



Seduced by Her Fake Husband (The Martinelli Wedding #2)

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Category: Romance

Description: She hates her husband with a passion or does she?

Luisa Rossellini is counting the days until she can divorce the man whos her husband in name only. Marriage to the wildly rich, outrageously handsome and unrepentantly ruthless Gennaro Martinelli was never her choice, but before she can finally be free of him, she has to spend six days playing the role of his devoted wife at the wedding of the century or lose everything she holds dear. The last thing she expects is for their suite to have only one bed or that Gennaro will fix his dangerous dark eyes on her with nothing but seduction in mind

Seduced by Her Fake Husband is a spicy, full-length contemporary romance that's perfect for lovers of unrepentantly alpha heroes and the heroines who bring them to their knees.

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Chapter One

Most male adolescents had to grow into being men, in looks, physique and maturity. Not Luisa Rossellini's husband. Luisa had known Gennaro Martinelli her whole life and couldn't remember him being anything other than the towering, intimidating figure he was today.

His parents were her godparents. Over the years, the Rossellinis and Martinellis had enjoyed plenty of holidays and weekends away together on top of the regular visits to each other's homes, and there had always been an aloof, other-worldly quantity to Gennaro that had set him apart from everyone else.

At least there had been in Luisa's eyes.

The ten-year age gap between them might have had something to do with that perception, but his brother was eight years older than her, a massive gap when you're a child, and she'd felt nothing but ease in his company.

When Niccolo looked at her, Luisa's insides didn't quail with fright.

Two years of marriage and Gennaro still made her quail.

Two years of marriage and silence was still their preferred means of communication .

Their journey to Accardiano, an exclusive town on the Amalfi Coast, was spent without the exchange of a single word.

Not one. Gennaro spent the two-hour flight and fifteen-minute car ride on business calls.

His phone was stuck to his ear when they drove through The Bianchi Hotel's gates, and he was still talking in that terse, clipped way he had when he got out of the car and strode through the lobby doors, leaving Luisa to trail behind him like a forgotten spare part.

She'd long ago learned not to care that she was essentially invisible to her husband.

The only part of her that had ever cared was her pride, and it was her pride that straightened her spine, elongated her neck, lifted her chin and fixed a smile to her face.

It didn't matter that their wedding contract stipulated she must always act like a happy, loving wife in public, Luisa's pride would never let anyone see what an ordeal just sharing the same air as her husband was to her.

The Bianchi's lobby, like the rest of the famous hotel, was traditionally Italian in its style and décor but with a vibe that made you feel like you'd walked into a world of Hollywood starlets oozing busty sex appeal and where the casting couch saw more action than any movie produced.

A world of sex and power. Much like the world Luisa currently inhabited, except her personal world had zero sex.

In exactly one week, she would be leaving this world. In exactly one week, Gennaro's lawyers would file the separation papers and Luisa would walk away with half her contracted settlement. The remaining half would be hers when the divorce was finalised.

In exactly one week, Luisa would be able to breathe properly again.

Conscious of her heels clacking over the sprawling blue and gold tiled floor filled with people checking in for the pre-wedding celebrations of what the Italian press had dubbed The Wedding of the Century, she took a moment to soak in the towering circular staircase before joining Gennaro at the reception desk.

Only when Leonardo appeared from behind the horseshoe desk did Gennaro end his call and stick his phone in his back pocket so he could embrace his maternal cousin.

Leonardo Bianchi, owner of the magnificent hotel Luisa and practically everyone she knew would be spending the next six nights at, was one of only two people in the world Luisa had ever seen Gennaro crack a smile for.

The other was Niccolo's best friend Dante Coscarelli, but everyone smiled when Dante was around.

He had that knack for putting people at ease and making the world seem a little less dark.

Luisa had adored him since she'd gone to one of the Martinellis summer parties as a child and he'd carried her on his shoulders so she could join in a game of water polo.

Gennaro had been the opposing goalkeeper, she remembered, remembering too how he'd glowered his way through the game.

Leonardo had also played, although she couldn't remember which side he'd been on, and now, two decades on from that carefree summer's day when the big boys had let her play with them, Leonardo embraced her with loud smacking kisses to her cheeks.

"Luisa, you are looking incredible," he said with a wide, appreciative smile.

Leonardo had a terrible reputation with women, but with Luisa, he never crossed the line.

Before, she'd been too young, and now she was his cousin's wife and so off-limits for anything except the light flirting their countrymen excelled at.

Indeed, the only man in Luisa's circle who didn't flirt with her was her husband, but then, Gennaro didn't flirt with anyone.

She smiled her thanks at a compliment that had no doubt been given to every woman who'd already checked in that morning. "Is my sister here yet?" She'd sent Marisa numerous messages that morning, all of which had been read but none of which had been answered.

"Let me check for you," Leonardo called one of his staff over, and while Luisa asked again about her sister, she noticed Leonardo draw Gennaro away. Whatever Leonardo said, Gennaro reacted in his usual poker-faced manner.

Having established that neither Marisa nor their parents had yet arrived, Luisa caught Gennaro's eye. As usual, he was only looking at her so he could give one of his silent commands, this one a subtle jerk of his head, which translated as, 'Come to heel.'

Resisting the urge to bark like the nodding dog he treated her as and masking the stronger urge to throw one of the priceless pieces of art carefully displayed throughout the lobby at Gennaro's face, she gave a sweet smile and obeyed like the good little wife she was.

Leonardo took Luisa's arm and led them outside. A porter followed them, effortlessly managing their copious suitcases and clothes carriers.

As Accardiano was a town built on towering cliffs like its near neighbour Positano,

The Bianchi was designed to accommodate its landscape, being as high in places as it was wide, and comfortably accommodating five hundred guests in the utmost luxury.

“This is the main communal pool,” Leonardo explained as they traversed a large rectangular swimming pool and sunbathing area surrounded by immaculate accommodation blocks.

Guests were already soaking up the mid-morning sun, and Luisa waved at a few of the faces she recognised.

Soon, they reached a staggered three-storey, salmon-pink block, its white balconies covered in climbing flowers.

Leading them through an arched opening, Leonardo introduced them to their butler and then said his goodbyes with a slap to Gennaro’s back and an agreement to meet for drinks in a few hours. It was an invitation Luisa sensed did not include her.

Luisa’s first impression of their top-floor suite was of space and light.

Covering the entire floor, its rooms interconnected through wide arches, giving a defined lounging area, dining area, sleeping area and dressing area.

Only the bathroom had a door for privacy.

Everything was clean and luxurious, a suite a princess could happily spend six nights in.

There was just one little – major – problem, and she glanced at Gennaro to see if he’d noticed too.

His gaze was already on her, his set stare telling her in no uncertain terms to keep her

mouth shut.

The knots that had lived permanently in her stomach since she'd accepted she had no choice but to marry the man she found so physically and intellectually intimidating tightened.

She had to wait until the butler finally left them alone before she could point out the obvious. "There's only one bed."

Muscular arms flexed and folded over a broad, muscular chest. "Yes."

"We're supposed to have a bed each." A statement of the obvious.

It was in their contract. They had separate rooms. Whenever they travelled, they slept separately.

Even their sham of a honeymoon had been spent in separate beds.

In the whole of their marriage, they had exchanged one kiss on the lips, and that had been in the church to cement their vows.

Luisa had had to hold her breath to do it.

Cold black eyes drilled into hers. His strong throat and prominent Adam's apple moved. "Yes."

It was like talking to an immovable plank of wood, except planks of wood generally didn't come in an undeniably sexy package.

That was another thing that had always unnerved her about him: how effortlessly sexy he was.

Gennaro Martinelli was six foot plus of muscle and sinew.

His was a body the Roman Gods of old would have revelled in and came with a face the Roman Gods of old would have killed to have.

Short hair a shade darker than his seemingly permanently narrowed black eyes was matched with thick eyebrows and a trimmed beard.

His jaw was chiselled perfection. Even his lips were perfect, not too wide and not too narrow, not too full and not too thin.

The only imperfection was a slight bump on his nose that had often made her wonder who in his life had had the nerve to punch him and then wonder if she could track them down to shake their hand.

As imperfections went, Gennaro's only increased his sexiness, but it was a sexiness that repelled rather than attracted, at least for Luisa.

"I assume we'll be moving to a different suite?" But even as she spoke, the knots in her chest tightened further, a sense of dread rising inside her.

There was the slightest tightening of his jaw. "There are no other suites available."

"But..." She couldn't continue.

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“The Bianchi has only two suites with two separate beds. Two. One of those rooms has been given to my grandparents. The other had been assigned to us, but last night Leonardo received a call from Valeria Esposito’s assistant to confirm Valeria’s request that her suite has two beds.”

It wasn’t like talking to a plank of wood, Luisa realised dimly as dread morphed into horror.

It was like conversing with a block of ice.

Gennaro was telling her they had only one bed in their suite with less emotion than the cashier who’d looked through her when Luisa had paid for her art supplies the day before.

“What about adjoining suites?” she suggested, trying not to let panic add itself to the knots, dread and horror. Adjoining rooms would be acceptable under the terms of their contract, surely ?

“Every suite has been allocated. This suite is second only to the honeymoon suite for luxury. It had been allocated to the Espositos, and now it is ours, and I will not allow a scene to be made about it.”

She held her ground. “But the terms of our contract specifically states separate beds.”

“It also states that the true nature of our marriage remains private and that this need trumps all other considerations. Need I remind you that my whole family is here to celebrate my brother’s wedding to Lorenzo Esposito’s daughter?”

Luisa shook her head. Gennaro didn't need to spell out why Lorenzo's wife's wish for separate beds trumped theirs. Lorenzo Esposito was the most dangerous man in Italy.

She made one last attempt. "Separate rooms, then? It could work in our favour by making it more believable when we file for our separation. You do realise that's only a week away?"

Finally, something that resembled emotion flickered on his immovable face.

"Believe me, I am counting down the days, but no, the idea of separate rooms is out of the question, and not just because there are no free rooms. This week is too important for distractions of any kind to be allowed, and that includes allowing rumours to circulate about our marriage. We part ways next Monday and not a minute before, and if I hear so much as a scintilla of gossip about the state of our marriage before the day we part then I will consider you to be in breach of our contract."

Even though her insides were quivering, she kept her neck elongated and held his stare. "Any gossip will not come from me."

His smile was as taut as his jawline. "Then there is nothing further to discuss. Now, excuse me, but I need to find my brother. I will join you for lunch on the sun terrace at one."

Gennaro digested everything his brother had just confided to their select group.

Namely that Niccolo's most recent lover's sister was at that moment on a flight to Naples, travelling with the express intention of sabotaging Niccolo's wedding.

Niccolo's idea to counter this was for his best man, Dante, to whisk her off to his secure Tuscan castle and keep her locked up until after the nuptials.

“Don’t you think it’s a bit extreme, though?” Gennaro posited. “She can’t get into the grounds. There is zero chance of the Espositos crossing her path.”

Niccolo grimaced. “She’s a loose cannon.

You’ve seen Georgia’s message. If Callie talks to the press, then God knows what will happen, and I can only thank God she didn’t think of going to the British press first. Siena knows about Georgia – hell, her damned father knows about her.

Neither of them cares, but if Callie spills my affair with Georgia to the world in the run-up to the wedding, then it will humiliate them, and you know how Lorenzo will react to that. ”

Gennaro closed his eyes and bit back calling his brother a fucking idiot.

The message from his brother’s ex-lover stated that her sister had stolen pornographically compromising pictures of Niccolo and the ex-lover and that she was planning to hand them over to the press.

Gennaro knew his brother could be impulsive and reckless, but creating homemade porn with someone who wasn’t his fiancée had to rank as one of the most reckless things he’d done, especially when the fiancée in question was Lorenzo Esposito’s daughter.

That paled though, in comparison to the most reckless thing Niccolo had done, which was getting into bed – in a business sense – with the most dangerous and notorious man in Italy.

And now he was stuck, days away from marrying into Italy’s most dangerous and notorious family, to a woman he felt nothing for, and with no way out.

Because getting into bed with Lorenzo meant Niccolo owed the Esposito patriarch hundreds of millions of euros, and all because he'd been too proud to go to Gennaro for help.

He supposed he could understand why Niccolo had been reluctant to confide his money problems with his older brother, but, damn it, the fool had been too proud to go to Dante or Leonardo for help too.

While the conversation continued, Gennaro worked to keep his temper controlled.

What was done was done. Niccolo had got into bed with Lorenzo Esposito, and the repayment for the debt he owed him was marriage to Siena.

If the marriage failed to go ahead, the financial debt would be called in, and when the Espositos called their debts in, the interest they added wasn't of a financial kind.

So yes, on reflection, hiding the ex-lover's trouble-making sister away was probably a wise choice, for the sister's sake as well.

If Lorenzo or any of his sons got wind of what she was planning, then God alone knew what would happen to her, because nothing – nothing – could be allowed to spoil this wedding.

And it was because nothing could be allowed to spoil this wedding that Gennaro would have to share a bed with his wife for the next six nights.

"Has Dante gone?" Gennaro's wife asked an hour later when they sat down for lunch on the sun terrace.

"Yes," he answered shortly. "A business emergency."

That had been the agreed explanation to account for Dante's sudden absence from the pre-wedding celebrations.

"Will he be gone long?"

"He will be back in the morning."

"Oh, good. It wouldn't feel like a proper celebration without Dante. "

Pouring them both a glass of iced water, he kept his tone even as he said, "There are times when it seems to me that you have a special interest in Dante."

The enormous Jackie Onassis-style shades Luisa wore hid her eyes from his view, but her golden cheeks coloured and her wide lips twitched. "Don't be ridiculous."

"There is no need to be defensive, I have simply noticed you become more animated when he is around." He'd noticed that about her as a child too.

Where she'd turned the colour of a tomato and hidden behind her mother's skirts or in a book whenever in Gennaro's presence, she would poke her head out of her shell for his brother and come out of it completely for his brother's best friend.

"I didn't think you noticed anything about me," she said coolly.

That was because Gennaro spent an inordinate amount of his time making efforts not to notice his wife.

He shrugged. "We live together. I am bound to notice things." Whether he wanted to notice them or not.

Just as Niccolo had committed to marrying Siena to save his own skin and fortune, so

Gennaro had committed to marriage with Luisa to pull off the business deal that would turn him from a multi-millionaire to a billionaire and secure his company's fortunes for decades to come.

It had all come about when the ruling monarch of a Middle Eastern country had pulled out all the stops to entice Gennaro into expanding his electric car company to his small but fabulously wealthy kingdom.

The kingdom's riches and its location in the hub of other fabulously rich nations had meant the monarch's enticement had made perfect business sense and would give Gennaro a huge advantage over his rivals.

The problem had come after Gennaro had invested millions in the construction of the factories and was in the process of getting the necessary permits to start production.

Without any warning, the kingdom's law changed – for non-citizens to get the necessary permits to do business there, the non-citizen had to be married.

Either Gennaro got married or he could forget the production permits and kiss his investment goodbye.

The monarch had not been in the slightest bit amenable to bending the rules for him.

“Take a wife,” he'd laughed. “It doesn't have to be forever – once production is up and running and a decent amount of time has passed to stop the rousing of suspicious minds, you can divorce her.

Just make sure none of my family or ministers suspect the truth. ”

Swallowing his rage at this underhand last-minute changing of the goalposts, Gennaro had forced himself to think rationally, and in doing so had thought of the

Rossellinis.

Only days before, his mother had mentioned that they'd hit hard times and were on the verge of bankruptcy, something Gennaro's father, a cruel brute of a man, had dismissed as their own fault.

Despite the extenuating circumstances and Pietro Rossellini dedicating his entire legal career to Giuseppe Martinelli's service, and despite three decades of close friendship with the Rossellinis, his father had refused to help them.

Gennaro had thought, too, of their ugly, buck-toothed eldest daughter.

A win-win scenario had formed in his mind, and he'd approached the Rossellinis with it.

He would pay off enough of their debts to keep them solvent and in exchange he would marry their eldest daughter.

Once two years of marriage had passed, they would quietly divorce, and he would pay the parents enough money to never have to worry about falling into debt again and pay the bride a substantial amount of money in her own right so she could live in luxury for the rest of her life.

His only proviso was that the nature of the marriage must be kept secret between himself, the bride and the bride's parents, something he'd subsequently had written into the wedding contract.

The penalty for revealing the truth would result in all monies at the end of the marriage being forfeited.

The Rossellinis would have bitten his hand off to agree but they'd tempered their

relief at this potential way out of their money problems by calling their daughter down from her bedroom to present the proposal to her. Up to that point, Gennaro hadn't even known Luisa was in the house.

Marriage to the ugly duckling Rossellini daughter, he'd thought, would be tolerable for him.

She'd been a shy little girl with an extraordinary talent for drawing whose presence had never irritated him the way others had and, most importantly, there would be no danger of desiring or developing feelings for someone he found physically unattractive.

It had been a good ten years since he'd last seen her.

Intellectually, he'd known the twenty-five-year-old woman he was proposing marriage to would be much different from the shy adolescent he remembered but hadn't factored in just how different she would be.

Hadn't factored in that the ugly, buck-toothed duckling would metamorphose into an elegant, beautiful swan.

Short and slimly built with gentle curves, she had a face anyone would take a second look at.

It wasn't perfect, the mouth being a little too wide and a little too full and the nose being a little too small, but when combined with her large dark brown eyes, oval face and high cheekbones, the effect was breathtaking.

Factor in the long, thick, glossy dark hair that reached down to her high breasts, and she was devastatingly beautiful.

He'd come within a whisker of insulting everyone by demanding marriage to the other daughter instead. If Luisa hadn't accepted his proposal with a look of cold indifference, he just might have done.

Only seven more sleeps and he would never have to suffer her presence again.

Never have to walk through his home and breathe in her essence.

Never have to keep such tight control of himself and watch his every word and reaction around her.

Never have to retire to his bed and fight his own mind from thinking of her sleeping in the adjoining room.

To reach that end game though, he had to get through six nights spent sharing a bed with her for the very first time...

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Chapter Two

L uisa brushed her teeth at the double sink, unable to stop herself from staring at the second toothbrush.

In the home they shared in Florence, she had her own bathroom.

It was the same set-up in those of Gennaro's other homes she'd stayed at when accompanying him on his work travels these last two years.

Their separate, private spaces were clearly demarcated.

The one time they'd shared a bathroom had been on their short honeymoon.

She'd spent those four days terrified he would breach the agreed boundaries and decide to share her bed too.

She wouldn't have been able to stop him if he'd been set on having her; he was twice her size and built of solid muscle.

She'd been so hyper-alert in those early days that she'd barely slept a wink.

It had taken weeks to realise he'd no interest in breaching the agreed boundaries and that she could sleep easy.

Gennaro held all the power in their marriage, but he'd never abused it, not in that way.

Maybe it would have been different if he'd desired her, but the only emotion she'd ever elicited from him had been irritation.

He'd needed a temporary wife; her parents had needed the money, and that's all there was to it.

If he held any residual affection for the girl who'd been a part of his family for so many years and whose heart he'd once touched with a random act of thoughtful kindness, he hid it well.

Had he shared a bathroom with another woman before, even for one night?

She couldn't imagine it. Gennaro was a solitary creature.

His socialising was, for the most part, business-related.

If he'd sought other women to fulfil his sexual needs since their wedding, he'd been discreet about it, and Luisa quickly pulled her thoughts away from wondering about his sex life because to think about it always made her feel a squidgy kind of sickness.

Teeth clean, she dressed quickly, pulling on the skinny black trousers and red corset-style top she'd taken into the bathroom with her, and tugged up the zip of the top as far as she could get it to go.

She looked at her reflection from all angles and rued that she'd become accustomed to having female staff available in Gennaro's home to help her deal with little things like zips.

Thankfully, her parents and sister had arrived and would be meeting them for dinner.

She would get Marisa to pull the zip up properly.

She stepped back into an empty suite. Gennaro was on the balcony, his back to her, looking out at the seascape. She slid the glass door open enough to say, “The bathroom’s free.”

He nodded acknowledgement but didn’t turn to face her. It was a snub she’d been on the receiving end of so many times in their two years together that she really should have become immune to it, not sit at the dressing table and open her makeup bag imagining herself throwing a vase at him.

He slipped back into the suite and into the bathroom without a word.

Alone, Luisa stared at her reflection and took a deep breath.

It was time to put on her war paint, just as she’d done for every function they’d attended together.

Except she’d always applied her war paint in the privacy of her own room and without the sound of the shower running telling her that Gennaro must be standing beneath it. Must be naked...

Another deep breath and a tight squeeze of her eyes to drive the image out, and she got to work.

Her moisturiser already on, she primed her face and then applied a thin layer of light foundation.

She’d just finished applying dark brown eyeshadow to her eyelids when the bathroom door opened.

From the mirror’s reflection, she saw Gennaro head to the dressing area with nothing but a towel hung around his snake waist.

Her breaths suddenly feeling heavier and the beats of her heart weightier, Luisa put the makeup brush away and reached for her black eyeliner.

When she put it to her eye, she found her hand was trembling and had to concentrate hard not to stab herself with it.

Right eye done, she was about to do her left eye when he stepped into the mirror's reflection again, right at the edge of it, and opened his wardrobe.

The muscles of his back rippled. A beat later, the muscles of her heart rippled too. God, his body ...

Luisa had never forgotten that game of water polo or how the glowering Gennaro had filled the goal he'd been defending.

She'd squealed with delight on Dante's shoulders but it had been Gennaro's glowering gorgeous face her eyes had been constantly drawn to.

But only his face. She'd been only eight or nine, too young to notice a man's body.

He might as well have been invisible from the neck down for all she remembered.

In all their many months of marriage, the closest to naked Luisa had seen Gennaro was when he wore polo shirts.

She always had to keep herself in check to stop herself staring at his muscular arms. Just as her eyes had always been drawn to his face as a child, marriage had found them drawn to his arms and the fine dark hair covering them, and to his neck on the days he didn't bother to shave it.

Resisting this had been a constant battle.

It was worse the times he undid the top buttons of his shirt and she was given a glimpse of the dark hair that covered his chest. Seeing it always made her feel sick, although it was like no other sickness she'd suffered from.

This sickness was low in her abdomen, and it was hot, like her insides were melting, and pulsed in ripples that collided with the knots in her stomach.

She'd finally finished lining her left eye when he turned to open a drawer in his dresser, and she caught a near full frontal view of him.

She sucked in a breath, the last breath she was able to make as suddenly she found her throat had closed too tightly to let in air and her heart had become a roar in her ears.

Gennaro was raw, unadulterated, masculine perfection. Every inch of him, from the smoothness of his olive skin to the hair that covered his chest but then faded into a straight line down the middle of his washboard stomach until it reached his navel.

If he was bothered by her presence, he didn't show it, dressing as if he was quite alone, unaware the angle of her mirror meant she could see everything.

No matter how hard she tried, she couldn't tear her stare away, not when Gennaro dropped his towel to slide snug, black boxer shorts up his long, muscular calves and thighs and over his tight buttocks, and especially not when she caught a glimpse of an impressively large manhood.

The Lord alone knew how she didn't blind herself with her mascara wand.

While Luisa somehow managed to apply a second layer of mascara and then sweep bronzer over her cheeks and paint her lips red, Gennaro continued to dress as if unaware of her presence, shrugging his arms into a black shirt that he fastened deftly

and tucked into black jeans.

Onto the bed he sat to put his feet... feet she was certain were twice the size of her own...

into a pair of polished black boots. Standing back up, he went again into his wardrobe and selected a black leather jacket.

Only then did his stare meet hers through the mirror's reflection.

"I'm going to have a scotch before we go down and join everyone," he said evenly. "Can I get you anything?"

Praying the heat she could feel scorching her skin... had he been aware of her watching him all along...? was only internal and not blazing on her face, she managed a short nod and had to clear her throat to say, "A white wine please." Make it a bucket, she almost added.

Even with him now at the far end of the suite, she struggled to refill her lungs with much-needed air.

Her thoughts were scrambled, so scrambled that she abandoned her plan to tie her hair into an elegant knot and left it loose.

After spraying on perfume, she slipped into a pair of black, strappy heels and then summoned her courage to join him at the bar in the living area.

Gennaro didn't need the telltale click of Luisa's heels crossing the tiled floor to know she was nearing him. Hers was a presence he'd been attuned to from the start.

Downing his scotch, he poured himself another and pushed the glass of wine further

down the bar so she didn't need to get too close to reach it.

Taking another drink, he held the liquid in his mouth and breathed deeply through his nose before swallowing. He could still feel the electricity in his skin from when he'd sensed her watching him dress.

He should have followed her lead and dressed in the bathroom, but he'd been determined to prove that their current living arrangements meant absolutely nothing to him, that Luisa's presence meant nothing to him. That sheer willpower alone could make the next six nights tolerable.

The woman he'd married, who rarely drank more than a glass of wine over the whole of an evening, picked up her glass and drank the contents like it was water. "Ready?" she asked, putting the empty glass on the bar.

"Sure." With the scent of her sultry perfume filling his nostrils, he downed the last of his scotch and was about to sling his jacket over his shoulder when she reached down to pick up the black handbag she'd dropped on the floor, and her glossy hair slid over her bare shoulder.

The zip of her strapless top wasn't fully done up.

Leave it, he told himself firmly. No one will see. Luisa's hair would cover it.

"Your zip is undone." The words spilt out before he could stop them.

Startled doe eyes locked onto his.

He forced a tight smile. "I can't have my wife dining with a half-zipped top. Turn around."

She held his gaze a long moment before rigidly turning her back to him.

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Inwardly cursing himself, his heart suddenly thumping, he filled his lungs slowly through his nose, then carefully gathered her long hair.

In all their time together, Gennaro had instinctively known Luisa's hair would be soft to the touch but could never have known it would feel like silk.

The urge to bury his fingers in it was close to irresistible, and, teeth gritted, he placed it over her shoulder, taking great pains not to allow their skin to connect, blocking out that the movement of her hair had released the scent of her shampoo and that it was mingling with her perfume to create a scent so divine his senses reeled.

Luisa had forgotten how to breathe. In the two years they'd been nominally husband and wife, Gennaro had never stood so close to her, not in private.

Even in public he kept physical contact to a minimum; the occasional hand to her lower back when entering a function the most he could bring himself to touch her.

He'd never been so close that she could feel the exhalation of his breaths in her hair, never stood so close that she could feel the heat of his skin, and now her heart had ballooned and was making thrashing movements, and she had to concentrate harder than she'd ever concentrated before to stop her weakening legs from turning into jelly.

Fingers pressed lightly into her back. They didn't touch her skin. They didn't need to.

She closed her eyes and snatched a short breath.

When it came, the sound of the zip being pulled up seemed magnified, a ringing to join the white noise already whooshing in her ears.

Done, he stepped away.

They left their suite without another word exchanged.

The Bianchi's lobby was filled to bursting with glamorous guests.

The entire hotel had been turned over for the exclusive use of the wedding party, but that first evening nothing formal had been planned, the guests nominally free to do as they pleased.

Tomorrow, the pre-wedding celebrations would start in earnest with four days of forced fun to look forward to until the wedding day itself.

A month earlier, each guest had been sent a gold-leafed booklet with the itinerary for the duration and accompanying instructions.

Having pored over it, the only part of the itinerary Luisa was looking forward to was Wednesday's masquerade ball, but only because the instructions had stated guests were required to make all efforts to disguise themselves and that the evening would start with guests strictly segregated by sex.

A whole evening where she wouldn't have to be glued to Gennaro's side, an evening where they could happily ignore and avoid each other.

Unfortunately, he was glued to her side that evening, but she made sure to fix a smile to her face and not give away so much as a flicker of emotion at his closeness or a flicker of her distaste at the members of the Esposito family holding court.

There was no sign yet of Lorenzo and Valeria, but their three brutish sons were already there and, of course, their daughter the bride.

Siena Esposito stood with Niccolo, her groom, their smiles as big and as fake as the smile Luisa was wearing.

It was an open secret that theirs was a business arrangement rather than a love match, and she wondered if they had a contracted end date like she and Gennaro had.

Through the crowd of mostly familiar faces in the main restaurant, she spotted her parents and sister and Gennaro's parents and maternal grandparents seated together.

She could feel the tension from across the vast space, and she pulled an even bigger smile and was more effusive than normal as she circled the table to kiss greetings to everyone, even to her hateful godparents.

She'd been too knotted with the sickness of sharing a bed with Gennaro to have time to worry about this particular meal. Small mercies, she supposed.

The great friendship between the Martinellis and the Rossellinis had strained beyond repair.

If this meal had taken place three years ago, her parents and Gennaro's parents would be sat together, laughing and talking in the familiar way that only came through decades of close friendship.

That evening, Gennaro's grandparents sat between the two couples, Marisa, Luisa and Gennaro the other foils to keep them separated.

She noted Gennaro's greeting to his parents was positively arctic compared to the greeting he gave his grandparents.

Luisa hadn't seen Gennaro's parents since their own wedding, and not for the first time wondered why he kept them at such a distance.

Their mutual distaste towards his parents was about the only thing they had in common, but the few times she'd probed about his relationship with them he'd looked at her as if she'd asked about the health of his prostate.

It was the same look she'd received when trying to probe about Niccolo and Siena's forthcoming marriage.

Gennaro had always been emotionally aloof, but he hadn't joined any family get-togethers that she'd been invited to since she was at least fifteen...

but then, once she'd turned eighteen and gone off to art school, she'd been too busy embracing adulthood to join family gatherings with any frequency either.

His absence in the decade before he'd made his marriage proposal, though, was something she'd always felt keenly, probably because she'd always felt his looming, terrifying presence so keenly.

Taking the seat beside her sister, she leaned in and whispered, "Is it me or is it cold enough to freeze the Sahara?"

Marisa grimaced and raised her eyebrows.

Growing up, neither Rossellini sister had liked Giuseppe Martinelli.

There had been something about him they'd been instinctively wary of, a coldness in his eyes that had made the coldness of his oldest son's eyes seem tropical, but they had both adored Carmella.

Carmella Martinelli had always made a big deal about treating the Rossellinis as if they were blood.

Words, Luisa had realised when her father was diagnosed with Parkinson's disease, were cheap, and the aristocratic Martinellis were cheap too.

Sure, they'd been under no obligation to help her parents when the Rossellinis finances had taken such a nosedive, but to blame her father for it after all he'd done for them and as if their own actions hadn't contributed to it and as if he'd deliberately got himself a debilitating, incurable disease, had been beyond the pale.

Family looked out for each other, that was the Italian way.

That the Martinellis had refused to help only proved they didn't see the Rossellinis as family.

Even Gennaro's marriage offer had been self-serving.

If he'd wanted to help her parents out of the kindness of his heart then he would have done.

Luisa might just have married him voluntarily as a thank you if he'd gone that route.

Instead, he'd used their precarious situation to his own advantage, and she couldn't despise him more.

Niccolo excepted, the Martinellis were cold, selfish bastards. Seven more sleeps and she'd be shot of them all, and yes, she most definitely was counting. She would return to her family and rebuild her life; one in which the man seated to her right would have no part.

“How come you were so late arriving?” she asked Marisa after their wine had been poured and she’d taken a generous swallow to calm the skittishness that was threatening to overpower her.

She needed conversation. Whenever she sat next to Gennaro, she was always acutely aware of his physicality, but tonight that acuteness had ramped up, a blistering awareness that if she moved her arm or thigh she would brush against him.

God help her, she could still feel the spot on her back through where his fingers had touched her corset, still feel sensation in the roots of her hair from where he’d moved it.

“We were late setting off.”

Something in her sister’s tone made Luisa look more closely at her.

Marisa’s eyes were bruised with tiredness.

“Has something happened with Dad?” Their father’s condition meant he had difficulty walking unaided and made him prone to falling.

Luisa had never shaken the guilt that marriage to Gennaro meant she’d had to move out of their Tuscan home, leaving her unable to help as much as she should and as much as she wanted.

Their father’s health had deteriorated rapidly these last two years, all the caring responsibilities falling on Marisa and their mother .

Marisa shook her head and gave a smile that didn’t quite meet her eyes. “No, he’s not been too bad these last few days.”

Before she could ask if something else had made them late, the waiting staff arrived at their table to take their order, and the moment passed.

Gennaro listened to his mother chatter on about the latest charity she was patronising with only half an ear.

He found it was better to only pay a modicum of attention, just enough to make the expected noises of concentration to stop accusations of not listening.

It wasn't that he disliked his mother's chatter, more that when he listened to her blather on about starving children and cruelty to animals, he wanted to lift the table above his head and bring it crashing down with a roar of suppressed fury.

To release his fury though, would be to make him like his father, and he would rather live like a Tibetan monk than be anything like that man.

Living like a Tibetan monk was unnecessary for the very good reason that Gennaro had learned to control his emotions before he started adolescence.

Ruthlessly control them. It was in his relationships with the opposite sex that he exerted the most self-control, and he did this simply by not engaging with them.

Relationships that was. This wasn't to say he didn't have female interactions.

He enjoyed sex as much as the next man, but he selected his discreet, short-lived affairs carefully, physical appeal mattering less than attitude.

Any detection of needy vibes from a potential hookup, and he walked away.

Gennaro had reached the age of thirty-seven without a single long-term relationship, and he had every intention of spending his next thirty-seven years alone too.

He might consider getting a dog though. He loved dogs.

They were loyal and, unlike humans, were never cruel and only bit when provoked .

Luisa, he suspected, only bit when provoked.

Over the course of their marriage, he'd gone to great lengths to provoke no form of emotion from her.

It had been for her sake that he'd been a cold, remote husband.

He took no joy from it. It's the way it had to be.

She was too great a temptation for him to behave differently.

He should have married the sister. Marisa was as beautiful as Luisa, but her beauty did nothing for him.

It didn't strike his chest the way Luisa's did.

Her entry into a room didn't punch him in the guts the way Luisa's did.

If he'd married Marisa, he wouldn't have had to keep his distance to the extent that he had with Luisa, would have established a more cordial relationship from the start, just to make their time together bearable.

If he'd married Marisa, he wouldn't be seated beside her as he was right now with Luisa, tortured with awareness sluicing through his veins.

He kept catching wafts of her perfume. Each inhalation landed straight in his loins.

This time next week, they'd be over. Luisa would be free of him, and he'd be free of her presence and her scent and the intolerable arousal and emotions she evoked in him.

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Chapter Three

There was a chill in the air, a reminder that, despite the balmy daytime temperature they'd enjoyed that day, they were still in spring.

Luisa hugged her arms for warmth. She'd been so desperate to get out of the suite and escape the heat the simple fastening of a zip had induced that she'd forgotten her jacket.

"Are you cold?"

Gennaro's question startled her. She wouldn't have thought he'd notice, never mind mention it.

"A bit."

"Here, take my jacket."

Heart thumping, she recoiled internally at the unexpected offer. "I'll be okay. We'll be back in a minute."

"I don't need it." Without missing a step, he shrugged it off and passed it to her.

Feeling she had no choice but to take it, she murmured, "Thank you," and slipped her arms into its warmth.

Warmth that came from Gennaro's body. It dwarfed her small frame and smelt of

leather and his cologne, and she experienced an almost irrepressible urge to rub her nose into it and inhale the scent deep into her lungs.

The rest of the short walk was conducted in silence. It seemed to Luisa that it took forever.

Not until they were back in their suite was the silence broken.

“I’ve got work I need to catch up with,” he said. “I’ll take it out on the balcony so as not to disturb you.”

She took the jacket off. “You should wear this. It’ll only get colder.”

He gave a fleeting, almost mocking smile. “You sound like a wife.”

Stung for reasons she couldn’t begin to fathom, she dredged a smile of her own to mask it. “After two years, it was bound to happen at least once, but don’t worry – we won’t be together long enough for it to happen again.”

A hardness came to his stare. “Good. Because the last thing I have ever wanted is a wife.”

“So it’s not just me you don’t want as a wife, then?” she asked impulsively.

His features tightened. Lifting his chin, his nostrils flared. “Some people are meant for solitude. I am one of them.” Then, with another forced, fleeting smile, he bowed his head. “I will leave you to prepare for bed. Sleep well.”

“You too.”

He’d stepped out onto the balcony with his laptop, jacket and a bottle of scotch before

Luisa realised it was the first time he'd ever wished her to sleep well.

Gennaro didn't actually have any work that needed catching up with. He'd worked until midnight the night before to get caught up and had handed over everything to his team. For the next week, he would only be contacted in the event of an emergency.

Pouring himself another drink in the hope it would help him relax, he tilted his head back and breathed deeply. In the brief time she'd worn it, Luisa's perfume had transferred onto this jacket.

God, he wished this week could be over already, almost wished Dante hadn't been successful in kidnapping the English woman who'd travelled to Italy to destroy the wedding.

He wouldn't wish marrying into the Esposito family on his worst enemy, let alone his brother, but Niccolo had made his bed, and unless he wanted a future where he would never sleep again for fear of a bullet or worse, he had to lie in it.

If only Niccolo had confided his troubles in him or even in Dante. Both men would have dug him out of his hole. Pride could make a man stupid, and it was Niccolo's pride that had stopped him going to Gennaro for help. Pride inherited from their bastard father.

Sipping his scotch, he thought grimly that at least the distraction of Luisa sitting beside him over dinner had dulled the effect of sharing a table with his father.

The last time he'd seen the bastard had been at his wedding, the invitation sent only for propriety reasons.

Niccolo had invited him on the order of Lorenzo Esposito.

Niccolo had escaped the tyrant of their childhood only to marry the daughter of another.

He took another sip of his scotch and closed his eyes.

It seemed he was destined to spend his whole life worrying about his impulsive brother.

Better to be worrying about him than have a dead brother though.

Gennaro might not do emotion, but Niccolo was the exception.

Deep in his stony-cold heart lived the love he'd carried for him since their mother had brought him home from the hospital at two days old. It was his earliest memory .

A breeze carried another whiff of Luisa's perfume into his airwaves at the same moment he sensed movement, and he turned his head to find her closing the drapes.

Their eyes met.

She stilled.

His heart pulsed.

She'd changed into cream, long-sleeved silk pyjamas. All her makeup had been removed. She was as breathtaking bare-faced as she was fully made up.

His heart pulsed again, and he had to clench his jaw to nod an acknowledgement before turning away from her.

He wasn't bloody working, Luisa fumed. He'd lied to her. He hadn't even bothered

opening his laptop! Gennaro found the idea of sharing a bed with her so distasteful that he'd rather sit out on a cold balcony and pickle his liver with scotch.

Well, screw him. She was tempted to take the righthand side of the bed just to piss him off.

She only knew he preferred the righthand side because she'd passed his room on a few occasions when his door had been left open and before the staff had made the bed up, and noticed the bedding bunched over on that side.

She couldn't fathom why his preferred side of the bed had lodged in her brain, but it had, and if she didn't prefer the lefthand side herself then she would bloody well sleep on his side.

But that would be cutting off her nose to spite her face.

Knowing perfectly well it would be hours before he came back into the suite and too wired to feel sleepy, she got into bed with her eReader and tried to switch her brain off in an escapist novel.

An hour later, she was still on the same chapter she'd started with.

It was her stupid eyes continually flicking to the balcony door that had her reading the same paragraphs over and over .

The eReader turned off, she nestled into the bedsheets and closed her eyes. Tried to close them. They kept opening to peer through the dark to the balcony door, so she burrowed deeper into the covers until she was practically entombed in them.

At least two more hours must have passed before her body began to feel heavy and a lethargy stole into her mind. She was sinking into the welcome darkness of sleep...

Her eyes sprang open at a muffled noise.

Footsteps treaded quietly over the floor. The bathroom door closed softly.

She swallowed and gripped the sheets, willing her mind back to its sleepy state.

Time stood suspended, every atom in her body on the highest alert... until the bathroom door opened and her atoms went into hyperdrive and her heart thumped into her throat.

Frozen, she heard the muffled sound of clothes being stripped and discarded, and then there was the slightest movement on the firm mattress and the slow rustling of sheets as he drew them over himself.

She knew he'd turned his back to her just as hers was turned to his, and when she was finally able to make a slow, quiet inhalation, the scent of toothpaste and the remnants of his cologne drifted into her airwaves.

She slid her hand quietly to the base of her throat and pressed on the wildly beating pulse.

Did he know she was awake? Was there a way of telling?

Her mother had always known when Luisa was faking sleep, but in those days she'd been a small child who liked to play with her toys in bed rather than sleep and her mother had been an expert on children faking sleep.

Luisa didn't imagine Gennaro had ever climbed into a bed with a woman and had her fake sleep on him before.

But then, she didn't imagine he'd ever climbed into a bed with a woman without the

express purpose of having sex with her and without the intention of either leaving that bed or making the woman leave it shortly after.

She closed her eyes and willed her thrashing heart to still.

Gennaro woke instantly after the least refreshing sleep of his life.

His willpower was such that it controlled his sleep too, and he was in the exact same position as when he'd first got into bed.

Luisa, though, had moved. It was the first thing he sensed, before he even opened his eyes.

There had been a huge gulf between them when he'd climbed in, both positioning themselves as close to the edge of their respective sides as was practicable without falling out.

Though not so much as a strand of her hair touched him, she felt closer.

Close enough for the arousal he'd spent the night fighting to uncoil into his loins.

Gritting his teeth, he slipped stealthily out of the bed and headed into the bathroom without looking at her.

Showered, a towel around his waist, he opened the door slowly. All he could see of her was the top of her glossy dark brown hair poking out of the top of the sheets she'd cocooned herself in.

He dressed quickly and, in the same stealth mode that he'd climbed out of the bed with, left the suite.

After the worst sleep of her life, Luisa knew before she opened her eyes that she was alone in the bed and that Gennaro had gone. At some point while she'd slept, she'd rolled over and moved close to the centre of the bed. She could only hope she'd done that after he'd left the suite.

Her chest too tight for relief that he'd gone, she dragged herself into the bathroom and was assailed with the scent of Gennaro's shower gel and cologne.

He was everywhere, she thought miserably, even in his absence.

He always had been.

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She'd spotted him in Florence once, in her art school days.

She'd been enjoying an al fresco lunch with her boyfriend in Piazza della Signoria when he'd suddenly appeared from nowhere, strolling in her direction with his phone glued to his ear and shades on his face.

Her heart had never gone from a gentle trot to a full-blown canter at such speed before.

The closer he'd got to her, the harder her heart had beaten and the stronger the sickness that had set off in her belly.

If it had been his brother she would have hurried over to say hello, but it had been Gennaro, the man who'd frightened and unsettled her since she was old enough to think.

He'd walked past, getting to within three feet of her, without noticing her.

She'd followed him with her eyes until he'd been out of sight and then found herself unable to eat another bite.

She'd carried the sickness in her belly for days.

For the rest of her time at art school, she'd been incapable of walking anywhere in the Renaissance city without her eyes searching for him, but she'd never seen him again.

Not until he'd turned up at her parents' home with his proposal.

By the time she'd dressed and thrown a black coffee down her throat, it was closer to lunch than breakfast, but her stomach was as tight as her chest and in no need of food.

She must have sent him a hundred messages over the course of their marriage – it was a habit they'd formed, probably because it saved either of them having to talk to the other – but this was the first she'd written with trembling fingers.

Where are you? Do you want me to join you?

His reply came promptly.

Join your family. I'm busy.

"Fuck you," she muttered under her breath, but his terse response was exactly what she needed to galvanise her.

Only six more sleeps and she would never have to deal with the asshole and her confusing feelings for him again. Thank God their last sleep would be in separate beds.

Outside, the sky was blue and the sun warm. Guests were sunbathing around the pool, and she smiled and waved and hailed greetings as she passed them, even the disgusting Esposito patriarch and two of his disgusting sons.

She spotted Gennaro at a table in the bar area on the other side of the pool, deep in conversation with his brother.

With her shades on, she could pretend she hadn't noticed him, and she carried on her way into the main section of the hotel where her sister and parents had been roomed without missing a step.

It was in the lobby that she saw Dante bounding down the circular staircase. “Darling!” he hailed when he spotted her, and pulled her into an embrace. “Sorry, I can’t stay – I thought my business emergency had been dealt with, but...” He shook his head ruefully.

“You’re leaving again?”

“I will be back in time for the wedding.”

“That long?” she said, not hiding her disappointment.

Luisa had a secretly held dream that Dante would fall in love with Marisa, had been planning to play matchmaker that week.

Yes, the man was a playboy, but he had a good heart and most playboys settled down eventually.

Just because Luisa was seemingly destined to live her life a born-again virgin didn’t mean Marisa had to, and she feared that if her sister didn’t come out of her shell soon, she’d never find her way out of it.

Luisa had at least had one lover, even if he had been boring and had done nothing for her in the bedroom. Marisa hadn’t even had that .

“I’m afraid so. If you’re looking for your family, I just saw your parents go into the bistro.”

“Thank you.”

He kissed her cheeks and then bounded out of the hotel without looking back.

The bistro was one of The Bianchi's smaller restaurants, and she found her parents on its outdoor terrace.

"Where's Marisa?" she asked after she'd kissed and embraced them both. Her father, she was relieved to see, was reasonably steady when he rose to his feet.

"Taking a walk," her mother said.

"She wants to explore the church," her father added in the slow, slurring way his disease had reduced his once booming voice to.

"Is she okay?" At one point in their teenage years, Marisa had wanted to be a nun. While her brief religious fervour had certainly abated, Luisa's sister still found comfort in the church, especially in times of trouble.

Her mother patted her hand. "She's fine. How about you? You look tired."

Luisa shrugged ruefully. As much as she'd put a bright, positive spin to marrying Gennaro in the beginning so as not to distress them, her parents knew she was counting the days until her marriage could end. They were counting them, too. "So do you."

Her mother had lost weight, and not even the glamour of her makeup could fully disguise the bruising of little sleep beneath her eyes.

She received a rueful shrug in response. They'd all known this week wouldn't be easy for any of them. "Have you eaten?"

"I'm not hungry."

"But you must eat, cocca ."

She smiled at the endearment her mother had addressed her with all the years of her life.

“I’ll eat at lunch with Gennaro.” If he summoned her, that was.

“Is Marisa doing the boat trip later?” Her parents wouldn’t be.

Her father’s disease was a ready-made excuse to get out of any activity they’d rather drink methylated spirits than attend.

“She said she would.”

Luisa’s phone buzzed. She read the message and grimaced. “I’ve been summoned.”

“This time next week, you’ll be free of him,” her mother said softly.

She tried to inject cheer into her voice. “Six more sleeps.”

Kissing them goodbye, she fixed her shades to her face and walked back the way she’d come.

Her husband and his brother were still at the same pool bar table and had been joined by Niccolo’s fiancée.

Luisa embraced Niccolo and Siena first, then held her breath and pressed her cheek to Gennaro’s, their typical public greeting.

Having stood to greet her, he courteously pulled out a chair for her.

She sank into it with a practised, gracious, “Thank you.”

Luisa had never forgotten why she'd agreed to her marriage and, as such, always played her part even when she wanted to stab him.

Always, though, she'd been aware of the tempestuously cold undercurrent running between them, an undercurrent she doubted anyone else picked up on.

Gennaro was generally aloof and indifferent to everyone so his minor displays of affection to her, given only when he deemed it strictly necessary, were completely in line with his character.

Niccolo was a completely different character, and while she hardly knew Siena, she knew enough to feel the undercurrent running between them, a coldness that would be entirely understandable if they'd spent a few years locked in a room with Gennaro but not between a couple only days away from marrying.

Wanting to ease the tension so thick you'd need a chainsaw to cut through it, she smiled brightly. "Poor Dante has had to leave again and probably won't be back until the wedding."

She knew immediately that it was the wrong thing to say. Both Martinelli brothers seemed to freeze, and then Gennaro's black, icy stare lasered onto hers and, his tone sharp, said, "Who did you hear that from?"

Luisa didn't let her smile drop or doubt enter her voice.

"From Dante himself – I bumped into him in the lobby as he was leaving. What awful timing to have such a major business emergency to deal with," she embellished with no real idea why she was embellishing other than some instinct was telling her to.

"The poor thing looked devastated, like he had the weight of the world on his shoulders." He hadn't.

Dante had had a spring in his step. “Still, I’m sure he’ll get it all sorted, and the main thing is he’ll be back in time for the wedding. ”

The ice in Gennaro’s stare thawed a tiny bit, and he bowed his head. “Indeed.”

“Did he say what the emergency was?” Siena asked.

Luisa shook her head. “I didn’t like to ask – it’s clearly a bad one.

Let’s hope it isn’t something fatal to his business.

” Then she gave another bright smile. “Let that not ruin everyone’s fun.

I’m very much looking forward to the afternoon’s excursion.

Have any of you been to Nerano before?” Nerano was the seaside village they would be sailing to.

“I have,” Siena said, and proceeded to discuss the village’s charms, all thoughts and talk about Dante forgotten. But not forgotten by Luisa. She sensed danger, and had to clench her hands into fists to stop them rubbing arms that suddenly felt cold.

Chapter Four

Early afternoon, the guests going on the boat trip made their way to the harbour and boarded Lorenzo Esposito's superyacht.

Gennaro, who had no interest in sailing and who disliked nothing more than being in a crowd of people for forced fun, hoped for major engine failure, and that was before he found his parents holding court in the saloon with the Espositos.

Such a heartwarming scene, he thought cynically, the parents of the bride and groom playing the role of great friends.

Neither couple knew the meaning of friendship.

Playing the role of dutiful son, he kissed both his parents and then Lorenzo and Valeria, and then endured Lorenzo's gregarious welcome speech before swiping two glasses of the copious champagne being poured by the magnum and muttering to Luisa, "Let's go on deck."

She complied without demurring.

Gennaro's thoughts were grim as he led Luisa outside. He didn't know which role was the hardest to play: the dutiful son or the dutiful husband. Both were intolerable in their differing ways.

Having already had enough of people for one day, he climbed the outdoor steps up numerous decks until he found one that was, as yet, unoccupied other than with staff.

He didn't fool himself into believing it would be unoccupied for long.

He estimated around three hundred of the wedding party had come on this trip, and each of those people would be seeking their own space in which to soak up the sun.

When that happened, he would seek out one of his cousins – he could generally tolerate them – or find somewhere quiet indoors.

Lorenzo had told the guests they were welcome to use all the onboard facilities, and Gennaro was going to take him at his word.

Comfortable loungers were scattered around a swimming pool, and he stripped down to his swim shorts and stretched out. With his shades on, no one who spotted him would think him anything but a man on a well-earned break relaxing in the sun with his wife.

Up to that point, his wife had played her role with equal aplomb, but there was a long hesitation before she turned her back to him and removed her thin, white sundress.

Keeping his gaze fixed ahead, he tried to tune out the semi-naked body folding the dress and placing it neatly at the foot of the lounge next to his own.

Tried to tune out the golden skin and the scraps of black material covering the most intimate parts.

Especially tried to tune out the tightening in his loins and the tingling in his flesh.

Although not looking at her, he was aware of her every movement, and when she bent over to take something out of her bag, he screwed his eyes shut and fought the thickening sensation in his groin.

When he next looked, she was propped upright on her sun lounger, one toned golden leg stretched out, the other bent at the knee. Her eReader was in her pretty hand.

“So what’s really happening with Dante?” she asked, breaking the tense silence enveloping them without lifting her eyes from the screen in front of her.

“Nothing,” he answered shortly, now having to contend with a tightening in his chest as well as his loins.

“It didn’t feel like nothing earlier when I mentioned him leaving in front of Siena.” He felt her stare land on him. “I’m not stupid, Gennaro. I know something’s going on.”

“And you want to know what it is for what reason?”

“Because I dug you out of a hole earlier. Your poker face in public is normally professional standard, but it dropped when I mentioned Dante leaving. If I hadn’t exaggerated my conversation with him, Siena would be wondering what the hell is going on too, and my instinct is that whatever is going on is something you and Niccolo want to keep from her. ”

Taken aback at Luisa’s perception and its depth, Gennaro turned his face to look at her properly. But only her face. He would not let his gaze drift below her chin.

“Do you want to know because it concerns your crush?” he asked roughly.

Her doe eyes narrowed. “He’s not my crush.”

“You keep dropping his name into conversation which suggests a crush.” And her eyes always lit up for him. And her voice. She smiled a lot more when Dante was around too. Proper smiles. Only by exerting ruthless control had Gennaro smothered

the disturbing emotions those smiles elicited in him.

“We don’t have conversations, Gennaro.”

“We are having one right now.”

“Only because I haven’t let you shut me down like you normally do.”

“I don’t shut you down.”

“Yes you do. Every time I try to hold a conversation with you, you either dismiss me or ignore me. It’s why I stopped bothering, but what the hell, we’ve only got a few more days left to put up with each other.

I’d never tell anyone anything you confide in me, and not because of that sneaky clause you put in our marriage contract allowing you to sue me for the return of the settlement if I speak out about you or our marriage.

If you’d bothered getting to know me, you’d know I can keep my mouth shut without threats. ”

If Gennaro was a man for dropping his mouth open at the unexpected, his would be on the floor.

It wasn’t just that Luisa was contradicting him and arguing with him, but the fire blazing from her eyes, a fire he’d never felt before.

He’d always sensed she had fire in her veins.

To witness the small, tempered flame she was exhaling now...

God, it was arousing. Everything physical about her had always aroused him, but this was the first time her attitude had thrust itself into his loins too, and though he knew he shouldn't...

mustn't... he could no longer stop his stare from dipping the length of her semi-naked body.

His throat running dry, he quickly pulled his gaze back to her face, but not before every inch of her softly curved perfection lodged into his retinas and into the arousal he was already fighting.

Luisa's heart was hammering so hard it felt like a heavy pulse of its own in her throat, and she swallowed back the heavy, quailing sickness that always went hand-in-hand with Gennaro's presence and which felt even heavier than normal.

It was taking everything she had to keep her focus on her eReader and not let her gaze drift over his semi-naked body.

She hated how deeply aware she was of him. How deeply aware she'd always been.

His terse message earlier had galvanised her more than she'd realised.

She could put up with being treated like a nodding dog when their private lives were kept separate, but it was much harder to swallow now they were destined for days with little respite from each other and when her awareness for him was mushrooming.

If there was a tether, hers had been reached.

There was a strange thickness in his voice when he slowly said, "It was never my intention to make you feel shut down."

The quailing sickness that was like no other sickness increased at both his expression and his tone, and she jutted her chin and tightened her trembling fingers around her eReader. “Wasn’t it?”

Before he could answer, excited voices cut through the sea breeze Luisa had barely noticed dancing around them, and they simultaneously broke the lock of their eyes to find a handful of Siena’s excitable, glamorous friends bounding towards them.

The giggling women, all younger than Luisa, threw themselves onto the surrounding loungers and stripped to their teeny bikinis.

With nearly as much flesh on display as the day they’d been born, they introduced themselves.

Every one of them, Luisa noted, addressed their introductions to Gennaro.

All were openly making eyes at him, and she experienced a sudden strong urge to shove them all into the pool.

Swallowing back the acrid taste that had formed on her tongue, she glanced at Gennaro to see how he was reacting to their flirtations. He looked bored.

She expelled the breath she hadn’t realised she’d been holding.

Maybe he’d spoken the truth, and his indifference to Luisa wasn’t personal...

not that he’d said that in so many words, but it had been implied.

Maybe he was one of those asexual people she’d read about...

She dismissed the thought as quickly as it formed.

Gennaro was practically wrapped in masculine sexuality, but for whatever reason, he kept the wrapping tight around him.

Before she could stop herself, she wondered what it would be like if he were to loosen the wrapping and cloak her in it, and as she imagined this, imagined Gennaro lowering himself on top of her, his face turned to hers.

Their eyes clashed and held, and suddenly she had the strongest sensation that he was reaching into her mind, the sensation so strong it felt like a touch to her skin.

A flush of heat pulsed deep between her thighs, a pulse so intensely powerful that she automatically pressed the top of her thighs together and sucked in a breath.

For one long moment, the breath stuck.

Her pulses, already erratic, went haywire, and she wrenched her stare away and gripped even tighter to her eReader.

Heart pounding, she pretended to be engrossed in her book; came within a fraction of jumping out of her heated skin when his clipped yet smooth voice murmured, “Let’s go inside and find some less excitable company.”

She didn’t respond for the longest time. She couldn’t. She couldn’t even look at him.

The only time she’d experienced anything like that pulse of heat had been when watching a particularly erotic love scene in a film when she’d been at art school.

That had been the night she’d first brought herself to orgasm, and her horror grew to remember the man in the love scene that had turned her on so much had looked like Gennaro.

She'd never made that connection before and she wished to hell that she hadn't made it now.

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He was looking at her. She could feel it. He was waiting for her to acquiesce like she always did to his commands, and she drew in a ragged breath and jerked a nod.

Turning away from him, she put her eReader in her bag, pulled her sundress on and slipped her feet into her flat sandals.

Still not ready to face him, she groped in her bag for her butterfly clip, then gathered her hair together and pinned it back.

There was something so graceful and yet so sensual in the way Luisa gathered that long, glossy hair into her hands that Gennaro found himself mesmerised, the annoying, chattering women surrounding them nothing but a distant buzzing noise in his ears.

When she lifted the hair and exposed the slender neck he must have seen multiple times, the buzzing chatter disappeared completely, the pumping of his blood the only sound.

He'd been wrong, he realised. He might have looked at that neck multiple times, but he'd never truly seen it before.

He'd never allowed himself to. He'd blurred his eyes and refused to see it, just as he'd metaphorically blurred his eyes to stop himself from truly seeing any of her because to see Luisa was to want her; want her with a need that was close to primitive in its strength.

She rose to her feet and slung her bag over her shoulder. The sun beaming down on

them cast her in a shimmering golden light.

He blinked to clear the effect. She still shimmered. And then she turned her face to him. The moment their eyes met, he knew with a hard punch to his guts that he would never be able to blur his eyes to her again.

Something had changed. Luisa didn't know what that something was but she could feel it in the very fibre of her being, an effect magnified every time Gennaro looked at her.

She sensed him studying her in a way he'd never done before, a sensation that vibrated through her skin even when they joined some of his cousins and their families in the yacht's games room.

It was unsettling. Frightening. Thrilling ...

The quailing sickness intensified, and when they returned to their suite she had to exert all her self-control not to run straight into the bathroom so she could gather herself together in private.

"Do you mind if I shower first again?" she asked as she put her bag, which she'd hugged to her chest the entire walk back from the harbour, on the table.

"Go ahead. Can I get you anything for when you're finished? A glass of champagne? Wine? Coffee?"

She was so stunned at an offer Gennaro had never once made before unless in relation to getting something for himself that she couldn't stop her shocked gaze from darting to him.

He'd propped himself against the wall, arms folded loosely across his chest, that

unsettling frightening and thrilling expression in his eyes.

“I’m good, thanks,” she murmured, edging herself to the bathroom.

Hastily locking the bathroom door, Luisa closed her eyes and pressed her hand to her racing heart with a long, slow exhalation.

She swore she could still feel Gennaro’s black stare penetrating her flesh.

It felt like she had electricity running through her veins, and when she stripped her clothes off, she stood in front of the full-length mirror half-expecting to see glimmers bouncing off her skin.

Her breasts felt heavy. Taut. Without thinking, she cupped one and imagined Gennaro taking it into his mouth...

What was she doing?

Horried at the direction her imagination was trying to take her, she dived into the shower.

Bad enough being so intensely aware of him never mind feeding her sick attraction with her imagination.

It wasn’t until she’d finished drying herself that she realised she’d forgotten to bring her evening wear into the bathroom. She’d been too intent on escaping Gennaro to even think about it.

Thick bath towel wrapped tightly around her body and a smaller one wrapped around her head, she spent an age with her hand on the door handle, only able to galvanise herself into leaving the room by remembering his terse reply to her message that

morning.

She was reading too much into things. She only thought things had changed because her attraction to him had virtually slapped her around the face. She only felt his stare more deeply because her awareness of him had skyrocketed. Everything she was sensing was her imagination going into overdrive.

Her heart managed to sink and jump simultaneously to find him on the sofa that acted as a divider between the sleeping and dressing areas.

It sank and jumped simultaneously a second time when he lifted his gaze from his phone to her, and then it began to pump furiously, driving hot blood to her cheeks... driving hot blood everywhere .

A long moment passed in heavy silence before, eyes still locked on hers, he stood up. "If you have finished in there, I'll take my shower."

Vocal cords all tied up, she nodded and stepped aside on weakening legs to let him pass.

As soon as she heard the shower running she hurriedly threw her clothes on.

Gennaro scrubbed his body with more vigour than usual, as if rubbing the loofah hard enough into his skin could erase the sight of Luisa in a towel.

There was nothing sexy about a towel. Not in itself.

It's what lay beneath it that made it sexy, especially when that something was Luisa's naked body.

God help him, he was already struggling to erase the image of her breasts in that

black bikini.

Breasts that were higher and fuller than he'd imagined in those few moments of weakness when he'd been unable to stop himself from imagining them.

Breasts that were the perfect fit for his mouth...

He closed his eyes and let the hot water pour over him and rinse him clean.

He couldn't rinse his thoughts. This, what was happening to him, was all the proof he needed to confirm he'd taken the correct course of action throughout his marriage. Separate rooms. Everything separate unless conducted in public.

Being with Luisa in public had been hard enough to deal with.

In public his awareness of her, always so developed, became intolerable.

He would spend evenings at functions with Luisa at his side forced to breathe in her scent, forced to hear her voice when she made conversation, forced to endure other men casting her with desirous eyes.

Despite his earlier denial, he had shut her down when she'd tried to make private conversation with him.

Like everything else he'd done in their marriage, it had been for her sake.

If he hadn't found her so attractive it might have been different, might have been possible for a form of platonic...

not friendship; he didn't do friendship, but a sense of camaraderie...

to develop between them. He could have shared his admiration for her artwork, maybe even shared how touching he found her exquisite illustrations that were childish and almost comic at first glance but on second look revealed a depth and tenderness that tugged at something in his chest.

Any form of bond with a woman like Luisa was impossible for a man like him.

Luisa wasn't just beautiful and talented but had an unshowy intelligence and wit about her too that pulled at him.

Bonds, no matter how tentative, could strengthen.

Bonds with a woman whose brain fascinated with the same ferocity as her beauty could strengthen into something dangerous for a man like him.

Gennaro had too much of his father in him to risk them.

Luisa's preparation for the evening was a Groundhog Day experience spent applying her makeup at the dressing table and watching Gennaro dressing for the evening in the mirror's reflection.

The difference was he didn't make any effort to hide that he knew she was watching him.

Those black eyes kept locking onto her reflection, holding her stare as he pulled his snug boxers up his muscular thighs and over a manhood surrounded by a thatch of black pubic hair that was even more impressive than the glimpse she'd caught the evening before and which made the pulse deep between her legs relight into a flame.

No matter how hard she tried to tear her gaze away, her eyes refused to obey, and she watched with barely concealed fascination as his stomach and the line of black hair

covering it stretched when he lifted his arms to pull a black t-shirt over his head.

Not a word was spoken. Not verbally. What was being left unsaid...

He was playing with her, she told herself with more than a hint of desperation. Asserting his dominance. Reminding her of who held all the cards between them.

He was shrugging his arms into a black velvet suit jacket when he said, "What you said earlier, about me shutting you down. You were right. I did shut you down. Deliberately."

Luckily she'd finished doing her eyes otherwise she really would have taken one of them out. Unsure how to respond, she simply held his stare .

"You're a beautiful woman, Luisa. That makes you dangerous."

She blinked in shock.

The faintest smile curved the corners of his mouth.

"People are drawn to beauty. It's coveted, and those in possession of it rarely want to share.

" He lifted a hefty shoulder and added, "When it's a beauty unique to someone's personal tastes, then people become selfish and possessive.

" The faint smile disappeared. "I don't do possessive, Luisa.

I don't do relationships. My life is lived how I need to live it.

We married because I needed a wife for a business deal and your family needed my

money, and our end date is carved in stone.

If I've treated you in a way that's made you unhappy then understand it was never personal – it's how it had to be between us. ”

“Why are you telling me this?” she whispered.

The black eyes glittered. “I think you know why.”

Her breath caught in her throat. The meaning in his stare was unambiguous. Hot blood filled her head, dizzying her, the roar so loud she barely heard the sound of Gennaro's phone ringing.

He held her stare a moment longer before picking up the phone from the bed and taking it out onto the balcony to answer it.

Chapter Five

It was with much relief that Luisa found herself seated beside her sister again for the evening meal.

Less of a relief that Gennaro was seated on her other side.

Joining them at their table were her parents and a tech tycoon and his wife.

Gennaro's parents and grandparents were seated at the other side of the restaurant, which was also a relief – she felt tense enough as it was without having to deal with Gennaro's parents too.

Any hope the meal would give her a chance to relax, she soon realised, had been a pipe dream. Whatever ability she'd developed to block out Gennaro's physicality when they dined together had been blown to smithereens.

Crowded around the table as they all were meant they sat closer than they usually would, and she had to press her thighs tightly together and cross her ankles under her chair to stop any part of her leg rubbing against his.

She could do nothing to stop their arms from brushing as they ate though, and she wished she'd worn a long-sleeved top rather than a white halter-neck.

Wished, too, that he'd put his blazer back on because it was his warm, bare arm hers kept brushing against, and when he rested his hand on the table between courses, the temptation to cover it with her own hand was almost more than she could endure.

Why, she wondered miserably, were her feelings for him refusing to stay buried now they were only days away from parting? And how could they be so strong when she hated him so much?

She tried to console herself that it was only physical feelings, but it was no consolation.

While Gennaro was discussing business with the tycoon, Luisa was picking at her food and trying to stop herself spontaneously combusting each time their arms made contact.

Which was approximately every other second.

If Gennaro was feeling anything like she was, he was hiding it well.

But then, the man was an expert at masking his feelings.

He thought she was beautiful. He desired her.

He knew she desired him. There had been no ambiguity about any of that.

He desired her but he didn't want to desire her and he wouldn't do anything about it...

or would he? Because there had been ambiguity at how their conversation had ended, the way he'd spoken in the past tense. It's how it had to be between us.

Had .

God, this was intolerable. She should not be sitting there fighting her own body and practically quivering with the wish for him to move his hand from the table and put it

on her lap.

She didn't want to want him any more than he wanted to want her, but now their attraction was out in the open the thing she didn't want to want was all she could think about.

His arm brushed against hers for the hundredth time.

Heat pulse through her for the hundredth time.

Feeling like she could scream, Luisa downed her wine and poured herself another.

She longed to confide her feelings with Marisa and get her perspective, but her sister was unusually subdued and picking at her food too.

"Is everything alright?" she whispered.

Marisa nodded and drank some water.

"You missed the boat trip."

Another nod. "I got the time confused and thought it was leaving later than it was." A flash of mischief appeared on her wan face. "Was Lorenzo's yacht the best yacht ever?"

"The best," Luisa answered, deadpan. "The best of the best."

Their eyes met, and mild amusement turned to smothered giggles. Luisa impulsively planted a kiss on her sister's cheek and whispered, "If you need to talk, you know where I am."

Marisa squeezed her hand. Luisa hated that it was Gennaro's hand she longed to do the squeezing.

The rest of the torturous meal passed at a snail's pace, but pass it did.

Luisa was on her third glass of wine when their final course was cleared away, but respite was nowhere in sight, not yet.

The ballroom had been transformed into a casino for the evening courtesy of the Espositos youngest son Rico, who ran the family's chain of gambling dens.

There was no question of Luisa being able to retire to bed like her parents or disappear pleading a headache like her sister.

"We'll give it an hour and then make our excuses," Gennaro murmured as they left the restaurant and stepped onto one of the hotel's many terraces.

A little lightheaded from too much wine and not enough food, and increasingly furious that she'd developed such strong sexual feelings for the man who'd treated her like she was invisible for the whole of their marriage and who'd then had the audacity to tell her she was beautiful, she sweetly said, "Worried that mixing with humans for too long will cause your hard-drive to malfunction?"

He abruptly stopped walking and stared at her with one of his many expressions she'd never been able to read. "What did you just say?"

She smiled with the same sweetness as her tone. "You heard me perfectly well, but don't worry, Gennaro, your secret's safe with me."

"My secret?"

“You know; that you’re actually an android and that your creators forgot to input human emotions into your programming? That secret.”

For the second time in one day, Gennaro’s jaw wanted to hit the floor. “You are comparing me to a robot?”

“Well, an android is a form of robot designed to resemble a human, so I suppose I am. Your creators did a great job on your external appearance, so full credit to them for that, but when you go to the laboratory for your annual check-up, tell them they need to install the Being Sociable With Other Humans programme. I’d also recommend they upgrade your Recognising the two of them locked in a battle of wills with their selves.

Whether he would have taken the step needed to close the distance between them and haul her into his arms to kiss her senseless if voices and footsteps hadn’t suddenly rung out in the still air was something he would never know.

Dropping his finger from her cheek, he took a step back and rolled his neck, swallowing control back into himself.

No one entering the casino would guess it was actually a ballroom. Luisa walked into it on legs that were still trembling. It felt like the entirety of her body, inside and out, was trembling.

That shock of sexual attraction she’d suffered on the yacht had nothing on what was happening to her now. She could feel the mark Gennaro’s finger had made on her skin like a scald.

All around them, betting chips were being placed, card sharks trying their luck against the house, but it was to the roulette table that Gennaro steered her.

“Want to play?” he asked.

She shook her head. She didn’t like roulette. All gambling was a game of chance but the outcome of a spin of the roulette wheel was out of everyone’s hands.

He shrugged, unconcerned, and handed the croupier a thick wedge of cash to exchange for a pile of playing chips. By Luisa’s estimation, he’d just handed over ten thousand euros.

“I’m going to play blackjack,” she said impulsively, sliding away before he could respond.

She didn’t care that she was technically breaking their agreement that she cling to his side like a limpet unless otherwise instructed. She needed to breathe air that wasn’t polluted with Gennaro.

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The first blackjack table with empty seats was three tables away, and she sank onto the stool with relief and handed over her bank card, exchanging one hundred euros for chips.

She'd worked too hard in not killing Gennaro these last two years to waste the money she did have.

She'd saved virtually every cent of the allowance he transferred into her account each month for her 'living expenses'; money doled out in the same way her parents had paid her allowance when she'd been an adolescent, a reminder of who was in charge and who held the purse strings.

It was one thing being entirely reliant on your parents as a minor – that was the natural order of the world – but quite another to be a fully grown woman and entirely reliant on your husband.

As part of their contract she'd been forbidden to work lest, heaven forfend, it made her too busy to ask how high when he told her to jump.

Her stomach curdled every time her allowance landed in her account.

And now her stomach was curdling for a whole different reason, and she studiously looked at the two cards she'd been dealt and fought the compulsion to turn her head to the roulette table.

Gennaro didn't see the ball land in its final pocket of the spinning wheel.

His gaze was on Luisa playing blackjack with a body language so stiff she should be playing poker.

He watched her indicate for her croupier to twist at the same moment his croupier pushed the pile of chips Gennaro had just won to him.

“Cash them in,” he ordered. He’d made a killing on the roulette table and beaten the casino which meant he’d beaten the Espositos and so made his killing taste even sweeter, but his head wasn’t on the gamble of the roulette wheel.

His head was on the gamble of his wife.

Stick or twist...?

Although Luisa’s outward attention was focused on the game she was playing...

she was down to her last two playing chips; enough for only one more hand...

inwardly, everything was Gennaro. The rapid increase of her heartbeats and the sensation of her skin lifting told her he was nearing her even before his hand landed on her shoulder and the scent of his cologne invaded her airwaves.

His deep voice was low. “Come. We have socialising to do.”

She didn’t even pretend to bark like a disobedient dog in her head at this. Her heart wasn’t just thumping in her chest but in the whole of her body, the beats a torpid echo through her veins and skin and a roar in her ears.

Was it any wonder she’d lost every hand she’d played when she’d spent the whole time on tenterhooks for the moment she was required to join herself back to his hip?

She could still feel the mark of his finger on her cheekbone.

It felt like she'd been branded.

Nodding like the good little wife she was, she dropped her remaining playing chips into her clutch bag, swallowed what was left of the scotch she'd ordered for herself, and followed him to the bar area where plump leather armchairs were scattered around an array of low tables.

Niccolo and Siena were crowded around one of the tables with a rowdy group of Siena's friends.

Efficient staff carried two chairs over for them to join the party.

Their champagne arrived. Luisa downed hers in two swallows without tasting it. Only because she sensed one more glass would tip her over the edge to full-blown drunkenness did she refuse another, but, God, she felt that she could use the oblivion full-blown drunkenness promised .

Gennaro wouldn't want to socialise for much longer and soon, very soon, they would return to the privacy of their suite and she had no idea what would happen or even what she wanted to happen.

She knew what her body wanted – just to sit beside him as she was now was to burn her from the inside out – but as she'd learned as a young girl, just because the body craved something didn't mean it should have it.

That lesson had come when she'd been given an enormous slab of Swiss chocolate as a sixth birthday present.

Her parents had allowed her a small portion before she'd gone to bed but she'd laid

beneath her sheets consumed with thoughts of the rest of the giant bar.

Her cravings had gotten the better of her when the house had fallen silent.

She'd snuck downstairs and eaten the whole lot.

Within minutes she'd brought it all up again.

Luisa did her best to join in the conversation but her thoughts and feelings were all over the place. When Gennaro casually announced to the group that they were going to retire for the night, she couldn't remember a single word that had been spoken by anyone.

Her thoughts were as wild as the sensations careering through her when Gennaro steered her out of the casino with his hand on her back, a gesture that felt a thousand times more possessive than the other times he'd done the same.

Outside in the cooling air, his hand slipped away, but there was no mercy to be had, not when she could still feel the heat from it as deeply as any burn.

The walk to their block was conducted in a silence that felt a million times different to all the other silences she'd endured throughout their marriage; the tension a million times different too.

Alone in the suite, she crossed to the bar and came within a fingertip of grabbing the bottle of gin. The fear of full-blown drunkenness had passed but her nerves were too chewed up to tolerate any more alcohol.

She'd never been so fully aware of Gennaro's presence before. Not like this. Not with every cell in her body.

The sensation of being stared at had never penetrated her skin so deeply.

Silence had never been so loud.

The sickness in her stomach churning violently, she opened a bottle of water with trembling fingers and drank half of it. Only then did she summon the courage to face him.

Back propped against the wall, he made no effort to disguise that he'd been openly staring at her.

Painfully aware of fresh heat rising on her face and of her heart thrashing into her throat, she blithely said, "Tell me something – what's the end date for your brother's marriage?"

After the slightest of widenings, his eyes narrowed dangerously. A beat later, he said with clipped precision, "There is no end date. What makes you think there is?"

"It's hardly a secret that their wedding is a business arrangement."

His jaw tightened, strong neck extending. "Where the hell did you hear that?"

"Nowhere. I worked it out from my own observations. I just assumed others must know too."

"There's nothing to know. Your imagination has led you wide of the mark."

She laughed without any humour. For two years she'd accepted Gennaro's stonewalling of any conversation that could slide into the personal – any conversation at all, really...

Luisa had accepted it for those one hundred and three weeks because that had been the safe thing to do.

She saw that now. She'd shied away from confrontation, not out of fear or shyness but out of self-preservation, because she had always felt his presence, had always felt the essence of Gennaro Martinelli in her senses and had always reacted to it by hiding or running from it.

She was too angry to accept it anymore. Angry with Gennaro for treating her like she was a nodding dog for two years and angry with herself for wanting him so desperately despite everything.

"I know it's always suited you to pretend I'm an ignorant bimbo, but I'm not," she said, extending her neck in imitation of his.

"And I'm not blind or stupid either. Niccolo and Siena's marriage is the Espositos way of buying themselves into high society.

Or am I wrong?" There was a dangerous fire blazing in his black eyes but she didn't care, barely pausing for breath to add, "Your family are old Italian royalty. Lorenzo Esposito is a jacked-up thug whose shady wealth has bought him a load of politicians and adoration from the public, but he's never had a seat at the table your family belongs to or respect from those who sit on it. "

"Your family sit there too," he pointed out so tightly it was a wonder his jaw didn't snap.

"My family got their seat through your father's patronage and lost it when my father fell ill.

Your father saw to that – he was the kingmaker in their rise and fall.

” Giuseppe Martinelli was a powerful societal figure whose endorsement others followed.

When he’d distanced himself from the Rossellinis, Luisa’s parents had found themselves ostracised from those they’d regarded as friends.

Invitations to parties and dinners had dried up to nothing practically overnight.

Luisa had often wondered if part of Gennaro’s motivation in marrying her had been to bait the father she was convinced he despised.

“My parents don’t want the seat anymore,” she continued, “but Lorenzo does, and it feels like everything about this wedding and these ridiculous pre-wedding celebrations is designed to flaunt his wealth and connections rather than celebrate a couple pledging their lives together, and while I know that’s the way of weddings in our world, this feels an extreme version of it, and there is nothing in either Niccolo or Siena’s body language to suggest they’re a couple madly in love – if anything, your brother’s body language suggests someone being held hostage and forced to act as if he’s happy about it, which makes me wonder why he agreed to it and what’s in it for him. ”

“Whatever’s in it for him is none of your business, and you had better not have discussed these ridiculous theories with anyone else,” he said, the closest to angry she’d ever seen him.

“As if I would dare! And they’re not ridiculous – when you’ve suffered a loveless marriage, you recognise the signs.

I thought it was an open secret but clearly not, but if you want to dismiss my observations on this like you dismissed my observations on Dante’s disappearance from the wedding and pretend that everything’s the opposite of what it really is, then

fine, I can go along with that.

” She injected all the disdain that she could muster into her voice.

“After two years of misery with you, I now consider myself a pro when it comes to pretending.”

Heart pounding in her ears, she stalked away from him without looking back, grabbed her pyjamas, and locked herself in the bathroom.

Chapter Six

While Gennaro waited for Luisa to finish in the bathroom, he paced the balcony, fighting the urge to hurl the bottle of scotch he was holding at the wall and letting it shatter into a thousand pieces.

He was also fighting the urge to smash the bathroom door open and throw Luisa over his shoulder like a caveman.

He had never known desire could be so powerful and consuming and for perhaps the tenth time that day, he thanked God that this side of Luisa, the whip-smart, feisty side, the complete opposite of the docile doormat she'd portrayed herself as for the past two years, hadn't stepped out of the shadows sooner.

He'd not been the only one hiding from his spouse. Luisa had been hiding too.

But, of course, he'd always known that.

For two years they'd lived apart together, both hiding from the attraction that was no longer content to be kept in the shadows, and now they were locked in a dance where both were fighting a desire strong enough to taste.

Because that's what Luisa's performance just then had been about.

She hated the attraction that had mushroomed between them as much as he did and was fighting it the only way she knew how: by taunting and provoking him into anger.

He'd kept the anger at bay by the skin of his teeth but could still feel its vapours coursing through his veins, a volcanic toxicity he'd spent the whole of his life fighting.

Only once since an early childhood spent talking with his fists had he let it erupt, and he pressed his finger to the physical reminder of that one time: the bump on the bridge of his nose.

As much as he despised himself for letting his temper get the better of him on that occasion, he had no regrets.

No, he would never regret that; would do it again without hesitation in the same circumstances.

But this was nothing like that circumstance and he would not dare risk giving the volcanic toxicity space to breathe again.

His attraction to Luisa was already too potent.

He wanted her with a strength he'd never known was possible, and if it wasn't that this was his brother's wedding celebrations and that it was imperative he stay the duration to protect Niccolo from himself, he would get the hell out.

But it was his brother's wedding celebrations, and Luisa's observation about Niccolo's body language being that of a hostage had brought home afresh the danger his brother was in.

Her observation was too close to the knuckle to be ignored.

If she recognised it then there was the possibility others recognised it too.

Needing to satisfy himself that at least one potential danger point was under control, he called Dante for an update on the Callie situation.

He ended the call reassured but troubled by the way Dante rushed their talk.

While he'd never been as close to Dante as Niccolo, he'd known him all his life, long enough to know when Dante was hiding something.

What he could be hiding now troubled him because it had to concern Niccolo.

If not, Dante, who was the most open person Gennaro knew, wouldn't feel the need to hide it.

All this fed the feeling Gennaro couldn't shake that the sister of Niccolo's lover had flown to Italy for a very different reason than the one given by Georgia.

Swearing under his breath, he took a large glug of the scotch, was about to take another when movement in the suite caught his attention. Luisa had finished in the bathroom.

His lungs managed to inflate and deflate in one motion.

The silk of her full-length pyjamas covered her body like a loving caress, full breasts softly moving and rounded hips gently swaying as she padded to her wardrobe.

In the blink of a moment, red-hot arousal punched him in the guts.

As if in a trance, he watched her remove a rucksack-type bag from her wardrobe and put it on the bed before pulling a chunky cardigan off the rail and shrugging her arms into it.

He'd stepped back into the suite before he was even aware of his feet moving.

She met his stare with defiance. "I'm going onto the balcony for a while. If you want to pretend to work again, use the dining table – I want to be alone."

Without another word, she swished past him in a cloud of her glorious scent and toothpaste, and closed the balcony door firmly behind her.

Luisa took her brand new art supplies out of her bag with shaking hands. She was so full of rabid emotions that she didn't even inhale the delicious scent of unsealed fresh pencils like she always did.

In all the long months of their marriage she'd forbidden herself from doing any illustrations but had figured that with only a week until she was contractually free to work again, now was the time to shake the cobwebs off.

She'd missed her art terribly. Missed using the creative part of her brain. Missed losing herself in the absorption that came with transferring whatever was in her head to paper or whatever other medium she was using.

To get through her marriage, she'd had to turn off her artistic side.

She imagined it had been a little like a drug addict going cold turkey: painful but necessary.

She didn't imagine Gennaro would have cared if she'd pursued it – not for money, of course, but as a quaint little hobby – but she'd cared.

Her art had always been precious to her, her first commission at the age of fourteen still the proudest moment of her life.

A cutesy picture Luisa had drawn of two small children bundled up for the winter chill ice skating had been selected by her school to go in the school art gallery.

One of the mothers had seen it and loved it and asked Luisa to paint something with a similar feel that she could use as a design for the Christmas cards she was planning to send that year.

To reduce something that meant so much to her to a hobby that could be picked up and put down on a whim would have hurt too much, been too much of a reminder of the life and budding career she'd been forced to give up.

Better to turn that side of herself off completely than let resentment get its foot in.

Better to never think about it than imagine Gennaro's reaction if he were to catch her drawing or painting.

Arrogant dismissal that her work had barely evolved since she was a child. That's how she'd always imagined he would react to her creations, an imagined reaction that never failed to make the whole of her insides twist.

And now she was sat on their hotel balcony with her insides twisting and prickles on her skin, as certain that he was looking at her than she'd ever been certain about anything, and a long-ago memory, one she'd thought of so often it was still as vivid as the day it had happened, danced into her mind.

She'd been eleven, maybe twelve – Niccolo had still been living at home so it had been before he'd gone off to university – and they'd gone to the Martinellis for the Easter weekend.

Gennaro had still been living there too.

Not long after their arrival he'd appeared in the garden and casually handed her a gift bag.

"I was passing an art shop in Florence the other day and thought of you," he'd said.

Inside the pretty paper bag had been a set of watercolour pencils and a book of thick drawing paper.

He'd disappeared back inside before she'd found her voice to thank him.

To her horror, tears filled her eyes. She frantically blinked them back.

So he'd done one nice thing to her in her twenty-seven years on this earth? Well, so what? One long-ago memory didn't change anything.

It took another two hours of sitting in the chilly air before she dared go back into the suite.

She hadn't drawn a single stroke.

It was the buzz of his phone that woke Gennaro the next morning. Even as he reached for it, he knew the suite was empty.

Luisa had slept on one of the sofas... or maybe not slept.

Through the beam of moonlight that had poured through a crack in the drapes, he'd watched her emerge through the balcony door carrying the bag he was certain was filled with her art supplies, and tiptoe through the archway into the living area and then disappear from his sight.

After that, he'd not seen or heard her, but instinct had told him that the long hours

spent willing himself to sleep had been the same for her.

So many thoughts and feelings had consumed him, memories of the shy little girl whose quirky art had touched his heart...

until that night, he'd seen no evidence Luisa had drawn so much as doodle throughout their marriage...

and the beautiful, intelligent woman with the mesmerising eyes she'd grown into.

He read the message and almost smiled.

Gone for brunch with Marisa at the bistro. Let me know when you're ready for me to play your nodding dog/ dutiful wife.

He could practically feel the sarcastic defiance she'd written those words with.

He should be out of bed already and giving his brother a much-needed reminder of everything he stood to lose if he didn't up his game.

Instead, his thoughts were still consumed with the woman whose face had hovered behind his eyes for all the long hours it had taken him to fall asleep and whose face had then haunted his dreams.

There was something off again about Marisa, a skittishness that Luisa would have probed her about if she wasn't feeling so skittish herself. Gennaro had messaged her back.

Need to see Niccolo to discuss what you and I spoke about last night. Will join you when I can.

She had to read the message a number of times to make sense of it.

Need to see Niccolo to discuss what you and I spoke about ...? Did that mean her observations he'd dismissed?

She thought hard but couldn't think what else it could mean .

“Are you okay?” Marisa asked, her forehead furrowed with concern. “You look like your head's somewhere else.”

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She pulled a face to convey that this was like the pot calling the kettle black and then gave a dazed laugh. “Gennaro... It’s only taken two years but he’s finally taken something I said seriously.”

“What do you mean?”

She shook her head. “Nothing I can talk about. You know, that damned contract he made me sign.”

Marisa did know, although, strictly, she wasn’t supposed to.

But then, Niccolo wasn’t supposed to know the truth either and Luisa knew he did.

Siblings were a whole different ballpark when it came to secrets and lies, and it suddenly came to her that if Gennaro was capable of loving anyone, it was his brother and with that thought came a deep pang down in the pit of her stomach.

“Luisa?”

She blinked and met her sister’s concerned stare. Mustering a smile, she cleared her throat. “Sorry. Just thinking of something I shouldn’t.” And feeling something she shouldn’t because she shouldn’t care that Gennaro was incapable of love.

“Gennaro?” Marisa asked.

She nodded, wishing she could deny it. Wishing she could pretend to herself that her feelings for him weren’t growing. Mushrooming.

Wished, too, that she could pretend to herself that her mushrooming feelings were tied solely to her desire for him.

There had been a moment earlier when she'd been silently removing clothes from her wardrobe and had been helpless to stop herself from watching him sleep.

He'd been on his stomach, cheek turned towards her, an arm hooked around his head.

The arrogant cynicism she'd thought embedded in his gorgeous features had vanished.

To watch him unobserved and at his most vulnerable had made her chest so full it had felt like it was choking her.

She didn't want to think of Gennaro as human. She wanted – needed – to hold on to her loathing of him for reasons she didn't dare explore.

A couple of the Esposito sons strolled past and then backed up on themselves and joined them without invitation. No doubt they assumed the Rossellini sisters would be delighted to have their company.

Despising them almost as much as she wanted to still despise her husband, Luisa swallowed her growing melancholy and forced her features into a welcoming smile.

More people gravitated to them. What had started as a private brunch for two soon turned into an early lunch party of ten, all drinking coffee and chatting excitedly about the evening's masquerade ball.

It seemed to be the one event of the week everyone was looking forward to, more so, Luisa thought cynically, than the wedding itself.

“Hey, Niccolo, Gennaro,” one of the party said, the first words to properly penetrate Luisa’s mind, and she whipped her head around before she could stop herself. Her pulses had skyrocketed before she’d fully taken him in.

Dressed in casual khaki shorts and a black polo shirt, a pair of shades resting on the top of his head, her husband strode towards them with his brother beside him, his tall, muscular perfection gleaming under the high sun.

A waitress hurried over with a couple of chairs. Gennaro sank into one directly across from Luisa with an elegance no man his size should be able to pull off and ordered a coffee.

Only then did his gaze seek hers.

There was a moment that stretched for an age when everyone surrounding them faded to grey and the chatter diminished to a distance buzz.

Neither acknowledged the other by word or gesture.

Neither needed to. In that long, stretched moment where the beats of her heart became weighted and her skin saturated with a prickling, lifting sensation, it could have been only the two of them in existence.

The moment ended when Siena, flanked by her closest friends, bounded over to join them too.

Luisa’s gaze flicked to Niccolo, who stretched out his hand to his fiancée and playfully pulled her onto his lap.

Whatever Gennaro had said to him was already having an effect, and it was an effect that spread throughout their group, the light atmosphere becoming raucous and

peppered with laughter she absorbed only minimally because her entire being was consumed with Gennaro.

As hard as she tried, she was helpless to stop her gaze seeking his.

Every dart of her eyes to him was met by his stare on her, as if some irresistible force had locked them in a private bubble.

Oh this was hopeless !

A whole night spent sleeping on a sofa to put distance between them and create distance for her desire had failed miserably.

He hadn't got within three feet of her since arriving on the terrace but the whole of her body burned with awareness for him, and when he received the same message as Niccolo and the other groomsmen reminding them of their imminent wedding suit fittings and got to his feet to leave, her stomach's plummet of disappointment was strong enough to frighten her.

They shared one last, lingering glance before he disappeared with his brother and the Espositos.

In normal circumstances, Gennaro's tolerance limits found their peak when in the presence of the Espositos.

Lorenzo, the patriarch, was an overbearing Pitbull of a man – the most complimentary description Gennaro could muster for him – his thuggish sons boorish and entitled.

He despised each and every one of them, but nowhere near as much as he despised his own father.

Spending a few hours in Lorenzo's suite – the suite that should have been Gennaro's – so the groom, all the groomsmen (bar Dante) and the fathers of the bride and groom could have their last fitting was something he would rather have waxed all the hair from his body than endure.

That afternoon, his mind was too full of Luisa to feel anything but mild revulsion at his father's kiss-arsing of Lorenzo Esposito, too full to feel more than passing pity for the women spoken of so salaciously by the Esposito sons. For once he didn't need to train his face into not reacting.

He let the conversation swirl around him, sipping on Lorenzo's specially imported bourbon and allowing Luisa to take centre stage in his thoughts.

He could hardly do otherwise, not even when Leonardo, who was late for the fitting because of a 'staffing emergency', finally joined them, looking strained and smelling faintly of sex.

Gennaro couldn't bring himself to care about the strain on his cousin's face or care who the lady was. With Leonardo, it could be anyone.

It was rare that sex drove itself to the forefront of Gennaro's mind. He'd always been excellent at compartmentalising, and that included sex. Sex was a tool to satisfy his natural urges, nothing more, the women in his fantasies faceless. Generic.

Luisa was the opposite of generic. His reactions to her were the opposite of generic, and that's why he'd spent two years ruthlessly suppressing them, but in this suite with its two beds that should have been his and Luisa's and with the air he was breathing filled with more testosterone than a professional football team's changing room came the slow revelation that he didn't need to suppress it anymore.

Why continue keeping Luisa at a distance when the danger of their attraction had

reduced to nothing?

How could there be danger when they were parting in five days?

Why should they not enjoy their last days together in the most pleasurable way?

Throw off the shackles of two years of celibacy before they were in a position to start taking lovers again with a few days of hedonistic fucking to see out the dying days of a marriage neither had enjoyed nor wanted.

He drained his bourbon and swiped the residue with the back of his hand.

Fuck everything.

It was time to take the gamble of his wife and play the cards.

It was time to twist.

The rules for that evening's masquerade ball were simple.

No mixing of the sexes until the ball started, males and females expected to dress for the evening in separate rooms and suites.

All male guests had to be in the ballroom by seven thirty p.m., the ladies joining them at eight.

The seating allocation would be chosen by lottery, the swapping of seats forbidden, and masks that covered at least the top half of the guests' faces to be worn at all times.

Unwritten was the rule that anything that happened at the masquerade ball stayed at

the masquerade ball.

Luisa got ready for the evening in her sister's room in the main part of the hotel with a thrumming heart, and when Marisa helped her into her dress, she was helpless to stop her thoughts straying to Gennaro peeling it off.

She hadn't seen him since he'd left for his last wedding suit fitting but he'd been in her thoughts every passing second, that last lingering look between them a constant image in her mind's eye.

Luisa wasn't the only one with an occupied mind.

The Rossellini sisters must have got ready for an evening out together dozens and dozens of times in their lives, but even though they played their usual music and sipped champagne, the bonhomie between them that usually came naturally was taking effort from them both.

Marisa had disappeared that afternoon and when Luisa asked where she'd been, her sister's mumbled answer of sunbathing on the beach would have been believable if her cheeks hadn't turned so red.

She hadn't pressed her, too sick with anticipation of what the evening...

night... could bring to give her sister the attention she deserved.

Nothing had to happen, she continually told herself with increasing desperation.

Both sisters dressed and ready, it was with a lot of relief that they left Marisa's room, popped into their parents' room next door – they'd begged off the ball – for the obligatory proud parents gushes and photos, and then took the elevator to the ground floor lobby where all the women were gathering.

The bride-to-be, the deserved centre of attention, looked spectacular in a gothic gold dress and gold and black harlequin mask. Her blonde hair gleamed, and when she approached Luisa, she looked more relaxed than she'd ever seen her.

Where Luisa's reaction to the male Espositos was a visceral dislike, she felt a strange sense of compassion towards the only daughter, and she welcomed her approach with a genuine smile.

"I'm having a sleepover in my suite for some select friends to celebrate my last night of freedom on Friday night," Siena said in an undertone. "Would adore for you to join us."

"That sounds great, thank you," Luisa replied, trying not to sound too taken aback.

Despite Siena marrying Luisa's brother-in-law, the two women hadn't had much to do with each other since the engagement party, something she suspected had been deliberately engineered by both Martinelli brothers.

They were probably afraid Gennaro's wife and Niccolo's fiancée would talk and reveal secrets both preferred to keep hidden.

"Wonderful. You look amazing, by the way." Pressing her cheek to Luisa's – no danger of lipstick transferring – Siena moved on to the next woman to catch her attention.

Luisa had barely started on her glass of champagne when a gong rang out. In an instant, the atmosphere shifted.

It was time for the ladies to enter the ballroom and for the masquerade to begin.

Chapter Seven

If the staff had done an incredible job turning the ballroom into a casino, magic had been used to transform it into this sensuous delight of deep red walls and even deeper red heavy drapes.

Not a sliver of natural light penetrated, all illumination coming from the gold and crystal chandeliers and the candles and heart-shaped lamps running the centre of the long tables laid out like a horseshoe around the dancefloor.

All the men, dressed in compulsory black tuxedos and masks, were lined up facing the ladies as they entered.

Their stillness would have been impressive if Luisa was capable of being impressed, but anticipatory sickness was churning too hard for her to think with any coherence.

She'd barely crossed the threshold when her heart lurched at the tall, dominating figure to the far left of the room, and she plucked out a number from a theatrical top hat without any thought.

"What number are you?" Marisa asked.

Luisa pulled her stare away from the tall, masked figure making her heart thump so wildly. "Sixty-four. You?"

"One hundred and six."

Another gong rang out.

Time to take their seats.

Gennaro tried to pay attention to the gorgeous lady seated to his left and pretend he didn't recognise her behind her mask as Sophia Silva, the brains behind a luxury goods empire.

The female guests all looked spectacular in their elaborate ballgowns and theatrical masks, but there was one woman, seated far on the other side of the ballroom, he couldn't stop his eyes from seeking.

Wearing a low-cut black dress that fitted like a corset to her hips and then spread out like a fan to her feet, it was only when she walked that you saw the side splits in the skirt that ran to the top of her thighs.

With her glossy dark hair piled onto her head and elegant ringlets framing her face and blood-red lips below the black gothic mask she wore, she was the sexiest creature he'd ever seen.

His blood thickened every time their gazes locked across the room.

The first course finished, the gentlemen all selected a fresh number and moved to the corresponding seat. Gennaro's seat took him further from her, the angle being so he could only see a glimmer of her profile.

After the fish course, it was all change again. When he rose to his feet, the woman's head turned to him.

His next placement was beside the bride...

although, of course, he had to pretend not to recognise her too...

and a slightly better view of the beautiful woman.

Though he and Siena both made the effort of small talk whilst pretending not to recognise each other, all he could see was the man to the ravishing woman's right, engaging her in conversation and making her laugh.

He was too far away to hear the sound of her laughter but he could imagine it, and his jaw clenched as he envisaged himself flying across the dancefloor to separate the man's head from his body.

Their main course finished, Gennaro didn't bother selecting a new placement number. He went straight to the ravishing woman in the corset dress and took the seat to her right.

With most of her face hidden behind an elaborate gothic black mask, her plump red lips were the only facial feature completely visible from a distance. This close, the large, dark brown eyes were clearly visible too, and when they locked onto his, a deep frisson snaked his spine.

"Enchanted to meet you..." He allowed his gaze only the smallest of darts to her placement number, "... number sixty-four. How are you enjoying your evening?"

The doe eyes flickered. Her reply was a cautious, "Very well, thank you."

There was a tap on his shoulder. He turned his head to the suave male guest hovering behind him. "Yes?"

"I think this is my seat," the man said apologetically.

He didn't blink. "You're mistaken."

He turned his back to the hovering man without a second thought, put his elbow on the table to rest his chin on his knuckles, and locked the doe eyes in his stare again.

She was fingering the rim of her wine glass, gazing at him contemplatively. "Breaking the rules of the ball?"

He inched forward. "Some rules demand to be broken."

There was another flicker in her dark eyes. Creamy golden cleavage and shoulders rose. Her graceful throat moved. "Who determines which rules should and shouldn't be broken?"

He put his mouth to her ear and inhaled her skin.

She smelt like heaven.

"I do," he whispered .

She drew back. The pulse at the base of her neck was jumping. " You choose?"

"I choose which rules I'm prepared to break. It is for others to choose their own."

Fresh glasses were placed before them. After red wine had been poured, Gennaro lifted his glass. "To breaking rules."

Only by sheer strength of will did Luisa raise her glass without her hand shaking. "To choosing which rules one is willing to break."

The glimmer of a smile played on his lips. " Touché ."

They clinked their glasses together and drank.

“Tell me,” he said, “What did your last dining companion say that made you laugh?”

“You’ve been watching me?”

Of course he had. Luisa had felt Gennaro’s stare on her with every mouthful of food she’d forced into her tight stomach.

When their main course had been cleared away and he’d risen to his feet, she’d known he was going to come to her even before he’d crossed the huge dancefloor.

There had been such purpose in his steps and in his eyes that everything she’d managed to eat had churned violently.

And now he was sat beside her, a gold and black Venetian mask hiding much of his features, but, for the first time since she’d entered her parents’ living room to be given his proposal of marriage, the mask he’d always worn around her had been stripped away.

His black eyes were blatant in their intent and the intent was seduction.

Gennaro intended to seduce her, she could feel it right to the core of her being, could hardly breathe through the thrills of excitement rousing themselves in her.

Subconsciously, she’d known this was going to happen. Sick anticipation had been a living thing since that last lingering gaze in the bistro. And fear. Fear at how badly she wanted it to happen.

“I don’t imagine there’s a man here who hasn’t been.” His black eyes glimmered. “You are entirely ravishing... So tell me, what did he say to you?”

“Why do you want to know?”

“Because you’re beautiful when you laugh.”

She arched an eyebrow and somehow managed to stop her thrashing heart from sounding in her voice. “Ravishing and beautiful in two sentences?”

“You don’t like compliments?”

“It depends on the context.”

“In what context do you like them?”

“I like them when I believe they’re coming from a place of sincerity.”

“As opposed to...?”

She forced herself to hold his stare and her composure. “As opposed to coming from a place with an end game in mind.”

“Everything a person does is with an end game in mind but that doesn’t mean compliments given to achieve an end game aren’t sincerely meant.”

Mercifully, the waiting staff chose that moment to deliver exquisitely presented chocolate tarts she would usually fall into raptures over.

She doubted she’d be able to manage a single mouthful.

It had been hard enough eating with Gennaro on the other side of the vast room, but with him sitting so close that his thigh was pressed against hers and with his molten eyes holding hers with such desirous intent and his scent swirling into her airwaves

with each inhalation, her senses were going haywire.

God, he was just so divinely beautiful and so, so sexy. She hated him. Loathed him. Ached for him.

His body still angled to her, his attention fixed solely on her, he cut into his tart with the side of his spoon. “You still haven’t told me what your last dining companion said that made you laugh.”

She had to unscramble her brain to think. “He was telling me about his pet dog chewing his specially imported furniture.”

“You looked like you were enjoying his company.”

“I did enjoy it. Very much.”

His eyes narrowed a touch before he brought his mouth to her ear. “Would you have enjoyed it if he’d touched you?”

He’d barely finished asking the question when warm fingers slipped through the split in her dress to caress her naked thigh. The shock of his touch was so strong that she froze.

Molten eyes holding hers, he spooned another mouthful of chocolate tart into his mouth, chewing slowly while the fingers of his left hand made tiny circles on her thigh. “Would you have welcomed his touch?”

Although her external body was frozen, inside she was a giant throb of heat.

His mouth came back to her ear. Warm breath danced over her sensitised skin as his fingers tiptoed a little higher. “Would you have let him do this to you?”

Hot blood was roaring in her ears, and when he drew back, she gazed dazedly into his pulsing stare.

He spooned more chocolate tart into his mouth. His fingers tiptoed a little higher.

“Tell me about yourself, number sixty-four,” he said huskily, as if his hand wasn’t caressing her naked flesh. “What do you like to do? What is your passion?”

“I...” she could hardly speak. “I like to paint.”

“Let me guess... watercolour is your preferred medium and you paint illustrations?”

Her eyes widened in surprise .

His fingers tiptoed a little higher. “Illustrations for greeting cards and children’s picture books?”

They were the exact words needed to cut through the haze and bring Luisa back into the room. Snatching hold of his hand with every intention of pushing it away, she instead clasped it tightly. “How...?”

“It was always obvious to me that you would find a career in the world of art. My mother still keeps one of your illustrations in her study. She believes – and I agree with her – that one day it will be a collector’s item.”

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“You never said you knew,” she accused in a whisper, her mind reeling. One hundred and three weeks of marriage, and not once had he even hinted that he knew she’d made a career from her art.

“I didn’t speak of many things but I can say them now – not only are you ravishingly beautiful but you’re a phenomenally talented artist. You always have been.”

She threaded her fingers through his and squeezed as hard as she could, wanting to hurt him as he’d deliberately hurt her. “A phenomenally talented artist you forbade from working.”

“Being my wife was your work. Your art is exquisite but I remember how it took your full concentration and how oblivious you became to the world around you when in the process of creating. I needed your attention on the role I was paying you to perform.”

“You knowingly took my art away from me.”

“Only in a professional capacity and only for a fixed period of time.”

Still holding tightly to the hand on her naked thigh, she shook her head in disbelief. “If you’d bothered getting to know me, you’d have known my art is my life and so my work is my life.”

“I already knew that about you and didn’t want to know more – you were the last woman in the world I wanted to know more than I had to.”

“Because my beauty makes me dangerous?” she challenged tremulously, throwing his words back at him.

“Because how I respond to it makes me dangerous,” he corrected. “I saw you laughing and smiling at that man and wanted to throw him out of a window. Jealousy lives in my veins, jealousy and violence. I am not a good man to get close to.”

“Then why are you getting so close to me now?”

“Because the level of jealousy and violence is controllable and we don’t have the time left together for it to grow stronger.

The danger has passed.” Sensuality blazed from his black eyes.

“We have four days left together and then this marriage will be nothing but an ugly memory...” He brought his mouth to within a feather-distance from hers.

“But we don’t have to say goodbye with only ugly memories.

We can end it all on a high... if that’s what you want, too. ”

She wanted to say no out of spite and pride, but his hot breath soaked into her lips before his lips brushed against hers at the same moment his little finger stretched out and traced the rim of her lace knickers at the juncture of her thighs.

She gasped into his mouth as a bolt of pure, unadulterated desire shot through her.

His nostrils flared. So too did the pupils of his eyes.

A waiter cleared their dessert plates. He didn’t try to come between them.

The position of the table and the volume of material in the skirt of her dress meant it was impossible for him or anyone to see what was happening beneath it, but she was still shocked at her own wantonness.

The spot between her legs was on fire and she was holding Gennaro's hand so tightly in part to stop herself dragging it even higher.

Turning her head, she tried to catch a breath. Tried. It was impossible to breathe properly when Gennaro's hand was still on her thigh, his little finger only a swish away from where the spot between her legs burned the brightest.

Oh why had it all turned on its head like this? How was it possible to go from having fewer sexual stirrings than a nun to feeling like a tinder box only a Gennaro away from exploding in just three days?

Swallowing hard, she gazed through dazed eyes around the magnificent ballroom.

They weren't the only couple sitting so close, and she experienced a pang deep in her chest to know that none of this was real.

The other couples around them were lovers in the true sense of the word, but even if she did give in to her desires, she would never be Gennaro's true lover and he would never be hers.

Not in a true, meaningful sense. He just wanted to have sex with her before their time together ran out.

Luisa had never just had sex before. She'd had exactly one lover in her life.

Sex with him had never been like that erotic scene from that film of her art school years, but she'd gone along with it because her lover had got so much out of it, and

she'd loved him, not with the whistles and bells that came with steamy lust but with a quiet caring.

Even though the relationship hadn't worked out, while they'd been together she'd wanted to make him happy.

His affection and thoughtfulness had made her feel loved and so she'd willingly shared his bed, always hoping the expression of their love would get better over time.

She wasn't someone who could just separate her mind from her body...

Except with Gennaro. With him, it was like her body had separated from her mind without her consent, but even as she thought this and released his hand to slide her fingers onto his thigh, a voice in the back of her mind laughed scornfully, a voice that was drowned by the sensations of the heat from his impossibly muscular thigh permeating through his trousers and onto her fingertips and the thrills ravaging her as his fingers responded to her touch by biting a little deeper into her sensitive skin.

The aching spot between her legs was on fire, and it was taking everything she had to stop all her thoughts from being drowned out by sensation.

There would be no affection or thoughtfulness in Gennaro's lovemaking. That wasn't what he was offering her. He was offering her hedonism, not love. Sex for sex's sake, something she'd never considered herself capable of...

Fingers teased themselves beneath the band of her knickers.

The pulse of desire was so strong she reflexively sucked in a breath and dug her nails into his thigh.

Dear God ...

Around them, the world continued to turn. Coffee was poured and dainty plates of pretty petit fours served, but she was barely aware of any of it, her senses incapable of focusing on anything but the pulse of fire burning between her legs.

“Look at me,” Gennaro commanded in a hoarse undertone.

Struggling desperately for breath, she obeyed, fixing onto the black eyes barely visible behind the mask.

His features had tightened but his eyes...

His eyes were liquid.

A chocolate petit fours was pinched lightly in the fingers of his right hand. “Open your mouth.”

Her mouth opened in obedience without any input from her brain.

He brought the petit fours to her mouth and as he placed it between her lips, he slid a finger inside the heat between her legs.

The pleasure was so unexpected and intense that all she could do was stare at him in complete astonishment that he would dare go so far... And complete astonishment at herself for letting him .

After a long beat, the corners of his firm lips twitched in the hint of a smile. “You need to eat it.”

Still acting on its own accord, her mouth closed around the chocolate delight. Gennaro slid his finger out of her mouth with the same sensuous fluidity that he drove his finger further inside her slick heat, and, God, the sensation ...

“You like?” he murmured huskily when she’d finally opened her throat enough to swallow it.

Breathing hard, her head reeling, she nodded.

“Another?”

Unable to tear her gaze from his, incapable of speech, she nodded again.

Sliding another finger inside her, he casually... at least with an outward casual appearance... selected a pink treat for her to eat. “Open.”

She obeyed.

A slight adjustment of the hand between her legs allowed his palm to press against her swollen clitoris. A low moan she had no control of escaped from her lips.

God in heaven...

“Don’t forget to swallow,” he whispered, cupping her feminine heat and pressing with more strength against the nub of her pleasure.

She closed her eyes.

“Look at me,” he commanded again.

Her eyes flew back open and landed on his.

“Keep your eyes on me,” he said with quiet intensity as he subtly strengthened the pleasure of all he was doing between her legs.

“That’s it. Just keep looking at me as if we’re engaged in conversation...

and imagine everything we will do to each other when it’s just the two of us...

all the things we’ve spent our marriage denying ourselves... ”

Luisa had never concentrated so hard on keeping herself still in the whole of her life.

It wasn’t possible to forget that they were in a crowded ballroom surrounded by hundreds of people but it had all become a distant blur.

The only clarity she had was Gennaro and the glorious sensations he was evoking in her, stimulating the need for him that had lived beneath her skin for so long she couldn’t remember a time it hadn’t been there.

Unable to move or speak, she was helpless to do anything but silently chase the approaching peak, and she gazed into his hooded eyes, the seductive words he was saying soaking through her skin with the same strength as the hand cupping her and the fingers moving inside her until the sensation exploded and all she could do was dig her nails into his thigh and ride the most powerful climax of her life without crying out or moving in any way.

It seemed like forever passed before the ballroom came back into focus.

All she could hear were the ragged beats of her thundering heart.

Trying her hardest to catch her breath, she swallowed and blinked to clear her vision.

Although her gaze was still trapped in Gennaro’s swirling black stare...

she was incapable of looking anywhere else...

she had a growing awareness of life and movement around her.

The singer who'd performed for them throughout the meal had disappeared, music playing out over the speakers as the live band performing next set themselves up.

Many of the guests had moved from their seats, grouping on the edge of the dancefloor, talking, laughing, drinking.

Their gazes still locked so starkly together, the hand between her legs skimmed down her thigh before bunching the multitude of layers of her dress's skirt.

His throat extended. "Let's get out of here," he said roughly.

"Now?" she whispered dazedly .

He pushed his chair back and got to his feet. The meaning in his eyes was clear. "Now."

For a man who insisted his private life always be private, Gennaro should be furious with himself for allowing jealousy of a man making his wife laugh spur him into such proprietary behaviour.

He should be furious, too, for daring to go so far as he just had with her, but he defied the most private person on God's earth to experience what he'd just experienced and feel regret.

He'd never lived as a monk. He'd had his share of private, hedonistic experiences but in all his thirty-seven years, he'd never seen or experienced anything as erotic as Luisa's still, silent climax.

Her stillness had been entirely external. Internally, she'd melted for him. Only her

eyes and the stain of colour where her mask didn't cover her face would have hinted at what had been happening beneath the table to anyone who happened to be observing them.

He could still feel the mark of her nails in his thigh.

Arousal of a kind he'd never known before coursed through his veins, and he held her hand tightly as they navigated their way out of the ballroom, blanking out the faces of everyone who tried to catch his eye and deafening himself to the voices of those who would try to strike up a conversation.

The only person his senses could focus on was the woman he was abandoning the ball for.

Chapter Eight

There was a breeze in the cool evening air that felt delicious against Luisa's fevered skin.

Small clusters of people were standing outside, most of them enjoying a post-dinner cigarette.

Her head felt separated from her body and yet in complete connect, a paradox she couldn't begin to make sense of any more than she could make sense of the paradox that she, a woman who'd never particularly enjoyed sex and had never wanted it for its own sake, had allowed a man to bring her to orgasm in a room filled with approximately five hundred people.

Not just any man but the man she hated. Her husband.

And now here she was, her hand gripped in his, abandoning the ball and sweeping past the smoking revellers to head to their suite to have sex for sex's sake.

She felt like she was floating and yet didn't think she'd ever walked with such purpose before.

She wanted this. Him.

Maybe there wouldn't be tenderness or thoughtfulness but there would be pleasure, and if that's all she could walk away from their marriage with then she would take it.

They kept the same purposeful, rhythmic strides all the way up the stairs to their suite. Not a single word was exchanged between them. Not a single word needed to be said.

The second Gennaro kicked the door of the suite shut, Luisa found herself pinned to the wall. A second later her mask was whipped off her face and thrown to the floor and then his mask was ripped off too, joining hers.

There was no ceremony, no tender build-up.

When Gennaro's mouth found hers it was with a hungry intent she responded to like she was the touchpaper to his flame.

His mouth crushed hers, his lips forcing hers apart as his tongue swept into her mouth, filling her with a dark, sensual taste that was instantly addictive.

Wrapping her arms around his neck, she matched his hunger with her own, kissing him back with the furious passion his touch had ignited.

His mouth devouring hers, the bristles of his beard scratching her skin, his hands made quick work of undoing his trousers before he bunched the skirt of her dress to her waist and ripped her knickers off.

In barely the blink of an eye, she found herself weightless and being lifted higher up the wall.

Fully trusting in his strength to support her, she lifted her thighs and wrapped her legs around his waist.

Again, there was no ceremony or tender build-up but she didn't care. They were both ready – more than ready – and in one deep thrust Gennaro was fully inside her,

exactly where she wanted him. Needed him.

Clinging tightly to him, she closed her eyes and allowed the pleasure of his wild fucking to saturate her, moaning her encouragement as he pounded hard into her, barely aware of a picture frame falling off the wall and crashing to the floor, aware only that this was a sensation like no other and that it felt incredible.

The ripples of her earlier climax were still in her, and soon they'd formed into another undulating swell of ecstasy that had her scratching her nails into his head and crying out loudly as he drove her orgasm higher and higher until he shouted his own climax and threw his head back as he slammed into her one final, glorious time.

The world took its time coming back into focus and for that, Luisa was glad, content to cling to Gennaro like a sloth and luxuriate in the sensation of his breath hot on her neck and the sensation of him still being inside her.

But the world was always turning and its focus was never more than a shimmer away, and so when he released his tight hold around her in a silent command for her to put her feet back on the floor, she sighed inwardly and braced herself for whatever came next.

Please don't say you regret it , she silently pleaded.

She'd made an active choice to have sex with him and she refused to regret letting her hormones rule her head.

It had been the most wanton and exciting experience of her life, but there was still so much that was unknowable about Gennaro that she couldn't predict how he would react to what they'd just done now that the heat of passion had burned itself out.

The last thing she expected was his troubled expression. "We didn't use protection."

Disappointment lanced her, although she had no idea why.

She'd hardly expected him to throw himself at her feet and declare eternal love after what had been, in reality, a quick knee-trembler against the wall of their suite.

Other than her knickers, they hadn't even removed any of their clothing.

The only part of his body she'd touched had been his head .

Tucking his shirt back into his trousers, he swore under his breath and shook his head, biting out, "I'm sorry."

Still pressed against the wall as support for her wobbly legs, her brain still in a bit of a pleasure-saturated fog, she blinked. She didn't think apologies formed part of Gennaro's vocabulary.

He pinched the bridge of his nose and took a deep breath. "Is it too much to hope that you're on the pill?"

She cleared her throat and strove to sound normal. "I'm afraid so."

"Fuck."

"But I do have a contraceptive implant."

"What?"

She tapped the underside of her upper arm and injected brightness into her voice. "It's inserted right here. It's coming to the end of its use-by date but it's still effective."

“So you’re protected against pregnancy?” he clarified.

“Yes.”

He seemed to sag, blowing out a long puff of air as he sank onto a chair and gripped the back of his neck.

Even though she knew she shouldn’t take this reaction personally – he’d implied before that he didn’t want children – she couldn’t help but feel wounded at his overt relief that there was no danger of her falling pregnant and the implication that she was good enough to have sex with but not good enough to breed with, which was a ridiculous way to feel seeing as he’d be the last man she’d choose to have children with.

Hating the contrariness of her thoughts and feelings, and needing to do something to distract her from them, she carefully picked up the broken picture. She was thankful the shattered glass was contained within the frame. Her feet were bare and she had no recollection of removing her shoes.

She put it on the table. “I don’t think the picture itself is damaged. ”

He tilted his head back and closed his eyes. “Please accept my assurance that I’ve never had unprotected sex before.”

Strangely, his formal speech and clipped tones had the effect of loosening her chest, and she looked at him, really looked at him, taking in the strain etched on his face and experienced a sudden swell of her heart to realise she wasn’t the only one to have acted completely out of character.

“I guess even an android’s hard drive can malfunction,” she said softly.

His eyes snapped back open.

She gave a small shrug. “For a brief moment in time, you seemed entirely human.”

He dragged a hand down his face and grunted a laugh. “For a brief moment in time, I felt more alive than I think I’ve ever done before.”

His honesty made her heart swell even harder.

Pulling the chair out next to his, she twisted it to face him before sitting down. Impulse had her putting a foot on his lap. The way he looked from her foot to her face made her smile. “I liked the human Gennaro.”

“You shouldn’t.”

“Yes I should. I’ve never come with a man before.”

His next grunt of laughter had more substance to it, and he shook his head. “Are you being serious?”

“Completely. Sex has never done anything for me,” she admitted.

He shook his head again in clear disbelief.

She wriggled her toes and expelled a long, peaceable breath.

She’d spent so many years... her whole life...

thinking of Gennaro as a forbidding block of ice – a gorgeous block of ice, yes, but a block of ice all the same – that she’d never allowed herself to imagine him as someone capable of having the same doubts and fears and uncertainties as everyone

else, and certainly not as someone who ever lost control .

A few minutes earlier, they'd both lost control and her veins still buzzed from it.

“You make me feel sexy,” she said simply.

“And your previous lovers didn't?”

There was only one, and no, he didn't.”

“So why were you with him?”

“Because I loved him... just not in that way.” She pulled a rueful face. “If he'd made me feel like you do, I'd have married him in a heartbeat, but I guess you can't force desire. It's either there or it isn't, and with you it is.”

His face fell, eyes narrowing with a warning. “Don't fall in love with me, Luisa.”

“I loved Riccardo because he was a good, kind man. You, dear husband, are an asshole.”

There was a beat of silence after this before Gennaro burst into a deep rumble of laughter.

It was such a rich, infectious sound that Luisa laughed too, laughing even harder to remember herself just a few hours earlier, all skittish and filled with nervous anticipation for what the evening would bring.

Well, the evening had brought her pleasure, and it had freed something in her too that allowed her to see her husband with the eyes of the woman she'd grown into and not the frightened child she'd once been.

His fingers wrapped around her foot. “You will remember that, yes? That I’m an asshole?”

“I’ve only got four days left of being stuck with you so I’m hardly likely to forget.”

The amusement faded. “I don’t want to hurt you.”

She raised her shoulders. “You don’t have to worry about that – I hate you too much to let myself do something stupid like fall in love with you.”

His brooding face creased into a smile that was far more heartbreaking than she’d ever have imagined a smile from Gennaro could be. “Despite the childlike illustrations she produces, little Luisa Rossellini really did grow up.”

She grinned. “Just not in height.”

His eyes gleamed, thumbs slowly sliding up the length of her foot. “Trust me, I’m not complaining about that aspect.”

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She held his sensuous gaze knowing exactly what he was thinking. The broken picture frame on the table was a physical reminder of how gloriously he'd taken complete advantage of her diminutive stature. "I'm not going to fall in love with you, but I'm not willing to go back to how we were."

Kneading the sole of her foot, his eyes narrowed in question.

"I've spent the whole of our marriage feeling like your personal nodding dog.

We've only got four days left together so if you can't do anything else, can you at least promise me that you'll try to treat me like a human being?

There's only so many times a woman can mentally fling a vase at a man's face before her arm starts to hurt. "

His heavenly fingers continued their heavenly work on her foot. "Have I been that bad?"

"Worse."

"Then I promise to do better."

"Thank you."

Gennaro took in Luisa's mussed hair; the artful pile that had been on her head now half-strewn around her shoulders, and the plump lips that had been kissed so hard only a faint stain of lipstick remained, and felt his chest swell.

Already, he wanted her again. He wanted to forget the world, strip her naked and lose himself in her until every drop of their desire had been extracted from them both.

Releasing her foot, he leaned forward and gently pulled out the clip holding what was left of her hairstyle in place and dragged his fingers through falling tresses that felt like a silken cloud. "I need to go back to the ballroom and be sociable for a while longer."

Her sigh at this was filled with regret.

He cupped her cheeks and gazed into her beautiful doe eyes in the way he'd spent two years swearing he would never do. "I don't have to stay for long but I'm the brother of the groom and my prolonged absence will be noted."

"And you want to check in on your brother?" she guessed.

He gave the flicker of a smile. "You notice everything, don't you."

"Only the things that matter."

"Don't ever let me matter," he felt compelled to warn her darkly. Remind her. Remind himself.

He might never lost control like he had with Luisa before, but that was only because he'd never felt such a bone-deep fever to be inside someone before.

The fever had caught them both.

Two years of celibacy was always bound to take its toll, and that went for Luisa too.

She might not have enjoyed sex much with her previous lover, but it still served a

human function.

What they'd shared against the wall a short while ago had been a pent-up explosion of lust, nothing more, and now they had days left together to work the rest of that lust out of their systems.

They'd taken the lid off Pandora's Box but the effects would be contained. He would make certain of it.

There would be no misery from what they'd unleashed. Only pleasure. And then they would say goodbye.

"I won't, I promise."

"Good." He pressed his mouth to hers and held it there, filling his lungs with the heady scent of Luisa's breath and her skin.

"Why don't you stay here? I can say you have a headache which means I'll be able to leave even sooner, and when I get back, I can start making amends for all the times you've wanted to throw a vase at me. "

The pupils of her eyes dilated. "That's a lot of making up to do."

His senses already thickened to arousal, he kissed her swiftly but savagely. "Then it's as well that I'm not a man who's afraid of hard work."

The ballroom's dancefloor was heaving with bodies, the noise level substantially increased in the time Gennaro had been gone. His brother, he noted, was in the mass of dancers, dutifully dancing with his fiancée.

Helping himself to a glass of scotch from the drinks tray carried by one of the many

waiting staff dotted around, he spotted Marisa dancing with a man who, beneath his mask, bore an uncanny resemblance to Rico Esposito.

This in itself wouldn't be remarkable if he hadn't noticed the positioning of Rico's hand on her bottom.

Just as he was debating whether to ask her to dance and so save his sister-in-law from the devil, Gennaro's mother, wearing an elaborate Venetian mask that covered everything on her face except for her mouth and chin, sidled up to him.

"There you are, darling. I've been looking for you. "

His good mood evaporated in an instant. "I took Luisa back to the suite. She's got a headache."

"The poor darling," she said automatically but without any inflection of meaning. "We need to talk about Saturday."

Although Luisa's headache was a lie, his mother's dismissal of it made the hackles that always rose in her presence strain even higher. Luisa was her goddaughter. That should mean something. "What about it? "

"I've heard a rumour your father and I are not being seated at the top table."

He stared at her in disbelief. "Whatever made you think you would be?"

"We're the parents of the groom. Our place for the wedding breakfast is at the top table."

"You're the parents of a groom who despises you."

She didn't even have the grace to blush. "So this is a deliberate humiliation?"

"No, it's a deliberate compromise. If Niccolo had had his way, you and father would have been banned from the whole thing.

You're only here because Lorenzo insisted – if you hadn't figured it out yet, he's very much looking forward to being related by marriage to a duke – but his one concession to Nic was that neither of you would have the honour of being treated as parents of the groom – that honour, I'm afraid, is going to your own parents.

"About to stalk away, he added, "You're damn lucky to be here and not be having to deal with the humiliation of the whole world knowing you've been excluded from your son's wedding, so don't even think about complaining to Nic about it."

Downing his scotch, he left his mother staring at his retreating figure, uncaring if he'd wounded her feelings. The word toxic was used so frequently in today's world that it had lost all meaning, but it was a word that perfectly epitomised his parents.

Lorenzo Esposito was in Gennaro's eyeline, flirting with a woman younger than his daughter.

Another toxic bastard with another poisonous family, but unlike the Martinellis, a proper family in the proper Italian tradition.

They reserved their toxicity for everyone else, never turning it inward on each other.

Once Gennaro's brother was safely married into their family he would be considered one of them and would finally be safe.

Only three more days until that happened, he reminded himself grimly, and it was his job to make sure it did happen. There would be no cold feet. If he had to march his

brother up the aisle and force him to say his vows then that's what he would do.

Tonight, though, any cold feet his brother was suffering from were well hidden. Observing him across the dancefloor, Niccolo was giving every outward impression of enjoying himself.

As if he sensed his brother's stare, Niccolo, like Gennaro a head taller than most of the guests, caught his eye and raised his glass.

Gennaro raised his empty glass back.

After another twenty minutes of circulating, making small talk and discreetly observing his brother, Gennaro determined it was safe to leave.

Outside, he took a moment to reflect on what he was doing. What he'd done.

He'd abandoned the masquerade ball to have sex with his wife and now he was abandoning it again for the same reason.

He'd made his wife his lover.

He'd done the one thing he'd sworn he would never do.

Just to imagine Luisa in the suite waiting for him pumped fire into his veins.

The first thing he registered when he stepped into the suite was the fragrant scent filling the air... bubble bath.

Stepping out of his shoes and removing his bowtie and jacket, he paced to the bathroom, the thuds of his heart somehow getting even stronger and weightier.

The bathroom door was ajar.

He pushed it open.

His heart exploded.

Chapter Nine

L uisa hadn't realised how frightened she'd been that Gennaro would return to their suite having reverted to his ice-block android self, not until they locked eyes and relief to find only heat in his black stare ripped through her.

After a long, breath-stealing passage where only their eyes spoke, he said, "Is there room for two in there?"

Inexplicably shy in a way she hadn't been since childhood, she nodded.

"How was it?" she asked once she'd untied her tongue. Silly to feel shy when he'd brought her to orgasm in a room filled with hundreds of people and then screwed her against a wall.

But he hadn't seen her naked, and though she'd run the huge sunken bath with half a bottle of the foaming liquid currently covering her breasts and pubis, for the first time in all the years she'd known him – her whole life – she was naked in front of Gennaro.

He gave a half-smile and removed his shirt. "All seemed to be going well... Champagne? "

"That would be nice, thank you."

He soon returned with a bottle from their bar's fridge and two champagne glasses, and stretched across the bath to place them on the deep window ledge.

And then he stripped the rest of his clothes, as nonchalant about his nudity as he'd been when she'd watched him dress through the mirror's reflection.

Her heart bloomed, the beats exponentially increasing in tempo and clashing with the tempest of excitement churning in her stomach.

He was just so utterly and unashamedly masculine that it made her feel the essence of her femininity in a way she'd never done before; made her feel not just human but entirely female.

“Are you going to make room for me?”

Still feeling inexplicably shy, she hid her foam-covered breasts with an arm and lifted herself from her lying position to a seated one.

The water moved as he stepped into it, then rose above her breasts as he sat himself at the other end of the bath facing her, his long legs bending at the knee, calves resting by her thighs.

While Luisa tried to emulate his nonchalance and act as if sharing a bath with him was no big deal, Gennaro poured them both a glass of champagne.

After handing her one, he raised his. “To the end of our marriage.”

She lifted hers in acknowledgement and took a small drink.

Settling back, his feet pressed into her sides as he observed her for the longest time. “You really are extraordinarily beautiful.”

Her heart was thumping too hard for her to form more than the tiniest of smiles.

Luisa had run the bath with the full knowledge she would still be in it when Gennaro returned, but the fantasy in her head and the reality playing out were proving very different.

In her fantasy, she'd been cool and seductive, a Hollywood siren from the bygone age. The Bianchi's lobby so strongly reminded her of, a woman ready to embrace the carnal side of her nature...

And then she'd heard his footsteps approaching the bathroom and her pulse points had gone into overdrive and now she was feverishly aware of his naked body and of his long legs practically enveloping her.

But it was more than carnal desire making her heart beat so hard.

She shouldn't have been relieved that he hadn't reverted to an android ice-block. She shouldn't have cared at all. Not with her heart. She shouldn't be faking nonchalance. Shouldn't be feeling shy.

She had a large drink of her champagne and let the bubbles play on her tongue and slide down her throat before saying, "Is that really why you've spent our marriage treating me like a carrier of the plague?"

His eyes glimmered and he inclined his head slowly. "There's something about your particular beauty that affects me in ways that are dangerous."

And there was something about him that was affecting her in a way she was starting to fear was dangerous too.

She shouldn't have cared that he hadn't returned from the ball as an android ice-block.

She shouldn't have. "Beauty is only skin deep. I had to grow into my looks – I was an ugly child, as you must remember."

His smile was rueful. "I do remember. That was the Luisa I thought I was proposing marriage to. That's why I asked for you."

Her hurt at this was instant. "You wanted to marry me because you thought I was ugly?"

"Yes. By the time I realised the ugly duckling had turned into a swan, it was too late."
"

"Too late for what?"

"To back out. Once I'd made the proposal, the genie had been unleashed and could not be returned. I either went ahead with it or risked your family talking, which could have killed the business deal I needed to marry for."

Luisa thought of their numerous visits to the Middle Eastern kingdom Gennaro's business had expanded into. Knowing that if she did anything to cast doubt on the validity of their marriage it would result in the loss of his multi-million investment had made them the hardest trips to endure.

"You were taking a risk even suggesting the marriage. How did you know my family would go along with it?"

"Because your parents had been desperate enough to turn to my father for help. The biggest risk was in securing your agreement. I had to trust the young girl I remembered who'd always clung to her mother's skirt still loved her family."

"The ugly young girl," she reminded him pointedly. She couldn't understand why

that admission hurt so much.

“Yes,” he agreed without shame. “The ugly young girl. That’s who I’d imagined had grown into the woman I would marry. It was both our bad fortune that you’d blossomed into a beauty because it meant I had to keep you at a distance.”

“So if I’d never had dental treatment, you’d have been nice to me?”

“I can’t say that being nice to people is something I strive for,” he said with an ironic lift of a black eyebrow. “I’m not one for cultivating friendships and relationships.”

She drank more of the champagne and let it work its magic in relaxing fears that had sprung from nowhere and so needed to be consigned back to nowhere. “Consider me shocked.”

He grunted a laugh and took another drink.

“To answer your question, it’s likely that if you hadn’t had dental work, I wouldn’t have felt the need to keep you at a distance.

It had been many years since I’d seen you – I think the last time you’d been a young adolescent – and so it is equally likely that I’d have still reacted to you in the same way even if you hadn’t worn braces. ”

“It was a lot more involved than just braces,” she said after another drink. “Close to four years of treatment.” Most of that had been the treatment needed to correct her severe overbite.

He shrugged. “I never met that adult Luisa so I will never know how I would have reacted to her. Your sister is beautiful too, but her beauty does nothing for me.” His black eyes swirled with a meaning that made her pelvis fizz. “Your beauty does.”

“But it doesn’t define who I am. Physical beauty is only a surface thing. It doesn’t mean anything. Another ten or twenty years and any beauty I’ve gained will have faded.” Not that he’d be around to see it fade. Maybe some other man would but not Gennaro.

“My grandmother was a beauty at your age. Now she is approaching eighty and my grandfather still sees her as the woman she was when they pledged their lives together and she still sees him as the man he once was too.”

She drained the last of her champagne. “Maybe that’s why our eyesight fades as we age, so we’re blind to the physical changes in our partners.”

The lines around his eyes creased. “An evolutionary trick to keep us faithful and monogamous?”

She conjured a smile, wondering why two people who’d just drunk a toast to their marriage being only days away from ending were having this conversation. Wondered, too, why she was the one driving it. “My mother’s had laser eye surgery and she still loves my father, so probably not.”

Bath water rose again as he moved to refill her glass. “Does she still love him the same way she did when she married him?”

“I don’t know. I just know that she loves him and is very protective of him, which is a strange thing for me to get my head around because my father was always the protective one; the big bear protecting his women.

” She refocused her stare on Gennaro. “He changed his mind about me marrying you. Did you know that?”

He laid back and had a large drink from his refreshed glass. “It was never said but I

did get that impression.”

“The morning we married, he begged me not to go ahead with it.”

“And yet you did.”

“And yet I did,” she echoed. “And I did it for him and for my mother, and for my sister too, because I love them and because none of what was happening to them was their fault.”

“And you hate me for not helping them directly. You think I should have just handed over the cash to bail them out.”

“No, I hate you for using their desperate situation to your own advantage. That was as cruel as the disease he has.”

“I didn’t see it like that. To me, it was a business arrangement. A quid pro quo.”

“A quid pro quo with the family you’d grown up with. You came to my christening – your parents are my godparents. Marisa and I called your parents aunt and uncle.”

“A quid pro quo with my parents’ friends, not my friends.

I never regarded you as family. I never called your parents aunt and uncle.

You all took my family at face value and believed we held the same values as you, but we don’t.

We never have. Just as physical beauty is surface, so too is my parents’ love of family.

They are gracious and welcoming hosts but only if there's something in it for them.

They were happy to welcome you into their home and treat you like family when you had something they wanted but as soon as that was gone, you'd used up your usefulness to them. ”

“You mean when my father could no longer practise law?”

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“Exactly that. My father recognised your father’s talents when he joined the firm he used.

It’s why he cultivated his friendship and encouraged your father to set up his own practice – your father had one of the sharpest legal minds in the country and my father wanted it directed at his own affairs. ”

“Not sharp enough to ensure he had adequate coverage to protect himself when things went wrong.” She grimaced.

“He thought he would go on forever. He never envisaged being forced to stop working by the age of fifty-five. None of the insurance policies he’d taken came into effect before the age of sixty. ”

“A harsh lesson to learn,” Gennaro conceded, also conceding why Pietro Rossellini, a man who’d brimmed with good health, had fallen into that trap.

When Gennaro had made his offer to marry Luisa, he’d still had much of the old vibrancy Gennaro remembered.

Pietro’s deterioration since Gennaro’s marriage to his daughter, though, had been swift.

When Gennaro had made his offer, he hadn’t understood the extent of the speed at which the disease was progressing in him, something that sat with increasing discomfort in him.

“A harsh lesson for all of us. Until you stepped in with your proposal they were only weeks away from declaring bankruptcy.”

“And your father found the idea of bankruptcy preferable to his daughter marrying me?”

She held his stare without blinking. “He couldn’t bear to think of me spending what he called my best years living with a cold, unfeeling, selfish bastard.”

Despite the sudden icy twist of his heart, Gennaro deliberately didn’t blink either. “You should have listened to him. I am every bit as cold and unfeeling and as selfish as he said.”

“I would have suffered ten years with you if it meant saving them from bankruptcy and having the money to pay for decent care for him. Twenty years. My whole life.”

He experienced an inexplicable stab of envy that the bond between the Rossellini parents and daughters was so strong that their eldest was so willing to sacrifice herself for the sake of love for her father. Gennaro wouldn’t sacrifice a day of his life for his father. Not even an hour.

As if she could read his thoughts, her expression softened and she said, “Why do you hate your father, Gennaro?”

If she hadn’t posed the question with the same softness of tone as in her eyes, he very likely wouldn’t have answered. “Because he’s a selfish, cruel, violent, jealous bastard.”

He waited for surprise to light her face. Instead, she closed her eyes and breathed out a sigh before her eyes fixed back onto his.

There was no demand for him to explain himself. Her soft, steady stare stayed on him, waiting for him to speak without pressure.

“Cruelty and violence are innate in my family,” he eventually said.

“The Martinelli history is littered with it, going back generations. Fights, the beating of women, even murder. Our wealth and so-called nobility meant most of these incidents were swept under the carpet. My father has the gene in him.” His eyes glittered.

“He shot our family dog when I was a child because the dog crapped on an expensive rug.”

Her horror was immediate. It was a horror he shared. Gennaro had never forgiven his father for that. One of many things he would never forgive him for.

“He beat a man he thought was flirting with my mother to a pulp. He’s beaten more men than I could ever know about for trespassing on our land.”

Her golden cheeks had paled, and he remembered how close Luisa had been to his mother.

“He’s never touched my mother if that’s what you’re thinking. No, she’s his enabler.” At her widening eyes, he added, “She facilitates his cruelty by pretending not to see it. He beat my brother black and blue and always she turned a blind eye. ”

Her fingers fluttered to her lips in shock.

“I don’t know what it is, but there’s something about Niccolo that pushes my father’s buttons.

I don't remember him ever liking him. He was always hyper-critical and it seemed like he took pleasure in finding fault because then he could punish him.

'Correcting' him, as my father called it.

His form of correction usually involved a belt buckle across Niccolo's backside but he liked to use his fists too. "

"And your mother let this happen?" she whispered hoarsely.

"She always said it was for my father to decide how he wished to correct his own son."

"And you? Did he ever...?" Her voice trailed off as if she couldn't vocalise the words in her head.

"Niccolo was his whipping boy, not me. The only time he hit me was the day I stepped in to stop him killing Nic." He shook his head and drained his champagne to wash away the bitter taste coating his tongue.

"I'd been out and came back earlier than expected.

I'm certain my father didn't know I'd returned.

I was in my room when I heard a crash, and when I came downstairs I found Niccolo curled in a ball and my father kicking his head like a football.

I'd seen my father correct him before a few times – he usually saved the beatings until I was out – but never like that.

I pulled him off and so he swung around and punched me.

” He touched the bump on his nose and met Luisa’s horrified stare again.

“I punched him back, hard enough to floor him. He went sprawling onto a coffee table and smashed through it. I told him if he ever touched my brother again, I’d kill him.

He must have believed me because he never laid another finger on him. ”

There was a long beat of shocked hush. “How old were you when that happened?”

“Sixteen. ”

Luisa leaned forward and wrapped her arms around her knees. “I’m so sorry. I...”

“What?” he probed when she quietened. “Speak your mind.”

Trying to gather her jumbled thoughts, she rubbed her chin on her knee.

“I never liked your father – Marisa didn’t either, and I don’t think our mother did – so to hear about his viciousness...

I wish I could say I’m surprised, but I’m not.

But your mother...? I loved her very much, and to learn she allowed and enabled such cruelty makes my heart hurt.

” She squeezed her eyes shut to drive out the vision of Giuseppe viciously beating Niccolo, a man she’d always regarded as a cousin.

But it wasn’t Niccolo her heart was hurting so hard for.

It was for his brother, a man she'd never seen under the terms of family, and it made her feel wretched that she'd long wanted to shake the hand of whoever had caused the bump to Gennaro's nose.

No wonder he'd always held himself apart from everyone.

The courage it must have taken him to stand up to his father and protect his brother would have been immense.

She remembered her father smacking Marisa's bottom once as a chastisement for something naughty she'd done when they were small.

Luisa had cried harder than Marisa. She didn't know if her tears were the reason but her father had never raised a hand to either daughter again, and she knew in her heart that Gennaro had suffered that same distress and that he would have spent the entirety of his childhood trying to protect his brother from their bully of a father.

In her heart she'd always known Giuseppe Martinelli had a cruel streak.

It was there in his cold eyes, the reason she'd always been instinctively wary around him.

To her father, though, Giuseppe had been his friend and benefactor.

It was thanks to Giuseppe's patronage that her father's law firm had grown so successful, but that success had been entirely tied to Giuseppe.

As soon as her father's disease had started impacting the timeliness of his work, Giuseppe had appointed a new law firm to take care of his business and personal needs without even blinking.

The effect on her father's business had been instantaneous.

To imagine living with such a cold-hearted brute...

She pulled in a ragged breath. Gennaro wouldn't want to see her distress for him.

"I suppose it shouldn't shock me," she whispered.

"I thought I knew your mother but she spent decades pretending to love us and then the minute my father's law firm hit trouble when his disease accelerated, she sided with your father in dropping us and in making sure their circle of friends spurned us too.

"She thought of all the weekends and holidays they'd spent with the Martinellis and all the bonds and familiarity that had developed between the two families.

It had all been a lie. Everything about Giuseppe and Carmella Martinelli was a lie. "I must have been blind."

"Not blind. They are experts at painting themselves in the light they wish to be seen."

Luisa took a moment to gather thoughts and emotions that were all over the place.

"You know, I spent years wondering why you and Niccolo stopped joining us at family celebrations. I think the last time I saw Nic before you and I married was just before he went to university. By the time I went to art school, you'd long stopped joining us too. "

"I lived in the family home until Nic left and then I left too."

"You stayed to protect him?" A question she already knew the answer to in her heart.

“Yes. He’s not set foot in the villa since he left, but I still visited in the hope of convincing my mother to leave.

I knew my father was evil, but even with all the evidence it took me a long time to fully comprehend that her enabling and condoning of his violence is a form of evil too.

I was in my mid-twenties when I realised she loved her position in life as his wife too much to ever leave him, and I’ve not been back home since.

I meet up with her occasionally for lunch, but only because she’s my mother, and never in the villa. ”

“And your father?”

“Once this wedding is done with, the next time I see him will be in hell.”

She opened her eyes and looked square at Gennaro as everything about their marriage slotted into place. “You believe you have this gene too, don’t you. That’s why you refuse to get close to people.”

His neck extended before his features twisted.

“I have spent my life knowing I’m capable of great violence.

All my life people have compared me to that man.

All my life. And all my life I’ve known I’m as capable of violence as he is, and when I found him kicking Niccolo that time, I let that violence out.

I didn’t just threaten to kill him; I wanted to kill him, and the only reason I didn’t is

because my mother came into the room – I didn't just punch him through the coffee table, I kicked him just as he'd kicked my brother.

I only restrained myself because she screamed at me to stop, something, I should add, that she never did for my brother.

And so yes, to answer your question, I don't just believe I have that cruel, violent gene in me, I know I have it.

I nearly killed my father and I haven't shed a second of remorse for it. ”

Chapter Ten

It was the empathy ringing in Luisa's eyes that twisted the knife in Gennaro's guts and filled his chest with ice.

What the hell was he doing?

He hadn't climbed into the bath for a cosy chat – Gennaro didn't do cosy chats, and he certainly never shared confidences, especially not ones of this magnitude.

He'd never shared what had happened the day he'd tried to kill his father with anyone, so why the hell had he just shared it with the woman he'd spent two years keeping at a deliberate distance?

He'd only breached the distance he'd imposed so they could spend their last days together screwing, not so he could reveal his darkest secrets.

It was those damned doe eyes. They were as capable of ringing with fire as with empathy and softness.

He'd always hated looking into them, had always sensed they saw more than she or anyone had any business seeing, and right then it felt like she was gazing into the very heart of him, a sensation that twisted the knife.

"I did try to warn you about the man I am," he said in a voice as cold and tight as the ice in his chest. "Be thankful you only have four days left with me." Water that was considerably cooler than when he'd got in sloshed as he climbed out of the bath.

He dried himself with quick vigour before taking a fresh towel off the heater. Opening it wide for her, he caught her stare. “Are you ready for me to start making amends? Or has my murderous tendencies killed your desire?”

It took a moment for understanding to penetrate and for her cheeks to stain with colour. “Amends? After all that, you want me to get out of the bath so you can have sex with me? Just like that?”

“That is why we’re here and not at the ball, is it not?”

The stain of colour deepened, a line creasing in her forehead as she searched his face, and he experienced that same gut-twisting sensation that she was peering into his heart.

“Do you have to put it quite so bluntly?” she whispered.

He narrowed his stare and sardonically said, “If you want a man to seduce you with fluffy, meaningless words before fucking you then you only have to wait a few more days for that freedom to be yours.”

Her mouth dropped open, eyes widening into orbs before the starkness vanished and she shook her head with a bitter laugh. “Welcome back, Android Gennaro. Looks like your creators have fixed your malfunction.” She rose to her feet like a majestic goddess, bath water pouring off her...

In an instant, his mouth ran dry.

Suddenly, he couldn’t breathe, could only stare at her with his heart smashing through the ice block in his chest and a sense that the world was moving beneath his feet.

He'd believed Luisa semi-naked in a bikini was the pinnacle of beauty, that what was left to be revealed could add only a little enhancement, but the reality of her naked flesh was so much more.

In one swift glance, he took it all in, the high, full breasts that had clearly never seen a second of sunlight, the cherry red colour of her large nipples, the dark V of her pubis...

He couldn't remember the last time he'd seen pubic hair on a woman, but, God, the thrills at seeing it, of seeing Luisa in her full feminine glory, was like nothing he'd experienced before, and when he gazed back into her blazing eyes, the world didn't just move again, it tilted off its axis.

The towel he held out to her was snatched from his hand.

"Did it all get a little too intimate for you?" she snapped, looking him square in the eye as she rubbed her back dry, all earlier shyness vanquished under the weight of her visibly growing anger.

"A little too human? Is that why you felt the need to put me back in my place by insinuating that I'm good enough to fuck but nothing else?"

It felt like everything inside him clenched. "I never said that," he refuted hoarsely.

"Oh yes you did," she spat, rubbing the towel over her stomach and between her legs.

"You said it with your eyes. One minute you were telling me about your bastard father – I could feel actual human emotion coming from you then – the next a shutter came down, and you reverted to the cold asshole I've spent the last two years hating and demanded sex..."

although in fairness, you graciously implied you'd let me off if your murderous tendencies had killed my desire.

” Her face contorted with loathing. “The only thing that's killed my desire is the man standing before me now, not the sixteen-year-old boy he used to be who probably saved his brother's life.

If your programming is still giving you sexual urges, I suggest you either get a sex doll delivered or use your hand to relieve it because I will not be used as a warm body to get yourself off on, now get the fuck away from me. ”

Angrier than she'd ever been but for reasons she couldn't even begin to dissect, Luisa dropped the towel then shoved Gennaro out of the way to step out of the bath, water dripping from her calves and feet as she stormed across the tiled floor to the door.

She wasn't just furious, she realised with an awful sinking feeling. She was hurt. Deeply, deeply hurt. Wounded enough to burst into tears.

If you want a man to seduce you with fluffy, meaningless words before fucking you then you only have to wait a few more days for that freedom to be yours.

She swallowed back the tears and staunchly told herself that there was no hurt; the tears were a side-effect of her anger because only a complete fool could spend two years living with the android who called himself Gennaro Martinelli and give him the slightest bit of power to hurt them...

A hand clasped her shoulder. In an instant she'd been spun around.

Gennaro's was as tight and as twisted as she'd ever seen it, the only movement a pulse throbbing at the side of his jaw.

“If all I wanted was sexual release then believe me, you’re the last woman I would choose to have it with,” he said tautly, his hands gripping her upper arms, black eyes boring into hers.

“I hate how you make me feel, don’t you understand that, Luisa?”

I despise it. I hate that I always have to fight to keep the shutters down around you.

I hate that I can’t be in a room with you without fantasising about the taste and scent of your skin.

I hate that I’m attuned to every word you say.

I hate that every time you move your mouth to speak or eat, all I want is to feel your mouth on mine.

I hate that whenever you leave a room I want to follow you.

I hate that I’ve spent every night of the last two years fighting the craving to crawl into your bed and make you mine because that’s what I hate the most – that I don’t just want to fuck you.

I want to imprint myself into you. I want to imprint myself so deeply that you become mine alone and never look at Dante or any other man again. ”

A stunned silence fell between them. All Luisa could hear was the rapid tattoo of her heart pushing hot blood between her ears and Gennaro’s ragged breaths; all she could see the tortured desire etched in his stare.

After the longest time when it seemed like time itself had stopped moving, he breathed in deeply through his nose, his chest shuddering on the exhale.

“I’ve never wanted to feel like this, not with anyone but especially not with you,” he said starkly.

He slid his hands up and over her shoulders and up the curve of her neck.

“I’ve never regarded you as my family but I remember the ugly little girl who loved to draw and read and who glowed with love for her family...

I envied your family, Luisa. I envied you and I hated you all too.

I would see the way you interacted together and the bonds of love you shared and it made me sick with jealousy that those bonds would never be mine.

” He speared her hair to cradle her head, his face closing in on hers.

“You didn’t need to tell me that you’d only changed on the surface – I already knew it.

You’re much tougher and feistier than you were as a child but there’s still that inherent glow of goodness shining out of you.

All that’s in me is darkness. Everything I feel for you is dangerous and wrong, and I keep fighting it and fighting it, but now...

.” He breathed deeply, the pads of his fingers pressing even tighter into her skull. “I don’t know how to fight it anymore.”

It wasn’t just his words that filled her thrashing heart so completely: it was the raw honesty lacing it, Gennaro laying himself bare to her in a way she knew deep in her core he’d never done before.

“I hate how you make me feel too,” she admitted in a ragged whisper.

She’d always hated how he made her feel, how as a child he’d walk into a room and her cheeks would go all hot and red and she’d lose any ability to string a sentence together.

She’d always hidden behind her mother or a book or stuck her face even lower onto the pages she was drawing on, and prayed he wouldn’t see her or speak to her.

Most of the time her prayers had been answered, but that one real time he’d instigated an interaction between them when he’d gifted her the expensive grown-up art equipment all those years ago – the kindest, most thoughtful and unexpected gift she’d ever received, given without any hope or expectation of reciprocation – she’d been too much of a tongue-tied, red-faced wreck to thank him properly for it.

She still had it. The watercolour pencils were reduced to stubs, the book filled with her colourful drawings, all kept safe in her childhood bedroom, and as her thoughts continued to swirl and she continued to gaze into Gennaro’s tortured black eyes, terror snaked its way through her veins and gripped hold of her heart.

Oh, God, no ...

As if he could see right into her mind, his features convulsed and he muttered something incomprehensible before his sensuous mouth came down on hers.

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 4:39 am

The first brush of his lips sent a shockwave of sensation through her that was even headier than the first kiss they'd shared what felt like forever ago.

Sinking into his hard, almost primitive demands, their mouths moved together in a fusion of passion that incinerated her terror, and she gave herself to it, switched off her thoughts, cast aside her fears and gave herself to Gennaro, gave herself to his dark taste, his scent, his touch and the sensations flickering like lightning through her skin.

"God, Luisa," he groaned into her mouth, his fingers dragging through her hair.

"You taste like heaven." And then his lips plundered her again with a kiss so hot and demanding that if hadn't wrapped his arms so tightly around her, her legs would have buckled.

Scraping her fingers through his soft hair, she returned his kisses with the same passion, every sweep of his tongue against hers filling her with fizzes of sensation.

He lifted her into his arms as if she weighed nothing and carried her to the bed.

Breathing heavily, he lowered himself on top of her and gazed down at her for another long, suspended moment.

And then he kissed her with a hungry possessiveness she felt all the way into her marrow.

Where their first coupling... had it really only been just a few hours ago...? had been a desperate explosion of pent-up lust, this was an explosion of pent-up emotion.

Burying his face in her neck, his tongue trailed the sensitive hollow beneath her ear and down over the frantic pulse at the base of her throat. The scratching of his beard on her sensitive skin was as heavenly as the sensual assault of his lips and tongue.

The sensation in her breasts when he took them in his mouth, encircling the taut peaks with slow strokes of his tongue, was almost more than she could bear.

She moaned softly at the untrammelled pleasure, the moans deepening when he answered her wordless plea for more with deeper sucks and licks and grazing bites until the pleasure became so acute it turned into a form of pain.

She'd ached for this for so long, she realised in the hazy recess of her mind. Ached for Gennaro.

All her life...

Gennaro had never tasted or smelt such exquisite, arousing flesh before. Never touched such exquisite softness, the hard the scrape of Luisa's nails on his shoulders an exquisite contrast.

Everything about her was exquisite, the thrills raging through him stronger even than that moment he'd first thrust into her against the wall.

They'd both lost control and taken each other selfishly, but even with that loss of control and in the heat of their passion, he'd managed to retain some detachment.

That detachment had been ripped away. The urge to take Luisa again and lose himself in her slick tightness fought with the hunger to devour every delicious inch of her flesh and learn every last one of her erotic secrets.

Not just her erotic secrets. He wanted to strip her back to her essence and learn every

last thing there was to know about her.

God, she was beautiful. Every delicious inch.

The weight and fullness of her breasts... it was like they'd been created especially for him and he slavered attention on them, fighting the very real need to consume them whole.

Consume her whole. Crawl into her skin and taste her heart and then etch his name into it.

He'd never known such greed before, and it was this greed, this need for Luisa, to taste every inch of her deliciousness and mark himself on her, that had him snaking lower.

Luisa did something to him, something that was more than sexual. She made him feel things it was dangerous to feel, things that transcended mere sex and desire, and he'd been a fool to ever let himself believe otherwise.

It was the way she'd stalked to the bathroom door, so majestic in her nakedness and yet so vulnerable.

It had broken something in him and filled his chest with something he'd never felt before, and now everything he'd spent the past two years ruthlessly determined to never allow become reality had been unleashed.

He didn't think he could fight it if he wanted to.

God, she tasted so good, so damned fucking incredible. The more he tasted the more he wanted. For the time they had left together, Luisa would be his in every greedy, selfish way possible, and when they said goodbye, she would walk away with his

imprint in her soul.

The pleasure being bestowed on Luisa was so intense that she didn't know if she was in heaven or hell.

Gennaro worshipped every inch of her flesh with his mouth and tongue, his hands and fingers caressing and exploring, shivers flaming over and through her skin.

Her pulses raged, liquid heat pooling deep inside her and when his mouth reached her pubis, she parted her thighs and raised her buttocks in another wordless, wanton plea.

With a barely suppressed groan, he explored her most intimate secret flesh with almost restrained reverence.

His tongue probed and flickered, fingers working in tandem, stroking her inside and out until she was nothing but a coiled flame of hot, sticky need and her nub swollen to an arousal so strong it was close to torture.

Writhing beneath him, the liquid in her core thickened to molten, she arched her back, losing herself in this maelstrom of intense, all-consuming pleasure.

She was riding the crest of a wave, each stroke of Gennaro's tongue sweeping her higher and higher until the wave smashed and in the split of a moment she was thrown headfirst into a vortex of shimmering, spasming pleasure that had her crying out and claspng tightly to the sheets as she rode the ripples for as long and as far as she could until she'd dissolved into tingling atoms.

With one last tender kiss to her most feminine part, he shifted his attention, caressing his way back up her body with kisses and bites, taking a breast whole into his mouth and sucking it with a savageness that released fresh darts of pleasure.

Reaching for him, she clasped his skull and scraped her fingers through his hair to pull him up to her just so she could fuse her mouth to his and taste his heavenly kisses all over again before hooking a leg around his waist and using her body to coax him onto his back.

Gennaro gazed into Luisa's fevered eyes and knew she was seeing the same fever in his.

"My turn," she dragged out huskily before kissing him such passion and hunger his brain shut down to everything but her.

The sensations as she explored his body were like nothing, nothing ...

Every mark of her plump lips and silky tongue on his flesh fed the fire, her soft, glossy hair covering him like a sheet, trailing its own pleasure, and when she took his rock-hard cock into her hot wet mouth he had to squeeze his eyes shut to stop himself coming on the spot.

God in heaven ...

Gripping him tightly, she pleased him simultaneously with her mouth and hand.

He reached for the head bobbing up and down between his legs and speared his fingers through her hair, groaning his encouragement and pleasure.

And she groaned too, soft groans from the throat taking in as much of his length as she could manage.

A tugging sensation was building inside him, the unmistakable sign that his orgasm was edging closer, and he fought to hold on against a mouth and tongue bestowing such heady, erotic delights on him.

As if she sensed he was on the brink, she sucked her lips up his length one final time and crawled back up his body to straddle him.

Heady doe eyes locking onto his, she reached for his arousal and guided it to the V between her legs. With a long cry of pleasure, she sank onto it.

In the beat of a heart he'd filled her, filled her so completely that it shocked the breath from his lips... and the breath from hers .

Cheeks flush with passion, she rode him with her nails digging into his chest, her breaths shallowing, moans deepening. He clasped her hips to steady her and gazed in wonder at her utter abandonment. If he thought he'd been in heaven in her mouth...

Her climax came quickly, her eyes glazing as she ground herself down, thickening and contracting around him, her face closing in on his until her final cry of bliss was a breath on his tongue.

Only when he was certain her climax was sated did he flip her onto her back. Pushing her thighs back as far as they would go, he drove into her with his hips, and then he started to fuck her, fucking her as hard as he'd done in the fantasies he'd barely allowed himself to acknowledge.

Her legs wrapped tightly around him, hands gripping his shoulders, she took every powerful stroke with hitched moans of encouragement.

It felt like he was drowning in her.

The pleasure saturated every part of him.

Harder and faster he drove into her, building the sensation for them both, dimly and yet potently aware of the colour in her cheeks darkening and the pupils of her eyes

dilating and the tendons in her neck straining, and then she was thickening and contracting around him, her body pulling him deeper and deeper until he no longer felt like he was drowning but was drowning; drowning in a climax so powerful that white lights flickered behind his eyes and every inch of his body throbbed.

Chapter Eleven

L uisa kept her eyes closed and prayed for the world to stop turning and to never shift back into focus.

She didn't want this moment to end. Wanted to stay exactly like this forever.

Gennaro was slumped on top of her, his cheek pressed tight against hers. His breaths were heavy. She could feel the thrashing of his heart, the beats so close to hers.

If she kept her eyes closed and kept the world out, she could pretend to herself that they were one and always would be. Her and Gennaro, always.

He lifted his head to gaze down at her, drinking her in as much as she was drinking him in.

Her heart swelled.

His mouth came down on hers in a tender, lingering kiss before he rolled off her and onto his back.

The coldness at the loss of his warmth was immediate, but only lasted seconds for he hooked an arm beneath her and rolled her into him.

With her cheek on his chest and her leg slung over his thigh and both his arms wrapped around her, a sense of contentment like she'd never known before settled in her.

For the longest, longest time they just lay there, Gennaro's fingers making gentle trails up and down her back, and the world's focus stayed in the shadows.

"Are you warm enough?" he asked huskily.

She nodded and kissed his chest, inhaling the musky scent of his skin deep into her lungs.

His hold around her tightened.

Her contentment deepened.

Nothing in her whole world had ever felt as right as it did in that moment, but just thinking that was a sign of the world pulling itself out of the shadows, and its focus sharpened when the distant voices of two people shouting at each other drifted into their suite.

They must have been passing their suite's block for seconds later the voices had melted into the night.

"I wonder who that was," she whispered.

He sighed, his breath whispering through the roots of her hair. "Right now, I'd prefer not to know."

She lifted her face to rest her chin on his chest and gazed at him. "In case it's your brother?"

His features tightened. Closing his eyes, he jerked a nod. Another beat passed before his face softened and he grunted a laugh. "I never thought I'd get to thirty-seven and still have to protect him."

“He doesn’t want to marry Siena, does he,” she said quietly.

Gennaro gazed into the soft doe eyes and skimmed his fingers up her spine and gently fisted her hair. “No,” he admitted. “And she doesn’t want to marry him. But you’d already intuited that.”

Her lips curved into a small smile. “Then why are they doing it?”

He held her stare and then inhaled deeply. “Niccolo got himself into debt with Lorenzo. I’m talking serious debt. He made a deal with the devil that he couldn’t afford to pay back and the devil’s solution was for Niccolo to marry his daughter as payment for that debt.”

He watched her eyes flicker as her clever brain turned. “So I was right? The marriage really is for Lorenzo to have the prestige of being related to the great, ancient Martinelli family?”

“Yes,” he agreed. “Niccolo is the son of a duke and one day will be the brother of one, and is considered a noble in his own right. Lorenzo has created great wealth for himself and by clever manipulation of the media he owns, has the love of a large portion of the population. But he’s not stupid – he knows those in the upper reaches of Italian society look down on him.

The marriage is his way of buying himself into that society. ”

She was silent for a long time. “I’ve never really thought about your family’s duchy before, or that you inherit the title. Not in any real, non-abstract way.”

“And why would you? It means nothing. The title is worthless in all but name but to someone like Lorenzo, it’s priceless.”

“Did he engineer Niccolo’s debt?”

“I am certain of it. Niccolo crossed paths with him in the course of his ordinary business and Lorenzo cultivated his friendship, much like my father cultivated your father’s friendship.

Lorenzo and my father are more alike than either of them realise and Nic was too naïve or greedy or desperate or whatever was going through his mind at the time to recognise it. ”

There was more silence before she quietly asked, “What will happen if Niccolo doesn’t go ahead with the marriage?”

“Lorenzo will call in the financial debt but he will add interest to it, and it is the interest that means the wedding must go ahead. If it was just money, then I’d pay it off myself – hell, Dante would pay it off for him – but Lorenzo’s interest is never monetary.”

Feeling suddenly cold, Luisa put her cheek back on Gennaro’s chest and pressed herself tighter against him. “Would you be put in danger?”

“Everyone Niccolo loves will be in potential danger. If Niccolo fails to marry Siena then Lorenzo will be humiliated in front of the whole country, and that will only make him more dangerous.”

It wasn’t just Luisa’s body that had turned cold, her erratically beating heart had turned icy with fear, not for herself but for Gennaro. “If it comes to it, will you increase your security?”

“If it comes to it,” he agreed. “I think, though, that if Lorenzo goes for anyone then it will be Georgia.”

“Who’s Georgia?”

“Niccolo’s English lover... His ex-lover,” he corrected himself. “Her sister is in Tuscany with Dante – that’s why he’s not here. He’s keeping her locked in his castle so she can’t destroy the wedding.”

Confused, she lifted her face again. “What do you mean?”

“Georgia’s sister flew to Naples on Monday intending to give intimate photos of Niccolo and Georgia to the press. We only found out about it because Georgia warned Nic. Dante agreed to hide the sister away until after the wedding.”

“Why would the sister do that?”

“That, for me, is the million-dollar question. Why would the ex-lover’s sister come all this way to try and stop a wedding?”

There has to be more to it than the reason Georgia gave which is essentially that her sister’s gone crazy.

Crazy or not, surely it would have been simpler and more effective to give those pictures to the British press?

There has to be more to it than what Georgia told Nic.

I’m certain their affair was a lot more serious than he’s admitting, and if my suspicions are correct then Lorenzo will know it too – he has spies everywhere – and he will go for Georgia first. If my suspicions are wrong then he will likely go for Dante first.”

Or Gennaro, Luisa thought with a cold shiver that raced from her toes to the roots of

her hair. Niccolo despised his parents, but he loved his brother.

She had to clear her constricted throat to say, “But this is all hypothetical, yes? A hypothetical that could only become a reality if Niccolo jilts Siena?”

His eyes had narrowed almost imperceptibly. “Yes. Purely hypothetical. Lorenzo is dangerous but also unpredictable in his methods of hurting people, so your crush might still be safe even if Nic does take the nuclear option.”

She blinked and was about to ask what he meant by her crush when it came to her that Gennaro had felt her shiver and had thought it was out of fear for Dante.

He was jealous...

Stretching herself over him to bring her face closer, she palmed his cheek and gently rubbed the bristles of his beard.

“Gen... I have never wanted Dante. I like him very much but I’ve never wanted him in that way.”

Black eyes bored into hers with an intensity she felt all the way to the pit of her stomach.

“It was the thought of anything happening to you that made me go cold,” she whispered. “You. Just you. You’re the only man in the world for me. You always have been.”

Those final words came from nowhere but as they fell from her tongue, Luisa knew they were true, and as they spilled out, something broke free inside her and her chest filled with the light of the truth.

And the truth was she loved Gennaro. She'd always loved him.

He'd been a brooding figure who'd loomed over the whole of her life, but he'd elicited fascination as much as terror.

She'd been drawn to him in the way children and adolescents are often drawn to books and films guaranteed to reduce them to terror, a morbid fascination that in her case had always been accompanied by a strong quailing sickness.

She'd hidden behind her mother whenever he'd come into a room but had still peeked between her fingers for a glimpse of him.

As she'd approached adolescence, she'd spent the days before a visit to the Martinelli home unable to sleep or eat properly, and though she'd always believed herself to be frightened of him, she would take her drawing pad or whatever book she was reading and snuggle in the nearest nook to wherever in the house he happened to be...

and she'd always been like a compass able to determine his exact location with pinpoint accuracy.

When he'd come out of the room she'd scurried away like a frightened rabbit. .. but never scurried far.

Her love for him had subconsciously guided everything she'd done since he'd casually gifted the art stuff to her in that unexpected random act of kindness that had stolen her heart.

That gift had determined the course of her life.

Luisa could have gone to art school anywhere but she'd chosen Florence, not for its prestige but because that's where Gennaro lived.

She'd never consciously sought out the art shop he'd bought her supplies from but she remembered how her heart had thumped the day she'd recognised the name on the shop front.

It had thumped because it had matched the name elegantly printed on the bespoke paper bag his gift to her had been wrapped in and which she'd kept.

She hadn't bought supplies from any other shop since.

The day he'd passed her on the Piazza della Signoria ... that had been the day she'd known it was over with her boyfriend. She'd ended the relationship days later, wracked with guilt for hurting him when he'd done nothing wrong and not even understanding her reasons for needing to end it .

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 4:39 am

She understood it now. The only thing he'd done wrong was not being Gennaro.

In breathless silence, she soaked in all the features of the face she'd fallen in love with before she was even old enough to know what love was.

Her promise not to fall in love with him hadn't been a lie because she'd already been in love with him, a love that had always been there, hovering out of sight, waiting for her to see.

Her feelings had been the monster of her childhood. Not Gennaro.

His eyebrows drew together, his black eyes studying her with the same intensity she was studying him. Suddenly terrified of just how deeply and absolutely she loved him and terrified he could see it, she fused her mouth to his and poured out all the words she could never say in a kiss.

There was a moment of hesitant resistance before his lips parted and his tongue slid into her mouth, and then his arms wound tightly around her.

In the beat of a heart, the flame between her legs went from a simmer to an inferno and suddenly the need to feel him inside her again; inside her, a part of her, was more than she could bear.

Kissing him with all the passion in her soul, she dragged herself fully on top of him and writhed until she felt his hardness at the juncture of where she most needed it to be.

He thrust up and slid his massive length inside her, filling her so completely that she cried into his mouth at the sheer bliss of it.

Their groins locked together. A hand speared into her hair, the other gripped her hip, and then they were moving together, the fusion between their groins as absolute as the fusion between their mouths.

The pleasure was so intense that when she sensed her peak approaching it was all she could do not to cry her disappointment that it had to end, and then she was crying, crying in ecstasy as sensation exploded and she exploded, the fingers on her hips biting into her delicate skin an added pleasure as Gennaro shuddered his climax deep inside her.

Gennaro gazed at the demon reflecting back at him in the bathroom mirror and dragged his fingers down the thick bristles of his beard. It felt like weight laced with barbed wire had been placed in his chest.

Luisa was still sleeping. He'd woken spooned into her.

He'd rarely stayed the whole night in a lover's bed. The few times he had, leaving had been easy. Mechanical. He would wake up, get up and get the hell out.

Leaving their bed had never felt like a wrench.

He rolled his neck and breathed deeply and methodically. His chest was barbed but the rest of him felt tight.

Everything he'd sworn he would never do...

He hadn't just ripped up the rule book but incinerated it.

He climbed into the shower and scrubbed himself hard all over, and wished he could scrub out the image of the way Luisa had looked at him when she'd told him he was the only man in the world for her.

Luisa opened her eyes to a suite filled with sunlight and an empty bed.

Yawning, she blinked the sleep out of her eyes and sat up. "Gen?"

There was no answer, but then she spotted his phone on his bedside table and the nibble of panic at his absence faded. He must be in the bathroom .

A quick check of her phone revealed it was closer to lunch than breakfast. They'd fallen asleep after the birds had woken.

Ignoring the messages that had pinged in overnight, she turned her phone off and laid back down to wait for him.

Her head was as full as her heart. Every minute of their night together replayed itself like a reel, from the moment she'd read seduction in Gennaro's eyes at the ball to when they'd ordered room service at three in the morning and Gennaro had spooned ice cream over her breasts just so he could lick it off to when they'd eventually fallen into an exhausted sleep wrapped in each other's arms.

It had been the most fulfilling, terrifying and thrilling night of her life. The thrills from their lovemaking still lingered in her blood, but the terror, released when she'd been forced to confront the depth of her feelings for him, had quieted into dormancy.

The Gennaro who'd spent the night making love to her was not the Gennaro she'd spent two years living with. The Gennaro she'd found such incredible pleasure with had opened himself up to her. He'd let her in. And she'd let him in too.

She didn't know what their future held, knew only that come Monday, she wouldn't be able to bear saying goodbye.

Not now. Maybe she could endure it if she was still living in blissful ignorance of her love for him, but she wasn't.

Her love for him had burrowed into every cell of her body.

She fizzed with it. And she fizzed, too, to know he had feelings for her.

Real feelings. Feelings that ran deeper than desire.

The bathroom door opened.

Her heart jumped and then flipped over on itself.

Scrambling back up, a smile she had no conscious control of fixed itself on her face before he even came into view. The smile dimmed slightly to find him fully dressed in black jeans and a black shirt, and then she met his stare and it fell away completely.

Luisa was looking at the Gennaro she'd spent two years living with, not the Gennaro whose arms she'd fallen asleep in.

"What's wrong?" she whispered.

He closed his eyes briefly before slowly running his fingers through his hair and taking a seat on the armchair close to the foot of the bed. His black eyes found hers. The firm, sensuous lips that had kissed and caressed every inch of her body tightened. "I need you to leave."

She blinked in confusion. “What do you mean?”

“That I need you to go home. I’ve arranged for my driver to collect you – he’ll be here within the hour.”

Chapter Twelve

The dormant terror leapt back into life in a single pump of Luisa's heart. "You want me to go...? But why? What's happened?"

"Nothing's hap—" He cut himself off and drew in a long breath of air.

"Last night happened. My job here is to keep my brother focused on the wedding and ensure he makes it to the church on Saturday and exchanges his vows. Instead of watching over him and making sure he didn't do anything stupid at the ball, I spent the night fucking you and have slept half the day away. "

She flinched, not at the crudeness of his language but the denigration of everything they'd shared. "That's what you call it? Fucking?"

"That's what I have to call it," he stated bluntly. "And if we had only fucked then we wouldn't be having this conversation. I need you to go home, Luisa. I will tell people we had an argument and agreed it was best you leave so we both had a chance to calm down."

"What happened to this week being too important to allow rumours to circulate about our marriage?" she asked tremulously. "Because that's what you said to me when I suggested we have separate rooms instead of this suite. You dismissed it."

"Things have changed, but your reasoning back then was solid and if you leave now it will have the added effect of making it more believable when we announce our plans to divorce on Monday."

She didn't just flinch at this, she recoiled as if he'd struck her with his bare hand. She could barely speak to say, "You still want us to divorce? Even after last night?"

He was unyielding. "More so. Last night was a mistake that went too far. I need you gone, not just because you've become a distraction to me but for your safety."

White noise was buzzing so loudly in her head that it was difficult to make sense of what he was saying. "What has my safety got to do with anything?"

"It has everything to do with it. The way you make me feel is dangerous, Luisa."

"So you keep saying," she said in a tone so hushed she barely heard it herself.

"I keep saying it because it's the truth and I need you to understand it."

She shook her head and hugged herself tightly. Her heart was beating so hard she could hardly breathe. "Who are you trying to convince, though, Gennaro? Me or yourself?"

A tic appeared right beneath his eye. "You know the kind of man I am."

She stared at his implacable face and swallowed back a swell of nausea. She had the strong feeling she was going to be sick.

"I got too close, didn't I?" Her voice sounded all quivery and wrong. Everything inside her felt quivery and wrong. "And now you want me gone, out of sight and out of mind so you don't have to deal with it."

He muttered a curse and expelled a long, ragged breath "No, Luisa, I want you gone for your own safety because everything I feel for you is dangerous and last night has made those feelings a thousand times worse. I let it go too far and have put you in

danger. I'm a jealous, violent man, you know that – why the hell do you think I imposed the rules I did on our marriage and kept the distance I did with you? It was for your sake."

The white noise turned into a scream in her head and suddenly she was hurling the phone she hadn't even realised was still in her hand at him. Only her terrible aim stopped it hitting him in the face.

He jumped to his feet like he'd been shot. "What the fuck, Luisa?"

She'd thrown the covers off and launched herself off the bed to shove hard at his chest before she even comprehended what she was doing. "If you're so violent, retaliate," she taunted shrilly, shoving at his chest again. "If you're that incapable of controlling yourself, hit me."

If he'd been implacable before, he was a block of marble now. "Stop it," he ground out through clenched teeth.

"Stop what?" She pushed his immovable chest as hard as she could.

"Stop goading you into hitting me? I want you to hit me. Go on, Gennaro. Prove what a violent shit you really are. Blacken my eye before I take myself to Dante and let him kiss it better for me." She brought her face right up to his.

"And then I'll let him fuck me better too. "

Impossibly, his features darkened even more, the marble turning to granite.

She laughed, a bitter ragged sound, right in his dark, stony face. "I bet he's amazing in bed. I bet he can do things to a woman you've never even dreamed of."

The tic pulsed even harder.

“Which of us would you want to kill first? Me or Dante? Picture it. Go on. I dare you. Picture me and Dante naked together. Picture us laughing at you because I promise you, that’s what we’ll do when we’ve finished screwing each other’s brains out.”

She’d been lifted into the air and laid on the bed before she could catch a breath.

Catching her chin in his hand, he brought his face down to within an inch of hers. “You push me too far,” he said savagely.

“Then hit me,” she spat. “Do it. You know you want to.”

His mouth twisted and then, breathing heavily, he dropped her chin as if her skin were scalding him and strode away from her. “Pack your things, Luisa. And put some clothes on. I want you gone within the hour.”

The coldness that filled her as Gennaro’s long legs crossed the suite seeped into every atom of her being.

Atoms that only hours ago had been filled with the fizz of his lovemaking.

Not his fucking . That’s how it had started but not how it ended, and it slammed into her that this was really it, this was the end of them.

Gennaro was walking out of her life as if none of what they’d shared had happened.

“You coward !” She was on her feet with the words screamed out of her before she knew she was going to say them.

His steps faltered.

“Even after all that provocation... you didn’t even come close to hitting me. None of those rules you imposed on our marriage were for my sake: they were for your sake because you’re too scared to let anyone in.”

His legs started again on their journey out of her life.

“You seduced me thinking you had everything under control but I broke through, didn’t I. I breached the distance you impose on everyone, and that terrifies you and so you’re running away.”

He reached the door and grasped the handle.

“I understand that fear, Gennaro – I’ve felt it the whole of my life, and it’s all been tied to you.

My feelings for you. That’s what scared me – how you make me feel.

” A tear broke free and rolled down her cheek.

She wiped it away with the back of her hand and fought to hold back the rest. “And now I understand why. It’s because deep down I’ve always known they’re feelings you will never allow yourself to return. ”

His head jerked but his back remained firmly turned to her.

“You’ve spent so long containing your emotions for fear of being like your father when you are nothing like him that you’d rather spend the rest of your life alone and lonely than take a chance on a real, human relationship.

You’d rather throw my love back in my face than risk opening your heart to what we both know could be something truly special.

And that makes you a coward. We could have it all, Gennaro.

You know we could. But you won't take it.

You're not even prepared to try." Her voice finally broke, the tears she'd barely been holding back breaking free, and then her legs buckled beneath her and she slumped to the floor sobbing uncontrollably.

He left the suite without looking back at her.

Gennaro sat at the main pool terrace playing poker with his brother and a couple of his cousins. For the first time in his long amateur gambling career, he found himself on a losing streak.

Niccolo, with his monster hangover, wasn't faring much better. Gennaro didn't even have a mild hangover as an excuse.

He couldn't rid his ears of the sound of Luisa's sobs.

The relief he'd expected to find at ending things with her had failed to kick in.

The barbed wire-laced weight in his chest had grown. He took another large drink of his scotch in an attempt to numb it .

A hotel porter appeared from the direction of his suite, heading towards the lobby. He was pushing a trolley loaded with luggage.

The weight spread to Gennaro's throat, making it difficult to breathe.

"I wonder who that belongs to," Niccolo muttered.

Gennaro had another drink of his scotch without responding.

“Lucky bastard, whoever it is.”

He flicked his stare to him. Even with his hangover, Niccolo was more on edge than he'd been since Gennaro had reminded him of everything he stood to lose if he didn't make an effort to play the happy loved-up groom.

Their father's appearance at the table added another layer to the froideur.

After hovering a few moments, he cleared his throat and brightly said. “Can anyone play?”

Niccolo eyed him coldly. “Fuck off.”

Their cousins continued studying their cards and pretended not to hear anything, but the poolside was busy, and Gennaro noticed people on neighbouring tables turn their heads.

Seeing his father's face turn red with embarrassment and outrage, Gennaro got to his feet and leaned into him.

Speaking in a low voice, he said, “How many times do you have to be told? You're not here because Nic wants to patch up nearly two decades of estrangement and play happy families with you.

You're here because Lorenzo demanded you be invited so he could make a friend of you, but no amount of sucking up is going to get you a seat on the top table at the wedding breakfast.”

His father's ageing face convulsed yet somehow he managed to dredge a smile, as if

what his eldest son had just whispered in his ear was something warm and witty.
“He’s still my son.”

“You gave up the right to call him your son when you used his head as a football all those years ago.”

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 4:40 am

He could see by the glint in his father's mean eyes that his thoughts were ugly, but whatever the ugliness of his thoughts, his father was an expert at controlling his emotions.

It was only in private that he let his cruel, violent side run free.

He'd never let that cruel, violent side run free on Gennaro though, something Gennaro had always assumed was because his father had recognised the same violent streak in his eldest son that lived in himself and knew he would fight back.

"Go and find your new friend and get the hell away from us before you embarrass yourself further," he added in the same low undertone before sitting back down and picking up his cards.

Now he was the one pretending to study the hand he'd been dealt. Pretend, too, that his heart wasn't racing.

Gennaro had let his violent side run free only once since his early childhood, decades back when he'd been certain his father would kill his brother. It was one of the few times he'd witnessed a beating. His father had lost control that day believing Gennaro was gone from the villa.

His heart made a sudden flump in his weighted chest.

Hands suddenly shaking, he downed his scotch as a maelstrom of thoughts collided.

His father was frightened of him. That's why he'd never beaten Gennaro and why

he'd saved his beatings of Niccolo for the times Gennaro was absent from the home.

Just as there was something in Niccolo that had always pushed their father's cruellest buttons, there was something in Gennaro that had always frightened him, and on a subconscious level Gennaro had always sensed this and absorbed it into a fact.

He was violent and cruel like his father, an assumption that had steered the whole of his life.

But just because his father saw something frightening in the eyes of his eldest son didn't mean that something was there. It didn't mean that it was an inherent part of him as he'd always believed.

Luisa looked into his eyes and saw something different to what his father saw and different to what Gennaro believed he saw in his reflection.

She'd goaded him, not to provoke him into acting on his worst instincts but to prove his worst instincts didn't exist, at least not in the way he'd always believed them to.

"Gennaro?"

He looked at his cousin.

"I've raised. Match or fold?"

He loosened the cards clenched in his hand. Their pictures swam before his eyes. He'd lost so many hands in the short time they'd been playing that to match his cousin's raise of the stakes, he'd have to go all in.

Go all in...

He turned his stare to his brother, now just two days away from marrying a woman he didn't want, let alone love, and forming a marriage that would never be a true marriage and one he would never be able to walk away from.

If Gennaro's intuition about Niccolo's English lover was correct then Niccolo would have gone all in with her.

Niccolo, who for all the abuse he'd suffered at the hands of their father, had never lost his ability to charm.

It was a charm he used to keep people at a distance, a talent that stopped people noticing he never gave anything away about himself.

The only close relationship Niccolo had was with Dante.

In their very different ways, both Martinelli brothers had built walls deliberately to repel people .

Georgia had knocked down Niccolo's walls, he was certain of it.

Luisa hadn't just knocked down Gennaro's walls, she'd smashed them.

The ugly little buck-toothed girl whose shyness and unmistakable talent had touched his heart all those years ago had grown into a woman who now only had to look at him to touch his heart.

She was his heart, and he'd sooner drive a stake through it than harm a hair on her head.

Over the last two years she hadn't just consumed his every waking and sleeping thought, she'd seeped into him and wound herself around his heart to claim it.

He'd been an arrogant fool to believe he could contain the effects of opening Pandora's Box.

One prise of the lid and everything contained in it had sprung free, but it wasn't the evils of the world that had been unleashed, it was the light to extinguish the darkness in him. Luisa's light. Luisa's love.

"Gennaro?"

Now they were all looking at him waiting for him to make his move.

He threw his cards on the table and shoved the last of his cash into the pile. "All in."

And then he got to his feet and ran to the lobby.

Luisa sat in the back of the same car that had driven her to The Bianchi and left its exclusive grounds.

Just four days ago she'd expected to make this return journey ready to party like it was a new Millennium.

She'd never expected she would leave with her heart smashed into little pieces.

Her phone buzzed. She turned it off without looking at it.

It would be one of her family. Unable to face them, she'd messaged her sister and given her Gennaro's version of why she was leaving.

In many ways, it was the truth, except in the real version she wasn't leaving to give them time to cool down.

She was leaving because Gennaro would rather be lonely and miserable than take a chance on love.

She was such a fool. She'd given the whole of herself and her heart to a man she'd known could never return her feelings.

She'd let him breach her defences; defences she'd only put up to protect herself from exactly what she was feeling now, and now she had to navigate the rest of her life without him.

There was a long beep from the car behind them. It barely penetrated her misery.

She couldn't go back to Florence. She'd have to go to her parents or check into a hotel.

Yes. A hotel. Somewhere she could spend a few days without any memories of Gennaro in it and grieve the future she'd barely realised she'd spent all her life longing for before it had been snatched away from her.

The horn of the car overtaking them made a series of beeps.

She closed her eyes and wiped away more tears that were immediately replaced with fresh ones. Only when she opened them again did she realise the driver had turned off the road they'd been travelling and was pulling into a layby.

She pressed the buzzer and croaked through her raw throat into the microphone, "Why are we stopping?"

The driver didn't answer. About to repeat the question, her body jumped when her door flew open and then her heart jumped when Gennaro appeared.

She gazed at him as if he were a mirage. “What are you doing here?” she whispered.

His gorgeous features contorted. “Don’t go.”

“What?”

He held out a hand to her. “Don’t go. Please, Luisa, don’t go. ”

She continued gazing at him and dumbly said, “But you told me to go.”

“And now I’m telling you – begging you – not to.”

Feeling like she was in some kind of dream, she gripped the hand extended to her and let him help her out of the car. The hand felt real. The scent of his cologne smelt real.

But her legs felt shaky. Everything felt shaky. She was so wrung out she could barely comprehend what was happening, and she yanked her hand out of his and pressed her back to the side of the car to keep herself upright.

With cars streaming past them, he quietly said, “Please, come back with me. Come back and see out this farce of a wedding and then we can fly anywhere in the world you want to go and retake our vows with the meaning we should have given them when we first made them.”

He looked serious, she thought dazedly.

“You want us to have a proper marriage?” she whispered, needing to be concrete in her certainty of what he was saying.

“With all my heart....”

Her feet had leapt from the ground before he'd finished speaking as she launched herself at him, pummelling his chest with her fists as she screamed at him, "You absolute fucking bastard! I would rather sleep on the streets than go back with you. I hate you."

Strong arms wrapped around her, pinning her to the chest she was so desperately trying to pummel.

"I know you hate me," he whispered, pressing his mouth into the top of her head.

"I deserve your hate. I have treated you terribly and if I could wind back time to the day I made my proposal to your parents, I would. I have so many regrets but using their terrible situation to my own advantage is second only to how I've spent our marriage treating you.

" There was a crack in his voice. "You were the first person other than my brother to ever touch my heart and now you've grown into the woman who owns it.

I love you, Luisa. I think I've loved you since you walked into your parents' living room and agreed to marry me with such contempt in your eyes.

I deserved that contempt. I was a selfish bastard acting in my own self-interests while you were acting out of love. "

She stopped struggling against him and held her breath.

He pressed another tight kiss to her head and quietly said, "I think you've saved my soul, Luisa. I know you deserve so much better than me, but I beg you, please give me the chance to be that man. I swear I will do everything I can...."

His voice tailed off as he sucked in a deep breath of air.

“Say it,” she dredged.

“I want to be the man and husband you deserve but I don’t know how to be.”

It was the starkness in his voice that cut through the last of her desolation and anger and allowed her heart to pump with hope.

Disentangling herself from his tight hold, she lifted herself onto her toes and cupped his face. His eyes were closed. “Look at me,” she ordered quietly.

His chest rose and then his black eyes locked onto hers.

“Do you love me?”

“More than life itself.” If Gennaro hadn’t already known it, the panic that had gripped him when he’d forced Leonardo to chase after the car driving Luisa out of his life would have sealed it. It had been a terror like nothing else on this earth.

She studied him intently for the longest time.

“Gen... The man I fell in love with is the man who out of nothing but kindness bought a shy little girl the best gift she could ever have received. He’s the man so determined to be nothing like his tyrant father that he’s denied himself the best things life has to offer out of fear of hurting others.

He’s the man who is so intensely protective of his brother that he’s given up a week of his life to be amongst a crowd of people he detests for his brother’s sake.

That’s the man I love. That’s the husband I want.

Just you, exactly as you are.” She swallowed.

“It’s not going to be easy. It’s going to take time but we can build something special, but for that to happen you’ve got to have faith. ”

“I have faith in you,” he said simply.

She continued studying him, gazing into his eyes, peering into his heart, peering into his soul.

He didn’t take a single breath until her hands slid around the back of his head and cradled him closer to her.

“And I have faith in you, and if we have faith and love in each other then that’s all we need. ”

“I do love you,” he whispered. “More than anything.”

“And I love you. My heart’s been yours since I was a little girl.”

“I will keep it safe,” he promised solemnly. “And protect it always.”

Slowly, the soft smile on the face he found more beautiful every time he looked at it broke into a wide beam and suddenly she was laughing with a joy that was so infectious that the last of the weight in his heart lifted and Gennaro laughed too, and then they were kissing with the same joy, kissing until neither of them had any air left, oblivious to all the drivers beeping their approval as they sped past them.

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 4:40 am

When Luisa had first arrived at the BolognaFiere Exhibition Centre, she'd soaked in every little thing, spending hours studying the Illustrators Wall – which really should be called the Illustrators Maze – and squealing to find her own illustrations on it.

Now she left it without any awareness of her surroundings or of her legs or feet moving.

She felt like she was floating. Jules Chambers, a children's author whose books Luisa provided the illustrations for, seemed to be in as big a daze, and they wordlessly embraced their goodbyes.

In the distance, a tall, imposing man unfolded himself from the back of a large black SUV.

The soles of Luisa's feet regained their substance but the disconnect between them and her brain remained until she was gazing into her husband's black eyes.

“Well?” he asked expectantly.

No one had more faith in Luisa's career and talent than Gennaro.

He'd insisted on coming with her to the conference centre so they could go straight out afterwards and celebrate what he had absolute certainty was a done deal with a children's publisher for Jules and Luisa's magical adventure book for small children.

She burst into tears.

Swearing, he pulled her into a tight embrace. “I’m so sorry, my angel. They are fools. I will buy the publishing house and sack the whole idiot team. They wouldn’t know talent and exciting storylines if –”

“No,” she choked out, wriggling out of his hold and cupping his bristly cheeks. “They didn’t turn it down. They want four of them.”

“Four?”

“With the option of more.”

She watched his clever brain process this before a huge smile transformed his face from gorgeous to heartbreakingly gorgeous, and then she was being swung in the air much in the same way he swung their young daughters, except the kisses he always gave their daughters when he finally put them down was nothing like the kiss he gave Luisa when he finally put her down.

“See, didn’t I tell you,” he grinned before devouring her with another deep kiss. “I knew they’d bite your hands off for it. You just needed faith.”

She burst into laughter and threw herself back into his embrace.

In the six years since the renewal of their wedding vows, the one thing her husband had been unswerving in was his faith in her.

Gennaro was her biggest champion. Where he was still aloof and inscrutable with the outside world, in the privacy of their home he was a loving husband and father, and when he accompanied Luisa to parties connected with her work, he was charm personified and promoted her talents with a greater zeal than even her agent managed.

Cuddled into him on the drive back to their hotel, she thought back to the shy little

girl who'd been so morbidly fascinated with him that she'd quailed just to hear Gennaro's name mentioned.

When under the same roof as him, that little girl had followed him around like a moon orbiting its sun, always positioning herself as close to wherever he happened to be as she dared.

Gennaro was still her sun; would always be her sun.

And she would always be his too.

THE END

CHAPTER ONE

Federico Esposito, better known to all who loved and hated him – not always mutually exclusively – as Rico, was propped against the bar of the vast party room with his brothers watching the guests doing their thing on the dancefloor.

This was their little sister's engagement party, which meant lots of female pickings.

Even better, there were some fresh faces.

One fresh face in particular had caught Rico's eye, a dark chestnut-haired beauty whose hot little body was wrapped in a white halter neck dress.

There was something self-conscious and uncertain about the way she danced, clumsy even, as if this were the first time she'd ever let herself sway to music.

Or maybe it was her shoes. He'd spotted her earlier when she'd crossed the room, the flared skirt of her dress swishing behind her.

The stiffness in her gait suggested a woman unused to wearing five-inch black heels.

When she stepped out of them, he doubted she would reach his armpit.

Rico wasn't particularly fussy when it came to women, but there was something about the shorter ones that did it for him.

He nodded in her direction. "Who's that in the white dress?"

Both of his brothers followed his stare, and then Tommaso, the middle brother, grinned. “That’s Marisa Rossellini.”

“Luisa’s sister?”

Luisa Rossellini was married to Gennaro Martinelli, brother of Niccolo Martinelli, the man marrying their sister in four months. Now that he thought about it, Rico could see the sisterly resemblance.

“Yes. She’s one of Niccolo’s guests.”

“She’s hot. How have I never met her before?”

Tommaso smirked. “Because she lives like a nun.”

“Nuns don’t wear dresses like that.” The only thing holy about Marisa Rossellini’s dress was its colour. Backless, its front plunged in a V to her midriff, its design cleverly revealing only a hint of cleavage.

“She’s a good girl who’s never had a boyfriend and attends mass every Sunday. My guess is she’s a virgin, so if she’s your chosen conquest, my suggestion would be to forget it – that one doesn’t put out.”

People thought money made the world go around, but people were wrong. Information was king. Information was power, a fact of life instilled in the three Esposito sons when they were learning to read.

Take Niccolo Martinelli. Niccolo was a member of one of Italy’s oldest, wealthiest and most aristocratic families. That was no secret. However, it was information their father had harvested about him that had enabled him to lure Niccolo into his lair.

Since the engagement had been agreed, Rico had been charged with keeping Niccolo under surveillance.

Through this surveillance, information had come that Rico's future brother-in-law had spent the last weekend shacked up in a Parisian hotel with a woman who was not Rico's sister.

No one, not even Siena, expected Niccolo to be faithful.

All he had to be was not stupid. As information was also currency, Rico had pocketed his knowledge of Niccolo's infidelity on the basis that one never knew when information would need to be cashed in.

It was the Espositos' thirst for information and self-preservation that meant every guest in attendance that evening had been thoroughly vetted, a task overseen by Tommaso. Again, you never knew when uncovered information could be cashed in. Or weaponised.

"How old is she?" Rico asked, his interest piqued even more.

"Twenty-five."

"A twenty-five-year-old virgin?" he murmured. "Rarer than a unicorn." And this one was more beautiful too. "Does she work?"

"In accounts."

"Of the creative kind?" Creative accounting was the only worthwhile accounting as far as Rico was concerned, a sentiment shared by all Espositos.

"I told you, she's a good girl. She works in the accounts department for a fashion

chain. When she's not working, she helps with the care of her father. He has Parkinson's disease. When she's not at work or caring for him, she goes to mass."

"No interests at all?"

"She's in a book club."

"A what?"

"A book club – it's where a group of people choose a book to all read and then get together to discuss it."

"To discuss books ? Why would people do that?"

Tommaso shrugged, his expression mirroring Rico's bemusement, but Mattia, the eldest brother, said, "Maybe if you'd ever read a book, you would understand the appeal."

Rico and Tommaso looked at each other and then burst into laughter.

Unimpressed, Mattia raised an eyebrow and drained his bourbon. "You two are philistines."

"What was the last book you read?" Rico challenged. Mattia's delusions of intellectualism never ceased to amuse him.

"A book on the foundations of Rome."

Rico and Tommaso caught each other's bemused eyes again. "Do you think my virgin unicorn would enjoy it?"

“She’d enjoy it more than anything you have to offer, but why don’t you go and ask her?” Mattia said. “It will be fun to watch you humiliated.”

“You don’t think I can have her?” In all his thirty-two years, Rico had never come across a woman who could resist him.

Those who kept their guard up at his approach quickly lowered it when he told them his name.

Having never suffered false modesty, Rico knew his name, wealth and looks were a killer combination.

“Not that one,” Tommaso said. “That one will never put out without a wedding ring on her finger.”

“How much do you want to bet?”

“Ten grand.”

“Done.” They shook on it, and then Rico downed his neat vodka and rubbed his hands together. “Excuse me, gentlemen, but I have ten thousand euros to win.”

*

Marisa Rossellini was trying very hard not to return Federico Esposito’s stare. It felt like his eyes had been on her the whole evening.

She doubted there was a sentient person in Italy who hadn’t heard of the Espositos or who was unfamiliar with their faces, so to be on the receiving end of such blatant interest from one of them was unsettling.

Led by patriarch Lorenzo, who in four decades had dragged them from being minor drug dealers in Naples – a fact conveniently memory-holed – to being one of the richest families in the country, no money or shiny shoes could disguise what the Espositos were at heart: thugs.

Dangerous thugs. Dangerous, powerful thugs.

Lorenzo owned a hefty chunk of the media, including television stations, much of what was left of the newspaper industry and, more recently, social media platforms. The family had fingers in the pies of many other industries too, arms dealing only included by the very brave in their lists of them.

They also had something equally as powerful in Italian society – charisma.

It was Lorenzo's special brand of charisma that made the family so dangerous.

The Italian public adored the Espositos.

They saw in Lorenzo a gregarious, working-class hero made good, a stinkingly rich man who'd never forgotten what it was to be poor (as if he'd ever been truly poor!) and loved nothing more than donating his money to worthy causes close to his heart.

Lorenzo had opened numerous care homes for the elderly across the country which were unique in providing top-class care and facilities at prices even the poorest of society could afford, and even had hospital cancer and children's wards named after him.

That much of the funds that paid for these good deeds were a means of laundering his filthily-gotten gains wasn't even strenuously denied by the family: the few journalists who dared ask the question, however obliquely, were dismissed offhand, swatted away like pesky flies.

That the journalists who refused to be dismissed and probed beneath the deep veil of secrecy had a habit of disappearing...

well, that was memory-holed as effectively as the Espositos' origins.

Marisa was quite sure that if she'd grown up in an ordinary household, she'd think the Espositos were the second coming too.

As it was, she'd been raised by a lawyer-father whose main client was Giuseppe Martinelli, a Duke and one of Italian society's foremost men. Giuseppe and his wife were – had been – extremely close family friends of the Rossellinis, and evening suppers had often been spent discussing the Espositos in contemptuous tones. To the Martinellis' minds, and those of their high society friends, the Espositos were scum and undeserving of a seat at their table.

Having always disliked Giuseppe, Marisa would have loved to have seen his face when he'd learned his youngest son was marrying Lorenzo Esposito's only daughter.

However, with Giuseppe having terminated his business relationship with Marisa's father and taken away her parents' seat at his high society table in light of her father's Parkinson's diagnosis, she'd had to take her amusement from afar.

She'd not wanted to come to the party tonight and suffer seeing Giuseppe and Carmella.

The way they'd treated her parents was something she prayed daily to find forgiveness for, but Luisa had begged her to come.

Luisa had married Giuseppe and Carmella's older son, Gennaro, in a deal to prevent the Rossellinis going bankrupt (Marisa was quite sure both Martinelli sons hated their father as much as she hated him), and it was a marriage most definitely made in cold

loathing.

Considering her sister had given up her life, even if the marriage was only temporary, to save their family, the least Marisa could do was support her when Luisa needed her.

And so Marisa had travelled to the party with her sister and brother-in-law, braced for an evening spent with the Espositos, the most powerful and dangerous family in Italy.

What she hadn't factored in was catching the eye of the youngest Esposito son.

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 4:40 am

He was good-looking. She couldn't deny that.

Gorgeous even. How the disgusting Lorenzo had bred four gorgeous offspring was something she'd take up with the higher being if she were admitted into heaven.

Lorenzo's wife was a handsome woman, so probably they'd inherited their looks from her side of the gene pool, but still.

There was a basic unfairness at play. Having the face of an angel when you had the heart of the devil put the unwitting at a disadvantage.

Marisa wasn't unwitting. Ignoring Federico's blatant ogling was the best way to deal with a situation like this.

Carry on dancing and pretend not to feel his eyes on her.

Carry on dancing and refuse to reciprocate the long looks.

Except... it was hard not to look back. It felt like being back at school.

There had been a boy she'd known for years and shared many subject classes with, but had never given more than a passing thought to until one science lesson when she was fifteen she'd turned her head and found him staring at her.

After that, it had been a nightmare to stop herself from staring back, in part to see if he was still looking and in part because knowing he was interested in her had piqued her interest in him.

When he'd finally asked her on a date, she'd become so taken with him that she accepted. It had been an unmitigated disaster.

Soon after that date, Marisa had spent two years committed to the idea of being a nun.

While she'd long since abandoned thoughts of joining a convent, she was still to go on another date. She'd been asked on occasion but always gracefully declined. Either they didn't make her feel anything or they were the type of men she could imagine having to use her knee on again.

None of those men had been even a fraction as dangerous as Federico Esposito or had a fraction of his swarthy good looks.

Square-jawed, his nose was a touch too big and his mouth too wide, but they fitted him perfectly.

It was his eyes, though, that were the killer.

They were deep-set and piercing, and as she danced, she couldn't help wonder what colour they were.

Dark brown like his hair, which he wore short at the sides and long at the top? Instinct told her not.

The tempo of the music changed to a slower beat.

Catching Luisa's eye, she mimicked having a drink.

Her sister's glance darted to the table their champagne was warming and flattening on, and she made a slight grimace before nodding.

Gennaro was sat at that table deep in conversation with his brother and Niccolo's best

friend, the affable playboy Dante Coscarelli.

She'd barely set off when the hairs on the nape of her neck lifted. The beats of her heart were already accelerating when she felt a tap on her shoulder.

She turned to find the imposingly tall and broad figure of Federico Esposito standing before her.

His eyes... they were blue; a deep, piercing blue... gleamed down at her. "Dance with me?"

Taken aback at this forwardness from a man she'd never spoken to, she scrambled for a response. "I was about to have a drink."

"One dance and then a drink?"

Trying not to panic, she looked for Luisa, but her sister had disappeared from the dance floor.

Drawing his eyebrows together, he cast her with a pleading look and placed a hand on his chest, right where his heart rested. "Please?" he beseeched, practically fluttering his long, dark eyelashes. "One little dance?"

When he put it like that, how could she refuse? And it was only one dance. And he was Federico Esposito, so agreeing to one little dance was probably safer than a flat-out refusal. One little dance, and then she would glue herself to Luisa.

"Okay. One dance."

He broke into a grin so wide faint lines appeared at the sides of his eyes. "You have just made my evening." Stepping closer, he put his hands on her hips.

The warmth of his touch was frighteningly electric and made her want to bolt, and she had to summon all her courage to place her hands lightly on his shoulders.

Marisa wasn't the most confident dancer at the best of times, and she'd never danced with a man before...

Okay, she had once, but that had been with her dad at a family party, and so didn't count.

To have her first real dance with a man who happened to be the notorious Federico Esposito made her limbs stiffen and her torso go rigid.

"Relax. I don't bite," he murmured before putting his mouth to her ear and with seductive good-humour added, "Unless invited to."

With the warmth of his breath dancing against her sensitive skin, revulsion and a curious excitement laced her spine.

Frightened at how hard her heart was beating, she would have wriggled out of his hold if he hadn't slid his hands from her hips to the bare skin of her lower back and closed the tiny gap between them.

A shock of sensation flushed through her, and suddenly she was struggling to breathe, every ragged inhalation pulling in a microdose of his scent.

He smelled beautiful. There was none of the overpowering cologne so many of their countrymen liked to douse themselves in.

Federico smelled clean and fresh. She couldn't say why, but his scent reminded her of fresh oranges warming in the hot summer sun.

Without thinking, she slid her hands up to hook around his neck and pressed her

cheek into his chest.

His hold on her tightened.

“I’ve been watching you all night.” His breath was hot on the top of her head. “You eclipse every woman here.”

But she couldn’t speak, not with her breasts crushed against him.

She could feel the heat of his skin and the strength of his heartbeat through the silk of his light blue shirt.

There was something incredibly solid about him, a masculinity that made her feel her femininity in a way she never had before.

The tune they were swaying to stopped. Another track came on.

She concentrated hard to pull in a full breath and then slid her hands down to his chest to gently push him away.

She had to summon all her courage to meet his stare. Clearing her throat, she said, “That’s our one dance done.”

His hands moved back to her hips. There was something wolfish about the hungry gleam in his eyes. “Another?”

The temptation to hook her hands back around his neck was almost overwhelming, the gleam in his eyes close to hypnotic.

If she hadn’t spotted her sister slinging her handbag over her shoulder and her brother-in-law rising from the table to exchange a manly embrace with Dante, there was every chance she’d have agreed.

With escape now real, relief shot through her. Smiling, she shook her head. “Thank you, but it looks like we’re leaving.”

His forehead creased in disappointment. “Already? It’s so early.”

“It’s not up to me. I’m travelling with my sister and brother-in-law.”

His hypnotic stare not leaving hers, he caught her hand and threaded their fingers. His hand was practically twice the size of hers. “Stay. I’ll see you get safely home.”

This should not be such a tempting proposition... “I live a two-hour flight away.”

He squeezed her fingers. “I can get you home. Don’t leave me when we’ve only just found each other.”

Her brain in serious danger of becoming scrambled, Marisa shook her head to give herself a much-needed reality check. This was Federico Esposito, thug, notorious lothario and breaker of hearts.

She tugged her fingers out of his. “Don’t worry, Federico – there are plenty of other women for you to find here.”

“But you’re the only woman I see... and call me Rico.”

“Get yourself to an optician, Rico . You’re a little young to be losing your eyesight.”

He put his hand back to his heart. “Your beauty has blinded me.”

“Invest in new sunglasses then.” Absurdly amused, she grinned and stepped around him. “Thank you for the dance. Enjoy the rest of the party.”

“Can I call you?” he called as she walked away.

She flipped her stare over her shoulder, and, still grinning, said, “No. Goodbye, Rico.”

*

“Looks like you owe me ten thousand,” Tommaso said the moment Rico rejoined his brothers at the bar.

He knew damned well the pair of them had watched the entirety of his dance with Marisa and had seen her sashay away from him without looking back.

She’d downed what had remained of her champagne and then, with her sister and brother-in-law, left the party. Again, without looking back at him.

But she’d wanted to. She’d walked out of the party with the posture of someone feigning nonchalance.

“Losing your touch, little brother?” Mattia asked with an ironic lift of his eyebrows.

Rico flicked his chin and made a pft sound. As if he’d lost his touch. He’d felt Marisa’s hot little body tremble in his arms. Seen, too, the confused desire in her stare when she’d met his eyes after their dance. His hot little virgin unicorn was attracted to him.

“Ten thousand. Bitcoin works for me,” Tommaso said.

Rico met his stare thoughtfully and smiled. “How about we extend the bet?”

“No. You lost. Pay up.”

His smile widened. “This one is going to take time and effort, so let’s make the bet reflect that.”

Tommaso laughed. “You will never have her. Not that one.”

“I bet you that by the time our sister marries, I will have had her. Name your price.”

“If you’re that confident, I want in too,” Mattia said while Tommaso’s eyes narrowed in thought. “If you bed her by the wedding, I will give you my Swiss chalet.”

Rico’s eyes widened in glee. “And if I fail?” Which he wouldn’t.

“Your Dali collection.”

Now Rico winced. Dali was the only artist, living or dead, he had any time for, and he’d spent a small fortune over the years hunting originals and paying an obscene amount to make them his. Still, he wasn’t going to fail so there was no danger of him losing them.

He held his hand out to Mattia. “Deal. And when I win the bet, I’ll hang the collection in my new Swiss chalet.”

They shook on it, and then Rico turned back to Tommaso. “Well?”

Tommaso’s eyes gleamed. “Your Neiman Marcus in exchange for my Patek Philippe.”

“Go screw yourself. The Neiman’s worth much more than your watch.” Rico’s limited edition motorcycle was his pride and joy. He was more attached to it than to any woman, including his mother. “Add your Ferrari and you’ll have a deal.”

“Deal. But I want evidence. No evidence, and you lose by default. There will be no extension.”

Rico rolled his eyes but nodded. “Sure. Whatever. Your watch is going to look great

on my wrist.”

The second bet shaken on and sealed, the three brothers clinked their glasses together and downed their shots.