



His Captive

Author: *Kelli Callahan*

Category: Action&Adventure

Description: I started the night as his date. I ended it as his captive.

Upon discovering that the devilishly sexy Italian who asked me to dinner tonight is a powerful mafia boss, I promised myself I'd be a responsible girl and make an excuse to end the date early.

But then I tried to get a recording of him for my best friend's crime podcast and got caught

Now I'm bare-assed over his knee for a spanking that's leaving me so shamefully wet there's no doubt he can see it, and I can only imagine how long and hard I'm going to come for him when he does what we both know he's going to do to me next.

When I captured her, I didn't plan to keep her. At least that's what I told myself.

I was enthralled even before her curiosity forced me to take her captive and then take her over my knee, but the moment I tasted her for the first time I knew I had to have all of her.

That's why I'm not just going to claim her virgin body one helpless, desperate climax at a time.

I'm going to make her mine.

Publishers Note: His Captive includes spankings and rough, intense sexual scenes. If such material offends you, please don't read this book.

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CHAPTER 1

Lea

I'm on a ferry that is taking me from the Sunshine State to an island paradise. Thanks to a small inheritance, and a promise I have no choice but to keep, I'm going to spend a week without a care in the world. Absolute luxury. Delicious food, mocktails by the ocean, maybe a sip of rum, if the mood feels right.

I'll get to catch up on some reading, and if the mood is good enough for rum, I might even try to flirt with a cabana boy. I'm not actually sure if they have any cabana boys where I'm going, but my grandmother sure talked about the ones she flirted with an awful lot.

But first I have to get there.

Currently, I'm standing near the edge of this rocking boat, worried about keeping the contents of my stomach... well, in my stomach.

My hand flies to my abdomen when it spasms and I clumsily grab the rail. A jagged sliver of rust slices into my palm and I squeal, but turn it into little more than a peep, so I don't draw attention to myself.

Great, now my hand is bleeding.

Then the boat rocks again and I fight to keep the Pina Colada mocktail I drank earlier from making a return appearance. A coconut and pineapple bubble that escapes my

throat confirms it won't taste nearly as good the second time around.

"Oh, no," I groan, tightening my grip on the railing, despite the pain, and leaning forward. "Please don't throw up. Please don't throw up. Please don't..."

I swallow a gag as the boat rocks the other way, which causes me to white-knuckle the railing and break off the sliver, but part of it stays embedded in my flesh. I should have bought the motion sickness patches like my friend Sarah suggested. But who gets sick on a one-hour boat trip to an island paradise?

Me. I do.

I should be taking pictures of the sun sinking into the Pacific, but I'm not even sure I can hold my phone steady, much less get a good shot.

"Excuse me, miss," a voice with a hint of an Italian accent echoes behind me. "Are you okay?"

"I-I'm fine," I groan, not looking back. "Perfectly fine."

"Motion sickness is as much mental as it is physical," he comments, walking beside me, leaning against the railing, and offering a glass filled with an amber-colored liquid. "Try to find something to focus your eyes on and sip this."

I glance at the drink he's offering me. I don't take drinks from strangers to begin with, but the last thing I need right now is a glass of beer. That'll surely make me sicker than I already am.

"I don't like beer." I shake my head and feel another flutter of nausea as several crested waves rock the boat.

“It’s ginger beer. It’ll help, trust me,” he says, his tone more insistent. “Ginger soothes the stomach. Natural remedy.”

The thought of drinking beer makes my stomach churn, but I’ve heard ginger helps. I’d drink gasoline right now if I believed it would get rid of this nausea. I reluctantly let go of the railing with one hand and hold it out for the glass. The hand that offers it is tanned and inked, with thick, callused fingers. The pale outline of a recently removed wedding band catches my attention more than the tattoos as our fingers brush together, but my stomach forces me to divert my gaze to the waves below us. I quickly shift the drink to my other hand when I feel the coldness on my cut.

“Ow,” I whimper.

“You’re bleeding,” he says, grabbing my hand and pulling me toward him so fast I nearly lose my balance. “Hold on, I’ve got a first aid kit.”

He lets go of my hand and drops to one knee, hastily opening an expensive-looking black leather suitcase.

“We’re getting closer to paradise,” the man says, his voice becoming low and soothing. “Just look at that gorgeous sunset. You don’t want to miss that, do you?”

A wave of dizziness that makes my legs wobble sweeps through me as I force myself to look at the sunset. It really is picture- perfect. The kind of sunset you’d take a photo in front of and use as your profile picture on social media. The waves are calm on the horizon and clouds that will likely bring rain are a mixture of purple and pink. They blend together to make the sky almost look like it is on fire, with the sun gently grazing the surface of the ocean.

“It’s beautiful,” I relent, bringing the ginger beer to my lips for the smallest sip I can manage.

“They say everything is beautiful as far as the eye can see on the island,” he comments, gesturing in the direction of our destination. “I tend to agree. Ever been before?”

“No,” I reply, feeling another twinge of nausea, but my second sip of ginger beer seems to ease it. “You?”

“A few times,” he answers. “But it’s been a while.”

He stands back up with a first aid kit in his hand, which he pops open and motions to me. I let him take my hand, turn my palm over, and inspect the cut. His callused hands are so gentle. I can’t help feeling a slight shiver from the contact. The ginger beer seems to be helping. Or maybe it’s the beautiful sunset. Or... I swallow hard and take a quick sip of the beer before finally getting a good look at the man tending to my wound.

He’s wearing black chinos and a white button-down shirt. His sleeves are rolled enough for me to see more dangerous-looking ink and hints of what appears to be an impressive physique. His shirt is unbuttoned around his neck, revealing more ink that stops right below the collar.

“I’m Massimo,” he says, a brow raising above the dark sunglasses he’s wearing as if he’s expecting me to introduce myself. He leans closer to my hand, and with the swiftest of motions, plucks the piece of rust out like it’s nothing.

“Lea,” I mutter, taking another sip of the beer and wincing from the sting. I follow the beer with a deep breath when I see him tear open an alcohol swab.

“I need to clean it. This may sting,” he warns, then he wipes the swab across my cut. “Have you had a tetanus shot recently?” he asks, a hint of a smile turning up the edges of his lips and accentuating his sharp cheekbones that are partially hidden

behind neatly trimmed black stubble.

“W-what?” I stammer, my eyes getting wide. “No!”

“I’m kidding, it’s not that bad,” he says, ripping open a Band-Aid with his teeth and smoothing it across my cut with a touch that lingers and grazes my fingers as he pulls away. “Good as new.”

“Thank you,” I say, probably with a lot more gratitude than required. “I should have packed a first aid kit.”

“Never travel without the essentials,” he says, nodding and motioning ahead. “We’re almost to the island.”

I’m feeling well enough to wish I had declined the drink, considering all the horror stories I’ve heard, but I doubt he would have bothered to tend to my scrape if he had those kinds of intentions. Plus, I’m feeling much better. My hand, and my stomach. Standing this close to possibly the most attractive man I’ve ever seen isn’t hurting anything. There might even be some butterflies—although that could still be my stomach acting up.

“Yes, we are,” I say, feeling heat tint my cheeks. “That was very kind of you. But how did you know it was motion sickness? What if I partied too hard last night?”

“Same remedy,” he answers, his strong chiseled jaw flexing. “Best way to cure a hangover is to start drinking again.”

The ship rocks as it turns toward the island, but it doesn’t make me queasy. I let out a breath of relief, finally feeling like I’m on vacation. I glance at Massimo again. I’m usually wary of strangers, especially men covered in tattoos, but Massimo isn’t setting off an alarm bell. He seems rather pleasant. And he certainly knows how to

take care of someone. He cured my motion sickness and patched up my hand before I knew what was happening.

“Is that so?” I question. “I wouldn’t know. I rarely drink.”

“Good. Alcohol is a poison. A delicious poison, sometimes, but still poison.” He motions to the island. “How long are you staying?”

“A week,” I answer, glancing toward the island for a moment, then back at him. “You?”

“Same,” he replies. “My last vacation.”

“Last as in... ever?” I tilt my head inquisitively.

“Something like that,” he sighs. “What brings you here? Boyfriend? I know a beautiful woman like you isn’t here alone. That would be... That would make things way too interesting.”

I feel the blush heat my cheeks again. “N-no boyfriend,” I reply, quickly taking a drink of the beer. A bigger drink than my last few. “I’m keeping a promise I made to my grandmother.”

“That sounds like a good story.” He turns and leans against the railing, so I do the same now that I’m not worried about adding the contents of my stomach to the blue water below us. This time, I find a spot with no rust.

“I don’t know if it’s a good story,” I sigh. “My grandmother came to Isola Selvaggia when she was about my age. She said it’s the best place to go when you have no direction in life. I’ve been rather directionless since she passed...” My voice trails off and I shake off the tears that glisten in my eyes. “Sorry. She made me promise that

I'd come here at least once before I decided what to do with my life. So, here I am."

"For what it's worth, I think that's a fantastic story," he says, pulling his sunglasses off and revealing piercing icy blue eyes that I get lost in for a moment. "Most people don't keep their promises. The fact you're keeping one to someone who is no longer here is admirable. My condolences, by the way. For your grandmother."

"T-thank you," I stammer, breaking away from his gaze. "She was a wonderful woman. She took me in after... She basically raised me."

I look away for a moment, but I can still feel his piercing stare. It makes my breath hitch when our eyes meet again. There's something familiar about Massimo, like I've looked into his eyes before, but—that doesn't make sense. I'd remember a name that rolls off my tongue like his does. Wouldn't I? I'd certainly remember a gorgeous guy with an Italian accent, especially one covered in tattoos. Maybe he's a doctor? On a billboard? No, that doesn't make sense, either. I'm from a small town. He's probably from somewhere much more interesting than Pine Grove.

"Well, she must have raised a fine young woman," he says, nodding to me. "Otherwise, you wouldn't care about that promise you made, right?"

"I suppose." I smile fondly as I remember a few of my grandmother's stories about Isola Selvaggia.

"Let's carry our bags to the front so we don't get stuck in line." Massimo leans down to grab his. "Which resort are you staying at?"

"Uh, Twelve Palms," I answer, following his lead.

"Excellent, so am I." He smiles, offering to help with my bags, but I decline with a wave of my hand. "If you're not doing anything later tonight, you should join me for

dinner. There's a nice restaurant that overlooks the ocean. Bellissima's. I usually eat around six."

I stare at him like a deer caught in the headlights. Is he asking me out on a date? Surely not. Not a guy like him. I'm just a nobody from a small town and nowhere near as attractive as the girls guys like him usually date. Plus, he's older than me. He's at least in his mid-thirties, if not older. I'm barely twenty-one.

I should decline, but something causes me to hesitate. The promise I made to my grandmother. I nervously glance at his hand where the pale outline of his wedding band still lingers. There's a rose tattooed on the back of that hand. The vines wrap around his finger, like his missing wedding band is part of the design.

"Are you married?" I ask point-blank, gesturing to his hand. "If you are, I'm not that kind of girl."

The easy way out. If he's married, that'll erase all my hesitation. I won't be breaking my promise to my grandmother. I don't care how attractive he is, or how his icy blue eyes are making my knees weak. I'll shut him down right now if he's just looking for some kind of vacation fling.

"No," he says, lifting his hand and tracing the pale circle. A pained expression haunts his face and makes his eyes dim. "My wife passed away five years ago."

"Oh, my gosh! I'm so sorry!" I take a step back, feeling a pang of regret for asking.

"It's okay." He swallows hard, lowers his hand, and shakes his head. "I like that you asked. Your grandmother really did raise a fine young woman."

My heart aches when I see the pained expression etched on his face. He loved her. Is that why he wore his wedding band for so long after she passed? That's admirable. I

guess there's no harm in having dinner with him. He seems genuine, even if his tattoos suggest he's got an edge hiding behind his mountainous physique. I promised my grandmother I would let Isola Selvaggia guide me, rather than overthinking everything like I normally do.

"Bellissima's? Six o'clock?" I repeat. "Okay, I'll join you for dinner."

"Excellent," he says, putting an arm in front of me so I don't lose my balance when the boat moves close to the dock. It's a kind, almost protective gesture. "Maybe I can even convince you to try the wine from my family's vineyard. It's one of Bellissima's most popular selections."

"You want me to drink a glass of poison?" I question, unable to hide my grin.

"Delicious poison," he chuckles.

"I'll consider it," I say, moving away from his protective gesture once the boat stops rocking.

"See you tonight, bambina ," he says, the inflection on the last word stirring something strange inside me, even though I don't know what it means.

I have a silly grin on my face as I leave the boat and walk toward the shuttle. I glance back to see if Massimo will be riding the same shuttle, but he's already getting into the back seat of a black sedan. He has his own ride, and his own driver. He must be important. Or wealthy. That would make sense if the wine from his family's vineyard is one of the most popular ones at the resort—or at least at Bellissima's, where I'll be joining him for dinner.

"I'm keeping my promise, Grandma," I say under my breath. "I'm letting Isola Selvaggia guide me on this adventure. I really hope I don't regret this."

I say his name a few times once I find a seat on the shuttle. There's something so familiar about him, but why can't I figure out what it is? He's too old to be someone I met at school. He's definitely not a professor. Not with those tattoos. I don't know anyone with that much ink.

But then we get close enough for me to see Twelve Palms and I let out a gasp. "Oh wow," I say, the sight of the resort taking my breath away and making me forget about the attractive stranger for a moment.

My grandmother didn't stay at a resort. She found a hotel near the beach and let the island do the rest. I'm not that brave. Isola Selvaggia is a tourist destination, so it's relatively safe, according to what I read online. Still, I'm a woman traveling alone, so I have to be careful. I planned a few excursions away from the resort, but I plan to stay safely within the walls most of the time I'm here.

Once we pass through the gates of the resort, I pull out my phone and confirm I have a signal before sending a message to my best friend.

Lea: I made it.

Sarah: Good! Meet any cute cabana boys yet?

Lea: I haven't made it that far. I did meet someone on the boat, though...

Sarah: Is he hot?

Lea: Very. He asked me to dinner tonight.

Sarah: And you said no, because you're afraid of dicks.

I shake my head and start giggling, which draws the attention of a few others on the

shuttle, so I quickly stifle my reaction. I'm not afraid of dicks—just wary of doing something I'll regret. I really hope I don't regret agreeing to have dinner with Massimo.

Lea: You'll be very proud of me. I'm following my grandmother's advice.

Sarah: Oh, you're definitely getting your cherry popped this week! I want all the details!

Lea: There won't be any details. I'm going to have fun, but I'm not having that kind of fun.

Sarah: Details!

The shuttle arrives at the front of the resort hotel, so I put my phone away and gather my things. The hotel is a lot more luxurious than I expected, but considering what I'm paying, I'd be upset if it was a dive. I follow the line of guests and when I step into the lobby, there's a band playing island music with some grass-skirted dancers that the men in line seem to enjoy staring at. Much to the displeasure of a few girlfriends and wives.

After I make it to the front desk, I decline the offer for someone to take my bags and collect my keycard. I'm staying in a bungalow on the resort's private beach. Another luxury I'm treating myself to. I'll have dinner with Massimo, because I'm letting the island guide me, but I'll be spending most of my time on the beach, catching up on a few books that have been sitting on my Kindle for far too long.

I leave the hotel and follow the signs toward the bungalows. The sights are impressive, but my mind wanders back to the attractive stranger from the boat. Massimo.

“Massimo, Massimo, Massimo...” I say, racking my brain. “Why do you look so familiar... Where would I—Oh, my god!”

Then it hits me like a lightning bolt. I know exactly why Massimo looks so familiar.

He’s on Sarah’s true crime wall.

Her Mafia true crime wall.

CHAPTER 2

Massimo

I didn't come to Isola Selvaggia to meet anyone.

Not now. Not after five years of feeling absolutely nothing. Why didn't I mind my own business on the boat? She didn't need to be rescued. Especially not by me. She would have dived off the boat and swam back to the mainland if she knew even a fraction of the man I am underneath this ink. How much blood is on my hands. She'd choose the sharks over dinner with me.

My finger traces the pale outline of my wedding band as my driver takes me through the gates of the Twelve Palms resort. This is the first time I've taken my wedding band off since my wife was murdered. I left it in the jewelry box beside the two I put on her finger. One on the day I asked her to be my bride. The other on the day we celebrated our love with family, friends, and those important enough to get an invitation to a Morandi wedding.

I wore my wedding band longer after she was killed than I did when she was alive. I promised her a lifetime and couldn't even give her three years. Our life together was barely getting started when hers was stolen—when my heart was ripped out of my chest and replaced by something that beats with malice and poison.

I thought the worst was over.

But now it's happening again. More pain. More heartbreak. Like there's anything left

to break. But this wound is different. When my wife was murdered, I loaded my gun and kept reloading until I extracted every ounce of revenge I could. The streets of Las Vegas turned crimson with their blood. My hands just got more stained.

“Want me to pull around back, Mr. Morandi?” my driver asks.

“Yes, thank you, Ronaldo,” I answer. “I’m already checked in.”

The car passes the shuttle and I catch a glimpse of Lea walking into the hotel. Such a gorgeous girl. Beautiful green eyes. Delicate, soft features. Curves that beg to be touched. Lips that should always have a fresh kiss lingering on them. She’s the kind of girl I would have chased to the ends of the earth before I fell in love.

“What the fuck am I doing?” I mutter.

“Sorry, sir. What was that?” Ronaldo asks.

“Nothing,” I sigh.

I step out of the car without waiting for Ronaldo to open the door. He awkwardly shuffles to the back, opens the trunk, and reaches for my bags. I nudge him out of the way and grab them.

“I can carry those to your suite, Mr. Morandi,” he says, gesturing to my bags.

“I got it,” I assure him. “I’ll let you know if I need you again while I’m here.”

“No excursions planned, sir?” he questions.

I answer him with a shake of my head and start walking toward the back door of the hotel. Excursions? Like I’m here to see the fucking sights. I’ve got more important

things on my mind than that. Things way more important than a gorgeous girl with green eyes and soft lips.

I make my way to the elevators and look around as I wait. Part of me hopes I'll see Lea again. Another part hopes she'll forget all about me and I'll have dinner alone tonight. But I'm never truly alone. Too many ghosts haunt me for that. I've got poison in my heart and there's no antidote. Too much malice that never seems to be silent.

"Forget all about me, Lea," I sigh as I step onto the elevator and swipe my keycard so I can access the floor with the suites. "That way I can forget all about you."

I lean my head against the wall of the elevator as it ascends. I've barely spoken to a woman since my wife was murdered. Never lingered long enough for conversation. Never let my mind wander, like it's wandering right now. A cold bed honors the memory of what we shared, as brief as it was. But I guess everything is in disarray now. It's hard to focus on anything.

That's what happens when you find out your little brother put a price on your head.

"Fuck," I grunt as I leave the elevator and make my way to my suite. "I have to get myself together."

I drag my keycard across the sensor and push the door open. My hand immediately goes into my bag, and I wrap my fingers around my Glock. I yank it free as I storm into the suite and sweep every square inch of the lavish space. Once I'm satisfied, I put my gun down beside the mini-bar and pour several shots into a glass.

"Never can be too careful," I mutter, downing the entire drink in one gulp and pouring another. "Fuck you, Emilio. Fucking asshole."

I've called my little brother an asshole a lot over the years, but usually I'm saying it to his face with a smile on mine. I've never actually meant it before. Now, I do. Emilio has always been power-hungry and greedy, but I thought he respected our family and the hierarchy we were born into. I'm heir to my father's throne. When he's gone, I'll be the one running the Morandi family. I planned to make Emilio my consigliere—my right-hand man. My uncle is way more qualified, but I wanted to do right by my brother and show him he would always have a spot close to the head of the table.

That's all out the window now.

"Emilio, you little prick," I sigh, walking to the window and looking out at the resort while I nurse my second drink. "Putting a hit on your own fucking brother because you want Dad's throne. That's not the kind of ambition that makes people follow you. All it will do is tear our fucking family apart."

In my world, family is more than just blood. The Morandi family is rooted in Mafia tradition, but we've had to bend a few of them to maintain order. Maybe that's where we went wrong. I could shut down this coup with a phone call if all I had to worry about was my little brother. But he's made his moves. He's got secret alliances. I should have been paying closer attention, rather than wallowing in misery.

"Here's to another dose," I say, lifting my glass and downing what is left. "Alright, I'm here on business. I have to keep up appearances."

Twelve Palms is part of Morandi International, which is made up of dozens of shell corporations we use to launder our money. Most are legit businesses, like this one. It's a beautiful resort that shines like a gem in the middle of the Pacific. I almost brought Layla here on our honeymoon, but I'm glad I didn't. All those memories are sour now, like grapes that got plucked off the vine too early to turn into good wine.

I leave my suite and take the elevator to the lobby, scanning every inch of it, looking for any sign of danger—any sign of Lea. Fuck, I've got to get my head out of this daze. She was sick and had a scrape on her hand. I helped her. That should be the end of it. Why the hell did I ask her to join me for dinner? Why the hell do I keep seeing that smile and those gorgeous green eyes when I close mine?

“Meet with Theo. Keep up appearances,” I reiterate to myself as I walk outside of the hotel and turn toward Bellissima's. “The hit isn't supposed to happen until my last day here.”

Bellissima's is an open-air Italian restaurant that serves food so authentic my great-grandmother gave it her stamp of approval. It would have been awkward if she didn't, considering my great-grandfather named the restaurant after her. Not her real name, of course, but that's what he called her. His *bellissima*—his beauty.

“Theo!” I call out, tugging my sunglasses off as I walk through the door of the restaurant.

“Massimo!” Theo's face lights up with excitement when he sees me. “You made it!”

Theo is in his late forties and walks with a limp thanks to a bullet he took that was meant for my father. His wounds made him too much of a liability to continue serving as my father's bodyguard, but his sacrifice was recognized and rewarded. He looks after a few of the businesses we run on Isola Selvaggia. The resort is way too big for one person to manage.

I shake Theo's hand and he wraps me up in a quick hug that I tolerate because of the respect I have for him. He motions for me to follow him to a table in the corner and sits down. The restaurant isn't open yet, so we're the only two here except for a blonde-haired waitress who looks out of place since most of the people we employ here are locals.

“Monica!” Theo yells. “Bring us a bottle! Morandi ‘82!”

“Haven’t had that one in a while,” I remark as I sit down across from him and glance at the waitress who hurries into the back. “Who’s she? One of your bastard kids finally track you down?”

“No,” Theo chuckles, removing a cigar from his pocket and lighting it up. “Want one?”

I’d normally decline, but the aroma of the earthy Toscano wafts across the table as he lights it and piques my interest. What’s a little more poison at this point? I might as well indulge myself, considering I’m supposed to stare down the barrel of a gun in less than a week.

“Sure, why not,” I say, taking the cigar he offers, along with his lighter. “But you didn’t answer my question. Who’s the girl?”

I’m naturally suspicious of people, especially people who work for us that I’ve never met. For all I know, my brother could have sent her to Isola Selvaggia to keep an eye on Theo since he’s more likely to be loyal to me seeing as how I’m the rightful heir to my father’s throne—for now.

“She’s a stray. Don’t worry about her,” he says, puffing on his cigar while I light mine. “She found herself in a bad situation and I’m helping her out. She’s not on the books. It’s all under the table. That’s where I keep her sometimes, too.” His lips spread into a grin around his cigar and he winks at me.

“Got it.” I nod in understanding, then I hear a glass shatter that draws our attention.

“Damn it!” Theo growls, jumping up from his seat. “I’ll be right back.”

I hear Theo yelling and some apologetic responses from Monica. Then everything goes silent. I enjoy a few puffs of my cigar before an unmistakable sound echoes—he's spanking her. I chuckle under my breath and glance at the door. It's a good thing Bellissima's isn't open for business yet. I listen to the melody of slapping and whimpering until it stops. A few minutes later, Theo walks out of the kitchen carrying a bottle of wine and two glasses. He grins when he approaches the table.

"She's a little clumsy," he says, puffing his cigar as he sits down. "Thankfully, it was a glass instead of the bottle, otherwise she would have gotten my damn belt."

"Fair." I lean back and watch as he uncorks the bottle and pours two glasses of wine. "And I appreciate the hospitality, but this is more than a social call. I have to look over the books."

"We'll get to that." Theo waves a hand and slides a glass over to me. "It's a formality, right? Your father hasn't lost faith in me, has he?"

"Never," I state emphatically, then raise the glass to inhale the aroma that reminds me of childhood summers playing in my grandfather's vineyards back when life was a lot simpler than it is now. "1982. There was a drought that year, wasn't there?"

"Yep," Theo confirms, taking a sip of his wine. "You've got your grandfather's nose. He could always tell everything about the grapes, just by smelling the wine."

"Skipped a generation, I guess," I chuckle, then take a sip and let the flavor sit on my tongue before swallowing. "My dad can't even tell which vineyard the grapes come from. I could probably take you directly to the vine."

"Nice party trick," Theo says, puffing some smoke into the air. "Not very useful when you're sitting at the head of the table. What's the word? Is your father going to retire this year like he said?"

“Who knows,” I sigh, shaking my head. “Who fucking knows...”

My old man’s intentions are always something of a mystery, but I doubt retirement will be in his plans when this week is over. I already know how this plays out. My brother hired a hitman. A good one. Same one I would use if I needed someone eliminated and couldn’t use one of our guys. But this will divide the family. Civil war. Vultures will pick at our bones while we’re fighting each other, because we won’t have any way to hold all of our territories with bullets flying in every direction. Las Vegas will burn to the ground as collateral damage and the Morandi family will lose everything.

“Let’s finish our wine and cigars, then we’ll have a look at the books,” Theo says. “Got any plans for the evening?”

“Yeah,” I mutter. “I need a table tonight. I’ve got a date.”

“A date? Want me to close the restaurant so you can have it to yourself?” he offers.

“Nah, that’s not necessary.” I shake my head and exhale the smoke from my cigar. “It might scare her.”

“If that is enough to scare her...” Theo raises a brow, the expression on his face saying the rest.

“Yeah,” I sigh. “But it’s just dinner. Nothing more than that.”

That’s the truth. I may have let a pretty girl distract me from my grief, but I can’t let it go further than that. I’ve got way too much at stake. There’s only one way to save the Morandi family. It’s not an easy decision, but I have to make my peace with it.

It’s either civil war...

Or a Morandi funeral.

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CHAPTER 3

Lea

I'm pacing back and forth in my bungalow in a panic. My heart's beating so hard it's making me dizzy. The nausea is back, and it's got my stomach coiled into a knot so tight I'm struggling not to collapse.

"Sarah... Call me! I need you!" I mutter, staring at the last message I sent her, which hasn't been read yet. "Please..."

I desperately wish I had paid closer attention when Sarah was rambling about all the guys on her true crime wall. Or more specifically, the ones on her Mafia true crime wall. She's obsessed with true crime, especially modern-day mobsters. I like listening to the stories, but I don't want to be a part of one. Why did I throw common sense out the window when I was staring into those icy blue eyes? The warning signs were there. Literally tattooed on his impressive, gorgeous...

"No! No, stop." I shake my head. "I'm not having dinner with someone who is in the Mafia. That's absurd."

I tremble and send another message to Sarah, hoping the frequency will convey everything the frantic urgency doesn't. This isn't the kind of adventure I was looking for on Isola Selvaggia. I just wanted to sit by the ocean and catch up on my reading. See a few sights. Maybe, just maybe—and it's a big maybe—flirt with a cabana boy. I haven't even seen a cabana boy and I don't want to flirt with anyone anymore.

“Maybe I should go home.” I turn and look at my bags. “The boat runs again tonight. By this time tomorrow, this could all be a weird dream. But I spent so much money to come here, and I promised?—”

My phone lights up. Sarah’s calling me. I decline it and immediately call her back on video. I need to see her face, and if she sees mine, she’ll understand how serious this is. I’m practically in tears.

“Sarah!” I say as soon as she answers. “Listen, are you at home?”

“Uh, yeah.” Sarah turns the phone and shows me the entrance of her mom’s house. “Give me a second. What do you need?”

“I need you to go to your room,” I say with as much urgency as I can muster. “And then I need to see your Mafia true crime wall.”

“O-okay,” she says, blinking in surprise as she turns the phone so I can see her face. “What’s going on, Lea? Are you crying?”

“Don’t worry about it,” I sputter. “Just hurry! Please!”

“Okay, okay, hold your horses,” she grumbles.

My hand trembles so hard I can barely hold onto the phone as the video bounces while Sarah rushes up the stairs. I close my eyes and mutter a silent prayer that I’m mixed up. That Massimo just looks similar to some Mafia guy and isn’t actually a dangerous criminal. If he is, I have no idea what I’ll do. Will he hunt me down if I stand him up? He knows I’m staying at this resort. Knows I’m all alone. Oh, god.

“Alright, I’m here. Mafia true crime wall.” Sarah flips the video and walks closer.

“Down. To the right,” I urge, then I see Massimo’s face. “No, oh, god, no. It’s him!”

“What are you talking about?” Sarah asks, flipping the image again as she turns around.

“The guy I met on the boat!” I point at the screen, aiming over her shoulder at the Dirty Vegas Mafia. “It’s the guy on the wall behind you! Massimo Morandi!”

“What?” Sarah’s face pales. “Are you sure? He’s like a Mafia prince, next in line to run the Morandi Crime Family if my wall is still accurate.”

“I’m sure!” I answer. “He’s older than in that picture, and he’s got a beard now, but that’s him! I swear it is!”

The video shakes and Sarah scurries toward her desk. She puts the phone down and I’m staring at her ceiling.

“What are you doing?” I ask, tilting my head like it would somehow give me a better view.

“I’m checking the message boards. Just a second,” Sarah mutters, then I hear her typing.

My legs wobble and I stagger over to the couch, barely making it before I collapse. This is a nightmare. Definitely not what my grandmother had in mind when she said I should let the island guide me.

“Anything?” I ask, the knot in my stomach nearly doubling me over.

“Okay. Morandi Crime Family... Dirty Vegas Mafia...” Sarah’s fingers tap on the keyboard. “I haven’t done a lot of research on them, but they run Las Vegas,

obviously. Oh, god! Lea!”

“What?” I ask, feeling a surge of panic—as if I’m not already panicking enough.

Sarah grabs the phone and turns it so I can see the startled expression on her face. “He murdered his wife!”

“No!” I shake my head. “He... He murdered her?”

I start hyperventilating and gasping for air. That doesn’t make sense. Massimo—the outline on his finger. The pain I saw in his eyes. That didn’t look like the face of a man who killed the woman he supposedly loved. That pain looked real.

“Wait, maybe he didn’t,” Sarah continues. “This happened like five years ago. The police responded to a call about a domestic dispute. They found her on the floor, and she had been shot multiple times. He was holding her and covered in blood. They never recovered the gun... But it looks like he was the only suspect.”

“Why did they think he killed her?” I question.

“It’s always the husband, Lea,” Sarah sighs. “It doesn’t look like he was ever charged, but he refused a polygraph. Refused to give a statement without his lawyer present. Then... that’s it. Nothing else. It’s a cold case now.”

“Were there any theories?” I ask, unsure why I care. I should be planning my escape from Isola Selvaggia. “You have theories about everyone on your wall!”

“Yeah, the true crime cases I follow,” she says, glancing over at her wall. “Delphi—they finally got that guy. Asha Degree. Laci Peterson. Ask me anything about serial killers and I can talk your ear off with theories. It’s a little harder with Mafia guys. There’s not a lot of information available about those cases unless

they're really old and everyone is dead."

"Yeah, but you're obsessed with them!" I rattle, trying to get my breathing under control. "Your podcast about the Mafia Prince Murders got over a million hits!"

"That was a huge case, Lea," she says. "The Dirty Vegas Mafia is good at keeping things secret. I'm searching all the major true crime podcasts. I can't find any about the Morandi Crime Family, except for a few after his wife was murdered. There's not much here."

"Sarah, I'm supposed to have dinner with this guy in less than two hours!" I tense up and squeeze my eyes shut. "What the hell do I do? I can't get off this island until later tonight! He'll know I stood him up!"

"Hold on, relax," Sarah says, biting the inside of her lip like she does when she's contemplating something. "He's not a serial killer and he may not have murdered his wife. Mafia guys never talk to the cops, and they generally don't kill women unless there's a damn good reason."

"I-I don't want to give him one!" I stammer.

"Then go to dinner with him and play it cool." Sarah leans forward. "After it's over, just tell him you're not feeling a connection or whatever. There's no reason to ruin your entire vacation over this. I'm sure he's not going to waste his time with someone who isn't interested. He's on vacation too, right?"

I consider Sarah's words and feel some of the tension easing. That's probably the best option, even if I don't like it. If I stand him up, that'll give him a reason to come looking for me, even if he just wants to make sure I'm okay.

"I-I guess so," I sigh apprehensively. "Okay, I'll go to dinner. I was seasick earlier, so

I'll put in an appearance, tell him my stomach is still bothering me, and get out of there as fast as possible. He can't fault me for that. It's not like I came to Isola Selvaggia looking for some kind of fling."

"Virgins rarely do," Sarah retorts, a slight grin tugging at the corners of her lips. "Except for your grandmother."

"Yeah, that promise is out the window," I mutter. "I'm going to tell him I don't feel well, make it clear that I'm not interested in seeing him again, and get back to my bungalow as fast as possible. I've got an excursion planned tomorrow, so I won't be at the resort. I doubt Mafia guys go on excursions."

"Unless they're trying to find a place to hide a body," Sarah jokes.

"Sarah!" I shake my head angrily. "Don't say that! I'm just going to treat him like any other guy."

"Then it should be easy to turn him down if he asks for a second date," she says, still trying to joke with me. "You never go on second dates."

"Exactly!" I nod, although I'm not happy that she used that as a frame of reference. "I'll let him down—gently. Then I'll never talk to him again. Never even think about him again!"

"I'll keep looking into the Morandi Crime Family and the Dirty Vegas Mafia. If I find anything interesting, I'll text you," Sarah offers.

"Thank you," I say. "Now I need to get ready for my date..."

Sarah and I say our goodbyes and I end the call. I sink into the couch and stare at the ceiling. This is why I don't take drinks from strangers. This is why I don't agree to go

out with guys I just met. This is why I stay away from guys covered in tattoos—they're always bad news. I should have listened to my gut. Maybe I sensed danger and that's why I was seasick to begin with.

"Okay." I take a few deep breaths and try to gather what is left of my composure. "I can do this."

Dwelling on my regrets and what I should have done won't get me through this evening. I'll treat it like any other first date. I'm an expert at terrible first dates. Granted, they usually aren't my fault.

I walk over to my bags and open my suitcase. I brought several dresses with me. I put them all on the bed and take a step back. I'd normally wear the black dress my grandmother bought me. That's my every-first-date dress. But that's what I wear when I want to impress the guy across the table. I don't want to impress Massimo. The exact opposite, actually.

"Massimo probably wants some sweet, submissive girl who fawns over him," I say, picking up my red dress. "That's what guys like him usually want. I think. I'll be the exact opposite."

Sassy red, as my grandmother used to call it. I wish she was here. I don't have any sassiness in me right now. My grandmother would march right up to Massimo, grab him by the ear, and throw him in the Pacific. Then again, maybe it's best that she's not here. That might get both of us killed.

"Sarah better do a podcast about me if I go missing tonight," I mutter, taking a deep breath as I sit down to do my makeup. "And she better not let me turn into another cold case!"

My facade of bravery sounds hollow, even to me, but I'm better at turning guys off

than turning them on. It should be easy enough to convince Massimo I'm not worth the effort. He's not going to murder someone because they were a terrible date. I hope. I wish I wasn't thinking about that right now.

I mentally and physically stumble my way through getting ready. Despite my nervousness, my reflection doesn't look half bad. Under different circumstances, I'd be happy walking into a restaurant looking like this for a date.

As soon as I leave the bungalow, I get a message from Sarah.

Sarah: Hey, so I'm looking into the murder of Layla Morandi. Nobody has ever gotten so much as a statement from the family about it, except for the one their lawyer released. It's extremely vague.

Lea: If there was a confession, he'd be in prison right now instead of waiting for me, right?

Sarah: Yeah, but I think you're missing the point. You're having dinner with him. It might come up in conversation.

Lea: I don't plan on staying long enough to get into any conversations like that.

Sarah: You should ask him about her. He might let his guard down and say something useful. I could have you on my podcast after you get back. All the Mafia fans will go crazy for that kind of content!

Lea: You want me to ask him if he killed his wife? So you can get some hits on your podcast? Are you crazy?

Sarah: Well, no, don't ask him if he did it! Just ask what happened! Do it casually, like normal conversation. Anything he says will be more information than anyone

else has. It'll basically be an exclusive.

"Ugh!" I say angrily, squeezing my phone so hard the case bends before I start typing again.

Lea: If it comes up in conversation. I love you, but I'm more worried about staying alive than getting an exclusive for your podcast.

Sarah: You're the best! Love you, too!

My best friend.

Of course she's already figured out how to turn my misfortune into content for her podcast. And she knows I'll do it, because I'd do anything for her. I'd like to believe that goes both ways. But maybe I can use this to my advantage. I doubt anyone wants to spend their first date with someone new talking about their dead wife.

I'm probably foolish for thinking this, but I don't believe Massimo killed his wife. That wasn't self-inflicted pain I saw on his face. Why would he have worn his wedding band for so long if he killed her? The outline is still on his finger. Sarah said it's a cold case now, so it's not like anyone is investigating it. Well, except for true crime podcasters like Sarah. She's probably salivating right now.

I take a deep breath when I get to Bellissima's. This would be an incredible place for a first date if my date wasn't in the Mafia. More than just in the Mafia. He's next in line—in Las Vegas, at least. A Mafia prince. That's what Sarah said. I don't know how any of that works and I'm not eager to find out.

"Get in, get out," I mutter as I step into the restaurant. "And if it comes up, I'll... try to get something Sarah can use for her podcast."

A flicker of confidence radiates inside me as I scan the restaurant. Massimo is seated at a table in the back. He's got a glass of wine in front of him, and an empty glass in front of my seat. He lifts his head and I force a smile when he spots me.

Then I'm trapped in his piercing gaze, and something more primal than fear makes my knees wobble.

This was a really bad idea.

CHAPTER 4

Massimo

All of the troubles plaguing my mind seem to melt away when I see Lea walk into Bellissima's.

For a moment, she's the only thing that matters. She's wearing a red dress that hugs her curves perfectly. Her gorgeous green eyes reflect a hint of nervousness. First date jitters, perhaps? Is that what I'm feeling, too? No, that can't be it. I haven't done this in a really long time, but I was never the jitters type. I see what I want and go after it—but I can't do that tonight.

Tonight is just to take my mind off everything. A short mental vacation. Keeping up appearances. If Emilio is anything like me, he's got someone watching and reporting my every move. He'll be surprised to hear that I'm on a date, but I doubt he'll care. Not if he's decided to eliminate me because I'm in the way of his ambitions.

I stand up when Lea approaches and walk around the table to pull out her chair.

"You look ravishing, bambina . Simply ravishing." I motion to the chair and she sits down.

"Thank you," she whispers, picking up her napkin and rolling the edge between her thumb and index finger.

Nervous. Definitely nervous. That's not a bad thing. If she's nervous, it means she

likes me. And she's here. That means I made a good first impression on the boat. I shouldn't care about that. There's no future for us. I'm too broken and the only thing left in my heart is poison. But I can sit across the table from her and share a nice meal. Talk. Feel like a regular human being instead of a miserable wretch for a little while.

"How are you feeling?" I ask as I return to my chair and pour a glass of wine for her. "Stomach okay?"

"Better," she says, then winces. "But still a little queasy. I probably shouldn't have any wine."

"At least have a sip," I encourage. "If you don't like it, we can order something else. I'm sure they have ginger beer if you'd prefer, or ginger ale if you don't want alcohol. How's your hand doing?"

"It's fine." She shows me the Band-Aid.

"Good, good," I say. "Try the wine, bambina . Tell me what you think."

She nods and puts a hand on her glass, then she turns the label of the bottle toward her. "Morandi Vineyards. Is that your family's vineyard?"

"It is," I confirm.

Lea lifts the glass of wine and takes a tiny sip. Barely enough to flavor her tongue. She swishes it for a moment and swallows, but her face stays neutral.

"Is it terrible?" I ask, watching her reaction carefully.

"It's good..." she says apprehensively, then she takes another sip and nods. "Really

good, and I usually don't like wine."

"Like I said earlier," I chuckle, feeling a bit better now that I know she likes the wine. "Sometimes it's delicious poison."

Lea smiles, but it looks unnatural and forced. Nothing like the beautiful one I saw on the boat. Something is bothering her, and I don't think it's just nerves. I shouldn't care, but I can't let go of it. There's something stirring inside of me—a beast that I thought was dead.

"So, do you come here often?" she asks, putting the glass down and folding her hands in her lap. "To Isola Selvaggia?"

"No, not really," I admit. "But I don't want to talk about me. I'm boring. I want to talk about you."

Redness tints her cheeks and she looks away. It looks like she wants to say something, but she shakes it off.

"I-I doubt you're boring," she laughs and I detect even more nervousness in her gaze when she looks back at me. "I'm the boring one. What you see is what you get."

"I like what I see," I say, biting my tongue as soon as the words leave my lips. I shouldn't have said that, even if it's true. Even if something I never thought I'd feel again is simmering below the surface. "Tell me more about yourself, bambina . You said your grandmother raised you?"

"Y-yeah," she answers, fidgeting with the napkin in her lap. "My mom got pregnant when she was really young. My dad—he didn't want kids. Well, that's what he said back then, but now I've got two brothers and a sister I've never even met."

“He abandoned your mom? And you?” My jaw tenses angrily. I despise men who walk out on their families.

“Sorta,” she replies. “My mom left me with him. He left me with my grandmother. Grandma was pretty angry about it, based on what I’ve heard. She told him if he left, not to ever bother coming back, because she didn’t raise him like that. They never spoke again. He didn’t even come to her funeral.”

“Damn,” I sigh, taking a sip of my wine. “Maybe it was for the best, hmm? Your grandmother raised a fine young woman. I’m sure she did a much better job than he would have done, if he didn’t even care enough to look after you when you needed him most.”

“Yes, my grandmother was amazing,” Lea says, a hint of a smile appearing on the edges of her lips before quickly disappearing. “I never felt like I was missing out on anything, even though it was just the two of us. She made everything fun.”

“I can tell you miss her.” I lean back slightly. “It’s normal to feel directionless after you lose someone close to you.”

A twinge of pain radiates inside me. I know exactly how that feels. Being directionless and lost. Like the world forgot all about your happiness, or karma finally came, holding the Grim Reaper’s scythe, except it isn’t your soul being reaped.

“Is that how you felt?” she asks. “After your wife...”

I wasn’t planning on talking about her tonight. That wound has never fully healed. It’s so easy to rip open. So quick to bleed. But I won’t hide from it. Layla’s memory means too much for me to sweep it under the rug and pretend she never mattered. She was everything to me.

“Yes,” I admit, lifting my wine to my lips and flooding my mouth with the sweetness. “Still do, most of the time. Some days are harder than others.”

I can’t hide the pain when I talk about Layla. I can feel the pressure along the sides of my eyes that mingles with the tightness in my throat, tensing my entire face. Lea seems to notice. She swallows hard, looks down, and fidgets with her napkin before reaching for her wine. I’m blowing it. Maybe that’s for the best. Maybe there’s too much pain left for me to sit across the table from a beautiful woman and have a normal conversation.

“I’m sorry,” Lea whispers, downing enough wine for me to fill her glass again. “I’m sure you don’t want to talk about that.”

“No, I’d rather talk about you,” I sigh. I need to turn this around before she’s as miserable as I am. “What were you doing before you lost your direction, bambina ? Going to school? Working?”

Lea begins to answer, but then Monica walks up to our table and clicks her pen as she introduces herself to my date. Lea and I haven’t even looked at the menu yet. I sigh and pick it up, motioning for Lea to do the same.

“Oh, this menu is in Italian,” Lea says apprehensively. “I don’t...”

“Don’t worry, most people who come here don’t speak Italian,” Monica says, nibbling her bottom lip. “Tell me what you like and I’ll try to match it up with something on the menu.”

I speak Italian and could translate everything, but Lea seems content with Monica’s offer, so I let them converse. Layla used to like for me to choose something for her, and I almost did it out of instinct.

“No clams. No seafood at all,” Lea states. “And no red sauce. I got sick on the boat earlier.”

With Monica’s assistance, Lea chooses a chicken and pasta dish. The most neutral thing on the menu. Probably a good choice since she mentioned her stomach is still bothering her. I’d normally choose seafood since everything is fresh and caught daily by the locals, but the smell might not be pleasant for Lea, so I settle for cotoletta di vitello —veal parmigiana, with a side of broccoli and sweet cherry peppers. After Monica walks away from the table, I turn my attention back to Lea.

“I believe you were about to tell me what you were doing before you lost your direction,” I say, sipping my wine again.

“Right,” Lea sighs. “I guess it isn’t fair to say I lost my direction entirely after my grandmother passed. I was already spinning in the wind and unsure what I wanted to do with my life. I started college, but didn’t like my major, so I dropped out and got a job. A really terrible job that I hated even worse than school. Then my grandmother got sick, and I had to take care of her for a while.”

“Admirable,” I remark. “Family is important.”

Or it should be. I was raised to value family above everything else. The lesson must not have resonated with my brother like it did with me, considering that he’s decided I’m in the way of what he wants.

“Yeah,” Lea agrees, but she starts fidgeting with her napkin again.

Uncomfortable silence. I’m not sure what else to say. She opened up about her grandmother, but there’s still so much hesitation in her eyes. I thought it was nerves, but there’s something else lingering below the surface. What could it be? She seemed so different on the boat, even when she was sick. It’s probably me. I used to be able

to keep a conversation going with no effort at all. There's so much I want to know about Lea. I want to know everything . But that's complicated, because conversations go both ways, and there's so much I can't share.

"The weather is supposed to be great while we're here," I say absently, trying to fill the uncomfortable silence.

"Really? That's good," she responds, dragging her wineglass closer and letting it sit in front of her.

"Are you doing anything fun away from the resort while you're here?" I ask. "If you're feeling up to it, of course."

"Yeah," she answers and it looks like she doesn't want to elaborate, but when the silence lingers, she continues. "I-I'm supposed to go on an excursion tomorrow to see the ruins and all the statues."

"Ah, yes, a popular attraction." I force a smile, feeling a twinge of my naturally protective nature bubble to the surface. "But if you're leaving the resort, bambina , be careful. Stay with the tour guide and don't wander off. Especially if you go to town. Stay in the tourist area."

"I read that online." She nods, picks up her wine, and puts it down without taking a drink. "My stomach is acting up again. I'm sorry."

"I understand," I say, hoping that is the only thing bothering her. "If you're not feeling up for it, we can get our food to go. Maybe try again tomorrow when you're feeling better?"

Her eyes widen for a second and her face turns slightly pale. A strange reaction, if it's only her stomach that is bothering her right now.

“No, I’ll be okay. If I don’t feel like eating everything, I’ll take it with me.” It’s her turn to force a smile.

Something is definitely wrong. Her body language. The apprehensive look in her eyes. What happened? What did I do wrong? And why do I care? Maybe it’s because something inside of me just won’t let go—confusing, conflicting emotions that I thought went into the ground along with my wife.

“Did I do something to upset you, bambina ?” I question, tilting my head slightly. “You can tell me if I did. I’d just like to know so I can apologize properly.”

“What do you mean?” she asks, raising a brow.

“You seem different than you were earlier and I don’t think it’s just your stomach that is bothering you,” I sigh. “Be honest with me. Please.”

Lea looks down at her glass of wine and fidgets with the stem, turning it as she does. There’s definitely something. I can feel it. Why won’t she just tell me? Surely I haven’t done anything to offend or upset her since she walked into the restaurant.

“It’s nothing,” Lea says, and I can tell it’s a lie. “I just don’t feel well, like I said.”

“Okay,” I relent, leaning back in my chair.

Maybe I should just let this go. Forget all about the gorgeous girl sitting across from me. That would be the smart thing to do. I’ve got too much on mind for this to begin with. Trying to go on a date when my brother just put a price on my head? When there’s a hitman somewhere on this island, planning to put a bullet through my skull before I ever make it back to the mainland?

But this is the only place I want to be right now.

CHAPTER 5

Lea

I'm wearing sassy red, but I can't seem to find any sassiness to go with it.

I tried to ask more about Massimo's wife to help Sarah out with her podcast, but all I did was bring the pain back to Massimo's eyes. He didn't kill his wife. I'm sure of that. But he's still in the Mafia. He's still a criminal.

"Would you excuse me?" I ask, sliding my chair back. "I-I need to use the restroom."

Massimo nods and stands up, but I'm out of my chair before he has a chance to help. I hurry to the restroom, close the door, and take several deep breaths.

"Keep it together. Once we eat, the date will be over." I lean against the wall for a moment, then walk over to the sink and turn it on. "I'm an expert at screwing up first dates, so this should be easy."

I run some water on my hands and rub the back of my neck. The temperature in this outdoor restaurant is perfect, just like the rest of the island, but I've had several hot flashes since I sat down across from Massimo. Partially because I'm scared—partially because the attraction still lingers, even if common sense is winning that war.

The door opens and Monica walks in. I fumble with my purse and pull out my lipstick so that it looks like I have a reason to be in the restroom. Monica disappears

into the stall. I stare at my reflection like I'm in a trance while my thoughts spin in every direction. When the stall opens, I snap out of it and start touching up my lipstick. Monica walks up beside me and turns on the water, then squeezes some soap into her hands.

"You okay?" she asks, giving me a side-eyed glance.

"Y-yeah," I lie.

"You don't look okay," she remarks, washing her hands and turning the water off. "You look scared to death."

Oh, god. Is it really that obvious?

"I got sick on the boat and I'm still feeling it," I lie again. "I probably should have canceled this date."

"He would have been disappointed," Monica says. "My boss has known him a long time. He said it's the first time he's seen Massimo smile when talking about a woman in years. You must have made a hell of an impression on him."

I force a smile that leaves my face the moment Monica turns away and walks out of the restroom. Somehow, that makes me feel even worse. But I have to stick with my plan, or whatever is left of it. I'm not going to run him off with sassiness because I can barely force myself to answer his questions. Staying closed off seems to be working. I don't think he's enjoying himself any more than I am.

I turn to leave the restroom and my phone buzzes in my purse. I pull it out to see I have a message from Sarah.

Sarah: Still alive?

Lea: Yes, it's going horribly. I don't think I'm going to get anything useful out of him.

Sarah: Why not?

Lea: He just wants to talk about me. I asked about his wife, but he didn't say much.

Sarah: That's what follow-up questions are for!

Lea: He didn't kill his wife. I can tell. If you were here, you'd be able to tell, too.

Sarah: Did he say that?

Lea: I didn't ask him that! Obviously! But I can tell.

Sarah: Try to get something useful! Please! You've listened to my podcasts before. Ask questions like I ask them.

Lea; I'll try. I'm in the restroom right now. I need to get back to the table before he comes looking for me.

Sarah: I believe in you!

I sigh and shake my head as I put my phone away. I'm so conflicted. All I need to do is keep this miserable date going long enough to eat some of my dinner. Then I can say my stomach is bothering me, get back to my bungalow, and forget all about Massimo Morandi. I've done nothing that would encourage him to ask for a second date. The exact opposite, actually. He'll probably be glad when this is over, too.

I take a deep breath, check the mirror, and adjust a few stray curls before leaving the restroom. Massimo's icy blue gaze meets mine as I walk toward the table and he

flashes a half-smile as he gets up and pulls out my chair.

“Welcome back, bambina ,” he says. “Are you feeling any better?”

“No, not really,” I admit, even though it isn’t for the reasons I’ve said.

“Maybe some food will help,” he says, motioning behind me and I glance over my shoulder to see Monica approaching with our plates.

“Yeah, maybe.” I nod in agreement.

One step closer to getting out of here. One step closer to forgetting all about those piercing eyes. One step closer to forgetting how incredibly attractive the man sitting across the table from me is.

“Thank you,” Massimo says to Monica as she puts our plates down in front of us.

“Is there anything else I can help you with?” Monica asks.

“No, I think we’re fine.” Massimo glances at me and I nod in agreement.

“Yes, it looks delicious. Thank you,” I say.

My stomach rumbles when I inhale the aroma of chicken, pasta, and white sauce. I haven’t eaten since this morning and I’m starving now that the nausea has passed. But my stomach issues are my way out of here, so I can’t devour everything on my plate like I want to. Instead, I carefully carve off some chicken, twist some pasta around it, and take a timid bite. The taste is incredible and I can’t stifle the satisfied sigh that passes across my lips.

“It’s good, right?” Massimo asks, taking a bite of his food.

“Yes, it’s amazing,” I admit.

“Good! Want to try a bite of mine?” he offers, gesturing to his plate.

My hunger seems to have taken over now that I’ve had a bite of food. I nod apprehensively and take the bite Massimo nudges onto my plate. It’s even better than my chicken and pasta—way better.

“Wow,” I remark. “Yeah, that’s good.”

Massimo smiles. It looks so genuine, but foreign, like I’m putting a smile on the face of a man who hasn’t smiled in years. Isn’t that what Monica said? I glance at his hands as he takes a bite of his food. I immediately imagine them on my skin—touching places that have never been touched by anyone. I shake it off as soon as I feel some redness in my cheeks again.

“Tell me something interesting about yourself, Lea,” Massimo says. “Favorite color. Favorite book. Fondest memory. Anything. I want to know more about you.”

He’s still pushing, even though I’m trying to retreat into my shell. I can’t sit here in silence. That’ll be more uncomfortable than talking. I take a deep breath. If I’m going to share things about myself, then he has to do the same. I don’t want the details—well, not the horrible ones. But something... anything Sarah could use on her podcast.

“My favorite color is plum. My grandmother said it’s a perfect contrast for my eyes, so she’d buy everything she saw in plum,” I answer truthfully, unable to avoid a smile as I think about her.

“There’s that gorgeous smile I saw earlier,” Massimo comments. “You’ve been depriving me of it.”

I swallow hard and the smile leaves my face immediately. “My stomach... Okay, your turn.”

“Favorite color?” His blue gaze flicks between my eyes and my dress. “Right now I’m torn between emerald green and ruby red.”

I bite my tongue and grimace. I walked right into that one. Gave him an opening to compliment me. Even worse, I liked his answer. I shouldn’t, but it causes heat to radiate from my core and make everything that was previously nauseous tingle. I shove a couple of bigger bites of food into my mouth, followed by a generous sip of wine.

“A-as for books, I don’t really have a favorite,” I admit.

“Me either,” he replies, reaching for his wine. “I guess we have that in common.”

“You read?” I question, finding it hard to imagine him sitting in a corner with a Kindle or a novel.

“Sometimes,” he says, nodding and sipping his wine. “It’s been a while—my wife used to recommend books she thought I’d like.”

His wife. He brought her up this time. I take a deep breath. I may not get another opportunity to ask about her. But it could bring the pain back. Mentioning her didn’t do it like it did earlier.

“D-do you mind me asking what happened to her?” I suck air through my teeth as soon as the question leaves my lips.

“She was murdered,” he growls, pain radiating in his eyes for a moment, then it gets replaced by something dark—something almost sinister. “The cops thought I did it at

first. Fucking assholes. Like I would..." He squeezes his eyes shut, exhales a long sigh, and gulps every drop of wine in his glass.

"I-I'm so sorry," I stammer, trying to find the courage to keep pushing, despite his reaction. "M-murdered? Did they ever find out who did it?"

"The cops? No." His gaze turns into a distant stare, like he's lost in a memory. "The cops didn't do a damn thing except make my life hell until they realized it was a dead end."

He reaches for the bottle of wine and pours another glass. I should decline, but I slide my glass over so he can top me off. He's opening up. This isn't enthralling content, but it's genuine. I wish I didn't feel so bad for asking about her. It feels wrong, even if he's in the Mafia. Even if he's a dangerous criminal who is next in line to run his family's empire.

"I can tell you really loved her," I say, my heart aching as the pained expression returns to his face. "I-I don't mind if you want to talk about her."

He drinks more of his wine. I do the same. He pushes his plate away and rests his forearms on the table. There's so much pain and I'm the one causing it. Well, I didn't cause it, but I'm bringing it to the surface. Criminals can love. Criminals can hurt. He's still a human being, underneath all that ink.

"Fuck it. I may never get a chance to talk about her again," he sighs, his thumb rubbing the spot where his wedding band used to be. "Layla was the first woman I ever loved. Only woman I ever loved. We were so close to having everything we dreamed of... she was pregnant when..." He squeezes his eyes shut and looks away.

"Oh, my god!" My hand flies to my mouth. Sarah didn't mention that. I really wish she had. "I..."

“Love doesn’t die just because you’re forced to say goodbye,” he mutters, his fingernail digging into the pale outline.

“No, it doesn’t,” I admit, doing my best to fight off the tears that glisten in my eyes. Before I even know what I’m doing, I reach out and put my hand on his. “It lingers after they’re gone. I’m so sorry, Massimo. We don’t have to talk about this.”

“It’s fine,” he sighs, his thumb tracing my index finger and sending a pulse through my body. “After this week is over, it won’t matter.”

“W-why?” I question apprehensively.

“Nothing,” he growls, an emotion I don’t recognize flickering in his eyes. “I didn’t take my ring off because I was finally ready to move on. Ready to meet someone new... You were something of a surprise.”

I feel like a broken record as I stammer the same question again. “W-why?”

He squeezes my hand and raises his head, trapping me in his icy blue gaze. I can’t look away. Don’t want to look away. All the emotions inside of me are in conflict. His touch is making my core tremble—no, I think my entire body is trembling except the hand he’s squeezing.

“You made me feel something.” He lets out a sharp exhale. “First time I’ve felt a damn thing since... I lost everything.”

Oh, god. He feels something? For me ? This date is going in the wrong direction. I’m supposed to make him forget about me, not make him remember me. Not make him feel something. But I can’t even pull my hand away. The tension inside me is so tight it hurts.

Thankfully, Monica's arrival causes him to let go and I quickly tuck both of my hands in my lap.

"Did you two save room for dessert?" Monica asks, flashing us both a smile.

"I'm fine," Massimo answers, but it doesn't sound like he's referencing dessert. He motions to the menu and shoots me a glance. "You want anything?"

"N-no, I think I'm ready to go," I manage.

"Have a good evening!" Monica smiles and nods to us, then turns and leaves the table.

"No check?" I question, glancing at her.

"Not when your family owns the entire fucking resort," he mutters, yanking his wallet out of his pants and throwing money on the table. "But she deserves a tip."

Wait. His family owns the entire resort? Why did I pick Twelve Palms? It was the most expensive option, and there were several others that would have been perfectly fine. But no. I had to choose the Mafia resort. Is everyone here in the Mafia? I look around, feeling a twinge of fear. Nobody sticks out like a sore thumb—except Massimo. I think that's because I already know who he is.

"Let's go," Massimo says, standing up and walking around to help with my chair. "I'll walk you back to your room."

My bungalow. That's where I need to be right now. Not following Massimo out of a restaurant. Not feeling things bubbling inside me I don't understand. I've never felt a connection to any of the guys I've dated. I'm sure that's why there are never any second dates. But I feel something now. Something foreign and strange. A flutter—a

tingle—a heat .

What if he's walking me to my room because he expects me to invite him in?

Oh, god.

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CHAPTER 6

Lea

Massimo leads me out of the restaurant and down the path to the hotel. I need to make a right to go to my bungalow. I don't want him to walk me to my front door—don't want to give him even as much as a hint that this could go further than that. But what if he tries to kiss me goodnight? My stomach flutters. I imagine his rough-looking lips against mine.

"I-I can make it the rest of the way on my own," I stammer, motioning to the bungalows that adorn the private beach. "I'm down there."

"You sure, bambina?" he asks as he turns to me. "I don't mind walking you the rest of the way."

"I'm okay, really," I manage with very little confidence. "Thank you for dinner. It was amazing, even if my stomach was a little off. So was the wine. It didn't taste like poison at all."

"I'm glad," he says, a smile tugging at the corners of his lips. "I like you, Lea. Can we do this again tomorrow night? I'll take you somewhere even better than Bellissima's."

"I don't know." I look down, finally breaking from his gaze, but I still feel it.

"Because of my wife?" he questions with a sigh. "I understand."

I should agree. That's an easy way out. But I can't. I don't want him to feel like opening up is why I don't want to see him again. I mentally stumble through several options, remembering the few times guys have asked me out on a second date, even after the first one went awful.

"That's not it." I exhale sharply. The truth is I like him even more, knowing that he's capable of that kind of love—knowing that he loves so deeply, it lingers that long. That it hurts. I can't even imagine being loved like that. "I-I just didn't come here looking for something like that. I promised my grandmother I'd let the island guide me..." And it's guided me here. But this isn't what she meant.

"Where is it guiding you, bambina?" he asks. "Tell me."

He leans closer, his eyes darkening like he's staring into my soul. I'm staring into his. A frozen tundra that just tasted sunshine for the first time in so long he doesn't remember exactly what it tastes like. But he wants to. And I want him to.

No! Reality snaps me like a twig and I wobble, looking away.

"It's guiding me to my bungalow," I reply, meeting his gaze again. "Thank you for tonight. Really. But I need to go. I've got plans tomorrow and I need to get some rest. My stomach..." It feels hollow to keep going back to that excuse, considering he cured it.

He takes my hand, squeezes it, and nods. The expression on his face doesn't radiate pain. Disappointment, maybe? I guess that's fair. I'm feeling a little of that myself. Disappointed that the hottest guy I've ever met, the first guy to bring these strange feelings to the surface, is a criminal. And not just the bad-boy-in-his-troubled-teens kind of criminal. He's probably killed people. Like, people, people. More than one.

Then the emotion just kind of drains out of his face, and his stare gets cold enough to

make me shiver. Is this what his anger looks like?

“Goodnight, Lea,” he says, letting go of my hand and turning away. “I’ll never forget you. Or tonight.”

He starts walking toward the hotel and I’m frozen where I’m standing. Part of me wants to rush after him. Part of me wants to run away. I’ve never felt so conflicted. Every rational thought says I should not only run, but pack my bags, and see if I can still make it to the boat before it leaves tonight. Why am I hesitating? Why are my feet shuffling forward? Why is the word wait forming on my tongue? I bite the w to stop myself from calling out like some desperate girl who just got left wanting so much more than his goodnight.

“This is... ridiculous,” I mutter under my breath. “Why do I feel this way?”

I stumble forward on my heels, trying to will my feet to go in the opposite direction. Everything about this is wrong. I had dinner with Massimo. I let him down gently. He’s not going to come chasing after me. So why am I chasing after him? Why is the scent of his cologne a vapor trail I’m following in a daze?

He’s still quite a ways ahead of me when I walk into the hotel. I need to turn around. Anything that happens from this point forward is my fault. I can’t blame it on the promise I made or thinking he’s a great guy with a few too many tattoos.

I’m so conflicted, I don’t know what to do. I hesitate. I squeeze my eyes shut and walk after him, my pace quickening. What am I even going to say? Just when I’m about to force myself to choose, his cell phone rings. He stops dead in his tracks, pulls it out of his jacket, and answers. He glances over his shoulder and I dash around the corner I just came from before he can see me.

“Is this about the hit?” Massimo asks.

The hit? Oh, my god! Mafia , Mafia. Like the kind who doesn't even kill people himself. He pays someone, or just orders them to kill people.

“Yeah, I don't like the way that sounds either.” Massimo's footsteps echo and he's moving.

I can't hear what he's saying, so I let out a breath of relief. Then my duty as Sarah's best friend zaps me like I'm hearing her voice telepathically, telling me to follow the Mafia prince, because that surely can't go wrong.

“No, I'm not going to listen. No...” My hand is already in my purse. I pull out my phone, take a deep breath, and hit record. “If I die tonight because of this... what the hell am I doing?”

I groan and shuffle around the corner. I creep against the wall and around a few plants until I hear his voice again.

“The arrangements have been made,” Massimo growls. “You got the money, right?”

A hit? Arrangements? Money? Yeah, this is like he-will-kill-me territory. I end the recording, fire it to Sarah in a text, and start recording again.

“No, nothing else,” Massimo says. “Goodnight.”

Oh crap, oh crap. He's walking back this way. I take a few steps back, and as I spin around, I trip over a plant I forgot was right behind me.

“Ah!” I squeal as I tumble forward, drop my phone, and see the carpet rising up to meet my face. I throw one arm out, and then a firm hand grabs my other one. My purse dangles on my arm and I manage to catch it before it hits the floor.

“I’ve got you, bambina ,” Massimo says, hauling me back onto my heels and steadying me with both hands. Then his gaze drifts to my phone. “I’ll get that for you.”

I freeze on wobbly knees. There is absolutely no way to explain why I’m standing right here. No way to hide the fact I just overheard him say something that would land him in prison.

Massimo holds me steady with one hand and leans over to retrieve my phone. It’s face down. My stomach does a somersault as he flips it in his hand and I see the recorder still going. Massimo presses his finger on it and meets my terrified stare. I just made the worst mistake of my life. A series of them. I’d be the girl the audience yells at in the horror movie.

“You followed me?” he asks, his eyes flickering like icy embers connecting dots that I don’t want him to connect. “You recorded me?” He looks down at my phone, and swipes his finger across it, showing the text message to Sarah. “Why?”

Why? Yes, why? That’s the question he should be asking. That’s the question I should already have an answer to. Uh, okay. Feminine charm? You’ve never worked for me before, but—I did actually follow him for a different reason than recording him talking about a hit.

“I, um, didn’t want to be alone tonight,” I whisper, like I don’t spend every single night alone. Like my bed hasn’t been ice cold on that side every day of my life. I tremble harder, and he can feel it, because his hand is holding my arm.

“Don’t lie to me, bambina ,” he growls, flicking his finger on the messages to Sarah and reading them.

Feminine charm was not the right way to go.

Massimo doesn't listen to the recording, but there's enough in those text messages to sign my death warrant. I'll be on Sarah's podcast, alright. I'll be the star of the show. I look around desperately. I'm in a hallway and it's completely deserted. It actually looks like they're doing renovations ahead, because that part is closed off. Which means there's absolutely no reason for anyone to come down this hallway—unless they wanted to talk about something in private.

“So, you think you know who I am,” Massimo rumbles, looking up from my phone. “But you didn't on the boat, did you?”

“N-no,” I squeak out.

He nods like he's considering something, clicking his tongue. His grip on my arm tightens and I wince.

“How did you find out? Did someone approach you?” He narrows his eyes, staring into my soul again. I don't feel like I'm staring into his. I don't think he has one. “Tell me, bambina . If you know who I am, then you damn sure know this isn't the time for silence. Unless you'd like me to get answers out of you another way.”

Tears well up in my eyes, then stream down my face. I shake my head desperately. “N-no,” I squeak again, my entire body clenching. “Please don't kill me. My friend really likes true crime. She has a podcast. And a wall... a Mafia wall. Modern day mobsters, you know. I saw your picture on her wall and I didn't realize why you looked familiar until I got to the hotel. That's all there is! Other than what you read!”

His jaw tightens menacingly. This is what his anger looks like. It's almost enough to take my breath away. It's also what genuine fear tastes like. Wine. Chicken. They're bubbling with every tremor.

“A fucking podcast,” he sighs. “Mafia fangirl bullshit? Fuck. How stupid am I? Of

course my brother is..." He lets go of my arm abruptly. "That's all dinner was? You wanted information? Didn't get what you were looking for, so you followed me? I should have known better."

It actually doesn't sound like he's planning to kill me. I should try to walk away slowly to see if he stops me. Kick off these heels and run once I'm far enough way. But I can't. The anger is relaxing and the pain is back. It still makes my heart ache and flickers something inside me.

"I-I enjoyed having dinner with you," I admit. "I didn't want to go, that's true. I wanted to pack my bags and get back on the boat when I found out who you were."

"Who you think I am," he growls. "Trust me, bambina, if you're getting your facts from a fangirl, you have no fucking idea who I am. I'm the villain of a lot of stories. But I wouldn't have been the villain of yours."

"A-are you going to kill me?" I ask, trembling.

"I don't kill women or children." His eyes bore into mine. "I do have standards, you know. A code I try to follow. Sometimes an exception has to be made, but I'd never actually hurt you. You do need to be taught a lesson, though."

A tiny whisper of relief pushes through pursed lips. I'm not going to die, but what kind of... lesson is he talking about?

"Of course, the phone call you just overheard makes this a bit more complicated," he continues. "And you sent this to Sarah, which means she's a problem, too. Or she would be, if my phone didn't emit a frequency that interferes with recording devices."

He presses the recording I sent to Sarah and it begins playing. The only audio I hear

is a slight hum that makes my ears tingle. I tilt my head like a dog and he stops the recording.

“I-it didn’t record,” I say, my lip trembling. Another tiny whisper of relief. “Okay, so... Can I have my phone back? Can I go? I promise I’ll never say a word about any of this. Ever!”

“Yeah, everyone says that,” he scoffs, shaking his head. “Then as soon as they get somewhere safe, they’re calling the cops.”

“I wouldn’t!” I shake my head frantically. “I swear! I won’t do Sarah’s podcast! I’ll make sure she never does one about your family!”

“Easiest thing to do would be to get rid of you. Sell you to someone in a foreign country where you don’t speak the language.” He nods slowly as if he’s considering it and I shake my head even harder. “But I don’t sell women, either, so you’ll be coming with me. For the rest of this week, at least. It won’t matter after that.”

Coming with him? For the rest of the week? That does sound a lot better than being sold. Much, much better than being killed.

“Come on, bambina ,” he growls, taking a step forward, pocketing my phone, and motioning for me to follow him. “Your bungalow just got upgraded to the penthouse suite. I’ll have someone bring your bags.”

Am I... his prisoner?

I swallow hard and do the only thing I can.

I follow him.

CHAPTER 7

Massimo

I don't like the thoughts that went through my head when I realized Lea followed and recorded me.

It was like every stage of grief all at once while I mourned things that would have never happened to begin with. Now it's all condensed into a feeling of neutrality and I don't know which direction it's going to go. But I have to make sure she keeps her mouth shut for the rest of the time we're on Isola Selvaggia. I can't have her running around blabbing about a Mafia hit. There are people on this island who wouldn't think twice about feeding her to the sharks in the Pacific.

"I-I'm sorry," Lea whimpers as she trails behind me. "I really am."

"Oh, you're going to be sorry," I growl, pulling her into the elevator and swiping my keycard. I tap out a message on my phone and shove it into my pocket. "I'm not going to sell you. I'm not going to kill you. But I am going to punish you for this."

"P-punish me?" she questions, her eyes getting wide. "What do you mean?"

"A spanking, bambina ," I state firmly, making sure she hears the seriousness in my voice and sees it reflected in my eyes. "You're getting a spanking."

I let go of her arm and watch the color drain out of her face. My expression doesn't soften.

“What?” she asks, her eyes widening into gorgeous green saucers. “You’re not saying... You can’t!”

I close the distance between us and tower over her. A low growl echoes in my throat. My lip twitches and my jaw flexes. I should put her over my knee right here in this elevator.

She breaks my gaze and looks down, her cheeks turning redder than they’ve been all night.

“Look at me, bambina ,” I demand, staring daggers into her gorgeous green eyes as soon as she looks up. “Tell me you don’t deserve to have your ass spanked until it is as red as that beautiful dress you’re wearing.”

She swallows a gulp and doesn’t respond.

“Yeah, that’s what I thought,” I snap, turning as the elevators open. “Come on, let me show you to your room.”

I step off the elevator and turn around. She actually has an out here. If she hits the button to close those doors, she could get to the lobby before I could. Her eyes flick to the elevator buttons, then back at me. She’s considering it. But I’ve already sent a message to Theo, and one of his men is standing in the lobby, ready to grab her if she does. Then she’s really going to get her butt worn out.

Lea bravely, and wisely, steps off the elevator. The doors close behind her. That’s it. She knows she deserves the spanking she’s going to get. And she knows this is for the best, even if she doesn’t want to admit it.

I lead her across the penthouse to one of the bedrooms, then motion for her to go inside. She gulps as she does, and I follow her, closing the door behind me. The thud

of it makes her jump. The sound of it locking causes her to shake.

“Are you scared?” I ask gently.

“Y-yes,” she whispers, trembling with fear in her eyes as she turns around. “I’ve n-never... with a guy...”

A virgin? Interesting.

“I’m not going to rape you, bambina ,” I growl. “You’re going to get a spanking, just like I said. And I won’t turn your gorgeous ass as red as your dress, even though it’s what we both know you deserve. But it’s going to hurt and you’re going to cry. You’ll have plenty of time to think about what you did wrong while you’re over my knee.”

She’s not ready yet. There’s too much fear in her eyes, even if she can’t deny she deserves it. I want her to accept it, no matter how scared she is.

“Please,” she whimpers, her eyes tearing up again. “Don’t spank me, Massimo. I-I know I messed up. I’m sorry! I swear I am!”

“I know, I know,” I say, my voice relaxing. “You’re sorry. But being sorry isn’t good enough, bambina . You put yourself in serious danger tonight, didn’t you?”

“Yes,” she squeaks out, a tear rolling down her face. “But...”

“But what?” I ask. “What could you possibly say that would make what you did okay?”

Her silence answers my question. She looks down at the floor and more tears glisten on the curves of her cheeks. She has nothing to offer because she knows she fucked

up. Royally fucked up. The kind of fucked up that puts you on your knees with a gun pressed against the back of your head—seconds before your last thought is interrupted by a bullet.

“I-I’m sorry,” she manages, but she finally seems to understand it isn’t enough.

“Take some time to get yourself together,” I command, turning and walking to the door. I unlock it with a click and open it. “Come join me for a drink after you do.”

I leave her alone in her bedroom and walk to the main part of the penthouse. I can’t deny the thrill radiating inside me as I imagine having her draped across my lap for a spanking. But we’ll get to that. She’s brought things to the surface that have been buried beneath the malice and poison for so long they feel exciting and new. The timing is terrible, but I can’t ignore it. Especially since I’m stuck with her the rest of the week.

I remove my suit jacket, toss it on a chair, open the cabinet under the mini-bar, and examine the wine selection. I find one from my family’s vineyard that is similar to what we had with dinner. Between the whiskey and the wine, I’m feeling it, but not enough to interfere with my judgment. I pour two glasses, place hers on the table at one end of the couch, and sit down on the other end with my glass in my hand. I sip it, letting the flavor linger before downing the delicious liquid.

“Come on, bambina ,” I mutter under my breath, glancing toward her bedroom. “You’re making this a lot harder than it has to be.”

I doubt Lea has ever been spanked before. Certainly not by a man, if she’s still a virgin. I don’t remember what it’s like to be afraid of punishment. It’s simply a consequence. Something we can put behind us, once she’s learned her lesson.

Finally, Lea appears at the door of her bedroom. She’s dried her tears and cleaned

herself up. I can still see the telltale signs of crying, but she's as gorgeous as she was the first time I laid eyes on her. I watch carefully and pay attention to the reluctance in her footsteps as she approaches the couch. I motion to her glass of wine and she nods, sinking into the couch before reaching for it.

"I'm not going to spank you because I want to hurt you, Lea," I say, leveling a stern gaze on her. "I'm going to spank you because you put yourself in serious danger tonight. I know men who would have slit your throat right there in that hallway if they caught you spying on them. Then they'd make a phone call and Sarah's throat would be cut before you finished bleeding out. Some of them are staying at this hotel right now."

She swallows hard, squeezes her eyes shut, and nervously gulps so much wine she nearly chokes. "I-I know it was a mistake. I don't know what I was thinking. Sarah?—"

"Don't blame this on her," I interrupt. "You made the choice. You followed me. You recorded me. Sarah isn't the one who is going to get punished for it. You are."

She squirms on the couch. She's imagining it, too. Being bent over my knee like a naughty little girl. Bared for the punishment she deserves. Feeling the sting of her comeuppance, one slap at a time while I redden her ass. She drinks more wine, fidgeting with the glass like she did in the restaurant. She has a reason to be nervous now. First spanking jitters, I suppose.

"I'm really sorry for asking about your wife," she mumbles. "I felt horrible about it. I-I know you didn't kill her."

"I'm not upset about that, bambina ." I shake my head. "It actually felt good to talk about her. But since you're so curious, and I intend to make sure you never talk about this until after you leave Isola Selvaggia, would you like to know what really

happened?”

“I-I don’t know,” she whispers apprehensively.

“I’ll tell you anyway,” I growl. “It was the Bratva. Do you know who that is?”

“T-they’re the Russian Mafia,” she whispers.

“That’s correct,” I confirm. “The Bratva was moving into Las Vegas. My family sees Sin City as the land of opportunity. If someone wants a piece of the pie, we don’t stand in the way, as long as they play by the rules, and give us our cut. The Bratva didn’t want to play by the rules. They were yanking women off the streets and selling them. And not just prostitutes. They didn’t discriminate. Once they started kidnapping tourists, it turned into a problem my family couldn’t ignore.”

“Oh, god,” she says, her eyes getting wide.

“Believe it or not, violence isn’t how I begin most discussions. I tried to do it civilly. As civilly as I could, but the message was clear. If they didn’t stop trafficking women, they were going to have problems with my family.” I sigh, tighten my grip on my glass of wine, and down a gulp. “Their response—they killed my wife.”

“Massimo, I’m so sorry,” she whimpers, moving closer to me and putting a hand on my arm. “I-I had no idea. I shouldn’t have...”

“It’s fine,” I interrupt again. “They wanted a war and they got one. I killed every single man they had in Las Vegas and made it clear I wouldn’t stop there, if they ever tried to move into our territory again. They got the message.”

Lea doesn’t respond, but her hand squeezes my arm, like she’s trying to comfort me. Her touch feels nice. I can’t deny that. It stirs things inside me I thought would

remain silent until I drew my last breath.

“You won’t hear that story on a fucking podcast,” I say, pouring some more wine into my glass. “But if you decide to talk about it with your friend, and she tells that story, things won’t end well for either of you.”

“I-I won’t,” Lea stammers. “I-I’ll never tell anyone! About that... about the phone call I overheard. Any of it!”

“I’ll make sure you keep your word until the end of the week,” I growl. “Outside of locking you in a cage for the rest of your life, that’s all I can do. But actions have consequences, bambina . I’m going to spank you until I’m sure you understand that.”

“I understand it,” she whispers, tears glistening in her eyes again. “You don’t have to spank me.”

“If you understood it, you wouldn’t still be trying to get out of it,” I say, taking a sip of my wine. “The spanking is your consequence, Lea. A pretty mild consequence in my world. I’m going to put you over my knee, bare your bottom, and punish you for what you did wrong. Nothing you say is going to change my mind. The faster you come to terms with that, the faster we can put this behind us.”

She looks away and a tear trembles down her cheek. When she looks back at me, I see something different in her eyes. She’s accepting it, even if she doesn’t want to. Realizing there’s no way out of it. No way to escape what she deserves.

“How bad is it going to be?” she asks, sniffing away her tears. “I’ve never been spanked before.”

“Worse than you’re imagining, I’m sure,” I answer. “Are you ready to get it over with?”

She swallows hard and hesitation flourishes in her gorgeous green eyes, then it fades and she nods.

“Y-yes, sir,” she whispers.

Good girl.

She’s finally ready to accept her punishment.

CHAPTER 8

Lea

I'm not going to die a horrible death.

I'm not going to be sold as some kind of slave—some kind of sex slave.

But I'm going to get a spanking. And it's going to hurt.

Massimo shuffles on the couch until he's in the middle and unbuttons his right sleeve, rolling it to his elbow and revealing more of his ink than I saw on the boat. He's getting ready to punish me. Getting ready to put me over his knee and spank my bare bottom like I'm a naughty little girl. The worst part is that I know I deserve it. What I did tonight was stupid. Foolish. I played a dangerous game, and there are consequences for losing.

“Are you ready, bambina ?” he asks gently. Too gently, considering what is about to happen.

“Yes, sir,” I whisper. I don't know why I'm calling him sir . It slipped out once and now it's just part of my vocabulary.

“Then lie across my lap,” he says firmly, patting his thigh.

I down what is left of my wine for courage, but my knees still wobble when I stand up. I glance at the lap waiting for me and feel a tremor of something else. Arousal?

Fearful arousal? This is definitely not the time for that. I've never fantasized about being put over someone's knee for a spanking. But the moisture is there, and I feel it as I shuffle toward Massimo. I take a deep breath before leaning forward. He takes my arm and guides me the rest of the way until I'm stretched across his thick, muscular thighs. They're almost like steel beneath my trembling frame.

"You're doing good, bambina ," Massimo says, his voice still gentle. "I know you're scared, but just try to relax. It'll go a lot smoother if you do."

I'm not sure which one of us it will be smoother for. I have no doubt he could hold me down and punish me if he wanted. I'd be powerless to stop him. I almost wish he'd done that. I feel like I should be kicking and screaming, instead of submitting to my punishment. I close my eyes and take a few deep breaths. I squirm on his lap and feel something hard press against my belly.

"Oh, god," I whimper. "Is that..."

"I never said I wasn't going to enjoy it, Lea," he chuckles.

More arousal heats my core. I shudder and try to mentally force it to go away, but it just keeps getting hotter. It's fearful and shameful arousal, blending into something that makes me squirm. The more I squirm, the more I feel him . He puts a hand above my hip and squeezes, pulling me closer until I'm pressed against his erection. Then I feel his hand on the back of my thigh. It goes lower, tracing and making me tingle until his fingers brush against my bare skin. Goosebumps rise in response.

His fingers tighten around the fabric of my dress and he starts pulling it up. Slowly. Like he's savoring every inch of bare skin he exposes, and I feel the reaction against my belly as he does. I gasp and struggle as his fingers continue to graze skin no man has ever touched before. The back of my thighs. A lingering trace along the sensitive skin between them. Then the cool air caresses my lower cheeks as my panties are

exposed. He grips my dress with the hand holding my hip and bunches it there, which leaves my panties and everything below them completely exposed to his gaze.

“Please don’t pull my panties down,” I whimper, feeling the moisture that dampens them as I squirm. “I’ll accept my punishment, but please don’t pull them down.”

“What makes you think I would even consider that request, bambina ?” he questions, his fingers trailing along the curve of my ass right below my panties. “Why would I deprive myself of such a beautiful sight, hmm?”

“B-because it’s embarrassing!” I whine.

“I’m not embarrassed,” he chuckles.

“Embarrassing for me!” I whimper. “Please, Massimo...”

“A little embarrassment can be a good thing,” he says, moving his hand to the waistband of my panties and wrapping it around his fingers, which pulls them tight against my skin. I shudder and shake my head, but it doesn’t stop him. He abruptly yanks them to my knees, causing me to gasp and stiffen on his lap. “Embarrassment will linger long after the sting of the spanking fades.”

I groan and squirm. I can feel his piercing gaze on my skin. He can see everything now. I squeeze my legs shut, praying he doesn’t notice my arousal, but I can tell from the way his cock throbs against my stomach that he’s already seen it. My face is so hot it’s burning. My core is tight and engulfed in flames.

“If you hadn’t been such a naughty bambina , you could be on your back right now, getting your wet pussy devoured,” he growls, tracing my inner thigh where a trickle of wetness has formed a drop. “I’d much rather taste you than punish you.”

“No, don’t say that,” I whine, shaking my head.

“Why? Does it embarrass you to know that a man wants to taste you?” he questions, his fingers teasing my inner thighs so much I’m unable to stop myself from getting wetter—unable to stop my body from squirming against his thick erection.

“Y-yes,” I confirm with a groan.

“Well, you don’t have to worry about that tonight, *bambina* ,” he assures me. “The only thing you’re getting is a spanking.”

He pulls his hand away and before I realize what is happening, it comes down hard on my bare ass. I hear the sound a split second before I feel the sting radiate from the spot he spanked. Then his hand lands again, this time on the opposite cheek. I can feel the pinkness, like the shape of his hand is branded on my bottom. The third stinging slap lands across the first one, making it sting even more.

“Ow!” I whimper.

His hand keeps coming. One slap after another, and each one makes my butt sting. I’m a fully grown woman getting spanked like a disobedient child. Like a naughty little girl that danced so close to the flames, I set myself on fire. I whimper, groan, and squirm as the sting amplifies into a burn that really does feel like fire. A fire he started on my ass, and every slap just stokes the flames higher. My legs involuntarily twitch. The fingernails on my right hand dig into the couch while my left grips his pants so tight I’m sure I’ll tear his chinos. But I can’t help it. This really hurts!

“P-please, Massimo!” I cry out, tears of pain replacing the ones I cried from fear and humiliation. “I’m sorry!”

“You’ve said that plenty of times tonight, *bambina* ,” he says, his hand not slowing

down at all. “I believe you, but you’re still getting the spanking you deserve.”

“Ah! Ow! Ah!” I cry, the tears streaming in earnest with each painful slap.

My tears just seem to encourage him. The slaps come harder and faster. I’m humiliated. Sobbing like a baby. Yet the pulsations of arousal still linger between my legs, my clit throbbing in unison with the hard cock pressed against my belly. This shouldn’t turn me on. Pain shouldn’t turn me on. But I’ve never been wetter. Never been more aroused. Never craved— everything I’m craving right now.

A hard smack lands on my upper thigh, right where the curve of my ass meets my leg, and it burns so much I kick my feet. Then another and another, before he moves to the other thigh and leaves the same burning sensation there as well. But something else lingers below the sting. The way I feel the impact of his hand. The way it makes my body vibrate so much it teases my untouched walls. The way my squirming makes me grind against him. It’s too much. Too intense.

“Stop!” I cry out, my hips bucking against him.

“Oh, we’re not even close to being finished, bambina ,” he says firmly, his hand peppering my bare bottom with stinging slaps that make the fire burn hotter. “But if you admit you were a naughty little girl, and deserve this spanking, I might show some mercy if you mean it.”

His hard, callused hand forces a few more sobs out of my throat. Beg for mercy? That’s what he wants? I’ll do anything if it’ll make him stop. I don’t care how small or embarrassed I feel. I just want the spanking to be over.

“Please, Massimo! Mercy!” I wail, kicking my feet and squirming frantically against his erection. “I-I was a naughty little girl! I deserve this spanking! Please stop!”

“If you deserve it, why should I stop?” he growls, his hand smacking my thighs and bottom, making both of them burn.

“Because I’m sorry! Because I know I screwed up!” I cry, my body shaking with a mixture of pain and throbbing arousal. “Because I’ll never do it again!”

“Are you going to be a good girl for the rest of the week?” he asks, slapping dangerously close to my pussy. “Are you going to do everything I say, without questioning me?”

“Yes!” I howl miserably.

“I liked it better when you were saying yes, sir ,” he muses, smacking my sit spots so hard my body jerks with each one.

“Yes, sir! Yes, sir!” I squeal. “I’ll be a good girl!”

His hand comes down several more times, then he stops, and rubs the last burning spot he spanked. I whimper as my sobs turn into sniffles. My bottom feels like it’s still on fire, but his callused hand is somewhat soothing now. I tremble from the mixture of pain and arousal. I’m so turned on I could probably come if I rub myself against him now that the spanking is over. He’s still hard as a rock, and he throbs when he squeezes my ass enough for me to feel cool air wafting between my legs.

“Ah!” I protest, trying to squeeze my legs together as tightly as possible, but his grip keeps my pussy exposed.

“Don’t be embarrassed, bambina ,” he says. “Your reaction is normal. I’ll let you go in a moment. I just want a peek at what I’m going to be dreaming about tonight.”

A peek? At what he’s probably been staring at the entire time he’s been spanking me?

I'm not sure which is redder: my butt or my face. Feeling his gaze just seems to make me wetter. I squirm, but it doesn't make him release me. All it does is make me feel his thickness. Am I going to be dreaming about that ? My core trembles as I imagine it—his rough hands providing pleasure instead of pain. His hardness, stretching me for the first time. I whimper softly until his hand finally releases the grip on my thigh.

“Why don't you go to your room and take some time to get yourself together?” He pats my reddened bottom dismissively. “Then you can come back, thank me properly for punishing you, and have another glass of wine.”

“Y-yes, sir,” I whisper, letting him help me up from his lap.

I stand in front of him, feeling small, vulnerable, and exposed. My dress cascades down my legs, covering some of my skin. I reach for my panties and tug them back around my hips, grimacing when they slide across my seared flesh. I sniffle, wipe my eyes, and shuffle toward my bedroom. I don't let out a sigh of relief until the door is closed and locked.

“What is happening to me?” I question, feeling fresh tears spill down my saturated cheeks. “This reaction is normal? It doesn't feel normal.”

I stagger to the mirror and stare at my reflection. My face is a mess. I've cried all my mascara off and my makeup is a disaster. Even my lipstick is smeared around my lips like a clown. No wonder Massimo sent me to clean myself up. I wouldn't want to look at this either. I grab my purse and retreat into the bathroom that adjoins the bedroom. This would be easier if I had my bathroom bag, but what is in my purse will have to do.

Then I have to thank him.

Properly.

Whatever that means.

CHAPTER 9

Massimo

Lea's scent lingers on me after she's gone. Sweet lavender perfume. I've never liked perfume before, but I love the way it reminds me of her. It's not the only scent in the air. I can still smell her arousal. Still see the evidence smeared across my pants where she squirmed.

I pour more wine for myself and fill her glass. Once I'm settled in my seat, I reach into my pocket and pull out Lea's phone. I want to know everything about her, but I won't invade her privacy more than I have to. I just need to make sure Sarah is the only one she's been talking to. As soon as I scroll to her text messages, her phone buzzes in my hand with a new message from Sarah.

Sarah: Hey, why did you send me an audio file? All I hear is humming that makes my ears feel funny.

I sigh and contemplate a response. I scroll through the messages they've exchanged tonight, feeling more anger, but I swallow it. I mimic Lea's responses and try to make it sound like this one is coming from her.

Lea: Sorry! I was trying out something new on my phone! It's nothing.

Sarah: Is the date over?

Lea: Yes.

Sarah: Details!

Lea: There are no details worth talking about. I didn't get anything useful for your podcast. Sorry. I'm going to bed.

Sarah: Are you okay? Can you call me?

Lea: Not tonight. I'm okay. I just want to go to bed.

Sarah: Okay, will you call me tomorrow?

Lea: Maybe. Goodnight, Sarah.

There's no response. It must have been good enough. I look through the rest of Lea's texts, but don't read them, once I confirm they are prior to her meeting me. She doesn't seem to have many friends. No guy friends, unless she hasn't texted them in a while. The last one is from over a year ago, and the guy has been renamed Never Again , so I guess that tells me how their date went.

"I wonder what my name would be after tonight," I chuckle, sipping my wine.

The bedroom door opens and I look over as Lea walks back into the main part of the suite. She's cleaned herself up and removed her makeup. She looks absolutely ravishing without it. So much natural beauty it takes my breath away.

I'm not going to fight what is simmering inside me anymore. It's too raw and primal to dismiss, no matter how bad the timing is. I could have threatened her into silence. I saw the fear and regret in her eyes. She would take the first boat out of here tomorrow morning, if she could. But I'm not willing to let her go. She's brought too much to the surface and I can't ignore it.

“Welcome back, bambina ,” I greet her, staring into her gorgeous green eyes. “Are you ready to thank me properly for punishing you?”

“Yes, sir,” she whispers, looking down.

I nod and smile. “Good girls show genuine gratitude on their knees,” I say, gesturing to her.

Lea squeezes her eyes shut and walks closer. She takes a deep breath before submissively lowering herself to her knees. She looks like she was made to be in this position. Her head raises slightly and I see more fear in her eyes.

“A-are you wanting me to...” Her eyes nervously flick to my crotch and then she looks up at me.

“If I wanted you to suck my cock, I’d tell you open your mouth,” I growl. “All I want is to hear your gratitude. Your sincere gratitude. I want you to mean it.”

Another deep breath. I can already see it in her eyes. Whatever she says will be the truth. But I still want her to force the words out. It’ll make her feel a lot better, whether she realizes it or not.

“T-thank you for spanking me... sir,” she whispers. “I-I’m sorry for what I did. I know I deserved to be punished for it.”

“Good girl,” I praise, leaning forward and tracing her lips with my finger, imagining what they would feel like if I told her to open her mouth for me. “You’re forgiven. I’ll never bring it up again. It’s in the past now, where it belongs.”

“But I can’t leave?” she gasps, her lips pressing against my finger and parting. They brush against me as she continues. “I have to stay here for the rest of the week? L-like

a prisoner?”

“It’ll only be a prison if you make it one, bambina ,” I say, pulling my hand away from her face. “You’re going to stay with me, that’s true, but I’m not your warden. At least I don’t want to be. I’d like to be able to trust you, and if I can, you’ll simply be my guest.”

“You can trust me,” she whispers, and I see the genuineness in her eyes.

“Then get up off your knees, sit down on the couch, and enjoy your wine,” I grumble, moving back to my end and motioning to her seat.

Lea swallows hard as she gets up. She sits down and grimaces when her ass makes contact, but she squirms until she finds a position that is comfortable. Her fingers find the glass of wine and it trembles in her hand.

“I never drink this much,” she mutters before downing a large swallow.

“A little poison while you’re on vacation won’t kill you,” I say. “And I won’t let anything happen to you. You can trust me, like I’m hoping I can trust you.”

“O-okay,” she whispers, taking another nervous sip of wine. “I-I’ll try.”

“Is there anything you would like to ask me? Any questions burning inside that pretty head of yours?” I tilt my head slightly. “If you ask me something I can’t talk about, I’ll tell you, but I’d rather you ask than let them fester.”

“I don’t know.” She looks down and shrugs. “I’m not a Mafia fangirl, or whatever. Sarah is the one obsessed with true crime. Not me. I wouldn’t even listen to her podcast if she wasn’t my best friend.”

“You didn’t really strike me as the fangirl type,” I admit, sipping my wine.

“There is one thing, though. If you don’t mind me asking.” She glances at me nervously, and I hold her gaze.

“Go ahead, ask it, bambina ,” I say, nodding to her.

“D-did I really hear you put a hit out on someone?” she whispers, her eyes flickering with unease.

“No, you heard me talking about a hit with someone,” I answer truthfully. “I’m more the hands-on type. Not to say I haven’t used a hitman before. I certainly have, but it’s never my first option. Do you want to know who the hit is on?”

I shouldn’t open up like this, but I just don’t give a fuck anymore. Everything I’ve worked so hard to build is coming down like a house of cards. All because my brother doesn’t like the fact I was born first. That I’m the rightful heir to the Morandi family throne. I didn’t choose my destiny. But apparently my brother thinks he can choose his. The only option is for Morandi blood to be spilled—but I’m not the one making that choice.

“I don’t think... I don’t know,” she says, shaking her head. “Do they deserve it?”

“A lot of people probably think so,” I say wryly. “I’m inclined to agree with them. The target is a miserable wretch with more poison in his body than blood. He hasn’t felt like he was alive in a really long time. Until recently.”

Lea’s eyes reflect a flicker of confusion. She tilts her head inquisitively, so I decide to continue.

“The hit is on me, bambina ,” I sigh. “ I’m the target.”

“W-wait, what?” Her eyes get wide. “You? But you were asking if he got the money! What? I don’t understand.”

I’ve come this far. Told her things that would get me a bullet in my head, if she talked to the wrong people. But there’s already one of those with my name on it. She won’t be foolish enough to talk about anything I share after I put the fear of God in her. She had that before I took her over my knee.

“My little brother put a hit out on me,” I explain, reaching for my wine and taking a sip. “At the end of the week, when I get in my car to leave the resort, a hitman is supposed to walk up to my window, and make sure the only thing that makes it home to Las Vegas is a corpse.”

“Oh, my god!” Lea’s hand flies to her mouth. “Your brother?”

“Emilio. The fucking asshole,” I growl. “My father has been talking about retirement for a long time. It might actually happen this time around. Who knows. I guess my brother thinks the old man is finally serious, and Emilio wants to make sure he’s the next in line. I’m just in the way of his ambition.”

“How did you find out?” she asks, her hand trembling when she picks up her wine for another drink.

“Hitmen aren’t the most loyal people to do business with. The one Emilio chose is one of the best, but he’s as greedy as my brother. He thought I’d pay more to stay alive than my brother would pay to kill me,” I chuckle, shrugging my shoulders. “He called me less than an hour after he got off the phone with Emilio.”

“So, you’re going to stop the hitman?” she asks, her words still uneasy. “You’re going to kill your brother, instead?”

“I thought about it,” I admit. “But in order to do it the right way, I’d have to bring this to my old man. I’d have to get his permission to kill Emilio. My father won’t give it. No fucking way. He’ll want to try and talk some sense into my brother. Try to salvage this. But we’re way past that. Once I started looking into things, I realized my brother has a lot of alliances. Guys who will side with him, if everything goes to shit. It’ll be a civil war. There won’t be anything left of my family worth saving by the time it’s over.”

“Then what are you doing to do?” There’s a hint of panic in her voice now.

“Nothing,” I sigh, downing what is left of my wine. “Absolutely nothing.”

Lea seems stunned to silence. Or maybe she’s just processing it. But it takes a different turn than I expect. The confused, apprehensive look gives way to one of despair.

“What? No! You can’t just let him kill you!” she protests.

“Why do you care?” I chuckle. “You didn’t even want to have dinner with me. Now I’m holding you in my penthouse against your will, and I’m sure your butt is still burning from the spanking I gave you.”

“Yeah, but that doesn’t mean I want you to die !” she says frantically, shaking her head. “Wait, this is just a ploy, right? It’s a plan? Make them think you’re dead, and then you’re going to run away to Italy or somewhere?”

“Nah, faking my death isn’t really my style,” I answer. “I will not tear my family apart, plain and simple. I have too much respect for what we’ve built. And admittedly, I haven’t been much of a leader in a while. Not since my wife died and I got my revenge. It just left a hole—a hole that got filled up with malice and poison. My brother is ambitious and greedy, but I’m sure he thinks that the Morandi family

would be better off with him in charge after my father retires. Maybe he's right. Either way, I won't be around to see what happens after he takes over. If he fucks everything up, that's on him. I've made my peace with it."

"Massimo..." she whispers, blinking as more tears glisten in her eyes. I've seen her cry enough for one night, and I damn sure don't want to watch her cry over me. I'm a miserable wretch who doesn't deserve it.

"You're not going to change my mind, bambina ," I say, standing up and sighing. "No reason to waste your breath. I'm going to bed. I've got some business to take care of tomorrow morning. Resort business, nothing crazy. I'll be back in time for breakfast."

She tries to say something, but I don't acknowledge it. I walk into my room and close the door. Lea's phone, along with mine, and everything else in my pockets, goes into the safe. I strip to my boxers and get into bed. I wait until I see the lights go off in the main part of the penthouse before I lean over and turn off the lamp. Lea is the last thing on my mind when I close my eyes. I already know what I'm going to dream about.

No nightmares tonight.

It's going to be the best dream I've had in years.

CHAPTER 10

Lea

I'm at a loss for words.

Stunned beyond comprehension.

I turn off the lights and walk into my bedroom like I'm lost in a daze. How can Massimo be at peace with dying? With letting his little brother kill him? I know Massimo is in pain. I saw that every time he mentioned his wife. But... this? He knows exactly when he's going to die, and how it's going to happen, yet he isn't going to do anything to stop it?

I remove my clothes and turn to look at my ass in the mirror. It's not burning anymore, but it's definitely stinging. There's redness in the center and a pink halo that surrounds it. It's not as red as my dress, thankfully. I might still be feeling it tomorrow, but he could have done a lot worse if he tried. I'm grateful he didn't.

I feel strangely liberated as I look at the result of my punishment. I screwed up big time and the only thing I have to show for it is a red bottom. I didn't bleed. I didn't get sold. Massimo forgave me and said it's all in the past. That's where it'll stay. I'm not going to bring it up again if he doesn't. The lesson has been learned. I'm his prisoner—guest, whatever. I'll do as I'm told and I'll never breathe a word about this to anyone. I'll leave the true crime mysteries to my best friend. I'm not cut out for it.

"I wonder if she'll want to do one about Massimo," I sigh, getting into bed and

wincing as I try to find a comfortable position. “After he’s gone... I-I don’t even want to think about that.”

In the darkness, tears prick my eyes. I’ve cried so much today, I feel like a baby. But I can’t help it. These tears are foolish. I barely know Massimo. Why do I care if he gets killed at the end of the week? Just another bad guy gone, right? I doubt many people will shed tears. His brother certainly won’t. Not if he’s the one who ordered the hit.

“So much for letting the island guide me on this adventure.” I blink away my tears and roll over, grimacing again from the sting as I get settled. “All I get to do now is be a good girl until Massimo is gone, and I get on the boat to go back to the mainland. That’s what I get for not following my instincts.”

As I drift into the haze of sleep, I imagine it going a different way. I meet Massimo on the boat. He offers to help, but I decline. I don’t take the ginger beer. I don’t let him look at my hand. I stay away from the gorgeous guy covered in tattoos because that’s what good girls actually do. What I’ve always done. If I’d just followed my instincts, I’d be thinking about the latest chapter of whatever book I decided to read by the beach, rather than thinking about the Mafia, hitmen, and the man in the other bedroom.

But he’s the only thing on my mind when I finally fall asleep.

The next morning, I wake up in a warm, comfortable bed. For a moment, I forget about everything. I treated myself to a bungalow, but it’s nothing compared to this penthouse suite. I sigh as I sit up and then my eyes get wide. My bags are sitting by the door.

“What the...” I mutter, getting out of bed.

Massimo said he would have my bags brought to his suite. I didn't expect them to magically appear in my room. That means someone was in my room while I was asleep. Was it Massimo? Did he... watch me? I pray the covers stayed tightly around my neck the entire night, because I didn't have pajamas to sleep in, and my bottom hurt so much I didn't keep my panties on. Massimo was in my room when I was completely naked under the covers. A strange shudder shoots through me and I feel a tingle between my thighs.

"No, no, no." I shake my head. "None of that."

I don't need anyone else to mourn. Don't need to let these feelings flourish. It's wrong on so many levels. I don't think he's the kind of man to change his mind once it's made up. And even if he did, by some miracle, he's from a world I want nothing to do with.

I cautiously open my bedroom door and peek out. I don't see any sign of Massimo, so I grab a hotel robe and investigate. His bedroom is empty. The kitchen is untouched, except for a pot of coffee that is still warm.

"Massimo?" I call out, pouring a cup of coffee and opening the fridge to look for something to cut the bitterness. "Milk will have to do, I guess."

Massimo isn't here. I sip my coffee as I return to my bedroom. He must be away on whatever business he has to attend to this morning. That'll give me time to wake up and get myself together. For what? I have no idea. My first day as Massimo's guest—a kind way of saying I'm being held hostage because I know too much.

I take a shower, put on my makeup, and put on some casual clothes. Jeans, sneakers, and my favorite t-shirt. It's from a Post Malone show Sarah dragged me to when we were teenagers. I like the memories more than the music.

I hear a thud when I finish getting ready and walk out of the bedroom to see Massimo. His face lights up with a smile when our eyes meet. A smile that is almost enough to turn me into a puddle, but I fight against my feelings, doing my best to shake them off.

“Good morning,” he says. “Are you hungry? Breakfast should be here in a few minutes.”

“Yeah, I think my stomach can handle it,” I joke, unable to stop from smiling.

Massimo looks like he wants to say something. The look in his eyes gets distant for a moment, like it was triggered by my response—or my smile. I feel a flutter in my stomach that’s hard to ignore, but there is a knock at the door, and Massimo turns away.

He opens the door, says something to the man who has brought our breakfast, and wheels a large tray into the suite. He pushes it next to the table and motions for me to join him, so I walk over. Once he begins removing the metal covers on all the dishes, I see a vast breakfast spread. I’m hungry, but not that hungry.

“I wasn’t sure what you like, so I had them send a few options,” he remarks, moving some food around and placing a plate in front of each chair. “Eat. You’ll need it today.”

“To be your prisoner?” I chuckle. “I don’t think I need a big breakfast to lounge around in this luxurious suite all day.”

“No lounging today, bambina ,” he says, pulling out my chair and pushing it in once I’m seated. “You said you have an excursion planned to see the ruins and the statues, right?”

“Yeah,” I answer apprehensively. “You’re letting me go on an excursion?”

“I arranged a private excursion,” he explains. “Just the two of us. I’ll show you everything, even a few things they don’t let the tourists see. It’ll be fun. A lot better than going with a tour guide and a bunch of rowdy vacationers.”

I blink in surprise. A private excursion? Just the two of us? It’s a nice gesture, and I guess it’s a necessary one, since he wants to keep me away from people I could talk to. Still, it’s rather surprising.

“You want to spend one of your last days alive taking me on an excursion?” I question. “Surely you’ve got better things to do with your time than that.”

“Perhaps,” he chuckles. “But I’d rather spend the day with you.”

I struggle with a response, so I sip some orange juice and move some food over to my plate. A tremor of excitement radiates over me at the thought of spending the entire day with him. That a hot, tattooed Mafia guy wants to spend the day with a nobody from a small town. But why? We’ll never have a relationship. If I let my feelings flourish, I’ll get my heart shattered into a million pieces after he’s gone. And it’s such a terrible idea to begin with.

“Thank you for breakfast,” I sigh as I begin to eat my food. “And the excursion, but it really isn’t necessary. I’m okay with skipping the sights.”

“I’m not,” he growls, loading his plate up with bacon, eggs, and ham. “You came to Isola Selvaggia for an adventure, and you’re going to get one. You’re my guest, remember? It’s my job to make sure you enjoy yourself.”

“We both know I’m not a guest, no matter how many times you say that,” I mutter, meeting his icy blue gaze. “This is my ‘Hotel California.’ I’ve checked out of my

bungalow, but I'm stuck here for the rest of the week."

"Don't be so dramatic." He shakes his head and waves a hand. "And you're way too young to know that song."

"My grandmother introduced me to a lot of old music." I smile at the fond memory. "She used to make me tell her what I thought each song meant. She said most of the music these days doesn't have much meaning."

"Every song has meaning," he chuckles. "Sometimes the meaning is nonsense, but there's still meaning."

"Perhaps," I concede.

We steal glances at each other while we eat. I can't help being a little excited at the thought of getting a private tour from Massimo. If his family owns the resort, he probably knows a lot about Isola Selvaggia. Mystery is part of the charm. My grandmother told me all sorts of stories about this place, including a few about the ruins and statues.

After we finish eating, Massimo goes into his bedroom to change. He emerges wearing black hiking boots, jeans, and a t-shirt that stretches so tight over his mountainous physique that I have to suck a drop of drool back into my mouth. I can see a lot more of his ink now. The rose on his hand that seems to be missing a piece without his wedding band forms an intricate pattern of thorns that run along the length of his arm in a full sleeve. The tattoos on his other arm seem to be Vegas-themed, but I don't get a good look at them before he motions for me to follow him.

"I've got a Jeep waiting downstairs," he said. "I had them pack a lunch, too, in case we get hungry later."

“Oh, are we going on a picnic?” I laugh as I follow him into the elevators.

“If you like wine, cheese, and crackers—sure,” he says, swiping his keycard.

“Good to know I can get drunk if the tour sucks,” I joke.

“Yep, if you have to be drunk to spend the day with me, I understand.” He winks at me and leans against the wall as the elevator descends.

Massimo wraps his fingers around my arm once we get to the lobby. To make sure I don’t run off? I’ve given up all hope of that. If his family owns this resort, then I assume there are more Mafia guys around. Massimo said as much. I’ll take the devil I barely know over someone who would slit my throat without thinking twice.

When we get outside, I see a Jeep parked near the stairs. Massimo leads me over to it and opens the passenger door. I climb inside and see a basket sitting in the back seat. I can’t help peeking and notice two bottles of wine, along with multiple different types of cheeses, and some crackers I would have really liked to have when my stomach was angry at me on the boat.

“Stay out of the wine until we get to the ruins,” Massimo says playfully as he gets into the Jeep.

I wait until his door is slammed and I’m sure nobody can hear before I respond. “So, killing people is okay, but you draw the line at drinking and driving?” I flash him a grin.

“I have standards, remember?” He winks at me again.

“Your standards need to be reevaluated.” I reach for my seatbelt and put it on.

“Little late for that,” he chuckles, not even bothering with his seatbelt before he pulls away.

“Right,” I mutter. I’d mention the seatbelt, but why bother? “I hope you realize it’s going to be difficult to just have fun with you when I know you’re...” I don’t finish my sentence.

“Can you pretend?” he growls. “Humor a man who is on his deathbed?”

I shake my head and sigh. “I’ll try, Massimo. I’ll try.”

I struggle to put everything in the back of my mind so I can enjoy the excursion. I doubt he cares to see the ruins and statues one last time before he dies, which means he’s doing this for me. That means something, although I’m not sure if I like what it means. I felt his reaction when I was over his knee last night. He— likes me. Or he just liked having me bare. Liked punishing me.

The adventure is still on, but the island isn’t guiding me anymore.

Massimo is.

CHAPTER 11

Lea

The sight of the tropical paradise takes my breath away as the Jeep follows the trail.

“It really is beautiful as far as the eyes can see,” I remark, looking around.

“Yes, it is,” Massimo replies, but when I glance over, he’s looking at me, instead of the tropical paradise I’m enthralled by.

“Stop,” I say, blushing as I look down.

“Stop what?” he growls.

“Saying things like that. Looking at me.” I shake my head. “It’s almost... romantic.”

“Romantic?” he chuckles. “Not really my style. If I wanted to make you mine, I’d pull this Jeep over and kiss those beautiful lips the way they deserve to be kissed. Leave you breathless and begging for so much more, bambina .”

My breath hitches in my throat and my face gets redder. Yeah, that’s not romance. Not the kind I’d expect, anyway. But if he did that, I’m not sure what I’d beg for. I don’t want to find out, even if that’s the only thing I’m thinking about right now. Being his. Being claimed by those rough-looking lips and callused hands.

“You’ll be able to see the ruins as soon as we get to the top of the hill,” he says,

gesturing ahead. “The official tour should have moved on from here by now, so we’ll have the place to ourselves. You can explore them to your heart’s content.”

My eyes get wide when the ruins come into view. I saw pictures online, but those were nothing compared to seeing them in real life. An ancient civilization, long forgotten. More mystery than answers. The locals call it the Valley of the Ancestors, but some artifacts discovered during the excavation suggest the people who built the impressive array came from somewhere else. They may have even ruled the ancestors the locals are referencing.

“Wow,” I say as we get closer. “You could spend a whole day exploring these ruins and not see everything.”

“Yeah, the tour just drives by them and moves on to the statues,” he explains. “But we can do whatever we want, as long as we don’t blow the place up.”

“I’d say that’ll never happen, but for all I know, you’ve got a bomb in the back of this Jeep,” I joke.

“Nah, just a shotgun,” he smiles. “A few knives. Some rope...”

I can’t tell if he’s serious or joking.

“Right.” I roll my eyes as I look away. “I doubt we’ll need any of that.”

“Depends on whether or not you’re a good girl,” he teases, but there’s some firmness to his tone that suggests it might not be a joke. “I’ll hogtie you if I have to.”

“I’ll be good!” I squeak out. “Please don’t threaten me like that, even if it’s a joke. Especially after you spanked me. That really hurt.”

“You might not have liked it, but I don’t think you hated it,” he says, parking the Jeep in front of the ruins. “I certainly enjoyed it.”

“I could tell,” I groan.

Massimo gets out of the Jeep and I mutter a few things under my breath. He’s not wrong. I didn’t like the pain, but my body reacted to it. It would be hard to say I hated it. But I’m not eager to experience it again. Nor am I eager to find out if he will actually hogtie me if I misbehave.

“Come on, bambina ,” he says, opening my door. “Let’s have a look around.”

Massimo helps me out of the Jeep and we walk under a breathtaking archway carved from stone, with missing chunks that used to be marble, and grooves that were once filled with gold. According to legend, at least.

“I’m sure your grandmother told you about all the rumors and mysteries surrounding this place,” Massimo comments as we step into what was once a room—possibly a throne room, or a lavish dining hall. Most of it is missing.

“Yeah, the most popular one is that the people who built this place were the last survivors of Atlantis, right?” I ask, turning and marveling at all the impressive architecture that was built while most of the world was still in straw huts.

“It is, but... you know, wrong ocean,” he chuckles. “Atlantis was supposed be in the Atlantic. They would have passed plenty of islands before they made it to this one, so I’ve never believed that.”

“Then maybe they’re from the Lost City of Pacifis,” I joke. “Who says there was just one ancient civilization as impressive as Atlantis?”

“You might be on to something,” Massimo laughs, helping me down a flight of stairs carved out of stone. “Watch your step.”

The bottom of the stairs is broken into fragments that make me pause. Massimo doesn’t. He steps over the rubble, grabs me under the arms, and whirls me across it like I’m as light as a feather. I struggle to get my footing once my sneakers are flat on the ground. He’s strong—really strong. He could have hurt me a lot more than he did last night, if he wanted to.

“Thank you,” I whisper, and Massimo’s gaze lingers on me for a moment before he looks away.

“The tunnels are up ahead. If you look closely, you can even see some blood from all the human sacrifices.” Massimo motions for me to follow him.

“Wait, human sacrifices?” My eyes get wide. “Are you serious?”

“They don’t put that in the brochure,” he chuckles. “Bad for tourism.”

“Great, so the people from the Lost City of Pacifis were serial killers.” I shake my head and follow him into the tunnels.

There’s enough light for us to make it several feet before things get dark. They definitely don’t let tourists come down here. Massimo turns on his phone and guides me. I find myself clinging to his arm because the ground has some rubble that would be easy to trip over.

As we get deeper into the tunnels, and I see drawings on the wall that seem to confirm the people who built this place sacrificed human beings to whatever sun-looking deity they worshiped, it occurs to me that if Massimo wants to kill me, this would be a great place to hide my body. I gulp uncomfortably as the tunnels open up

to a large circular room with shafts that provide natural light. There's a large pit in the middle. A reddish-brown tint to the floor, more prominent around the pit. I look around and I notice an altar with similarly hued stains.

"No wonder they don't bring tourists down here," I remark. "It would be a great place to film a horror movie, though."

"They've filmed a few down here," he comments, putting his hands on his hips. "Alright, so in order for the ritual to work, I need to sacrifice a virgin on the altar. Now, where would I find a virgin..."

I take a step back. "I asked you not to say things like that," I groan. "It makes me uncomfortable."

"Oh, right, because you're still a virgin," he chuckles, turning to me. "That's an easy problem to fix. Then you won't have to worry about being sacrificed for good harvest next year."

Massimo's gaze flickers as he closes in on me. I shake my head and back up until I'm against the wall.

"Seriously, don't say things like that," I protest, trapped between his stare and the wall behind me.

"You never have to worry about being uncomfortable with me, *bambina*," he growls. "I won't lay a hand on you—unless you deserve it." Massimo grins and turns away. "Come on, let's check out the other tunnels."

I'm breathless for a moment, then I gather my composure and follow him. Despite my better judgment, I cling to his arm once we're walking across rubble again. His arm is so thick and strong. I can't help imagining what it would feel like to be

wrapped up in both of them—breathless for an entirely different reason. Even a hug would be nice. I haven't had a real hug since the last one I got from my grandmother. No. I can't think like that. Can't think about things too dangerous for me to even comprehend.

"This room is where they slept," Massimo explains as we venture into another circular room. This one has even more natural light. "Not the important people, of course. This room was likely for temple servants or slaves."

"You know a lot about this place," I comment, looking around at the ancient room that has been thoroughly plundered down to some of the stones.

"When I was a kid, I spent a lot of time in Italy with my grandfather. Part of my education, I guess you could say. He wanted me to learn everything about the family, but he also brought me to places like this," Massimo says. "History, especially ancient history, always fascinated him."

"It is rather fascinating," I admit. "To think that these people lived their entire lives on this island. Never saw the rest of the world... Not that I'm one to talk. This is the first time I've been anywhere other than Pine Grove."

"You should travel," Massimo turns to face me. "Seriously. Don't waste your life stuck in one place. The world is beautiful and full of interesting places like this."

"Easier said than done, Massimo," I sigh. "I'm not wealthy. I can't just go anywhere I want on a whim. The only way I was able to afford to come here is because my grandmother left me a small inheritance. She made me promise I'd use it to... keep the other promise I made."

"How much do you want?" Massimo shrugs. "A million dollars? Ten? It's not like I can take it with me when I go."

“Massimo, no.” I shake my head. “I-I... No.”

“I’m serious, Lea.” He walks closer, tilting his head slightly.

“Yeah, until you’re gone and your family wonders why you sent millions of dollars to some random nobody.” I hold up a hand and take a step back. “I don’t want Mafia money, or the kind of attention that would come with it.”

“I’m not an idiot,” he growls, looking offended. “I’d put it in a trust and burn the paper trail. Nobody would ever find out where it went. And my family will have bigger problems to worry about than where some of my money went.”

“No.” I state firmly. “It’s a generous offer, and I appreciate it, but I don’t want your money.”

“You might regret that one day.” He shrugs. “There’s more to see. Follow me.”

I sigh and do as I’m told, following Massimo down another dark tunnel as we go deeper into the ancient structure. The path narrows and the incline makes it harder to keep my footing. Massimo seems fine in his hiking boots, but my sneakers lose traction a couple of times. Massimo holds my arm to make sure I don’t fall. It finally opens up into another circular room, similar to the last one.

“What is this room for?” I ask, looking around at what I can see with the natural light.

“Nobody knows,” Massimo answers. “Could have been another place for people to sleep. Could have been a place of worship. Could have been for giant orgies.”

“Giant orgies?” My eyebrows shoot up.

“Look at the wall.” Massimo gestures to it and shines his light.

I walk closer, then I blush. The wall is covered in crude drawings that look like they could have been the inspiration for the Kama Sutra.

“Okay, sure,” I admit, turning back to him. “Maybe they had giant orgies down here. Fun! Can we go now?”

“Does that make you uncomfortable?” he chuckles. “Giant orgies?”

“What do you think?” I mutter. “I obviously haven’t been in any giant orgies. I’m sure you have.”

“No, bambina .” He shakes his head. “I don’t like to share. If you were mine, you’d be all mine. You’d only feel my hands on your delicate skin. Only feel my lips—everywhere. No man would ever touch you. They’d die if they tried.”

“Massimo...” I sigh.

“Lea...” he says, walking closer.

I take a step back and my foot slips on a rock. I nearly stumble, but Massimo grabs me. Then he pulls me close until I’m pressed against his impressive physique. I can feel his heat. See the growl as it twitches his lip. “Careful, bambina .”

“Th-thanks,” I whisper, then try to pull away, but he doesn’t let go.

I’ve always wondered what it would be like to stare into the eyes of man who wants to kiss me. To want him to kiss me. I know what it looks like now. How enthralling it is. How it makes my heart skip a beat while my stomach flutters and my core trembles.

“I-is there more to see?” I ask, my breath sounding more like a gasp.

“Not down here,” he answers, his free hand moving to my chin and tilting it. “I’m looking at the only thing worth putting my eyes on.”

I swallow hard and close my eyes. I wait for the kiss. My first real kiss. I know it’s foolish, but I can’t help how I feel. I want his hands on my skin. His lips—everywhere. I’m mixed up, confused, and falling for a man who can’t offer me more than the rest of this week.

The kiss never comes. Massimo exhales a sharp sigh, steadies me on my feet, and lets go. I hear his footsteps and open my eyes. He’s walking away. At least one of us still has common sense floating around in our head somewhere.

I need to figure out where mine went.

CHAPTER 12

Massimo

What the hell am I doing?

What the fuck am I thinking?

I've made peace with what's coming. The bullet with my name on it. I should be in my penthouse right now, finishing the things I need to finish before it's all over for me. Not gallivanting around Isola Selvaggia with a gorgeous girl. Not all fucked up inside, wondering if I made the right decision. Not thinking about whether I should put a bullet in my brother's head, just to have one more damn day with Lea.

"Not much further," I mumble, motioning ahead and glancing back to make sure she's still okay.

Okay? That's a laugh. She's far from okay. Her face is still a mixture of are-you-going-to-kiss-me and please-don't. She's as confused as I am, and I'm not making it any easier. The rational part of her brain is telling her why this would be a horrible mistake. And not just because my days are numbered. There are millions of reasons why she should stay far away from me. Death follows me like a trail of blood and ghosts. I just keep adding to the numbers. But soon... soon I'll get to join them.

When I made my decision, I imagined my grandfather looking down on me with a smile. Satisfied that my sacrifice would keep the Morandi family from going up in flames. But in these ruins, where memories of our conversations seem to pour out of

the walls, I'm questioning everything. My grandfather was a fighter to his last fucking breath. He survived over a dozen assassination attempts when he was sitting at the head of the table. He'd call my brother a traitor. He'd slap my father out of his chair if he hesitated to give me permission to pull the trigger. But my grandfather isn't here anymore, and my father isn't as ruthless as he was. I guess that skipped a generation, too.

"Ah!" Lea grimaces, holding up her hand as we exit the ruins and get blinded by the sun.

"Here." I squint and turn, placing my sunglasses on her. "Can't have the sun ruining those gorgeous green eyes."

"Thank you," she says, smiling when my fingers trace the side of her face as I pull away. "I should have grabbed mine, but I guess I've been a little preoccupied. Being taken prisoner by a man who spanked me."

"If you keep bringing it up, you're going to get another one," I threaten, motioning for her to follow me. "And it wasn't that bad. Just a little color."

"Easy for you to say," she mutters. "You weren't the one who got spanked."

I shouldn't do this. Shouldn't say this. But I can't help myself. I stop in my tracks and turn, towering over the beautiful girl I can't get out of my head.

"I'll make a deal with you," I say. "Tonight, I'll give you another spanking. One that you're sure to enjoy."

"What kind of deal is that?" she asks, her eyes getting wide.

"That's not the deal," I growl. "If you don't enjoy it, you'll never get another

spanking from me. No matter what you do. I'll just punch a wall or something."

"That was the alternative to spanking me?" she questions. "You're so violent... Okay, so you spank me, and if I hate it, you'll never spank me again? I mean, I wasn't planning on doing anything that would put me over your knee again, but it would be nice to know it isn't an option. But what if I—enjoy it?"

"You have to let me taste you," I say, leaning closer. "Anywhere I choose."

Lea gulps and her face turns red. A shudder puts goosebumps on her skin, and I see her pulse in her neck. Her green eyes flicker with curiosity, hesitation, and concern.

"That's it? Nothing more than that?" she asks, like she needs reassurance, while secretly unsure what she really wants.

"That's it, bambina ," I assure her. "If we make this deal, I'll honor it. You have my word. Nothing but a taste—unless you beg for more."

She shudders again, but then she slowly nods, biting her bottom lip. "Okay. You've seen my bare ass once already, so I guess it doesn't matter. But just so you know, if I don't enjoy it, and I know you can't spank me, I'm going to be a brat the rest of the time you're holding me hostage."

"So, nothing will change?" I growl, playfully swatting the back of her jeans.

"Hey! That doesn't mean you can just start slapping my ass whenever you want to!" she protests, scurrying away from me.

"Then I'll save them all for later," I chuckle, following her toward the Jeep.

She's damn sure going to enjoy it. I saw how wet she got last night. Even when it

started to hurt, she still couldn't stop grinding herself against me. I would have stopped her, if I wasn't hard as a rock myself.

It would be so easy to claim her. So easy to make her mine in every way. But I'll settle for a taste. I don't deserve more than that. I certainly don't deserve her innocence. The man who gets that pleasure should be able to give her the world, and I don't mean money. They should love her the way a woman deserves to be loved and have a lot more to offer her than a few days.

"Oh, my god!" Lea says, peering into the back of the Jeep. "You really do have a shotgun, rope, and a bunch of knives back here!"

"Did you think I was lying?" I ask. "I always pack the essentials."

"Your definition of essentials and mine are way different!" she says, walking around to the passenger door. "Seriously, why did you bring all of that?"

"There are wild boars on the island," I explain. "And if we happen to run into one, you'll be glad I have the shotgun."

"And the rest of it?" she questions.

"Because I'm not going to leave good meat out here to spoil," I laugh. "That would be a waste."

"I didn't realize this was a hunting trip." She rolls her eyes as I open the door and help her into the Jeep.

"At least you're not the prey." I lean closer to her. "Yet."

Her face turns red and I smile as I close the door. I walk around to the driver's side

and get in. She still looks a little flustered, but there's a hint of a grin on her soft lips. They're still begging for a kiss, but that isn't what I plan to taste.

"The statues aren't far from here. We'll spend as much time as you want looking at them, have lunch, and head back to the resort," I explain, glancing over at her. "Then you're going to get a spanking."

"Wonderful," she says, her grin getting a little wider. "I didn't even do anything wrong, and I'm still going to get a spanking."

"If you start acting like a brat now, I might forget all about tasting you, and just blister your ass," I warn. "Make up for all the spankings you're not going to get after I'm done."

"Hey!" she protests, squirming in her seat. "That's not the deal we made."

"Then you better be on your best behavior," I chuckle, cranking the Jeep.

Lea has a silly grin on her face while I drive us to the statues. It's almost as captivating as her smile. I can't help stealing a few glances, just to make sure it's still there. I'm glancing her way when the wonder dawns in her eyes as soon as the statues come into view.

"Wow! They're way bigger than I expected!" she says excitedly.

"Too easy," I mutter.

"What?" She perks a brow.

"Nothing," I say. "We can't park as close to them. The terrain isn't safe for the Jeep. Up for some more walking?"

“Sure, I don’t know how many excursions I get, so I better get my steps in,” she laughs.

It’s a hike to the statues, but I enjoy every minute of it, because I’ve got Lea by my side. I might as well be playing with a sharp knife, tossing it carelessly in the air and waiting to see if it hits something vital on the way down. I’m getting wrapped up in her. Thinking dangerous things. Questioning decisions that seemed so clear. Lea’s breathing fresh air into my lungs. Opening wounds that let the poison slowly seep out. Making my heart beat with something that feels like life, instead of sorrow.

“So these are the legendary statues carved by the people from the Lost City of Pacifis,” Lea says, putting her hands on her hips once we reach the crest that overlooks the valley below.

“Local legends say they were carved by giants,” I say. “They’re the same age as the ruins though, and if the people from the Lost City of Pacifis were giants, they must have liked crawling through tunnels, instead of walking through them.”

“And if there were giants, wouldn’t there be bones and stuff?” Lea adds sarcastically. “I’m sure there were a lot of bones in that—pit.”

“Yeah, some things just get to be a mystery forever.” I nod in agreement. “These statues are even more impressive than the ones on Easter Island.”

“Have you ever seen those?” she questions, turning to me.

“Not in person,” I admit. “Guess I never will.”

“Why—oh, right,” she sighs. “There are probably several things on your bucket list you won’t get to do.”

“Never had one of those.” I shrug. “Would you like to go further, or is this close enough?”

“This is way closer than I would have gotten if I took the tour.” Lea looks around. “This seems like a nice place to have lunch.”

I nod, put the basket down, open it, and remove the blanket. I spread it out, then place the platter with the cheese and crackers in the center. Lea takes her seat, cross-legged, and I lower myself to the ground.

“Red wine or white wine?” I ask, removing both bottles from the basket.

“Uh, I don’t know,” Lea says.

“Hmm.” I look over the cheese selection and palm the white wine. “This one will pair better.”

I remove the wineglasses and corkscrew, opening the wine and filling both glasses. I give one to Lea and watch as she takes the first sip. Once a smile confirms she like it, I put the red wine back in the basket.

“This tastes better than what we had last night,” she remarks, glancing at the label. “And of course, it’s from Morandi Vineyards.”

I bring the glass to my nose and inhale the fruity scent, closing my eyes as I imagine myself in my grandfather’s vineyards. “The soil in the northern vineyard has a lot more clay. It’s better for red wine, but the white wine from that vineyard always has a heavier tart in the flavor profile. Can you taste it?” I sip the wine and let the flavor sit on my tongue before swallowing.

“Yeah,” she says, taking another sip. “I can. Do all Mafia guys know this much about

wine?”

“No,” I chuckle. “But I grew up around it, so I picked up a few things.”

“I guess it’s good to know more about the poison you’re drinking,” she jokes, her eyes meeting mine for a moment.

I’ve had plenty of poison.

But I think I may have finally found the antidote.

CHAPTER 13

Lea

I'm falling.

And I'm falling hard.

Common sense has gone out the window. It fluttered away and I'm not sure I'll ever see it again. I practically begged for a kiss, even before I agreed to let him spank me—before I agreed to let him taste me, if I enjoy it. And I know I'm going to enjoy it, especially if it isn't a punishment like last night. Which means I've given Massimo's lips free rein. He can taste me anywhere .

I squirm as I think about it, watching as Massimo loads everything back into the basket. I had more wine than he did, and I'm a lightweight, so I'm feeling it. A pleasant buzz that makes the world feel more vibrant and alive. That makes my inhibitions not seem so... inhibiting. But it's only a taste, right? I'm not agreeing to anything more than that—unless I beg for it. I won't let it go that far. I can't.

“Alright, let's get a move on it,” Massimo snarls, picking up the basket and motioning for me to follow him.

“Eager to get me back to the resort?” I tease, feeling flutters and tingles in places I didn't realize could flutter or tingle.

Massimo doesn't respond. He just grunts and hikes his way up the hill with me

trailing behind him. I have an excellent view of his broad shoulders and muscular back pressing against his t-shirt. A great view of his ass in a pair of tight-fitting jeans. I raise my hand, hesitate, and grin. I shouldn't do this, but turnabout is fair play. As soon as he gets to the top of the hill, I slap his ass and giggle.

“What the fuck?” he challenges, spinning around and leveling a stern gaze at me.

“Now we're even,” I chime, unable to stop giggling.

“Get your ass over here,” he growls, snatching my arm so quickly I lose my balance, but he holds me in place. “These don't count, so I don't care if you enjoy them.”

Massimo forcibly turns me around and starts slapping my ass. Hard. I kick my feet and dance on my toes as the stinging slaps land on the seat of my jeans.

“Hey! Stop! That's not fair!” I protest, still giggling.

“Naughty bambina ,” he scolds, but there's some playfulness to it.

Massimo only gives me around a dozen stinging slaps before stopping. It's enough to make my giggles trail off and force a couple of whimpers toward the end. As soon as he lets go, I move away from him.

“Okay, okay! I won't smack your ass,” I sigh, rubbing my bottom through my jeans and doing my best to pout. “Meanie.”

“You're adorable, but I don't like being hit,” he says. “Even playfully.”

“Got it,” I mutter.

Massimo starts down the hill and I follow. I mock him silently, mouthing you're

adorable, but I don't like being hit while mimicking his expression. It's enough to make the giggles return until Massimo stops and I nearly run right into his powerful frame.

"Stay behind me," he growls.

"What? Why?" I peek around him and my eyes get wide. "Oh!"

The Jeep is where we left it, but all the doors are open, and there are several men surrounding it. One of them is holding Massimo's shotgun and several others are playing with his knives. The men appear to be locals, with the same olive complexion I've seen around the resort.

Massimo slows down and puts a hand behind him, keeping it on my hip in a protective gesture. I appreciate it this time, but my heart still starts beating hard as we get closer. I'm not sure if we're in danger, or if he's just being overly cautious. Either way, I'm not excited about approaching a group of armed men. I'm glad I have an enormous meat shield in front of me that I can hide behind.

One of the men says something in a language I don't recognize. The dialect is similar to the accent most of the workers at the resort have, so it seems to confirm they are locals. I peek around Massimo and see the one with the shotgun step forward.

"English? Italiano ? Gaeilge ?" Massimo asks. I assume he's running through the languages he knows. I'm not sure what the last option he offers is.

"Basket. Now." the man responds in broken-sounding English, pumping the shotgun and making me flinch. "And the girl."

Massimo stiffens and I cower behind him. And the girl? Oh, no. I don't like the sound of that.

“I’ll give you the basket and you can keep everything else. I’ll even give you my wallet,” Massimo offers. “But the girl stays with me.”

The man with the shotgun takes a step forward. Massimo takes a step back and I nearly get shoved down, but he holds me steady. When he lets go, fear twists my stomach into a knot. Several of the other men advance on us, a few brandishing knives, and not just the ones from the Jeep.

Suddenly, my meat shield is gone. Massimo drops the basket, lunges forward, and drives his fist into the throat of the man holding the shotgun. Except Massimo’s hand isn’t empty. He’s got the corkscrew from our wine tucked in his palm and I see blood splatter as it rips through the skin. The man screams and Massimo disarms him, flipping the shotgun around and backtracking to me. I tremble and cling to the back of his shirt, moving with him as he keeps distance between us and the men holding knives.

I close my eyes and hear gurgling. The last gasps of a dying man. Tears well up behind my eyelids and I pray this isn’t about to get worse.

“Cover your ears,” Massimo grunts. “Do it, now!”

Worse. Much worse.

I open my eyes, and when Massimo raises the shotgun, I let go of him and cover my ears with both hands. I squeeze my eyes closed like that is going to help, too, and cower against his back. A muffled boom that sounds like an explosion echoes and I feel the recoil vibrate Massimo’s massive frame. I brace myself, waiting for more shots, but when they don’t come, I peek out of one eye and see the shotgun lowered. I lean around Massimo and see the men running toward the edge of the forest to our left. Except for one. His lifeless eyes and the limp hand clutching the corkscrew in his throat makes my stomach churn.

“I knew I should have put my Glock in the basket,” Massimo sighs, walking to the back of the Jeep and tossing the shotgun in. “Help me gather everything up. I don’t want to be standing around if they decide to come back with friends.”

“Yeah,” I agree, feeling a bit queasy as I pick up a few things. “Did you shoot one of them?”

“No, I just fired a warning shot,” he growls. “They’re locals. Probably in a gang. They rob tourists sometimes, but they’re usually harmless.”

“Thank you,” I whisper. “For not letting them take me.”

“You’re always safe with me, bambina ,” he says, kicking the dead body out of the way before yanking my door open.

My nose wrinkles and I gag as I step over the blood. Massimo hoists me up and puts me in the Jeep, making sure my sneakers never touch the ground where the man fell. I’m grateful for it, even if getting some blood on my shoes would have been the least of my worries if he wasn’t here. Not that I would have come here alone. I’m glad I got to see the ruins and statues, but I’m okay if this is my only excursion during this trip. Being safely locked away in Massimo’s penthouse suite seems like a much better option.

“You alright?” Massimo asks as he gets into the Jeep and slams the door.

“Yeah,” I whisper, my voice shaky. “I’ve just never seen anyone die before. It happened so fast.”

“Just relax and breathe,” he instructs, then he starts the Jeep and pulls away, leaving the dead body on the ground. Once we are far enough away not to see the statues, Massimo pulls out his phone and dials a number. “Theo. I need a couple of your guys

to take care of something for me. Yeah, near the statues. It's a local, don't worry. He tried to rob me."

I can't hear the other side of the conversation, nor do I want to. Massimo killed someone right in front of me. But it was to protect me from whatever those men would have done, if they got their hands on me. I don't even want to think about that.

I turn and look out the window once Massimo ends the call. I don't feel as traumatized as I would expect to feel after something like that. It's an odd feeling, really. Like justice has been carried out and the problem is over, yet there is lingering sadness that someone had to lose their life. Massimo is driving us back to the resort like nothing happened. He can get rid of a dead body with a phone call. That's scary, but also a little—impressive? The way he handled himself certainly was. The way he protected me.

"I remember the first time I watched someone die," Massimo sighs, reaching over and squeezing my hand. "It gets easier, but I hope you never have to find that out."

"Me either," I say, my fingers tracing a speck of blood near his fingernail. "How old were you? When that happened?"

"I was eight years old. My brothers were younger, but they were there too," he says. "Our father wanted us to see what happens to traitors. One of our guys was talking to the cops. It wasn't a pretty sight."

"Damn, Massimo. You were a kid." My eyes get wide. "The only thing I was worried about when I was that age was if my grandmother was going to bake my favorite cookies."

"You don't get to choose what you're born into," he shrugs, shaking his head.

“And I guess you can’t escape it either?” I ask. “You and your brothers were basically forced into it?”

“No, I chose to follow in my father’s footsteps. I don’t get a pass for everything because I was born into it.” Massimo squeezes my hand again. “Maybe I should have done what Leo did and became a priest.”

“Leo is one of your brothers?” I question.

“Yeah, there’s three of us. Well, four if you count the bastard, but my father never does,” Massimo answers. “My mom just pretends he doesn’t exist.”

“Are you close with Leo... or the bastard?” I tilt my head inquisitively, still absently tracing his fingers.

“I’m close with all of my brothers,” Massimo grunts. “Even Emilio. Or I thought I was. I’m not sure of anything anymore.”

“Me either,” I say, but my response is referencing more than just family ties.

Massimo is the kind of man I should run away from. Far, far away.

But I just keep getting closer. Physically, mentally, and emotionally. But he’s so much more than a criminal. So much more than just a Mafia guy. There’s a good person under this ink. Not in the conventional sense, but there’s goodness in him. He’s capable of love. Soul-crushing love that left him broken. And he’s willing to die, rather than start a civil war with his family.

“I don’t think I want to leave the resort again until the boat gets here at the end of the week,” I mutter as we pass through the gates.

“You sure about that?” he asks. “I’ve got another excursion planned for you tomorrow.”

“Wait, what?” I raise a brow.

“Well, I had the guy who brought your bags find out which excursions you booked. You wanted to go swimming with the dolphins,” he says. “That’s a little boring, so tomorrow, we’re going swimming with the sharks.”

“Uh, Massimo, no.” I shake my head. “I don’t want to go swimming with the sharks! Plus, I got sick the last time I was on a boat, and I was planning on canceling that one.”

“You’ll be in a cage the entire time you’re underwater,” he says. “It’s completely safe. I’ll get motion sickness patches for you. They work. You’ll be fine.”

I mutter a few things under my breath and say a silent prayer that the motion sickness patches will work. But swimming with the sharks? I’m already doing that. I’ve been doing that since I got sick on the boat.

Swimming with one shark, at least.

Massimo is more dangerous than anything in the water.

CHAPTER 14

Massimo

I never take a life unless it's absolutely necessary.

Today, it was.

I would have given them everything in the Jeep and everything in my pockets if that would have made them leave. But they wanted more. They wanted Lea. I don't know if they just wanted to ransom an American girl or if they had something planned much worse than that. Either way, I wasn't going to turn her over to them, even if it meant I got to walk away. They picked the wrong tourists to rob.

I tried to shield her from it all. The best I could, at least. If I hadn't been concerned about her, there would have been more than one body on the ground. There wouldn't have been any warning shots. Thankfully, it didn't come to that. I took one life and gave the rest of them an option to run. They chose wisely.

Now Lea is safe, but she's not okay. I get that. I remember how it was for me. I had nightmares for months, and saw that traitor's lifeless eyes every time I closed mine. Saw the horrific things my father did to him, before he was allowed to die. My father isn't as ruthless as my grandfather, but he's still a dangerous man. I learned that at a young age.

As I got older, I began to understand his weaknesses. The way he coddled Emilio. The way he gave him chance after chance that nobody else would have gotten. But

that's not my problem anymore. I've made my choice.

Or I had... until Lea made it a lot more complicated.

"We can wait a day to swim with the sharks, if you're not ready," I offer, squeezing her hand once I park the Jeep.

"That might be a good idea," she sighs. "Let me see how I feel tomorrow morning. Right now, I'm just... I don't know."

"Let's go inside," I say, patting her hand and letting go.

Lea waits for me to open her door, and I help her out of the Jeep once I do. She clings to my arm as we walk into the hotel. I don't think I have to worry about her running away anymore. That seems like the last thing on her mind. I lead her into the elevator, swipe my card, and put an arm around her after the door closes. I pull her into an embrace and she squeezes tighter.

"We can also forget about the spanking tonight," I say. "Tonight, we'll just have dinner, wine, and put all of this behind us. How does that sound?"

I'd love to have her over my knee again. Love to watch her admit she enjoyed being spanked, so I can taste her. But things are different now. She may not be in the right headspace for it. Taking care of her is my priority.

Lea slowly lifts her head and looks up at me. She looks so beautiful right now. All I want to do is hold her close, kiss those pretty lips, and tell her everything will be okay. But those words would be hollow. They wouldn't be true. I'm letting her get attached to me, and I can't offer her all of the things a woman like her deserves.

"I-I don't want to wait," she whispers, her green eyes flickering. "We don't have that

much time together.”

“I know,” I sigh, looking away. “But it’s supposed to be enjoyable. Today may have been a little too traumatic for you to enjoy it.”

“If I don’t enjoy it, then you don’t get to spank me again,” she says, biting the inside of her bottom lip. “I’m not going to lie and say I’m perfectly fine, but I understand why you did what you did. And I’m grateful for it. You protected me.”

“Like I said, you’re always safe with me, bambina ,” I tell her gently, squeezing her tighter.

Those words are as hollow as the ones I can’t bring myself to say. Always safe with me, like I can keep her safe for the rest of her life. The rest of mine, sure, but that promise isn’t worth much. My days are numbered. I won’t make it off this island alive.

“Thank you,” she whispers, leaning against my chest.

I feel an ache when the elevator doors open, because I have to let go of Lea. I love the way she feels in my arms. I didn’t realize how much I missed that kind of closeness. That kind of vulnerability. Nobody could ever replace Layla, but if the circumstances were different, Lea could heal me. Her beautiful smile and gorgeous green eyes could melt all the malice inside me. She’s already the antidote to the poison I thought would linger forever.

“Any preference on wine?” I ask, putting the basket down and walking to the mini-bar.

“Something stronger than wine, please,” she whispers, sitting down on the couch.

Yeah, that makes sense. Harsh poison. That's what I turned to, when I was eager to devour as much as I could so the pain would go away. Except it doesn't work. It's just more toxin to mix with the venom you didn't choose. Still, it'll take the edge off. We both need that right now.

I fill two glasses with whiskey and discard the bottles from the mini-bar. I don't normally add ice, but she might need it, so I make them both the same way. I walk over, hand Lea her glass, and sit down on the opposite end of the couch. Lea clutches her glass before lifting it to her lips. As soon as she sips it, her face twists into a scowl and she gags.

"Oh, god, that's a lot stronger than wine," she groans.

"Never had whiskey before?" I ask.

"I had a shot of vodka once," she sighs. "I really don't drink much. I've drunk more since I got to this resort than I have in the last year."

"Would you like me to fix some vodka instead?" I offer.

"No." She shakes her head and takes another sip. "This is fine. I had such a nice buzz from the wine, too. I was happy before..."

"Before you slapped my ass and I had to spank you," I tease, even though I know that wasn't the reason.

"I didn't hate that part," she says, a tiny grin moving the edges of her lips.

"I must admit I liked you like that. So carefree and happy." I down some of my whiskey. "It seemed like your natural element."

“I don’t know about that.” She sips her whiskey again and grimaces. “This isn’t my natural element. I’m on vacation.”

“Because you’re directionless, right?” I ask. “Maybe you were born to be directionless. There’s nothing wrong with it. Life doesn’t need direction to be meaningful.”

“I think I need one, Massimo,” she sighs. “I don’t like feeling lost. After I get back home, I have to figure out what I’m going to do. Probably go back to school, and find a major I like.”

“Or forget about that and see the world,” I say. “Experience life, without the burden.”

“I don’t want your money,” she reiterates. “I’ll figure things out on my own.”

“Okay, bambina ,” I sigh. “I won’t bring it up again, but if you change your mind, my offer stands.”

She nods, sips her whiskey, and puts her glass down. Then she moves closer to me on the couch. I put my arm around her and pull her into a warm embrace. Not as tight as on the elevator, but enough to comfort her. It seems to work better than the whiskey. “There’s no way to get you to change your mind, is there?” she whispers. “I know you said faking your death isn’t really your style, but wouldn’t that solve the problem?”

She’s not wrong. Faking my death would be easy enough. My family would grieve—or celebrate. A mixture of both, I presume. But I know how that would go, just like I know how it would go if I went to war with my brother.

“It’s more complicated than that, bambina .” I casually trace my fingers along her arm while I speak. “I could disappear, but what I do is a part of me. If I fake my own

death and things don't go well after my brother takes over, I'll feel obligated to step in. The only way I can walk away is if it's permanent—and the only thing that makes it permanent is the grave.”

“It's so unfair,” Lea sniffles, and I realize she's crying.

“Don't cry, Lea,” I plead. “Especially over me. The last thing I deserve is your tears. I'm the villain, remember? The scary guy on your best friend's Mafia true crime wall?”

“Oh, god, Sarah,” she groans. “I bet she's tried to call me.”

“I texted her last night,” I tell her. “Told her the date was over and you had nothing for her podcast. Although, I did say you might call her today...”

“Sarah will freak out if she doesn't hear from me,” Lea says apprehensively.

“Then let her freak out,” I say. “You're on vacation.”

“No, you don't understand.” Lea pulls away and I see the concern in her eyes. “She's obsessed with true crime. She assumes the worst every single time. If she doesn't hear from me, she'll call the hotel. She'll call the cops. She might even get on a plane herself. And she knows your name.”

“Shit,” I mutter, realizing I may have underestimated Lea's best friend. “If I give your phone back, can I trust you?”

“You still have to ask if you can trust me?” she questions, looking slightly offended.

“No,” I concede, getting up from the couch.

I trust her. Probably more than I should. But Sarah is a problem. She wouldn't be the first armchair detective to poke around, and my family would handle her if necessary, but now isn't the time. There's too much at stake and too many lives on the line.

I walk into my bedroom, open the safe, and remove Lea's phone. It needs a charge, but her screen is full of messages from Sarah. I take the phone into the living room without reading them.

"Okay. Here is your phone," I bark, handing it to Lea. "But choose your words carefully, bambina . Make it clear you are not in any danger. You're on vacation, remember? You don't have time for her foolishness."

"I understand," Lea replies, swiping her finger across the screen.

I sit down and watch, but I reach for my drink and sip it while Lea reads the text messages. I can tell by the look on her face that she's concerned by what she reads.

"I need to call her," Lea sighs. "She's been alternating between are you okay and call me all day. Only way I can get her to settle down is to call her."

"That's fine." I nod in understanding. "I trust you, so if you want privacy, you can go to your bedroom."

"No, that won't be necessary." Lea hits a button on her phone and puts it to her ear. "Hey, Sarah. No, I'm okay. Things didn't go very well last night. I'm sorry I couldn't call."

Lea isn't a liar. She looks uncomfortable telling half-truths. Or maybe she's just getting an earful from her best friend. That's what it sounds like, but I can't make out everything.

“There’s no story. I asked and... there’s nothing. His wife was killed, but he didn’t have anything to do with it.” Lea pauses, glancing at me with discomfort in her eyes. “I could tell. Like you said, it’s a cold case. If the cops couldn’t figure it out, you’re just wasting your time.”

I don’t care if Sarah makes a podcast about my wife’s murder. There are no sources that will talk to her. Speculation is all she will have, and there is plenty of that to go around. Speculation won’t get the attention of my family.

“I wish I could have been more helpful, but I’m just going to enjoy my vacation and forget all about Massimo Morandi.” Lea glances at me and there’s a half-smile on her face. “I’ll call you soon and give you all the details. I promise.”

They say their goodbyes and I let out a sigh of relief. One problem solved. I wish all of them were this easy.

“All set?” I ask.

“Yeah, she’s disappointed, but she’ll be okay,” Lea sighs. “She’s been investigating your wife’s murder nonstop since I talked to her. She gets a little obsessive, but there’s no information out there for her to find, right?”

“No,” I confirm. “But I’m a little worried.”

“About what?” Lea’s eyebrow shoots up with concern.

“Well, you said you were going to forget all about me,” I chuckle. “You don’t get to do that until the end of the week.”

Lea looks down and shakes her head. “I’ll never forget you, Massimo, but I had to tell her something.”

I smile and motion to her glass. “Ready for another?”

“No,” she answered, biting her bottom lip. “I’m ready for my spanking.”

“Oh, really?” I laugh, feeling my cock twitch. “You sure about that? You don’t want to have dinner first?”

“I don’t want to wait,” she says, and I can tell she’s trying not to grin.

“Alright, then. Get up, bambina .” I motion to her, scoot to the middle of the couch, and point to a spot on the floor between my feet. “Stand right there.”

If she wants a spanking, she’ll get one.

But this isn’t punishment and we’re both going to enjoy it.

CHAPTER 15

Lea

I put my phone down, finish the last few drops of whiskey in my glass, and stand up.

Then I move to the spot Massimo pointed at.

I'm standing between his legs. A quick glance tells me he's already hard, and I gulp. I agreed to this... and I can't deny feeling a rush that isn't just the alcohol.

"First thing I need to do is remove your shoes," Massimo says, leaning forward and tugging at the laces on my right sneaker.

"I-I can just kick them off," I offer. They're old sneakers and I rarely untie them.

"No, let me do it," he insists, so I relax, and do my best not to tremble.

Massimo removes my sneaker, then pulls off my sock and caresses my foot. His strong, callused hands squeeze and massage the muscles. It feels good after the walking we did today, and I put a hand on his shoulder for support.

"I-I'm enjoying this part," I say, exhaling sharply.

"You're going to enjoy it all," he says, moving his hands to my other sneaker.

I smile and enjoy the way his hands feel on my skin. I'm still a little apprehensive,

but he's already spanked me once. I'm likely to get another one, regardless. And if my body doesn't react like it did last night, I'm safe from his firm hand the rest of the time I'm with him.

"Next thing I need to do is remove your jeans," he says, his hands moving up my legs.

I don't think I can stop my body from reacting to anything right now.

"I guess you want to do that part yourself, too?" I ask, my breathing getting faint when his fingers trace along my inner thighs.

"Yes, bambina ," he growls. "And I'm going to enjoy this part even more than you do."

My breath hitches when Massimo raises my t-shirt, and his fingers brush against my belly. It's like his touch smolders straight to my core. He hooks his fingers into my jeans, pulls me forward, and unfastens them.

He slides my jeans down slowly, exposing my panties as he does. I wore basic black today. I wasn't expecting anyone to see them—not that I ever do.

I shudder when his fingers reach bare skin again. I feel the heat from his touch matching the spark inside me. They blend together beautifully, as goosebumps rise against his calluses.

"I can't wait to taste you," he rasps, his words bringing another shudder. "I'll let you imagine the spot I'll choose." His fingers move lower, tugging my jeans to my ankles.

My imagination doesn't have to go far. I can already picture him between my thighs,

his rough beard rubbing against my skin before his lips do. But I don't know how it will feel. That part, I'm not sure I can even imagine.

I brace myself on his shoulder until he pulls off my jeans and tosses them to the side. His hands move along my legs, and he barely leaves any skin untouched until his fingers graze my inner thighs. Even the light tease makes my legs shake and my pussy clenches with anticipation.

“Now, I'm going to remove your panties,” he says, his gaze meeting mine. “I don't have to, but they're coming off anyway, because you won't need them when I taste you.”

“Oh, god,” I whimper, but I don't say anything to stop him—don't want to do anything to stop him.

His fingers trace the waistband before he hooks it with both hands. Then he slowly tugs them down and I gasp, feeling myself getting wetter. I'm not even over his knee yet and I'm already burning up.

As soon as he peels them away from my wetness he stops, inhaling my scent like an animal. “You smell delicious, bambina,” he murmurs, then he pulls my panties down my thighs.

I feel vulnerable and exposed when he tosses my panties to the side. But I don't get to dwell on it. Massimo guides me into the familiar position across his lap. I squirm, wanting to feel his hardness this time, and when it presses against my bare belly I can't stifle my gasp.

“Glad to see I didn't spank you hard enough to leave any marks earlier,” he says, patting my bottom before letting his hand rest there. The anticipation builds, making me squirm while my pulse quickens. “But you're going to be red before I finish this

time. Are you ready, bambina ?”

“Y-yes, sir,” I answer, closing my eyes when his hand pulls away.

The first slap isn’t hard. Just enough to sting and make me wetter. I get a matching slap on the other cheek, followed by two that are harder. I squirm on his lap, intentionally guiding my movements to tease his erection.

The slaps keep coming. Gentle. Almost too gentle, after last night. But the sting builds as they continue and I can’t help whimpering, even if it isn’t enough to bring tears to my eyes.

Last night, I was aroused due to a mixture of fear and shame, before the spanking even began. It’s different today, but I can’t deny the thrill building alongside the sting.

I like the way his hand feels on my bottom. Like feeling his reaction each time I squirm. I’m already thinking about what comes after. About him tasting me. There’s no way I’ll be able to resist, because I’m enjoying this, and I’ll have to admit it.

“Sometimes, even good girls need a spanking,” Massimo says, slapping and rubbing along my thighs. “Especially when they get as wet as you do.”

His words make me clench with anticipation. The slaps get firmer, but they’re not coming very fast. He spanks and rubs, teasing my skin with his callused touch, which makes me whimper and wriggle against him. His hard cock throbs each time I do. It makes me think about more than his lips—more than his tongue. If he wants it, I’m not sure I have it in me to resist. Not sure I want to resist.

“How are you feeling, bambina ?” he asks, his hand rubbing circles on my bottom for a moment before his fingers tease my inner thighs. “Still enjoying your spanking?”

“Yes, sir,” I whimper.

“Good, good,” he says, patting my bottom. “Because it’s about to get harder.”

A hard, stinging slap lands in the center of my ass. My arms and legs spider with surprise. Then another and another. Now it hurts—but even that doesn’t seem to quell the fire raging inside me. I whimper and groan. It’s not as enjoyable, but it doesn’t make me want to scramble away. I lift my ass to meet his hand several times, which just seems to make him more determined—and more excited. His dick throbs against my belly each time a stinging slap lands.

“Ow,” I whine. “Massimo, it’s... it’s starting to burn.”

“Yes, I know,” he says, still spanking me with the same firmness. “But you don’t hate it, do you, bambina ?”

“No, sir,” I admit.

Last night, it felt like punishment. I knew I was in trouble and the stinging slaps were my consequence for my foolish actions. This is different. Way different. I groan, whine, and squirm, but I don’t cry. There’s too much excitement burning inside me. I grind myself against him, feeling a tease of beautiful friction that makes my clit throb. I don’t just want him to taste me. I need it.

But the spanking isn’t over yet.

“This may be for fun, but I won’t hesitate to give you a real spanking if you don’t do as you’re told,” he growls, accentuating his point with a few stinging slaps. “You’re going to be a good girl for me, aren’t you, bambina ?”

“Y-yes, sir,” I cry out, finally feeling my eyes water.

“Then say it,” he demands, slapping my sit spots hard enough to get an immediate reaction.

“I’ll be a good girl!” I squeal. “I promise!”

“After I’m done spanking you, I’m going to take you to the bedroom,” he says. “I’m going to taste you. Do you remember where I get to taste you?”

“Anywhere you want...” I whisper, trembling as I think about it.

His hand seems to be spanking everywhere at once. The sting has bloomed into a burn that is making me squirm with every slap. It’s hurting, but I don’t want him to stop. I’m not sure if that is because of the way my body is reacting to the spanking—or his words. They’re stirring things to life I’ve never felt. Teasing sensations I didn’t know were possible. The harder slaps vibrate into my core and make me clench.

“I bet you have a good idea of where I want to taste you,” he comments, slapping my sit spots a few more times. “Don’t you, bambina?”

“Yes, sir,” I whisper.

His hand lands a few times, then it stills for a moment before he starts rubbing the part of my ass that stings the most. I get a little more comfortable, enjoying the rubbing and the way he feels against me.

“Now you have to tell me if you enjoyed it,” he orders, his fingers tracing down to my inner thighs. “If you say no, you’ll never be in this position again, no matter what. If you say yes, then you already know what that means.”

I’m a virgin craving something I don’t fully understand. But I can’t lie to Massimo,

even if it saves me from a spanking I don't enjoy. And that's what it would be... a lie. I enjoyed the spanking, even when it started to hurt. That rush of excitement. That lingering sting that still seems to be stoking the fire burning inside me. The way his hand made my walls vibrate when he spanked me harder.

"I-I enjoyed it," I admit, my breath hitching in my throat.

"Then stand up," he growls, moving his hand to my arm.

Massimo helps me up from his lap. I stand in front of him, feeling a trickle of wetness run down my inner thigh. My body clenches with a mixture of anticipation and fear. I want it, but I can't help being scared. I've never been touched by a man, much less felt a tongue in all the places I know it will feel good.

Massimo rises from the couch once I'm steady on my bare feet. His fingers brush against the bare skin below my t-shirt, then he wraps his fingers around it and starts tugging. I squirm to resist and shake my head.

"If you're going to taste me there ...," I whimper, rubbing my thighs together. "I can keep my shirt on."

Massimo chuckles, his blue gaze piercing into me as he shakes his head. "I get to taste you anywhere I choose, bambina ." He leans forward until his lips are against my ear. "And I choose everywhere ."

"That's not the same thing!" I protest.

"A deal is a deal, Lea," he rasps into my ear, pulling on my t-shirt. "Now stop fighting what you want before you end up over my knee for a spanking you don't enjoy."

I groan, but my arms relax. Massimo peels off my t-shirt, tosses it to the side, and drags his fingernails up my back. I arch into it, pressing my body against him while his fingers twist the clasp of my bra. It cascades down my arms, and Massimo removes it roughly, tossing it on the floor beside the rest of my clothes. I'm completely naked—fully exposed. My nipples harden from a mixture of the sudden coolness and the arousal that is still building.

“Now, bambina ,” he says, leaning back and glaring at me with a grin on his face. “You’re mine .”

Massimo takes my hand and pulls me toward his bedroom.

There’s no backing out.

CHAPTER 16

Lea

Massimo takes me to his bedroom and closes the door with a thud.

Then it locks.

The last time I heard a door lock behind me, I got scared. Afraid he was going to do a lot more than spank me. Now it is making my stomach flutter. I turn to meet his gaze and my breath hitches. The look in his eyes is different. More primal, almost like an animal sizing up his prey. That's what I am now—his prey .

“On the bed, bambina ,” he says, his hungry gaze shifting for a moment. “I want you on your back.”

“Yes, sir,” I whisper, swallowing hard.

Massimo's bed is bigger than the one in my bedroom. It's a canopy bed with four posters and a sheer curtain that hangs from the top, mostly for decoration. It's not thick enough to block the light. I walk over, move the curtain, and get comfortable. I'm not brave enough to spread my legs. I keep them tightly shut and remain as still as a statue, except when I have to squirm a little because I feel the sting left behind by the spanking. Massimo goes to his suitcase, opens it, and removes a few things. I can't see what they are until he turns around with several ties draped across his arms.

“What are those for?” I ask nervously.

“I’m going to tie you up, Lea,” he says, walking to the bed. “That way you stay exactly where you are until I’m done with you.”

“That isn’t necessary,” I say, feeling my throat tighten when he kneels on the bed and wraps one of his ties around my wrist. “Really, Massimo.”

“Don’t argue with me,” he growls, wrapping the tie tighter and yanking on it.

I whimper a few more protests, but I don’t do anything to stop him. He binds my wrists together with one tie and uses another to secure them to the headboard. I tug against my restraints, finding them too tight for me to ever escape on my own. Now I’m helpless and completely at his mercy. But he’s not finished yet. He moves to the foot of the bed and wraps a tie around my ankle. He’s going to make me utterly helpless.

“My feet too? Really?” I groan.

Massimo turns to me, letting go of the tie and glaring. He shifts until he’s towering over me and puts a hand on my thigh.

“What did I say about arguing with me?” he rumbles, squeezing my thigh until my legs part.

“S-sorry,” I whimper.

Massimo lets go of my thigh and before I realize what is going to happen, he slaps my labia. I squeal and squeeze my legs shut, shaking my head frantically.

“No! Don’t do that!” I cry out.

“You keep arguing, so now you’re getting punished for it,” he says. “Spread your

legs, Lea. You're getting ten of those."

"No, Massimo! I don't like that!" I rub my thighs together, feeling the sting where he slapped me—it wasn't entirely unpleasant, but it caught me by surprise.

"Either open your legs willingly, or I'll finish tying you up, and you'll get twenty instead of ten," he warns. "And if you keep fighting me while I'm tying you up, I'll use my belt instead of my hand."

I'm in trouble again, and this time, he's spanking me somewhere I never imagined feeling pain. But what choice do I have? Ten is bad enough. I don't want twenty—and I really don't want him to use his belt. I whimper, my legs shaking as I part them. I only give him a few inches, but he spreads them wider, and I don't fight him. Fighting just makes things worse.

"Count them out, bambina ," he demands, pulling his hand back. "And tell me you're sorry after each one."

I watch the first one and as soon as the sting resonates, I squeal, forcing my eyes shut. "Two! I'm sorry!"

"No, no, that was the number one," he declares. "The first was a warning. Now we're starting over."

I feel him shift as his hand moves and the sound echoes right before the sting blossoms.

"One," I whimper. "I'm sorry."

Two, three, four. I struggle to keep count. Struggle to keep apologizing. Yet my body still reacts to it. The sting makes me wetter. The impact of his hand against my most

sensitive spot makes my clit ache from more than just pain. I don't hate this part either, but I'd never admit it. This is supposed to be punishment, so I have to take it like a good girl.

"Ten!" I belt out as the last smack lands. "I'm sorry!"

"Now hold still so I can finish," he growls, pulling away.

I stare at the ceiling with my folds stinging and my clit throbbing while Massimo ties my ankles to the posts. I don't even groan my displeasure, even though being tied up has never been a fantasy. At least the next part should be pleasurable, as long as he doesn't pull out any more surprises.

"Where to taste you first," Massimo muses, moving on the bed and tracing his way up my body. "I think I'll start with your pulse."

Massimo leans forward and his lips caress my neck. They're like molten lava against my skin. I shudder and writhe, tugging at my restraints, but I'm not going anywhere. I can feel my heart beating so hard it thumps against his lips. Then I get his tongue, making quick circles as his lips move. All along my neck. Down to my shoulder. Across my throat, and up the other side of my neck until I can feel his breath on my ear.

"I want to taste everything, bambina ," he says. "Even your secrets."

"I-I don't have any secrets," I mutter, goosebumps covering my skin as I react to him.

"No?" he questions. "You haven't even told me your full name. I bet Lea is short for something, isn't it?"

"Yeah," I admit. "It's short for Eleanor."

“Eleanor, huh?” he says, pressing his lips to my neck and kissing his way back up to my ear. “You don’t hear that name much these days.”

“I was named after my grandmother,” I whisper. “Back when my mom thought my dad would still come around to—the idea of me.”

“I like it, Eleanor ,” he whispers. “But I bet you have a last name, too, don’t you?”

“Fuller,” I answer.

“Eleanor Fuller,” he repeats, nibbling my earlobe. “A beautiful name for a beautiful girl.”

I’ve never been called beautiful before—never felt beautiful. I’m not sure what I feel right now. Arousal mixed with teases of pleasure. His lips against my skin, and moving lower. His tongue, tracing the spots his lips press down, so he can taste me. It’s hard to get my thoughts together with his lips and tongue distracting me from everything else.

“I only got permission to taste you, bambina ,” he says, kissing the top of my right breast. “Can I touch you?”

I’m tied to the bed. It’s not like I can stop him. But I can have a little fun with this, since he’s asking.

“That wasn’t the deal we made,” I whisper, my back arching when he drags his tongue down to my nipple and circles it, which causes it to harden into a nub.

“Smart girl,” he chuckles. “Which means we have to make another one, don’t we? So I can touch all of the places I’m going to taste.”

“Maybe,” I whimper, pleasure shooting through me as he continues to tease my nipple. “But only if it’s a good deal.”

“What do you want?” he asks, his lips moving to my other nipple.

“I’ll let you touch me, but you have to... let me make one request after you’re done,” I groan, a shudder shooting through me when I feel his tongue.

“After I’m done tasting you?” he rasps, my nipple still against his lips.

“Yes, sir,” I whimper.

“Deal,” he growls, leaning back and running his hands up my stomach until he’s holding both of my breasts. “One request, and I’ll honor it, unless you ask for something you know is impossible.”

I’m too overcome by the way his rough hands feel on my breasts to respond. He kisses and licks between them while squeezing, caressing, and playing with my nipples. He pinches the right one and I groan some displeasure, but it still makes me quiver. Then his lips move lower... and lower. His tongue circles my belly button and moves even lower. I can barely hold still. If I wasn’t tied to this bed, I’d squirm away because of how sensitive I am. Instead, I tug at my restraints while he kisses my pelvis and runs his fingers along my inner thighs.

“You knew I was going to taste you here, didn’t you, bambina ?” he asks, then he kisses right above my clit and beside my folds.

“Yes,” I gasp. “I expected you to start with that.”

“It’s going to be worth the wait, trust me,” he says, kissing my inner thighs down to my knee before shifting to the other leg. “Because I’m going to taste your very first

orgasm.”

“I’ve... touched myself before,” I whimper, my breath hitching as his lips move back toward my pelvis.

“Naughty girl,” he chuckles. “But I’m talking about your first real orgasm. And your second... and your third.”

I start to respond, but then I feel his breath on my folds. He rubs his finger along them, parting them gently before his tongue flicks against the sensitive flesh. It feels so good I gasp, but when his tongue moves to my entrance, I struggle not to squeal. It feels way different—so different it’s like a completely new sensation. More pleasurable. More breath-stealing. More intense .

“Oh, god,” I whimper, my hips bucking toward him.

“Settle down,” he scolds, holding me in place with his hands. “No need to be so eager.”

“I can’t help it,” I gasp, feeling his tongue circle my entrance. “It... it feels good.”

Massimo laughs and his beard scrapes against my skin like a tease. His tongue makes slow sensual circles, then presses inside me, just enough for me to feel the tip. My breathing gets heavier and I struggle not to buck against him again. Just when the sensation causes some pressure to build, he moves away, kissing and sucking my labia as he makes his way higher. I feel his breath on my clit a second before his tongue.

“Ah!” I yelp, caught off guard by how strong the pleasure is.

“Your punishment got you ready for me,” he growls, kissing and sucking on my clit

before his tongue begins to make circles.

I'm not sure what part of the punishment got me ready for this, but I can tell I'm a little swollen—more from arousal than pain. His tongue feels like heaven, but I'm so sensitive it makes me squirm. His hands get tighter on my inner thighs in response, then his tongue moves faster, and I pull against the restraints so hard they rub against my wrists and ankles. Now I understand why he tied me. I'd be tempted to push him away or stop him, just so I can breathe instead of gasp.

“Oh, Massimo,” I mewl, shifting my hips against his grip.

The pressure builds and builds in response to his quick circular motions around my sensitive knot. Just when it feels like he's going to push me over the edge, his tongue slows down, and he glides back to my entrance. I'm wetter now—a lot wetter. He tastes my juices, a low growl of satisfaction rumbling within him. His tongue makes circles around my entrance before penetrating me again with the tip. It wiggles inside me for a moment before he kisses his way back to my clit.

“Oh, god, yes,” I moan, grinding myself against his tongue as soon as I feel it.

The pressure returns with a fury, making my core feel like it is going to explode, but then he slows down. I whimper my disappointment, but his gentle caress feels incredible, too. He repeats the pattern, bringing me close to a frenzy before slowing down. He brings me so close to the edge, it starts to ache, but I'm completely at his mercy. His hands hold me down and press harder every time I try to squirm.

“P-please,” I whine. “I need to come.”

Massimo's tongue pulls away suddenly, leaving me jarred. “Begging already, bambina ?” he chuckles. “I haven't even tasted your first real orgasm yet. But I'm about to.”

His tongue flicks against my swollen knot a few times before he starts circling it again—slowly. My core clenches with so much pressure I can barely see straight. I whimper and groan as the ache builds along with the speed of his tongue. But this time, he doesn't slow down once he brings me close to the edge. He keeps a steady rhythm, his tongue bringing so much pleasure I can't even speak. My words come out like jumbled syllables that make no sense.

The pleasure gets more intense. I dance close to the edge, feeling the pleasure bloom into something incredible. All of the pressure releases and my body convulses beneath his tongue. I gasp for air, finally able to form words that sound coherent.

“Oh god, oh god!” I squeal, my body rocking as the orgasm hits me like a wave.

Beautiful euphoria courses through my veins. Massimo was right. This is my first real orgasm. Everything else seems like a tease compared to the bliss Massimo brings to the surface. Instead of peaking and fading, like they normally do, I remain trapped at the peak with his tongue swirling around my clit. I shudder, shake, and writhe on the mattress, still firmly held down by his powerful grip.

Just when the pleasure starts to wane, Massimo's tongue dips to my entrance, devours my juices, and returns to my clit. Then it starts swirling faster. Too fast. It causes the pressure to build even faster than it did the first time.

“I-I'm gonna...” I mutter, then another wave of euphoria hits me. “Wow! Oh, god!”

My second real orgasm merges with the first and brings me right back to the peak. This is what heaven feels like. It has to be. There's absolutely no comparison to this pleasure. But Massimo isn't done. His right hand slides to my pelvis. He maintains his grip, but replaces his tongue with this thumb, grinding it into me while his tongue dips back to my entrance.

And it stays there.

He licks, circles it several times, and then he pushes the tip into me. I'm almost spent, but he won't let me come down from my high. His thumb grinds my clit while his tongue darts in and out of my tightness. I can already tell I'm going to come again. I don't have a choice. My hips jerk against him as the pressure builds, then it releases, and I come so hard my eyes roll back in my head.

"Don't stop!" I gasp.

My core clenches and flutters with every wave of ecstasy. My inner walls spasm on the tip of his tongue. Passionate moans and gasps rush from my throat. The orgasm seems to go on forever, with multiple mini-orgasms ripping through me before I finally come down. Massimo's tongue follows my movements, and as I feel the afterglow, he releases his grip and slows his tongue to a stop. As soon as he pulls away, I miss it, even though I'm spent.

Now I get to make a request.

And I know exactly what it will be.

CHAPTER 17

Massimo

Lea is tied to my bed.

Beautifully ravaged, skin glistening with sweat, and pleasure radiating in her gorgeous green eyes. All I can give her, at least, without claiming her innocence.

I'm certainly tempted. My cock has been throbbing in my pants since I pulled her jeans down. But I can't, no matter how much I want her. I've already let her become too much of a distraction. Let her awaken things that should have stayed dead until I was in the ground. The more time I spend with her, the more confused I get—about my feelings, desires, and the life I've made peace with giving up.

"Thank you for letting me taste you, bambina ," I say softly, my hands moving to her wrists so I can untie her.

"You're thanking me?" she laughs, biting down on her bottom lip. "I've never felt anything like that."

I remove the ties binding her hands and feet, then drape them on the chair. Lea rolls over on her stomach, and I see the color on her ass. I made sure she enjoyed the spanking I gave her. It wasn't punishment this time, even if it hurt a little.

"Don't forget that I get to make a request," Lea says coyly, sliding to the edge of the bed and sitting up. "Anything I want, remember?"

“Within reason,” I reply. “There are things that are off limits, and I think you know what they are.”

Unease flickers in Lea’s eyes. Yeah, she knows what the boundaries are, but she doesn’t like it. But then the unease fades and she smiles, moving closer to me with a look in her eyes I’ve never seen before. A hunger that almost matches mine. But why? I know she’s spent. I made damn sure of that.

“I want you to tell me to open my mouth,” she whispers, meeting my gaze.

“Lea,” I sigh, my cock twitching in my pants. “You don’t know what you’re asking for.”

My dick has been starved for attention for far too long, but those desires have been wrapped up in malice and poison so long I barely recognized them when Lea brought them to the surface. I certainly want her, and I don’t mean her mouth. I want to claim her, mark her, and make her mine. If the circumstances were different, I wouldn’t have asked to taste her—I would have demanded it, and that would have just been the beginning.

“I’m asking for the same thing you did,” she says. “I want to taste you.”

I take a step closer and trace the curve of her jaw. She leans against my hand, closes her eyes, and when my thumb drags across her lips, she kisses it. Then I feel her tongue and I imagine how incredible it would be. It would be easy to give in. Too easy. That’s a dangerous game, and one I’m not sure a sweet, innocent virgin is ready to play.

Which means I have to scare her. That’ll make her rethink her request.

“You want to taste me?” I say threateningly, leaning down until my lips are against

my ear. “It’ll be more than a taste. If I tell you to open your mouth, and you do it like a good girl does, you’re not just getting a taste. I’ll fuck your mouth, just like I would fuck that tight virgin pussy between your legs.”

“Oh, god,” she whimpers, and goosebumps rise across her skin.

“You can’t handle a man like me, *bambina*,” I say, my words getting firmer as my hand moves along her back until I have a handful of curls. I pull her head back, forcing her to look me in the eyes. “I’ve been gentle with you. I’ve made it all about you, even when I was punishing you. I’d destroy you, Lea. Unleash something you don’t even understand.”

She swallows hard, but the hunger doesn’t leave her eyes. If anything, it seems to get more intense. My cock twitches again. I can only hold back for so long, and it seems like my resolve may break before hers does. I tighten my grip on her hair, making her wince.

“I’ve made my request,” she whispers. “Are you going to honor it? You said you would, unless I asked for something impossible.”

“Damn it, *bambina*,” I snarl, my free hand moving to my cock. I rub it through my pants, fighting the urges that flourish. “You could ask for anything right now. I’ve still got the taste of you on my tongue. You could ask for more—I’ll spread your legs and make you scream. Make you come so many times you forget your own fucking name. Ask for that, Lea. Don’t ask for this.”

“That’s not what I want,” she says, putting her hand on mine, following the same motions I do as I stroke my length through my pants. “This is what I want.”

My hand falls away, but hers doesn’t. Her fingers brush against my hardness, bringing even more confusing thoughts to the surface. My resolve is breaking. Maybe

it broke the moment I heard those words leave her lips. I push her hand away, taking a step back and glaring at her.

“Are you sure?” I ask. “Last chance, Lea. I mean that.”

The hunger in her eyes doesn't wane. My cock throbs against the fabric prison so hard it aches. I grit my teeth as I imagine her warm, wet mouth taking my length.

“I want you to tell me to open my mouth,” she repeats, sucking on the edge of her bottom lip. “Sir.”

“Fuck,” I snap, unable to resist any longer. I narrow my eyes, walk closer, and my fingers are unbuckling my belt before I even realize my hands have moved. “Then do it, bambina . Open your fucking mouth like a good girl and beg for my cock with your tongue out. If you're brave enough.”

I pause with both ends of my belt in my hands. All she has to do is hesitate, and I'll buckle it. I'll forget all about her request. But she doesn't hesitate. She flicks her tongue against her lips, dampens them, and pushes it across the moisture. Then she opens her mouth wide. Not wide enough for me, but wide enough to work with. I feel the surge of desire radiate all the way to my balls as she sinks to her knees.

She pulls her tongue back into her mouth for a moment. “Please,” she whispers, sticking it out even further.

I lose control. I can't fight it anymore. I yank my belt out of the loops and double it in my hand. My fingers slide the leather into the buckle and I take a step forward.

“You have no idea what you're asking for,” I mutter, sliding the belt over her head and pulling it tight around her neck. “But you're about to find out.”

I wrap the belt around my fist until I can slide a finger between the leather and her windpipe. I look for signs of fear—signs that she wants me to stop. But all I see is the hunger. My free hand unfastens my pants enough to push them down, along with my boxers. Lea's eyes get wide when she sees my size, and once it's free from the fabric prison, it swells even more.

I don't give her time to think about it. I grip the base of my cock and guide it toward her open mouth while I pull on the belt. When the head gets close to her lips, she puts her hands on my thighs, but I let go of my dick and slap them away hard enough to make her recoil.

"I didn't give you permission to touch me, *la mia bambina* ," I growl. "All I told you do was open your fucking mouth. Now hold out your hands. I'm going to punish you for not listening."

She holds out her hands and I uncoil the leather until I have several inches to work with. I grab her right hand, fold it back, and bring the leather down on her palm. She squeals and tries to pull her hand away, but I don't let go. I slap her hand with the belt seven times, then immediately grab the other one. Lea's jaw is trembling, but she still has her tongue out. The sound of leather meeting skin echoes again—seven more times. Then I let go.

"Now keep your hands to yourself and do as you're told," I order. "Open that mouth wider, like you want me to fuck it."

Lea obeys and I wrap the belt back around my fist, pulling her lips to my length as I slip a finger between the leather and her windpipe. She rubs her hands together, obviously feeling the sting, but I don't care about that. All I care about is this warm, wet paradise begging for my dick. I use her tongue like a runway, sliding across it before I stretch her jaw. Her eyes bulge as she gets her first taste of me and a muffled groan surrounds my girth as she realizes just how much pressure she's going to feel

in her jaw while she pleasures me.

“I want to feel your tongue and your hungry mouth at the same time,” I demand. “If you get tired, you better not slow down. If you do, I’ll punish you.”

I push deeper and her tongue caresses my length. Then she starts sucking. It’s gentle and timid, but still feels good. I gasp with pleasure and shudder, pulling her lips along my length, guiding her motions until she figures out what I expect. I relax my grip and enjoy it, my dick getting harder against her wiggling tongue.

“All the way in, bambina ,” I grunt, pushing into her throat. “This is what you asked for.”

She tries to pull away, but I don’t let her. I force her to get used to the way it feels, then push deeper, hitting the back of her throat. She whimpers and groans, slobber leaking out the edge of her lips. I pull back and thrust, driving it into her throat enough for her to know I expect more. She sputters, chokes, and I see desperation in her eyes, so I give her a break, letting her pull back enough to breathe.

“The next time, I’m not going to stop until you swallow every inch,” I warn, invading her throat again.

Lea struggles even more, but just when it looks like I may have to let my threat turn idle to keep her from passing out, her throat relaxes. I push the rest of the way in with a gasp, then pull back immediately so she can breathe before pushing in deeper, my body going rigid with the sudden surge of pleasure. She’s ready to have her mouth fucked, now that she can take me, but this feels too good for me to stop her. My grip relaxes more, until my fingers are barely holding the belt.

But I promised her more, and I’m a man of my word.

“Now, la mia bambina ,” I say, finding the strength to squeeze the belt tight. “Time for me to honor your request.”

I tangle my fist in her hair, pulling her head back while I tighten the belt around her neck. I hold her steady and drive my cock into her throat. I pull back enough for her to taste the pre-cum on her tongue, then do it again. Again and again, my cock throbbing and pulsating in her throat. Her symphony of slurps and moans is the sweetest melody I’ve ever heard, and I want more. I muffle her moans, feeling the vibrations in my balls.

I’m a hungry man. Ravenous . Starved of this for so long the pleasure feels foreign and new. It’s almost like my first time, too, but I know what I want. Know what I need.

I stare into Lea’s eyes while I fuck her mouth. I don’t hold back, even when the thrusts get hard enough to bruise her lips. She tastes the pre-cum, then gets a drop that trickles down her gullet. Over and over, while my lust turns primal. Animalistic urges take over, and I ravage her sweet mouth.

Sweat beads on my forehead.

I’m not done yet, but I’m getting close.

I may come harder than she did.

CHAPTER 18

Lea

I had no idea what I was asking for.

But I don't want him to stop.

Massimo is enormous. I didn't realize a man could get this big—or this hard. I'm a virgin lost in a world I stumbled into, but one I don't know how to escape.

His thick leather belt is tight around my neck. I feel woozy from the restricted blood flow. If his finger wasn't protecting my windpipe, he'd choke the life out of me. And if his belt didn't do it, his cock certainly would. It goes so deep in my throat every time his hips hammer forward that all I can do is suck until he lets me taste oxygen again.

This is doing something to me, too. The roughness. The intensity. My core is clenched tighter than it was when I felt his tongue, and the heat is radiating through my body. I can feel the need trickling down my thighs again. Burning with the same fire that is reflected in Massimo's primal, icy blue glare. He's been deprived of this for so long—too long. And I feel deprived, too, knowing that this could be the only time I ever get to feel him throb in my mouth.

I taste his saltiness on my tongue. Inhale his musk every time I'm yanked forward on his length. Yet everything about it arouses me. I want to brace myself on his thighs. Feel those muscles tighten every time I send another shudder of pleasure coursing

through his veins. But my hands are stinging from that mistake. I won't make it again. He's in control, and my mouth belongs to him, until he's done fucking it.

Every time his hips piston his impressive length into my throat, I imagine him between my legs. This same roughness. This same intensity. Claiming me as his—I'd give him everything, if he'd let me. I don't care if he's a criminal. Don't care if he's in the Mafia, and next in line for his father's throne. I've seen the good in him. Nobody will ever take care of me or protect me like he does. I'd ignore everything else, if I could have that for the rest of my life.

But I can't. Massimo's fate is sealed and he won't change his mind. The clock is ticking against us. Maybe he'll draw his last breath with a smile on his face, because he got to feel alive one last time before it was all over. Or maybe I'll be forgotten by then. It doesn't matter. He'll linger in my memories, regardless. I just want him—I can't have his best days, but I'll settle for the ones that are left.

"Are you ready, bambina?" Massimo asks, his length going deep in my throat and staying there.

I don't have to ask what it is. I already know. I can taste what is coming. Feel the urgent throbs and needy pulsations. But this is what I asked for. I moan my answer around his girth, unable to convey much more than a whimper. It seems good enough for him.

"Good girl," he rasps, getting thicker in my mouth and stretching my lips.

I want to close my eyes, but I force them to stay open. He drives his cock into my mouth harder and faster. My lips feel like they'll have bruises where he's ground the flesh into my teeth, and my throat feels wrecked, but I'd endure anything to make him feel this good. I'd do it even if his days weren't numbered.

Massimo's frenzied thrusts shudder and his pulsations quicken a moment before he erupts in my mouth. His seed releases like the fury of a caged animal and I swallow, tasting him as the pulsations continue. I welcome his seed with whimpers and pleasurable moans, feeling proud of myself for being able to do something so intimate for him.

I don't stop sucking until Massimo is completely drained. His breathing gets heavier and he lets go of the belt. I lick along the bottom of his shaft as he pulls away, tasting one final drop before he leaves my mouth. I look up at him, awaiting further instructions. Awaiting correction, if I did something wrong. The look in Massimo's eyes tells me he's satisfied.

"You're incredible, bambina ," he praises, his fingers untangling from my hair and tracing my jaw. "Simply incredible."

"I'll do it again, if you let me," I offer, finally able to breathe properly. "All you have to do is tell me to open my fucking mouth."

He laughs, probably because the word fucking sounds so strange coming from my lips. He kneels on the bed and wraps his arms around me, pulling me into a warm embrace that feels so protective I don't want him to ever let go.

"If things were different, you'd hear that a lot," he mutters. "But I'd never settle for that—not if you were mine."

"Then tell me to open my fucking legs," I mewl, leaning against him and nuzzling his chest. "You can have me, Massimo. All of me. I'm yours."

"No, Lea," he sighs. "That wouldn't be fair. After I'm gone, you'll meet someone. A girl as pretty as you won't have any trouble."

“I don’t want anyone else.” I feel myself tearing up and blink the tears away. “I’ll never recover from losing you. You’re not that easy to forget.”

“You barely know me, bambina ,” he grumbles.

“I know enough,” I insist.

Massimo lowers himself to the mattress and I snuggle close to him. His powerful arms keep me in a protective, possessive embrace. I may not be his forever, but I’m his right now. If that’s all I can have, I’ll cling to every moment like I’m currently clinging to his mountainous physique. He’s rigid and stiff for a while, but then he relaxes, and I hear his breathing change. I glance up and notice he’s dozed off.

I’m tired too, so I let the exhaustion take me, falling asleep in the only arms that have ever held me.

The only arms I ever want to hold me.

I sleep through the rest of the day, and into the night. It’s late when I finally stir and notice Massimo hasn’t moved at all. My stomach is growly, and I could use some food, but I don’t want to leave his embrace. I snuggle in tighter, and the next time I open my eyes, daylight is peeking through the windows. I’m alone in the bed, which causes a flutter of concern, but his side is still warm.

When I sit up and rub my eyes, I smell coffee. I wrap the sheet around me and pull it off the bed, letting it drag behind me as I walk to the main part of the penthouse suite. A loud thud causes me to jump back, but then I see Massimo carrying a tray.

“Good morning,” he says, nodding to me. “I don’t know about you, but I’m starving. I haven’t slept that long in years.”

“Do I get credit for that?” I ask apprehensively, unable to hide my smile.

“You get all the credit in the world, bambina,” he says, putting the tray near the table and walking over to me. In an instant, I’m in his powerful embrace again. “Thank you. I hope I wasn’t too rough with you.”

“Not at all,” I whisper, leaning against his bare chest. “I can handle you, Massimo.”

My tongue traces my bruised lip. A swallow leaves my throat a little uncomfortable. But I don’t care. I’m buzzing with something new. Something incredible, like seeing snow for the first time or standing in front of a roaring fireplace after having enough of the cold weather. Massimo is the reason for that. He’s changed everything I thought I knew about the world in a matter of days. What could he do if we had longer?

“Let’s eat, and then we’ll head out, if you’re feeling up for it,” he says. “If not, we can wait until tomorrow.”

“No, you promised I’d get to swim with the sharks,” I laugh, looking up at him. “I was scared after what happened yesterday, but I’m a little intrigued to see what kind of danger is waiting in the Pacific.”

Massimo chuckles and helps me into my seat. Nothing in the Pacific Ocean is as dangerous as the man who sits down across from me. I’ve seen him kill without hesitation, but I’ve also seen his pain. And I’ve seen the beauty beneath his ink. The good that beats in his heart, despite what he says.

My hunger takes over as soon as I get some food on my plate, so we mostly eat in silence. After we’re done, we clean up, shower, and get ready for the day. Since I’ll be in the water, I put on a swimsuit under my t-shirt and cut-off jean shorts. I walk into the main part of the suite and Massimo emerges from his bedroom a few minutes

later. He's dressed in jeans, a t-shirt that seems even tighter than the one he wore yesterday, and his hiking boots.

"Where do you think you're going in those shorts, *la mia bambina*?" he growls, narrowing his eyes.

"Uh, everywhere except the ocean," I laugh, pulling my shirt up to show my swimsuit. "They're coming off before I see the sharks."

"I should put you over my knee," he grumbles. "If you were mine, I'd never let you walk outside in something like that. But suit yourself."

"I-I'll change," I stammer, hurrying back to my bedroom before he can say anything else.

I've never been comfortable showing much skin, but I didn't think the shorts were that bad. Obviously, Massimo disagrees. I peel them off, toss them in my suitcase, and grab my jeans. I'm able to kick my sneakers off and slip them back on without bothering with the laces.

"You didn't have to change," Massimo grunts when I step back into the main part of the suite. "I don't have a say— can't have a say."

"I may not be yours, but I'm going to pretend I am," I say, meeting his gaze. "As long as I can."

"Then get your ass over here," he snaps, pointing at his feet.

I walk over without hesitation, even though I'm not sure what to expect. Massimo grabs my arm, spins me around, and bends me at the waist. Then I get several hard slaps on my bottom that make me dance on my toes.

“That’s for the shorts,” he says, slapping my ass a few more times before letting go. “Since you want to pretend you’re mine.”

“Ow,” I mutter, rubbing the back of my jeans and pouting. “No shorts, got it. Are you going to spank me again if I have to take off my jeans to swim with the sharks?”

“No,” he says. “I’ll just throw the boat captain into the water with the chum if he dares to look anywhere below your neck.”

“Seems... a bit drastic,” I say, my eyes getting wide.

“I don’t think so,” he says, reaching into his pocket and pulling out the motion sickness patches. “We’ll go with one behind each ear to be safe.”

I move my brunette curls out of the way so Massimo can put the patches on. His fingers are gentle again, and I tingle a little as they brush against my skin. Then they’re gone, and all I can do is sigh.

“Let’s go,” he says, motioning for me to follow him.

I notice Massimo has a gun tucked into the back of his jeans, but I don’t mention it. I’m becoming a lot more comfortable with firearms after what happened yesterday. If he hadn’t gotten his hands on the shotgun, horrible things could have happened to me.

Massimo leads me to the elevators. I touch his hand and rub my fingers along his while the elevator descends. I can’t tell if he’s okay with the show of affection or not, but he doesn’t pull away, so I let my hand linger there. Only a little more and we would be holding hands. But that gesture would probably be too romantic. Too much for what we’re sharing in his final days.

It’s Wednesday.

On Saturday morning, Massimo is going to die, and I'm supposed to go back to living my life the way I did before I met him.

I've never felt more directionless.

CHAPTER 19

Lea

I trace Massimo's fingers as the elevator descends.

He pulls away when the doors open, and I don't try to stop him. I fall in place beside him, feeling a strange ache because I can no longer feel his skin against mine.

Massimo takes me to the same Jeep we used yesterday. He puts his Glock in the basket before getting behind the wheel. We leave the resort, taking a right, and drive toward the dock, but when we pass the one we arrived at, I glance at him with concern.

"Where are we going, exactly?" I question.

"The resort has a private marina down the beach," he explains. "We're going to take a yacht out to where the dolphins swim, and after you get to see how boring they are, we'll meet the other boat so you can see the predators."

I steady my concern over the sharks before replying, "A yacht?" I raise my brow. "If you had access to a yacht, why were you on the ferry? Why not have someone pick you up?"

"That's what I usually do, for safety reasons. This time was different. What's the point of safety when you already know you're going to die? I didn't even let my bodyguard come with me." He shrugs, almost dismissively.

“You need a bodyguard?” I ask, my brow raising higher.

“Need one? No,” he says. “But my father insists, and as long as he sits at the head of the table, people do what he says. My bodyguard’s name is Rowan O’Malley. He’s the meanest motherfucker to ever put on a kilt.”

“Wait, is he Scottish? I thought all Mafia guys were Italian, or whatever.” I tilt my head inquisitively. My knowledge is limited to what Sarah has told me, but I remember full-blooded Italian being important.

“Used to be, yeah,” he replies. “Couldn’t be a made man unless you were. My family values the old ways, but we’ve had to make some exceptions over the years. Marriages—not everyone falls in love with an Italian girl. My father didn’t arrange marriages for his kids, like my grandfather did. Neither did my uncle. The Morandi family is very diverse these days.”

“Sounds like it,” I comment, taking it all in. “You even have a priest.”

“He doesn’t really associate with the family anymore,” Massimo chuckles. “He shows up for weddings, family holidays, and funerals. Sometimes he officiates them, depending on who it is. Other than that, he does his thing, and we do ours.”

“How did that happen anyway?” I ask. “Did he not want to... be in the Mafia?”

“He used to be just like me until he fell in love,” Massimo sighs. “He started questioning everything when his girlfriend got sick, and he turned to a power higher than our father. She didn’t make it, unfortunately. It was... awful. I think God was all he had left after she died. I guess it’s a better option than poison.”

“Oh, goodness, I’m so sorry.” I wince, looking away for a moment. “You guys don’t have the best luck when it comes to women.”

“No,” he relents. “Except for Emilio. His wife has been by his side since he was sixteen. They got married right out of high school because she was pregnant. She’s a bit bossy, but Emilio seems to need that. Well... he used to. I guess he’s ready to be his own boss now.”

“You talk about him so casually. I don’t even know him, and I hate him,” I mutter, shaking my head.

“I’m not excited about what he’s doing, but I get it,” Massimo sighs. “I’ve been in a dark place for a long time. I’m sure he doesn’t think I’m fit to lead the family. Part of him probably thinks he’s making the right decision, and deep down, I have a hard time disagreeing. I’ve been a fucking mess, Lea.”

“For good reason!” I fire back, my nostrils flaring. “Your wife was murdered! What did he expect? Were you supposed to shrug it off and pretend it didn’t happen because you killed the guys who did it?”

“In our world, you learn to shrug off a lot,” he grunts, then he motions ahead. “There’s the marina.”

I don’t want to let it go, but Massimo seems done with the conversation, so I don’t push back. I look in the direction he’s pointing and see a dock that is much nicer than the one we arrived at. There are several luxurious-looking boats parked along the side. I assume they’re yachts. I’ve never seen one before, except on television. Massimo pulls up to the smallest one and opens his door.

“I’d take you out on one of the bigger yachts, but then we’d need a crew. At least one other person who knows how to operate it.” He gestures to the smaller boat. “So, the mini-yacht will have to do.”

“I’ve never been on a yacht, period, so I’m still impressed.” I get a good look at the

mini-yacht while Massimo walks around and opens my door. It looks more like a fancy speedboat, but the top is mostly enclosed in glass.

“Come on, bambina ,” Massimo says, helping me out of the Jeep.

Massimo gathers everything. This time, he doesn’t leave the knives, rope, or shotgun in the Jeep. He wraps the shotgun in a quilt. I decline when he offers it to me.

“I’m not carrying that!” I say, shaking my head.

“Fine, but at least put a knife in your purse,” he urges, slipping one in that is sheathed and has a cherry-wood handle. “Just to be safe.”

I glance at it nervously, but nod. I’m not sure I’d know how to use it, and I really hope I never have to. I stack some towels on the cooler and pick it up, following behind Massimo.

“If you’re going to spend much time in the sun, you’ll need some sunscreen,” Massimo comments as we walk along the dock. “I’ve got some in the basket for you.”

“I was fine yesterday.” I shrug.

“It’s different when you’re on the water,” he says. “And there are no clouds today. That delicate skin will be burnt to a crisp if you’re not careful.”

“Okay, I’ll do you if you do me,” I tease, bumping him with my hip. “Can’t have you getting burnt to a crisp, either.”

“Deal,” he chuckles, leading me onto the boat.

The top part of the mini-yacht that is enclosed in glass is set up like a lounge. There are stairs that lead down, and I can see at least one bedroom down there. Too bad we won't be spending any time there. I wouldn't mind his lips on my skin again—I'd even open my fucking mouth, despite the discomfort I'm feeling today.

"Do I get to drive?" I joke as Massimo starts the engine.

"If you want, bambina ," he says, shooting me a glance. "Let me get out in the open water so you won't hit anything except fish."

"Oh, I was just kidding," I laugh. "I don't want to drive. I'd rather watch you drive and have a glass of wine."

"That's fine, too," he chuckles, gesturing to the basket. "Pick a bottle and pour two glasses."

"Drinking and driving, hmm? Is it okay when it's a boat?" I tease, opening the basket and looking at the options.

"I don't plan to get drunk," he explains. "Besides, like I said, there's nothing to hit out here except fish."

I laugh as I open the basket, but my laughter trails off when I see the new corkscrew. It reminds me of what happened to the last one, and I shudder, but shake it off.

After uncorking the wine, I pour two glasses and carry one over to Massimo. He takes it with a nod, and I clink his glass with mine, even though there's no toast.

"Not much further, then we'll drop anchor," Massimo says, sipping his wine. "The water is clear enough to see everything, and there's usually some dolphins in the area."

“But no sharks, right?” I ask apprehensively.

“Not in the shallow water,” he confirms. “You have to go into the deep water for that. We’ll get there. But first, sunscreen.”

“You’re not going to spank me if I strip down to my swimsuit, are you?” I tease, bumping him with my hip again.

“I might,” he smiles, playfully swatting my bottom. “But it won’t be punishment.”

Massimo watches as I peel off my t-shirt and remove my jeans. My swimsuit is fairly modest, considering what I’ve seen other women walking around in at the resort. Mine even has a frilly skirt, although it doesn’t cover much.

“Damn, you’re beautiful.” Massimo exhales sharply, clicking his tongue like he’s pondering something.

“Are you sure you want to throw me in the ocean with the dolphins?” I glance toward the stairs. “There’s a bedroom down there.”

“Tempting, but I promised you an excursion,” he says firmly, walking over and removing the sunscreen from the basket. “Now be a good girl and hold still, so I can put my hands all over your gorgeous body.”

I bite my bottom lip and grin. Massimo squeezes sunscreen into his hands, rubs them together, and walks over. I whimper from the coolness and his callused touch when I feel his hands. They feel so good on my skin. I’d be fine with skipping the dolphins, but I’m not going to argue. I’m grateful for the time we have together, even if it is limited.

Massimo’s hands roam across my body, making me tingle until I struggle to hold

still. Even this is enough to make me crave more. When his hands finally make it to my legs, I lift my skirt, giving him full access to everything below the waist. I manage okay until his hands move to my inner thighs and my breath gets caught in my throat. When they finally rub across the skin where my inner thigh meets my pelvis, I let out a gasp.

“I don’t think I have to worry about the sun there,” I tremble out.

“Never can be too careful,” he says, kissing right above my clit before moving his hands to my other leg.

A tingle of arousal makes my core clench. I fight against the urge to throw a leg across his shoulder and beg him to see if I still taste the same as I did the last time he was between my legs. A pleasant thought, but I’m not that brave. It took everything in me to make my request last night. I’m surprised I managed to say it, but I’m saying a lot of things I don’t normally say. Massimo is rubbing off on me, and I don’t mean the sunscreen.

“Alright, that should take care of you,” he says, applying some to my face and smearing it until he’s satisfied.

“Your turn,” I say happily, taking the sunscreen from him. “Strip!”

“Don’t order me around, little girl,” he growls, his eyes narrowing for a moment before he finally smiles. “You’re lucky you’re so damn cute.”

“Am I?” I ask, squeezing the sunscreen into my palm. “Doesn’t seem to save me from the spankings.”

“Even cute girls need their ass turned red every now and then,” he chuckles, pulling off his shirt.

I take a step back and nibble my bottom lip while he strips down to his swimsuit. Massimo looks like an Italian god, carved from a fantasy. Everything about him makes me quiver. I'd drop to my knees, pull his swimsuit down, and open my mouth without being asked—without being told to do it. But I keep my urges to myself and sigh.

“You’re going to have to sit down.” I glance up at his broad shoulders. “Or get me a ladder.”

“Over here,” he says, walking to a chair and lowering himself into it.

“Perfect,” I say, stepping behind him and admiring his ink before I start applying the sunscreen. “Do all of your tattoos mean something, or do you just love getting them?”

“A little of both,” he answers, holding up his left arm. “Layla loved roses, so I got a lot of this for her. Our wedding bands had the same pattern as the tattoo on my hand and wrist.”

“Yeah, I can tell it was part of the design,” I comment, glancing at the outline where his wedding band used to be.

“I had my other arm done first,” he explains, showing me some of the designs. “If I wasn’t in Italy, I was in Vegas, so it influenced me a lot. The tattoos on my back are similar to the ones my grandfather had on his arm.”

“Grapes, wine, and...” I trace my finger around a design I don’t recognize. “What’s this? It looks like an old washtub.”

“Sorta,” he laughs. “We stomp the grapes in those.”

“Oh, right. I’ve heard of that.” I nod, moving my hands across his skin as I apply the

sunscreen.

This could be the only time I get to touch him like this. He wouldn't even let me put my hands on him last night. I guess he's okay with being touched, except when he's in control. Either way, I'm not going to waste my opportunity. My hands linger much longer than necessary on his muscular back and broad shoulders, then I walk around him and start applying the sunscreen to his chest.

"Yeah, this is more your style," I remark, moving my slick fingers across some skulls and other macabre designs that adorn his upper torso.

"A few days with me, and you think you're an expert, hmm?" he chuckles, his abdominal muscles tightening when I rub the sunscreen on them. "Rowan and I got a lot of similar ink when we were younger. Skulls were more his thing, but I found a few designs I liked."

"All done up here," I say, squeezing more sunscreen in my hand and lowering myself to my knees.

I intentionally meet his gaze and grin before leaning forward and rubbing the sunscreen on his legs. He tolerates it until I move my hands underneath his swimsuit and keep sliding them higher.

"Careful, bambina ," he warns. "You're here to see the dolphins and sharks, not that. But if you're a good girl today, I'll tell you to open your mouth again tonight, right after I have another taste of you."

"That's all you want?" I ask, biting my lip. "A taste?"

I'm a little terrified, because I've never done it before. Because of how big he is. But I want him. I've never wanted anyone before. Never felt the constant arousal, just

being near them. Never felt common sense melt into a puddle, circle the drain, and disappear.

“That wouldn’t be fair,” he mutters, shaking his head. “Save your first time for someone who will give you more than a few days, Lea. I’m serious.”

“What does anyone ever get promised?” I look down, feeling conflicted. “The rest of your life, right? That’s what you give someone.”

“Stop.” He shakes his head and gets up. “It’s not the same thing and you know it. Let’s go swim with the dolphins.”

Massimo walks to the wheel, turns it, and the boat moves forward. I rise from my knees, adjust my swimsuit, and swallow the lump trying to form in my throat.

I don’t like what I’m feeling right now, but I’m not going to let it ruin our day, even if the rejection stings more than the palm of his hand.

I just don’t know how much of a good girl I’m going to be.

CHAPTER 20

Massimo

Lea downs the wine in her glass and pours another while I take us close to where the dolphins visit the shallow waters.

“Hit that button for me,” I say, motioning to one over near her.

“What does it do?” She turns, seeing the sign as soon as she does. “Oh, it’s the anchor. Okay.”

Lea leans forward to press the button and I kill the motor. The anchor makes the boat rock a little as it goes down, and I glance over my shoulder at her.

“Are the motion sickness patches working?” I ask.

“Yes, I feel a lot better this time. Thank you so much.” She smiles and drinks some of her wine, so I pick up my glass and do the same.

“You’re welcome. Ready to see the dolphins?” I ask, walking toward the door.

“Yeah,” she replies, trailing behind me, but her face lights up when she sees several dolphins swimming nearby. She hurries to the edge of the boat and leans over.

“Wow!” she says with some genuine excitement in her voice.

“Snorkels and stuff are in this box,” I say, walking over to it. “But the water is fairly shallow here, so we can just go in with goggles if you can swim. If not, we’ll put on some gear.”

“I’m not an Olympic swimmer or anything, but I can float in the water,” Lea laughs, walking closer as she downs the rest of her wine. “And if I go under, I know you’ll save me.”

“Yeah, yeah,” I mutter, putting on her goggles and making sure there is a tight seal.

“So, you said goggles are all we need?” Lea asks, walking over to the edge of the boat.

“Let’s hope so,” I say, turning away to take a sip of wine before slipping my goggles on.

When I turn around, my eyes nearly bulge out of my head. Lea has removed her swimsuit entirely and is completely naked—except for the goggles I put on her. I feel my dick getting hard at the sight of her gorgeous curves on full display.

“That wasn’t what I meant, and you know it,” I chuckle, not looking away from her. “Put your swimsuit back on.”

“Why?” she asks, tilting her head slightly. “We can go skinny dipping with the dolphins.”

“No, come on. Put your swimsuit back on,” I mutter, imagining things I shouldn’t.

Lea turns and walks closer to the edge of the boat, completely defying me.

“I don’t see the harm in skinny dipping,” she replies, leaning forward like she’s about

to jump.

“Don’t,” I growl. “We’re the only ones out here right now, but that doesn’t mean other boats won’t drive by, and?—”

Before I can finish, Lea grins and jumps into the water. I stomp to the edge of the boat, a flicker of anger sparking inside me. She’s treading water, looking up at me, and giggling. She’s already had too much wine, or she just wants to be disobedient right now.

“You’re going to regret that, bambina ,” I sigh, jumping into the water.

I hit the water with a splash, locate her swimming a few feet away, and emerge right behind her. Lea is still giggling, and she turns to face me, but starts swimming backwards. I don’t have to worry about her drowning, at least. She’s a much better swimmer than she let on.

“You’re not really mad at me, are you?” she asks, continuing to swim backwards as I tread water and move in the same direction.

“You think you can get away with being disobedient?” I grumble, narrowing my eyes at her.

“I’m sure everyone skinny dips in the ocean at least once,” she says. “Let me have my fun. I’m supposed to let the island guide me, remember? I guess the ocean counts, too.”

“You can have your fun,” I say. “But you’re still getting a spanking tonight.”

“I was probably getting one of those anyway,” she laughs. “So, I might as well earn it.”

Lea dips under the water and starts swimming toward the dolphins, so I follow, keeping an eye out for any sign of danger. There shouldn't be anything to worry about, but I'm not taking any chances. Luckily, it's clear as far as the eye can see, and quite serene, except for the two of us.

I get closer to the dolphins and stop. Lea surfaces for air, glances back at me, and goes underwater again. I get distracted by two dolphins that are getting closer, and the next thing I know, Lea's fingers are tugging on my swimsuit.

"Hey!" I yell, but she clearly can't hear me.

I don't want to kick her, but I try to nudge her away. It doesn't work, and she yanks my swimsuit down to my ankles. It gets caught there for a moment, which makes me sink as I kick it off. I mutter angrily until Lea emerges a few feet away, holding my swimsuit over her head like a trophy.

"You're really trying to earn it, aren't you, bambina?" I threaten.

"Maybe," she giggles, swimming away from me.

"You better not lose it!" I call out.

She's being a brat. Probably on purpose. The wine might have something to do with it, but I'm sure my rejection didn't help. I doubt it was easy for her to offer herself to me like that. Her virginity. Her innocence.

I'll admit I'm struggling right now. My thoughts are in disarray. I'm having a hard time fighting the feelings clawing their way through the malice and poison.

"This one seems to like me!" Lea says, cautiously swimming toward a curious dolphin.

“Just be careful,” I say. “They’re rarely aggressive, but if they feel threatened, they can certainly defend themselves.”

“I’m not scared of a dolphin,” she laughs. “Especially one this cute. Hi, what’s your name? I think I’ll call you Louise.”

“ Louise might be a boy,” I chuckle, circling from a distance so she can have her fun. I keep my eyes peeled for any sign of danger, but don’t see anything of concern.

“Then I’ll call you Louie!” she giggles.

Lea is having fun with the dolphins, so this excursion is already a success. With her distracted, I can’t escape the thoughts churning in my head.

It would be so easy to say fuck it and put a bullet-sized hole in Emilio’s plan. I could call off the hitman, return to Las Vegas, and confront my brother. Put a bullet in his head before he could even try to explain what the fuck he was thinking.

But that isn’t the right way to do things. The right way is to go to my father, explain everything, and let him make the final call. It’s his right since he sits at the head of the table, and I’m always respected his authority, even when I didn’t agree with him.

I’ve played it out in my head a thousand times. My father won’t give the order. He’ll hesitate. Emilio will find out I’m still alive. Then it’s war. Good men forced to choose sides so they can lose their lives for absolutely nothing. Brother against brother, while Las Vegas burns.

And what kind of prize does the winner get? A family that will never be the same, after being torn apart by civil war. If I’m the one left standing, my niece and nephew will grow up without a father. They’ll never understand—never be able to forgive me. Never smile and run outside to greet me when they hear my car again. I can’t do

that to them. I'm better as a memory.

That's all I truly offer Lea. Memories .

"Alright, ready to see the sharks?" I ask, noticing that she no longer seems to be as enthralled with the dolphins as she was when we swam over.

"Yeah, I guess so," she says, moving in a circle around the dolphin that seems fond of her. "Bye, Louise... or Louis. I hope you never get eaten by a shark!"

"Dolphins are good at avoiding sharks," I tell her, moving closer and motioning to her. "Give me my swimsuit."

"Fine," she relents, putting it in my hand.

As soon as Lea gives me my swimsuit, she ducks under the water. Her hands touch my chest and move lower until she's rubbing my cock. It stiffens in response, and I sigh. I can't deny it feels good, so I let her have her fun until she finally has to surface for air.

"You just keep making your spanking worse, bambina ," I growl, taking the opportunity to slide my swimsuit back on.

"I can handle it," she giggles, swimming toward the boat.

"Keep it up and you're going to get my belt," I warn, following behind her, my eyes roaming her gorgeous curves.

"You wouldn't really spank me with your belt, would you?" she asks, glancing back at me with an apprehensive look behind her goggles.

“If you don’t stop acting like a brat, you’re going to find out,” I reply.

Lea has already felt my belt on the palm of her hands. She knows how much it can sting, and that was barely punishment. But there are other ways to punish her that won’t leave welts. I’ll save that for when she truly deserves to be punished.

We make it back to the boat, and I get an intoxicating view of Lea’s pussy as she climbs the ladder. I’ve touched it. I’ve tasted it. My dick wants so, so much more. I fight those urges as I climb the ladder.

“More wine?” Lea asks, walking over and pouring a glass.

“Yeah,” I mutter, nodding in agreement.

Lea pours the wine and brings me my glass. I take a sip and look around the boat.

“It’ll take about twenty minutes to get to the other boat, so why don’t you dry off in the sun until we’re closer,” I suggest, picking up a towel and walking to the front of the boat, where I spread it out. “That way I can keep an eye on you while I drive.”

“You just want me to stay naked, huh?” she teases, taking a sip of her wine.

“I might have ulterior motives,” I chuckle, motioning to the towel. “On your stomach, bambina .”

Lea grins, downs more of her wine, and lies on the towel. I make sure she’s comfortable before walking inside the enclosure and raise the anchor.

I’ve got a fantastic view from the helm when I start the motor. Lea—naked as the day she was born, on full display while I drive. Some men would kill for a sight like this. Taking a bullet with their name on it would be the last thing on their mind. They’d

burn everything to the ground for one more day with a girl like her.

And I want to. I'm imagining things that are impossible. Not just Lea in my bed. I could have that, regardless of what happens at the end of the week. I'm thinking about the future. Imagining her in a white dress as my blushing bride. Imagining her belly swollen with the heir to the Morandi family. Imagining a life I was robbed of, and never expected to even think about.

"I think I'm already dry!" Lea calls out, shifting so she can drink some wine.

"I'll let you know when you need to put your swimsuit back on!" I yell, motioning ahead. "We can't even see the other boat yet!"

I glance at the marine radar. Nothing on that yet, either. Plenty of time to enjoy the sight of this gorgeous girl while the sun kisses her delicate skin. Plenty of time to imagine all the things I'll never have. They're nothing but a fantasy. I know that. Still, I can let my mind wander. That's certainly better than dwelling on all the reasons that make it impossible.

When I see the other boat's blip on the radar, I slow the engine to a crawl and walk to the front of the boat. Lea looks up at me with a grin on her face, and all I want to do is kiss her. I swallow hard and gesture to her swimsuit.

"Alright, bambina ," I say. "Get dressed."

Lea sighs and does as she's told. My dick throbs to attention as I watch her shimmy into the swimsuit and adjust her skirt. It's getting harder to resist her by the second.

"Oh, I see the other boat!" Lea says, turning away and pointing toward the horizon. Then her expression changes to one of worry, and she glances at me. "You're sure there's nothing to worry about with the sharks?"

“There is no danger at all, because we’ll be in a cage when we go underwater,” I say, trying to ease some of her concerns. “And if it’s too much, we won’t stay long. This is supposed to be fun, remember?”

“I like having fun with you, Massimo,” she says, nudging me with her hip.

“So do I, bambina .”

I like it way, way too much.

CHAPTER 21

Lea

I put my hand up to block the sun as we close in on the other boat.

The shark boat, or whatever it's called, is much bigger than the mini-yacht, but it doesn't look like it is built for leisure. It's painted white along the top and blue along the bottom. I can see a huge cage hanging from a crane. A cage I'm supposed to be in, while sharks swim around me.

"H-how many people have died doing this?" I ask apprehensively.

"None that I'm aware of," Massimo chuckles, then he walks over to the ladder. "Captain Reynolds, good to see you. It's been a while."

"Massimo Morandi!" Captain Reynolds responds, his voice a little gravelly and thick. "And..."

"This is Lea," Massimo says, gesturing to me.

"Nice to meet you, ma'am." Captain Reynolds tips his hat to me.

Captain Reynolds is an older man in his late forties or early fifties. I can see some gray hair poking out from beneath his peaked cap. He looks like he's spent most of his life outdoors, and his ruddy complexion suggests he doesn't believe in sunscreen like Massimo does.

Massimo secures the yacht and helps me onto the ladder. He keeps a hand on my bottom until I'm high enough for Captain Reynolds to take my hand. Once I'm safely on the deck, Massimo ascends the ladder.

"I put a few pieces of chum in the water as soon as I saw you on the radar," Captain Reynolds explains. "And it looks like we've already got some takers for the bait."

I glance at the radar and notice several smaller dots moving around near the boat.

"T-those are all sharks?" I ask, my eyes getting wide.

"More than likely," Captain Reynolds says. "I've seen some fins poking out of the water. No way to know for sure until you get in the cage, though. We'll need to wait a few minutes before we go under. Give them time to really get crazy for the bait so you get the show you want to see."

"Uh..." I raise my brow. "I don't really care about watching them eat."

"Better than being dinner," Captain Reynolds jokes. "Once we have a few more, I'll dump the chum bucket, and you can get in the cage."

"Come on, let's watch from the side of the boat for a few minutes," Massimo suggests, gesturing for me to follow him.

I follow Massimo to the railing. I spot several shark fins that make me shudder. They aren't very close yet. The bait has caught their attention, but I guess they're looking for more than a bite. The thought of that makes me shudder even more.

Music starts playing and I glance over my shoulder as Captain Reynolds turns up the volume.

“Music?” I ask.

“Sharks like music,” Massimo answers. “Or so I’ve heard.”

I shrug and lean forward, my feet tapping along with the beat. It’s a classic rock song. I can’t remember the name, but it’s one my grandmother used to play. Between the song and the wine still coursing through me, I can’t help taking a step back and swaying with the music.

“Alright, we’ve got several more dots showing up!” Captain Reynolds calls out. “Massimo, come help me with the chum.”

“Almost time, bambina ,” Massimo says as he walks away.

I keep swaying, letting the music distract me from the fact I’m about to watch bloodthirsty predators devouring a bunch of cut-up fish, judging by what is in the bucket. I do my best not to think about it. This will be an experience, just like every day with Massimo. At least nobody is going to die this time—I hope.

Massimo and Captain Reynolds start baiting the water with chunks of chum. The song ends and another one starts. This one, I remember the name of. ‘Pour Some Sugar on Me’ by Def Leppard. My grandmother used to love this one, so of course I did, too. Every time we’d bake a cake, she’d start singing the chorus when she was adding the sugar to the bowl.

“Pour some sugar on me,” I sing, dancing along the edge of the boat.

My eyes are closed. The wind feels amazing, a gentle breeze that brushes away the sun’s warmth just enough to give the best of both. I’m obviously buzzing from the wine, and probably look like a fool, but I don’t care.

“Bambina, watch out!” Massimo yells.

I open my eyes, right as my foot slides into some smeared blood and fish guts on the side of the boat. I try to get my balance and reach for the railing, but I’ve got too much momentum. A scream rips from my throat as I hit the railing, spin toward the ladder, and fall off the side of the boat.

“No! No!” I scream, closing my eyes as I see the blue water beneath me.

I hit the water awkwardly as I belly flop into it and feel a sting in my midsection that knocks the breath out of me. I gasp, go under, and struggle to breathe. Then I remember what is in the water and start furiously kicking my legs.

A second later, strong arms are around my waist. My head breaks the surface and I’m finally able to breathe, but I sputter on the water.

“I got you, Lea,” Massimo barks, swimming toward the boat.

I cling to him, then look over my shoulder and scream when I see a fin darting toward us. “Shark!”

I look up and see Captain Reynolds with a worried expression on his face. He picks up the bucket and starts hurling chum behind us. Some of it drips on me, but I’ve got bigger things to worry about. Massimo grabs the ladder and yanks me out of the water. He half-draws, half-carries me up the ladder as I struggle to get my footing.

I’m trembling when we get to the deck. Massimo grabs a towel and wraps it around me. I’m safe—I don’t feel any pain. I pull the towel tight, looking up at Massimo, who has an angry expression on his face.

“You okay, ma’am?” Captain Reynolds asks, putting his hands on his hips.

“Y-yeah,” I stammer.

“You’re not supposed to be the bait,” the older captain chuckles, then he returns to the cage.

“S-sorry,” I whisper, looking back up at Massimo’s ice-cold expression. “I’m definitely going to get a spanking now, aren’t I?”

“You already were,” he growls. “Now it’s going to last a little longer than I previously planned. Do you still want to go in the cage, or would you rather forget about this?”

I swallow hard. I’m not eager to go back into the water, but we came all this way. I’d hate to ruin the entire excursion because I fell off the boat.

“I still want to do it,” I mutter.

I expect more anger from Massimo, but his expression softens, and he wraps me up in a tight embrace.

“You scared me to death, bambina ,” he murmurs. “I thought I lost you.”

“No, you’re still stuck with me,” I sigh, leaning against his chest.

I’m trembling from a mixture of adrenaline and fear. This will be my last excursion. I nearly got robbed and kidnapped yesterday and nearly got eaten by a shark today. But I didn’t. Because Massimo will jump into shark-infested waters to save my life.

How is anyone going to compare to that? They can’t. I’ll never meet anyone like Massimo again. Never feel the things I’m feeling. I’m so directionless I fell off the boat. The only time I don’t feel directionless is when I’m in his arms. Like now. I’d

go into the water without the cage, if it meant I got to stay in his arms the entire time.

I feel an ache in my chest when Massimo finally lets go. Our eyes meet and his gaze looks less frigid than normal. More like the ocean I just got rescued from than a cold tundra the sun never illuminates.

“Alright, you two,” Captain Reynolds says, motioning toward the cage. “Put on your gear so we can do this before the sharks finish all the bait.”

We have wetsuits to put on, flippers for our feet, and oxygen tanks so we can stay under the water. Massimo helps me suit up and I watch while he does the same.

The cage is big enough to hold at least a dozen people and the bars are close enough together to ensure the sharks can’t get to us. Massimo tests the sturdiness before he reaches out and helps me inside. He joins me and slams the door closed, making sure it is secure.

“Ready?” Captain Reynolds asks, walking over to the panel that operates the crane.

“Yep,” Massimo confirms, glancing at me. “If you’ve had enough and you want to go up, just point at the surface.”

“Got it.” I nod and swallow hard, then put the breathing apparatus in my mouth.

The cage begins to lower and my pulse races. Sarah always says she doesn’t like the ocean because she has thalassophobia, but I’ve never feared the water. Until now. Sinking into the watery depths is terrifying, but not nearly as terrifying as the sharks I see circling below us.

I clench my hands into fists and try to breathe normally so I don’t get too much oxygen from the tank. The cage comes to a grinding halt, and we’re suspended in the

water. I can see the sunlight above us, but it's still rather dark in the water. The sharks are more concerned about the bait than our arrival. I guess we don't look very appetizing in the cage.

Massimo points out a few sharks and I watch them feed. It's a disgusting sight, but mesmerizing in a way. One shark finally notices us and moves closer to the cage. I keep a distance, but Massimo approaches it, standing only a few feet from the behemoth that could rip us in half as easily as I could rip apart a piece of paper.

This isn't an excursion I would have planned myself, but there's something captivating about watching sharks in their natural habitat. The one near Massimo bumps into the cage and it rocks, but since I'm floating, it doesn't frighten me as much as it should.

After about ten minutes underwater, the sharks have finished most of the bait. Some are still circling and watching us, but several have moved on. Massimo tugs on a chain and a few seconds later, the cage begins to rise toward the surface. I move closer to Massimo so I can hold onto him when we emerge from the water.

"You got to see a lot of them today!" Captain Reynolds calls out, stopping the crane and unlocking the door.

Massimo helps me out of the cage and removes my mask. I take a few breaths before trying to speak.

"That was a lot more fun than I expected," I admit.

"Good," Massimo smiles. "Just don't try to swim with them without a cage to protect you in the future."

"I'm staying far away from the edge of the boat," I laugh, finally able to make light

of the terrifying situation.

Massimo and Captain Reynolds talk for several minutes, but I'm too preoccupied with removing my wetsuit to listen. I wait until they finish, then watch as Massimo strips to his swimsuit. He helps Captain Reynolds put all the equipment away before walking over to me.

"Think you can manage to get back to the yacht without taking a swim?" Massimo jokes. "You'll have to be near the edge of both boats for a couple of minutes."

"I'll let you go first this time," I say, glancing toward the mini-yacht with some apprehension in my eyes.

Massimo nods, leads me over, and scales the ladder. He effortlessly steps over to the yacht and motions for me. My hands tremble a little, but I manage to get down without falling. Massimo's strong hands pull me the rest of the way and I lean against him once he puts me back on my feet.

"Let's find a nice spot between here and the marina so we can have lunch," Massimo says. "Then I'll give you a tour of the reefs on the way back."

"No more swimming, right?" I ask.

"Nah, I'm going to keep you out of the water for the rest of the day," he chuckles. "But you're still getting a spanking after dinner."

I have nothing to say in my defense. I acted like a brat, and I knew there was a trip across his knee in my future, even before I fell into shark-infested waters.

But at least I had fun.

If I fall for him much more, my face is going to hit the ground, unless he's there to catch me.

CHAPTER 22

Lea

Outside of nearly getting eaten by a shark, this has been an incredible day.

We enjoy a nice lunch. The water is very peaceful, and the mini-yacht barely budges. Massimo shares stories about his childhood summers in Italy. I talk about the summer I skinned my knee, because exciting things like summers in vineyards and regular days in Las Vegas don't happen in Pine Grove.

Then we return to the suite, cool off, and get ready for dinner. I step out of my bedroom in my black dress. I'm wearing my grandmother's earrings. The ones she wore when she visited Isola Selvaggia. I would never want to travel with them normally, but she insisted I wear them on a date. The first one didn't feel right for the occasion, but this one does.

Massimo emerges from his bedroom in a black suit, and I'm certain his crimson-colored tie is more expensive than my dress... and my heels. Possibly even my grandmother's cherished earrings. I get a good look at the pants I'll be lying across later tonight, and a quiver makes my walls clench. I'll definitely leave a stain on that shade of black.

"You okay, bambina ?" Massimo asks, a grin moving the edges of his lips as he adjusts his sleeve. "Stomach isn't bothering you again, is it?"

I could lie and say that's the reason for the tremor and somewhat blank stare. It might

save me from the worst of what is coming after dinner. But I can't force myself to say it.

"Yeah, I'm fine," I say, taking a deep breath and smiling. "Just ready for dinner."

"Good," he says, walking closer to me. "You look incredible by the way. I love those earrings. They look—vintage."

"These old things?" I say sarcastically, looking away for a moment. "My grandmother wore them when she was here."

"Will you carry on the family tradition?" he asks, brushing his hand along my neck and caressing the emerald—and my skin. "Give these to your daughter or granddaughter one day? Tell them to come here and let the island guide them on their..." He pauses and chuckles, "adventure?"

"Mmm," I pretend to ponder. "No, are you crazy? This resort is owned by the Mafia. I almost died... twice! Three times, if you count... never mind."

Massimo gives me a deadpan stare for a moment, then he starts laughing. Genuine laughter. It almost sounds foreign. He doubles a bit, and his hand falls away from my face, grazing my arm on the way down and making me tingle.

"You know what, you're right. Please don't tell anyone to come to this fucking island," Massimo nods, continuing to laugh. "Nobody you care about, at least. Come on, let's go have dinner."

Massimo seems to be in a good mood as we leave the penthouse suite and go to the elevators. He lets me caress and touch his hand on the way down. He doesn't pull away when we reach the bottom and the doors open. Instead, our fingers interlock, and we hold hands on the way to the restaurant.

We share more stories over dinner and wine. I'm feeling it, but that might be a good thing since I'm going over his knee after we're done. Toward the end of dinner, I notice some discomfort along my back and my bottom. I squirm a little and Massimo notices.

"Something wrong?" he asks.

"No, I guess I'm just still feeling some warmth from the sun," I reply, squirming some more when I feel it again.

"That's what happens when you spend about fifteen minutes lying on the deck of the boat without any sunscreen on your bare butt," he says. "Very light sunburn. You'll feel it a little, but you'll feel it a lot more when you get your spanking later."

My eyes get wide, and my throat gets dry. "Wait, you knew this would happen, didn't you? That's why you told me to... Massimo!"

"You should have listened when I told you to put your swimsuit back on," he says, flashing me a stern look. "I didn't spank your ass as soon as we got back to the boat because I decided to teach you a little lesson about being disobedient."

"That's not fair," I whine, realizing how childish it sounds as soon as I say it. "It's going to hurt a lot more!"

"I know it is," he smirks. "That's the point. Now come, let's go back to the suite."

I wince a little as I get up. It's the lightest sunburn I can ever recall having, but that doesn't make me feel any better considering what is coming. I guess I'm going to find out what happens to bad girls this time. This doesn't sound like a playful spanking, and if it's like the first one, on top of a sunburn... Thinking about it makes me shudder.

“Massimo, please,” I whimper as he takes my hand outside the restaurant. “It was mostly teasing. Come on, I... It was harmless, except when I fell in, but that was an accident!”

“You earned yourself a spanking before you fell in, *la mia bambina*,” he replies. “You shouldn’t have been dancing so close to the edge, and you should have kept your eyes open, but it was mostly an accident. And you know you acted like a brat today. You can’t deny that.”

“I might have been a little upset that you told me to save my first time for someone else,” I admit. “But I was still just playing around. I wasn’t trying to make you punish me. I thought it would be like last night... Something I’d enjoy.”

“It would have been, if you’d put your swimsuit back on when I told you to,” he says, glancing at me. “Or behaved in the water, when I told you to, instead of pulling mine off.”

“Fine,” I relent, feeling a twinge of anger. “If you’re going to punish me for making you have fun on one of your last days alive, then do it.”

His grip on my hand softens. He takes a deep breath and exhales sharply. I tremble, wondering if that comment was one step too far. He swallows hard and his jaw flexes.

“Alright, *bambina*,” he sighs, turning to me. “What kind of spanking would you like tonight?”

I’m completely caught off guard. Did I just change his mind? Or did I offend him? I’m not sure. Oh, no, it’s worse. I see the pain in his eyes again. Except this time, I’m the one who put it there.

“I’m sorry,” I whisper. “I shouldn’t have said that.”

“No.” He shakes his head. “That’s exactly what you should have said. You’re right. You’ve made... these have been the best days of my life in a really fucking long time.”

“Mine too,” I say, tearing up a little. I try to bite back my words, but the floodgates open. “And you’re telling me I only get a couple more, and I’m not okay with that. I’m far from okay with it. But I’ve accepted it. I know I can’t talk you out of it, and I’m not going to waste my breath or upset you by trying. If you think I’m just going to... move on? Forget about you?” I scoff away a snuffle. “No, Massimo. It’s not going to be that easy for me. And that’s not just my fault. You’re the one who invited me to dinner to begin with.”

“You’re right again,” he relents, taking a deep breath and nodding. “But for the record, you knew who I was before you ever came to dinner, so dinner is my fault. Everything that happened after... you have to share some of the blame for that.”

“I do, but regardless of who shoulders the blame, we’re standing here right now.” I shrug. “And there’s one part of me you didn’t taste last night.”

Massimo narrows his eyes and growls under his breath. I don’t know why he didn’t kiss my lips last night. I didn’t ask. But I certainly noticed the one place he left untouched.

“This is your fault,” he says, taking my hand and pulling me closer.

Then his rough lips crush mine and I nearly see stars. It’s tender at first, then it gets fiercer, and his hand tangles into my curls while he ravages my mouth. I gasp and moan into his, completely shattered by my first real kiss—from the only man I’ve ever wanted it from.

He kisses me like it's the first kiss, last kiss, and every kiss in between. Like if I can't have all of those, then this one is going to make up for it. His other hand grips my waist, pulling me even closer. I feel his hardness and my clenched core gets doused in gasoline and set on fire. I melt into his firm grip and ravenous kiss.

The perfect seal finally breaks and we both gasp.

"I want the kind of spanking that ends with you telling me to open my fucking legs," I whisper.

"Then that's exactly what you're going to get," he says, pulling me closer and kissing me again.

Everything around us just seems to fade away. Massimo kisses me until we're gasping for the second time, then pulls me along the path to the hotel. I nearly trip over my heels, but he keeps me steady.

As soon as we're in the elevator, Massimo's lips find mine and his hands seem to be everywhere. On my hip. Caressing and squeezing my sunburn until I whimper. Then on my breasts, with just the right amount of gentle roughness to perk my nipples against his callused touch.

The elevator doors open and Massimo pulls me into his penthouse. He turns, towering over me with a look in his eyes that is stern, but not angry. There's a faint hint of a grin on the edges of his lips. I don't know what kind of spanking I'm going to get, but I know what is coming after. I'm so wet I'm surprised it hasn't already started trickling down my thighs.

"Take off your clothes, Lea," he demands. "Everything. Even the earrings."

I swallow hard and my breath hitches in my throat. I'm not sure where this is going,

so I can't help some nervous trembles as I remove my dress. I'm going to lose my virginity. But first, a spanking that turns him on enough to make me spread my legs.

I remove my earrings and step out of my heels. I glance up at him with an apprehensive look before reaching behind my back and unfastening my bra. It joins my dress on the floor, and I reach for my panties. Massimo smiles when they come down and I don't have to wonder if he can see the wet spot.

"Good girl," he praises, removing his suit jacket and rolling up his sleeves. "Now put your hands behind your back."

Massimo looms over me until I tuck my hands behind my back. Then his hand goes to his crimson-colored tie, and he removes it before walking around me. His fingertips graze the back of my thighs and my sunburnt bottom on the way to my wrists. He grabs them tightly, crosses them, and wraps his tie around them. The tie goes around my wrist several times, then between them, and my arms are completely immobilized once he pulls it tight.

"You're going to get a spanking, bambina ," he rasps into my ear. "The kind of spanking a naughty little girl gets. Because that's what you've been today. Haven't you?"

"Y-yes, sir," I whisper, unable to deny his words, or the arousal that burns inside me.

"And after you've been spanked like a naughty little girl," he says, tracing his fingers around until he's rubbing my clit, "I'm going to fuck you. Hard. I'm going to tell you to spread your gorgeous legs, and you're going to do it for me. Aren't you, bambina ?"

"Y-yes, sir," I whisper again, my core clenching with anticipation.

“Good girl,” he repeats, rubbing my clit until I’m whimpering and squirming on my toes before he moves his hand to my arm.

Massimo guides me over to the couch. He sits down and smooths out his pants before helping me lie across his lap. I feel his hard cock as soon as I’m in position.

I’m so turned on I can barely see straight. The spanking that sounded terrifying outside the restaurant no longer seems so scary. I acted like a naughty little brat, and I’m going to get punished for it.

But I’m going to enjoy it.

No matter how much it hurts.

CHAPTER 23

Massimo

I've lost the fight.

It's over.

I can't give Lea the life she deserves, but I can give her everything I have left. Because she's right. She has made the last few days absolutely incredible. She's brought things to the surface I never expected to feel again.

Her fault? My fault? We're both to blame, and we know it. I shouldn't have let the sight of a beautiful girl in distress distract me from my priorities. I shouldn't have invited her to dinner. I don't understand what came over me, nor do I understand why I can't seem to pull away from her. I'm entangled, entranced, and nothing feels right except being with her.

But she's still been a brat today, and she knew she would get a spanking for it, so I'm going to make sure she remembers this one.

Now she's naked across my lap. She's trembling a little. Her pussy is so wet I'm struggling not to take her to the bedroom immediately. Her ass is a beautiful shade of pink, thanks to the light sunburn, but it's going to be red before I'm done.

"Tell me why you're getting this spanking, bambina ," I say, dragging my fingers along her inner thighs and tracing her wetness before I let my hand rest on her

bottom.

“Because I deserve to be punished for acting like a brat today,” she whimpers, squirming her hips against me and making my cock throb.

“But you don’t regret it, do you?” I ask, squeezing her bottom. “Because you are going to get exactly what you want after I spank your naughty little ass.”

“No, sir,” she admits, her body tightening for a moment before relaxing. “I don’t regret it at all.”

“Normally, I’d spank some regret into you. A lot of it,” I growl, my cock twitching in response to her movements. “That’s what I planned to do, after the sun did a lot of the work for me.” I squeeze her ass again and move my finger down to her pussy, stroking her slick folds.

“Oh, god,” she whimpers, grinding herself against my fingers.

“But, since I know there’s no way to make you regret it,” I mutter, returning my hand to her ass, “I’m just going to spank you for being a brat.”

I raise my hand high and wait for her to tense up with anticipation before I give her the first slap across her right cheek. It’s not hard, but it’s enough to get her attention, and leave a lovely outline of my hand in her pink sunburn. Her hips buck immediately, and she groans, so I slap her other cheek a little harder.

“Naughty little girl,” I scold, slapping her ass a few more times. “Naughty, disobedient little girl. I told you to put your swimsuit back on, but what did you do?”

“I-I jumped in the water naked,” she whines, grimacing when a few more slaps find their mark on her sunburnt skin.

“Yes, you did,” I agree, peppering her bottom with stinging smacks. “And then what did you do, bambina ?”

“Ow...” she whimpers. “I-I took off your swimsuit, too.”

“After saying you were going to earn your spanking,” I remind her. “Well, you earned it, alright.”

I start spanking her faster, slapping each cheek before giving her a few directly in the middle. It doesn’t take long for her squirms to get frantic.

“Ow!” she squeals, extending her fingers and shoving her bound wrists down to cover what she can of her bottom. “That hurts!”

I pause the spanking and move my free hand to the tie holding her wrists. I anticipated this, and that’s why I tied her wrists to begin with. I pull her hands away from her bottom and pin them to the small of her back. I wait a moment for her to realize how helpless she is before I place my hand on her ass again.

“I know it hurts, bambina ,” I growl, holding her wrists firmly in my grasp. “But do you really think that’s enough punishment for a naughty, disobedient little girl like you?”

“N-no, sir,” she whines, squirming helplessly. “I’m sorry.”

I’m letting her dictate her punishment a little. This wasn’t part of the plan, but I’ve noticed how wet she gets, even when I’m punishing her. And I’m enjoying this too. Her ass has some redness blooming and I’m hard as a rock. But she’ll be a lot wetter and a lot redder before I’m finished.

“Disobedience has consequences,” I state firmly, then I resume the spanking.

Lea squirms, whimpers, and groans while I'm spanking her. Every squirm rubs against me and makes my dick twitch. Every whimper and groan is music to my ears—the music of a naughty girl, getting the comeuppance she deserves. There are few things more beautiful than that.

The naughty girl seems to accept it. Lea stops squirming and her fingers scrabble against my grip, but she doesn't try to get away. My hand lands on her lovely bottom, sit spots, and the delicate skin along the top of her thighs. That part got enough sunscreen to protect her from the rays, but it's still a good place to land a few firm swats before I give her sunburnt skin another round of slaps.

“Ow, ow, ow!” she cries out, her voice breaking a little. “Ah!”

“You're lucky you're not getting my belt,” I growl, my hand not slowing down. “If you disobey me again like that, you might not be so lucky.”

A stern warning between slaps. I don't like to be disobeyed. Obedience sometimes means the difference between life and death. Today wasn't one of those days, until she fell in the water with the sharks, but if she hadn't been such a brat, that might not have happened either.

“Massimo, please,” she whimpers, her fingernails digging into the hand holding her wrists.

“I believe I told you this spanking was going to be a little longer because you decided to swim with the sharks,” I say sternly. “Didn't I, bambina ?”

“Ow, please, Massimo!” she cries out.

“That doesn't answer my question,” I say, landing some firm swats on the back of her pink thighs.

“Ah! Yes, you said it would be longer!” she squeals.

“The proper response is yes, sir,” I remind her, spanking her red bottom.

“Yes, sir!” she answers properly, her hips bucking again in response to the pain.

“It’s almost over, Lea,” I tell her, but still land a few hard slaps on her ass. “All you have to do is promise to be a good obedient girl from now on.”

“Ow, ow, I’ll be good! I’ll be obedient! I promise!” she cries out and I hear a sniffle that tells me she’s had enough.

I stop the spanking and rub her reddened skin. It’s warm to the touch, and it isn’t just the sunburn doing it now.

“If you disobey me again, you’re getting my belt,” I warn. “And you won’t beg me to spare you. You won’t look at me like you can’t believe I’m actually going to use it to punish you. You will accept it. Understood?”

“Yes, sir,” she whimpers. “I understand.”

“Good girl,” I praise, my gaze lowering to her slick folds. “Now, I believe there’s something else that needs my attention.”

I slide my hand between her legs and rub her wetness. My fingers quickly find her clit, and she gasps as I circle it. It’s already swollen and practically throbbing. It takes very little friction to make her squirm and whine.

I can already imagine how incredible her tight pussy is going to feel when I take her virginity. I didn’t want to. I wanted her to save that for someone else—someone who could promise her the life she deserves instead of a few days. But that’s impossible

now. I fucked up. I let her get too close. So close that I don't know how to pull away. If there wasn't a bullet with my name on it, I'd make her mine forever. I'd never let her go.

"That feels good!" Lea gasps, writhing against me as I continue to tease her clit.

"You're getting so much more than my finger tonight, bambina ," I growl, sliding my finger down to her tight entrance and circling it. "You're getting fucked . You're going to come on my cock over and over until you don't know if you should beg for more or beg me to stop."

"Oh, god," she whimpers, pushing against me like she needs my finger inside her.

"That's what you want, isn't it? What you have been craving since the first time I put you over my knee?" I let go of her wrists and slap her ass while I continue to tease her entrance.

"Ow! Yes!" she squeals.

"Yes, sir ," I snap, slapping her ass harder.

"Yes, sir!" she squeals louder.

"Are you ready for that, bambina ?" I ask, stopping the spanking and focusing on the rubbing. "Are you ready to be mine, even if we don't have much time together left?"

"I am," she whimpers. "I-I know you can't give me more than that, but I want you, Massimo. More than I've ever wanted anything."

I keep rubbing and teasing. I want this too. I can't deny it. I've given in to the point of breaking already, so holding back is pointless. It's just making us both miserable and

leaving us teetering on the edge. It'll be her first time, but once won't be enough for me. I'll want her again and again. She'll be the last thing on my breath—the last thing on my mind, before the darkness takes me.

And I'm okay with that.

I run my fingers along her folds, grind into her swollen clit, and tease her entrance. She's getting wetter. Wet enough that her tightness will be the only resistance when I make her spread her gorgeous legs.

“You're ready for me, aren't you?” I ask, pushing the tip of my finger inside her and feeling her clench on it.

“Yes, sir,” she whimpers.

I pull my hand away from her pussy and untie her wrists. Her arms tremble a little as she flexes them once they're free.

“I want you to go to my bedroom, get on the bed, and spread your fucking legs,” I command, giving her a slap on the ass.

“Ah!” she squeals, scrambling off my lap.

Lea looks back at me with need burning in her eyes. She's ready. More than ready. So ready she can't hide her grin before she turns and walks to my bedroom. Or she thinks she is, at least. She has no idea what I'm going to do to her. I've been starving for far too long to hold back.

I unbuckle my belt as I get up from the couch. I can't see her from here, but I can already imagine how wet and needy she will be when I get to the bedroom. But some anticipation won't hurt. I take my time removing my pants and boxers, then I

unbutton my shirt. The fabric brushes against my dick as I remove it, and I shudder.

“I guess that anticipation goes both ways,” I say under my breath.

There’s only one thing left to do.

Claim her.

CHAPTER 24

Lea

I'm naked on Massimo's bed.

Waiting for him with my legs spread like a good obedient girl.

And this time, I'm going to get exactly what I asked for.

I'm a little nervous. I want him desperately, but it's my first time. I'm scared it will hurt. Scared of what his massive cock will feel like when he buries it inside me. Scared that my first time will be as hard as he warned.

But there's no turning back. I want him too much. I don't care if he can't offer me anything but the short time we have left on this island. I'd rather have him now than spend the rest of my life regretting it. The grave may free him, but it won't free me.

I'm completely unraveled. There's nothing left inside of me except this burning need—this aching desire. The spanking hurt, but all it did was make me crave him more.

I lean up when I hear Massimo moving around in the main part of the suite. It sounds like he's removing his clothes. The thought of it makes my core tighten with anticipation.

Then his shadow darkens the doorway a moment before he does. A gasp gets caught

in my throat when I see his incredible physique, my mouth watering as my gaze lowers to his hard cock. But it isn't going in my mouth this time. I can't resist sliding a hand between my legs and rubbing my throbbing clit.

"I thought you were going to be a good girl," he scolds, walking closer to the bed. "Only naughty girls touch themselves without permission. Do I need to tie you up again?"

"No," I whimper, pulling my hand away. "No, sir."

Massimo kneels on the bed and grabs my leg with his callused hand. I wince as he pulls me toward him and raises his hand. I flinch, because I know exactly what is going to happen, even before his palm smacks my wet folds.

"Ow!" My hips buck on the bed.

"I won't make you count them this time," he says, raising his hand again.

I don't count them out loud, but I keep count in my head. Two, three, four, five... all the way to ten before his hand remains on my pussy, rubbing and caressing my stinging folds. He parts them and teases my entrance before shifting on the bed.

Massimo grabs my hip with one hand and the base of his cock with the other. He leans forward, his icy blue gaze boring straight into my soul. I no longer see a cold tundra in his eyes. They're burning like mine are—the same need, reflected like a mirror.

"I want you," I whimper, shifting my hips toward him. "Please, Massimo."

"This is what you want, bambina?" he asks, rubbing the head of his erection down my folds until it pushes against my entrance.

“Yes,” I sigh, taking a deep breath and swallowing hard. “I’m ready.”

Massimo leans a little further and nudges into me. My eyes open wide with surprise as I feel him. There’s less pain than I expect, but when he tears through my hymen with a gentle thrust, I feel the sting and it makes me whimper. My back arches on the bed as the discomfort spreads, but Massimo pushes deeper.

“Damn, you’re so tight,” he grunts. “I can feel your fucking pulse.”

“Oh, god,” I groan, gasping as I get used to way he feels inside me.

“Are you scared?” he murmurs, leaning over me and shifting his knees.

“Not of you,” I whisper. “Right now, at least.”

“I’ll be gentle at first,” he says, his body pressing against me as his lips graze my ear. “But then I’m going to fuck you hard. The way we both know you need to be fucked.”

I start to respond, but Massimo’s lips crash into mine. His hands roam across my body, teasing and touching while he gently thrusts into me. The discomfort melts away, replaced by a pleasurable sensation that trembles all the way to my core. The gentle friction is enough to make me moan and whimper into his mouth and he devours them with a growl that vibrates through me.

Every thrust sends the head of Massimo’s enormous cock deeper inside me. My walls shudder as the inches sink into me. I put my hands on his waist, bucking my hips into his thrusts, begging for more—begging for the inches he hasn’t given me yet.

But Massimo is in control. He keeps me silent with his tongue, except for my whimpers and groans. He moves in unison with me, depriving me of what I’m

begging for. I can tell he's holding back. For my sake. I should be grateful, but I want him so bad I can't think straight. Or maybe that's because I can't breathe. I gasp for oxygen when our lips finally part.

"You're going to be mine tonight, bambina ," he promises. "You'll never be the same after I'm done with you, but remember, this is what you asked for."

"I know," I whimper, his lips against my neck making me even more aroused—if that's even possible at this point. "I want you, Massimo. All of you."

A growl rumbles in his chest, and he goes deeper with a harder thrust. Then another. And another. The ache makes my eyelids flutter, but I still buck my hips into his thrusts like a desperate girl who needs this more than I need my next breath.

Massimo lets out a gasp and rests his weight against me. His cock sinks into me until his pelvis is against mine. I never knew I could feel this full—this complete . It feels like this is what I've been missing my entire life. Like I was only directionless, because I hadn't looked his way yet.

"You're mine," he grinds out. "All fucking mine."

His powerful hips rise and fall, driving his length into me. Each time he goes deep, my walls tremble against his hardness, and the pleasure is driven straight into my core. Then his thrusts get faster and my breath hitches in my throat. The next hard thrust drives all the oxygen out of my lungs, and I don't even have time to breathe before the next one is hammered deep.

I'm stretched around his girth, so full it feels heavenly, and the way the friction rubs against my g-spot is almost overwhelming. I've never felt pleasure like this. There's no comparison. It feels even better than his tongue, and I thought that was the peak of bliss. I was wrong. This is incredible.

His growls of pleasure and needy rasps echo in my ears. The heat between us is scorching, burning hotter than the lingering sting on the surface of my well-spanked, sunburnt bottom. I stare into his scalding blue gaze, silently conveying everything I can't force out between my gasps.

“Massimo, oh, god,” I groan as he stays deep and hammers his thrusts directly into my g-spot.

The pressure builds faster than it did when I was being raptured by his tongue. It's deeper and makes my body clench so tight it forces him to slam into me harder. Our bodies come together again and again until the sound of skin against skin muffles everything else.

I can feel the orgasm coming. There's no way to fight it—no need to fight it. I give in to him, desperate for every inch as his length continues to ravage me. Desperate to feel his release as much as I crave my own.

“Don't stop,” I mewl. “Please don't stop.”

“Nothing could stop me right now, bambina ,” he assures me, the friction sending currents of pleasure through me. “I'm going to fill your tight little pussy with cum, and I'm still not going to stop. You're going to be screaming my name when the sun comes up.”

His words are like molten lava that mixes with the pressure and sends me over the edge. I come so hard my entire body convulses. Massimo grunts, then he throbs inside me, and every pulsation vibrates my walls.

“That's it,” he groans. “Come for me, bambina . Let me feel what I'm doing to you.”

Beautiful bliss rips through every inch of my trembling frame. Massimo's thunderous

thrusts make the orgasm peak higher than the ones that introduced me to true pleasure. These are even better. It feels like a volcano is going off inside me, erupting every time my walls clench on his cock.

The orgasm fades for a moment, then several smaller orgasms send me right back to the peak. I gasp and groan, my nails digging into his skin as I hold on for dear life. I can't buck my hips into his thrusts anymore. I can't do anything but take his cock. The pleasure softens into a wonderful ache that lingers until the pressure builds again.

"I-I'm going to..." I manage, then my body finishes my sentence for me. "Massimo!"

My walls spasm on his hardness and his torso buckles. The look in his eyes turns primal and unhinged. It would be scary if I wasn't the one who put it there. His powerful thrusts tear into me until they become erratic. His fingers dig into my skin hard enough to leave bruises, but I don't care. I want it. All of it.

And I get exactly what I want.

Massimo slams into me with his erratic thrusts until I feel his release. His hot seed pumps into me and his throbbing pulsations make me come even harder. We meld into a moment of passion, lust, and blinding ecstasy that continues until we're both spent. His weight collapses against me and he pants for a moment before leaning back.

"All fucking mine," he growls. "But we're far from done."

"Massimo, I-I may need a break," I mutter, gasping for air as I come down from the incredible high.

"I don't," he says. "I haven't even fucked you hard yet, like I promised."

“That wasn’t hard?” I ask, my eyes getting wide.

“No, bambina ,” he chuckles, moving his hands until he has a grip on the inside of both of my thighs. “Not even close.”

Massimo squeezes my thighs and pins me to the mattress, then he drives his cock into me again. Much harder than before. It’s so hard I would get driven straight into the headboard if he wasn’t holding me down. I groan with discomfort through the first few thrusts, then I feel my body reacting to his roughness.

“You’re going to make me come again,” I moan.

“That’s the point,” he says. “I’m just getting started with you.”

I might be in over my head now, but it feels too good to worry about it. His mountainous frame settles into a hard rhythm, and I feel the orgasm coming. It’s a big one.

“Fuck!” I scream as it quakes through me, like my entire world is shaking.

“Heh,” Massimo chuckles. “Just wait until I flip you over and spank your ass while I fuck you.”

“F-fuck,” I repeat in a stammer, then my vision blurs with another orgasm—partially because I imagine it happening.

“You’re going to tell me what a naughty girl you were today and beg me to punish you again for it.”

I try to respond, but it comes out as babble. My vision begins to come back in focus, and I gasp when his thrusts twitch. He’s getting close again.

His grip tightens on my thighs, and he hammers his body into me relentlessly while I orgasm so hard I barely even feel his release until the warmth sends another tingling shudder through me.

I mutter something incoherent that doesn't match my blank stare or shattered thoughts. I take hard breaths as I come down.

Massimo shifts and slowly pulls out. I gasp when he's gone, immediately hating how empty I feel.

I'm destroyed in the best possible way. Floating on a cloud of pure euphoria, with my bones still partially rattled from the intensity.

"Are you going to get on your knees and stick your ass out like a good girl or do I need to flip you over myself?" he asks.

His words hit me like a bolt of lightning and my eyes fly open.

"N-now?" I stutter. "I can't even move."

He laughs, wrapping me up in his arms and turning me over on my stomach.

His hands squeeze my hips, and he yanks me onto my knees. I'm a rag doll on wobbly knees, but I fight against the urge to sink back down to the mattress. His roughness stokes my arousal until I can't do anything but ache for what comes next, despite being exhausted.

"Are you trying to kill me? I don't think there's anything left," I whisper, even though I know it's a lie and a drop of the shared pleasure inside me mixes with a fresh trickle of arousal that runs down my thigh.

“Then tell me you’re done,” he says, rubbing my ass with his hand. “Tell me you don’t want a spanking, and don’t want me to fuck you again.”

I don’t even think about saying it. I whimper and move in unison with his hand.

“That’s what I thought,” Massimo says, squeezing my ass.

The first stinging slap makes me gasp.

But he’s just getting started.

CHAPTER 25

Massimo

I've given in to Lea in every way.

And I can't get enough.

She's on her knees with a fresh handprint blooming on her ass. My seed is leaking out of her and mixing with the intoxicating arousal that drips down her thighs. She's been claimed, marked, and I still want more. My cock throbs to attention as I rub the curve of her ass and deliver another hard slap.

"Ow," Lea whimpers, her toes curling and her feet kicking against the mattress.

"I told you what you have to say," I remind her, kneading the stinging flesh before spanking her again.

Lea groans and nods. Her hips rise and fall, then she leans forward, pressing her chest to the mattress so that her ass is sticking out—just like a good girl is supposed to.

"I-I was a really naughty girl today," she relents, moving her ass against my hand. "So naughty that I need to be punished again."

"Tell me what you did, naughty girl," I demand, giving her a firm slap across both cheeks for motivation.

“Ow, ow, ow!” she squeals, her hips bucking as the sting reverberates through her.

“I teased you while I was on my knees,” she whimpers, and I give her a few stinging slaps. “And I took off my swimsuit to tease you again!”

“You sure did,” I growl, spanking her several times for it.

“Ah! Then I disobeyed you by not putting it back on,” she whines. “And took your swimsuit off, too.”

“Naughty girl,” I scold, spanking her a few more times before grabbing the base of my cock. “You did all of that because you wanted me to fuck your tight little pussy, didn’t you, bambina ?”

“Yes, sir,” she whimpers.

“And I said you were going to get what you asked for,” I growl, lining up with her slick entrance and pushing into her.

“Oh, god!” she cries out.

Lea is so tight it makes my entire body go rigid when I feel her squeeze my cock. I’m making up for lost time, and time I’ll never have, but I can’t get enough of her. She’s turned my world upside down and made me question everything. I want her to be mine in every way, but since that isn’t possible, I want enough to go to the grave with a smile on my face.

I nudge my hardness deep into Lea’s tight pussy and start thrusting. Once I get a rhythm going and hear a symphony of pleasurable moans, I start spanking her. I alternate between stinging swats and hard thrusts, keeping her on the edge of pleasure and pain.

Every time I slap her ass, she clenches so hard it makes my cock throb. It feels too good to stop, even when the redness blooms across the surface of her sunburnt bottom. Her gasps and groans of pleasure tell me she isn't suffering. She's not in distress. She's lost in the same ecstasy I am, where pain and pleasure turn into something beautiful.

I fuck her until I feel her get close to an orgasm, then I spank it away before the rhythm of thrusts resumes. She'll come when I'm ready to let her.

"Ow, ow! I was so close!" she squeals, her toes kicking the mattress.

"I could tell," I tease, squeezing her hips while I thrust into her. "But you didn't ask permission like a good girl."

"You didn't tell me I had to!" she protests. "Oh, god, Massimo—please let me come!"

"No," I reply, slapping her ass and squeezing, letting my thumb brush against her bottom hole. "You haven't earned another one yet."

"But..." she whimpers, and I turn it into a squeal with a stinging swat.

"Only good girls get to come," I growl, pressing my thumb into her reluctant hole.

"Ah! No!" Lea shakes her head frantically. "Not there!"

"Why not, bambina?" I ask, not pushing further. "Don't you want to be mine in every way?"

"Y-yeah, but... not there," she whimpers.

“That’s not an answer,” I say, spanking her a few times. “Tell me why.”

“I’m scared,” she admits with a loud groan. “You’re so big...”

“Do you trust me?” I ask, leaning over her until my lips are against her ear. “Tell me you trust me, bambina .”

“I-I trust you,” she trembles out.

“Then don’t fight it,” I say, pulling my lips away. “Beg for me to fuck your ass and I’ll let you come.”

Lea whines, groans, and shakes her head. I give her a hard slap, then thrust into her furiously, bringing her close to the edge. I can feel her resolve breaking. Her fear passing. She grinds back into me, urging my dick deeper while my thumb penetrates her tightest hole.

“Beg for it, bambina ,” I insist. “Trust me.”

Lea gasps a few times, like she’s torn between obedience and her natural fear of the unknown. I slow my thrusts so she can breathe between them. She’s so close to an orgasm, every stroke feels like it will send her over the edge.

“P-please... fuck me in the ass,” she whispers, her voice barely audible.

“Good girl,” I praise, pushing my thumb into her. “Now, you can come as many times as you want.”

I give her lovely red ass one final slap, then clamp down on her hips with both hands. I’m not going to hold back, and she’s going to scream for me. I can go deeper from this angle, but I’ve held back a little for this moment. But now that she’s begged

like a good girl, she's going to get her world shattered.

Thunderous, bone-rattling thrusts slam into her. My dick throbs and pulsates like it's stuck in a permanent ache that eternally craves the next release. But I only want her. Every bit of her.

I grind my thumb into her ass and pump it inside her while I fuck her. I'm like an uncaged animal, finally free of the collar that has kept poison in my throat while bars constructed from my own malice surrounded me. Lea has freed me, just in time for me to face the bitter end, but I'll take my last breath with her on my lips.

I feel her getting close. It sends me into a frenzy, because I'm close too. But her pleasure is all that matters right now. I slip a finger into her bottom hole, joining my thumb, and that is enough to cause her to erupt in bliss.

"Oh god, oh god, oh god!" Lea screams as the orgasm rocks her body.

I slam my cock into her beautiful spasms of ecstasy while my fingers pump into her ass. Orgasm after orgasm rips through Lea until I can't hold back anymore. I grunt, gasp, and erupt with her name pouring off my lips.

"Lea! Oh, fuck!" I roar, shuddering and shaking as I unload inside her.

I collapse against her, taking a moment to get my breath before I lean back and resume the thrusts, feeling some numbness for a few seconds before the pleasure returns.

"Again?" she whimpers.

"You get to come as many times as you want," I remind her. "And when you're done, you know what is next."

I pump my finger and thumb into her ass to make sure she understands, which results in another whimper.

Lea does things to me that I don't fully understand. She brings something incredible out of me, and I want to share it with her as long as I can. I keep my cock moving, creating the perfect amount of hard friction to send her over the edge again and again. Time fades into pure pleasure that stretches on long enough to make everything ache before I finally feel my release building.

"Fuck!" I grind out, slamming into her as I fill her with another eruption of seed.

Lea orgasms again when she feels my pulsations. Her walls spasm along my entire length, milking me dry. I can feel the weariness settling in, pure exhaustion in my muscles that racks my frame. But I promised her as many as she wants, and I keep my promises.

"W-wait," Lea whimpers when I resume my steady thrusts. "I'm ready."

"You sure about that, bambina?" I ask, working my fingers into her ass again.

"Yes, sir," she mewls. "As ready as I'll ever be."

"Good girl," I grunt, slowly pulling my fingers out of her before I slide my cock free.

Lea is trembling when I drag the head of my cock to her virgin bottom hole. I'm dripping with a combination of lust and arousal, so I easily push past the ring. She tenses, groans, and shudders, so I give her time to adjust before I go deeper.

This is more than just desire for me. This is about claiming her in every way. Making her feel like she's mine, even if it won't last. It's what she asked for—what she practically begged for, both with her words and her actions. A taste of what spending

every night in my bed would be like.

“Every bit of you belongs to me tonight, Lea,” I rasp, shuddering as I feel the tighter walls clench my cock. “Relax and you’ll be fine. You might even enjoy it.”

Lea responds with a whine and squeezes her eyes shut. I ease up until the discomfort passes, then I work more of my length into her. Slowly, but surely, I open her eyes to a new world of pleasure. Pleasure she likely never imagined. I see it dawn in a gorgeous green flicker right before she gasps and pushes back against me.

“Oh, wow,” she groans. “I-it’s not as bad as I thought.”

I smile and slowly increase the speed of my thrusts, making sure she’s comfortable as I do. Once I hear the moans pouring from her lips, I settle into a rhythm. My cock throbs inside her and I do my best to stifle my release. This is an introduction, not a marathon, but I at least want to make her come once from it.

The minutes pass in a flurry of bliss. It gets harder to hold back, but I can feel her getting closer. Her soft cries and gentle moans get louder. They make my cock ache as the pleasure radiates through my entire body.

“I-I...” she trails off, then her entire body jerks. “Massimo!”

Lea comes hard.

So hard it makes me pant from exertion as I drive my length into her clenched hole. But I don’t stop. I keep hammering my cock into her until I feel the final quake of her orgasm and force the friction that will send me over the edge.

“Lea!” I roar, my hips bucking erratically as I finish inside her.

I shudder and gasp until I'm spent. My grip on her hips relaxes and Lea slumps forward like a doll, the only thing holding her up is my dick, which is still deep inside her. As it goes limp, she falls further, and I gently ease her to the mattress before pulling out.

"Good girl," I say, rubbing her back. "Rest for a little while, and then you'll be ready to spread your fucking legs when I tell you to."

"There's nothing left, Massimo," she whispers. "I-I'm done."

"I disagree," I growl, running my hand across her ass and between her legs until my fingers are against her clit. "You wanted me, bambina . That means you're mine, anytime I want you."

"Yes, sir," she whimpers, her hips moving in unison with me. "But let me catch my breath."

I nod in agreement and pull my hand away, lowering myself to the mattress beside her. I pull her weary, exhausted body into my arms and kiss her cheek. Lea melts into my embrace and snuggles close. Having her in my arms is incredible. I wish she could stay here forever. I wish it was possible for me to hold her like this every day of her life.

But I can't.

So I will hold her like this for every one of mine.

CHAPTER 26

Lea

Massimo is insatiable.

Nothing stands between him and what he wants.

All I can do is give in.

Massimo takes me again and again throughout the night. Sleep becomes a series of naps between eruptions of lust that consume us both. I'm exhausted, spent, and almost broken when I scream his name while the sun spills the first rays of morning across the bed.

Then we're in the shower. His lips are on my wet skin. His hands are teasing me again. I wrap my weary legs around his waist and get driven into the wall while the steam rises around us. I've orgasmed so many times I've lost count. His seed feels like a permanent thickness inside me. When he finishes again, I slump against his shoulder, my legs shaking as they return to the pool of water at our feet.

"I'm so glad there are no excursions today," I whisper. "I'm not even sure I can walk."

"You can rest after breakfast," he says. "I have a few things to take care of, so I can't spend the entire day with you like I wish I could."

“Those things you need to take care of...” I trail off, looking down at the drain.

“Yes, Lea,” he confirms. “I don’t have much time left, and I’ve made most of the arrangements, but there are a few last-minute things to handle.”

Last-minute . That burns through me like wildfire, stirring my emotions, and putting tears in my eyes. It’s Thursday now. That means we’re one day closer to the end of my adventure—the end of Massimo’s life. And I have to let it happen.

“I promised I wouldn’t beg you to change your mind,” I say, looking up at him with tears in my eyes. “But I’m going to, because I can’t not do it. Please, Massimo. Please don’t?—”

He silences me by putting a finger on my lips and shaking his head. “Don’t say it, Lea,” he sighs. “It’s impossible and you know why.”

I pull away from his finger and take a step back. “You didn’t order the hit. Your brother did. If anyone should die, it should be him. Why do you need your father’s permission? Emilio didn’t ask for it.”

“I need to go, Lea,” he says, turning off the water. “I’ve made my decision. This is the only way. I’ll have breakfast sent up for you.”

Massimo gets out of the shower, and I stand in it, sobbing my eyes out while he dries off. He dismisses his life so casually, like it doesn’t matter at all. But it does. He matters to me. He may be the only thing that matters to me right now.

What do I have left after this? I go home to Pine Grove? I return to the sorry excuse for a normal life I was living before I came to Isola Selvaggia? I can’t. What is there to go home to? A crappy job I hate. Mindlessly wandering around my grandmother’s house, trying to come to terms with the fact it’s mine now and she’ll never come

through the door again. I'll be more directionless after I get home than I was before I left.

"Massimo, please," I sniffle, following behind him without even bothering with a towel. "Please think about this. There has to be another way."

"There isn't," he growls, shoving a leg into his pants. "Don't you think I already considered every possible alternative?"

"Did you consider..." I whimper, swallowing hard. "Me?"

Massimo sighs. He buttons his pants and turns to face me, an expression of pain staining his face. He shakes his head and exhales sharply.

"No, Lea," he admits. "I made my decision before I met you, and I'm sorry about that, but it doesn't change anything. I warned you, bambina . You're incredible and you've given me more than I could have ever hoped for, but we're talking about a lot of lives here. Good men dying. My niece and nephew, forced to grow up without a father. Everything my family has built..."

I listen to him, but can't stop the tears from returning. I get it. I really do. I understand all the pain and heartache that left Massimo feeling like this was his only option. But there has to be another option. One that doesn't involve him giving up his life. One that doesn't involve him passing all of his heartbreak and despair to me, because that won't die with him. I'll carry it for the rest of my life, instead.

Massimo walks over and hugs me. I don't feel the same warmth or comfort in his arms. Maybe it was a mistake to give myself to him like I did. He seemed to know it wouldn't be as easy as spreading my legs for what I was burning for. I should have listened.

“When will you be back?” I ask as he pulls away.

“It could be later tonight before I get back,” he replies. “I put your number in my phone, so I’ll text you if anything comes up.”

“Okay,” I relent, watching as he finishes getting dressed.

Massimo leaves me standing in his bedroom. I hear the door slam, and it feels like a piece of my heart goes with him. My legs are still wobbly and shaky from the intensity of our passion. I let them buckle and sink to the floor, tears running down my face.

I’m still sobbing when breakfast arrives, but the knocking forces me to stand up and slip on a robe. There’s no sign of the person who dropped it off when I finally open the door, so I wheel the cart into my room. My stomach is twisted in a knot. I don’t feel like eating, but I’m so weary, I have to try.

I sink into my chair, open the trays, and shove food in my mouth. I barely taste it and chase it with juice, so I don’t choke. I ate like this after my grandmother died. Nourishment for the sake of survival. I was finally over that, and feeling good about my directionless life, before Massimo crashed into it.

After eating as much as I can stomach, I sit at the table and stare at the wall. I’m not sure what else to do. Massimo won’t change his mind. I might as well be facing the bullet myself. I’d rather take it than live in this world after he’s gone.

My despair consumes me while I sit in my bedroom, staring at a different wall. I barely remember coming in here. I look down and my phone is in my hand. Sarah’s number is on the screen. Subconsciously, I’m doing what I always do when everything falls apart.

I'm calling my best friend.

I realize a second before she picks up that it's a video call, and then her face lights up the screen.

"Lea! Finally, I was wondering when I would hear from you—wait, are you crying?" Sarah's face scrunches with concern. "What's wrong? Are you okay? Did something happen with Massimo?"

"I'm not in any danger," I sigh. "Far from it, even though I've spent my entire vacation... with him."

"What?" Sarah's eyes get wide. "Are you serious?"

I break down in tears again. I try to fight them off, but they won't stop, and I end up sobbing incoherently.

"Lea, did he hurt you? If he did, I'll be on the next plane!" Sarah says angrily, her tone getting more urgent by the word. "What happened, Lea?"

"I messed up, Sarah," I cry. "I messed up bad. I... I should have stayed away from him, but I couldn't. He's... he's incredible."

"Lea. Did you... did you sleep with him?" Sarah asks frantically.

"Yes," I sniffle. "But that's not why I'm upset."

Sarah and I have shared every single detail about our lives since we were children. We don't keep secrets from each other. I know I shouldn't talk about what happened with Massimo, but I can't stop myself. The tears open the blabbering floodgates, and I tell her everything . About the hit. About Massimo's brother. About our wonderful

time together... even the part about falling in the water. I leave out the intimate details, but I share way more than I should.

“Oh sweet mercy, Lea. Oh sweet mercy...” Sarah mutters her favorite expression. It usually makes me laugh, but today, I just stare at the screen in a daze.

“Y-you can’t use any of this on your p-podcast,” I stammer out. “Best friend vault. It has to stay there. You could be in serious danger if you talk about any of this.”

“I won’t use any of it. I swear,” Sarah says. “But I should probably show you where I am right now.”

I blink away my tears as Sarah walks to a window. I don’t recognize the room she’s in. It isn’t her bedroom. But as soon as she tilts her screen and I see the Las Vegas skyline, my blood runs cold, and all my sorrow gets replaced with bone-chilling concern.

“Sarah, what the hell are you doing in Las Vegas?” I gasp.

“I told you I’ve been looking into the Morandi Crime Family and the Dirty Vegas Mafia,” she says hesitantly. “I’m in Las Vegas to meet with someone who might have some information I can use on my podcast.”

“You can’t, Sarah!” I say hurriedly. “I’m serious! Massimo’s family is dangerous! I just told you what his brother is going to do! If he’ll kill Massimo, what do you think he’ll do to a podcaster who talks about his family?”

“Well, I didn’t know any of that before I came to Las Vegas!” Sarah mutters, her voice cracking. “I’ll meet with Cadence and then I’ll go home.”

“And you’re not going to do a podcast about them, right? Promise me, Sarah,” I say.

“I’m sorry if you wasted your time and drove all the way to Las Vegas, but this is too dangerous.”

“Yeah, I’ll forget about doing a podcast on them,” Sarah relents. “But you have to promise you’ll be careful. It can’t be any less dangerous for you, hanging around some Mafia guy who is about to get killed!”

“I won’t be there when that happens,” I sigh, looking down. “Text me when you leave Las Vegas and again when you get home. I may not be able to respond immediately, but I need to know you’re safe.”

“I will,” Sarah promises. “And you better try to reply, or else I’ll drive straight to the airport instead of going home. I’ll come get you and drag you on the boat by your ear like your grandmother used to when you really pissed her off!”

“I’ll do my best.” I swallow hard.

I feel even worse after talking to Sarah, and she always makes me feel better. I’m glad I called, but I’m worried about her now, too. I didn’t tell her to keep investigating Massimo’s family or go to Las Vegas, yet I still feel responsible. If something happens to her, I don’t know what I’ll do. She’s literally the only person I will have left after I leave this island.

“Grandma,” I whisper, my eyes glancing toward the ceiling. “You said a piece of your spirit never left this island. If that’s true... I need you. Maybe more than ever.”

I’m grasping at straws. Talking to spirits, even though I’m not sure I even believe in life after death.

Even if a part of my grandmother’s spirit is still here, she can’t help. Sarah certainly can’t. Nobody can.

I need a miracle.

CHAPTER 27

Massimo

I'm sitting in a small office Theo let me use.

A glass of whiskey is to my right and a cigar is smoldering in the ashtray next to it.

The computer screen finally lights up and a woman's smiling face appears. Jillian Morris. She's my attorney for private matters, when I don't want to use someone associated with my family. She's not the best, but she's effective, and thanks to some trouble I saved her from a while back, she owes me her life. That means she won't discuss anything with anyone, and that goes well beyond lawyer-client privilege.

"Mr. Morandi, it's good to see you," she says, clicking her pen. "I've made all the arrangements you asked for, and I'll send the documents. They just need your signature. I'll get them notarized, like we discussed, without you having to be present."

"Tear them up," I snap. "All the financial documents. We're starting over."

"Uh, you're serious?" she asks, her eyes widening in surprise.

"Yes," I snarl. "I'm about to email you something. This is what you need to do. Follow my instructions exactly how I outlined them."

One thing my family is good at is laundering money. It doesn't matter how much

cash you have in a warehouse or vault if you can't spend it. We do our laundering within the confines of the law, but bend it as needed. A business has a great year—no big deal, if there are receipts to back it up. Forging them is easy, and if you spread them out across enough businesses, it won't get the attention of the feds.

I lean back, sip my whiskey, and enjoy a few flavorful puffs of the Toscano I got from Theo. Jillian reviews the email, and I see her tilt her head as she takes it all in. It's not a difficult thing for her to do, but there are several steps to make sure everything is run through the shell companies that will ensure nobody knows where my fortune went.

"One beneficiary?" Jillian questions. "The trust is for Eleanor Fuller—from Pine Grove?"

"That is correct," I confirm. "It'll take a couple of months for the money to go through all the right channels, but once it does, I want you to send her the paperwork. Make sure I didn't miss anything, but it should be untraceable."

"Nobody could trace this," Jillian replies. "I won't even be able to trace it once it leaves the offshore accounts."

"Perfect." I nod and exhale sharply. "And like we agreed, there's enough money to set you up for the rest of your life and send all three of your kids to college."

"Thank you, Mr. Morandi," she sighs. "You don't know what this means. Ever since I got disbarred... I..."

"I know, but you've got your law license back now, just like I promised," I say. "If you choose to keep practicing, you can. If not, you've got enough to start over somewhere else."

We say our goodbyes and I end the call.

Lea outright refused my money, but I don't like taking no for an answer. I've already hurt her. I gave in, despite knowing how wrong it was, and my death will leave a wound. Money won't mend her broken heart, but she'll be taken care of. I'll rest easier in whatever grave they stick me in knowing that.

I doubt my family would ever try to trace my money, but this will ensure the trail never leads them to Lea. I set it up so that it looks like an inheritance meant for her grandmother that she never knew about. Lea's smart enough to figure it out, but it won't matter if she does. I'll be gone by then.

I take a few minutes to enjoy my whiskey and cigar before I make my next call. I planned to spread this out while I was here, but I've been preoccupied. The arrangements still have to be made. I've accumulated a few debts over the years and most of them aren't financial. I'm settling them all before I take my last breath.

Call after call. Arrangement after arrangement. The sum of my life, simmered down to favors, debts, and things I barely give a fuck about. It would be easier if I didn't know it was coming. If the hitman hadn't decided to see if he could cut a better deal with the victim than the one who paid for the hit.

But it's better this way. I'll leave the world with a clean slate. I didn't even get to scream my way into the world with one of those. I'm Salvatore Morandi's firstborn son. Expectations were laid out before I drew my first breath, and I'm going to die before I take my place at the head of the table, like my birth destined me to do.

"Fuck you, Emilio," I sigh, downing what is left of my whiskey and stubbing out my cigar. "I hope it's worth it."

With business concluded, my thoughts return to Lea. She's waiting for me in my

penthouse suite. I could claim her again—spend the entire night with her tight pussy begging for more. But I’m doing irreparable harm. Deep down, I knew what would happen, if I made her mine, even for one night. It’s harder to let go when you’ve got something to hold onto. I should have never let her grasp onto me.

But what’s done is done.

I don’t want to be alone tonight.

After signing the paperwork and faxing it to Jillian, I meet Theo for dinner, drinks, stories, and cigars. It’s not something I want to do, but keeping up appearances is important. Especially now. Lea has become a part of those appearances. To anyone who is watching, I’m having the time of my life. The sad part is that it’s true, except I’ve got one foot in the grave while I try to let go of the girl who has brought me back to life.

When I get to the elevator, I’m drunk enough to feel it. Drunk enough to have a slight stagger to my step. I swipe my keycard, drop it, and mutter obscenities as I retrieve it from the floor. Then I stumble off the elevator, open my door, and peer into the darkness.

“Lea?” I call out, feeling a twinge of concern. “Are you here?”

My concern leads me to Lea’s bedroom first. Her bed is empty, but her bags are still there. I turn back to the main part of the suite and turn on the lights. The breakfast I sent up is mostly untouched, but it looks like she had a plate.

“Lea?” I call out again, walking down the hall and pushing my bedroom door open. She’s in my bed, but the lights are out, and the covers are pulled tight around her. “There you are. Are you sleeping?”

“No,” she whispers.

“Did you hear me calling for you?” I walk closer to the bed.

“I knew you’d find me eventually,” she mumbles, pulling the covers tighter.

She’s broken and that’s my fault. I take off my suit jacket, toss it on the chair, and remove my tie before pulling the covers back. She didn’t even get dressed today, but while the sight of her naked body is enough to make my cock twitch, I’m more worried about her.

“I’m sorry, Lea,” I sigh, getting into bed and pulling her into my arms.

“Stop apologizing, please,” she mutters. “It doesn’t matter how sorry you are if you won’t do anything to change it.”

“I know,” I relent, unable to offer much else.

We lay in the darkness, the silence saying everything. She’s silently pleading for me to do something to stop what is going to happen. I’m silently explaining why I can’t, while she silently berates me for being such a damn fool—I don’t think she would actually berate me, but she should. I deserve every bit of her anger and frustration.

I’m the one who allowed this to go too far. I’m the one who gave in. She’s a victim of all of this. Her only crime was meeting a man and daring to let the island guide her toward one misadventure after another. Despite what I said last night, none of this is her fault. I’ll shoulder that blame all the way to the end.

“I know you don’t want to hear it, but you’ve still got your entire life ahead of you, bambina,” I whisper, trying to comfort her the best that I can. “You’re going to leave this island, and it’s going to hurt for a while, but one day... one day, it’ll pass. I’ll be

a memory you look back on, and I hope one of those times, you're looking back on it from a happy place. Hopefully surrounded by children and a loving husband?"

"Don't." She cuts me off. "Like you said, I don't want to hear it, so please don't say it. Don't romanticize the rest of my life because it makes you feel better. What makes you think it'll be that easy for me, hmm? It wasn't easy for you."

"That's different, Lea," I sigh.

"How?" she questions with a sniffle. "Love is love, Massimo. The years might make it stronger. A baby certainly does. But once the spark is lit, it's lit. Except this time, you don't have to suffer after it's over. I get to do that alone. Or maybe I won't be alone." She grabs my hand and moves it to her stomach. "Maybe you left me something to remember you by."

"Lea!" I say, pulling my hand away. "You're not pregnant."

"How do you know?" she asks, sniffing again. "We didn't do anything to prevent it, did we? And I still feel you inside me."

"Yeah, but..." My words trail off and I sit up. "Aren't you on birth control?"

"Why would I be on birth control?" She turns to face me, and I see the tears glistening in her gorgeous green eyes. "I wasn't running around trying to lose my v-card every chance I got."

"You didn't say anything, so I... I assumed," I mutter, shaking my head. "Damn it, I should have worn a condom."

"I really don't care, Massimo," she sighs, looking up at the ceiling. "If I'm pregnant, I'm pregnant. At least my life will finally have some direction, if that's the case."

I want to tell her she'll be taken care of, regardless. That if our spark created life, she'll be able to give our child a life she never dreamed of. But I can't do that. It'll just upset her more than she already is, because I'm leaving something for her, after she told me not to.

"If you are... it doesn't change anything," I say, unable to hide the pain that the thought brings.

"I didn't say it to change your mind," she says. "I've been staring at the wall all day, trying to come up with something. Anything, really. I've given up on that. I know you won't do anything to stop it, and I certainly can't. So, just hold me. At least give me that."

I swallow hard and nod as I lean against the pillow. Lea scoots into my arms and I wrap her in a tight embrace. Listening to her sniffles while her tears run down my chest is heartbreaking. I wasn't sure if anyone would cry for me after I'm gone. Now I know there will be two eyes that don't stay dry.

So I'll hold her.

Because my arms, while there is still blood pumping through them, are all I have to offer.

CHAPTER 28

Lea

I'm broken in Massimo's arms.

Totally shattered.

I don't really think I'm pregnant. There's no way to know for sure, but it's just one of a million thoughts that passed through my head while I stared at the wall. None of them felt like they would sway him. I doubt he'd be swayed if my belly was swollen with undeniable proof of the love we shared.

The only thing in my foreseeable future is pain, and not the kind that makes me wet. This pain is going to ache in an entirely different way. I sampled that pain after my grandmother died. But I had a lifetime of memories, and it was her time. I understood she wouldn't live forever.

Massimo's time isn't up. It's so far from up, the hitman offered a way out. An easy way out for a man like Massimo. Easy in all the ways that don't matter—impossible in the ways that do.

After crying myself into a state of exhaustion, I fall asleep in Massimo's strong arms. I wake up in them hours later, with the sun seeping through the windows. I struggle not to cry. It's Friday. The best day of the week, most of the time. Except this is my last day with him.

“Good morning, bambina ,” Massimo murmurs when he feels me stir. “I’d ask if you slept okay, but I don’t want you to lie.”

“How do you know?” I ask, glancing up at him.

“You talk in your sleep,” he sighs. “Or you did last night.”

“What did I say?” I feel a twinge of concern in my stomach. I know how bad my nightmares were, but those were in my head.

“I couldn’t make much of it out,” he answers. “I heard my name a few times, and you were trying to say something to Sarah, too. It was mostly nonsense, but I could tell you weren’t having a restful night.”

“No,” I admit, wiping my eyes. “I’m sorry if I kept you awake.”

“I slept enough,” he says, letting go of me and sitting up. “I’ll go make coffee and order breakfast. Want anything in particular?”

“No, whatever you get is fine,” I mutter, not feeling hungry at all. “I’ll be okay.”

I see the pain in Massimo’s eyes as he gets out of bed. That pain drew me to him like a moth to the flame, and now I’ve added to it, but I’ve got plenty of my own to deal with. Pain I’ll carry with me after Isola Selvaggia is out of sight—pain that will linger long after Massimo is gone.

I sit in bed until I hear the food arrive, then I drag myself to my feet and slip on a hotel robe. I see my reflection in the mirror and nearly gasp. I barely recognize my own face. My eyes are puffy from crying. My cheeks are sunken and pale. The color on my lips is lighter, like a layer of pink has been permanently stripped away. I’ve never considered myself pretty, but I look like I’ve been through the wringer. I guess

I have—emotionally and physically.

Massimo is seated when I step out of his bedroom. He looks almost as vibrant as ever, except for the lingering pain in his blue eyes. He's hours from death and I'm the one who looks like a corpse.

"Try to eat something," Massimo says, gesturing to the breakfast spread. "Even if you don't feel like it."

I nod and sit down without saying anything. Maybe it was a bad idea to push the intimacy as far as I did. He seemed to understand it would make this more difficult, and now, I understand, too. But I wouldn't change it for anything. I'll treasure our time together and won't let any regret fester.

I move a biscuit to my plate, break off a piece, and nibble on it. Despite the unease in my stomach, once I swallow a few bites, I feel my appetite returning. I haven't eaten anything since breakfast yesterday, so I give my body what it can handle.

"You're not eating much," I remark, noticing Massimo has a lot of food left untouched, which isn't normal for him.

"I had dinner with Theo last night," he says.

"Must have been some night," I mutter. "Dinner... and I could smell whiskey and cigar smoke on you when you got into bed."

"We always get together a few times when I come to the island," Massimo explains. "If I turned him down, he would have asked questions. Easier to go than answer them."

I shrug and keep eating. I'm not being intentionally bitter. I just can't get over the

ache inside me. So much for making his last days fun. This one is likely going to be miserable for both of us.

“Do you have to go anywhere today?” I question.

“No,” he says. “Today, I’m all yours.”

I should be elated, but the sting of what happens tomorrow just won’t let the emotion surface. I nod and finish eating my breakfast.

“I need to shower,” I say, pushing back from the table and standing before he can help with my chair.

“Want me to join you?” he asks, a half-smile tugging at the edges of his lips.

“Not today.” I shake my head, then feel a twinge in my stomach—it might be the last time I get to shower with him.

Part of me wants to ask him to join me, but I don’t. I walk into the bathroom, close the door, and start the shower. I cry a little more once I’m under the water, since I know he can’t hear me. This is so much harder than I expected it to be. Or maybe I was just fooling myself because I was in a daze like a schoolgirl experiencing her first crush.

I finally stop crying, finish my shower, and step out. I wipe the mirror down so I can see my reflection. The shower has helped some. The steam and heat eased some of the puffiness around my eyes and gaunt look in my cheeks. My lips are still pale, though.

After I’m dry, I hide what I can under makeup and lipstick, looking more like myself than I did before I walked into the bathroom. I gather what is left of my composure

and steady myself. Despite all of the emotions coursing through me, I don't want to make Massimo's last day alive completely miserable.

I emerge from the bathroom faking my smile and doing my best to keep the despair hidden. This is my last day with Massimo. Yesterday was my day to cry. Today, I let him have another piece of my heart to break before he's gone.

"What would you like to do today?" I ask, trying to keep my voice steady.

Massimo looks up at me. He tries to smile, but it doesn't fully form.

"Spend the day with you," he says. "Doing anything."

"Well, you don't have a bucket list, so what about your lasts?" I ask, taking a deep breath. "Any of those?"

"Hmm," he ponders, intrigue flashing in his icy blues. "You've given me some amazing lasts, Lea. Better than I could have ever imagined."

Even with the chaos inside me, I can't help blushing. "I'm sure there are a few things, right? Surely? There are so many things you'll never get to do again."

The intrigue turns into a solemn glance, and he nods. "I suppose there are, but they don't seem that important now."

"Tell me what they are." I walk over and sit down next to him on the couch. "Humor me, Massimo. I'm—honestly trying to hold it together here."

I'm distracting myself with conversation, because as long as we're talking, I can't dwell on my thoughts. Can't dwell on the heartache. I may not be able to make today as exciting as some of the others, but I'll do my best not to make it miserable.

Massimo takes a deep breath. Maybe he senses it, too. The need for something to distract us from the inevitable.

“I always planned to get more ink,” Massimo admits, lifting his shirt and motioning to a few spots that are open on his chest and torso. “I had some designs in mind, but never found the time for sit for a tattoo.”

“Do you want to do that today?” I ask. “I saw some tattoo parlors when we drove through town on our way to see the ruins and statues.”

“Sit for a tattoo?” Massimo shakes his head. “Nah, that takes too long.”

“Then tell me what you’d get if you could,” I suggest, glancing at the spots that could be filled in across his impressively inked physique.

“Right here, between the skulls and two skeletons, I always wanted to add something to connect them. I thought about extending the line of skulls or getting another skeleton to match the other two.” Massimo shrugs, then points to another spot. “I left this spot open because I was going to blend the Vegas designs and the macabre ones with some sugar skulls covered in poker chips, or sugar skulls with poker hands for teeth.”

“Interesting,” I reply, trying to picture it. “They would fit the theme and bring everything together. You’ve got some skulls with roses that blend into the other arm.”

“Yeah, and I wanted to do that with my back, as well,” he continues. “Skeletons drinking wine, or skeletons stomping wine. Something like that. I had a few ideas.”

I move closer and shift Massimo’s shirt so I can look at his back. There are several bare spots where the tattoos could go. I can’t resist tracing them, feeling the tingle of electricity between us as my fingers roam across his back.

“Maybe roses and wine on the left, and Vegas and wine on the right?” I say, tracing several spots. “Along your shoulders, at least.”

“Not a bad idea,” Massimo agrees. “Maybe I should have let you design all my tattoos.”

“Yeah, right,” I laugh, feeling a little more at ease. “If I was designing them for you, you wouldn’t have any.”

“Seems like a waste. You wouldn’t even want me to get your name somewhere?” he asks. “I bet Eleanor would look great across my stomach. Big bold letters, too.”

“Hah!” I laugh again. “You’d go with Eleanor instead of Lea? Nobody calls me Eleanor.”

“I’d even add your last name, except it wouldn’t be Fuller.” He glances at me over his shoulder. “Not after I put a ring on your finger.”

“Don’t say that.” I look down at my hands but can’t stop myself from saying Eleanor Morandi in my head a few times. “That’s not fair.”

“I know, but if circumstances were different, that’s what I’d be thinking about right now,” he sighs. “Making you mine in every way, and that goes a lot further than the bedroom.”

“You barely know me, Massimo,” I mutter, even though I feel the same connection to him—one that dances inside me like love should, despite our short time together.

“What about wine?” I ask, trying to shift the conversation away from marriage and things that make my heart ache. “Is there a bottle you were saving for a special occasion?”

“Not really,” he answers. “Although, I always said I wanted to hunt down another bottle of red from the year I was born. My dad sent them to the family, clients—literally everyone he could think of. He was so happy to have a son.”

“Think there’s one on the island?” I ask.

“Theo might have one,” Massimo says. “He has a lot that isn’t on the menu. But it’s a little early to crack open a bottle of wine.”

“Is it?” I chuckle. “Are there rules you have to follow on your last day?”

“No,” he admits. “I suppose there aren’t.”

“Then see if he has that year,” I suggest with some insistence in my voice. “Come on, if that’s something you wanted to do, let’s do it.”

“Alright,” Massimo relents. “Let me grab my phone.”

Poison, as Massimo would say. Delicious poison. Wine might be what we need to relax some. I’m not sure it’s genuinely possible, but it’ll be another distraction.

Minute by minute.

Hour by hour.

I have to find some way to get through today.

CHAPTER 29

Massimo

Lea's trying to hide her pain.

Trying to do everything she can to avoid dwelling on it.

I understand it because I'm doing the exact same thing. The war I'm saving my family from is raging inside of me. I want to tear the world apart, if it means I get one more minute with Lea. But the price is simply too high. Too much blood will be shed. Too many lives will be lost.

"Well, we're in luck," I say, walking out of the bedroom and putting my phone in my pocket. "Theo has a bottle and he's sending it up."

"Good," Lea says, forcing a smile that doesn't look nearly as good as the natural one I'm practically obsessed with. "Then what's next? We've covered tattoos and wine. What about food? Even death row inmates get to choose a last meal."

"There are plenty of options here on the island," I say, sitting down beside her. "It's hard to choose."

"I think I'd go with a big greasy cheeseburger and enough fries to make me question my life choices," Lea says, her smile showing a hint of genuineness. "Maybe even a slice of apple pie, after I'm stuffed."

“That does sound delicious,” I admit. “But I’d probably go with something from Bellissima’s. Maybe one of the dishes my grandmother used to make when I spent my summers in Italy.”

“Do you want to have dinner there tonight?” Lea asks.

“No,” I answer immediately. “I don’t want to be around other people today. Just you.”

“Then we can have it sent up, just like the wine,” she suggests.

“We’ll figure that out later.” I wave a hand. “We just had breakfast.”

The reality is that I don’t care about any of it. Not even the wine. I can leave this world happy, as long as I get to spend my last day with Lea.

Lea offers some other suggestions, but it’s meaningless conversation. Words for the sake of keeping the discussion going so silence doesn’t fill the air. Silence seems to be difficult for us both.

We’re finally interrupted by a knock at the door.

“That must be the wine,” I say, standing up and adjusting my shirt.

I give a generous tip to the young man who is delivering it. Might as well get rid of the cash in my pocket like I got rid of what I had sitting in the bank. The rest of it—my family can figure that out.

“Is there anything special about this wine other than it being made the year you were born?” Lea asks while I remove the cork and pour two glasses.

“There were a lot of storms that year,” I reply, inhaling the aroma as I walk over and give Lea her glass. I sit down beside her and motion for her to try it. “The grapes got riper than normal, because of all the rain, and that always makes the flavor sweeter than the years when irrigation is necessary.”

“Wow, it seems like everything impacts the flavor.” Lea sniffs the wine, then sips it. “It tastes similar to what we had on the boat.”

“Not even close,” I chuckle, picking up the distinct differences as I take my first drink and letting the wine sit on my tongue for a moment before swallowing. “But you haven’t had much wine, so I understand why you would think that.”

“I’ve drunk more alcohol, or poison as you like to call it, since I got to this island than I ever have before.” Lea smiles as she takes another drink. “Now I’m drinking wine before noon!”

“It’s a special occasion.” I lean over and give her a playful nudge. “Just don’t let it turn into a habit.”

“Why not? Are you going to haunt me?” The pain still lingers in her eyes, but I can tell she’s trying to keep the mood light.

“If you ever feel a firm slap on your ass when you know you’re doing something you shouldn’t, it might be me,” I growl, holding back a laugh.

We enjoy our wine and peaceful conversation while we drink. It’s the lightest mood either of us can manage, considering what happens tomorrow morning.

When we finish our first glass, we pour another. And another. When the bottle is empty, I open a second. It’s from the selection in the room, but we’re both feeling it enough not to care. I notice the difference, but Lea clearly doesn’t. She just wants the

poison, like I used to, when everything in my life went to shit.

“You know there are a few other lasts,” Lea says, her mood clearly impacted by the wine.

“Like what?” I ask, putting her glass of wine on the table and sitting down beside her.

“My, um, last spanking,” she whispers, some excitement finally piercing through. “And today is the last day you can tell me to open my fucking mouth—or my fucking legs.”

“I wouldn’t want to miss out on any of those,” I say, rubbing my chin thoughtfully. “But what am I going to spank you for, hmm?”

“To help me remember to be a good girl?” she suggests. “Otherwise, I might forget.”

“We can’t have that, can we?” I narrow my eyes and my dick twitches. “On your feet, bambina .”

“Y-yes, sir,” she whispers, biting her bottom lip as she stands up.

“I want you naked for your last spanking, bambina ,” I say, motioning to her. “Just like before.”

Lea swallows hard and begins to undress. I take in the sight of her gorgeous body as it is revealed, and my dick swells in my pants.

A lifetime isn’t long enough with this amazing girl. If I had a dozen of them to share with her, I’d never get my fill. The cruel hand of fate loves to put one last dagger in your heart on the way out, I suppose.

“I’m naked, sir,” Lea whispers, her arms hovering like she wants to cover up for a moment before lowering them.

“I can see that,” I reply, rubbing my cock through my pants. “Turn around, let me look at you. One last long look before I put you over my knee.”

Lea blushes but she obeys. I take in the sight of her marvelous, heart-shaped ass, already imagining it a lovely shade of red like it’s been almost every day since I met her.

“Bend over, bambina ,” I growl, rubbing my cock a little harder. “Show me where you want my dick after I’m done spanking your ass.”

Lea whimpers and hesitates before bending over. I get a perfect view of her slick folds and puckered bottom hole.

“Absolutely gorgeous,” I sigh. “You need all three of your holes fucked one last time, don’t you?”

A shudder sweeps through her before she softly whispers, “Yes, sir.”

“Then get over my lap,” I demand. “You’re getting a good, hard spanking before I take you to the bedroom.”

Lea stands up and turns to face me. There’s a hint of a grin teasing her submissive gaze. She’s not scared of being spanked anymore. She craves it as much as she craves my cock.

I help Lea into position across my lap and adjust her until she’s pressed against my hardness. That’s the best place to have her for a spanking because she’ll rub against me every time she squirms, and she squirms a lot once it starts to sting.

“Are you ready for a spanking that will help you remember to be a good girl for the rest of your life?” I ask, rubbing my hand along the curve of her ass and teasing her inner thigh.

“Yes, sir,” she whispers hesitantly.

I lean forward and hook an arm around her waist, sliding my hand between her legs until my fingers are against her clit. I rub until she squirms, then let my finger rest there while I pat her ass with my other hand.

“To prove how good you can be, you’re not going to come while I spank you,” I instruct. “If you do, this good girl spanking is going to turn into a naughty girl spanking and you’ll get my belt.”

I slap her ass for emphasis and as soon as she jerks, I rub her clit. I alternate between the two, keeping her on the edge of pleasure and pain while I spank her. It doesn’t take long for the melody of whimpers and groans to fill the air and mix with the sound of my callused hand landing on her delicate skin.

“This isn’t going to be easy,” she whines, her squirms rubbing against my erection. “Your finger feels way too good.”

“Then give in and you’ll finally get to feel the belt you’re so scared of,” I growl, alternating between hard stinging slaps that leave a lovely pink mark and gentle caresses that make her clit throb.

“No, please,” she whimpers. “I don’t want that.”

“It won’t be as bad as you think, especially now that your sunburn has faded a little,” I say, slapping her bottom. “But it will definitely hurt more than my hand.”

I let her feel the sting for a while before I increase the pressure on her clit. I could force her over the edge, but I'm keeping it light enough for her to hold back her orgasm if she tries. If she's successful, I'll reward her. If not, I'll punish her.

"Good girls never come without permission," I tell her, continuing to alternate between pain and pleasure. "And you want to be a good girl, don't you, bambina?"

"Y-yes, sir," she mewls.

My cock is throbbing against her. I can feel the heat radiating from her ass each time I spank it. The pink spots are beginning to redden, and she's so wet she's dripping with arousal.

"Ow, ow," she whimpers, so I focus my attention on her clit, which makes her grind against my hand. "Oh, god!"

"That was a close one," I chuckle, lightening my caress and slapping the reddest parts of her ass. "You almost came all over me."

"I know," she whines, squirming away from my fingers, and then right back into them when I pepper her bottom. "Massimo! I..."

"Hold on a little longer and I'll tongue-fuck you until you scream before I tell you to open your fucking mouth," I rasp, already imagining her sweetness on my breath.

"I'm trying!" she squeals.

She's so close that every rotation of my finger around her swollen knot makes her hips buck. I wait for them to buck away from my probing fingers before I deliver the next series of stinging slaps. I could push for more, but she's taken a hard spanking like a good girl, so I cut her a little slack. I finish with some gentle rubs and lighter

slaps.

“That’s a good girl,” I praise, rubbing the redness that colors her ass. “Now I want you to go to my bedroom, get on the bed, and spread your fucking legs. I want to hear you begging for my tongue before I make it in the room.”

“Yes, sir,” she whispers, a shudder sweeping through her that makes her clit twitch against my finger.

I watch the sight of her lovely red ass as she disappears into my bedroom. I stand up and start to undress, waiting for her to follow my instructions.

“Please, Massimo,” she calls out. “I need your tongue.”

A smile spreads across my face as I toss my shirt to the side and unbuckle my belt. There are plenty of things I don’t want to think about floating around in my head. I’m doing my best to ignore them, because I don’t want to ruin my last day with Lea.

Lea continues to whimper and beg, her words making my dick throb as I approach my bedroom. She’s going to get what she’s begging for, and I’m damn sure going to enjoy it.

I’ll leave her too exhausted to miss me when I’m gone.

CHAPTER 30

Lea

I'm naked in Massimo's bed.

Again.

But this will be the last time he joins me. The last time I get to feel his tongue. The last time I feel my body react to his dominance when he orders me to open my fucking mouth or spread my fucking legs. I'll even roll over and stick my ass out like a good girl if he tells me to—because it will be the last time for that, too.

It's hard to swallow all the bitterness and accept what is coming. I've had my day to cry. I'm sure there will be a lot of those after I leave Isola Selvaggia. But I'll keep myself together. For his sake, and mine. The last thing he sees before he marches himself to his execution may be a sobbing girl, but at least I can make him feel good before I bawl my eyes out.

I hear Massimo's footsteps, and it makes my pussy ache with a need for more than just his tongue, but I remember how incredible it felt. I rub my legs together to create a little friction. My hips squirm against the mattress. As soon as he darkens the doorway, I spread my legs obediently, giving him a view of what he's already claimed—what he wants another taste of.

Massimo walks to the bed and rubs his cock before he lowers himself to the mattress. His shadow covers me completely for a moment, then he puts his hands on my thighs

and leans forward.

“You’re mine, bambina ,” he growls. “All fucking mine.”

He’s said that before. I wish those words meant I was his longer than one more night. He’s become my direction, and it feels so right I could scream, but this is all I can have. One more night of passion. One more night of his dominance. One more night of the roughness that makes my body react in ways I barely understand, but I love it.

“You’re so fucking delicious,” Massimo sighs, teasing my thighs with gentle kisses before I feel his breath on my folds.

Massimo’s tongue flicks against my folds, then he gently caresses them apart until his tongue is against my clit. I melt into pleasure as his tongue swirls around my swollen knot. Then his finger pushes into me and my back arches against the mattress. That feels even better.

His thick finger pumps into my pussy while his tongue dances on my clit. It doesn’t take long for the pressure to build, but I remember the lesson I learned over his knee.

“Am I allowed to come?” I gasp.

His tongue pulls away. “As many times as you can,” he replies, then his tongue immediately returns to my clit.

I give in to the first orgasm, and it’s just the beginning. Waves of pleasure crash into me again and again. By the time Massimo’s tongue pulls away for the final time, I’m dizzy and my vision is blurry. It feels like I might pass out. But Massimo resuscitates me with his lips, breathing life back into my body as he positions himself between my legs.

“Do you need this, bambina ?” he asks, rubbing the head of his cock against my slick folds.

“More than anything,” I groan, grinding against his erection until I feel him pushing in.

I’m letting him take me without protection again. It’s foolish, but I don’t care. If our short time together results in something amazing, then I’ll have a piece of him to hold onto after he’s gone. In a strange way, I want that. His life continuing inside me—a piece of him I’ll get to love unconditionally. A never-ending reminder of the incredible man who changed my life.

“You feel so fucking good,” he rasps into my ear while his hips move in unison with mine.

“Harder, Massimo,” I whisper, begging for his roughness.

Massimo’s hands move to my wrists, and he pins me to the bed. His thrusts turn thunderous between my trembling thighs. This is the beautiful ache I crave. Hard pleasure that makes me forget about everything except the moment we’re in.

In a matter of minutes, the pressure is intense, and I can’t hold back. I have permission, so I let the pleasure consume me. The orgasms come like bolts of lightning that hit my core and make my walls spasm on Massimo’s incredible length.

But it isn’t enough. I need more. I cling to him with my nails pressed into his flesh while I ride the waves of euphoria. Then I feel him getting close and it brings me right back to the edge of bliss.

“Fuck!” Massimo hisses, his hips slamming into me.

Massimo erupts and his hot seed pumps into me. I welcome it with an orgasm so hard it knocks the wind out of my shuddering frame. I exist in a breathless moment of pure ecstasy until he's done. Only then do I finally get enough oxygen to keep me from passing out.

"Now roll over and stick your ass out like a good girl," Massimo demands.

I was scared of that the last time he said it. I'm not scared anymore. I wait until Massimo pulls away, then I obey. My weary arms barely support my weight, but I keep myself on them until I make it to my knees. A twinge of anticipation sweeps through me as I find the right position and push my bottom out for him.

"Fucking perfect," he growls, giving me a sharp slap on the ass before both hands dig into my hips.

The slap vibrates through me, teasing my walls and making me gasp. Then I stick my ass out further, feeling his cock against my bottom hole.

"Not so fast, bambina ," he says, moving his cock and sliding a finger into my pussy. "You're not ready yet."

I feel ready, but I don't argue. Massimo's finger slips inside my pussy, then he spreads my juices on my puckered hole and slips a finger past the ring. I gasp from the sudden intrusion, but my body adjusts a lot faster than it did the last time.

Massimo's fingers prepare me and once he's satisfied, I feel his cock. I brace myself as I'm filled by his length, gasping once he's deep.

The thrusts are gentle at first, but he quickly speeds up, and the friction radiates into my trembling vaginal walls, reigniting the spark in my core.

“Oh god, oh god,” I mewl, the pleasure building inside me.

I’ll have more bruises tomorrow. I’ll be sore and aching with exquisite agony. Several hard slaps land on my bottom in unison with his forceful thrusts into my ass.

And then I come.

“Massimo!” I cry out, clenching his cock as my pleasure gushes from my core.

My toes curl. My back arches. Massimo’s grip tightens and he pounds his throbbing cock into me.

“Oh, fuck!” he roars, then I feel him erupt deep inside me.

His pleasure sends tremors that quake through my body and force me to come again. Massimo rests his weight against my back and his lips brush my ear.

“Thank you for not making me spend my last day alone,” he rasps, his hips twitching as another rush of hot seed spills into me. “If I could say the three words I want to say, your ears are the only ones that would ever hear them again.”

“Then say them,” I whimper. “Just so I can hear them once, even if it’s too soon for those kinds of feelings—I don’t care.”

“I love you, Lea,” he whispers.

“I love you too,” I whisper back, sinking to the mattress under his weight with his softening length still inside me.

Three words that should convey so much more than they do. But I’ll cherish them long after he’s gone.

We doze off for a while. Then we make love again before dinner. As soon as we finish, and have another wine-buzz to reenergize us, we're right back in bed.

Massimo makes the most of his last night, and after he's spent, I fight back the tears, aching to hear those three words again. But they never come. I listen to his breathing until he's asleep, then I fall asleep in his arms for the last time. His may be the only ones that ever hold me.

I wake up with the afterglow of shared passion still coursing through my veins. The sun is trying to come out, but it's cloudy today. I look to my right and stretch out my hand, immediately noticing Massimo is gone. That makes me sit up with alarm, and a cold surge of fear replaces the pleasant afterglow.

"Massimo?" I call out, getting out of bed. "Massimo, where are you?"

I walk out of the bedroom and hear the shower. That causes me to exhale a short sigh of relief. He's not gone. He didn't leave without saying goodbye. I'm not sure I could handle that. It would make everything we've shared seem hollow.

"You could have woken me up," I mutter as I walk into the bathroom. "I would have joined you for your last shower."

"Then join me, bambina ," he sighs, opening the shower curtain. "I didn't want to wake you because I thought you might need your rest after last night."

"My legs are still shaking, and I feel completely numb below the waist," I reply, unable to hide my grin. "But I'm sure I can handle a little more—if you can."

"Damn right," he growls, grabbing me by the arm and yanking me into the shower.

Massimo pushes me against the wall and slaps my ass. I jerk from the impact and the

sting that reignites the fire from last night. Massimo's hands roam my body and squeeze my breasts, then one hand goes lower, and he rubs my clit.

"Oh, god," I whimper, feeling his hardness against my folds. "Please... I need you."

Because as long as he's inside me, he's alive. There's blood pumping through his veins instead of exiting his body. I don't want to think about that. The images will get burned into my head, and I won't be able to enjoy this.

"Needy bambina ," Massimo chuckles, pushing into me. "This is what you need?"

"Yes!" I gasp, a shudder making me tingle as Massimo goes deeper.

One last time.

Then I have to let him go.

CHAPTER 31

L ea

I hold back my tears until Massimo is dressed and I'm watching him pack his bags.

Then the floodgates open.

"Massimo, please," I whimper, not caring how desperate I sound. "You said faking your death isn't your style, but anything would be better than this."

Massimo sighs and turns to me. "I dismiss a lot of things by saying it isn't my style because it's easier than the details. I've shared a lot, but not everything."

"You owe me that much," I whisper, tears streaming down my face.

"When I came here, I had no reason to live. My life was shit and you understand why." He looks down and takes a deep breath. "It wasn't worth living anymore."

"And now?" I question through my tears.

"You've given me every reason to live, bambina ," he sighs. "But it doesn't change the past, and it's too late. This protects my family and everything we've built."

"It may do that, but it's going to tear me apart," I sniffle. "You've given me direction. Now you're taking it away."

“Then be directionless, Lea,” he says, walking closer and pulling me into his arms. “Be beautiful, incredible, and let the world guide your adventure.”

I wish it were that easy. But there’s no reason to keep pleading. I already sound pathetic. I do the only thing I can. I melt into his embrace and cry.

When Massimo finally pulls away, I’m so distraught I can barely stand. But I do, for his sake. I watch him gather his things, walk to the door, and I rush to him on wobbly legs for one last hug.

“Goodbye, bambina ,” he whispers. “Wait until you hear the commotion, then take the next shuttle to the boat. They won’t leave on schedule because of the chaos, so there’s no reason to rush.”

“I love you, Massimo,” I whisper back. “But I can’t say goodbye.”

Massimo holds me for several minutes before pulling away. I meet his icy-blue stare one last time and see a glint that breaks my heart all over again before he leaves the suite.

Then he’s gone.

I collapse where I stand, my knees and ankles crashing into the tiled floor. I catch myself with my hands and sob.

I don’t know how long I stay on the floor. It feels like the world has crashed around me and there is no reason to stand.

I mourn a life I’ll never have. A life I didn’t expect, but one I stumbled into when I let the island guide me on my adventure. My time with Massimo flashes like a montage in my head, but every moment hurts. All I feel is pain.

Time drips by, every minute like another dagger that goes straight through my heart. I eventually summon the strength to stand.

Everything reminds me of Massimo. The bottle of wine we had with dinner, still sitting open on the table. The empty one from the year he was born that we finished before we went to the bedroom.

I can't bring myself to keep looking around. I cry on my way to my bedroom, crawl on the bed, and cry into my pillow. Big, heaving sobs rack my body while I soak the pillow with my grief.

"I can't stay here," I mutter, pushing myself up. "This hurts way too much."

Massimo told me to wait for the commotion before I leave, but I can't handle it. The waiting... the continuous heartbreak. I gather my things and make it as far as the couch before I have to stop.

I sink into the couch where he sat when I was over his knee. I'd take any spanking he wanted to give me if it means we could spend one more minute together. I'd even beg for his belt.

My phone chimes on the table behind me. I ignore it. I don't care who it is. But the chimes continue, then it rings, and when I ignore the call, it starts ringing again.

"It could be Massimo," I whisper, feeling a tremor of hope.

I walk to the table and see that I have missed calls and texts, but they're not from Massimo. They're from Sarah. Even my best friend can't ease this pain, so I put my phone down without looking at the messages.

The calls and texts keep coming until they're so distracting, I just want them to stop. I

press the button to answer Sarah's next call, realizing as soon as I do that it's a video call. I don't bother hiding my face.

"Lea! Thank God!" Sarah says. "Listen, I found out who killed Massimo's wife! Well, Cadence helped. Cadence, this is Lea."

I blink away tears and see Sarah sitting next to a girl about our age with raven-black hair that hangs on her shoulders.

"Hi, Lea," Cadence says, her face in a tight grimace, probably because I look like a disaster.

"I told you who killed his wife," I sigh, not elaborating because of Cadence. "And I told you to go home."

"I will, but you need to listen to me!" Sarah says hurriedly. "Stop crying and listen, Lea. Is Massimo with you right now? Put him on, too!"

"Massimo's gone," I whisper, unable to stop my tears. "It's too late."

"Too late as in..." Sarah's face pales and Cadence flashes a nervous glance.

"He already left," I clarify. "It hasn't happened yet."

"Then listen." Sarah leans forward. "Cadence was able to hack the security cameras and pull some footage from the night Layla Morandi was killed."

"Didn't the cops do that?" I ask, then some concern slips through my grief. "You didn't tell her what I told you, right?"

"I did," Sarah says flatly.

“Sarah!” I cry, shaking my head. “That was supposed to stay in the vault!”

“You don’t know me, but you can trust me,” Cadence says. “The cops pulled the footage, of course, but it was wiped. That’s what they thought, at least.”

“Remember that audio you sent me?” Sarah asks, then she motions to Cadence who taps her phone.

The recording I made begins playing, except the weird humming sound is gone. I can hear Massimo’s voice perfectly as he talks about the hit.

“Cadence was able to isolate the frequency and that allowed her to decode it, then strip it from the recording,” Sarah explains. “But that wasn’t all it allowed her to do.”

“Right,” Cadence says. “Something similar was used to mask all the security cameras they passed on the way to Massimo Morandi’s residence. They weren’t wiped. The footage was just hidden behind a layer of static. Since I already knew which frequency to isolate, the rest was easy.”

“I still don’t understand.” I wipe my eyes and sniffle. If Sarah has already told Cadence everything, I didn’t have to choose my words as carefully as I originally thought. “The Bratva killed Massimo’s wife.”

“Yes, but they weren’t alone,” Cadence says, then she turns her laptop toward the phone. “Watch this.”

I watch the screen and listen to them explain what I’m looking at.

Sarah’s right.

This changes everything.

But it may already be too late.

CHAPTER 32

Massimo

Every step feels heavier than the one before it as I march to my execution.

I'm not afraid of death. I never have been. Death is one of those things you learn to accept when you're born into my family. There are more funerals than weddings.

Leaving Lea behind is what truly hurts. Knowing she's sobbing her eyes out—over me. I've been a miserable wretch for way too long to deserve sympathy or tears. But the connection we have is genuine. It was too soon for those three words, but they came from my heart. A heart that is finally free of the malice and poison that left me a shell of the man I used to be.

"Massimo!" a familiar voice calls out; I turn to see Theo approaching me. "Glad I could catch you before you left. Your father called me. He's been trying to reach you."

I pull out my phone and glance at it. I have several missed calls from my old man, along with a few other calls I've ignored.

"I'll call him when I get to the ferry," I mutter, pushing my phone back into my pocket.

"Alright, he said it's important," Theo replies. "Something about Leo."

“He didn’t say what is going on?” I ask.

“No,” Theo answers. “He just asked me to find you and tell you to call him. Anyway, I delivered the message. Have a safe trip home. I hope we can get together again soon.”

I nod and shake Theo’s hand, then tolerate a quick hug. I’d like to tell him goodbye and thank him for a few things, but that would be out of character for me. It would definitely raise some suspicions. Truthfully, Theo has been more like an uncle to me than one of my father’s business associates. He was the one who taught me how to hold a gun when I was in elementary school—much to my mother’s displeasure.

“I’ll see you around, Theo,” I say, turning away before I let my emotions show.

Lea has brought so many emotions to the surface I’m having trouble bottling them like I usually do. I shake my head to clear it as I walk toward the hotel exit. As soon as I’m outside, I pause and pull my phone out.

I don’t really want to talk to my father, considering the next call he’s going to get will be about my death, but I need to know what is going on with Leo. My brother and I aren’t as close as we used to be. His decision to turn to the cloth had a lot to do with it. But he’s still family.

I apprehensively tap my phone and hold it up to my ear.

“Dad?” I ask. “Theo just stopped me in the lobby. What’s going on with Leo?”

“He’s missing!” my father fires back in his usual gruff voice. “His office was torn apart, and they can’t find him anywhere. Have you heard from him recently?”

“No,” I answer truthfully. “It’s been several weeks.”

“Fuck,” my father growls. “Okay, I’ve got my guys on it. If you hear anything, call me. And come see me as soon as you get back to Las Vegas. We need to talk about a few other things, too.”

“Sure thing,” I mutter, ending the call.

Part of me wants to call around and try to figure out what happened to Leo, but Ronaldo is already waiting by the car. I’m sure the hitman is nearby. If I delay too much, he may not wait until I’m in the car, and I don’t want to be lying on the ground with my things all around me when Lea comes through the doors.

“Ronaldo,” I say, motioning to him as I approach. “Open the trunk.”

“Yes, sir, Mr. Morandi!” he replies, hurrying to the back of the car.

It’s not the first time Leo has disappeared. The last time it happened, we found him in the worst part of Las Vegas, drowning his painful memories in a bottle of whiskey. I can relate to that. Sometimes, they’re too painful to ignore.

There’s no reason for Emilio to go after Leo. He’d be next in line after me, but Leo made his decision about the family years ago. Even if he wanted to come back, the door wouldn’t swing wide open for him. That was made clear when he left.

“I hope you find peace one day, brother,” I sigh, walking to the back door of the luxury sedan.

“What was that, sir?” Ronaldo asks.

“Nothing,” I mutter, getting into the car.

The door slams and I let out a sharp exhale. This is it. In a matter of minutes, a man

will walk up to the side of my car. He'll look like a lost tourist until he fires a single shot, drops the gun, and vanishes into the crowd. He never misses and he's never been caught. My brother spared no expense and chose the absolute best.

A shadow appears outside the window, and I take a deep breath. I wondered if I would turn and stare into the barrel of the gun or close my eyes. I don't do either one. I stare ahead in a daze, thinking about Lea, and the precious moments we shared.

"Goodbye, bambina ," I whisper, waiting for the end.

The shadow gets closer. I see the outline of a gun in my peripheral vision. Instead of my life flashing before my eyes, I choke up as I imagine Lea mourning me. Giving into the same malice and poison that I allowed to devour my soul.

Then the gun fires. The window shatters. Hot, scalding pain shoots through my right arm. I look down and see blood. Panic erupts around us and people run screaming in every direction.

"Fuck," I growl, looking at the hitman through the broken glass. He has a blank look on his face. "Finish the fucking job!"

But he doesn't. He puts a hand on the car, and it's covered in blood. He slumps forward, and I see a knife with a cherry-wood handle sticking out of his back. If that wasn't enough of a shock, I see Lea standing behind him. She's trembling and all the color is drained out of her tearstained face.

"I'm sorry!" she squeals. "I didn't know how else to stop him! He already had his gun drawn!"

"Lea, what the hell did you do?" I roar, holding my arm as I get out of the car.

“Mr. Morandi! Are you okay!?” Ronaldo asks, hurrying to my side.

“I’m fine!” I growl. “Get back in the car!”

There’s chaos all around us. People are screaming. The hitman is on the ground. It looks like he’ll live, but the knife has done some damage.

“Theo’s men are going to be here soon,” I snap, grabbing Lea by the arm and shoving her into the car. “Fuck, ow!” I grab my shoulder as I get in beside her. “Ronaldo, drive! Don’t stop for anything! Take us to the resort’s private marina.”

“You have to see this!” Lea trembles out, trying to show me her phone. “Oh, god, your shoulder! Are you okay?”

“We have to get out of here.” I shove her phone away. “I don’t know who I can trust right now, and you just stabbed a hitman who works closely with the Mafia. If they get their hands on you...”

My blood runs cold at the thought. If someone loyal to Emilio gets their hands on Lea—I can’t let that happen. I have to get her to safety. Then I’ll sort all of this out.

“Massimo, this is important,” she says, leaning forward with her phone, but then she glances at Ronaldo and shrinks back. “W-we can’t wait until we’re alone.”

I don’t know what Lea has to show me, but it can’t be that important. Anger builds inside me as I consider what could happen next. Emilio will find out the hit was unsuccessful. If he’s anything like me, he’ll start taking out the people who would stand by my side during a civil war, especially if he thinks the trail will lead back to him.

“Fuck, fuck, fuck!” I yell, slamming my hand into the seat and wincing as the pain

radiates from my shoulder.

“I’m really sorry, Massimo. I promise you’re going to want to see this,” Lea whispers. “It changes everything.”

I glare at her, probably with nothing but fury on my face, because she shrinks back again. Getting her to safety is my top priority. Then what? I don’t fucking know. I’ve got an enormous mess to clean up. I pull out my phone and send a warning to my closest allies, but I don’t elaborate. I tell Rowan to get out of Las Vegas, because he’ll be the number one target.

I don’t think Emilio will go as far as killing our father. Especially now, since the hit failed and I’m next in line. But war is coming. There’s no way around that now. I can’t pretend I don’t know there’s a bullet with my name on it anymore.

“Here’s fine,” I bark, yanking the door open before Ronaldo stops. I immediately turn to Lea and grab her by the arm. “Let’s go. Where did you leave your bags?”

“I-in your suite,” she answers, stumbling out of the car, but I keep her steady, so she doesn’t fall.

I fire a message to Theo to take care of Lea’s bags. It’s too risky to wait, so I tell him to burn them. I grab mine from the trunk, pull out my Glock, and stuff it in the back of my pants. I might actually need it now.

Theo will have questions I can’t answer, and so will the others who run the resort with him. Especially since there’s a hitman with a knife in his back in front of the hotel. Hopefully he is able to get away, because if he gets caught, he’ll sing like a canary to save his own skin. If that happens, everyone will know Emilio put a hit on me—and that I didn’t do anything to stop it.

“Massimo, please!” Lea says as I grab the keys and storm toward the mini-yacht, half-pulling and half-dragging her along. “You need to see this!”

“Once we’re in the open water,” I snarl. “We’re not safe until then.”

I push Lea onto the boat, wipe some blood away from my shoulder, and hurry to the helm. I point at the anchor and Lea hits the button. As soon as it’s up, I start the engine and open it up. This isn’t a leisurely drive.

“Okay,” I say, turning to her once the marina is out of sight. “What is it, Lea? What is so fucking important you had to destroy my family?”

“Y-your wife,” she whispers, holding up her phone. “T-the Bratva weren’t the only ones involved.”

“What?” I stare at the screen. I see several vehicles that look like the ones the Bratva use, passing through an intersection. I remember setting a few of them on fire. “The date... That’s the night Layla died.”

“Y-you’re going to be really mad at me, and I’m sorry, but I told Sarah everything,” she whimpers. “And she told a hacker who... she investigates a lot of true crime, looking for things the police may have missed.”

“Lea, I already told you about this Mafia fangirl bullshi—” I stop before I finish. The screen flickers to a different angle, and I see the Bratva vehicles passing by. “Is that... Is that Erica?”

“T-that’s what I had to show you!” Lea says. “Sarah said that is Emilio’s wife!”

“It is...” I stare in disbelief. “Why... why is she with the Bratva ?”

“I don’t know!” Lea answers. “The cops thought all the cameras were wiped, but they weren’t. I can’t explain it like the hacker did, but it has something to do with the frequency you use to mask your phone calls.”

“Fuck,” I growl. “We’re the only ones who have that technology. My father commissioned a Department of Defense contractor to create it and paid him enough to walk away without ever sharing it with the government.”

The malice and poison begin to seep back into my heart. If Erica was with the Bratva on the night Layla was killed, then she’s involved. Which means Emilio is involved. But why? Why would they kill my wife? Erica and Layla were like sisters, or so I thought.

“Was my brother in any of these vehicles?” I ask, watching the screen shift to a different camera, but there’s nothing visible.

“Not that they could find,” Lea whispers. “Once they figured out which direction the vehicles were traveling, they scoured every single camera.”

“That one wasn’t masked,” I say, pointing at her phone. “It shows the license plates. That’s how I found out it was the Bratva. The cops never connected that dot because they didn’t know what to look for.”

“If all the others were masked, do you think that was intentional?” Lea asks cautiously.

“Has to be,” I mutter. “I still don’t understand why Emilio and Erica would want to kill my wife. I wasn’t the target. If I was, they would have waited until I got home. This doesn’t make any fucking sense.”

I turn back toward the helm and steer the mini-yacht toward the coast, but I head

north, instead of the dock that the ferry uses. If anyone is looking for us, that'll be the first place they look. It's safer to make landfall somewhere else. Then I have to get back to Las Vegas.

"I don't know if I should kiss you or take my belt to you," I grumble, shaking my head.

"I couldn't let you die without knowing about it," she whimpers. "But we need to do something about your shoulder. Do you still have your first aid kit?"

"That won't do much," I sigh, motioning to my bag. "It's in there. You ever removed a bullet before?"

"N-no," she whispers, her eyes getting wide.

"There's a knife in the side pocket. Clean it with alcohol and give me the bottle," I mutter. "I'll dig it out."

"I'm sorry," she sniffles, hurrying to my bag. "I tried to get to him before he took the shot, but I wasn't fast enough."

"A second later and we wouldn't be having this conversation," I say. "Not my first time getting shot."

Considering what's coming?

It probably won't be my last.

CHAPTER 33

Massimo

I get the bullet out of my shoulder and Lea helps me wrap it in a bandage that immediately bleeds through. It'll have to do. I need stitches, but I don't have time for it. I grab a black button-down shirt from my bag, hoping it will make the blood less noticeable.

We make landfall at a fishing dock that is mostly deserted. I text Theo to let him know where the yacht is. I've got several fake IDs, so I use one of them to rent a car. That's safer than getting it under my real name, or using Lea's name, since I don't know for sure that Theo will get rid of her bags in time. I'm not sure who I can trust right now other than him.

"Are you mad at me?" Lea asks nervously once we're on the highway.

"I'm frustrated and angry, yes," I snarl. "But not at you. Well, I'm not happy you told Sarah, and I'm definitely pissed about the hacker, but I'd be dead right now if it wasn't for you. I can't believe Erica was involved in Layla's murder."

"Maybe she was forced?" Lea whispers.

"It's possible, but I took care of the Bratva. If they were holding something over her, then she had no reason to fear them after that," I mutter, still trying to make sense of it in my head. "Plus... she tried to take care of me after it happened. Most of my family kept their distance, but she came almost every day. I had to tell Emilio to keep

her at home, because she was driving me crazy when all I wanted to do was drink. She was like a damn mother hen.”

It was annoying at the time. Now it makes me feel sick to my stomach.

Neither of us says anything for a while. The miles pass beneath us. I’m lost in disarray. Lea seems shell-shocked, and I’m not surprised. The sweet, innocent girl who came to Isola Selvaggia looking for an adventure certainly found one. I bet she never imagined her vacation would end with her stabbing a Mafia hitman.

“What are you going to do when we get to Las Vegas?” Lea asks timidly, finally breaking the silence.

“I don’t fucking know,” I mutter. “First thing I’m going to do is make sure you’re somewhere safe. After that, I need to talk to Emilio—or shoot him in the fucking face. I haven’t decided yet.”

“What about his wife?” she whispers.

“I don’t kill women,” I sigh. “But today, I might make an exception.”

It’s easier said than done. Erica is my niece and nephew’s mother. If Emilio had something to do with it, he’s a dead man. Fuck going to my father. Fuck doing it the right way. But Erica... I need to know more, and I can’t get those answers until we get to Las Vegas.

More silence. I’m okay with that right now. I have too much going on in my head for conversation. Too many questions I don’t have answers for. But my top priority is getting Lea somewhere safe. I can’t take her to my place, so I’ll have to use one of my safehouses. Luckily, I’ve got a few nobody knows about except Rowan.

When we finally get to Las Vegas, I see some wonder in Lea's gorgeous green eyes, despite everything that has happened today. I wish I could give her the grand tour, but we don't have time for that. Hopefully, I can do that after all of this is over. Whenever that is.

"My phone is blowing up," I snarl, ignoring another call. "Word is spreading."

"That's not a good thing, is it?" Lea asks apprehensively.

"No, but they haven't started shooting at each other yet," I answer. "Emilio hasn't made a move. I might be able to use that to my advantage."

"What are you going to do?" Lea tilts her head inquisitively, and there is more concern than I can ease etched on her face.

"The less you know the better," I say firmly. "I'm dropping you off somewhere safe. As long as you stay there, nobody will find you. If I don't make it back tonight, it means something went wrong, and you need to get out of Las Vegas. Don't go home."

"Where should I go?" she asks.

"I'll leave you some cash, directions to another safehouse, and a card for a woman named Jillian Morris. Tell her who you are. She'll know what to do," I instruct. "Understood?"

"Y-yeah," she whispers, nervousness cracking her voice.

Lea can figure out the rest once she sees how much money she has at her disposal. I hope it doesn't come to that, but precautions are necessary. Emilio hasn't made his move yet. He could be expecting me to come for him and setting a trap. Or he could

be planning to pretend he had nothing to do with it so he can try again after the dust settles. He doesn't know the hitman talked to me—another thing I might be able to use to my advantage.

I turn into the driveway of my safehouse and open the garage. Once we're safely inside, I turn off the car and hop out.

"I'd give you the grand tour, but I don't have time," I mutter, helping Lea out of the car and leading her inside. "Just stay here and remember what I said."

I lead her straight to my office, open my safe, and leave it ajar. I pull Jillian's business card out of my wallet, put it on my desk, and scribble the directions to the next safehouse on the back.

"Keys for the Bentley in the garage are hanging by the door," I say. "It should have a full tank of gas."

Lea rushes to me and wraps her arms around my waist. It yanks me out of my horrifying reality for a moment and I pull her into a warm embrace. I never thought I'd hold her again—never thought I'd see Las Vegas in her eyes. I've got a chance here. A chance at things I never imagined. It's just going to come at one hell of a price.

"I love you, Lea," I sigh. "I mean that."

"If you love me, then come back to me," Lea cries, tightening her arms around me.

"You'll be okay, regardless," I say. "But I'm going to do everything in my fucking power to walk through this door and kiss you the way you deserve to be kissed every damn day for the rest of your life—or at least the rest of mine."

She looks up and I kiss her with the fury of a man who has a second chance. A man who has tasted death and wants to stay amongst the living as long as he can. Lea is the reason for that. She's changed everything.

But first, it's time to make everything right. Settle a score I thought was already settled. I don't know if I'll put a bullet in Emilio's head for the hit, but I'll damn sure do it if he was involved with Layla's murder.

Who am I kidding? Death is the only way this ends. It's brother versus brother, now. This civil war will be a bloody, violent mess that lasts until one side can no longer keep fighting. But if Emilio hasn't started firing shots yet, then I might be able to stop the worst of it before he can start giving orders.

"Remember what I said, bambina ," I growl, looking her in the eyes. "No more playing hero. You could have gotten yourself killed earlier and if something happens to me, you have to leave."

"I will." Lea swallows hard and tears prick the corners of her eyes.

"I'll text you soon," I say. "Remember, if you don't hear from me, something's wrong, and you need to go."

I turn away before she starts crying. I've seen her cry so many times I'd like to give her a reason to smile for a change. The only way that happens is if I survive.

I leave the safehouse, get in my car, and make sure everything is locked down before I leave. There are several places my brother could be holed up. He's got a club on the strip, an office at one of our casinos, and several safehouse I know about—probably several I don't know about, if he's anything like me.

I make my rounds, looking for one of my brother's cars, or one that my immediate

family would use. My phone is still blowing up. Theo, Rowan, my father, my mother, Emilio—everyone is trying to call me. I'm not answering them. The element of surprise is about all I have. If word has spread that I got shot, Emilio may think I'm licking my wounds rather than launching a direct attack.

"He's at his fucking house?" I hiss as I park on the hill that overlooks his estate. "Fuck."

The signs are obvious. Extra security at the front gate. Men patrolling the grounds, and not just foot soldiers. I spot several made men, one of my father's Capos and Emilio's bodyguard. There's no sign of Big Boyd, which is a relief. He's Erica's bodyguard and a tough son of a bitch. I've seen him shrug off a half-dozen bullets and break the neck of the motherfucker shooting at him.

But loyalty is the real question. My father sits at the head of the table. I'm next in line. None of them should raise a gun if they see me, unless Emilio has flipped them to his side. I know he's got a lot of secret alliances, and men who will support him, but identifying them in a group of guys I've known my entire life?

Time to see who calls my bluff. A traitor won't, and I'll deal with them on the spot. Hopefully, I don't have to fight against an army of guys I'd want on my side in a war.

My Glock is tucked in the back of my waistband. I park close to Emilio's estate and walk the rest of the way. The guys at the front gate spot me first. I let my hand hover, ready to pull my weapon at a moment's notice—if I get that long, considering the two men in front of me are holding M16s.

"Massimo!" the first guy calls out, stepping forward. "We heard—there was trouble."

Dante De Luca. My cousin, by way of my father's younger sister. He doesn't sit at the table, but he's a Capo. He should be the highest-ranking member of the Morandi

family here except for my brother—well, now that I’m here, I outrank everyone.

“Stand down,” I growl. “The trouble is over. I handled it. Pull all your guys and leave. I need to meet with Emilio, and it’s a private matter.”

Dante gives me a curious look and scratches the back of his head. “Your father asked us to lock this place down. First Leo goes missing, then someone takes a shot at you? Something big is happening.”

“Like I said, I handled it,” I bark, reaching for my phone and watching them closely. Their guns don’t budge. They haven’t been flipped. “Do you want me to call my father so he can give you the order, or are you going to do what I said?”

Dante and the guy next to him exchange nervous glances, then they both nod. Dante reaches for his walkie-talkie, and I hold up my hand.

“No, don’t use that. It may have been compromised,” I caution. “Just pull your guys and go.”

Emilio will see this, but if I’m going to have a fighting chance, I have to thin the herd. Emilio’s bodyguard is no problem. Johnny Price is a weasel and has always been scared of me, even when we were kids. I’ll do what I have to. I’m getting answers today.

As soon as Dante begins pulling his guys, I march straight for the house. Johnny meets me at the door, and I ball my fists.

“Out of the way, Johnny,” I say. “I need to see Emilio.”

Johnny stiffens for a moment then he nods and opens the door. “Yes, sir, Mr. Morandi.”

That was easy. Too fucking easy. The hair sticks up on my neck as I walk into Emilio's residence. As soon as my brother turns the corner, I see red. I can't hold my emotions back. He looks surprised to see me. Probably because he thinks I should be dead right now.

"I'm going to ask you one fucking question, and you damn sure better tell me the truth," I snarl, stomping toward him and catching him by the throat before he can react. I lift him off the floor and he gasps for air.

"What the fuck, Mo?" Emilio shrieks. "Johnny!"

I have my gun out and pointed behind me before Johnny can reach for a weapon. My shoulder screams with pain, but I try to ignore it.

"Don't fucking move, motherfucker." I keep the gun leveled at Johnny and turn my attention back to my brother. "Answer my question, Emilio. Did you have anything to do with Layla's murder?"

"Mo, I'd never!" Emilio shakes his head. "It was the Bratva! I was right there with you when we took them out! I killed as many as you did!"

"No, you didn't!" I snarl, but that actually sounds like something my brother would say.

I stare into Emilio's eyes, trying to read him—trying to get the answer that will decide if he lives or dies. This doesn't make any sense. Emilio looks scared to death. He didn't scream for anyone except Johnny.

"Of course he didn't have anything to do with it," a shrill voice calls out. It's Erica. She walks into the room with a guy named Paulie right behind her. "My husband is too much of a coward to make sure his family is taken care of."

I glare at Emilio, but don't let go of him. Johnny has his hands up, but Paulie has an M16. He's clearly on her side. If it was Big Boyd, I'd be fucked, but since it's Paulie, I may still have a fighting chance. I move the barrel back and forth between the three of them as Erica walks closer. The look on her face reflects pure hatred, but I don't understand why.

"Maybe less of a coward than you think," I growl, glancing at my brother who is still struggling to breathe. "He hired a hitman to kill me."

Emilio starts shaking his head and Erica laughs.

"You really think your worthless brother has the balls for that?" Erica asks.

"Erica, what the fuck did you do?" Emilio gasps.

"What you wouldn't!" she snarls. "I took care of our family! I made sure our son will sit at the head of the table—or I will. Paulie..."

Paulie raises the M16, and I shoot first. The pain radiates into my shoulder and pulls the shot, so he still gets off a round. Except it's not a bullet. A dart lodges in my chest. I try to squeeze the trigger again, but the room starts to spin. I lose my grip on Emilio. Another dart hits. Then another. They're hitting Emilio too.

"Fuck!" I growl, then Johnny staggers back, trying to pull his gun.

Johnny doesn't get hit with a dart. Paulie switches to his Glock and ends Johnny's life before he can pull his weapon. The last thing I see is the front door flying open and more guys storming in.

Then everything goes black.

CHAPTER 34

Massimo

I have no idea how long I'm unconscious.

I wake up in the back of a car and my hands are tied. My vision doesn't have time to focus before I hear Erica's voice and something sharp jabs into my neck.

The next time I regain consciousness, I'm sitting in a chair. It feels like handcuffs are on my wrists. My ankles are shackled. I blink several times and see shadows moving.

"Fucking bitch," I mutter, even though I can't see Erica. I assume she's in the room.

"Mo! You're awake!" It's Emilio's voice.

I blink several times and glance to my right. Emilio is in a chair, too. His hands and feet are secured like mine.

"No matter what I do, I can't get away from this family," another voice sighs.

"Leo?" I look to my left.

Leo looks like he put up a fight. He always was a tough fucker. But this means we're all here. The shadows come into focus. I see Erica and Paulie. No sign of Big Boyd, but he's the least of my worries now. I yank at the handcuffs and my shoulder aches. I try the shackles and see they are secured to the floor.

“Why?” I demand, glaring at Erica.

“Why did I hire a hitman?” Erica laughs.

“No, I get that,” I growl. “But why Layla? She was like a fucking sister to you.”

“She was...” Erica walks closer and smiles. “Until she got pregnant and told me it was a boy.”

My face pales. Layla wanted to know, but I didn’t. I wanted it to be a surprise.

“Your brother was next in line after you, and you were such a hothead, I figured you’d get your damn self killed before you became a problem,” Erica continues. “But a baby? An heir? He’d jump the line, and I couldn’t have that, now could I?”

“This isn’t how we do things!” Emilio spits out. “I told you I’d never sit on my father’s throne!”

“But Matteo will,” Erica says, referencing my nephew. “One day, after I deal with the three of you.”

Leo is silent. I glance over at him before looking at Erica again.

“Leo doesn’t even want the damn job!” I growl. “There’s no reason to kill him! He’s a fucking priest!”

“Too risky.” Erica shrugs. “I can’t have a crisis of faith getting in the way of my son’s destiny.”

“You’re going to kill your own fucking husband?” Emilio shouts. “Who do you think is going to raise Matteo right, so he can even run this damn family, huh?”

“You coddle the boy. It’s better this way,” Erica answers. “I thought I could deal with Massimo and force you to man the fuck up, but we’re past that.”

I size up the room, even though there’s nothing I can do except sit in this damn chair and listen to the bitch who killed my wife talk about killing the three of us. Paulie still has his M16. It probably has bullets now, instead of darts. Most of the men here are associates, but I spot some former Bratva in the mix, too. Guys that survived the massacre. They must have been hiding for years.

My brother isn’t the one leading the coup. It’s his damn wife. If I’d taken the bullet in my skull instead of my shoulder, he’d be completely oblivious to everything.

“Got any bright ideas, Mo?” Leo mutters. “You’re supposed to be the leader here, aren’t you?”

“No,” I sigh. “Maybe you should pray for us.”

“Lo?” Leo asks.

“Besides strangling my wife?” Emilio says dryly.

“That’s not a plan.” Leo shakes his head. “Well, at least we’ll be together when we die, right? I’d say I’ll see the two of you on the other side, but I don’t think you’re going where I’m going. Unless you’d like to repent, so I can put in a good word for you.”

“I don’t think we’ll live long enough for me to list all my sins, Father ,” I grumble.

Erica and the guys with her are talking. I can’t hear what they’re saying, but judging by their glances, they’re discussing us. We’re in some sort of warehouse. Probably one of Emilio’s. I don’t guess it matters where we die.

“Anyone who thinks killing three members of the Morandi family is a bad idea, it’s not too late,” I bluff, looking around. “You know what will happen. Our father isn’t going to rest until he has vengeance. Someone will talk...”

“Really?” Erica laughs, walking away from the group. “And who do you think is going to talk? Paulie? Your father has treated him like shit for years. He should be a Capo, instead of a soldier.”

Erica fires off the names, laying out the reasons each of them is standing by her side. All I see is a bunch of fucking traitors the Morandi family is better off without. Except they’ll still have their position after this. Our father will have no idea they were responsible.

“And the Bratva?” Erica asks. “Obviously, they want you dead.”

“Yeah,” I mutter.

“I’m curious, though,” Erica says. “How did you find out about Layla? And who is this girl who stabbed Claudio before he could take his shot?”

My lip twitches and I bite my tongue. She doesn’t deserve an answer to her first question, and no amount of torture will give her the answer to the second one.

“Doesn’t matter. The Claudio loose end is already tied up. I should have known I couldn’t trust him.” Erica shakes her head. “We’ll find the girl. She left Isola Selvaggia with you, so she must be in Las Vegas. Your safehouses are being ransacked as we speak.”

They don’t have Lea’s name. That’s a relief. Theo got rid of her stuff before Erica’s men could get to it.

“Just a girl who didn’t want me to die,” I say dryly. “She’s nobody.”

Erica smiles and it almost looks sinister. “Nice try, Massimo, but I know you better than that. You haven’t even looked at a woman since Layla died, and we didn’t even get the knife under Claudio’s skin before he told us everything he knew. You told him to take the shot, which means you didn’t know about Layla until... well, we’ll figure that out when we find the girl.”

I pull at the handcuffs, no longer caring how much my shoulder hurts. I’m not in the position to make threats.

“By then, this place will be on fire, and the three of you will go...” Erica pulls a cigarette out of her purse, lights it, and exhales. “Up in smoke.”

“I loved you, you fucking bitch!” Emilio yells, yanking at his restraints. “We’ve been together since we were kids! How could you do this?”

“I never loved you, Emilio,” Erica sighs, taking a drag from her cigarette as she walks over to my brother. “I saw how powerful your family was, and after Massimo wouldn’t give me a second look, I realized you were my way in. I certainly wasn’t going to get anywhere with the priest.”

“I should have told Emilio what you tried back then,” Leo growls. “I thought you were just a mixed-up kid.”

“Forgive me, Father, for I have sinned,” Erica mocks, but her lips spread into a grin. “It’s been... two weeks since I’ve had a hard cock in my mouth. You were tempted, Leo. I saw it in your eyes.”

“You kept that from me?” Emilio snarls, his anger now directed at Leo.

“I’ve already repented for all of my sins,” Leo sighs. “Even that one. I thought I made the right choice after you two got married. Lots of kids get mixed up when they’re sixteen.”

“Did she throw herself at you, too, Mo?” Emilio asks, looking at me.

“There was no fucking point,” Erica chuckles. “Massimo is a brick wall. An emotionless void. I didn’t even think he was capable of love until he met Layla. I guess he has a thing for sweet, innocent girls.”

“Fuck you,” I snap.

“I bet that’s what this mysterious girl from the island was, before she ran into you,” Erica says. “Less than a week with you, and she’s stabbing people? I bet she’ll scream beautifully when we start peeling her skin off—and we won’t stop, even after she tells us what we want to know. I’ll leave a strip of it in your coffin, so you have something to remember her by.”

If willpower could get me out of this chair, I’d rip these handcuffs off. I pull at them until my wrists are bleeding, but the steel is stronger than my willpower.

“We picked up something on a security camera,” Paulie says, walking over to Erica and showing her his phone. “That’s her in the passenger seat. I’m having your tech guy run the image.”

“Splendid!” Erica says with sickening excitement in her voice. “Once we tie up that loose end, we’ll set this place on fire, and I’ll go play the grieving widow.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Paulie says, nodding to her.

If they got Lea’s picture from the security camera, then it’s only a matter of time until

they figure out who she is. If we were close to the safehouse when we passed that security camera, they'll have a general idea of her location. My phone signal isn't strong enough to mask a camera. I'd need some additional equipment for that—equipment Erica is obviously familiar with.

I just hope Lea does what I said.

It's too late for me, but she's still got a fighting chance.

CHAPTER 35

Lea

Too much time has passed.

I haven't heard from Massimo, which means something is wrong, and I'm supposed to flee Las Vegas as fast as humanly possible.

It's the smart thing to do. I'm in way over my head. I'm still shell-shocked from stabbing the hitman. My emotions have been on a roller coaster for days, and that roller coaster ran off the tracks long before I had to pull a knife out of my purse.

But I don't regret it. Massimo couldn't die without knowing the truth. Except now that he does, I still want him to live. We may have a chance together, if he forgives me for starting a Mafia civil war to save his life and let him know what Cadence found out about his wife.

So, the smart thing goes out the window. I tap my phone and take a deep breath as I wait for an answer. It's a video call. I'm not crying right now. I think I've cried every tear my body can produce.

"Sarah!" I say, staring at my screen. "Are you still in Las Vegas?"

"Yes, thank god you finally called!" Sarah replies. "I was worried sick! What happened? I'm still with Cadence."

I'm done keeping secrets and I've already shared so many with Sarah, a few more aren't going to hurt. At this point, even she will understand this is the kind of stuff she can't put on her podcast unless she wants to get murdered.

Cadence—I don't know her, but we wouldn't have made it this far without her. I catch the two of them up on the latest developments, even though I'm not entirely sure what is going on now.

“Okay, so Massimo went to confront his brother?” Cadence asks and Sarah turns her phone so I can see the hacker. “How long has he been gone?”

“Hours,” I mutter. “He said he would text me, so I know there's a problem. But I have no idea where to start.”

“I do,” Cadence says, opening her laptop. “What kind of car was Massimo driving when he left?”

“A rental... uh, California plates. Silver Mercedes,” I reply, giving her all the information I know.

I chew my bottom lip while Cadence types away. I don't know what she's doing, but I mutter a silent prayer to anyone who is listening that she can figure this out. I just need to know Massimo is alive. If he's too busy to text, or dealing with his brother, I'll follow his instructions. If not... I have no idea what I'm going to do.

“Okay, I got something,” Cadence says, finally breaking the silence. “I found Massimo's car on a traffic cam. The footage is a few hours old, but if I can follow him...”

“There!” Sarah points at the screen.

“Yep, that’s him,” Cadence confirms. “But this still doesn’t help.”

It’s a painstaking process, or at least it feels like one. Cadence switches between security cameras and traffic cameras, combing them all for a glimpse of Massimo’s car. Every time she locates it, I feel a surge of hope, but when it disappears without an answer, the hope dissipates.

“There’s nothing after this,” Cadence says.

All the hope vanishes. My heart sinks into my stomach. If this is a dead end, then I’m out of options. My only choice is to flee Las Vegas and mourn him—again. I’m not sure I can go through it a second time. The first time nearly tore my heart to shreds.

“Hold on!” Sarah opens her laptop. “I have a map of everything registered to the Dirty Vegas Mafia. What I could find, at least.”

“It won’t be much,” Cadence sighs. “They hide everything in shell corporations except their personal property and a few legitimate businesses.”

“This is where Massimo’s car disappeared, right?” Sarah asks, turning the laptop to Cadence, who confirms with a nod. “The only place he could be going is Emilio’s house.”

“Okay, let me find all the cameras in that area,” Cadence says, furiously tapping on her keyboard.

I sink to the carpet and stare at my phone. The money Massimo left for me is on the desk behind me, along with the business card, and directions to the next safehouse. That’s where I’m supposed to be. Not sitting here playing hero, like he told me not to do.

He can punish me later for disobeying him—if he’s still alive. I mutter a few more prayers, but it doesn’t do anything to slow my racing heart or quell the concern that has my stomach twisted into a knot.

“Is that the same static from the night Massimo’s wife was killed?” Sarah asks, leaning forward.

“Yeah, it looks like it is,” Cadence confirms. “It’s recent, too. I’ll have to download the footage to isolate the frequency. This is going to take a few minutes.”

More time. Time we don’t have. Time Massimo doesn’t have.

“Oh, shit,” Cadence says. “That’s a Bratva vehicle.”

“They’re involved?” I question. “I thought Massimo took them all out.”

“Not everyone, it seems,” Cadence says. “The vehicle is registered to a company in Russia, just like the others. Different company, but they don’t hide stuff as well as the Dirty Vegas Mafia. It’s the same parent company.”

“Which means Emilio and his wife are working with them,” I sigh. “Any sign of Massimo?”

“No, hold on. I’m still trying to find angles that give me a better view.” Cadence keeps typing, downloading, and decrypting the masked footage. Every second feels like an eternity. “There’s two people in the back seat. That’s Emilio!”

“Is he... unconscious?” Sarah asks, leaning forward.

“I think so,” Cadence says. “And look, from this angle, we can see Erica in the front seat. The guy who is driving... I don’t recognize him, do you?”

“No, he’s not on my Mafia true crime wall,” Sarah replies.

I put the pieces together in my head. Erica is the one who did this. She has to be. If Emilio is unconscious in the back seat of the car, then he wasn’t involved. Or he was, and his wife turned on him, too. Either way, if there’s any chance of saving Massimo, time is of the essence.

“This is the last image I can get,” Cadence says. “There are no cameras after this that I can access from here. All I see is warehouses, so those security cameras are likely only accessible if you’re on their network.”

“That has to be where they took Massimo and Emilio,” Sarah mutters. “I’m checking the properties, but nothing is registered... well, there are a couple registered to corporations that aren’t based in the United States.”

“I bet those are the ones they have hidden behind shell corporations,” Cadence says. “But we can’t exactly go search them ourselves.”

“No,” Sarah admits with a sigh. “Even if we found Massimo and Emilio, there’s no way we could help them considering how many guys were in those vehicles. We’d be throwing our lives away, too.”

Sarah’s right. I know it, but I can’t accept it. If there’s a way to save Massimo, I have to try. I close my eyes and shake my head. I know what I have to do, and this is a really, really bad idea, but I don’t have a choice.

“I need an address,” I say, standing up and running to the door.

“To where?” Sarah asks.

“Salvatore Morandi’s h-house,” I stammer. “Or wherever he might be. Cadence, see

if you can figure out where he is from the cameras.”

“Lea, no!” Sarah shakes her head. “Are you crazy? If you start talking about hitmen and accusing his daughter-in-law of murder, you’re not walking out of there!”

“I know,” I reply, swallowing the lump in my throat. “Find him. Text me the address.”

I end the call, grab the keys from the wall, and rush into the garage.

I’ll risk anything for Massimo.

Even my life.

CHAPTER 36

Massimo

I'm not sure if the blood dripping from my hands is coming from my wrists, which have been rubbed nearly to the bone, or the wound in my shoulder that bled through the bandage before Lea helped me put it on.

The drugs have mostly worn off, so I've my wits about me, but they're not much use right now.

Emilio looks defeated. I'm pretty sure he cried at some point, but he turned away from me. Leo seems to have accepted everything. I guess it's easier when you trust a higher power more than anything else.

Erica, the traitors, and the leftover Bratva refugees are still trying to find Lea. It's only a matter of time, but every second that passes is one that gives Lea a chance to get away.

Maybe I can distract them and buy her more time.

"Hey, Paulie! You fucking asshole!" I yell.

"What the fuck do you want?" Paulie grumbles, walking closer.

"Why don't you forget all about this, huh?" I ask. "Everyone else here is fucked, but I always liked you. Cut us loose and I won't consider you a traitor. I'll tell my father to

make you a Capo, and you know he listens to me.”

It’s all bullshit. The only thing Paulie will get is a bullet between his eyes, but if he’s looking at me, he’s not looking at his screen. He’s not searching for Lea.

“That’s all it takes?” Paulie sneers. “A good word from Mighty Massimo and suddenly I get to be a Capo? Forget all the shit I did for the family, right? Forget all the years I’ve put in? Nah, Massimo. I like my chances better with the madam.”

Paulie storms toward me, flips his M16, and drives the butt of the rifle into my skull. I turn my head to soften the blow, but it still makes me see stars.

“Ignore him!” Erica calls out. “I want him to be conscious so he can feel the flames. We might even get to listen to him scream.”

“Fuck you, Massimo,” Paulie says, driving the butt of the rifle into my shoulder.

“Ah, fuck,” I mutter, gritting my teeth as the pain cascades through my body.

“I think I’ll start the fire under your chair,” Paulie chuckles. “I bet it’ll burn the skin off your bones before you choke on the smoke.”

I stare daggers at him, but I’ve lost his attention. He turns away and walks back to his laptop.

“I got something,” Paulie says. “Her name is Eleanor Fuller.”

The daggers abruptly change course and go straight through my heart. Fuck. If they’ve got her name, then she won’t be safe unless she has already done what I asked. Hopefully, the time it’s taken them to find her has given her enough time to get out of Las Vegas.

“I’ve got something too,” a Bratva guy says in a Russian accent. “Security camera. Wait—the footage just got wiped.”

“She’s using a masker,” Erica says. “That’s fine, just follow the static.”

“No, ma’am,” the Bratva guy replies. “I mean the footage is gone . All of it. Every single camera in Las Vegas just got wiped and taken offline.”

“What?” Erica yells and her back stiffens. She jerks her head toward me. “Who the fuck is this Eleanor Fuller?”

I want to rage, but all I can do is laugh. Lea is smarter than I gave her credit for. Not only is she getting out of Las Vegas, but she’s got the hacker covering her tracks. If the cameras are offline, they’ll never find her. After I’m gone, she’ll have enough money to disappear without a trace.

“Seriously, Mo,” Emilio mutters under his breath. “Who the hell is she?”

“The only person who has made me feel alive since Layla got murdered,” I sigh. “But it’s time to make peace with whoever you believe in, because we don’t have much time left.”

“Already made it,” Leo murmurs.

“There’s nothing after that? No way to find it?” Erica asks, her voice distressed.

“No, ma’am,” Paulie confirms. “If the cameras are offline and the footage is wiped, we’d have to search the entire city. We don’t have enough men for that.”

“Then forget it,” Erica says, lighting a cigarette. “Torch the building. Let’s get the fuck out of here.”

Paulie nods and motions to several guys. They grab canisters of gasoline and start pouring it all around the warehouse. Leo winces when he gets splashed. Emilio curses and screams, then sputters on some that goes in his mouth. I stare Paulie in the eyes while he dumps it on me, and I get more than either of my brothers. That's fine. I'd rather go quick.

"I really hope all three of you assholes scream," Paulie chuckles. "That way we have something to listen to while we drive away."

This is it. This is how the Morandi family ends. Erica is a fool if she thinks Matteo is going to run the family one day. Our father won't retire, after losing all three of his sons. He'll sit at the head of the table until he rots, but he won't have the strength to keep the family together without us. The only thing Matteo will inherit is a worthless throne and a table nobody sits at anymore.

At least I won't be around to see it.

"We got a problem!" a Bratva guy yells. "Vehicles! Lots of them! They're headed this way!"

"What the fuck?" I glance at Emilio who looks equally stunned.

"It's the boss!" Paulie yells. "Oh, shit! Fuck, fuck, fuck!"

"Light the warehouse up!" Erica calls out. "We'll have to fight our way out!"

"Fight our way out?" Paulie's voice is panicked. "That's suicide!"

"Do you think the outcome will be any better if we give up?" Erica questions, then she turns and flicks her cigarette toward a puddle of gasoline.

The fire erupts in an instant. I can feel the heat as it spreads, but thankfully, it's moving in the other direction. Erica, the traitors, and the Bratva refugees run toward the door. I start rocking the chair, tearing more skin against the steel on my wrists, and kicking at the shackles.

"The chairs are bolted to the floor," Leo says. "I already tried that while you were yelling at Paulie."

"Thought you made peace with it," I mutter, not giving up, despite the pain that radiates through my body.

"Doesn't mean I want to die," Leo sighs. "I thought I was avoiding fiery damnation when I became a priest."

Gunfire erupts outside the warehouse. The flames are getting closer. The warehouse is filling up with smoke, and I'm lightheaded. It's closer to Emilio than me, and he's freaking out, trying to keep his feet away from the fire.

The gunshots peter out. I can hear yelling, but the flames are making so much noise, I can't make anything out. A second later, the warehouse door flies open, and I see the meanest motherfucker to ever put on a kilt.

"Rowan!" I yell. "Over here!"

Rowan holds up his arms and rushes toward us. He's not alone. My father is right behind him, and he's got a chain around Erica's neck, dragging her behind him while she screams.

"The lass wasn't lying," Rowan grunts, finding a clear spot to hop over so he can get to me. "Fuck, got yourself into a bit of a mess, eh?"

“You’re not even supposed to be in Las Vegas,” I mutter, realizing the only lass he could be referencing is Lea. “Nobody listens to me anymore.”

“I listened, I just ignored it,” Rowan chuckles. “Thought you might need me. Guess I was right.”

“Help Emilio first,” I growl, motioning to my brother who is nearly sideways in his chair with the fire dancing around him. “We’re covered in gasoline. If the fire gets to us, there’s no saving us.”

“I can’t help either of you,” Rowan says, trying to move my chair. “Dante, we need the fucking bolt cutters, lad!”

More of my father’s men storm into the warehouse. The fire has spread too much for them to put it out, but they clear a path and put out the flames that are close enough to ignite us. Dante hurries over with the bolt cutters and releases Emilio first, then he tosses them to Rowan, who cuts me free. He tosses them back to Dante who runs over to Leo.

I stagger when I get to my feet, partially from blood loss, and partially from smoke inhalation.

“Easy, pal,” Rowan says, pulling my arm across his shoulders. “I got you.”

“I’m fine, help Leo,” I mumble.

“Dante’s already got the chains off,” Rowan says, glancing over his shoulder. “You need medical attention.”

Rowan dodges the flames as he helps me out of the warehouse. I cough and gag on the smoke, staggering along until I taste clean air. I gasp a few times, then everything

seems to melt away, because I see Lea running toward me with tears in her eyes. I immediately pull away from Rowan.

“Massimo!” she squeals, nearly bowling me over with a hug.

“You really are the most disobedient girl in the world, aren’t you, bambina ,” I sigh, stumbling to keep my balance as I wrap my arms around her.

“You can punish me later,” she sniffles.

I hold her in my arms while my brothers are pulled out of the warehouse. They collapse on the ground and try to get their breath. I’m feeling it too, and my father’s personal doctor is waiting to attend to me.

“Excuse me, miss,” he says, tapping Lea on the shoulder. “I really think I need to have a look at him.”

Lea nods and pulls away. I stumble to the hood of a car and support my weight while the doctor examines me. He slips an oxygen mask over my face and cuts through my shirt with a pair of scissors. My shoulder is throbbing, and the wound has opened up so much I’m not sure a few stitches can repair the damage now.

“We need to get you back to the house,” the doctor says.

“Not yet.” I stagger away from him and toward my father, who is still holding Erica by the neck.

Emilio moves in front of me before I can get to them. Lea rushes to my side, offering me what little support she can.

“She’s my wife, Mo,” Emilio says firmly, then he coughs. “I’ll deal with her.”

“After what she did?” I growl, leaning more weight on Lea than I should. “Get the fuck out of my way.”

“It’s Emilio’s call,” my father announces, dragging the screaming Erica toward us. He tightens the chain around her neck so she can’t speak. “When a wife turns traitor, the husband decides, and we do not question his judgment.”

I bite my tongue to silence my rage. My father’s right. Those are the traditions we live by, even if Erica murdered my wife. I take a step back and nod.

My father releases the grip on Erica’s chain and tosses it to Emilio. Emilio yanks Erica to her feet and pulls her close.

“P-please, Lo! Please!” Erica begs, tears streaming down her face. “I-I’m sorry! I just got... tempted by the Bratva! I had no choice! I was looking out for our family!”

“This is my fucking family,” Emilio growls, motioning to everyone except his wife. “You weren’t looking out for them at all. You were looking out for yourself.”

“No, baby, please,” Erica whimpers. “Think about Matty... and Mia...”

“I am thinking about them,” Emilio says harshly.

“T-they need me!” Erica whines.

“No, they don’t need you at all.” Emilio yanks on the chain and then starts wrapping it around Erica. She shrieks, but he pulls it tight around her neck. “The smoke will probably kill you before the fire does. I won’t pour gasoline on you—consider that one last act of mercy.”

“Oh, god,” Lea whispers, clutching my arm.

“Are we sure all the traitors are here?” I ask, glancing at my father. “Big Boyd wasn’t at the house. I sure as fuck hope he hasn’t turned.”

“He’s at the casino,” my father replies. “He was as shocked as I was when I filled him in, but I still thought it was best for him to sit this one out. It might be a while before I can trust anyone who was that close to Erica.”

“Understood.” I nod in agreement and watch as Emilio drags Erica toward the warehouse, then I pull Lea closer. “Come on, bambina . You don’t want to see this.”

Justice will be served. I can make peace with that. I don’t have to be the one who finishes her off, nor does the need for personal vengeance gnaw at me, like it did when I went after the Bratva.

The only thing I need is right beside me.

CHAPTER 37

L ea

It's been a week since I walked into Salvatore Morandi's house and nearly got a bullet for it. There were so many guns pointed at me that I would never have known which one fired it.

My relationship with Massimo's father has improved since then.

"To the guest of honor," Salvatore says, nodding to me and offering a glass of wine. "We are naming a private selection of wines we'll be releasing soon, and I've decided to call this one Eleanor."

"What?" I gasp, nearly dropping the wine before I get a grip on it. "You're naming a wine after me?"

"Mm, yes," he smiles, and his drop-dead-breathtakingly gorgeous wife walks up beside him. Massimo's mother. "I still have a few bottles of the wine I named after my wife, back when it was just the two of us."

"Do you?" she replies, her tone a bit lighter than his thicker one. "I thought I finished the last bottle a couple of years ago, when you left me alone to go to Isola Selvaggia without me."

"It was business," he says, slapping her ass. "And if you drank the last bottle, you and I are going to be having a talk later."

“I look forward to that,” she says, clearing her throat. “Anyway, our guest of honor! Eleanor!”

“L-Lea,” I say, even though I’ve told her that several times. “Nobody calls me Eleanor, really.”

“Maybe I’ll start calling you that, too,” Massimo growls, sneaking up on me like a shadow and wrapping his arms around my waist. “Eleanor .”

“Ah!” I stiffen, then relax in his arms, careful not to lean on his injured shoulder. “Please, don’t. If I’m the guest of honor, that’s my request. Don’t I get one of those?”

“Oh, she’s been reading up on the family traditions!” Salvatore says with some excitement in his voice. “That’s what I like to hear. But you’re going to waste your request on a name? Tonight? Some people wait decades before they come to the table to make it.”

“He’s not lying,” Massimo says. “You have a personal favor from the head of the Morandi family—or as your friend Sarah likes to call us, the Dirty Vegas Mafia.”

“I hate that fucking name,” Salvatore spits out and his wife consoles him with a gentle rub on his back.

“I can ask for anything?” I blink a couple of times. “I’ll be honest, I haven’t been reading up on the family traditions. Massimo just told me I was going to be given a special request as the guest of honor.”

“It means a little more than that,” Salvatore says dryly. “And you’re not the only guest of honor tonight. Just the only one who has a wine named after her.”

“Hmm,” I say. “Okay, I guess I can live with everyone calling me Eleanor.”

Massimo lets go of me, and we continue talking for a while. I mostly listen, because I'm still getting used to being around such a lively crowd.

Yes, I'm still in Las Vegas. Sarah's here too. And Cadence. We're the guests of honor at a party that nobody outside of the Morandi family knows about. Salvatore Morandi's way of saying thank you for saving all three of his sons—and the wine, well, that might be because I'm not leaving.

Sarah and Cadence fly home tomorrow. Sarah's been gambling at Massimo's casino, and he's been ignoring the fact she's counting the cards. She's smart enough to push her luck and thinks she's getting away with it. Cadence stays in her room, doing something on her laptop. She swears it has nothing to do with the Morandi family, and we're trusting her. A hacker we literally don't know.

But she's owed the same debt of gratitude, and this is how the Morandi family does things.

“Wow!” Sarah says, pulling me away from Massimo and his parents. “I'm just going to borrow the other guest of honor for a moment. Guest of honor—stuff!”

I glance at Massimo and shrug, then let Sarah lead me away. She pulls me toward the corner, where nobody else is.

“Can you believe this?” Sarah asks excitedly, then pulls her vape out of her purse and takes a tiny puff. “We're at a Dirty Vegas Mafia party! And we're the guests of honor!”

“Don't you usually want all these people in prison?” I laugh nervously. “Isn't that the whole point of your true crime obsession?”

“Maybe there's been a tiny bit of Mafia fangirl in me,” she laughs. “Not, like, crazy

fangirl or anything...”

“Fangirl enough to put their pictures on your wall,” I say.

“But seriously, isn’t this kind of awesome?” she asks, tilting her head slightly.

“It’s a little overwhelming,” I admit.

“You spent a week as a Mafia prince’s prisoner.” Sarah bats her eyelashes. “How can any of this be overwhelming?”

“He’s not a Mafia prince,” I sigh.

“His father is the king of Las Vegas, right?” Sarah asks. “I mean, they even call it his throne at the head of the table. So, what does that make Massimo?”

“A Mafia prince,” I relent. “But not like the ones from your podcast. He wasn’t hunted by the Mafia Prince Killer.”

That podcast put Sarah on the map in the true crime world. I listened to it, but I wasn’t obsessed with the killer like she was. I never imagined coming face-to-face with someone who could have been targeted by the killer. Thankfully, he’s in prison now.

“I know, but he’s still a Mafia prince, and you’re going to marry him,” Sarah says emphatically.

“Stop!” I say louder than I should and feel the heat in my cheeks. “It’s way too soon to talk about anything like that! I’m... staying in Las Vegas. I’m his guest.”

“His prisoner ,” she cackles, nudging me.

“Enough,” I laugh. “I have to get back to Massimo. Enjoy the party. Remember, none of this ever goes on your podcast.”

“I know. Morandi family. Off limits forever,” she exclaims, darting away from me. “Have fun!”

Staying in Las Vegas. At Massimo’s enormous estate. I’m no prisoner. I have a life I never imagined having—right now. I’m letting life guide me, and following my adventure, wherever it decides to take me.

It seems to keep leading me back into Massimo’s arms.

EPILOGUE

One year later

Lea

If there's one thing more impressive than being the guest of honor at a Morandi family party, it's being the bride at a Morandi family wedding.

"She's going to throw the bouquet!" Sarah screams, jumping around as she tries to gather the rest of the women.

I tremble a little as I turn around and clutch my flowers in my hand. I used to picture my wedding day. I described the perfect one to Sarah so many years ago, I can't remember how old we were. It was nothing like this.

There are so many people. I barely know any of them. There's a senator here. I don't even know why! He's just invited to things for some reason, and everyone just nods about it like it's one of those things you know, but don't talk about.

But I guess this part is familiar. Throwing the bouquet. I glance over my shoulder once, then prepare myself. I don't care who catches it, but I'm sure Sarah will try, even if she doesn't have a boyfriend or any prospects that I'm aware of.

"Alright, ladies," I laugh. "Whoever catches this is the next one to take a trip down the aisle!"

I hurl the bouquet overhead and spin around as soon as it's airborne. It's more a clumsy turn than a spin, thanks to my dress, but I get to see everyone jump for the flowers.

"Mine!" Sarah giggles, jumping much higher than her petite frame would suggest she is capable of.

Sarah's fingers tip the bouquet, which causes it to bounce away from her. She nearly knocks the girl next to her over trying to get to it, but it gets tipped several times before sailing away from the group—right toward Cadence, who isn't even paying attention.

"I don't want this!" Cadence shrieks, throwing her hands up, along with the bouquet.

"Give it to me!" Sarah laughs, jumping for the bouquet again.

The bouquet gets bobbled a few times, then lands in the hands of Massimo's cousin, Cassandra. She's barely eighteen and like Cadence, she isn't really trying to catch it. Cassandra holds the bouquet like a deer caught in the headlights and her face turns beet red.

"It'll be a long fucking time before that wedding!" her father growls from several feet away.

Sarah looks disappointed, but she joins the others in congratulating Cassandra. Cassandra looks as timid and shy as I was before I met Massimo. I don't know her very well. She's spent more time in boarding school than with the family, so she doesn't visit Massimo as often as the rest of his family.

I slip away from the crowd, now that my duty is done. Massimo is talking with his parents, but as soon as he sees me, he excuses himself and walks over to me with a smile on his face.

“My beautiful bride,” he says lovingly. “Are you finally ready to change out of that dress? Most brides do that before the reception.”

“Yeah, I guess so,” I say, looking down at my gorgeous white dress. “I love the way it looks so much I wanted to wear it a little longer.”

“Let me put in a quick appearance with a couple of guests and I’ll go with you,” Massimo says, glancing over his shoulder.

“I think I can manage,” I laugh. “I can get Sarah to help, if I need someone.”

“No way, bambina,” he chuckles. “Nobody is taking that dress off you but me.”

I look down and blush, then shuffle to the side so Massimo can make his rounds.

A few people stop by to offer their congratulations. Some rave more about my namesake wine than the ceremony. After several minutes, Massimo rejoins me and leads me toward the bridal suite.

“Still nothing from Emilio?” I ask, interlocking my hand with his.

“No, but I’m not surprised,” Massimo sighs. “I was hoping he’d show up for the wedding, but he may never come back. Wounds like that are difficult to recover from.”

“At least Leo came,” I say. “It was nice of him to officiate the wedding.”

“He said nobody was going to pronounce us husband and wife but him.” Massimo opens the door to the bridal suite, then glances over his shoulder before stepping in and closing the door. “Now, let’s get you out of that dress...”

Massimo’s lips press down on my neck, kissing and teasing while his hands roam my

body. I feel rather stiff in my wedding dress, but I lean against him, enjoying the heat between us.

“Careful,” I gasp when I feel his hand on my ass. “There won’t be much of a wedding night if you start now.”

“If I start now, I might finish before sunrise,” he chuckles. “And don’t think I’ve forgotten about the spanking you’re going to get for acting like a Bridezilla the last few days.”

“You’re going to spank your wife?” I pretend to be shocked.

“Damn right I am,” he growls into my ear. “I’m going to give you a good one tonight, so you learn your place.”

“You can try,” I giggle, turning to face him. “But you’ll never make me obedient .”

“No, not even my belt could do that,” he chuckles, putting his hands on my hips. “I love you, Lea.”

“I love you too,” I say, looking up at him with a smile. “Oh, and I have a gift for you.”

“We exchanged gifts at the rehearsal dinner,” Massimo says, motioning to the necklace I’m wearing that matches my grandmother’s treasured earrings.

“Yes, I know.” I walk over to the table, pick up a small box, and turn to him. “But this one is just for you. I don’t want everyone else seeing it.”

“Kinky,” Massimo jokes, taking the box and pulling at the ribbon. “I bet it’s sexy lingerie you’re going to wear for me tonight, isn’t it?”

“No, that’s in my bag,” I tease, motioning to the box. “Open it!”

Massimo nods and tosses the ribbon aside, then he opens the box. He stares at it for a moment, then his face goes blank.

“I-is this...” he asks, pulling a pregnancy test out of the box and holding it up. “Are you...”

“Surprise!” I say, biting my bottom lip.

Massimo rushes to me and wraps his arms around my waist. He pulls me into a tight embrace that lifts me off the floor. I melt into it, happy that Massimo is as excited as I am.

Life is still guiding me on my adventure.

But I’ve found my direction.

The End