



# Own Me

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**Category:** Erotic, Romance, Billionaire Romance, Adult

**Description:** To be a Marchetti is to marry for famiglia...

For the first time ever, HER RUTHLESS OWNER and HER CRUEL ONE-SIDED LOVE are published in one book.

From homeless to hitched...

I'm eighteen years old when I'm plucked out of poverty...and it's revealed to me that I'm the missing bride of a powerful mafia boss.

A not-so-normal marriage...

I know I should be thinking of running away, but instead I choose to wear the ring of Boston's most dangerous billionaire—and submit to his ruthless demand.

Forget about me being your husband...and think of me as your owner instead.

\*\*\*\*

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

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

My terrifyingly cruel and irresistibly gorgeous husband clearly hates me.

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

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

**Total Pages (Source):** 107

# Page 1

*Source Creation Date: May 22, 2025, 8:33 am*

Her Ruthless Owner

By Marian Tee

Penelope

IT'S A MISERABLY PERFECT day to commit my first act of crime.

The skies are a dull shade of gray, and it's been drizzling all day. People are running to and fro with either their hands over their heads or their faces peeking out from hoodies and jackets.

Everyone's mood is downcast, and the direction of their gazes also mirrors this. No one wants to look at anyone else; no one wants to be bothered, no one wants to risk seeing anything that's only going to add trouble to their already troubled lives.

You can't get weather more criminally perfect than this, really, so...

Now or never, dude.

My hands start to perspire, and fear curdles in the pit of my stomach. My conscience is already warning me of the fires of Hell, but I tell it to go take a hike for now.

It's not like I mean to make a habit out of mugging rich, old ladies. I've been planning this for a week, and I really think if I play it smart and not do anything rash...I really believe this is all I need to turn my life around.

I've seen the other kids do it, and since I also know for a fact I'm a lot quicker and more flexible than most of them are——

Show time, dude!

My target walks out of the bank at exactly three-fifteen, like clockwork. Coiffed silver hair, shoulders slightly hunched, and petite and thin enough for a strong gust of wind to easily blow her over. It honestly feels like she's asking for trouble, with that string of pearls she's wearing around her neck and the Louis Vuitton purse she's always holding so, solooselyin her left hand.

She's going to get mugged sooner or later, really...

So why not me?

At least I know for sure I have no plans of hurting her in any way. I just need a bit of her money to start a new life, but I swear I'll find a way to pay her back.

So please, lady, don't make this harder than it should be!

My target is about to cross the street, and I know I need to make my move before she...shits.

I mean,shit!

There's a familiar-looking boy crouched in hiding behind a couple of unevenly stacked boxes.

Shit, shit, shit!

Marko's about my age, and he's lived in the streets far longer than I have. It was about

a month ago when he joined the local Russian gang that's recently been busy making its name in Queens. Since then, he's gone from being okay to outright sadistic, and I know for a fact Marko won't be satisfied with just mugging my feeble-looking target. He'll also take pleasure in killing her to prove to his new "family" he's as tough as they come...and I can't do a thing about it.

Or rather...I mustn't.

Because the smartest thing to do now is to walk away.

Just walk away, forget what I've seen, and pretend I have no idea of what's to come.

So get moving, you idiot!

But instead I find myself desperately jumping up and down and yelling at the old woman when I see her heading Marko's way like an elderly ostrich with her head happily buried in the sand.

"Yo, old lady, over here!"

She halts and looks at me in confusion, and please, please, please don't tell me she's hard of hearing, too?

My antics already have Marko on his feet and glaring at me like I'm next on his murder list. I know I still have one last chance to walk away...alive. But when I see the old lady resume walking towards Marko—

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Shit, shit, shit!

My self-preservation instincts fly out of the window, and I run like hell as Marko charges towards our mutual target.

Oh God.

It feels like I'm on a suicide mission, by choice, but...I just can't find it in me to do nothing. I'm not sure this is enough to get me into Heaven, but...God always love the foolish, right? And honestly, I can't remember feeling any more foolish than I do now—

Please God, please let me get to her in time!

Marko raises his fist to punch the daylight out of the old lady—

"That should do it, young man."

I crash into a halt when I see her shooing Marko away like he's some harmless little fly, and things get even crazier when Marko actually backs off.

"Sorry, Pens," he says sheepishly as he turns to face me. "And good luck."

My mind feels like it's about to unravel when Marko even starts whistling as he walks away with his hands buried deep in his pockets, and I'm pretty sure it's absolutely not a coincidence that Marko also happens to be whistling One Republic's I Ain't Worried.

He's acting like the three of us weren't this close to being the newest statistical data point in New York's fast-growing crime rate—and I just don't get it.

What the hell's going on?

Cesare

LABORERS ON A CIGARETTE break outside the public market turned a blind eye when they saw a convoy of vehicles rolling up to the entrance of the Marchetti warehouse across the street. Doors simultaneously opened as men in dark-colored suits stepped out, and being dragged behind them was a man in chains, yelling for help.

Life in the city had been peaceful ever since the Marchettis came into power. It was like having an Italian brotherhood of Bruce Waynes to look after folks like them who worked their asses off day in and day out.

It was just plain nice, to wake up and know they lived in a city where no one was going to mess with them, just because they were broke and powerless. As far as they were concerned, Boston, and not a theme park, was the happiest place on earth, and all they had to do, for the status quo to remain in place...was to occasionally look away, every time a Marchetti was in the process of teaching a valuable lesson to one of their enemies.

The cries of pain and agony continued well into the night, but not a single call to 911 was made. Time...as well as the whole city was on the side of the Marchettis', and after over forty hours of torture, their captive finally broke down and began talking.

Cesare had just finished scrubbing the blood off his knuckles when his phone vibrated in his pocket. It was a message from his grandmother, and it was short and viciously simple as always.

I found her.

'Her' was someone he had long assumed dead, and while her existence meant that it was his life which would now be upended—

Do you need me to do anything?

Duty to famiglia always came first, and his phone vibrated again with his grandmother's reply.

Nonna: We'll see.

Cesare: And her family? Will you tell them you found her?

Nonna: It depends.

Cesare: On what?

Nonna: On whether she's good enough for us to proceed with our plans.

He was still staring at his phone broodingly when it rang, and Massimo's name flashing on the screen had Cesare answering the call.

"I'm about to order some flowers for you, fratello. I just need to know if it's for your wedding or funeral?"

"Fuck you, fratello," Cesare returned pleasantly without missing a beat, but the words only had Massimo smirking.

## Page 3

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Being born in the same year but having different mothers was no walk in the park for either of them. Many had delighted in constantly pitting them against each other, and while Cesare and Massimo had come to blows numerous times growing up...

"What's your plan?" Massimo asked in a sober tone.

Adulthood had changed all of that, and they might as well be twins with how fiercely loyal they were to each other.

"There's nothing to plan. Everything's already set in stone. If Nonna comes back unaccompanied, I never have to think about her again. But if Nonna thinks she's worthy, then I'll marry her."

"Just like that?" Massimo's frown was evident in his tone.

An image of their eldest brother's fiery fiancée came to mind, and Cesare almost winced. Sarica was like a sister to all of them now, but it was no secret how the girl was also hell-bent on finding a way to escape her arranged marriage to Giancarlo.

And then there was Massimo himself, who would have to break things off with Ynez, once it was his turn to marry for famiglia.

For an arranged marriage to succeed, emotions must never be allowed to come into play, and since he had no heart to begin with—

"Sì, fratello." Compared to his brothers' respective predicaments, his own situation was as simple as adding one and one together to come up with a rule-based marriage



for two. "I'll marry her, just like that...because I intend to train her to think of me as her owner, and not her husband."

## Chapter One

Penelope

A BLACK CAR COMES OUT of nowhere like a monster that's about to swallow me up, and my suspicions unfortunately prove true when I hear the old lady behind me speak.

"Get in, please."

Just like that, our roles have been reversed, and I realize all too late that everything about her was a sham. Weak and feeble, my butt.

It was all an act obviously, since the woman I almost mugged now looks more like someone's rich badass granny with her witchy near-black eyes ablaze with cunning, and her shoulders set firmly back without the slightest hint of a droop.

More cars roll into view, and in a blink of an eye I find myself surrounded by an army of remarkably well-dressed...bodyguards. Or extras for the next Matrix sequel, but presently moonlighting as hitmen.

Either way, the sheer number of them is a not-so-subtle warning about the pointlessness of fighting back or running away, and since I didn't survive living off the streets this long by being stupid—

I get in, she gets in, and my back immediately knocks against the door as her driver slams his foot on the gas, and the car blazes off like we're practicing for the next Formula One race.

My heart leaps into my throat as we overtake three vehicles in the past five seconds. What the heck? Why bother abducting me when her driver clearly means to kill us before the next stoplight?

My almost-victim-turned-captor raises a brow when she sees my white-knuckled grip on the roof handle. "You have no reason to worry, *bambina*—"

I mentally beg to differ, with the traffic lights having just turned red, which her driver then interprets as an encouragement to 'go faster' instead of 'stop'.

"Francisco is a very good driver."

We barely escape crashing into a ten-freaking-wheeler truck from an intersecting lane, and all eighteen years of my life flash before my eyes.

"And anyway, it won't be long before we reach the airport—"

I think I must've misheard her or something. Did she just say—

"Sì, *bambina*. You did not hear incorrectly, and we are indeed heading to the airport."

It's bad enough that I've been abducted, but why does my abductor have to be clairvoyant as well...just like the witch I fear her to be?

"If it makes you feel more comfortable, we're not leaving the country. We just need to get out of New York, and the sooner, the better, too."

I know there's a good chance she won't care to answer, but I ask it anyway. "Why?"

"Because I'm not in charge here."

## Page 4

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She looks at me meaningfully when she says this, and I guess that only means one thing, doesn't it?

Wherever she's taking me, it's a place where the old lady's in charge—and I might as well kiss my chances of escaping goodbye.

"You have a very expressive face, bambina."

The crafty sound of the other woman's voice reminds me of witches with an appetite for the tender hearts of virgins...like yours truly (the virgin part, I mean, since I've always been more the thorny than tender type).

"I know you have no reason to trust me, but surely there's no harm if you listen to what I have to say first?"

I WARN MYSELF AGAINST believing anything she says, but by the time she's done talking, I end up questioning her sanity instead. Is she really saying what I think she's saying? Does she really expect me to believe that everything that happened today...is nothing but an elaborate scheme to determine if I'm a 'decent' human being?

"You obviously don't believe me," she observes, "but maybe you'll change your mind if you see this..."

Holy shit.

I panic the moment I see the old lady reach into her purse.

"Here..."

My threatens to leap out of my chest, but instead of pointing a gun to my head like I expected her to do—

The old lady hands me a photo instead.

Oh.

I guess I was being a little paranoid back there, and...whoa.I can't remember the last time I held an actual printed photo in my hands, and—

No.

My throat tightens when I realize whose faces I'm staring at. The woman on the left is obviously the old lady from years back...while the couple next to her can only be my parents.

There's Dad, with his usual goofy grin, and Mom, whose chagrined expression may have something to do with the fact that toddler-me in the picture was busy chewing on the hem of her skirt.

"I'm so very sorry for your loss."

My gaze jerks back to the old lady at her words. I know I can be fooling myself here, but the gruff note of sympathy in her voice doesn't sound like a lie.

"Whoareyou?" I whisper.

"Mi dispiace tantissimo..."

I don't speak a single word of Italian, but I know an apology when I hear it.

"I did not mean to make you think I am your grandmother by blood."

"No, of course not." It takes more effort than I expected to force myself to smile and shrug off my disappointment.

"But we are still related, to a point——"

I don't want her pity, and I'm already shaking my head even before she's done speaking. "You don't need to lie."

"——because you've been betrothed to my grandson since birth."

"I'm fine, and——" Wait. A. Freaking. Minute. Did she just say what I think she said? My stunned gaze swings back to her, and the older woman has no trouble meeting my eyes.

"Who are you?" I ask again, but this time I'm unable to keep my voice from shaking.

"My name is Potenziana Marchetti."

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All I can do is stare at her.

Well...that explains a lot.

"You've heard of me?" she questions.

Asking me if I've heard of her is like asking me if I know who America's president is. Ever since I ran away from my foster home over a year ago, there hasn't been a single day that I haven't heard other homeless folks whispering her name like it's either a curse or a prayer.

La Strega, La Strega, La Strega.

It's one of the few Italian words I've come to know...and it translates to 'the witch' in English.

### Chapter Two

Penelope

THE RAIN'S COME TO a complete stop by the time we arrive at the airport, and I follow behind La Strega as we climb the airsteps leading up to her private five-seater jet. The old me would have taken a million pictures by now, but a lot has changed since then...the first of which is not having my own cellphone like I used to.

I feel myself growing numb as I fasten my seatbelt, and it's only when the pilot announces we're about to take off for Boston that I find out where we're going.

Not good, dude.

I've watched my share of murder-and-slasher flicks, and the only reason bad guys (or bad witches in this case) let their captives know where they're being taken is because they also know those poor souls won't live long enough to tattle.

A cabin attendant pops by my seat as soon as the light for the seatbelt sign switches off. "The shower is ready for your use, signorina."

"I'm not—"

La Strega looks at me. "Do take a shower. Please."

"But—"

"To put it bluntly, bambina—you need one. Per favore."

It's easy to figure out those words mean 'please'...and it's equally easy to understand that her words aren't really a request.

Oh well.

I do kinda stink, anyway, and so I unfasten my seatbelt and dutifully follow behind the cabin attendant, who introduces herself as Rita as she gives me a quick tour of La Strega's jet. The one bedroom available on board is for the signora's private use, the pantry is on the other end, and as we finally make it to our last stop—

"We've prepared toiletries and fresh towels," Rita says as she opens the door to the shower, "and there's also a selection of dresses to choose from."

"Thanks, Rita."

"Just call out if you need anything else."

Translation:I'm on strict orders to make sure you no longer stink by the time we land.

I close the door on Rita's smiling face, and in a matter of minutes, I've officially joined the mile-high club for showers.

Yay for me.

In my old life, this would've made me the envy of everyone in school, and it almost makes me want to fool myself into thinking that today can be the start of a good thing.

Almost.

But I can't...since bad memories have already crawled out of the woodwork, and I nearly hyperventilate in my effort not to let a single sob out.

Stop! Stop! Stop!



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I squeeze my eyes shut, and I keep them shut until my body finally ceases to tremble.

La Stregaglances up when I return to my seat, and she nods approvingly when she sees I've ditched my rags for a cowl-necked woolen dress with loose-fitting long sleeves and a skirt that swings around my legs.

"A lovely choice," La Strega compliments.

"Uh...thanks." It feels awkward to be polite to one's kidnapper, but since I've also been raised to always mind my Ps and Qs, it feels next to impossible to just be rude without reason.

Rita comes back to ask if I'd like anything to eat, and I tell her right away I'd love a sandwich if there's any. 'Empty stomachs often lead to stupid decisions' is another thing I've learned from being homeless, and I need all of my wits with me when dealing with a powerful real-life witch.

I can feel the older woman watching me as I take a bite of my sandwich, and I make sure to chew slowly even though I'm tempted to wolf the whole thing down in seconds. Hunger is a sign of weakness, and I still don't know her well enough to reveal any chinks in my armor.

"You still don't trust me," La Strega comments.

Will she kill me if I lie...or will she kill me if I tell the truth?

She's La Strega, after all, and I still remember every gruesome story I've heard about

her from other homeless folks.

They say she was once a simple housewife in her fifties...when a group of men had gunned down her husband and son in an attempt to take over the Marchettis' billion-dollar empire. Everyone had thought she would quietly fade into the night after that...but instead she had been reborn from tragedy, and Potenziala had singlehandedly wreaked vengeance on everyone who had conspired against her family. It was only after everyone in her shit list was six feet under that she and the rest of the Marchettis had barricaded themselves in Boston, and since then people in the streets had liked to scare themselves with stories about La Strega and her "crazy" appetite for righting wrongs.

I nearly jump out of my seat when the older woman places her hand over mine.

"I'm not your enemy, bambina."

I look at her hand, which is smaller and frailer than what I imagined it would be like. This was not the hand of a witch, but of a woman who had lost the people she loved the most...like I have.

Give me a sign, God.

Please.

I don't know what to do.

Trust must be earned, but hope also springs eternal, and it's these two principles I've struggled to cling to day after day. That someone like me could be the reason for La Stregato show her face in public after so many years seems impossible, but if what she's saying is true...

I look down at the photo of my parents, and I hear myself say, "The hit-and-run that killed my mom...it wasn't really an accident, was it?"

"No." La Strega's voice is quiet and grave.

"And my dad, he'snevertaken drugs, but they said he died of a drug overdose."

"They lied."

I only realize I'm crying when I see my tears splattering against the glossy surface of my parents' photo.

"Why?"

"Because your mama wasfamiglia."

I impatiently wipe the tears off my cheeks and force myself to concentrate on her words. 'Famiglia'can only translate to 'family',but what exactly does itmean?

"Are you saying she'smafia?"

The older woman's lip curls. "That term ismolto abusatothese days. It's very...misused.So I prefer we use the term 'famiglia',va bene?"

I decide to test the words by saying them back."Va bene."

La Stregagives me another approving nod, and even though I know she's not your usual 'Gran' in any way...I realize that it's still what I want.

I wish she can be my Gran, just so I'd feel like there's a home I belong to once again.

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"Your mama was born Angela Sorrento." She looks at me as if she's expecting the name to ring a bell, but it doesn't. "The Sorrentos are also famiglia. Your papaw was the family's chauffeur, and their relationship was... frowned upon. An attempt was made on your life just a few months after your birth. Obviously, the attempt failed, but your mama wasn't willing to take any chances after that."

My instincts tell me she's speaking the truth, and I don't know how to feel, now that I realize how little I know of my parents' past.

"Your parents went into hiding when you were three years old—"

"And they chose New York of all places?"

"Close enough to be right under everyone's noses, but also strategically unreachable, since New York belongs to another famiglia."

"That sounds...smart?"

"Very much so. And the only reason it stopped working was because your maternal grandmother accidentally placed a bounty on your heads, when she let everyone know of the contents of her will."

With everything she's said, only one word immediately stands out, and it has nothing to do with anyone's inheritance.

"I have a grandmother?"

A slight smile cracks over the older woman's lips. "Sì, bambina. And Pilar has never stopped looking for all of you. But when members of her famiglia found out that she intends to leave everything to Angela, Perry, and any offspring they have..." La Strega's lips press together in a straight line. "You understand then, why certain people wanted all of you dead?"

If she's asked me this over a year ago, I'd be too terrified to face reality, and I'd lie to her and say 'no'.

But a lot has changed since I lost the only ones who mattered to me, and when I think about how my parents had to die because of other people's greed...

"I wish I could make them pay."

I know vengeance or justice can't bring them back, but I still want it all the same.

"You can, bambina——"

I want it at all costs.

"I will help you avenge your parents' death...if you agree to help me in return."

My heart slams against my chest at the other woman's words, and I remember what she told me earlier.

"When you say help...are we talking about the betrothal?"

"Sì."

"Have I really been betrothed to your grandson since birth?"

"Sì."

"And that's legal?"

"Infamiglia such as ours, absolutely."

"What if I don't want to marry him? Are you going to kill me?"

La Stregablinks in surprise. "You're no use to me dead, Penelope."

I know I shouldn't be surprised that she knows my name, but hearing her say it for the first time still makes me flinch.

"I need you alive, preferably married to my grandson——"

"Even if it's against my will?"

A glint that's almost evil flashes in her eyes, and I can only gulp and hope that she really isn't actually a witch in disguise.

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"How about this, bambina? Why not meet my grandson first, and if he's not to your liking, then we shall talk about other alternatives. Va bene?"

### Chapter Three

#### Penelope

ANOTHER FANCY-LOOKING car is waiting for us when we land, and we're driven straight to the Marchetti Mansion at the center of Boston. It looks more like a haunted university than a home, to be honest, and it even has stone gargoyles scowling at us from the rooftop.

While the grounds are crawling with bodyguards armed to the teeth, the high-ceilinged living room with its mosaic windows and marble fireplace is completely empty. The walls are of darkly stained wood, and there are sculptures of angels in every corner, also of marble. Every piece of furniture looks like it could fetch thousands of dollars in auctions, and I'm betting it's no coincidence that the leather cushions are the color of blood.

With a 'famiglia' like theirs, you gotta be proactive when hiding evidence of murder.

An imperial staircase provides a majestic backdrop for the living room, and La Strega has already ascended a step when she pauses to turn back and look at me.

"This shall be your home for the next couple of days, so please make yourself comfortable. Cesare will be with you shortly."

The way she nods at me feels like a 'see ya' and 'you're dismissed' at the same time, and I find myself remaining on my feet even when she reaches the top of the stairs and disappears from view.

She obviously isn't worried I'd be tempted to escape, but that's probably because she also knows I'm neither stupid nor suicidal. Big guys with bigger guns notwithstanding, I've also spied packs of bloodhounds running around, and none of them looked remotely friendly.

Boston being colder than Brooklyn is a pretty well-known fact, but I'm starting to realize it's one thing to know this...and another thing entirely to experience it. I rub my arms in an effort to keep myself warm, but it's useless, and my own fears are only making me feel even colder.

"Ciao, Penelope."

The voice makes me whirl around in shock, and my throat dries up as I have my first glimpse of La Strega's grandson...and the man I've been allegedly betrothed to since birth.

Cesare Marchetti.

He's strikingly tall and shockingly virile, his presence dominating the room in an instant. His hair is black as sable, and his eyes are dark like La Strega's, and just as sinister, too. The V-neckline of his black sweater reveals a bronze wall of muscles, and the way he has his sleeves pushed up to his elbows accentuates the sculpted strength of his arms.

He's perfectly beautiful, perfectly hot, and perfectly dangerous. He's the kind of man whose path should never have crossed with mine...and yet I'm supposed to believe I'm this man's promised bride since birth?



"I apologize for making you wait."

His accent is more Italian than Boston, more coolly composed than brutally cold. His voice is mesmerizing and terrifying at the same time, and the sound of it makes my heart race, either out of fear or a foolish sense of excitement, I'm not really sure.

La Strega seemed so convinced earlier I won't say 'no' to marrying her grandson, and now I think I know why. They say attraction can be fatal...and I don't think it can get any more fatal than this, with Cesare Marchetti striding towards me like a biblical lion looking for something to devour, but instead of running away I find myself breathless and unwilling to move.

I feel like I'm a lamb about to be swallowed whole...or one that's about to be slaughtered by marriage, and the most terrifying thing about all of this is how neither prospect makes me want to run away.

My heart is actually pounding with excitement, and I can barely keep still when he finally slows to a stop before me, and the scent of his aftershave lures me in like a moth to a flame.

Holy...shit.

I'm terribly scared of him still, but I also find his scent terribly appealing. Does this mean I've officially started losing my mind?

"There's no need to look nervous," he murmurs. "I'm not going to harm you."

Says every serial killer, natch.

"You are no use to us dead—"

If I needed any more proof that he's related to La Strega, that would be it.

"Or married to someone else," he finishes silkily. "But you're not thinking of marrying another man...are you, Penelope?"

I'm tempted to say 'no' just because he scares the shit out of me, but...

"What about you?" I dare to ask. "Are you really okay with marrying...me?"

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"Sì."

His dark gaze glitters down at my person as he says this, and I fight against the urge to run away.

Memories devour my soul, and I'm back in the cage of my past. It's just me and that monster again in the shower, and bile rises to my throat.

I remember feeling ashamed by my nakedness, remember blaming myself for catching the eye of someone bigger, stronger, and meaner. It was that part of my life which taught me what it truly meant to be prey, in a world ruled by animals whose only thought was to harm me.

I look back at Cesare, and even though he's so much bigger and stronger and meaner than the foster father who tried to force himself on me—

He's different.

Maybe this is just me finally losing my mind after everything's that happened. Or maybe this is just my hormones going on overdrive, since it's my first time to meet a man I find sexually attractive.

I can't explain it. I just know, I just feel the truth all the way to my soul. Cesare Marchetti is not a good man, but he's not and will never be evil the way my foster father was—

"If we marry," I begin.

"You mean 'when'we marry," he puts in smoothly.

Like grandmother, like grandson,I can't help thinking, with how both of them are acting like our wedding is already a foregone conclusion.

But while that's obviously not the case, I think I should let it go for now...since I still have a more important question to ask, which is—

"What kind of marriage do you think we'll have?"

"Are you asking me if I plan to fuck you?"

My face turns red. "No!"

"The answer is yes, by the way."

"I don't care," I manage to choke out...even if I'm not quite sure I'm telling the truth.

"Then perhaps you can elaborate," Cesare invites. "What exactly are you asking, Penelope?"

"I just want to know if we'd be like a normal couple—"

"Don't normal couples fuck?"

I should've seen that coming, dammit.

"I'm being serious here," I say stiffly. "I need to know—"

"No, we will not be a normal couple."

Uh...ouch?

"My answer obviously disappoints you."

"Why can't we be a normal couple?"

"Why would you want to be?"

"Is it because you, I mean, is it because we, are, uh, famiglia?"

"That's part of the reason, but if you'd really like me to spell it out..."

"Yes!"

## Page 10

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"Then it's because I don't want you to think of me as your husband—even when we're married."

"Excuse me?"

"I'm sure you're aware that today's normal marriages have high divorce rates all over the world. Marriages between famiglia, though... divorce and annulments are exceptionally rare, and do you know why that is?"

If I have to guess... I think that's because some members of famiglia may not see anything wrong with shooting their spouses or lovers when one of them wants out. So who needs a lengthy divorce battle, when you can just turn yourself into a widow real quick?

"When you're famiglia, you eventually understand as you grow older that marriages are more likely to last when both parties treat it as a business transaction. And we can't do that if you think of me as your husband... or insist on seeing yourself as a wife."

"Then how do you want us to see each other then?" I ask in confusion. "As business partners?"

"That could do," he acknowledges, "but since that's boring as fuck, I would like you to see me as your owner instead."

"Excuse me?"

"And you, on the other hand, will be my property."

"You're kidding me. Right?"

"I could've lied to you," he points out, "and use pretty words to convince you that I have feelings for you. Instead, I'm telling you the truth...because I don't want our marriage to be built on lies."

"But...an owner?" I choke out. "I'm not an object to be owned. What you're suggesting is completely crazy——"

"Will you still think that," he muses, "if I say that you shall own me as well?"

My mouth opens and closes several times, but I'm still unable to think of what to say.

"I thought that would catch your attention."

The lazy amusement in his tone makes me feel like bristling and blushing at the same time. "If this is some kind of joke——"

"I'm afraid I'll have to disappoint you on that score, since I've never been good at cracking jokes."

That, I have no trouble believing, but...

"You seem to be the sensible type, tesoro. So tell me. Would it be sensible for you to reject my proposition...without giving it a try?"

Oh...no.

"Allow yourself to imagine what it would be like, for me to own you."

I think he's trying to seduce me like the Devil tempting a human to sell his soul to him.

"Imagine me as your owner, taking care of your every need, your every whim."

And I'm afraid—

"Just close your eyes," he whispers, "and imagine the hands of your owner engulfing your sweet, lovely tits—"

He's succeeding very,verywell, and how can he not, when it's the first time in my entire life that I've had someone say something so explicitly dirty to me?

"Imagine me feeding on your nipples because they're mine. Every fucking inch of you is mine—"

"S-Stop it."I make a desperate attempt to cover my ears, but this only has the Devil, I meanCesare,releasing a low laugh that also sounds devilish...just as he forces my arms back down, and I'm once again powerless to resist the sinful temptation of his words.

"I'm far from done,tesoro.There's still more for you to imagine...because I want you to have a vivid idea of what it would be like for me to own you."

All I can do is shake my head...since I no longer trust myself not to cry out.



## Page 11

*Source Creation Date: May 22, 2025, 8:33 am*

"Imagine my cock owning your pussy, Penelope. And I'm not going to lie—I'm fucking bigger than most men."

The words are a trap, and I know it.

But even so.

I still end up doing what he wants me to do, with my body trembling violently as my gaze slowly drifts past his chest...until I find myself staring at the impossibly huge bulge behind his jeans.

Holy...shitty...cow.

If it were anyone else, I'd be tempted to think what I'm seeing includes several inches' worth of padding.

But because this is Cesare Marchetti and his, um, package I'm gaping at...

I know it can only be real, and it has my breasts aching and swelling like they've never done in the past.

"Do you remember what I told you earlier,tesoro?" The lust coating his whispered words makes my womanly folds start to throb with forbidden heat.

"Our marriage is not a one-way street of ownership. Just as I own every inch of you, all of me is also yours,tesoro...and that includes all fourteen inches of my cock."

Did he just say fourteen inches?

My gaze jerks up to his...and a gasp escapes me when I realize that all this time Cesare has been talking, he's also been busy devouring my flesh with his gaze...with my nipples all shamefully puckered up against my dress.

Shit!

I'm about to cross my arms over my chest when we hear the nervous intrusion of another woman's voice.

"Signor Marchetti?"

Cesare turns his back to me, and I nearly sag in relief.

Phew.

The maid says something about supper being served in the Blue Room, and I listen vaguely to the two of them talk while hurriedly gulping air back into my lungs. I honestly didn't even realize I was holding my breath the entire time he was speaking. It's as if the darkly inviting sound of Cesare's voice had me under a spell, and every word he's silkily let slip is a new layer of seductive entrapment.

You can't let him get to you like that again, dude!

My head starts to hurt as I try to mentally regroup. I can't believe it was just hours ago when I was so desperately starving...that I had seriously planned to mug a (seemingly but not really) defenseless old woman.

That was just hours ago, for heaven's sake, but here I am now, feeling a shamefully different kind of hunger, and all because Cesare Marchetti said 'cock' and 'pussy' in

the same breath.

C'mon, dude!

I grit my teeth and tell myself I'll do better, but as soon as Cesare turns to face me again, my body betrays me anew, and my pussy starts getting wet like it's turned into his personal faucet of desire.

Shiiiiiiit!

"You're blushing, my Penelope."

I wish I could say he needs to have his eyes checked, but I can't. The heat burning my cheeks is impossible to deny, and him calling me his Penelope only makes me blush even harder.

How in the world have we gotten to this point? We were supposed to have a serious discussion about what our marriage maybe like, if it pushes through, but the only thing that the past few minutes has made clear is how my wildly wanton body is not to be trusted at all.

"Would you like to tell me why?"

Never.

"Or perhaps you'd prefer I make a guess," he teases.

## Page 12

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Nope.

"Is it possible...that you're blushing because you've finally realized how filthy fucking good it would feel...when we become each other's owner in marriage?"

Yes! No! I mean, I don't know at all, with how diabolically good he is at using really dirty words to mess with my senses.

When I ran away from my foster home, I already knew to expect the worst once I became homeless, and I think that was what helped me survive my first few days in the streets.

I knew what I was getting into that time...unlike now.

Nothing in this world has prepared me for the reality of having to match wits with Boston's underworld royalty—or resisting the wiles of a smolderingly hotmafiaboss like Cesare Marchetti.

Everything that's happened today has completely blindsided me, and I have the craziest urge to laugh and cry when Cesare offers me his hand, and I realize how absolutely none of the thoughts racing in my mind has to do with rejecting his touch.

This man already owns me.

But can I really believe him when he says he'll also be mine?

Chapter Four

Cesare

HE HEARD HER BREATH catch as their fingers twined, and Cesare's grip on her hand involuntarily tightened. The sound she had made was delicate, just like the rest of her was, and it had him feeling fiercely protective, in a way that he had never been in his life.

Why did this girl seem so different from all the others?

With her head still bent, and her gaze on their clasped hands, he was able to run his gaze over her from head to toe, broodingly.

She was eighteen to his twenty-eight. Too damn young, in other words, and especially since Cesare had always preferred his lovers to be closer to his age, as this made them less likely to be emotional and clingy.

She was also too pale and too thin, all skin and bones actually, and he wondered grimly if this meant she was the type to go crazy on her diet.

Nothing about Penelope matched his usual type in women, and while he had been mentally prepared to still go through with their wedding even if he were to find her completely unattractive—

That was the fucking irony, really.

The moment he had seen her, he wanted her, and he wanted her with the kind of intensity and hunger that he had never felt with any other woman.

Big, dark eyes suddenly lifted up to his, and Cesare sucked his breath at how everything about her effortlessly seduced him...despite her sexual innocence. Just looking at her had him so fucking hard...and for better or for worse, it was just as

fucking clear that she wanted him back.

Penelope's heart-shaped face was like an open book, and while both her fear and confusion were patently evident, there was also no mistaking the sweetly imploring plea in her lovely, dark gaze.

I want you, those eyes said.

I want to fuck you.

But I don't know where to start.

His Penelope was a virgin in short...and while in the past he had never given a fuck about being any woman's first—

With her, it was different.

With her, it mattered a fucking lot that he would be her first—and her last.

His cock would be the only cock she would ever know the shape, taste, and feel of—and this, too, was different, since he had never felt this possessive with any of his previous lovers.

She was starting to change him, Cesare realized, and what was more disconcerting was how completely unaware she was of her effect on him.

He could feel her nervousness growing as he led her further down the hallway, and Cesare slowed his steps to a halt.

## Page 13

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"What's troubling you,tesoro?"

She shook her head, but he was not to be dissuaded. "Your silence will not solve anything," he chided gently.

Frustration further darkened her gaze, but she eventually ended up blurting out the truth.

"It's just that...everything's happening so fast."

He cupped her chin, and he heard her catch her breath again at his touch. "Lying to yourself won't solve anything either."

"But I'm not——"

"What you're truly struggling to accept,tesoro,is the speed in which your feelings have changed towards marriage...and me."

Her lips parted in shock, and it was just too much fucking temptation for him to resist.

A whimper escaped her as he abruptly took her lower lip and sucked hard on it, and only Cesare's swift reflexes had his arm automatically curling around her waist when her knees buckled as soon as he lifted his head.

"Careful,tesoro."

She pushed him away, and he obediently stepped back from her.

"You s-startled me," she stammered.

"I think I did more than startle you, Penelope."

"W-What do you mean?"

"Youknowexactly what I mean..."

His gaze lowered to her cleavage as he drawled the words out, and another whimper slipped past her lips when she saw what he was staring at.

"It seems that your nipples are more honest than your lips,tesoro." Cesare looked at his fiancée gravely. "I shall endeavor to remember that once we're married."

Penelope's shock had her hands flying up to cover her mouth, but then a second later it seemed as if she had realized she wasn't covering what was pertinent, and Cesare was unable to stifle his grin when she released a mortified cry.

"Allow me to help you," Cesare offered.

"Wh-what——"

The alarm in her eyes only made him want to bully her even more.

This is all your fault, tesoro.

And so he did.

Penelope



By the time I realize what Cesare plans to do, it's too, too late.

His big, strong hand has already cupped my breast, and my lungs threaten to collapse when I feel his fingers tighten around the plump, swollen flesh...before giving it a squeeze.

Nooooo!

It goes without saying that I've never had a man touch me like this before, but I also know in my heart that only this man's touch can make me feel this hot and bothered.

Is this really happening?

I look up at him in a mixture of dismay and helpless desire, and lust glitters down at me from his gaze...just as he adjusts his hold on my breast, and I find myself nearly jumping out of my skin when he suddenly pinches my nipple between his fingers.

## Page 14

*Source Creation Date: May 22, 2025, 8:33 am*

Aaaaah!

The feeling is totally indescribable, but it also makes me panic, and I shove him off as hard as I can.

Cesare only smiles as he steps back, and it's no wonder he does, since we both know I'm only free of his grasp because he chose to let me go.

"There's no need to feel shy."

It's my first time to hear a purring note in his voice, and the sound makes me grit my teeth.

Don't let him seduce you!

"I'm just as turned on as you are, tesoro."

There's only one thing I can do when I hear that—

Don't fall for his trap!

My gaze immediately swerves down, and is it just my imagination...or has his package gotten even bigger in the past five minutes?

"Ahem."

I quickly whirl around as soon as I hear La Strega's voice, and I see her witchy gaze

narrow when her grandson also turns to face her...while casually placing a hand on the small of my back like he's already claiming me as his property.

I try to pull away and fail, with Cesare this time refusing to let go.

"How disappointing." The older woman's tone is dry. "I thought you'd have charmed her by now."

"You must have me confused with Massimo, Nonna," Cesare returns mockingly. "I've always gotten what I wanted...while being the opposite of charming."

"Hmph."

La Strega walks past us, and Cesare firmly keeps me by his side as we follow behind her.

"Please let go of me," I mutter under my breath.

Cesare bends his head, and I don't even have a chance to gasp as he takes a punishing bite of my ear before whispering—

"Never."

I trip over my own feet after that, and of course this gives Cesare another opportunity to play the gallant knight as he easily yanks me back and saves me from my clumsiness.

Grrr.

Cesare only lets go of me when we finally reach what I can only assume is the Blue Room at the end of the hallway, and being *famiglia* must pay really, really well because

the room apparently borrows its name from the blue porcelain dinnerware sparkling from a Rococo-style dining table that can comfortably seat a dozen guests.

Agnes from earlier starts handing out menu cards when we're all seated, and I guess that makes it official: it really pays to be famiglia, and ooooooh...

My stomach rumbles as soon as the mouthwatering smell of our first course hits my nostrils. It's the creamiest soup with the freshest slices of mushroom, and I feel like crying when I finally have a taste. It's really, really, really good...and the last time I had anything as good as this was back when my parents were still alive.

Just focus on the food, Penny!

I grab the menu card to distract myself, and it certainly does the job.

Wow.

I have to read the menu card twice just to make sure I'm not imagining anything. Everything listed here is plant-based, and I guess that means the Marchettis don't see anything wrong with harming fellow human beings...but are choosing to draw the line on consuming animals?

"Is anything wrong, tesoro?"

## Page 15

*Source Creation Date: May 22, 2025, 8:33 am*

I realize both Cesare and his grandmother have heard me choke back a laugh, and I quickly shake my head. "Just, um, something stuck in my throat." My life right now may be in shambles, but I'm still far from suicidal, so thanks, but no thanks, I have absolutely no plans on sharing my thoughts about their dietary choices.

Their famiglia, their rules.

Agnes and two other maids come back to take away our soup bowls, and the other starters that follow include three-cheese cigar rolls (non-dairy, of course) and edamame tartelettes. The real star of the night is, of course, the main entrée, and it's only when I'm halfway done with my cauliflower truffle risotto that I hear Cesare bite my name out while talking to his grandmother in Italian.

"Are you guys talking about me?" I ask suspiciously.

"Sì," the two Marchettis confirm at the same time, and without any hesitation at all.

Err...ouch?

Should I feel offended because they're being rude...or alarmed since they are my kidnappers, and it's quite possible they're planning something nefarious?

I know I should feel concerned at the very least, but it's hard to make myself care when I'm enjoying the best meal I've had in ages, and...oooh, dessert's here, and it smells decadently divine.

Just one bite of my seven-layer chocolate cake tastes like sin, and I make up my mind

then and there: I'm just going to focus on filling my stomach, since I am still their prisoner, and I need to have enough energy for whatever my next ordeal will be.

Supper comes to a satisfying end with a palate-cleansing coconut sherbet, and it's only when I hear Cesare murmur my name that I'm aghast to realize I've nodded off while waiting for coffee to be served.

Oops?

"Congratulations, tesoro," Cesare drawls. "I think it's safe to say you're the first person in the world to have had food coma while being kidnapped."

I think so, too, actually, but no way am I going to admit it, you know?

"I...I...was just tired—" It's the lamest excuse, but I end up stunned when the gleam of amusement in his gaze abruptly vanishes. He bought that? Really?

"I asked Nonna if I may speak to you in private," Cesare says tautly.

The atmosphere in the room instantly changes, and I start feeling nervous when I realize the sudden tension between us hasn't anything to do with my food coma. "Is it that bad?"

"Sì, tesoro. It is that bad."

Shit.

Is this about something I did? Is it something that could get me killed? Is it—

"Perdonami."

—something that would make him say 'fuck me'?

"I'm saying...I'm sorry."

But I heard him wrong obviously, and I'm relieved to be wrong. Honest.

"Because unlike you, I've always known about our betrothal."

He says the words like he's grimly confessing his crimes to a judge, and my confusion only grows, since I just can't see where this conversation is leading to.

"But unlike your grandmother or mine, I never tried to look for you. I even convinced myself it was for the better—and for that you paid the price of my selfishness."

The self-contempt harshly underscoring his tone is unmistakable, but—

"I still don't get it?" I say weakly. "Are you blaming me—"

"Certo che no!"

I don't get that either, but the exasperation in his tone is clear enough, so I'm guessing he's saying no?

## Page 16

*Source Creation Date: May 22, 2025, 8:33 am*

"I am blaming myself," Cesare grates out.

"For what?"

"For what you had to endure," he snarls. "I was watching you eat earlier——"

Oh shit,did he hear me burp?

"And I could not understand why it seemed like you hadn't eaten for days. That was whenNonnatold me where she found you——"

Understanding finally dawns, and I jerk in my seat.

"It is because ofmethat you had to live off the streets, because ofmyselfishness that you look like a fucking breeze can blow you away——"

I was afraid this was all about Cesare pitying me, but instead it's so much worse, and I frantically shake my head at him.

"Stop.Please."

And I mean it.

He has to freaking stop...because if he says another word, I think I'm going to cry, and that's the last thing I ever want to do.

"Just...stop."



Because it feels like an eternity ago since the last time someone made me feel I'm not alone.

An eternity,dammit.

It felt like an eternity since my parents died, an eternity since someone cared, an eternity since someone gave a shit about me.

And after that, it was day after day of feeling I was alone in the world even when I'm surrounded by other people...until now.

Untilhim.

I jerk in shock when Cesare turns my chair to face him without warning, and a gasp escapes me as he suddenly leans forward.

"Wh-what—"

He clasps my face with both hands, and the moment I feel his touch on my skin—

No, no, no.

I try slapping his hands away. I try freeing myself. I try anything and everything that can keep my eyes from watering—

But it's too late.

His gaze captures mine, and tears start spilling down my cheeks as soon as I see the remorse in his eyes.

"I know I fucked up,tesoro.I know I've given you every reason to choose someone

else—"

This is so embarrassing, dammit.

"But I still want you to choose me."

Everything I've gone through should've made me tough, and I did think I've become tough...so why am I crying now?

"Choose me," Cesare says fiercely, and it's just ridiculous how his words have my tears falling even faster.

Is this really how it's going to be, dude?

## Page 17

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"Choose me,tesoro,and there will never be another day in your life that you'll have to fear anyone or anything."

A gorgeous mafia boss only has to act like you're important to him, and you turn into a crybaby all of a sudden?

He wipes my tears away, and the gentleness of his touch nearly kills me.

No, no, no.

"You only have to belong to me, Penelope——"

I try pushing him away again, but it's simply too late.

"And I will take care of you for the rest of your life."

It's bad enough that I want him so much he's come to own me——

You're making a big mistake, Penny!

But now I realize I also trust him with all of my heart, and I don't even know how or when it happened.

"You better mean everything you said," I snarl through my tears, "or I swear to——"

Mmph!

Just like that I have my first kiss, with his mouth stealing my breath away as it swoops down on mine.

## Chapter Five

Penelope

MY TOES CURL HARD AShe deepens the kiss, and I find myself squirming when his hands start moving anew. Restless heat burns through my blood as his fingers find the curve of my waist, and I gasp against his lips when his other hand moves to the back of my head...before grabbing a fistful of my hair.

The unforgiving strength I can sense in his touch, and the fact thatLa Stregaherself described him as the most ruthless of her grandsons—

These things should've made me shrink away as his lips pry mine open, but instead of wanting to run away and escape—

I hear myself whimpering in surrender as my lips part, and a violent tremor of desire rocks my body as his tongue thrusts inside of my mouth.

Aaaaaah.

I feel greedy and delirious all at once, and I find myself helplessly clutching his sweater as he strokes his tongue against mine.

Please, please, please don't stop!

His kiss enslaves my senses, and my breasts are once again swollen and aching as he starts forcefully thrusting his tongue in and out of my mouth.

More, please, more!

I wish I could sob each word out as my stomach starts to tighten with need. But just as wetness begins coating my throbbing folds, Cesare suddenly jerks away, and I cry out in dazed protest at the abrupt ending of his kiss.

"Look at me, Penelope."

His voice is rough and commanding, and I can feel my body trembling even more as I lift my eyes up to his, and I see his lustful gaze glittering with the filthiest of promises.

"Do you know what 'tesoro' mean?"

I shake my head.

"It means 'treasure', Penelope...and that's what you are to me. My. Fucking. Treasure."

## Page 18

*Source Creation Date: May 22, 2025, 8:34 am*

His words end with a finger on my lips, and I just can't seem to help it.

My lips part open, and his finger slips in...so I can start sucking on it like I have my own mini-cock to practice on.

"Harder," he growls, and my already-swollen folds throb even more as I find myself dazedly obeying his command. I feel myself growing wetter as I suck on his finger as hard as I can, and I can't help but wonder how it would feel, if the next time we do this, it's really his fourteen-inch cock that's driving inside of my mouth.

Cesare suddenly pulls his finger out, and I'm once again whimpering in protest at how empty I suddenly feel.

"Next time," he promises thickly. "Next time, you can suck on my finger as long as you want. But for now..."

A strangled sound slips past my lips when he catches me completely off guard as he reaches for my legs and repositions them until they're dangling over each arm of my chair...and the shamefully drenched state of my panties are completely exposed to his gaze.

"It's my turn to take care of you, Penelope."

Before I can even figure out what he means, Cesare's already down on his knees as he reaches under my dress, and I squeak in shock as I look all around me in panic. The door's closed, but is it locked? What if someone suddenly walks in? Won't they be scandalized if—

Aaaaaah!

Panty ripping happens all the freaking time in romance novels, but I never thought it would happen to me of all people, and the moment his dark eyes lock with mine, and I feel the first brush of his fingers against the silken slit between my folds—

"C-Cesare..."

The rest of the world ceases to matter, and I see his nostrils flare when he hears his name tumble past my lips for the first time.

"Say it again," he growls, and I end up whimpering his name out as his fingers slowly trace the length of my folds, the pleasure of his caress magnified tenfold by the contrast between the rough, callused texture of his touch and my sensitive flesh.

We've barely begun, and I can already feel my mind spiraling, and when his lips slowly curve into a smirk, my heart pounds hard against my chest—

Something's going to happen soon...

And I'm so, so, exquisitely right, with the way his head disappears under my dress in a blink.

Aaaaaah!

His fingers pull my nether lips so widely apart I feel like my pussy is about to split open, and another whimper escapes me as cold air blows against my throbbing core. I can feel him staring at me down there, and it's making me want to squirm and blush and moan all at the same time.

"P-please," I hear myself beg in a choking whisper.

Wetness trickles down to my ass at the intensity of his stare, and just when I didn't think I could last for another second—

What I dread and yearn for finally happens, with his tongue spearing into my pussy—

"Cesare!"

His tongue thrusts deep.

Once.

Twice.

Thrice.

I wish I could make it last, but he has me so, so turned on that it's just not possible.

"Cesare!"

I sob his name out as I start to cum, my head falling back as pleasure pulses thunderously through every shuddering inch of my body.

Chapter Six



## Page 19

*Source Creation Date: May 22, 2025, 8:34 am*

Penelope

'SILLY' IS THE FIRST thing that comes to mind when I feel my eyes actually flutter open at the touch of Cesare's hands on my knees. I can't remember my eyes ever doing that before, but since I've also never had a man make me cum until now...

Maybe...this is all part of my sexual awakening? Or is it something worse...like me being head-over-heels infatuated with a mafia boss who's too handsome for his own good?

The thought of resisting doesn't cross my mind even as Cesare gently parts my legs open. But then I see him reach for a damp washcloth as he crouches back down on one knee—

Oh...no, no, no, you don't!

I've read enough steamy romances to know what he plans on doing next, but Cesare only clucks his tongue when I try - and fail - to snap my legs back close. "Disobeying me on this will only earn you a punishment, tesoro. And you wouldn't want that, would you?"

"I just don't want you to, um, bother with unimportant stuff—"

"On the contrary—cleaning you up is one of my most important responsibilities as your owner.

But if it means to you that much——" He looks at me gravely, and I know right away whatever he has to say is guaranteed to either kill me——

"You have my permission to suck my cock clean the next time."

——or embarrass and piss me off all at the same time, andyyyyyaaargh, I'm totally right, and that's why I'm still red-faced and choking as Cesare guides my hands to the hem of my dress and orders me to hold it up.

"Now be a good girl and sit still while I clean you up."

His every stroke is gentle and thorough. He's treating me as a doctor would, really; it's just totally my bad that his touch makes me feel anything but a patient, and it's getting harder and harder not to squirm or make the slightest sound as he takes his sweet,sweeeeetdamn time——

"You're starting to get wet again——"

Aaaargh.

Cesare only chuckles as I shove him away, and he rises gracefully to his towering height while I jump out of the chair like a toddler who's just starting to learn how to walk.

"Mm..."Cesare manages to run his knuckles down my cheek before I'm able to slap his hand away. "Your face feels very hot,tesoro."

"Because I'm...I'mmad,not embarrassed!" It's a lie, of course, but I just want to save some face for once. "So don't you flatter yourself——" I break off with a squeak of surprise when he suddenly scoops me off my feet and carries me out of the room.

"Let me down!"

"Relax," he says soothingly. "I'm only taking you to your room."

"I said let me go!"

I continue to struggle even as we make it to the stairs, but I'm unfortunately no Allah to make mountains move.

"I am only doing this to make it up to you, my Penelope. It was not my intention to make you mad." His tone is soft and cajoling, and every word he utters weakens my defenses.

Oh no.

Here we go again—

"Mi può perdonare, tesoro? Will you forgive me?"

My mind wants to continue resisting him, but the rest of me has already given up. My senses are once again tingling at the lovely and now-familiar scent of his aftershave, and instead of beating his chest and doing my best to wriggle out of his hold, my arms have tightened around his neck while my breasts start to swell and ache.

Oh boy.

Maybe it's time to just throw in the towel and admit the painful truth: I'm putty in this man's hands, and as if I didn't have enough proof of that as it is—

Ugh.

## Page 20

*Source Creation Date: May 22, 2025, 8:34 am*

We've finally reached the second floor, and I actually feel abandoned instead of liberated when Cesare gently lowers me to my feet at the end of the hallway.

"Your room, tesoro..."

He opens the door for me, but before I can take a look at it, he's pushed me up against the wall, and a shudder rocks my body as it comes into contact with the erotic hardness of his length.

Magnetic dark eyes glitter down at me, and the urge to pull his head down for another kiss is so, so tempting...I end up curling my fingers tightly into fists against my sides.

"You haven't given me an answer yet," he chides softly.

"You're forgiven," I say hastily, "so can you please let me——"

"One last question."

I look at him warily. "What?"

"Will you dream of me tonight?"

Yes. For sure. Duh.

But since I do have some pride left, I lift my chin up and lie without a single ounce of hesitation. "Nope."

"Then you lied about forgiving me. Does that mean you are still mad?"

"What if I say I am?"

A cocky smirk flirts with his lips ever so briefly, but the ephemeral sight is still enough to make my womanly parts throb achingly to life.

You're so freaking hopeless, dude.

"What if I say I won't do it again—" He gently traces my lips as he speaks, and it's pure torture not to open my mouth so I can start sucking on his finger.

"Now that I know how truly furious it makes you—" His fingers trail down the side of my neck, and I can barely hear his words over the thunderous pounding of my heartbeat.

"When I accidentally turn you on with how hot I am?"

He begins tweaking my nipple as his seductive voice weaves around me like a web, and I have trouble concentrating on his words.

What did he say again?

Cesare pinches my nipple hard, and a moan spirals out of my throat...just as the mortifying reality of what he's said finally sinks in.

Aaaargh!

I really do try kneeing him in the groin this time, but his reflexes are criminally quicker than mine as always, and a dark, infuriating chuckle only slips past his lips as he catches my wrists and pin them over my head.

"Buona notte, Penelope."

His words taunt and seduce; I'm dying to snarl out something smartass-y, but the moment his mouth crashes down on mine, it's all over for me.

Outrage melts into lust, and all I can do is desperately hang on to the massive breadth of his shoulders as he starts sucking on my tongue.

Heat burns deep in my belly, and my body feels so, so achingly restless...that I start rubbing myself against the violently pulsing length of his arousal.

Yes, Cesare, yes...

I'm crying the words out in my mind just as one muscular thigh wedges itself between my legs, andaaaaah...

I just can't help it.

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The puckered tips of my nipples scrape against his chest as I start riding his thigh—

Nooooo!

We're suddenly apart, and I barely manage to swallow back an instinctive cry of protest. Cesare's body is rigid, his arousal still bulgingly visible under the tight confines of his jeans. He obviously wants me still, so why did we have to stop?

"Don't look at me like that, tesoro."

I'm tempted to lie and pretend I have no idea what he's talking about, but if we really are going to marry each other, and spend the rest of our lives together, for better or for worse—

"Why are we stopping?"

A strained smile touches his lips. "I do not want to stop either, believe me. But we have an early day tomorrow, and you need to rest. What I can promise you though is that tonight will be the last night you'll sleep a virgin—"

Oh no.

"The last fucking night that you won't know what it's like to have my big, hard cock driving into your pussy and filling it up with cum—"

That pretty much does it.

I throw myself back into his arms, whimpering and begging without shame. "One last kiss——"

Cesare groans and laughs, but his hands are also cupping my cheeks, andaaaaah.

His mouth plunders mine in a kiss so savage and deep it makes every trembling part of my body ache so, so badly for his possession.

Oh, if only this could go on forever.

If only.

But the kiss eventually comes to an end, and all I can do is swallow back my cry of protest as Cesare pulls away.

"Tomorrow," he rasps out. "Tomorrow, I will make you mine. And you want that, too, don't you,tesoro?"

All I can do is nod.

"I am a very possessive man," he warns. "So make no mistake about this: I will kill anyone who's stupid enough to get in the way of that."

It's my first time to hear him speak with such ominous softness, and my first time to truly taste terror in his presence.

"I own you, Penelope."

The look in his eyes is unmistakable, and it's that look which finally gives me the tiniest inkling as to why everyone speaks of Cesare Marchetti like he's the devil incarnate.



"Every fucking inch of you is mine...just as all of me is yours."

There's still the tiniest part of me that thinks I'm insane to entrust myself to my kidnapper's grandson, but...

The rest of me also knows there's no going back.

One kiss from him, and my world has completely changed. I can't be apart from him, and when I try to imagine how it would feel, if it's some other woman he'll marry and claim him as hers—

"Sì..."

As soon as I whisper 'yes', he sweeps me back up in his arms, and I find myself stupidly struggling not to cry as he tucks me in bed like I really am his most precious treasure.

Cesare straightens up, and my fingers curl back into a fist under the covers. The thought of him leaving suddenly has me anxious, and it's all I can do not to beg him to stay.

"Do you need anything else before I go?"

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You, I almost blurt out.

But because that's just too disgustingly pathetic—

"Where are you going to sleep?"

A moment passes, and just as my anxiety threatens to erupt into full-blown panic—

"My room is right across yours, tesoro."

"Good to know," I mutter just before faking a yawn and flipping to my side.

"Anything else?"

I fake another yawn. "Nope, nothing. G'night."

His lips touch my forehead just as I close my eyes, and I'm once again fighting back tears as I hear my bedroom door close behind him.

I'm no longer alone.

After everything I've lost, and everything I've gone through—this is more than enough. I'll work hard to be the best wife to Cesare Marchetti, and I swear to myself that I won't ever be so greedy as to wish for him to love me...the way I've already begun to fall in love with him.

Cesare

He stood outside the room, silent and motionless, and over half an hour had gone by before he finally heard her breathing settle down.

Penelope was finally asleep, and it was only at this moment Cesare finally allowed himself to turn away.

Tension still gripped his body even as he walked back into his old bedroom. It was indeed right across hers, just as he had said. But what was a complete lie was the way he had made her believe he meant to sleep here all along.

What the fuck was happening to him?

He had never been this soft with another woman outside his family. All of them had been expendable, and he couldn't even recall sparing a few seconds to consider their feelings. The moment he tired of a woman, he would not waste time getting rid of her. The moment a former lover would displease him, he would just as swiftly replace her with someone else.

But Penelope was different, and it was not just because his duty to famiglia required him to marry her.

Maybe it was guilt, Cesare thought broodingly.

She had suffered a lot, and more than she fucking deserved, and all because of his negligence.

He owed her, and that was why he was soft.

Just that.

Memories of Penelope started playing back in his mind, and Cesare bit back a groan

when he suddenly found himself reliving the alluring feel of her body against his.

FUCK.

He ended up jerking himself off in the shower, which was something he had not done since he first discovered sex at the tender age of ten.

Cesare headed down to the library afterwards to pour himself a drink, but he soon found himself disconcerted to find the place already occupied, and with his grandmother nursing what looked like a glass of wine in her hand.

The older woman motioned for him to join her, and he obligingly walked forward.

Her grandson's hair was still lightly wet from the shower, and Potenziana smiled in satisfaction upon seeing this.

Cesare was not unaware of the way his grandmother was watching his every move as he poured himself a shot of whisky. "You have something to say, Nonna?"

"I'm only curious...you are spending the night here, I take it?"

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"You already know the answer to that," Cesare said dryly.

Potenziana's expression turned crafty. "But you also know what I'm really asking is...why."

His broad shoulders moved in a dismissive shrug. "She seemed to take comfort in knowing that I'll be nearby."

"She's started to trust you then?"

"I believe so."

"And you? Have you started to trust her?"

"We've come to an agreement."

The words didn't disturb her as much as the smoothness of his tone did, and her gaze narrowed. "What kind of agreement?"

"Something that will remain between the two of us."

Potenziana thought of how one's past shaped one's decisions in the present, and her mood turned somber. "She's a good girl, Cesare. It's no surprise if at this early a stage you've come to care——"

"I donotcare for her." Cesare's words came out sharper than he intended, but the way his grandmother visibly took no offense to this only made him feel worse. Disrespect

to one's elders was almost akin to blasphemy infamiglia, and a grimace of apology twisted over his lips as he looked at the woman who had been more like a parent to him than both his own father and mother.

"Perdonami, Nonna."

Potenziana only waved a hand. "There is no need to ask for forgiveness, bambino. I know I am being meddlesome——"

"You have every right to be meddlesome, Nonna. But I also ask, if only for Penelope's sake——" His voice turned gentle but firm. "Refrain from filling her head with nonsense, per favore. I am not and will never be the type to fall in love, and to say anything to her that would make my fidanzata believe otherwise would only lead me to breaking her heart."

## Chapter Seven

### Penelope

I'M NOT SURE IF IT'S exhaustion or something else, but I was out like a log last night, and so the first thing I do when I wake up the next morning is to just look around and take things in.

Wow.

The bedroom they've given me is huge. It's about the same size as my entire classroom back in high school, and that's not counting the en-suite. The walls are the same darkly-stained wood used in the living room (or parlor, as everyone here in Boston seems to call it), and while I've never had a good eye for art, what little I know about mafia (or famiglia, as everyone here also insists on using) tells me that the painting across my bed likely costs a fortune.

A walk-in closet precedes the shower, with lining each side are open shelves that are chock-full of brand-new clothes that still have their price tags attached. Just looking at them makes me want to pinch myself. Wasn't it less than twenty-four hours ago that the only thing I owned were the clothes on my back and nothing else?

My body instinctively stiffens when I step into the shower, but instead of the usual trauma turning me into a sobbing mess, what I find myself recalling are memories of a certain mafiaboss—

Oh.

And so I end up crying again, but what my eyes are shedding are happy tears. Life has been so shitty over the past year...that I know it makes me seem foolish to believe so easily that I've been miraculously cleared of my trauma.

But I don't care.

Maybe it's because the shitty part of my life has finally come to an end, and it's God Himself deciding to instantly heal the wounds of my past. I know it seems equally stupid to believe that it's also God who wants me to belong to a man like Cesare Marchetti, but...

That's what my heart tells me, dammit.

Men like my foster dad can never hurt me again, now that I'm the property of Boston's most powerful and dangerous mafiaboss. I'll always be safe and free, and while I know someone like Cesare can hurt me even more—

I know it's never going to happen because I trust him.

I trust him with every beat of my heart, I trust him with every fiber of my being. And

when I think about Cesare, it's not fear that grips my body but—

Curiosity,I hastily tell myself.



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It's the safest way to classify the emotions coursing through my blood, and so for the next half hour that's the only thing I allow my mind to focus on.

I'm curious about how things between Cesare and me will further progress.

I'm curious about what today will bring.

I'm just curious, that's all.

But excited?

"Nope." I say the word out loud, in case it makes a difference. "I'm absolutely not excited—"

"About what?"

Holy...freaking...shit!

Powerful strong arms slip around me from behind, and I can only gasp as my back falls against his chest, and I realize he's just as naked as I am.

Gaaah.

Self-denial is moot at this point, with how every inch of me has started to tingle in the most lewdly vivid way possible. I'm absolutely, shamelessly, and arousingly excited...and so is he, if the way his cock is throbbing so violently against my ass is anything to go by.

My heart skips a beat when Cesare's mouth nuzzles my ear, and another gasp spills past my lips as his hands slowly sweep up until they're able to start kneading my breasts like they're dough to be sensually molded for his consumption.

"Have you soaped yourself yet,tesoro?" Cesare whispers.

The truthful answer to that would be 'yes', but instead I hear myself croak out, "Not yet?"

"Good."

My knees threaten to crumble at the purring tone of his voice, and when he spins me around, and I have my first eyeful of his masculinely nude form—

Oh...boy.

My throat dries up as I slowly run my gaze over every chiseled edge of his figure. His whole body looks like it's steel encased in bronzed flesh, and he just looks so much bigger when he's nude like this. I've heard people say that size doesn't matter, but...how long did Cesare say his dick was again?

Because I think I'm going to beg to differ.

I think size does matter, and when I try eyeballing its length—

One, two, three...oh, shit.

I stop counting as soon as I get past eight inches. My height and frame are average at best, and I have a hard time wrapping my head around the possibility that my body can accommodate anything longer than a banana. Or a Venti cold cup. Or—

You're getting hysterical, dude!

I silently take in big gulps of air in an effort to calm myself. I'm definitely excited still, and turned on for certain, but the way I can see Cesare's boner actually still swelling in size is also making me feel just a wee bit...apprehensive.

"You're looking a little nervous."

Grrr.

It's that tone of his again. The one that's uniquely able to taunt and seduce me at the same time, and as much as it makes me want to throw a punch at his perfectly gorgeous face—

The moment I see the sculpted muscles of his arms flex and bulge as he pumps out body wash into the palm of his hand, it's all over for me, too.

Shiiiiit.

A smirk curves over his lips as his gaze drifts down my trembling body, and I realize as soon as I look down that what he's staring at are the pouting pink tips of my breasts.

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"May I begin,tesoro?"

His hands have already claimed my breasts before he's even finished speaking, and my body starts writhing helplessly when he plays with them like they're his favorite toys to squeeze.

Aaaaaah.

I become a mindless slave to passion as he starts soaping every inch of my body, and the way his hands caress my flesh oh so slowly and thoroughly is an exquisite torment in itself.

His touch is as unbearable as it's addictive, and the water that's still cascading down my body has nothing to do with how my nether lips are getting wetter and wetter by the second.

My knees buckle for real when he finally inserts his hand between my trembling thighs, and Cesare's chuckle plays into my ear as I end up clutching the broad slope of his shoulders for balance.

My nipples scrape against his chest just as his fingers find my clit, and it's the beginning of the end.

"Cesare..."

I whimper his name without thinking as my hips start moving on its own, and I find myself riding his hand harder and faster like it's a five-fingered beast meant to sweep

me off to paradise.

Every stroke of his finger on my clit makes me feel more delirious; I want and need more. I want both of us out of our minds with lust, and before I even know what I'm doing, I'm also reaching down between our bodies—

"Fuck."

Cesare groans the word out the moment my fingers wrap around the huge girth of his boner. He's so, so much thicker than I imagined, and my pussy quivers even harder when I hear him groan anew as I start stroking his length.

The movement of my fingers soon matches his, and sex flavors the air as I feel my own clit start to tighten, and his own cock twitches even more violently in my fold.

I start to pant, and so does he, and the sound is just so maddeningly erotic—

Aaaaah.

I wish I could make it last longer, but it's impossible. Pleasure bursts out of me the moment he pinches my clit, and Cesare growls my name out as my fingers squeeze his cock hard.

We cum at the same time, my creamy release coating his fingers as they slide down against my folds, and his own cum dripping all over my hand as his cock pulsates endlessly in my grip.

A faint cry tumbles past my lips as he suddenly pushes me up against the wall, and the next thing I know his other free hand is grabbing a fistful of my hair. He angles my face up, and my toes curl hard against the cold, wet tiles as his mouth hungrily ravages mine in a kiss so, so deep it ends up branding me all the way to my soul.

I own you, this kiss of his says.

And as I suck eagerly on his own tongue, and I hear him groan just as his big, strong body jerks against mine, this kiss just as clearly says—I own him, too.

## Chapter Eight

Penelope

CESARE CAN'T SEEM TO keep his hands to himself as he towels me dry after our shower. His fingers casually tease my nipples as he hooks my bra close at the back, and he accidentally makes my pussy quiver as he checks the seamless fit of my panties.

He asks me to choose something sleeveless for some reason, so I opt for a little black dress that makes me feel rather elegant. I want to ask him if I'm overdressed, but as soon as I come down, Cesare informs me that La Strega is waiting for us at her private study.

"Sit down, please."

While the older woman no longer terrifies me the way she had yesterday, I still find her vastly intimidating, and I end up answering her like a newly recruited soldier being interrogated by his commander.

"I hope you slept well, bambina?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"And you seem to be getting along with my grandson, sì?"

"Yes, ma'am."

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"Do you have any complaints? Any worries?"

"No, ma'am."

"You weren't this nervous with me the first time."

That's because yesterday, I was mostly in shock, but now that the truth of her identity has truly sunk in, and I find myself recalling of all the other gory stories I've heard of how La Strega has tortured those stupid enough to piss her off—

"I'm sorry, ma'am."

The older woman glances at Cesare, asking, "Is she also like this with you?"

"Not at all," her grandson drawls. "But maybe that's also because most of the time we're busy turning each other on—"

"Cesare!"

His grandmother and I end up saying his name at the same time, with La Strega sounding outraged while mine comes out in a dismayed squeak.

Cesare only smirks. "You can't say it didn't work."

La Strega and I look at each other...and we end up grimacing at the same time.

Grrr.



Both of us find it rather galling to realize that Cesare's absolutely right, and although our conversation takes a serious turn after that, it's indeed true that I no longer feel nervous or intimidated in La Strega's presence.

"The whole of New England has not been involved in the drug trade ever since I took the reins of our famiglia. It was about a year ago, however, that we started to hear rumors about someone from the Sorrentos wanting to change this. That's when I knew I had to do everything to find you——"

"Because you believe be able to put a stop to it," I say quietly, "through my marriage to Cesare."

"Oh no, bambina. I don't just believe this. I know it will be so, and I mean it to be so. Our famiglia is ready to go to war with whoever opposes us on this, but let us hope it will not come to that, sì? In the meantime..." La Strega reaches over the desk to gently squeeze my hand, saying, "I know you are looking forward to meeting your grandmother, but for now it is best to keep your existence a secret, just to keep anyone from...meddling. Va bene?"

THINGS HAVE STARTED to feel overwhelmingly surreal again by the time Cesare and I leave his grandmother's study, and it's only when I'm already in the passenger seat of Cesare's sports car, and he's driving past the ornate gates of the Marchetti Mansion that I finally manage to get out of my thoughts.

I glance at the rearview mirror, and my heart skips a beat when I realize there doesn't seem to be a convoy of cars full of bodyguards following us.

If it's truly just the two of us now, then...is it safe to assume we're about to have our first date?

Eep.

The thought makes me giddy as a schoolgirl, and my heart starts racing when I turn my gaze to mymafia boss.

Oh.

Is it just me...or does Cesare look so much cooler when he's driving, and especially with a pair of aviator glasses shielding his gaze?

"As much as I love having you stare at me——"

Oops.

"I need you to concentrate and listen carefully to what I'm about to say."

It takes everything not to squirm in my seat while I wait for his next words. Is this it? Is he going to tell me we're about to go out on a date, and it's because he's changed his mind, and he's realized that what he really wants is a normal marriage——

"You know that Boston is Marchetti territory, sì?"

I nod and say yes even as I try figuring out what this has to do with anything. Maybe...Cesare is just like his grandmother, and this is all a test? Maybe he wants to know if geography is a strong suit of mine, since it's something everyone expects from amafia boss's wife?

"There is nothing that goes on in this city that ourfamiglia does not control. Everything you see is ours. Everyone you will meet here works for us. Boston is ours, in every way there is."

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And I guess...he's now explaining to me what's about to be our conjugal assets?

"But in a couple of minutes, we'll be taking the interstate and heading to Providence."

He looks at me like he's expecting me to say something, and so I say...

"That's in Rhode Island, right?"

Cesare relaxes. "Essato."

"And, um——"

I feel like I'm acting like a goody-two-shoes student eagerly aiming to be some teacher's pet, but...I just can't seem to help myself.

"Providence is about an hour's drive away, isn't it?"

"Sì." Approval underscores his tone, and I'm now absolutely certain of two things: geography does mean huge to famiglia, and yes, I really am acting like I want to be this man's pet.

"You understand then, tesoro? What that one hour means?"

Since he looks slightly perturbed, I'm guessing he doesn't want me to be bored during the drive?

"You don't have to worry about me——"

"I will always worry about you, Penelope."

A faint smile curves over his lip when he sees me blush, and I mentally swoon when Cesare takes my hand and presses a quick, feather-soft kiss to my knuckles.

Boy, oh boy.

Cesare only smiles every time he catches me stealing looks at him, but as embarrassed as I am, it's simply another thing I'm unable to control.

He's just too beautiful and hot to be real, and it feels even more incredible when I remember Cesare telling me every inch of him is mine.

With my head in the clouds the entire ride, it's only when Cesare's car finally backs into a parking slot that hunger pangs hit my stomach, and I belatedly remember that we have yet to have breakfast.

Cesare helps me out of the car, and I tell myself I need to be patient and not ask him about what he has planned. It seems like he wants our date to be a surprise—shit.

I know I'm doomed to starve a little while longer the moment Cesare leads me up the entrance steps of a high-rise building, and a guard holding an honest-to-goodness machine gun greets him with the kind of deference that only someone who's also a *famiglia* can show.

I wish I could convince myself there's a Jollibee waiting and ready to feed us inside, but this place screams 'mafia-exclusive' any way you look at it, and I'm not even surprised when security has their dogs sniff circles around our bodies for explosives before clearing us for entry.

The first set of heavily-tinted doors slides open, but this only allows us inside an

empty antechamber of sorts, with what looks like a concierge counter adjacent to another set of doors made of bulletproof glass.

"Buongiorno, signore, signorina."

The man behind the counter looks like Abraham Lincoln...if our former president ever opted for a mohawk and a nose ring

"Regular or extra, Signor Marchetti?"

"Regular would do, Cassio."

I tug at Cesare's sleeve as the other man turns away. "Please tell me he's offering complimentary coffee?" The concierge comes back just as I finish speaking, and he immediately starts coughing as he places a small metal box on the counter.

Why is this guy laughing at me?

Is everyone here so loaded that they don't care for—oh.

All I can do is gape as Cesare starts loading the box with two handguns, three pocket knives of varying lengths, and...do I even want to know why he needs a pair of handcuffs when he isn't a cop?

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Cesare catches me gaping, and his dark eyes gleam. "Worried,tesoro?"

I scowl up at him. "If you ever use those cuffs on me——"

"You're welcome to use them on me, too."

"Seriously?" Wait, what am I saying? "I mean, no. Not interested, sorry."

A smirk plays over his lips. "Are you sure about that?"

A loud buzzing sound saves me from lying - I mean, replying, and the last pair of doors slowly swing open.

Whoa.

I feel like Cesare and I have just entered Hell, with all-red lights glowing down on black-painted walls and stone floors of the exact same shade.

"What is this place?" I ask nervously.

"La Torre dei Mostri."

I bite back a sigh. Why did I even think this place would have an English name? I should have realized by now anythingfamigliawill likely come with an Italian name, and——what in the world?

As soon as Cesare and I step inside an elevator, the first thing I notice is how the

entire panel of buttons below the LED display is completely blank.

Just seeing Cesare press a couple of them makes me feel like my life has suddenly turned into an action movie—but whether I'm playing the role of the female lead or victim, I've yet to figure out.

My heart sinks when the elevator doors finally slide open, and there's still no Jollibee we can grab some ready-to-serve breakfast from. Instead, we have a guy who looks like a rockstar in a white coat, and he wastes no time in introducing himself as Dr. Rivera.

The older man takes us straight to a laboratory, and my stomach growls just as Cesare assists me to a seat.

Oops.

I look at Cesare and the doctor in sheepish apology. "I'm sorry—"

"I'm the one who's sorry, tesoro," Cesare cuts me off with a grimace. "But I promise you'll be able to eat anything and everything you want soon enough. Dr. Rivera will only need you to complete several tests, and it shouldn't take more than a couple of minutes."

I'm about to ask exactly what kind of tests we're talking about, but then I see Dr. Rivera with his swab kit, and I realize this is probably to establish my identity with a DNA match.

Dr. Rivera is able to get my swab samples in less than two minutes, but just when I'm about to stand up, Cesare's hands curve over my shoulders, and he gently presses me back down to my seat.

Huh?

"Just one last thing to do, tesoro."

Honestly, I'm starting to feel disappointed about how insensitive he's being. Couldn't we have breakfast before coming here? It's not like—OH SHIT.

A nurse with a blood extraction kit enters the laboratory, and I start feeling a little faint as she takes the seat across mine.

"Un momento, signorina," she says with a smile. "I just need to take a sample of your blood."

Something flashes in the air, and I feel even fainter as I watch her insert a really, really long needle into a syringe.

I remember Cesare and La Strega discussing the need to have a doctor see me over last night's dinner, and I also remember telling them how I was fine with that as long as it didn't involve someone poking me with a needle.

I remember Cesare not saying a word, and idiot that I am, I had thought his silence signified his agreement.

But obviously that's not the case, and since Cesare is not La Strega's grandson for nothing—

Shit, shit, shit!



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No freaking wonder he's delayed us having breakfast. Blood tests typically require individuals to fast a certain number of hours, and when the nurse reaches for my arm to tie a tourniquet around it—

Oh no, you don't!

The hemophobic wimp in me freaks out, and all hell breaks loose.

### Chapter Nine

Cesare

MASSIMO:È vero? It took three men to keep her still?

Cesare:Sì.

Massimo:And that she managed to give one of them a shiner?

Cesare:Also true.

Massimo:I do not know whether to think you are lucky or unlucky.

Cesare:All you or any other man needs to remember is that she is mine.

Massimo:You almost sound jealous, fratello.

Cesare's lip curled at his brother's message. He was not geloso, for fuck's sake. Never

had been in his life, and he would not start acting so now, even where his own fidanzata was concerned.

"I'm back..."

Penelope marched out of her gynecologist's clinic with a still-stony look on her face. Even though she had already enjoyed the most sumptuous breakfast in the tower's rooftop restaurant, it was obvious that she had still not forgiven him for tricking her into getting her bloodwork done.

"Can we go now?"

No woman had ever dared to hold a grudge against him before, but instead of finding this annoying, it only made Cesare want to tease his Penelope even more.

"Not just yet," he drawled.

Penelope's gaze turned mutinous then, but he pretended not to notice.

"You are certain you've discussed everything with your doctor?" Cesare asked silkily.

"Of course."

"Then she's given a prescription for birth con——"

"Yes!" Penelope was now red-faced in embarrassment, and she was also looking around them nervously as if wanting to check if someone else had accidentally heard his words.

"And did you make it clear that I wanted to fuck you without a con——"

A mortified squeak escaped her lips as she tried to cover his mouth with her hands, only to end up losing her balance as her body fell against his.

She beat his chest upon hearing him chuckle in amusement, but as soon as she looked up, Cesare was able to retaliate by taking her mouth with a swift, hard kiss.

"Mmmph."

Penelope cried out as he sucked hard on her lower lip, and she glared up at him as soon as he lifted his head.

"Will you still not forgive me,tesoro?"

"Never," she grumbled without hesitation, "and will you please stop kissing me just anywhere you please?"

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"If I really meant to kiss you anywhere I please," Cesare purred, "it would've been another set of lips on your body that I'd be tasting with my tongue."

She blinked at him in confusion. "What do you mean another set—" Understanding dawned, and heat flamed back into her cheeks. "Y-You—"

"I can do it, you know. Right here, right this very moment—"

"Signorina?"

A relieved Penelope pulled away from him as soon as she heard one of the nurses at the station calling out to her, but he saw how her mood also quickly turned sour, with the way the nurses were all ogling him shamelessly.

Penelope attempted to block the other women's views by standing right in front of them, and when they moved to this side and that, so did she.

It was like watching little girls compete for their favorite toy, to be fucking honest...but when one of the nurses went as far as unbuttoning her cardigan and give her tits a shake while licking her lip—

Penelope spun around, her arms thrown up as if planning this time to obstruct this view...

Cesare arched a brow as their gazes collided. Did you really think another woman can tempt me just like that?

The way she bit her lip revealed her uncertainty, but the way she suddenly squared her shoulders also told him something was up. He had a feeling things would get even more interesting from here—

Penelope suddenly crooked a finger at him.

And he was right.

She crooked a finger at him again, and Cesare did his best to stifle his smile while making his way to her.

Ah, tesoro.

His long-legged stride had him reaching her in moments, and the first thing he did was have her squeak in surprise when he pinched her cheeks.

"Ouch!"

He pinched her cheeks again, and Penelope glowered. "What's that for?" she grouched under her breath. "I just wanted to demonstrate to them that I'm your owner—"

"You were the one who forgot that," he chastised gently, "not me, and that is what this is all about."

All she could do was make a face when he was able to steal another pinch from her cheeks.

"It's punishment, tesoro...for doubting your claim on me."

"HMPH."

She scowled up at him as she said this, but she also caught him completely off guard when she stood on her toes a second later—

What the hell?

It was her turn to steal something from him, with her lips brushing against his in a kiss—

Fuck.

And then she was hurrying away from him, mumbling something about having to go back to Dr. Rivera's clinic.

Fuck, fuck, fuck.

Everyone at the nurses' station was staring at him again, but this time all of their gazes were trained at the bulging evidence of his arousal.

Fuck!

He himself was the one to tell Penelope that their upcoming marriage could be nothing more than a business transaction. But as he watched her disappear into the doctor's clinic—all he could think of was how he couldn't fucking wait to make her hiswife.

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Penelope

"It's a positive match," Dr. Rivera says with a smile as soon as we settle into a comfortable pair of seats across his desk. "There is absolutely no doubt that you are Signora Pilar Sorrento's granddaughter, but...I have a feeling both of you already know that."

The doctor goes on to discuss results from my blood tests next, and my heart feels like it's about to burst when I see the taut edges of Cesare's gorgeous face while he listens.

He looks really concerned, but...I can't let myself assume anything just yet.

This is still the same man who only sees us as owners looking after each other's properties, and until he says otherwise...

Don't get your hopes up, dude!

We stop by the concierge on our way out, and I see the other man look at me while Cesare is busy re-arming himself like he's John Wick. "Signorina?"

I feel like a student being called to the dean's office, and my back automatically straightens as I nervously meet his gaze. "Yes, sir?"

"Thank you for your visit. We look forward to being of service to you again."

He takes something from the shelf behind him, and I can't help laughing when I

realize he's giving me a bottled frappe from Starbucks.

"Thank you, Cazzo."

Cesare chokes as I thank the concierge, and I end up grasping empty air when the concierge, now looking murderous, throws the bottle of coffee straight into the trash.

"Mi dispiace, Cassio."

I realize my mistake as soon as I hear Cesare apologize on my behalf, but I have no chance to say sorry myself with my mafia boss is already whisking me out of the hospital like the concierge is about to shoot us dead.

"I guess it's a mortal sin to mispronounce a famiglia's name?" I ask weakly as he walks me to my side of the car.

"Not generally, no——" Cesare slides back behind the wheel before facing me. "But it is when you call him a dick, which is what 'cazzo' translates to in Italian."

Oh.

SHIT.

I groan, and being the ever-supportive owner that he is, Cesare throws his head back with a laugh.

"It isn't funny," I bemoan as his sports car blazes out of the parking lot. "I'll never live this day down. Everyone will remember me as that bitch who said——"

"Fuck!"



I nearly drop an F-bomb myself as his tires screech under us, with Cesare abruptly making a hard turn to the right. Is it just me...or do allfamigliamen have this dream of shooting for the next Fast & the Furious movie?

Panic starts feeling like an old frenemy when I see Cesare keep one hand on the wheel while yanking his pistol out with the other.

I know I should've expected something like this because he'sfamiglia, but the moment his window rolls down, and he starts shooting at the car trying to crash into us from another lane—

I scream and freak out like a headless chicken as chaos erupts all around us.

"W-What's happening?"

Cesare shoots me a look of disbelief...even as he keeps shooting at everyone else. "What the fuck do you mean what's happening? Didn't you fucking say you understood—"

"No, I didn't!"

"You even told me I shouldn't fucking worry—"

"I thought you were worried I'd get bored during the drive," I cry out. "I didn't know you were warning me about peoplewaaaaaantiiaaaiing tooooo kiiiiiiiill uuuuuuuuus!"

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I have no idea how Cesare is doing it—

Oh my God, oh my God, oh my God!

But all the other vehicles have either flipped into the air or crashed into each other while we continue on our merry way, his Lambo unscathed, and my mafiaboss driver equally unscarred.

"Duck," Cesare suddenly hisses, and I'm just so out of my mind with terror I have no idea what he's saying.

"Where?" I choke out. And are we talking about Daffy, Donald, the Mighty—

"I said, fucking duck!"

Cesare shoves my head down between my legs.

OH, so it's that kind of duck he was talking—shiiiiit!

Tears prick my eyes when a swift flip of the lever has Cesare's seat instantly falling back, and just in time, too, with a bullet whizzing by and grazing the edge of his cheek. One second slower than that, and he could've—

He could've—

He—he—

"Gluck," Cesare grates out.

Sobs threaten to spiral out of my throat. Is that his way of telling me we're vastly outnumbered, and it's only a matter of time before one of our enemies shoots us dead?

"Good luck," I say fiercely even as my whole body is now quaking in terror. I'll be by his side through thick and thin—

"Fuck, tesoro."

I wonder if Cesare's finally snapped, with the sound of strained laughter tingeing his voice.

"I'm asking you to hand me the fucking gun in the glove compartment, tesoro—"

Oh.

"It's called a fucking Glock—"

OH!

"You should have told me that in the first place!" I feel like laughing and crying at the same time as I scramble to open the glove compartment and get his stupid Glock. Maybe I'm the one who's lost my mind—

"Now!"

The snap in his voice makes me bump my head and jump in my seat, and I'm all thumbs as I fumble with the gun in my hand—

Shiiiiiiiiit!

Its weight takes me by surprise, and just as the gun starts to slip out of my fingers, another car slams into us on Cesare's side, andBAAAAAAAANG!

Cesare falls back against his seat in the nick of time once again—but the other guy isn't as unlucky, and the gun I'm holding drops to the floor as I watch a bloody hole slowly form right in the middle of his head.

Oh God.

Cesare gets back up, and a swift yank on the steering wheel has our car swerving away in safety, and a weird ringing fills my eardrums as I watch the other car spin out of control.

God. Oh God.

I feel sick to my stomach as I force myself to look over my shoulder, and I see all the carnage we're leaving behind.

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"Brava, tesoro."

The words have my gaze jerking back to Cesare, and I look at him in a daze. "W-What?"

"You just had your first kill—"

It almost sounds like he's proud of me, but that can't be, right?

"It w-wasn't. I d-didn't—" I look at him desperately. "Maybe he's not dead?"

"With that hole in his head?" Cesare says with a snort. "You have a very dark sense of humor—Penelope? Fuck! Penelope!"

### Chapter Ten

Penelope

TWO THINGS COME TO mind as soon as I wake.

Firstly: Ifainted.

And secondly: Cesare was right.

I did kill someone, and the thought has me flying off the bed. I barely make it in time, my knees crashing to the floor as I throw up in the toilet bowl.

I'm sorry, God, I'm sorry.

My brain is insisting I had no choice, but my heart believes things could've ended differently...if I hadn't so foolishly panicked.

I'm sorry, God, I'm sorry.

Maybe I'll get over this in time, but right now, the act of taking another person's life is weighing me down like a brick around my neck, and I feel like I'm about to drown in my guilt at any moment.

I've watched people killing other people all the time in action movies, and they all make it look so easy. Other people's deaths don't seem to bother them, and it's all because they're the good guys, and the ones they've killed are the bad guys.

I'm sorry, God, I'm sorry.

"Are you alright?"

A gentle hand carefully gathers my hair away as I vomit the last of my breakfast, and I feel weak and dizzy as I lean back against the wall.

I catch a brief glimpse of a girl with bubblegum-colored hair quickly leaving my side with the full skirts of her ankle-length dress swishing around her legs. When she comes back, it's to meticulously wipe off the puke from my face. "Feeling better?"

Her tone is calm and sensible, and the remnants of my shock eventually fade at the reassuring sound. "Uh...yes. T-Thanks."

She helps me back to my feet, and it's as we're walking out of the en-suite that I belatedly notice my surroundings. This...is definitely not the same bedroom I slept in

last night, and I can't help feeling anxious. "Where am I?"

"One of the guestrooms in Cesare's penthouse."

The way she says his name with utter ease has me clumsily falling back on the bed, and a green-eyed monster starts messing with my brain as the other girl takes a step back from me.

She looks about my age, maybe a few years older tops, and so eye-catchingly attractive with her lilac-colored locks and the dramatic shimmer around her cat eyes. Even her outfit is an enthralling contrast: a vicious-looking pair of army boots...vis a visher dark-gray apron dress that's made more prim and proper by the white-buttoned-up blouse underneath, with its round collars and long, billowy sleeves.

Shekindalooks like Wednesday Addams dressed up as Harley Quinn for Halloween, or maybe it's the other way around?

Either way, I'm just praying she's related to Cesare by blood...or I'll have a huge problem in my hands, if this girl somehow turns out to be my rival.

"Do you need anything?" the girl asks. "A glass of water? Painkillers? A——?"

"Are you also a Marchetti?" I blurt out.

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"No way!"

Her aghast tone takes me aback...even as I start feeling a little sick again. I'm so, so dead if this girl is also after Cesare—

"Or at least not yet," she adds with a roll of her eyes, "and if it were up to me, I won't be one...ever."

I can only stare at her, now more confused than jealous and insecure.

"I obviously forgot to introduce myself," she says with a wrinkle of her nose. "I'm Sarica, you're Penelope, and in case you're wondering why I already know who you are - or what I'm doing here - I guess you can say we're in the same boat?"

My eyes widen. "You're...you're engaged to one of Cesare's brothers?"

"To Mr. Perfect himself, actually."

I have no idea who that is, but I'm more than a little curious with how she says the word 'perfect' like it's synonymous to 'pervert'—

"Speak of the devil," Sarica mutters under her breath as the door swings open, and a man who strongly resembles Cesare in appearance comes striding in. Same dark coloring, same build and height, only this time the man looks slightly more distinguished with the faint hint of silver streaking through his hair.

Sarica waves to him, saying, "Penelope, meet Giancarlo, Cesare's oldest brother."



"Ciao, Penelope."

His accent is even more Italian than Cesare's, and I'm dying to know why that is.

"I'm sorry we have to meet under these circumstances. How are you feeling?"

"I'm okay." His concern makes me feel guilty and awkward. "I wasn't really injured or anything. I just fainted because..." My voice fades as I find myself unable to say the truth.

"Will you try to look at it another way, sorellina?" Giancarlo asks gently. "Because your actions also meant that you were able to save your life and that of my brother's."

"If you hadn't killed the other guy," Sarica adds gruffly, "then it would've been the other way around, and take my word for it: guys like those wouldn't have let you die a quick and easy death. They'd have raped and tortured——"

"Sarica."

The other girl only shrugs at Giancarlo's exasperated tone. "I just wanted to drive the point home——"

"You could have done so without being graphic——"

I clear my throat, not wanting them to argue over me. "I'm, um, okay, and Sarica was -is- right. I got her point, and——"

The door opens again, and this time it's Cesare himself who walks in, followed by La Strega and another man who can only be his brother as well.

"You're awake..."

Cesare is already cupping my face and kissing me hungrily as soon as he reaches me, and I can't think of anything to say by the time he lifts his head.

"How are you feeling?" he asks tautly.

"I'm fine. Nothing really hap—" My words falter as he scoops me up to take my place on the bed...before settling me down on his lap.

Awkward...but I also can't think of any other place I want to be.

Cesare's grandmother comes forward then. "Cesare tells me you were very brave,bambina."

"I'm sure what he really means is'silly'—"

"You are very new tofamigliabusiness. Cesare should have taken more time to explain to you about the dangers of leaving our territory."

"I think I ended up being a little too lax because it was just the two of us. No bodyguards—"

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"That was unfortunately my choice."

Cesare frowns. "Nonna——"

"We both know I am solely to blame for what happened today," La Strega says sharply. "I thought it would be safer and less conspicuous if you were to drive out of Boston without security. I also mistakenly assumed that they would not dare attack you in a neutral territory like Providence——"

"Essato," Cesare says. "What happened was not your fault. It happened because they were stupid enough to break the rules, and even more stupid to go after us without being able to finish the job."

The older woman looks at me. "I am sorry, bambina. Never again will you come into harm while under my watch——"

I open my mouth to tell her that I'm not blaming her at all, but when she raises her hand in a halting gesture——

Gotcha.

If she wants me to shut up, then I'm shutting up.

"It is what I owe you, bambina, and a Marchetti always pays his debts, you understand?"

"Yes, ma'am."

A faint smile touches her lips, and both of us share a moment of déjà vu.

Gosh.

I know it was just this morning I was nervously seated in her office, but those memories honestly feel like they happened a lifetime ago.

"Now, then..." La Strega glances at the others. "I assume you already know Giancarlo and Sarica?"

"Um, yes—"

"Dare I hope she's introduced herself properly?"

Sarica makes a face. "We all know what you're really asking, signora, and to answer your real question—yes, I did tell Penelope I'm Giancarlo's fidanzata...for the time being."

I nearly choke at her daring...while the rest of the Marchettis are acting like they haven't heard anything out of the norm.

Huh.

Cesare's grandmother then motions to the only member of her family that I've yet to meet.

"Penelope, may I introduce you to another grandson of mine? Massimo is also twenty-eight like Cesare. Growing up, they were like twins, albeit of different mothers."

"Ciao, Penelope," Massimo drawls with a lazy smile. "It is nice to finally meet you,

and if you have any second thoughts about Cesare, you may be pleased to know that we have one other brother——"

"Fuck off, Mas," Cesare snaps, but this only has his brother smirking.

"What did I say,fratello? I told you, didn't I? You'regeloso——"

I bite my lip hard.

No, no, no.

I'm pretty sure I've heard his brother wrong——

Cesare tips my chin up. "Penelope?" The frown in his voice tells me he's somehow sensed the change in my mood. "What is it? Is something wrong?"

"Um..."

"You can tell me anything."

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Well, in that case...

"Why did he call you...an ice cream?"

"Scusa?"

"He said you were 'gelato'——"

Everyone in the room starts coughing, and the sound is all too annoyingly familiar.

Yeeeargh.

I make a face at them and throw my hands up in surrender. "It's not my fault I don't speak Italian or mafia——"

Everyone winces at this, but this doesn't really make me feel any better, and I can't help eyeing Cesare's family rather warily. "How much do you guys know about what went down today?"

Sarica looks down on her phone while Giancarlo carefully avoids my gaze, and Massimo checks his watch as if he suddenly has somewhere to go. Only La Strega looks at me in the eye...before saying rather baldly, "You're a good girl, bambina...but why on earth did you even think my grandson would ask you to look for some duck in the middle of a shootout?"

This time, none of his family even bothers to cough. Sarica is already doubled over in laughter while Massimo snickers and even Mr.-So-Called-Perfecthimself is not so

perfect with his barely suppressed smile.

Cesare, however, only cups my face. "Ignore them, tesoro. You are adorable as you are——"

"Are you really sure you don't mean silly?"

"Well——"

I try jumping off his lap, but this only has him chuckling as he tightens his arms around mine.

"Do not ever change, mm?"

"It seems you will make a doting husband," La Strega remarks with a strangely crafty gleam in her witchy dark eyes.

"Sì, Nonna."

Am I imagining things...or has Cesare's voice become a little too silky?

"I intend to dote on Penelope for the rest of our lives, but not as her husband."

His grandmother stiffens. "Chiedo scusa?"

The anger in her gaze is unmistakable, and I remember all too late that it's La Strega and not just a normal grandmother I'm talking to.

"It's r-really not as bad as you think it is," I point out in a hurry. "Cesare and I will still marry, but we also have a misunderstanding—I mean, an understanding——"

Shit,I feel like I'm digging a deeper hole for myself here.

"What is it, really?" the older woman asks impatiently.

"There is no need to raise your voice at her," Cesare says between clenched teeth.

"Then you be the one to explain," his grandmother snaps back at him. "What is all this nonsense——"

Not wanting the two of them to get into a full-blown quarrel, I take a deep breath and say in a rush, "We're each other's owners!"

Silence.

"T-That's how we agreed to consider each other once we marry. A-As owners..."

More silence.



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Oh, shit.

Just when I start feeling sick at the possibility that I might've made things worse, Sarica suddenly flashes a smile, saying brightly, "I like that." And her alluring cat-like eyes then turn to Cesare's oldest brother as she asks, "How about it, signore? As your owner, I'd like you to dye your hair the same color as mine——"

"Over my fucking dead body...signorina."

The contrast between his words and courteous tone is exactly what we all need to hear, and I can only mentally sigh in relief as the tension in the room instantly evaporates, and I even see La Strega shaking her head at Sarica with exasperated affection.

Private catering takes care of dinner later on, and all of my troubles temporarily fade as the warmth of Cesare's family wraps around me like a cozy embrace.

Massimo promises to take me out to meet some girl named Ynez just as La Strega imperiously asks me to start calling her 'nonna' while Sarica argues with Giancarlo about the number of bodyguards he intends to assign for both his fiancée and me.

And when I glance at Cesare and catch him looking at me like he wants to chain me to him for all eternity——

Shit, oh shit.

I'm not sure if this has to do with how I almost died...or how I've taken another person's life, but my feelings for a certain mafiaboss are suddenly painfully clear.

## Chapter Eleven

Cesare

WHILE MOST OF HIS FAMILY left right after dinner, he was not surprised when Massimo opted to stay behind...and his brother wasted no time in confronting him as soon as they were alone in his office.

"Explain to me what you're doing, fratello."

"Is it not obvious enough?"

"All that's obvious to me is how you've convinced an eighteen-year-old girl to truly believe it's actually a good thing for married couples to see themselves as each other's owners."

"We're famiglia," Cesare said flatly. "The fewer people we trust, the better——"

"And so you are choosing not to trust your own fidanzata?"

"She is not our blood——"

Massimo threw his brother a look of disgust. "Porca miseria, Cesare! We both know I have more experience with women so damn greedy they wouldn't think twice about selling their own sons for the right price——" His own past came to haunt him, and his jaw clenched. "So trust me when I say that Penelope is not and can never be the type to let you down."

Cesare bit back an expletive upon hearing his brother's words.

Fuck.

Massimo's mother was a Vegas stripper who had not hesitated to use her own son as a bargaining chip every time she needed to ask money from the Marchettis—and asshole that he was, he had not realized how his treatment of Penelope might end up reminding Massimo of his parent.

"Mi dispiace—"

"You do not owe me an apology," Massimo said quietly, "but it would make me feel better if you just stop lying to yourself. Being famiglia also means we learn early about the nature of humans, and you and I know Penelope has not an evil bone in her body."

Massimo's gaze turned grim at Cesare's continued refusal to speak. "I cannot just watch and say nothing when I see my own brother hell-bent on ruining his life. Penelope is not the problem here, fratello. It is you and your feelings—"

"I do not have feelings for her," Cesare denied tightly. "I know it's not what you wish to hear, but it's the fucking truth. I don't love her—and I never will."

Penelope

Silence is an insidious twat.

At first I'm basking in the afterglow of being surrounded by family, but as the minutes tick by, my eyes start to droop...and before I know it, I'm falling back into the bloody, thorny arms of my nightmares, and I'm forced to relive everything I've been desperately trying to run away from.

The deafening, soul-eating sound of endless gunshots. The screech of wildly spinning tires and the stench of burnt rubber. And because nightmares like this always save the worst for last—a demon sinks its claws into my flesh and turns me into a puppet.

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No, please, no.

But I'm powerless to stop the demon from forcing my hands to hold a gun, point it at that man's head, and then I'm pulling the trigger—

Bang. Bang. Bang. Bang. Bang. Bang. Bang. Bang. Bang. Bang.

The demon doesn't allow me to stop firing even as the man's face has completely split open, his skull shattered into pieces, and his brain looking like stupid freaking macaroni—

I wake up with a voiceless scream trapped in my throat, and I end up puking my guts out for the second time.

I'm sorry, God, I'm sorry.

I brush my teeth several times and step into the shower in a foolish attempt to wash away my sin. Punishingly cold water blasts down my shivering body, but guilt still scorches me from within.

I walk back into the room, still trembling and naked and hurting.

I know can't go on like this.

I just can't—

The bedroom door slowly open, and as soon as Cesare walks back in, the first thing I

see is the agony etched over the sculpted edges of his gorgeous face, and it's the exact same torment haunting my own soul.

I don't know why he's hurting. All I know is that it's hurting me even more to see him suffering...because I love him.

I think it's time I admit the undeniable.

He owns me because I want him, owns me because I need him. And the one reason he will never lose me is because I love him.

I love Cesare Marchetti, and that's why I know. He's the only one who can truly heal me, and as he suddenly hauls me against his body—I can only reach up to lay a trembling hand against his cheek. I'm hoping, even if he's yet to love me back, that my touch may heal his pain, too.

"What's wrong?" I whisper.

He shakes his head before slowly letting me go...in order to step back and stare at me. The shadows in his gaze gradually fade, and replacing it is a glitter of lust that has his eyes devouring every inch of my naked flesh.

"I want to fuck you," Cesare says roughly.

"Then fuck me," I say unevenly. "Keep your promise and don't let me sleep another night a v-virgin who still doesn't know what it feels like to have your cock inside of me——"

He lowers his head with a groan, and the moment his mouth swoops down in a kiss so ruthlessly deep his tongue reaches the back of my throat——

Aaaaaaah.

Passion explodes between us, and all rules are forgotten. They say a girl's first time is supposed to be slow and gentle, tender and loving.

But this girl is different.

The things that have shaped my life up to this very moment makes me different, and all I want is to lose myself in his possessive embrace. All I need right now is for the forceful power of sex to break me, to just stop me from thinking in any way so that all I can do is feel what it likes to be owned—

"C-Cesare!"

I cry out in a mixture of fear, shock, and excitement when he suddenly spins me around, and I find myself bent over the edge of the bed, my already-aching breasts flat against the covers, feet on the floor, and my ass up in the air.

The sound of his fingers working his zipper down is enough to make moisture coat the swollen folds of my pussy, and my fingers curl helplessly against the bed. It feels like things are happening too fast, but at the same time it also feels like things aren't happening fast enough, and I find myself writhing at the restless clamor of heat pulsating deep in my belly.

"P-Please..."

I'm not even sure what I'm pleading for, but the moment I feel him sliding the thick, throbbing length of his erection up and down against the crack of my ass—

Yes, yes, yes.

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My body arches involuntarily, and just as the soft back of my thighs hits his denim-clad legs, he suddenly slaps one of the bare cheeks of my bottom—

"Cesare!"

He gives my bottom another slap, and I end up writhing anew as my flesh starts to burn in the most unbearably delicious way. It hurts so, so good, that by the time he starts slapping the other cheek of my ass, I'm close to feeling delirious, and I barely notice the way one of his hands has curved around my waist...just as his other hand guides the bulbous head of his cock to the quivering entrance of my core.

"Fuck, tesoro," Cesare groans. "You're so fucking wet."

I feel him slowly pushing his cock inside of me as he speaks, and all I can do is moan because he's barely an inch inside, and it already feels like he's about to tear me apart.

"You're too big," I choke out.

"I know..."

It's that beautiful, annoying voice of his again. The one that simultaneously taunts and seduces, and just like before, it makes me want to say 'fuck off'...and 'fuck me', also at the same time.

"If I try pushing another inch more..."

My gasp comes out all strangled this time, with the way that added inch of his cock



already has my pussy stretching more widely open than it's ever been. Two inches, just two inches in, and—

AAAAAAH!

Cesare suddenly thrusts all the way inside of me, and it hurts so, so good, that I feel like I'm about to spontaneously combust even as tears painfully sting my eyes.

"I'm sorry, tesoro..." His words are a whispered balm for the excruciating fullness that's pulsing violently inside of my pussy. "But this isn't the last time my cock will feel too fucking big for your cunt."

He says the words so gently, and his touch is just as gentle as he gathers my hair in one hand in order to softly kiss the bare curve of my shoulder. Everything he does is so, so gentle, really, that it takes me an extra second to understand what he's just said.

Wait a minute.

Is he saying his cock will always feel like this massive beast bulldozing its way into my—

"C-C-Cesare!"

My stunned cry only melts into the devilish sound of his laugh, and all I can do after that is sob and claw on the sheets helplessly as Cesare pounds into me hard and fast—

Aaaaah

He's fucking me roughly and relentlessly like the ruthless mafia boss I fear, want, and need him to be—

"P-please..."

I'm not sure if I'm begging him to be more rough or gentle, but when he grips my hair to pull my head back and turn my mouth to his kiss—

Rough, I realize dizzily.

I definitely, absolutely, and totally need him to be this wonderfully rough, with his tongue once again diving so deep into my throat that I nearly stop breathing—

I love you, I love you, I love you.

I know it's silly to want to cry the words out when his mouth finally leaves mine...and I taste the tiniest bit of blood as he bites my lip.

But that's just how it is.

The way his hands are forcefully pressing my hips down on the bed as his massive length plunges in and out of my swollen and exquisitely battered cunt—

The way his thumbs are digging deep into the soft flesh of my ass when the head of his cock has finally reached all the way to my womb—

All of these things just make me want to cry the words out—

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I love you, I love you, I love you.

And when his big, muscular body suddenly jerks behind me, and he groans my name out as I finally experience what it means to have my mafia boss's cock fill my pussy with his cum—

I love you.

The words play endlessly in my heart as his orgasm triggers my own, and I can only sob as the thick, creamy essence of my release pours out of my body and coagulates with his own seed before trickling down my thighs.

I love you.

We make love several times more after that, and when my stomach starts growling again, we end up enjoying a midnight meal in his balcony, and with Cesare feeding me Chinese takeout while I'm still naked in his lap.

I can barely keep my eyes open by the time he carries me back to his bedroom, and I'm vaguely aware of Cesare quietly telling me that he'll set up a meeting with Pilar Sorrento first thing tomorrow morning.

'I don't want another day to pass without making you my wife.'

I wish I have the strength to ask him if what I'm hearing is true... since I know Cesare calling me his wife is another way of him saying he loves me back.

But because sleep is ever so traitorous, his words are left unanswered, and I find myself dreaming...again.

"DAD."

I sit up and rub my eyes so I can have a better look at the time on my phone.

01:53 AM?

I'm wide-awake in an instant, and confused, since this isn't the usual time for him to come home. "Where have you been?"

Dad sits next to me on the couch. "That's the question you really want to ask?" He reaches for the book from the coffee table and places it on my hand. "You've been working on this, haven't you?"

"Yes...and no? I mean, it's a book about ancient mysteries. And countless experts have already tried solving them and failed. It's not like I can do anything else—"

Dad shakes his head. "You're looking at it the wrong way, Penny."

My brows furrow as I belatedly notice the way he's looking at me. "What's wrong, Dad?"

"It's not always about what or how much you know."

"Why do you look so sad?"

"Sometimes, it's all about the simplest things, like what you saw. What you heard. What you remember."

I shake my head. "You're starting to scare me. Is this about Mom?"

Dad ruffles my hair. "Love you, Pens."

Tears start rolling down my eyes, and even though we see each other every day—why does it suddenly feel like it's been forever since I last heard Dad say that?

I wish, God, I wish I can say the words back.

But when my lips part, it's all too late.

I'M CRYING WHEN I WAKEup, but I waste no time in wiping the tears away since someone is furiously knocking on the door.

"Penelope?"

I think that's Massimo's voice?

I open the door, and it's indeed Cesare's brother standing in the hallway, and the grim set of his features makes me feel sick.

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No. Please. No. Not again. Please, God. Please.

"It's Cesare."

My knees threaten to fold. "He's n-not dead—" I would've felt it. Would've known.

Massimo whitens. "Dio, no.It's not that," he rejects right away. "Mi dispiace,I did not mean to frighten you."

My knees do give out this time, and even though I'm crying again, it's tears of relief coursing down my cheeks.

He's alive, thank God.

That's all that matters.

Cesare's alive.

Massimo carefully helps me back to my feet, and I look up at him, saying unevenly, "Just tell it to me straight."

And so he does.

Pilar is dead, and Cesare is now behind bars...as the prime suspect behind her murder.

Chapter Twelve

Cesare

HE HAD ONLY BEEN IN jail for a few hours when the police was telling him he had his first visitor, and while Cesare was not surprised to see La Strega on the opposite side of the bulletproof window—

It pained him to see her frailty emphasized, with how her fingers were badly shaking as she reached for the receiver that would allow them to hear each other's voices.

"How bad is it?" Cesare asked calmly.

"The evidence against you is damning." Potenziana felt like she was breaking her own heart as she forced herself to speak to her grandson as La Strega.

Once he was free, and she was assured of his safety, it would only then that she would indulge herself with the luxury of weeping like a grandmother whose little boy was in danger.

But until then, she had to act like the matriarch whose famiglia was under threat.

"Whoever killed her," Potenziana emphasized curtly, "had all of their ducks in a row."

"Fucking ducks again."

Potenziana was stunned to find herself almost smiling.

Next time, she promised herself.

Once Cesare was free, this, too, would be another wonderful story about those fucking ducks that they could laugh about.

But until then——

"If I were to make a guess, those ducks are the killer's multiple scapegoats, with evidence meticulously prepared against each and every one of them. It just so happened that you were the unlucky one to draw the shorter stick, with your visit to Pilar."

Silence followed, and an inscrutable mask smoothened over the chiseled features of her grandson's face.

"If I end up charged——"

"No!"

Emotion finally cracked through her voice.



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"You are not to think of that. Ever. You will get out of this place, do you understand? And Penelope——"

Cesare had not allowed himself to think of her at all since coming here, but he also knew the time had come to be a fucking man and do what he had to fucking do.

"What exactly does she know?"

"That you were the one to find her grandmother's body, and that there was enough made-up evidence to have you arrested. She——"

"I don't need to hear anything more," Cesare said curtly. "And this is the only favor I'd like to ask of you, Nonna."

Potenziana had a feeling she already knew what her grandson was about to say.

"She's not to come here at any point——and this will be the last time we'll be talking about her."

His grandmother stared at him, and his jaw clenched.

"You...IDIOT."

That she was choosing to call him that now, after what he had said, was not lost on Cesare.

But he didn't give a damn, and he also made it clear to his grandmother that he was

not going to change his mind about this either.

It was over.

He laid back on the cold, hard bed in his cell and stared at the blank ceiling for hours.

His grandmother was not La Strega for nothing. She always had a plan—and the fact that she had visited him without one spoke volumes. There was a very good chance that he would indeed be charged for Pilar's murder, and that would mean serving years on the minimum. Maybe even a decade at the very least. He would be stuck here indefinitely and that was why this was the only decent and logical decision for him to make.

He had to cut all ties with Penelope...and forget she ever existed.

TO BE JAILED WAS LIKE a rite of passage for every member of famiglia. It made one tough and smart, made one know better to take certain things for granted, once released. But to be jailed outside one's territory?

It was to be avoided at all cost for one reason alone, and that "reason" began on Cesare's first full day behind bars.

Men who were either paid or wanting to be paid with Sorrento money attacked Cesare the first chance they got, and the guards, who were also on Sorrento payroll, waited until he was properly welcomed with a stab wound to his side, before taking Cesare to the clinic.

He was moved to maximum security for the night, and waiting for him in his new cell was a letter from her.

I know you must have a reason for not wanting me to see you. No one wants to tell

me anything either, and that's fine, too. It could be the famiglia way, for all I know.

If I truly can't see you, then so be it.

But please just let me know you're okay. Please tell me you know that I trust you above all else. If you tell me you didn't kill my grandmother, I'll believe you. If you tell me you have a reason for killing her, I'll believe you.

I grieve for her because she's my flesh and blood, but it's you I miss, you I dream of, you I need to see. Please, Cesare. Please let me see you.

His family also wrote to him, and the news they shared came as no surprise as well. The Sorrentos had employed a mixture of legal and not-so-legal measures to bar the Marchettis from visiting Cesare, and until their own lawyers were able to put into effect a countermeasure of their own—there were always hands to be greased that could smuggle in whatever Cesare needed.

His family sent their love to him, and while Cesare believed their words were not a lie—he could not and would not let himself believe her.

And so he wrote back to Massimo, and asked his brother to inform Penelope that her letters would no longer be delivered.

ANOTHER DAY BEGAN, and it ended with someone managing to sneak up on Cesare from behind and grab his fucking hair so he could slam Cesare's head against the wall.

He suffered a concussion, and members of the press that had been tipped off by the Marchettis were already waiting for Cesare as soon as he was wheeled out of the ambulance and sent straight to a local hospital's lab for brain scans.

His face was all over the news by six in the evening, and it was his famiglia's turn to cash in favors. Massive public protests in Boston were heavily covered by the press, and with influential politicians lobbying for his release, Cesare's case was ultimately ruled as a medical emergency, and thus recommended for indefinite private confinement.

Come midnight, he was alone in his own suite, a contingency of local FBI agents stationed outside his door for his protection, and with Cesare now having unrestricted access to his phone and laptop, it was then he received a text from an unregistered number.

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I saw you in the news, and it killed me to see you...like that. I still don't understand why I can't be with you, but please. Please just talk to me. Please let me help you. Please.

Cesare deleted her message and blocked her fucking number from ever contacting him again.

Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.

He squeezed his eyes shut, but it was no use, and he ended up remembering what he didn't want to remember: his mother behind bars, having admitted to a crime she didn't commit, and all in the name of love.

Cesare remembered her crying every time he came to visit, and she would realize that his father hadn't come with him.

He remembered crying himself back at home, but doing his best not to make any noise while he listened to his father rage at his mother on the phone.

'How many times do I have to fucking tell you? We're over, goddammit. It's never going to work between us, so stop fucking using our son to get to me. I didn't ask you to love me, and I didn't fucking ask you to throw your life for me either. You did that all to yourself, and you can't fucking guilt-trip me into wasting mine. It's over between us, Claudia. So fucking deal with it.'

Three months later, his mother had done as his father asked. She had dealt with it by killing herself, and now it was the past poised to happen all over again, with her son

behind bars, and Penelope, the bride promised to him—

FUCK.

Why couldn't she just fucking leave him alone like his father had left his mother? Why did she have to convince herself that things could still work out between them? Why, dammit—why was she making it so hard for him to forget her, even though he knew they were just fucking doomed like his own parents?

Sooner or later, Penelope would start to tire and get bored of being with a man who had nowhere to go—and no fucking way would Cesare wait for that to happen.

He had it right the first time, dammit.

Emotions destroyed marriages, and that was why, when his grandmother was suddenly cleared to visit him on the fifth day of his confinement—

"I've been able to cut a deal." And it was one that could cost her soul and his. "We break the betrothal agreement with the Sorrentos," Potenziana said tightly, "and you get out free."

"But you want me to say no...don't you?"

"I want her for you, but I will never choose anyone else over my own flesh and blood. So this has to be your choice. Do we take the deal?"

"Yes."

Chapter Thirteen

Penelope

IS IT TODAY, GOD?

My life has been trapped in some kind of limbo since Cesare was arrested for my grandmother's death, and with everything in this world no longer making any sense—

I've found myself simply going through the motions of living: breathing, eating, and sleeping, while those words play endlessly in the back of my mind.

Is it today, God?

It's an umbrella question that covers all the other questions that have been plaguing both my mind and heart like a disease.

Is it today, God?

Because one other thing I learned from my life hitting rock-bottom again and again?

He always has a plan, and He never reveals it too early or too early. There's always a plan, and you find out all about it in the right time.

IS IT TODAY, GOD?

I'm standing at the center of the chapel, Pilar's casket behind me, and relatives on each side. People have been coming up to us for over an hour to offer their condolences and introduce themselves...together with the sons they're hoping would be my groom.

Everyone is acting like I'm already free to marry someone else, now that the man Pilar herself had chosen to be my groom ends up a suspect in her own murder.

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I continue to play my role as Pilar's memorial service begins, and I take my place on the front pew with people I should see as my family.

But I don't.

My parents were my family, but they're dead.

The Marchettis are my family, but I'm the one who's been avoiding their calls...because they remind me of the one that matters the most.

And of course that person is him.

He's my home. My owner. My everything.

But Cesare is acting like he no longer knows me.

THROWING UP HAS BEEN my favorite hobby lately. And honestly, it's also the only thing that's made me feel alive, ever since I woke up to a world where Cesare and I are suddenly leading separate lives.

I threw up when Massimo told me about Cesare's arrest. Threw up when I accidentally saw photos of Pilar's corpse. I threw up before writing my first and only letter to Cesare, and I threw up yet again when Massimo grimly says he can no longer help me write another letter to his brother.

I threw up when I saw Cesare on the 6:00 news, threw up before attending Pilar's service, and I threw up again afterwards, with my mind strangely taking delight in



torturing me with nightmares where my grandmother has been buried alive by mistake, and she's screaming that it's all my fault, for loving the man who killed her.

I KNOW IT'S NOT TODAY, God.

But it no longer feels right to continue living in Cesare's apartment and sleeping in his bed and eating food bought by his money—when the owner of all these things seem hell-bent on getting rid of me.

The son of Pilar's attorney, who's also a lawyer himself, has arranged for funds to be deposited to my account. I've also supposedly inherited a couple of properties, but for now I think I just need a place of my own, and one that's completely free of any memories.

I know it's not today, God.

But I'm terrified that I'll start to forget what really matters, and I think that's what will inevitably happen, if I spend another night in his home. Everywhere I look, I remember him. I remember us. I remember how we used to be, and it hurts. It hurts to remember all those things...and not have an idea if I can ever have any of it back.

I know it's not today, God.

I know I said that while Cesare stills breathe, I have reason to hope. I know I said what matters most is that he's alive. I remember everything I said. And it's because I still believe in all of those things that I need to leave.

I need to go away even just for a while, I need to be somewhere I can find myself...because it's also getting harder and harder to pretend that my mind is still glued to my body, even when it isn't.

Each day seems to bring more pain lately, that I feel like I've turned into this stupid, little balloon floating around aimlessly, just waiting for someone to either puncture my fragile grasp on life so I can finally expire—or someone to grab on to me so that I'll remember what it means to be anchored.

IT'S MY FIRST NIGHTback in New York, and Greg is already waiting for me in Rufino's when I arrive at the restaurant. Ever the perfect gentleman, the son of Pilar's legal counsel comes to his feet as soon as he sees me, and I absently notice how he's attractive enough to draw other women's gazes.

"So..." A friendly grin curves over his lips. "We finally meet."

I'm secretly surprised when I manage to return his smile without having to force it. "Yup." Greg and I have only been talking to each other on Zoom before this, and another surprise is how he's much taller than I imagined.

"Well, just to make things official..." He pulls his wallet out of his pocket, but something else falls out, and I blink in surprise as he bends down to swipe a black-colored die with unusual markings from the floor before shoving it back into his pocket.

"Is it some kind of charm?" I can't help asking curiously.

"Something like that," he acknowledges wryly.

"Is it a lawyer thing or a famigliathing?"

"A little bit of both...just like this is." It's a perfectly executed segue, and I can only smile as he offers me his business card with both hands.

"Thank you." The card looks and feels fancy, with gold lettering printed on a textured

black surface.

Gregorio Buffon

Anatra Law Group LLC

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"So..." Greg looks at me expectantly from across the table when we're seated. "Did this place used to be one of your local haunts?"

"It's actually my first time to be here," I admit sheepishly. "I just Googled for popular New Yorkmafiarestaurants——"

Greg winces as soon as I say the forbidden word, and I guess Rufino's really is a popular restaurant with New Yorkfamilies since those seated in nearby tables also turn to look at me like I've lost my mind.

The whole thing is funny, actually, but it also makes my heart ache because it reminds me of how all of the Marchettis used to react the same way, every time I slip up.

Stop it, dude! Just stop it!

"Are you alright?" Greg asks quietly.

A smile doesn't come as easily this time, and I end up forcing it in the end. "Sorry." I don't have the energy to lie, but I also know I only have to say a single word of truth, and I'll be sobbing like crazy in seconds.

Keep yourself together, Pen!

Greg studies me for a moment. "I know we agreed that we can't talk about Cesare Marchetti, since it would be a conflict of interest for me, but...how about I refer you to another law firm?"

"I appreciate the offer, I really do, but I don't think there's anything I can do that the Marchettis can't." I bite my lip afterwards, but even though I know I might end up sounding shamelessly demanding—

"There is one favor I'd like to ask...if you think it's possible?"

"Name it."

"I know it's the Marchettis who requested for a media blackout on...on h-his case, but do you think you can ask around..." I'm just waiting for Greg to tell me I'm being stupidly hopeful and clingy at this point, but he doesn't.

"I will."

Greg hasn't made any secret of the fact that his law firm is convinced of Cesare's guilt, and even though I'm also aware his willingness to do me a favor won't come for free—it's a risk I'm willing to take, and I find myself able to breathe more easily by the time a server comes by our table to take our orders.

I just want to make sure he's okay, and then I'll be okay, too.

The rest of the evening is surprisingly enjoyable, with Greg's stories about Pilar effectively distracting me from thinking about a certain mafiaboss.

I excuse myself to go to the ladies as our evening comes to an end, and when I return it's to find an elegantly wrapped gift box waiting for me on the table.

"Just open it before you say anything," he urges with a grin. "I guarantee you'll like it."

So I do as he asks, and he turns out to be right...since what's inside is nothing but a

beautiful pen with my name engraved on it...and a contract that just happens to require my signature.

This is actually what tonight's dinner is all about, with Greg having pointed out in our last Zoom meeting that celebrating my inheritance is also one way of honoring Pilar's memory.

I sign my name on each page of the contract, and Greg hands me my copy before we leave.

"Thank you," I say simply.

"It's what you're paying me for," he reminds me as we walk out of the restaurant...and nearly bump straight into Cesare, whose hand was resting on another girl's back.

No. No. No.

I rub my eyes, but the vision in front of me doesn't go away, and Cesare's lip even curls as if he finds my shock pathetic.

"H-How—" How long has he been out? How did he get out? How?!

"I've been out for almost a month."

His voice is cold and dismissive, and every word feels like a knife to my heart. The girl next to him looks like she's dying to speak, but one look from Cesare has her biting her lip, and when our gazes meet, the look in her eyes has my favorite hobby calling.

Cesare's new girl feels BAD...for me.

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My fingers dig desperately into my palms, but as soon as Cesare and his date walk past us, and the familiar scent of his aftershave hits me——

No. No. No.

I throw up on Rufino's footsteps——

And I know Cesare's heard me.

But he just doesn't give a fuck.

Is it today, God?

Is it today...that everything finally makespainfulsense?

GREG DRIVES ME BACKto my new place, and the whole ride is spent in silence. I wish I could just say'thank you',but I'm still terrified that the moment I open my mouth, the tears I've been desperately holding in check will never stop falling.

He pulls up by the sidewalk across my apartment building, and I get out of his car on my own. It just feels weird if I were to wait for him to open my door; that would make this seem like a date, which it's not.

"Sure you'll be okay?"

Relief breaks over me when I hear the concern threading through his voice. It's more than enough that he doesn't pity me the waythatgirl did.

"I'm fine."

"Want me to walk you up to the door?"

His phone rings before I can say no, and I know it's an important call when I see frustration flash in his eyes.

'Good night,' I mouth at him.

He makes a face as I wave at him, but he also mouths back 'good night' in the end.

I feel like it's only polite for me to remain in the lobby while he walks back to his car, and so I stay there...watching him.

And that's when I remember that night.

It was the night before Dad died, a night where he had come home unusually late—a night that I had dreamt of a few weeks ago.

I remember sitting up and looking at my phone. Remember asking him—

'Where have you been?'

I remember him sitting next to me on the couch.

'Sorry, Penny. I should've called. You didn't have to wait up for me.'

'You still haven't told me where you've been...'

'Grief support.'



'For real? You finally attended one?'

'Yeah. I think I even made a new friend. He lost someone because of his gambling addiction. Since then, he's never stepped inside another casino, and everywhere he goes, he's got this die in his pocket, to remind him of what he's lost.'

## Chapter Fourteen

Cesare

GAZELLE COULD NO LONGER hold her silence. "Are we really not going to talk about it?" She had been waiting for her brother to talk to her about what just happened, but all he had asked her in the past hour was if she wanted red wine or white.

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"There's nothing to talk about."

"I know that's her, Ces." Gazelle couldn't keep her voice from shaking as she remembered the stricken look on the other girl's face. "And I can't believe you allowed her to think I was your date."

"It doesn't matter what she thinks——"

"You hurt her!"

"She'll get over it——"

"No, Cesare. She won't. You broke her heart——"

The glass stem in her brother's hand snapped into pieces, and a gasp escaped her when she saw him start to bleed.

"Signore!"

Nearby servers were in a panic, but Cesare didn't pay them any heed as he used a table napkin to apply pressure to the large gash in his palm.

"Is there anything we can do to——"

"Apologies for the disturbance." The dismissive note in Cesare's voice wasn't lost on the staff, and they were quick to walk away without another word. If Cesare Marchetti did not want them to fuss over him, then they were no idiots to insist on

doing otherwise.

Gazelle hadn't known what to believe when their grandmother told her over the phone that Cesare was not his usual self. Cesare had always been the most ruthless among her brothers, and she had grown up somewhat thinking of him as their family's most invincible pillar of strength that no one and nothing could ever topple.

Until now.

"You love her," she whispered.

"Shut up, Gazelle."

He had never spoken to her like that before, and instead of feeling hurt, she just wanted to cry because she was all the more convinced that what she had said was true.

"Please make me understand. Why do you have to push her away—"

"Because she makes me feel needy—"

"Oh, Ces." She had to work harder not to cry, since all those words really meant was that her brother did love that girl, and he probably loved her even more than Gazelle could ever comprehend.

"I know...you're thinking that you love her, the way your mother loved our father—"

"And it's true," Cesare bit out. "We both fucking know it's true—"

"It is true, and I'm not going to convince you it's not. But Ces...can't you also see? Penelope isn't like our father. She won't leave you, she won't hurt you, and I

know——"

Her voice broke as she remembered the sound of Penelope throwing up behind them.

"By the way she's hurting, you know...you know she never stopped loving you, so please——please, Cesare——"

Please go after her before it's too late.

But Gazelle was unable to say those words...since her brother had already left.

Penelope

I keep waiting for Greg to realize he's being followed.

But he never does.

I keep waiting for him to start shooting at us.

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But he doesn't do this either.

And so I end up following him all the way to a motel, and I ask my cab driver to park a short distance away while I wait and watch.

Is this a trap?

Greg's making it so easy for me to stalk him. The motel has open corridors that lets me see exactly which floor he gets up to, and even which room he enters.

This has to be a trap.

My cab driver looks at me like I've lost my mind when I give him a thousand dollars...but when I tell him I'll hand over another grand as long as he waits for me to come out, the older man even insists I save his number in my phone, just in case I need any kind of help.

You can do this, dude.

My hands start feeling clammy as I take the stairs all the way to the fourth floor, and my steps silently come to a stop now that I've passed five doors from the left.

If this door is locked, then...

I have no idea what I'll do next, but it's just my luck that the door knob turns rather easily in my fingers.

Maybe...this really is a trap?

There's only one way to find out, and as soon as I step inside the room—

Oh...SHIT.

The first thing I see is Greg...standing over an old man'scorpse.

"Well, I'll be damned."

He actually soundsamused, and that's when I realize this isn't a trap at all.

"You and Marchetti seem to have an unfortunate talent for sniffing out dead bodies."

This is just a madman thinking he's so damn smart, he's like Ted Bundy reincarnate with how he's so convinced he'll be able to get away with whatever crime he cares to commit.

"Since this is your last day alive," Greg goes on conversationally, "I guess I should give you some closure. When I found out about Pilar's will, I worked fucking hard to look for your parents—"

"And you killed them..."

Greg feigns a look of surprise. "Damn. How did you figure that out?"

A part of me just wants to throw all caution to the wind and be fucking done with it.

Kill or be killed.

But somehow...I manage to stay still. "What about my grandmother?"

"Duh."

I look at the dead body on the floor. "And...him?"

"Ah." Greg is smiling again. "Sayciaoto my own fuckingpapa."

I can't stop myself from flinching as he starts kicking his father's corpse like he's bored and just looking for something to do.

"The old man somehow figured out I'm behind Pilar's death, and he started freaking out over the phone. So I asked him to come meet me here, and when it became obvious that he would never be willing to go along with my plans..."

I guess this really is the day, God...with how everything keeps making sense.

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"You're the one who wants to revive the drug trade..."

"Bingo." Greg actually sounds impressed when he says this. "I was wondering if the Marchettis would keep you in the dark about it."

"Do you really think they'd let you get away—"

"Fuck the Marchettis!" Greg stalks towards me, and it takes everything to stand my ground and not move a muscle. "I really had high hopes for you, Penelope. I really believed I could get you to marry me, and that I could take over the Sorrento clan as your husband. But since that's now off the table, I'm thinking you'd make a nice little gift to my new business partners instead..."

Cesare

Terror had bile rising to his throat as Cesare got back into his car and started making calls. His first call was to Ezio; this brother of theirs also lived in New York, and it was to Ezio he entrusted their sister...since there was no knowing what it would take to undo the fucking mess he had caused.

His second call was to Giancarlo, who was in charge of their family's personal security. Cesare would bet his life that his eldest brother still had bodyguards shadowing Penelope's every move even if they were no longer betrothed—and he was right.

"I'll text you the number of Penelope's head of security." Giancarlo made the offer as soon as he realized what had happened. "Do you need anything else?"



"Prayers." And Cesare was deadly serious. "I need you to pray that I still have a shot at getting her back."

"Dio sia con te, fratello." God be with you, brother.

And finally, his last call was to a number he had blocked almost a month ago.

Please pick up. Per favore, tesoro. Pick up. Please.

But her phone only kept ringing until it went into voice mail.

Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.

He dialed the number from Giancarlo's text, but the tension gripping his chest didn't fucking loosen even as Penelope's bodyguard answered his call on the first ring—

"Mi dispiace, signore."

And that was because...a part of him had already known he had his punishment coming.

No, Dio, no.

It wasn't just the words from Penelope's bodyguard that made his blood run cold. It was also the noise he heard in the background. The wailing of sirens and law enforcement officers radioing in details of a crime scene. Ambulance doors being thrown open and first responders wheeling out stretchers.

He fucking knew what all of those could mean—

Please. God. Please.

"Just fucking tell me," Cesare said rawly. "Is she safe? Is my Penelope alive?"

## Chapter Fifteen

Penelope

I'M NOT SURE HOW MUCH time has passed since the sound of gunshots had caused guys in suits to come barging into Greg's room. But by that time, it was too late.

I've already taken a man's life...again.

As for everything that's happened after that...it's all pretty much a blur. I vaguely remember those same guys telling me they're my bodyguards and emergency responders checking my vitals. A local law enforcer or two may also have questioned me. Or maybe it was the press. I'm not really sure.

It's just too hard to concentrate, and I can't even remember how it's been since the police escorted me to a vacant room that's right next to the motel's reception.

Right now, the only thing that's stark clear in my mind is...that.

I took a man's life.

## Page 50

*Source Creation Date: May 22, 2025, 8:34 am*

Again.

My brain tells me I had no choice. It's self-defense, and unlike before, I know for a fact that Greg was not a good man, and he would've killed me if I hadn't killed him first. Those are the facts...but they mean shit to my heart, which has been shriveling in shame since I made a grab for Greg's gun...and accidentally fired it straight into his heart in the process.

I'm sorry, God, I'm sorry.

It's almost like I have this knack for shooting evil men dead, and I wonder if it's a skill that I may have inherited from the criminal side of my family. Once a sinful famiglia, always a sinful famiglia. Maybe that's just how these things go, and this is a case of an apple never falling far—

"Penelope?"

I haven't even heard the door open, but one thing I'm heartbreakingly sure of is that voice.

Cesare.

Even though I know it can only be him, a shudder still violently rocks my body as soon as my head jerks up, and my stricken gaze collides with his.

He's standing by the doorway, still dressed in the same clothes I've seen him in earlier, and his too-handsome face still bearing faint evidence of the beating he had

endured while in jail. His pallor is unmistakable, but I'm not going to fool myself into thinking it's because he's concerned about me.

My lip starts to tremble as I watch him stride in.

I want to cry.

I want to scream.

I want to run away.

But when he finally reaches me, and he crouches down on one knee——

God, it hurts.

The pain is just too much, and my heart is aching just too hard, that all I can do is breathe.

"That girl you saw with me——" He's speaking so damn fast, it's as if he wants to make sure he gets everything out before I can escape him. "It's Gazelle,tesoro.My sister."

His...sister?

"I knew you didn't recognize her, and I deliberately let you think she was someone else."

Because he wanted to hurt me.

"I'm sorry," Cesare says jerkily. "Forgive me. Please."

He speaks as if each and every word is whipping his soul—but how can I believe him, after everything that he's confessed, and after everything I've found out?

"I n-need you to tell me the truth," I say stiltedly. "G-Greg told me...b-before he...before we started fighting over the gun..."

"Penelope——"

"I need to know the truth!"

My voice cracks in the end, and the way his face whitens tells me more than I want to know.

God, oh God.

"Perdonami. Forgive me."

But because I'm still so, so damn foolish, there's still the tiniest part of me hoping that I have it all wrong.

"Did you r-really cut a deal with them?" I ask brokenly. "D-Did you agree to end our betrothal——"

## Page 51

*Source Creation Date: May 22, 2025, 8:34 am*

"Ho sbagliato, tesoro. I made a mistake——"

"So it is true," I say brokenly. "In exchange of h-having the charges dropped, you didn't care that they'd make me marry someone else——"

He tries to take my hands into his, but I nearly fall out of my seat just to avoid his touch. It wasn't so long ago that I used to crave any kind of contact with him, but now...

"Listen to me, tesoro——"

"Stop calling me that," I choke out.

"Then just listen. Per favore. Just please fucking listen. I hurt you. I know that. And I kept hurting you...because I couldn't handle how you made me feel...so fucking needy. My mother...she was sent away in prison. She offered to take the blame for my father. Because she loved him——like I——"

No!

The moment I realize what he's about to say, I lose it.

No more, dammit.

I manage to take Cesare by surprise as I shove him away, but God——

He's always just too fast for me, and I haven't even reached the door when he wraps

his arms around mine from behind—

"I love you, Penelope."

It hurts, oh God. It hurts to hear the words and know that they can't be real.

"I love you so fucking much it reminded me of how my mother desperately loved my father, and how much she begged him to come visit her, but he never fucking did. He told her to fucking deal with the fact that it was over between them, and so she killed herself."

God, no.

I've covered my ears the moment he started speaking, but his words were just too good at piercing my heart—

"I was terrified I would be like her,tesoro."

So am I, dammit.

Because these words of his are hurting me just as much, with the way they're forcing me to see that the man I used to think as ruthlessly perfect...is as human and flawed as I am.

"I loved you too fucking much, and so I also knew I would not be able to fucking bear it...if they were to succeed in having me sentenced for murder, and I'd be forced to see you gradually get bored of being with me."

Cesare suddenly spins me around, andGod, oh God—

Now, I have no choice but to see the way his haunted gaze reflected the terror in his

heart.

"I know I've failed and hurt you too many times," Cesare says rawly. "I know I have done nothing to deserve you, but please...please give me another chance, tesoro."

I never imagined a day would come that a man as proud as Cesare would end up begging—but that's exactly what he's doing now.

"You don't even have to be mine. You don't have to fucking marry me or sign anything. Just take me back, per favore."

And it hurts.

"Make me yours. Punish me for the rest of my life...just don't fucking go."

It's Cesare's voice this time that cracks, and the sound reminds me for some reason of that one night I've spent in his arms—

'I don't want another day to pass without making you my wife.'

Those were the very words he whispered, words that I knew even then were simply Cesare's way of indirectly saying he loved me—because he does.



## Page 52

*Source Creation Date: May 22, 2025, 8:34 am*

Cesare loves me.

But imperfect man that he was, he also ended up hurting me because he loved me.

I guess it really is today that everything becomes clear, God.

Cesare's powerful body jerks when I shakily reach up to clasp his face, and my own heart aches when I see him suck his breath at my touch.

Cesare loves me.

I know this is true now, but even though the thought of taking him back and leaving me open again to pain still terrifies me——

When I think about the people I've loved and lost, and the ones I could've loved but are no longer here——

It really is so clear now, God.

I think about the lives I've ended without meaning to——

I'm so sorry, I'm so, so sorry.

And it drives a simple point home.

Life is short.

And that's when the tears start falling, and a smile wobbles to my lips as I look up.

"Ti amo, Cesare," I whisper.

He hauls me close in the next second—

"Ti amo, Penelope."

The rawness of his voice tells me I'm not the only one who's crying...because that's just how love is.

## Epilogue

THE NEWLYWEDS SAID their goodbyes at the stroke of midnight, and their guests cheered wildly as Cesare swept a blushing Penelope up in his arms before swiftly striding out of the ballroom and carrying her straight into a waiting chopper whose enormous blades were whipping up gusts of wind that had the long train of her gown dancing in the air.

Her cheeks were flushed with excitement as he settled her down on her seat, and Cesare carefully placed a pair of headsets over her ears before taking his place next to her and putting on a pair of his own.

"Try talking," he urged her.

Penelope was visibly startled upon seeing him lips move as he yelled the words out...only to have her headset course the sound to her ear like he hadn't raised his voice at all.

"You yelled, didn't you?"

"I did."

The chopper finally took off, and he saw her entire face glow and her eyes sparkle with excitement when she realized they were airborne.

Ah, fuck.

Even though Cesare was by now well aware of how over-the-fucking-top his need to cherish his wife could get, every time he saw his Penelope looking excited like a kid like this, he just wanted to spoil her rotten and give her the moon and the fucking stars.

Penelope tugged his hand, asking, "Where are we going?"

"I have a place up in the mountains. We'll be there in half an hour. It's very secluded, and our closest neighbor is miles away."

"That sounds lovely."

"Ever skinny-dipped?"

Her eyes widened.

"Inhibitions have no place in one's honeymoon, tesoro..."

Cesare had only meant to tease her when saying this, but before he could take the words back, Penelope surprised him by suddenly looking resolute as she nodded.

"It's a promise then. No inhibitions——"

His lips twitched at the fierceness of her tone. "You do not have to force yourself——"

"I'm not! I promise! Because you're right. This is our honeymoon, and...and this once, I don't want to be shy. I want to be...adventurous!"

"In what way?"

Cesare was expecting her to suggest they try the usual outdoor activities such as cliff diving, rock climbing, and paragliding. But instead——

"I don't just want to skinny-dip," his wife blurted out. "I...also want to have sex in the forest! And I...I want to fuck while we're in the water, and——" She bit her lip before saying in a rush, "Do you think you can teach me how to stop gagging every time I try to give you a blow job? I...I really love sucking on your cock, but it's just so big, and it always hits the back of my throat, and I hate how I can't seem to make it all the way to the end and have you cum inside of my mouth and——"

Cesare felt it was time to cover said mouth, and he had a hard time keeping his face expressionless as Penelope looked up at him in confusion.

"As much as I would love to hear about the rest of your, er, goals for our honeymoon..." He inclined his head in the direction of the two men seated in the cockpit, and the moment his wife caught a glimpse of their reddened cheeks—

An aghast-looking Penelope flung his hand away from her mouth. "D-Don't t-tell me..."

"Sì, tesoro—it is exactly what you think. Our good pilot and his co-pilot have heard everything you said—"

"B-But they're not wearing headsets!"

"They are, mia moglie. It is just not as obvious as ours since they are using in-ear headsets—"

"Oh God."

She tried to cover her face with her hands, but he wouldn't let her, and instead cupped her chin so that he could whisper against her lips—

"I just had the nicest idea, tesoro. Since our honeymoon has officially begun the moment we left, and you promised to shed your every inhibition during this time—I want to make you cum. Right here, right now."

"Cesare!"

"I can touch you under your skirt, and no one will see anything."

"D-Don't you dare——"

"But of course, what they're able to hear is a different story..."

AS PENELOPE INEVITABLY joined another mile-high club with the studious help of her mafia boss, most of the guests they had left behind were practically crying tears of joy now that they were finally free to update their social media feeds.

The no-cellphone-rule had been strictly enforced throughout the evening, but now that the newlyweds had already left for their honeymoon, many were busy competing with each other as to which of them could be the first to upload (and thus gain the most likes) a photo of the groom's spectacular wedding gift for his bride: a declaration of ownership permanently tattooed right above his heart.

PROPERTY OF PENELOPE SORRENTO MILTON MARCHETTI

And as for the few guests whose attention was not firmly on their phones——

"I still can't believe Penelope promised to get herself a matching tattoo," Sarica exclaimed. "She's crazy scared of needles or just getting pierced in any way——"

"I wouldn't go as far as saying that," Giancarlo interjected mildly.

Sarica's gaze narrowed. "Is that your way of saying you know something I don't?"

*Source Creation Date: May 22, 2025, 8:34 am*

"No, dolcezza. I only mean to remind you that there are more ways than one for a woman to be pierced by her lover."

Ezio and Gazelle did their best to hold back their smiles upon seeing Sarica blush at the innuendo in their eldest brother's words.

Massimo, in the meantime, was ready to call it a night when their grandmother asked to speak with him in private.

"Why do I have a feeling this isn't going to be good?" Massimo teased as he walked her to one of the private balconies circling the ballroom.

"Because you take after me."

"Conscienceless?"

"Intuitive."

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

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

"I have found a bride for you."

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

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

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

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

Massimo blinked. Seriously?

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

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

"Language, per favore!"

"You can't be serious!"

"I am, very."

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

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

A moment passed...and then Massimo was inclining his head in mocking assent.

"Certo che no, Nonna." Of course not. "It will be as you wish, as always."

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



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

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

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

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

Now it is your turn, bambina.

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

The End

*Source Creation Date: May 22, 2025, 8:34 am*

Her Cruel One-Sided Love

By Marian Tee

Part One

One

Ysabel

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

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

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

The way everyone's acting, it's as if a new tailgating season has started, and it's the same level of excitement you'd expect when the Red Sox seems poised to win the

World Series. But this time, instead of baseball caps and jerseys, most of us are wearing dark gray Boston Says Booshirts and matching face masks (all we had to do was click 'yes' on an Eventbrite link, and we get both free of charge).

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Well, well, well.

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

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

Well freaking played, unseen DJ.

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

"PARTY TIME!"

The words, yelled out by a sunglass-wearing driver of a convertible, take me away from my thoughts, and I absently watch the guy's red-hot Camaro slow down to let security inspect his car with metal detectors and bomb-sniffing dogs.

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

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

'Oh, sure.'

My head jerks up at hearing the other passenger speak.

That voice!

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

That can't be her, can it?

## Page 56

*Source Creation Date: May 22, 2025, 8:34 am*

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

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

Argh!

"I really think that girl——"

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

"But I really think——"

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

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

"Of course, I care——"

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

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

Julio shakes his head. "Not enough."

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

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

"Bene, bene." Fine, fine.

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

"Yes, okay, you have my word."

"Good girl."

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

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

Ugh.

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

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

"Oh my gosh, is that..."

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

"Is that really..."

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

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

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

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



## Page 57

*Source Creation Date: May 22, 2025, 8:34 am*

Non andare lì, Ysabel!

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

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

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

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

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

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

I think I need...that.

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

Answer right, and you get out alive.

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

Apprehension skitters down my spine as I read the words that have been spelled out

with incandescent light bulbs on a signboard right above its doorway. Since this is a famiglia-organized event that's held in a famiglia-owned property—should I be worried and take that warning literally?

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

Forza, Ysabel!

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

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

"Bring it on, Pennywise with Black Lips."

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

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

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

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

Uh-oh.

I suddenly find myself wondering what I've gotten myself into. There's an exit sign

just a few steps away from me, but since it's also labeled COWARD'S WAY OUT—

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

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

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

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

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

I know this!

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

## Page 58

*Source Creation Date: May 22, 2025, 8:34 am*

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

Oh.

Shit.

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

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

Two

Ysabel

PANIC ATTEMPTS TO TAKEover my senses, but lust swiftly spirals up to battle it for control.

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

How can this be happening?

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

Oh.

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

Shit, oh, shit.

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

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

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

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

My rebellious ways have always had to do with being a rebellious smartass around authority...but I've never gotten in trouble involving the opposite sex. Just the thought

of dating freaks me out, while the thought of watching porn embarrasses the shit out of me.

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

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

Get your ass moving, Ysabel!

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

I'm fucked.

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

Don't look away.

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

But she doesn't.

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

Shit, oh, shit.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Yes, Master!"

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

His dark gaze remains on me as he fucks the other girl harder and harder, and my

helpless gaze remains on him as I hear that one-word echo in my mind like the serpent in Eden tempting me to sin.

Master. Master. Master.

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

My mind urges me to look away and leave, but I just can't. This man is my most sensual downfall; one look from those dark eyes is enough to chain me in place, and my own flesh is aching in need as I listen to them fuck. There's the erotic slapping sound of their bodies as he drives his cock in and out of her quivering mound. There's the unmistakable squirt of wetness as she comes closer and closer to the edge of her orgasm. But the point of no return is when I hear her start to pant—

Oh no.

I suddenly can't help it.

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

Aaaaaaaah.

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



Aaaaaaaaaah.

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

You want me to fuck you, too.

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

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

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

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

Argh!

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

I lift my chin.Got that?

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

Who do you think you're fooling?

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

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

Fuck me.

My eyes widen. Did he just say—

His lips move again.

Say it.

Understanding dawns, and his eyes gleam.

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

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

Say it.

The temptation is excruciating and unbelievable.

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

Oh shit, I'm doomed.

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

Massimo is a Marchetti.

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

Three

Massimo

THE MOMENT SHE GIVES me the middle finger is the moment I make up my mind.

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

But that girl...

That sweet, hot, infuriatingly stubborn girl...

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

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

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

I want her.

And I'll do anything to have her.

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

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

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

"We're done."

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

"Orazio outside will take care of your fees——"

"B-B-But Master——"

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

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

"Oh, thank you so much, Master!"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

But I don't.

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

devour my prey.

She wants me.

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

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

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

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

Good.

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

"What's your name?"

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

"Do you know who I am?"

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

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

"I'm no evil man, ciliegina mia——"

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

Interessante...

"So you think I'm evil?"

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

Ah.

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

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

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

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



"Ynez!"

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

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

FUCK!

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

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

"È successo qualcosa?" Did something happen?

"I'm looking for a girl."

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

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

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

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

"How many guests named Ynezdo we have registered?"

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

"Email me everything you have on her."

"Sì, signore."

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

Ciao, ciliegina mia.

### Part II

#### One

#### Massimo

#### FIVE YEARS LATER...

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

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

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

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

"Something wonderfully fucked-up must be happening inside," one of the reporters

muttered suspiciously, and the others nodded in agreement.

"What do you think it could be?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

What the hell was wrong with him?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Well, fuck."

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

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

"Nothing."

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

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

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

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

Giancarlo looked at his younger brother more closely. "If it is neither marriage nor Ynez that is keeping you from proposing to her, then what exactly is the problem? You cannot be worried about Nonna, surely? She has made it clear that she will not force us to marry another woman if we have already found someone before she's picked a bride."

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

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

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

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

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

Fuck.

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

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

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



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

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

"May we speak in private, Massimo?"

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

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

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

"Conscienceless?"

"Intuitive."

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

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

"I have found a bride for you."

A muscle started ticking in Massimo's jaw. He had known this day would come

sooner or later, but wasn't this a little too soon?

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

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

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

Massimo blinked.Seriously?

"She has an older sister,sì?Ysabel—"

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

"Language,per favore!"

"You can't be serious!"

"I am, very."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Now it is your turn, bambina.

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

Two

Ysabel

DOOR CHIMES JINGLEAs I push the glass doors open, and my boss-slash-step-aunt beams at me from her usual place behind the counter.

"Buongiorno, bella!"

"Buongiorno!"

"Buongiorno!"

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

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

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

Are you Ynez Ossani's older sister?

Is your sister really dating THE Massimo Marchetti?

How is he in real life?

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

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They groan even as they good-naturedly give in, and as I turn away to pass their orders to the kitchen, I overhear one of them saying they'll need to leave in half an hour to avoid being late for their first class.

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Have you heard the news, Ysa?"

"About what?"

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

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

Bene, ecco qua. There you go, Ysabel.

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

Three

Massimo

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The Ossanis, however...

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

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

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

Did she not realize how unbecoming her behavior was? Or was she so desperate for



attention that she would willingly gossip about her own sister, as long as it meant she would become famous as well?

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

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

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

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

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

Almost.

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

Non essero stupido. Don't be stupid.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"I will marry her, nonna. On that, you have my word. And out of respect for you and

ourfamiglia,I will keep my vows. But that is all I can promise."

Four

Ysabel

BY THE TIME AFTERNOON rolls in, Ynez and Massimo's names have become the top trending hashtags locally, and Mammina's consequently reaps the benefits as we welcome an endless influx of #Masnez shippers. They're all happy to order whatever we recommend and in exchange...

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

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

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

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

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

"Oh my gosh, oh my gosh."

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

"And then what?"

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

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

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

"Yes, that's right."

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

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

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

I can't take this anymore.

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

"I'm fine——"

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

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

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

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

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

Huh?

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

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

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

Che sera sera.

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

Questo non va bene. This is not good.

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

Shit, shit, shit.

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

Che cosa sta succedendo? What's going on?

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

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

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

Stop. Stop. Stop.

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

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

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

How can you be so stupid, Ynez?

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

Five

Massimo

HAVING BODYGUARDS TAILmembers of theirfamigliahad always been a given, and this precaution was extended to anyone else whom the Marchettis considered deserving of their protection.

Ynez, however, had been the sole exception.

As Massimo was aware of the trauma Ynez had gone through in high school because of her older sister, he had wanted her to feel safe and offered his girlfriend a



compromise instead. Security would only follow her around if she had work outside Marchetti territory. This arrangement, which had taken effect years ago, was now proving to be a gross oversight on his part since his girlfriend's uncurtailed freedom had allowed her to nurse her damaged pride in the most irreparable of ways.

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

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

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

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

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

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

I am sorry, Ynez.

Even though he had already informed her days ago about his arranged marriage, Ynez

had refused to acknowledge their breakup. She had been bitter and almost volatile as she lashed out in her pain, and after what he had just witnessed, Massimo knew there was only one way for Ynez to move on.

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

Six

Ysabel

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

Ynez is fucking another man while dating Massimo Marchetti.

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

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

"Ysabel?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"So?"

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

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

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

What in the world?

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

Shit.

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

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

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

Hmm...

Massimo's most recent photos were all of him looking like a tuxedo-clad James Bond while he plays best man in his brother's wedding. This was a week or so ago, and I belatedly remember how Ynez mentioned that she'd gotten into a fight with Massimo about it. He had apparently refused to ask Cesare's bride to include her in the entourage, and so she had made him "pay" for his sins by not attending the event.

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

My phone suddenly starts vibrating inside of my pocket.

Ynez.

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

"SignorinaOssini?"

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

"Our boss would like to speak with you."

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

"SignorMassimo Marchetti."

Part Three

One

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

Così stupida, Ysabel!

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

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

Dio aiutami! Help me, God!

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

Oh no.

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

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

Once inside the warehouse, Ysabel was stunned to discover that everything was air-conditioned, and all the walls and floors were of glossy, pearl-tinted marble. Was that to make it easier to get rid of bloody evidence, literally? And what about the air-conditioning? Was it to keep the smell of rotting flesh from leaking out?

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

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

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

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

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

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

"I know this is highly unorthodox—"

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

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

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

"I will cut right to the point."



Ci siamo, Ysa! This it it!

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

"You are the next Marchetti bride, signorina."

—by making her die laughing?

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

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

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

"I did not."

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

"It was why your sister was calling you."

How did he know Ynez had been calling her?

"But I preferred to tell you myself—"

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

"Sì."

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

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

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

"It's not fake."

Then this had to be—

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

Shit. Shit. Shit!

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

Can this really be true?

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

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

Two

"COULD THIS BE A TYPO?"

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

Ysabel tried not to wince at the way Massimo's lip curled in response to her words.

"What I mean is...could they have gotten your names switched with Ezio—"

"No, signorina."

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

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

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

No. Impossible. It can't be.

Massimo couldn't understand why it had pissed him off to hear Ysabel think of

himself as a possible bride for his younger brother. What was wrong with him, dammit? And when he heard her laugh nervously yet again, he even had the strangest compulsion to punish her with a kiss.

What. The. Hell.

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

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

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

"You are."

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

"But Ynez——"

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Why not?"

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

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

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

"I don't understand—"

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

Ysabel's confusion faded. "I see."

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

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

Perché, Ynez?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

killed her to admit this—

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

Three

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

"Both our families have come into an agreement for the two of us to marry, and I have been raised to honor my duty without question. You have the right to refuse your duty, of course, but I think you already know without being told that your decision will come with consequences."

Ysabel could only nod since those consequences were well-known to anyone who

knew of La Strega's hold over the entire city. That they could simply be asked to leave and never to return to Boston would already be a blessing. Worst-case scenario, however...wasn't even worth contemplating at all.

"As for our marriage..."

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

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

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

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

"You are saying I have to earn your trust as well?" Massimo asked sharply. "You dare to question my integrity?"

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

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

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

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

Fuck.

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

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

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

"Can I just say something?"

"No."

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

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

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

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

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

How did he know that, too, dammit?

"But I understand your point——"

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

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

"N-Nothing."

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

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

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

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

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

"No, of course not—"

"Don't lie," Massimo snapped.

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

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

Ah.

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

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

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

Or at least not until...now.

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

Fuck you!

Massimo was more stunned than offended when Ysabel suddenly flipped him the bird. For one second there...for one painful second, her response was an agonizing

reminder of the Ynez that he had first met and imagined himself in love with.

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

I'm sorry, Ynez.

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

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

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

"Help!"

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

Oh no.

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

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

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

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

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

Questo non va bene! This is not good!

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

Is this for real?

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

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

Aaaah.

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

Knock, knock, knock.

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

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

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

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

"And then you will kindly open this door—"

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

"Present your *fidanzato* to your grandmother—"

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



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

Four

TROPPE VELOCE. Everything was happening too, too fast again, and in what seemed like a mere snap of La Strega's fingers, Ysabel found herself inside another vehicle, but face to face this time with Boston's ruling queen.

Khaleesi.

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

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

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

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

"May I call you Ysabel, signorina?"

Ysabel's back shot ramrod straight at suddenly being spoken to by Massimo's grandmother, and she ended up half-stammering in her nervousness. "Sì, La Strega—

" Horror ate her alive when she realized what she had slipped."Mi sculto molto, signora! Chiedo perdono!" I'm so sorry, please forgive me!

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

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

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

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

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

"I know it's not my place to ask—"

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

"I feel guilty—"

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

Ysabel jerked in her seat. Stolen?

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

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

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

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

"How?" Ysabel whispered.

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

"During my shift?"

"Sì."

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

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

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

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

Grazie a Dio! Thank God!

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

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

Ysabel, however...

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

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

"When Cattleya told me about this—" It was La Streganow who was speaking. "I decided to investigate the matter myself, and it quickly became evident that your sister

has somehow found a way to deceive my grandson about that night. But what gives me absolutely no pleasure to tell you is that she has also made every effort to poison Massimo's mind against you."

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

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

Perché, Ynez?

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

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

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

Ynez and Massimo, however...

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

"Do you love my grandson, Ysabel?"

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

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

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

was.

"Yes," she choked out.

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

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

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

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

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

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

"I hope you say yes, signorina—"

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

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

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

The grumpiness of the older woman's tone had Ysabel biting back a smile. Who knew



someone like La Strega could be so...well...cute?

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

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

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

"A coward?"

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

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

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

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

Like me, in other words, Ysabel realized.

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

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

"Nothing to say in your defense, signorina?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Ouch."

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

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

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

"It will truly be alright, Ysabel. My grandson is a one-woman man like his grandfather, and it is the only reason he and your sister have been dating for years. Massimo keeps remembering that one night you made the most spectacular impression on him, and it is what makes him unable to let go of your sister."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Five

## WHAT THE HELL HAPPENED?

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

Porca miseria.

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

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Her mistake did not negate his dishonor.

He had kissed Ysabel because he desired her.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Shit.

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

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

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

This time, however...

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



"La Streganever visits the hospital for anything," Sarica answered, also with a frown. "Even I'd be worried about that. Unless of course——" Sarica looked at Massimo questioningly. "This has something to do with Ysabel Ossini?"

"No fucking idea."

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

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

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

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

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

Six

THIS MAN...COULD HAVE fallen in love with me five years ago.

The thought popped out of nowhere as soon as Massimo filled her vision, and Ysabel

realized dazedly how such a thought changed everything. Guilt still lingered in her heart, and while she would've done anything to keep this arranged marriage from hurting Ynez—

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

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

Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.

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

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

Let her go, Marchetti.

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

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

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

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

"Are you here because of Ysabel?"

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

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

"Chiedo scusa, nonna—"

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

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

"We came here because of your fidanzata."

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

"And according to Dr. Rivera..."

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

"Yourfidanzatais without a doubt——"

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And that was tonotlet go of Ysabel. Regardless of her past, he wanted to...do his duty.

"One hundred percent——"

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

"Una vergine."

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

Did she just say hisfidanzatawas a virgin?

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

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

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

She took a deep breath even though she still had no idea what to say, but just as her

lips parted, she heard Massimo drawl—

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

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

"It seems I have missed a lot," he murmured to hisfidanzata.

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

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

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

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

I am to be her first!

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

How the hell had he come to this point?

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

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

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

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

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

Fuck.

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

Aaah.

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



This...

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Aaaaaah!

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

This, dammit.

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

Almost.

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

Seven

FIVE YEARS AGO

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

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

Weak people like her dad always died first. Weak people like her dad always got

themselves bullied and scammed, and ever since her father's avoidable death, Ynez had sworn to herself she would never be like him.

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

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

What the hell?

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

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

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

Since she was no idiot like her dad, Ynez only allowed herself a tiny mysterious smile without betraying the fact that she had absolutely no idea what Massimo Marchetti was saying. All she knew was that one of Boston's most powerful men had mistaken her for someone else...and she had every intention of keeping it that way.

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

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

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

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

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

*Source Creation Date: May 22, 2025, 8:34 am*

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

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

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

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

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

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

"And you expect me to believe you?"

"I don't lie."

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

But in the meantime, she would be more than happy to work with what she had, and

since they had already talked enough for now—

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

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

Tanya.

Joy.

Greta.

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

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

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

"Ynez? Can we talk?"

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

"Last Halloween..."

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

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

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

Fuck! Fuck! Fuck!

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

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

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

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

Eight



*Source Creation Date: May 22, 2025, 8:34 am*

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

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

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

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

"Sì, signorina."

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

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

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

He suddenly leaned close, and Ysabel froze in shock.

Were they going to start in Round 2—

Oh.

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

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

Massimo expected her to play coy, but when Ysabel only made a face, it hit him then and there that he had expected her to act like Ynez usually did—but she didn't, and he liked her all the more for it.

What. The. Hell.

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

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

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

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

Ysabel knew she was being unfair, but she couldn't seem to help it. She knew she should be more furious with her own sister, who had been the one to do the

deceiving, but in times like this, all she could feel was hurt and despair.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Calm down, Ynez," their mother begged.

"Why are you asking me to calm down? Can't you see what she's done?" Ynez

screamed. "She's the one who stole Massimo away from me! Can't you see that?"

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

"Fuck all of you!"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"I should warn you thatLa Stregaalso knows about it."

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

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

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

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

"It's becauseLa Stregaalso found out that Massimo and I met first. Before he ever met Ynez..."

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

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

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

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

Nine

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

What if it was Ynez?

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

Forza, Ysabel.

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

Huh?

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

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

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

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

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

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

Why had she hurt Ynez?

Had she not promised him she had changed?

So why, dammit?

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

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

She shook her head, and his lips tightened. Ynez had come to him last night, sobbing her sister's name out in accusation. While hisfidanzata, even with all the ugly red lines

marring her face, refused to say a word.

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

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

"Mi dispiace."

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

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

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

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

Oh!

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

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

"S-Stop..."

And to her shock, he actually did stop.

Huh?

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

invisibly seductive caress.

"Never, ciliegina mia."

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

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

"What did you call me?"

"Ciliegina mia..."

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

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

"It was only that one time."

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

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

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

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

Because you did.

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

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

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

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

Oh, amore mio!

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

I love him.

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

He loves me, too.

Because that was what his admission amounted to.

Massimo loved her!

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

"I understand."

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

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

Her cheeky tone nearly had him smirking, just because.

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

"What's true?"

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

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

Fuck!

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

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

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

Massimo suddenly hauled her close, and the rest of what she had to say was replaced with a whimper.

Aaah!

Instead of kissing her as she was already breathlessly waiting for him to do, Massimo's fingers gripped her hair as he pulled her head back...so he could start sucking on her neck.

Oh!

She knew right away he was avoiding kissing her or touching her face because of her



wounds and bruises, and his tenderness made her fall for him all over again...even as every part of her body burned in desire.

"Massimo..."

His name slipped past her lips in an aching whisper, and in the blink of an eye, she found herself gasping as he had her pressed against the cold, smooth glass of the windows in their living room.

"No!"

Her parents' apartment might be on the fourth floor, and the windows fully tinted, but Ysabel still felt mortifyingly exposed, and more so when she felt Massimo reach under her robe.

"S-Stop..."

But her protest quickly turned into a moan as his hands cupped the cheeks of her ass before giving them a tight, hard squeeze.

"I...I w-want to stay a virgin!"

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The panicky claim was supposed to stop him, but all it did was make Massimo release a soft, lazy laugh that had her bare toes curling against the floor.

"And so you will, ciliegina mia."

Her knees buckled as soon as Massimo purred the words straight into her ears.

"But in the meantime, we can still enjoy each other's flesh...sì?"

She could no longer answer him coherently, with his fingers already tracing her folds over the shamefully soaked fabric of her panties.

Up. Down. Up. Down. Uuuuuuuup. Dooooooooown.

That was just how long she lasted.

That was just how much she wanted him.

And she couldn't even make herself feel angry when she heard Massimo chuckle as her body writhed helplessly in her release.

Yes, yes, yes.

Ysabel felt as if she was floating, and lost as she was in a haze of desire, she couldn't even put up a token of resistance as Massimo guided her to the couch before going down on one knee and cleaning her up with his handkerchief.

Massimo struggled to make sense of his feelings as he gazed down at hisfidanzata.Ynez had often warned him about Ysabel's ability to fool and manipulate the people around her.She's so good at pretending to be nice, Mas. I'm just so scared if you let her close, she'll get her claws into you, too.

It was one of the reasons he had avoided Ynez's sister in the years they had been dating, and it was those words that now taunted him in his mind. Had he not come here, furious on Ynez's behalf and intent on demanding answers? So how had it ended this way?

"Massimo?"

He remained on his knee even as her searching gaze collided with his."Cos'è?" What is it?

"You never answered my question either. Why did you come here?"

A shuttered expression fell over his features as the uncertainty of her tone threatened to break the walls around his heart.

Because I was furious with you for hurting Ynez.

Thatwasthe truth...but as he gazed at the scratches that cut into the soft skin of hisfidanzata's face, Massimo could feel his anger finding a new target in his ex-girlfriend, and he then heard himself say, "I came here...to make things official."

Ten

YSABEL WASN'T SURPRISEDto see the horde of reporters waiting outside Mammina's. #MasNez shippers had been up in arms since the public announcement of her upcoming marriage to Massimo, and local media had been more than eager to

feed their need for gossip.

Massimo glanced at Ysabel, asking gruffly, "Are you sure you're up for this?"

"Yup."

She did look ready, he considered broodingly, but what if this was merely Ysabel not wanting to show her weakness?

Makeup might have miraculously concealed every scratch on her face, but memories of it were still viciously fresh in his mind. He also remembered how she had involuntarily flinched at his touch, and this had him feeling so fiercely protective Massimo found himself tightening his grip on Ysabel's hand as he helped her out of the car.

Click! Click! Click!

The reporters immediately swarmed close upon seeing them, taking photo after photo.

"How does it feel to steal your sister's boyfriend?"

Ysabel had already prepared herself for such a question, and more importantly, she knew it would be foolish of her to expect Massimo to come to her defense. But just as she opened her mouth to answer the press—

"Ysabel and I dated when she was still in college. A whirlwind romance, if you will."

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It was all Ysabel could do to keep her jaw from dropping. What was Massimo saying?

"But Ysabel isn't used to being in the limelight, and so only a few people knew about our relationship."

"And then you started dating her sister? Isn't that fucked up?"

"I didn't know they were related until Ynez introduced me to her family. When Ysabel and I were dating, a certain aspect of our relationship kept us quite busy—"

Ysabel could feel her cheeks burning pink as a few reporters snickered at this.

"And so the topic of getting to know each other's families never came up."

"You really think we'd fall for that crap?"

A cold smile curved over Massimo's lips at the question. "And if you do not? What then? You really think all of you can still live in my city if so?"

There was one second of stark silence, and in the next second, it was as if the billionaire's words had unleashed a hurricane of fear, and this time, her jaw dropped as everyone started mumbling about having something else to do.

It was like watching an infestation of roaches fleeing from their impending doom as everyone scuttled back into their cars and started their engines in a hurry. Car doors slammed shut, tires screeched against the pavement, and then...silence.

Just like that, only she and Massimo were left standing outside her step-aunt's restaurant, and it almost seemed as if Ysabel had dreamt the whole thing up.

"Are you alright?"

A dazed laugh escaped Ysabel at Massimo's courteous tone, the sound of which only made things feel even more surreal.

"What you did was...brutal."

"But necessary," he answered dismissively. "It would not be in their best interests if they were so foolish again as to forget who owns this city."

"And me?" Ysabel dared to ask. "Are you going to say you own me as well?"

"Do I not?"

"Only if I own you as well." The words were out before Ysabel even realized what she was saying...but how could she take them back, with the way those same words had desire flaring in his gaze?

Another second passed, but just as he took a step towards her, the doors to Mammina's suddenly opened, and a beaming Carlita came rushing out.

"È stato incredibile!"

Massimo stiffened as if coming to his senses, and Ysabel bit back a laugh as he glared at her like he was seriously suspecting her of casting a spell. Oh, amore mio. How long would it take him to realize that love was the only magic she needed to bewitch him?

A smile tugged her lips at the way Carlita was now planting big, fat kisses on both of Massimo's cheeks, and the way Massimo did not dare pull away at such an effusive show of affection was heartbreakingly adorable.

"We all heard what you said, bambino! What a grand romance you and Ysabel have! It is like a fairytale..."

Massimo allowed Ysabel's step-aunt to propel him inside while his fidanzata obediently followed behind them.

"Since Ysabel did not let you meet us five years ago, we must rectify that immediately, sì?"

Massimo could only nod even though a part of him was still in disbelief over the things he had said to the press. Where the hell had those words come from?

"So, I think you have already met Ysabel's mama and my brother Arnoldo?"

Massimo expected a change in the older couple's attitude towards him, but both only smiled and greeted him as if it were normal for a man to date one sister...before being engaged to another. Were they not angry with him about hurting Ynez?

It was a question he would seriously like an answer to...in time. But for now, there were more people for him to greet, since it was now apparent to him that Ysabel's famiglia also included the regulars of Mammina's.

A part of Massimo expected them to take advantage of their closeness to his fidanzata, the way Ynez's friends had not hesitated to ask favors upon realizing he was a billionaire. But with Ysabel's extended famiglia, it was the opposite, and even the same group of high school students he had "seen" the other day, pestering Ysabel with question after question about his relationship with Ynez, was looking at

him...like he was the enemy.



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They were all truly concerned for Ysabel, and although this could be considered proof that Ynez was telling the truth about her sister's ability to manipulate other people—

Tra il dire e il fare c'è di mezzo il mare. Between saying and doing, there's the sea in between.

His mother of all people had spoken those words to him when he was seven, and her drunken state had made her unusually candid. In vino veritas. In wine, there is truth—and so it was, with Sheila bluntly warning her own son at that time not to believe everything she said just because she was his mother.

It was a hard lesson to learn, but Massimo had taken her words to heart, and since then, he had only trusted the few people who were able to meet his standards. People like his own famiglia, and people like Ynez, who was the opposite of Sheila...on paper.

But then on the other side of the coin, there was Ysabel. She had a college degree that she did not put to use. Preferred to work in her step-aunt's diner with no seeming ambition of her own. Was eccentric to the point of taking a canoe to work. Had no friends except for the regulars in Mammina's, all of whom Massimo had originally expected to sing Ysabel praises while dissing her sister.

But none of them did, and when he questioned one-armed Ric bluntly about this, the older man looked at him in surprise, asking, "Why would we say anything bad about Ynez? We have not even met her."

"Are you saying she hasn't come here? Not once?"

"They say it is because of Arnolando. That she never got over her father's death." One-armed Ric shrugged. "But that is all gossip, really. We do not ask, and they do not speak. Life goes on, sì?"

The conversation went no further since Ysabel had already returned to his side to let him know that she had cooked something for him.

"I was told this was your favorite..."

All eyes were on them as Ysabel took Massimo to one of the diner's corner booths, and she presented her masterpiece with a flourish. "Clam chowder for starters, and the entrée, a triple-layered Philly cheesesteak sandwich made of organically sourced wheat bread, vegan cheese, and plant-based meat. Oh, and double scoops of mashed potato on the side. Made from scratch—" Her voice then lowered into a whisper as she revealed her secret. "—using La Strega's very own recipe."

The whole diner burst into laughter at Massimo's visible surprise, and they laughed again when it was Ysabel's turn to gasp in surprise, with Massimo suddenly giving his fidanzata a little tug that had her tumbling into his lap.

"Let's put it to a test then," Massimo murmured.

"Of course." She tried to get to her feet, but he wouldn't let her leave his lap. She offered him a fork, but he only raised a brow.

"You are not going to feed me?"

"Only if you will feed me back."

"Of course."

Ysabel, having expected him to argue like he always did, was surprised at the swiftness of Massimo's concession, and she looked at him suspiciously. "You promise?"

"You have my word as a Marchetti." He then took the fork from her hand and replaced it with a soup spoon. "Since you're feeding me, we should do this properly..."

Ysabel rolled her eyes but took the soup spoon all the same. "Whatever..."

Massimo's expression turned veiled when he saw her give the spoonful of soup a little blow. Had she forgotten he was from one of America's wealthiest and toughest families? So why then was she acting like the mother he never had? Ynez had never displayed such care towards him—porca miseria! Why did his brain keep making these pointless comparisons between the two sisters? Was it because Ysabel was more and more becoming like what he imagined Ynez could be?

"Here you go, Master." The word had already slipped out before she realized what she was saying, and her heart nearly stopped beating when she saw the way Massimo's gaze suddenly narrowed at her.

"Why did you call me that?"

Because it's what I heard the other girl call you.

And as much as she wanted to say the truth out loud, Ysabel couldn't muster the courage to do so. Today was one of the best days of her life, and she just didn't want to risk ruining it. If another lie would keep Massimo by her side, then so be it.

"Because you're bossy," Ysabel quipped instead, and her heart ached at the way he visibly relaxed. Was he finally starting to suspect the truth?

Massimo finally took a sip of her clam chowder, and she looked at him hopefully.  
"Well?"

"It's fine."

The dismissive tone had Ysabel bristling. Why was he being unnecessarily rude and hurtful? Would it kill him to—

Oh!

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A gasp escaped her when she finally noticed the amusement gleaming in his dark eyes.

"Jerk!"

Massimo sensed everyone's relief when they saw him merely chuckling as Ysabel hit him on the shoulder. Just a second earlier, he had also seen them holding their breath when they heard what hisfidanzatahad called him, and it had seemed they were ready to defend her from his wrath—and die doing so, if that was what it boiled down to.

Could this still be another example of Ysabel's ability to manipulate people...or was it Ysabel being able to win them over simply because she wasnice?

Ysabel insisted on taking her seat across from him as they each had a slice of her sandwich, and it tasted as good as it looked, too. He saw her take her phone out like Ynez usually did, take pictures of the food also like his ex-girlfriend habitually did, but after this—

The phone went back into her bag, and Massimo could not help feeling bemused as he watched her take another huge bite of her sandwich.That was it?

Ysabel came back to their table later and saw the way Massimo frowned as she served him coffee. "Are you worried I'm planning to poison you for your wealth?" she asked teasingly.

He tugged her back into his lap before answering, "No."

"I don't believe you——"

"Because you don't have to." Massimo had finally come to a decision. Ynez might have repeatedly warned him against falling for her sister's tricks, and he wanted to believe not everyone was like his mother, who had lied over and over about wanting to change but never did.

"All of mine is yours, Ysabel."

She was about to laugh when she realized he was being serious, and her smile faded. "Don't say that. I don't want it, and I'm willing to sign whatever's needed so that you won't ever have to worry about me being after your money."

"You are entitled——"

"I really don't want it," she insisted.

"Why?"

She looked at him as if he had lost his mind. "Um, duh? To prove that I'm not the evil fiancée you think I am." All thanks to my own flesh and blood, Ysabel couldn't help thinking, but since she also knew better than to say those words out loud, she could only cup his face and look into his eyes in hopes that he would see the truth in her gaze.

"I want to earn your trust——"

"You already have."

Her heart nearly stopped beating at how swiftly, how easily Massimo uttered the words, and her entire body started trembling. "Please don't lie——" Her voice cracked

as her eyes started stinging, and her head dropped to his chest.

"Please do not break my trust, Ysabel." His lips brushed over the top of her head as he spoke, and the rawness of his tone had her crying harder. She wrapped her arms tightly around his neck, knowing how much it cost Massimo to say such words.

"I won't," she promised him fiercely. "I promise I won't."

Whether he believed her or not, she didn't really know...since his phone suddenly started ringing, and Ysabel could tell who the caller was just by the way Massimo had stiffened.

Ynez.

And her heart started to ache, even though Massimo was absolutely gentle in the way he pulled her arms down.

"I'm sorry, Ysabel. It is your sister calling," he said heavily.

"I know."

"You understand I have to take this?"

"Of course." She was proud of the way her voice didn't even shake as she answered him, but she was not proud at all of the way her heart sank to her stomach when he walked back to their table minutes later, and she saw the grim look on his face.

"Mi dispiace, Ysabel. But I need to go to your sister and explain."

Non farai niente di stupido, she warned herself determinedly. You will not do anything stupid!

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"She wants an explanation, and I owe it to her——"

Ysabel knew it should be enough that he wasn't lying about it, but instead, she heard herself ask, "Can't you just text it?" As soon as the words fell past her lips, she knew right away it was a stupidly shallow thing to say, and she wasn't surprised at the way her question had Massimo's lips tightening in impatience.

"Do you truly think I am the kind of man who would explain these things over text?"

It hurt to sound him so scathing, especially when just earlier he had been so heartbreakingly tender. But what hurt even more was to realize how shamefully desperate she felt. She didn't want him to go to Ynez and have her sister further poison him against her.

"You must learn to trust me, Ysabel. It is over between me and your sister, but she also heard me lie——"

"But it's not a lie," Ysabel blurted out. "Five years ago——"

"Do not say another word," Massimo gritted out.

"Please just let me explain," she begged. "It was Halloween, and——"

The entire diner fell silent, and Massimo bit back a curse at the way everyone was now looking at him like he had committed murder. It was true then, the way Ysabel could have everyone on her side, even though she was exactly the one to blame.



Ysabel mustered the courage to try one last time to have him hear her out. "I know you have every reason to doubt me, but I can prove it to you. My cousin——"

"Yourcousin,you say?"

Why was Massimo suddenly speaking to her in such a vicious tone?

"It wouldn't happen to be Julio, would it?" A humorless smile twisted over Massimo's lips at Ysabel's visible shock. "I spoke to your cousin years ago, and he warned me about you."

Ysabel couldn't help feeling as if her entire world had turned into a nightmare, and there was no way to escape its horrors. "I d-don't understand——"

"You told him about reading Ynez's diary, and he warned me about how you may choose to twist the truth to your advantage."

She could only look at him, unable to believe what she was hearing. "You're l-lying. Julio would never——"

"Just fucking stop!" Massimo saw her eyes well up with tears at the tone of his voice, and the sight tore him apart even though he knew he had not done anything wrong. "You promised you had changed, dammit."

"Massimo, please——"

This, dammit.

This was the consequence of allowing himself to open up to a woman who had too many similar traits to his mother. But even though this realization should have led him to walk out, Massimo instead heard himself say, "Just admit it."

Her eyes widened.

"Admit that you lied. That you planned to lie. And all will be forgiven."

A part of her wanted to say no. To stand her ground and force him to realize the truth.

But when she thought about how she could risk losing him completely by doing so—

I can't. I'm sorry, God, but I can't.

And so she heard herself choke out, "I'm sorry, Mas. The moment I heard you say you wanted to go to Ynez, I was terrified you'd realize you wanted her, not me. B-because how can you—" It hurt so, so much to say the next words, but she knew she had to. "How can you want s-someone likemewhen you can have s-someone like Ynez—"

His arms closed around her, and as Ysabel began to weep, she realized that she didn't know what she was crying for.

Was it because she was relieved Massimo had forgiven her...or was she crying because it felt as if she had just sold her own honor and integrity for love?

Eleven

JULIO: I'm so sorry, Ysa. `I didn't know I was talking about you!

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Ysabel:How can you not know?!

Julio:Ynez told me it was ROMANA I was talking about. But that I shouldn't mention her name because she's got spies all over the place. So, when I was talking to him that day, I just did what Ynez told me, and I told him that someone close to Ynez had read her diary...

Ysabel:And of course, he automatically assumed you were talking about me.

Julio:I'm so sorry. She paid me to do it, and I figured why not take it since I was just helping her warn her boyfriend about her best friend? I'm so sorry, cuginetta. I'm so, so sorry.

Ysabel:It's not your fault. You trusted Ynez...just like I did.

Julio:Where's Massimo? I can go to him and explain---

Ysabel:No, it's fine. I don't think it would do any good if you go to him. He's just going to think I found a way to convince you to lie for me.

Julio:I'm so, so sorry. Sono mortificato, chiedo scusa. If you need me to do anything, like anything, just tell me, and I will do it. OK?

ALL EYES WERE ON MASSIMO and Ynez as they occupied one of the few available tables in Boston's most popular Italian restaurant. Ynez had wanted him to visit her house, but he had put his foot down about the necessity of meeting in public.

We can meet anywhere else you wish, he had offered by way of compromise, and of course, Ynez had chosen a place where they were sure to be photographed. She had always been the type to get even and retaliate, whenever she didn't get her way. He had actually forgotten that part about her, and being reminded of it left a bad taste in Massimo's mouth.

He might have only known Ysabel for over a day, but he already knew his *fidanzata* was not as vindictive. She was not perfect, sì, but the good traits she possessed...were the very ones he had once imagined Ynez to have, only to be disappointed by reality.

And that is more my fault than Ynez's, Massimo thought grimly. Ynez had never asked to be placed on a pedestal, and it was not her fault that their brief but unforgettable encounter in the funhouse had led him to create a false image of her in his mind.

Ynez was struggling to contain her resentment and rage. Massimo had barely said a word in the past hour, not even when she had accused him outright of no longer caring for her. Maybe, it was time to bring out the big guns...

Massimo's jaw clenched when Ynez suddenly started crying. "You're just like them, Mas. You're just like them."

"Do not make this more difficult, Ynez. I already explained I had no choice. Ysabel is now my *fidanzata*, and it is my duty to protect her——"

"But to do so at my expense?" she cried out. "How is that fair?"

"That is why I am here, apologizing——"

"I don't want your apologies, Mas. Can't you see that?" She tried reaching for his

hand and nearly ended up screaming in rage when Massimo drew back as if not wanting her touch. "Why are you acting this way? You're so unfair," she choked out in a sob. "I was with you for five years, and you've known her for what? A fucking matter of hours? Can't you see what she's doing to us? She's evil——"

"Enough, Ynez."

"No! You have to hear the truth——"

Massimo had truly had enough, and he cut her off, saying harshly, "If you insist on speaking the truth, then do not act as if you yourself have not done anything wrong."

A shiver crawled down Ynez's spine at the hardened look on her ex-boyfriend's gorgeous face. He had never looked at her like this. Never!

"If...if Ysabel told you something——"

"She did not have to tell me anything since your best friend Romana had already offered ample evidence about your affair with her boyfriend."

Ynez paled. Fuck. So that was why the other woman had been so cold to her lately, and there were also times she had caught Romana looking at her with a catty little smile. That bitch!

Her mind raced as she tried to come up with the best possible excuse, but then she saw the steely expression on Massimo's gorgeous face, and she knew him well enough to know there was only one way out of this.

"I'm sorry." Ynez's fingers curled into fists as she forced the words out. "I don't know how much she's told you, but...I've been having an affair behind your back since you stopped wanting to have sex with me."

Ynez's confession was unexpected, and Massimo's jaw clenched as his anger faded, and guilt over wasting years of his ex-girlfriend's life once again assaulted his conscience.

"Perdonami." Forgive me."You were right from the start. I was mistaken about my feelings, and I ended up wasting your life."

Ynez lowered her head, but only because she was unable to keep herself from smiling. Stupid, stupid Mas. Why were so many people so predictably stupid? Truth didn't always set people free. Truth could be just as easily weaponized and turn into a cage...when spoken by the right at the right time and place.

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She tried reaching for his hand again, and in his guilt, he allowed her fingers to come into contact with his. "I will never regret those years we had, Mas," she whispered. "Please don't ask that of me."

Massimo had already withdrawn his hand from Ynez's even before she had finished speaking. Fuck. Fuck. Fuck. Ynez's touch might have only lasted for seconds, but it should not have lasted in the first place.

He jerked to his feet, saying stiffly, "I truly am sorry this is how it ended between us. From now on—it is best that you only think of me as your brother."

"But what if I can't? I still love you, Mas."

The pain in her eyes whipped his chest. His honor demanded reparation. But his hands were fucking tied, not only by the duty he owed to his famiglia...but also by the simple reality that his feelings - or the lack of them - had not changed.

"Perdonami."

It was the only thing he could say before turning his back and walking away from the girl he had convinced himself he was in love with for five years.

Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.

His mind began to taunt him with side-by-side comparisons of his memories of Ynez...and the time he had recently spent with Ysabel. There were moments, just fucking moments that it had seemed to him Ysabel was more like the girl he had met

in the funhouse five years ago. But of course that could not be true, and it would do him no good to wish for what was impossible.

When he came back to his apartment, all he wanted was to find some fucking thing to do - maybe hit the treadmill or do weights, anything that would have both his mind and body so exhausted he would be asleep as soon as he hit the bed.

That was the plan...but when he entered the bedroom, and he saw Ysabel waiting for him—

Well, fuck.

Now he knew exactly how to tire himself out.

Twelve

A QUICK CALL TO ASK one little favor from La Strega enabled Ysabel to enter her fiancé's apartment and wait for him to come home. Julio's revelation had troubled her greatly; it had made her realize just how far and how well thought out Ynez's plans were when it came to deceiving Massimo. And her sister could've so easily succeeded, if not for divine intervention in the form of Cattleya and La Strega playing fairy godmother (and her assistant).

Just one last time, she promised herself.

Ysabel had come here to tell the truth one last time, and if necessary, she would ask for La Strega to vouch for her—even if her whole heart was against this. Maybe she was being too much of a foolish and hopeless romantic, but was it really not possible for Massimo to believe she was telling the truth?

Ysabel paced the length of Massimo's bedroom as she tried to rehearse what she



would say. I'm sorry. I know I may be the last person you want to see right now, but could we talk? Please?

She sat on the floor, and painful memories engulfed her mind as she leaned back against the side of his bed. She remembered the look on his face when she told him about Julio, remembered how he had shouted, and how the entire diner had fallen silent. She remembered, and she started feeling hopeless—

Questo non è da te, Ysa! This is not like you!

She pushed all of the ugly memories away and took her phone out in hopes of distracting herself, but this ended up backfiring when she saw #MasNez trending on all social media platforms—and all because of one photo.

It was of Massimo and Ynez having dinner, and with her sister holding her ex-boyfriend's hand.

Ysabel's first instinct was to run away. If Ynez and Massimo wanted to be together, why should she stand in the way of their happiness? She was so, so tempted to give up, but then she remembered his own grandmother's words—

If only you could have seen him in those days, bambina. He was a man in love! He had such high hopes! But when he and Ynez finally started dating, we saw the stars in his eyes slowly fade, and we saw him changing bit by bit until he seemed like a man who had lost all hope and had decided to simply...settle.

Ysabel got to her feet and started pacing again. Her sister would indeed win if Ysabel were to let Massimo go without a fight. She was in love with him still, and she was so very sure that he was in love with her, too.

She had to fight for him!

She had to!

It was while she was giving herself a pep talk that she heard the door open, and when she whirled around, it was to see Massimo standing by the doorway, staring at her.

Oh!

Gone was the anger he had shown her earlier when he believed she had lied to him about changing for the better.

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And in its place was need. The kind that was both physical and something more. The kind that made her realize how hard he was trying to ignore all of her supposed similarities with his own mother.

Amore mio. Oh, my love.

His torment was almost acutely palpable. She could practically feel his agony, could feel how Massimo was doing his very best to forget all of Ynez's lies and believe that she had changed. But most of all, she felt his need.

Massimo needed her so because he loved her.

That was so clear to her now, and this had her heart pounding so, so hard.

Forza, Ysabel! You can do this!

Truth once again came to her rescue, and she was indeed beginning to see that with this man, it always had to be the truth, for better or for worse.

That was probably something her sister had also figured out, Ysabel realized uneasily, but she hurriedly pushed the thought away. Instead of worrying over Ynez, she was much better off focusing on her own fidanzato, who had just now raised a brow when he saw her lips curve into a little smile.

"Do you care to share the joke, ciliagina mia?"

Butterfly wings fluttered inside of her stomach - she just loved it so much when he

called her that - and Ysabel couldn't keep her voice from turning breathless as she answered him. "No joke, but it's just something I noticed..."

"About what?"

"The way you look at me." She looked at him under her lashes, and her heart pounded harder when she saw how his nostrils had flared at her words. "It just seems you want..."

"Wantwhat?"

Her knees knocked against each other at the roughness of his voice, and she ended up whispering—

"To worship me."

A few moments passed, and she could only swallow hard when a muscle started ticking at his jaw. Oh no. Had it been too much? She was really just teasing him, and she didn't think any relationship could work without humor—even if one was led to believe the other was a pathological liar.

Another second passed, and just as Ysabel started gnawing on her lip—

Should she or should she not take the words back?

He was suddenly standing in front of her, and all she could do was gasp and laugh as he swept her off her feet...only to throw her on the bed like one would do with a child.

Her breath caught as she raised herself on her elbows, and she saw him already getting down to his knees. He slowly parted her legs open, and desire rippled through

her body.

Massimo got rid of her jeans swiftly and efficiently, and every inch of her flesh was aching and burning as he slowly pulled her panties down her legs.

I love you, I love you, I love you.

It was all Ysabel could do not to sob the words out as his mouth closed over the swollen nub of her desire, and she clawed helplessly on the bedsheets as he started sucking on her clit. She tried, she tried so, so hard to make it last—

But just like before, it was simply too much, and his name spilled out in a cry as she started to cum.

"Massimo..."

Thirteen

I CANNOT GET ENOUGH of this woman.

There were only three days left until their wedding and just about every minute of the past two weeks had been spent with Ysabel by his side...or under him or over him, depending on what and where they ended up seducing each other, and always with the most excruciatingly satisfying results.

He had tasted her while she was lying on his office desk, naked from the waist down, and the door unlocked. She had also pleased him on her knees when they were enjoying dinner in a private room at one of Boston's most popular restaurants—but one that also happened to have panoramic tinted windows on all sides. The drive to her work from her apartment was only supposed to take ten minutes tops, but every damn day she would arrive at the diner, barely making it in time, and all because they

had to take a detour along the way.

The same thing had happened tonight, with Massimo and Ysabel on their way to their rehearsal dinner, and they were scheduled to arrive on time as well...until he had caught her staring at him, with stars in her eyes.

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"Too handsome for you?"

He had only meant it as a joke, but instead, she had shaken her head. "I don't think 'handsome' is going to cut it." And then her voice had gotten a little shy as she admitted, "I think you look beautiful——"

And that was it, Massimo thought. He had asked his chauffeur to drive in circles while he rewarded his *fidanzata* with two consecutive orgasms, and he would have gone for a third if not for their incessantly ringing phones, and an exasperated *La Strega* saying she would die of hunger if they were to delay another minute longer.

Life had been really good lately, Massimo conceded somewhat grudgingly. He could not even recall the last time it had been this good, and that was what disturbed him the most.

Had he really not loved Ynez at all, and that was why he could not recall having this good a time with her?

Had he truly been mistaken for everything he imagined her to be?

Sex with Ynez had been good - or at least it had been when they were still doing it. And anytime he had wanted to talk about business, Ynez had been able to converse with him at the same level, and he had liked that about her. It had made her all the more different from his mother.

But when he tried to remember the last time Ynez had made him laugh the way Ysabel often did—his mind drew a complete blank.

What the hell?

They had been dating for five fucking years. Surely it was not possible that Ynez had never made him laugh?

"Massimo? What is it?" Ysabel's voice drew him back to the present, and he saw his family seated around him, all of them looking like they had no problem at all with the fact that just weeks ago, it was Ysabel's sister he had been dating.

That, of course, was not Ysabel's fault, but the fact that his family had never liked Ynez only made him feel guiltier about his previous relationship.

"You've been staring at me for some time," Ysabel whispered under her breath. "Do I have something on my face?"

Massimo's entire family could see that there was absolutely nothing on Ysabel's face...and not one of them was surprised to hear the reply of herfidanzato.

"Sì, ciliegina mia."

There was nothing Massimo liked more than having an excuse to touch hisfidanzata, and Massimo's body turned rigid with need as he ran his tongue over an otherwise clean spot next to the corner of her lip. He heard her catch her breath, lifted his head, and saw the stars in her eyes—

Too damn adorable.

And so he could not resist doing the same thing all over again.

Cesare and Penelope, who were seated across the engaged couple, exchanged looks at how Massimo was acting towards hisfidanzata. He had the opportunity to speak with



his brother in private last night, and when he had asked Massimo bluntly if he had already fallen in love with Ysabel——

"Just because I am also about to be a married man does not mean I have also lost my heart to my future bride."

His brother's tone had been sardonic, and the smile that had accompanied his words had not reached Massimo's eyes. Cesare had told his wife about it, and she in turn had told him what she observed from the night Ynez had unexpectedly dropped by at the Marchettis' estate.

"I think she loves him, Cesare. And I think he loves her, too. But Ynez..."

"He will never cheat on Ysabel if that is what you're worried about."

"I believe you when you say he won't. But...there's more than one way for him to hurt her, and that's what worries me."

Penelope could see in the way her husband frowned that both of them were thinking of the same thing. It was also equally obvious that Cesare did not want to think of his brother capable of breaking Ysabel's heart...but such a thing seemed inevitable, with the famiglia enjoying their coffee when news suddenly broke out on the Internet about a drunk and wildly sobbing Ynez going live...as she begged for Massimo to come to her and talk.

Ysabel could already feel herself paling when she heard Massimo say her name in a low voice. She already knew what he was about to ask of her, and as much as her own heart broke for Ynez——

What do I do, God?

She knew her sister inside and out, and this was not unfortunately Ynez's first attempt at emotional blackmail. In fact, Ynez had virtually done the same thing to get Ysabel to admit to a crime she had never committed, and so of course...of course, she understood why it was easy for Massimo to fall for the same trick. But—

"Please don't go."

His gorgeous features hardened the moment she whispered the words, and Ysabel bit back a sob.

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"I get that you feel guilty, I really do. But if you know my sister like I do——"

"What are you going to tell me this time, Ysabel?" Massimo bit out. "Will you try to stop me from helping your sister by telling me about her affair?"

Ysabel could only stare at him, stunned. Heknewof Ynez's affair...and he was still willing to help her sister?

"You told me you changed, dammit." And he had fucking believed her.

But just like how his mother had always lied about wanting to change——

So had Ysabel.

Just like his mother, Ysabel would always be the selfish little bitch who had used her sister's identity to fool around with a married man. Just like his mother, she was bound to disappoint him again and again——and it was time he fucking accepted that.

Ysabel couldn't even say a word as she watched him walk away.

I was wrong.

He was rushing to Ynez's rescue despite knowing about her sister cheating on him, and that could only mean one thing, couldn't it?

Massimo was in love with Ynez...and not her.

Fourteen

WHAT THE HELL AM I doing here?

All eyes were on Massimo as he stood outside Ynez's penthouse apartment, his fingers frozen mid-air. On the other side of this door was his ex-girlfriend, who had publicly begged for him to talk to her. Unspoken but very much obvious to everyone was the possibility that Ynez would harm herself if she did not come...but was that truly reason enough for him to walk out of the rehearsal dinner for his own wedding?

Are you really going to do this, Marchetti?

Ynez might need him still, but Ysabel was the woman he had sworn to marry. More than that, he wanted to marry her—but would she still want to marry him, when every time her sister asked for his help, he would feel conscience-bound to offer it—even if doing so was hurting his fidanzata?

Ysabel was not perfect. But neither was he. And once he allowed himself to imagine what life would be without Ysabel—

No!

Massimo's blood ran cold, and he knew right away it was not a risk he was willing to take. His heart had already made its choice, and its choice, for better or for worse, was not the one who was the opposite of his mother. His heart chose Ysabel, and he would do anything to make her forgive him and take her back.

Having made up his mind, Massimo started to turn away, but it was then he heard the door open behind him, and Ynez cry his name out.

"Massimo, wait!"

Her arms locked around his waist from behind, and before he knew it—photographers suddenly came out from nowhere, and Massimo realized it was as Ysabel had tried to warn him.

A trap.

This was all a fucking trap, and it was all he could do to control himself from shoving Ynez away.

The fury in Massimo's eyes had Ynez nervously backing up a step even as she looked at him with tear-stained eyes. "Please don't be mad at me—"

"You planned this, damn you."

"I just wanted you to be free of her," Ynez whispered. "But I knew you were too honorable—"

"It's over between us, Ynez. And that will never change."

The finality of his voice was just too much, and even though Ynez knew the sensible thing to do was to regroup and find another chance to cause trouble—

Her temper got the better of her like it always did, and she found herself lunging forward to slap Massimo in the face.

"Damn you!"

The photographers she had personally contacted gleefully took pictures as Massimo's face snapped to the side.

"You never really loved me, did you?"

Massimo did his best to control his own temper. "Whether I did or not has nothing to do with your sister——"

"Of course, it does, you——" Too late, Ynez realized what she was about to let slip...or had let slip.

Shit, shit, shit!

Her panicky gaze swung wildly to Massimo's, and Ynez felt herself pale at the chilling expression on his hardened features.

"You lied to me, didn't you?"

His murderously soft tone frightened her, and all Ynez could do was shake her head and stammer incoherently. "I—I——"

"Don't fucking lie to me!"

Massimo had never spoken to her like this way before, and she finally understood why even La Strega herself described Massimo as the most terrifying among her

grandsons.

"It was Ysabel that I met at Halloween five years ago. Wasn't she?"

Ynez was so, so tempted to lie, but the moment Massimo took a step towards her as if he were willing to wring her neck if that was what it took to get the truth out—

"Y-Yes." It killed her to admit to her deception and trickery, but Ynez also knew Massimo would make her life hell if she was stupid enough to try lying to him again.

"And you lied to me about other things," Massimo bit out. "Didn't you?"

Ynez desperately racked her brains for something to say that would turn the tables around and have Massimo trust her again. But when she saw Massimo's dark gaze drop to her neck as if trying to gauge whether he could strangle her with just one hand—

"I d-did..."

By the time Ynez finished confessing her every lie, security was already waiting to escort her out of the building, and Massimo didn't even turn her way when she begged for him to forgive her.

"Please, Massimo! I did it for you! I love you! We belong together!"

The sound of her cries only made Massimo want to kill her even more, and the only reason he wasn't punishing her as she deserved was because he knew now—just when it was too late, and so much damage had been done...

He now knew exactly what kind of girl his fidanzata was, and it was not the type who would ever want to see her sister hurt—even if that same sister had hurt her first.

On his way back to the family estate, Massimo tried calling Ysabel several times, but none of his calls could get through. In his desperation, he decided to call his grandmother, and the older woman answered his call on the first ring.

"Where is she, nonna? I need to talk—"

"She's gone, Massimo."

The pain underscoring La Strega's voice lashed at his heart...because he knew his grandmother could only be hurting on his fidanzata's behalf.

"I could not force her to stay, you understand? She could not even cry when she asked me..."

The first time Massimo had ever heard his grandmother's voice crack was when she had to tell him and his brothers that both their grandfather and father were dead. The second time...was now.

"She was in so much pain, bambino."

His heart threatened to collapse at the thought of Ysabel hurting to such an extent, and all because of his blind stupidity.

"It was just too much to bear, and so when she asked me to help her disappear..."



*Source Creation Date: May 22, 2025, 8:34 am*

His fingers tightened around his phone. "Nonna——"

"Mi dispiace molto." I'm so very sorry. "But I had to say yes."

Fifteen

MIAMI, FLORIDA

Three months. It had been three months since his own nonna had helped Ysabel disappear, and even though he had already spent a fortune of his own money in search of his missing fidanzata——

Where are you, Ysabel?

It was often whispered about in Boston that there was no one better than La Strega at making people...disappear. Most times, that typically meant the person missing was already six feet under. But in his fidanzata's case?

Massimo was the one who felt as if he had ceased to exist, the moment he found out that the only way to find the girl he loved was to beat his grandmother at her own game.

Where are you, ciliegina mia?

He had barely slept since she had gone missing, and it was only when he had almost gotten himself run over by a damn school bus that his eldest brother Giancarlo had reluctantly pulled rank and ordered Massimo to choose between two alternatives.

You will end up killing yourself at the rate you're going, and then what? Will you be able to make it up to Ysabel if you are already dead? Do all of us a favor, fratello—either take a fucking break from searching for her or go on a working trip to Miami.

As painful as it was to admit, Massimo knew that every word his brother had uttered was true, and so here he was, playing the role of a billionaire entrepreneur and killing it. He had just closed another multimillion real estate deal for his famiglia, but the success meant nothing to him.

Where are you, my love?

Massimo bowed to the group of Japanese investors that had partnered with the Marchettis for a project in Tokyo, but as soon as they stepped out of the private room he had reserved for their meeting, the polite smile completely dropped from his lips.

I miss you, Ysabel. I love you. Where are you?

He was about to leave the restaurant when its manager hurried after him. "Mr. Marchetti? There is a Ms. Ynez Ossini on the phone for you, and she says—"

"Whatever she says, you can bet it's a damn lie."

Those who were near enough to hear his words ended up gasping; the expressions on their faces made it clear that they knew who Ynez was...and just as clear was the fact that none of them intended to keep this incident to themselves.

"I'm so sorry, sir," the restaurant manager stammered. "I was not aware..."

"I have a restraining order against her," Massimo explained curtly. "I appreciate if you'd get the word out about this."

Massimo heard the incessant click of cameras as the other guests hurriedly took photos of him as he walked away. Such invasion of his privacy would have been unheard of in his city, and it was one of the reasons why Massimo rarely traveled out of Boston.

Ysabel was the only reason he had flown around the fucking world twice in three months, and now that he was done with his duty here—

Where are you, Ysabel?

He had just walked back into his hotel when a blast of air-conditioning struck him, and with it came the scent of...cherries?

His heart slammed against his chest even though he knew he was being fucking fanciful. But all the same, he found himself sending up a desperate prayer to the heavens. *Dio aiutami. Help me, God.*

Ysabel had not stopped loving him in the five years that he had mistaken Ynez for her. Or at least that was what his grandmother had insisted. But either way—Massimo knew he was willing to wait far, far longer than that. If forever was how long it took to find his *fidanzata* and beg for her forgiveness—

I will do anything just to see you, *ciliegina mia*. Anything.

The scent of cherries refused to disappear, and even though he was convinced it was God punishing him with false hope just as he deserved, Massimo finally looked up—

And it really was...his Ysabel, in a wedding dress.

FORZA, YSABEL! YOU can do this!

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*Source Creation Date: May 22, 2025, 8:34 am*

Ysabel had promised her newfound friend she would do this, and do it she would...even if it killed her.

So just put on the damn gown and keep your promise!

Her tears started falling as she squeezed herself into the gown, and Ysabel angrily wiped them away. Big girls don't cry, she reminded herself, and most especially not when it involved walking down the aisle in a pretty dress.

She did her best not to think of anything else as she applied her makeup, but it was only when she sprayed some perfume on herself that she realized too late it smelled of...cherries.

The perfume was part of a welcome gift set from hotel management, and Ysabel didn't know whether to laugh or cry as its scent made her remember the one person she had no business remembering.

I don't understand, God.

Three months had already passed, and she had been so, so sure that this time around, she would be able to forget him for good. The past five years, Ysabel hadn't been able to move on because of the countless what-if questions that troubled her soul.

But it was different now. Or at least it should've been different, since she had come to realize that she, Cattleya, and his grandmother - all of them were wrong. All of them had assumed Massimo had never been satisfied with Ynez because she wasn't Ysabel.

But they were all wrong, and it was time for Ysabel to accept this.

Her sister might have deceived Massimo about that night, but the two of them were clearly meant to be together. How could she believe anything else, when someone as possessive as Massimo could still rush to her sister's rescue...even when he knew Ynez had been cheating on him?

I know it's over between us, God. I already know that. So why can't I still forget him?

She was about to step out of the hotel when the doors opened, and her steps crashed into a silent halt.

Massimo?

He was so, so much more gorgeous than she had allowed herself to remember. But he had also visibly lost weight, and agony squeezed her heart as she tried to wonder why. Were they fighting again? Had he caught Ynez cheating—non andare lì, Ysa! Don't go there! Just don't!

It was over between them, and—

Shit.

Massimo had already looked up, and the moment his dark haunted eyes clashed with hers, it was as if the entire world had stopped, and it was all Ysabel could do not to cry the words that were threatening to rip her apart.

Perché, Massimo? Why? Why can't it be me?

Massimo could feel himself whitening as he stared at this Ysabel...but she would not be for long, considering what she was wearing.

"Who is it, Ysabel?" he asked hoarsely.

"I d-don't..."

Was she saying she didn't want to tell him? Perché? Because she believed it was no longer his business?

Massimo knew a man much better than him was deserving of her, but dammit, dammit, dammit—

"How did you even find me?" Ysabel asked painfully. La Strega had told her she would be safe here, and he would never find her. So why was Massimo now standing in front of her?

"I've been looking for you every fucking day, Ysabel."

It hurt to hear the hollowness of his tone, and while she knew he would never lie—what if he was only searching for her out of guilt?

"I was driving everyone crazy because of it, and that's how I ended up here."

Was he saying...he had only bumped into her by coincidence?

"Please don't do this." Massimo could no longer bear staring at his Ysabel dressed like a fucking bride and not saying anything about it. "I know I have no right to ask you of this," he admitted tautly, "but per favore, Ysabel—give me another chance. Please."

"This is about your duty, isn't it?" she asked stiltedly.

*Source Creation Date: May 22, 2025, 8:34 am*

"No, dammit. It's about you and me—it's always been you and me since Halloween five years ago." He tried to reach for her, but Ysabel stumbled back as if terrified by his touch, and her reaction cut him to the core. "Ysabel—"

"It's over, okay?" she choked out. "And...and now, if you'll excuse me, I...I have somewhere to go."

Did she really think he would let her go just like that?

A gasp escaped her lips when Massimo's arms suddenly wrapped around her from behind in a chain-like embrace.

"Forgive me, Ysabel. Forgive me."

Tears tracked down her cheeks at the rawness of his tone. "There's nothing for me to forgive. You and Ynez—"

"I don't give a damn about Ynez," Massimo bit out. "I never did—"

His face whitened at the way Ysabel tore out of his hold at the words.

"Don't lie, Massimo. Please—" Her voice broke, and his own fucking heart broke at the sound of it. "Just please don't."

"I'm not lying," he said fiercely. "I know I was stupid and blind all these five years—"

"But you loved her anyway—"

"I never did, Ysabel. It's why we've stopped having sex for over a year. It's why I've never called her my little cherry after the night I met you. I never loved her, and that's why I didn't feel a goddamn thing even when I saw her fucking another man."

Ysabel felt as if her world was spinning too fast for her. All this time, she had thought he had loved Ynez so much he was willing to forgive her sister for anything. But apparently, she was wrong about that, and she could only start crying again as Massimo cupped her cheeks with the most heartbreaking tenderness.

"I'm sorry I didn't realize it was you that night. I'm sorry I wasted five years with the wrong woman, and ended up hurting the one that truly mattered. I'm sorry I believed all of Ynez's lies——"

She paled at his words, but he wouldn't let her pull away when she tried to break free.

"Massimo, when Ynez was in high school——"

"I know, cielingina mia. I know you took the blame for her——" His jaw clenched. "And the only reason she's still alive, after everything she's done to you is because she's your sister. But if you tell me you will not mind——"

"I totally mind," she said quickly even as she fought back the urge to cry and laugh at the same time. Was this for real? Was Massimo really here saying——

"I love you, Ysabel."

God. Oh God. Is this really happening?

"I have loved you from the first moment I saw you," Massimo said hoarsely. "And I will always love you. So please, please just give me a fucking chance before you marry another man——"



This time, Ysabel did cry, and she did laugh as well. "Oh, Mas."

"I'm fucking serious——"

"So am I."

And then she was taking the hands that were holding his face...and Massimo could only swallow hard as she kissed his knuckles on each hand.

"I missed you so much, Massimo. And I love you even more——"

"Then will you promise to marry me," he asked tautly, "and not be someone else's wife?"

"Oh, Mas."

"I don't fucking know how to interpret that," he grated out.

"It can mean a lot of things," she teased shakily, "but right now it means...I only look like a bride in your eyes because you're biased. But actually...I'm someone else's bridesmaid, and——"

Oh my gosh!

Massimo was stunned when Ysabel suddenly grabbed his hand and swiftly dragged him towards the doors leading to the hotel's largest ballroom. "We have to go, Kayra's literally going to kill me if I'm late——"

She stopped speaking when Massimo suddenly whirled her around to face him.

"Are you talking about Kayra...Petinos?" Massimo demanded.

Ysabel looked at him in surprise. "You know her, too?"

"Everyone who's family knows her," he said flatly

"Why are you looking at me like that?" she asked uncertainly.

His fiancée obviously didn't know this, but Kayra was the kind of woman who made even La Strega appear like a saint. Making a person disappear was child's play to the likes of Kayra, and when he thought about how he had been this fucking close to losing Ysabel completely if not for divine intervention——

Grazie, Dio.

Ysabel was stunned when Massimo suddenly hauled her towards him, but before she could ask him why, he was already kissing her senseless, and oh, oh, oh...

Oh, Mas.

It was the loveliest and hottest kiss ever, and all because this time, both of them knew the truth. Both of them knew they were in love with each other, and both of them knew their love had started five years ago.

## Epilogue

JOE: Good morning, Boston! Welcome to Coffee with Joe and Jane, everyone's favorite morning show on the radio.

Jane: And speaking of favorites, we've got an early bird - well, birdwatcher actually - tweeting a photo of one of our city's most beloved couples. We've already uploaded the photo to our socials, and if you check it out now, you'll see it's none other than Massimo Marchetti and his fiancée Ysabel Ossini.

Joe: Am I seeing things here? Or are they really on a canoe? At five \*bleep\* thirty in the morning?

Jane: Canoeing is said to be one of the future Mrs. Massimo Marchetti's favorite hobbies, and take this - it's actually how she's been traveling to work for some years now. Her billionaire fiancé thinks it's 'cute', and I'm quoting Mr. Marchetti verbatim, since he's gone on record several times to say this.

Joe: Their love story still confuses the hell out of me.

Jane: It's really not confusing at all, or maybe it is to guys. I mean, stories like this would never have happened if it was the other way around. Women's intuition, you know.

Joe: As a happily committed bachelor, I'm afraid I'll have to say no, I don't actually know anything about women's intuition—

Jane: You're honest about it at least, so that's a start.

Joe: Can you give me a rundown of their relationship timeline? Maybe we've got other listeners who've yet to hear the whole story.

Jane: Well, okay. Anyone who follows me knows I've never been a #MasNez shipper, and I was Team #MasBel from the start, but...for the sake of objectivity, I'll do my best to outline stuff without bias.

Joe: We appreciate that.

Jane: So basically, five years ago, Ysabel was one of those who attended the Marchettis' annual Halloween bash.

Joe: Love those!

Jane: Now, Ysabel and Massimo kinda sorta bumped into each other in the funhouse, but then Ysabel had to do a Cinderella thing and run away when she heard someone call out her sister's name.

Joe: The Diabolical Ynez Ossini.

Jane: Now who's being biased?

Joe: No, seriously. I'm just reading one of the headlines that came up when I googled her name.

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*Source Creation Date: May 22, 2025, 8:34 am*

Jane:Oops. Sorry.

Joe:For the record, I'm not lying. The article's legit, and you guys can look it up as well and fact check what I'm saying.

Jane:Well, I guess I can see why her actions would seem diabolical? I mean, picking up from where we left off, we have Ysabel who ran away when she heard Ynez's name, and then there was Mr. Marchetti, who saw Ysabel react when the name 'Ynez' was mentioned.

Joe:So that's how he ended up mistaking Ysabel for her sister?

Jane:She had a face mask on that time, and since the two sisters do look really similar, I get why he'd be mistaken. But - and this is where women's intuition comes in - I really think he should've realized eventually she was nothing like the girl he had met that night, you know?

Joe:Well, here's the thing about us men. We hate admitting mistakes.

Jane:And again, I love that you're being honest about that. Way to go, Joe.

Joe:Thank you, and way to go to Massimo Marchetti and Ysabel Ossini, who have proven that true love will always win in the end...because they did, right?

Jane:Oh, absolutely. The last confirmed sighting of Ynez in Boston was like ages ago, and I've read several blind items online that say it's because Ynez has been, you know.

Joe: No, really, I don't know.

Jane: Excommunicado by everyone in Boston. They say it's tit for tat, and she's expected to stay away for five years, which is the same length of time she's kept the truth hidden from Massimo and Ysabel.

Joe: That's brutal, man. If it were true, I mean. But...it could've been worse, right?

Jane: Oh, wait! Look, someone's tagged us in another photo, and aww...these two have really been #couplegoals foreveryone since they went public. I love how Massimo openly dotes on his fiancée.

Joe: We've been tagged in another photo, and err...I think you should use a different hashtag with this one.

Jane: Huh?

Joe: Think...NSFW, since I think Massimo's doting on her in a very special way!

Jane: Oh my goodness! Is he...oh my gosh!

Joe: You know how people sometimes talk about men hiding behind their women's skirts like it's a bad thing? Well, I guess it's completely different when they're under it? Or rather inside of it?

Jane: And...I think that's our cue to take a short break, here's a song requested by one of our listeners...

IT WAS THE MOST WICKEDLY beautiful wedding Bostn had ever seen, as well as the most haunting and terrifyingly challenging. For invited guests to enjoy the lavish reception prepared for them, they must first enter a funhouse and answer three

questions. A single correct answer would be enough to have the doors to the ballroom open, but for those who failed all three, well...

"Did anyone fail, though?" Ysabel asked curiously as her bridegroom swiftly undid the row of pearl buttons lining the back of her wedding gown.

"You'll have to ask Sarica about that," Massimo said dryly, "since she volunteered to take care of that part of the wedding."

Ysabel couldn't help laughing. "Why am I not even surprised?"

"And why, *ciliegina mia*—" He carefully peeled her gown off her shoulders and allowed it to slowly fall into a pool of silk around her feet. "—are we spending our wedding night talking about another woman?"

Her breath caught at the way he was staring at her. This, she thought dizzily. This was exactly how he had been staring at her that night five years ago, and she just wanted to cry, when she thought about how both of them had been so close to losing each other for good.

Need blazed through his veins as he looked his fill of his bride, who was now down to a delicate set of underwear and matching thigh-high stockings held up by the sexiest pair of garter belts. He saw her start to squirm under his gaze, and a smirk slowly unfurled over his lips.

"Am I making you uncomfortable—"

She started to say yes.

"—or is it more like you're starting to become uncomfortably wet?"

But as soon as she heard him say the other word, all she could do was swallow hard. Gosh, oh gosh. How was it that Massimo only seemed to get devilishly hotter every day of their lives?



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Her heart pounded against her chest as he suddenly swept her off her feet, and she already felt close to losing consciousness by the time he was laying her gently down on his massive bed.

"I love you, Ysabel."

The tenderness underscoring his words was just too much, and she could only choke out a reply. "I love you, Massimo. So, so much."

And then there was nothing else for her to say, with his lips raining her face with kisses before slowly moving down to the side of her neck.

Her arms went around his neck as her body arched up against his, and a moan slipped past her lips as he unhooked the front clasp of her bra.

"You're so gloriously beautiful, Ysabel..."

He saw the way she teared up at the words, and he knew it was because a part of her was still unused to hearing such things from him. How could she, when for five long years he had treated her with aloof contempt and disapproval?

All he could do now was worship her with his mouth, his lips closing around one nipple as his fingers carefully kneaded one pale globe. He suckled her nipple gently at first, and then more deeply and passionately, until she was gripping his head and whimpering his name.

Ysabel was out of her mind with desire by the time he slowly parted her legs open,

and all she could do was shudder and moan when he tore her panties off her body with one quick yank. The savage gesture thrilled and frightened her, but as he positioned himself between her legs and loomed over her, his dark gaze filled with love and need—

"I love you, Mas. I love you. I love you."

She just couldn't help it. After so many years of having to deny her feelings even to herself, there were times when she just wanted to savor the freedom she now enjoyed. She wanted to tell him again and again and again, and oh, the way he always looked at her with such fierce possessiveness every time she told him she loved him—

"You are my life, Ysabel," Massimo said roughly. "My love. My everything."

Not even Ysabel could have imagined Massimo being able to say such words, and all she could do was cry as she heard them...and cry some more when she finally felt the head of his manhood slowly rub against her swollen folds.

He was so, so big. Too big, really, that she ended up digging her nails into the muscular panes of his back as he slowly penetrated her virginal pussy, inch by careful inch. She couldn't stop herself from clawing his back as her pussy stretched to accommodate his massive length and girth, and aaaaaaaah...

She had known losing her virginity could hurt, but oh, this pain...it was as excruciating as it was beautiful, knowing that the only man she had ever loved would also be the only man who would possess every inch of her body.

Finally, finally, finally, she was his...

A growl ripped out of his throat as soon as he started thrusting hard and fast inside of his wife's body. This, dammit. This was how he had imagined it from the moment he

first saw her. This was how it should be and would always be, when two people loved each other, and fuuuuuuuck...

He tried, dammit.

He tried so damn hard to be gentle, but when he saw her look up at him, her eyes subconsciously begging him to fuck her as hard as he wanted—

Ysabel could only gasp and shudder as Massimo suddenly pulled out...just before flipping her around and pulling her up on all fours.

"Massimo!"

She couldn't stop herself from crying his name out as he pounded into her from behind.

Yes, yes, yes.

She could only sob the words out. It still didn't feel real, just didn't feel real at all to have Massimo love her like this and know that this was no longer forbidden. Instead, this was right. This was fated. This was her and Massimo loving each other, and oh, oh, oh Mas!

They came at the same time, with Ysabel crying his name out one last time while he groaned out hers. She clung to him as a massive tidal wave of pleasure washed over her shuddering body, and she could only sob as Massimo didn't stop thrusting hard and fast into her even as his cock filled her pussy with his cum.

IT WAS A LONG-STANDING tradition for every Marchetti bride to join the entire famiglia for breakfast the morning after her wedding, but what was not customary at all was for an outsider to join them on such an occasion.

A crafty smile flashed over La Strega's lips when she saw how everyone was struggling to hide their surprise at seeing Cattleya seated on her right.

"I have an announcement to make, and now seems a good time as any to make it."

Giancarlo's expression turned impassive at the way his own fidanzata stiffened at his grandmother's words.

"But before anything else, I would like to welcome the newest member of our famiglia once again." Potenziana smiled warmly at her newest granddaughter-in-law. "Thank you for making do with my grandson, bambina."

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"It was a very great sacrifice to make," Ysabel said with a sigh, "but one must always do one's—" The rest of her words disappeared in her husband's kiss, and when Massimo lifted his head, the soft, dreamy look on Ysabel's face made it quite clear that sacrifice was the last thing on her mind where her husband was concerned.

Potenziana cleared her throat. "As for my other announcement..." She nodded at the direction of her personal assistant, saying, "Cattleya here has asked for my permission to become Ezio's bride."

Ezio nearly jerked out of his seat. What the fuck?

"And I said yes."

Cattleya's expression remained serene even as she became the subject of everyone's stunned scrutiny.

Ezio's dark, enigmatic eyes focused on Cattleya. "Did I hear nonna correctly?" he asked quietly. "Did you truly ask her to marry me?"

"Yes."

Gazelle was in absolute awe. The girl sounded so calm! She had never imagined Cattleya could do such a thing, but it was definitely inspiring! She could only hope she would be just as...proactive, if she were to ever be so lucky to find a man to fall in love with.

Her gaze then switched back to her brother, who was now staring at Cattleya like the

other girl was the most infuriating puzzle he had to solve. It was so not like Ezio to reveal his emotions like this, and maybe...maybe it was because of this their nonna had agreed to the marriage?

Ezio could not believe that was all Cattleya had to say. Not once had she ever expressed any interest in him, and in the years they had known each other, there were even times when her words and actions seemed to suggest that she did not even like him as a person.

So why in hell had Cattleya asked for his grandmother's permission to become his bride—and more importantly, what reason did La Strega have for accepting?

What the hell was happening?

The End