



A Bride for a Billionaire

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Chapter One

MATTEO

“WHY ARE YOU here again?”

Stretching my legs out in front of me, I lean back in the large recliner that I’m slouched in as I speak. No matter how luxurious the VIP lounge at the Palermo International Airport intended these seats to be, I can’t get comfortable.

Shifting again, I lace my fingers behind my head and crack open my eyes. Emilia is posing on the edge of my chair, all long legs and glossy hair and plump lips. Leaning forward enough to give me a good view down the front of her slinky dress, she trails a scarlet tipped fingernail over my bicep, sending a sting of pain through my skin.

I like it. I also like the view down her dress, even though I know that the move was calculated. Not willing to remain passive, I place my hand on the warm, soft skin of her bare thigh and squeeze once, just enough to make my point.

Her eyes flash with heat, and my cock responds, swelling to half-mast. The teasing between us is a game, perhaps a dangerous one, but one that we’ve played since my dad married her mom over a decade ago.

“You’re going to make me think you don’t love me.” Those perfect lips of hers, painted with man-killer red, turn down in a pout that makes me picture them wrapped around my erection.

“I don’t.” I’m satisfied by the flicker of pain in her eyes, pain that she smoothes over effortlessly.

The cruel streak in me, the one I got from my father, enjoys hurting her feelings. The rest of me just doesn’t care. Truth is, I don’t have a lot of feelings for my stepsister. And the ones that I do have mostly center around her tits and the heated space between her legs. Not that I’ve ever sampled the latter, of course.

There are some lines that even I won’t cross.

“What a thing to say, when I came to see you off properly.” Her lips find the taut muscle at the base of my throat, and her teeth sink in, making me shudder. The basest part of me wants to drag her astride my lap. I want to unzip my pants and shove inside of her without any foreplay at all, and I want to find my release in a soulless fuck between the legs that have taunted me since I was fifteen, never mind that we’re in the VIP lounge at an airport, and that there are at least a dozen other people around us.

Only the thin sliver of humanity that remains inside of me, the tiny shard that my father wasn’t able to extract, keeps me from doing it. That, and the fact that if I do the dynamics between us will change irrevocably, in ways that I don’t want.

So though my body wants to let her keep nibbling on my neck—wants her mouth to move lower—I shove her away irritably, the recliner rocking forward with a jolt.

She frowns. Still, undeterred, she reaches out, runs a hand through my hair.

“The meeting just won’t be the same without you.” She flicks her tongue over those glossy red lips. “You know how I love it when you lead board meetings. All that raw power.”

“You’ll handle it just fine.” Smirking, I meet her eyes. I’m not stupid. Though she pretends that all she wants is to get her hands on me, we both know that it’s Benenati Enterprises that she really loves... the company, and the billions of dollars that it generates.

She would probably make a far better CEO than me, if I were feeling honest, which I rarely am. I have the same hunger for power that Emilia does, but there are days when the baggage my father left behind in the empire that he built feel too heavy for me to carry.

Which is why I’m waiting to board our family’s private plane, which will take me to one of our vacation homes, the one on the Amalfi Coast. I do everything I can to avoid these meetings in person, instead attending by phone whenever possible.

I hate the way the board—all people who were been handpicked by my father—stare at me, their expectations weighing me down.

I’m not Carmine Benenati, and I’m thankful for that fact every day. But I’m still his blood, a fact inescapable even six months after his death.

The man—this company—can still mold me in his image. The very thought haunts my every waking moment, and sometimes my dreams, as well.

Shuddering inwardly, I slam my empty scotch glass on the side table, hard enough to shatter. Catching the eye of the very attractive, very scantily clad waitress, I contemplate a second drink. And possibly a quickie with her in the executive washroom.

Anything to take the edge off. But from the corner of my eye I see Emilia taking note of my intentions toward the pretty redhead, of the scotch that I drained too quickly.

I can't show weakness in front of her, or it will cost me.

"What the hell is taking so long?" Scowling, I shove away thoughts of another drink, of the mind numbing emptiness of release, and push my way to my feet. Emilia's fuck-me lips turn down sullenly as I stride to the glassed in door of the lounge, wanting—needing—some distraction.

I barely have time to blink before a skinny teenager dressed in black sprints by, a large straw purse clutched tightly in his emaciated arms.

"My purse! That man took my purse!" The voice wavers, clearly belonging to an elderly woman. Still, it filters through the thick glass door that separates the VIP lounge from the rest of those striding through the airport with scowls on their faces just fine.

Sucking in a breath, I push the glass door open. It slams against the wall with such force it could break, but I don't care—if it does, I'll buy them another. Adrenaline rushes through me as I bounce on the balls of my feet, looking from the rapidly shrinking figure clutching the handbag, to the older woman with clouds of white hair, who is trying to rise from the floor.

My instinct is to sprint after the young man who just callously preyed on the weak. But a small voice inside my head whispers, holding me back.

It's not your problem, Matteo. These people are beneath you. Let them solve their own problems.

That voice is Carmine's, not mine. But does it really matter?

"You're not seriously thinking of playing the superhero, are you?" Behind me I hear Emilia laugh, the sound rich with amusement and condescension. "Who are you and

what have you done with my stepbrother?”

That decides it.

“You could go help that old woman up,” I snap over my shoulder as I break into a run. She won’t, I know she won’t, but someone will.

I barely make it three steps before I’m overtaken by a woman. A girl, really, younger than me, with long chestnut hair streaming out behind her.

“I’ve got it!” She shouts as she pushes past me, picking up speed. Dio, but she’s fast, the movements of her legs highlighted by the spandex legging style pants that girls like to wear.

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I race after her, my course of action decided.

This girl is maybe five foot four to my six three. She's so small... what is she going to do when she catches up to a man mean enough to steal from an old woman?

No matter how rotten I am on the inside, I can't let that slide. So I sprint after her, after the thief.

I'm fast, but she's faster. She's gaining on the mugger, who casts a panicked look over his shoulder. Even from this distance I can see that his eyes are wide, crazed.

He's high on something... he would have to be, to try a stunt like this in an international airport.

And this pazzo woman, this crazy girl, is two strides away from being in a lot of trouble.

"Stop!" I shout, but it's too late. She jumps, lands on the unkempt man, wraps her arms around the purse as they struggle to stay upright. Horror joins the adrenaline pulsing through me as I see a flash of silver, the whites of the man's eyes.

The girl screams, a sound full of anger more than pain, as she twists, the knife sinking into her upper arm rather than her chest. The scene plays out in slow motion before my eyes as she falls to the floor, a viscous stream of crimson staining the front of her white T-shirt.

My instinct is to drop to my knees beside her, to put pressure on her wound. But her

eyes—beautiful blue eyes, brilliant as the Mediterranean—meet my own.

“I’m fine!” She wheezes at me, despite the very obvious fact that she is not. Her arms wrap ever tighter around the purse, and with one foot she kicks the knife out of range. “Go!”

I don’t usually take orders, especially from women, but I understand the fire in her stare. The mugger has already scrambled to his feet, is poised to run.

The girl managed to get the purse, but justice must be served. I appreciate this desire of hers. So without breaking my stride, I leap, wrapping my arms around the man. My muscles are burning from the sprint, but I hold tight as we crash to the floor.

“Off! Off!” The thief’s voice is high-pitched, hysterical. He thrashes beneath me, and I grunt as his knee connects with my gut. “I need that money! I need the fucking money!”

“There’s probably nothing more than pocket change and stale mints in that purse, you idiot.” My muscles strain as I grab hold of his wrists, secure them behind his back—I’m by far the bigger of us two, but he has mania on his side.

He doesn’t respond, his gaze fixed on something over my shoulder as he struggles. His skin is pale and clammy, eyes bloodshot and glassy. His muscles are tight with tension and pressed against him like I am, I can feel the hammering of his pulse, unnaturally fast.

I lift my head, try to crane my neck back to get a glimpse of the girl, but she’s out of my line of sight. Instead I see a man and a woman, both dressed in the blue uniforms of aeroporti security, running toward us.

“We need you to let go of him now,” the male says, but I don’t let go until they have

a good grip on the thief, who now has saliva dribbling down his chin. It disgusts me, as so many things do, and I swivel, trying to get a good look at the girl.

The female security guard catches a full glimpse of my face, and her mouth falls open. I sigh as she emits a small squeak, leaving her partner to do their job by himself.

“Signore Benenati,” she whispers, a bright flush staining her cheeks. I shake my head in warning as I scramble to my feet.

“Not now.” My voice is harsh, and I begin to push my way through the crowd of people who have gathered. “Call an ambulanza. Now!”

She says something behind me; I don’t care. Other whispers from the crowd tell me that I’ve been recognized, not an unusual occurrence here in Palermo. And while normally I enjoy the benefits that come with being one of the country’s most eligible bachelors, right now I’m focused on the girl.

And there she is, propped up on her elbows, a hand held to her own wound, her fingers painted in blood. Several well-meaning citizens flutter around her, but no one has truly touched her—afraid of getting their hands dirty.

Just like you were. If you hadn’t hesitated, she wouldn’t have been stabbed.

It should have been you.

“Signorina.” I am never at a loss for words, nor do I ever feel guilty. But it seems that today is a day for firsts as I fall to my knees at the side of this strange, brave girl.

I shrug out of my light cotton sweater and press it to the wound. It soaks through, wetting my hands as well.

Her blood is sticky and warm. Full of life.

“The ambulance will be here shortly.” I’m pressing down gently on the gap in her flesh, the place where the knife sliced through her, but she winces anyway.

“No! No ambulance!” She struggles to sit up, but since she is clearly going into shock—her skin is paper white and her eyes glassy—she winds up falling back with her head in my lap.

Is she insane?

Wait—I already know the answer to that.

“You need medical attention.” Frowning, I brush an errant lock of her hair away from her forehead, scowling at both the impulsive gesture and the smudges of blood that I leave behind on her white skin.

She shakes her head—maybe she doesn’t understand.

“Ssh,” I try to soothe, but I have never soothed anyone in my life. “They’ll stitch you up, give you some pain medication. You’ll feel better.”

“No!” With surprising strength, born of adrenaline, I would guess, she wrenches herself from my grasp, rolls to her side, starts trying to get to her feet. “No ambulance. I can’t afford it.”

Aah.

“I will pay.” Maybe this will assuage some of the guilt that was building inside of me, the sensation strange and unpleasant.

I hesitated. If I hadn't, I would have been the one to tackle the thief. To be stabbed. And this strange girl would have gone on her way.

“Like hell you will.” Managing to pull herself to a sitting position, she glares at me. I can feel my mouth fall open a bit, with shock.

I can't recall meeting a woman—ever—who refused my money. It is just a fact that has come along with the privilege of my family name.

“You're not paying. So, no ambulance.” With that damned purse still in hand—where is the owner, anyway?—the girl rises to her knees and wobbles.

I ignore her, catching the eye of the female security guard that I shouted at. She nods to signal that she has in fact called the ambulance, then blushes again.

I will pay the costs. It is the least that I can do, since this situation is my fault. Besides, I have money—a lot of money. The ambulance ride, the medical expenses—they will cost less than the sweater that the girl has discarded. It lies in a bloody, deep blue heap on the floor.

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“Where’s the woman this was stolen from?” I rise to my feet along with the stubborn signorina, arms around her, ready to catch her if she should fall.

Instead of thanking me, she pushes at my touch irritably—and weakly.

“Really, Matteo?” The sharp clack of a shoe tapping on marble tile has my teeth grinding together. I spare a glance in the direction of Emilia, who is standing to the side of the crowd, nose wrinkled with distaste. “You can’t get on the plane until you’ve cleaned up. I’m taking it to Milan next week, and I don’t want to wait for blood to be cleaned from the upholstery.”

I’m not surprised by Emilia’s response—for the ten years I’ve known her, she’s been inclined to lash out first, ask questions later. But while normally I would simply roll my eyes and ignore her, this time I find anger heating my veins.

The girl in my arms was stabbed trying to help someone. Does Emilia have no feelings at all?

“Not now, Emilia.” I tighten my hold as the girl tries to pull away from me.

“I can’t miss my flight!” Her voice is full of panic. “I’ve been waiting for this seat sale forever. It’s non-refundable. All of my things are already on the plane!”

Emilia laughs, probably at the idea that all of one’s possessions could possibly fit on a plane at all, let alone in the bag or two that I suspect are all that this girl has.

Ignoring my stepsister, I try to gather the girl in my arms. Though she still fights it,

when her hot, smooth skin presses against mine, something electric jolts through me, taking me by surprise.

Emilia isn't one to be ignored. "Guess you'll be at the board meeting after all." Grinding my teeth together, I give in, turning to glare at her. She smirks, making even that look sexy, and in that moment I hate her.

And damn it, she's right. I groan, as I realize that now I'm stuck.

All for a stubborn scrap of a girl who's eyeing the paramedics like they're the spawn of Satan.

"I'm telling you, I can't afford it." Pushing out of my arms, she staggers a few feet, then lurches to a stop. "I'm perfectly fine."

Turning back to me, she holds out one of her hands, which is tacky with congealing red.

"Hey, look." Her face is full of amazement, as if she has no idea why she is bleeding, and she sways back and forth. "Blood."

I have no choice but to catch her as she falls.

Chapter Two

RILEY

A SEA OF SILVER swims in front of my eyes when I finally pry the lids open. I blink, willing my vision to clear. But my eyelids feel gritty, raw, like sandpaper scraping over my corneas.

Pushing myself up onto my elbows, I rub my fingers over my eyes until the grainy sensation stops.

But the silver is still there. It's everywhere, in fact... in the embossed wallpaper that stretches up fifteen feet, in the plush looking carpet that invites me to sink my toes in. It's in the gauzy curtains that hang at the window that spans an entire wall, and in the satin covered headboard that's propping me up from behind, the one with antique looking studs.

It's even in the chandelier hanging over my head—holy hell, yes, that is a full on crystal chandelier, a giant death trap, right above me.

For some reason I fixate on that first—on how this giant piece of uselessness could kill me if it falls—before my brain allows me to contemplate the fact that I have no idea where I am, and that I feel like I've been drugged.

Shifting on the bed, I take note of the satin sheets—silver, of course, mustn't mess up the color scheme—and frown. My sheets, before I gave up my apartment at least, were threadbare in several places, and a heinous bright plaid. They clashed spectacularly with all the other colors that I crowded in. But I'd always craved that kind of visual chaos.

The kind that was the exact opposite of my current surroundings.

Toto, something tells me we're not in Kansas anymore.

Sucking in a deep breath, I close my eyes, press my fingers to my temples, try to remember. The airport—the scream of an elderly woman—bright pain—blood.

And strong arms catching me as I fell.

“Shit.” Pulling back the sheet, smoothing my snarled hair back from my shoulder, I find it—the place where the knife sliced through my flesh, concealed by a wide square of gauze secured with surgical tape.

I grimace as I peel back the sticky edges. The gauze is stuck to my skin, crusted with dried blood, and when I pull it away I can’t stop from crying out as it tugs on the wound.

The cut itself is puffy, a long line the exact shade of my favorite Cadmium Red oil paint, telling me that the blade went deeper than I’d initially thought. But it’s sewn up neatly with blue thread, the stitches marching tidily along the angry slice in my skin, and I can see the shiny gloss of ointment.

The wooziness I feel likely comes from medication of some kind... an antibiotic, which always makes me nauseous, and maybe a painkiller.

Panic is a thousand tiny needles jabbing into the softness of my belly. I can’t afford medication, or the doctor’s bill—I just graduated from art school. I’m broke, having spent my last available cash on my flight home.

When the rest of the scene in the airport flashes through my mind, my heart clenches, then sinks. I scrimped and saved and aggressively hunted down that bargain airfare, my ticket back home. I gambled, knowing it was non-refundable—but I hadn’t been able to think of a single thing that would keep me away from that flight.

And now it’s gone. I have no apartment anymore, no money, no job. No way home. And no one at home to help me out.

I am well and truly fucked.

And, I realize as I squirm in the bed, I am naked. In what I assume is the bed of Mr.

“I’ll Pay Your Bills”.

“Oh, shit.” What the hell happened after I blacked out?

A low chuckle disrupts the still air, and I whip my head in the direction of the sound.

It’s him. The guy who got my blood all over his sweater, one of those garments that you just know cost more than my entire year’s tuition.

I’ll never be able to replace it for him, no matter how much I hate owing anyone anything. Just like I’ll never be able to pay him back for the medical attention that I’ve clearly received.

Not with money, anyway. The thought makes me stiffen, a rod of steel snapping into place in my spine.

I open my mouth to say something... probably to give him hell, because he’s done exactly the opposite of what I told him to do. Instead my brain chooses to narrow in on the one thing that’s making me super uncomfortable.

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“Where are my clothes?” I blurt out, clutching the sheet tightly to my chest. I’m not a prude or anything... but this is the closest I’ve ever come to being naked with a member of the opposite sex. It’s like by taking my clothes, he’s taken away my carefully constructed defenses.

He laughs again, low in his throat. The sound sends a shiver skating over my skin, and the sensation isn’t entirely unpleasant.

Oh, who am I kidding? I haven’t even heard him speak yet, but his voice, with its mocking edge, still makes my girly parts sit up and pay attention. Combine that with the way his stare rakes over my body, which is one hundred percent naked under this thin silk sheet—the way he looks at me isn’t lecherous, but more like he has the absolute right to look, like he knows I’ll let him.

The feminist in me wants to be affronted. But the rest of me is undeniably affected by the heat in his eyes.

If I were a different kind of girl, I would be able to answer that heat with some kind of flirtation, some sexual undertones. But I’m not... I’m the kind of girl who buys her clothes from flea markets, who considers it a treat to be able to afford some salumi to the cheap bread that is available everywhere in Italy.

The kind of girl who knows only too well what this kind of man might demand as payment for the favors—the unwanted favors—that he has bestowed upon me.

“What’s going on?” I despise the shakiness in my voice. I’m stronger than that. But I’ve also been through a lot in the last... however many hours it’s been.

The thought of being unconscious, of being in the care of stranger's hands, makes me very, very nervous. I've fended off enough of my mom's sleazeball "boyfriends" to know exactly what kind of trouble can be found if a girl doesn't have her wits about her at all times.

It was stupid, chasing down that guy in the airport. But what the hell else was I supposed to do? Somebody had to do something.

The look that this guy gives me as he leans casually against the doorframe tells me that his thoughts haven't strayed all that far from my own. Yeah, I just bet that the women he knows wouldn't be crazy enough to chase after a knife wielding druggie in an airport. It would wreck their Louboutins.

"What do you remember?" His lips curl upward in a smirk, the expression both arrogant and freaking hot—hot enough to that I'm momentarily distracted from his accent.

Here in Italy, I'm the one with the accent, and I've grown accustomed to the seductive flow of the romantic language. But hearing English, my native tongue, coming from that sexy mouth reminds of why so many women are such suckers for accents.

It's not helping the heat that's gathering in my nether regions, and when I shift in an attempt to get myself under control, that smirk only grows wider.

He knows—he knows just what effect he's having on me. I bet there's not a woman alive who is immune to that smile, that voice.

In defense, I clutch the sheet tighter to my chest. The silk is cool against my breasts, and when I feel the tips pucker, I want to groan.

He clears his throat, pulling me out of my inner monologue. I can feel my skin flush with embarrassment.

I am so out of my league here.

“You were telling me what you remember?” Pushing away from the doorframe, he crosses the room. Moving a heavy leather chair up to the side of the bed, he takes a seat, rests his elbows on his knees. My nostrils flare as his scent drifts to my nose—some kind of expensive cologne, and beneath it, a male musk that sends my hormones into overdrive.

Not that they need the encouragement.

“Ahem?” The sound is meant as a gentle prod—no, I correct myself. Gentle isn’t a word I would apply to him.

He’s tall.

He’s hard.

He’s dark.

There’s nothing gentle about him. And yet, even as my instincts scream intruder as he leans forward beside the bed, invading my space, I’m pretty sure that he won’t hurt me.

It takes a certain kind of person to throw themselves into a situation like we were in at the airport. And even though he hesitated, he nonetheless did it.

And he took care of me after. So much so that I’m pretty sure we’re in his house.

And that's a good reminder to start talking.

"I remember everything that happened at the airport." I start slowly. My throat feels like I've swallowed a handful of gravel, and I wince.

He reaches into what I assumed was a bedside table but turns out to be a cleverly disguised mini-fridge. Removing a bottle of water, he unscrews the cap, then hands it to me.

"Thanks." I drink greedily, the frigid water soothing the ache in my throat. Some of the clear liquid rolls down my chin, falls onto the sheet clutched over my naked breasts, and I can feel myself turning redder still.

Classy, Tremaine.

But he doesn't seem disturbed. No, instead he looks... intrigued.

Just wait for it, buddy. Or rather, don't. You're the most interesting thing that's happened in my entire life.

"He was on drugs. The man who stole the purse." I remember seeing the tremor in his hand as he whirled on me with the knife. Rubbing a hand over my wound, I grimace, even as pity washes over me.

I'm all too familiar with how drugs can make a person change—make them become someone else entirely.

This man, the one in front of me, scowls. "What, precisely, were you planning to do once you caught him?"

I blink, startled. This isn't what I expected him to ask.

“I did what I planned to do,” I retorted, setting the now empty plastic bottle on the bedside table. He’d poked right at a soft spot—my tendency to act before thinking things through. “I got the purse back.”

He huffs out an exasperated breath. “You were stabbed while doing it. It could have been worse. What are you—five foot two? One hundred twenty pounds?”

One fifty, my inner voice corrects. Thanks to the local gelato. But no need to tell him that.

Besides...

“What does my size have to do with anything?” Once again, his eyes take a leisurely stroll down the length of my body.

I’m the kind of girl who always has something to say—in less polite terms, I have a big mouth. And yet when that stare of his reaches my face, I find that my command of the English language has disappeared entirely.

“You are a small woman.” Damn it, that voice. Like whiskey on ice, hot and cold at the same time. “You could have been hurt much worse. You should leave things like that to men.”

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I'm floating a bit from his comment about me being small, which I'm not, not really. But the latter half of his sentence brings me crashing back down to the ground.

"Leave things like that to men?" Oh, there she is—my inner feminist coming out to play. She's outraged. "I'm perfectly capable of doing anything that a man can do."

He smirks again, and I see red.

"I'm not trying to keep down your right to vote, or attempting to put you barefoot in the kitchen, or whatever else it is you women folk get tied in knots about. Though the kitchen would likely be safer."

"What did you say?" I gape; I can't help it.

"My point is that some differences between men and women, they are biology." His stare catches my own, and though his expression is mild, his words, the most subtle shift of his body in that chair, serve to demonstrate exactly what he means.

He is a large, well-muscled man.

I am a small, soft woman.

No matter how much of a fight I put up, he could overpower me in about three seconds.

Some cavewoman part of me purrs at the notion, and I gasp, appalled at myself.

He takes my gasp as outrage, and the expression on his face shifts... becomes darker.

“Shall I take that to mean you need a demonstration of just how different we are?” He slides forward, lays his palms flat on the bed. Though I do my best to suppress it, the image of him overpowering me, pressing my naked body down into the slinky sheets of this bed floods my mind.

What is wrong with me?

As he moves, the dim light of the room dances over the fine bones of his face. His left eye is cast in shadow, a shadow that doesn't move when he does. Not a large bruise, but noticeable enough.

“Where did someone like you get a black eye?” I blurt out, mostly to break the tension. Raising an eyebrow, he eases back, and the spell is broken.

I'm left with a pulse that thunders through my veins. I inhale, then exhale slowly, trying to calm it.

The question seems to set him back, if only for a second, and then he has that smooth mask back in place. He even smiles wryly.

“You don't recognize your own handiwork?” He sounds amused. I, however, am appalled.

“Shut up.” It's American slang, using those words to say that you don't believe something, but his affronted expression tells me that he doesn't understand. Realizing I have shoved my foot in my mouth, I hurry on. “I've never punched anyone in my life.”

Not that I wouldn't, if I had to. I try to do what's right, what the moral compass

inside each of us—the one that my mother has always so blithely ignored—says is wrong, and what is right. But I cannot think of a single reason that I would swing at this stranger. Even if he clearly got me medical attention that I do not want.

“Well, I assure you, I am not mistaken.” He rubs his hand over the stubble on his jaw, eyeing me thoughtfully. That stubble, the dark shadow, lends him a human edge that he was missing when I first saw him in the airport—a well groomed, dark companion to Italian Barbie.

“You passed out from blood loss. The ambulance came. You woke up just as we arrived at the hospital. You were quite insistent that we not go inside, so you took a swing at me.” He shrugs, and if I’m not mistaken, he’s a bit embarrassed that I—a woman—managed to land a hit. “I did not wish to upset you further, so I asked them to instead bring you here. To my home. I had my family doctor come to treat you.”

The family doctor of some man I don’t know, examining me while I’m unconscious. Great. “Why were you in the ambulance?”

I know, from the times I’ve had to ship my mom off to the hospital to get her stomach pumped, that only family members are allowed to accompany a patient in an ambulance—and then only one.

A quick look around serves as a reminder that this man likely has enough money to bend all kinds of rules.

And the air of arrogance that he wears as comfortably as he wore that dark blue sweater earlier makes me think that he wouldn’t have any problem bending them. Which is why I’m surprised to see that confidence falter, just for a split second, but impossible to miss.

“It is my fault that you needed the ambulance.” His words are stiff, colored with the

faintest hint of... guilt?

Say what?

“How do you figure that?” I sit up straighter, which causes the sheet that I’m holding to me to slide down slightly. I don’t care, but I do notice that his eyes dip briefly to the hint of cleavage that I now have on display before rising back up. “It’s not your fault. It’s the fault of the man with the knife.”

The man shakes his head, completely dismissing my words, and anger rises inside of me. “No. It is my fault. I hesitated. If I hadn’t, I would have reached him first. The blade that hurt you should have been meant for me.”

As he speaks, he reaches across my lap. Sliding the heavy locks of my hair back so that it hangs behind my shoulder, he traces a finger over the line of my cut.

I stiffen, then shudder—his finger is cool against my feverishly hot skin.

I shake my head in disagreement, knowing as I do that somehow there will be no changing his mind.

“I can’t afford any of this.” Shame, that ghost that has haunted me my entire life, becomes a visible apparition. “I am—well, was—a student. The ambulance. The doctor. The medicine.”

“Well, I can.” Pulling away from me abruptly, he stands. “It is my responsibility. My fault. So you will stay until you heal.”

Hell no. I know that I don’t actually have any other options right now, but instinct is its own entity, honed over long years of watching my mother make promises that she could never fill, anything to get her next fix.

I slide over to the edge of the bed. I have to get up. I can't owe him any more than I already do.

The abrupt movement causes my stitches to pull tight, tugging on the healthy skin surrounding the wound, and I cry out in pain.

“Lie down.” The word is a full-on command, infused with the authority of a man who knows that he will be obeyed.

Again, instinct tells me to rail against it. But someone else—something either much smarter or much more idiotic—has me doing as he says.

He scowls down at me, an expression that suits him better than the smile, though I like the smile far better.

“I am not holding you hostage.” He points to a cordless phone that rests on the bedside table. “You are free to call whomever you wish, so that they do not worry. But you will stay until you are healed. I assure you, the money—it is nothing.”

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Looking at the room around me, that is easy to believe. And easier to focus on than the fact that I have no one to call.

No one who cares.

Every fibre of my body wants to protest this arrangement. No matter how well-meaning this guy seems, he's a stranger. And I do not want to be in his debt.

I don't see that I have a choice.

Huffing out a sigh of exasperated surrender, I flop back against the pillows. "Do you always get your way?" I'm irritated, or at least I would be if I could gather enough energy.

The longer I'm awake, the more that the pleasant fog from the painkillers dissipates. Right at this moment, I kinda feel like I've been hit by a semi.

"Yes." His answer is simple, and I absolutely believe him.

"Who are you, anyway?" Squinting, I study his face. He's hot enough to be a movie star or a musician, absolutely. But I don't recognize him—and some strange little tug inside of me tells me that I would, if I had seen him before.

He hesitates, like he doesn't want to tell me—like he wants to keep what's between us the way that it is now. Unbalanced.

"My name is Matteo Benenati." Pausing, he cocks his head to one side, and I know

that I'm not imagining that he is watching me for my response.

His last name sounds vaguely familiar, true enough. But I could be making that up. To my American ears, everyone in Italy has names with a similar tone. Benenati. Agnelli. Fiori. Leoni.

So probably it's not familiar at all.

"I'm Riley." I offer my hand, a very American custom, I know, and realize the absurdity of the gesture when he arches an eyebrow at my proffered hand, which I snatch back.

I'm naked in a bed in his house, with a stab wound on my shoulder. We're a little bit past the introductions phase of our relationship.

"Riley Tremaine. Twenty-one years old, from Coal Creek, Colorado. Here on an exchange program for your final year of college, where you have just finished studies in fine arts. Speciality is oil painting. Currently of no fixed address." Sliding his hands into the pockets of his slacks, he rocks back on his heels, studies my face as I gape at him. I shouldn't be shocked that he knows any of this about me—I have a Facebook account, though I rarely use it.

But I'm a bit startled that he bothered to look. That I, a stranger to him—and a troublesome one at that—was important enough to dig for information on.

He doesn't smile as he regards my obvious confusion. Instead, I get the sense that he's just pulled some kind of power play.

He is in charge here. Not like I needed the reminder. And it makes me mad, even though I suppose I should be thanking him profusely for his help.

I don't like needing help. Don't care for being weak.

To his credit, he doesn't rub in the fact that, at that moment, I have no choice but to stay here, as he has ordered me to do. I'm out of options. Out of money. Across the word from my home, simply because I wanted a taste of life in a town of three hundred that saw my mother every time they looked at me.

"Rest." He turns, strides to the door. "I will be back later."

The rational part of my brain tries to stop the next question from leaving my mouth, but then, if that part of my grey matter was strong, I wouldn't have gotten stabbed, wouldn't be here in the first place.

"Matteo." My voice still sounds rusty, and to my surprise, tired. I suddenly want nothing more than to fall back on the softest bed I've ever been in in my life and crash. "Who undressed me?"

Looking over his shoulder, he smirks and winks, a small gesture that nevertheless sends a flock of hormonal butterflies crashing around in my stomach.

"Sweet dreams, Miss Tremaine." And then he is gone, though the scents of his cologne, of the musk of his skin, linger.

Holy hell.

Sweet dreams, indeed.

Chapter Three

MATTEO

THE IMAGE OF RILEY TREMAINE, nearly naked and flushed from my words, lingers in my mind as my driver, Franco, pulls to a stop in front of the towering building that houses Benenati Enterprises. I instruct him to wait for a moment before he gets out of the vehicle, before he comes to open my door.

I need a second to compose myself, and that irritates me greatly. I know that the second that I step outside of this car, I need to portray myself as Matteo Benenati, son of the legendary Carmine. A man who might be young, but who is nevertheless as controlled and ruthless as my own father always was.

Often, I play the role so well that even I am fooled. Even today, knowing that I will be facing the entire board that my father hand-picked, people who will look at me and see him, I might have been able to pull it off, but for the guilt that is dogging my steps.

“Dio.” Watching that knife slide into Miss Riley Tremaine’s flesh made my well-repressed demons jump out of the dark in which I force them to hide. It was like watching my father with my mother—the lack of power swamping me all over again.

And it had only happened because I had hesitated—because I had, even just for a moment, acted as he would have. Even dead, he is still influencing my actions, molding me in his image.

For a long, agonizing moment in which I bury my head in my hands, I wonder if I will ever truly be free.

In my pocket my phone vibrates. I don’t have to look to see who it is—it will be a text from Emilia, wondering where the hell I am. Since I no longer have the excuse of being out of town, I am expected to attend this meeting, and not even helping a damsel in distress—a sexy, albeit puzzling one—will be an excuse in Emilia’s books.

While I am the acting CEO of the company, I know that my stepsister will use any excuse that she can to undermine me. And, heaven help me, I admire the ambition.

Sucking in a deep breath, I push out of the sleek black vehicle without waiting for Franco to open my door for me. As I stride toward the tower of glass and chrome, I try to think of something besides this meeting, which, despite my best efforts, fills me with dread.

This, of course, brings my thoughts circling straight back around to the puzzling woman lying naked in one of my guest rooms.

And thinking about that soft ivory skin beneath the clinging silk of the bed sheets has my pants starting to feel a bit tight. I didn't undress the girl—I had one of the maids do it. Mostly because I was a little too interested in what lay beneath those dreadful cheap clothes that she wore.

I had plenty of time to study her while she lay unconscious in the ambulance. She is an attractive young woman, of that there is no doubt. But her beauty is of the wide-eyed, innocent type—a far cry from the sleek, predatory women I usually date.

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I call it dating, because I am happy to provide dinner, tickets to fancy functions, and pricey gifts... even though the only part of a woman's companionship that I truly desire is the sex. Which is why I choose the women I do.

They are happy to take what I can give them, and do not sulk when we part ways.

The American girl—she is different. She is sweet. Untainted by my darkness.

It makes me want to possess her.

It would ruin her.

Inside the vast building now, I stride through the lobby, past reception, past security. From the corner of my eye I see them scramble to stand at attention, to show me the very best sides of themselves.

I do not care. They are not individuals to me, and never will be, and that is because when they look at me, they do not see Matteo the person. They simply see Carmine's heir, the man they think I am.

Most days I could care less. I have vast wealth, great power. Anything a man of twenty-five could ever dream of.

But today—today as I enter the packed boardroom on the highest floor, I feel like a poor imitation of the man whose loins gave me life. Like I will never live up to his greatness. A sad thing, when I am one of the few people who knows that behind closed doors he was not great at all.

“Matteo.” The company lawyer, Fabio Rossi, nods at me over his laptop as I suck in a deep breath and push through the thick glass doors of the massive conference room. I could frost over the transparent walls of the room with the press of a button for privacy, but I never do. I have found that people work harder when they are nervous, and watching large meetings like this take place make them so, even though they have no reason to be.

“Rossi.” Nodding back at the lawyer, I stride to the head of the table, take a seat in the plush chair that was once my father’s. It irritates me that he addresses me by my first name in front of the board, but then again, he has known me since I was a small child. I could make it an issue, insist he address me with more respect.

I know that it will not break his habit, and so I do not push. But it is one of many ways in which the people who surround me show me that they do not think me my father’s equal.

Emilia is seated to my left. She has come straight here from the airport, I know, but must have changed in her office. She is wearing a snakeskin suit, her hair pulled back in the severe style that she favors at work. She wears no blouse beneath her blazer, a trap of sorts, I know.

Those men she meets who dismiss her as just another pretty face, who allow themselves to be distracted by the view that she offers down the front of that suit jacket—in her opinion, they deserve to be crushed by her razor sharp intelligence and her ruthless method of doing business.

I don’t disagree. In fact, I approve. Really, she is the perfect match for me, and I have lusted after her ever since my father married her mother.

Apart from a few steamy kisses, some petting before we were old enough to gain control of our hormones, I haven’t touched her. Not that I am not tempted to, every

day. Her body is a work of art, and mutual lust underlies our entire relationship.

But after ten years I know that she is fully capable of consuming my soul, of dragging me fully into the dark that I have battled my entire life. It isn't worth the risk.

Still, she is a valuable employee. And my stepsister, though neither of us have any parents left. So I nod to her as I settle back in my chair, then direct my attention to the lawyer.

"What is so important that it could not wait for next month's meeting, Rossi? I'm all ears." I smile, coldly. Not only does this man refuse to address me with respect, but he has forced my hand here, called for another of the meetings that I hate, though it is only two weeks until the next.

I'm not happy, and I want him to know it.

Rossi sputters a bit, pushing his glasses up on his nose. I see him the bruise on my cheekbone left by Riley's fist, and just dare him to say something.

He does not, instead drawing in a deep breath, much as I did before entering the board room, and suddenly I'm certain that I'm not going to like whatever it is he needs to say.

"Your twenty-five birthday was yesterday," he starts, and from his briefcase pulls a folder. When he opens it I see that the top sheet of paper looks like a legal document of some sort, something fancy and embossed.

I nod, feeling a gentle trickle of relief. The last details of Carmine's will are still being addressed. I have always known that I would inherit the lion's share of the company when my father died, but if that happened before I turned twenty-five—which it did—I would serve as the CEO with a board of directors until I came

of age.

The relief now, as I turn it over in my head, is huge. Coming of age—being the legal head of the company...

No more board to answer to. I can make any change that want.

I can stop feeling as though I am playing dress up in my father's shoes. Emilia stands to inherit shares as well—she and my father were always frustratingly close—but the majority comes to me.

“What papers do I need to sign?” I hold out a hand for the folder. Rossi meets my stare and holds on to it.

The relief begins to chill into dread as he shifts, clearly uncomfortable.

“I would like you to understand that I advised your father against adding this clause. It is highly unusual and not, to my mind at least, something on which he should hang the future of his empire.”

Pinpricks of cold rise on my skin, and I slowly lower my hand.

“Out with it.” I order, doing my best to ignore the rest of the board. I wish that I could order them from the room, but if they are here during the unveiling of a clause from Carmine's will, then I am certain that it is because he insisted it be so.

Still controlling me, even from beyond the grave.

“The company is yours, Matteo, in its entirety.” I feel shock like a punch to my stomach, even though Rossi is still eyeing me with apprehension. “Provided you fulfill one requirement.”

It's all mine? What?

And what requirement?

“What is it?” My stomach sinks. I know I'm not going to like this.

“You must marry within thirty days of your twenty-fifth birthday.”

The world drops out from beneath me. Stunned, I turn to look at Emilia. She looks as outraged as I feel, though for different reasons, I'm sure.

For a split second I feel a surge of triumph—despite how close she and Carmine always were, I have won—but then the enormity of the terms hits me.

“And if I won't marry?” I won't. I can't. My mother was destroyed from the inside out by marriage to my father. I won't do that to any woman.

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And my reasons aren't selfless. I like the decadence of my life—I like the money, and even more, the women. I have no intention of changing it. Bringing a wife into it, a wife who will surely suffer as my mother did—I do not want to feel the guilt.

My eyes meet Rossi's. His lips are pinched in a thin line.

“If you do not comply with the terms that your father has set forth,” he starts carefully, holding his breath—the calm before the storm.

“Then Emilia inherits the company in full. You will get nothing.”

“The mother fucking bastard!” I am on my feet, the chair crashing to the floor behind me, before I know that I have moved. I can feel my face draining of color as I turn, lock stares with Emilia.

Though she demonstrates the same shock that I do, it is also easy to see the glint in her eyes. I know that I have just gained a formidable enemy—after all, she stands to gain so much more than she ever hoped for.

“Rossi. Is this kind of term even legal?” Ignoring the buzzing of the other stunned board members around the rest of the room, I cross to the lawyer, plant myself in front of him so that he has no choice but to look directly at me.

I need him to change this. I will not do it. Carmine is barely cold in his grave, which means that I have only just tasted freedom. Hard, perhaps, but when you spend your childhood watching your father beat your mother within an inch of her life, only to heal and then repeat the cycle, you might rejoice to be free of the tyrant, as well.

But it seems that he will not relinquish his hold on my life, not even from hell.

“Your father was free to attach whatever terms he wanted in regards to the collection of his estate, Matteo.” Rossi’s mousy face is resigned, but also set in steel, and this sends ice water running through my veins. “And—ah—there is one addition to the term.”

I close my eyes as a massive headache begins to build behind my eyes. The years that I put into this company, ever since I was a teen—the shit and abuse that I took from Carmine while doing it—it was all done with eyes on the prize, knowing that it would all be worth it in the end.

Now I don’t even know what to think. Do I take a wife in name only? Can the wedding be annulled once I have control of the company? How can I maneuver this to my advantage?

My mind whirling, I barely hear Rossi as he starts to talk again, my brain occupied with finding a loophole, some way to both follow my father’s order and get the company that I feel I deserve.

Then I make out what he is saying, and the world that hasn’t already crumpled beneath my feet falls away.

“As I have said, you must take a wife in the next thirty days. You must remain married to her for a minimum of one month. And you must remain faithful to her for that time frame, or you forfeit everything to your sister.”

Wordlessly, I let my stare swing to where Emilia stands, her hands not planted on the glossy wood of the conference room table. The hunger that I see in her eyes chills me to the bone, as does the small smile that curves her lips.

But it is only a moment before I feel my own competitive nature rise—one predator ready to battle another for supremacy.

I know Emilia, and I know that she is about to throw every dirty trick in the book at me to trip me up.

But I am a Benenati. I have survived my father's hand for too many years to give up now.

I will win. And my legacy will be mine.

Chapter Four

RILEY

I WAKE WITH A START from a fitful sleep, my heart pounding. Even before I open my eyes, I know that I'm not alone.

The scent teasing my nostrils tells me that it's Matteo. When I turn to see, I find him slouched in the chair that he pulled up beside the bed that afternoon. The pale blueberry hues slanting in through the window tell me that twilight has fallen, and yet he is dressed in a suit—well, part of it, anyway. He has removed the jacket, which is slung over the back of his chair, and his tie, which is nowhere to be seen.

The sleeves of his once crisp white dress shirt are rolled up to his elbows, offering me a view of well muscled forearms tanned the color of gold. The top two buttons at his neck are undone as well, revealing the hollow of his throat. When I squint, I think I can make out the flutter of his pulse under that skin, an unexpectedly soft spot in the middle of all of this masculinity, and all I can think about is pressing a kiss there.

Rein in those hormones, Tremaine. A man like this is only going to be interested in a

girl like me for one thing. And while, over the course of the afternoon, I've grudgingly decided that I'm grateful that he insisted on getting me stitched up, I have no intention of paying for the favor that way.

It rides a little too close to home. And whether I might enjoy it or not won't change that.

"Did you sleep well?" He leans back in his chair, and I hear the clink of ice against glass. He lifts a small snifter of golden liquid to his lips, regarding me over the edge of his drink.

I note that the bruise around his eye looks worse than it did earlier, the purple tones having darkened over the course of the day. There are matching semi circles beneath his eyes, and he smells ever so faintly of cigar smoke.

Despite his generally dishevelled appearance, as he sits there, regarding me steadily as he sips at his scotch, I feel my long dormant libido roar to life.

Hours ago I unearthed a men's shirt in one of the bureau drawers, and am now wearing that. It falls to mid-thigh, and I've rolled the sleeves up to my elbows. But when he looks at me like that I'm ridiculously aware of the fact that the buttons strain across my rather ample chest.

And also of the fact that my bottom half is completely bare. It's covered by that thin silk sheet, but I'm not even close to worldly enough to be comfortable with that scrap of comfort.

Belatedly I realize that he has asked me a question. Clearing my throat, I nod, running my tongue over suddenly dry lips, not at all sure what to do when his stare follows the movement.

“I—the medication—it makes me drowsy.” Which is yet another reason I wish I’d been conscious to refuse it. My shoulder is starting to hurt like a beast with fangs has sunk its teeth into it, but I don’t even take aspirin if I can help it.

I spent my formative years watching my mother slump around in a drug induced haze. It didn’t endear me to those substances, not even when they’re medicinal.

“I brought you some food.” He gestures to a platter of fruit, crackers and cheese that is sitting on the bedside table. The sight of the plump purple grapes, of the juicy figs and soft cheese makes my stomach growl, and I reach out a hand, only to snatch it back.

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I am growing more indebted to Matteo by the minute, and though I know it's not rational—though he hasn't made a single demand on me—it makes the grapes that are just out of reach lose some of their appeal.

“Before you make up another reason that you should go, perhaps you will think rationally about how you are feeling.” He places his glass on the table, looks me over with those rum colored eyes. They're fringed by dark lashes that any woman would kill for. “Tell me. And don't lie. I will know.”

As I meet his stare, I feel a jolt of heat pass through me. I think that I'm imagining it—though he is everything that I'd ever daydreamed of for a wild Italian fling—the sober set of his face makes me think that maybe, just maybe, I'm not.

“Tell me.” The intensity in his eyes, on his face, tells me that I don't actually have any choice but to do as he says... this is not a man who will be refused. I part my lips to answer, and his gaze tracks the movement, making me feel like he's the lion and I'm the lamb... and that I'm about to become his dinner.

In a sexy kinda way.

“I... my shoulder hurts.” I hate admitting the weakness, but I'm not entirely sure what he'd do if I lied.

As it is, he nods, seeming satisfied with my answer. “That's what happens when you jump in front of a knife.”

“Hey.” My brow furrows as I glare at him. “How dare—”

“Can I have anything brought to you?” He continues on as though I haven’t said a word, and I stare at him, astonished. His choice of words hasn’t escaped me either... not can I bring you anything, but can I have anything brought to you.

Matteo Benenati is clearly a man who is used to having whatever he wants, just as he seems like he’s incapable of accepting the word no. It’s so different from my existence that I literally cannot fathom living that way.

My spine stiffens; the stitches in my shoulder pull my skin tight and I wince.

In an instant Matteo leans forward in his chair, his expression concerned.

“Drink.” Unceremoniously he shoves his snifter in my face, moving so quickly that I have no choice but to take it.

The liquid pretty, a dark brownish gold. Warily I sniff at it, then wrinkle my nose.

“It stinks.” No way I’m drinking this. “It smells like iodine.”

“That’s the peat.” Raising an eyebrow at me, he sits back in his chair, the lord at his leisure. In contrast I feel... plebeian. Like a servant girl, unused to the riches that surround me.

I don’t care for that feeling at all, and as if arguing with it, I press the chilled glass to my lips and take a tiny sip, letting the liquid spread out over my tongue.

It’s a mistake. Once the medicinal flavor passes, flowing down my throat, I taste a hint of something warm, salty and sweet. Him, his imprint left behind on the glass.

My eyes meet his over the edge of the glass, and once again I get the sensation that I am prey.

“You’re quite beautiful, you know.” Damn that sexy accent. I should be used to hearing the lovely lilt and flow of the Italian tongue by now... but when uttered in a dark, dangerous tone, it seems that I’m done for.

He shifts in his chair, and his scent again reaches me. My hormones stand up and pay attention, even as warning bells start to clang in my head.

Danger, Will Robinson.

But even though I know I’m at a distinct disadvantage—I’m half naked, injured, in a strange place—I find myself leaning toward him, a magnet pulling me closer.

“Yes, quite beautiful. And am I correct in assuming that you are also broke?”

“What?” I rear back as though he’s slapped me. My mind reels. “Where the hell did you get that idea?”

He merely raises an eyebrow, and I can feel my temper begin to lick along my skin.

“Whatever you’re getting at, it’s not happening.” Damn it, I’m seriously pissed at him, but at the same time, my body is not at all pleased with this pronouncement. “I told you I didn’t want medical attention, or any of this, and you did it anyway. I don’t owe you anything.” I flap my hand in the general direction of the room, so he knows what I’m referring to.

And the bastard simply smiles at my anger, which only serves to infuriate me more. “I’m not asking you to have sex with me.”

MATTEO

I wonder if the girl has any idea how appealing she looks right now, all wide eyes and

flushed cheeks. I'm not usually drawn to ingénue types, but there's something about this one that pulls at me.

For one brief moment, the voice of reason sounds in my head, warning me that I might be about to jump in over my head.

But what choice do I have?

None. Thanks to my late father, I have no choice, and it infuriates me.

"I do not pay for sex," I say sternly. The girl shifts on the bed, and I can see that I've unsettled her.

Good. I won't stand to be the only one who is feeling as though his life has just spun out of control.

"What the hell are you getting at, then?"

I haven't known her for long, but I've already come to see that when Miss Riley Tremaine is uncomfortable, she gets defensive. I watch, not feeling nearly as removed as I'd like to, as she crosses her arms over her chest and glares at me.

Instead of intimidating, she just looks damn sexy. And all that innocence just screams complications.

But I've never been very good at turning down the things that I want—I've never had to. And that creamy skin, utterly devoid of makeup and fresh in a way that the women I know never are, is calling to me to touch it. Those lips, the color of rose petals even without that goop that women slather on, look as sweet as the fruit that is sitting untouched on the bedside table.

For no reason other than to please myself, I pick up a round red grape, press it to equally plump lips. She eyes me suspiciously, but I push it past the seam of her lips anyway. Her eyes spark with irritation, but she slowly chews, swallows, wipes a drip of juice from her lips with the tip of a finger.

I can barely hold back my groan, and press another grape to her mouth. This time, though, she catches my hand before I can press the fruit to her lips, plucking the grape from my fingers.

“You were saying?” She prompts me. I think she means to be chastising, but the faint pink flush that has spread across her cheeks tells me that she’s no more immune to me than I am to her.

“I have a story to tell you.” I lean back in the chair while I tell her the highlights of the meeting that I had this afternoon. I skip over a lot of details, partly because I don’t think she’ll care, and mostly because it’s just not in my nature to be forthcoming.

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She seems faintly puzzled as she listens. “Why are you telling me this?”

She’s not stupid; after the meeting I did some digging into her life. But most of the woman I know would already be batting their eyelashes at me and making a play for the coveted position as my wife.

This girl, though—she either truly cannot comprehend a situation like what I’ve described to her, or she is going to make me say the words.

Make me ask her to marry me.

The question freezes on my lips, and I feel anything but casual. I am not used to needing people... but I need this girl to say yes to me more than I need my next breath.

I don’t know how to ask. I only know how to manipulate, to push, to take.

“You have student loans that you cannot afford to pay. And you do not have even enough money to get back to the States.”

Her fingers clench in the sheet, and I try not to think about the way that the slate colored satin looks against that smooth skin.

I expect her to ream me out for checking up on her, but instead her hand reaches for the bandage covering her wound. Though I don’t think she intended it, I get the message as surely as if she stabbed me with it like that blade sliced through her.

I can't afford to go home because I took a knife for you.

Guilt is not an emotion that I am accustomed to, and I don't quite know what to do with the heavy weight of it. I know that I should bite back my words, should find someone else for what I am about to ask of her.

But I don't want to. For reasons that I can't explain, I want her, and so I tell myself that I am doing her a favor.

"You need money." My voice is casual, but I feel anything but. "I need a wife. Immediately."

"Oh my God." A choked kind of cry issues from her throat, and I wonder if maybe she really hadn't understood what I was getting at. "You're not seriously—"

"I'm asking you to be my wife for thirty days, in exchange for five hundred thousand dollars." I snap. I don't like having to ask, and I set the amount low, sure that she will ask for more.

"Five hundred thousand dollars? Are you insane?" The girl's mouth works, and I can't help but imagine it doing other things.

Not the time, Matteo.

"It's not a large amount of money." What the hell am I saying? I'm just asking her to gouge me. But she's looking at me like she can't imagine that there's that much money in the world.

Probably I shouldn't tell her that Emilia can spend that much in one shopping spree in Milan.

Riley's cheeks are flushed, and that long, lovely body is tense. She's going to say no, and my mind is reeling with possibilities about how I can make her say yes.

But instead of yelling, as I find American women are wont to do, she asks a simple question that gives me hope.

“What's the catch?”

She is tempted. And for some strange reason I am disappointed, even though I am a step closer to what I want.

But for some reason, this woman seemed... different. Not like the ones who are obsessed with my money.

Shoving that feeling down, I try to focus in the way I do at the office.

She is an acquisition, Matteo. Nothing more.

I think about trying to sugarcoat the next words, but the intelligence that I see in those eyes tells me that she won't swallow anything but the truth.

“I am expected to be faithful to my wife for the term of the contract.” Her eyes widen, just a bit, and I find myself wanting to bend over, to sink my teeth into her full lower lip. “And so I would expect you to be my wife in all meanings of the word.”

Her cheeks flush. Honestly, I'm not sure what to expect from this girl—wide eyed protestations of innocence or the calculation that I am accustomed to from women.

She gives me neither, instead twisting her lips into a sardonic smirk. “So you're asking me to have sex with you for money.”

“I told you. I do not pay for sex.” I glare, indignant. But...

Does she not have a point?

Still... “I am not asking you to be a common whore.” I place my hand on her thigh, feel the muscles tense beneath my fingers. Watch heat flicker through her eyes.

“I’m not going to be any kind of a whore, common or not.” She scowls, but without conviction.

I’m offering her a way out, and she knows it. And being who I am, I capitalize on that need.

“I will seduce you whether you accept the offer or not. Be smart. Take the money.”

“Fuck you.” Riley sits straight up, and her hand flies, heading for my cheek. I allow her palm to connect, the sharp crack echoing throughout the room.

“I believe I just suggested that.” Smiling darkly, I twine my fingers around her wrist—her hands are so small compared to mine—and drag her towards me.

“Stop it!” She barely manages to speak before I crush her lips to my own. I mean the kiss to be intimidating, to show her just who is in control, and so I’m deliberately rough.

But... the way she struggles, even as she moans... the surrender of a strong woman. It overwhelms me. Makes me... feel.

Planting my hands on her shoulders, I push her back. Trying to hide the way that I am panting, I all but jump off of the bed—away from her warmth, her skin, her scent—and sneer.

“I require an answer by morning.” My heart is thudding against my ribcage, and the sight of her there on the bed, sheets rumbled, cheeks flushed, lips swollen from my own...

I want to possess her, make her mine, on the most primal of levels. But what I want from this girl is simple—sex and a business arrangement—and I have to keep it that way.

So I close my eyes against the sweetness that is begging me to take a taste and head for the door. Her voice stops me before I can pass through the arched exit.

“What you... what you want from me. I may not be very good at it.” Her words aren’t trembling and virginal... they are matter of fact. Still, I tense.

Surely she is just talking about being my wife, being in the public eye... not about the sex. Because there is no way that a woman of her age is untouched.

“Matteo?” Her voice is silken, caressing my skin like I just know those sheets are caressing her thighs.

No. She cannot be innocent. Because if she was...

I don’t know that I could stop myself from claiming her entirely. And the very thought has my cock hardening, pressing against the thin fabric of my trousers.

I could have her right now. She may not be like the other women I know, but there is no mistaking the attraction between us.

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But something in me hesitates. And I don't care for it.

"By morning," I snarl without turning around. And then I am gone.

Chapter Five

MATTEO

THE CRYSTAL SNIFTER in my hand is heavy with scotch. My father would have mocked me for it, preferring traditional Italian drinks—campari with white wine before dinner, grappa or strega for a digestif.

If he had been alive, I probably would have swallowed down the bitter grappa to keep comments on my manhood at bay, though I've always detested the stuff. And then I would have gone to my room, to drink my scotch away from those eyes that were always judging me.

It's a small thing, being able to drink what I want, eat what I want, do what I want without commentary from Carmine. But as today's reading of the will has shown, it seems likely that I will never be out from under the thumb of Carmine Benenati.

"Enough, Matteo. That's enough for tonight." Arching my neck from side to side to remove the accumulated tension, I tug open a couple more buttons on my shirt. Unbidden, I imagine Riley moving my hands aside, to do it herself. Riley, those bright eyes full of heat as she removes her own clothing and presses her wet, naked heat against me.

I'm already hard from being in the same room with her, from smelling that sweet, feminine musk, and from watching those sheets slither over her naked thighs.

I should scroll through my phone, find the number of one of the literally hundreds of socialites, aspiring actresses, models and singers... I even have the personal number of a very sexy young princess.

These women, they would all understand if I took them to a high end hotel, fucked them long and hard, then sent them something sparkly the next day. They might be disappointed not to have me for a longer time, but they know the rules of the kind of lives we lead.

Riley would not. And it is precisely because of that that I don't want the European princess, or the American singer, or the Italian actress who is rumored to have a mouth like a vacuum.

Which means that any relief I seek tonight will come at the touch of my own hand.

As I pass the front door I hear the doorknob turn, then a muffled thump as someone turns a key in the lock, only to find that it doesn't work. I turn sharply toward the sound, startled only for a moment before I realize that Emilia is the only one besides Carmine who would be able to get past security at the front gate, and who would think that she could gain entry.

I haven't told her that I changed the locks, and smile grimly when I hear her push on the heavy mahogany door, though the wood is too thick for me to make out what I know is a stream of curses.

The doorbell chimes, a somber sound that has rarely been heard here. No one entered this house without Carmine Benenati's approval—no one even knew about it.

I wait a moment, sip my scotch, knowing that to wait will infuriate Emilia. Finally I stride to the door and wrench it open. I'm in no mood to deal with my step sister, but I would enjoy handling her resultant tantrum if I ignored her even less.

Emilia poses in the doorway as I open it, making a visible effort to smooth away her irritation. This puts me on edge, as does the fact that she doesn't immediately tear into me for making her wait.

"You've changed the locks." She eyes me narrowly, fingering a strand of her glossy dark hair. I don't reply; it isn't a question.

We wait, eyes locked upon one another, neither willing to do so much as be the first to ask what it is she wants—to break would be to show weakness, after all.

"Let's cut the nonsense, shall we?"

I watch, puzzled, as her fingers slide briskly to the loose knot in the belt of her coat. I watch her undo it, watch the coat fall open, but my mind struggles to catch up to what I'm seeing.

Within seconds the long black overcoat is on the floor. Emilia stands in the doorway, and she has my attention.

As teenagers, we explored more than was healthy, given our relationship. And the attraction never faded, no matter how superficial it was.

But never did I think I would see her in front of me like this. A scrap of black lace covers her mound, a trio of elastics emphasizing her coltish hips on each side. It hides nothing. Her legs, impossibly long and slender, are displayed in spike heeled leather boots that extend all the way to mid-thigh.

But my attention is caught by her breasts. I've felt them before, in secret, in the dark. But she is wearing a black lace... I don't even know what to call it. It looks like a bra, a bit—it is black and lacy and fits the way a bra would. But rather than covering her breasts, holding them close, the garment offers them up like they are sitting on a shelf.

It leaves nothing to the imagination, and I've imagined those small brown nipples, those creamy globes plenty.

I'm already aroused by the woman in one of my spare bedrooms.

Emilia's tits make my already hard cock press painfully against the front of my slacks, begging for relief.

"No more skirting around it, Matteo." She drops to her knees in front of me, her eyes fixed on mine. Warning bells clang in my head—Emilia Guerra does not kneel—but then she takes my belt in hand, and my attention is drawn elsewhere.

"What are you doing?" My voice is rough, harsh, and she seems to like it, looking up at me and licking her lips.

"I'm offering you what we've both wanted since your father starting fucking my mother." She smiles up at me, that seductive half smile that I've seen her use on so very many people, both men and women.

"You can have me, Matteo. Any way you want to." Eyes on me, she starts to pull my belt through the loop. My pulse accelerates. And my cock hardens to the point of pain

She's right—we've been dancing around this since we were young teenagers. Part of me feels like it's inevitable. And today has me so confused, so fucked in the head—and the whisper of her fingers over the front of my pants feels so damn

good—that I seriously consider it.

What man wouldn't? And no matter the steely resolve forged in me by the sadistic man that I called father, no matter that I know well that I can't trust this woman for an instant...

I feel myself caving. I want to grab her by the back of the head and thrust past her lips. Want to press her against the wall and take what I need.

Maybe if I do, I'll have a clear head when I ask Riley for her answer.

I feel my fingers fisting in Emilia's silky hair, smell her perfume wafting up to my nose. It's expensive, I'm sure, and overly sweet... cloying.

It makes it hard for me to inhale. And that might not have been so noticeable, if I hadn't just met Riley, whose presence seems to make it easier for me to breathe.

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“No.” My fingers clench, pulling Emilia’s hair, and she hisses. Disentangling myself, I step back, putting space between us.

Her eyes spark dangerously.

“What do you mean, no?” Sliding forward on her knees, she reaches for me, and this time it is easier not to succumb to temptation.

“What’s going on, Emilia?” It’s still hard to think, with those tits offered up on a black lace platter. But as I look down at my stepsister, I can see the rage distort her otherwise beautiful features, and the realization pumps clarity into my blood.

Emilia offers nothing without expecting something in return.

She meets my challenge with a slight nod of acknowledgement and stands. This makes those breasts sway enticingly, which makes my cock get even harder, but I haven’t let my second head do all of the thinking for quite a few years.

“Well?” Lifting my snifter, I again sip. The burn of the scotch sears my throat, helps pull me from the cloud of raw animal lust.

Emilia closes the space between us, her fingers reaching again for my belt buckle. This time I don’t pull away, but cover her hand with mine, stopping her movement.

I’m close enough that I can see the irritation again distort her face, but it’s gone within seconds as she teasingly brushes her lips over my own, then moves in for the kill.

She kisses me, hot and hard, her tongue pressing against the seam of my lips. I'm not easily shocked, but for the second time in as many minutes she manages it.

Heaven help me, it takes everything I have to pull away. She's a warm, willing female, and I'm not used to denying myself. But this just isn't right.

"Emilia. Stop." For the first time in memory, I use a gentle, if still firm, tone, grabbing her upper arms in my hands and pushing her away. "Just tell me. What is going on?"

I can see the calculation, displayed over her features. But she deliberately tries to hide it behind that seductive curve of her lips.

"Fine then. Business first." Before I can stop her, her fingers brush over my cock, and I groan before jerking back.

"I think we should get married." Her lips are on the curve of my neck as her words hit me, and I'm not sure I've heard her correctly.

"What?" Everywhere I move, she moves with me, rubbing that long, sleek body against me. Offering herself to me in ways that I've only dreamt of.

Even as I want to turn her to face the wall, to push between those spread thighs, I find that I'm growing irritated, and disgusted. And then when she repeats herself, shocked.

I shove at her shoulders, and this time I'm not so gentle.

"You are out of your fucking mind." Nothing this woman does should ever surprise me, but...

What?

“It makes perfect sense. Think about it, Matteo.” She rubs against me again, and now I just want to shove her out the door and tell her to stop acting like a cheap whore. If she was seducing me because she genuinely wanted to, that would be different.

But she is not.

And am I asking Riley to have sex with me for something in return?

I suppose I am, and an emotion that I can only barely recognize as shame works its way through me at the realization... it’s not something I’m used to feeling.

I push it away. Double standard? Perhaps. But I never claimed to be a good man.

“It makes no sense.” And yet... it does.

“Matteo.” She fists her fingers in the collar of my shirt. “We’ve always cared for one another. Always wanted each other. If we married, neither of us would lose the company. We could both have it all.”

Her words are logical, absolutely. And it would be a giant fuck you to my dear dead dad.

But...

“But then we would be sharing it.” I narrow my eyes, study the woman in front of me. She’s absolutely stunning, while the woman in the other room is fresh faced and possibly even a little bit plain.

But beyond the fact that she has tits and an ass, something has changed today, and I don’t want her.

I suspect that that something is named Riley Tremaine.

And more...

“You’re worried that you’ll lose.” I say slowly, and feel a deep satisfaction start flooding through my body when she startles, just the tiniest bit. “You wouldn’t be worried that I’d find a wife, because that’s easy enough. But you’re worried I’ll manage to stay faithful, because so much is at stake. And you can’t stand the idea that you’ll be left with nothing.”

I watch the red of fury slowly stain Emilia’s cheeks. Well, this is interesting. I’ve managed to touch a nerve in the ice queen.

“Why I’m doing this doesn’t matter, Matteo.” Stepping back so that I can see her full length, she cups her breasts, and damn it, my traitorous cock can’t help but swell. But by this point I would rather cut my own hands off than touch her with them.

“What matters is that I’m right. Think how powerful we could be, you and I. No one would ever tell us what to do again.”

I close my eyes, both against the image, and against what her words conjure.

The idea of freedom is a heady thing, but I know that I will never truly be free of Carmine.

“Get out of here, Emilia.” Knowing that she won’t respond to anything else, I make my voice deliberately cruel. “You’ve embarrassed yourself enough.”

“You’re the one who will be embarrassed, when I take everything I’m due and leave you with nothing!” Emilia’s remaining control snaps, and she releases her breasts, her hands curling into fists at her side. Her face flushes darker still, and I knew that if

looks could kill, in that moment I would be six feet under.

I'm not too pleased with her myself. "Everything you are due?"

That bitch.

She was always the favorite, the one treated well and shown favors. The one my father preferred, ever since she first joined our family.

I, however...

No, Matteo. It does no good to dredge up the memories that I have worked so hard to suppress.

Carmines gone now, and I won't let him take up space in my head.

"Leave." When Emilia starts toward me again, I push her hands away as though I'm swatting a fly. If she doesn't leave, I'll have to haul her bodily out the door, but she's now made me so angry with her flippant statement, that my cock no longer wants anything to do with her. "Leave, and I'll never mention this delusional episode of yours again."

"You fucking bastard." Emilia's hand swings out, and just as I did with Riley not an hour ago, I catch it, stop the blow. She laughs, low in her throat, and I realize with a churning in my gut that she's getting off on this.

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“I want to fuck!” She shrieks, and I wince, hoping that Riley—that the servants—can’t hear.

What is going on? The Emilia I know would scheme like this, certainly, but she would be the picture of control.

“I don’t.” Releasing her with disgust, I point to the door, and she hisses.

“I’ll ruin you, Matteo.” Seeing that I’m not about to change my mind, she turns on the spike heel of her boot, stalks to her fallen coat. When she bends to pick it up, she does so slowly, making sure to give me a full view, even though her body is vibrating with rage. This tells me that she wants, more than anything, to entice me into her ridiculous offer.

It’s not happening.

“You can try,” I reply calmly. “But I wonder who the press would sympathize with more, a pampered Italian princess like you, or a man who went through what Carmine put me through.”

Emilia laughs, the sound high and slightly hysterical. It’s not what I expected, and it makes me uneasy.

“You have no idea what I did to earn this company,” she says finally, shaking her head. Her lips are curled into a smile, but there’s no hint of mirth. “No idea. But I’ve paid my dues. And so it will be mine. I won’t offer this again.”

“Go!” Finally losing patience, I throw my snifter against the wall, as hard as I can. The glass explodes like fireworks, and my voice is a roar. But how dare, how dare she compare her pampered existence to my own? “Get the fuck out!”

“You’ll regret this.” Her words drip with venom as she strides out the front door. She doesn’t bother putting her coat back over top of her non-outfit, and I wonder for a moment if Carmine’s death has somehow sent her over the edge—paparazzi follow us everywhere, and once one of my more... intimate... moments with a woman were captured with a long range camera and splashed across the Italian tabloids.

Nearly naked pictures of Emilia Guerra, stepdaughter of the late, great Carmine Benenati, would fetch a pretty penny, and reflect horribly on the company.

In that moment, I don’t give a fuck. I just want her gone.

“Bye, Matteo. Hope you’re ready to lose everything.” Finally outside, Emilia turns to look at me over her shoulders, smirking and wiggling her fingers in a wave. Her veneer of control is back, firmly in place as I slam the heavy wooden door shut behind her.

My own control is sadly lacking. I slump back against the barrier, cold sweat spearing on my forehead.

I’ve never seen that side of Emilia before, and it has thoroughly unnerved me. More than that...

She has declared war. I won this battle, but she’ll strike again.

I have to make sure I’m ready.

Chapter Six

RILEY

“I NEED AN ANSWER NOW.”

Startled, I whirl around, the long tangle of my hair whipping me in the face as I do. Matteo is standing just inside the doorway. At first glance, nothing is different from when he left twenty minutes ago... but when I take a moment and look harder, I can tell that something has changed.

The man who left this room before was confident and in control. Now... well, he still looks that way, mostly. But there's just the thinnest edge of something darker, something... desperate.

“I need your answer now,” he repeats, slowly stalking his way toward me. I can feel my pulse accelerating, pounding just under the line of my jaw, as I note the clouds that have gathered in his eyes.

I don't think he'll hurt me. It might be stupid to trust him, but really... if he'd wanted to, he's had plenty of chances already. You know, like when I was unconscious.

Still, right now he seems harder, wilder than the man who just kissed me senseless. And I don't know him well enough to know what that means for me.

“You said I could have until morning.” I hate that my voice is breathy, aroused. But damn it, I've never had the full attention of a man like him, never felt so... wanted.

“Things have changed.” He stops just a bit less than an arms' width away from me... just inside my personal space. When he reaches out to toy with a piece of my hair, I can't stop the shiver that runs through me.

I have no business wanting this man. I'm not stupid, it would be like a lamb and a

lion. And I have no desire to be anyone's dinner.

And yet...

"We both know what you're going to say, anyway." His voice is smug, and I pause, my lust rapidly cooling off in the face that tone. "You need the money."

Cocking his head, he studies me, his gaze lingering on the flush that still stains my cheeks. "Or maybe you just want the money. Maybe it's something else that you really want."

Jackass. The word is on the tip of my tongue. Matteo is the most infuriating man I've ever met, and my palm itches to slap him one right across the face. Or maybe to knee him in the nutsack.

And yet... that's what he would expect me to do. I can see it on his face—to play the part of the reluctant female, or maybe to go in the other direction, to swoon and fall right into his arms.

For reasons I don't quite understand, I don't want to be like all the other women, so I tamp my anger down, and try to think rationally.

"You need me." My voice is quiet, but the words seem to stop him in his tracks. Anger flickers over those gorgeous features, but again, it's like I'm wearing special goggles that can see beneath.

There's a thread of vulnerability there that is just barely detectable.

A sneer curves those lips that played over mine with such skill, and the expression is cruel.

“You still don’t understand who I am, do you?” He spreads his arms wide, and I eye him warily, trepidation skittering over my skin. “I don’t need anything or anyone.”

“You’re not making much of a case for yourself.” I don’t miss the hint of self-loathing that shows through his scorn. “I won’t give you a decision until morning.”

“Didn’t you hear me?” He laughs, mockery a knife’s edge in the sound. “There are thousands of women all over the world who would jump at the chance to be my wife. Take the offer, Riley, before I change my mind.”

That glint in his eyes makes my heart pound against my ribcage. I’m still certain that he won’t hurt me, but at the same time, I don’t like him very much in that moment.

No, I don’t like him... but I still want him. Cause I’m crazy like that.

“I’m sure there are other women,” I say, keeping my voice as calm as I can make it, even though that storm in Matteo’s eyes makes my own pulse accelerate. “But for some reason you want me. And I will give you my answer in the morning.”

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I feel the insane urge to giggle when I see the shock on his face. But it's a slightly hysterical feeling, because as the shock is replaced by anger, I become aware that I've just poked the sleeping bear.

"What did you say to me?" His face registers total and complete disbelief. A tremor runs through me, because I can see his temper rising right before my eyes, but...

I don't want to be that girl.

"You heard me." I'm holding my breath, and it's making me slightly dizzy, but I keep going anyway. "I just think that you're not used to anyone making you wait."

A strangled sound emanates from Matteo's throat, and I can feel a bead of cold sweat slowly slither down my spine. But I stand my ground, and don't break eye contact.

The muscles of his jaw twitch as he clenches it tightly shut. Then without another word, he turns on his heel and stalks from the room. He slams the door behind him, and the sound it makes is thunderous, echoing throughout the large bedroom.

"Christ." Adrenaline rockets through me and, suddenly breathing hard, I sink down to the floor, right where I've been standing. I feel sick.

He has no idea why I'm at such odds over his proposal, if you can even call it that. I really do need the money, and as he ever so eloquently pointed out, there's a definite attraction between us anyway.

There really isn't a choice. I've always sworn that I would never make the choices

that my mother did. But now, penniless and desperate, I have a bit more understanding for what might have been going through her head.

I might have to follow in her footsteps, just for a month... because that amount of money will ensure that I'll never have to again. I'll be able to shake that shadow that has haunted me my whole life—the one that took the shape of the various men travelling to and from my mother's bed. I mean, who am I kidding? I'll do it. I might even... like it, if I can forget that I'm being paid for sex.

Because a man like Matteo Benenati... if anyone can make my first time amazing, I'd bet money I don't have on it being him.

MATTEO

After a half bottle of scotch and the resultant restless night, I sit on the massive balcony just off of my bedroom, my sunglasses not doing quite enough to protect my hung-over eyes from the hideously bright glare.

My father would have told me that real men don't get hangovers. This morning I have to not-so-respectfully tell his ghost to fuck off.

Even after downing three aspirin and two glasses of water, even after sipping at the rich caffè e latte and sweet rolls that one of the maids brought me a few minutes ago, I feel like absolute shit... and only part of it is the physical.

Miss Riley Tremaine set me back on my heels last night, and while I can't say that I much care for it, I know that I deserved it. Emilia's ridiculous proposition had upset me more than I'd wanted to admit, and I'd taken it out on Riley.

And the impertinent chit had the nerve to call me on it. Even as my own words echo in my ears, I wonder at that.

I've rarely been told no in my lifetime, and then only by my father. Certainly never by a woman. And I know, somehow I just know, that this particular woman is going to be trouble.

If I was thinking only with the brain in my head, I would just find another woman, one who understands the score. One who won't blink when the month is over, and who will be happy enough to warm my bed in the meantime.

"Fuck." Wincing as a particularly bright shaft of sunlight sneaks in the sides of my sunglasses, I settle back in my lounge and try to ignore the incessant throbbing in my head, the throbbing which is only intensified by the way my thoughts keep running in circles.

I saw Riley Tremaine for the first time yesterday morning, and yet she and her big eyes have managed to work their way under my skin. What kind of a woman chases after a knife wielding drug addict, just to help someone else?

What kind of a woman has to think about whether or not to accept half a million dollars when she doesn't have a penny of her own ?

"The kind of woman you should leave the hell, alone, Matteo, that's who." I glower down into my cup before shoving it away.

I already know that I won't. There's a darkness inside of me, forged by my father's hand, and it's drawn to the sweetness and light that this strange woman represents.

Since I set eyes on her in those ridiculous athletic pants that American women insist on wearing, I've wanted to possess her, and some primitive part of me loves the idea of marking her with a ring, of making her mine.

And though I know that Emilia is right, that Riley isn't for me, I know that I'm not a

good enough man to send her away. I'm used to having what I want, and her reluctance has been like a red flag in front of a bull.

Even knowing all of this, I cannot change it. Or maybe I just don't want to. Either way, my conclusion is the same.

I will do whatever it takes to get Riley to agree to my proposal.

Standing, I pull my cell from my pocket, dial Rossi the lawyer. The older man answers on the fourth ring and doesn't sound fully awake—it is just barely dawn, after all. But after the scene at the office yesterday, I find a strange glee in irritating the man who thinks he knows what's best for me.

“I need you to get Mama's ring out of the vault today.” Saying the words gives me a little jolt... even knowing that the marriage is temporary, it's still... marriage. Something I've always intended to avoid, thanks to the example my own parents set for me.

Thanks to Carmine, I have no choice, and for the millionth time in my life, I curse him. Why had he done this? My best guess was just to continue being the miserable bastard he'd always been... to show me that even death can't stop his control over me.

To tease me with the freedom I'd never had, only to cruelly snatch it away. Certainly, I could refuse my father's terms, and forfeit the company.

But my mother silently suffered years of abuse, keeping up appearances and eventually dying in that same silence, just to make sure that that company would still be there for me, as my legacy.

To honor my mother's sacrifice, I would do a lot. And though I chafed at being ordered, at having my choices taken away...

Would it really be so terrible to spend a month with a woman that I find fascinating? Though I am irritated when I think of the way she put me in my place last night, I am also... intrigued.

And aroused, truth be told. The life that I have—there is little that surprises me anymore, and that includes sex. I've had women who promised to be a seductress, and then didn't participate in the act at all. I've had women who were too aggressive even for my liking, and everything in between.

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Riley Tremaine? I have no idea what it will be like to lie with her... to lie with her as my wife. And that excites me like nothing has in years.

Belatedly I realize that Rossi is still droning on in my ear. “I really don’t advise using an heirloom like your mother’s ring for an occasion like this...”

He continues, and, unable to control myself, I slam my fist into the wall. “Shut up. Just shut the fuck up.”

I hiss as the pain radiates outward from where my closed hand impacted the cold plaster.

“I beg your pardon?” Rossi sounds as stuffy as I know he is. I want to give him some respect, for dealing with Carmine and the business for so many years, but the fact is, he doesn’t have any respect for me in return.

That has to change.

“Did you or did you not, just yesterday, inform me that I need to take a wife?” I can hear the ice in my voice, and I do nothing to hide it. This man may have known me since I was a child, but the fact remains that he is now in my employ. And the bastard knows, he knows exactly what I had to put up with at Carmine’s hands to get to this point.

Rossi sputters through the line. “You know I did. It’s the term of your father’s will, one that I advised him against—”

“Then please enlighten me as to why you feel I shouldn’t use my mother’s ring to give to my future bride.” I smile as I would if the lawyer was here, a smile that I really don’t mean.

Rossi sighs, and I can feel my temper rise.

“Matteo. You know that this marriage... it won’t last past the month.” The lawyer’s voice is full of condescension, and I cannot believe that he has the gall to say this to me—me, the one who pays his retainer. “And you may well want to give that ring away to someone you truly care about someday. Or perhaps Emilia—”

“Emilia is not to touch my mother’s ring. Ever.” Even if she hadn’t pulled last night’s stunt... that ring is mine. Mine to give to whom I choose. “And thank you ever so much for your thoughts on the matter, but let me make myself clear. I need the fucking ring, and I need it now. Figure it out.”

“Matteo.”

I know I’m not imagining it, the way Rossi is talking to me like a petulant child. And I realize that that’s exactly what I’m acting like. But I can’t seem to stop—it’s a kneejerk reaction. I have so much to prove, and Carmine had ensured that I’ll never be able to do so.

I’m not going to correct him for using my first name over a private phone call. But I’m also not leaving this phone conversation without making something clear.

“Rossi. Until the company passes to either Emilia or myself next month, you are under my employ, yes?” This isn’t a question—it’s a fact. “I have asked you to do a simple task. Are you refusing?”

“What? I—no.”

I can tell that he has picked up on the steel that I have infused my voice with.

“Good. There’s no need to come in when you get here; just leave it with Massimo.” Massimo is the massive thug who works at the front gate; he’ll ensure it gets delivered to the house unharmed.

I almost hang up, but Rossi stops me with words that I don’t expect.

“Matteo. You don’t have to do this.” His words pull my world out from under me.

Rossi, of all people, knows exactly what my parents’ marriage was like—know exactly what my mother and I endured.

Knows how I must feel to be controlled like this from beyond the grave.

“Are you saying you have a loophole in Carmine’s will?” My spirits rise, then unexpectedly crash.

Without this will, I would have no further need to keep Riley Tremaine around. And that...

I don’t like it.

And so I’m only partially disappointed when Rossi replies in the negative, and as I hang up, the realization stuns me.

I have never wanted to marry. Have actively avoided it. Where are my mushy feelings coming from... the disappointment, the primal desire to see that ring on the girl’s finger?

For, despite my anger with Rossi, he is completely right. I will marry Riley—that I

will be able to convince her, I have no doubt. I will enjoy her for the month.

And then I will let her go.

There is no other choice, not for a man like me.

Chapter Seven

RILEY

I CAN'T DO IT.

I just can't do it.

This morning after I woke up, I stood by the huge glass window in my room for the longest time, looking out over the city of Palermo.

I don't want to leave. I learned so much in my year here, and I fell in love with the city in the process. Everything about this place—the language, the buildings, the people... it nurtures that artistic spark inside of me like Colorado never did.

But responsible people don't just pack up and move to Italy on a whim, not permanently. It had been hard enough to convince myself that a year abroad to study art of all things was okay.

Impulsive decisions—those were my mother's forte, right up there with spending money that doesn't exist.

I will never be like my mother. And that's why, no matter how tempting it is, I can't accept Matteo's offer.

As I pull on the yoga pants and shirt that I was wearing at the airport, now newly laundered by some mysterious staff member that I never saw, I wonder why this decision makes me so sad. It seems that fate has decided I'll be in Palermo for a while longer, after all, since I can't afford a plane ticket home. And that should make me happy, right?

But I'm not. Instead, I feel dread over knowing exactly how little money is in my bank account. And I also feel strangely letdown, that this little adventure with Matteo Benenati is coming to such a meek ending.

For one brief moment, as I push through the heavy doorway that takes me out of the bedroom and into a hallway I don't remember, being unconscious when I was brought here and all, I consider doing the impossible. Consider throwing caution to the wind and accepting Matteo's wild offer.

I knew plenty of girls at school who would do it in a heartbeat, if not for the money and the lure of being with someone I am coming to understand is a very powerful man, then for the sheer thrill of it. What a wild story they'd have to tell someday—that time a billionaire paid them to be his bride.

But I just can't. It's not entirely because of my mama, or because I think it's wrong, or even because Matteo will expect things that I've never done in exchange for money that he can quite clearly afford to blow on something like this.

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It just doesn't feel like the right decision for me. I can't have sex with a man who doesn't want me... me, Riley Tremaine, with all of my nuances and quirks. And I'm okay with that.

Which is why I can't understand why I feel so strange, so disappointed, as I make my way down the massive, ornately decorated hallway in search of the front door.

After two wrongs turns I at last find the stairs, which thankfully lead right into the front entryway.

As my feet descend the last step, I pause, sucking in a big mouthful of air. This is it, then. I'm leaving this opportunity behind. Leaving five hundred thousand dollars and a fling with an Italian stallion for a night in a hostel and, please God, a job of some sort. Surely I can scrounge up a job as a waitress. Or hell, even Italy has McDonald's.

And I can always set up on a street corner and try to sell one of the many paintings that I've done this year, though it hurts my heart a bit to lose a piece of my year of freedom. But I know that that's my best shot at quick cash.

"Shit." That's when I realize that the last I saw of my luggage was on a conveyor belt at the airport. Matteo strikes me as the kind who would know that and would order someone to retrieve it, but still, I can't leave until I have my suitcase and my portfolio in hand. Which means that I can't sneak out like I'd planned. Damn it.

"Going somewhere?" The voice is smooth and dark, one that I think might be seared into my brain for all time. Still, I jump—he's standing in an open archway that leads to what looks like a sitting room, looking dark and dangerous and altogether

delicious.

I wonder how long he's been standing there, watching me. Hopefully not for long, because then he'll know how easily I could be persuaded... I've always been atrocious at keeping my thoughts from playing across my face like a movie.

Just seeing him sets my pulse fluttering, and I wonder briefly if I've made the wrong choice. As he has so succinctly pointed out, there are thousands of women who would kill to be in my shoes right now.

He knows it. I know it.

And yet...

"I'm leaving." I blurt this out like a seventh grader at her first school dance. But then, I've never claimed to be smooth... I haven't had enough experience with the opposite sex to have perfected my flirtations.

I looked down at my feet as I spoke, nervous about upsetting him, the man who has shown me unnecessary kindness, even if he is a jackass. Now I look up, force myself to look right into his eyes. Something dark passes through them, something that I can't put a label on. And then it's gone, and his eyes are narrowed with contemplation.

"I see." He nods thoughtfully, pushing off from where he is leaning against the wall. The movement makes the muscles of his arms, visible beneath the short sleeves of his black T-shirt, ripple in a way that ahs saliva pooling in my mouth.

Slowly he stalks toward me, and find my mouth drying up with both nerves and excitement. What is it about him? He's a jerk. He's not sorry for it, either.

But there's that hint of something more... that part of him that was revealed when he took care of me after the incident at the airport.

He didn't have to. He could have just left me there. But he didn't, and that's what has led me to believe that there's more to Matteo Benenati than meets the eyes... more, even, than I think he himself knows.

He moves until he's just inside my personal space, just like he did last night. I'm sure that it's intentional—I somehow don't think that there's much in his life that isn't meticulously planned. Except, of course, for this demand that he marry.

This softens my heart. It's an incredibly difficult situation for me... for it's even harder for him. I can walk away.... He can't.

He stands there, just looking at me, that half smirk that is already so familiar playing over the corners of his lips. He hasn't asked me why, but I find myself blurting the words out regardless.

"I'm so sorry. I know you need a wife to secure your company. But there are so many women who would say yes. I'm sure there are. Better choices than me. I just... I just can't."

He leans toward me, just a breath, and as the masculine scent of his soap, his skin, and what is surely some very expensive cologne hits my senses, I start to think that I absolutely can.

"I see." He's close enough to kiss me—it's an assault on all of my senses. But he does nothing of the sort, instead regarding me with that mildly curious expression on his face. "Is it the money? Is it not enough?"

"What?" I blurt, horrified. Does he think I'm some kind of gold digging whore? "Of

course not. That's an insane amount of money! I just... I can't."

I won't. I won't be like my mother.

Though if my mother felt even half of these emotions toward any of her johns, I might be able to forgive her, at least some.

"All right, then." Matteo stands straight, putting an extra sliver of space in between us. I sigh with relief as he gives me room to breathe.

It's a fake out. The second the tension in my muscles eases, he slides one hand into the long tangle of my hair, the other around my waist, and pulls my body flush against his. I gasp as that big hand pulls my hair, just a bit, just enough to get my attention, seconds before his lips come crashing down on my own.

While his kiss the night before had been a taunt, this one is a possession. He's marking me when his lips slide over my own, when his tongue teases over the line that divides my lips. When he sinks his teeth into my lower lip.

Against my better judgment, I moan and melt against him. He's long and hard, radiating heat. I can feel his arousal, pressing against the softness of my belly.

Teasing me. Making me want things that I've only dreamt about to this point.

I gasp when he abruptly pulls away. My lips feel swollen, and I know that I must look a little wild as I stare, not entirely sure of anything but the fact that I want more.

"Why?" He demands, the hand still fisted in my hair tugging until I have no choice but to look him right in the eyes. "You want me as much as I want you. So why not take the money that you need, and explore this?"

I'm mortified to feel a tremble working its way over my skin.

Why is a good question. We may know next to nothing about each other, but still, something in me recognizes something in him.

And yet...

“What is it, exactly, that you want to explore?” I have seen that there's more to this man than the veneer he shows to the world, but he's still a man, and thanks to my mother's... profession... I have a healthy distrust of the creatures.

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Matteo smiles, that seductive little half curve of his lips, then reaches over to brush his lips over mine once more. His fingers remain tangled in my hair, and I'm shocked to discover that I like the bite of pain.

His touch has ruined me for every other man, before I've even gotten started. Damn him.

"If you have to ask, then I'm clearly not doing it right." Again, that smile, but this time it makes me feel a bit sick.

If I do this, even if it's something that I think I want...

Won't that make me just like her?

I can't. I won't.

"I'm sorry." Jerking out of his grasp, I shake my head and step away. A chill seeps into my bones as I move away from his heat. "If you'll show me where my bags are, I'll just go."

Matteo presses his lips together, clearly not pleased. But he nods calmly, places a hand at the small of my back, and guides me forward, toward the door. But underneath that calm...

I don't know him well enough to say for certain, but I don't think he's taking this news quite as passively as he seems to be. I wonder at that, because Matteo Benenati does not strike me as the kind of man to take no for an answer.

I tense, wondering if he's going to kiss me again in an attempt to change my mind. I can't lie... part of me... okay most of me... is hoping for it.

He doesn't.

"I will have your bags brought down. My driver will take you wherever you need to go." I want to protest, but truthfully, I don't have the cash for a cab.

"Thanks." Our stares catch and hold, and a tangible wave of heat pulses between us. When he clenches his jaw I have to fight the urge to reach out and smooth my fingers over the hard planes of his cheek.

"Be well, Riley Tremaine." Reaching around me, Matteo opens the heavy wooden door, and the bright sunlight of morning in Italy floods in.

I should be proud of myself, should march straight out into that sunshine with my head held high.

Instead it's everything I can do to not shout that I've changed my mind, that for once in my life I want to be wild and free from the shadows that haunt me.

But that's not who I am. Even if it's hard to remember that with Matteo's pricey cologne teasing my nostrils and his heat warming my skin. If it hurts to walk away, well, this is all my own damn fault.

Coming to Italy in the first place, going to art school—those are not things that a sensible young woman does. I should have known better.

Unbidden, depression washes over me, a grey sheet of rain. I push forward, desperate to be outside, for fresh air, but all of a sudden Matteo's arm is in front of me, holding me back.

“May I help you?” His voice has lost all of the warmth that it held just moments ago, and I crane my neck to look at him, startled. What is he talking about?

But then I see that his attention is trained not on me, but on two large men that have appeared on the front steps of this mansion.

“Miss Riley Tremaine?” The two men are dressed in what are unmistakably uniforms of la policia—the police, even if they differ slightly from the ones I’m used to seeing back in the States. The navy uniforms, the gun belts, the narrow eyed look... I’ve seen it before, more often than I’d care to admit, always trained on my mother.

But this time their attention is focused on me, and though I know I haven’t done anything to warrant their attention, I can feel my pulse stutter.

“That’s me.” My voice sounds like it is coming from beneath a sheet of ice, and I would believe it, because my toes and fingers have suddenly gone numb. “Is there something I can help you with?”

“Miss Tremaine, may we come inside? We need to have a talk with you.”

I try to conjure up a smile—again, I know I have nothing to worry about—but when I feel those disapproving eyes roam over me, standing in the doorway of this monstrous home, dressed in my cheap Walmart yoga pants and T-shirt, I feel like I’m being instantly dragged back to the trailer that I’ve called home, the small, stinking hovel where my mother sells her body to anyone who’ll have it, just to earn her next hit.

I’m not her. But in that moment, I feel like I could be.

“That’s fine.” I smile as calmly as I can—what’s going on?—and step back to let them in. But Matteo’s arm, still in front of me—protecting me?—tenses, flexes. His

free hand comes to rest protectively on the small of my back, anchoring me, and I'm instantly focused on the small square of heat.

"Whatever you have to say, can be said right here." Matteo's voice is calm, yet deadly, and I look up at him with surprise.

Why is he protecting me? He should be furious with me.

"Mr. Benenati, we're sorry to have to bring this business into your home." The one police officer, the younger one, nods at Matteo with something akin to respect on his face. The other one, who is older with a shock of wiry grey hair, barely manages to withhold a sneer of disgust. He pushes slightly in front of his partner, attention trained on me.

I feel like a rabbit, cornered in a yard. Feel like I did when I was a teenager and one of my mom's johns would get a little too close for comfort.

"Then spit it out."

I can barely reconcile the man that I've spent time with over the last two days with the one who stands behind me now. I've heard him be cruel, but the razor edge in his voice now takes it to an entirely new level.

"Very well, Signor Benenati." The older cop smirks, and I wonder if he's someone who once knew Matteo's father, or if he just doesn't like people younger than him in positions of power. But then his hawk-like gaze is trained on me, and unease trails ghostly fingers down my spine.

"Signorina Tremaine, would you care to elaborate on where you received the million dollars that appeared in your account last night?"

MATTEO

My front is pressed to Riley's back, and I can feel that curvy little body of hers stiffen. Since most of the women in my life have been interested in two things—my money and my body, in that order—I could be cynical and suspicious and immediately suspect that she has somehow swindled me out of part of my empire.

But I just don't think so. One, while she's clearly a very smart woman, I'm not sure that this art student from Colorado is hiding ninja like hacking skills beneath her fresh faced exterior. And she clearly doesn't have the money to hire someone else to do it.

Plus... a woman capable of stealing from me would be greedy. And greedy women don't turn down six figure offers, no matter what form those offers come in.

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No, little Miss Riley Tremaine had nothing to do with this. But I don't doubt that the money is in the account, or la policia wouldn't be here.

That leaves Emilia. Emilia, who has gotten it into her twisted little brain that she is meant to be my bride.

Emilia, who considers Riley little more than a bug to be squished beneath her Prada pumps.

And while this animosity between my stepsister and I is nothing new, the announcement yesterday put us on a whole new playing field. Benenati Enterprises is worth billions of dollars, and it's at stake.

Emilia is a stubborn, sneaky bitch, but I never expected this from her. And my vision hazes with violet rage.

"All money in Miss Tremaine's account was a gift from me." I say smoothly, thinking fast.

I'm absolutely certain that this is a trick of Emilia's. And if so, the money will trace back to Benenati Enterprises.

Riley squeaks in protest.

"And why, exactly, would you give this woman so much money?" The older cop lets his gaze wander up and down Riley, his lip curled in a sneer that he doesn't bother to conceal, and I feel my rage building.

Without thinking, I pull Riley into my arms. Her skin is cold and clammy against my own, and the officer's last words have her shaking like a leaf in the wind. A bit of an overreaction, I think, but then I don't imagine a woman like her has been around many cops before.

I'm surprised when, rather than sinking passively back into my arms, she struggles against them, her cheeks flushing crimson.

"I'm not a whore, if that's what you're implying." Unable to break my grip, her fingers curl into my forearms, the bite of her nails just a bit painful. And though it's so not an appropriate time, I can feel my cock stirring to life.

Dio, but this woman is different. And I'm drawn to it like a child to candy.

"No," I add calmly, tightening my grip on her slim waist. Calm down, I tell her with the embrace. "You most certainly are not a whore. You are my fiancée."

Riley makes that little noise again, and it makes me wonder what sounds she would make if she was underneath me in my bed. At the very least, I want to kiss her, and even though this isn't the time or place, I'm not afraid of these men.

As much power as they think they have, I have more. And so, to please myself even though I'm enraged at Emilia, I brush a slow, damp kiss over Riley's temple, savor the jolt that works through her body.

"Your fiancée?" The younger cop repeats, and I'm not above feeling grimly pleased when he looks Riley over with an appraising eye.

The older one looks her over too, his eyes lingering on her breasts, which are clearly outlined in the cheap T-shirt that's stretched over her torso. He sneers.

“I don’t see a ring.” His eyes meet my own, and he smirks. I simply stare back, letting the darkness inside of me pulse out in waves until he finally turns away.

“I just proposed last night. Didn’t I, cara mia?” This time when I kiss her, I turn her chin in my direction, allow myself a brief sample of those lips. It’s all I can do not to just press her against the doorframe and tear those ugly pants from her body. Fully aware of the two men whose gazes are fixed on us, I allow my lips to play leisurely over Riley’s, sampling her sweetness until her lips part and her body softens against mine.

When I finally turn back to the cops, my actions slow and deliberate, I can see that I’ve won. The younger one just looks dazzled to be here, and the older...

The older clearly has some issues, and I wouldn’t be surprised to discover that he’d had dealings with Carmine in the past. But I’m sure he’ll be handled easily enough.

“I trust these unfound accusations will be kept out of the press?” I don’t try to hide the implied threat. Young cop nods eagerly. Old cop bares his teeth.

“I don’t care if you are a Benenati. We have a job to do. You can’t just order us around—”

“Can’t I?” Letting go of Riley with one hand, I reach into my pocket, pull out a money clip. I pointedly count off bills, then hand half to each, twisting my lips into a cold smile when their eyes bug out of their heads.

On a cop’s salary, what I just pulled from my pocket is surely an outrageous amount of money. I know that it will buy their silence and their cooperation.

To me? It is less than nothing. They are less than nothing.

“Go.” I meet the stare of the older cop, and though he doesn’t look at all happy about it, he tips his head in acquiescence. “I wish to spend time with my future bride.”

The door slams behind us as I pull Riley back inside, the sound echoing throughout the massive entryway, loud enough to make the Swarovski crystals in the chandelier tremble.

“Son of a bitch.” I shout, one hand raking through my hair. The other slides to Riley’s hip, squeezes once.

The touch... anchors me. It is a strange sensation.

“What was that?” When I look at her, I find Riley is no longer trembling. Her face is instead flushed with rage.

It’s sexy as hell. It takes everything I have not to grab her, to slam her back against the wall and let us both work out our rage in the only way that I know of to express emotion.

But I have things to do. Things that cannot wait.

“That,” I reply slowly, forcing myself to step away, “was my stepsister setting you up.” It pains me, but I remove my hand from Riley’s waist. To touch her is to want her, and I can’t afford the distraction right now.

“She doesn’t want you to get married.” Riley doesn’t need me to explain things to her, a welcome change from the woman I usually see, whose brains have been addled by booze and drugs. “But why bother? You could just marry someone else.”

Someone like Emilia, to my stepsister’s way of thinking. Get rid of Riley, and then make another play.

“She overplayed her hand.” I pin my stare on Riley, note the way her pupils dilate as that inexplicable connection between us pulls tight.

“What do you mean?” Riley licks her lips, and I watch, fascinated. This woman is such a refreshing change from everything that is tired and familiar, I know Emilia has unexpectedly done me a favor.

Stepping closer to Riley, I gather her hair in my fist the way I did when I kissed her. It’s a mark of possession, and while she initially stiffens, her body melts against me as she submits.

“Emilia expected me to throw you to the wolves.” I smile humorlessly, and Riley’s lips part, just a bit.

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“But instead she gave me exactly what I wanted. Now, my dear, you have to marry me.”

Chapter Eight

RILEY

SURPRISINGLY, MATTEO LEAVES me alone after dropping his bombshell on me. He tells me to make myself at home, then strides away, stating that he has business to take care of that can't wait.

I watch his ass as he leaves. The realization that somehow, someway, I'm about to marry that ass seems like something from the Twilight Zone.

It's not a real marriage, Tremaine. Get it through your head before you get hurt. I know this, and yet... I can't help but feel a tremor of excitement.

The choice has been taken out of my hands—I'm embarking on this wild ride. And I know I could protest further, but let's be honest here.

What just happened, with the police? It scared the ever living hell out of me. Somehow, someway, I've found myself in way over my head. And marrying Matteo serves the dual purpose of letting me have the adventure that I not so secretly want, as well as protecting me.

But I only need so much protecting—maybe it's the trailer park trash in me, but the more I think about the way Matteo's bitch of a stepsister set me up, the more I feel

the need to prove myself.

If I'm going to be married to someone like Matteo Benenati, then I'll earn my keep by refusing to be an easy target. If I was in possession of my right mind, I'd never even dream of doing what I'm about to. But one thing I've never been able to tame, no matter how much I've tried, is my kneejerk reaction to all things unjust. It got the best of me in the airport, and it's getting the better of me now.

I don't care if Matteo's stepsister is a rich, powerful woman. I only care that she tried to get me sent to prison.

Oh, hell to the no.

The blind fury carries me right out the door of that monstrosity of a house, right into the car that's still waiting, and all the way to Benenati Enterprises, which is where Franco, the driver, thinks that Signorina Emilia will be today. I'm almost thwarted when I get inside the giant tower that houses my soon to be husband's empire—I'm dressed like a bum, after all, and security doesn't think I have any business there, strangely enough.

But as I argue with security, I note that, behind the lobby reception desk, an icy cool blonde has pressed a phone to her ear. She's one of those ones who is tall, slim, and effortlessly stylish, and just looking at her makes me want to turn and run.

That's the kind of woman that Matteo should marry, not a penniless American student with a whore—a literal whore—for a mother.

But though I can tell that she thinks she's being sneaky about it, this woman is very, very interested in me. And when she puts the phone down and approaches the place where I'm standing, hands on my hips, glaring at the security guards, I know that I don't mistake the slight glare that shoots out of her eyes.

I wonder if she's slept with Matteo.

I tell myself that it's none of my business, but I once again feel my self esteem take a hit. I can see it all over her face...

She's heard of me. But what, exactly, has she heard? Whatever it was, she's clearly not that impressed. I wouldn't be, either—I'm not who I would pick as a bride for a billionaire, either.

"Signorina Guerra says to send the American up." The woman's voice drips with disdain. Watching her wraithlike eyes look me over and effectively dismiss me, as if she's decided she has nothing to worry about, rids me of the worst of my self-consciousness, stiffening my spine once again, reminding me of why I'm here.

I may not run with the rich and famous. I may not have been born with a silver spoon up my ass. But that doesn't make me less. I know this, even if I sometimes have to work to believe it myself.

"Thank you." I arch an eyebrow, staring the girl right in the eye as the guards tell me which floor to go to. She seems startled that I'm being so direct, but I'm gratified when she flushes and looks away.

"Won the battle, but not the war," I mutter to myself as I head for the elevator. The snotty girl at the front desk? I have no doubt that she's a teddy bear compared to Matteo's stepsister.

Eyes scrape over me as I wait for the glass elevator, abrading me, chipping away at the shield that I've erected around myself. I don't blame them. I look like hell, and everyone here is a shark, dressed in suits and ties and sky high heels that still manage to scream business.

It's more than clear that I don't belong.

Matteo says you do, a little voice in my head insists. And though I shouldn't really care about the opinion of someone I've just met...

Remembering this infuses me with strength. So when the elevator opens onto the second highest floor in the massive building, I know that I appear calm and cool, even though inside I'm an uncertain, angry mess.

That calm facade is quickly tested. I step out of the elevator into a massive waiting area. Massive, elaborate... and empty.

Though there is a large, dark paneled reception desk, no one sits at it. A quick peek shows me steam still rising from a foamy latte, so someone was forced to leave their desk rather quickly.

The sliding door that sits behind the reception desk, like a nest guarded by a dragon, is firmly shut. I know the bitch who set me up is in there, and I want to crash through and pull her hair out strand by strand.

I don't want to give her the satisfaction. She knows I'm here. She's playing games.

I seat myself in a cushy armchair that faces the fortress of a door, and cross one leg over the other, wishing like hell that I was wearing something else.

I wish that for twenty long minutes, before Emilia finally deigns to appear. My head snaps up when the door slides open almost soundlessly... she must have some sort of remote opener, because she is standing in the middle of her office, revealed like a wicked witch dropping in from the sky.

She poses for a moment—there's no other word for it—allowing me to take in her

undeniable beauty. Tall and model thin, she shows off that body in a severe black suit that probably cost more than a car. She's not wearing anything beneath the blazer, and the combination is both intimidating and ridiculously gorgeous.

Her dark hair is in some kind of sleek updo, her skin and makeup are flawless. And her eyes sparkle with cold amusement as she saunters toward me, seating herself primly in a chair that faces me directly.

"Oh, look at those leggings. So cute. I remember wearing those back when they were in style." A plastic smile on her face, a cruel glint in her eyes, the woman crosses her legs, smooths a hand over her hair.

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Every movement she makes is... sensual. Like sexiness just seeps out of her pores. Sexiness, and a razor sharp perfection.

It makes me, in my Walmart discount clothes, feel fat, ugly, out of place. But if there's anything growing up in a trailer park taught me, it was how to fake it.

I stand abruptly, which should startle her, I think. But she just looks up at me with those jet black eyes, and for a moment I've thrown off of my tirade.

Anger, amusement, derision... something should be showing in those eyes, right? But there's nothing. They're just... dead.

It's creepy as hell. She reminds me of a snake poised to strike, the way she sits there, so still and perfect. Goose bumps pop out along my skin, a bead of cold sweat tracing my spine, and suddenly I question the brilliance of confronting this woman.

I don't know for sure, but... somehow, I think she could do a lot worse to me than try to get me thrown in jail.

In for a penny, Tremaine.

I look down into those dead eyes and swallow past the sudden knot of fear in my throat.

“Don't fuck with me again.”

There—there is a spark of something, a tiny light that has been nearly swallowed by

black. But it's gone so quickly that I might have imagined it, absorbed back into the darkness as those perfect, glossy lips curve into a smile.

Leaning forward, she places a finger against the line of my jaw, slides it downward in a touch that can only be described as... seductive. My heart thuds in my chest and my words catch in my throat as I wonder what the hell she's doing.

"So sweet. So... untouched, am I right? I can see why Matteo is so drawn to you." Emilia leans forward, and for a frantic second I think that she's going to kiss me. Instead I feel a sharp stab of pain when she digs her glossy burgundy nail into the tender flesh of my chin.

I swallow back a cry of pain. Back home we have wild dogs that live just outside the trailer park. If you look them in the eye, speak to them with authority, they'll leave you alone. But if you show even a hint of weakness, they'll go for your throat.

This woman is like those wild dogs, and I refuse to let her scent blood.

"I understand why you don't want Matteo to get married," I say carefully, making a point of maintaining eye contact. Too bad you don't have any scraps to throw, I think, and barely suppress a hysterical giggle. "But trying to get me thrown in jail when I haven't done anything wrong isn't any way to do things."

The dark eyes narrow to fathomless slits, and the nail on my chin presses further. I can't quite swallow my hiss as she breaks through my skin, and the rich, coppery scent of blood reaches my nose.

Holy shit, this bitch just drew blood. I rear back, unable to keep a leash on my temper any longer, but Emilia follows, standing and grabbing my chin in her fingers. She twists it until I cry out in pain.

“You jumped down the wrong rabbit hole, sweetheart.” Her breath is hot as it fans out over my face. “Let me enlighten you. Matteo and I belong together. We are part of the same world. The same world that won’t bat an eyelash if a delicious, untouched morsel like yourself gets eaten alive. In fact, we would enjoy it.”

My spine stiffens and my temper flares. I’m already quite aware that I’m out of my league here, but to hear her lump Matteo in with her? The man who took care of me for no reason but the goodness of his heart?

I won’t have it.

“Just because Matteo is part of this world doesn’t mean he’s anything like you.” And in that instant, I relax about my impending nuptials.

If Matteo has shown me anything over the last two days, it’s that he won’t hurt me. Quite the opposite, in fact... he defended me against this woman, right here.

And then it hits me.

“You didn’t just want me out of the way,” I say slowly, backing further away from Emilia as she tilts her head to the side, examining me as though I’m a bug she’d love to squash beneath her stiletto. “You want him for yourself.”

Oh man, that’s fucked. I may have hillbilly blood running through my veins, but even the people I know don’t get it on with their stepsiblings.

Though I assume that if there had been any actual getting it on, Emilia would be a lot less cranky.

Without warning, Emilia springs forward a step, landing her right in my face again. I want to flee, but lock my knees in place.

“You don’t know what the fuck you’re talking about, little girl.” Emilia gets right in my face, close enough that I can see a very thin sheen of perspiration film her forehead. “And if you know what’s good for you, you’ll walk away before something very bad happens to you.”

I may have little reason in my lie to believe in fairy tales, but one thing my past has shown me is that taking the easy road doesn’t lead to rewards. I’ll be honest and true to myself until I die.

“I didn’t steal the money.” I annunciate every word. “And Matteo knows that.”

Emilia smirks, and damn her, looks gorgeous even though she’s quite clearly half crazy. “No, but you could have.”

“Does he know?” I back up a step. Even though retreating goes against everything inside of me, I calculate in my mind how far away I am from the elevators, or even the stairs... she can’t follow me in those heels, I’m sure, and I want the hell out of here.

But not before I’ve made my point.

“Does he know how you feel about him?”

Emilia rears back as though I’ve struck her. She looks at me, wild eyed, beautiful lips parted. She stares at me wordlessly for a long moment—I’ve struck her dumb.

“Get out of my face.” She whispers, gesturing wildly toward the elevator. I back up quickly before she decides our chat isn’t actually over.

Turning, I walk briskly toward the elevator. She repeats herself, her voice growing louder each time.

Hurry up, hurry up. The elevators take entirely too long to arrive, and when the clear glass doors finally part, I all but throw myself inside. I don't dare slump against the walls with relief the way I want to, but I do cast one last look over my shoulder as I try to counter the adrenaline that has surged into my veins.

But Emilia is gone.

Chapter Nine

MATTEO

I AM UNEXPECTEDLY NERVOUS.

It doesn't sit well, as I pace the floor in my office, the box containing my mother's ring tucked into my pocket, pressing against my leg.

I am the son of Carmine Benenati. I've been wrapped in wealth and privilege my entire life, and have rarely had to ask for anything.

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But I'm asking today. And despite the fact that I'm fully willing to tie Riley up to ensure that she stays—to get my way—this feels strangely real.

I can't hold back the grin or the stiffening of my cock at the mental image of Miss Riley Tremaine, tied to my bed, her pale skin luminous against the sheets.

Tomorrow night, I'll have everything I want—the company in my hands, and Riley underneath me in my bed. Emilia even went to the trouble of putting the money in Riley's account, and a few well placed calls this afternoon have ensured that it will stay there... and I'll let the girl keep the bonus, for what my stepsister tried to do.

It's the most successful business transaction I've ever lined up. Why, then do I care so much what Riley will think when I put my mother's ring on her finger? Why am I even so set on doing just that?

Scowling, I stride out to my balcony, look out over the city. It's midday. I've arranged for a romantic dinner to be set out here later today, complete with candles and roses. After Riley is sated with food and wine, I'll give her the ring. To my way of thinking, just because this is business, doesn't mean it can't be pleasurable for us both.

Just because she'll be my wife for only a month, doesn't mean I can't do my best to counteract the idea of marriage that was planted in my head by my father and how he treated my mother.

I can't wait that long. We will still have the dinner... and maybe I can seduce her into my bed a night early... but I want my ring on her finger now.

And what I want, I get.

“Get a hold of yourself, man.” I sneer with disgust, all directed at myself. Real men don’t have nerves—my father drilled that into my head long ago. And I hadn’t thought I had any left.

I won’t deal with this sensation a moment longer. It’s appalling.

Digging my cell from my pocket, I dial the maid’s line. “Escort Miss Tremaine to my room.”

The woman—Alberta? Annalisa?—hums with displeasure.

“Signorina Tremaine, she has not returned yet.”

I am stunned into silence for a full moment. “What do you mean, she has not returned? Where did she go?”

The maid continues in my ear, but movement from below catches my eye. The sleek black town car that I use when Franco drives me places appears from between the thick olive and lemon trees that shield the house from view at the front gate. I didn’t give Franco any orders...

But I did tell Riley to make herself at home.

For the briefest of seconds I second guess my decision... what if the police had it right? What if she was ready to try to take me for every penny? It wouldn’t be the first time or, I’m sure the last.

But my mind is already rejecting the notion as the car slides to a stop in front of the fountain that graces the front courtyard. I watch Franco exit the driver’s side, but

before he can make it around the car, Riley shoves out of the back.

Shading her eyes from the sun, she looks up at the house. Like magnets, our eyes meet, and I know that my worries are not possible.

She is in need of money, yes. But I have known many women.

And this American art student, with her cheap clothing and no bullshit attitude, is different from all the rest. No woman I've ever known would have taken a knife for me, not even my own stepsister.

Emilia.

Yes, this straightforward little American wouldn't hesitate to stand up for what she thinks is right. And now I know where she went.

Pushing away from the terrace, I stalk out of my room, down the stairs, shouting her name. I find her in the kitchen, Alberta/ Annalisa dabbing at her chin with a cloth, the smell of antiseptic heavy in the air.

"What were you thinking?" The maid moves aside at one look from me, and I close in, catch Riley's chin in my hand. The cut isn't big, but the fact that it's there at all infuriates me. "Emilia tries to get you sent to prison, so you confront the dragon in her den?"

Riley studies me with a furrowed brow. "Your stepsister wants to marry you."

I wince, thinking of the night before, of how Emilia offered herself to me so blatantly. "She doesn't want me, she just doesn't want to lose Benenati Enterprises."

There is a sharp intake of breath from the maid; a narrow eyed look from me sends

her scurrying from the kitchen. Inwardly I roll my eyes—this news will work its way through the staff within the hour, if it hasn't already.

Riley snorts, a hugely inelegant sound which is nevertheless adorable I her. I tilt my head in question. "And why is that so amusing?"

She arches an eyebrow in return. "I wouldn't be so sure of that."

Unease trickles through my gut. "What do you mean?"

She simply purses her lips and shakes her head, then continues on as though I haven't asked anything.

"You believe that I didn't steal from you." Her words are matter of fact. "Even though I very well could have."

At this I grin. "Surely no bride of mine would behave in such a fashion, cara mia. Not when I've offered to care for your every... need."

Rather than responding to the flirtation with a breathy sigh, Riley rolls her eyes. "I've decided that I won't fight marrying you."

I'm slightly taken back by her tone. Yes, this is a business arrangement, but... still.

"Since Emilia put you in danger, you no longer have a choice." Tracing a finger over the small cut on her face, I narrow my eyes in warning.

And she rolls her eyes again.

"Whatever makes you happy." She smiles up at me wickedly, and my fingers tighten on her skin.

This woman is clear mountain air in the stale castle of my life. I want her. Now. But when I lean in to kiss her, she pulls away.

“I’m doing this for you.”

Wait... what? Her expression tells me she’s deadly serious. “When I went to see Emilia, I fully intended to just walk away. But that woman... I’m sorry, I know she’s your sister. But she’s fucking nuts. And it’s small of me, but I’m happy to help you out if it means thwarting her.”

“Stepsister,” I correct automatically. I’m not sure what to make of Riley’s pronouncement.

No one has ever wanted to... protect me... before.

It’s rather strange. And I’m not sure I entirely believe it.

“That’s the only reason, hmm?” Testing her, I let my fingers stroke down from her chin to her neck, then further to her shoulder, bared in the loose T-shirt. Bending, I press a kiss there, and savor her sharp intake of breath.

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I slide my lips up the smooth column of her throat, marking a path to her lips.

“I’m a virgin!”

I accidentally nip her chin as she all but shouts. Incredulous, I pull back to look her in the eye.

Her chin is raised defiantly, her chin flushed.

“I beg your pardon?” She must be joking. No woman her age could possibly be untouched—it’s unheard of in this day and age.

“You heard me just fine,” she shoots back, squaring her shoulders. “Still want to marry me?”

Heat is a tsunami, washing me over, pulling me in. It’s all I can do not to bend her over the counter, strip those ugly clothes away, and mark her as mine right in that moment.

With more control than I ever thought I possessed, I pull the ring box from my pocket silently. Her eyes blur a bit when I open the velvet case to reveal the ring that once sat on my mother’s finger, the one my father chose for her before money ruined them, when they were still in love.

It’s old fashioned, a flower constructed of small diamonds, on a white gold band. Emilia would never be caught dead with it on her finger.

But Riley... when I silently slide it on her ring finger, I find that it suits her perfectly.

“Are you sure?” Her mouth parted with shock, she holds her hand between us. I admire the way the diamonds set off the creamy skin of her hand. More than that, I admire the flush that still sits on her cheeks from my kiss.

“You’ll be Riley Benenati by tomorrow night.” I smirk a bit at her small, cute squeak. “If you think you can wait that long.”

“Ah. Speaking of waiting.” Her face flushing crimson, she places the hand with the ring on my chest. When her eyes meet mine they are wide and full of nerves. “I don’t want to. Can we... just...”

To demonstrate, she slides off the counter, her body rubbing against mine the entire way down. I stifle a groan as her women’s heat, her belly rub against my cock, which by now is rock hard.

She can’t seem to spit out the remaining words, but I understand. She wants me to relieve her of her virginity before she loses her nerve.

I can feel my face splitting into a wicked grin. No way in hell am I depriving myself of the pleasure of a virgin bride on our wedding night.

And it will be her pleasure too, I’m sure. So I shake my head, kiss the hand that wears the ring—my ring.

“Try not to get in any more brawls with my stepsister.” I stroke a hand over the small cut, still furious that Emilia—that the taint of my family—has already left a mark on her.

But it has begun, and it cannot be stopped. So I step away, even though my cock

shouts a protest, and smile at my soon to be bride.

“I will see you at our wedding. And I look forward to seeing you in white.”

Chapter Ten

MATTEO

I WAS FULLY AWARE OF what money could accomplish in a short span of time, but seeing Riley’s face when she stepped into the wonderland that Italy’s most expensive wedding planner had created on the estate overnight was well worth it.

My initial thought had been to have a small civil ceremony. There was no need for frills with a sham of a marriage, after all.

But Riley... tonight she will be giving me something very special. And though the feeling is a new one for me... I want to give her something in return.

And so I gave the wedding planners free reign, with one stipulation only... white. The constant reminder of Riley’s gift to me has me excited beyond measure, and I know that she will be thinking of it all day, as well.

I would gladly skip the entire party, eager to rush on to the evening’s planned activities. But in addition to knowing that Riley would be stunned, I knew that having an actual wedding, complete with paparazzi at hand to document the nuptials of Italy’s most eligible bachelor, might set Emilia back on her heels.

I need her to understand that, even though we both know this marriage is a sham, for the month that it exists I intend for it to be very real.

No one will harm my wife, in any way. That primal need to mark Riley as my own is

only strengthened when she walks down the white petal strewn aisle toward me, her sparkling eyes wide and nervous.

Though I didn't tell the planners my reason for choosing white, they seem to have understood, and have emphasized the theme with the bride herself. Riley's dress is white, of course, short and sleeveless and sweet. Her hair is a mass of innocent braids, all pulled back in a twist, and my fingers itch, to rip the short lacy veil away, to fist the long chestnut ribbons as I thrust inside of her.

I couldn't be more pleased with my choice of temporary bride. And that pleasure allows me to tamp away thoughts of marriage as I know it, a loveless, miserable union.

I have no choice in this matter. And no matter that I paid this woman to be here, I intend to make the most of this next month, for us both.

The ceremony passes in a blur of camera flashes and traditional Italian music. In the interest of keeping it on the smaller side of things, I decided that we wouldn't have a full meal for our guests, but rather wine and antipasti and dancing, followed by a timely exit by the bride and groom.

I am pleased with the dancing aspect as I pull my new wife into my arms for the first dance. She has had the same slightly dazed look on her face all day, and as press my body to hers I can't resist claiming her lips with my own, a dark promise of what is to come.

"Mmm." She sighs, the trepidation and nerves disappearing as we both ignore the camera flashes that explode, recording the kiss. "It's real then, isn't it? We're married."

"So it would seem." It's hard to remember, in that moment, that I barely know my

bride. “Of course, it’s not entirely legal... not yet.”

“Right.” Riley looks up at me, all big eyes, as she sinks her teeth into her lower lip.

“Keep doing that and we’ll be consummating this before we can make it anywhere private.” I warn her. Her cheeks flush, and I grin. “Careful, Mrs. Benenati. I might forget that you’re a bride for hire and fall for you for real.”

Riley stiffens in my arms, and I curse.

“Dio. Riley, I didn’t mean it like that.” Stupid Matteo. Stupid. I know I’m an arrogant ass, but somehow, I don’t want to be with her. “I just meant... this all feels real. But... it’s not.”

I don’t like the expression on her face. But then again, maybe it’s best that I remind her... remind us both.

That small internal click that I feel when we look at one another... that will fade with time. It’s for the best that this union comes with an expiry date.

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“Right.” I expect her to ream me out, to have a tantrum. Instead she grins up at me mischievously. “Matteo Benenati with his foot in his mouth. Some might say you were nervous... like a virgin.”

My body heats, my focus intensifying, narrowing until I see nothing but her.

“Don’t taunt the lion, little lamb.” I whisper against her ear, my teeth nipping at the tender lobe.

She shivers, her body pressing against me, and I’m done. I’m not used to waiting for things that I want, and now?

Riley Tremaine... Riley Benenati... is mine, officially, legally. At least for the next month. There is no reason to delay any longer.

I intend to spend the next month naked and in bed with her. It’s not such a bad deal, after all... sating myself on the only woman to ever intrigue me, and protecting my legacy by doing so.

“We’re leaving.” I’m feeling quite smug, entirely pleased with myself as I scoop Riley into my arms without warning and carry her to the house. Catcalls and well wishes, as well as yet more camera flashes, follow the movement.

Setting my bride down on her feet at the foot of the stairs, I kiss her soundly, long and hot and wet, pulling away only when her fingers slowly, tentatively, curl into my belt.

“Take me upstairs?” Her eyes are wide pools, her stare innocent and hot at the same

time. My fingers curl around her waist, then release quickly.

“Not yet.” Swallowing thickly, I wrench myself away. “We’re going somewhere first.”

Riley’s eyes narrow with determination, and she stands on her toes, pressing a kiss to my jaw. The smell of her perfume, her skin, are nearly my undoing... I’ve never wanted a woman more.

“I don’t want to wait.” Her fingers toy with my collar, and I allow her to undo my tie and loosen the top button of my shirt. “Let’s go after.”

“Mrs. Benenati. A little restraint, if you please.” Catching her wrists in my hands, I kiss her fingers, then step back. “It will be worth the wait, I promise.”

Franco enters through the front door, nodding when he sees us.

“Go get in the car.” I gently turn Riley in Franco’s direction, and can’t resist spanking her delectable ass, just hard enough to get her attention. Her cheeks flush, and I wonder if I can make it all the way to our destination without sliding inside of her.

She takes a step toward Franco, then pauses, turns. “Your doctor came to see me today, while I was getting dressed. He said that everything is good.” She holds my gaze, and a growl emanates from my throat.

“Get your ass in the car, woman.” I know what she’s saying.

I had my doctor pay her a visit, to give her a birth control shot. He had warned me that it might not work for up to a week, depending on timing.

But what she’s telling me is that the first time I make love to my wife, I can do it with

nothing between us.

My internal temperature rises as I watch her sashay through the front door, knowing full well what effect she is having on me.

I've never met anyone quite like her.

"You look like you're about to have a stroke, Matteo." Emilia's voice floats through the air from behind me, and I stiffen, remembering the events of the last two days, before whirling and baring my teeth at my stepsister.

Before I can say a word, she holds up her hands in a gesture of peace. "I'm just here to give my blessing."

"What?" This stops me in my tracks. I look her over suspiciously. Most weddings that I have seen Emilia attend, she has dressed in the skimpiest dresses imaginable, designed to display her fabulous body and detract attention from the bride. That's just who she is.

But right now she's wearing a cream colored, textured shift. It's the most demure I've ever seen her.

"What are you doing?" I know this woman. She's ruthless. I can't imagine her vacillating between offering herself to me and... this... within a few days.

She has the good grace to look down at her dress and flush. I've never, not once, ever seen Emilia Guerra blush. It edges me ever so slightly from suspicion into wanting to hear what she has to say.

She might be a ruthless demon, but she's the only family I have left.

“I came to apologize. And, like I said, to give my blessing.” She purses her lips, and the expression makes her seem softer than her usual man eater persona. “The company was never meant to be mine. I know that. It just... it hurts to be cut out. I overreacted.”

I don't quite know what to say. I want to be suspicious. I know the way Emilia's mind works. But...

Something rings true, and I find a crack in my own ruthless armor.

“Let's set up a meeting for when Riley and I are back.” Though it's a strange thing for me to do, I reach out and pat my stepsister on the shoulder.

I can't believe I've said it. I'm married now. I'm almost there—almost full owner of Benenati Enterprises.

But Emilia has worked long and hard, too. She deserves something. Though not to the extent that I would be left with nothing.

An expression that I can't quite understand crosses her face, but it morphs so quickly into a smile that I don't ponder it for too long.

“Be careful with her, Matteo.” Emilia says shrewdly, her eyes narrowing. “She's not your usual type.”

Anger flashes white hot. “I'm fully aware of that. It's why I like her.”

Emilia smiles knowingly, and I grind my teeth together. “Yes, but Matteo... this marriage... it's only for a month. You know that you'll be able to walk away after, because you know that money, excitement, woman will be waiting for you.”

“I don’t like where you’re going with this.” I glare, even as her words worm their way into my consciousness.

“I’m just saying, Matteo. A girl like Riley? She’s not going to be able to help falling for you. She’s not used to our kind of lifestyle. She could walk away with a broken heart if you’re not careful.”

I shake my head irritably, even though Emilia’s words are a punch straight to my gut. Two days ago, I wouldn’t have cared about Riley’s thoughts or feelings. The idea of her being crushed at the end of this all wouldn’t have been my problem, so long as I got what I wanted.

Now... I don’t like the idea of her hurting. Not at all.

“I know what I’m doing,” I snap at Emilia. She smiles.

“Just be gentle.” She places a kiss on my cheek, and it makes me think of how much smaller Riley is. Despite all of her bravado, she’s fragile when in this world. It’s my job to protect her, not to hurt her more.

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As I bid Emilia goodbye and leave the house, heading for the car where my bride is waiting for me to take her to our wedding night, I wonder...

I wonder if I've made a terrible mistake.

Chapter Eleven

RILEY

SOMETHING HAS CHANGED.

Before we left the Benenati estate, Matteo was... well... the husband of my dreams. No one looking at our wedding would ever have guessed that it was a sham... not even myself. Though we could easily enough have had a civil service, he had clearly gone to not a little trouble to make sure that the day held pleasant memories for me.

When he'd carried me off of the dance floor, I had felt feelings stirring for him that I'd never felt before. Since we'd known each other for such a short amount of time, I guess I would have to say that I had a crush. Yes, a crush... on my husband.

Which is just too weird for words.

I hadn't known what to expect, exactly, while we drove to wherever he was taking me. But after our flirtation, and the fact that we'd both admitted how much we wanted each other, I had thought... I don't know. That there would have been some kissing. Maybe even more... and I wanted it. Was even anticipating it.

But when Matteo slid into the car after me, something had changed. He'd gone from playful, full of sensual promise, to withdrawn. Tense.

I'd tried to tease him back to the way he'd been, flirting as best as I knew how. When my hand had brushed his leg, he'd jumped as though I'd burned him and retreated to the far side of the car.

It was a long ride to our destination... a massive, stunning white yacht. By this point I wasn't surprised to discover that it belonged to Matteo.

But now I'm sitting alone in the room that he showed me to... a room separate from his own! He bid me goodnight, then shut the door in my face.

"Damn it." This kind of turnaround doesn't happen without a catalyst. I sit on the bed, worrying the silken duvet between my fingers as I turn things over in my mind. Though my kneejerk reaction is to feel rejected, when I think about the look in his eyes, the way he kissed me before I went out to the car...

Someone said something to him to make him wary. And though I didn't see her there, I'd bet money that I don't have that it was Emilia.

My irritation is a palpable thing as I pace, sort through the contents of the bag that Alberta, one of the maids, packed for me—everything is brand new—and try to figure out what to do.

The only reason that the idea of this marriage is tolerable to me is because it's an excuse for me to be a bit wild, to explore the connection between Matteo and I that is apparent every time we're in the same room.

I'm dying to explore that connection... to explore it all the way.

And, I think as I come across a little white nightie, I'll be damned if that bitch Emilia is going to ruin my honeymoon with my sexy Italian fake husband.

My heart begins to hammer, pounding against my ribcage as I struggle to unzip the back fastening of my wedding dress. After it falls to the floor, I pick it up, hang it neatly in the closet.

I'm left in the strapless bra, bikini panties, thigh high stockings and heels that consist of the rest of my wedding day ensemble. I wonder who selected them... the wedding planners, or Matteo?

The thought of him deliberating, selecting these very garments for me to wear has my blood pumping through my veins, hot and fast. Slowly I remove the heels, the stockings, then the rest. The nightgown slides over my head easily, settling into place like it was made for me... and for all I know, it was.

Swallowing thickly, I turn to look at myself in the mirror, and almost swallow my tongue.

I'd worried that I wouldn't look like myself today... that I would be primped and polished until nothing of Riley remained. And while I was certainly pampered with a haircut, a massage, a pedicure, I still look like me. Just... more expensive.

The nightgown doesn't alter this. The pretty braids, the soft makeup... I look like a blushing bride. A virgin one, waiting for her husband in a little white nightgown that screams both innocence and sex appeal.

You are attractive, Riley. You can do this. You can seduce your... husband.

"Hoo boy." Before I lose my nerve, I light the scented candles that are strewn about the room, note the vase full of white roses and the empty ice bucket.

It reinforces the notion that at some point Matteo's plans were right in line with my own. And now I'm going to go coax them back into that line.

I hurry to the door of the room that Matteo has told me is mine, before I can lose my nerve. The corridor is dark, quiet—Matteo assured me that it is private, off limits to the crew.

At the end of the hall, I can make out the soft glow of a lamp. Exhaling heavily, I force myself to pad along the hardwood in my bare feet.

The room is a den of sorts... a very exquisite, expensive man cave. A chair and a sofa upholstered in hunter green leather are bolted to the floor, and teak bookshelves line the walls.

He has music playing... Coldplay, I realize after listening for a second. The selection surprises me... Matteo seems steeped in the traditions of his family, his culture. I don't know why that means I thought he'd be listening to a tarantella or something.

It reminds me that there is much I don't know about my husband. And, I think as my eyes search the room and find him silhouetted against the railing on the deck outside, much that I would like to.

I enter the room silently; the smell of his scotch hangs heavily in the air. My heart leaps into my throat as I take a moment to study him, the way the moonlight outside plays over the strong features of his ridiculously handsome face... a profile that holds more than a hint of melancholy.

I want him, for however long I can have him.

I could watch him like this forever. But as though that connection between us is a tangible thing, he stills, like a wolf scenting his prey.

He turns, and my pulse skitters.

“Riley. What are you doing here?” Slowly, as though he is being moved against his will, his gaze moves from my face, down my neck, my breasts, my belly and legs and back up. I burn everywhere he looks, his stare awakening something in me that I’ve never felt before.

I shift, nervous, and when his eyes widen I realize that the movement has made my braless breasts sway beneath the very thin silk.

“You know why I’m here.” My voice doesn’t sound like my own brash one, full of nerves as it is. Catching the hem of my little nightgown in nervous fingers, I twist it, all the while drinking in my new husband.

His shirt has been untucked from his slacks, and is unbuttoned, revealing golden skin stretched tight over... oh my. Over one hell of a stomach. Clearly when he’s not cooped up in the office, Matteo Benenati works out.

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And, to my delight, that delicious chest is dusted with some soft, fine whorls of hair. More of that hair starts beneath his navel, leading straight into his slacks, emphasizing the jut of ridiculously sexy hipbones.

I'm on fire, just from looking at him.

What will it be like when he touches me?

Belatedly, as I drag my stare back up to his face, I realize that he hasn't responded... and yet, the way he's looking at me, not to mention the way the front of his pants have tented out, tells me that he's burning for me every bit as much as I am for him.

"Matteo, it's our wedding night." I swallow thickly, then hold out my hand to him. "Won't you come to bed?"

His eyes darken, and wicked intent passes over his face. My nipples tighten, and heat throbs between my legs.

How did you ever think this would be a bad idea, Riley? You idiot.

He takes one step toward me, then another. I tremble as he reaches for me, closing my eyes.

Those eyes fly open when, rather than a sensual caress, I find firm hands clasping my shoulders and gently pushing me away.

"What the hell, Matteo?" Indignant and exposed, I cross my arms over my chest and

glare. “You were the one who said that since you had to be faithful to your wife that I would have to be... you know... your real wife. And you want it. I know you do. So what the hell are you doing?”

My voice cracks; I’m very close to shrieking. But this is a rather delicate situation, and after the ways in which my life has been turned upside down in the last few days, I’m feeling more than a little bit on edge.

Matteo closes his eyes, rubs his fingers against his temples. When he looks at me again, his expression is set.

“Yes, the contract states that I have to be faithful.” His stare flickers from my face to my breasts and back, and his face reddens with tension. He kinda looks like he’s going to have a heart attack. “But it does not state that we are required to... consummate... the marriage.”

Again he closes his eyes.

“Go to bed, Riley. I’ll see you in the morning.”

My mouth falls open, and I can feel mortification painting my skin pink.

Maybe I’ve misunderstood everything. Logically, I don’t think so, but here I am, almost naked, throwing myself at my husband, and he’s turning me away...

“You don’t want me. I see.” It’s the only logical conclusion. I don’t want to be the girl who cries, so I blink rapidly to hold back the tears as I turn and scurry toward the door. “I understand. I’ll be going now.”

And I do understand. I know I’m not exactly hard on the eyes—and when I looked in the mirror just moments ago, I really thought I looked pretty—but I’m not leggy, or

thin, or glamorous. I don't look like any of the women he's used to seeing.

I don't look anything like Emilia.

"Damn it, Riley. Get back here!"

I ignored Matteo's shout as I run back down the hallway. His hand closes over my upper arm as I skid into my room; I try to close the door, but he's right there, blocking the way.

"Go away." Anger burns away the film of tears, and I glare daggers at my husband.
"Go far, far away."

I push at him, then gasp when he slams the door, then pushes me back against it. I squirm, trying to break free, but he covers me with that long, lean body, holding me in place.

The heat of his skin pressing against mine is maddening. And as I wiggle, I can feel exactly how hard he is, the length of his erection pressing into the softness of my stomach.

He wants me just as much as I want him. So what the hell?

"Let me go." I try to sound as calm as I possibly can. I just want him to go, so I can be alone with my embarrassment and misery.

The thought of spending the next month like this does not sound appealing.

Rather than doing as I asked, fury crosses his face. I suck in a deep breath as, without warning, he grinds his rock solid pelvis against my softer frame.

“This has nothing... nothing... to do with me not wanting you, so get that out of your gorgeous head right now.” The grinding turns to a slow roll, and my head falls back as delicious sensations take me over.

I open my eyes to find him looking right at me, the same desperate need that I feel mirrored there.

His mouth is just a whisper away from my own; a thin ribbon of space is all that keeps us from devouring one another.

And yet he doesn't make a move.

It's infuriating.

Grinding my teeth together in temper, I push away from the wall, ducking under his arm and escaping his grasp. He reaches for me, but I've caught him by surprise.

I scamper halfway across the luxurious room then turn. Before he can follow me, I fist my hands in the hem of my nightgown and, with a deep gulp of air for bravery, pull it over my head and throw it away.

“Oh my God.” I'm standing in front of Matteo Benenati, the most eligible man in all of Italy... and I'm naked. I want to squawk and dive under the bedcovers, but I force myself to hold absolutely still as he devours me with his eyes.

I can feel my limbs starting to shake with the strain of the unknown when a garbled sound rises from the depths of his throat.

“Fucking hell, Riley.” Matteo glares at me, his fists clenching and releasing, over and over again. The small movement makes the muscles of his chest ripple, and I can't tear my gaze away.

When he strips off his shirt with one swift move, I hold my breath.

“I’m a man,” he says darkly, prowling – there’s no other word for it—across the room toward me.

“That fact is readily apparent.” My voice sounds faint even to my own ears. I can’t swallow the small cry when he plunges one hand into my hair, loosening my mass of braids, the other hand finding my waist, and his lips attacking my own.

I groan, long and loud, at the decadent sensation of my bare breasts rubbing against the solid planes of his chest.

“Matteo—” I’m not a begging kind of woman, but in that moment, I’m ready to do absolutely anything to get him to follow through on the promises that he is making with his kisses and his hips.

Finished with my braids, his hands cup my bottom, and he lifts me, pressing me against the firmness of his erection.

And then I’m lying on the bed, completely naked, the sensual feel of smooth satin at my back. My husband stands over me, bare-chested, like a Greek god, and finally, finally, I can see that I’ve broken through his restraint.

My mouth goes dry as he loosens the fastening of his trousers, then reaches for one of the white roses in the ornate crystal vase. Seating himself on the bed beside me, he stops me with a stern look when I reach for him.

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He presses the soft petals of the rose to my lips, further shushing me, and my pulse accelerates, as does my breathing.

“I won’t take from you what I don’t deserve to have.” He quells my protest with another dark, dangerous look. My spirits sink, but then he trails the rose from my lips, down the column of my throat, and into the valley between my full breasts, where he pauses.

“Whatever you do, Mrs. Riley Benenati.... do not move.”

Chapter Twelve

MATTEO

THE WOMAN IS KILLING ME.

I thought that my eyes might bulge right out of my head, first when she showed up in the office wearing that little slip of nothing... and now, again, with her entire luscious body spread out before me to enjoy.

Every fiber of my being wants to lose myself in what she is so sweetly offering. And the Matteo of just a few days ago would, without thinking twice.

But Emilia... for once, Emilia has been the voice of reason. She is so very right...

Riley is nothing like the women who are normally a part of my life. She needs to be treated with care. And that’s why I’m trying to be a man here, even though the way

she's taunting me is just about killing me.

I'm so serious. I feel like I might die. I'm in physical pain.

Riley lies on the bed before me, her smooth, pale skin cast with intriguing shadows from the flames of the candles that she lit—that I meant to light myself, to make our wedding night romantic.

Her eyes are half shut, and her focus is entirely on me. It makes me feel like more of a man than I ever have in my life.

And it's driving me crazy, trying to hold on to my restraint when a fundamental part of me wants to make her my wife in every sense of the word.

I need something. More, I need to give something to her.

"Matteo?" Riley props herself up on her elbows. The movement makes her breasts jiggle, and I close my eyes and count backward from ten.

When I open them again, I cast a deliberate, hungry stare down the length of her body. I've never seen a woman like her in the skin... never knew what I was missing. But now I know what wonder there is in full hips, in the softness of a woman's stomach... in the delicious movement of full, natural breasts, and in the softness of thighs that aren't stick thin.

I'll never be happy with anything else. And I don't quite know how to resist sinking into all of that softness.

"I believe I told you not to move, Mrs. Benenati." The challenging spark in Riley's eyes tells me that she is bound and determined to see this through.

I can't. But I can do... something.

“And if I do?” Those pale eyes of hers catch my own, hold, and I can feel my pulse stutter. Dio, but this woman is gorgeous. Like, seriously beautiful.

I place my hand flat on her chest, my palm in between her breasts. She gasps, a sexy little sound, as I push her back down so that her head is once again cushioned by the soft pillow.

“I mean it. Do not move, or I'll tie you in place.”

Her lips fall open a bit in shock, but rather than repulsion, I watch her squirm a little bit.

Sweet little Riley Tremaine likes that idea. Heaven help me.

“Eyes closed.” I brush the rose over her lids to demonstrate. She sighs heavily, but does as I've told her.

“Not a word,” I warn her as I start to trail the rose down her face, brushing it over her cheekbones, the line of her jaw. Her lips part beneath the petals as I stroke her mouth, her tongue darting out to swipe over her lower lip, and I'm hard pressed to hold back my own groan.

In silence, I trace the shadows cast by the candlelight over her collarbones, her shoulders. She hugs out a small laugh when I reach the sensitive skin beneath her arms, but true to my command, she remains silent.

Her body tenses when I begin to stroke the flower over her right breast. With long strokes, I trace stripes from the plump base to the erect tip, over and over again, savoring the way her breathing quickens and grows shallow and rapid.

Her teeth sink into her lower lip, and her fists clench in the sheets. I smile grimly, my cock hardening even further, as I watch the flush of arousal turn her skin the most delicious shade of pink.

A sharp cry echoes from her throat when I love past her breasts, pleased to see the way the nipples have contracted tightly and darkened. My own throat goes dry as I continue to play the rose over the soft planes of her belly, enjoying the way she trembles when I reach her lower abdomen.

She moans with frustration when I skim just slightly over that space between her legs, instead moving to tease the sweet skin of her inner thighs with the soft petals.

“Matteo!” Her eyes fly open as I trace more lines, this time leading up those soft inner thighs, to the place that I know needs my attention. Her eyes are wide, glassy with need, and it humbles me that she’s nearly undone by something so simple.

I don’t chide her for speaking—I’m nearly at the end of my own control, as well. It’s harder for me to breathe as I watch the head of the rose glide into the space between Riley’s legs, gathering the moisture there.

That’s where I want to be. But I can’t... I can’t take that from her. I don’t deserve it.

“Matteo, please!” Propping herself up on her elbows again, Riley looks down the length of her body, eyes avidly taking in the sight of the stark white petals stroking over her creamy skin. Her pupils dilate, and knowing just how aroused she is drives me wild.

Still, I hold on to my last sliver of control—hold on to it until she falls back to the pillow, closes her eyes, and begs.

“Matteo, please... I... I need... more.”

I move without even thinking, throwing the rose aside carelessly. Shifting my weight on the bed, I spread her thighs with both hands, drop a kiss onto the softness of her belly, savoring the whimper.

Then slowly, so slowly, I slide my hand between her legs. Her eyes again fly open, and our gazes lock as I slide my fingers through the slickness.

“Is this okay?” I barely recognize the sound of my own voice, hoarse with need. She arches against me in response, and I chuckle darkly.

I wonder if she’s ever done anything like this before. I wonder if she’s ever been naked with a man. The thought that I might be the very first makes me want to thump my chest like a caveman, ridiculous as that sounds.

I have to make this good for her.

My focus narrows, until the only thing I’m aware of is Riley—the way she responds to my touch. I watch her face intently as I find the centre of her pleasure and circle overtop, greedily taking in the way her hips twist beneath my touch, the way she gets louder, making throaty, sexy little cries.

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She's close, I can tell. Hell, I am too, just from giving this to her. But this is about her, not me, so I push away my own rising need, concentrating on what brings her pleasure.

Slowly, so slowly, I slide a finger inside. Her wet heat closes around me, and for a fleeting moment I wonder if I'm about to lose control like a teenager. She's hot, and tight, and I want more than anything to bury myself inside of her.

Think about someone other than yourself, Matteo.

My arms tremble with restraint as I push inside of her, pull out, push in again. On either side of where I kneel, her thighs start to tremble; her cries become faster, louder, until one keening cry rises above the rest, and her heat clenches down on my hand so tightly that I see stars.

I'm not quite sure what to do after that... I've never in my life been in this situation. So I lie down beside her, pull the duvet over her naked body, and pull her in close. I wonder if she's going to want more once she's thinking straight again—and after watching her come undone, I don't know that I have the strength left to resist.

But instead she nuzzles in, falls asleep with her head on my chest. For the longest time I lie there, watching her innocent face as her chest rises and falls with the slow, deep breaths of sleep.

She deserves so much better than me. But I no longer know if I can resist.

RILEY

When I wake up, I'm alone. I sit straight up in bed as the events of last night come flooding back through my consciousness.

"Oh my God."

Holding up my left hand, I study the diamond encrusted eternity band that has joined the massive engagement ring that I barely had a chance to get used to. They both flash in the early morning sunlight, reinforcing that this is not a dream. I'm married. To Matteo Benenati.

And despite our agreement, he won't have sex with me.

I can feel my skin heating, partly with embarrassment, partly because, well, wow, when I shift on the bed, wincing at the slight pinch between my legs.

Last night wound up being some kind of magical. I fully believe Matteo now when he says he wants me.

If nothing else, I saw the evidence of that quite plainly last night, felt it pressed against the small of my back as I fell asleep.

I won't take from you what I don't deserve to have.

"Screw that." I shove away the covers, stretching. Despite almost getting thrown in jail two days ago, and despite the stitches that have started to itch like crazy, I feel better than I have in... well, ever.

Though it makes my inner feminist wince, it's amazing, not having to worry about money. People may sniff at that notion, but let me tell you, when you've never gone a single day in your life without counting pennies, that kind of freedom is mind blowing.

Add in the feelings that are growing towards Matteo... and I'm excited to get up and face the day.

An entire day in which to bring him around to my way of thinking.

Grinning, I rifle through my bag. I consider several options before snipping the tags off of a siren red scrap of a bathing suit and a white and red floral sundress. The bathing suit isn't something that I would ever have even considered wearing before.

But Matteo has made it clear that he likes the way I look, and I'm going to use that to my advantage.

He's going down.

Dressed in the skimpy bathing suit and the little sundress, skin slathered with sunscreen, I wander out of my room in bare feet. The hallway is dim and empty, but I can hear voices, so I follow the sound up to the deck of the yacht.

I stop short the second I'm through the doorway. I remember thinking last night that the yacht was big... but with brilliant water in every shade of blue and green stretching out as far as I can see in every direction, the sensation that we are just a tiny speck in a massive world is nearly overwhelming.

It's humbling and awe-inspiring in its beauty, and I find myself frozen in place, just enjoying the rhythmic beat of the waves slapping against the side of the boat.

The sound of utensils rattling brings me back to myself. I turn to find Matteo seated at a small table set for two, those dark eyes of his watching me intently.

"Good morning." His face is expressionless. A hint of fear shoots through me—has he changed his mind about me yet again?

But I'm getting to know him well enough that I can just barely discern the fine lines of tension that bracket his mouth.

Well, isn't that interesting.

"Did you sleep well?" I ask sweetly, pulling out a chair. A crew member rushes over to assist me but I'm seated before he can reach me.

He's cute, with dark hair, olive skin, and bright green eyes. The name Dante is stitched onto the pocket of his crisp polo shirt. I smile brightly at him, and he winks back, pouring me a cup of steaming caffè e latte.

I'm not interested in him, or in anyone but Matteo, but his appreciative glance buoys my spirits a bit. Especially when I look over the rim of my cup to find Matteo scowling at the poor boy.

"Be nice," I say mildly, eyeing the plate that he shoves my way, a frown still marring his face.

"Eat." To demonstrate, he selects a cookie, bites into it with more force than is strictly necessary. I stifle a grin.

"I'll never get used to eating cookies for breakfast." Studying the plate, I choose a piece of fette biscottate, a cookie-like hard bread that I've learned from experience is slightly less sweet than the other traditional breakfast offerings in Italy.

When I bite into it and lick at my lips to catch the crumbs, Matteo's eyes follow me, and unbidden, heat settles in the aching place between my legs.

Now, though, now it's my turn for restraint. He's not getting anything more from me unless he's willing to give me everything.

I munch on my bread, admiring the view, though from the corner of my eye I can see Matteo stewing. I know he's thinking on how to broach what happened between us last night, but I don't intend to help him.

"I hope you understand about last night." Matteo finally breaks the silence, pulling his sunglasses down to cover his eyes. Like any good college graduate, I've taken Psych 101, and know that this is basic defensive body language.

Good. He'll need his defenses.

"I absolutely understand." Finished with my bread, I push away from the table and stand. When relief washes over his face I can't help but smirk.

Catching the hem of my sundress in my hands, I lift it up and over my head, revealing my skimpy red bikini.

The coffee that Matteo has just sipped comes flying right back out of his mouth as he sputters. "What the hell are you doing, you pazzo woman?"

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“I’m going to sunbathe.” Innocently, I gesture to the pristine white loungers that are arranged at the far end of the deck. “Unless you had another idea?”

I try my best to sound seductive, but think I probably sound a bit more like I have a head cold than anything. Still, I’m gratified to see that Matteo can’t take his eyes off of my body. It gives me the confidence to strut across the deck, the wooden planks warm beneath my feet.

Dante doesn’t try to hide the fact that he’s checking me out. It makes me feel good as I settle myself in one of the loungers.

“Get your eyes back in your head or get off the boat!” Matteo snaps at the young man as he pushes away from the table so fast that he upends his chair. He storms across the deck after me, coming to loom over the lounge.

“You’re blocking my sun.” Shading my eyes, I look up at him, and for a moment I tremble, thinking about his analogy of lions and lambs.

He’s one mad lion.

“I thought you said you understood.” He adjusts his position, and I see that he’s trying to block from view of the crew.

Well, then. Matteo is jealous. My feelings aren’t entirely one sided.

“I do understand.” Lying back, I close my eyes, a show of nonchalance, though I really want to keep looking at my big, beautiful Italian stallion. “I just don’t agree.”

“Put your damn clothes back on,” he hisses, looking from side to side. I can’t help it then—I laugh. Never did I ever think I would see Matteo being a prude.

“You or your staff purchased this bathing suit for me.” I remind him, enjoying his scowl. “I’ll change it on one condition.”

“And what is that?” His voice is impatient. Over his shoulder I can see Dante grinning at me... if Matteo saw him right now, I think he just might throw him overboard.

I sit up, and all I can see is Matteo. I shift on the lounge, feel my breasts jiggle with the movement. Matteo curses under his breath, and I watch, fascinated, as a bulge appears in the front of his casual shorts.

“Are you prepared to make me your wife?” Despite all the teasing, this question is dead serious.

“You are my wife.” I can see his range of emotions, lust and irritation and a jumble of other things. I suppose it’s a good thing, that he’s trying to be so noble, but what’s frustrating is that he’s not listening to me.

I know what I want. And I want him.

“Not yet, I’m not.” There. Challenge issued. I lie back down and close my eyes.

And laugh quietly to myself when Matteo mutters a curse and flops down beside me.

Chapter Thirteen

MATTEO

I KNOW WHAT she's doing. Riley of the cheap yoga pants is playing dirty, and damn it, I gave her the ammunition when I ordered one of the shoppers at a high end department store to pack a bag full of sexy honeymoon clothes for my bride.

I had anticipated ripping those bits of fabric from her body. And what I thought had started as a simple matter of being noble has turned into a challenge.

One the one hand, it's fascinating to watch my sweet virgin bride own her sexuality like this.

On the other... I'm dying a slow, very painful death. All I've gotten in the last two days for being noble is a sunburn from guarding her on deck and a major case of blue balls.

Though I haven't sullied her with my darkness. So that's something. But when I think of resisting her for the rest of the month, I actually feel the pain.

Right now we are having cena—dinner—at the little table on the deck. We've made it through an aperitivo of olives and martinis, an antipasto course, and a primo—first—course of wild mushroom risotto.

The secondo is delivered, a flaky, steamed fish that one of the crew members caught just hours ago. Riley murmurs her appreciation, reaching for her wineglass, and the movement causes her breasts to press against the fabric of her sundress. The cotton is pale yellow and tissue thin, and I can clearly see the outline of nipples that make my mouth water.

“Stop.” I don't even realize that I've spoken, that I've risen to my feet. Riley pauses with her wineglass halfway to her lips, surprised.

“Please. Just stop.” I gesture to her dress, then rake my hand through my hair with

frustration. “I’m trying to do the right thing here.”

My bride’s temper snaps like a whip, almost audible in the warm evening air. She stands too, the movement arching her spine, pressing those breasts forward, and I think I’m about to go crazy.

“That’s all well and good, Matteo. But don’t I get a say in what I want?” Those wraithlike eyes shoot pale sparks of temper.

“No. You do not.” Goaded past restraint, I reach across the table, catch my fingers in the front of her dress. Pulling her halfway across the table, I kiss her, the embrace hot and hard and full of frustration.

She blinks at me as I release her, pressing her fingers to her lips, the gesture innocent and sensual.

I let out a gargled sound of pure frustration, and storm away from the table before I lose my mind entirely.

I head directly for the room in which I’ve been sleeping. I can’t remember the last time I’ve gone so long without sex, especially not when I’ve been teased and taunted by the woman of my dreams at every turn.

I’m barely through the door when I start to unfasten the zipper of my shorts. Sliding them over my hips, I shove them down, kick them away, then pull my shirt up and off.

I need relief. I should go for a shower, but that would take too long. Instead I throw myself down on the bed and wrap my erection in my fist, the bite of pain.

I’m too far gone to have any kind of restraint when Riley slams open my door,

gasping when she sees what I'm doing. Temper has added red to the sun kissed glow she's gotten while torturing me over the last two days. Knowing exactly where her tan lines are under that dress doesn't help my self-control.

My hand slows, but doesn't stop. Riley's eyes are riveted on me as she slowly crosses the room to stand at the foot of the bed.

"Matteo." Gone are all traces of seduction, of flirtation—if I had had any doubts about what she truly wanted, this moment would have answered them. "Please. Let me."

Rising quickly, I pull her into my arms, take her mouth with a kiss that demonstrates every bit of my pent up frustration. Setting myself on the edge of the bed, I slide a hand between her legs, urge her thighs apart, then settle her on my lap, straddling me.

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When her core settles against my rigid cock and I realize that she's not wearing underwear, I make up my mind.

"Are you sure this is what you want?" My hands fist in her dress, but I manage the strength to pull away, to look into those eyes.

"More than anything." There's no hesitation on her face as she brushes a soft, sweet kiss over my lips. "Please, Matteo. I know it's not for real but... I want to truly be your wife."

Growling low in my throat, I tug at the thin fabric of her dress. It rips down the middle, and I shove it away, over her shoulder, down her arms. She's entirely naked underneath, leaving us skin to skin for the very first time.

It's different than any other time I've been with a woman, and I don't entirely understand why. I just know that I don't like it when she reminds me that our marriage is a sham. It redoubles my need to mark her, to make her mine.

My hands roam over her, discovering her body, but she seems to have other ideas. Sliding from my lap, she drops to her knees between my parted thighs, looking up at me with wide eyes.

The sight of her, glowing from the sun and arousal, on her knees just for me, is my undoing. I cradle her jaw in my palm, rub a thumb over her lips.

"You don't have to do this." This is her first time. I want it to be all about her.

She shakes her head, resisting my effort to pull her back up. “I want to.” Her hand trembles as she reaches for me, wraps her hand around my shaft, and I can feel my eyes roll back in my head at the tentative but long desired touch.

“Tell me if... if I’m not doing it right.” She inhales deeply, then places her lips around me.

Oh sweet baby Jesus.

I freeze in place, afraid to ruin this moment. To do something that will take away from it for her. Her movements are slow, slightly awkward, but I would never dream of asking for it any other way.

The sensation, the emotion... it’s too much, too intense. When the base of my spine starts to tingle, I cup my hands beneath her elbows, pull her off of me, urge her up.

She sighs dreamily as I take her mouth in a gentle but hungry kiss, my tongue parting her lips, urgency increasing as she meets my demands.

I’m tempted to just lie back and urge her on top of me, but my guess is that she’s going to want some guidance. So with more patience than I ever imagined myself capable of, I gather her in my arms, then stand and place her gently down on the sheets.

“You are exquisite, Riley.” The late evening sun filtering in through the small window highlights her body, and I can’t resist tracing a finger over the tan lines that outline her breasts.

I won’t insult her by asking again if she’s sure, but there’s one thing I do have to double check.

“The doctor... he said you are protected now?” I have condoms, packed as backup in case Riley’s shot had been administered at the wrong time of her cycle, but I hate the thought of anything between us.

She nods, ducking her head, hiding behind a fall of hair. Climbing onto the bed, straddling her hips, I brush the soft locks out of the way again.

“I want to see you.” Keeping my stare fixed on hers, I dip my head, take one of her breasts into my mouth. She gasps and arches against me, and I close my eyes, doing my best to not hurry things along.

“You can see me next time. We can go slow next time.” Wrapping her legs around my waist, Riley hooks her ankles behind my back, bringing my hardness flush with her wet heat. I can feel my eyes crossing.

“I want this to be good for you.” Working my hand between our bodies, I slide my thumb over her center, find her wet and ready.

“You’ve made me wait long enough.” She grins up at me breathlessly, rocking her pelvis against mine. “Now. I want you now.”

Her smile is my undoing. The air thickens, the moment intensifying as I shift position, hands sliding over her thighs, urging her to let them fall to the bed. I bend to press a kiss along the crease where one leg meets her stomach before aligning our bodies.

“I hear that this might hurt.” I warn her, but truthfully, I don’t know. If I’ve taken someone’s virginity before, they haven’t informed me.

“I want it.” Face set stubbornly, Riley arches her hips; the way I’m pressed against her finds me sliding in, just a bit.

“Oh. Oh, God.” She claws at my biceps, squirming on the bed beneath me. I tense my muscles, using everything I have not to just take her.

I hold as still as I can, allowing her time to adjust to what must be a strange sensation. Christ, she’s tighter than I could ever have dreamt, lush and wet and welcoming.

My arms begin to shake, and a bead of sweat rolls down my temple.

“More.” Riley’s hands slide from my biceps to my hips, urging me onward. I move forward another inch, thinking to stop again, but she smacks my ass with her palm in her eagerness.

I laugh out loud, and she joins in.

“Sorry. Just... please. More. I want it all.”

“Just so you know, any future spanking will be administered by me, on your gorgeous ass.” I’ve distracted her with that; her eyes glaze over and she bites her lower lip. Her muscles relax, just the tiniest bit, and I use the moment to work forward. I have to push, to twist, to make my way past her resistance, and she cries out loud as I slide home, her nails digging into the muscles of my ass.

She feels so fucking good around me, a velvet glove, but I keep my movements slow as I pull back.

“Are you okay?” Looking down, I can see the smear of blood. I hate knowing that I’ve caused her pain, and yet part of me—the asshole part—wants to beat my chest and do a primal war chant.

They say you never forget your first. So I’ve marked her memory at least... when Riley walks away at the end of this month, I’ll be imprinted in her mind, her body

forever.

“Yes. Keep going.” There’s an edge of pain in her voice; I don’t know if that’s normal. Cautiously I move back in, then out again, keeping my movements slow and deliberate, my muscles tensed as I try to hold back.

Beneath me, Riley is making these insanely sexy little cries, squirming as though she’s both trying to get away, and trying to move closer. But when she gasps and begins to rock against me again, I understand that the pain has passed, and that it’s started to feel as good for her as it is for me.

“Hold on to me.” Bracing an elbow on either side of her head, I cover her, sealing our bodies together with heat. My thrusts become shorter, harder, and she meets every one with a hunger that, incredibly, matches my own.

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I can feel my release gathering, tightening, at the base of my spine. Desperate that she comes before I do, I slide my hand between our bodies, stroke that small nub of flesh that I know will bring her over.

She cries out as she clenches around me, those pale eyes locked on my own. And as I fall with her, she's the only thing I see.

The only thing that's real in my world.

RILEY

"Isn't this the part where you ask if it was good for me and light up a cigarette?" I can't help trying to inject something to lighten the mood into the room.

What just happened was so intense, so huge, I don't rightly know what to do with it.

And the way Matteo is looking at me, the way he's stroking his hand over my cheekbone...

This just got real. And though my brain is warning me that this can't end well, my body and heart are floating on a cloud of bliss.

Matteo presses a playful kiss to the end of my nose. "And just how would you know that, hmm?"

Rolling my eyes, I snuggle in closer. "Let's just stay like this for the next year or so." I freeze when I realize that I've alluded to time together beyond the month.

When I look at him, Matteo's eyes are thoughtful. He seems like he's about to say something, but is distracted when we hear a churning noise, then the unmistakable sensation of the yacht slowing down.

"Shit!" He sits straight up in bed, sending my hair flying into my face in the process. He looks at the clock on the bedside table, then abruptly pulls the covers off of me with a grin.

"Matteo!" My instinct is to cover myself, which is silly, since he's now seen it all.

Seen it. Touched it. Tasted it.

I blush.

"We've got to get dressed, cara mia." Jumping off the bed, he holds up my sundress, then frowns. "And perhaps you could wear something a bit less... revealing."

I narrow my eyes as I sit up too. "I'll wear whatever I damn well want." Reaching, I grab for the dress, then remember it's torn anyway.

Matteo catches my chin in his hand and the look he sends my way is both dark and sexy as hell.

"We are now in Kalamata, Greece. We're docking at the home of a good friend of mine. A friend who will find you very attractive indeed, and who will not be overly concerned with the fact that you are my wife." He is serious. "So unless I've made a loose woman of you in the last hour, I must insist that you wear something... more."

I feel that I shouldn't like this demand—after all, we're married, but he doesn't own me. And yet...

It's oddly thrilling, being bossed around like this. Wondering how I can do as he says, and yet test the limits.

As he dresses, I run back to my room, search through the clothing that was packed for me. I settle on bikini panties and a sky blue dress. When I return, Matteo nods approvingly at the demure neckline, the built in bra.

"That's much better." Pulling me close for a kiss, he nips at my ear. "You can model some of your other clothing for me tonight. Actually, you may as well not. I like you best in nothing at all."

His hand strokes down the length of my spine, and I stifle a laugh as he discovers that, while innocent in the front, the dress has absolutely no back.

"Riley..." he starts, warning in his voice, but I skip out the door ahead of him after sending him a naughty glance.

By this time the boat has come to a complete stop. Dante is lowering the retractable plank that will allow us to exit the yacht.

"Riley." Matteo catches up to me, garbs my elbow. Tucking my hair behind one ear, he whispers into it.

"Remember the conversation we just had about spanking?"

My mouth falls open. Surely he's not serious.

But then he is gone, striding off of the boat toward a figure standing at the end of the dock. I can't help but do a double take—the man is hugely tall, well over six feet, and in addition to being ridiculously handsome in the classically Grecian way, his hair is reddish black rather than the ebony one would expect with his coloring.

“Alexi, this is Riley. My new wife.” Matteo reaches out for my hand, and I note that he tucks me right into his arm, a possessive gesture, as his friend eyes me appreciatively.

“Riley, this is one of my oldest friend, Alexios Kosta. Alexi for short. We were at school together.” Matteo grins at his friend, a smug smile that fades quickly as we both notice the other man’s grim demeanor.

“Don’t shoot the messenger, if you please.” Alexi hands Matteo a tablet that looks like it could shoot a rocket into space, then casts me an unreadable stare.

I barely register the latter, as I stand on tiptoes to read over my husband’s shoulder.

What I see makes my knees buckle.

“I didn’t do it.” I tremble as I back away from both men with wide eyes. “I couldn’t have. I wouldn’t know how.”

“Clearly someone does.” Alexi gives me that inscrutable stare again. My mouth dries up.

“Matteo. I didn’t. You know I didn’t.” I grab my husband’s arm, but he won’t even look at me.

“What is this?” He finally says to his friend. His face... oh, his face. It’s tense, full of rage.

“The front page of the Corriere del Mattino paper this morning. I tried to reach you earlier, but your captain said you were unavailable.” Alexi sends me another of those looks, and my temper quickly rises.

“Look, buddy, you don’t know anything about me. So don’t throw stones.” I can detect no change in his facial expression, whatsoever... is the man made of stone?

“I know a few things.” He says finally, rubbing his hand over his chin. “Like the fact that you married my friend for money.”

“Enough!” Matteo snaps, but as I look at him I feel wounded. I don’t know why I’m hurt that he would have shared that detail with an old friend... in fact, I have no business feeling hurt at all. Our marriage isn’t real.

But the ache between my thighs tells me otherwise.

“Matteo, I didn’t. Please, you have to believe me.” But when he shakes his head, holds up a hand for silence, I feel like my world is falling out from beneath my feet.

He doesn’t answer me, instead handing the tablet back to Alexi.

“I must impose on your good will, my friend. Can you drive us to the airport?”

Chapter Fourteen

MATTEO

RILEY HAS BEEN silent for the entire trip back to Palermo... eerily silent. And for the first time in my life, I’m terrified of losing someone.

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Though I can't blame her for finally being scared off. It's no secret to me who the villain here is, and I'm damn sure that it's not my wife. Yet she's the one whose name is being dragged through the mud.

I wince as I think about it. I know damn well that, by this point, the story will have spread across the world. Even the people Riley knows back in America... they will hear.

And though it sickens me to think how much Emilia fooled me, in that moment I make a decision that I never thought I'd make.

If it means that she'll leave Riley alone, then Emilia can have the company. But I won't allow this sweet girl to be dragged down with me, not anymore.

"I have to go upstairs to see if Rossi is still there," I tell her as the car stops in front of the tower that holds Benenati Enterprises. "And then we'll go home and talk."

She nods listlessly.

I wince inwardly. I'd give anything to know what's going through her head in that moment.

Whatever it is, I suspect I won't like it.

Hesitating to get one last look at her, I move to slide out of the car. Her voice stops me, holding me in place.

“This is what happens, I guess. I should have known.” She smiles at me humorlessly. “Just please... I don’t care what else happens. But I need to know that you believe me. That I didn’t do this.”

Incredulity bangs me over the head.

“I never thought that.” I say carefully, climbing back into the car, sliding across the bench seat toward her. “Why on earth would you think that?”

Riley stares at me. “You believe me?”

“Of course I do.” Cupping her face in my hands, almost giddy with relief, I stroke my thumbs over her cheekbones. “I may not know you very well yet, cara mia, but I do know that you’re just not that kind of person.”

And add to that that my stepsister is the spawn of Satan, and we have a winner.

“Have you been thinking that I thought you were guilty, this whole time?” I feel awful. The entire flight back from Greece I’ve been stewing over the fact that Emilia managed to trick me, to catch me off guard. I’d assumed that Riley was upset that her reputation has been torn to shreds, not that she thought I was blaming her.

Riley nods, and I resist the urge to shake her with frustration. Rather than melting into my arms, though, she glares and shoves me away.

“You don’t understand how bad this is going to get!” She cried. “I thought you did your research on me. My mother is a whore. A literal whore. She raised me in a piece of shit trailer with whatever man happened to be paying her bills that week. I haven’t had two nickels to rub together once in my entire life. The only reason I accepted this marriage was so that I could avoid the same future for myself!”

She sucks in a deep breath as soon as she's done speaking, as if she realizes what she just said. I, myself, feel as though she has sucker punched me in the gut.

"The only reason?" I ask quietly. I know, deep down I know, that that's not the case. And yet I never thought that my stepsister was evil rather than merely cruel.

Am I that blind?

"Matteo, that's not what I meant." The words rush out of Riley's mouth. "You know that's not how I feel."

I don't even know how I feel in that moment. I have no right to be upset—the entire premise of our marriage was that Riley needed money, and I needed a wife.

And yet... is that really all there is?

I hold up my hand again, stopping her speech. "I need to go deal with this mess. After I'm done we'll sit down and talk about... about our future. Okay?"

Riley's eyes widen, and I swallow past a great lump in my throat.

I am Matteo Benenati. I've never even had a serious girlfriend, because I've never wanted to be tied down when there was so much life to be lived.

And now I'm thinking about keeping my wife.

"I'll be back as soon as I can. Just remember. You are the light in my darkness. Now that I've found you, I won't let you go so easily."

The air outside the car is stifling. Alexi lent us his private jet for the flight back, and I took the time to change into a sharp suit, knowing I would need every tool at my

disposal to fix this.

I just want to be back on the yacht with Riley. In fact, I don't care if I ever see the inside of this damn building ever again.

Once inside though, I can immediately tell that something is wrong. The tower that houses Benenati Enterprises is usually bustling with activity. Today... it's empty. Eerily silent.

The hair on the back of my neck stands up as foreboding washes over me.

What has Emilia done?

I take the elevator up to my offices on the top floor and as I do, I realize that I've never been in the lift alone. It's always crowded with people.

Where has everyone gone?

Fury drives my movement as the doors open. I stride through my private reception area, and into my office. I'm not overly surprised to find Emilia sitting at my desk primly, one leg crossed over the other.

"You're fired." I spit out at her. "I can't stop this ridiculous clause of Carmine's from playing out, but I still have the authority to take your job. Consider it taken, and get out."

"You might want to hear what I have to say first." Idly, she holds her hand out in front of her, inspects nails that she's painted glossy red.

"Get out before I have security carry you out. That will make a great shot for the paparazzi." I've never before wanted to strike a woman, but this creature... she's not a

woman. She's a demon.

She's ruining Riley's life.

"Perhaps you haven't noticed, brother dearest, but there is no security to escort me anywhere." She smiles, lets her fingers trail down the low neck of her wrap around dress. I look away, disgusted. "Since news broke this morning of their incompetent acting CEO allowing his little bride to swindle the company out of everything, they're all looking for new jobs."

Her words give me a pang, but I can't focus on it. Some of those employees have been around since I was a child. I don't know what she did to get rid of them, but I'm sure it can be fixed.

It doesn't stop my rage.

"How was the honeymoon?" She continues, smiling maliciously up at me. "Have you had to look outside the marital bed yet? Or maybe she has... that's more her style. Or her mother's. Isn't it?"

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“I know about her mother, if that’s what you’re getting at.” I spit out the words, clenching my fists at my side, trying to mentally get a step ahead of her. What does she want? “There’s nothing you can tell me about Riley that will change my opinion of her.”

There—there. The tiniest flicker of something works across Emilia’s face, but it’s gone in the blink of an eye.

“I was worried that you might say that.” Emilia smiles, and doesn’t look concerned at all. “So let me lay this out for you. I want what was promised to me. Either I get it, or I fail to pull the plug on a nasty little fall that little Miss Riley is set up to take for a mafia drug ring.”

“A drug ring?” I’m incredulous. “Are you nuts?”

Something in my choice of words seems to make Emilia snap. She slams her hands on the desk, standing, baring her teeth at me. “I am not crazy, Matteo Benenati. But I’ve paid in full for what I was promised. And I’ll get it, or your wifey poo goes to jail for life. And a sweet little thing like that? I think we both know what will happen to her there.”

“What is it that you think you were promised?” I want to punch Emilia in the teeth, but there’s a look in her eye, a slightly unstable one, that makes me think I should play along.

She smiles, and looks like nothing so much as a snake. “Ever since I first joined your family, Matteo, your father promised me two things... Benenati Enterprises. And

you.”

I bark out a laugh.... then fall silent. The Carmine I knew was a chauvinist pig of the highest order, and I would never have imagined that he would leave his legacy to a woman.

Then again, didn't he open us up to the possibility of just that with this ridiculous clause in his will.

“He gave you a shot at it, Emilia.” I try to sound reasonable. “You know that's more than he had to do.”

She shakes her head, the movement wild. When those dark eyes focus in on me, I realize that her pupils are so dilated I can't differentiate between them and the thin ring of dark iris that surrounds them.

She looks more than a little crazy.

“He gave me a shot at the company, yes. But a shot isn't possession. And it doesn't clear up the matter of him promising me you.” She steps toward me, and the cloying scent of her perfume, and of sweat, makes its way to my nose. After days spent with the fresh scent of Riley's shampoo, it makes me nauseous.

“I'm married, Emilia.” And even if I wasn't...

I wonder now, how I ever lusted after this woman. It's so... wrong.

“That can be taken care of.” Emilia says this so matter of factly that I think I must not have heard her correctly. But when the words sink in, a chill runs through my blood.

I think of Riley, downstairs in the car, and have to resist the urge to run straight

toward her. She's with Franco. She's fine.

But in that moment, I'm not sure I trust my bride with anyone but myself.

Emilia laughs at my expression, a tinkling little sounds that grates on nerves that have just gone raw. "Oh, your little wifey is safe as can be, Matteo. As long as you give me the down payment I ask for."

"How am I supposed to do that, when you siphoned off all of my money?" I bite out through gritted teeth.

Emilia's expression darkens. She stalks across the room toward me, and I, a man who hasn't been afraid since his father nearly bashed in his skull, feel fear.

"I made you a very nice offer, Matteo, that could have let us all live happily ever after. You hurt my feelings terribly when you refused. And so rudely. So now I need something more."

"I need your body. Right now. Or your little wife is going down."

RILEY

Matteo has been upstairs for a very, very long time.

And in that time I haven't seen a single person go in or out of the tower.

Something's not right.

With trembling fingers, I wrench open the car door. Franco is outside, leaning against it. He looks at me questioningly as I start up the stairs to the tower.

“I’m just going to see what’s taking Matteo so long.” I laugh nervously. I don’t know how I know, but I do. Something’s just not right here.

“I’ll come with you.” He looks around at the lack of people and visibly shudders. “Creepy vibe going down today.”

He follows me into the elevator, and up the interminably long ride to Matteo’s office. He doesn’t ask me about the headlines, and I’m sure as hell not going to bring them up.

We step out into the empty reception area—no secretary, no assistants. Franco’s brow furrows.

“I’ll wait here.”

I nod, my feet taking me across the thick carpeting to Matteo’s office. I’m still wearing the backless sundress, and I shiver as air conditioning wafts over my shoulders.

There are voices inside, quiet but definitely there. I sigh with relief, swinging open the heavy wooden door.

“Matteo? Are you almost done?” I step inside.

And my world shatters.

Matteo is leaning back against the desk, his shirt open, his tie askew, and his pants around his ankles. Straddling his hips is Emilia.

His stepsister.

The engineer of this entire mess.

“Matteo?” They’re not having sex, not yet, but they’re definitely on their way.

Matteo looks at me, and his face is absolutely expressionless, his eyes empty. I can’t breathe. This man was inside of me just hours ago.

He blinks, then, as though with an effort, pushes himself up. “I didn’t think you’d find out about this. You should have stayed in the car.”

My mouth works, but no sound comes out. All the noise is inside, the sound of my heart shattering into a million pieces.

“If you tell anyone, it won’t end well for you.” Again, that blank look. “Emilia and I have reached an... agreement. You’re no longer under any obligation to pretend to be my wife. The money is yours. Just go home.”

A choked sound escapes my throat. I tear my gaze from Matteo to Emilia, and visibly recoil when I meet those dark eyes.

I’ve never seen so much hatred on a person’s face.

“Go on, little one.” Emilia smirks at me, waving a hand in dismissal. And in that moment I hate her, hate her more than I’ve ever hated my mother, or the men who used her.

I hate her for taking away what I’ve only just gotten.

I back away from the horrible scene, looking again at Matteo. His jaw is tense, but other than that, there is no expression on his face.

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Do not cry. Do not cry.

Turning, I march woodenly from the office, slamming the door behind me. I walk right across the lobby, to where Franco is waiting for me.

“Is he in there?” Franco asks, hurrying to follow me as I rush at the elevators. I’m holding it together, but just by a thread, and when he sees my face, he visibly recoils.

“Oh, he’s in there, all right. And he’s very, very busy.” I barely choke back a sob as the elevator doors open, and I stumble into the lift. Franco follows me, his expression concerned.

I feel so full, I can barely contain it. The ride down seems interminably long.

Just long enough that, by the time I reach the bottom, a though has wormed its way through everything I’m feeling.

When I first met Matteo... he didn’t hesitate to be cruel. His tongue was a whip, one that he wielded at every opportunity.

The man I just saw in the office? He was wearing a mask. One that Matteo uses when he doesn’t want anyone to know what he feels.

Just like I thought, something’s not right. But it’s not that Matteo is cheating on me.

The elevator doors open to the front desk in the lobby. Beyond it I can see the empty security station, twenty monitors flickering through shots of empty offices.

“Franco...” slowly I step from the elevator, then turn to Matteo’s massive driver and body guard. “Are there security cameras in Matteo’s office?”

He eyes me curiously, but doesn’t accuse me of anything, and for that I’ll be forever grateful. But he shakes his head, and I feel my spirits plummet.

“Damn it. Okay.” I’m probably crazy anyway.

“There’s a microphone, though. Used to be his daddy’s office. Carmine was paranoid of being blackmailed, recorded everything.”

“Can we access that from down here?” Adrenaline surges through my veins, hot and potent.

Franco does look at me strangely that time, but nods. “I don’t know what you’re doing, Signora Benenati, but I like you.” Gesturing, he leads me over to the security monitors. There he taps a few buttons, and smiles when a monitor crackles to life.

“Ah, Matteo got a camera installed after all. Smart boy.” He taps more buttons, and the camera zooms in.

Matteo is again leaning back against the desk. Emilia has her hands wrapped around his erection, and I feel sick at the sight.

But... it doesn’t seem right. He’s not moving. I know firsthand that that’s not how he makes love.

“Can we turn up the volume?” My throat is dry, scratchy. Surely I’m not seeing what I think I’m seeing.

Matteo turns his face toward the camera, and, contrary to the lack of expression that

he had while I was in the room, now his features are painted in anger and fear. Franco turns up the volume; the sound isn't totally clear, but I can make out Emilia's maniacal laugh... and can distinctly hear Matteo say no.

"No, Emilia. Please don't do this." A full body tremor wracks him, and she just smiles and continues to work on his cock. "You know I'll do this for Riley... I'll do anything... but can't you see you're not getting what you really want? I don't want this."

She backhands him. His entire body clenches, and I can see his need to pry her off of him bodily. But physical force isn't the only thing that can keep a person in place.

Oh my God.

That crazy bitch is about to rape my husband.

I sprint toward the elevator. "Make a copy of that and hide it!" I shout back over my shoulder at Franco.

"Come on, come on!" I jam my finger on the elevator buttons. Instinct tells me to run for the stairs, but a tiny voice of reason reminds me that I can't run up thirty flights of stairs faster than I can go in the elevator.

Cold sweat is running down my back by the time the elevator reaches the top floor again. I haven't thought this through, but I just know that I can't allow Matteo to let this happen to him, just for me.

I burst through the doors of his office, chest heaving. Matteo's face floods with relief when he sees me, before he wrestles the passive mask back in place.

"Get off of him." I've never been in a bitch fight in my life, and I don't know what

has come over me, but before I can even think, I'm wrestling my way in between them, shoving Emilia off of Matteo.

Off of my husband.

"Sorry kitten, but I only do ménage a trois with women that I'm attracted to." Emilia simpers at me then, with a forceful move that makes me sick, reaches for Matteo's cock again.

I swallow thickly. "Get the hell away from my husband."

I press back, feel Matteo's reassuring weight behind me. But then his hands are on my shoulders, pushing me away. "Cara mia, I have no choice."

"You do now that I have a recording of Emilia attempting to rape you." I flinch at my own use of the word.

Emilia whirls on me, wild eyed. "You don't know what you're talking about! I'm not forcing myself on anyone. We're meant to be together."

"You have a recording?" Matteo murmurs in my ear, his hands clutching my hips like a lifeline. I nod, my heart in my throat.

He pushes forward off the desk, tucks me behind him protectively. And as he stands tall, facing down his crazy-ass stepsister, I feel relief wash over me.

"Get out." His voice belongs to the strong, alpha male that I know. "We may not get you thrown in jail for this like you tried to do with Riley, but I think this will cast enough doubt on anything that you've tried to set up."

Emilia looks at him, dumbfounded. "What are you saying?"

Matteo shakes his head in disgust. “I’m saying, get the hell out of our lives. Before I mess with you the way you’ve messed with us.”

Emilia screams, a sound full of pure rage and not a little bit crazy. “We belong together! He promised!”

“Emilia, go.” She doesn’t listen, dropping to the floor in a ball and continuing to hurl obscenities.

Matteo sighs, the sound heavy. “Emilia, please.”

She doesn’t appear to even hear him. I watch him hesitate, and I understand. For all that he projects that he cares for no one but himself, I know Matteo Benenati better than that.

This is his sister. And she is beyond help.

We stand there for one more long moment. Then, finally, Matteo straightens his clothes, wraps his arms around me, lifts me. I feel like I should be the one carrying him, but I understand that I need to let him take this piece of his dignity back.

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And to be fair, I could use his strength. As least until I get some of my own back.

Chapter Fifteen

RILEY

MATTEO IS SILENT on the way home, but I don't mind. We're both edgy, on overload, and I'm content to just curl against him.

I want to ask him if he's okay, if there's anything I can do for him. But those are typical female responses. With Matteo...

He'll be affected by what almost happened at some point, I'm sure. But I think I need to let him come to me.

When we first sat down, Matteo pulled out his phone and sent off a flurry of e-mails. I didn't ask what he was doing. But as the car pulls up in front of the house and I see that there are several distinctly feminine bags on the front steps, I sit straight up, dread sinking into my heart.

"What are you doing?" Matteo just shakes his head, exiting the car when Franco opens the door. I scramble after him, temper flaring bright.

"I asked you a question!" Catching up to him as he strides toward the house, I catch his arm. He whirls, and the anguish in his eyes stops me cold.

"My world isn't for you." He sounds like he's choking, reaching for air, and I know

the sensation exactly. “Since you met me you’ve been stabbed, nearly arrested, and splashed across the headlines. No more. You’re going home.”

I’d thought my heart had broken earlier, when I saw Matteo with Emilia. But that was nothing, nothing, compared to what I feel right now.

“You’re... divorcing me?” I whisper. I almost choke on the words.

“You deserve better.” He laughs humorlessly, smiles sadly.

“Don’t I get a say?” I’m furious, heartbroken, terrified. He can’t do this. He just can’t.

Matteo runs his fingers through my hair, kisses me sweetly on the mouth. “No.”

“Franco just had to fill up the car. He’ll be back to get you in just a moment.” He presses one last kiss to the top of my head. “Goodbye, Riley.”

And then he’s gone. Leaving me all alone. I stand there, numb, until the car pulls back in front of the house. I think it’s strange that Franco doesn’t get out to grab my bags, the way he normally would. Then again, I don’t want them. I’ll never be able to use anything from here... it’s too painful.

Leaving the bags on the step, I slide into the car. I don’t say a word, knowing that Matteo will have given Franco full instructions. I assume I’m being taken to the airport, the place where this all started.

The promise of tears steals my breath as the car travels down the long drive. I hold them back, but the ache in my chest is real, and it hurts enough that I want to die.

As soon as the car passes through the first copse of trees, Franco stops the car. I

frown, pressing the button to lower the privacy window, wanting to ask him where we're going.

And terror strikes my head when I see that the driver isn't Franco at all, but a wild eyed Emilia.

"Hello, Riley."

EMILIA

Riley Tremaine ruined my life.

Matteo was supposed to be my prince. He was supposed to save me. He promised me, with his words, his kisses, back when we were just kids. He was the only one who understood—Carmin touched him too, but with fists instead of hungry caresses.

He was supposed to save me from his father, from the unwanted touches in the dark.

He never did.

But that was okay. Carmin had always told me what a good girl I was. Had promised me that as long as I did what he wanted, someday I'd rule the company.

And I'd known then that Matteo would come to me with the company, and we would be together then. So I'd let Carmin do what he wanted.

I love Matteo so much. We are meant to be together. Two halves of one whole. And I could have gotten him to give in... the Matteo I knew would have seen the reason behind our marriage.

But then she came along. She ruined everything, turned him against me.

The idea of them together makes me sick. He's mine. Mine.

The gun that now sits on the seat beside me is one that I've carried for years. It's the one that Carmine held to my head the first time he came to my room, before I understood what a gift he was giving me.

There's poetic justice in that.

Matteo hurt me terribly today, accusing me of trying to rape him. I did no such thing. He wanted me. He's always wanted me.

And no matter how much he hurts me, I will always love him. I will do anything for him

It's all Riley's fault.

And so she has to die.

MATTEO

I look down at the estate from the window of my office. It's the same as it's always been... beautiful. Rich.

It's never seemed so empty.

Raking a hand through my hair, I crane my neck, trying to see if Riley is gone. A flash of pink on the front steps catches my eye... did she leave her bags behind? Why would she do that?

A light flashes in the first cluster of trees that line the long drive. Squinting, I can just barely see through the leafy green.

I can make out something soft blue... Riley's sundress. And something blood red...

The dress that Emilia was wearing today.

"Oh, fuck!" My heart stops in my throat as my brain begins to whirl, trying to process what I'm seeing. And that's the thing... I can't see.

But if Emilia followed us back here after all of that... Riley is in danger.

I sprint down the stairs, out the door, and across the great expanse of land. My lungs burn, and for the first time, I curse the long drive that was installed for privacy.

I hear them before I round the corner, Riley's low murmur, Emilia's hysterical tone. And then there are, splashes of red and blue.

Riley is pressed against the car, her hands held out before her.

Emilia is pointing a gun at my wife's heart.

"No!" I'm just steps away from Riley, just steps, when Emilia sees me.

"Stop right there, or I'll shoot her." I can hear that hysterical edge in her voice, but with it is a deathly calm.

It nearly stops my heart. In her mind, only one of them is leaving alive.

"I'll go with you," I say calmly, ignoring Riley's protest. "I'm the one you want. Let her go."

"You don't understand!" Emilia whirls on me, and adrenaline surges as she levels the gun at me before returning it to Riley. Her face is set in an expression that tweaks

something in my memory, and I realize that I've seen it on her face many times before.

I just don't know what it means.

Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 9:56 am

“If I don’t understand, then why don’t you tell me?” I try to keep my voice calm, but terror is clawing at my insides. And it’s not terror for me... right then, I realize that I would give my life for Riley without thinking twice.

“You’ll never understand. I see that now.” Emilia looks at me, smiles sadly. “It’s all such a mess. And he promised me. Carmine promised me that if I just did what he wanted, I could have the world.”

Cold fingers of dread probe their way into my gut. “As long as you did what he wanted?”

Emilia laughs, and the sound is without mirth. And right then I understand.

“Dio, Emilia.” I feel nauseous. “For how long?”

“Since I was fourteen. Right through until he died.” She steals a quick glance at me before returning her attention to Riley. “So I’ve paid my dues, you see. And I would have everything I ever wanted right now, if it wasn’t for this stupid little virgin.”

I feel frozen. I don’t know what to do, so I open my mouth and just start talking.

“Emilia, we can fix this.” My heart hammering, I start to walk toward her. The gun, I need to get the gun. Pasting an understanding smile on my face, I hold out my arms. “Look. It’s just me. Let’s go to the house and talk this through.”

Emilia looks uncertain, the hand holding the gun lowering. “I can’t shoot you, Matteo. I love you.”

But then I smile at her, and her eyes search my face, and something in her expression changes.

“It’s too late, isn’t it?” Her eyes are heartbreakingly sad. “You’ll never be mine now.”

The hand holding the gun lifts. I shout, and time seems to move in slow motion.

Emilia aims the pistol, not at Riley, but at her own head.

I jump toward her, but she’s scurried back, toward Riley.

A blur of blue, of red, and the crack of the pistol firing.

And then there is nothing but silence.

Chapter Sixteen

RILEY

I WAKE UP IN a bright white hospital room. A steady series of beeps accelerates in my ears, scaring me, but then I realize that it’s just a monitor, just my own pulse.

And my hand is numb. Squinting against the light, I turn to find Matteo sitting at my bedside, dark circles under his eyes, holding my hand tightly between both of his.

My heart thuds in my chest. He’s here. We’re alive.

We’re together.

“If you ever do something that stupid again, I will tie you to the bed for the rest of your life.” The words could be joking, but Matteo’s tone is dead serious. “You could

have died.”

I frown, searching my memory. Emilia... guns.

Tackling her to the ground so that she wouldn't shoot herself.

I flush. It was an infinitely stupid move. But...

“You would have hated yourself forever.” I saw it on his face when Emilia told him about Carmine's abuse.

“I should have known. I had no idea.” For a moment Matteo looks less like the superstar CEO of a massive corporation and more like a lost little boy. “I should have... given what he did to me.”

I wait to see if he will tell me more, though I understand now what he suffered at the hands of his father. But he doesn't comment further—clearly he's not ready, so I don't push. “It's hard to blame her, under the circumstances.”

I'm not quite that forgiving, myself. I'm a firm believer that people make their own choices, though our lives certainly help to shape us.

But that's not what Matteo needs to hear right now, so I keep my thoughts to myself.

“What's going to happen to Emilia now?” My heart pounds just saying her name.

Yes, she clearly has some mental issues. But I can't erase the terror that she caused. I know that I will forever have nightmares of that blank look on Matteo's face as she straddled him.

“She'll be charged with a lot of things, but ultimately, I think she'll end up in a mental hospital.” He smiles wryly. “Alexi is in town to help me straighten out the

mess she caused. Once that's done, she'll have the best help available."

I nod, then struggle to sit up, wincing at the throbbing in my temple.

My fingers stray to touch the painful spot, and encounter a bandage.

Oh yeah. Forgot about that. A bullet grazed me in the head.

"So that's twice now that you've saved me." Matteo reaches over, strokes a very, very gentle finger over my cut. "A man with a smaller ego than me might be having issues right now."

I snort, even as I arch into the touch. The warmth. "There's nothing wrong with your ego, husband. You have plenty to spare."

We fall silent as my term of endearment echoes in the air.

"I'm still not used to saying that," I finally murmur. I want to say so much more, but I can hear my pulse accelerating on the monitor at the very thought.

"Well, you're going to have to get used to it." Matteo catches my chin gently in his hands. The affectionate touch makes me want to nuzzle into him, but my attention is caught on his words.

"Why do you say that?" My voice is breathy, and I couldn't have squelched the hope if I tried.

Bending, Matteo brushes a butterfly light kiss over my lips. The heart monitor goes wild.

"The one month deal is off. I have to save your life twice before we're even. And since I plan for us to have a nice, quiet life from here on out, that debt should be

worked off... never.”

I swallow thickly, overwhelmed. “What are you saying, Matteo?”

He pins me with that dark, enigmatic stare. “I’m saying that I don’t believe in divorce.”

“Try again.” Arching an eyebrow, I twine my fingers in his. “Here. I’ll go first. I love you, Matteo.”

“You don’t have to get shot to prove it, you know.”

I huff out an exasperated breath, and he grins.

“I love you, Mrs. Riley Benenati. And I’d pleased if you would continue to be my wife.”

His kiss is better than any pain medication. And when the nurse comes in and demands that he let me rest, I close my eyes, and realize something.

No matter how crazy this journey started...

In the end, there’s nowhere else I’d rather be.

Stay tuned for All Night With the Billionaire, Alexi’s story and