

The Master of the Island

Invitation to Eden Series

Lauren Hawkeye

The Master of the Island

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ISBN: 978-1-928068-10-5

For R.G. Alexander, for being pretty damn awesome.

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We are very pleased to issue your Invitation to Eden, an exciting series coming to you in 2014 from 27 of the biggest names in romance. Join us as we take you on an exciting adventure to Eden, where anything... and everything goes!

This story is meant as an introduction to the Invitation to Eden series.

It is not meant to be read as a standalone.

Prologue

“I’ll take it.”

I study the castle standing alone at the top of a lush green hill. An Irish castle. It is built of dove grey stone and rocks that have crumbled with age, but it caught my attention—my imagination—as soon as I saw the photographs. In truth it’s not much to look at right now...but then, neither am I.

Originally home to the wealthy and privileged, the once proud structure shows nothing but decay and disrepair on the surface. But the tallest tower still stands, spearing the dull, misty sky proudly, as if to say *I may not be much to look at anymore, but I’m still here.*

It’s a sentiment that resonates with every fiber of my being. In my gut I know that this is the place I’ve been searching for.

The one that I saw in my dreams.

“I’ll take it,” I repeat firmly, nodding at the realtor and giving one last look at the seven hundred year old ruins, fixing them in my mind before turning on my heel and striding back to the hired car. I hear an exclamation of surprise from the man behind me, but it doesn’t slow my steps.

“Mr. Vardalos.” He is panting when he catches up to me, though the distance between the car and where we were standing just moments before is miniscule. “Don’t you want to look inside, at least?”

I turn to face him, and though I know I appear outwardly calm, inside I still feel the burn of pain when I see him flinch. It isn’t a reaction I’ve been able to get used to. In fact, each time I get that look, the ache inside me intensifies. But he doesn’t need to know that.

He won’t meet my eyes as I regard him calmly. “I’ve seen all I need to see. Draw up the paperwork. You’ll be contacted next week regarding transport of the structure.”

My fingers, clutching the car door, tighten when the man dares to look at me, and can’t quite hide his wince. “Mr. Vardalos. You understand that I can’t be held responsible for the condition of the interior if you don’t care for it after you’ve seen it.”

I focus on him for a moment. He is overweight, and his bald head shines both with sweat and the drizzle of moisture in the air. A man whose opinion would mean nothing to me...before.

His gaze flicks to mine briefly and clings to the only feature he saw before we arrived at the castle, before I'd removed the silk hood that I normally wear over my face. I wonder, briefly, if I should reach into my pocket and put it back on.

As if he can't bear to look at me, he pulls off his glasses for something to do, polishes them with the hem of his shirt. He's a bit like a cartoon character to me, out of place in the mystical beauty of Ireland.

But that's not his fault. I know that to his eyes—to anyone's—I look like nothing so much as the beast from one of the many fairy tales that haunt this land.

“What do you mean, transport, sir?” He frowns as my words catch up to him. “To where?”

I sigh a bit, inwardly. The billions that pad my bank accounts let me get away with a lot—like wearing a balaclava with my designer suit—but I suppose I was hoping for too much, thinking that I could make a request like this and not be asked any questions. I slip my hand inside my pocket and retrieve the hood, casually concealing myself once again.

The realtor's shoulders instantly relax and he takes a relieved breath.

“This castle will be reconstructed, stone by stone, on an island off the coast of Florida.” I don't elaborate, don't tell him of my plans for it, though the curiosity—and sheer disbelief—is plain on his face.

“Mr. Vardalos. May I call you Theo?”

“No.”

He is clearly startled by my refusal, but I don't much care. A man who would be sick at the sight of my face isn't my friend. And if he were, he would know that I much prefer the full form of my name—Theodosius—to the abbreviated version that Americans always want to use.

After a moment's pause, he presses on, undeterred. “Mr. Vardalos. I would be remiss if I did not tell you...”

He lowers his voice, as though we are sharing a secret. “...I am shooting myself in the foot here. But to buy this castle and move it overseas... it's worth nothing away from Ireland. Why not just build something new?”

I refrain from rolling my eyes. He won't actually be losing much if he fails to earn a commission on this building. Though this castle has been such an obsession that I knew I would pay any sum once I found it, in actuality it is not listed for very much at all—likely due to the state of decay.

No one else sees what I do. The beauty underneath.

“If we’re quite finished?” The expression on his face amuses me as he sputters and I close the car door. Once sealed inside the cool, dim interior, I sigh and turn to take one final look at the castle, adjusting the hood as I do.

I run my fingers beneath the silk and over my scars as I study the tower of crumbling stone. How does one explain to someone who hasn’t experienced it that it has to be this castle and none other? That the island demands it?

The island—a small, deserted outcropping of rock in the middle of the soothing waters of the Bermuda Triangle...

It showed me this place. And there isn’t a single cell in my body, not even the ones that have been horribly altered and maimed, that does not believe that the course of action I have set out upon is not meant to be.

This calms me as I lean back against the smooth leather of the seat, as I order the driver to take me to the airport and leave the sweating, flinching realtor behind. Ireland is beautiful, to be sure, and I now understand why I felt pulled to come here.

But I’ve had enough of travelling. I’m dreaming of palm trees, of the smell of salt on the breeze, and air so thick with heat and magic that its touch feels like a lover’s hand upon my skin.

I’m tired.

I want to go home.

Chapter One

Six Months Earlier

There are too many people. They are everywhere, crowding the sidewalks, the streets, adding to the already unbearable heat of Miami.

Millions of eyes, all staring at me with disgust.

The rage boils up inside me, but what am I to do? And how can I blame them? No matter the injury done to me, no matter how much I rail at the injustice that people can no longer see past my hideous face... it doesn't change my circumstances.

I am the same person inside that I always was, for the most part. Though I admit, storms of anger now taint my every thought, every feeling with red, because of what I've become on the outside. A monster.

It doesn't matter. Soon I will be alone. Finally, blessedly and completely alone.

As I stalk down the crowded sidewalk to the office of the seaplane charter company, I try to push away the memory of how I came to be like this—once a rich, successful man on top of the world, now a mangled beast. Though I know I can't focus on it if I want to survive, still the darkness dogs my every step.

Celeste. A beautiful icy blonde who loved the same things that I did: money, celebrity, and games of dominance and submission. But she loved one thing that I did not—her childhood sweetheart, a grifter more ruthless than I had ever been. I'd been so in love—at least, I'd thought I was—that I'd never seen the trap they'd set coming, the trap that left me bloody, scarred and very nearly broken. It also left me without a considerable chunk of my bank account, though not nearly as much as they'd imagined. I wish I could find more satisfaction in the fact that I'd withheld the enormity of my fortune from her.

The money? I can let it go.

The scars, both inside and out? They changed my life irrevocably. The prodigal son made a fool by love.

Never again. Where I'm going, it won't get the chance.

A year ago I purchased the small island in the warm waters of the Bermuda triangle sight unseen, with thoughts of opening an exclusive resort of some sort. A fanciful dream made more

tempting by my accountant's promise of lower taxes.

Maybe the fingers of fate prodded me towards that particular purchase, because though the accident has halted those plans abruptly, I have plenty of use for the island.

I need to heal. And a tiny, deserted chunk of land that doesn't even have a name sounds like heaven at the moment. A place where there will be no one to see me. No one to stare.

No one to make me feel like less of a man.

The plane charter office is much as I expected it to be—a rundown interior housed inside a tiny bungalow by the edge of the water. The door is propped open, to let the sunlight in and, I imagine, the stuffy interior out. Only a handful of people are inside.

The woman behind the counter is young, perhaps mid-twenties—close to my own age. She's attractive, with skin the color of copper, and long spirals of dark curling hair.

Once, I could have charmed her with nothing more than a slow smile.

Now? She looks up as I enter, and though she quickly recovers from it, she winces once, quickly, when her eyes find the scarred half of my face.

Though it makes my stomach do a slow roll, I ignore it, push it down. Approach the counter that she stands behind.

"Theodosius Vardalos." Pulling a sheath of papers from the pocket of my jeans, I slide them across the chipped laminate. "I have a reservation for a private charter."

Her smile is bright, overly so as she scans the papers detailing my reservation. Her smile falters as she reads to the bottom of the paper.

"Mr. Vardalos." Smiling nervously, she looks at me—and immediately looks away. Staring at her hands, she taps on the ancient looking computer in front of her. "I'm sorry, Mr. Vardalos, but your charter has been cancelled. Your pilot is sick."

"And I'm sure you have more than one. There must be someone available." Calmly, I hand her a crisp stack of bills. I won't entertain this turn of events. I hired this company and paid them a ridiculous amount of money to not only fly me the two hours that it will take to get to the island—alone—but also to procure all the items on the list of supplies that I gave them.

I don't really care who pilots the plane, so long as they're competent. What matters is that within the next few minutes I am on that aircraft, sailing toward the blessed solitude that I crave.

Have to get away. Need to get to my island.

"I'm so sorry, Mr. Vardalos, but we're just a small operation here. We only have three pilots

total, and the other two are booked up for the day.” She still won’t look at me, and the rage that I am becoming so accustomed to again beats beneath my skin.

I have been attempting to hide my scars, angling my face so as not to frighten her, but now I rotate my body so that I am facing her fully, so that if she looks up she has no choice

Look at the monster, little girl. Be afraid.

Her stare settles on me, and when she flinches I feel the pulse of satisfaction, deep in my gut. I don’t say anything; I know that looking at me is reprimand enough.

“I don’t know what to tell you, Mr. Vardalos.” Tearing her gaze away from my disfigured face, the woman looks down at her hands and pushes the money back in my direction. “There are no more options here. We have no one.”

Frustration blinds me with its thick haze, and with it comes a healthy dose of panic. I need to get out to that island, *now*. The thought of being out there, of being blessedly *alone*, is what I’ve clung to since the accident. It’s the only thing that had kept my mind from becoming as mangled as my face. I’ll die if I have to go through this hell for one more day.

“This is unacceptable—” I’m cut off by a clear female voice.

“There’s one more option, if you’re interested. I can fly the plane.”

The quick burst of hope is tempered with incredulity when I turn and find the owner of that voice. A slip of a girl that I barely even noticed on my way into the charter office has sidled up to the counter where I’m standing, a thoughtful expression on her face.

She’s dressed in worn denim overalls and a sleeveless shirt the color of green olives. Her hair is light brown, and pulled back in a way that only makes her innocent looking face appear younger.

She’s a child. She doesn’t look old enough to have a beer, let alone to fly a damn plane. But something about the spooked look in her green eyes, the determined jut of her chin is familiar, and holds my attention.

She’s a pretty girl, but the interest she piques in me isn’t sexual. Maybe it’s the way she doesn’t pretend that she hasn’t seen my scars, but instead studies them with mild curiosity, the way she’d look at anyone else. She doesn’t care about them, I realize. Not at all. But the determined tilt of her head says she is serious about flying my plane.

More than desperation tells me to trust her. I can feel it in my gut. She can take me where I need to go.

“You have a pilot’s license?” Narrowing my eyes, I shoot her my most intimidating stare, the one that once struck fear into the hearts of businessman far more experienced than me.

“I do. And I’ve got more hours in flight than the other three put together.”

The clerk doesn’t disagree, and the girl sounds sincere. I can’t help but wonder why she isn’t one of their pilots...and why this young woman who seems so resolute has so many ghosts in her eyes.

My instincts are telling me to go with her. For once I listen, nodding my head as I make up my mind. “That will do, so long as you can get this particular plane in the air. It has all my supplies.”

For what I have already paid this company, it better.

“The plane is loaded up, but I can’t just let anyone fly it.” The woman behind the counter slaps a hand down on the laminate service, as if trying to regain control of the situation. “There are regulations. Insurance. She was only hired to help the owner with some repair—she isn’t authorized to fly our planes.”

“She most certainly is.” Without looking at the charter employee again, I draw another thick stack of folded bills from the pocket of my jeans. I don’t count it before adding it to the rest and sliding it across the counter, but it’s probably more money than the small sea plane is worth.

I hear her stutter; I don’t care. Instead, I look the girl over once more.

She doesn’t care about the scars. Have I run into a single old friend or stranger on the street since it happened who didn’t recoil in horror? If so I can’t remember. I’ve either hired a blind pilot, she’s angling for sainthood, or she’s seen worse.

Rattling off the coordinates, I study her intently. Apart from that look in her eye, the one that suggests that maybe she has some demons of her own, she appears cool. Collected.

“That’s where I’m going. Can you get me there?”

She shrugs, nonchalant. “If there’s a lagoon where I can land the plane, then sure. Can’t land a puddle jumper on open water.”

“Don’t you need to see the plane before you know you can fly it?”

“Do you need to inspect every different model of car out there to know that you can probably figure out how to drive them?” She grins, the first smile I’ve seen. It lights up her face, chases away the shadows. “I’ll have to find where a few key things are before we take off, but I haven’t met a plane yet I can’t fly. So yes, I’m sure I can do it.”

Momentarily placated, I gesture for her to step outside, following closely behind. Blinded by the late afternoon sun, I shield my eyes, look down the dock to where a small white puddle jumper with sky blue accents is tied up.

“Why do you want to do this? I haven’t even told you how much I’ll pay you.” She doesn’t know my name, doesn’t have any idea who I used to be. For all she knows I could be a dangerous criminal. A killer.

She could be a killer. It wouldn’t be the first time I’d been fooled by a pretty face.

At the end of the day, I suppose it doesn’t really matter. If my instincts are off, if she’s a shitty pilot, if she wants to murder me and dump my body in the ocean...

I don’t entirely know that I care. Not anymore.

The girl shrugs again, stuffing her hands deep into her baggy pockets. “Doesn’t matter. I’ve got nothing else to do.”

That’s not it—or at least, it’s not all.

But her reasons for being here are none of my business. Even though I’m about to put my life in her hands, I’m hard-pressed finding the energy to care.

“Just tell me your name, then, and we have a deal.” I hold out my hand, a gesture that I’ve adopted, though it’s not so common in my home country of Greece. She eyes it warily, then slides her small palm against my own.

A jolt passes through me—that sense of familiarity, but stronger.

“Do I know you?” I query, peering down into her face. The feeling isn’t one of attraction, not at all... rather, the feel of her dry, cool hand against my own soothes me in a way that nothing has since my accident.

“I think I just have one of those faces.” She hesitates, then seems to settle. That jolt that passed between us—that almost familial feeling link—I’m pretty sure she felt it too. “And you can call me Joely.”

“Joely.” An unusual name, yet it fits her. Satisfied I nod, squeeze her hand once more. “I’m Theodosius Vardalos.”

I wait for her eyes to widen with recognition—the society pages used to love to detail my exploits, especially those of a romantic nature.

“That is one mouthful of a name, big guy. I think I’ll call you Mr. V.” She nods decisively, as if satisfied with the nickname, then gestures to the plane. “Your chariot awaits, Mr. V. Please

keep your hands and feet inside the plane at all times, no smoking or listening to music the pilot doesn't approve of, and in the event of a crash landing I'm sure something on this baby floats, so we're good. Next stop, the middle of nowhere."

Nowhere was exactly where I wanted to be.

I was going to the island.

Chapter Two

Since the accident I have wondered, quite a bit, about whether I care to keep living. But instinct is just that, and I feel my pulse stutter in my veins when Joely starts up the plane, then cackles with maniacal glee.

Irritated at being made to lose my cool, I shout at her over the roar of the engine as she taxis the small seaplane through the harbor, then lifts us into the air.

“It’s not that safe a decision that you made, you know. Sealing yourself off up here with a complete stranger. A man who’s twice your size, and probably twice your age.”

Though her eyes are fixed on the expanse of air in front of us, the slight twitch of the muscles in her face tells me she is rolling them.

“Be as big and old as you like, but I’m at the wheel or we crash, buddy.” She flicks a switch, adjusts a knob. “Kinda closes off your opportunity for extracurricular activities like murder or hanky panky. Plus, you’re not that kind of person.”

Her response takes me aback completely, and I find myself at a loss for words, which I never am. When I find my voice, it sounds as mortified as I feel.

“I’m not talking about *raping* you, girl. I am saying you shouldn’t make a habit of volunteering to fly a perfect stranger out to, as you said, the middle of nowhere.”

“I can take care of myself, and you just proved my point. You’re a decent guy. Giant chip on your shoulder, but decent. Anyway, even if you weren’t, you and I don’t go down that road.” She tilts the wheel, and I feel the plane turn in a slow, steady arc. “It isn’t meant to be.”

“How do you know that?” I should be insulted, perhaps, even though I know what I look like now. “Is it the scars?”

“No.” No quantifiers—just *no*. “And I just know.”

I mutter something under my breath about stubborn females as I move to return to my seat behind her, though the words have no heat. She replies, and I have to turn back to catch what she says.

“You’re not a beast, you know. You should remember that before you forget you’re just acting.” Her tone is matter of fact, like she couldn’t care less one way or the other. It’s a refreshing change, after leaving people who were never-ending founts of demands, of needs.

But she's wrong. I built my empire on charm and sophistication. But now... with my face so scarred...

"I'm not acting. And you don't know as much as you think, so stop talking and fly the damn plane."

There hardly seems to be a point in trying to be something more than what I've become.

I wake up when my ears start popping. The roll of my stomach tells me that we're descending, and I prop myself up in my small seat, surprised that I slept at all.

It couldn't have been more than two hours, but it's more sleep than I've had at once since the accident.

"Wakey, wakey, eggs and bacey." Joely calls back from the cockpit. Flying the plane has made her downright perky, and it's fascinating to watch the absorption play over her face as she expertly maneuvers the small aircraft down through the air. It's because of this that I don't look out the window until the plane has coasted to a stop.

Suddenly desperate to experience it up close rather than through a pane of glass, I pry open the door. Toeing off the hand-tooled leather sandals that a former assistant had purchased for me for some warm weather vacation in a previous life, I jump into the water feet first, not knowing or caring how deep it is.

It's warm, like a tepid bath, and wets my jeans to the knees as I shield my eyes and take a first look at my island.

My sanctuary.

It's small enough that I can see how far the land extends, even from this close up. And yet there are swathes of sparkling white sand, rocks that slopes upward into a small mountain, the thick canopy of a verdant forest.

Paradise.

The only sound is that of the water rippling in the warm air, and the quiet tick of the plane's engine as it cools off.

The sun is low in the sky—not long until sunset. The heat is intense, a damp kiss—reminding me of Greece in a way that New York never did.

As I stand there, momentarily overcome, I feel that heat start to melt the ice inside of me.

“I’ll help you get your things to shore.” Joely breaks the silence by plopping into the water behind me. She’s rolled the legs of her overalls up above her knees, and she has my new knapsack strapped to her back, and a cardboard box in her thin arms.

“You’re far too small to be lugging around things like that,” I snap and take hold of the box. I’m more irritated that she’s interrupted my moment of peace than I am that she’s carrying things. “I can manage it.”

She holds firm to the box. I’m reminded of some of my childhood friends, and the way they would glare at their irritating siblings.

“Joely. Let go.” I can’t even remember the last time someone so blatantly ignored my orders. It’s... weird.

“You’re awfully bossy,” she comments, relinquishing her grip on the box so suddenly that I stumble backward a step. “Used to being in charge, I’m guessing. It’s not your most attractive quality, big guy.”

“You have no idea,” I murmur as I adjust the box in my arms. I stand six foot two, and I have a lot of muscle, but damn it, this thing is heavy. She has no business trying to lift it, let alone haul it to shore.

“So is it a rich thing or a Greek thing?” Hooking her hands in the straps of the bag on her back, Joely starts to wade to shore. I resist the urge to dunk her in the water—someone needs to teach her a little bit of respect—and instead decide to shock her.

“Actually it’s a sexual dominance thing.” As I speak I think that this wide-eyed sprite probably doesn’t even know what that means.

But she just shrugs, much the same way as she did when she took in my scars. “Whatever makes you happy, guy. I’m just here to fly the plane.”

Her comment weighs heavily on me as we splash closer to shore... not because there are any sparks between us, but because deep down I wonder if I will ever feel sparks like that again. Not long ago I was what many would consider a playboy...or a sexual deviant. I enjoyed women—as many as possible—enjoyed controlling their pleasure. I would miss that more than I’d ever imagined.

I wasn’t a complete cad. Just a traditional Greek man, like my father before me. I craved passion and experience, but I knew that when I found the right lady, I’d want to marry, have a

family.

My future was stolen from me, gone forever now. Anger bubbles up inside of me again, and though I know it isn't fair, I lash out at Joely.

"Just here to the fly the plane... because you *know* things, or because you can't stomach this face?" I regret the words as soon as I've spoken them. "I'm sorry. That was uncalled for. Perhaps I'm a beast after all, eh?"

She glances at me from the corner of her eye.

"We all have scars, Mr. V. Some of us are just better at hiding them." Pausing for a second, she tugs at her ponytail, her expression contemplative. "You're not even interested in me, big guy, so don't be so sensitive. I'll let you in on a little secret. I'm not interested either. In *anyone*. And I didn't just happen to be at the charter office when you needed a pilot. I woke up and knew I had to come down. I wasn't even planning to stop in Miami before I ...but you don't need to know all that. What you need to know is that you and this island—this entire day seems weirdly familiar and it scares the shit out of me. But I have a feeling you can handle weird, and it's too late to fire me since I've already brought you to your destination in one piece so..." She takes a breath. "...there it is."

Before I can comment, she's pushing the rest of the way to shore. I press after her, and we both step onto the sand at the exact same moment.

A sonic boom deafens me and forces me to my knees. The ringing in my ears grows louder and more insistent as I grab for Joely, my instinct to protect her from this, whatever it is.

She's just out of reach, and she too falls to the ground, though she seems to be moving in slow motion.

The ground beneath us trembles, the sand rising up in a pale arc that slices through the shimmering air between us.

And then, just as suddenly as it started, the shaking stops. The auditory assault is over.

When Joely and I stare at each other with wide eyes, push off from where we are both crouched on the sand, the movements are no longer exaggerated.

I swallow—my mouth is dry as dust, though it was fine just moments ago.

"Earthquake?" I finally manage, though even as I say it, I know it's not true. Before I ever bought this small spit of land, I researched it. The local weather patterns are unpredictable, and severe thunderstorms, water spouts, hurricanes... though not common, they're possible.

A small earthquake like what we just felt? Not out of the realm of possibility, but as Joely slowly shakes her head, I know, deep down I know, that something very, very strange just occurred.

“We’re in the Triangle, Mr. V,” she says slowly, sliding the straps of the backpack from her shoulders and letting it drop to the ground. I note the way that the sand, the ultimate silence of the island swallows even that noise, which makes me wonder what on earth it was that just assaulted our eardrums. “Other pilots have shared some pretty strange stories over the years.”

“You believe in all that? Ships lost at sea, aliens and UFO’s, magical mysteries?” I knew when I bought it, of course I knew, that the unnamed island was within the perimeter of the area known as the Bermuda Triangle. The so-called disaster zone is encapsulated within apexes at Miami, Florida, San Juan Puerto Rico and Bermuda, and it is undeniably an area of the world with an unusually high incidence of tragedy.

It is also a huge tourist draw, one that I figure a smart business man should capitalize on. Never, until this very moment, have I seriously considered the possibility that there might be something to the stories.

Joely looks at me, takes in my expression. Her face set in inscrutable lines, she wades back into the water. “There are some things in this world that just can’t be explained, Mr. V. Doesn’t mean they’re not real.”

The words are grim, full of... acceptance, perhaps? But she doesn’t give me much time to think on what she means, instead splashing her way back to the plane.

I chase after her—what kind of a man would let a woman haul all of his supplies? Though she doesn’t look at all open to the idea of talking further on the subject, I can’t stop turning things over in my head.

She knows things, she’d said. What does that even mean?

It would be easy to tell myself that she is crazy. But I can barely bring myself to entertain the notion. The fact is, she was there at exactly the moment I needed her, and even she doesn’t have a good explanation for that.

And something just happened on that beach. I might be a skeptic—actually, it’s probably more accurate to say that I’ve never paid any attention to the supernatural at all. My topics of choice were sex, money and power, usually in that order.

But whatever just happened... like Joely, I’m not afraid. I’m... curious. Energized.

I feel truly alive for the first time since that bitch Celeste watched me burn.

Joely and I each take another armful of gear and wade back to the shore. At the edge of the sand I shake off the excess water, dump my cargo, turn back to my pilot.

Rather than stepping back onto the island herself, she hands me the box and remains ankle deep in the water.

“Thank you.” From my pocket I pull out yet more cash. Her eyes widen slightly at the sight of the thick roll, and for a brief second I wonder if this has all been an act, an elaborate hoax to get at what everyone wants from me—money.

My body tenses as my mind flashes back to the fire, the fear, the utter betrayal.

But Joely shakes her head vigorously, again stuffing her hands into her pockets, something I’ve noted that she does when she’s uncomfortable.

“I can’t take your money. I thought I could, but I can’t. I told you; I think I was supposed to be here.” She eyes the sand with distrust and undeniable curiosity sparking in those bright green eyes.

Is she as interested in this place as I now am? Digging my bare feet into the sand feels like home.

“Do you want to explore the island with me as payment?” Even as I say it I know that isn’t what I want. It’s mine. I’m supposed to be here. I need to see it for myself.

Joely shakes her head again. “No payment needed, and I think you came here for some alone time right?”

“Yes.” Seeing that her mind is made up, I slide the money back into my pocket. But something makes me hesitate. We just shared something unexplainable, me and this strange girl who has too much pain in her eyes.

And she doesn’t notice my scars.

“I don’t have everything I need,” I speak swiftly, without thinking. “I believe they shorted me on supplies. I’ll get myself set up and then I’d like to make another run to Miami and back tomorrow. I want you to be the one to pick me up.” I don’t give her a chance to say no. “Where shall I radio you from?”

I have a satellite radio, somewhere in one of these boxes. I have everything that I might need until I can find the nerve to return to the world. But I’m not ready to be completely alone just yet. Not after today.

She shakes her head again, and another sliver of that brotherly annoyance works into me.

“I don’t have a phone,” she hesitated. “But if it’s okay with you, I’ll stay here.” Crossing her arms over her chest, her expression just dares me to argue. “In the plane.”

Something inside me, as loud and clear as if someone were whispering in my ear tells me Joely has nowhere else to go. It just doesn’t tell me why.

“You can’t stay in the plane.” Exasperated, I run fingers through my hair. After the day I’ve had, I know it’s standing up in thick black spikes all over my head, but I don’t care what I look like. In fact, if I never have to think about what I look like ever again, that will be just fine with me.

“Come camp out for a bit.” I hold out a hand, scowl when she steps back.

“I’ll be in the plane,” she repeats firmly. “Best camping spot I know.”

And then she’s gone, her steps making small waves in the crystal like water of the lagoon. Shading my eyes, I watch as she climbs back into the tin can with wings, sliding the door shut behind her. Her actions speak of competence, but I wonder if the reason she’s so familiar to me is because my own loneliness recognizes its twin in her.

But standing here, on the beach of my own island, I find an anchor. Clutching tightly to it with both hands, I watch the sun set, blazing streaks of apricot and amethyst painted by the fingers of God.

And beneath that miraculous view, a small metal plane, bobbing all alone on the darkening water. It looks as solitary as I felt, right up until I set foot on this island.

Chapter Three

I've never slept under the open sky. I'd thought it might feel strange, being out here all alone, when I'm so used to the crush of the city. Instead, I haul my sleeping bag out of my tent and lie on my back under a velvet dark sky dripping with silver stars.

I'm exhausted, but I feel as though I could stay awake forever like this and be perfectly content, lulled by the gentle sound of the waves lapping at the shore, washing away my pain—the cold light of the stars filling me back up with something new and clean and pure.

I've always been a man with a plan, but right in this perfect moment in time, I could care less about where I go from here. Instead, I wallow in the strange sensation of peace. And I'm not afraid of sleep the way I have been since the accident, which is yet another triumph.

For the last six months, my memories have terrorized me each time I close my eyes. Haunting me. Reminding me of the pain I'd brought on myself. Of bitterness and betrayal.

Here, I fall asleep without even being aware that it is happening.

The next time I open my eyes, I am standing in the middle of the woods. My toes curl, digging into a tangle of roots and the moistness of soil.

In front of me is a small, rugged wooden shack of sorts. It's barely bigger than two outhouses placed side by side, constructed roughly from branches, woven together with plant matter.

“What the fuck?” I'd be lying if I said that my pulse doesn't pick up speed as I blink the grogginess from my eyes and realize that, somehow, I've made my way into the island's forest in my sleep.

My body tenses, a human's instinctual response to the possibility of nature. But as I take a deep breath, the calmness of the night filters back in, the quiet of the island soothing my inner animal.

When I purchased the island, every scrap of information that I could find on it said that it was deserted, and likely always had been. But this tiny, crude building is evidence that someone was here first.

When I press my hand against the low door, the cool night air pulses with something that feels a lot like magic.

Before I can ruminate too much on what might be inside—bats, rats, a human skeleton—I

press my weight against the door. It swings inward on loose hinges made of what appear to be braided palm leaves; I squint, and all I can see inside is darkness and dust.

Then I enter the shack, and the sight before me takes my breath away.

She is kneeling at the base of a large flight of stone steps. Beyond her I can see a castle, a crown atop the mountain of the island. It is beautiful, and the details etch themselves into my mind even as my eyes greedily devour *her*.

Blue is what I see first—eyes of the purest, most intense sapphire, surrounded by a thick fringe of golden lashes. The amber colored half veil that hides the rest of her face only serves to emphasize those orbs, which look up at me as though she can see into my very soul.

She shifts on her knees as I approach her, long locks of hair the color of the sun parting to show me that she is naked. Her body is lushly rounded, feminine curves that have my blood rushing straight into my cock.

Jeweled clamps connected by a thin golden chain decorate nipples that are the most perfect shade of pink. The sweet flesh between her legs is naked, plump, and begging for my attention.

“Rise.” As I stalk toward her I know, inexplicably I know that she is mine. She rises to her feet, her stare fixed on me.

As soon as I can reach her, I catch her chin in my palm, squeeze just hard enough that I would have been sure to get her attention. But I already have it. Her breath catches in her throat, and I watch, entranced, as a beautiful flush spreads over her chest and cheeks.

“I’ve waited so long for you.” Her voice is musical, clear as the church bells that ring along the coast back home.

“And what would you have me do to you now that I’m here?” My grasp slides from her chin to her throat, clasping her neck in a gesture of primal possession. The ends of her half veil brush against my hand, waking the nerves.

My soul sings when she sighs contentedly and arches into the touch. When those stunning eyes again meet my own, my pulse stutters.

“I wish only to please you.” Handing me a silk scarf she waits, utterly still, completely focused on me.

It is what I’ve dreamt of since I first identified my need for a power exchange—a sweet submissive who wants to yield to me, and only me.

It hardens my cock, makes my muscles tremble with need.

More than that, it makes my soul sing.

Gaze fastened on hers, I wrap my fingers around one of her wrists. Lifting it to my lips, I press a damp, open mouthed kiss to the place where her blood quickens. She gasps when I graze my teeth over the vein where I can feel her own pulse pick up speed.

Slowly, teasing us both, I trail the end of the silk scarf over the heated curve of her wrist, where the pulse beat steady and true. I savor the coolness of the fabric, a direct contrast to the heat of her flesh, as I wrap the scarf around first one wrist, then the other, a perfect figure eight that binds her hands in front.

The position of her arms makes her breasts press together enticingly. Catching a finger in the chain that links her jewels, I tug once, sharply, then swallow her cry with my mouth.

“Turn around.” I don’t know where the whip comes from, but as soon as I want it, it’s there, a well worn coil of leather that is as familiar as my own hand, and moves like an extension of me.

She trembles as she looks at it, then me, but when she does as I say I note the way that her blood has risen to stain her skin with a blush, the arch of her spine, as if she can already imagine the blows.

She wants what I will give her. The sensation is heady.

“Bend over. Place your palms flat on the third step.” She does, and I am given a view of the most luscious ass, the soft curve of her waist, the creamy skin of her inner thighs.

My free hand drops unbidden to stroke over my solid erection, and my thumb sweeps over the moisture already gathering at the tip. The muscles of my arm ripple beneath swirls of black ink, tattoos that seem to dance, and this gives me pause.

I don’t have tattoos. Do I?

I can’t remember. And with this woman—*my* woman—surrendering so beautifully before me, I don’t much care. The vague confusion quickly fades away.

Stepping back, I let the whip fly once, twice, practice strikes that flick against the stone steps. She jumps each time, a quick movement that makes those lovely large breasts sway and jiggle in a way that makes me glad I’m naked, that my hard to the point of pain cock isn’t trapped beneath tight layers.

How did I get naked?

Who cares?

The whip sure in my hand, I send it flying again. The lash swipes over the smooth skin of her lower back, leaving a stripe of red in its wake.

She jolts again, shudders beneath the blow. But she doesn't cry out, and this makes my lips curve in a slow smile.

I've trained my submissive well.

I lash out again, and again, raining practiced blows down her back, over the curves of her ass. She continues to jump, her body tense, fighting against the pain.

I can tell the moment that she begins to embrace it, the tension melting, softening her body like warm wax from a candle.

"Good girl." To reward her, I flick the tail of the whip up between her legs. Finally she cries out, the sound a mix of joy and pain, and raw need slices through me.

I need her. I need my woman *now*. Striding toward her, I grip her hips, intending to mount her from behind, to slake my lust in that slick heat between her thighs. But suddenly there is a flower in my hand, something bright and tropical and sweet smelling.

Without thinking, I stroke the soft, cool bloom over the scarlet ribbons that paint her back. She tenses, moans, and I know even without turning her over that she is taking the long, sweet slide into subspace.

With my free hand I slide between her thighs. I growl with satisfaction when I find her hot and wet, knowing that I am the one who did that to her.

Sliding two fingers inside of her, I begin to pump them in and out, all the while running the soft bloom over skin that I know is on fire. Her hips cant back, and soon she is rocking against me.

My own need rises, a furious, demanding creature, but I shove it away and focus on the woman beneath me.

Bringing her pleasure will bring *me* pleasure. And so giving her a release that makes her weak is my only objective in the world.

Deepening my thrust, I crook my fingers, find that tight bundle of nerves buried inside of her.

"Oh! No—I... wait!" Pressing against me, she squirms, bucks, not sure if she wants me to stop or wants more.

Grinning to myself, I add the slide of my thumb over her clit. She cries out, her pussy clenching at my fingers, her sweet arousal dampening my hand.

I want to wait. Want to bring her back up again, and then again. But now that I've found her, this creature who is mine, the need is like nothing I've ever experienced.

Turning her quickly, I hook her knees over my arms and slide into her impossibly tight sheath. I grunt as I thrust, gaining an inch, pulling back, then working forward again.

Fuck me, but she's tight. All swollen with arousal and need. But the utter surrender in her eyes tells me that she won't accept anything less than all of me, so I continue to work forward until I am hilted inside of her, her pussy squeezing my cock tight.

Her eyes blur with pleasure as I slowly, gently tuck the flower behind her ear. This—this is what the games of dominance and submission are about for me. About giving the power to someone else so that you might lose yourself completely.

"You're perfect." I reach for her veil, but she shakes her head at me. In another situation, I might press, not allowing my submissive to say no.

But even here, in this dream that isn't a dream, I understand that that veil is something my own mind has conjured, a reflection of my own need to hide away.

"I want to see you. All of you." My voice is gritty with desire as I slowly pull back, then work my way back inside of her. Oh, she just feels so fucking good, her slick heat easing my passage bit by bit until I am thrusting inside of her with all of my pent up need, hilding completely with each press of my hips.

I want to make her come again, but I am lost, lost in her. Sighing with pleasure, she lifts her hand, clasps my cheek in her cupped palm.

And then I remember. Remember what I look like—that half of my face is horribly disfigured.

"Don't!" I flinch away, even as the pleasure draws tight at the base of my spine. I groan as my release causes every muscle in my body to tighten, the wave building.

I can't, I can't. I can't let go, not while she's looking at me. Not while she sees me the way that I am.

She can't possibly be seeing me that way, or else she wouldn't still be sighing with pleasure. How could I have forgotten? Even the most well trained of submissives wouldn't be able to hide their disgust at my hideous face.

"Eyes down." I snap, searching her face for a hint of that revulsion. The part of me that has come to feel less than human curls into a ball inside of me, even as my body rockets towards

climax.

“No. I want my eyes on my Master.” Her hand strokes softly over my cheek, her fingers finding and tracing the raised lines and shallow grooves of my scars. The tender touch is what undoes me, and I gasp, then shout, pushing into her once, then again and again as the pleasure shoots from the soles of my feet, through my entire body, into pulsing waves of release from my cock.

I ride the shudders of bliss, my arms straining, my breath heaving. Sweat drips from my temple to her breasts.

Slowly, suddenly unsure, I wipe it away, then carefully release her nipples from their clamps. She gasps as I palm the soft globes, rubbing in slow circles designed to drive us both crazy.

“I’m a beast.” I know this to be true. And yet here, with her, I feel like a man.

Pushing her breasts into my hands, she writhes beneath me, and though I’ve just spilled inside of her, I can feel myself growing hard again. Her face is flushed with pleasure, but when she clasps her hand in my hair and forces me to look down into her eyes, I don’t object.

“I will know and love every part of you.” This woman is submissive to the core, I’d have bet my fortune on it, but strength radiates from inside of her. With her free hand, she pulls the sheer fabric of her veil down, and I am blinded by the sheer perfection of her smile.

“The island knows what you need.” Her lips curve into a smile as she takes the flower from her hair, presses it into my hand. Her lush curves undulate beneath me, her movements synchronized to my own, but as she moves she fades away, vanishing before my eyes.

“Wait!” I reach for her, my fingers swiping through air. “What’s your name?”

She smiles at me, trails her fingers over my scars one last time.

And then she is gone.

Chapter Four

Bright sunlight slanting in through the gaps between the branches wakes me in what feels like early morning. I'm disoriented as I open my eyes, pull myself to a sitting position.

I'm lying on the dirt floor in the tiny shack. Through the cracks in the crude walls I can see the forest, can hear the humming of insects, the whisper of the breeze through the trees.

What the fuck just happened to me?

Furrowing my brow, I let the images tumble over me, each one coming faster and faster. I'm dressed in the clothes that I wore to sleep in last night, and when I hold out my left arm, I see only the raw skin of my scars—not swirls of dark ink.

Disappointment is a crushing wave of depression that threatens to flatten me. It can't have been a dream. I won't let it be.

The woman—the castle—the magic.

It was too real—too right.

“Face reality, Vardalos.” Wincing, I crawl to my hands and knees, struggling to fight back the encroaching clouds.

The dream, or visions, or whatever it was... it was probably just my body and mind's way of getting rid of the extreme stress that I've been under for the last six months. I feel safe here, in the middle of the southern Atlantic ocean, and so my subconscious has gone for broke.

Sitting back on my heels, I inhale deeply and try to get a handle on myself. And that's when I see it—the flower, still miraculously fresh and whole, lying on the ground.

The flower that I tucked into the golden ribbons of her hair.

With a whoop I grab at it, clutching it tightly in my palm, not even caring that I'm crushing it. Part of me wonders if I've become completely unhinged when I scramble to my feet and hightail it back to the beach, and the rest of me just doesn't give a shit.

I know now. I know she's coming.

Running past the stacks of my supplies, I race straight into the water. The plane is more or less where it was last night, rocking back and forth on the rippling surface of the water.

“Joely!” I bang on the door with enthusiasm. “Open up! We've got to go!”

I rap once more for good measure, then dunk beneath the surface of the water, clothes and

all. When I surface, a sleepy, owl-eyed face is blinking out at me.

“Mr. V?” Joely looks puzzled and sleepy and kind of like an adorable kitten. Everything looks better today, I think with a smile. Even irritating know-it-all pilots. “Mr. V, what happened? Are you okay?”

“Never better.” Grinning up at her, I shake like a dog to dry my hair. She shrieks when droplets spray across her, then crosses her arms and scowls.

“This better be good. I am *not* a morning person.” She mutters crossly as I grab hold of the plane and hoist myself in, dripping wet. “Especially not after the night I had. Jesus, Mr. V. What the hell’s gotten into you, big guy?”

“I need to get back to Miami. Just for a few days.” Just long enough to make some calls, to set the wheels in motion.

This island will be home to a resort after all... it will just be a little bit different than I’d originally intended.

I know, though I have not a shred of rational proof—I know that this is meant. It wasn’t a fantasy, it was a revelation. An awareness filling me, a knowledge I can’t explain and don’t need to. My life has a purpose now.

The island knows what you need...

Blearily Joely rubs her hands over her eyes, studying me, probably debating whether or not I’ve gone crazy or have been replaced by one of her Bermuda Triangle aliens. I grin as, finally, she crosses to the cooler in the small cargo area of the puddle jumper. Fishing out a can of cola dripping with condensation, she cracks the top and chugs.

“I need fifteen to do my checks, then we’ll fly.”

She’s true to her word. Fifteen minutes later we are soaring out of the lagoon and into the bright blue morning sky.

We fly in silence for a few minutes. I don’t mind—my mind is racing.

“What happened last night?” She asks finally, turning her attention from the sky for a brief moment. “What changed?”

I’m not going to recount my night. It’s personal. “You wouldn’t believe me.”

Joely laughs softly and I see something in her expression that makes me wonder if she didn’t have her own epiphany last night. The way I’m feeling now, I’d believe it.

I stretch, settle back in my seat and watch the island shrink in the distance.

“Eden. I’m going to call it Eden.” My own paradise.

She chuckles again. “Okay, boss. Not super original, but I like it anyway. It fits, I think. Definitely looks like an Eden.”

Boss...

I watch her handle the plane with utter confidence, thinking about how comfortable I feel around her. Like I know her, like I always have. I owe her. I trust her in a way I don’t think I’ve ever been able to trust anyone else, even before everything changed. Hell, I’m not sure this would have happened, if I’d have ever made it to Eden without her. Suddenly I have another one of those gut feelings I’ve decided never to question again, and the words fall from my mouth, sounding right as I say them.

“Joely? I have a proposition for you...”

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A Bride For A Billionaire Excerpt

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MATTEO

“Why are you here again?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“What a thing to say, when I came to see you off properly.” Her lips find the taut muscle at the base of my throat, and her teeth sink in, making me shudder. The basest part of me wants to drag her astride my lap. I want to unzip my pants and shove inside of her without any foreplay at

all, and I want to find my release in a soulless fuck between the legs that have taunted me since I was fifteen, never mind that we're in the VIP lounge at an airport, and that there are at least a dozen other people around us.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

That decides it.

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

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

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

I race after her, my course of action decided.

This girl is maybe five foot four to my six three. She's so small... what is she going to do

when she catches up to a man mean enough to steal from an old woman?

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

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

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

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

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

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

My instinct is to drop to my knees beside her, to put pressure on her wound. But her eyes—beautiful blue eyes, brilliant as the Mediterranean—meet my own.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"We need you to let go of him now," the male says, but I don't let go until they have a good grip on the thief, who now has saliva dribbling down his chin. It disgusts me, as so many things do, and I swivel, trying to get a good look at the girl.

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

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

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

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

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

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

It should have been you.

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

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

Her blood is sticky and warm. Full of life.

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

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

Is she insane?

Wait—I already know the answer to that.

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

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

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

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

Aah.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Milan next week, and I don't want to wait for blood to be cleaned from the upholstery.”

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

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

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

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

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

Ignoring my stepsister, I try to gather the girl in my arms. Though she still fights it, when her hot, smooth skin presses against mine, something electric jolts through me, taking me by surprise.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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