for the reception?" Leo asked Gia.

Gia nodded, her expression calculating. "Of course. I want to see how everything is run."

"So you *are* spying on Silas," Leo said seriously.

Gia rolled her eyes. "Any good business owner is aware of the competition."

Leo's forehead wrinkled. "Don't forget, Silas is my friend."

Gia scoffed. "And my biggest competitor."

"I hate that you two don't get along," Leo said softly.

I wondered if Leo felt stuck in the middle of that situation. There was animosity coming from Gia, and I'm sure Silas didn't have good things to say about her.

Gia's eyes narrowed. "Does it matter? We're competitors. We were never going to be friends."

I could see Gia and Silas interacting as enemies and maybe even lovers, but anything else was too preposterous to consider. Both of their personalities were so big they'd clash. Not that I was an expert on relationships.

"What about you? You need to get back?" Leo asked me, and I was touched that he cared.

"Your mom said she didn't mind keeping Evie. You know she loves her as if she were her own grandchild. But I don't want to leave her all night." Mrs. G. loved to say I was the only one of her kids who bothered to give her grandkids. I loved that she'd referred to me as her child, but a part of me knew she was just being nice. I wasn't part of the Giovanni family. Not really.

As we moved into the aisle, Leo let Gia walk ahead of us, and he wrapped his arm around me for a second time, drawing me into his side. His heat enveloped me. “I want to thank you for that. As the eldest, I get the most pressure in that department.”

“To get married and have kids?” I was aware of the dynamics of the Giovanni family, but it never failed to surprise me how much they cared for each other.

Leo nodded as we followed the line of guests to the cocktail area.

“You don’t want that?” It wasn’t something I’d ever had an opportunity to ask before. We were usually surrounded by their family. It was loud and boisterous, and private conversations weren’t possible.

Leo sighed. “I do. Just not on my mom’s schedule.”

He’d dated Bianca for three years, and everyone thought they would get engaged. Her family owned a fancy Italian restaurant in town. For me, her existence meant that Leo would remain a silly crush, not a real possibility. When they broke up, everyone was surprised, but I never heard why it didn’t work out.

Leo was a good son. He’d eventually give in to his mother’s demands and get married to a nice Italian girl who didn’t already have kids with a deadbeat dad. He’d be with someone worthy of him. I had no delusions that I was it for him.

When a waiter walked by with a tray, we each grabbed a champagne glass. Leo held his up and said, “To Happily Ever Afters.”

“To Happily Ever Afters,” I repeated, and Gia smiled.

“I can get behind that.”

We clinked glasses, and I drank deeply from mine. It was dry going down, and I immediately started coughing.

Leo’s large palm rested on my back as I leaned over, hoping the ground would swallow me. “Are you okay?”



“It went down the wrong pipe,” I said, slightly embarrassed yet enjoying his concern.

Leo grabbed a glass of water from a nearby waiter and handed it to me.

I drank slowly, hoping it wouldn't set off another coughing fit.

When they were satisfied I'd recovered, Gia drifted away, presumably to see how things ran at a Chesapeake Resort wedding. But Leo kept his hand on my back as I sipped my water.

“Are you sure you're okay?” he asked. His eyes were soft and filled with concern.

I sighed, wishing I could stay this close to him forever. “I am now.”

When I was with Leo, I felt protected and cared for, even if he didn't see me as anyone more than his sister's best friend.

*Two*



When I heard about Gia's plan to attend a wedding at Silas's resort, I knew I had to find a way to go with her. She and Silas didn't get along. They either complained about each other to me or, if they happened to be in the same room, traded barbs. It was uncomfortable for me since Gia was my sister and Silas was my best friend.

I wanted to step between them, but I wasn't sure Gia needed or wanted that. She could handle herself, even against Silas. There was something about those two that had me on edge, and I couldn't figure out what it was. I didn't think Silas would hurt her, not really.

If he did something to jeopardize her business, he'd have me to deal with. We might have been friends, but Gia was my sister. She'd always come first.

Sometimes, I think Silas enjoyed their rivalry a bit too much. I wondered if he'd poached Harrison on purpose. There had to be other people who built arbors, but what did I know about the wedding business?

It was a smart move when Silas bought and renovated this resort. It was the perfect location for weddings, as it bordered the bay. It quickly became the number one wedding destination and fine-dining option in the area. Whenever he booked a wedding, he filled most of his rooms, and the restaurants too.

In a perfect world, Gia would stay in her corner of Annapolis, and Silas would stay in his at the resort. But

somehow, these two circled each other, sniping at each other and making everyone around them uncomfortable. I had a feeling it was going to blow up in their faces soon, and they weren't going to like the fallout.

There was a second reason I was here, and it was because I knew Gia wouldn't come without her best friend, Harper. She'd eased into our lives slowly when we were younger. First, coming over for the occasional playdate, and when Mom realized her mother worked a lot, she was invited to dinners and, eventually, sleepovers.

Mom told us to protect her as if she were our sister. I took that role seriously over the years. My father frequently reminded me that it was my role as the eldest of my siblings. As Gia got older, she didn't need me to watch out for her as much, but Harper called out to every one of my overprotective instincts.

Harper tended to gravitate toward guys that were trouble. When she got pregnant, I offered to remind Manny, Evie's father, of his responsibilities, but Harper was adamant that I not confront him.

And I adored her little girl, Evie. She was the center of joy in our family. Even if she wasn't technically ours, she was part of our family.

The wedding planner instructed everyone to sit at their tables. I stuck close to Harper since Gia had disappeared during cocktail hour and hadn't reappeared.

I kept my arm loose over the back of Harper's chair as she made small talk with the other couples at the table, explaining that we were there to support Finn. It was a weak explanation because I didn't think Harper and Gia were especially close to Finn. There was some tension when Gia discovered he was dating his colleague, one of Gia's wedding planners, Aria. Apparently, Gia had rules against fraternization, but Finn stopped accepting new contracts to play at Gia's weddings, and that seemed to solve the issue.

When talk at the table turned away from us, Harper asked, "Where do you think Gia is?"

“Who knows? That girl’s always been trouble,” I grumbled. I didn’t mind my role as protector, but Gia had never made it easy. Once, as teens, we were at a town fair, and she’d jumped into the car of some guy without telling me. Then I had to find her and somehow keep it from our father. I swear she did it on purpose to drive me crazy. As an adult, I knew she could handle most things that came her way.

But Harper had always been a bit easier. She stuck by my side and listened to me. But as she got older, the control I exerted over Gia and Harper diminished. They were adults who could make their own decisions.

I scanned the room, and when I didn’t spot her, my gaze dropped to Harper, who’d covered a smile with her hand.

“You think I’m funny?” I asked her. Even though she’d been in my life forever, she was a bit of a mystery to me. She was quieter than Gia, but then maybe Gia’s personality was so big it cast a shadow over everyone around her.

“A little bit.”

“You know my father tells me to protect her, but it’s impossible,” I grumbled.

Harper grinned. “That girl operates on her own frequency.”

I’d never taken the opportunity to get to know Harper. I always thought of her as Gia’s friend, and therefore, she was off-limits to me. But I adored her daughter. “How’s that sweet girl of yours?”

Harper’s eyes lit up like I knew they would. “She’s going to kindergarten now, and she loves it.”

“Is she smart like her mamma?”

“She is.” Harper blushed, and I wondered what that was about.

Was she not used to compliments or my teasing? Maybe I reserved it for Gia, not wanting to get involved with Harper in any way. Now, I wondered why that was.

“She’s so social. She’ll talk to our neighbors for the longest time. It’s like she’s this old soul in a tiny body. They

love her.”

“She’s adorable.” Every time she was in my parents’ house, I took the opportunity to hold her. I loved spending time with her, playing and listening to her jabber on about her dolls. She was the cutest thing, and she made me want to start a family sooner rather than later. I couldn’t help but wonder if my kids would be like her.

Harper’s shoulders relaxed. “I’m so grateful that your mother watches her. I don’t know what I’d do without your family.”

Harper was a gorgeous, independent woman, who worked hard and took care of that girl on her own. She was just as strong as my sister. “You’d be okay.”

“I don’t know. Daycare is so expensive, and with my hours, I’m not sure I could work for Gia and manage.”

“Thank God you’ll never have to find out.” If my mom couldn’t watch Evie, one of my aunts would. It was just the way it was. We watched out for our own, and Harper and Evie were part of that.

“What did I miss?” Gia asked as she sat down in the chair on the other side of Harper.

The waitstaff was setting the salads down on the table in front of us.

“Just the cocktail hour,” Harper said, turning her attention to her.

Reluctantly, I removed my arm from Harper’s chair and set my elbows on the table. “You get any good intel?”

Gia flashed me an irritated look. “I took a walk to see the grounds. The property is gorgeous.”

“You’ve never been here?” I asked, a little surprised. She said she was here to check out the resort, but I guess I thought she’d been here before. Stayed for another wedding or a girls’ night out or something.

Gia rolled her eyes. “If it wasn’t obvious, Silas doesn’t want me here.”

I shifted in my chair, the idea making me uncomfortable. “He’ll come around. You’re my sister.”

“And his number-one enemy,” Gia muttered as she picked up her fork to pick at her salad.

I wondered if that was accurate. I didn’t want something happening between them that would affect my friendship with Silas or my relationship with Gia.

“From what I can tell, he runs a beautiful resort. The accommodations are luxurious, and the waitstaff is professional and accommodating.” Gia’s eyes were round, her expression soft.

“Are you staying overnight?” I asked her.

Gia nodded. “I want to get a better feel for the hotel.”

“I want to get back to Evie,” Harper said uneasily.

“I’ll take you,” I offered easily.

Harper frowned at me. “Don’t you need to spend time with Silas?”

“I can grab a drink with him anytime, and if you need to be home, I’ll get you there.”

Harper’s expression softened. “Thank you.”

“Anytime.” I popped a cucumber into my mouth, knowing it was true. I took care of people; it’s what I did. And I didn’t mind, but I wondered if I’d have a marriage and a child in my immediate future. There was something about being here today, witnessing Chris and Naomi with Paisley, that had me thinking more about Harper and her situation.

Would she meet a good man who would treat Evie and Harper like they deserved? With her luck in men, I wasn’t so sure. Not that I knew what happened in her life, but Manny wasn’t there for Evie, and Harper’s dad was never in the picture.

I heard Gia and my mom talking about it on occasion. Manny didn’t pay child support as ordered. As soon as child support services found out where he worked, they’d garnish

his wages, and then he'd quit his job. The search would start all over again. I hated the guy on principle, and no one would ever be good enough for Evie.

I liked things how they were now. Harper and Evie were close. My family could help them. I didn't like the idea of another man coming into Harper's life and offering her security. It didn't sit right with me.

"Their wedding planner is organized and well-prepared. The ceremony went smoothly," Gia continued, as if she was having a business meeting with Harper.

"You thought it wouldn't be?" I couldn't help but butt into their conversation. Silas was good at everything he did, especially in business.

"I was hoping there would be something I could exploit."

I leaned back, still hungry after devouring the salad. I needed something more substantial. "You aren't in direct competition, you know. If a couple wants a resort, they come here; if they want a venue in Annapolis, they go to you."

"I've been losing more clients lately. When I ask about why, they say they prefer the all-inclusive offerings of Silas's resort."

"Can you blame them? I can't imagine planning my own wedding." Harper shuddered. "There are so many details."

"Yet you don't mind doing it for other people," I said, interested to know more about her.

"I'm not a wedding planner. I'm the manager."

"That's right." I wondered what her position entailed in Gia's business. Gia had said Harper had been invaluable to her since she hired her, but I hadn't paid close attention to her job duties.

Dinner finally came, and I dug into the steak while Gia and Harper made small talk with the other couples at our table. Afterward, Finn played his guitar for the bride and groom's first dance, and a few others. When the guests filtered onto the



dance floor, Gia said, “You two should dance. We need to blend in and look natural.”

“Not like we’re on a supersecret spy mission?” I teased.

“Just go dance,” Gia said with a wave of her hand.

I had a feeling she wanted to take another tour of the place, and I should have told her not to, but when had she ever listened to me?

I stood and held my hand out to Harper. She placed her hand in mine, and it reminded me a little of another wedding of Gia’s I attended, and Harper insisted we dance. It had been a little awkward because I’d never been that close to Harper, but it surprised me because I realized I was attracted to her. As much as I tried to shove it down and ignore it over the years, I liked her.

When we reached the dance floor, I pulled her into my arms, keeping a little distance between our bodies.

“We’ve been in this position before,” Harper mused.

“This is weird, isn’t it?” I asked her, needing confirmation that she felt the shift in the air between us. Maybe I’d never gotten close to her for a reason. Because the way she felt in my arms was nice.

Harper’s lips pursed. “I wouldn’t say it’s weird, but it is different.”

I’d put Harper into this little box labeled *Gia’s best friend*, and I didn’t like to take her out of it. Whenever I did, like now when I was forced to dance with her, emotions swirled in my chest that had nothing to do with affection for a sibling or a friend.

A couple brushed behind Harper, causing her to stumble into my body. I pressed her close, steadying her. “Are you okay?” I asked into her hair.

“Yeah,” she said, her voice a little shaky, so I kept her close, enjoying the feel of her soft body pressed against mine. I tried not to think about how I felt the hard nubs of her nipples pressed against my chest, and when I spread my palm

on her back, I didn't feel the band of a bra. Was she bare under this slip of a dress?

I felt my pants getting tight, the blood draining from my head.

"I'm okay," Harper reassured me, and I loosened my hold on her, letting her create a few inches of space between us.

"Even though I'm in the business of planning weddings, I think it's an odd tradition."

I eased back so I could see the expression on her face. "You don't like weddings?" They'd always been a big deal in my family. A celebration of life, love, and family.

"I wouldn't say that. I just don't understand them. Why spend so much money on one day?"

"I think it's because women look forward to feeling special. They don't care about the cost."

Harper pursed her lips again, and I chided myself for forgetting that she hadn't grown up with money. She'd relied on government assistance and our family's hand-me-downs.

Harper shook her head. "It's not about the money. I just don't get it. I can't explain it."

Then a thought hit me: She didn't think meeting a man who'd accept her and her daughter was possible. "There's someone out there for you."

Harper laughed without any humor. "You believe that?"

I frowned. "Don't you?" Didn't all women hope to meet their soulmate or their significant other? They believed in that more than men did.

Harper sighed. "My mom never married. No one ever thought she was right for them."

I didn't know much about her mother. I knew she worked and had boyfriends. But I wasn't sure if she intentionally neglected Harper or if it was a by-product of her circumstances. I remember not liking how often men came and went. "I'm not sure that's what she was looking for."

Harper's lips curled. "She wanted desperately for someone to love her. Trust me. I know."

Had her mother looked for love in the wrong place? "You think you'll have the same experience?"

Harper shrugged. "I'm a young, single mother. Manny isn't involved."

I tensed.

Harper squeezed my hand as if she sensed my unease. "Not that I want him to be. It's better this way."

I forced my muscles to relax because I thought so too. I didn't like the guy, and I didn't want him around Harper and Evie. They were too good for him.

"No one wants to date a single mother."

"I don't know about that—" I didn't think I'd ever had the occasion to choose the option. I met most of my girlfriends in school or, later, through my extended family. None of them had a child, but I don't think it would have bothered me if they did.

"You know it's true. What guy my age would want to deal with the added responsibility?"

"Are you looking to date?" I didn't remember Gia mentioning her dating recently. It seemed like she only asked my mom to watch Evie when she worked.

Harper chuckled. "Definitely not. There's just something about being at a wedding that makes you question your choices in life."

"Tell me about it." I'd had similar thoughts while watching the ceremony. But it was Paisley whom I was drawn to. Even though she was closer to eight or nine, and Evie was only five, I couldn't help but think of the parallels, wondering if a child was in my future.

Harper smiled up at me, and something about it sent a pang through my heart. "What are you questioning?"

“Whether I should find someone and settle down. I’m not getting any younger,” I said, repeating one of my mom’s favorite phrases.

Harper frowned. “Is that what you want, though?”

“Watching Naomi and Chris interact with Paisley... I wonder if that’s what I want.”

“A stepdaughter?” Harper asked, her brow raised.

“I meant a child in general,” I rushed to correct her, because I wouldn’t admit that it had made me think of Evie and Harper and how I wouldn’t want them with anyone else. Which was ridiculous, because Harper deserved to be happy, and Evie deserved a stepdad who would take care of her like she was his own.

Harper smiled softly. “You’re great with Evie.”

“I love her,” I said without thinking, and Harper smiled at me. My heart squeezed. I would do anything to make her smile like that at me again. “You know she’s irresistible.”

Harper smiled, and then it faded. “I just want her to have a good life.”

I heard what she wasn’t saying—not the life that Harper had growing up. “You’re a great mother.”

Harper let out a breath. “I needed to hear that. Sometimes it’s hard doing it on your own.”

“Do you need help with anything? Because you know my family will be there for you.” *I’m here for you.* But I couldn’t tell her that. We weren’t friends. We barely knew each other outside of our respective roles in the family.

“And I appreciate that. But I feel like I should stand on my own. I shouldn’t need help.”

Surprised by her admission, I stopped swaying to the music. “Raising kids is hard work. Take all the help you can get. Especially since Manny isn’t involved.”

She bit her lip. “I feel so guilty all the time—like when I have to work or when I need to go to an appointment.”

“Evie loves you.” I brushed a hair back from her face, wishing I could comfort her in another way. But we weren’t that close. I shouldn’t want to touch her.

She closed her eyes, and I moved when Finn struck up a new song on his guitar.

I lowered my head and spoke directly into her ear. “Never doubt that you are enough. *Sei la più bella cosa che c’è.*”

My heart pounded hard in my chest as I waited for her response.

*Three*



**N** ever doubt that you are enough.

His words drifted over me, sending tingles down my spine and goose bumps over my skin until the truth of the words settled into my consciousness. And there was just something about how he'd lowered his voice to speak in Italian. I didn't know the meaning, but I didn't have to in order to feel the effect of the words—they were like a caress from a lover.

My muscles relaxed one by one until I was leaning into Leo's body. As we talked, he kept his head slightly bowed, his body curved around mine so that I felt like I had his full attention.

It was an addictive feeling. I'd always felt supported by his family, but I'd never felt this connection to Leo before. I moved my hand from his arm to curve around his back. It brought me even closer to his warmth. I pressed my cheek against his hard chest, waiting for him to pull away and pretend this wasn't happening.

I closed my eyes and allowed my mind to drift, to pretend that Leo was here as my plus-one, that he was my boyfriend. He obviously adored Evie. Was it possible he could love me too?

I imagined us at a playground, holding hands while Evie played. Her calling out to Leo to help her on the monkey bars or to push her on the swings. It was so real, so vivid, my eyes

stung with unshed tears because that dream wasn't real. It was a figment of my imagination, one I needed to snuff out.

But I let myself play the images like a reel in my head while the music played and couples danced around us. I knew I'd never forget this moment, when we were connected in a way we never had been before.

When the music ended, Leo stepped back, and I looked away, not wanting him to see the crushing disappointment on my face because he wasn't my boyfriend. He wasn't even a friend. He was my best friend's older brother. He was too responsible. Too mature. Too everything for me.

"Thank you for the dance." I attempted a smile that I didn't think hit the mark before turning to head back to our table. I was stopped by a tug on my wrist.

"It was my pleasure, *è stato un vero piacere*," he said with a smile and a wink that made me feel weak in the knees.

My heart fluttered as I tried to regain my good sense and remember that nothing could happen between us. I was friends with Gia. The Giovannis were like a second family to me, and nothing was worth losing them.

As we walked back to our table, he kept a hand on my lower back, guiding me. The warmth of his palm radiating through my body felt good. By the time we reached our table, my legs were shaky.

I collapsed onto the chair, grateful for the cooler air coming in on the breeze from the bay. Someone had refilled our glasses of champagne, so I took a long drink of mine, emptying the glass, needing to soothe my dry throat, and trying to forget that dance we'd shared.

"Gia's still missing," Leo observed.

"You don't think she's—" My voice dropped off when I realized what I was going to ask—was she hooking up with Silas somewhere?

I'd seen those two interact enough to know the inevitable result would be him throwing her up against a wall and having his way with her. Silas was so arrogant, so cocky, I had a



feeling he'd know not only how to handle Gia, but how to show her a good time.

Leo's brow raised. "What were you going to say?"

I flushed, and before I could respond, I saw Gia moving across the room toward us. Her cheeks were pink, and if I wasn't mistaken, her lips were slightly swollen. She'd reapplied her makeup, though, so it was hard to tell.

She offered us a bright smile as she sat down. I wanted to ask her what she was doing, but I couldn't in front of her brother.

"Where were you?" Leo asked, his gaze steady on her.

Gia smoothed her dress. "I was just checking on things."

"Anything we can use?" I asked her, wanting to give her an out.

After a quick look at Leo, she said, "We can talk about it later."

Leo's lips quirked. "So, I can't know about the secret workings of Happily Ever Afters?"

"It's on a need-to-know basis, and you're friends with the enemy," Gia said cheekily.

"You really want to know?" I asked him.

"Not unless you have late-night sleepovers and throw pillows at each other." Then his eyes widened, and he sucked in a breath. "No, wait. This is my sister we're talking about."

I wondered if he'd been thinking about *me*. It was that inner girl buried deep inside me who wouldn't let go of the idea of him.

Gia narrowed her eyes at him. "Is that what you think we do?"

"You drink champagne to celebrate a job well done, don't you?" Leo asked.

"Yes," Gia said tersely.

“Isn’t that how the rules were created?” I asked, feeling a little light-headed from drinking my glass of champagne so quickly. I wasn’t present when they were created, but they’d been mentioned many times since.

Gia played with the tablecloth, a rare sign of unease from her.

Leo shifted in his chair to face her. “What are these rules?”

Gia waved a hand as if it was no big deal. “No sleeping with coworkers. That kind of thing.”

“Is that all?” Leo turned to ask me.

I grinned, feeling lighter than I had in a long time. I tapped my chin. “Oh, there’s more. Let’s see if I can remember correctly... There’s no sleeping with coworkers or members of the wedding party—oh, and Gia’s brothers.”

Leo leaned forward. “Wait. What?”

Shit. Had I said that out loud? That second glass of champagne must have gone directly to my head.

“Did you say there’s an office rule about not sleeping with Gia’s brothers?” Leo asked, his voice dangerously low.

“Yees,” I said, drawing out the word. “Everyone knows you’re off-limits.”

“I didn’t realize we were ever an option,” Leo said, his tone more amused than irritated.

Gia rolled her eyes. “You know all my friends liked you, even in high school. I just like to keep things clear.”

Leo sobered, his gaze swinging to meet mine. “Is that true, Harper? Did you like me in high school?”

Gia shook her head. “Not Harper. She’d never betray me that way.”

I was grateful Gia had instantly denied it. I knew she hated it when her friends asked about her brothers. She wanted trustworthy friends, not girls hanging around, hoping her brothers would notice them. Angela had been one of our best friends in high school, but when Gia caught her making out

with her brother, Matteo, that was the end of that. She'd felt hurt and betrayed.

The guilt settled in deep because I'd crushed on Leo. I didn't hang around just for her brothers. I genuinely liked Gia and her family. It was why I'd never acted on my feelings or told anyone about them. It was my secret crush, one I'd never tell anyone or admit out loud.

But Leo's gaze hadn't left mine, like he was waiting for me to answer. Had he sensed something when we were dancing? Had I moved too close? Been too obvious about my feelings?

"Oh, look, it's time to cut the cake," Gia said. In her mind, she'd answered Leo's question.

I didn't have a crush. End of story. The truth was far messier.

"Let's get a closer look, shall we?" I stood and moved toward the table where the crowd gathered around the bride and groom and the four-tier white cake with cascading flowers.

I needed to get away from Leo before he saw through my façade. That was the closest he'd ever been to learning the truth. Between that conversation, the champagne, and our dance, I was off-balance.

As we stood with the rest of the guests, watching the bride and groom hold the knife and carefully slice through the bottom layer, I asked Gia, "Did you learn anything useful?"

Gia rolled her eyes. "Just that Silas runs a tight ship."

"We suspected that." He was a well-respected businessman, and even though he didn't have any prior wedding experience, he'd hired competent staff to guide him. He wasn't so cocky that he didn't seek experts when necessary.

"I can't believe he drew Harrison away from me."

I frowned. "But he didn't. Not really. Harrison's in the business of renting wedding supplies, and he's the only one in

the area who designs and builds arbors.” Ethan assisted him with the more complicated ones, but he wasn’t involved in the wedding business. He owned a hardware store on Main Street and built furniture on the side.

Gia crossed her arms over her chest. “He did it on purpose to piss me off.”

I wasn’t sure I believed that. Harrison was one of the best in the business. He was reliable, and his prices were competitive.

Gia’s lip curled. “I bet Silas offered him an incentive.”

“Harrison is building a business, just like you are. He’s not going to turn down paying customers.” Especially ones with Silas’s reputation in the event-planning community.

Gia sighed. “I’m not mad at Harrison.”

“You came to this wedding to get some insight into Silas. We didn’t find anything, so maybe there isn’t anything to find. He runs a good business, just like you do. You can coexist. You aren’t offering the same things,” I said, trying again to divert her attention from Silas.

“I don’t like that he poached my vendor,” Gia hissed.

“He didn’t, though. He works for both of you.”

“I’ll never forgive him for it.”

I chuckled softly. “You didn’t exactly like him before you learned about Harrison.”

Her lips turned up. “True.”

“Your brothers are friends with him. Maybe he’s not that bad,” I said, trying a different angle.

“Silas has taken some of the biggest clients from me recently. I can’t let it continue. I need to figure out a way to handle this.”

We lost a certain number of *potential* clients because what Silas could offer was different than what we could. It didn’t help that weddings on the bay were so popular in the area. The

town of Annapolis didn't have a comparable venue. Besides, Gia didn't own our venues. We rented them.

"I'm trying to get the Christmas Tree Farm on board. It's something we could offer that's different."

"Have they changed their mind about working with us?" I asked.

"They won't give me a definitive answer."

"Is it the son—Emmett—who's the issue?" I remembered meeting with the owner—the wife and mother. It had been a good meeting until her overbearing mountain of a son had shown up, nixing the whole thing. Gia hoped they'd come around.

"I think so. I'm going to send Ireland to talk to him. Maybe she can talk some sense into him."

Ireland was one of the wedding planners. She had a knack for dealing with difficult brides. I think it was the years she'd spent living in the elite circle of Baltimore's richest. But I wasn't sure it equated to grumpy men who didn't want wedding planners on their farms.

Holding weddings on a Christmas tree farm during their busiest season was a lot to ask, especially when it was a family-run business.

"You're successful because you're hardworking and the brides know you'd do anything for them." That was one of Gia's issues. She was overextended in her business. She worked like someone possessed, like she had something to prove.

When she'd brought me on board to create an organizational system for her, I'd convinced her to let me evaluate everything—the business, the finances, everything. I'd convinced her to hire a couple more wedding planners as the business had grown. But she was right. Lately, we hadn't gotten as many high-budget weddings as we had previously. We needed a certain number of those to float the business the rest of the year, especially in the off-season. Gia was right to

be concerned, but as her friend, I didn't want her to work harder.

"I have to figure this out."

Coming to Silas's den hadn't helped; it had only fueled her desire to figure out his weaknesses. I wasn't sure he had any—except maybe her.

I scanned the room and found Silas leaning against the back wall, his gaze on us. "Don't look now, but he's watching us."

Her back stiffened. "I won't give him the satisfaction of knowing he gets to me."

I thought it was too late for that. Everyone saw the blow he'd landed when he'd mentioned he'd hired Harrison for his weddings. Gia prided herself on using the best vendors, and Harrison created custom pieces for our brides. But if Silas was using him too, what did we offer that was unique? Sure, we were good at our jobs, but so were Silas and his wedding planner.

"Are you still planning on staying the night?" I asked her.

She nodded tightly as a gentleman in a suit approached her. "Would you like to dance?"

Gia placed her hand in his and said, "I'd love to."

"I'm going to head out. I need to get Evie."

"Have a good night," she said to me before the man led her to the dance floor.

"You ready to get out of here?" Leo asked.

Suddenly, I was exhausted. I couldn't solve this problem for Gia, and it was literally my job to ensure we had enough money to survive. "I want to relieve your mom. It's getting late."

"She doesn't mind. Evie's probably sleeping."

I hated being away from her. It was nice that I could rely on Leo's mom, but how could I explain that I didn't want to? I was all she had.

We gathered our things, and when we left, I didn't see Silas. I wondered if he'd seen the man ask Gia to dance and if it bothered him. If I had to guess, he liked her more than he let on, and not just as an attractive woman, but as a savvy businesswoman. For that reason, and because he was friends with Leo and his brothers, I suspected Silas was a good guy. But probably not the right one for Gia.

In Leo's large SUV, I settled into the deep leather seats. "Thanks for driving me home."

"Anytime." He signaled to change lanes on the highway. "You know, I didn't want to come tonight."

"I don't blame you." That hurt, even though I knew he hadn't meant anything about the company. What guy liked to attend weddings, especially for a couple he didn't know?

"It's just that Gia is playing with fire. I wish she'd let this thing with Silas go."

I thought about what I wanted to say before I began. "I think she feels like she can't. Silas is taking more of her business, and she's right to be worried."

Leo glanced over at me. "Are you serious?"

"We need several large weddings to float us the rest of the year, and she's panicking because we either haven't gotten them, or they've left before signing the contract. They always end up at Silas's resort."

"Does she need help?"

"Don't tell her I told you. She'd hate that, you know. She wants to make it on her own. The thing is, we used the recent profits to hire a couple of wedding planners and new vendors, and we need continued growth to pay them. The responsibility of employees relying on her is weighing heavily on her."

"I had no idea."

"She wants to make it without the family's help."

He flicked his hand. "Family helps each other."

“I think Gia wants to prove she can make it on her own.” She’d always been independent and, as the youngest of four kids, felt like she was babied growing up. She wanted to be more involved in the restaurant, but her father hadn’t allowed it. He had her older brothers for that. He’d wanted her to work for him, but not as a manager. There wasn’t room for her, and she hated that. She wanted to be the boss.

“Papà’s a hard guy to please. I started out as the busboy and dishwasher, learning everything there was to know about the business over the years, but he still doesn’t trust me to manage a restaurant. Not by myself. One of my brothers is usually there, or he is.”

“Aren’t you the manager when your father isn’t working?”

“He’s always stopping by to check on me or calling in to get an account of the night. I’m never in charge, and the employees know that.”

“I didn’t realize.”

Leo shook his head. “I shouldn’t even be telling you this.”

“You want him to have more faith in you?” I asked gently.

“Something like that, but ultimately, I want to open a new restaurant. Our profits support the possibility, but Papà won’t consider it.”

“Where would you open it?” I hadn’t heard anyone talking about another restaurant. Mr. G., as I liked to call him, loved having one restaurant where his entire family worked together.

“I’m not sure yet. I haven’t gotten past his skepticism that a second location would overextend us. But I think we can manage it. Especially since I’d do the heavy lifting.”

“I had no idea you wanted to open a second location.”

He ran a hand through his hair. “I have so many ideas on how to improve the business, and Papà isn’t interested in hearing them. I want my own space to create and run the business. I don’t want him hovering forever. At first, I thought he’d take a step back, but he’s not showing any signs of slowing down, and Mom says that he’ll never retire.”



I chuckled. “She does say that.”

“I think he enjoys being in the restaurant, greeting the customers. He’d be bored if he left.”

“So, you want him to have that restaurant while you lead a second?”

He glanced over at me as if surprised I was interested. “That’s right.”

“If you approach your father with the plan and the projected numbers, you’ll have a better shot.”

Leo sighed. “I can have Carlo take a look at the numbers.”

Carlo was the brother who oversaw the books. I’d never spent this much time with Leo, and I sensed being around him wasn’t good for this attraction I had for him. It only made it worse. He wasn’t an ancillary figure in my life. He was becoming a bigger part of it.

He drove me to his parents’ house on the outskirts of town, where I’d dropped off Evie earlier this afternoon. “I’ll grab Evie. Mamma’s probably already asleep.”

“Thank you.”

I’d left my car at their house earlier to ride with Gia. I hadn’t expected her to stay the night at the hotel, but it worked out. I got into my car and turned it on, opening the back door so Leo could put Evie inside without waking her.

But nothing prepared me for when he came out the door with Evie cradled in his arms. I’d never seen him carry her like how a father held his child.

My heart thudded in my chest as he carefully lowered her into the car seat and pulled the straps over her tiny shoulders. He clipped her in and tested the tightness of the straps over her shoulders. Leo’s actions were sweet and protective and sent pangs through my heart.

What would it be like to have this help all the time? A man to watch Evie while I worked. Someone to pick up the slack when I was exhausted. Instead of going down that road, I

steeled my shoulders as he straightened, gazing down at Evie with a soft look. “She didn’t wake up.”

“She usually doesn’t once she’s asleep.”

His lips twitched. “She’s so sweet when she’s sleeping. When she’s awake, she’s constantly on the go.”

I smiled indulgently. “That’s my Evie.”

He closed the door.

“Thanks for carrying her. She’s getting heavy for me,” I said, trying to cover how affected I was.

“You’ll be okay getting home?” Leo asked as he opened the front door for me.

I slid into the seat. “I make this drive all the time.”

Leo leaned an arm against the frame of the door, considering me. “I worry about you.”

I gave him a tight smile. “You don’t need to. I’ve got this.”

He cocked his brow. “But who’s got *you*?”

My body flushed with heat. I took his question to mean something else entirely. Was he offering to take care of me and my needs? No one had done that in such a long time, and certainly not well. I had a feeling Leo knew his way around a woman’s body, and I’d love to find out. But I was sure he’d meant who was taking care of me in other ways.

“The Giovannis. Always.” Or at least I hoped so. If they found out that I’d harbored a crush on their eldest son, they might not feel the same way.

“If you need anything, call me.”

“I don’t have your number.” I never needed it. If I needed to talk to one of her brothers, they showed up at the house, or Gia texted them.

“How is that possible?” Leo asked as he shifted his stance to pull out his phone. “Put your number in, and I’ll send it to you. Then you can text me to tell me you got home okay. I won’t be able to sleep until you do.”

That was—I swallowed—I couldn't even describe it. I took his phone and, with shaky hands, inputted my number and name and saved it to his contacts. "You've got it now."

His fingers flew over the keys, and my phone inside my purse buzzed with an incoming message. "Now you've got mine. Don't forget to let me know you got home safely."

"Will do," I said.

He leaned down, and, for a few exhilarating seconds, I thought he was going to kiss me. Instead, his lips brushed over my forehead. "*Brava.*"

It was sweet and had my insides fluttering.

He winked as if he knew the effect he had on women and closed the door softly so he wouldn't wake Evie.

He watched me drive away, and my crush morphed into something far more sophisticated. *I liked him.* My attraction had only grown. I had to remember he was just a good guy. He wasn't attracted to me. I was just his younger sister's best friend. An extension of Gia. Not an attractive woman he could see himself with.

*Four*



Carrying Evie had been this warm, comforting weight against my chest, but my heart had filled with love at the sight of her face soft with sleep, her lashes spread over her cheeks. Evie was so full of life when I spent time with her, but tonight, she'd been adorable in sleep. She made me long for a child of my own.

Tenderness washed over me, along with this overwhelming need to protect Evie and Harper. Tonight was the first chance we had to spend any measurable amount of time together. It had opened a host of thoughts I'd never had before, like the way Harper's dress hugged her curves and how I'd wanted to brush her hair off her neck and kiss the soft skin of her shoulder. Was she having a similar reaction to me?

I'd told her she was the most beautiful thing there was in Italian because it was how I felt, and it was safer to say it in a language she didn't understand. I wasn't sure she'd welcome my feelings.

I hadn't noticed any change in her demeanor. Except, when she'd stepped away from our dance, she couldn't manage to meet my gaze. Was she hiding her reaction, and if so, why?

I pushed thoughts of Evie and Harper out of my head as I drove to the home I'd bought in an older neighborhood. It had been a responsible purchase, cheaper because it needed work. But I wondered if I'd bought it because my parents thought it was the right thing to do, not because I liked it for myself.

I hadn't started on the renovations because I worked long hours at the restaurant. Papà always said not to hire someone to do work that we could do ourselves. When was I going to start living my life on my terms?

If I wanted to make a change in my life, to meet someone who had the potential to be a girlfriend, and possibly even my wife, I needed to make my home welcoming.

I pulled into the garage, pushing the button to close the door behind my SUV. The garage itself was cluttered, full of things left behind by the previous owners. Inside, I saw the house in a different light. How would a woman see it? There was a narrow kitchen that faced the woods. The living room had dark wood paneling and worn furniture I'd inherited from my parents, and the dining room was empty.

I needed to clean out the garage, renovate the kitchen and bathrooms, and buy new furniture that reflected my personality, not my parents'. We were raised to be frugal, but I was tired of living my life to please my parents. I was ready for something different.

I plopped onto the couch and flipped on the TV, searching for a ball game. I loved having it on in the background, even if I wasn't paying attention to every play.

What would Harper think if she saw my place? Then I wondered why it mattered what she thought. If Evie came here, it wasn't childproofed. God knew what was stored in the garage and the basement.

Unfortunately, I worked most days of the week. I only had one full day off, and I usually found myself stopping by to check on the restaurant. My parents were hard workers and instilled the same in their children.

My phone buzzed with an incoming message. *Harper:*

**Harper: I got home okay. Evie's sleeping in her bed. Thank you for the ride and for helping me with Evie.**

**Leo: You don't need to thank me.**

Now that I'd talked to Harper, I'd gotten the impression she felt indebted to my family, and that didn't sit right with

me. She was like family to me. She shouldn't feel like she owed us anything. At the same time, I didn't like thinking of her as family, either.

If I'd met her outside of the restaurant and she wasn't Gia's friend, would I have pursued her? I was clearly attracted to her physically. I'd never dated a woman with a child, but I loved Evie. It didn't detract from Harper at all; it only enhanced my opinion of her. She was strong, hardworking, and a great mom.

I would have been attracted to her if she came into the restaurant to eat or grabbed a pizza to go. I would have flirted with her for months before finally asking her out because I wouldn't want to push a single mother. I would have eased her into the idea of me.

Fuck. Why was I planning anything when it came to Harper? She wasn't a potential love interest. She was Gia's best friend, and she practically lived with us when she was a kid. And now, my parents watched her daughter. This was messed up on so many levels.

I liked her. I admired her as a mom and a person. I loved her daughter. She was hardworking and sweet. She was the perfect woman for me. And it didn't hurt that I was seriously attracted to her. How had I never noticed it before, or had I pushed it down deep so I didn't have to look too closely at it?

What mattered was, what was I going to do about it? Now that I saw her differently, it would be impossible to see her in any other light.

\* \* \*

Friday night was one of our busiest nights of the week, but with the rain coming down outside in slanted sheets, we were swamped. The dining room was full, the waiting area standing room only, and the carryout orders were piling up.

On top of that, a waitress called out sick. Mom and Dad were taking a much-needed day off work, and I refused to

bother them. I wanted to prove that I could handle things without their presence.

Carlo handled the accounting side of the business and rarely stepped in to help with the running of the dining room or the kitchen. Now that Gia had her own business, she adamantly refused to work at the restaurant. I think she wanted Papà to see her in a different light.

I'd messaged Harper an hour ago, begging her to come in and give me a hand. She wasn't on the schedule regularly but filled in when needed.

The kitchen was working smoothly and didn't need me hovering, so I filled in for the waitress who'd called out. I took orders, ran food out, and cleared tables. Over the years, I'd worked every position in the restaurant, and I wasn't above doing them.

Every time the door opened, I looked up, hoping it was Harper. When she finally came in, her hair was wet, but she had a big smile on her face as she talked to Evie at her side.

"How's my favorite girl?" I asked Evie, who wore a green rain jacket and held a ladybug-patterned umbrella.

"Can I play in the puddles?" Evie asked me.

Her expression was so earnest, I almost said yes, before I remembered that this was Harper's call.

"No." Harper gave me a look as she squeezed water out of her hair.

"Why don't you come back to my office? I have a towel you can use," I offered.

Harper's eyes widened as she took in the crowd. "Is everyone in town here?"

"I think so," I murmured as I touched her elbow and guided her through the maze of tables to the hallway that led to the offices and storage room. Evie trailed behind, chattering excitedly about the rain.

When we were alone in my office, I grabbed a towel from the adjoining bathroom and draped it over Harper's shoulders.



“Where’s your jacket and umbrella?”

Harper’s shoulders lowered, and for the first time, I noticed how exhausted she looked. Her eyes were red rimmed with dark circles underneath. “I got Evie ready and thought we’d make it before the rain started up again. But we didn’t. This is just from the walk from the car.”

I was sure she had to park at the back of the parking lot due to the number of people inside. “You don’t have to work tonight. I shouldn’t have called you in.”

She offered me a tired smile, dabbing her hair with the towel. “No. It’s fine. I don’t have anything else going on. I hope you don’t mind that Evie is here.”

Evie threw her jacket on the floor, propped her umbrella against a chair, and sat down, pulling coloring books and crayons out of her book bag. “I brought coloring books!”

“I see that.”

Harper’s forehead wrinkled. “Is it okay if she colors back here? I’ll keep an eye on her.”

“Of course. You know she’s always welcome here.” I’d practically grown up in the restaurant, doing homework and coloring in that same spot.

“Why don’t you sit at my desk?” I asked Evie.

Her eyes widened. “Really?”

“You’ll be more comfortable,” I said as I cleared a spot for her.

“We’d better get out there before the customers get upset,” Harper said, grabbing an apron from my closet, a pen, and a pad. She kissed Evie on her cheek and asked, “Are you going to be okay?”

Evie rolled her eyes in response.

We could always put a show on one of our phones if Evie got restless. I intended to pop back and check on her too.

Harper stopped in front of me before we stepped into the hallway. “Thank you for this.”

Knowing she meant allowing Evie to stay in my office while she worked, I touched her shoulders with my hands, silently pleading with her to look at me. When her gaze lifted to mine, I said, “Evie’s always welcome. I love having her here.” I loved Evie, and I was quickly realizing I might feel a little something for her mother too.

“Thank you.” She touched my cheek before pulling me down, and before I could question what she was doing, she kissed my cheek. The touch was feather light, and I closed my eyes for a second to try to memorialize the moment.

By the time I opened them, Harper was gone, and Evie was smiling at me. “Do you have to work, Mr. G.?”

I cleared my throat, feeling a little off-kilter from Harper’s lips on my cheek. “It’s Leo. Mr. G. is my dad.”

“Mommy said to talk to adults with re-pect,” she said, drawing out the word, and missing the S entirely.

Evie’s head was bent over her book, her tongue between her lips in concentration, as she squeezed the crayon.

“But I’m your friend.”

Evie blinked up at me.

“I’m your mother’s friend. So, you can call me Leo.”

She smiled, and it was wide and sweet, and I blinked against the brightness. “Okay, Mr. L.”

“Ugh,” I groaned, knowing she was teasing me. “I’m going up front to help. If you need anything, just holler, okay?”

“Okay, Mr. L.” Then she giggled.

“Stop calling me that,” I bellowed as I headed out of the room and shut the door firmly behind me. Evie had been here enough times that she knew most of the staff and felt comfortable coming to anyone with a question.

I should have been stressed with the dining room full and the carryout orders coming in, but I felt content knowing Harper was here, and Evie was in my office. It felt right, even

though I hated that I had to bring her in. Harper had enough things going on without me adding to them, but she was the one we called when we needed an extra server.

We'd rented the apartment above the restaurant to her for years, so they didn't have far to go. But still, I felt responsible for the exhaustion I saw on her face.

Harper had taken over my tables, so I was free to float between the dining room and the kitchen, pitching in when necessary. The waitstaff's uniform was a white polo and black pants, but Harper stood out in her office clothes of a white tailored blouse, slacks, and heels.

The rest of the night passed in a blur. I oversaw everything, which meant making sure that carryout orders were getting out the door, food made it to the tables, trash was cleared, and diners were seated quickly. Every fifteen minutes or so, I checked on Evie.

When I checked on her at the end of the night, she was curled up on my leather chair, watching a show on Harper's phone.

Evie's eyes widened. "Mommy said I could watch."

"You want me to take you upstairs?" I asked, concerned.

Evie shook her head. "Mommy said I had to wait until she was done working."

"Let me check on her." It was getting late, and things had slowed. If I was going to send anyone home early, it would be Harper so she could get off her feet. Those heels weren't ideal for waitressing.

Harper was by the service area, plugging in yet another order. "Why don't you head out with Evie, and I'll take over from here."

"I usually work until closing." Closing for us meant ten, but that was too late for Evie.

"Evie's falling asleep in my chair."

Harper winced. "I'm sorry. I'll carry her up when I'm done."

I nudged her out of the way and plucked her notepad from her hands. “Clock out and take Evie upstairs. I’ll check on you in a bit.”

Her brow raised, and I couldn’t blame her. We never sent Harper home early because she was a family friend. My parents didn’t question asking her to help. “Are you sure?”

“I’m positive,” I said firmly.

I was enjoying having Harper around me in a way I never had before, but I wanted Evie to sleep in her bed tonight. “You already worked a full day with Happily Ever Afters. Take a load off.”

Harper finally nodded and untied her apron, tossing it into the laundry basket we kept by the kitchen.

“Thanks for coming in.”

“Anytime,” Harper said with a tired smile, and I watched her as she walked away. Then I got back to work. By the time the restaurant was shut down, I’d remembered my promise to check on Harper and Evie.

I had a good excuse because Evie left a couple of crayons in my office. They must have rolled off my desk, and she didn’t see them.

Other than my promise, there was no reason why I should check on them. I never had before. I hadn’t seen the inside of this apartment since I was a kid. We always kept it for cousins or relatives who needed a cheap place to stay, but Harper had been living here since she graduated from high school and wanted to move out of her mother’s place.

I didn’t know how much she paid for it, if anything, since it was always used for family. It wasn’t an investment rental. When the last of my employees left for the night, I turned off the lights, grabbed the crayons, and took the back steps up to her apartment. There was an interior and an exterior entrance to her apartment. The latter was really a fire escape.

Not hearing the drone of a TV, I knocked softly on the door. Maybe I shouldn’t be here so late at night. What if she was sleeping?

The door swung open a few seconds later. Harper stood in the doorway in a tank top and tiny shorts set that left nothing to the imagination.

I could make out her nipples under the soft top, and there was so much skin on display, I wasn't sure where to look.

Her face. That's where I should be looking. When I finally lifted my gaze, her forehead was wrinkled in confusion. "What are you doing here?"

"I said I would check in on you, and Evie left these in my office." I held up the crayons and felt a little ridiculous. She hadn't expected me to check on her. That was clear by her expression and her pajamas. She hadn't expected me or anyone. At least I hoped she hadn't. I had no idea if she was dating someone and knew I shouldn't care.

Harper was Gia's best friend. I just needed to keep telling myself that so I wouldn't ogle her.

She took the offered crayons and stepped back so I could come inside. "How was the rest of the night?"

"Quiet. Thanks for pitching in."

She crossed her arms over her chest as if she was trying to block her nipples, but it was too late. That vision was embedded in my brain, and I was positive I'd pull the image out later when I was alone. There was nothing that said I couldn't jerk off to the vision of her in my head.

There was a small kitchen open to a living room. A TV mounted on the wall played some show, but the volume was turned down low.

"Is Evie asleep?" I asked, not sure what I was doing here or what to talk about.

"As soon as you let me off, she wanted to go to bed. She's always tired on Fridays after a week of kindergarten."

"I bet."

An awkward silence fell.

I cleared my throat, seriously questioning what I was doing here. “Well, I just wanted to see if you were okay. I should get going.”

“Thanks for stopping by,” Harper said, and I wondered if anyone had before. We were friends with Harper and helped her out when she needed it, but she was alone in all other respects.

“Do you see your mother?” Then I winced. Her relationship with her family was none of my business.

I’d always taken Harper’s presence for granted. I didn’t ask questions about Evie’s father or ask about Harper’s family. I just assumed she’d always be there. I knew next to nothing about her as a person, other than surface-level things.

“We aren’t close,” Harper said, her words clipped.

Of course, they weren’t. She spent more time at our house than at her own growing up. “She doesn’t see Evie?”

“She’s not that interested in having a grandchild. I think it makes her feel old. Telling prospective boyfriends she’s a grandmother isn’t that attractive.” Harper rolled her eyes.

“She’s missing out.” I couldn’t imagine anyone not loving that child.

Harper huffed. “I don’t think she cares about that.”

“She’s an idiot, then,” I said, never feeling more confident about anything. I felt lucky to have Evie in my life, even if she wasn’t blood.

Harper’s expression softened.

“I’ll let you get back to your night. I’m sure you’re tired. Thanks again for covering.” I was almost to the door when Harper touched my arm.

The heat of her palm seared through my skin, sending tingles through my body. I turned to face her as she dropped her hand.

“I’m always happy to help out. Your family has done so much for me. Watching Evie, this apartment...” She gestured

around us with her hands. “But no one has ever stopped by to check on me or thank me for doing my job.”

She wanted to know why I was here and what had changed.

“I just wanted to check on you and Evie. Make sure you were okay.”

“But why?” Harper asked as her eyes widened in surprise at her candidness. She obviously hadn’t meant to ask.

“I care about you.”

“You do?” Harper asked, genuinely confused.

“You’re like a younger sister to me. You know, I do the same for you that I do for Gia.” My heart pounded in my chest at my words. There was no truth to them. I’d never thought of Harper like a sister.

Her face clouded over. “Of course. Well, now you know I’m okay. I’ll see you later.”

She opened the door for me, and I was standing on the landing as the door shut in my face before I could process what just happened. Had I just compared Harper to my sister? I basically told her that I didn’t like her, that there would never be anything between us. I was supposed to be getting her used to the idea of me, not shutting it off entirely.

I ran a hand through my hair as I jogged down the steps, grabbed my keys from my office, and shut and locked the door. I was an idiot. I wasn’t used to being this clueless around women, but Harper was different. I couldn’t just drop a few Italian phrases on her and have her melting in my arms. She was worth more than that.

I needed to get myself together before I approached her again. I needed a better plan. I couldn’t help but think that Harper wasn’t a game or a challenge. She was this incredible woman, who’d get swooped up soon by another man who was smoother than me.

*Five*





I spent the weekend catching up on laundry and spending time with Evie. I enjoyed the time we had together. Before we hired new wedding planners, Ireland and Aria, I attended weddings on the weekends too, but I didn't need to be present. As the manager, I could oversee things from my tablet.

Now I had to go to family dinner with this issue of Leo hanging over me. The last few days, it was like Leo finally saw me as a woman he might find attractive. The way he'd acted when I arrived at the restaurant on Friday night, how he'd checked in on Evie and then sent us home early, as if he cared about me. And I hadn't expected him to stop by the apartment when he got off work.

The entire time I lived here, no one from the Giovanni family had stopped by. The only one who'd been inside was Gia, and she always called or texted first. It was like they went out of their way to make it feel like any other apartment rental. Except they gave me an amazing deal on the rent.

They didn't want to invade my space, and I appreciated that because, inside the Giovanni family, there didn't seem to be boundaries between the family members.

When Leo dropped that little bomb that I was like his sister, I was disappointed, which was ridiculous because, of course, he saw me that way. I was just like any other member of his family. I worked at the restaurant, and I helped out whenever they called. I lived in their apartment and used his mother for babysitting. I wasn't a potential date. I'd always be

his younger sister's friend, a part of their family. It was what I'd always wanted.

Even though I knew nothing had really changed, I'd let myself hope that something had for a few days. Then everything came crashing back down to earth, and reality exploded in my face.

Why would Leo look at me in any other way? I was an idiot for thinking he had. That one dance at a wedding made me think that something was possible between us.

When I got to his parents' house, Evie rushed into the kitchen, excited to be part of everything. At home, it was quiet with just the two of us. Here, everyone was loud and boisterous. Someone was always teasing someone else, and there was always too much food.

Mrs. G. spent the day making homemade pasta and sauce, and by the time everyone showed up to eat, the house smelled like marinara sauce.

When I lived with my mom, I was responsible for making food for myself, so I ate a lot of peanut butter and jelly sandwiches and mac and cheese. Things that kept in the pantry for a long time.

Once I'd befriended Gia, I was invited over for meals more often, and I loved the closeness and the love. It made me long for things I couldn't have.

Evie ran straight for Leo because they'd always had a close relationship. He lifted her high in his arms, saying how big she'd gotten since he'd seen her last. She giggled as he kissed her and then blew raspberries on her cheeks.

She wiped her cheek with a look of disgust on her face. "Don't spit on me."

Leo paused, his eyes wide. "That's not spitting. I gave you raspberries."

Evie shook her head. "Mrs. Walters said it's spitting."

"Who is Mrs. Walters? Your teacher?" Leo asked Evie and then looked to me for confirmation.

At my nod, he said, “Mrs. Walters doesn’t know what she’s talking about.”

“Leo,” I admonished. Even if I didn’t agree with everything a teacher said, I taught Evie to respect it.

“I still say they’re kisses.” He held Evie on his hip and rubbed his nose over her cheek until she giggled. “I love that sound.”

Mrs. G.’s eyes sparkled. “I think you’re ready for a little one of your own.”

It wasn’t a new thing for her to say. She put a lot of pressure on her sons to settle down, get married, and give her some grandbabies. Even though she said Evie was one of hers, it wasn’t the same as a blood grandchild, and I was positive she wanted some of her own.

Usually, Leo would disagree, saying he wasn’t ready or that he hadn’t met the right girl yet. That usually placated his mom, but tonight, he didn’t say anything.

Mrs. G.’s eyes widened. “Have you met someone?”

“What? No.” He cleared his throat and let Evie down when she wiggled. “I would love to have a child.”

“You’ll meet someone.” She said it so matter-of-factly, like it was already done.

Did she have someone in mind for him? She introduced him to his last girlfriend, Bianca. I’d gone to Mass with their family over the years but never received any of the sacraments. It was another reason that I’d never be good enough for Mrs. G.’s son. I wasn’t Italian or Catholic. I hadn’t gone to college or done anything to make myself worthy of a man like Leo.

“What’s new with you, Harper?” Mrs. G. asked me, thankfully changing the subject.

I’d been thinking of ways I could gain more independence lately. “I was thinking about taking some college courses.” It wasn’t anything new. I’d perused the college catalogs for years, wishing I could go.

“I didn’t realize you wanted to go to school,” Leo said.

“I’ll probably go when Evie’s a little older.” I’d work hard to make sure she’d be able to go to college. But how would I ever have enough money without bettering myself in some way? I needed to stop leeching off the Giovannis. Maybe then Leo would see me as an independent woman.

“That’s ridiculous. Of course, you should go to school if you want to. You know I would watch Evie,” Mrs. G. said.

“You already do so much.”

Leo’s jaw tightened. “We’ll work it out. Someone can watch Evie so you can go to school.”

I smiled my thanks, but inside, I knew it was a pipe dream. I never should have voiced it out loud. The Giovannis would do anything to help me, but it was time for me to figure things out on my own.

We gathered around the table and ate the pasta and garlic bread. Everyone brought dessert, so there was a lot to choose from. I spent the evening trying to stop Evie from getting more than one. She loved Italian cookies, and Mrs. G. always slipped her some when I wasn’t looking.

When it was getting late, I gathered Evie, said my good-byes, and headed to my car like I always did. I felt lonelier when I left. These family dinners reminded me of how empty my life was. I had Evie, but that was it. I had nothing else to offer her. I wasn’t any better than my mother.

A chill ran through my body.

“Are you cold?” Leo asked, startling me.

“Oh, I didn’t know you were leaving too.”

He shrugged. “I thought I’d follow you out.”

“That’s not necessary,” I said as I opened the rear door and helped Evie into her car seat.

I closed the door and turned to face him. His hands were stuffed into the pockets of his pressed pants. The Giovannis took family dinners seriously.

His expression was sheepish. “You should go to school if that’s what you want to do.”

I started to shake my head before he finished speaking. “It’s not the right time. I have Evie to think about.”

“Aren’t you thinking about her by going? You want her to see you have a better life. Better than the one your mother gave you. You want to set an example for her. Not that you’re not doing great, but you want to show her the value of education.”

I swallowed hard because he’d gotten to the core of the issue. “It’s not the right time. I’ll still go, but maybe when she’s older.” But I’d gone through the details a million times in my head. I worked during the day and watched Evie at night. I didn’t want to give up my evenings or weekends with her.

“Have you talked to Gia about taking classes during the day? You could work some weddings to make up for the hours lost. Or work more of a flex schedule.”

I shook my head, quickly dismissing the idea, even though I’d gotten excited by the possibility. “That’s not what I agreed to when I took the job.”

Leo dipped his head. “You know Gia would help you.”

Gia hadn’t been at family dinner. She told her parents she was busy, but I knew she avoided them. Her father was forever asking Gia to return to work at the restaurant. But it was important to Gia that he saw her as an independent and successful businesswoman. I wasn’t sure that was going to happen.

“Just because she would doesn’t mean I should do it.” I appreciated the Giovannis’ help, but it was time to stand on my own.

“Why do you fight it?” Leo stepped closer and brushed a hair out of my face.

“Fight what?” I asked, my breath catching in my throat and my imagination running wild. Was this where he admitted he liked me, that he always had?

“Fight us. We want to help you. We love you.”

My shoulders fell because he was talking about his family, not himself. “And I appreciate it, but I shouldn’t rely on your family. It’s not right.”

Leo’s brow furrowed. “Who decides what’s right and what’s wrong?”

“I’ve been thinking it’s time to move out.” I wondered if the Giovannis could rent to someone else and charge more. I hated to leave the security of this place, but maybe it was time.

Leo’s nostrils flared at that. “You’re moving out?”

“Don’t you think it’s time? Evie should have a house, a backyard, and maybe even a playground.” That’s what she deserved. Whether I could afford it was another thing entirely. It was expensive to live in this area, especially if I wanted to keep her in a good school district.

“Of course she deserves that, and so do you, but can you manage it?” His tone was genuinely curious.

“I need to do some research first.” I don’t know why I’d told him before I’d figured things out. I checked on Evie in the backseat, but her head was tipped to the side, and her eyes were closed. These family gatherings wore her out.

When I straightened, Leo said, “I worry about you.”

I shook my head. “You don’t need to. Evie and I will be fine.”

He tipped his head to the side. “There’s nothing wrong with me worrying about you.”

“I don’t need you to.” But I liked it.

“Mmm,” he hummed as he moved closer to me.

“I’m not your sister.” I was positive he didn’t feel anything for me except for a misguided sense of brotherly affection.

His brow furrowed. “I know you’re not my sister.”

“The other night you said I was.” Then my face flamed with embarrassment.

He drew himself up to his full height as he considered me, and I had no idea what he was thinking. Could he see right through me? Did he know how I felt? Suddenly, I couldn't seem to draw in a deep breath.

"If you want to move out, you should. But don't do it because I'm overprotective. I have a feeling my mom will be heartbroken if she loses you and Evie."

"She has you, your brothers, and Gia." She didn't need me.

"I don't know what's going on in your head, but we do consider you part of the family."

That was sweet, and it was something I'd longed to believe deep in my soul, but if the Giovannis were my family, then Leo was off-limits.

"I'm sorry if I've been in your space too much lately. My parents will never forgive me if I push you away."

"I promise you're not." It wasn't him. Not really. I'd been wanting to take this step for a few years. It stemmed from guilt and shame for taking advantage of the Giovannis over the years. I was an adult. I shouldn't be relying on them anymore.

He stepped closer, his hand cupping my jaw. "Good. Because you and Evie are important to me. *Ci tengo a voi.*"

"You're important to me too." My entire body softened at his declaration. I wanted to be someone special to him. But I wanted to be so much more. I wanted to be the woman he was attracted to, the one he couldn't resist. I wanted him to kiss me.

For a few seconds, I thought he might lower his head and touch his lips to mine, but it was wishful thinking. "Please don't feel like you have to move. No one in the family minds you living here. We never resented you or thought you didn't belong."

My eyes stung with unshed tears. "You didn't do anything. I promise it's not you."

He studied me for a few seconds and then finally nodded. "Let me know if you need any help finding a place."

I remembered he'd bought his house a couple of years ago. His mother hoped it meant he was ready to settle down and get married, but then he hadn't dated anyone seriously since Bianca.

"You and Evie should come over. There's this old playground in the backyard. I didn't knock it down because it's still in good shape."

I'd said Evie deserved a yard and a playground, and he was offering me his. "She'd love that. Thank you."

"There's this old storage shed in the back too. It looks like a house. Maybe we can fix it up as her playhouse. Maybe you being there will be the motivation I need to finally fix the place up."

My throat tightened, and before I said something I'd regret, I opened the door and got into the car.

"Good night, Harper," Leo said as he shut the door and stepped back so I could drive away.

I was falling for him, but he saw me as a family friend, and I needed to be okay with that. No matter how much my heart wanted more.



*Six*



**A**s Harper drove away, guilt wrapped around my chest and squeezed tight. It was different from the guilt my mom laid on me for not settling down and giving her a grandchild. I hated the idea that I'd done something to make Harper feel like she wasn't wanted.

On the way home, I called Gia.

Despite the late hour, she answered after one ring. "Why are you calling so late?"

"I was at family dinner, and when Harper was leaving, she mentioned something about wanting to move. She wants a backyard for Evie."

"Evie's getting bigger, so that makes sense."

"Can she afford to move?" I ran my free hand through my hair, wondering if I sounded as conflicted as I felt. I hated the idea of her not living above the restaurant. I liked being close to her, even if I was only just admitting it to myself.

"Honestly, she doesn't confide in me about financial stuff. Why are you so worried about Harper all of a sudden?"

My heart thumped a little harder, worried she'd read through me. "She said some things that made me worry. She said she wanted to be independent from the family and that Mom watching Evie is too much. Maybe she thinks that she's taking advantage of Mamma and Papà."

"That's ridiculous. They love Evie like a granddaughter."

I sighed. "I told her that, but she still feels guilty."

“I’ll talk to her.”

“Don’t let her know I talked to you about her. She seemed irritated with me.”

Gia laughed at that. “I get annoyed with your big brother, overprotective routine too.”

“I don’t think I’ve ever used it on Harper.” She never needed it like Gia had, but then I was starting to see her in a different light.

“She hasn’t needed it, I guess. I’d say we missed what was going on with Manny, but then, I don’t think it was ever serious.”

“Oh, really?” I tried to keep my interest light, even though I really wanted to know what had happened between him and Harper.

“She was ready to break things off when she found out she was pregnant. She was upset, you know. She didn’t want to be a single mother like her mom had been. She wanted to give Evie a better life. I think she feels like she’s not worthy of someone better than Manny, which is ridiculous.”

“Why would she think she’s not worthy of a great guy?” A nice guy who could give her a new house and all the amenities. The thought of someone else holding Evie, loving her, and being her stepdad made my throat tight.

Gia blew out a breath. “Her mom and her boyfriends did a number on her. None of the guys her mom dated ever married her.”

I huffed out a laugh. “That’s because her mom was dating losers.”

“I don’t think Harper thinks of it that rationally. Honestly, it’s a little frustrating because she’s amazing.”

“She is.” Harper was sweet and kind, reliable and hardworking. She was a great mother to Evie and worked hard to provide for her. She was worried that she was taking advantage of my family. She was the best kind of woman. How hadn’t I seen it before? Maybe I had blinders on, not

wanting to like my sister's friend. She was younger than me, and I knew my parents wouldn't be happy with us together.

Mom wanted me with a nice Catholic Italian girl, and Harper wasn't that. She was the girl from the wrong side of the tracks we'd brought into our family. But she was so much more than that. I could understand her wanting to be seen differently, to prove herself. But I didn't want to lose her. I liked her working at the restaurant and living so close.

"She can't live in that apartment forever. Evie deserves something nicer."

"I agree. Does Dad still have that rental property? The townhome?"

"I think so, but there might be a renter there. Doesn't Harper want to get a place on her own?"

"That's what she said." It didn't stop me from wanting to help her.

"If that's what she wants, you can't interfere."

"You're right," I said as I turned into my driveway. I didn't want her to see me as a brother, but rather as a man she could see herself being with. Inviting her and Evie to my house was more in line with that idea. Getting her another family rental wasn't.

I pulled into the garage and turned off the engine, switching the call from the SUV to my phone. I pushed the button to close the garage door and headed inside, disgusted that I hadn't made any progress on the house.

"You know any good contractors?" I asked as I dropped the keys onto the kitchen counter.

"Are you finally going to fix up your house?" Gia asked, getting excited.

I sighed as I took in the chipped Formica countertops and red walls. "It's time, and I don't have the energy to take it on."

"What would Papà say?" Gia asked, and I could hear the smile in her voice.

“He doesn’t have to like it, but I’m tired of living here like this.”

She laughed. “It’s about time. I’m proud of you.”

Gia had always rebelled against my parents. I don’t know if it was because she was the only girl or if it was because she was the youngest. But I felt the pressure to be the perfect son at a young age. It was expected that I would take over the restaurant, and I wanted to, but on my terms. I didn’t want my parents calling the shots forever, and I was starting to worry that would be the case.

Maybe creating the home I wanted would be a good first step in going out on my own. I could understand why Harper felt the same.

“I’ll send you Cade’s contact information. He co-owns Morrison Brothers Construction. I’ve heard he’s reliable, and the prices are reasonable.”

“I appreciate it.”

“If you need any help with designs, let me know.”

“I will. I’ll let you go.” I was tired and drained from the busy night and Harper’s revelation. I didn’t know why I hadn’t anticipated it. I guess I thought she’d always be there. That nothing would change. But that was life. People moved on. If I wanted Harper, I needed to make a move sooner rather than later.

“Night,” Gia said as she hung up.

I sat on the couch and pulled up Harper’s name.

**Leo: I’m off tomorrow. You want to come over with Evie?**

**Harper: We’d love that.**

I’d need to get up early and clear out some things, make sure the grass was mowed and the playground was still in good condition.

I wasn’t sure what I was doing, but I liked Harper. I loved her little girl, and the thought of her moving away and creating

distance from my family hurt. I wasn't ready to let her walk out of my life before I figured out if she felt the same way about me.

There was something in her eyes when we talked outside her car. It felt a little like the anticipation of a first kiss on a date, but it wasn't a date, and I hadn't planned on making a move on her. But had she wanted me to?

I got ready for bed with hope simmering just below my skin. I wanted Harper, and maybe it had taken me a while to figure it out, but I wasn't going to let any more time go by without doing something about it.

Some other guy would scoop her up, or Manny would realize what a mistake he'd made in walking away from her and Evie. I wanted to be a factor in Harper's life going forward.

\* \* \*

The next morning, I got up early, threw on some old clothes, and got to work on the yard. I cleared the sticks and debris so I could mow, then weeded the bare garden patches. I inspected the playground, making sure everything was secure and there were no nails protruding.

Then I worked on the small shed. I moved the lawn mower and leaf blower to the garage. When the small storage space was clear, I hosed it down to clear the cobwebs. I didn't know much about little girls, but I knew Evie hated spiders. There was no way she'd play inside if she thought one was living there.

Then I hosed off the patio, grateful I'd bought some outdoor furniture. We'd have a place to sit while Evie played and ran around the yard. The only thing missing was a dog.

I'd always wanted one, but I worked long hours at the restaurant. But wouldn't Evie love to play with one? When had everything in my life come down to what Harper and Evie would like?

When my stomach rumbled, I realized it was lunchtime, and I hadn't had anything to eat since having a bagel at breakfast. I jumped in the shower and washed off the grime and sweat. Then I pulled on new jeans and a T-shirt.

Barefoot, I padded to the kitchen to make myself a quick sandwich. I piled on the lunch meat, cheese, tomatoes, and lettuce before I poured my mom's homemade Italian dressing on top. It wasn't as good as the subs we made at the restaurant, but it was close.

The doorbell rang, and I left the food on the counter to get it. My nerves kicked up right before I opened the door.

"Leo!" Evie cried, right before she wrapped herself around my leg.

I untangled her and lifted her into my arms.

Her nose turned up. "You smell."

"Probably like salami," I teased her. "You hungry? I have lunch on the counter."

"We ate—" Harper began.

"I want some," Evie said as I carried her down the hall to the kitchen, which opened to the backyard. I set her on the counter, standing in front of her so she wouldn't fall. I wouldn't make a good impression if Evie fell off my counter and broke her arm on the first visit.

"What do you want on your sandwich?" I asked Evie.

Harper stood across the island from us, taking in the outdated space. It never bothered me as much as it did right now.

Evie pointed to the salami and the cheese.

"That's it?"

"Uh-huh. Salami is yummy, but Mommy says it's bad for me."

"She didn't."

"She said it's process or something."

“It’s processed meat,” Harper corrected her.

“Don’t let my mamma hear you say that,” I teased Harper.

Her nose wrinkled. “Trust me. I know.”

I wondered if she was careful around my family. If she was worried she wouldn’t be accepted at some point. I didn’t know how to broach that subject with her and reassure her.

I made Evie’s sandwich and handed it to her.

“Yum,” she said after the first bite.

Harper pushed her water bottle across the counter for her.

“I’ll need to get some kid food if you’re going to be coming around more often,” I said lightly, wondering how Harper would take it.

Evie nodded. “I like lemonade and cookies.”

“Is that it?” I asked her, amused by her answer.

“Uh-huh.”

“You know we eat healthier than that.”

“I have watermelon in the fridge. Would you mind grabbing it?” I was grateful I’d thought to buy the cut-up melon when I went grocery shopping.

Harper went to the fridge and pulled out the container, scooping a few pieces into a bowl and giving it to Evie.

After a few bites of melon, Evie asked, “Can I see your playground?”

She’d eaten a few bites of her sandwich and watermelon, so I let her down. “Sure.”

She went to the slider and opened it.

When Harper moved toward the door, I said, “I checked it this morning. It’s safe.”

Harper moved back to the counter, closing the open food containers.

“I can get that. Why don’t you watch Evie, and I’ll be right out?”



I moved to grab the lunch meat, and Harper touched my arm. “Thank you for this. It’s nice for us to get out and do something different.”

I nodded, and for the first time, I wondered if they were lonely.

Harper went outside, closing the slider behind her, leaving me alone. I stowed the food in the fridge, wiped off the counters, and refilled Evie’s water to carry out to her.

Evie was on the swing, giggling and screaming, “Higher,” to Harper.

“If you go any higher, you’ll fly over,” Harper teased.

I watched while Evie slowed to a stop, and she climbed the ladder to the fort.

Harper approached me. “This is nice.”

“I don’t have kids, and I thought about tearing it down, but it’s in good shape. Besides, Evie can use it, and maybe one of us will have kids soon.”

Harper nodded. “You’ll meet someone soon. You’re a good man.”

“You think that about me?” I asked as Evie looked through the periscope on the railing of the fort.

“Well, yeah. You’re so put together. Any woman would be lucky to have you.”

“Any woman?” I asked, a little mesmerized by her words.

Her cheeks flushed, but she kept her gaze on Evie and the playground. “Of course.”

We fell silent for a few minutes.

“Whatever happened with your ex? Everyone thought you two would get engaged.”

I scuffed the dirt with my toe. “Bianca cheated on me. She’d been doing it for a while before I figured out what was going on.”

Harper turned to face me. “You’re kidding.”

“She dated me because it was what her parents, and mine, expected. We were considered a good match, but I wasn’t what she wanted.”

“I can’t imagine the pressure to date a particular person. Someone your parents think is a good match.”

“I know my parents want the best for me, and despite the cheating, we had a good relationship. But looking back, we were better friends. The sex wasn’t amazing.”

She blanched.

“Too much?” I asked, slightly amused at her reaction.

Harper shook her head. “I don’t need to know the details.”

“You asked,” I said, enjoying her discomfort. I liked to think she didn’t enjoy the thought of me being intimate with someone else.

“I’m sorry. No one deserves to be cheated on.”

My heart clenched. I wanted to say no one deserved what she’d been through in her life—her mother’s inattention and Manny’s absence—but she had me and my family.

“What about you and Manny?” I asked, emboldened to ask the same question of her.

Harper shook her head. “I was going to break up with him when I found out I was pregnant. I told him I was keeping the baby, and he could be as involved as he wanted to be, but that we wouldn’t be together.”

I’d always thought Manny left when he found out about Evie. “You’re stronger than you give yourself credit for.”

“I knew he couldn’t step up the way I needed him to. The way Evie needed him. I knew more than he did how hard raising a child was, and he wasn’t up for it.”

She was smart, practical, and strong. I admired her even more.

“Does he support you at all?” I asked, hoping I wasn’t overstepping.

“Occasionally, he’d give me money, but I filed for child support so that I’d have a record of him not paying. Sometimes we track him down and garnish his wages, but most of the time, he claims he can’t find a job.”

“You think he’s purposely not working?”

“He’s never been a hard worker, and he’s not good with responsibility.” Then she shrugged. “It is what it is. As long as I don’t expect much, then I don’t get frustrated. It’s just those times when he comes around, demanding more time with her, that it gets to me—”

“What do you mean?” I didn’t like the idea of him hassling her.

“Every so often, he shows up and acts like he’s a dad. He wants to see Evie. He wants to take her somewhere, but I don’t trust him. I don’t know if he’s dating someone who wonders where his kid is or if he wants to prove something to his parents. I don’t think it’s because he genuinely wants to be a father.”

“I’m sorry for Evie.” My heart ached for that little girl. To me, she was so bright and happy. I couldn’t imagine not wanting to spend time with her and supporting her mother. “I’m sure my family is a poor substitute for an absentee father, but you’re not alone.”

“I appreciate that.”

I liked Harper, and I wanted to give her everything she was missing. Was I crazy to think I was the right guy for her?

*Seven*



I'd never been to Leo's house before. Family gatherings were held at his parents' home or the restaurant.

I wondered why I'd garnered an invitation. Leo said it was so Evie could play on the playground and in the yard, but my traitorous heart wanted to find meaning behind it. That he was interested in me.

Why now? Nothing had changed over the years. Was it that he'd only just now noticed me? Or maybe he was finally willing to risk his parents' disapproval.

Evie slid down the slide and tumbled onto the ground. When she cried out, we rushed to her. Leo got to her first and brushed the dirt and leaves off the scrape on her knee and lifted her.

Her eyes were filled with tears as he carried her inside. "Let's clean this up and get you some medicine."

I followed them into what looked like a spare bathroom. There was a blue toilet, a tub-shower combination, and a sink. He settled her down on the edge of the tub and ran the water.

"Can you grab the first aid kit from under the sink?" he asked me.

My hands trembled as I rushed to comply. No one had ever comforted Evie in this way. I'd always been the primary parent. If something like this happened when Manny was around, he'd step back and let me handle it.

Leo dabbed at her wound with a wet paper towel, and I handed him the antibacterial ointment. He blew the wound dry before applying the ointment. “There. All better.”

“It doesn’t hurt anymore,” Evie declared.

Leo visibly relaxed, his shoulders lowering as he said, “Good. I’m glad. That slide was a little faster than I anticipated. Maybe I should adjust the slope.”

“Now that Evie knows how it is, she’ll be okay.”

“It was fun,” Evie said as she slid to the floor and left the bathroom.

“She seems okay,” Leo said, as if he was reassuring himself.

I squeezed his bicep, marveling at the size of his muscles. “She is. Thanks to you.”

His brow furrowed as we followed Evie out of the bathroom. “I washed it and put on some ointment. It wasn’t a big deal.”

But it was to me. It was nice having someone to share things with. What if Evie grew closer to him and this went badly? I didn’t think I could handle that.

At least with my mom’s boyfriends, I knew they wouldn’t stick around. I had no expectations that anything would turn out differently. But with Leo, I held out hope.

We followed Evie to the kitchen.

Not ready for Evie to go down that slide again, I asked Leo, “Did you say something about a playhouse?”

“I cleaned it out this morning,” he said to me, and then to Evie, “You can tell me how you’d like it decorated.”

Evie turned to us as she opened the slider in the kitchen, her eyes wide. “You have a playhouse?”

She adored dollhouses.

“It’s a storage shed, but it looks like a house.” He led her to the other side of the yard where a storage shed sat. It looked

like a miniature house with a door, shutters, and a window. “I was thinking we could add a flower box under the window and a little porch on the side.”

He opened the door for Evie, and she went inside, exploring every inch. “What do you think I should put inside?”

“A kitchen and a table and chairs,” Evie said.

“I think we could get some curtains for the window too. What do you think?”

“Yes,” Evie breathed in agreement.

“It’s not much, but we can make it yours.”

“Leo, this is too much,” I hissed when she ducked back inside to explore.

“The only thing in here was my lawn mower, leaf blower, and a few other tools, and I have plenty of room for that in the garage. Can you get the things she wants for the inside? I don’t know anything about play kitchens. She’ll need pretend food and dishes, right?”

I swallowed. “Yes. But you don’t have to do this. She’s happy playing with it as it is. She has a good imagination.”

“But it could be so much better. I’m sure she won’t be the only child in the family who’d like to play in here.”

He hadn’t called her a niece or a grandchild, but he’d lumped her in as family. It was nice, but at the same time, I didn’t want to be a charity case. “I’ll pay for the upgrades,” I finally conceded. I was saving for a new apartment or even a house, but I couldn’t let Leo do this himself.

“Why don’t you mark the things you’d like on the computer later, and we can order them?”

“Yeah, okay,” I acquiesced.

“Is this mine?” Evie asked, her head popping out of the doorway.

Leo smiled wide and said, “It is.”

I didn't want to ruin this moment for him or her, so I stayed silent.

Evie grabbed sticks and rocks and pretended she was making stone soup.

"She needs the real thing so we won't always be eating stone soup," Leo murmured when she gave him a handful of rocks.

I laughed at how silly he looked sitting cross-legged on the ground, playing pretend restaurant with my daughter. He was always so confident in the restaurant, but with Evie, he was a softie.

Leo cocked a brow at me. "I think your mom would love some soup."

"Oh. I forgot about Mommy. Be right back." Evie hunted in the grass surrounding the playhouse for more rocks.

When she returned, I accepted the soup and thanked her, pretending to eat it. "That was good soup."

Evie sighed. "Wasn't it?"

When she grew tired of the game, we went inside for a snack and drinks. Leo arranged crackers and cheese for her on a plate, then pulled out his laptop and set it on the counter so we could search for a play kitchen.

Evie pointed out the ones she liked.

"I'll measure it and see if it fits," Leo said.

"You don't need to buy her a kitchen," I said, unable to stop myself from saying it.

"I can't leave the playhouse empty. That would be silly, wouldn't it, Evie?"

"Uh-huh," she said around a mouthful of crackers.

"Don't forget to drink something," I prompted her.

Leo crossed his arms over his chest. "Besides, she was having so much fun."



My heart melted a little at his words. I would have thought that he would have gotten annoyed with having us here all afternoon. Kids could be a lot for people who weren't used to them.

"I want to clean out more of the house and the garage. Gia's put me in touch with a contractor."

"You're going to renovate?"

"My parents always say you should do it yourself, but I've lived here for a couple of years now, and I haven't had time to do any improvements."

I was impressed he had the money to buy and renovate a house while I struggled to save money for a bigger place.

"I'm excited to get started."

"What do you have planned?" I asked, genuinely curious.

"I want to do the kitchen and bathrooms, the flooring, and paint."

"Wow. That's a lot. But it's going to look amazing when it's done." The home was older, but that meant the neighborhood had mature trees, and his lot backed to trees. He had a nice, flat yard that was perfect for kids to play in. There wasn't a fence, but then he didn't need one living here alone.

"Can I help?" Evie asked.

"Leo said you could help with the *playhouse*, not *his* house."

"I'd love to have your input. I don't know anything about design."

"I love lots of color," Evie said.

I laughed. "I think you're going to regret that offer."

Leo ruffled Evie's hair. "I don't mind."

I'd thought a lot about what it meant not to have a father or male figure in my life growing up, and it pained me to think I was creating the same experience for Evie. But that didn't mean I needed to find a guy to fill that hole. It hadn't worked

for my mother, and it wouldn't work for me. Evie would be okay if it was just me and her.

I assumed we'd be the best of friends, and we'd weather everything together, but Leo was making me think of other possibilities. One where I opened my heart to the right guy, and he loved me and my daughter. It was ridiculous and went against everything I'd ever told myself. Or maybe it was my mother who always said to keep your expectations low, then you won't be disappointed. It had served me well over the years.

But being here with Leo was making me wish for a different life. One where I could have everything I'd ever wanted. Someone to love, a father figure for Evie. It was too good to be true, and when something seemed that way, you had to trust your instincts.

"We should get going," I said, brushing the crumbs off the counter and dumping them in the garbage. I put away the box of crackers in his pantry and put Evie's cup in the sink.

Evie's face fell. "But I'm still hungry."

"You want to get some pizza at the restaurant?" Leo asked.

"Oh, that's not necessary," I said at the same time Evie said, "Pizza!"

"How can you be hungry? You just ate," I asked her.

Leo waved a hand in the air. "I'll follow you back, and we can grab a pizza to go or sit in the dining room."

"Are you sure that's a good idea?" I asked when Evie ran to grab her shoes she'd left by the slider.

"I'm not ready for the day to be over," Leo said.

Pleasure filled my chest, but before I could ask what that meant, Evie was next to us. "Can we go?"

"Sure. Let's get in the car." We went outside. I was parked in front of the garage, and Leo was parked inside.

On the drive over, I wondered what I was doing getting involved with Leo. Maybe he was just being nice. He was just

doing what he would for Gia if she had a child.

But I couldn't stop my heart from longing for a different reason. That he'd finally noticed me and wanted me.

I parked at the back of the lot, not wanting to take a closer spot from a customer.

"You know you can park closer. There's no point in walking farther with Evie or when you have groceries. You live here."

"I don't want to cause any problems with the customers who are coming to eat. It's not a big deal." Making myself small had been an unfortunate habit over the years. I wasn't sure it was healthy, but I couldn't seem to stop myself from doing it.

"You want to eat pizza in the dining room or take it to go?" Leo asked Evie.

"Inside," Evie said.

"Are you sure it's a good idea? It can be busy on Saturdays," I said.

"I want to eat inside too," Leo said firmly.

We followed him inside, where he talked to a hostess, and she led us to a booth in the back.

"This is nice," I said, realizing I never sat at a table unless the Giovanni family had closed the restaurant for a party. "I don't usually eat in the dining room."

Evie was busy coloring on the kid's menu the hostess supplied.

"Tonight, you girls are my dates," Leo said, with a wink in Evie's direction.

Evie's eyes went wide. "Are you Mommy's boyfriend?"

The boyfriend-girlfriend thing was going around her school, and it drove me a little crazy. They teased each other mercilessly about it.

Leo chuckled. “We’re not dating. But I’m having fun spending time with you.”

“I think that’s what you do on dates,” Evie said before returning to her coloring.

I shrugged to play it off. “That’s a child’s logic for you.”

The waitress appeared at the end of the table with a notepad and a smile for us. “What can I get you?”

“Hi, Lindey,” I greeted her.

She didn’t act surprised to see us together. “Is it nice to sit on the other side of the table?”

“I have to say it’s easier on the feet,” I said with a laugh.

“You want your usual?”

“I always get the Hawaiian,” Leo said.

“That works for me, but Evie needs a plain cheese,” I said apologetically.

Manny always got annoyed that Evie ate something different from him.

“One Hawaiian and one cheese,” Leo said with a flick of his hand, as if he couldn’t have cared less.

When the waitress was gone, I leaned in to say, “Evie can’t eat a large pizza.”

“Will you share your pizza, Evie?”

Her lips pursed in concentration. “Nope.”

“Evie,” I chided.

Leo smiled easily. “It’s okay. She’ll have some leftover.”

“I can pay for her pizza.”

Leo reached over to touch my hand. “Let me.”

I swallowed over the lump in my throat. He was being a nice guy. I just hadn’t seen many of those in my life. “Yeah, okay.”

Leo smiled widely, and I was momentarily blinded until he turned his attention to Evie. “Play tic-tac-toe with me?”

Evie pushed her paper toward him and handed him a small red crayon. I watched them play. Evie won one, and then Leo won one.

I couldn't look away because I was so enraptured with the fantasy of Leo, Evie, and me being a family.

“What are you doing here?” a male voice asked, startling me from my reverie.

Manny stood at the end of the table, his hands curled into fists.

“We're eating dinner,” Leo said more evenly than I would have.

Manny's lip curled. “You look awfully cozy over here. Like you're a family.”

“The Giovannis are like my family,” I said smoothly.

“What's going on?” Manny gestured at Leo and Evie, who sat on the same side of the booth.

“I'll be right back,” I said to Leo and Evie as I stood and led Manny outside. “I don't know what your problem is or what you think you saw, but I'm eating dinner with a family friend. That's it.”

“So, you're not fucking him?” he asked incredulously.

I flinched at the venom in his voice. “If I was, it wouldn't be any of your business.”

“You were the one who made that decision.”

I didn't respond because even if I'd made the decision not to stay with him, he wouldn't have stuck around. This argument was pointless.

“You took Evie from me.”

We'd had this argument a few times, but whenever I gave in to his demands and gave him more access to Evie, he always disappointed her. I'd given up on expecting much of

anything from him. I crossed my arms over my chest. “You did that all on your own. I said we wouldn’t be together as a couple but that you were free to be in Evie’s life however you wanted.”

“How was that going to be? I wasn’t even allowed to be in the delivery room.”

“You don’t support me.” Mrs. G. and Gia were there for me, and their entire family afterward. “When you’re around, it’s always about you. But this is about Evie. You choose not to visit her and not to pay child support consistently.” My stomach rumbled in hunger. “Now, if you’ll excuse me, I’d like to get back to dinner.”

I opened the door, but before I could go inside, Manny grabbed my elbow and said, “This isn’t over.”

Then he was gone. I drew in a shaky breath before I steeled my expression. I returned to the booth, pleased to see the pizza had arrived and Evie was preoccupied eating hers.

“Everything okay?” Leo asked softly, his brow raised.

“It will be.” I’d take care of Manny like I always had. I kept a family attorney on retainer, and whenever he requested more time, or something else, I had her send a letter requesting he put it in writing. He never responded. That way, I could say he was the one who didn’t want to cooperate.

I believed that Evie should know her father, but he didn’t make an effort.

Leo leveled me with a look that said we’d be discussing it later, so I nodded in response. The only people I ever spoke to about Manny were Gia and my attorney, Avery. It would be good to have a male perspective.

I focused on my pizza and watched Leo help Evie eat hers. It was nice. Like I wasn’t the only one Evie could rely on. “I can’t remember the last time I ate at a restaurant.”

“You’re kidding,” Leo said, his brow raised.

I smiled. “I’m usually working at this one.”

“Mommy said it’s healthier to eat at home.”

“Your mamma’s smart, but it’s nice to have a treat every once in a while.”

I flushed because I was sure he understood why I didn’t eat out often. I had to save money. We did the drive-through on nights when we were running around or grabbed the free pizza on nights I worked. But otherwise, it wasn’t a luxury I allowed myself often.

“We should take her out for a nice meal. At one of those fancy places.”

Evie nodded. “We can get dressed up.”

“That would be nice,” I said to Evie, knowing how much she loved dresses and feeling like a princess.

“We’ll make it happen. Just let me know what you like.”

“I love crab and lobster,” Evie said with a straight face.

Leo coughed as if he were choking on the bite of pizza he’d just eaten. He drank some water, and when he recovered, he said, “You’re going to be an expensive date when you’re older.”

Laughing with him, I said, “She has good taste.”

“Just like your mamma, *bimba*,” Leo said.

From working and being around the Giovanni family, I knew *bimba* meant little girl, and I loved that he called her that. He was a natural with her, reminding her to drink water between bites and cleaning up any messes she made.

Being around him like this was dangerous. It made me want things I couldn’t have.

*Eight*





**W**hen we were finished eating, Harper said, “It’s getting late. We better head home and get ready for bed.”

Our meal was free, but I didn’t protest when Harper threw some bills down for the tip. It was important to her to pay her own way. Or maybe she didn’t want to make it seem like a date.

It was something I hadn’t thought too much about when I suggested the outing. I knew I wanted to spend more time with Harper and Evie, and when Evie said she was hungry, dinner made the most sense.

When Manny showed up, it took everything in me to stay at the table with Evie and not follow them out. I wanted to know what he said to her and protect her from him. But it wasn’t my place. Harper was more than capable of handling him.

I walked them upstairs, grateful that Harper invited me in.

“Go get ready for your bath,” Harper said to Evie.

Evie crossed her arms over her chest, and her bottom lip popped out. “I don’t want to take a bath.”

“You were playing outside all day,” Harper reminded her.

After a few seconds, Evie said, “Fine,” before stomping down the hallway, presumably to her bedroom.

Harper shook her head before turning her attention to me.

“What happened with Manny?” I asked, my voice low in case Evie returned.

“Nothing that hasn’t happened before. He was probably jealous I was with you and wanted to make his presence known.”

“He only cares about you and his daughter if you’re seeing someone?” I asked, irritation swirling in my gut.

“It seems that way. Sometimes it’s easier not to be seen around town with anyone.”

“That’s not right.” I knew I’d seen him with other girls.

Harper sighed. “I’m the one who has to deal with him, and I’d rather not.”

“Does he hassle you on a regular basis?” I asked her; every muscle in my body pulled taut as I waited for her response.

“Just when he thinks I’ve moved on.”

I should have felt better that Harper hadn’t dated much over the years, but she had a right to a life too. “So, he doesn’t want to be involved in your lives, but he still wants to control it.”

Harper smiled sadly. “Something like that.”

“I don’t like it.”

Harper shrugged like there was nothing she could do about it. “It is what it is. I reminded him that he made the choice not to be in our lives or contribute financially. He threatened to get more visitation, and I referred him to my attorney. It’s the same song and dance we do every few months.”

“You have an attorney handling this for you?” I felt bad that I was so out of the loop on this, but then, the custody and child support arrangement with her ex wasn’t my business.

“Avery Arrington. She’s expensive but worth it. Every time he does this, she shoots him a letter reminding him of his unpaid child support and all the ways we can enforce it.”

“He could go to jail,” I said.

“Yes, but he can’t work and pay in jail,” Harper pointed out.

“He’s not paying now,” I said gruffly, frustrated with the situation.

“I just want him to leave us alone. I don’t think it’s good for Evie to have him in her life.”

“Not when he shows up angry like he did tonight.” Although Evie seemed more upset about her mother being with Manny than Manny acting like an asshole in front of her.

“I can handle him, and I have for years.”

“I know you can. I just worry about you.”

She pressed a hand to my forearm. “You don’t need to. I’ve got this.”

“But who’s got you?” At the end of the night, when Evie was asleep, who did she have to talk to? Who supported her?

Harper smiled sadly. “I have Evie and your family.”

I wanted to protest, to tell her it wasn’t enough. That she needed me, but we weren’t there yet. She still thought of me as Gia’s overbearing and protective older brother. I wanted to be someone different to her. That’s why I’d invited her to my house. I just needed to stick with the plan. “I’ll get everything ordered for the playhouse. Maybe Evie would like to help me paint next weekend?”

Harper’s forehead wrinkled. “Don’t you have enough work to do on the house?”

I grinned. “Remember, I’m hiring a contractor for that. I have time.”

Harper shook her head. “Then she’d love that.”

I had a feeling Harper could use a distraction from what happened with Manny. But I’d already spent a lot of time with her today. I needed to give her space and time to realize I might be more than just her best friend’s brother. I wanted her to see herself with me.

Evie ran across the hall, and the water turned on.

“I’d better supervise her,” Harper said, and just before she turned to leave, I kissed her cheek. “Good night, *bella*.”

Her cheeks flushed with pleasure, and I wondered if it was the Italian word. I’d used it on other women because I knew they enjoyed it. But with Harper, I said it for an entirely different reason. I felt the truth of the word deep in my soul.

My heart thumped in my chest as she murmured, “Good night.”

I hoped she knew I was sincere, and it wasn’t just an act. But before I could say anything, she’d disappeared into the bathroom. The water was running, and Evie chattered excitedly about something. I couldn’t make out the words, but I closed my eyes for a few seconds and imagined we lived together, and Harper was giving a bath to Evie and our baby.

Before I could get lost in that vision, I left, locking the door behind me. When I arrived home, it felt emptier than ever. Evie and Harper showed me what it was like to have someone in my space, and I liked it. Probably a little too much because now there was a hole in my chest that I couldn’t seem to fill.

I opened my laptop and ordered the play kitchen set and pretend food and plates Evie wanted. Then I searched for the perfect table and chair set. Plastic made the most sense since it was an outdoor playhouse, but I bookmarked another wooden set that would be perfect for her room. Maybe one day, I’d be in a position to spoil Evie and Harper.

I’d focus on the next part of the plan, painting the playhouse and taking them out for a nice dinner. I wanted to act while things were fresh. I didn’t want to give Harper a chance to back away.

The more time I spend with them, the more I liked them. I loved having them in my space, but it felt a little deceptive because she thought I was just being brotherly when my intentions were anything but.

\* \* \*

The next time a server called out of work, I made a conscious effort not to call Harper in. Instead, I advertised for new waitstaff. As much as I wanted to see Harper and spend time with her, I wanted her to have a break too. It wasn't right that she was always on call when she had a full-time job and a child.

There was a good possibility Harper came into work because she felt an obligation to me and my family. I didn't like that dynamic between us. She didn't owe me anything, and I needed to stop relying on her to work. She had a job with Gia now, and a daughter whom she wanted to spend time with in the evenings.

Harper had to work a wedding on Saturday, so we made plans to paint the playhouse on Sunday. I'd sent options for paint colors through text and asked Harper to find out which one Evie preferred. A few times, Evie seemingly highjacked her phone to send emojis and GIFs.

On Saturday, I stopped by my parents' house after work, knowing Evie was there. As soon as I went inside, Evie ran toward me, asking to be picked up.

I complied, breathing in her sweet scent. "You smell like cookies."

Evie giggled. "Nonna made them."

I pretended to breathe her in, and she giggled more. I set her on the floor where she'd been playing with some dolls.

"What are you doing here?" Mamma asked.

I kissed her cheek. "I came to see you."

She grunted like she knew that wasn't true.

"I heard Evie was here, and I couldn't resist seeing her."

Mamma's brow raised. "That's what I thought. Evie said she was at your house?"

"I told Harper they could play on the playground. It's in good shape and just sitting there."

Mamma tipped her head to the side. “That was nice of you.”

I grinned. “I’m a nice guy.”

“Hmm,” Mamma said. “She said you’re making her a playhouse, too.”

“It’s just a storage shed. I don’t need the space, and she’d love it.”

Mamma didn’t say anything else because Papà came into the room for dinner, and we sat down to eat. Evie crawled onto my lap at some point, and I entertained her. When a soft knock sounded on the back door, Evie scrambled off my lap. “Mommy.”

I opened the door for her, and Harper’s eyes widened when she saw me standing there. I usually only stopped by for Sunday dinner, but I wanted to see her and Evie.

“Are you hungry? There’s plenty left over,” Mamma said to her, bustling around the kitchen.

“I’ll take it with me. I have to get this one home and ready for bed.”

I helped Evie gather her things and carried Evie outside to Harper’s car. Once Evie was strapped into her car seat and the food was on the passenger side seat, Harper asked me, “What were you really doing here?”

“Having dinner with my family,” I said.

Harper frowned. “You’re not usually here when your parents are watching Evie.”

“I wanted to see Evie. I missed her.” Before Harper could respond with questions I wasn’t ready to answer, I asked, “Are we still on for painting tomorrow?”

“Evie can’t wait,” Harper said as she slid into the seat.

I wanted to ask Harper how she felt, but I couldn’t get a read on her. Was she just doing this as a favor to a friend, or did she feel something for me?

“I have next Friday night off if you want to go out to eat.” At Harper’s conflicted expression, I added, “I promised Evie I’d take her out.”

Harper’s expression softened. “That would be great.”

I slapped the top of her car. “I’ll pick you up at six.”

Before she could change her mind, I closed the door and waited for her to drive away. Then I went inside to say good-bye to my parents.

I didn’t stick around because I was worried they’d ask questions about me hanging around Harper and Evie. I wasn’t ready for my family to get involved. They could be pushy and opinionated. I wanted Harper and Evie to myself for a little while longer.

\* \* \*

The next day, I got the paint supplies ready for the playhouse and finished cleaning out the garage. With Harper and Evie visiting, I was more conscious about how clean the house was. I tidied the kitchen and living room, removing the dirty dishes from the sink. I even ordered juice and some kid snacks so Evie felt more at home.

When they arrived, Evie jumped out of the car and raced toward me. “Are we going to paint?”

She looked up at me, her blue eyes sparkling with excitement. “Yes. Are you ready for it, *bimba*?”

“Yes, yes, yes,” she chanted as I leaned over to kiss Harper’s cheek.

I loved the flush of her skin every time I greeted her. “Morning.”

She held up a box of donuts. “I brought food.”

“You didn’t need to do that,” I said as I took it from her and led them into the kitchen. I put out a few plates so we could eat and poured orange juice into glasses.

“It was the least I could do since you’re building Evie a playhouse.”

Evie ate quickly, then asked to go out to the playground. When Harper said yes, I waited for Evie to dart outside before I responded, “You don’t have to repay me.”

Harper cleared her throat. “I have to do something.”

“I like doing things for you and Evie.”

Harper nodded but still looked uncertain. Hopefully, she’d understand that when I did things for her, there weren’t strings attached. She didn’t owe anything to my parents or family either, but she’d have to realize that on her own.

We got the paint ready, then called Evie over. We were painting the trim and siding white and the shutters black. It could easily double as a storage shed or a little child’s playhouse.

Evie took long breaks to eat a snack and play on the playground while we kept working.

When we were done, we sat on the grass to admire our work.

“How did the meeting with the contractor go this week?” Harper asked.

“I liked that he’s the owner and well-respected in the area. I still scheduled a few more appointments with other contractors while I’m waiting on his estimate.” But I had a good feeling about Cade. He seemed reliable, and from all accounts, he did good work.

“It will be nice when your house is done.”

“I can’t believe I waited so long to do it.”

“Maybe you didn’t have a reason to finish it before.”

I rolled her sentence over in my head, wondering if she was right. I was living in a sort of limbo, not wanting to move ahead with my life, content to keep things the same. But I’d been wanting more responsibility at work for a while. Maybe I was ready for other changes too.



We cleaned up and got ready for family dinner. We drove over separately so that Harper would have her car to take Evie home afterward.

When we arrived, Mamma greeted me and then said, “I heard that Bianca is engaged.”

“Good for her.” I never told my parents she cheated on me. I felt it was better they thought we mutually agreed to end things.

“Whatever happened between you two?” Papà asked.

“We were better off as friends.” That much was the truth.

“I just want you to meet a nice girl and settle down,” Mamma said.

“I know you do, Mamma.”

Harper offered me a sympathetic look from across the table.

“Maybe you should try that online dating. That’s what all the young people are doing these days,” Papà said.

“That’s not really my thing.” I preferred to meet someone in person and get to know them. I wish Mamma would focus on one of my brothers, but I was the eldest. In her mind, I was supposed to be the first one to settle down.

“Better you than me,” my brother Matteo said quietly.

I couldn’t help but wonder what my parents would think of me liking Harper. Would they think she wasn’t the right girl for me? Or would they be happy because she’d officially be part of the family?

I needed to know if she felt the same way or if I was wasting my time.

The conversation turned to the restaurant and my plan to hire more waitstaff.

“Harper’s always filled in,” Papà said.

“And I’m happy to continue to do that,” Harper said with a smile.

I shook my head. “Harper wants to spend her free time with Evie. She already has a job working for Gia.”

Papà thought Gia’s business wasn’t a real one, that wedding planning wouldn’t be something that people wanted to pay for. So far, he’d been wrong, but he was too stubborn to see it a different way.

“I don’t mind,” Harper insisted.

In an effort to change the subject, I asked, “When are you going to retire, Papà?”

“When you boys are ready.”

“We’re not boys anymore, and between the three of us, we can handle the business. Maybe when you go to Italy this fall, you should let us run it on our own. No lists of instructions to follow, no phone calls to check up on us.”

“And what will that prove, huh?” Papà asked, his elbows on the table.

“That you trained us well, and we’re more than competent to handle the business in your stead. That you could think about working less and, eventually, retiring entirely. I’m not saying you can’t stop by and talk to the customers, but let us take over more of the business decisions.”

Carlo lowered his voice and said to me, “If he can’t agree to that, he’ll never agree to the expansion.”

Unfortunately, the entire table had fallen silent, and Papà heard him clearly.

“What was this expansion you mentioned?”

Carlo shouldn’t have said anything. I wasn’t ready to tell Papà our plans. “There’s three of us, and we don’t need that many managers.”

“Matteo is the kitchen manager, and Carlo handles orders, supplies, and the books. You manage the dining room. It works.”

I shook my head, frustrated with his logic. “But we don’t need all three of us working so much.”

Papà leaned his elbows on the table. “What are you proposing?”

“Opening a second restaurant. I’d handle finding a location and the necessary renovations.” It was too soon. I didn’t have the numbers ready.

Papà shook his head. “I never saw the business as more than one restaurant. I wanted it to have a family feel. How can we do that with another restaurant?”

“We can keep that same vibe with two. They’ll be in two separate locations, two different towns. I think it’s natural as businesses expand. Let Carlo run the numbers, and I’ll get back to you.”

I had to convince Papà. I had so many ideas to make the business better, but Papà was content doing what we’d always done.

Mamma shot him a look, and he sighed. “I realize I need to hand the business over to you eventually, but it’s hard.”

“I know it is.” It was hard to let go of the control he’d had our entire lives. “But you raised us in the business. We learned everything from you.”

Papà pursed his lips. “That is true.”

“Give him a chance,” Mamma said.

“Leo is smart, and he got the business bug from you,” Harper said.

It felt good to know the women in my life were on my side. Now I just needed my father’s support.

“Get me those numbers, and I’ll look at them.”

Harper smiled at me, and I let out the breath I’d been holding. Maybe, just maybe, I’d get everything I wanted.

*Nine*



**M**y job at Happily Ever Afters was to manage the office, including the contracts, the billing, and the schedule.

With three wedding planners and multiple weddings each weekend, it was a large task.

When Gia first hired me, it was to streamline their scheduling by choosing and utilizing a program. After that task was completed, she expanded my role. I loved the job, and I was so grateful to her for offering it to me.

I didn't have a college degree, and she could easily have justified hiring someone who did. But she always said I was uniquely qualified for the position.

I sat in on the initial consultations with clients to make sure I had a feel for the bride and groom and how demanding they would be so I could work that into the schedule. I also handled all deliveries and vendors. The more Happily Ever Afters grew, the more Gia relied on me.

We started each morning with a meeting between the two of us. Today, I carried the tablet I was never without into her office. She sat behind her large desk, looking professional in a fitted blouse and pencil skirt.

“Did you have a chance to look at the numbers?” Gia asked without looking up.

I sat across from her in the plush leather chair. “We aren't signing as many couples. Our conversion rate is down.”

“Do we know where they're going?” Gia asked.

Some couldn't afford a wedding planner, or one of Gia's caliber, others already had another planner in mind—a friend or even a family member—and others went to an all-inclusive option, either a destination wedding or something like Silas Sharpe's Chesapeake Resort. "Since the last time we talked about it, I started sending follow-up emails with a survey asking if they'd tell us why they chose not to use our services. Of those that responded, they either said they decided to go without, or they went to Chesapeake Resort."

Gia groaned.

"There's not enough data to conclude that Silas's resort is the problem." The luxury resort bordered the bay, offering a golf course, two large pools—indoor and outdoor—a spa, and several five-star restaurants. Silas employed his own wedding planner and didn't allow any outside planners on-site.

Gia pursed her lips. "Oh, Silas is most definitely a problem."

"The fact is, we're booking fewer high-budget weddings." I wasn't positive about the reason yet. Gia had her suspicions, but I wasn't convinced. I needed more data.

"We need the high-budget weddings to float the business the rest of the year." Gia voiced what we already knew.

"What are we going to do? I don't want to let anyone go. Aria just started handling her own weddings. Not only that, but we're friends with them." They'd become family. We had a contract with outside vendors like Lily, Sophie, Abby, and Harrison, but Aria and Ireland were salaried employees.

"I think Ireland loves this job, but she hasn't expressed any interest in being promoted. Not like Aria has."

"I think it's because she doesn't have to work. She genuinely enjoys working with brides and keeping busy." It was my understanding that Ireland had a trust fund to fall back on. She enjoyed this job but most likely didn't need it. "But it's not fair to take her trust fund into consideration when deciding who we might need to let go."

“Definitely not. It’s just that Aria needs this job. I like what both planners bring to the business, and I don’t want to lose either of them. Some brides are more suited to Aria’s personality, and others to Ireland’s. That’s what makes this service so unique.”

“We don’t want to lose anyone.” It was better for everyone to have more planners on staff. I didn’t want Gia to overextend herself by managing the weddings on her own.

“There has to be another way to bring in business before we consider cutting staff. We need to assume a certain percentage of brides will prefer the all-inclusive option, so how do we lure more brides interested in what we have to offer?” Gia asked, and, as always, I was surprised she asked for and relied on my opinion.

“I’ve always thought of the business as a specialized service. Brides come here to be taken care of.” It wasn’t just hiring someone to assist you. In most cases, we became close with the couple and their family, rejoicing alongside them at the ceremonies.

Gia nodded. “We’re a luxury for some, but a necessity for others. We need to appeal to any and all brides who are looking for assistance on their wedding day. Do we need to hire a marketing specialist, or is this something we can handle on our own?” Gia asked.

“We could brainstorm some ideas, and if we’re stuck, then maybe we should consult someone else,” I suggested.

“Let’s list what we’ve already tried.”

I pulled out my pad of paper, preferring to write with a pen when we were making lists or brainstorming. “We’ve run ads online and in the local paper, we’ve booked tables at local bridal fairs, and we’ve advertised in bridal gown stores. We have a visible storefront on Main Street. Frankly, it’s a lot.” I was at a loss for what we could do that we hadn’t already.

“Are there any fundraisers or auctions going on? Maybe we could raffle a free wedding package,” Gia said, her eyes bright with interest.

“We’d be giving away a service for free,” I pointed out, and her shoulders slumped.

“I don’t usually like to do that. Our time and work are worthy of compensation, but I’m not sure what else there is.”

“Let’s ruminare on it for a few days. See if we get some inspiration.” I’d hate to tell Gia that our only option was to work for free. We weren’t even sure a raffle would drum up more clients. There was also the possibility that we’d saturated the market. That there weren’t any more customers out there who hadn’t heard of us. If so, the only option would be to trim some of the employees or expand further. The second was a risk, and I was hesitant to suggest it.

Gia nodded. “My best ideas usually come to me when I have some time to think about it.”

“You didn’t get any inspiration when you attended Chris and Naomi’s wedding at the Chesapeake Resort?”

Gia’s lips twitched. “Not unless one of us has the money to purchase a luxury resort on the bay with multiple pools and five-star restaurants.”

I laughed. “What he offers is so different from us that he’s not exactly competition.”

“If a couple wants a destination wedding, then we can’t compete.”

Something about what she said clicked in my brain. “But isn’t Annapolis considered a tourist destination because of its rich history and architecture? Why couldn’t it be the same for weddings? We’ve been advertising locally, but what if we expanded our marketing campaign and drew people in with the idea of a destination wedding? It’s a desirable location for many. I mean, who doesn’t love a historic harbor town?”

Gia stood and started pacing behind her desk, her excited energy coming off her in waves. “I love it. We’d be latching on to Silas’s marketing plan but with a twist.” She paused and then looked at me. “He’d be so mad if he found out about our plan.”



“But you’re not copying him. This is something we could and probably should have been doing all along. We could cater to a much larger population if we can convince out-of-state couples that this is their ideal location for a wedding.”

“And they’ll need more help because they’re not from the area. They won’t already have a baker or a photographer in mind.”

“They’ll need our recommendations and guidance. We might not have a resort, but we can point them to the right reception location and bring everything else to them.”

Gia paused and gestured with her hands. “I can see it now. *Have you always wanted a destination wedding, but you weren’t sure of the perfect location for your big day?*”

“Come to Annapolis,” I said with a smile. “We have the Chesapeake Bay as the backdrop and a gorgeous historic town. We can also feature local food specialties, like crab and seafood, and use images of the water.”

“It’s perfect. I can’t believe we hadn’t considered this before. This could be huge for us,” Gia said as she resumed her pacing.

“Do you want to run some ads online to test it?”

Gia’s eyes widened. “What if we bring in too many clients, and we can’t handle them all? Or what if they do a search and find Silas’s resort? We’d be helping him.”

I held up my hand to stop her rant. “Now you’re going down a negative spiral. You can’t think of all the negative possibilities.”

“Thanks for catching that. I hate when I start doubting myself.” Gia prided herself on being confident and decisive. She charged what she was worth and provided quality service.

“Everyone needs a reminder now and then.” I couldn’t help but think I’d been doubting myself lately too. What if I just needed to believe in myself?

Gia sat at her desk and toggled on her computer screen. “Let’s work on the campaign, talk budget, and get moving on

this. I don't want to wait.”

That's what I loved about Gia. When she got an idea, she quickly assessed it and then went for it. I admired her. I wished I was fearless. Maybe if I was, I would already have made a move on Leo. The thought sent tingles down my spine.

Instead, I kept my thoughts and desires hidden, too afraid to tell Leo how I felt. How I'd always felt. This childhood crush had morphed into something far bigger than I anticipated. I liked him, and I had no idea what to do about it. Not when I was so entangled with the Giovannis that I'd never unravel myself.

“What do you think?” Gia asked as she tilted her screen so I could see the campaign.

I refocused on work because, at the end of the day, I needed this job. Leo was a distraction I didn't need.

\* \* \*

On Friday night, Evie insisted on wearing her nicest dress and asked me to blow-dry and curl her hair. I spent so much time on her, I barely had time to find something to wear myself. I was still getting ready when a knock sounded on the door with a corresponding text from Leo letting me know it was him.

“You can answer it. It's Leo,” I called to Evie, who unlocked and opened the door. I heard her shriek of joy and Leo's deep voice, but I stayed in the bathroom, putting on some mascara.

I'd put on a black cocktail dress that I wore to evening weddings. It felt a little weird getting dolled up to go out, and even stranger to be going out with my daughter. At the same time, my heart thudded dangerously in my chest. I liked the anticipation of going out with a man, even if I wasn't sure where he stood or what any of this meant.

I would enjoy the restaurant, the meal, and the company. And when he told me he was only interested in me as a family

friend, I'd have to be okay with it. It was always best to temper expectations. I wouldn't get my hopes up.

There was no better life out there for me. This was what I'd chosen and where I'd always be. I depended on the Giovannis for everything: my jobs, childcare, and my home.

"You almost ready?" A deep rumble from the doorway to the bathroom briefly startled me.

"Almost," I said brightly, hoping he'd give me a few minutes to pull myself together. It hurt to remind myself of our situation, but it was necessary. Dreaming about a different life didn't change anything. It just made the eventual crash that much worse.

"*Sei bellissima,*" Leo murmured.

The Italian words on his lips heated my body. Desire curled in my belly as I met his gaze in the mirror.

"Thank you," I said as I set the mascara wand on the counter and turned to face him. He wore black slacks and a crisp white shirt opened at the collar. He was striking.

He stepped closer to me, his hand lifting, hesitating, and then brushing a strand of hair out of my face. "There are no words. *Non ho parole.*"

"Mommy," Evie said, coming into the bathroom. "I'm starving."

I smiled apologetically at Leo. "I wouldn't let her eat any snacks this afternoon. I didn't want her to spoil her dinner."

"We'd better go then." Leo winked at me, then turned and lifted Evie into his arms. "I wouldn't want you to starve."

Evie giggled. "Put me down."

"Never!" he cried as he carried her out of the bathroom, giving me a few seconds of much-needed time to myself.

I took a few deep breaths in a vain attempt to calm my racing heart. Leo usually wore a dress shirt and pants when he worked at the restaurant, but this was different. I could smell the faint scent of his aftershave, as if he'd recently showered

to go out with me. His shirt and pants were neatly pressed, not rumpled from a long day at work.

I took one more deep breath before smoothing my hands over my skirt, then walked into the hallway. In the foyer, Leo held Evie's hand as she bent over to slide on her dress shoes. My heart squeezed in my chest at the sight.

Evie deserved to have a father figure in her life. Someone who put her first.

Leo lifted his gaze and met mine over Evie's head, and something electric passed between us. It felt like he could see through me, see my hopes and dreams, my desire for a man in our lives. He knew how important Evie was to me and what this meant to me. I hoped he wasn't just playing big brother but was truly interested in us.

I smiled tremulously. "Ready to go?"

Without waiting for an answer, I slipped on the pumps I'd set by the door this afternoon and grabbed my silver purse with the chain I'd splurged on for weddings.

"You look like a princess," Evie said as she faced me.

"You do too."

"You both are beautiful. *Siete bellissime.*" Leo's deep voice resonated in my chest.

"Thank you." I loved the compliment, but I enjoyed it even more in Italian.

He opened the door, still holding Evie's hand. I locked the door and followed them down the steps. There was a red sports car parked at the bottom.

"Is this yours?" I asked Leo when he opened the rear passenger side door.

He smiled sheepishly. "I don't get a chance to take it out often."

"This is so cool!" Evie said as she slid inside.

"Do you have a car seat?" I asked. "We can always take my car."

Leo shifted on his feet. “I bought the same one my parents have. Is that okay?”

I peeked inside to see Evie competently snapping the belt closed. “That’s perfect.”

When I straightened, he shut the door. “You didn’t have to go through all this trouble.”

He stepped closer, palming my cheek. “But I did.”

Before I could respond, he opened the front passenger door, and I slid inside, needing a second to calm my traitorous heart. It had been wildly thumping in my chest ever since he appeared in the bathroom. There would be no slowing it down if he kept saying things like that.

My body was heated, and my skin was flushed by the time Leo rounded the hood and slid behind the wheel.

“Where are we going?” Evie asked from the backseat, barely containing her excitement.

At least her presence should keep my out-of-control attraction to Leo in check. I couldn’t touch him or say the things I wanted to with her watching us.

“A restaurant on the water that specializes in seafood.”

“Sounds amazing,” I murmured, and he smiled over at me.

“I’m a lucky man. I get to take out two beautiful girls.”

“Did you hear that, Mommy? He said I was beautiful, and you are too.”

“That’s very sweet of him,” I said to Evie. I wasn’t sure what his intentions were. If it was to make me feel less lonely, it was nice, but I wanted more. I couldn’t continue like this. Not when my body seemed to think this was leading to something else entirely.

“That’s because you are,” Leo said to Evie in the rearview mirror, and I got what people said when they mentioned how important a father figure was to a little girl. I’d researched it online and wondered if I was doing the right thing by raising Evie on my own.

Leo could be just what my little girl needed and what I wanted.

*Ten*



When I saw Harper getting ready in the bathroom, it was like my heart stuttered to a stop, and I couldn't form words. Gorgeous didn't begin to describe how she looked. The black, shimmery dress showcased the gold highlights in the waves of her hair. But it was the amount of exposed skin and the way her dress clung to the curves of her body that had me off-kilter.

Holding Evie's hand while she put on her tiny shoes sent a streak of tenderness through my body. I'd do anything for the two of them. My heart ached for something more than the role I'd been given in her life. I wanted to kiss the exposed skin on Harper's shoulder and ease the straps of her dress off her shoulders, letting the material pool at her feet. Would that leave her in just a lace bra and panty set, or was she bare underneath?

I had no business thinking these thoughts when Evie was with us. Just the memory of that particular fantasy had me shifting in my seat. Being around Harper and not being able to touch her was torture. Why had I thought I could get close to her and control my baser instincts?

The only thing that kept me in check was Evie, chattering excitedly about all the things she was going to eat when she got to the restaurant.

It was the perfect evening, especially when I usually spent it working or alone at home. I hadn't been on a date in a long time. Since I broke things off with Bianca, I'd refused any



more arranged dates from my family, which had left me with no prospects.

When I parked in front of the restaurant and handed the keys to the valet, I rounded the car to find Evie holding Harper's hand.

I held my elbow out to Harper, and when her fingers curled around my arm, we headed into the restaurant and gave my name to the hostess before following her to our reserved table overlooking the water.

"This is magnificent," Harper said as she looked at the boats bobbing on the water. I was fascinated by the enthralled look on her face.

"I wanted to treat you."

Harper looked at me then, her face soft and full of questions. She was probably wondering what I was doing, and it was past time to tell her. Just not with Evie around.

We turned our attention to the menus, and I helped Evie choose something she'd like. I loved going out to restaurants and comparing their operations with mine. Some would say there was no comparison between a pizzeria and a fine-dining experience, but I could take anything I learned and apply it to my business.

Every customer liked to be treated as if they were important when they went out to eat, no matter the price point.

After the waitress took our orders, Harper pulled out a coloring book and markers from her purse to give to Evie.

Harper said, "You're examining everything as if you're mentally taking notes."

"That's because I am," I said, shifting my attention to her.

Her head tilted with interest. "What sticks out to you?"

I wondered if she was involved with marketing and customer service in her job at Happily Ever Afters.

"The one thing I'm big on is customer service. How can we treat our customers like they're dining at a five-star

restaurant?”

Her lips tipped up. “Interesting.”

“Papà runs a clean and efficient restaurant, but what if it could be even better? What if you felt like family when you stopped by?”

“Is everyone family?” Evie asked.

Harper turned her attention to her. “Leo’s just saying that it would be nice to feel like family.”

“Like how Leo feels like family?” Evie asked, and Harper’s startled gaze met mine.

“Exactly like that, *stellina*.”

“What does that mean?” Evie asked curiously.

I tipped my head toward her. “It means little star.”

“That’s sweet,” Harper murmured, as if she couldn’t help herself.

“Some things sound better in Italian,” I said, and her cheeks flushed.

She enjoyed it when I called her *bella* and *bellissima*, pretty and beautiful; maybe it even turned her on. I tucked away that tidbit for later.

“Do you speak fluently?” Harper asked me.

“Not as well as I used to. When I was a teen, I decided I was too cool to speak another language, so I refused to converse with my parents unless it was in English.”

Harper pressed the heel of her hand over her heart. “That must have broken your parents’ hearts.”

“I’m sure it did, but that’s how teenagers are, and then they stopped speaking it around the house. I know phrases, and I’m sure I could relearn it easily, but I haven’t gone on their trips to Italy lately. We stay back so they can enjoy their trip.”

Harper traced a pattern on the tablecloth with her finger. “That must be amazing to visit another country.”

“You’ve never been?” I asked politely, even though I knew the answer.

She shook her head and focused on Evie’s coloring.

My chest welled with emotion. I wanted to show her Italy, and anywhere else she wanted to go. “Have you taken Evie to the beach?”

“I want to go,” Evie said, without looking up at us.

Harper shook her head. “I don’t really take much time off.”

We were only a three-hour drive from Ocean City and many other beaches in Delaware and Virginia.

“You don’t take any vacation time?” I asked.

Harper’s shoulders stiffened. “I just started with Gia, and before that, I worked at the restaurant. I save my time for when Evie’s sick.”

My heart squeezed at that revelation. The plight of a single parent, never having time to just take a trip for pleasure. I wanted to offer to take them to the beach, but it wasn’t my place, and I rarely took time off myself. I covered the restaurant so everyone else could take their vacation time.

“You’re no different,” Harper said pointedly.

“I traveled when I was younger. But those trips were mostly with my family. I’ve never gone anywhere with a woman.”

Harper’s gaze met mine, and something shimmered in her eyes. Did she wish she were the woman I’d take on trips, that I’d plan a future with?

The server brought our food, and we dug in, enjoying the fragrant seafood dishes. We talked about Evie’s school and friends. She adored her teacher and was excited about every little thing—the day the bookmobile came to school, the assembly when a magician performed tricks, and even just playing on the playground. She was a ball of energy and so full of love.

Evie loved her lobster-stuffed ravioli, but it was too much for her to eat in one sitting, so we got her a to-go box.

I paid the bill and shook my head when Harper tried to protest. “This was my treat.”

I held my hand out to Harper when I stood. “Where to next?”

“I heard there are fireworks tonight at the harbor because there’s a festival downtown,” Harper said tentatively, as if she didn’t think I’d want to go.

“You want to go?” I asked them.

“Yes!”

I got the impression that they didn’t get taken out often, if ever, and this was a real treat for them. I didn’t want the evening to end, although I did want to talk to Harper in private. “To the fireworks it is then.”

I parked downtown, and we walked to the harbor. There was a raised wall around the edge of the dock where we could sit and watch the people coming and going.

I braced my arm behind Harper. The more crowded the area got, the more it forced Harper to lean into my chest. I secretly enjoyed the proximity.

I felt the slight tremor that ran through her body every time she moved closer. I resisted the urge to nuzzle my nose in her hair. I wished she were mine to touch and hold. This friendship thing wasn’t serving me anymore.

Evie danced to the music in front of us. Harper pulled out her phone to snap a few pictures and then a video.

It felt like we were a family. It sparked a longing in my chest. I needed to talk to Harper tonight. I couldn’t wait any longer to find out if she liked me.

When the first firework exploded over the water, the crowd stilled, and everything went quiet except for the loud popping noise. Evie climbed onto my lap and huddled against my chest. I pulled her closer, loving the feel of her in my arms.

Harper smiled as she looked at us, and I knew what she was thinking. Evie deserved to have a man in her life who thought she was the world. I could be that guy if only Harper felt the same way I did. What were the odds that she'd harbored some secret crush on me through the years or just discovered this attraction like I had?

The odds weren't in my favor, but it didn't stop me from hoping and wishing.

When Evie flinched a little from the noise, I asked, "Want me to cover your ears?"

"It's okay," she said, but she pressed her face into my chest and closed her eyes tightly.

"Is she afraid of fireworks?" I asked Harper, whose eyes widened.

"Not usually."

"Want to get out of here?" I asked Harper, my heart racing with the need to ease Evie's distress.

"We probably should," Harper said, rising and waiting for us to follow her.

I easily lifted Evie in my arms and headed to the pizzeria and their apartment.

"I'm sorry. She's always enjoyed them in the past," Harper said, regret tinging her voice.

"She might have been too young to know to be scared. If it's the noise that bothers her, you can always get her noise-canceling headphones." I'd seen a few kids wearing those in the crowd.

"I thought it would be something nice we could do. I had no idea she'd get scared."

"It's not your fault. Kids' preferences change." I'd seen that over the years with Evie. She liked apples one day, and the next day, they were gross.

Harper sighed long and hard, as if she had the weight of the world on her shoulders.

“I had a good time.” Just being close to Harper and watching the joy on Evie’s face as she danced to the music was enough for me.

“Yeah?” Harper asked.

I let Evie down when the fireworks were a distant popping noise, and she asked, “Can we get ice cream?”

“I don’t see why not,” I said before realizing too late it wasn’t my call. “Is that one of those moments when I should have asked you first?”

She laughed easily. “Probably. But it’s okay. We can get ice cream.” Then she stiffened. “Unless you have other plans.”

“You two are my plans this evening,” I said, leaning down to kiss her cheek and wishing I could do more.

We debated on ice cream stores before stopping at the newest one, a fountain soda shop. Evie opted for a root beer float, and both Harper and I got the lemon-lime one with vanilla ice cream.

“We love this place,” Harper said.

“You come here a lot?” I asked her, curious to know more about them when they were by themselves.

Harper nodded. “We walk to the playground and stop here afterward.”

I wondered if she did special things to make up for other stuff that Evie was missing out on—a father, a single-family house, and an extended family. Harper never mentioned her grandparents or even her father.

“Are you close to your mother’s family?” I asked.

“Mom didn’t speak to her parents. I think they were upset when she got pregnant. That’s my guess, anyway.”

“They’ve never reached out to you?”

She shook her head. “That’s why I always thought her story was true. Honestly, if they wanted to find us, they could have.”

“Probably.”

“And I don’t know who my father is,” Harper said so quietly that Evie, who was writing on a child’s chalkboard nearby, wouldn’t hear.

“I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay. I can’t miss what I never had.”

I highly doubted that, but I didn’t call her out on it. I didn’t want to make her feel worse. But I couldn’t imagine life without my father. He taught me how to ride a bike, how to make my first pizza, and how to treat a woman right. I owed everything to him. That’s why it was important for him to approve my plans for the restaurant going forward.

“Would you want to learn how to make a pizza?” I asked, suddenly wanting to give Evie everything she was missing.

At Harper’s raised brow, I added, “You could come in early on Sunday before the restaurant opens.”

It was one of my fondest memories of my father and the pizzeria, the time he spent teaching me things. How to make the perfect crust for pizza and bread for the subs. He believed in using the freshest ingredients and never skimped on anything due to cost. At the same time, he liked to keep things simple. He’d always say there’s nothing fancy about making pizza and subs. I always thought creating amazing food had a beautiful quality to it.

Evie raised her head. “I can make my own?”

“That’s right,” I said to her, and I couldn’t resist asking Harper, “How about you? Would you like it too?”

She nodded and opened her mouth to say something, but the waitress arrived with a tray of our drinks and set them in front of us before she could.

“What were you going to say?” I asked her once the server returned to the kitchen. I had a feeling it was something important. That there was something pressing on her mind.

Evie returned to the table, climbed onto one of the chairs, and slurped her float. Her eyes got big as the sugar reached her

mouth.

Harper waved a hand in the air. “Oh, it was nothing. Don’t worry about it.”

Was she going to ask about my sudden interest in her, and if she did, what was I going to say? A lot depended on how she felt about me. Was I brave enough to tell her the truth when I wasn’t sure about her feelings?

If she’d asked what we were doing, how would I have responded? I was in uncharted territory, liking a woman who was so intertwined with my family. What would my parents think? What would Gia think? I knew my brothers would be concerned it would affect our business.

All I could do was enjoy my time with Harper and Evie and pretend they were mine, if only for tonight. I knew I needed to tell her something tonight. Instead of worrying about it, I focused on Evie, offering to color with her.

It was surreal to be at an ice cream store on a Friday night, enjoying time with a five-year-old and her mother. Normally, I’d be working, even if I wasn’t scheduled to.

Once Harper heard what I had to say, she might tell me she only thought of me as a brother. Something painful twisted inside my chest.

“Are you okay?” Harper asked me, concern etched on her face.

“Of course.” I hated keeping things from her, but we couldn’t talk in front of Evie.

We sipped our sweet drinks and talked about the best combination of sodas and ice cream flavors, vowing to return and try a different one next time.

I liked that promise, and I hoped I got to hold them to it. When we finished, I walked them home. Once the door was unlocked, Harper said, “You should come in.”

Dread filled my stomach. Was this where she asked what my intentions were and why I was spending so much time with them?



“Let me get Evie to bed, then we can talk. Feel free to grab a drink from the fridge. I’ll be right back.”

“Do I have to go to bed?” Evie asked as they walked to her bedroom. “I want to play with Leo.”

“Leo has to go to bed too.”

“Then why is he waiting for you?” Evie asked, as she looked over her shoulder at me.

I grinned and said, “I’m just making sure you get to bed at a decent hour.”

I wasn’t sure what to say, but that seemed to placate her. When they disappeared inside her room, I grabbed a water bottle from the fridge and made myself comfortable on her couch. I mindlessly scrolled through my phone, my mind racing too much about what was going to happen when Harper returned to focus on anything.

When Harper stood at the end of the couch, I put the phone down. “Is she asleep?”

“She was out before I finished reading.”

“That’s good.” Then I wondered what it would be like to read Evie a story, to tuck her into bed. It was a little crazy because Evie wasn’t mine any more than Harper was.

Harper sucked in a breath, as if gathering her thoughts.

This was the part when she asked what I was doing here and why I was so interested in them. Was she already dating someone? Wouldn’t she have said something about that? I couldn’t remember her dating many men over the years, and if she did, maybe she kept it quiet from the family. She was entitled to her privacy, but the tenuousness of this situation gnawed at my stomach.

I stood, needing to be closer to her.

Her face lifted as I approached. “I have to ask you something.”

“Shoot,” I said and then winced. I wasn’t talking to one of my brothers. This was Harper. I needed to use finesse.

Looking back, I realized things with Bianca were so comfortable and easy. I could see now she was just a friend, but whatever this was with Harper was something more. Did she feel it too?

I noticed she was wringing her fingers in front of her body when she said, “Thank you for dinner, but I’m not sure—”

I sighed and took a step back, creating distance between us. “It’s a good idea?”

Harper nodded and gestured between us. “I don’t know what’s happening here.”

My heart pounded hard in my chest. I swear she could hear it from where she stood. “Whatever you want to happen.”

Then I waited for her to absorb those words and interpret their meaning.

Finally, she sighed. “I want you. I’ve always wanted you, Leo. But you’ve never shown any interest.”

The blood rushed south as I erased the distance between us, murmuring sweet words in Italian to her as I cradled her jaw and anchored her hip with my free hand. “Say it again.”

Her eyes fluttered open as her gaze met mine. “I’ve always wanted you.”

Then I crushed my mouth to hers, needing to absorb the vibration of those words on my lips. She tasted like a combination of lime and vanilla. As I explored her mouth, I tipped her chin higher so that I had a better angle. Her lips parted, allowing our tongues to tangle together. I couldn’t believe I was kissing Harper.

A tingle traveled through my body, making me feel light-headed. But we needed to talk. I pulled slightly back and waited for her eyes to open. Her lips were swollen from our kisses.

“Did you say you’ve always liked me?” My voice sounded like I was chewing gravel.

She nodded. “I thought it was some silly teenage crush, but then it only intensified these past few weeks.”

I rubbed the scruff on my jaw. “I can’t say I felt the same way. You were younger than me and Gia’s best friend.”

Harper carefully schooled her expression. But I didn’t want to put space between us. Not after that kiss.

“I thought of you as off-limits.” In the back of my mind, I knew she was still forbidden. My parents wouldn’t approve.

Harper nodded. “And now?”

Now was the time to tell her how I felt about the situation, not how everyone else would perceive it as wrong. “The more time I spend with you, the more I want you.”

She gestured toward the hallway. “You can see I’m a package deal. I have Evie.”

“I love Evie.” That part was easy. It was my feelings for Harper that had me twisted up in knots.

Harper’s expression softened. “Is that why you like me, because you adore my daughter, and Mrs. G. is always pressuring you to settle down and give her some grandkids?”

“What? No. Why would you say that?” This had nothing to do with my mom or Evie. “This is about me and you and this uncontrollable desire I have for you. Believe me, if I could like someone less complicated, I would.”

“You like me but don’t want to,” Harper said a little flatly, and I didn’t like it.

“I’m sorry. I’m screwing this up. Let me start over. Can we sit?”

When she gave me a slight nod, I held my hand out for her and moved to sit on the couch. “I haven’t liked you since we were kids. It was more recent, but I think I knew deep down there was something there, but I just kept reminding myself you were Gia’s friend.”

“That makes sense.”

“When I realized it, I thought about how I should approach you with these new feelings. I thought I’d spend time with

you, get you used to the idea of me, and see if it was real or just a fleeting emotion.”

She turned her head slightly. “What did you decide?”

I raised a brow. “You really need to ask that after that kiss?”

If she didn’t have a child sleeping in one of her bedrooms, I wouldn’t have wanted to stop.

“I just want you to be sure of your feelings before we do anything else. I don’t want you to regret anything, and a lot of people would be affected by this.”

“I can’t say I haven’t thought about that. Extensively. Can’t help but think that my parents wouldn’t be okay with us.”

Harper grimaced. “Gia has a rule against dating her brothers.”

“Is she serious about that?” I asked her.

“When we were teenagers, there were girls who were friends with us just to get closer to you guys. She had that one blow when our best friend, Angela, hooked up with Matteo.”

“All I know is that I like you, and I love your daughter. I don’t know how anyone else would react, but can we explore what this is first?”

I didn’t want to say it, but what if it didn’t work out? What if there was an initial spark of attraction that fizzled out quickly? Why tell everyone if it wasn’t going to last?

“I’d like that, but I can’t ignore what this means for your family. They’re everything to me.”

“I get that.”

Her brow furrowed. “If they aren’t okay with it, I don’t know if I could withstand it.”

I nodded. “They’re like a second family to you.”

“A first one, really. I’m not worried about what *my* mother will think about this.” She gestured between us.

I captured her wrist between my fingers, encircling the delicate bone. “Does it matter what anyone else thinks of what’s going on here?”

Logically, I knew it did, but I was thinking with my heart and my body. I wanted her, and she wanted me. Nothing else *should* matter.

She studied me for a few seconds before she said, “No.”

“Can I kiss you again?” I asked, and when her lips tipped upward in the early beginnings of a smile, I kissed her. I didn’t want to stop. I wanted to explore this thing between us. See where it would go.

But she stopped me with a hand pressed to my chest. “I want to take things slow. I have Evie to think about.”

“That’s the beauty of us, isn’t it? I already know Evie. You’re not introducing her to a strange guy.”

She licked her lips. “That makes it more precarious. She loves you. What if you decide we’re not for you? I might lose you *and* your family. The only one she’s ever known.”

I ran a hand through my hair. As much as I wanted to be reckless, we couldn’t. “I can do slow.”

She touched my face. “I’ve liked you for a long time. I’m not in a rush.”

I kind of was, but I could respect her decision. “I’m fine with that.”

Her forehead wrinkled. “How do you see this going?”

“I want to spend time with you and Evie, doing whatever you want to do.”

She closed her eyes.

“Is something wrong?”

When she opened them, her eyes were glassy. “No one’s ever wanted to spend time with both of us before.”

“I like you, Harper. I’m attracted to you in a way I haven’t been to anyone else. But I’m aware you’re a single mother. I

already know and love your daughter. Anyone who dates you should want to spend time with both of you.”

Her lips twisted. “I haven’t had the best taste in men.”

I had a feeling she didn’t think she was worthy of someone better, but I intended to prove to her she did.

“I look forward to showing you how much you both mean to me. But for now, I should head home.” I stood, and she followed me to the door.

I kissed her again in front of it, slower this time, as if she were a lover I’d already spent hours making love to and wanted to imprint my kiss on her brain for days to come. “Sweet dreams.”

The evening went better than I could have imagined. I couldn’t get over the fact that Harper had a crush on me. She’d never let on. Was everything finally falling into place for me, or was this new relationship going to derail what I was trying to do with the business and my parents?

I couldn’t worry about that, not when this thing with Harper was so new. I owed it to her and myself to explore it. If not, I’d always wonder what if.

*Eleven*



I floated through the wedding the next day, remembering Leo's kiss and his declaration that he liked me. I was relieved to finally know my attraction wasn't a one-sided thing. Maybe it started a little later for him, but he felt the same way I did. It was almost too good to be true.

I usually tempered my expectations for a situation like this, but I couldn't because my lips still tingled from his touch, and I felt the grip of his hand on my hip.

I spent time with Evie that evening before she went to bed and then texted Leo about our pizza date the next morning. I loved the idea of spending time in the restaurant. It reminded me of my childhood when I practically lived at the pizzeria with Gia and her brothers. We colored in the office, played in the storage room, and when we got older, we cleared tables and washed dishes.

I'd been so envious of Gia's close relationship with her family, even as it grated on her. She wanted something different, but I loved the family atmosphere of the pizzeria. And now, everything I ever wanted was here.

But I couldn't help but think it wouldn't last. That his parents or Gia would find out. That Leo would decide a relationship with me was too much trouble.

If Leo wanted to expand the business, was it a good idea to get involved with me when his parents wanted someone else for him?



I had trouble sleeping that night, and when I woke, I cuddled with Evie on the couch while she watched cartoons. When her stomach rumbled, I got up to make pancakes, but before I could, there was a soft knock on the door. Assuming it was an emergency of some sort, I opened it without asking who it was. “Is everything—”

It was Leo. He was grinning, his eyes dancing with mischief.

“What are you doing here?” I asked, surprised to see him so early.

“I thought we could make pancakes.” He leaned down to kiss me softly, and I turned to make sure Evie hadn’t seen us.

“Who is it, Mommy?” Evie asked, and I stepped back so Leo could enter.

“It’s Leo. He wants to make breakfast with us.”

“Yay!” Evie exclaimed as she bounded off the couch and over to us.

“You like pancakes?” Leo asked her.

She gave him a pointed look. “They have to have chocolate chips.”

“I brought supplies.” He lifted the grocery bag that contained pancake mix and chocolate chips.

I shook my head, still not quite believing he was here. “You didn’t need to do this.”

Evie raced to the kitchen, and Leo took the opportunity to kiss me again. “I wanted to.”

He winked at me and then turned to Evie, who had pulled up a kitchen chair to stand on.

Leo wanted to spend time with us. He liked us. It was unexpected. I never thought anything would happen between us, and there were too many reasons why we were a bad idea.

I sat on the stool across from them, trying to come to grips with reality. Leo Giovanni was in my kitchen, making

pancakes with my daughter. Goose bumps popped up on my skin.

“Lots of chocolate chips. I’m on it, *stellina*,” Leo said to Evie and winked at me.

If I thought Leo was attractive before, it was so much more potent now that he’d said he liked me.

If we were going to hide this from his family, we were going to have to be careful. But right now, I only had to worry about Evie.

“We’ll make breakfast and then go to the playground. Maybe the adults will stop for coffee.” Leo winked at me.

When I allowed myself to think about dating a man, this was my dream—making breakfast together before we walked to grab coffee and then to the playground. I never thought I’d be one of the happy couples I saw walking together on weekend mornings.

“Can I get a frappa-chino?” Evie said, stumbling slightly over the word.

Leo pointed his spatula at her. “That’s up to your mother.”

“If you eat your pancakes,” I promised, feeling generous since my dream seemed like it was finally coming true.

“Yay!” Evie cried, doing a little dance.

I appreciated that Leo asked me before making any promises. Maybe this thing between us could work.

Evie helped Leo mix the batter and dump in way too many chocolate chips, but I couldn’t bring myself to chide them. They were adorable together. By the time the batter was poured onto the griddle, they were covered in flour, and Evie’s mouth was covered in chocolate.

While they waited for the pancakes to cook, Leo played music, and they danced around the kitchen. Leo sang into the wooden spoon until Evie snatched it for herself. My heart felt close to bursting as I watched.

I found myself videotaping it on my phone so I could look at it later. There was something about these moments with Leo that felt fleeting, and I didn't want to forget them.

All of a sudden, Evie stopped dancing and shrieked, "The pancakes!"

"I completely forgot about them," Leo said, and the two of them erupted into laughter. Leo was genuinely having a good time with my daughter.

I never thought anyone would want to deal with a single mother and her child. Evie's own father wanted nothing to do with her. But Leo was breaking all my preconceptions. I wondered if it was because he'd already bonded with Evie.

Leo showed her how to flip the pancakes, but after several attempts, he took over for her and said they'd have to keep practicing.

I wondered if he'd stop by for pancakes more often. The fact that Leo already knew Evie might make dating him easier. She wouldn't question us spending time together unless she caught us kissing.

When the pancakes were cooked and eaten, I cleaned up the kitchen while Leo supervised Evie washing her hands and changing her clothes. She'd gotten chocolate and syrup everywhere.

When we were done, we put on our shoes and headed outside.

We didn't hold hands, and I wasn't sure if that was for Evie's benefit or in case we ran into one of the Giovannis while we were out. I vowed not to worry about the what-ifs, especially not when things were so new.

We got drinks from the coffee shop and made our way to the playground. There were only a few kids there so early.

We sat on a bench and watched while Evie played with one of the other kids.

Leo tipped his head in her direction. "Is she that friendly with everyone?"

“She knows the mailman, the delivery guy, and everyone who lives in the neighborhood, and the crazy thing is, she remembers things about them. Their pets’ names, if their kid was sick, or whether their family lived outside of town. She’s so unlike me in that respect.” I was so quiet and shy. It was a godsend when I befriended Gia, who had more of an outgoing personality.

“Maybe it’s because of our family. We are loud.”

I huffed out a laugh. “That’s true. Especially when you’re all together.”

“Have you thought about having more kids? I’ve always wanted a big family like mine.”

“I don’t want to be a single mom again. I’d want the father to be involved, and I’d want their support.” I didn’t voice my worries out loud, but how did you know if the guy would be the type to stick around?

“That makes sense.”

I wondered if he was asking about us, but it was too soon. How could he possibly know if he wanted kids with me?

“You wanted something different for Evie, but just because it didn’t work out the way you thought, doesn’t mean something better won’t come along.”

I nudged his shoulder with mine. “You mean—with you?”

“I meant someone who loves your daughter and you. You deserve everything.”

The space between my shoulder blades tightened. “My mom didn’t get that.”

“She made her choices. She dated guys who weren’t interested in commitment. She blamed it on them, but it was her.”

“I’ve never heard anyone explain it like that.” Gia hated my mother for not being there for me and for exposing me to her boyfriends. “I’ve been so jaded by everything that I haven’t even bothered trying to meet anyone. I just figured it was enough to be the two of us.”

“I hope you give me a chance.”

“Isn’t that what we’re doing?” I asked him, my voice a little breathless.

“I want to be good for you. I want to be everything you need.”

We were supposed to be exploring this chemistry between us, but Leo seemed a little more serious than that. It gave me hope that he might be the guy for me. “I can take care of myself.”

“That’s what I love about you. You’re strong.” He kept his gaze on Evie as if he was making sure she didn’t get hurt. It was so similar to how a father *should* act that my heart ached.

But my brain snagged on his words—*that’s what I love about you*. He couldn’t mean that. It seemed more feasible that he’d admire me, but it was too soon for a romantic kind of love. Wasn’t it?

“You are too. Being the eldest of the family, the responsibility weighs on you the most.”

He raised a brow. “You see that?”

“I see everything about you.” I’d watched him from afar for years. I saw the way he took over more and more responsibility at the restaurant. How seriously he took it. He liked being in charge, but it came with a price, especially when he still answered to his father.

Leo shook his head. “I can’t believe you crushed on me since you were a teenager.”

I flushed. “All the girls had a crush on you. I wasn’t any different.”

He shifted on the bench, resting his elbows on his knees as he looked over at me. “I’d like to think you were different.”

His expression was serious, so I said, “Honestly, I didn’t think anything would come of it. It was safe because you were so off-limits. You were the oldest, you never looked twice at me, and I was almost like a sister.”

His head shook. “I never thought of you like my sister. I tried not to think of you at all. I think I knew it would be a slippery slope, especially when you were younger.”

“And now?”

“Now we’re both adults who can make their own decisions and mistakes.”

I didn’t like referring to our attempt to get to know each other as a mistake, but there would be consequences from our relationship. Even if everything felt right in the moment.

We watched Evie play for a while, and then Leo said he had to get to work and prepare the restaurant for opening. We walked to the pizzeria, and Leo unlocked the door and closed it behind us. We washed our hands while he prepped the kitchen.

We sat on stools while he efficiently moved around the room, starting the sauce for the day. He showed Evie how he prepared it, the temperature, and the time it took to cook. Once it was simmering in a big pot, he said to Evie, “Now it’s time to make your pizza.”

He pulled out a container of leftover sauce, reheated it, and smoothed it over her crust. “We normally use fresh sauce, but the newest batch won’t be ready for a little while yet.” He pointed to the array of toppings that were chilling in the containers on the prep table, covered by plastic. “Do you know what you want on it?”

Evie studied the options and said firmly, “Pepperoni.”

Leo chuckled. “Pepperoni it is. I’m glad you went with something besides plain cheese.”

“I like pepperoni.”

Leo ruffled her hair. “That’s the thing—we’re allowed to change our minds.”

Evie looked up at him as if he’d said something important, and maybe he had, but I was mesmerized by the way my little girl was looking at this man. She was missing a father figure in

her life. She had Mr. G. and all of Leo's brothers, but at the same time, the Giovannis weren't our family.

Leo patiently demonstrated how he dressed a pizza but allowed Evie to do it her own way. He smiled when she placed the pepperonis in the shape of a smiley face.

"Can't say we've ever served a smiling pizza before."

Evie gave him a serious look. "Everyone would love it."

"I have no doubt," Leo said, his voice soft. And when he lifted his gaze from her, he winked at me.

He showed her the pizza oven and how they arranged the pizzas when there was more than one, the oven temperature, and how long it took to cook. Evie was interested in everything he had to say.

"My dad used to bring me in on the weekends and show me the exact same things before he let me make my own pizza."

Evie looked up at him. "Really?"

"Yeah, it's one of my favorite memories of my father."

"I don't see my dad very much," Evie admitted, and my heart broke for her. Then I wondered for the hundredth time if I was keeping her from her father, and whether that was fair.

"Sometimes, it's not our biological dads, but someone else who holds that special place in our hearts. You have your mother and Mr. and Mrs. G."

"And you," Evie said solemnly.

"That's right. You have me. Never forget that." Leo's voice was firm in his delivery, and my heart fluttered overtime at their sweet exchange.

He showed her a few other steps he took to open the restaurant before the rest of the employees would come in and finish opening the dining room. He even allowed Evie to stock some of the condiments.

When her pizza was done, he sliced it and served it on plates in the break room. We each ate a slice before he packed

it up for Evie to take home. When the employees started to trickle in, he said, "I'll take you home."

"Leo has to work today," I reminded Evie when her expression fell.

"But what are we going to do?" Evie whined.

"What we do every Sunday. Get caught up on laundry for the week and clean."

"That's boring," Evie said, and I couldn't help but feel a little inadequate. Did other families spend the entire day together? Did they plan elaborate day trips?

"When you're done, maybe you can watch a movie, and I'll stop by later," Leo offered.

"You will?" Evie asked.

"You don't have to—" I started to say as Leo said, "I want to."

I needed to warn him that Evie was coming to rely on him. She was getting used to seeing him more, and it was going to hurt if this didn't work out. I had more than my own heart to worry about. Evie would be crushed if Leo disappeared.

At our door, he kissed my cheek and said to Evie, "Be good, and help your mother today, okay?"

"Yeah, yeah," Evie grumbled.

"Hey, it's a big responsibility. You're a big girl now, and helping your mother is a good thing."

Evie nodded solemnly. "I am a big girl."

"That's what I was saying," Leo said as I opened the door, and Evie shot inside ahead of us.

"Thank you for today. It was—" How could I describe the best day I'd had in forever? "Perfect."

Leo grinned. "It was fun for me too."

"If you're not serious about this—"

"I'm very serious about you and Evie," Leo interrupted me.



“Please don’t hurt her,” I said, vulnerability making my voice shake.

“I won’t.” Then he kissed me softly. “Go inside so I can get to work. I don’t want to leave you, but I have to.”

I didn’t state the obvious, that if he opened a new restaurant, he’d have to work even more. And it wouldn’t be downstairs. It would be across town. I remember Gia complaining she only saw her family at the restaurant in those early years.

At the time, I wasn’t sure what she was complaining about, but now I understood. Dating someone who owned and ran a business meant long hours and time away from each other. As sweet as it was today to make a pizza in the kitchen, would the novelty wear off eventually?

I went inside and shut the door. Evie was sitting on the floor, playing with her dolls, and I took a few minutes to gather myself. To remind myself not to fall too hard for Leo, but I was afraid I already had.

A man showing up early on Sunday morning to make me and my daughter pancakes was the most romantic thing I’d ever experienced. Other things just didn’t compare.

*Twelve*



I hated leaving Evie and Harper. I wanted to spend my day helping them do laundry and lazing around their apartment. Maybe even take them to my house to play and work in the yard. But the reality was, I had to work.

We could hire managers, but we preferred to keep it in the family, especially since I had brothers who could help.

Maybe it was time to insist they take on more responsibility in the dining room, especially if I wanted to open another location.

Around lunchtime, I was surprised to see Manny at the hostess stand. Anger flared, and I was moving toward him without thinking about what I was doing.

I stood between him and Lindey at the hostess stand. “What are you doing here?”

“I’m looking for Harper,” Manny said easily, as if he had a right to inquire about her.

“Are you supposed to meet her here?” I would have thought she would have told me if that were the case.

Manny’s eyes darted around the restaurant as he shifted on his feet. “I thought I’d find her here.”

“We need to talk. Not here. My office,” I said, my words clipped.

“I don’t know what we have to talk about.”

“Trust me. We do.” I turned and headed toward my office, hoping he’d be curious enough to follow me.

I shut my office door behind him, moving behind my desk but remained standing, even though he’d taken a seat. I wanted Manny to feel uncomfortable.

In the past, Harper wanted my family to stay out of the situation with Manny. But things changed when he showed up at my restaurant looking for her. I felt this protectiveness take over, and I couldn’t rein it in. “I don’t appreciate you coming into my restaurant and hassling Harper.”

Manny leaned back in the chair as if he didn’t have a care in the world. “This is between me and Harper. Evie’s mine.”

My stomach dipped at his possessive tone regarding Evie. She was his in biology only. “I’m involved with Harper and Evie, and I won’t let anyone hurt them.”

Irritation flashed in Manny’s eyes. “She wouldn’t get involved with you. Not when she always says the Giovannis are her family.”

“All you need to know is that I’m in their lives. They mean something to me, and I won’t let you hassle them.” I wasn’t sure I could stay neutral in this situation, even if Harper explicitly asked me to.

Manny’s lips twisted. “I’m Evie’s father.”

I crossed my arms over my chest. “You don’t act like it. If you wanted to be her father, you’d support them financially and otherwise.”

He opened his mouth to protest, and I leaned in, bracing my hands on the desk. “We both know you don’t pay child support like you’re supposed to, and you don’t visit with Evie. You’re not capable of being the father Evie needs.”

Manny’s gaze darted away as he shifted in his chair.

“Leave Harper alone. Let her be happy.” That was the crux of the issue. He came around when he sensed Harper was moving on with her life. And she didn’t deserve that.

I straightened and moved toward the door. “If you don’t, you’ll have me and my brothers to deal with. We’ve stayed out of the situation because that’s what Harper wanted. But I won’t allow this to continue anymore. You don’t get to show up at a restaurant where she’s eating and pull her away from the table. You don’t show up where she is period. You need something, you call her attorney. We’re done here.”

I stood and opened the door, my jaw clenching.

He stood, and I almost wanted him to say something so I could fight with him some more, but instead, he pushed past me and down the hallway.

For Evie’s sake, I almost wished he’d stand up and be the man she needed. But I didn’t think he was capable of that. I wouldn’t allow him to hurt them anymore. Harper might not have wanted me to get involved, but it was too late. I was all in with her and Evie.

That night, we were so busy I couldn’t break away to see Harper and Evie. The rest of the week, I worked long hours too. I didn’t call Harper into work, even when a server quit without notice.

On Thursday, I called Carlo and asked him to help. That night, we were in the office, putting the cash away and getting the deposit ready, when I said, “I think we need to talk about hiring more help.”

“How about getting *reliable* help?” Carlo grumbled. He’d always hated dealing with the customers, preferring to hide out in the office or work remotely.

“Maybe if we raised their hourly wages, we’d attract better servers,” I said, voicing the thoughts that had been swirling in my head for months.

“Servers rely on tips,” Carlo pointed out.

“I understand that, but we’re not selling high-priced items on the menu, or even alcohol. If we raised the wages, maybe we’d attract more single parents and fewer high school kids.” In my mind, single parents were more reliable, even when their kids were sick.

“Some of the high school kids are good,” Matteo said.

I ran a hand through my hair. “But this isn’t a long-term commitment for them. They leave for college or whatever, and then we need to hire again.”

Carlo raised a brow. “So, the plan is to hire people who aren’t going to leave for school?”

“Not all of them. We still need high school kids to work a few hours a day. But we need a few long-haulers too.”

“You know Papà has to be on board,” Matteo pointed out.

The problem was, Papà didn’t like spending more money than necessary on the business. He prided himself on keeping expenses low. The only thing he didn’t skimp on was ingredients. “I think it’s time we sit down with Mamma and Papà and talk about a plan for us to take over.”

Matteo shook his head. “I hate to think of them not running this place.”

“We need to have more leeway to manage the restaurant, especially with them traveling for weeks and months at a time.”

Matteo’s expression was grim. “I’m just not sure how they’ll take it.”

“They won’t like it, but it’s the right thing to do. We need more autonomy.” We needed to take this step before I pushed the second location idea again. I needed my dad to concede something to us. “They’re not getting any younger.”

Carlo nodded. “They should enjoy retirement, and maybe that’s our angle.”

“It will certainly work with Mamma.” She’d been after Papà to retire for ages.

“It’s time for the next generation of Giovannis to make their impression.” Matteo slapped his hand on my shoulder.

I needed to tell someone about Harper, so I said, “I need to talk to you about something else.”

“Are you getting engaged and giving Mamma a grandbaby so I can relax?” Matteo asked good-naturedly.

When I hesitated, his eyes widened. “I was joking.”

“I’m not saying it’s serious yet. But I met someone. Someone they probably wouldn’t approve of.”

“Why wouldn’t they approve of her?” Carlo asked.

“She’s not Italian or Catholic.” And she’s a de facto member of this family.

Matteo frowned. “I don’t think they really care if we marry the perfect Italian girl.”

“Are you sure about that? They adored Bianca.”

Carlo waved a hand in my direction. “Bianca wasn’t right for you.”

“She was cheating on me for most of our relationship.”

“Everyone could see you weren’t in love with her. How do you feel about this other woman?” Carlo asked.

“I’m falling for her, but it’s new. I don’t know where we’ll end up.”

Matteo smirked. “I’m happy for you. You in a relationship has the added benefit of getting the parents off my back.”

“Is that all you care about?” I asked him.

“The pressure can be a little intense. I don’t envy your position as the eldest,” Matteo said.

There was a lot of pressure for me to represent the family and restaurant in a certain way. My brothers had been given a little more freedom in that area, but my parents had higher expectations for me.

“Who is it? Is it someone I know?” Matteo asked.

“Yes.” I wasn’t sure I was ready to tell them everything yet.

“It’s not...Harper, is it?” Carlo asked, and I wondered if I hadn’t done a good job of hiding my interest the last few weeks.

I let out the breath I'd been holding. "What if it was?"

"I'd say it's a bad idea. Harper's Gia's best friend. You know she'll be pissed when she finds out. Not only that, but Harper is part of the family," Carlo said, ever the practical one.

"She's not really part of the family." That was the only explanation that made any of this okay.

Matteo exchanged a look with Carlo. "We're the only family she's got."

My shoulders lowered.

Carlo stretched his neck. "What if Mamma and Papà don't approve? You know how they can be. They might cut her off."

"She's looking for her own place anyway." Although I wasn't sure if she could afford anything.

"It's more than just a place to live and work. You'd be taking away her family if it doesn't work out," Carlo insisted.

"Nothing has to change," I said, but the words felt weak to me.

"Isn't she worried?" Carlo asked.

I pursed my lips. "She is."

"And what about Evie? She deserves to have someone permanent in her life," Matteo asked. He wasn't always the most responsible, but he adored Evie.

"I think that's where this could be headed." As long as there was no outside interference, but we couldn't predict what would happen. I couldn't imagine a world where Harper and Evie weren't in it. Where she wasn't at Sunday family dinners or holidays.

"Mamma watches Evie for her too," Matteo said.

"She could hire someone—"

Matteo shook his head. "It's not the same and you know it."

"I don't think they'd cut off Evie, do you?" I asked, my stomach tightening.



“They are rigid when they want to be. If things don’t work out, they will be on your side. Even if you’re the oldest.”

I thought about our dates over the weekend and how they seemed to fit into my life. “I like her. I can see a future with her.”

“How long have you been together?” Carlo asked, studying me.

“We’ve spent more time together recently.”

“I don’t think this is a good idea. If you only just started dating, maybe you can stop it before it goes any further,” Carlo said, like it was no big deal.

“I don’t want to stop it. I don’t want to deny my feelings for her.”

Carlo shook his head. “Don’t say I didn’t warn you.”

“What if she’s the one? Are you telling me you’d walk away from someone like that?” They were probably the wrong ones to ask. Carlo was rigid when it came to women and didn’t have serious relationships. And Matteo was more of a good-time guy.

Matteo ran a hand through his already messy hair. “I’m not looking for that, so I don’t know what I’d do.”

“I want to be the man she needs. And part of that is taking more control at the restaurant, stepping up, and demanding Mamma and Papà take us seriously about running things.”

“I agree with you on that. I just don’t see how this thing with Harper ends well with Gia and our parents,” Carlo said.

“I know.” I needed to hash this out with someone, but they weren’t saying what I wanted to hear.

We finished closing, and I went home thinking about what was happening between us. I felt good when I was with Harper and Evie. I enjoyed being with them, and I loved Evie. The more time I spent with her, the more I adored her.

I wasn’t going to be able to walk away from them. I was only getting to know Harper on a different level now, and I

wanted to continue down this path. As much as I adored Evie, we needed some time to ourselves too. Was it selfish to ask Harper to get a sitter so we could go on a real date with just us?

It didn't escape my attention that the babysitter would be my mom, and we'd need to lie to her about where Harper was. That didn't sit right with me. Maybe Matteo and Carlo could watch Evie.

The next week, I saw Evie and Harper in passing when she was coming to and from the apartment. I texted her too, asking how their day was and when we could see each other again. My next day off was Saturday, so I invited them to my place. I still had a little time before construction started on the house. I'd hired Cade, but he had a project scheduled ahead of me.

When Harper arrived, I was just finishing mowing the lawn. I should probably hire a service because it was hard to find time for lawn care with my hours at the restaurant. When she pulled up, I opened the door. "Sorry, I'm all sweaty," I said as she hugged me.

She grinned. "I don't mind."

"You're stinky." Evie turned up her nose as she passed me in the garage.

"Now you've done it," I said as I chased her into the house and out the slider, into the backyard. "You need a stinky hug."

Evie shrieked. "No. I don't."

When I tackled her to the ground, I made sure she landed on my body, and I hugged her.

"Gross. You stink."

I chuckled as she scrambled off me.

"Can we do the sprinkler?" Evie asked Harper, who'd joined us.

"Do you have one? I told her you might."

"I have one in the garage. I'll grab it."

Evie followed me, asking questions about the house and the tools in the garage. It was hard to concentrate because I had to pause and answer her questions. “You ask a lot of questions.”

Evie shrugged. “That’s what Mommy says.”

I shrugged it off. “It’s okay. I like it.”

She tipped her head to the side as if she didn’t quite believe me. “It annoys Daddy.”

I didn’t like that she called Manny “Daddy.” I doubted he’d earned the name. “You’re perfect just as you are, and the people who love you don’t think you’re annoying.”

“Did you hear that, Mommy? I’m perfect.”

“That’s not exactly what I said.” I followed her to the backyard with the sprinkler. I attached the hose and turned it on.

It sputtered, then turned, and finally let out a stream of water. Evie squealed and jumped into it.

I stepped out of the line of fire, and Harper moved to join me with an amused expression on her face. “What is this about Evie being perfect?”

“She said she annoyed Manny with her questions, and I said she was perfect as she was. That the people who love her don’t think she’s annoying. Maybe I didn’t say it the right way.” I didn’t have this parenting thing down. There were so many ways you could screw up and say the wrong thing.

“That was a nice thing to say. Manny doesn’t see her much, so maybe she assumes that’s why he stays away. I’ll try my best to make sure she knows she’s loved.”

“You’re doing a good job,” I said, trying to reassure her. “This parenting thing is hard.” Harper laughed. “I still can’t believe he misses so much of her life. If she were mine—” My heart contracted in my chest. I’d spend every spare moment with her. I’d need to work less because I wouldn’t want to miss things. That thought caused me to pause. If I was going

to be in Harper's life, I'd need to rethink my plans for the restaurant.

Could I be there for Harper and Evie if I was opening a new restaurant? It would be more time-consuming than managing the current pizzeria with my family. But it was too soon to think about future things and long-term plans.

"I don't think of her as his either. He's not present in our lives, and when we see him, he's worried about other things, like whether I'm dating someone else. He causes trouble."

"He doesn't support you."

Harper shook her head. "Not at all. When he gives me cash, he qualifies it by saying it's for Evie, not for me. As if paying rent doesn't put a roof over her head. I guess I'm only supposed to use it on her clothes and food."

"That's ridiculous. Especially if he's not giving you much. He shouldn't have anything to say about how you choose to spend it."

"I don't want to talk about him," Harper finally said.

"Neither do I. I just want you to know that you deserve better."

"I know that," she said, but I wasn't so sure. She might have lower self-esteem growing up the way she did, with a mother who didn't make time for her and who constantly showed her that boyfriends were more important than her daughter.

"Come on, Mommy!" Evie said, grabbing her hand and pulling her into the water.

"I hope you brought a change of clothes."

"It's too late now," Harper cried as she laughed and covered her face from the onslaught.

Not wanting to miss out, I joined them, splashing water on Evie and darting out of the way when she tried to return fire. It was easy to appreciate the little things with Evie around.

I liked having the two of them in my space. I hoped they felt the same way. After Evie was done with the sprinkler, we went inside to dry off. Evie had a change of clothes, but Harper didn't. I offered her a T-shirt and a pair of athletic shorts while I threw their wet clothes into the dryer.

Harper came out of the bathroom with a shirt that was far too big on her, and the shorts were rolled up to fit better.

Evie giggled. "Those are huge on you."

Harper looked down at herself and laughed. "They are, aren't they? I probably look ridiculous."

"You look adorable," I said as Evie pulled out a game of cards from her book bag.

"Can we play?" she asked, attempting to shuffle the cards. Since the stack was too big for her small hands, I took the pile to help her.

The cards indicated it was Monopoly Deal. "I don't know this game. You'll have to teach me."

Evie explained the rules, which were a lot less complicated than I initially assumed. It was more fun than the real board game. It went quickly, and we were able to play several rounds before Evie complained she was hungry.

I grabbed her a snack, and we sat in the kitchen to eat.

"If our clothes are dry, we can get going so you can get some work done," Harper offered.

"Can we stay?" Evie whined.

Harper sighed. "Evie, that's not polite. You can't just invite yourself to stay at someone's house."

I wasn't sure if it was overstepping or not, but I said, "I don't mind if you stay longer. If you're here, I don't have to do any chores. So, it's a win-win for me."

"We can help you," Evie said sweetly as she made a double-decker sandwich of crackers, cheese, and salami.

I chuckled. "That would be amazing, actually."

“Evie’s a good helper,” Harper said proudly.

We ended up cleaning out one of the spare rooms. It was stacked with boxes I’d never unpacked. I was thinking that eventually, it would be nice to have a guest room, but I didn’t think too hard about who would be sleeping there. We got through several boxes before Evie got bored. Then we ended up in the kitchen, looking for something to eat for dinner.

Harper opened the freezer. “You have chicken.”

“I have some rice in the pantry,” I said as I pulled out my phone to look for a recipe.

“Can I pick something?” Evie asked.

I tipped the screen toward her and scrolled through the various chicken recipes. She finally chose firecracker chicken, after verifying we had the ingredients.

I was surprised that Evie stayed engaged as we added the spice to the chicken and put it in the oven. Then we cooked Spanish rice. The entire experience was domestic.

While dinner was cooking, Evie watched a show on TV about dogs who had an Australian accent. We watched together for a few minutes, and when I thought it had captured Evie’s attention, I gestured for Harper to help me in the kitchen. I moved her so that we were out of Evie’s eyesight and pulled her close, enjoying the feel of her in my arms. “I love having you here.”

Her forehead creased. “Are you sure about that? Kids can be a lot.”

“The house is so full of energy with you two. I love it.” It wasn’t like I laughed when I was here by myself. It was rather lonely, and maybe that was the reason I worked so much. I had nothing to come home to. “But as much as I love it, I would like to see you by yourself. Do you think that’s possible?”

I didn’t want Harper to think I didn’t enjoy Evie’s company, but it was time for us to explore the chemistry between us. It was hard to keep my hands to myself.

Harper's face fell. "I don't feel right asking Mrs. G. to watch Evie while we go on a date. It feels like lying to her."

I had to agree with her on that point. I racked my brain for other possibilities. "How do you feel about my brothers watching her?"

Her brow furrowed. "Are you sure they'd be okay with it?"

"They love Evie, and if there's two of them, they should be able to handle her."

Harper's lips tipped up. "It takes two Giovanni men to watch Evie?"

"When it's not me, yes," I said, pleased to put my brothers down.

Harper tapped my chest, the spot over my heart. The one that was quickly softening for her. "You've never tried. We'll have to see if you're up for the task."

"I can watch her the next time you have a wedding." I licked my suddenly dry lips, wondering if I was getting in over my head.

Her forehead wrinkled. "You'd do that?"

I brushed a strand of hair off her forehead, feeling a sudden tenderness toward her. "I'm serious about you, and like you said, you and Evie are a package deal."

She laughed. "I never thought I'd be standing in your kitchen, talking about you taking care of Evie so I could work."

We were new, but I wanted her to see that we were good for the long haul. This wasn't just a fling or a temporary relationship. "You need to get used to this. To us."

"We're not going to have a lot of time together, and when we do, Evie will be with us most of the time."

I'd already prepared myself for the reality of dating a single mother. I adored Evie, and I couldn't wait to spend more time with Harper. I wasn't worried about that. "My brothers might make excellent babysitters."

“That would be convenient for us, but would they be good role models for Evie?”

“They’re troublemakers, so probably not,” I finally concluded. Both raised hell in high school and drove my parents crazy.

Sometimes I wondered if they had more freedom as the middle and youngest children, and I was pressured to do more as the eldest. I didn’t resent them for it, but I was tired of living within the lines. I wanted a brighter life. One without restrictions.

“Mommy, where are you?” Evie called, and I snuck a quick kiss before Harper pulled away, giggling.



*Thirteen*



Leo surprised me in the best ways. He was great with Evie, patient and kind. He didn't mind when she made a mess and pulled me away when he wanted to kiss me. But I still wasn't sure that our relationship would be well-received by the rest of the family.

He'd assured me he'd already talked to Matteo and Carlo, but he wasn't clear about how they felt about us dating. I had a feeling they weren't pleased, but I was looking forward to an evening with Leo and no distractions.

I'd liked him for so long, and things felt easy between us, but there was this untapped electricity between us I wanted to explore. I almost thought it was a good thing that Evie was around because she forced us to slow down and get to know each other before the relationship progressed physically. The anticipation made everything so much better.

"You seem different," Gia said when we were going over the wedding schedule for the rest of the month. We had a lot of fall weddings, but it was a little slower than spring and summer.

My heart rate kicked up. "Hmm. How so?"

"You're happier. Did something happen?" Then her eyes brightened as she focused on me. "Did you meet someone?"

"No." After all, I didn't just meet Leo.

"Are you talking to someone online?" she persisted.

“Nope.” I didn’t like online dating. It seemed like more of a hookup space, which I had no patience or time for. I’d noticed the men on there preferred to text and not always meet in person. I didn’t have that kind of time. I wanted to meet, figure out if there was chemistry, and move on to the next. But lately, I hadn’t even done that.

“Then what is it?” Gia asked, and I thought about the last few weeks.

“I’m happy.” That’s what this feeling of expansion was in my chest. My heart was full, and I was hopeful that this thing with Leo could be the real deal. As much as I didn’t believe it was possible for me, maybe I was wrong.

“Are you doing something different? Did you pick up a new hobby?”

“It’s nothing like that.” I felt bad lying to my friend, but I couldn’t tell her about dating her brother. Not without talking to Leo first. “I’ve been thinking about moving out of the apartment.”

Gia’s eyes widened. “Why?”

“I’d like to have a yard for Evie.” And get some space from the Giovanni family. As grateful as I’d been to them over the years, I wanted independence and a little more privacy.

“Have you found anything you like? You’ll want to make sure you’re in a good school district for Evie.”

“Don’t worry. I’ve got this.” The Giovannis were so quick to help, and I hoped Leo wasn’t dating me out of pity or some weird sense of obligation to a family friend.

“You could stay with me.”

“No.” There was no way I was moving in with my potential boyfriend’s sister. Not when she was my best friend. “No offense, but I don’t want a roommate.”

“I just thought it would be easier for you. You’d get more space and a yard while you saved up. I’ve been thinking about giving you a raise too.”

“Gia, you can’t give me a raise because I’m your friend and need to move.”

“I can’t lose you. You do so many more things than I originally hired you for. You were supposed to organize my business, and you did, but you also create marketing plans and graphics and write ad copy. I’ll pay you whatever so you don’t go somewhere else.”

“I don’t have any plans to leave, but I won’t turn down a raise if that’s how you feel.”

“I’ve been thinking about it for a while. I believe in paying people what they’re worth, and you’ve more than proven yourself capable of the job.”

She’d hired me to organize the business, but she didn’t think she’d have any more work for me. That quickly turned out not to be true. “I’m glad you’re happy with my work.”

“You’re indispensable. I’m sure Papà hates that I’ve stolen you from the restaurant.”

“I love waitressing occasionally, but this challenges me more.”

“Have you thought any more about going to school?”

“I’d love to take some business and marketing classes. I had no idea how much I’d love working here.” I always thought of selling something to someone as being kind of icky, but every time we signed a new client, it felt amazing. It almost made me want to start my own business.

“I’m happy to help with Evie or whatever you need if you want to take some classes. I’m not saying you need it. You seem to have some natural talent for marketing and business.”

“I’ve always played around with design and graphics, but the marketing stuff just comes to me.” I came up with ideas when I was at the playground with Evie or taking a shower, and I’d text them to Gia. She’d tell me to create the campaign and let me take the lead.

“You deserve the raise. You gave me the idea of advertising to out-of-state couples, and we’ve already had

some inquiries from the ads you created.”

“Are you serious?”

Gia smiled. “We’re doing virtual meetings this week with several interested couples.”

“We need to sell them on Annapolis and our service.”

“Can you come up with a quick presentation on the venues and what Annapolis has to offer in terms of activities and amenities for their guests?”

“Absolutely.”

“Perfect. I’ll send a proposal over for your raise, and I was thinking about adding a commission incentive for every client you bring in.”

“How will we know if they’re from my marketing or word of mouth?”

“Easy. We’ll ask them. You already do a survey for clients who don’t sign on with us; we can do one for new clients who do.”

“I love it.” I was furiously typing notes on my tablet so I’d remember everything later.

When I stood to leave, Gia came around the desk to hug me. “You’re a good friend and employee. I don’t know what I’d do without you.”

“Me either,” I said, guilt filtering through my consciousness. What would she do when she found out I was dating her brother? Would she feel like I betrayed her? Would she think I was like every other friend she’d ever had who hung out with her to get close to her brothers?

I wanted to say she knew me better than that, and we’d been friends for years, but I wasn’t sure of her reaction. She tended to get hotheaded quickly and ask questions later.

What if she made Leo choose between me and her? I just hoped Leo and I were in a good place before she found out and anything went down.

“And whatever you’re doing, keep it up. You’ve been floating around the office, and your energy has been amazing for the planners and couples.”

I was happy, and I wondered if Gia was right. Was my energy rubbing off on others? If this thing with Leo worked out, would I feel like this all the time?

I had nothing to compare it to because I’d never been in a great relationship. I’d certainly never been in love. I had no good examples of it except for Mr. and Mrs. G. and the newer couples in the office—Aria and Finn, Sophie and Mark, Lily and Jake, and Everly and Harrison.

In my office, I refocused on preparing a slide presentation for the new couples we’d meet with this week. I scoured the internet for pictures that depicted Annapolis in the best light. We were competing with other destinations, like the Caribbean, Hawaii, and Bermuda. I wanted Annapolis to stand out.

I got lost in my work, and when I finally checked my email, I was shocked by Gia’s generous raise. I hurried into her office, where she was bent over her laptop, typing something.

She raised her head as I came in. “I take it you got my proposal?”

“It’s so generous. More than I thought it would be, but I can’t accept it.” Was I making a big mistake in turning it down?

Gia frowned. “Why not? I want to pay you what you’re worth.”

I sighed. “You know I’m not going anywhere. We’re friends.”

“You’re saying I should pay you less because you wouldn’t quit?” she asked incredulously.

I nodded, feeling a little miserable for turning down all that money.

Gia stood and came around the desk to lean against it. “Conceivably, you could go work for Silas.”

“You know I wouldn’t.” I thought that might be a worse betrayal than dating her brother.

Gia held up her hand to stop me. “You could work for Silas. I paid Harrison for priority. I’m paying you enough to keep you happy. As your friend, I want you to be happy, live in a comfortable house, and put Evie in a good school.”

“I don’t know what to say.”

“I researched salaries of business managers who also handle marketing, and this is in that range.”

“I had no idea.”

“You know I don’t do things on a whim. I’ve been thinking about this for a long time, and if you’re right about out-of-state couples wanting destination weddings, you’ll have saved the business.”

“We can’t know that yet,” I said, swallowing over the tightness in my throat.

“I know that you’ve radically changed my business for the better since you’ve been here. I know I can’t live without you, either personally or professionally.”

I was struggling with the raise, not only because it seemed like a lot of money, and I never thought I deserved it, but because I was sneaking around behind her back. I felt horribly guilty.

“You deserve this. You are worthy of success. You are not your mother. And you didn’t get this job because we’re friends. I hired you because you’re good at organization, and I’m keeping you because you’ve proven yourself in other ways. You did this.”

“I have a hard time believing good things can happen or that I deserve them. Especially when everything I have is because of your family.”

“You’re an amazing, kind friend and loving mother. You didn’t get that from us or your mother. That’s all you,” she

said forcefully.

I'd never thought of it like that before. I was a good mother, but I thought it was because I knew how not to be my mother. But at the same time, loving Evie came easily. Like it was how it was supposed to be. I could never understand how my mom was so distant and uninvolved. "All I can say is thank you, and I'll keep working hard."

"You do that." Then she hugged me. "Love you like a sister."

It was something we used to say but hadn't in years. She'd always said she couldn't trust other girls because they were after her brothers, but with me, she could relax and know I was a real friend. I'd never felt guiltier. "Love you too."

When she pulled away, she said, "I think you should work fewer weddings. We have enough wedding planners now, and I want you to focus on the marketing and business side. You'll still be at the initial consultations, but otherwise, you can work in the office or at home."

"I'm good with that." It would allow me more time with Evie, which was always my priority.

"I figured you'd want to spend that time with Evie."

"Definitely."

And then she smiled. "And whoever you're seeing that you won't tell me about."

When I opened my mouth to respond, she waved a hand at me. "Don't worry about it. You'll tell me when you're ready." She smiled like we shared a secret, but we didn't. Not really.

I stopped at the restaurant after work to grab a pizza and just to see Leo's face. I missed him. He'd been working nights all week, and I was asleep by the time he left work.

I stood at the hostess stand and gave Crystal my name for the carryout order I'd placed online. But before she could look for the order, Leo appeared. "Hey, I saw your order come in. Want me to help you take it upstairs?"



“Yeah, sure.” I smiled at Crystal before following him to the steps to my apartment.

“Are you hungry, Miss Evie?” Leo asked, smiling at her.

“I’m starving,” Evie said dramatically.

“I added a salad and some breadsticks too.”

“You didn’t have to do that.”

“I was hoping to join you for dinner,” he said sheepishly.

“I don’t want to take you away from work.”

“A guy’s gotta eat, am I right?” Leo directed his question at Evie, who giggled.

I opened the door and held it while they walked inside. Leo placed the boxes on the small round table.

“Wash your hands,” I reminded Evie, and when she disappeared into her bathroom, Leo crossed the room and pulled me against him. “I missed you,” he murmured before he kissed me like he was starving for me and not dinner.

By the time he pulled away, my lips were tingling. “I missed you too.”

We broke apart just as the water turned off in the bathroom, and Evie appeared in the hallway. I busied myself grabbing dishes and silverware while Leo popped open the pizza box. “Plain cheese for the princess.”

He pulled out a slice and put it on a plate and gave it to Evie.

It was nice having someone in my space and helping with Evie, even if it was only pizza.

“Sit. I’ll get yours too,” Leo said to me, and I did, because I was drained from the day.

When we were eating, I watched Leo ask Evie about her day at school for a few minutes until they both fell silent. “I have some good news.”

“What is it?” Leo asked.

It struck me that I didn't have anyone to share these kinds of developments with. "Gia offered me a raise. It's more than enough that I can start to look for a house."

"We're getting a house?" Evie asked, and I smiled, pleased I could get her what she wanted. "I think so. I'll have to talk to a realtor, but I've been saving for a while, and the raise should cover the mortgage."

"That's amazing. I'm so proud of you."

"Gia said she wanted me to focus on the business and marketing aspects of the business. Work fewer weddings."

"That's good news, right?" Leo asked.

"It's great news. Now I can spend more time with this girl." I tickled Evie, and she giggled.

When she sobered, she asked, "Can I watch TV?"

She'd eaten a slice and a half, so I said, "Yes."

"Are you happy about the raise?" Leo asked.

"I was worried she was doing it because she knows I want to move, but she said she's been considering it for a while. She said I was indispensable to the business."

"Of course, you are. Why do you think she stole you from Giovanni's? You've proven yourself. Enjoy it. Gia wouldn't do that if you didn't deserve it. She doesn't have patience for people who don't pull their weight."

"That's what I figured." But I felt guilty. I didn't like hiding things from her.

"I'm looking forward to having some time together this weekend. My brothers are up for babysitting."

"They didn't think it was weird that you asked them and not your parents?"

Leo looked conflicted. "They were both worried about it and how my parents will react."

I wondered if his brothers didn't think I was good enough for Leo. If his family didn't like us together, then it wouldn't

matter how Leo felt. If he had to choose, he'd go with his family, and I couldn't blame him.

“What are you thinking about?” Leo asked.

“That alone time we're finally going to get,” I said to cover my thoughts.

“Maybe we shouldn't go out,” Leo said, his voice gravelly. “But no, you deserve a first date.”

I flushed with pleasure at his words. He was sweet and kind. When we were together, the other issues fell away, and it was just us. And being with him felt so good. We needed this time alone, with no one from his family influencing us.

For once, I had something I wanted within reach, and I wasn't going to deny myself.

*Fourteen*



I headed over to Matteo's early so I could talk to him. Harper was going to meet us, and then we were going to go out. It was a little unconventional, but then I'd never dated anyone with a child.

Matteo grabbed a beer and handed it to me. "You know what you're doing?"

I laughed and shook my head. "No idea."

"I support you, but—" Matteo began.

"Harper isn't what Mamma and Papà want for you," Carlo reminded me.

"If you remember, their perfect match for me cheated on me," I reminded them, thinking of Bianca.

Carlo winced. "I'm not saying they know better, just that they won't be happy."

"I'm not sure I care about that," I said, a little shocked that I'd said that out loud.

Matteo whistled. "You must really like her."

"Tonight's about figuring out if we have a shot at something real." If things were awkward without Evie acting as a buffer, then I'd have my answer. But I had a feeling these emotions that had been swirling in my gut since I considered the possibility of us weren't going away any time soon.

"You know we support you in whatever you decide. I just wanted to be sure you understood the ramifications." Carlo

played with the label on his beer bottle.

“And I appreciate that.”

A knock sounded at the door, and I hurried to open it.

Harper looked down at her dress and sandals. “I wasn’t sure what we were doing—”

“You look perfect.” I leaned in to kiss her as Evie asked, “Are you kissing my mommy?”

“Just on her cheek,” I said as I pulled back. “Is that okay?”

She pursed her lips. “I guess so.”

“We’re going to dinner while you hang out with these yahoos,” I said, with a thumb thrown over my shoulder in their direction.

She pouted. “Why can’t I come?”

Harper squatted in front of her. “We talked about this. Leo’s taking me on a date. You’ll play with Matteo and Carlo, and we’ll be back before you know it.”

I was hoping for more time alone, but it didn’t sound like we were going to get it. But Evie’s comfort and needs came first. I wondered if Harper would end things if Evie didn’t like the idea of us. I had a feeling that might be the case, and it didn’t sit right in my chest.

“Yeah, okay,” Evie finally admitted.

“You want to play a game?” Matteo said.

Evie brightened at his question. She loved spending time with my brothers. I think she loved the male attention, although I wouldn’t tell Harper that. She already felt inadequate when it came to raising Evie. I wouldn’t add to it.

Harper kissed and hugged Evie before letting Matteo lead her away.

“This is our chance,” Harper whispered as they disappeared into the kitchen.

I opened the door. “Let’s drop your car off at home, and then we’ll eat. That way, we can pick up Evie together.” I

wanted to extend our time together as much as possible.

Harper nodded, not asking why I'd made that request. We dropped off her car, and when she was finally in my passenger seat, I relaxed. She'd added a jean jacket because the evening was cool. "You look beautiful."

"Thank you. I can't tell you the last time I had to get ready for a date. Where are we going?" she asked, shifting in the seat so she faced me.

I'd initially thought about the traditional dinner at a nice restaurant but then decided against it. "What do you think of mini golf?"

A smile spread over her face. "I don't get to play because Evie's not patient enough for it."

I chuckled. "Next time, we should take her."

"She takes it so seriously, and then when her ball falls into the water, she gets upset."

"Poor thing," I said, trying to imagine her pouting or even her stomping her feet.

"It's not cute when your five-year-old is throwing a temper tantrum in the middle of the green. I'm always worried someone is going to kick us off the course."

I reached over to touch her bare leg, my cock twitching in my pants at the contact. "Call me next time she wants to go. I can help."

"I'd love that."

Something warm settled in my chest when she looked at me. It felt right being here with her. I could easily imagine more nights like this one, with or without Evie, maybe even with a child of our own. The realization jolted me out of my musings.

Bianca wasn't right for me, but her betrayal was still fresh. Could I put myself out there with another woman, hoping she didn't crush my heart? I didn't think Harper was one to take a relationship lightly. She'd said it herself that she didn't date much because of Evie.

As we parked at the mini-golf location, I pushed aside the worries about us and Evie. Tonight was just for the two of us, and I was going to enjoy it. Who knew how many more evenings we'd get for just us?

"They have a range," Harper said as we got out.

"Maybe we can do that after we finish the mini-golf course."

She smiled as I reached out my hand to take hers.

Something about this evening, and the company, made me think of first dates. Not as an adult, but as a teenager. It meant so much more that we had this time together, and I wanted to make the most of this. There was a sweetness in the air mixed with anticipation.

I couldn't wait to be alone with her. I'd been imagining all the things I'd do to Harper if that ever happened, and tonight was my chance. We only had a few hours, and I needed to make them count.

I paid for the two of us, and we grabbed balls and putters and moved to the first hole.

"You go first," I said, wanting to watch her more than anything.

She smiled sweetly at me as she lined up with her ball and hit it a little harder than necessary. It popped over the small brick border, and I said, "I'll get it."

When I returned, she gave me a sheepish look. "I'll use a little less force this time."

I stood off to the side, watching as her skirt rode up her bare thighs when she leaned over. She was gorgeous tonight. I wanted to touch her, to feel how soft her skin was. I wanted to kiss her.

She wiggled her butt when the ball landed only a few inches from the hole. "Did you see that?"

"Much better," I said as I got ready to take my turn, even though I'd been completely distracted.



She cocked a hip and gave me a look. “Did you even see my shot?”

“I might have been momentarily distracted.”

She laughed and shook her head.

When we finished, I recorded our results as we waited for the next hole, where a family of five was still playing.

The boy who looked to be about six or seven kept starting over if the ball didn’t go where he wanted it to. The parents were exasperated, but I thought it was cute. “Is that how Evie is?”

“A little bit.” She sighed.

I moved closer, drawing her back into my space with a hand on her hip. She leaned into me, and the warmth of her body pressed against mine felt good. We were next to a waterfall and a little pond that provided ambiance and shade. We waited until the family of five had their turn and moved on to the next hole.

“Should we make a bet on the winner?” I asked her when she placed her ball.

She straightened, her eyes bright. “You mean, if I win, I get something?”

“If I win, I get a kiss,” I said, lowering my voice, even though there was no one behind us for now, and the family ahead of us moved around the corner.

I brushed her hair off her shoulder, and her breath hitched. I shifted the strap of her dress to the side so I could kiss the exposed skin.

A shiver ran through her. “Yeah, okay.” Then she swallowed hard. “What do I get if I win?”

“Whatever you want,” I said, easing back as she set up to take her shot.

She threw a saucy look over her shoulder. “Whatever I want? Hmm... Now I have to figure out what that is.”

I steadied her with a hand on her hip and then took a step back so she had room for her swing. “I’m looking forward to it.”

“I like the sound of that,” she said, my eyes fixated on her ass while she lined up for her shot.

Mini golf shouldn’t be sexy, but it was. Especially when Harper was wearing that dress. I was having fun imagining whether she was bare underneath her skirt or if she was wearing a scrap of lace panties. As much as I would have loved the idea of her bare, the thought of a piece of lace covering her pussy had me adjusting myself in my pants.

When she cheered, I finally looked at her face.

Her hands raised, she exclaimed, “I got a hole in one!”

“Great shot,” I said as I high-fived her, even though I hadn’t seen anything other than her legs and her ass as she moved.

I needed to get my head in the game. Although, what was the incentive? If I won, I got a kiss; if she won, would she want to have her way with me? I liked that idea a lot, and either option was a win for me.

“Are you going to give me an idea of what I get if I win?”

She shot me a saucy smile. “Oh, trust me. You’re going to like it.”

I wanted her to win. This was the most ass-backward wager I’d ever made. For fun, I attempted to distract her with a hand on her back or hip and a kiss on her neck when she lined up for her shot. Each time, she paused, sucking in a breath.

She didn’t seem to mind the distractions, and she got into the same game by rubbing her ass against me when I moved close to show her good form.

I was starting to throw my shot more and more. When it came to distraction, she’d get me each time.

Then I changed tactics and whispered Italian words into her ear, like *bellissima* and my personal favorite, *piccola*. I’d called women beautiful or gorgeous, but I’d never used *little*

*one.* Each time, a shiver ran through her, and her breathing grew uneven.

While we were waiting at a hole, I pulled her into a tiny cave where no one could see us. I pressed her against the wall and kissed her, my hands running down her back and onto her bare leg. I moved my leg higher as I explored her mouth.

I thought I was in control until she lifted her leg and hooked it around the back of my thigh and pulled me tighter against her. My cock nudged against her pussy, and all the blood drained from my head. I felt her warmth through the thin layer of her dress and the cotton of my pants.

I rocked into her, wishing we had more time.

She nipped at my lower lip. "It's probably our turn."

"Mmm," I murmured as I cupped the globe of her bare ass. I felt the thin strap of lace disappear between her cheeks. "You're wearing a thong."

She smiled, and it was a little naughty.

"I want to shove it to the side and slide inside your slick pussy," I said before I remembered this was Harper.

She melted into me. "I like when you talk dirty."

I groaned as I pulled away, adjusting myself and sucking in a breath. "We need to get out of here."

She lowered her leg and maneuvered under my arm to get free. "You started this game. You should be strong enough to see it through."

"Oh, I'm strong enough," I insisted as she laughed and moved away. The problem was, I was indecently hard for a guy at a mini-golf course. I needed to get my thoughts under control. So, I thought of my mother and Evie until I was presentable again. When I joined Harper, she told me she'd finished the hole in three strokes, and I recorded her score.

We focused on playing after that. Both of us were tense, biding our time until the eighteenth hole, when we could make a break for one of our houses.

At the last hole, I asked her, “Do you want to hit the range or grab food to go?” I was up for either, but since our time was limited...

“Let’s order food. I heard they have good burgers here.”

We returned our clubs and ordered burgers to go. On the drive to my house, she balanced the to-go boxes on her thighs.

After I parked in the garage, I grabbed the boxes and placed them on the counter in the kitchen before I turned to face her.

“Did you tally up who won?” Harper asked.

I raised a brow. “Does it matter?”

Harper’s eyes widened as I erased the distance between us. “I think we’re both going to win tonight.”

“Me too,” I said as I started up where we left off, with her pressed against a wall while I kissed her. It wasn’t slow or exploring; it was hard and demanding. It was like I’d finally let go. I could do whatever I wanted.

I didn’t waste any time lifting her skirt and touching her how I wanted to, the soft skin of her inner thighs and, finally, to the damp patch of lace between her legs. “*Ti voglio*. I want you now. I can’t wait.”

“I want that too,” she said breathlessly.

My fingers slipped underneath, and I caressed her softly, with a barely there touch, until she whimpered in protest. “*Mi fai impazzire*.” *You drive me crazy*.

Then I pressed firmer as her hands tangled in my hair, pulling and tugging. She wanted me as badly as I wanted her.

This wasn’t about wanting to take care of her or about her daughter, Evie. I wanted Harper in a way I hadn’t wanted any other woman. I’d die if I wasn’t inside her in the next thirty seconds.

She widened her stance, giving me better access. My finger dipped inside her heat, and I kissed my way down her jaw, along her neck, and sucked on the skin of her collarbone,

needing and wanting more. I tugged her dress down until her breasts spilled out.

She hadn't been wearing a bra, and my brain short-circuited for a second before I got back in the game and sucked one perfect nipple into my mouth. With her hand pressed against the back of my head, I sucked first one, then the other nipple until they were hard peaks. Fuck. She was gorgeous with her hair tousled, her breasts spilling over the top of her dress, and her legs bare.

I eased back a step as she lifted her dress over her head, leaving her in yellow lace. It was sweet and delicate, and I wanted to rip it off with my teeth. Before I could lower to my knees, she said, "I want to touch you, taste you." She lowered herself to the floor, unbuckling my belt and pants.

I was already hard, but the sight of Harper on her knees was too much.

When my dick finally popped free, she licked the pre-cum from the tip of my cock and sucked it into her mouth. There was a roaring in my ears as I touched her hair, forcing myself to keep my touch light.

She licked and sucked, jerking me with her hand. It was perfect, yet not enough.

"I need to be inside you," I said, my voice guttural.

Instead of stopping, she gripped me harder and sucked me down, swallowing when my dick hit the back of her throat.

I groaned as I lifted her up. I didn't waste any time grabbing a condom from my wallet and ripping the wrapper and then smoothing the rubber over my cock.

Then I lifted her, nudging my cock against her wet pussy.

"You want this?" I asked her, barely restraining myself from slipping inside. It would be so easy.

Harper's eyes were wide with lust. "I want you, Leo."

Something about her statement, that she wanted me and not my cock, made me pause. It felt good to hear her say that,

especially when we were risking everything to be together. She wanted me.

“Fuck, yes,” I said as I surged into her in one motion.

She tensed and then softened around me. “Move, Leo. Please.”

I eased back to the tip and thrust inside, alternating long and quick strokes, wanting to draw it out. Needing to give her the most pleasure possible.

“It feels so good,” Harper said breathlessly when I ground my pelvis against her clit.

“Need you to come,” I ground out, knowing I was barely holding on.

I lowered my head and sucked her nipple into my mouth, and she went off, her pussy spasming around my cock. I couldn’t stop myself from following her over. I rested my head against her forehead, wondering how I’d ever recover from this.

“That was—” I started to say as I slowly eased her to her feet. Her skin was flush, and I couldn’t help but think that I liked seeing her naked in my kitchen.

“Incredible,” she said softly, picking up her dress and covering herself with it.

My only regret was that I hadn’t gotten to taste her. I wanted all night with her, but it wasn’t possible. I wanted more. Instead of saying everything that was in my head, I asked her, “Are you hungry?”

“Starved.”

I pulled on my briefs and pants and washed my hands as she opened the boxes of food and pulled down glasses for water. It wasn’t the first time I thought she fit in my space.

I sat next to her. I should say I was sorry we didn’t make it to the bedroom, but I wasn’t. We ate in silence for a few moments before she said, “These are good.”

I didn't want to be talking about food, or anything else, for that matter. "How much time do we have before we need to get Evie?"

Harper frowned at her phone. "Maybe an hour."

"Then let's make the best use of the time we have. As good as that burger was, I need to taste you."

Her eyes widened at the promise in my words.

After checking to see that she was finished eating, I tugged her up from her seat and led her up the stairs to my room. The few times she and Evie were over, they hadn't entered my bedroom. I'd cleaned, hoping we might end up here tonight.

I pulled her to the end of the bed and slowly lifted her dress. She hadn't bothered to put her panties on, so she was blissfully naked. "How do you feel about me eating you for dessert?"

She scrambled onto the bed, letting her knees fall wide as she planted the heels of her feet flat on the bed.

There were no other words for the sight of her naked on my bed, her hair spread out over the comforter, and her pussy open for me. I sank to my knees and pulled her closer to the edge. I kissed her inner thigh, wanting to savor this moment. "*Bellissima.*"

Her pussy clenched at the word.

"You like that?" I asked as I licked her.

"Yes," she breathed and arched into my mouth. I wanted to drive her wild, show her that we could let go and forget about everything else. What happened in this bedroom was our business, no one else's. The bond we were forming, the connection we had, wasn't up for discussion. It was ours alone.

I licked and sucked, building her up before using my finger to give her the friction she so desperately needed. I wanted to be inside her, but I wanted her to come on my face first.

When her thighs tightened around my head, I reached up and tweaked her nipples. She cried out, arching off the bed, as

she spasmed around my finger.

I didn't let up until she was coming down from the orgasm. I wiped my face and shoved down my briefs and pants, grabbing a condom before placing one knee on the bed. I lifted her with an arm banded around her back and moved her farther up the bed. She was languid as I teased her entrance with my cock. "I could do this all night," I said, kissing her.

Harper didn't answer me, but her hands ran up and down my sides and back, as if she couldn't stop touching me. I hoped she was telling me how she felt with how she touched and kissed me. I whispered Italian phrases in her ear as I eased inside. I stayed close to her, my body pressing over hers. I wanted to stay this way always.

Her breath hitched as I moved inside her. "You're so beautiful. No words in any language can express how I feel about you."

Her eyes glistened, and she tightened her hold on me.

It was like I'd been waiting my whole life for her. Nothing felt as good or as right as being inside her. It was way too early to be thinking about the future or what any of this meant. But I suspected Harper was it for me.

She was worth whatever hell I was going to go through to be with her. I'd protect her and Evie. "You feel so good," I said as I braced myself on my hands.

She bit her lip. "I'm so close."

"Touch yourself," I urged, moving so that she had room to get her hand between us.

She bit her lip as her hand moved slowly down her belly, making me harder. I watched as her slender fingers circled her clit, slowly at first and then faster.

She moaned as I increased my pace, the telltale sign that my orgasm was overcoming me.

She shattered a split second before I followed her over. I rested on top of her, both of us breathing heavily as we came down.



“It was just as good as the first time.”

I moved to her side. “Did you expect something different?”

“I don’t know what I expected. This is so different from anything I’ve ever experienced before.”

I played with her hair, loving the feel of the soft strands. She was finally mine to touch. “You’ve never been with an attentive lover.”

She laughed softly. “I guess not.”

I kissed her shoulder. “I’ll always take care of you, Harper. You deserve to be treated like a queen.”

“I like the sound of that,” she murmured as she turned to face me.

The expression on her face was one of awe, as if she couldn’t believe we were here in bed together.

“I want to stay here forever.”

“Me too.”

“Can I take you and Evie home? Stay for a bit? We don’t have to do anything, but I’m not ready for the night to end.”

“I’d like that. Do we need to have a conversation about what we are or what this is?” Her forehead wrinkled.

I wasn’t sure about labels and things like that. My fingers tangled in her hair. “You’re my girl. *Sei mia*. If I have free time, I want to spend it with you.”

She licked her lips. “I want to be your girl.”

“Then it’s settled.” I didn’t like monikers like girlfriend or boyfriend; I just wanted her to be mine.

*Fifteen*



**M**y first date with Leo was the best one I'd ever had, and it probably had something to do with the epic sex. Our connection was heightened from the time we took to get to know each other.

I appreciated that he came home with me afterward to help get Evie to bed, and we watched TV before falling asleep. He was gone before Evie woke up, but it felt like he'd stayed most of the night. I loved that he said I was his girl. I got a fluttery feeling inside whenever I remembered that little detail.

Today, I was meeting with Gia's recommendation for a realtor, Juliana, to consider my options. I'd worked the numbers, spoke to a mortgage broker, and had a budget in mind.

When Juliana looked up from her paperwork, she said, "It will be tough to find something in your range. If you're willing to look outside Evie's school district, it will be easier."

My throat tightened. I wasn't willing to sacrifice her education. "I'd rather not."

"In her current school, single-family houses are out of your range. I could probably find you an apartment above a store in town. That would be your best option."

The apartments just outside of town weren't considered to be in a good area. They wouldn't be safe for a single mother and a child. "That's where I'm currently living."

Juliana's expression was apologetic. "I'm sorry I couldn't find something that works for you. But if you're willing to

expand the area, I can get you some things to look at.”

It didn't hurt to look. “Sure.”

She printed off several smaller homes that were older and needed a lot of work. Since Evie was at school, and I'd taken a few hours off work to look at properties, it made sense to see some of the options.

I told myself to be optimistic. Maybe the schools were still good. Maybe one of these houses would be exactly what we needed to start over.

Unfortunately, the photographs posted online were nicer than the reality. These places needed more work than I could afford on my salary, and I had no renovation skills.

“My husband owns a construction company, Morrison Brothers Construction, but I can recommend a few others, as well.”

I grimaced. “I was hoping for more of a turnkey property.”

“I'm sorry. There won't be anything like that in your price range. But if you're willing to increase the budget—”

I shook my head. I wasn't one of those people who was stingy. I literally only had this much to allocate. I didn't have a wealthy husband or family to fall back on. If I got in over my head, it was on me. I wouldn't overextend myself.

After the last showing, we stopped in front of her van. “You didn't like anything.”

“I'm sorry to waste your time. I just don't have the skills or money to deal with a fixer-upper.”

“No worries. These visits are as much for you as they are for me. Now that I know what you're looking for, I can send it to you when it comes on the market.”

I didn't say anything, but I was fairly sure there wouldn't be a magical unicorn of a perfect house in my price range. “Thank you for your time.”

The disappointment had turned into crushing despair. I'd give it a few minutes, and then I'd need to pick myself up and

resign myself to staying where I was.

If I couldn't afford a home in this area, even with the generous raise Gia gave me, then home ownership simply wasn't an option.

On the drive home, I let myself consider the possibility of a fixer-upper. Could I live in one of those places without doing the repairs for a few years and live in a different school district? I didn't want to. I knew my limitations and what I wanted, and I didn't want to lower my expectations. Unfortunately, that meant staying where I was.

Maybe if I got a second job or waitressed more at Giovanni's... I hated to give up my time with Evie, but she wanted a house, and I was so sure I could give that to her.

At work, I buried myself in the presentations we were planning for the out-of-state couples, and when I picked up Evie, I felt marginally better. All that mattered was that we were healthy and happy.

When we arrived home, I took a look at the bare pantry, remembering I never made it to the grocery store over the weekend. My phone buzzed with a text.

**Leo: Want to grab dinner? I want to take my girls out.**

"Who is it?" Evie asked, trying to look at my screen.

"It's Leo. He wants to go out to dinner."

"Can we go?" Evie asked excitedly.

"I don't see why not." I typed a response, and he said he'd be here soon, so I sent Evie to wash her hands.

When he knocked on the door a few minutes later, I'd pushed the house issue out of my head, or at least I hoped I had.

I opened the door, and Leo's expression faltered. "Did you not like any of the houses you saw?"

"No." I wished I hadn't mentioned it to him at all. I wasn't ready to dissect all the ways I fell short as a mother. Not being able to provide Evie with a home was starting to grate on me.

“Ah,” he said as he pulled me close for a hug. “You’ll find what you’re looking for. Sometimes it takes time.”

When he released me, Evie ran into the room to greet him. He immediately threw her into the air and caught her in his arms as she giggled. She wrapped her little arms around his neck while he whispered something to her that made her laugh.

They were so sweet together. This was what mattered.

“Are you hungry?” Leo asked her.

And she said, “I’m always hungry.”

“Want to go to one of the restaurants by the harbor?” Leo asked, and my stomach tightened. I probably should save my money and cook something.

“It’s my treat,” Leo said, as if he sensed my discomfort. I didn’t want to say anything in front of Evie, but I needed to pay my own way. I wanted to be an equal partner in this relationship.

When Leo walked down the steps and into the parking lot with Evie in his arms, he said, “My parents aren’t working today.”

I nodded, not wanting to acknowledge that his parents and Gia were a barrier to our relationship and continued happiness.

“When can I play with Matteo and Carlo again?” Evie asked as we walked toward the harbor. The good thing about our apartment was that we could walk to Evie’s school, shops, and restaurants.

“Whenever your mom says it’s okay.”

“Can I see them again soon, Mommy?”

I ruffled her hair. “We’ll figure something out.” I didn’t want to take advantage of Leo’s brothers or assume anything when it came to our relationship. At some point, Leo might decide I wasn’t worth the trouble.

“Did you have fun the other night with them?” Leo asked.

Evie nodded. “They’re silly.”

“She said they cheated when they played charades, dressing up and using props to act out the words on the card,” I said to Leo with a smile. I would have loved to see his big, muscular brothers, who always seemed so cool, dressing up and playing a part in front of Evie.

“My brothers are ridiculous,” Leo muttered as we turned onto Dock Street, which was along the harbor.

“Evie had fun, and I can’t thank them enough for watching her for me.”

“I had a great time too.” He winked at me, and I almost forgot about the house and money situation.

We went into Max’s, a casual bar and grill across from the recently renovated marketplace.

The hostess handed Evie a kid’s menu and crayons. With her attention on coloring, we looked at our menus.

Max, the owner, approached our table. “Leo. Good to see you.”

They clasped hands, and Max asked, “How are things at Gio’s?”

“Good.”

“Your parents thinking any more about retirement?”

“They talk about it, but I’ll believe when I see it,” Leo said, and they both laughed.

“Have you talked to them about your expansion ideas?”

“Papà wants to see my numbers.”

“That’s a good sign.”

“We’ll see,” Leo said, and I knew he was worried his father would never take his ideas seriously. It was hard for the older generation to let the younger one step in with different ideas and concepts, even if it could be good for the business.

I wondered if Leo was too wrapped up in our relationship to work on his plan.

Max turned his attention to me. “Harper, it’s good to see you too.” If he thought it was weird that I was with Leo, he didn’t mention it. “And who’s this?”

“Evie,” she said, without looking up from her drawing.

“You’re doing a good job coloring in the lines.”

Evie rolled her eyes. “Duh. I’m in kindergarten.”

“Evie, don’t be rude,” I admonished, a little embarrassed. “And we don’t say duh.”

Max clapped his hands together. “I’m glad you stopped by for dinner. If there’s anything I can do, let me know.”

When he left, I said, “I’m sorry about Evie. I don’t know what got into her.”

“She’s not going to be perfect all the time. I know that. She’s human.”

“I know. It’s just—”

Leo leaned over and lowered his voice. “I know Evie will have moments when she’s upset or cranky. We all do. I’m not expecting everything to be perfect all the time.”

I realized I had been worried that Evie would act out, and Leo would decide we weren’t the right fit for him. My shoulders relaxed at his words.

“What was wrong with the houses you saw today?”

I sighed. “They needed a lot of work.”

“Which ones did you see?”

I pulled the sheets out of my purse and smoothed the creases from being folded.

Leo took them from me, carefully examining each one. “I didn’t know you were looking in this area.”

“I didn’t intend to, but Juliana said these were the only ones that fit my budget.” I hated admitting that.

Leo gave me a sympathetic look. “I’m sure something else will come up.”



“She said she’d send me something if it came on the market, but I’m not getting my hopes up.”

“We’re not getting a house?” Evie cried as her gaze lifted to mine.

“I thought we could get one we’d like, but the ones on the market right now need a lot of work.”

“Leo hired a construction worker.”

Leo chuckled at her oversimplification. “I hired a construction company to handle all the work.”

Evie pointed her crayon at Leo. “So. Do that.”

“It’s not that simple, Evie. I won’t be able to hire a contractor. We’d need to do the work ourselves.”

“I can help you,” Leo began.

“You don’t have time to work on your own house,” I gently reminded him.

“This is different,” he said stubbornly.

“It’s not just the state of the houses. I don’t like the school district.” That was something a little easier for Evie to understand. “I’d like to keep you in the same school.”

“Yeah, I don’t want to leave,” Evie said with a nod and then returned to her coloring.

Leo reached over to squeeze my hand. “The right thing will come along.”

“I hope so. For the time being, we’ll have to stay where we are.” Every time I admitted that to myself, my stomach knotted tighter.

“There’s no rush to leave. Take your time to find what you want.”

There were so many variables: my housing situation, whether we’d get enough clients to keep Gia’s business afloat, and how Leo’s family would react when they found out about us. I had enough on my plate. Living in a single-family home was a dream that wasn’t going to happen any time soon.

“I don’t want to change schools.”

But the reality was, I couldn’t afford a home in her school district.

“You know, you could use the apartment address to stay in the school district.”

My spirits lifted slightly. “I hadn’t thought of that.”

“My parents won’t care.”

“Thank you for offering that,” I said, touching his hand with mine.

Our waitress took our order and talk turned to the restaurant.

“We’re having trouble retaining quality servers. They’re always calling out or not showing up. I think if we paid them more, they’d stay. The tips aren’t as good as other restaurants in town. I relied on your waitressing to cover them, but—”

“I can still cover when you need me to.”

“I don’t want to take advantage of you. You want to spend time with Evie, and my parents need to see that this is a problem.”

“Will they, though?” His parents preferred to run on a shoestring budget rather than have enough qualified and reliable waitstaff. They’d always been lucky with the kitchen staff. They were loyal and hardworking.

“They’re leaving for vacation soon. I don’t see them making any decisions before then.”

“That’s so frustrating. If they’re going to be gone, you should be able to make more decisions. Maybe you should tell them that. Stop waiting for permission and take charge.” I knew the Giovanni boys wouldn’t ever go against their parents’ wishes, but Leo was looking at me with newfound respect.

“I think you might be on to something.”

“You think it could work?”

“It’s worth a shot. We need the ability to make decisions, and if they’re not going to be around, then we should just step up.”

“Yeah, tell him who’s in charge,” Evie said, looking up from her page.

We all laughed because she was so earnest and adorable.

“I’ll just tell them Evie told me to do it.”

“They’ll have to forgive you because who can resist her face?” I said to him with a smile.

“Right?” His gaze on Evie was full of affection and tenderness. Was he falling for us, like we had for him?

Evie smiled at him.

Our date solidified everything I’d always suspected about Leo. He was a great guy, and we had chemistry in spades. I couldn’t wait to spend more time with him, both in the bedroom and outside of it.

“Are you going to be my new daddy?”

I sucked in a breath. Evie knew we were dating, but I wasn’t sure she understood the implications. Before I could figure out how to answer, Leo said, “You have a father. I’d never try to replace him.”

Evie’s lip curled. “He’s not like the other kids’ dads. He doesn’t live with us or spend any time with us. Not like you do.”

“That doesn’t mean Leo’s your dad.”

“If it’s all right with you, Evie, I’d like to be another important person in your life. One you can depend on, count on. I already love you.”

“Like Mr. G.?”

Leo cleared his throat, clearly uncomfortable with the situation, but I appreciated he was trying to navigate it. Manny would have said whatever came to mind, not worried about how a child might take it. “Not exactly. I want to be a father figure, if you’ll have me.”

“I do,” Evie said, and then she surprised us by getting down from her chair and climbing onto Leo’s lap. She wrapped her arms around his neck and kissed his cheek.

“Well, that’s settled,” Leo said, even though nothing was, because we hadn’t told anyone about us. In our little circle, things were good, but it was the outside I was worried about.

But I allowed myself to imagine that this was real. That everyone knew about us, and they accepted us. That Leo’s parents listened to him about the expansion, that we found a way to keep Gia’s business profitable, and most of all, that we were a family.

Like everything, it felt too good to be true, and that’s when I panicked in the past. But this time, I was going to let myself feel it, even if it was only for a day or a few weeks. It was unlikely that I’d get everything I wanted, and it certainly wouldn’t last forever. But I’d take the little bit of time I could get.

I’d remember the time we were happy, and everything was okay.

*Sixteen*



The pressure was mounting for me to confront my parents about their business plans. When I wasn't covering the dining room, I spent my time gathering data for the proposed expansion and worrying about what the rest of my family would think when they found out about me and Harper.

When I was with Harper and Evie, everything made sense. I didn't worry about the what-ifs and the *is it possible*, but when we weren't together, it was another story.

My parents were spending all their free time this week at the restaurant, preparing for their vacation. I wanted to suggest they do the opposite, but it was hard to tell them what to do. They didn't want to hear that we had it handled and didn't really need them.

We were afraid to say it out loud, even though it was true. We'd been running this place for years; it could operate without them.

The restaurant was a little crowded today with Matteo in the kitchen, Carlo in the office, and my parents moving around the dining room, greeting guests.

"You ready to take a look at the numbers?" Carlo asked.

We'd discussed it many times, and he thought it was possible for us to open another location, but he'd spent time running the numbers for every possible scenario.

We huddled together in the small office. "We could manage it, especially if the reputation of this location translates to a neighboring town."

“You don’t think we could open one in Annapolis across town?”

“Since we’re opening the same kind of restaurant, I think we’d be competing for the same customers. Those who travel here will just frequent the other location. Whereas, if we open in a nearby town, you’d have a new clientele. Theoretically speaking, of course.”

Carlo tilted the screen so I could see the rows and columns of numbers. The amount necessary to procure a location, renovate, and obtain the equipment and furniture necessary for another restaurant was significant. “I’m not saying it’s not risky. It could fail, and if so, we will have invested for nothing.”

“But if it works—”

Carlo nodded. “This could be huge for us. Next level.”

“There are three of us hoping to carry on the family business.” We made a modest income, but not enough for true wealth or a sustainable future. Especially if we had families. Then there were my parents to think about. The restaurant was their retirement. They never invested in retirement funds or accounts. They didn’t trust them.

Carlo knocked his knuckles on the countertop. “This is a way to increase business and give us room to grow. Matteo can take over this location, and you can run the second.”

I nodded. “He’s always wanted to do more than just the kitchen.”

“Or you can manage both, and Matteo handles the kitchens.”

“I think it’s too hard to manage kitchens that far apart. He’d do more driving than managing.”

“I agree.”

“Should we present this to our parents before they leave?” I asked him, eager to have an answer.

“I found several possible properties that could work.” Carlo clicked off the spreadsheet and over to an online search

of commercial properties. “An Italian restaurant just closed. It would be the perfect location.”

I frowned. “But if it failed, doesn’t that mean we will, too?”

“Not necessarily. It was a fancier Italian restaurant. The area couldn’t sustain it. There were several in town already.”

“What about other pizzerias?”

“There are only chains there.”

Excitement flowed through me. “That could be good for us.”

“I think so. It would also cost the least to renovate. The bones are already there.”

Matteo came into the room, smelling of marinara sauce and cheese. “I’m on board. It’s stifling with the whole family in one restaurant.”

“For the first time in a long time, I’m excited about the future. We can grow and expand, earn more money for our families.”

“I ran the numbers if we were to expand with a third restaurant, and in five years, we could easily sustain the next generation of Giovannis.”

“Isn’t there some saying about how one generation makes the money and another spends it?” Matteo asked.

“We won’t do that, and we won’t raise our kids to do that,” Carlo said firmly.

I imagined Evie working next to me when she was older, as a hostess or even in the kitchen. She’d learn the business. I’d never require it, but any child of mine could work there. I wouldn’t make it a requirement for them to stay, but the idea of one of my kids working alongside me was attractive. “We’ll eventually hit a wall with things here. This is the logical next step.”

“I think so too,” Carlo said.



Matteo raised his hands. “I’ll defer to you for the money side of things, but I’d like more autonomy. We all know that. I want to run the restaurant, not just the kitchen. And I want the freedom to try new things.”

Our parents were stifling our growth and creativity. They raised us in the restaurant, and all three of us had good business sense.

“What’s all this?” Papà asked as he stood in the doorway. The space was too tight for more than three people to move around.

“We were looking at Carlo’s projections to open a second location.”

“Not this again,” Papà said. “It’s too risky.”

Sometimes I was surprised my father ever opened a business. He was too scared to try something new. It was a lot of pressure, but the risk was worth it.

“Carlo ran the numbers, and it’s more than possible,” I said.

“If we don’t do something, we’ll outgrow this location. We all want to be challenged to have a restaurant of our own to manage. If we open a restaurant in another town, we can increase awareness of our brand and bring in more people from other counties,” Carlo said.

“We’ll be spread too thin,” Papà insisted.

“It’s the opposite. There are five of us here today, and we’re tripping over each other. We don’t all need to be here. We’ve all been doing it for years, and we have a reliable customer base, but some nights we are too busy.”

Papà crossed his arms over his chest. “Why not open a restaurant close, then? Why another town?”

I hoped this meant he was at least considering our idea.

“We don’t want to split our customers. We want a new pool of people,” Carlo said.

“You all agree this is what needs to happen?” Papà looked around the room.

“We do,” Matteo said. “It’s the natural next step. Especially if we want to support our future families with the income.”

Papà nodded. “If you think it’s necessary, I’ll look at these numbers Carlo prepared.”

“We’d like you to do more than consider it. We’d like the go-ahead before you leave for Italy. There’s a perfect location available, and it won’t be on the market for long. We need to jump on it,” Carlo said, pulling up the images.

Matteo stepped aside so Papà could get a better look.

“This is our best bet. Good location. It was already a restaurant.”

“But it failed,” Papà said, his voice flat.

“I polled the people nearby and asked what they think happened, and I realize it’s not necessarily accurate, but they said it was too fancy. They wanted a more casual restaurant to get pizza with their families.”

Papà’s chest puffed out. “That would be Giovanni’s.”

“Exactly. They want what we can provide. Consistent quality and a family atmosphere. We won’t skimp on what people have come to expect from us.”

“We have to expand, or we’ll be stagnant soon. We need some way to increase revenue to continue to support you and Mamma in retirement, as well as our future families.”

Carlo was appealing to what mattered most to Papà—family. He loved the idea of us settling down and finding women we could marry and have kids with. He wanted all of us to be involved in the business.

Papà’s brow furrowed. “But what does Gia think?”

Matteo shook his head. “Gia has her own business to think about. She’s not involved in this.”

“But if it’s to support future generations, then doesn’t her opinion matter?” Papà persisted.

“She supports herself with her business,” Carlo explained carefully. “If she wants to come back, we’d find a place for her, but I don’t think that’s going to happen.”

“I hold out hope.”

Carlo touched his shoulder. “I know you do, but she’s happy doing what she is.”

I wasn’t sure she was happy without our father’s approval, but she was driven and successful. I had a feeling she wasn’t satisfied yet. She was always looking to expand and get better. Just like me. The only difference was, I think she was trying to prove herself to Papà, and I wasn’t sure she’d ever get what she was looking for.

“Mamma wants to travel and spend time with family. You know she does,” Matteo reminded him.

“I’ll talk to her, and we’ll have a decision before we leave. If this is what you want—”

“It is,” I said, and my brothers nodded.

“We want you to be happy. We are so proud that you three have taken over the business and that you’re happy here. I want the Giovanni name to live on.”

“And it will,” Carlo said firmly.

“We will make you proud, Papà,” Matteo said.

“You already do,” Papà said, his eyes shining with unshed tears. He was fiercely protective of his family, and he was proud of us. He just didn’t always show it.

When he left to find Mamma, Carlo said, “I think that went well.”

I ran a hand through my hair. “Me too.”

“Hopefully, he wasn’t placating us,” Matteo said.

“He wasn’t. He wouldn’t have said he’d consider it if he didn’t mean it. Plus, he said he’d talk to Mamma, and we

already know she's on our side. She wants him to take a step back. To give us more autonomy," Carlo said.

"Thanks for doing the work," I said to Carlo.

"That's my job. I haven't been this excited about something since Papà gave me this position."

As kids, Carlo hated working in the restaurant itself. He always preferred the office and looking at the numbers. It took Papà a long time to realize his talents weren't in the kitchen or the dining room. He studied accounting and finance in school, and his education was coming into play now.

"I'm confident this is the right move for us to make," Carlo said.

"This thing you have going with Harper. It's not going to get in the way of this, is it?" Matteo asked.

I frowned. "Why would it?"

"If Papà thinks you aren't focused on what's happening here, he won't trust us. He won't like it."

"He doesn't need to find out," I said, but the words felt like ash in my mouth. I wasn't doing our relationship a favor if I kept it hidden from my family. Especially since she was so close to them.

"You're willing to keep it a secret for months, maybe even a year?" Carlo asked, and I felt sick to my stomach. "That long?"

"We could get held up with construction or permits. I planned for every possible scenario, but if Papà puts a stop to it because of Harper—"

"That would be crazy. You don't really think he'd do that, do you?" I asked them.

Matteo shook his head. "I have no idea how he'll react. He acts like Harper is another daughter, but does he want you to date her? Probably not."

She wasn't a *nice Italian girl*, as my mother always said, but was that really what they wanted? "I'm happy with Harper.

If they can't see that, then I don't know where that leaves us."

"We don't want anything to get in the way of this deal going through," Carlo said.

It seemed important to Matteo and Carlo, so I nodded. "We'll keep it secret for a while longer."

"Good," Matteo said, and even though I was happy that my dream of a second restaurant might come true, I was worried about what it meant for Harper and me.

Would I have time to manage a second location and still spend time with her and Evie? Would it be too much? Would she understand that we couldn't tell my parents about us? I had a feeling it would be too much at some point. That we were doomed, but I couldn't regret being with her. I was the happiest I'd ever been, and I had a feeling I wouldn't have had the confidence to pursue my ideas with my father without her support.

I avoided bringing it up with Harper for the rest of the week. If Papà didn't agree to our expansion plan, then she'd never have to know about it.

\* \* \*

I was on edge the entire weekend, knowing Papà would tell us his decision at family dinner. I spent Sunday morning at my house with Evie and Harper, cooking breakfast, playing games, and working in the yard. It was the perfect day.

When we got ready to leave, I said, "We should drive separately. My parents don't know about us yet."

Harper frowned. "Shouldn't we tell them at some point? Get it over with? If they don't approve, then we can decide. But to drag it out?"

"They haven't decided about the expansion, and if they agree, I don't want anything to get in the way of that."

Harper sucked in a breath. "You want to keep us a secret. You're embarrassed of us."

I shook my head. “No. Nothing like that.”

“That’s what it seems like,” Harper said carefully, and I got the impression she was holding herself together. “I won’t be with someone who doesn’t think I’m good enough.”

I rushed to add, “You’re good enough. I never said you weren’t.”

Her eyes flashed with hurt. “But not good enough to tell your parents.”

I drew an arm around her shoulders. “We discussed this. You might not be what my parents want for me, but that doesn’t mean they’ll come between us. I just want to make sure we tell them at the right time.”

“You don’t want me screwing up your business plans.”

“My brothers felt like we shouldn’t come out to them right now. Not before they make their decision.”

“But after, we can tell them?”

“When the timing’s right,” I said carefully, remembering how Matteo and Carlo were still concerned about how our relationship would affect the project.

“Will the time ever be right?” Harper asked, her voice flat.

I hugged her close to me. “You’re right for me. We just have to wait for the right time to tell my parents.”

She let out a breath. “Yeah, okay.”

“You’re willing to wait?” I asked, hopeful but worried it was too much to ask of her.

“For a little while. I won’t wait forever.”

“Of course not.” But my stomach twisted. I had a feeling Matteo and Carlo didn’t ever want me to bring it up. They didn’t want anything to get in the way of this expansion, and I couldn’t blame them. I wasn’t sure how my parents would react, and Mamma was on our side for the business things, but in this, she wouldn’t be. She had a vision of the right girl for me, and Harper wasn’t it. At the same time, I didn’t want Harper to think she wasn’t right for me.

“Evie and I will leave first so they won’t know we’ve been spending time together.”

“I appreciate it.”

“If Evie understands what’s going on, I won’t put up with it. If she feels slighted or less than, I’m out.”

Did that mean I’d made Harper feel that way? But Harper was already gathering up her things. I helped her get everything packed and ensured Evie was strapped into her seat.

Would Evie say something and give us away? That was something I couldn’t help. She’d always been affectionate with me, so if she didn’t say anything about us dating, we’d be okay. I couldn’t imagine why that would even come up.

Harper seemed a little distant when she got into the driver’s seat and said she’d see me soon. I tried not to think about whether I’d screwed things up for good. We’d be okay. We had to be. I wanted the second restaurant, my parents’ approval, and Harper and Evie. Surely, I could have it all.

But there was this feeling in my stomach I couldn’t get rid of, an unease that wouldn’t go away.

*Seventeen*





I couldn't believe that Leo asked me to keep our relationship a secret. We had been doing that, but I thought we were almost to the point where we could tell his parents. How could we have a relationship if we always had to keep it quiet?

I didn't like the look on Leo's face. I had a bad feeling that his brothers didn't want us together at all. It would be easier for the expansion if we weren't dating.

When we entered the house, Evie ran to Mr. G. and gave him a hug. I kissed Mr. G.'s cheek and carried her into the family room to play a game. When Leo arrived, I stayed away from him. I didn't want Evie to say anything to give us away, and I was upset about the conversation. I didn't like the implication that I wasn't good enough—and might not ever be—for this family.

Maybe we needed to create some distance between me and his family. I'd try harder to find a new apartment, and maybe even a babysitter. I didn't want to come between Leo and his brothers. I didn't want to be the reason why he wasn't happy and successful.

The restaurant was a family business, and it was clear I wasn't part of it. No matter how much time I'd spent with them over the years, I wasn't wanted here. I wasn't good enough for one of their sons.

It was something I always suspected, but to hear it laid out like Leo had hurt. It hurt a lot. It played on every one of my

insecurities. That I wasn't good enough. That I didn't come from the right kind of family. It affected my daughter too. She'd always be less than because of her circumstances.

Tears threatened during dinner, but I held myself together. For the first time, I felt separate from the family. I wasn't one of them, and I couldn't forget that. It was weird to not be able to touch or talk to Leo like I'd become accustomed to.

I excused myself early, saying that Evie was tired. I wasn't even sure it was a good idea to come to Sunday dinner anymore.

"Why didn't Leo play with me?" Evie asked on the way home, breaking my heart.

"I think he was busy with his brothers. They're planning something big for the restaurant, and Mr. and Mrs. G. are getting ready for vacation."

Evie pouted in her seat. "He usually does."

"I'm sorry, bug." I hadn't called her bug in a long time, probably since she was three, but I was feeling especially protective of her. If Leo didn't think we were good enough for him, maybe I needed to be more careful moving forward.

Evie wouldn't be able to handle him withholding affection and attention. When I got home, I had a text from Leo asking if Evie was okay, and I responded, saying she was tired and going to bed early.

I didn't expect to hear from him the rest of the night. Family dinner nights could go late, especially if there was business stuff going on.

After Evie was asleep, there was a soft knock on the door. I got up to answer it, a little surprised to see Leo. "What are you doing here?"

Leo stepped inside, his expression excited and energy pouring off him in waves. "I wanted to tell you what my parents decided."

"What was that?" I asked, still trying to slow my beating heart and reminding myself we needed space.

“They agreed to let us go forward with buying another building for the second location and renovating while they’re gone. They said they trust us to make the right decisions.”

“That’s amazing, Leo. I’m so happy for you.” And I was happy for him. This was everything he’d ever wanted. Autonomy in his parents’ business and their respect.

“I couldn’t have done it without you.” Leo hugged me tightly. “You were the one who believed in me, supported me, and gave me the courage to move forward.”

“I don’t know about that,” I said, easing away from him to sit on the couch.

He sat next to me on the very edge of the couch, braced as if he was going to stand up at any moment. He was amped, excited about his family’s approval and support. I wondered what that would feel like, especially since I’d never wanted or craved it. I just wanted a little attention.

“I wouldn’t have had the courage to follow through, to push for what I wanted, if you hadn’t believed in me.”

“You would have done it. With or without me.” That, I was confident about. Leo was a force to be reckoned with. The fact that he was careful with his parents’ feelings just made him that much better of a man.

“Why did you leave early? Is Evie all right?”

“She was a little disappointed that you didn’t play with her, but I told her you were preoccupied with the business stuff.”

“I’m sorry. I didn’t want anyone to look at us and know what was going on.”

“Would that be so terrible if your parents found out? You really think they’d hate it? They’d hate me?”

Leo shook his head slowly. “I don’t know how they’d react.”

And it was clear he didn’t want to find out.

“I have to be careful with Evie. She’s not going to understand if you suddenly start ignoring her. Or you only pay

attention to her when we're alone. This isn't fair to her. I know I said I'd give you time, and I will, but if Evie is affected, then I'll have to do what's best for her."

"I'll do better. I promise."

He was saying the right things, but keeping us a secret was bothersome. Evie wouldn't understand, and I wasn't sure I did either. I couldn't conclude anything else but that Evie and I weren't good enough for him. His parents would never approve, so why were we wasting our time? I should break things off before I got in too deep.

Leo stood and pulled me with him. "I'm so happy. I never thought I could feel like this. I have my family's approval for a new restaurant. I have you and Evie. Everything's amazing."

I smiled, but I didn't quite feel the same way because I wasn't sure those developments were good for me.

He dipped his head, his lips hovering over mine. "I'm falling for you."

Before I could respond, he kissed me, his hands ghosting over my shoulders and down my back to my ass. I felt the press of his dick against my stomach, and I melted into him. He was falling for me. Did I feel the same?

If I forgot about what he'd asked of me, that we were his dirty secret, and I remembered how I felt in his arms, then I was falling for him too. I might have already fallen, and maybe that's where my concern came from.

But then he picked me up and walked down the hall to my bedroom. He shut and locked it behind us and laid me on the bed.

Bracing himself above me, he brushed the hair off my forehead and leaned down to kiss me. "You're so beautiful. Beyond words. I don't deserve you."

Something about those last four words hit me hard in the chest. Did he feel that way? Was I worthy of his attention and love? Not someone to be hidden?

I lost myself in the feel of his touch. He slowly undressed me and worshipped me with his tongue and fingers before moving up the bed to notch himself at my entrance. “Do we need a condom?”

This moment felt huge. Did I trust Leo not to hurt me? My heart pounded in my chest.

“We don’t have to,” he said as he moved to grab his wallet.

I stopped him with a hand on his arm. “No. It’s okay.”

With his brow raised, he asked, “You want me bare?”

I swallowed hard. “I’m on birth control.”

He groaned as he moved back into position, and the tip of his cock slipped inside. I bit my lip against the sensation of him being inside me without a barrier for the first time. Tingles erupted over my skin as he pushed inside, filling me in a way he hadn’t before.

He lowered himself so that he braced himself on his forearms on either side of my head. His weight rested on my body, his chest pressed against mine, as he lifted his hips in slow movements to make long, measured thrusts.

With every movement, his pelvis ground against my clit, creating delicious friction. The pressure built until I was moaning into his mouth. I was surrounded by him, his scent, his touch. I couldn’t get enough.

We went over together. Then he rested his forehead against mine. “That was transcendent.”

I couldn’t think of a better word than that, and no one had ever described sex or making love quite like that. Leo set himself apart from the other guys who were only with me for sex or a good time.

He wanted me and my daughter. He was falling for me. That had to be enough for now. I’d be patient and bide my time. I had to trust that he would eventually tell his parents and Gia about me.

He moved to my side for a few seconds before pulling on his briefs and going to the bathroom in the hallway. He

returned with a washcloth.

Then he gathered me to him and asked, “Can I stay a while?” He kissed my temple. “I’ll leave before she wakes up.”

I nodded because my throat was too tight with emotion. I’d already fallen for him. I just hoped he’d get to the same place I was.

In the middle of the night, I reached for him, needing that connection, the reassurance that he was in this with me. This time, I rode him while he caressed my breasts.

Going without a condom was a show of trust for me. Manny hadn’t been there for me when I’d gotten pregnant, but then there were signs he wasn’t responsible before that happened. Leo was the opposite of Manny. I fell back asleep, hoping I wasn’t making a huge mistake.

When I woke in the morning, he was gone. The sheets were cold. He’d told me he was leaving early, and I knew it was necessary. I wasn’t ready to tell Evie our relationship was serious, not without Leo’s family and my best friend knowing. But I felt bereft.

I hated this duplicity, loving a man who couldn’t be honest with everyone in our life about what we meant to each other. He had a good reason. I just wasn’t sure how much longer I wanted to keep going on like this.

I wanted all of Leo, not just stolen moments or a few hours when everyone was sleeping. I needed to be part of his life in every way. Even if his parents never accepted me, it was better than pretending he was only a friend.

\* \* \*

The days leading up to Mr. and Mrs. G.’s trip were busy. I didn’t see much of Leo. He wanted to secure the new property before his parents left and show them that he had everything handled.

I didn't go to the next Sunday dinner. I needed space, and I couldn't bring myself to sit across the room from Leo and pretend we didn't mean anything to each other. Frankly, I was a little surprised that he could. That it was so easy for him.

He'd come to my house last Sunday night because he was happy about the developments in his work, not because of anything to do with us.

I was starting to wonder if I'd romanticized our relationship in my head. If I thought there was more to it than there was. Sure, he told me I was important to him, and he said he was falling for me, but what if he was just stringing me along and had no intentions of ever telling his parents?

When Mrs. G. called and asked me to see them off because she wanted to say good-bye to Evie, I couldn't refuse. Evie was going to miss them too. They were her de facto grandparents.

The send-off was at their house, and when I arrived, everyone was already standing outside. Evie was passed around, hugged, and kissed until she was finally in Mr. G.'s arms. "I'm going to miss you. Don't give your mother any trouble while we're gone."

"I'm not trouble," Evie said, and everyone laughed.

He kissed her cheek with a smacking sound before handing her off to Mrs. G., who hugged her tightly. Then Mr. G. hugged both of them, and Evie giggled. When Mr. G. kissed Mrs. G., Evie squirmed. "Ew. You're kissing like Leo and Mommy."

It was like time came to a stop. I felt everyone's stares as she ran to me. "Did you see? They kiss like you and Leo."

I couldn't respond because the words were stuck in my throat.

"What is she talking about?" Gia asked.

I slowly shook my head as I silently pleaded with Leo to fix it over her head.

“Why would Leo be kissing Harper?” Mrs. G. asked with a disbelieving smile. It slowly slid off her face when she saw my face. “Is it true?”

“Um. Yes?” I wasn’t sure how to handle this. We hadn’t discussed what to say or do if everyone found out, and I never anticipated that it would be like this, with everyone surrounding us. There was nowhere to hide.

“Leo, you never said you were dating anyone, much less Harper,” Mrs. G. said to him.

My cheeks flamed at her words. Everything hinged on his response, and my heart was suspended in mid-air while everyone waited for him to say something. Anything.

Leo cleared his throat but didn’t meet my eyes. “I didn’t want to say anything until it was serious.”

My face burned.

“It’s not serious? You’re fucking around with my best friend and it’s not serious? What the hell, Leo?” Gia’s voice rose with every word.

“Gia, language,” her father admonished her.

I couldn’t believe he’d care about a thing like that at a time like this. I felt like I was having an out-of-body experience, where I was watching everyone react with shock and horror but couldn’t seem to make myself move or say anything.

“It’s not like that,” Leo started again, but I’d had enough.

“Mr. and Mrs. G., have a fabulous vacation. We’ll see you when you get back.” Then I grabbed Evie and strode to my car, eager to get out of there, away from the uncomfortable sensation that Leo was going to deny what he felt for me. Or maybe he’d never really felt it at all.

No one stopped or approached me for an explanation. I knew I owed it to Gia, but this wasn’t the time or the place.

“Why is everyone upset?” Evie asked.

I finally settled on the truth. “They didn’t know that I was kissing Leo.”



Her face screwed up. “Does it matter?”

“I think they might be hurt that they didn’t know.”

Evie shrugged. “Anyone could see.”

“Maybe for you, but not when we were with them.”

“Leo likes you, and you like him.”

That was the simplified version of the story. I didn’t have the heart to tell her that adult relationships were so much more complicated. That even if he liked me, he might not pursue it because his family didn’t approve. I wasn’t ready to broach that conversation with her.

Evie wasn’t worried about what just happened. She was oblivious to the fact that Gia was upset and that Mr. and Mrs. G. were shocked by the news. She realized her words had an effect, but she’d forget about it in a few minutes.

She wouldn’t notice there was an issue until Leo stopped coming around, or we didn’t see Mr. and Mrs. G. as much. Maybe some of that could be put off with them being in Italy for the next few weeks.

When I got home, I had a few messages from Gia. Not wanting to put her off, I texted that we could meet at a playground and talk.

When I arrived, Gia was already there. She must have come straight from her parents’ house. She waited until Evie was on the play structure before she asked, “Care to tell me what that was about?”

“I don’t know what Leo told you, but we were seeing each other.”

Her forehead wrinkled. “You’re not anymore?”

“We were keeping it a secret because your brothers thought it might affect your parents’ decisions about the expansion.”

“That’s why you kept it a secret?”

I sighed. “It was more than that. You know, your parents want someone different for Leo.”

Gia paused. “What are you talking about?”

“They’re always trying to set him up with a family friend or someone from church. Remember Bianca?”

“Bianca cheated on him,” Gia said bitterly.

“Do your parents know about that?”

Gia sighed. “Knowing Leo, I doubt it.”

I turned to face her. “I never meant to hurt you or go behind your back. I know you have a rule against friends dating your brothers, and it’s a valid one. I get it. But I didn’t plan for this to happen.”

Her lips pursed. “How long?”

“We’ve been dating for a few weeks.”

“No. I mean, how long have you liked him?”

I thought back to our childhood and the way I was always aware of his presence, noticing the things he said and did and wondering if he liked me too. “Forever?”

Gia swore under her breath. “After all the times I said I couldn’t trust anyone because they always ended up liking one of my brothers. You were no different.”

“I never thought anything would come of it. But then he started hanging around more, said he liked me, and maybe had for a while but wouldn’t let himself go there because I was so close to the family.”

“That’s not an excuse. You should have said no.”

“I get it. You’re my best friend, and I never wanted to hurt you, but I like Leo. He was good to me and Evie. I fell in love with him, and I’m sorry about that, but I couldn’t change it if I tried.” It was like it was meant to be. I was barreling toward Leo my entire life, and I couldn’t stop the inevitable crash, even if I’d thrown on the emergency brakes.

“I don’t even know what to say.” Her disappointment was palpable.

“I love Leo, and I don’t know if your family will accept me. I knew that was a risk when we started seeing each other.”

“What are you talking about, *if my family will accept you?*”

“I’m not what they want. I’m not Catholic or Italian or even from a good family.”

“I don’t think that has anything to do with why we’re upset. We are upset that you hid it from everyone.”

“What did Leo say after I left?” My heart thudded in my ears.

“That he didn’t want to tell everyone unless it was serious.”

I’d heard that part. “He didn’t say anything else, like he was falling for me?”

“No, but Leo isn’t one to talk about feelings with us. If he was like that with you, then that’s not the guy we see.”

“The guy you see is who he is. I just thought things were different. That he felt the same way I did. I was stupid. I didn’t want him to hurt Evie or me, but it happened anyway.”

Gia frowned. “I’m not saying he doesn’t. He just didn’t say anything to us.”

He had his chance to declare himself in front of his family, to alleviate their concerns and legitimize our relationship, but he hadn’t. He’d stepped back.

I pushed our relationship out of my head because Gia’s friendship was important too. “Where do we stand? Do you think you could forgive me eventually?”

“I need to sort through my feelings. I feel betrayed. We’re not kids anymore. You knew what you were doing, and you kept it from me.”

I nodded miserably, knowing this result was foreseeable and preventable. If only I’d stayed away from her brother. “Will this affect my job?”

Gia’s jaw tightened. “Give me some time.”

Tears swirled in my eyes. “Of course.”

Then she walked away, and there was nothing I could do about it. The damage was already done. I’d slept with her brother, betrayed her in a way I promised I wouldn’t, like every other friend she had. She couldn’t trust me.

I wasn’t sure I trusted myself when it came to Leo. I fell for him when I knew it wasn’t a good idea. I set myself and Evie up to be hurt. I might have ruined my relationship with his parents and my best friend.

*Eighteen*



When Harper left, I wanted to run after her. I wanted to tell her that everything was going to be okay, but I wasn't positive about anything right now.

Gia was understandably upset, and she needed space when she was angry. She might come around, but it would take some time. And I wasn't sure if her relationship with Harper would ever recover. Although I hoped it would.

After Harper left, Mamma took me aside to ask me what was going on, but then Papà reminded her of their flight time. They said their good-byes and left, so we didn't get a chance to discuss it.

Everyone left after that. Only Matteo and Carlo remained behind.

"Well, that went as well as could be expected," Carlo said dryly as we went into the house to grab a drink.

I ran a hand through my hair. "I can't see how it could have gone any worse."

Matteo smiled. "It was kind of cute how everyone found out. Evie saying you kissed her mommy."

I shot him an incredulous look. "Yeah, it was adorable."

Matteo chuckled. "I mean, if everything works out, it will be a nice story to tell your future kids. *Remember that time when Evie said—*"

I held up my hands. "It's not funny."

“Too soon,” Carlo said with a smirk.

“Gia was pissed,” I said, remembering how she’d flown off the handle when she realized what Evie said.

“She’ll get over it.” Matteo didn’t take anything or anyone too seriously.

I cleared my throat. “I don’t know about that.”

Carlo shook his head. “She’s always been sensitive to her friends liking us, as if we have any control over that.”

“I think she feels betrayed, and I can’t say I blame her. That one time her friend hooked up with Matteo was awkward for everyone.”

Matteo held up his hands. “I learned my lesson. Don’t hook up with your little sister’s friends. But it seems like you didn’t.”

“I should have been able to control myself.” Now that I was on the other side, I couldn’t figure out why I hadn’t stopped myself from getting here. Why couldn’t I resist Harper? Why had I gone down this path that had the potential to ruin everything?

“Are you serious right now?” Matteo asked, grabbing a beer from my parents’ fridge.

I ran a hand through my hair. “I fucked everything up.”

He set the bottle in front of me with a loud clank. “So you’re saying that you don’t like Harper?”

“I like her.” But I didn’t feel the same lightness I usually did when I spoke of my feelings.

“You don’t love her?” Carlo asked.

When she left, I felt like my heart had been torn in two, leaving jagged edges. “I told her I was falling for her, but I think I was already there.” I was just feeling her out, seeing what she’d say, but she hadn’t responded. “What if she doesn’t feel the same way?”

“I think she does,” Carlo said.

“How do you know?” I asked him, curious if he had any inside knowledge or a way of seeing things differently.

“She was hurt when you said you didn’t want to tell us until it was serious. That’s why she left.”

“I said that?” The whole thing was a blur. I didn’t feel like I was in control of my mouth or my words. “Shit. That sounds horrible.”

“It was fucked-up,” Carlo agreed.

“You made it sound like it wasn’t serious when it obviously was,” Matteo agreed, tipping back his beer bottle.

“What is she thinking right now?” I asked, worst-case scenarios swirling in my head.

Matteo slapped my arm. “That you denounced her in front of your family.”

I braced my hands on the counter, needing to ground myself. “She’s been worried that our parents won’t accept her. That she’s not the right girl for me. That’s why we held back. It wasn’t worth the risk of her losing our family if it wasn’t the real deal.”

“Let’s be honest. You knew it was the real deal a long time ago. You were just scared to tell Gia and Mamma. Our request for you to keep it quiet was convenient for you.”

I felt sick to my stomach. “I was afraid of how they’d react. That Harper was right, and Mamma wanted someone else for me. That she’d never accept Harper, and then Harper wouldn’t feel comfortable being around us.”

We fell silent, all lost in our thoughts.

“What are you going to do now?” Matteo finally asked.

“I don’t know. I don’t know where anyone stands.”

Carlo crossed his arms over his chest. “What does it matter?”

“How can I move forward if our parents don’t approve?” Gia wasn’t as much of a concern for me as it was for Harper. I knew Gia would accept me and get over it, but Mamma? She



was strong-willed, and she wanted what she thought was best for us. Not what we wanted.

Carlo hesitated, as if he was thinking of the right thing to say. “You can care what our parents think, but you shouldn’t change your life because of their beliefs, wants, and desires. Are you living the life they want or the one you do?”

I thought about that for a few seconds. “If I don’t take into account what anyone else thinks, I want Harper and Evie.” When I let myself imagine the perfect future, those two were living in my house, filling it with love and joy and purpose. Whether we had more kids or not, I’d be happy with them.

Carlo nodded. “Then they’re the only two people you should be concerned about. Not Gia or Mamma and Papà.”

I couldn’t wrap my mind around what he was saying. A part of me wanted to follow him down this path because it held everything I wanted, but it seemed too easy. “But how can I ignore their feelings?”

“You’re not ignoring them. You’re doing what’s right for you, and that’s the only thing that matters.”

“We’ve always bowed to what Mamma wants, but then, we haven’t truly wanted anything different. We haven’t met someone who we want to spend our future with. You have,” Matteo said.

“Besides, if you go first, then it will be easier for us,” Carlo joked.

“I’m the oldest. I always go first.” And smooth the path ahead for my younger brothers. For the moment, Mamma and Papà were at the airport and would be gone for weeks. Gia would talk to me when she was ready, and she knew she didn’t have any real control over my life. If Harper was who I wanted, she’d accept it. Eventually. Besides, she wasn’t losing a friend, she was gaining a sister. And if not, it was her choice not to want to see that I was happy.

“Now, what are you going to do about it?” Matteo repeated.

“I need to talk to Harper. I need to explain to her that she’s the one I want.”

“Good luck with that,” Matteo said.

I remembered the hurt on her face when she turned away from me and left. I’d caused that pain when I was trying to be diplomatic in front of my family. I should have protected our relationship instead. “You think she’ll forgive me?”

“If you’ve established yourself in a healthy relationship, then she should hear you out,” Carlo said.

I bowed my head. “That’s not the same as forgiveness.”

“Do you think you deserve Harper and Evie?” Carlo asked.

Lifting my head, I said, “They’re amazing. I’m so lucky to be with them.”

In a rare moment of seriousness, Matteo said, “Then show them what they mean to you.”

“How much time do you think I have to do that?” I asked, a million things running through my head while I pulled up a number on my phone.

“How much time do you need? Just talk to her.” Matteo chuckled, clearly puzzled.

“I need to show her that she means everything to me. I need to make space for her in my life. I’m going to ask her to move in with me.”

Matteo huffed out a breath. “No offense. But your house is kind of a dump right now.”

“Cade’s guys have started on my place, and I told him to start with the guest room, guest bath, and kitchen.”

“Why the guest room?” Carlo asked.

“It’s for Evie. I asked Cade to prepare it for her so she could stay with us. So she’d feel welcome, like it was her home.”

“Do you think Harper will be okay living in an unfinished master?” Matteo asked.

“I needed to show her she meant something to me before that confrontation with my parents. That she wasn’t some secret or someone to hide from my family. She is everything to me. Her and Evie.” I couldn’t lose her. Not when I just realized my feelings for her.

“You’ve got a solid plan. We’re rooting for you,” Carlo said.

Matteo’s face twisted. “It’s a little sappy, but I hear women like that.”

I slapped Matteo’s shoulder. “Thankfully, you’re not out there breaking everyone’s heart.”

“Who said I’m not?” Matteo asked with a cocky grin.

We groaned.

“You’re hopeless,” I said as I hugged Carlo. “Thanks for the advice. I hope to return the favor one day.”

Carlo shook his head. “I don’t want to be twisted up over a woman.”

“You say that now...” I grinned as I headed out with the phone to my ear. “Cade, what’s the status at home? I need that guest room done sooner than I thought.”

We went over the schedule and moved a few things around. I really needed the bathroom and the kitchen to be ready. He promised the bedroom and bathroom would be done, but the kitchen would be a few more weeks. It wasn’t something that could be accelerated, and I got that.

I hoped it would be enough for Harper to understand where she always stood in my life—front and center. I wouldn’t ask her to hide again. She deserved so much more.

Now I just had to prove it to her. I wanted to reveal a finished room to Evie, so I ordered furniture and toys, telling the store I’d pick it up from the warehouse with my truck instead of waiting for it to be delivered. Evie could always change the decorations later if she didn’t like it.

Then I texted Harper.

**Leo: Can we talk?**

The bubbles popped up and then disappeared.

**Leo: Please.**

Then the phone rang, and I fumbled it. I couldn't believe she was calling me. "Harper."

"Leo." Pain filled her voice.

"Can we talk? What I said, it wasn't how I feel. But I'd like to talk to you in person."

The line was quiet and then she finally said, "I need some time."

I swallowed over the lump in my throat and all the things I needed to say to her. "I can understand that."

Harper sighed. "I talked to Gia, but it didn't go well."

At least Harper was talking to me. "You know she'll come around."

"I don't know that. She's known for holding a grudge."

"It doesn't matter what other people think."

"Doesn't it? I thought that was the point of keeping everything a secret. I should probably be apologizing to you for Evie revealing us."

"That wasn't your fault or hers. There's no need to apologize. The truth was going to come out."

"I can't think of a worse time than right before your parents' vacation. Did it mess anything up with the expansion?"

"I'm not worried about that right now." I hadn't even thought about it. The only thing that mattered was how Harper was feeling.

"I don't want to do anything to screw things up for you. I know how much you want this. Are your brothers upset?"

"They're worried about me and you, not the restaurant."

"Why?" Harper asked.

“Because at the end of the day, they love me and want the best for me.” Despite their worries about the restaurant and my parents finding out, my brothers were one hundred percent behind me. They wanted me to work things out with Harper, and that felt good. “They also said I was paving the way for them, making it easier for them to date whomever they want.”

“Did you talk to your parents after I left?” Her voice was soft.

“They had to get to the airport. But they seemed disappointed. I think they would have preferred I not date you,” I said, without even thinking. It was just a feeling I’d gotten after Evie dropped her bombshell.

“I should go.”

I couldn’t believe I’d said those thoughts out loud. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have said it like that.”

“I need some time to process everything.” Her voice was tight.

“I’m sorry, Harper. I’ve made a mess of this. But I’d like a chance to tell you how I feel in person. Would you meet with me?”

She hesitated and then finally said, “Yeah, I can do that.”

We scheduled a time to meet at my house later in the week. I hoped she hadn’t made up her mind that I was a waste of her time before that. Every time I talked to her, I said something wrong. I needed to tell her how I felt and show her what she meant to me. I just hoped it wouldn’t be too late.

*Nineteen*



**I** *think they would have preferred I not date you.*

Would it ever hurt less? Would it stop stinging as if someone stabbed me in the chest with a knife? I rubbed the ache in my chest as I got off the phone with Leo.

He wanted to talk, but I wasn't sure how much more there was to say. He was contrite, but we couldn't escape the truth. His parents didn't want him to date me. I couldn't be more than a family friend.

Aria had been in a similar situation with Finn. She wanted a relationship, but he didn't because of his parents' history of numerous divorces. They'd engaged in a casual relationship, and when the truth came out, his sister and Aria's best friend, Ireland, was mad they'd kept it from her.

Wondering how they worked through their issues, I texted Aria and asked if we could meet up to talk. I kept it vague because asking someone if you could talk about how they dated their best friend's brother wasn't a good starting-off point.

I spent the next few days working hard and trying not to think about the moment when Evie told everyone Leo was kissing her mommy. My stomach dropped out repeatedly as I replayed the shock on his parents' faces and the betrayal on Gia's.

I didn't think things could ever be the same again.

If Evie hadn't said anything, would we still be dating? I couldn't help but think we would have been happy.

Evie kept asking where Leo was, and I kept her at bay by saying he was busy at the restaurant since his parents were out of town. But that excuse would only work for so long. Even when he was busy, Leo spent time with us.

Gia and I met with a few clients virtually, using the slideshow presentation I'd prepared. The clients seemed impressed with what we had to offer, but we were still waiting for one of them to sign a contract.

On Wednesday morning, Gia came into my office. "The Forrest couple wants to speak with us again."

"They're the ones from Ohio?" I asked as I looked up from my computer, my heart rate picking up. If they wanted to talk, it meant they were considering it.

"That's right."

"What do you think is holding them back?" I asked her, needing to prepare for the meeting.

"They mentioned how most destination weddings are at all-inclusive resorts. I think they want reassurance that we'll handle all the moving pieces, even though the wedding hall and reception hall will be separate locations."

I tipped my head slightly, thinking it over. "Maybe that's our angle. We can offer multiple options and locations with the ease of an all-inclusive resort."

Gia grinned. "I like that."

I was pleased that what happened between Leo and me hadn't leaked into the workplace. Gia was professional, distant but receptive to my ideas. Our friendship was strained, but I could continue to work for her. For now, at least. At some point, it might be too awkward because our usual ease and friendship were missing.

Gia wanted to maintain a professional working relationship, and I respected that, but I missed our friendship and the ease and lightness with which we worked. I wondered if that ease filtered through to the clients.



I wasn't sure how long this arrangement could go on. And if Gia decided I needed to leave, I wasn't sure what I'd do or where I'd work. There weren't a lot of openings for someone who held a catch-all job in a small business, and most small businesses wouldn't or couldn't afford to pay me what Gia was.

But I couldn't think about finding a new job. I needed to keep the one I had.

I followed Gia into her office where she set up the virtual call on her laptop and connected with them. When the couple popped onto the screen, we both smiled like nothing had changed, even though everything had. There was a stiffness to our interaction now.

"Ian and Seyona. It's so nice to see you two again."

"Same here." Seyona smiled brightly.

"Do you have some questions for us?" I asked, keeping my tone light.

"We just want to make sure that if we sign with you, it will be as seamless as possible for us. We don't want to be the ones coordinating vendors and the hall. We want to enjoy the day without any administrative details." Ian relayed the information, but I had a feeling he was referring to his bride.

"We can handle everything. We help you choose the location of the ceremony, the reception, your colors, linens, and music. Then we follow up with the vendors and make sure everything is ready for the big day so you can relax."

The bride's troubled gaze eased as Gia went over how things would work.

"Thank you for easing our minds about this. We'd like to move forward with you," Ian said, and I breathed a sigh of relief.

We set up several meetings for them to pick their ideal location, decorations, and other items, then we'd handle everything else.

Seyona leaned forward. “What about the dress? Should I order it here or there?”

“That’s up to you. If you pick one near you, just make sure it will come in time for you to travel here. I have a seamstress on call if you have any issues at the ceremony.”

“That’s convenient,” Seyona said.

“I assure you, there’s no complication or issue that we haven’t already handled. Our job is to take care of everything so that you can relax and enjoy your day.”

“That sounds amazing,” Seyona said to us and then focused on her fiancé. “I feel so much better after talking to you. And we’ve had a chance to look over the contract. We’d like to get started as soon as possible.”

We went over a few more details before hanging up with them.

“That’s a relief. One destination wedding under contract.” Now we just needed a few more to ensure that we could weather the leaner months.

“I couldn’t have done it without you,” Gia said softly.

“I think you would have figured out something. You’re so smart,” I said to her, a little uncomfortable with her praise.

“I don’t know that I would have. I was so stressed and preoccupied with what Silas was doing; I couldn’t see the big picture. It’s like I couldn’t see the possibilities.”

“I’m glad I could help.” She was worried about her business, and I was sleeping with her brother. She hadn’t said that, and she was genuinely appreciative, so I wasn’t sure why I was thinking about Leo.

“I wanted to let you know that whatever’s going on between you and Leo won’t affect your job here. I’m not that kind of person. I hire people because they’re qualified, and I don’t want to lose you. Your working here has nothing to do with our friendship. You’ve more than proven yourself.”

“I have always wondered if you didn’t give me the job as a favor to me or a handout,” I said, voicing my biggest fear out

loud.

“I wouldn’t do that. You deserve it,” Gia said firmly.

“Thank you.” It meant a lot to me that I’d earned this job on my own merit. I might have become known to Gia because we were friends, but she saw something in me. She hadn’t given me the job because we were friends.

I was almost to the door when Gia said my name.

“Yes?” I asked as I turned to face her.

“You deserve Leo too. If you love each other.”

I smiled sadly. “I do love him. But he hasn’t told me how he feels.” He said he was falling for me, but I wasn’t sure if he had.

“He wouldn’t have pursued anything with you if you weren’t important to him,” Gia said confidently.

“He didn’t want to risk hurting anyone in his family. I know your parents would never approve of us.” I couldn’t get Leo’s words out of my head.

Gia frowned. “I’m not sure that’s true. I mean, Mamma can be vocal about what she wants, but that doesn’t mean she won’t accept someone else if it’s who Leo wants.”

“We haven’t really discussed it, so I’m not sure what’s going on. We’re supposed to talk tomorrow night.”

“Hear him out. Give him a chance to explain what he was thinking. Guys can be out of touch with their emotions.”

“Would you be okay if we dated?” I wasn’t even sure that was what Leo wanted, but I had to be sure.

Gia smiled sadly. “It doesn’t matter what I think, and I wouldn’t come between you two if it’s what you wanted. I’m not saying I wasn’t hurt that it happened, and you kept it a secret—”

“I’m sorry, Gia. I didn’t want to hurt you, but that’s exactly what happened.” The worst part was that we both knew this would happen, and we did it anyway.

“I don’t think things are that black and white. We can’t help who we like.” Then her eyes clouded over.

Did Gia like someone she shouldn’t? Was she in a similar situation where she wanted someone she couldn’t have? I couldn’t help but think of Silas. There was something there, even if it was purely physical, but he was her brother’s best friend. Was she sympathetic to my situation because she liked Silas?

As soon as the idea entered my head, I dismissed it. Gia wouldn’t sleep with a man she saw as her main competitor. She always spoke of him as if he were her enemy. There was no way she’d give in to the physical attraction.

“I love Leo, but I’m not sure he feels the same way or that it’s worth hurting everyone he loves to be with me.”

“You won’t know if you don’t talk to him.”

I finally nodded and left the room, wondering what had just happened. I wished I’d have clarified things a bit further because it almost sounded like Gia was okay with me dating her brother. She was hurt by my betrayal, and it would take her some time to get over it, but she wanted her brother to be happy.

Was a future with Leo possible? Hope soared in my chest before I pulled back because I wasn’t sure what Leo was thinking or how he felt. For all I knew, I might be in this alone. He might not feel the same or, even worse, he loved my daughter but not me.

I spent the afternoon corresponding via email with Seyona regarding the contract and the next steps to plan her wedding. By the time I was supposed to meet with Aria, my head was throbbing.

She’d responded to my text, saying she could meet me at Max’s. She was already sitting on a barstool when I arrived. I sat on the empty one next to her. “Thanks for meeting me here.”

She turned slightly on her seat. “Of course. I haven’t been out with friends in a while.”

We ordered drinks and then I said, “I wanted to talk to you because Ireland is your best friend, and you’re dating her brother.”

Aria laughed. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t make light of it because it wasn’t funny when Finn and I were hooking up. We were worried about what Ireland and Gia would think and what would happen at work. In the end, it was fine. But you don’t know when you’re in the middle of it.” Then she frowned. “Why? Are you in a similar situation?”

“I’ve been seeing Gia’s brother, Leo.”

She whistled. “Whew. You’re brave. Is that her oldest brother?”

I nodded. “The one who manages the pizzeria.”

She tipped her head to the side. “Does Gia know?”

“She does now. Evie said something in front of her and the family.”

Aria took a gulp of her mixed drink. “Yikes. I bet that was awkward.”

“It was, and I don’t know how his parents feel—other than Leo saying they don’t want him to date someone like me.”

Aria frowned. “What’s that supposed to mean? *Someone like you.*”

“I’m not Italian or Catholic. I don’t come from a good family.” It hurt even more saying it out loud. None of it should matter, but it did.

“Finn’s parents had been divorced so many times they didn’t have any opinion on our relationship. I was concerned about my job because there was that no-fraternization policy, and I worried I’d lose my friendship with Ireland. We were roommates at that point.”

“I remember.”

“Ireland was mad that I thought I wasn’t good enough for Finn.” Aria played with the straw in her drink.

“I didn’t know you felt that way,” I said, surprised she’d felt the same.

Aria nodded. “Oh yeah. I grew up in a trailer park, and Finn had a trust fund. We were from two different worlds.”

“How did you get past that?” My heart rate picked up slightly.

“I had to realize that I *am* good enough. I’m more than enough, just as I am. I didn’t need a college degree or a certain income to feel good about myself. That changed everything.”

“I feel like a charity case. I live in the Giovannis’ apartment over the pizzeria. I worked at the restaurant, and then Gia gave me a job.”

“You know you more than deserve that job. You’re invaluable around there.”

I smiled. “I’m starting to get that.”

“Gia may have hired you initially because you were friends, but you’re great at your job. We couldn’t do it without you. There are a lot of moving parts, and you keep everything and everyone moving smoothly.”

“It was hard to see at first.”

“That’s because you revert to your old way of thinking—that you’re not good enough. That you never will be. But you have to tap into who you are now, and you’re a badass.”

I laughed with her. “You think?”

“Oh yeah. You’re raising Evie on your own and doing an amazing job at Happily Ever Afters. You’re doing it. It’s not because of handouts or friendships. You’re not a charity case. You’ve worked hard for everything you have.”

A sense of pride flowed through me. “Thank you. I needed to hear that.”

Aria tapped her finger on her chin. “Ireland said something else to me. You can only love someone else once you learn to love and appreciate yourself.”

It had taken some time, but I was starting to see what everyone else did. I was successful in my own right, and people needed me. People weren't handing me things. I was doing it on my own.

"Where do you and Leo stand now?"

I sipped my drink. "We are going to talk tomorrow. I'm not sure what he's going to say."

"You go in there with your head held high, and you tell him how you feel. If he doesn't feel the same way, then walk away. You're stronger than that," Aria said confidently.

"I don't need him, but I want him. I love him." So much it physically hurt to be in this state of not knowing how he felt and where he stood.

"If he doesn't feel the same way about you, you'll move on and be stronger for it."

"Hell yes, I will." We cheered and clinked glasses, and I felt relaxed in a way I hadn't in a long time. No matter what happened with Leo, I'd be okay.

He'd still be in our lives. The Giovannis would always be like a second family to me, even if Leo decided I wasn't what he wanted. It might look a little different in the future. I might spend less time at their house and working at the pizzeria. But I was already planning on moving out of their apartment. I would always be appreciative of their support, but it was time for me to be more independent.

As Aria and Gia said, I was a strong, independent woman. I didn't need Leo Giovanni in my life, but I sure as hell wanted him.

*Twenty*





**T**onight, I was supposed to see Leo to discuss what happened and, I suppose, what it meant for our future.

I'd spent a lot of time thinking about what I wanted, and I knew how I felt about him.

The only question was, did he feel the same? Was I someone he could see himself with? Did he love me the way I loved him?

I thought there was chemistry, but what if I imagined it or it was all one-sided? I was driving myself crazy. I'd offered to find a sitter for Evie, but Leo said to bring her along, that he had something to show her.

I hoped he wasn't going to show her the completed playhouse and then say good-bye to us. That wouldn't be fair to either of us. If he intended to break things off, why would he want Evie present?

On the drive over, my heart rate picked up, and the knot in my stomach grew. Leo was standing on the porch when we arrived and opened the door for Evie when we parked.

"Leo!" she cried as she threw herself into his arms. "I missed you."

"I missed you too. I don't like to be away from you."

"Me neither. Mommy said you've been super-duper busy with the pizza shop."

"That's right. It's tough with my parents out of town."

"You work hard," Evie said, and Leo winced.

If the expansion went forward as he planned, I assumed he would be even busier.

There were so many details to discuss, but first, I needed to hear how he felt. Leo leaned over and kissed my cheek. “I missed you too.”

His lips against my skin were barely more than a feather of a touch, but it left me aching for more. Leo held Evie’s hand as we headed inside.

“I have something to show you,” Leo said carefully, as his uncertain gaze met mine over her head.

“Is it a surprise?”

“I guess you could say that. I’ve been planning it for a while, but I asked my contractor to speed up the timeline.”

The entrance to the kitchen was covered with a tarp to keep the dust from settling in the rest of the house, but Leo kept walking past it and up the stairs.

He stopped in front of a closed door. “This is what I wanted to show you.”

Then he pushed open the door before I could ask what it was.

Evie gasped as she entered the room. There was a white bed with a pink canopy over it, a dresser, a bookshelf filled with books, and a desk. Evie immediately ran to a bin full of stuffed animals and toys. “This is for me?”

“It’s all for you.”

“And I can sleep here?”

Leo winked at me. “That’s what I wanted to talk to your mother about. Can you play for a few minutes while I talk to her?”

“Uh-huh,” Evie said as she sank to the floor, a stuffed animal under her arm and a puzzle in front of her.

“Hopefully, that will keep her occupied for a few minutes,” Leo said as he took my hand and drew me down the hall to his room.

“I don’t understand. Why would you renovate a room for Evie?” I was struggling to catch up.

He closed the door and gestured for me to sit on the end of the bed.

Refusing to sit, I crossed my arms over my chest. “Talk to me. What’s going on?”

Leo stepped closer, his hands touching my stiff shoulders. “I should have told you this a long time ago. I lied to you when I told you I was falling for you.”

My shoulders lowered as I took in his words.

“I wasn’t falling for you.” Then he hesitated, his gaze meeting mine. “I was already there. I love you. I love your daughter. I see a future with both of you in it.”

Hope soared that he was saying all the right things, but I still felt confused.

“I told Cade to renovate that room for Evie before I said what I did in front of my parents. I need you to understand that I realized I loved you before she told Mamma and Papà about us. When I said what I did, I was trying to ease the blow to my parents. But that was stupid. We should have been honest with them. We never should have hidden who we are. We might have gotten some pushback, but I’ve been certain about you from the start. I love you, Harper.”

I dropped my arms, needing to touch him. “I love you too.”

Leo pulled me into his arms. “I feel like I’ve been waiting forever for you to say that. I wasn’t sure if you felt the same way.”

Relief swirled in my chest. “I’ve loved you for a while. I just wasn’t sure where you stood or if I could trust it. I worried that if our relationship came between you and your family, or messed with your business, you’d walk away.”

“You’re more important than any business issues. I’ll figure it out with you by my side. If my parents are upset with you, then my brothers and I will figure out a way to open a

business without them. Maybe that's a better idea." He paused as if he'd only just thought of that. "But I don't want to talk about that. I want to talk about us. I want to alleviate any concerns you have about how I feel and what I want."

I smiled softly. "I think you've done that."

His shoulders relaxed, and his face softened. "I'm sorry I asked you to keep us a secret. It was wrong, and it wasn't how I felt about you. It was like as soon as I figured out that I liked you, everything fell into place. I had this strong attraction to you, and then we built this connection. It felt right."

"I love that." I loved that he was pouring his emotions out to me.

"Never again, Harper. It's the three of us on the same team going forward. Whatever happens, we handle it together."

After talking to Gia and Aria, I figured out that I held all the power in any relationship. I had the ability to walk away, to demand better for myself. If Mr. and Mrs. G. made unreasonable demands on Leo and on us, I wouldn't stand for it. If they wanted to be in our lives, they'd need to accept us.

Leo palmed my cheek, and I leaned into the warmth of his touch. "I missed you. I missed us. I wanted to talk to you sooner, but I figured it was better to show you how I felt, and I needed a few extra days to get Evie's room ready."

"Do you want us to live here?" Or was the room just for us to visit?

"I wanted to ask you to move in with me, but I wasn't sure if you'd be ready. We have this room in case Evie needed some space to herself when she visited. I figured I could ease you two into the idea."

I smiled up at him. "So, you had this whole plan?"

"I want you two in my life, and I'll do anything to get what I want."

Leo wanted me. The love poured over me in waves, sending tingles through my limbs. I wrapped my hands around

his neck, pressing my breasts against his hard chest. He dipped his forehead to rest on mine. “You’re mine now, Harper.”

“You’re mine too.”

His lips twitched. “And Evie’s, if she’ll have me.”

“I’m pretty sure you have her wrapped around your finger.” She and Leo always had a special bond.

Leo let out a breath. “I hope so. I love her so much. I didn’t know what I was going to do if you didn’t forgive me.”

Our foreheads touched. “We’re here now.”

“Mommy. Leo. Come play with me!” Evie yelled from her room.

“Are you ready for this?” I asked as he kissed me and then pulled back.

“You mean a full house, love and laughter, and so much joy?” Leo asked as we headed down the hall toward Evie.

“When you say it like that...” It sounded beautiful.

Leo lifted our joined hands and kissed mine. “*Bellisima*. We’ll live a beautiful life.”

“I think so too,” I said softly, never thinking that this could be my life. That I could be so happy. That there was someone out there who fit me perfectly. It might have taken us a long time to realize it, and the circumstances made everything more difficult, but he was with me the whole time.

“Come on,” Evie said as we stood staring at each other in the doorway. “Play this with me.”

She’d found a new card game, and we sat on the floor with her to figure out the rules. We spent the evening exploring her new room and the completed playhouse, cooked dinner together, and watched a movie until Evie fell asleep.

When the movie ended, Leo carried her to her bed, and we tucked her in together. I loved this version of our lives. The one where we shared our joys and burdens. We celebrated the wins and figured out the issues together.

Leo turned on a night-light I hadn't noticed earlier and grabbed my hand as we headed toward his room.

He pulled me inside and shut the door behind us. "So, what do you say? Will you officially move in with me? Do you think Evie's ready?"

I nodded. "I'll talk to her tomorrow and make sure she understands."

"We can still use the old address for her school, and I can help with drop-off and pickup."

"You'd do that?" I asked, suddenly overwhelmed with emotion.

"Evie's mine now too. If she'll have me, of course. Even if she didn't adjust to me being in her life, I'd go slow and hope that, over time, she'd adjust."

"You're perfect."

"I think we established this week that I'm anything but. Far from it, actually. But I want to be perfect for you. I want to be the man you can count on."

Being the man I could count on didn't mean he was perfect. It meant he tried his best, and that's all I could ask for. I dropped his hand and pressed my palms against his chest and then wrapped my arms around his neck, pulling us closer. "I can't seem to get close enough to you." I felt like crawling inside his body.

"Mmm. I know just the thing that will help you."

"Yeah?" I asked with a raised brow as he easily lifted me and set me down on the bed. He remained standing so he could draw his T-shirt over his head, unbuckle his belt, and push his pants down until he was naked.

With one knee on the bed, he leaned over me, kissing and touching me. "You need my hands, my mouth, or my tongue?"

"All of the above," I said, between kisses.

He pushed up my shirt, his large palm resting on my stomach. Not going high or low enough for where I wanted

him but building the anticipation for what was to come.

He whispered Italian words as he kissed my exposed skin, slowly undressing me until I was naked. He seemed overcome with emotion. It was almost like he couldn't believe that I was his.

The feeling was mutual. I pulled him to me, never wanting to stop kissing or touching him.

He paid extra attention to my breasts, sucking on my nipples, working me up until I was writhing beneath him.

When he finally moved lower, dropping kisses onto my stomach, I widened my legs to accommodate him.

“Watch me while I make love to your pussy.”

I grew wetter at his dirty words and moved until I was on my elbows, watching him. He licked and sucked, adding his fingers until it was too much, and my head fell back.

When he stopped, I groaned in protest.

“I said to watch me.”

“Or you'll stop?” I whined.

“Yes, *piccola*.”

My skin flushed, and my entire body strung taut, but I complied. “Please, Leo.”

“I want to pleasure you, and I want you to watch me while I do it.”

I bit my lip at his honesty. I loved this version of ourselves. Where we were open and honest. “I'm watching.”

His eyes held a warning and a glint of a challenge. He worked me back up until my thighs were trembling with anticipation. “I can't wait any longer. Leo—”

And then he added two fingers in a motion similar to how he'd fuck me with his cock. When he sucked my clit hard, I exploded. There were no other words for it. My body spasmed endlessly around him, and I collapsed onto the bed, overwhelmed.

He moved up my body, dropping soft kisses before his cock nudged my entrance. I wanted more. I wanted him to fill me up.

He eased a hand under my back and lifted me so that I straddled his lap, and he slowly lowered me over his cock. It filled me inch by inch, feeling so good.

He eased me up with his hands on my hips and then lowered me down again. I didn't think it was possible to feel the start of another orgasm, but there was something about this angle that touched that spot inside me. Each movement built until I was wild with need. I whimpered in frustration, and Leo asked, "Do you need to come?"

I nodded, my muscles tense.

He shifted me forward slightly so that each time I lowered myself over his cock, his pelvis ground against my clit. The sensation grew until it burst through my body, my walls spasming around his cock.

"*Bellissima*," Leo murmured, his mouth on my neck, kissing and licking and biting. His grip on my hips tightened as he went over the edge.

I wrapped my arms around his neck and slumped against him. I couldn't believe I was in his house, that I'd agreed to move in with him, that this was our life and our future. It seemed so amazing and overwhelming at the same time.

"I've got you," Leo said, his words tickling my skin. "And I'm never letting you go."

"Just what a girl wants to hear," I said as he lifted me and lowered me to the bed.

He moved so that he was next to me, and I curled into his arms. "We're in this together."

"Forever," I said, no longer afraid of scaring him off or saying the wrong thing. He loved me.

"You're everything I've ever wanted. You've given me somebody to love."



I touched the skin of his face. “Somebody to love.” It was so much more than that. When you loved with your whole heart, everything seemed brighter and easier to handle.

# *Epilogue*



**W**e spent the next few weeks, while my parents were in Italy, running the Annapolis location and planning for the new one. We'd put in an offer on the Italian restaurant that had closed, and it was quickly accepted.

We were trying something new and hoping it would work out. Even if the business venture wasn't successful, I couldn't view it as a failure. But I was feeling confident that it would be. I'd spent so much time envisioning this second restaurant, I couldn't see it failing.

We already knew how to run a business, how to cut costs, and how to market to the public. We'd take everything we'd learned over the years, and everything that worked in the first store, and make the second store even better.

Despite the workload, I managed to quit at a normal time to get home to Harper and Evie. My brothers were willing to take the evening and weekend shifts so I could be with my family. Neither of them was seeing anyone, and they preferred sleeping in and working nights.

The schedule worked out for everyone. I hired Cade's company to renovate the restaurant too. It had a lot of things we needed, but I wanted the dining room to have more of a family feel. We added a fireplace for the winter and lots of windows for light. There was even room for an outdoor patio and a room in the back for larger parties. It was the perfect location to expand.

Knowing the importance of opening quickly, I paid Cade extra to expedite the renovation, and we were lucky we didn't run into any permit issues. Mainly because the first restaurant had already done most of the heavy lifting, and our changes were cosmetic.

When my parents arrived home, we met them at their house with a feast. Mamma was always taking care of us, and this was our chance to take care of her. I just wasn't sure how she'd react to seeing Harper with me. I braced myself for her reaction.

Mamma hugged everyone but paused when she reached me and Harper. "This is the real deal, isn't it? You love him?"

Harper smiled, a flush coming over her skin. "I do."

"He will always be my baby."

"I know," Harper said softly. "And we'll take good care of him."

"And my son will care for you. He has a huge heart, and I'm happy he has someone to share it with. I don't know why you thought you had to keep it a secret—" Mamma gave me a stern look.

"We weren't sure you'd approve—" I began and then broke off when she continued.

"That Bianca was no good for you. My Harper is perfect for you and our family. She fits, and now we can keep Evie forever."

I wondered if she'd relaxed on vacation and realized happiness was all that mattered. If so, Evie's slip was perfect timing.

Mamma hugged Evie next, and when she let her go, she asked, "Will there be more grandchildren?"

I bristled. "It's still early in our relationship. We haven't discussed—"

"I'd love more children." Harper smiled, wrapping a hand around my arm.

“That’s my girl,” Mamma said, clearly pleased with her answer as she moved on to embrace Matteo.

“Are you serious?” I asked her.

Harper frowned. “I want more children. I thought you did too?”

My heart pounded in my chest. “I do. I just wasn’t sure where you stood.”

“Evie wants a sibling, and I love kids. I always saw myself with a big family like this one.” She gestured around the kitchen where my family talked and laughed and loved.

“I want to give you that. I want to give you everything,” I said, cupping her jaw and then kissing her.

When I lifted my head, she smiled sweetly. “You already have.”

That’s when we realized the room around us was quiet. They were watching us, Mamma with tears in her eyes. Even Gia’s expression had softened.

Mamma clasped her hands. “I’m so happy. Now, when are you two going to settle down with a nice girl?”

Matteo and Carlo groaned, and everyone laughed.

We ate dinner and looked at the photographs they took of their vacation while Evie sat in Papà’s lap. They treated Evie as if she was already their grandchild, and I intended to make it official. It was the best night. Everything was right in the world and in my family.

I thought it might take a while for my parents to come around, but their vacation must have helped. Maybe they liked the idea of retirement and were ready to hand more off to me and my brothers.

At the end of the night, Harper helped Evie go to the bathroom, and Papà pulled me aside. “I wanted to talk to you about your girls.”

“What about them?” I asked, sensing a lecture.

“You’ll take care of them like we have all these years. You’ll remind them of how much they are loved.”

I nodded. “Of course.”

“They couldn’t have found a better man. I’m proud of you.” Papà clasped my shoulder, and I felt the weight of his words.

I appreciated the sentiment even more because he wasn’t referring to my accomplishments, but rather my capacity to love. “Thank you, Papà.”

“You’ll marry Harper. Make Evie your daughter. My granddaughter.”

“I plan to.” There was always the issue of her biological father, Manny. I didn’t think he’d ever give up his parental rights, but I intended to be the father Evie needed. The one who was present and attended all her important events. I’d be there for her, and when Evie needed something, she’d come to me. There was no doubt in my mind.

Papà nodded, satisfied. “You’ll be good for her.”

I felt like I was flying. I had my parents’ approval. I was in love for the first and the last time in my life, and I had a daughter. The responsibilities were bigger, but I felt ready to meet the challenges. I was excited for what life had to offer.

\* \* \*

The restaurant was finally completed, and we were christening the place with a party.

Gia was here. She planned the event and even brought her coworkers, since they helped with the flowers, the cake, and the photography.

As soon as Papà gave us the go-ahead to move forward with the expansion, we conferred with Silas. He had good business sense, and his knowledge was invaluable. He’d bought the resort and renovated it to what it was now.

I knew Gia wouldn't like him here since she saw him as her main competitor in the wedding business, but he was a friend.

It was Gia's idea to have the door wrapped in a large ribbon and Mamma and Papà cut it for us. Abby took photographs that she said she'd send to the local papers, and I wanted to frame them for the walls.

Inside, the dining room had plush maroon booths, dark wood paneling, and a fireplace in the middle of the room. It was warm and inviting, everything I hoped it would be.

The walls were covered in family photos of us as kids, playing in the sprinkler, coloring in Papà's office, and later, greeting customers at the original restaurant. It was the first time Papà had seen the final renovated space, and everyone fell silent as we waited for his reaction.

"You did good. It's fantastic. It has the Giovanni feel." That was high praise from my father.

It was hard for him to give us the space to create something on our own, but he'd let us do our thing, and we'd met his expectations, maybe even exceeded them.

Papà hugged us as Gia poured the champagne glasses and handed them around. She even had a glass filled with juice for Evie.

Gia raised her glass. "Let's toast to Giovanni's."

She could have been referring to family, the restaurants, or everything. It fit perfectly.

"May you have the success we did with the first location. May you be happy in your relationships. May you find love like we have," Papà said to Mamma as everyone clinked glasses and drank.

I waited for the glasses to lower before I turned to Harper and said loudly so everyone could hear, "I already found love."

Here, in front of our family and friends, I wanted to declare my love for Harper and Evie. I'd already asked Evie's

permission for me to ask her mother to marry me.

Harper's eyes widened. "Leo, what are you doing?"

I lowered to one knee and held her hand in mine. "Harper, I've loved you far longer than you think. I think I fell in love with you the day you came into our lives. Back then, I wanted to protect you and care for you. But I pushed those feelings down deep because you were too young and Gia's best friend. But I'm so glad I lowered those walls because loving you is the best thing that's ever happened to me. I want to spend the rest of my life making you and Evie happy. Harper, will you marry me?"

She covered her racing heart with the palm of her free hand. "Yes, I'll marry you."

The room erupted into cheers, and I stood, lifting Harper in the air so that her hair fell around me, shielding us from the others. "I can't believe you proposed in front of everyone."

"I wanted everyone to know how I felt." I kissed her and slowly lowered her to the floor. And then I pulled out the ring box and opened it to hushed gasps as it sparkled under the lights.

Harper covered her shocked gasp with her hands. "It's beautiful."

"Not as beautiful as you," I said as I took her right hand and slid it onto her ring finger. Then I kissed her again.

When I felt a tug on my pants, we broke apart and looked down at Evie. "Me too."

She raised her hands to me, and I lifted her too. "I have something for you."

"You do?" Evie asked, her eyes wide.

"Can you get the other box in my pocket?" I asked Harper.

She smiled; her eyes filled with excitement as she grabbed the second velvet box.

"This is for you," I said as Harper opened it. It was a necklace with three rings. "One for me, one for your mommy,



and one for you. Together, we're a family."

"I will marry you," Evie said as she tightened her arms around my neck, and everyone laughed.

She was a little confused as to who got married to who, but she had the right sentiment. She was ours, and we were a family.

We had a few more seconds as a family, enjoying the moment, just the three of us, before everyone converged with hugs and congratulations. More champagne was poured. There was talk and laughter. It was just like Mamma and Papà's kitchen. There was so much love in the air. I couldn't help but want the same for my sister and my brothers.

I had a feeling love was more likely for Gia, since my brothers were still playing the field. Then the door opened, and Silas walked in.

Gia's eyes moved to him, and her mouth opened slightly before she recovered. "What are you doing here?"

I set Evie down and quickly walked over to them, wanting to avoid an argument, if possible. Gia was a bit of a hothead, and Silas never backed down when confronted, especially when it was her.

Silas nodded toward me. "Your brothers invited me."

Gia's hands were on her hips, and if I wasn't mistaken, Silas's gaze over her was appreciative. Before I could process that, she said, "You're not welcome here."

"Gia, be nice. We're friends with Silas. Whatever beef you have with him, can you let it go for one night? Can you just be happy for us?"

Gia's face softened as Evie ran up to me. "Can you put the necklace on me?"

I squatted down in front of her. "Of course."

I moved her hair and clasped it behind her neck. "Do you like it?" Evie looked up at Silas.

“It’s beautiful, just like you,” Silas said, and I swear Gia’s face softened even more.

Then Evie smiled brightly. “Leo’s marrying my mommy.”

Silas’s gaze met mine. “Did I miss something?”

“I just asked Harper to marry me.”

Silas grinned and pulled me in for a hug. “Congratulations. Although I didn’t even realize you were dating.”

“I’ve liked her forever, and when I finally realized she was the one for me, everything fell into place.”

“That’s great,” Silas said.

“What do you know about love?” Gia asked Silas.

I wanted to tell Gia to give it a rest, to leave him alone, but I was a little curious as to why she was asking.

“I can like it for other people,” Silas said.

He was frequently photographed with women at the events at his resort, but I didn’t think he’d dated any of them seriously. He was too busy with work.

She nodded as if he’d said something she agreed with.

“This place looks great,” Silas said.

I clasped his shoulder. “Thanks for helping us. We couldn’t have done it without you.”

“You asked Silas for business help? Why didn’t you come to me?” Gia asked, clearly offended.

“You don’t own a restaurant,” I said tightly, knowing this confrontation was inevitable.

“I own a business.”

“It’s different,” Silas began.

And before the conversation could degrade any further, with Silas saying that wedding planning wasn’t a business to be taken seriously, I asked, “Do you want a tour?”

“I can walk around while you enjoy time with your fiancée.”

“Silas, it’s so good to see you again.” Harper hugged him. Silas had been around the house as much as Harper when we were growing up, so it was always odd to me that he and Gia didn’t get along. But then, maybe he was like another brother to her. I preferred that idea to the one where Gia secretly lusted after my best friend.

There was zero chance I’d be okay with Silas hooking up with my sister. The idea made me shudder. But there was no way that was a possibility. Gia hated him.

“When can we get out of here?” I asked Harper as Silas walked away, and Gia followed him. I wondered if I should stay with the two of them and referee, but I had other things to do. I wrapped an arm around Harper’s shoulder, and she placed a palm on my chest.

“This is your party. We’re celebrating your success.”

“I want to celebrate us and our engagement.” I loved the diamond on her finger; it declared her to be mine.

“Me too, but there’s plenty of time for that.”

I touched her hand. “Do you love the ring?”

“I loved that you proposed in front of family, and I adore the ring. It’s exactly what I would have dreamed of.”

I knew she never thought any of this was possible for her, but I wanted to change that. “You deserve everything you want in life. It doesn’t matter how you were brought up or who your parents were. Besides, you’re a part of my family.” I didn’t add *now* because she’d always been a Giovanni.

“I know that.”

I kissed her, knowing we were surrounded by the love of our family and friends. Nothing could ever come between us. This was love. This was life, and I couldn’t wait to start mine with Harper and Evie. It was her and me forever. “*Io e te per sempre.*”

I hope you loved Harper and Leo’s story! To read more about their happily ever after, download their [bonus epilogue](#).

Gia and Silas’s story is next in [\*Everything About You!\*](#) Silas Sharpe is enemy number one—my biggest competitor and my brothers’ best friend. It was supposed to be a onetime thing, but in true Silas Sharpe fashion, he refused to give up until he had the one thing that had eluded him for years—me.

Want to read the first three books of the Ever After Series? Get the [Special Edition Box Set, only available on Lea’s Shop.](#)

“If you’ll excuse me, I’m here to enjoy the wedding.”

Her hair was pulled back in some complicated knot that bared her neck and shoulders. Her dress wrapped around her body in a way that made me want to unravel and discover her secrets.

Gia brushed past me, her floral scent lingering in the air as she strode with purpose down the aisle toward my hotel.

Irritation burned in my gut as I followed her. I hadn’t known *she’d* be here. Gia Giovanni was my best friends’ younger sister and the woman who never failed to spark every one of my competitive instincts.

I couldn’t believe she’d shown up at one of my weddings. As the owner of a wedding planning service, Happily Ever Afters, she was my primary competitor when it came to weddings.

I kept a wedding planner on staff, Hannah, and didn’t allow couples to use any other planner. A few years ago, Gia came to me with her offer to plan weddings for her brides at my resort. I could torture myself by working with the woman who drove me crazy, or I could distance myself from her. I didn’t need the temptation.

I loved the Giovanni family, and the last thing I’d ever do was mess around with their youngest daughter and sister, no matter how much I wanted to usher her into the nearest closet and have my way with her. She was off-limits. Forbidden. And it only made her more attractive.

Gia opened the door to head inside the hotel. I grabbed it just in time, and she looked back at me in surprise.

“What are you really doing here?” I hissed into her ear.

I stood so close to her that I felt the ever-so-slight tremble in her body.

She pulled away from me, but I followed her, looking for somewhere I could talk to her alone. When I spotted a corner covered by a large potted plant, I grabbed her elbow and guided her there.

She looked up at me with a challenge in her eyes. “Why do you think I’m here?”

I braced my hand above her head. “To check me out.”

I’d clearly lost my mind because I was fairly sure she was here to scope out my five-star resort, not get in my pants, but I loved the way her eyes flashed with red-hot anger. Getting a rise out of Gia had always been easy and unbelievably satisfying.

She placed the palm of her hand on my chest, right above my pounding heart, as if to push me away. Instead, her fingers curled around the material of my shirt, making my heart race. “You wish.”

I smirked. “I wouldn’t touch my friends’ younger sister.”

She tipped her head to the side. “Then why did you drag me into this corner?”

“I won’t let you get away with whatever you’re up to,” I growled, a little distracted by her proximity.

She crossed her arms over her chest, pushing the globes of her breasts higher. “*I’m* not up to anything.”

One blonde strand of hair fell from her updo and curled over her forehead. I wondered if the dyed-blond hair was an act of rebellion from her Italian family. I swept it aside, loving the flash of awareness in her eyes as my fingertips brushed over her forehead. She wasn’t immune to me. “You’re always up to something.”

She cocked her head. “Wouldn’t you love to know what it is?”

“That’s why I’m standing here.” I moved closer to her, wanting to press my body against hers. I wanted to trace a trail

of kisses down her neck, over her collarbone, and lower. I wanted to tug down the bodice of her gown so that her breasts spilled over. I bet Gia wore sexy-as-hell lingerie.

I'd gathered important details about her over the years. She was feisty, quick to start a fight, and highly effective at ending one with her sharp tongue. She always rose to a challenge, and I seemed to be the ultimate one.

I lowered my head, breathing in her scent, floral with a hint of something spicy, and her breath hitched. I let my breath trail over the shell of her ear.

“What are you doing?” Her voice was shaky.

“You’ve never been seduced?” I taunted as my pulse kicked into overdrive. There was a roaring in my ears that drowned out my good reason and any sense of self-preservation.

“Is that what this is? A seduction?” Her voice was light as air. She tipped her head slightly so I had more access to her neck.

I cupped the back of her head, giving in to my desires, and sucked hard on her neck. She moaned softly into my ear, and it was the most beautiful sound I'd ever heard. I would enjoy making this woman come apart. It would be the greatest challenge of my life.

I lifted my lips slightly and said, “We could be so good together.”

Her fingers tangled in the hair at the back of my neck, and she pressed her tits against my chest. “That’s a bad idea.”

Her words said one thing, but her body was saying another.

“But so good,” I said as I kissed her neck and then her shoulder, not remembering any reason why I shouldn't be touching and kissing her. I couldn't remember anything except for the hum of desire beneath my skin and the throbbing of my cock. I wanted her in a way I hadn't wanted anyone before.

Then she nipped the underside of my jaw, and everything inside me ran molten hot.

“Fuck. I want you.”

She pulled away, her eyes flashing with irritation. “You can’t have me. I’m not some prize to be won.”

“I never said you were.” I pulled back, a little confused about her reaction but knowing I shouldn’t be touching her. Not with her brother, Leo, nearby.

I felt sluggish as she ducked under my arm and walked away. I let her go because I shouldn’t have touched her at all. I straightened, running a hand through my hair. I’d seriously screwed up.

I prided myself on always being in control. I’d imagined myself making a move on her and kissing her a million times, but I never thought I’d lose my mind when I did.

I didn’t need to watch the wedding because Hannah was excellent at her job. I only hired the best. But I couldn’t stay away. When the ceremony started, I stood outside to keep an eye on Gia.

When the ceremony was over, the bride and groom walked down the aisle with their joined hands raised to cheers and a standing ovation.

I should have walked away. There was no need for me to ensure a smooth transition from the ceremony to the cocktail hour and then to the reception. But I couldn’t move.

I was rooted to the spot as Gia walked down the aisle on Leo’s arm. Her best friend, Harper, was on his other side, but I only had eyes for Gia.

She was gorgeous in anything, but there was something about that dress. The tease of that ribbon was fucking with my head.

Gia’s gaze flashed to mine as if she remembered the way she’d pressed her body against mine only a few minutes earlier. I couldn’t forget her breathy moans in my ear and the insistent way she tugged on my hair.

I had a fleeting thought that Gia would be wild in bed, but then Leo nodded in my direction, and my throat tightened. I

shouldn't be lusting after his younger sister. I shouldn't be thinking about her at all. As far as Leo knew, we hated each other. Everyone knew it was difficult for us to be in the same room together without fighting. But when we were alone, that fire turned into desire.

I headed inside, knowing I should be doing anything but watching Gia Giovanni. If she'd stayed in Annapolis, I would never know what she tasted like.

To get back on track, I checked in with Brad, the chef in charge of the food for Naomi and Chris's wedding. Then I completed a quick tour of the hotel grounds, ensuring everything was running smoothly. I did this route several times a day to clear my mind, and it gave me the opportunity to check in with the various managers of each department.

I believed in hiring the best, but that didn't mean I wasn't closely involved in the running of my hotel. I'd bought the resort and renovated it into something beautiful, a five-star resort that was booked months ahead of time. I also wanted to be known as the premier wedding destination in the area, but Gia's business threatened that.

Early on, I set the standard that couples booking a wedding at my resort had to work with my wedding planner. They had to choose between Gia and me. Some dropped Gia and agreed to my terms. But others wanted her. It made me respect her even more.

She was good at her job. Now she represented a challenge not only to my business but to my body.

I wanted what I couldn't have.

What if we took out our frustrations in the bedroom, and to hell with everything else? It didn't have to mean anything. Her brothers would be pissed, but remembering that kiss, I was willing to risk it.

My footsteps faltered in the hallway of the hotel when I came around a corner and saw the flash of blue and heard the click of heels on the floor. Gia.



I quickened my strides until I was even with her. “What are you doing?”

Her expression was smooth, her tone dismissive. “I rented a room for the evening.”

My jaw tightened. “I didn’t authorize that.”

Gia stopped moving and smirked. “You approve all your guests?”

“I should,” I said, grinding my teeth together. I wasn’t sure why she got to me.

Gia had stopped in front of a utility closet. Without thinking about what I was doing, I opened it with one hand and snagged her slender wrist with the other. I tugged her inside and shut the door behind us. I turned the lock and walked toward her until she was pressed against the door. She hit it with a thud and a release of her breath.

She looked up at me, her expression a mixture of wonder and heat. “What are you doing?”

“This,” I said, just as my mouth descended on hers. Her hands grabbed at the back of my suit jacket as her lips moved under mine. I cupped her face, angling her so that I could dive inside that smart mouth.

I’d do anything to shut her up, to get her to think of me as someone other than her brothers’ best friend and her competition. I wanted her to see me as a man she desired.

We volleyed for control.

She moaned into my mouth as I moved one thigh between her legs.

She lifted her leg and hooked it around mine so that I could press against her center.

“You feel like heaven, sweetheart.”

“Don’t call me that,” she said as she claimed my mouth again. Her hands pulled me closer as she pressed herself against my cock.

I pulled away slightly and said, “I call it like I see it.”

“Shut up and kiss me.”

Kiss her. Touch her. Fuck her. I needed to be inside her. I needed her. I couldn't describe this out-of-control feeling. I was desperate for her. It was like we'd held ourselves back for so long that as soon as we unleashed this desire, we were unstoppable.

I pulled back, making sure the heat in her eyes matched mine before tugging on the bow at her waist. “I want to see you.”

Her dress gaped open, her breasts spilled over a strapless bra, and a tiny strip of flesh-colored lace covered her pussy. I dropped to my knees, needing to smell her, taste her. “Fuck, Gia. You're so gorgeous.”

Her chest heaved in time with the rise and fall of her breath.

“Are you wet for me?” I asked, looking up at her but not touching her to confirm.

She tipped her hips in my direction.

“You want my mouth, baby girl?”

Her jaw tightened. “I'm not your baby girl.”

“Sure, you are, sweetheart,” I insisted, loving how I riled her up, physically and mentally. “If you want my mouth on you, you're going to have to tell me.” I wanted her to be honest with me. I wanted to hear that she desired me. That this wasn't a power play. I needed to know she wanted me as a man.

Gia narrowed her eyes on me. “Silas, touch me—”

I raised a brow, needing to hear the dirty words.

Her hand rested lightly on my hair. “I want your mouth on my pussy.”

“Fuck. That word on your lips.” Heat rushed to my cock as I hooked my hands in the band of her lace panties and tugged them over her hips. The sweet smell of her arousal spurred me on as I spread her legs with my shoulders.

Her fingers tightened in my hair as I breathed her in.

“I like you on your knees for me.”

Without responding, because I loved it, too, I dove in, licking and sucking, devouring her sweet taste. She relaxed against the door, her hands an anchor in my hair as she tipped her hips toward me, and I added a finger.

I looked up at her, wishing I'd taken the time to remove her bra. “I want to see you. Feel you.”

Gia got the hint because she reached behind her back and unhooked her bra, allowing it to fall to the floor. Her hard nipples and pert breasts had me harder than a rock.

She was gorgeous. The hottest woman I'd ever had the pleasure of being with. In my lust-filled haze, I had a feeling it was because there was something else between us. Not just desire but mutual respect, an attraction that went beyond the physical, but I wouldn't explore that. This was a release of tension. An unraveling of pent-up desire. I wouldn't let it be anything else.

I wouldn't let the tenderness swirling in my chest soften my touch. In my wildest dreams, I never thought I'd be pleasuring Gia Giovanni in the closet of my hotel. Knowing this might be my only chance with her, I wanted to make it good. I wanted her to think of me long after her orgasm had faded. I wanted to ruin her for all other men.

I wanted her to light up only for me. A sense of possessiveness struck me while I added a second finger, mimicking how I'd fuck her with my cock. I sucked her clit and reached up to cup her breasts, rolling her nipple with my fingers.

She bit her lip and arched into me, whimpering with desire and need.

I wanted to make her feel good. I wanted her to call out my name. I found that spongy spot deep inside her and curled my fingers.

Her nails scraped my scalp as her muscles tightened, and she cried out. Her walls spasmed around me, and I held her up

as she came down.

Her eyes were a little unfocused as she looked down at me.

“Next time you come for me, say my name,” I growled.

The fog in her eyes lifted. “There won’t be a next time.”

She snatched up her bra and hooked it, covering her breasts and pulling her dress around her, not bothering with her panties. She tied the ribbon with jerky hands and straightened her hair. Then she turned away from me, her hand on the doorknob.

“You don’t want to return the favor?” I asked, unable to resist taunting her.

There was something hard and uncomfortable in my chest I couldn’t seem to dislodge. I didn’t want her to leave.

“I have no words except this”—she gestured in my direction—“was a mistake.”

She turned the knob and was gone, leaving me in the dusty storage room that was filled with spare towels and cleaning supplies. I stuffed her panties into my pocket, pleased to have a memento from our time together. I had a feeling it wouldn’t be happening again.

Read [\*Everything About You!\*](#)

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## *About the Author*

**Lea Coll is a USA Today Bestselling Author of sweet and sexy happily ever afters. She worked as a trial attorney for over ten years. Now she stays home with her three children, plotting stories while fetching snacks and running them back and forth to activities. She enjoys the freedom of writing romance after years of legal writing.**

**She currently resides in Maryland with her family.**

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