Transcendence

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by samwysesr

Summary

Having lost their parents, their home, and the only life they'd ever known, Wanda and Pietro Maximoff survived the only way they could—by staying together, no matter what the cost.

Notes

See the end of the work for notes.
I can remember the first time it happened; it is still crystal clear in my mind—as if it occurred only yesterday and not the year we turned thirteen. We’d spent the day trying to restock the depleted stash of food that we’d hidden away in the basement of the abandoned, war torn house we’d claimed as our own. Hours upon hours were spent searching through the rubbish bins and trash heaps as we looked for items that the shopkeepers deemed unsellable—items we needed to survive. We did not care if the bread was moldy or the produce wilted and the canned goods were out of date—starvation has a funny way of lowering one’s ideals about what constitutes a fine meal.

The pickings were scarce—even when we moved our searching from the alleyways behind the stores to a more affluent residential part of town; it was only after we’d scoured the whole area and come up empty handed that we realized the trash collection schedule must have changed. We were out of luck—our rumbling, empty stomachs would be left unsatisfied for the third night in a row.

“We could try to grab a wallet,” my brother muttered, scowling as he kicked an empty can we’d dislodged in our searching.

“No… it is too late in the day, There aren’t enough people on the street for us to hide ourselves amongst the crowd.” I shivered, hunching my shoulders as we rounded the corner—an icy gust of wind greeting us as we started back to what was now our pitiful excuse for a home.

“There are still a few stores open… I could—”

“No Pietro… it is not safe.” The risk was far too great; it was one thing to try and pilfer a few items in the morning when the shops were bustling with housewives—another thing altogether when the aisles were practically bare of patrons. The shopkeepers were always suspicious when we entered—for them, two unattended children dressed in torn ragged clothing that was unsuitable for the weather could only mean one thing.

Street Urchins.

That’s what we were—what we’d been for the last two years since Tony Stark had killed our parents with his bomb. Living off scraps and garbage, trying to survive the only way we could—together.

We fell into silence as we walked along the darkening, empty streets, heading for the poorest section of Novi Grad—one of the first attacked when the dissention began; the only sound was the wailing
of the wind—as if it too bemoaned our empty bellies and the way the cold made an aching deep within our bones. My mind drifted, as it often did on nights like this, to the past; to a warm bath and bed in a comfortable room, fully satiated from whatever delicious meal our mother had prepared. The memory made my eyes prickle with bitter, angry tears; no child should live the way we did… always unsafe, without a real home—we were unable to even attend school, for fear they would ship us off to an orphanage, separating us forever.

That was one thing we would never let happen—the one thing that would break us, shattering our souls. No matter how hard it was, living the way we did… it was worth it, to keep us together. We may have been forced to grow up far too fast—physically, we were only on the brink of being teenagers, but mentally, we had aged decades in a short span of time; however, doing so had made us cherish the most important thing in our lives…the one thing we had left—each other.

Beside me, Pietro tensed, then slowed his pace to a stop—his hand snaking out to claim mine, jerking me to a halt beside him. “We didn’t check this one…”

I glanced at the dark opening of the alleyway to our right; I remembered its twists and turns well—they haunted my nightmares. It was one of the first places we’d attempted to scavenge after running away from the volunteers who had dug us out of the rubble of our former home. “We can’t… you remember what happened the last time—”

“We are bigger now,” he argued, making a face, “not soft like we used to be.”

My brow wrinkled as I strained my ears, listening for any sign of movement in the shadows; there was a man who had claimed this alley as his own—he’d threatened to gut us like piglets, brandishing a wicked looking knife when he’d caught us here that day. “I don’t think we should.”

“I’m going. You need food, sister—you are practically skin and bones.” His face was grim and determined; his hand slipped out of mine.

I grabbed for him—terrified at the thought of what would happen if he entered that dark opening all alone. “Don’t—please! I’m barely hungry. I swear to you, brother—”

It was too late. He was gone.

Cursing under my breath, I slipped into the shadows after him—shoving aside the terror that was clawing at my chest. My fear for him was greater than any fear I had for myself; I was entering a dangerous place, yes… but it was far more dangerous for one boy all on his own than it was for two. I had to be there for him—to watch his back and keep him safe.

I caught up to him within seconds—practically bumping into him as I strained to see in the dark; he’d waited for me just out of reach of the dim streetlights glow—never doubting for a minute that I would come. “You see? You are braver than you give yourself credit for.”

I scowled at him, irritated that he’d plunged into the darkness without me. “Let’s just get this over with… the sooner it is done the sooner we will be home.”

Just as I remembered, two large dumpsters were spaced along the alley—one situated at each of the bends that formed a lopsided ‘s’ shape. The buildings on either side of us housed several restaurants and a bar—their refuse promising to offer a plentiful supply of food to anyone who dared to enter the insane man’s domain.

Luckily… he was nowhere to be seen.

Without speaking, we approached the nearest dumpster; Pietro hoisted me up over the rim of the
container, then turned to keep an eye out for trouble while I hunted for buried treasure. I shooed away several large rats and then I started digging—loading up my empty knapsack with half eaten rolls and scraps of meat. By the time I’d rifled all the way to the bottom, I’d almost filled my bag. There were plastic bags of chopped up fruit and vegetables and a large block of cheese that was only a little moldy, as well as several take away containers that were loaded to the brim—leftovers that customers had packed up then forgotten in their rush to get out the door. We would be able to eat for at least the next two weeks on everything I’d found. Slinging the bag over the side, I waited for him to take it; a moment later, he grabbed my outstretched hands—tugging gently to help me as I tried to scale the wall with my feet.

“So much! Well worth the risk, yes?”

“Fine… you were right—this time.” I glanced around nervously, eager to be off. “Come on… we don’t need to check the other one—there’s no more room in the bag.”

“In a minute—I want to look around.” He moved deeper into the alley, ignoring the sound of outrage that escaped me.

“Pietro!”

He glanced back at me, frowning. “Aren’t you curious? We might not get another chance to poke around in here—and besides, he’s nowhere around. I bet they locked him up.”

I hissed in displeasure, but trailed after him, unwilling to let him out of my sight. “Well hurry up! It’s cold and—”

“Look at that!” He darted forward, past the second dumpster; in the cul-de-sac of the alley there was a rough looking structure of some kind. “It’s cardboard, I think. Must be where he lives.”

“I don’t care if it is made of diamonds, Pietro Maximoff—I want to go home!” I crossed my arms across my chest, feeling a surge of anger; it wasn’t like my brother to ignore my demands—especially in light of my fear.

“Relax, Wanda,” He peered inside the shanty, shaking his head. “no one’s home.”

“Well well… what do we have here?” The voice came out of the shadows behind me; it was low and rough—practically a growl. I spun around, back peddling towards my brother, but the man was quick—he latched onto my arm, jerking me roughly towards him.

“Let me go!” I struggled to break free, but his grip was like iron. “Run Pietro!”

“I’m not leaving you—”

“Shut up—both of you. Come poking around my alley thinking to steal from me! I’ll show you—”

“Let go of my sister!” I could hear the anger in my brother’s voice, but even more important, I could feel his fear—it flooded through him, thick and pungent, making it hard to breathe.

“Gonna have to pay the price. Yes you are. Stop right there!” The man jerked me closer; my back hit his chest. I gasped as cold steel pressed against my throat. “Come any closer and I’ll open her up ear to ear.”

I stared across the two feet that separated me from my brother, my eyes locking with his—frantically sending him a silent message to save himself while he could. He shook his head, his eyes tearing away from mine, flicking along the ground. I watched him edge closer to the wall, wondering why
he did not heed my silent demands that he run.

“Got some nice curves coming in, don’t you girlie? Think maybe I’ll take my payment out in trade.”
A large hand slid down, roughly groping my chest; I bit down on my lip to keep from screaming, afraid that he might slit my throat if I let out the sound that was welling up inside me. “After I finish with you, maybe I’ll do your brother too. Show him what happens when you invade a man’s home.”

My knees hit the cobblestones as he shoved me down—flipping me over so violently that my head smacked against the ground. “Pretty little thing, aren’t you? We’re gonna have us some fun.”

The knife moved—slicing down the front of my t-shirt; I whimpered, turning my face aside as he ducked his head down towards my breasts. “Please… don’t.”

“Told you to shut the fuck up!” His fist smashed into my stomach; my breath left me in a rush. I squeezed my eyes closed, swallowing down the pain. “Gonna lay there and take it—”

His words turned into a low, pain filled groan—then the pressing weight of his body was gone; I heard the strangest squishing sound—then it came again, once more. I opened my eyes to see Pietro standing over my attacker, clenching a gore splattered brick tightly in his hand. “Are you all right?”

“I… yes. I’ll be fine.” It came out a whisper, but he heard it, nodding his head.

“Grab the knife, then check his pockets—“

“What?”

“Check his pockets, Wanda. See if he has any money.” Pietro’s chest was heaving, his cheeks still flushed with fury. “Hurry! The longer I stand here… the harder it is getting for me not to finish him off!”

I sat up, clasping the tattered edges of my shirt together as my eyes flicked across the ground, searching for the knife. Scooping it up, I crawled over, fighting back a wave of nausea as I began searching the oversized pockets of the man’s long, dirty coat. “Here—“ I handed him a leather pouch, then a half consumed bottle of Vodka that had miraculously survived when he’d fallen to the ground. “That’s all there is.”

He nodded. “Grab the food—let’s go.”

My legs were shaky as I stood and stumbled over to grab up the knapsack he’d abandoned. I didn’t speak…I couldn’t—I was choking on a mouthful of humiliation and shame. It wasn’t my fault that the man had touched me, but it made me feel dirty just the same. Brushing aside the tears that had slipped out of my eyes, I hurried past my brother—for the first time in my life, unable to look him in the eye.

“Wanda—”

“Don’t. Please. I just want to get out of here.” I didn’t stop—I kept moving, not stopping when I cleared the alley. Clutching my shirt in my fist to keep it shut, I kept my eyes locked on the ground—my thoughts racing as I walked. I’d almost been raped—my innocence stolen in a violent act, completely against my will. The first hands to touch me had not been the kind, loving hands of someone I cared about—they had been cruel and degrading, belonging to a stranger that took pleasure from my pain.

It wasn’t right. It wasn’t fair. It was yet another thing that had been stolen from me—one that could never be reclaimed. It would be added to the other things that always lingering in my mind—the
losses that were etched deep in my soul; my home… my parents… the easy, happy life that my brother and I once knew. All were things I’d lost because of one evil man and the bombs he’d created; my world had been torn asunder because of his filthy greed. Inside me, the hatred I harbored grew; it burned so strong that it overcame the last of the shock that clung to me like soot.

“Are you all right?” The soft whisper came from right beside me. I’d been so lost in thought that I hadn’t even noticed Pietro catching up.

“It would depend on your definition of ‘all right’, brother.” My voice was cold—colder than the freezing wind that howled around us, though I didn’t intend it to be that way. “I told you it wasn’t safe—”

“You don’t think I know that? You don’t think I hate myself right now?” His voice broke—the anguished sound clawing at my heart. “I’m sorry… I’m so, so sorry—”

“Don’t be—” I stopped walking, turning towards him—but still, I was unable to look him in the eyes. “You stopped him before he could… do anything. All he did was grope me.”

“He hurt you… it’s my fault. I should have listened to you.” He took a breath; the sound was ragged, as if the air was made of shattered glass, causing him pain when it entered his lungs. “Why won’t you look at me, Wanda? Please… don’t hate me. I’m sorry!”

I stared at the ground for a handful of heartbeats, trying to work past the tight knot lodged in the very center of my chest. “I don’t hate you… I could never hate you—and I don’t blame you, either.” I shook my head as more tears spilled free, faster and harder than before; they clouded my voice, making it thick and heavy with misery. “But… I feel dirty, Pietro. I feel violated. Even though all he did was touch me…. I feel impure—as if no matter how much I wash I will never rid myself of his touch. As if I will never again be good and clean again.”

He made an indecipherable sound—no words, just undisguised agony. Hesitant hands reached out, brushing away my tears—his long, gentle fingers caressing my jaw as he tilted my face up, his eyes seeking mine. “No. You are good. You are the most beautiful of all God’s creation, with a shining, pure soul. You’re my strength, Wanda. You give me a reason to wake up every morning. A reason to keep trying and to not give up and join Mama and Papa in the grave.”

I gasped, stunned by the enormity of what he was saying; my brother was the gentlest person I’d ever met—he wouldn’t even kill the vermin that invaded our makeshift home. “You… for me?”

He nodded, burying his face in my hair. “Forgive me… please. I’m sorry I did not listen.”

“There is nothing to forgive.” I buried my face in the curve of his neck, his words having a profound effect on me. They made me feel safe, and that was a feeling I thought I’d lost forever when the shells hit our home. It was hard to comprehend that he loved me so much—he’d killed to protect me. Filled with wonder, I pulled back, finally able to gaze at him and meet his eyes. “You saved me, Pietro… what you did… I…”

My voice trailed off as words failed me—there were none that could properly express the overwhelming love that I felt for him. It was more vast than the sea, like a riptide, pulling me under
—drowning me in a swell of emotions so intense that I could not process them. I stretched up, pressing my lips against his—gifting him with a kiss for his brave actions, the way girls always did in the movies when a courageous hero saved them. He tensed at first, but then slowly relaxed into it—his lips moving against mine with a sweetness that was the perfect balm for my ragged, wounded soul.

When I pulled back, I was more than a little breathless; he’d returned the gesture, but I couldn’t help but fear that he’d be appalled by the taboo nature of what I’d done. He stared at me a moment, looking slightly dazed, but then he pulled me closer—his lips searching for mine. And as wonderful as the first kiss had been, the second was even more heavenly; it chased away the horrors I’d faced, washing away the haunting taint that stained me—and it heightening the emotions that churned inside me to such a feverish pitch that I could barely think.

He broke the kiss, resting his forehead against mine; both of us were trembling, unable to understand the confusing things that we were feeling. It was wrong… but it felt so right—like it was meant to be. “Why… why did you kiss me?”

“I don’t know. I just… everything was welling up inside me. All the love I feel… the gratitude for what you did.” I leaned into him, inhaling deeply, suddenly reveling in the scent of his skin—how could I have not known he smelled so good? “When I was walking… I thought about how he almost stole away something that I would only ever share with someone I loved. The first person who touched me wasn’t someone I wanted to touch me… it was a creepy old man who wanted to hurt me. I guess… I wanted to give my first real kiss to the person I loved most in all the world. That’s you.”

“But you don’t love me that way…” his voice sounded strained—laced with something I could not quite place.

“Perhaps I do not fully understand all the different kinds of love, but I know this…” I blushed, suddenly feeling immensely foolish for letting my emotions take control, but at the same time, unable to hold my tongue. “…you are my other half, Pietro. We are one soul split in two. No matter what happens… I will never love anyone more in any way than I love you. I have known that my whole life.”

I shifted, prepared to pull away; the soft, pure beauty of what I’d been feeling was somehow spoiled by his comment. It made the happy glow I was feeling slowly begin to dim. Before I could step back, his arms tightened around me, locking me in place—his voice was a soft whisper, just like mine had been. “That’s it exactly. How I feel—how I’ve always felt… but it’s wrong.”

His brow wrinkled, his expression one of torn confusion; I reached up, my fingertips dancing along his cheeks as I gave him a gentle smile. “Our love transcends this world, Pietro. No one here can understand the enormity of what we feel—only the angels can. People spend their whole lives searching for the other half of their soul… but us? We are lucky, my brother, for we have been together since the beginning of time and always will be.”

“You’re right—”

“I am always right—you should know this by now, yes?” I teased him, trying to earn a smile, but a moment later, my voice softened to a gentle murmur. “Our love transcends this world, Pietro. No one here can understand the enormity of what we feel—only the angels can. People spend their whole lives searching for the other half of their soul… but us? We are lucky, my brother, for we have been together since the beginning of time and always will be.”

“I don’t know… it felt… amazing. Like being home again. Safe… warm… being cradled in Mama’s
lap before the fire.” He sighed, his fingers threading through my hair. “But—”

“It’s not like we’re going to do it all the time, you know—but isn’t it nice to know we can take comfort in it if we need to? And anyway… we’re not even thirteen yet—deep talks like this should wait until we’re at least fifteen, I think. Maybe sixteen. When we’re old enough to better understand what we’re saying—and when we’re not all shook up about my being attacked.” I pulled away from him, making a face as the image of the man touching my breast flickered through my mind. “I think we should go home and stuff ourselves on what we found and forget about what happened for a while. I don’t want to think about it anymore—I’m afraid I’ll start to feel upset again.”

He nodded slowly, his lips curving up in that special smile that he always reserved just for me. “I agree… and I think you’re right—it’s good to know we have found something that feels… special.”

I laced my fingers through his, returning his smile—determinedly trying to ignore the jolt of energy I felt flowing like an electric current when his palm slid against mine. “I love you, my brother.”

“And I love you, sweet sister. Always.”

As we set off for home, neither of us had any way of knowing that the emotions we’d unleashed would end up being impossible to ignore. We were just awakening; puberty had slipped up on us, flooding us with hormones that made us feel things our minds weren’t fully ready to fathom. Like Pandora’s mythical box, the door we’d unthinkingly opened would be impossible to reseal.

We would realize our mistake… soon enough.
THE HOUSE WE’D COMMANDEERED was on the outskirts of the city; large and dilapidated, it’s days of glory long were since spent, but something about it appealed to both of us immediately, though neither of us could put our finger on precisely why. We assumed that the previous owners had abandoned since over half of the upper level was decimated; the blow back and fires that accompanied the fallout from the bombs was widespread throughout Novi Grad.

It was by no means the first shelter we’d found—in the time we’d been on our own, we were frequently on the move. But out of all the places we’d stayed, it was by far the most practical for one main reason—it had a large, relatively undisturbed cellar, with an old fashioned hand bolt on the inside of the cellar door. That gave us something we desperately needed—a means to secure the few meager possessions we’d scavenged from the ruin of our old home; we would no longer have to worry about people stealing what was ours when we went out searching for food.

There were four small windows set at ground level along one side—one of which was the entrance and exit we used. Hidden from sight behind dense, low lying shrubs in the large, walled in back yard, it was hard to access for anyone who was not our size—and in truth, it was unlikely than many people would bother to scale the tall wall to go exploring the way we did. All in all, it was perfect—giving us relative surety that no one would enter our sanctuary while we were out roaming the streets. The only time we ever bothered used the door to the cellar was to empty the bucket we used for a toilet, or to cart down fresh water from the old stone well in the large backyard, or to bring down something we’d found that was too big to fit through the window.

I remember hearing my Papa say once that civilized life began when man first decided to make a cave his home; I suppose it was true—having a relatively safe place to live certainly helped us cling to the tattered home life we’d once had. Each of us had our chores to do—Pietro carting the water and emptying the toilet bucket, along with taking the small amount of garbage we acquired up to the trash pile that sat near the back wall, while I did what I could to turn the cellar into a home. I’d rummaged through the kitchen upstairs for basic things like dishware, and carted down the mattress from the pull out sofa in what must have once been a living room. Little by little I added to our nest—sheets and blankets I’d pilfered from laundry lines, as well as clothing for both of us that we procured the same way. There was a small stone basin we’d carted in from outside; it had started its life as a birdbath of some sort, but now we used it to burn trash and whatever kindling we could gather—as pitiful as it was, it was our primary source of heat.

“Do you want to bathe? I could fetch you some water?”

I glanced up from the fire I was lighting, my eyes flicking to the small galvanized metal trough that sat in the corner of the room; like our fire pit, we’d found it outside, full of dead plants and weeds—a container garden of some sort. I’d carefully scoured away years of dirt and grime as best I could with newspaper, lining the inside with a sheet to protect our skin from scraping against the rusty metal interior. “No… too cold… and the soap is all gone.”

It was just another thing I’d added to the mentally tally I had of things we’d need to find. He nodded, grabbing up the container we used to store the water from the well. “I’ll be right back. Are you okay?”

“Of course. I will have a feast ready when you return.” I smiled at him, moving to grab another shirt
off our meager stack to replace the one I wore; it was thin and worn out, but it was relatively clean—
I washed our things weekly in the metal tub, using scraps of soap we’d unload pilfered from the trash.

Pulling the shirt over my head, I tossed the old one on to the fire as I moved to unload the sack of food we’d gathered—storing it away in the empty ice chest we’d found tucked away on one of the shelves along the wall. We had no ice—but it was cold enough that we didn’t need it. We used the container because it was airtight and it kept the rats from stealing what we had. I packed everything away in the order it would be used; the containers of leftovers would probably keep the longest, so they went in first, followed by the rolls and cheese, with the meat and other things that would spoil first on top. Though from time to time the things we consumed made us slightly ill, so far, we’d been lucky; my nose was good, so if something smelled off, I would dispose of it rather than risk poisoning us both with tainted food.

By the time Pietro was back, I’d indeed prepared him a feast; four of the rolls had been layered with scraps of meat I’d warmed on a makeshift spit that consisted of a wire hanger that was suspended above the fire. To that, I added a few tiny slivers of cheese and some of the wilted lettuce that I’d torn into tiny shreds. I also had a surprise for him—but I forced myself to wait; he could not have it until after we’d consumed our dinner.

“Look at this—you’re a miracle worker!” He handed me the cracked pitcher of water, scurrying over to the blanket we used in place of a table; I filled two glasses with the icy liquid, hurrying to join him as my stomach let out a growl of protest. “You know… in a few weeks, after they clear away the body and stop poking around… we’ll be able to start collecting there all the time.”

I nodded; the thought had occurred to me too—that perhaps now we would be able to eat more regularly, and a much better fare than we were used to. “And none of it smells off—I think it’s all pretty fresh.”

He bit into the first of his two sandwiches, closing his eyes as he chewed—savoring the taste of the food on his tongue for the first time in days. “This is delicious—what you make is probably better than anything they serve on their menu.”

“Don’t be ridiculous—all I did was slap it together, they’re the ones that cooked it.” Though I protested his compliment, I couldn’t help but feel pleased; it was hard for me to make us a nice home in the circumstances we faced—hearing him say I was doing a good job made me light up inside.

When he scarfed down both his sandwiches, I tried to give him one of mine; he was bigger than me and as such I knew he needed it more—but as always, he refused. It was his way, you see, to always make sure that everything was halved between us. In fact, he often tried to pass his food over to me, even when his stomach was rumbling. My brother always put my needs ahead of his own when it came to almost everything. He would do without, or put himself in danger by daring risky things, like shoplifting in an empty store to keep me fed.

“I have a surprise for you.” I smiled, getting to my feet—crossing to the cooler to retrieve the treasure I’d hidden inside.

“What kind of surprise?” He looked suspicious—I didn’t blame him. My last surprise had been a pair of rusty scissors that I’d found—his hair was still a little uneven from the haircut I had given him.

“A good one.” I returned to him, hiding my hands behind my back. “Close your eyes.”

“Oh no—I don’t think so! Show me what you’re hiding.”
My lower lip slid out in a pout as I gave him puppy dog eyes. “You do not trust me?”

“Of course I do—I just do not want to end up looking like a shorn sheep again.”

“I did the best I could,” I protested, still holding my hands out of sight. “And this isn’t anything like that… I promise this is a treat you will enjoy.”

It took him a moment, but finally he acquiesced, his eyes closing tightly as he raised a hand expectantly. I crept closer, trying not to giggle at the thought of how he would react when he opened his eyes. My dear brother had a notorious sweet tooth—often bemoaning the fact that the one thing we rarely found in the trash was dessert.

The pasty was almost perfect—only one tiny bite had been taken off the end, exposing the flaky center, and it was covered in a sugary icing that I knew would make him moan in delight. I had found it in the smallest of the take out boxes, like the answer to an unspoken prayer.

Laying it gently across his outstretched palm, I stepped back, my eyes locked on his face as I whispered, “You may open your eyes now, Pietro.”

For a few seconds, he said nothing—he simply gazed in shock at the confection in his hand. “Wanda! How did you—”

“I found it. For you.” I smiled, reaching out to swipe my finger along the icing, raising it to his lips. “Taste it—it is not stale at all… it’s like it just came from the bakery!”

Returning my smile with one of his own, he opened his mouth, his tongue snaking out to swipe the sweetness from my finger. It was something we’d often done as children—dipping our fingers in the frosting Mama prepared to decorate her cakes. Back then, I’d felt nothing when his tongue brushed against the pad of my finger… but now? I was almost mesmerized by the warm, wet press of it against my skin. My stomach clenched up, and suddenly, I found it hard to breathe. In comparison to the moistness of his mouth, my lips suddenly felt as dry as cotton; I licked them, unable to keep my eyes from dropping to his mouth, the memory of the press of his lips on mine flickering through my mind—filling me with a strange yearning to experience it again.

I jerked my hand back, turning away—more than a little disturbed by the path my thoughts had taken. It was one thing to allow ourselves a kiss when we needed comfort—but longing for a kiss just because it felt good? That was something else entirely. Straightening my shoulders, I forced myself to walk away.

“I am tired—I’m going to bed. Enjoy your dessert, Pietro. Make sure to rinse your mouth with water to get all the sugar off your teeth,” I called back to him over my shoulder as I headed for the mattress on the other side of the room.

“You don’t want any?”

“No silly…I told you it was yours.” I slid beneath the blanket, shivering; there was a crack in one of the windows that made a horrible draft. Even though our stolen blanket was thick, I could still feel the cold in my bones.

I closed my eyes, trying to still my thoughts—refusing to dwell on my reaction to the touch of his tongue on my skin. It was easy enough to dismiss at first; soon the coldness claimed all my attention, making me think—not for the first time—that we should move our mattress closer to the fire.

Pietro fell silent—I naturally assumed he was enjoying his pastry. I was wrong—within minutes, he was right there, sliding in beside me.
“You ate it that quickly? “ I asked, astonished at the thought. When we’d lived at home, he had always eaten dessert slowly, relishing each bite and making it last as long as he could—sometimes taking so long that Mama would chastise him and shoo him away from the table.

“No, I put it in the cooler. I’ll eat it tomorrow.”

I frowned, unable to grasp the notion of him not eating it immediately; the only reason I could think of was that perhaps the meat I’d fed him had not been quite as fresh as I’d thought it to be. “Are you feeling ill?”

He chuckled softly. “I am fine. I simply felt cold and needed your warmth beside me.”

It was a logical enough answer; on the coldest nights we would retire long before we were tired, huddling under the blankets and watching the flicker of the firelight play across the ceiling—making up stories about the images we saw dancing in the shadows. “Oh... okay. Goodnight then.”

I turned my head to kiss his cheek; as was so often the case between us, he had the same thought, doing the same thing I was at exactly the same moment. The result was unexpected—not something that either of us planned. Instead of his cheek, my lips pressed against the softness of his—instantly reawakening the feelings I’d just banished. I pulled away quickly, rolling over to stare into the darkness; a heartbeat later, his arm slid around my waist, pulling me towards him so that my back pressed against his chest. The position was not a new one—we always cuddled close to stay warm on long winter nights. I always took comfort in sleeping in that manner—imagining that it mimicked the way we’d been curled up together in Mama’s womb.

Only it felt completely different than it ever had before—or maybe it was me that was different; whatever the reason, my insides trembled in a way that was quite disconcerting. I felt suddenly warm—as if the blanket was far too heavy, despite the chill in the damp air of our basement, and there was the strangest sensation, right in the center of my body—not quite in my stomach, but not in my chest either... it was somewhere in between. Afluttery feeling that left me tense and somehow restless, chasing away all thought of sleep. It was almost a sense of impatience... like I was waiting for something important to happen, but I wasn’t sure exactly what it was that should come next.

He felt it too—I could tell. It had been that way between us for as long as I could remember—one of us would feel a strong emotion and somehow it echoed in the other, like the way his fear had reached out in the alley, brushing against my mind. Even more telling, I could feel it in his body as it lay pressed against mine; he was rigid with the same tension that stiffened my muscles, and his heart was thudding against my back, racing in perfect time with mine. It made my breath quicken, fueling the subtle yearning—though again, I was confused about exactly what it was that I was wanting.

All through the long night, I lay awake, trying not to move a muscle. Long past the hour when the fire slowly burned out and the darkness fled from the windows, slowly replaced by the dim gray light of the early morning sun. Finally, realizing that sleep would not come, I sat up, trying not to groan at how sore and achy my body felt from my long vigil—I hadn’t moved an inch, not wanting to disturb him.

As I always did upon waking, I crept over to light the fire, waiting until it chased off a bit of the mornings chill before wiggling out of my grimy jeans. I had been wearing them for several days—I had no choice in the matter, since our wardrobe was rather sparse. We owned a total of seven shirts—six now, after the loss of the one I’d worn the day before—that we shared between the two of us, and three pair of pants each, though mine were starting not to fit. I grimaced as I struggled to get the clean pair over my hips—despite my brothers concerns about my weight, my body was slowly filling out. I dreaded the curves that were rapidly appearing—not because I didn’t want a womanly figure, but rather because I knew what their appearance would soon bring. Becoming a woman meant I
would have another obstacle to overcome—Mother Nature was not kind to girls living on the streets.

I would need to replace my pants, and soon, which meant searching for some in the neighborhood. In times of war, when people abandon their homes, there are many things left behind. People grab what is important to them, knowing they may never return—photo albums and family heirlooms were priceless treasures, while clothing could be easily replaced. Many of the houses—like the one we’d claimed—still had dishes and furnishings inside, or a few pieces of clothing or shoes. We ‘borrowed’ when in need—and it was easier to scavenge from abandoned houses, but truthfully… I hated doing it. It felt wrong, like we were common looters or burglars, instead of two kids just trying to survive. It was completely different than just grabbing something off a laundry line and running—maybe because it felt like we were invading their homes. I tried to avoid going into abandon houses unless we had no choice—usually it was easy enough to find t-shirts and jeans hanging out to dry, and as long as they didn’t look too small, sizes didn’t matter. When clothing is too big, it’s easy enough to make it fit.

When it came to undergarments… well they weren’t nearly as forgiving. I’d never given much thought to bras before, but after being pawed in the alley, I was suddenly extremely self-conscious of the fact I really needed to be wearing one. Jerking up my shirt, I gazed down at my rapidly blooming bosom, scowling in irritation; I wasn’t one to be overly concerned with my appearance, so I’d never considered how they might look in the thin shirts we owned, but now it seemed impossible to ignore the way the fabric clung to me. I didn’t want every man we saw on the street to stare at my breasts the way the bum had—just the thought of their eyes on my chest made me feel slimy inside.

“Did you sleep at all?”

I tensed, feeling warmth race across my cheeks. The sleepy sound of Pietro’s voice made me immediately jerk my shirt down—the thought of him seeing me examining myself in such a manner was extremely mortifying. “No… I’ll nap later.”

He yawned loudly, then groaned quite dramatically as he flopped over onto his back. “Why?”

“Why do you think? Because I’ll be exhausted by then,” I teased.

“That’s not what I meant.” He grumbled, making a face at me when I glanced over at him. “Why didn’t you sleep?”

“My mind refused to still.” I shrugged, trying to change the subject. “We need to get soap today—and I need to find some bigger jeans.”

“You can have a pair of mine,” he offered, stretching.

“Your hips are narrower than mine now.” I pointed out, my words tinged with accusation. We’d always been able to wear the same size in just about everything, but lately, he’d been growing up, while parts of me were spreading out. “Pietro… do you think I will get taller too? It doesn’t seem fair for you to get all of the height.”

“Perhaps… but I think that from now on I will always be taller than you,” he said, rather smugly. “It’s only fitting—I am older, you know.”

“Barely,” I scoffed, rolling my eyes, “and I still say you shoved me out of the way so you could come out first.”

“I believe you are mistaken, sweet sister—you are the one who is always doing the pushing around in this family. You inherited all the bossy genes.” He climbed off the mattress, his long limbs moving
with a fluid grace that I envied, disappearing into the small broom closet that we had designated as our ‘bathroom’.

I glared at the door as it closed behind him, huffing indignantly at the comment. I did not push him around—I simply tried to insert some structure onto our lives. Living as we did was not normal in any way—we didn’t have parents assigning us chores or telling us to go to bed at a decent time of night. I tried to fill that void as best I could—it was part of the reason I’d been so excited when we’d finally found a place secure enough that it would make do as a permanent home. A home that I tried to keep neat and clean—not an easy task since Pietro tended to be messy.

My housekeeping lessons had only just begun when Mama had been stolen away, but she’d still had time to instill within me the importance of taking pride in the place you lived. The limited amount I’d learned from her was hampered by the fact I had none of the things that would make such a task easier, but I did the best I could, always making the mattress up and keeping the sparse amount we owned tidy.

Hot tears filled my eyes as I bent to straighten out the blankets, though whether they were for my dead mother or tears of self-pity, I wasn’t quite sure. Maybe I cried because my body was still aching—my back protesting even the tiniest movement, or maybe I cried because for a single moment, I felt like Pietro did not see the truth. He seemed blind to the fact that everything I did was completely and solely for him—my sad attempt to replace what he had lost. Perhaps I cried because no matter how hard I tried, it would never be enough. Whatever the reason, my sorrows get the better of me—something I rarely let happen. Mindless of the fact I’d just made the bed, I flopped down on it, curling up as I cried. In my mind, I could easily imagine the look of disappointment on Mama’s face if she were to gaze about the squalor we lived in. I could see the accusation in her eyes, and hear her voice chastising me for the decisions we’d made since she’d been gone.

The mattress shifted—then a moment later my brother reached over, pulling me into his arms. “What happened? Why are you crying?”

“I’m… I’m not bossy,” I choked out, burying my face in his neck. “I’m just trying to give us back our lives! And I’m all sore and achy…my back is killing me. And… I need a stupid bra.”

His hands stroked my back gently, attempting to ease my pain. “I was only teasing Wanda. You’re not bossy. I know I’m messy… I’ll try to do better. Just please don’t cry. I hate it when you cry.”

“You’re just… a boy. You’re supposed to be messy.” I tried to stop crying, but it wasn’t an easy task. It was like I’d unleashed a river that had been dammed up for far too long.

“You’ve done wonderfully to make us a home. Really you have. Look at all we have now that we didn’t have before.” His lips pressed against my temple, then he swiped at the tears on my face. “Come on… calm down.

His presence gave me comfort, but it also cleared away the cobwebs in my mind, helping me to focus and look inside myself; cuddled up against him, I could see what it was that was truly bothering me, and it tore me apart. Deep down inside, though my soul screamed out in protest, my subconscious was trying to make me see something I refused to acknowledge—taking the form of our mother to get the point across. It was time to face the inevitable—sooner or later, we’d have to give up. We’d have to admit that we were too young to make it on our own, because if we didn’t, we’d end up living this way forever.

I shuddered, pressing my face against his skin, hating myself for allowing the traitorous thought to dwell in the depths of my mind. The only solace I could offer myself was that it wasn’t me I was worried about—I didn’t care if I ate garbage for the rest of my life, but my Pietro? It couldn’t happen
—he deserved so much more than the life we had. He deserved to go to school and then to
university, insuring he would have a bright future, with a good paying job. He deserved friends and a
home of his own someday—with a wife and beautiful children that would adore him. The chance for
all those things… it was slowly slipping away. They would forever be out of reach for him if we did
not act soon—the longer he lived on the streets, the harder it would be for him to acclimate back into
society. In our determination to stay together, no matter what the cost, we were dooming ourselves to
be homeless scavengers for the rest of our lives.

My beautiful, loving brother was going to lose all chance at a happy, normal future if he stayed by
my side.

What I had to do was obvious—already, I was mourning the greatest loss I would ever face. And the
fact that I had to be the one to make it happen was a bitter pill to swallow… but it had to happen—I
had no choice. I loved Pietro far too much to let him give up everything for me. Taking a deep
breath, I pulled back, swiping at my cheeks as I looked him in the eye. “I think it is time to go to the
shelter and ask for help.”

He stared at me, not blinking, a look of horror on his face. “No! Absolutely not! You know what
will happen Wanda! You know what they’ll do!”

“It doesn’t matter. We can’t keep living like this, Pietro. We’ve been lucky so far… but what
happened last night… it has opened my eyes to reality.” I tried to make my voice sound firm—it did
not work. It wavered, betraying my agony.

“You don’t mean that—”

“I do. We are already two years behind in our schooling. If we wait much longer we’ll never catch
up—”

“That’s what this is about? Fucking school? You care more about going to school than being with
me?” Despite his anger, all the life went out of his eyes; they were dull and broken, filled with hurt. It
shattered something inside of me, but I could not let myself back down—his future was far too
important.

“What do you think, that somehow this will all work out and we’ll magically get back our life the
way it was? This isn’t a fairy tale! If we keep this up, we’ll end up like that man—living on the
streets when we’re old! I don’t want that Pietro! Not for either of us. Do you think we will be able to
get decent jobs to make money to rent an apartment? We can’t do any of that—not without an
education!”

“We’ve kept up with our studies—”

“No—we’ve tried to teach ourselves from books. That’s not the same thing and you know it!” I
pushed my hair back out of my face, trying to find the words to make him understand. “Maybe if we
beg them to keep us together—”

“They won’t. You know it as well as I do. Remember Yuri? How he was bounced from one group
home to another? Missing a week of school here or a few days there as they tried to find someone to
take him. He had three little sisters that he hadn’t seen in years, Wanda. He didn’t even know where
they were or if they were alive—no one would tell him. That’s what you want for us? To lose each
other forever?”

His words made my tears fall faster, my shoulders shaking as I struggled to keep my agony inside.
That was my greatest nightmare—losing him. I often dreamed about the bomb hitting our building,
only it wasn’t just my parents that died in those horrible dreams—Pietro did too. “I am trying to do what is best for you—can’t you see that? I don’t want to lose you, but I want you to have a good, decent life. Don’t you want that? To have a nice home someday? To have a family again?”

“No! I want you by my side, where you belong!. That’s the difference in us! I would never even think of leaving you! I could never think about risking losing the only person that matters in the whole fucking world!” He tried to push me off his lap, but I grabbed him, hanging on for dear life.

“I don’t want it, Pietro! I just want what’s best for you! Please… listen to me—”

“What’s best for me is being with you, Wanda—don’t use me as an excuse for you wanting to give up.” His words were gruff, but his arms slid around me, his face going to the curve of my neck, mirroring the way I’d nuzzled against him. “Please, I don’t want to lose you. It will kill a part of me—I swear it will.”

I clung to him, drained by the intensity of what we were both feeling; his hurt and rage were honed with intense misery and grief—making me feel like a horrible, horrible person when I’d only meant to do what was right. “I’m sorry, Pietro. I won’t ever mention it again, I swear. I really only was thinking about you… wanting you to be able to have all the things you deserve in life.”

“There is nothing in life worth that price, little Pietra. It the devil himself appeared before me and offered me all the riches in the world in exchange for you, I would tell him to go straight back to hell.”

Hearing my childhood nickname made me cling to him even tighter; when we were little, the bane of our existence was that we did not share a name. Together we’d decided my new name was going to be Pietra—the female version of his name. It was what he’d called me for years, right up until our parents demanded he stop—telling us it was time to put away the childish nickname and start using my given name.

“It would kill me too, you know that, right?” I pulled back a little, so I could gaze into his eyes. “It would hurt more than losing Papa and Mama… hurt as much as if someone ripped out my heart… but for you… I would suffer it. To give you a chance to escape all this.”

“There is nothing to escape. We have a roof over our heads and a warm fire to sit by… and we have each other. That’s all we need” He flopped backwards, taking me with him, gazing up at me as he combed his fingers through my hair. “And we have all the time we could ever want, Wanda. We don’t have to waste it in classrooms listening to lectures. We can chose what we want to learn. And if there are days when we don’t feel like studying, we can chose to spend all day goofing off, or just watching the sun move across the sky… we can. We own our own future.”

“I like the sound of that… owning our own future.” I shifted, running my fingers through his hair the same way he was doing with mine—trying to make up for upsetting him with my stupid, ill thought idea. “I just realized… you didn’t just steal all our height—you stole all our curls too. That is doubly unfair—you definitely owe me.”

“I owe you huh?” He grinned up at me, then moved unexpectedly, flipping us over so that I was pinned down by his greater weight. “Fine—I will pay you back then. In tickles.”

“No! Pietro—don’t!” It came out a shriek as I frantically tried to wiggle free. “I hate being tickled! You know this!”

“I’m sorry, little sister… but you’re the one who said I owed you.” His wicked fingers danced along my sides, tormenting me to no end.
I increased my squirming, breathless with laughter, despite my irritation. “Please… stop… I can’t breathe!”

“No, where was it that you are most ticklish? I can’t quite remember. Was it here?” His raised up a little, his fingers wiggling across my belly—I took advantage of the space between us, trying to break free, but he was too quick, pinning me down again and moving his torture to my armpits. “Oh I remember… it was here!”

Wheezing, I arched up against him, trying to throw him off me. When it didn’t work, I tried it again; it didn’t get him off me, but he froze, his torturous fingers stilling—which was a definite improvement. “Is this a truce then?” I gasped, trying to catch my breath. He didn’t answer, so I bumped up against him, trying to get a response. “Hey! Earth to Pietro—”

“Wanda… stop.”

The sound of his voice—hoarse and strained—instantly made me worry. I squirmed, trying to see his face. “Stop what? You’re the one that—”

“Stop… moving,” he hissed out, gritting his teeth.

I huffed indignantly, bumping up against him again—making him groan in the process—immediately freezing too, as I became aware of exactly what his problem was. “Pietro—“

“It’s nothing!” He was off me in a flash, his face red with embarrassment as he hurried across the room toward the stairs.

“Where are you going?” I raised up on my elbows, unable to hide my concern.

“For a walk. I’ll be back soon.” A moment later, he was gone.

Flopping back, I stared up at the ceiling, slowly replaying what had happened in my mind; it would be a lie to deny that I was more than a little baffled—in all the years we’d wrestled around or engaged in tickle fights, never before had anything like this ever happened. And though I knew it was improper, it would be a lie to deny that I’d been affected too—though since I was a girl, it was in a much less obvious way.

I rolled over, burying my face in the sweatshirt he used as a pillow—filling my lungs with the intoxicating scent of him as I tried to puzzle things out. There had to be a reason why my heart had started racing and my stomach had gotten all fluttery again as soon as I felt the press of Pietro’s erection against me.

I just had to figure out exactly what that reason might be.

Chapter End Notes

Unproofed/Unedited because my proofreader is asleep.

Since I promised a few of you I’d get chapter two up last night, I decided to just stick it up and edit out any mistakes later. Hope you enjoy it—sorry I’m a few hours late. ;o)
I WAITED QUITE SOME TIME for Pietro to return, though it was impossible for me to judge exactly how long he had been gone. For us, time was not precise—how could it be when we had no watches or clock to count off passing minutes? It was different when we were outside scavenging—my brother was very skilled at estimating the time using only the sun's position in the sky. It was a trick our Papa had taught him when he was very young—in turn, Pietro had tried to teach me as well, but I never could quite catch on. I often tested him when we were out wandering, comparing his predictions against the clock tower in the city square; he was right practically every single time.

At first, I thought I might nap while I waited, but sleep was still illusive, refusing to come. The longer I lay there waiting, the more frustrated I grew—we had tasks we needed to accomplish, and the day was wasting away. Finally, irritated with him for leaving me all alone for such a long, long time, I decided I would set out on my own to find the things I needed.

I will readily admit, it was a little scary—never before had I wandered the streets on my own without him nearby. Early on, we had made a promise to each other never to risk it; our parents had always warned us of the dangers that could happen to a child that went out on their own. Still, I wasn’t a child anymore—I would be a teenager in less than a week, and as for the promise… well he broke it first when he went storming off on his own. Latching on to my angry feelings to strengthen my resolve, I grabbed my knapsack off the nail where it hung—and that’s when I realized the flaw in my plan.

I couldn’t go off and leave the basement door unbolted—and since Pietro had used it when he left me, he would undoubtedly plan on using it when he returned.

Glaring at the door, I chewed on the corner of my lip, wondering if I should take it as a sign. Our parents were both big believers in omens and portents—the way of the Rhusia was in their blood, passed down to Pietro and me, but I refused to allow silly superstitious whims to influence me or guide my decisions. Once you started putting your faith in such things, it could far too easily become an obsession, controlling every aspect of your life. Marching up the stairs, I threw the bolt, locking the basement door; my brother would just have to use the window to get back in if he returned while I was gone.

I clambered up the stack of old wooden milk crates we used as a means of accessing the window, then I was outside, my eyes searching the yard in hope of seeing my brother. He wasn’t there—which only served to increase my irritation; I was used to having Pietro by my side—that’s the way it was supposed to be. Though the sun was directly overhead, it did little to warm me; the day was cold and gloomy, with a drizzle in the air that wasn’t exactly rain, but not quite a heavy mist either. It dampened my skin with condensation, making my fingers slip as I scaled the back wall.

When you have no coat or jacket and live in a cold environment, the most important thing to keep in mind is the importance of staying in motion; it was something we’d learned over the last two years—though when the weather was at its worst even jogging did not help. In the winter when we scavenged, we often wrapped up in our blanket, cuddling together underneath as we searched for food. I was lucky, the worst of winter had already left us; though the weather was still inhospitable—the nights were cold, and the days not much better—there was no snow on the ground, and spring would be upon us soon.
One of the first things we’d learned about scavenging was never to do it in the area we lived in; we hadn’t known that at first, and as a result of our folly, several times we were almost caught. We had been forced to leave behind whatever home we’d made for ourselves—and that was something I was not about to let happen again. I did not even attempt to start searching until I’d walked four blocks over; only then did I begin examining the buildings—looking for telltale signs of abandonment. Once you knew what to look for, it was easy to pick them out; besides the obvious—like having half the roof missing, the way ours did—if there were windows broken out, or graffiti sprayed on the doors, it was a sure sign their owners were long gone.

The first house held absolutely nothing—even the appliances had been carted away, though there were empty bottles and cans, as well as a great deal of trash littering the floor; I moved on to the next, praying my luck would be better—but it too had already been picked to the bone. When the third house was the same, I moved further into the neighborhood—where the houses were a little bigger, though a little less worse for wear. It was a good decision—the very first house had half-used bars of soap in both of its bathrooms, as well as a half roll of toilet tissue under the sink. I tucked it all away in my bag, then after a cursory search of the rest of the house, climbed back out the same window I’d used to enter.

The next house had no sign of vandalism—and no obvious disrepair—so I avoided it entirely, crossing the street and walking a few doors down before trying again. I hit pay dirt—there was a basket of long forgotten dirty laundry in the basement; I sorted through it—taking only what would fit us and leaving the smaller items behind. Some might have thought it wasteful, since we could have found some use for them, but we weren’t the only children living in the street; what I left behind might help someone else in the future—it might make the difference between freezing to death or managing to stay alive.

Before I moved on, I pulled a sweater over my head; it was long sleeve, and woolen, immediately making me warm—though my nose wrinkled in disgust at the heavy scent of perspiration that it held. Later on, I would look back on that moment, wondering what might have happened had I not put that sweater on; how different would things have happened had I not put that sweater on; how different would things have turned out, had the sleeve not caught on a sliver of jagged glass that was still embedded in the window frame? Distracted and trying not to cut myself as, I wasn’t as attentive as I should have been; I didn’t realize anyone was behind me until I finally untangled myself and turned around and saw him.

My initial instinct was to cower backwards—he was terrifying, a giant of a man, with a long scraggly beard and dark, dangerous looking eyes. I gave into the impulse, doing just that—scrambling backwards, without removing my eyes from him; as a result, I caught my foot on an upturned root and fell, hitting the ground.

He moved towards me, extending a hand—I ignored it, sidling away. “Lačjo dives, chavi.”

I stared at him, not understanding the strange, guttural words he said.

“It was a greeting. I will not hurt you, girl.” He crouched down, studying me. “I have seen you before—around town. You are a runaway?”

I still didn’t answer him—I knew better than to disclose anything to strangers. Sitting on the ground as I was would not do—he was far too close to me, and I had to be ready to run. I slid my legs under me, crouching on the balls of my feet—ready to take off as soon as I saw my chance.

“Where is your companion today?” If my distrustful manner disturbed him, he did not show it; he sank down, crossing his legs, waiting for me to answer.

I hoped he realized that he had a very long wait in front of him.
After a few moments, he sighed. “My name is Grigori Mirga. I am seventy nine years old—far too tired to be a threat to young girls.”

Narrowing my eyes, I studied him; he was old, but he didn’t look ancient enough to be almost eighty. “You lie to me. You are not that old.”

“I am, I swear before god, on the soul of my departed wife.” He smiled—his teeth bright against the iron gray of his beard and the swarthy color of his complexion. When he smiled, his face wrinkled up in furrows, making him look the age he claimed. “But I thank you for the compliment, just the same.”

I did not point out the obvious—that I had not meant it as a compliment; I’d already said far more than I’d intended.

“I swear to you that I mean you no harm, child. I saw you from my window.” He gestured towards the house I’d bypassed, then scratched his scraggly beard, his smile fading, a look of worry replacing it. “What you are doing… it is not safe. People… they come to these houses sometimes. The drug users. The drunks. They would not hesitate to harm a young girl if they found you.”

His words were a catalyst—the image of the man from the alley flickered through my mind; I could feel his hands on me again—the slobber from his mouth on my chest; I whimpered without meaning to—his face hardened at the sound, all trace of good humor gone.

“It already happened… someone hurt you?” His voice was low in his throat—almost a growl.

I shook my head, whispering an answer before I could stop myself. “Almost.”

“Gadje scum!” He hocked, spitting on the ground beside him, a look of anger on his face. “You must stop this dangerous behavior—”

“I have no choice!” Again, my tongue betrayed me; I scowled, dropping my eyes to the muddy dirt between us.

“Whatever you ran away from, you could still go home. Your parents would surely—”

“There is no home to return to,” I snapped. “It was destroyed by shells—and my parents are dead.”

“You are a war orphan.” His eyes narrowed; he studied me for a moment, then nodded. “Let me see your hands.”

I glared at him.

“Show me your hands, chavi—I only wish to help you.”

“Why?”

“Why… what?”

“Why would a strange old man want to help a young girl he does not know.”

He stared at me a moment, then pushed up his sleeve; there were numbers and a single letter inked into his skin. “I was eight years old when they took my family; out of seven of us… only my little sister and I survived. One by one the others died in the camp in the five years they held us—Yuliana and I would have died there too, had they not decided to ship a group of prisoners to Chelmno. The conditions, they were bad—it was the middle of the winter. The truck we were in overturned when
we skid and slammed into a snow bank. Weak as I was. I grabbed my little sister and ran into the
woods, not caring if they shot us. A quick death was better than the long agony of starvation or their
experiments. Better than going to the gas house, or having her raped repeatedly by the Germans.”

I stared at the mark, then reached out, tracing my fingertip along his wrinkled skin. “I did not know
they used letters too—they did not teach us that in school.”

“The ‘Z’… it marks me as one of the people.” He tugged his sleeve down, hiding the mark away.
“You see, little one… I was a war orphan too. That is why I will help you. Now… may I see your
hands?”

I hesitated for a moment, slowly stretching them out, my cheeks flushing with embarrassment; my
Mama always said you could tell a lady by her hands—that they should be smooth and soft. We had
a ritual when I was little—every night, without fail, she rubbed sweet scented lotion on my hands
and feet before I climbed under the covers. I hadn’t had lotion in a very long time—my hands were
dry and chapped, covered in tiny scars where I’d cut them while digging through the trash, and my
nails were jagged and dirty. “Why do you need see them?”

“You can tell if someone is a good worker from their hands,” he said. “Turn them over.”

His words confused me, but I complied, showing him my palms. My fingertips were calloused from
climbing over the wall, the skin of my palms—like my knuckles—cracked from my washing our
clothes in icy water.

“You know how to clean, yes? To cook?”

“I know… some. Not much.” I answered slowly.

“The basics?”

I nodded.

“Good.” He reached in to his back pocket, pulling out his wallet. My confusion grew as he pulled
out some bills, holding them out to me. “Take it… it is an advance on your wages.”

“My… wages?” I stared at the bright bills, wondering if it was some kind of trick.

“I will pay you and your companion ten Euros a week each to help me with things I am too tired to
do myself—in addition to feeding you both one hot meal a day… which you shall cook. You will
clean the house… do the wash. He can help me with repairs.”

My eyes widened in shock. Twenty Euros a week was practically a fortune. “I… I don’t know—”

“I have no ulterior motive, chavi—this is one of our laws. We must help when we can. Someday
perhaps you will do the same for another who is in need.” He set the money on the ground between
us, getting to his feet.

“How do you know I will show up? I could just take your money and disappear forever.”

He shrugged. “I don’t know for certain—but you have honest eyes. I chose to trust you. Whether or
not you extend me the same courtesy is entirely up to you.”

He was almost to the street when I called out to him, doing the only thing I could think of to let him
know his trust was not in vain. “Wanda. I am Wanda.”
He turned, nodding his head respectfully at me. “I hope to see you tomorrow, Wanda. My house is very dirty.”

I watched him until he disappeared from sight, then snatched up the money, shoving it down deep in my pocket as I sprinted towards home.

Unfortunately, my excitement was short lived. When I entered the basement, to my surprise, Pietro still was not back. Immediately, I hated myself for being irritated with him earlier—I should have known something bad had happened. I should have known he would never willingly leave me alone for such a long period of time. Dropping my bag on the floor, I began to pace, trying to figure out exactly what I should do. Did the police have him? Had he been jumped by friends of the bum from the alley?

Hot tears filled my eyes, spilling down my cheeks; I was helpless—my hands were tied. There was nothing that I could do. I couldn’t go to the police station looking for him—if I did, they’d end up holding me for child services to claim. I couldn’t call them either—even if we’d had a phone, they’d want to know who I was, or expect me to come in and file a missing persons claim. I wasn’t old enough to—

Before I could second guess myself, I was out the window and running back in the direction I’d just come from. I didn’t slow my pace, even when a pain shot through my side and my chest started aching. By the time I arrived at the well-maintained house and pounded on the door, I was panting and my legs were shaking—but I’d made it, and that was what counted.

The door opened; the old man looked surprised to see me on his stoop. “Wanda… are you alright, child?”

“My… brother… he… is… missing,” I gasped out. “You… call… for… me?”

“Call… you want me to call the police?”

I nodded, bending over, holding on to my side. “See…arrested.”

“What is his name?” He was already moving inside, leaving the door standing open.

“Pietro. Pietro Maximoff.” I sank down, leaning against the wall, feeling quite dizzy; he reappeared with the phone in his hand, his brow wrinkled with worry.

“Good afternoon—is Inspector Horák in? This is Professor Grigori Mirga. Yes… I can hold.”

I glanced up at him, surprised to hear his title; he certainly did not look like a professor—not with that long wooly beard on his face.

“Otto… I am very sorry to bother you, but I seem to have misplaced my great nephew. I was wondering if any young boys were picked up today for getting into mischief?” He winked at me, but I did not smile—how could I, when I was unsure of my sweet brother’s fate? “None at all? I see. Well… I hate to ask for favors, but in the event one of your men does bring him in, could you call me? The boy is at that difficult age, and I don’t think being stuck living with a doddering old man is really helping matters—” His eyes flicked over me, his brow furrowing, “Pietro. Pietro Maximoff. I have to tell you, his sister is extremely worried. It’s not like him to—” he paused, listening to something the man said, reeling of a vague description of my brother in response.

My stomach tightened—suspicion clouding my mind.

“Yes, I do appreciate that Otto. I knew I could count on you for discretion, you were always such a
sensible fellow—my favorite pupil, in fact. Thank you so much—goodbye.”

He hung the phone up, shaking his head. “The police don’t have him, Wanda. Let me grab my sweater and I will help you—”

“How did you know what my brother looks like,” I asked, my eyes narrowed with anger.

“I told you—I have seen glimpses of you around town. It is hard to miss the two of you—you make a very pretty pair.”

My cheeks flushed with color. “We are not a pair—he is my brother.”

He opened a closet on the right side of the hall, pulling out a thick cardigan sweater. “We can stand here and discuss the fact that being siblings has nothing to do with how aesthetically pleasing the two of you look… or we can start searching for your brother. Which will it be?”

I stared at him a minute, then shook my head. “You don’t have to help me—I can look for him myself. Thank you for calling—”

“If you think I will let you wander the streets alone, chavi, you are very wrong.” He stepped out, pulling the door closed behind him and locking it up tight. “Now… where should we look first?”

I frowned. “That is the problem… I don’t know where he went.”

“You quarreled?” He asked.

My cheeks heated again. “No. We never fight.”

“I see… well, perhaps we should check wherever it is you are staying first, then start looking in that area, yes?”

My frown deepened. I trusted him enough to give him our names, but letting him see where we lived? That was another thing entirely. “I don’t know…”

“Alright, this is what we will do. We will walk in the direction of your accommodations… then I will wait at the end of the street while you run and check. I swear I will not follow you or watch where you go.” He set off down the path, not waiting for me—though I hurried to join him. “I understand your reluctance to overshare—remember, I was once in your position.”

“And yet you became a professor,” I said, unable to hide the wonder in my voice. “You have a house and money…”

“I worked hard for those things… but I suspect even without that, I was more fortunate than you, chavi. When the Nazi’s starting taking people into custody, my mother and father buried all the family valuables and a great deal of cash in the forest behind our house. I made my way back home and dug it up, then Yuliana and I snuck out of Hungary. We made our way here… and we started a new life.”

We fell silent; as we walked, I thought about his story, imagining how hard it must have been to move to a different country—glad that he’d had his sister there to comfort him.

“Does she still live here?”

“No chavi, she died—I swore on her soul earlier, remember?”

I frowned, glancing up at him as I replayed the conversation in my mind. “No you didn’t—you
swore on your wife’s soul.”

Something flickered across his face—but it was gone before I could place it. “I must have misspoken. When you get to be my age, things run together. Time is no one’s friend.”

“I am sorry for your loss on both counts. I cannot imagine what I would do if my brother died….”

He patted me on the back—attempting to comfort me, but it did not work. “We will find him. Don’t you worry. He probably has just lost track of the time—”

“He has never done this before—it is the first time he has left me alone since Mama and Papa died.” I stopped walking—we’d reached our street. “I will be right back.”

I hurried off, checking over my shoulder to make sure he was keeping his word and not watching where I went; he did not appear to be, but just to be safe, I walked right past our house and turned into the one three doors down—cutting through the overgrown back lawn and doubling back. It was harder getting over the wall—there were no handholds, so I had to climb a tree and drop down on the other side—but it was worth the extra effort to keep our home safe.

I slid through the window, only to be immediately swept off my feet; arms squeezed me tight in a giant bear hug as lips crushed against my temple—and then, Pietro exploded.

“How worried? Let me tell you about worried!” I cut him off, struggling to get free. “You put me down Pietro! Right this instant!”

“You swore you would never go off without me!” He snapped, completely ignoring my demands—instead, squeezing me tighter.

“You left me first! For hours and hours!”

“Yes I—where did you get this sweater?”

“I went hunting!” I growled, still trying to escape his iron tight grip. “I needed pants!”

“Without me? Do you know what could have happened? I—” His eyes widened in shock. “Did you hear that?”

I nodded. A moment later, the sound came again—a faint tapping on the cellar door.

My eyes widened—there was only one person it could be. “Put me down,” I whispered.

“What—”

“Just… trust me, okay?”

His eyes searched mine for a moment, then he slowly lowered me to the ground. I hurried across the room and up the stairs, to throw back the bolt and jerk the door open—immediately glaring at the tall man on the other side.

The professor gave me an innocent smile.
“You swore you would not watch me!” I scowled, crossing my arms across my chest.

“I didn’t—the two of you are very loud. I could hear you all the way down the street.”

“You could not!”

“Wanda…” I turned to glance at Pietro—ignoring the dangerous look on his face.

“It’s your fault,” I snapped. “If you hadn’t gone off and left me I wouldn’t have had to call the police!”

“The… police…” His face paled. “You didn’t! You swore you wouldn’t! You swore you wouldn’t leave me!”

It took me a moment to process what he was saying—his panic hit me full force, echoing through me and making it hard to think. “I didn’t! I swear to you I didn’t!”

He didn’t hear me—he was too far gone, his anger and panic blending together, making him almost manic. I watched in horror as he scooped up the knife we’d taken from the man in the alley, racing up the stairs; his hand closed around my arm, jerking me behind him as he positioned himself between me and the door, bristling with rage. “We’re not coming with you! I swear to God I will kill you if you—”

“Pietro… no!” I tugged at his arm, trying to get him to listen; he shook me off, so I wrapped my arms around him, pressing myself against his back. “He helped me! He called them and pretended to be our uncle!”

He froze, his body rigid with tension. “Who is he Wanda?”

“He offered us jobs.” I said softly. “I met him today… and he paid us in advance. Pietro. Twenty Euros a week to help him out around his house.” Stretching up on my tiptoes, I pressed my forehead against the back of his neck, trying to calm him down the only way I could; when we were little and one of us was upset, the comforting brush of skin against skin always made it better.

“I don’t understand. I don’t understand any of this.” He dropped the knife, turning to wrap his arms around me. “He’s not from child services?”

“No… he’s just a kind old man. I swear to you, I wouldn’t break my promise, Pietro. You know this.”

“Children… may I come in?”

We both moved at the same moment, our bodies turning sideways as we glanced towards the door. The professor gasped, his eyes going wide with shock. He stumbled, slumping against the doorway as if he might fall down.

I pulled away from Pietro, hurrying up the few steps that separated us from the old man—reaching out to touch his arm. “Sir? Are you all right?”

His eyes flicked from me to Pietro, then back again, as if he couldn’t believe his eyes. “Twins… you’re twins.”

I glanced back at my brother, frowning. “Yes... you must have known this. You said you’d seen us __”
“Only from a distance. I didn’t… My God. It’s unbelievable.”

“Wanda… I think he is crazy.” Pietro stepped up beside me, tugging at my arm. “Step back… just in case—”

“No… no. I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to frighten you. But you see… look here—” He fumbled for his wallet, pulling out an old faded picture and extending it to me.

I glanced down at it, my eyes widening as I examined the two young people in the photo. “This is you… and your sister?”

He nodded. “I know what brought you to my street today, chavi. You were guided there by my Yuliana. I was meant to help you both… it is what she wants me to do.”

I almost spoke up—almost said that I did not believe such things were possible, but there was a look of such hope in his eyes that it made me hold my tongue.

Making a sound of frustration, Pietro snatched the picture out of my hand, his brow furrowing as his eyes flicked from the image to the man before us. “I still think you are very crazy, old man.”

“No Pietro… don’t you get it? He was a twin,” I said softly, glancing over at my brother, “He and his twin sister were war orphans… they were just like us.”

Chapter End Notes

Sorry I didn't get this up earlier—I've been in bed all day with some kind of crummy bug. Unproofed/unedited since I still feel like crap and have a blinding headache. :o)
IF THIS WERE A FAIRY TALE, then everything would have magically worked out just right. My words would have been a catalyst, immediately erasing Pietro’s suspicions without any arguments or strife. Unfortunately, real life rarely works out so smoothly; though my brother begrudgingly allowed the professor inside, it was only so he could interrogate the old man about his intentions.

I held my tongue while I tried to make the old man comfortable—letting Pietro quiz him while I pulled a milk crate off the stack and offered it to the professor to use as a chair. After fetching a glass of water for him, I settled beside my brother on the blanket stretched across the floor—immediately elbowing him in the side.

“Pietro—enough. You are being rude to our guest—”

“An uninvited guest should not expect a warm welcome,” he shot back, giving me the look—as if that would change my mind. I knew that look well—it meant he was trying to pull rank as the oldest—as if twelve lousy minutes automatically meant he was the one in charge.

“Mama would disagree with you.” My voice was soft, but reproachful; our mother had always gone out of her way to make everyone feel welcome in our home—whether she had invited them or not.

He flushed, dropping his head to hide his eyes away behind his curly mop of hair. I hated to chastise him in such a manner, but it had to be done; the professor was not only our guest, but also our new employer which meant we needed to be respectful to him at all times.

“It is alright, chavi—I would be concerned too if I were in his shoes. I would be very suspicious of any strange man that befriended Yuliana when she was young. That is a brother’s job, you see—to watch over his sister, especially in cases like this… it is what your parents would want, yes?”

I shot a reproachful look at the old man, frowning; it wasn’t his place to interfere in our affairs. “Be that as it may, he still needs to be polite—unless he is intentionally trying to embarrass me with such behavior.”

I don’t know whether it was my words or the fact I’d tried my best to sound like our mother, but the message I was conveying got through to my brother loud and clear; his hand found mine, squeezing it gently for a moment before his fingers entwined with mine. “Tell me about this work you have for us.” He glanced over at me, then hastily amended his statement. “Please.”

My heart skipped a beat at the hopeful look he shot me; I couldn’t help but be pleased that he was trying to earn my approval. Leaning against his arm, I let my head drop to his shoulder—my little way of showing that I appreciated the fact he was trying to be polite.

“I am too tired to keep up the house on my own—there are repairs that require climbing a ladder, something that is very dangerous for old, brittle bones. When the weather warms, you can do the gardening—”

“What about my sister? I won’t have you working her like a slave—she’s only twelve.”

“Twelve?” The professor looked startled, his gaze shifting between us. “I thought the two of you were older… fourteen at least.”
“Mama always said we were big for our age—though he’s outgrowing me. And we’re only barely twelve—our birthday is in a few days. We’ll be thirteen on Saturday,” I offered quickly—more than a little afraid that he might rescind his offer. “Whatever you need me to do, I can do it. I’m a good worker when I have tasks set out for me. Tell him Pietro!”

“She does not lie.” Pietro gestured to the basement around us, giving me a proud smile. “Most of this is her doing—she wanted to make us a nice home, like the one we had… before.”

“I see… well then, since you have no references, perhaps I should look around so I can get some idea of what you can do?”

“There isn’t much to see,” I mumbled, playing with my brother’s fingers; I suddenly realized how dirty the basement looked in comparison to the glimpse I’d had of the entry to his lovely home. “I made do with what we could find in the garbage or in houses like this one.”

“I will take that into account, I promise. It will also give the two of you a chance to discuss things privately while I look around. If I may?”

I shrugged, lifting my head from Pietro’s shoulder. “It’s up to my brother.”

For some strange reason, the fact I had deferred to him seemed to please Pietro greatly; smiling, he sat up a bit straighter and nodded to the old man. As the professor shuffled off, peering around with interest at the things we’d collected and modified to suit our needs, I leaned over, my lips tickling Pietro’s ear as I whispered.

“What do you think?”

“I don’t know… it seems very strange to me. People don’t usually offer jobs to kids our age, Wanda—especially ones they don’t know.”

“I realize that… I think maybe he is just lonely and wants company. His wife is gone and his sister too—his twin sister, Pietro. Imagine how you would feel if you were in his place and I was de—”

“Don’t say that! Don’t you ever even think it again,” he said gruffly, his arm sliding around my waist. “We will die together, when we are old and gray—leaving the world exactly as we came in it. Together.”

“You came before me, remember,” I teased lightly. “If we die the same way we were born… you’d go first—that hardly seems fair to me.”

“That’s not funny, Wanda—just stop, okay?”

His tone was so serious that I instantly felt ashamed for making light of what he’d said. I understood the sentiment, it was one I shared too—I just couldn’t resist poking fun at him since he was always so smug about being the oldest.

“I’m sorry… I didn’t mean—”

“I don’t want to think about you dying,” he glanced over at me, his eyes full of pain. “I can imagine how he feels… and it hurts.”

I gazed at him a moment, then reached up, brushing his hair out of his face. “Together until we take our very last breath. I promise.”

“Good.” His eyes flicked over to the professor, his brow scrunching up as he watched the old man
stretch up to examine the cracked window about our makeshift bed. “We will do the work for him… but I don’t want you alone with him, okay?”

“Pietro! He’s ancient—”

“I don’t care. If you can’t promise me that, then we aren’t going to do it.”

I sighed, knowing by the way his jaw was stubbornly set that he’d make good on the threat. “Fine— but you can’t exactly say that to him you know.”

“We do the work together. All of it. When I am doing repairs, you will steady the ladder. When you are doing cleaning, I will help you.”

“Pietro… you aren’t exactly neat,” I pointed out. “In fact… you happen to be extremely messy.”

Leaning forward, he pressed his forehead against mine, the corners of his lips curving up in a smile. “I will learn to be neat and how to clean. For you.”

Hearing him say that while looking into his eyes… it made me feel funny. I swallowed hard, fighting against the urge to glance down at his lips; if I tilted my head just a little bit—

“Well? Have you decided?”

We both jumped backwards, increasing the space between us; my cheeks were hot with embarrassment—for a moment, I’d completely forgotten that we weren’t alone.

“What… uh…” Pietro cleared his throat, his cheeks as red as mine. “What days were you wanting us to come?”

“That is entirely up to you. I told your sister I would pay you each ten dollars a week and a meal on the days you worked—whether it’s one day a week or five or seven, I do not care as long as the work gets done.”

“We don’t have a clock… we won’t be able to be there at a precise time,” I murmured, glancing up at him—immediately flushing again at the bemused look on his face as his eyes darted between us.

“I have nowhere to be… though since you will be preparing the meals, I suggest you come early enough so you will have time to run to the market for whatever you might need for our meal.”

“Oh… okay.” My voice was colored by confusion; did he expect us to buy the ingredients out of our wages?

He narrowed his eyes, watching me closely. “What? Did I say something wrong?”

“No sir. I simply did not realize we’d be paying—”

He chuckled, shaking his head. “No chavi—you will make a list and I will tally up an estimate. Then I will give you money to run to the market.”

“Not alone.” Pietro said. “My sister does not wander about without me.”

“Except when you leave her unattended.” His tone wasn’t accusatory—just matter of fact, but Pietro took it the wrong way.

“I have never done that before! I had no choice—there was… something I had to take care of.” He blushed again, glancing over at me, immediately looking away when he caught my eye.
“I meant no offense, chavo—I was only pointing out the obvious. She was very distressed; I thought she was going to pass out on my doorstep.”

My brother shot me a remorseful look, but he did not apologize for scaring me out of my wits. “You are alright now, yes?”

I scowled, averting my eyes to the professor—ignoring Pietro’s question. “What does that mean? That word you keep using.”

He looked puzzled by the question for a moment, then shrugged. “It’s meaning varies…. I use it in the simplest form. Chavi is a young girl. Chavo—”

“A boy. Like Pietro and Pietra,” I said, nodding. The language was unfamiliar, but I understood vowel fluctuation representing masculine and feminine; what intrigued me was the way his accent changed when he spoke them. The vowels and consonants were much broader and flatter than they were when he spoke Sokovian, making the words sound harsh. “Is that how you say it your mother tongue?”

“In a way. It is the second language I learned.” He fell silent, looking almost wistful—like he was lost in a pleasant memory; it only lasted a moment—he realized we were staring, waiting for him to continue. “Forgive me… I was thinking about the way Saint Petersburg looked in the winter time.”

“Saint… I thought you said you fled from Hungary?”

“I was born in Saint Petersburg—we moved when I was very small. First to Turkey, then on to Hungary. I returned to Russia when I saved up enough money to attend University—it will always be the land my heart calls home. I would have been happy to stay there… but my Yuliana… she had trouble with the language, and living in the big city did not agree with her. She was not happy there—she wanted to live in a small, quiet place, not a big city.”

Most people would have pointed out the obvious—that he could have stayed without her—not understanding the deep bond that came with being a twin. But me? I understood his reasoning completely; I couldn’t imagine living apart from Pietro—it would kill me slowly, a little each day. “You could go back… live there now—”

“No—this is where I lived my life. It is where I belong now. Russia… it holds nothing for me anymore—it served its purpose in my life.”

“Was she happy here? Your sister?” Pietro asked, reaching over to take my hand.

“Oh yes… we both were. It was a very different place then—small… peaceful. A good place to raise a family.” He smiled, but it was tinged with sadness; I could not help but wonder what put such a haunted look in his eyes. I watched as he stepped closer to us, holding out his hand to my brother—treating him like a fully grown man instead of a child. “I must be going now, but thank you for allowing me to look around… for welcoming me into your home.”

Pietro looked startled, but as he shook the older man’s hand, his expression shifted—he looked more serious and somehow… older, as if by performing the simple gesture he’d taken an important step towards growing up. “Thank you for giving us the opportunity to work. We will not let you down.”

I glanced up at the window; dusk was upon us, the sky already growing dark. “We can escort you home since—”

“Nonsense—I will be fine. I am sure the two of you have things to do… preparing your dinner and such.”
“But all those abandoned houses around yours—”

“The derelicts do not bother me, little one—like your brother… they think I am touched in the head. I will see you both tomorrow. Get some rest—you will need it.”

Not wanting to argue, I moved to stoke the fire while Pietro escorted our employer to the door; I was already mentally running over the few recipes Mama had taught me—thinking about what I could cook the next day, and what I would need to prepare the meal. I was so lost in my thoughts that I did not realize my brother was beside me until he gently took my hand; his expression was contrite—his eyes full of pleading when I tried to retrieve it from his grasp.

“I am very sorry I was away for so long—I didn’t mean to upset you.”

“I suppose it is only natural that you would forget all about your sister—isn’t that what boys do as they mature?” It came out flatter than I’d intended—sounding cold and distant; I dropped my eyes, pulling away to move over to the ice chest—intending to start our dinner.

“I would never do that, Wanda—you know this,” he said, his soft words colored with hurt. “I said I had something important to do and I meant it—just… come over here for a minute.”

I huffed at the interruption, but allowed him to steer me across the room—perching on the edge of the mattress when he gently pushed me down. “Close your eyes.”

“Pietro—”

“I did it for you when you asked me to! Come on… don’t spoil my surprise.”

I was tempted to give him my version of the look; I used it rarely—saving it only for the occasions when he frustrated me to no end—but I wasn’t quite to that point yet. Instead, I crossed my arms, glaring at him.

“Please? For me, Pietra?”

Against my will, I felt myself softening; I squeezed my eyes closed, wondering what he was up to—my brother was always hungry, so I couldn’t imagine what he might think was more important than me preparing him food. There was a rustling sound, like the plastic bags we used to collect for gathering food before we’d stolen our knapsacks—then the air shifted beside me.

“Okay—you can look now.”

I was expecting a pretty pebble, or perhaps a feather he’d found; it was his habit to present me with such tiny treasures from time to time. I cherished each one, storing them away in an old heart shaped candy box that I’d rescued from the trash; on days when I felt especially sad or helpless, I’d spill the contents out on the mattress and let the tiny tokens of my brother’s affection chase away my blues.

Opening my eyes, I blinked at him in confusion—he was standing there in front of me with a pleased look on his face, but his hands were completely empty. “What?”

He nodded his head towards the mattress beside me; I followed his gaze, my mouth dropping in surprise. There was a pile of brassieres—at least ten of them—in different sizes and colors. “Pietro! Where did you—”

“I staked out the Laundromat for ladies that started their wash then left to run errands. Hopefully one of them will be a good enough fit—I would have gotten more… but I got caught rifling through a washing machine and had to run.”
I stared at the bras, amazed at his ingenuity—I never would have thought to try stealing from such a place. “Such a risk though!”

“It had to be done—you need one. You’re not a little girl anymore... you’re... developing.” His cheeks turned red.

I giggled at his embarrassed expression as I rifled through the pile of damp garments; most of them would be way too big for me now, but hopefully someday they would fit me. I held up the smallest one, studying it for a moment—it looked to be close to my size. “I think this one will work.”

“If it doesn’t I can try again—”

“Don’t be silly—you’re not going back there. They are probably on the lookout for you now.” Yanking off the oversized sweater and the t-shirt I had on underneath it, I slid my arms into the bra, struggling to fasten the clasp behind my back; it seemed like an impossible task—one that only time and repeated practice could teach me.

Pietro rolled his eyes at the helpless look I shot him, motioning for me to turn around as he closed the brief distance between us. “Am I going to have a new chore? Being your official brassier fastener?”

“Of course not—only when I take it off to wash it.” I shivered a little inside when his fingertips grazed my skin—the touch light, like he had brushed a feather along my spine.

“There.”

I glanced down, but to my dismay, even properly fastened, the fabric cups were still too low on my body. “It doesn’t fit right... maybe my body is built funny.”

“I think you are supposed to adjust these too—why else would they be here?” His fingers slid under one of the straps, fiddling with it before moving to the other; to my surprise, he knew what he was talking about—whatever he did moved the strap, the garment sliding up to cover and support my breasts.

I was quite pleased to see that it was almost the perfect size—only gaping a little bit where I hadn’t grown enough to completely fill the cups. “You’re pretty smart when you want to be.”

“Of course—I’m older... naturally that means I’m wiser than you are.” He didn’t mean it arrogantly—it was just his way of teasing me, and even though it sometimes frustrated me to no end, it always made me smile when he acted in such an imperious manner.

“What do you think? It is almost a perfect fit—you did good.” I turned around, striking an overly dramatic pose—like the models in the posters that hung in the windows of the shops in the center of town.

I expected him to laugh or roll his eyes at my antics, but he did neither; his face flushed as his eyes ran over me—then he abruptly turned away. “I’m glad one of them worked out okay. The others probably will too... eventually.”

Trying not to fret over his sudden loss of good humor, I retrieved the t-shirt I’d discarded, pulling it over my head; to my irritation, it was starting to smell like the stinky sweater I’d worn over it all day. “I need to wash the things I found today—could you get me some water for the tub while I fix our food?”

I didn’t wait for a response—I returned to the ice chest to mull over its contents. Now that we had wages coming in, we didn’t need to ration out what we had found—and we would need energy for
the physical labors we’d be performing the following day. I removed two of the take out containers, dumping them out on plates to warm by the fire.

“Wanda?”

I glanced up the stairs; Pietro hovered in the doorway, shifting restlessly from one foot to the other. “Yes?”

“It looks very pretty on you. You’re growing up very nicely.” He scurried out the door, but he didn’t move quite fast enough to hide the red flush that spread across his cheeks.

The compliment made me feel warm and fuzzy inside, like when he praised my skills at keeping house—only it felt even better, and in a different way too. Anyone could learn to heat a meal or make a bed—but being pretty? Well that was a term I never thought could ever apply to me. He was the pretty one, with his long lashed eyes and the curls that I thought should belong to me. Hearing him say I looked pretty made me feel special—so special that I couldn’t stop smiling; the silly grin refused to leave my face as I heated up the food, and it was still in place throughout our meal.

Afterward, to my surprise, my brother offered to wash the clothing I’d found while I cleaned up the remnants of our meal. It was the first time he’d ever offered to pitch in in such a way—if it were left up to him, he would just wear the same dirty clothes over and over again. I watched him out of the corner of my eye, making sure he didn’t skip a step or cheat, but my observation was unneeded—he was just as thorough as I would have been, perhaps because he was intent to prove that he meant what he said about helping me.

By the time we were both finished and the clothes were laid out by the fire, I was more tired than I could ever remember being—but as soon as he crawled in beside me, once again my body filled with tension. As if the feeling were infectious—like so many of the illnesses we’d shared as children—the tension spread from me to him, his body going rigid beside me. We lay there in silence for a few minutes—neither of us moving, just laying on our backs staring up at the wooden beams of the ceiling; it was an odd, uncomfortable feeling—one that I did not like one bit. Determined to dispel it, I held my breath, stretching my neck to aim a goodnight kiss at his cheek—though I couldn’t deny that a part of me was hoping for a repeat of the previous night… for him to move at the same time as me, the softness of his lips meeting mine. He didn’t move a muscle—not until I pulled back; mumbling a soft goodnight in response to mine, he rolled over, presenting me with his back.

It was the first time since we’d begun the nightly ritual as toddlers that he had not kissed me back.

Rolling over, I curled up in a ball, fighting against a wave of misery that tried to pull me under; when my back brushed his and he scooted away, increasing the distance between us, the pain in my chest increased—my hurt feelings mixing with the disappointment I felt at not having his lips touch mine. I don’t know how long I lay there pretending to sleep and trying not to give in to the stupid urge to cry—it had to have been an hour at least, if not more before the mattress shifted behind me.

“Wanda?” It was soft—barely a whisper. “Are you asleep?”

I didn’t respond.

The mattress shifted again, his arm sliding around my waist as he moved closer, snuggling up against my back. He sighed contentedly, then his lips pressed against the back of my head; within minutes, his breathing evened out—then a soft snore indicated he’d fallen asleep.

Though his actions played at my mind, I did not dwell on them or attempt to puzzle out why he’d acted so strangely; all that mattered was that our nightly ritual had not been forgotten—he’d kissed
me goodnight, though not in the manner I’d desired. He hadn’t been able to sleep without doing so—
and for the moment, that was enough.

His arms were around me.

Finally… I could sleep.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry for the mix up in posting the other day—it's a perfect example of why I need to stay off the computer when I have a headache. Also apologies for the delay in updating —my birthday was this week, so dealing with family etc cut into my writing time. Hope you enjoy this one, I'll have the next one up soon. ;o)
Chapter 5

WHEN I AWOKE, I WAS not in the best of moods—in fact, I was downright grouchy. In part, I was angry at my brother for his strange, distant behavior the night before, but there were other factors contributing to my mood too. I was achy all over, my stomach hurt, and I was rapidly realizing that wearing a bra wasn’t nearly as great as I’d thought it would be—the support wires were digging into my skin, leaving my breasts sore and tender.

While Pietro slept on, I stoked the fire, hoping that immersing myself in my normal routine would improve the way I was feeling—or that in the very least, it would take my mind off my aches and pains. However, once I had it going, I just sank down beside it, staring at the flames; I couldn’t bring myself to see to the other chores I normally did in the morning—the thought of eating or even looking at food made me feel more than a little queasy. Sitting there, so close to the fire actually made me feel worse; though the room was chilly, I felt suddenly overheated—to the point that I had to swallow hard, fighting back a wave of nausea. I hunched over, wrapping my arms around myself as my stomach clenched spasmodically—it kept tightening up into a painful knot, tearing a hushed moan from my lips.

“What’s wrong? Are you sick?” Though his voice was raspy with sleep, when a pain filled whimper escaped me a moment later, Pietro became alert and focused incredibly fast, crossing the room to kneel beside me. “Wanda! You’re as white as a ghost!”

“I think the food I ate was off.” I grimaced, leaning away from his outstretched hand—I felt so hot that I could not bear the thought of being touched.

“I feel fine and I ate the same thing—”

“No—yours was from a different carton.”

He frowned. “Stop squirming—let me feel your head!”

Gritting my teeth, I let him rest his palm against my forehead; his eyes widened, a look of panic shooting across his face. “You’re feverish!”

“It’s the fire, that’s all. I’ll be fine once we get outside—”

“We’re not going anywhere! Not with you—”

“We have to! He’s already paid us—and besides, I bet he has aspirin. I’ll ask him for some when we get there.” Mama had always said that aspirin was the only medicine a person needed—that it was good for a fever or aches and pains—it was a miracle cure, all in one little tablet.

“I can go by myself—”

“Please don’t argue with me—not when I feel like this.” I glanced over at him, trying to hide how miserable I felt; I would have loved nothing more than to crawl back into bed, but I was determined not to let the professor down. “It could just be nerves… you know… about working for the first time.”

“Nerves don’t give a person fever.” He looked skeptical, but he did not argue anymore, he just smoothed my hair back from my face. “I will feel better once we get some medicine in you, yes?”

I straightened up slowly, surprised to feel the spasms easing up, just a little. “It’s not as bad now…
really. Maybe I just got up too fast or something.”

As I stood, moving to retrieve my shoes from beside the bed, he grabbed my arm, pulling me in for a hug; I winced, letting out a hiss of pain as his chest pressed against mine. “Wanda… this isn’t normal. You never hurt like this. Maybe we should—”

“No, it’s the bra. I think perhaps I should not wear it to sleep again.”

“That is the most ridiculous excuse—”

“It’s not! Look!” I tugged up my shirt, displaying the angry looking red gouges in my skin, “Sleeping in it just made me sore, that’s all. I’m not used to wearing it yet.”

He frowned, his fingers gently brushing over the grooves in my skin. “But it didn’t hurt you yesterday when you put it on…”

I shrugged, stepping back as I dropped my shirt. “Like I said… I do not think they are meant to be slept in.”

His brow wrinkled as he chewed at the corner of his lip—watching in silence as I slipped my worn sneakers on and retrieved the oversized sweater. I glanced up at him, scowling—irritated by his close scrutiny. “What?”

“I’m sorry… I should have gotten more of them. If I’d found the proper size—”

“It’s not your fault! And look—” I scooped the garments up from where I’d deposited them by our folded pile of shirts “—they all have the same supports… feel them. They’d all do the same thing, Pietro. It’s just part of being a girl… learning to get used to it, I mean.”

“Being a girl seems like it is not much fun,” he muttered, retrieving his shoes and grabbing one of the flannel shirts that was laid out by the fire. “You go out through the door—I don’t want you climbing any more than you have to. I’ll meet you around front in a minute.”

It was a sign of how sore I was that I didn’t try to argue; the thought of climbing the wall was enough to make me cringe. “Hide the money before you come out. And bring your knapsack in case we have time to hunt on the way home.”

“I thought the point of working was so we could stop that sort of thing,” he pointed out.

“No, we are working for money to buy food and maybe second hand clothes when we need them. Other things… we will still scavenge.” I wasn’t a fool; there was no way of knowing how long we would be employed—we couldn’t risk getting soft or losing the skills we’d gained. “I want to find another ice chest, and maybe some plastic containers to keep stuff fresh longer, now that we can buy food.”

He smiled, shaking his head as he shut the door behind me; I waited until I heard the bolt slide into place before wandering towards the front of the house. As I walked through the rooms, I allowed myself to fantasize for a moment about making the ground floor our home; it was easy to picture us cleaning up the mess and moving our things up from the basement, but it was something that was far too risky to chance. We were already pushing out luck by staying as long as we had—we could only hope that the ongoing threat of war would continue to keep the owners away.

I slipped out the window at the end of the hall emerging on the side of the house. The latch was broken—it was one of the things that needed fixing, but it was something that neither of us had the skill or knowledge to do. By the time Pietro dropped over the top of the wall, I was thinking about
how we could fix up the front of the small cottage—painting the front door a cheery shade of blue and filling the window boxes with pretty plants.

“What are you grinning about?”

“Daydreams.” I smiled, slipping my arm through his.

“About?”

I bumped my shoulder against his as we started off down the street. “Silly stuff—making this place a real home.”

“Come on—if you’re going to dream, aim a little higher. Like one of those big houses on the other side of the city,” he teased.

“Would you want that, really? They’re so… modern looking—and they have practically no yard or garden space, just a little postage stamp square of grass, if anything at all.”

He thought about it, glancing back at the old house over his shoulder. “You’re right. It’s small… but it has character, yes?”

“I think so… and it’s sort of like us. An orphan, I mean—with no one to take care of it. Since no one has come back to claim it… I’m thinking about using some of our money to buy some vegetable seeds to plant in the back. That way we’ll have a supply of them on hand.”

“You mean I’ll plant them. Stuff like that is man’s work,” he corrected me, smiling.

I rolled my eyes. “Fine—you will plant and I will oversee to make sure you do it right.”

“Hah! You don’t know anything more about gardening than I do.”

“No—but making sure things are organized… that’s woman’s work. Mama was in charge of the house—Papa listened to what she said.”

“True, but she wasn’t bossy—she convinced him with sweet words. That is something you haven’t learned yet.”

“Oh! You are back on that kick, are you?” I huffed at him, pulling away—but his arm snaked around my waist, holding me close to his side.

“Relax—I am just teasing you. You’re not nearly as bad as you used to be—remember how you always demanded we play what you wanted?”

“I did not!”

“You did—though not in so many words. You would pout and give me sad eyes until I had no choice but to give in.”

“I think you are imagining things,” I said, though I knew what he said was true; he’d always been overly indulgent when I demanded things—so much so that Mama used to say I had him wrapped around my little finger from the very first time I cried.

“And I think you have a selective memory, little sister.”

“Older and younger does not count with twins, everyone knows—”I bit my lip, doubling over as my stomach clenched up again.
All traces if teasing faded from Pietro’s face as he peered down at me. “Is it getting worse?”

“Just give me a minute—I’ll be fine.”

“You shouldn’t be exerting yourself like this. Not when you’re ill—”

I’m not ill! I told you it’s just a touch of—” I gave a startled shriek as he grabbed me, scooping me up in his arms. “Pietro! Put me down!”

“No. You should not be—”

“You cannot carry me all the way there! It is too far!”

“Not like this maybe… put your arms around my neck. Do it!”

I scowled, but I did what he asked; he shifted, dropping his arm and sliding me around so I was on his back. “Now lock your legs around my waist—”

“This is stupid! You can’t—”

“I can. Go on—do it already—you’re starting to choke me,” he snapped. “I mean it Wanda—I will stand here all day if I have to!”

“You’ll never make it all the way there,” I muttered, wrapping my legs around his narrow waist.

He straightened up, the movement shifting me so that most of my weight was on his lower back, his hands grasping my thighs. “I will make it as far as I can—only then will you walk.”

I rested my cheek against his soft curls, trying not to smile. “And you have the nerve to call me bossy?”

“There is no comparison—firstly, I am older so it is my place to be bossy. More important… I am taking care of you—the same way you take care of me.”

I had to give Pietro credit—I’d greatly underestimated him. I was sure he would only make it a couple of blocks before he admitted defeat, but I was wrong. He was lean, but that leanness was all muscle—honed by climbing trees and carting pails of water up and down the stairs. Whether it was his strength or his determination, I could not say, but he wasn’t even out of breath when we reached the professor’s street.

“You can put me down now, Hercules,” I said, my tone light as I stretched my neck so I could kiss his cheek.

“No until—”

“We’re here.” I cut him off, pointing at the pretty house halfway down the block. “I think I can manage the rest of the way on my own—if you don’t mind.”

Loosening his grip on my legs, he bent his knees so I could slide down—making a big production of rubbing his back and grumbling. “You could be a bit more grateful since I just broke my back—”

“That is your fault entirely—I told you to put me down,” I said primly, ignoring his theatrics.

Not waiting for another sarcastic retort, I set off at a brisk pace—one he outdistanced fairly quickly since he had longer legs and he was unhampered by my aches and pains. By the time I caught up he was knocking at the door. I glared at him—getting a smirk in return.
“Ladies are supposed to go first you know.”

“Ladies—not ungrateful little sisters,” he shot back, making a face at me.

I scowled. “I am not ungrateful! I—” I bit back my retort as the door opened, trying to hide our silly squabbling from our new employer.

“Well! Bright and early. I like that—”

“My sister needs aspirin—she is sick. She has a fever.”

“Pietro!” I hissed through clenched teeth. “Manners!”

“Manners be hanged—you are sick!”

“Chavi, is this true? You are feeling under the weather?” The old man peered down at me, his eyes full of concern.

“I ate something bad… that is all.”

He reached over, pressing the back of his wrinkled palm against my cheek. “You are definitely a little warm—come in. We will take your temperature.”

He stepped back, waving us inside; I hesitated on the doorstep, not wanting him to make a fuss. “I don’t need my temperature taken, really. I just need some aspirin and I will be fine.”

“Food poisoning is not something that should be taken lightly—some forms of it can be fatal if left untreated. If your temperature is too high, I will call my doctor and we will go see him.” He grabbed my elbow, steering me into the house and down the hallway that opened up just past the entryway; Pietro followed on our heels. “Did you eat pork? Chicken?”

“Beef with noodles, but it did not smell bad or anything.”

“Sit there—” he pointed to the closed toilet lid as we entered the bathroom, “—while I try to find my thermometer.”

I sat, grimacing as I looked around the bathroom; compared to our bucket in the closet it was luxurious and plush, but if all the rooms were in the same state as the one we were in, he hadn’t been kidding when he said his house needed cleaning. The mirror was spotted with flecks of water and dried toothpaste—and both the sink and bathtub had grimy rings around their insides. I decided that as soon as he gave me the aspirin, I would tackle the bathroom first.

“Ah! Here it is.” He rinsed it under the tap, shaking it dry with a flick of his hand—adding more drops of water to the dirty mirror in the process. “Under your tongue—no talking until it is done.”

“That may be an impossible task—she chatters quite a bit.”

Narrowing my eyes, I glared at my brother; he smiled back, looking pleased with the fact I could not verbally respond to his quip.

“Are you feeling ill at all—or is it just your sister?”

“I feel fine—that is why I do not think it is the food making her sick. I think it might be the flu—she’s been complaining about aches and pains the past few days.”

The thermometer beeped, startling me so much I jumped, making Pietro chuckle; I huffed at him as
the professor peered at the display, frowning. “Only two degrees above normal. Where exactly do you hurt, little one?”

“My stomach—it keeps spasming, and I have been feeling nauseated off and on. My back hurts too. I’m just sort of achy all over.” I wasn’t about to discuss my sore breasts with a man—no matter how kind he might be.

“I think your brother is right… it is probably a flu bug. Aspirin and liquids should be all that you need—and I certainly understand if you don’t feel up to working today.”

“I will be fine—may I please have the aspirin now?”

He nodded, turning to rifle through the cabinet above the sink; Pietro edged into the room, brushing my hair back out of my face. “I think I should help Wanda today—since she isn’t feeling well, sir.”

“I agree—though I’d much rather she take it easy today so she doesn’t start feeling worse. Contrary to what you might think, I am not a slave driver, son.” He shook two tablets out into his palm, passing them over to me. “You can take this bottle with you when you leave—I can get more.”

“That is not necessary—”

“Of course it is—everyone should have aspirin on hand, and I can afford to replace it. Now come—we will get you some water and then I will show you around.”

As we trailed after him, my brother’s hand found mine, giving it a comforting squeeze; I shot him a grateful smile, quickly returning my eyes to the rooms we were passing through. My first impression was that I had honestly never seen so many books in my life; there were everywhere, piled in stacks on every available surface—even on the kitchen counter—and all of them were coated with a thick layer of dust.

“How do you cook with all these books in the way?” I popped the aspirin in my mouth as I took the glass of water he held out to me.

“I don’t—I use the microwave. Since my wife died I have existed on frozen dinners—I learned fairly quickly that I am a hazard in the kitchen. That is why I am excited to have someone cook for me again—it has been a long time since I had a good meal.”

“Well the books will have to be relocated for that to happen,” I pointed out.

“Pietro and I will move them while you acquaint yourself with what equipment I have—if there is something I do not have that you need… I will get it. We could get started on that right now if you do not mind, boy?”

My brother did not respond—in fact, he seemed completely oblivious to the conversation; his eyes had locked on a white bakery box that rested precariously atop one of the stacks.

“Pietro—the professor is speaking to you!” I hissed, nudging him with my elbow.

“Huh?” He didn’t even glace at me—apparently completely mesmerized by the box.

The old man chuckled. “They are American style donuts from the new pastry shop in town—would you like one, son?”

“He most certainly would not,” I said, before my brother could speak up; Pietro shot me a scowl, but I ignored it, unwilling to bicker about such things. “We are here to work—not to eat up all your
“But I bought them just this morning with the two of you in mind—I cannot have many sweets, so you will be doing me a great favor if you eat them.” He nodded to the box, giving Pietro an encouraging smile. “Go ahead—it is all right. Just be sure to save some for your sister.”

Pietro grabbed the box, opening it and shoving a donut in his mouth before I could object further; I rolled my eyes at the smug look he shot me.

“Thank you,” he mumbled around a mouthful of fried dough, “I haven’t had any since before Mama and Papa died.”

“And how long is that?”

“Almost three years,” I answered softly. “We lost them a few weeks after our tenth birthday.”

The old man looked stunned. “Surely you have not been on the street all this time? Was there no one to take you in?”

“We have no family that we know of—and we could not risk them separating us. At least on the street we can stay together, watching out for each other. It was difficult at first—but we learned fairly quickly how to find the things we needed.” Pietro reached for another donut, holding it out to me. “Sister? Have one—they are delicious.”

I shook my head, my stomach rolling; the thought of eating anything—much less sweets—made me feel queasy again. “No—you go ahead. My stomach is upset, remember?”

His eyes flicked from me to the donut in his hand; I watched in astonishment as he put it back in the box. “Maybe later…. It is not fair for me to eat them when you can’t.”

“No, go ahead—really.” I refused to have him denying himself a treat just because of me. Returning my gaze to the stacks of books, I frowned. There was no way I could do anything in the kitchen—there was no counter space free at all. “Professor—”

“Grigori. My name is Grigori. You may call me that… or Grisha.”

I shook my head vehemently. “No sir—it is disrespectful to call an elder by their first name. We will use your title.”

“I wish that you wouldn’t—it has been a very long time since anyone used my name. I haven’t heard it since Yuliana died.”

My eyes darted over to my brother; he lifted his shoulders in a discreet shrug, leaving the choice up to me. I sighed, at a complete loss—mama had always insisted we address adults respectfully, but if we refused his request we would be disrespecting his wishes in his home. “I suppose we can try calling you Grigori—but if other people are around we will call you ‘Professor’.”

“There is little chance of that happening… no one comes to visit me.”

“Don’t you have any children? Or nieces and nephews?” Pietro asked; I was wondering the same thing—the hallway we’d traversed was lined with framed photographs of children, obviously spanning the years they’d grown.

“My children… they live in the states.”
“Well… why don’t you invite them here if you want visitors? I am sure they would be happy to come see you.”

“I am sorry to say you are wrong, little one. I have not seen any of them in quite some time—I have never even had the chance to see my grandchildren.”

He looked so sad I felt my eyes prickle—a warning sign that tears were starting to brew. Had Papa lived, we certainly wouldn’t have left him to live out his old age all alone. In an attempt to distract myself, I grabbed a stack of books off the counter, moving them to the floor; Pietro took my lead, moving to do the same thing.

“You are wondering why they won’t see me, yes?”

“No sir—I am wondering how they can live with themselves, abandoning you this way. If we could have our parents back we would never leave their sides.” I dropped the books I was holding, turning my back to him—unable to keep my composure; I did not want him watching me struggle to control the hot tears that sprang up in my eyes.

“It’s okay Wanda,” Pietro reached over, wrapping his arms around me, pulling me into a tight hug. “We still have each other—that’s all that matters.”

“I am sorry, chavi—I did not mean to upset you.”

“You didn’t—your children did. They do not realize how lucky they are to have you.” My voice was muffled by Pietro’s shoulder, but the Professor managed to understand my mumbled words.

“It is not their fault… not entirely. Children tend to put their parents up on a pedestal, believing they can do no wrong; when they discover the truth… that their parents are only humans with feet of clay… they are often disillusioned. They disapproved of certain things—”

“That is ridiculous! If you were our father there is nothing that you could ever do that would make us turn our backs on you.”

He chuckled, but it was not a happy sound; it was weary, as if he suddenly felt the weight of all the long years of his age. “You might be surprised. There are some things that people consider to be grievous sins. Things that they think are far too evil to ever forgive.”

“And who are they to decide what constitutes a sin? They are not God—it is not up to them to deliver absolution.” I snapped, pulling away from Pietro—a sudden burst of anger burning off my sorrow.

“Enough of this sad talk—Pietro, we will take these books to the cellar. I have empty bookshelves down there that need filling.”

I eyed him—not at all fooled by his abrupt change of subject; it was obvious he was trying to distract me, perhaps to spare me further sadness. Letting it slide, I summoned up the prim look my mother had often used when Pietro and I misbehaved. “If they are empty then why are your books scattered all over God’s creation?”

“Because I am a very lazy old man—”

“That will be changing if I am to clean here. Everything will be returned to its proper place after you use it.”

He stared at me a moment, then glanced over at my brother, shaking his head. “Listen to the little
miss! Ordering me about in my own home! Does she do this to you?"

Pietro’s blue eyes flicked over to me, the corners of his mouth twitching. “Whatever you do… do not call her bossy. She has a temper.”

I scowled at both of them. “Get these books out of here so I can clean this kitchen! Right now!”

The professor saluted me, grabbing an armful of books.” Come on boy—we had best listen. She’s got that look in her eyes.”

The expression on my brother’s face was almost comical, clearly expressing his confusion. “What look?”

“Ah—I see I will have to teach you all the secrets about how to read the warning signs. Right now she is giving us the face a woman gets when they are about to pick up something and start delivering swats.”

“My sister is not violent!” Pietro looked scandalized at the very thought of me behaving in such a manner.

“All women are tyrants when it comes to the kitchen. It is something in the female genes, I think—they rule the roost with an iron grip. Didn’t your mother ever chase you out of the kitchen for getting under her feet when you were young?”

Pietro eyed me warily for a moment—probably remembering all the times Mama had done just that, then grabbed a stack of books, retreating to the old man’s side. “Wanda wouldn’t ever swat *me*. You, on the other hand…. perhaps.”

“I think this is the most ridiculous thing I have ever heard. If the kitchen is clean and everything is in its place then it is easier to cook—that is plain, simple common sense.” I huffed at them, crossing my arms over my chest. “If your books were shelved properly and not scattered all around, you would be able to find what you wanted to read much easier—and once everything is put away it will make it easier to clear away all this dust. You will be able to breathe better—”

“Unruffle your feathers, little bird—I am not disagreeing with you. I am simply pointing out that when it comes to keeping house, all females—whether they be women or young girls—take control and refuse to relinquish it. My house is in disorder because I never learned how to keep it clean—I always had Yuliana looking after me, and she never wanted me meddling in her work. She claimed I ended up making more of a mess when I tried to help her.”

“Be that as it may, I must point out that if you want me to cook I have to clean first, and I cannot do that with this place looking like a book shop. The longer it takes to move them the longer it will be before I can make the meal you seem to want so much.”

They didn’t argue—they got to work, disappearing through a door that I presumed led to the basement. I began shifting stacks of books from the counter to the floor beside the door; it would make it easier for them to grab them, and it would free up some counter space to be used. It was only when that was done that I began snooping through the cabinets, searching for the cookware; when I found the pots and pans I almost wished I had not bothered to look—they were in a sorry state. It looked like the professor had just shoved them out of sight after using them… without bothering to take the time to wash them first.

I held one up as the old man returned, giving him a pointed look. “You do know that you are supposed to wash these, yes?”
He looked confused by my question. “I did wash them.”

I snorted, rolling my eyes. “With soap? Or did you just rinse them under the tap?”

He blushed. “Well… now that you mention it—”

“That’s what I thought. They will have to soak so I can properly scour them all.” I shook my head at his questioning look, ignoring him completely as I filled the sink with scalding hot water and the cookware. “Where are your cleaning supplies?”

“Perhaps down in the laundry area? I am not really sure… as you can see, I have not used them. They have been undisturbed since my wife died.”

I felt a surge of sympathy for him—it was obvious his wife and his sister had pampered him the same way my mama had done with papa; it made me wonder how my brother would fare if something were to happen to me and he was left all alone. My heart clenched painfully at the thought of leaving him; to distract myself, I grabbed a stack of books, ignoring the sound of protest the professor made as I brushed past him for the stairs. “If I have to go down it only makes sense for me to take a load—the faster they are moved the faster I can inventory what you have and make a list of what you need.”

The basement was much nicer than the one we lived in; for one thing, it was finished out, so there was carpet on the floor and the walls were paneled over with a lovely dark wood instead of the plain—often damp—stone of ours, and there was an actual plastered ceiling as opposed to the roughly hewed overhead beams that we had. It was heated, too, so it was warm and cozy. Floor to ceiling heavy wood bookshelves that lined three of the walls with a large desk sitting adjacent to them—obviously it was intended to be some sort of study. I could not help but wonder why he’d stopped using it as such.

The remaining wall was covered with more shelves, but they were more utilitarian—plain metal holding rows of cleaning supplies and storage bins as well as a couple laundry baskets that were so full they spilled over onto the floor. They abutted a washer and dryer that looked far nicer than the ones mama had used in the basement of our old home.

Pietro was standing in front of one of the bookcases with a look of intense concentration on his face; he glanced over at me as I deposited the books on the desk, shooting me a sheepish grin. “He wants them alphabetized as we shelf them.”

I rolled my eyes, quickly sorting through the stack and rearranging them in order. “At this rate it will be midnight before I even start to cook.”

“It will be worth it though—to have a real meal.” His brow wrinkled, his eyes flicking over to me as he quickly amended the statement. “Not that what you usually make isn’t good—”

“I know what you meant,” I reassured him, tugging on one of his curls. “One that is fresh and not scraps that have been charred over a fire.”

“That’s it exactly,” he said, looking relieved that I had not taken offense at what he’d said.

“First I have to clean the pans—you should see them, Pietro! It looks like they have never before been washed!” I shuddered as I turned away—mama always kept her cookware immaculate, washing and seasoning each pan with grape seed oil after every use. His soft laughter followed me as I crossed to the laundry area, gathering up what I would need. My arms were full as I passed the professor coming down the stairs—I was almost to the top when he called out from below me.
“Wanda, I told your brother—”

His voice trailed off suddenly, words ending in a hushed gasp; I paused to glance back at him, concerned by the sound he’d made—thinking he’d perhaps stumbled on the bottom step. “Sir? Are you alright?”

His face was bright red—his eyes not meeting mine; they shot up to the ceiling, far above above my head. “You need to go to the washroom, chavi.”

I blinked with confusion at the statement. “No I don’t—”

“You are… unclean.”

“I am not!” I flushed, a mixture of hurt and anger welling up inside me at his words. “We may not have a fancy bathtub or running water, but I make sure we both—”

“Just go. Hurry.” He still would not look at me; his voice was gruff—as if I’d upset him in some way. I turned to storm up the last few steps, wondering what I’d done wrong.

“Now who is the one lollygagging and wasting time when she should be—” Pietro’s voice broke off as suddenly as the professor’s had; I felt a surge of sheer panic clawing at my insides as his emotions slammed into me. “Wanda! You are bleeding!”

Suddenly, I understood exactly what the old man had been hinting at—though I did not understand what he meant by ‘unclean’. My face felt like it was on fire as I dropped everything and sprinted for the bathroom. I could hear Pietro’s feet pounding on the stairs as he raced after me—I reached my destination a heartbeat before he did, slamming the door in his face and throwing the lock. Ignoring his sound of protest, I sank down to the floor, drawing my knees up to my chest—horrified and humiliated at what had happened.

The door rattled behind me as he attacked it with his fists. “Wanda! Open the door! Please!”

“Leave her alone son—”

“I won’t! She’s hurt!” His voice was low—almost a growl of protective rage. “She could bleed to death in there—”

‘She won’t—it is only her time. Your sister is a woman now—we must go fetch what she needs.”

“Her… what?” Pietro sounded completely baffled—apparently, our father had not discussed things with him the way mama had done with me.

“I will explain on the way to the pharmacy. Chavi… tell him you are alright before he tears down my door.”

“I’m… I’m okay. I promise.” It sounded pathetically weak and feeble—but it was the best I could do. My body had betrayed me in the worst way possible, before I’d had time to adequately prepare.

“While we are gone you will take a nice warm bath—there are towels in the linen closet. Stop glaring at me boy—the sooner we get back the sooner she can open the door, yes? Unless you want your sister to stay locked up in there forever?”

“I’m not leaving—”

“Pietro Maximoff, you will listen to me. From now on she will need certain things bought for her—I
am going to show you what they are. You will come with me so I can introduce you to the pharmacist as my nephew—that way if you do not have the money to purchase these things in the future… you can ask him to charge them to my account. Wanda has to be able to depend on you, son… you are all she has.”

My brother fell silent; I could feel his anxiety pressing against me through the door. “He’s right Pietro… I don’t know what to get. Mama told me she would show me when the time came…”

“But… I don’t want to leave you all alone.” His voice came from right behind me, like he had crouched down and was leaning against the door.

I bit my lip, trying not to cry; I didn’t want him to go, but the thought of facing him at that moment… after what he had seen… it was horrifying. “Please Pietro…go with him. I swear to you I will be fine.”

He sighed; I held my breath as their footsteps faded away, not giving in to the turbulent emotions inside me until I heard the front door slam behind them—then I gave in to my tears. Closing my eyes, all I could think about was the promise my mother had made me—that she would teach me all I needed to know when the time was right.

*But she wasn’t here.*

Like so many other things that had been stolen from us, my mother would never have the chance to fulfill that promise, thanks to one person.

I curled up in a ball, crying—filled with longing for my mother. But even in my weakness, the fire burning in my heart grew with every tear that I shed. I vowed to myself that somehow… someday… I would find a way to make Tony Stark pay for all that he’d done.

*Vengeance would be mine.*
FOR ALMOST THREE YEARS I’d dreamed of taking a real bath again; one where the water was warm and sweet scented like the ones mama used to draw me. I’d longed for real shampoo to use on my hair instead of the tiny scraps of soap that we dug out of people’s trash, and of having thick, fluffy bath towels to dry off with instead of tattered scraps of cloth.

There were no bath salts or bubbles—I suppose old men have no use for such things—but the hot water still felt heavenly. I soaked until my fingers and toes were wrinkly, washing my hair and body at least three times each. In truth, I dreaded the thought of putting on my soiled jeans back on, so I was delaying it as long as I could—it was bad enough I’d have to walk home with the embarrassing bloodstain in plain view for anyone to see.

I soaked so long that my brother and the professor got back before I’d left the tub; with my head partially submerged under water, I didn’t hear them coming into the house. I thought I was still alone until a sudden pounding on the door scared me out of my wits, making me shriek.

“It’s me—open up!” Pietro sounded impatient, but there was a hint of excitement in his voice too.

“Hold on, I’m still in the bathtub.” I pulled the drain plug, grabbing the towel I’d set out as I stood; wrapping it tightly around my body, I took a moment to spread out my sweater to cover the blood stained jeans before I cracked the door.

He rolled his eyes, pushing it open with his shoulder and gently nudging me back so he could enter the room. I eyed the bags in his hands suspiciously—there shouldn’t have been more than one.

“What’s all that?”

“Wait and see.” He perched himself on the edge of the bathtub, setting the bags on the floor in front of him, shooting me a happy grin. “This one is your… the things that you need. The pharmacist put in a little booklet of information for you to read and a calendar to help keep track of your… uh… lady times.”

His cheeks colored a little as he passed the bag to me; I felt my own cheeks flame up in response to his embarrassment. “Thank you—”

“There’s also a bottle of pills that he said will help the pain better than aspirin. And this… well your pants were messed up, so the professor bought—”

“Pietro! He shouldn’t be buying us anything—you should have paid for it out of our wages!”

“You needed something to wear home!” He said defensively, passing over the bag. “He got me something too—he said they are early birthday gifts.”

“He shouldn’t be giving us birthday gifts! We are supposed to be working for him—not mooching off him!”

“I said that,” he shot back, “and he said he would be paying a cleaning woman and handyman at least three times what he pays us. He insisted!”

I scowled, snatching the bag from him; peering down inside it, I immediately flushed bright red.
again. “Pietro! You did not let him buy this!”

“He didn’t look at it! He told me to get what you needed, so I did! I told the saleswoman that your
bra made you hurt—she said that one would be better… it doesn’t have those hard things in it. And
the package of feminine things says on it that you have to stick them in panties—you didn’t have
any, Wanda! You need them—you’re a lady now.”

“I am not! I’m still me!” I sank down on the floor, frowning. “I’m not different just because my body
—”

“You are…” he murmured softly, handing me the last bag. “He explained it to me. Papa left quite a
bit out, you know… about how the body works.”

“I’m starting to think Mama did too. She told me I would know beforehand… that there were signs I
couldn’t miss.” I opened the bag, my irritation doubling as soon as I saw the contents. “A dress?
Why didn’t you just get me pants?”

“I told you—you’re a lady now,” he said, patiently—as if that explained everything.

“I can’t climb the wall in a dress!”

“You won’t have to—I will climb it and let you in the front door.” He smiled proudly, pleased with
himself for having the solution.

I opened my mouth to argue about how idiotic that was, but he anticipated it, cutting me off. “Just
when you wear the dress, okay? I saw it… and it was so pretty… I wanted you to have it to wear on
our birthday. Remember how Mama used to dress us up for pictures?”

I sighed; it was obvious this was one argument I wasn’t going to win. “Fine… but no more letting
him buy us things. We will buy them ourselves, out of what we earn. Now go on… finish moving
the books out of the kitchen so I can start cleaning when I come out.”

He muttered something that sounded suspiciously like ‘bossy britches’, but since he was smiling I let
it slide. It was only after the door shut behind him and I pulled the dress out of the bag that I realized
despite my irritation at the impracticality of the garment, some of his excitement over it had rubbed
off on me—or perhaps it was really my own at the thought of putting on brand new clothing. It
would be the first time since our parents died that I wore something that had never been used by
anyone but me.

And having underpants? That was a long forgotten luxury—they were the one thing I’d never been
able to bring myself to steal; perhaps it was a foolish stance considering I willingly ate food from
other people’s garbage, but I’d never been able to conquer the skin crawling reaction I had at the
thought of wearing another person’s panties. I wanted to try everything on immediately, but as
excited as I was, getting dressed would have to wait; first I had to educate myself on the feminine
products that I’d be forced to use now that I was maturing. Grabbing the bag that held the products
from the pharmacy, I pulled out the booklet and started to read—though I admit, it was hard to focus
when the beautiful dress my brother had selected was demanding my attention like a siren’s song.

By the time I was dressed, I felt decidedly different—as if I had matured in some way, or been
through a rite of passage of some sort. Strangely enough, the feeling wasn’t because of the
uncomfortable, bulky pad below my waist—it was the dress my brother had picked out that made me
feel more like a young woman and less like the girl I’d been a few hours before. It was a lovely
garment that was almost my very favorite color—a blue that was only a few shades darker that
Pietro’s beautiful eyes; unadorned by frills or lace, it was cut in a way that flattered my blossoming
figure, the skirt hitting a few inches below my knees.

When I looked in the full-length mirror on the back of the door, I was taken completely by surprise; the young woman in the mirror *couldn’t* be me. She was *pretty*, with large green eyes that were rimmed with thick, dark lashes, and prominent cheekbones—her face was not full and plain, like mine. Her waist dipped in, accentuating her curves, and her legs were long and shapely. I shook my head, denying what I saw—the young woman in the mirror mimicked the gesture; when I lifted my arms to braid my damp hair, she raised hers too. I spun in a circle to watch the skirt of the dress flare out—the smiling image spun too. It *was* me—the dress had done the impossible, turning the plain, clumsy little duckling into a lovely, graceful swan. I was so fascinated by my image that I lost track of time—I might have wasted away the rest of the day had there not been a gentle rapping on the other side of the door.

“Are you all right in there, little miss?”

“Yes—just a minute please!” I tore my eyes away from the mirror, hurrying to shove my soiled clothing into the bag that held the feminine supplies and the extra pairs of panties they’d bought me. Opening the door, I gave the old man a nervous sort of smile. “Well? Does it look okay?”

He made a production of looking me over, gesturing for me to spin around—then he smiled. “It is very becoming on you—now you are quite the proper young lady!”

“As opposed to what? A ragamuffin?” I returned his smile to show I wasn’t really offended by the implication.

“Not at all… but in my day girls did not wear dungarees—or any kind of pants, really. They celebrated the beauty of their form instead of trying to hide it away behind bulky things.” His smile faded; he shifted, looking suddenly uncomfortable, dropping his gaze to the floor. “You took care of… things? What we brought was adequate?”

I flushed at the question. “Yes sir… thank you.”

“Your brother… he did not understand what it meant. Do you? You know that now you must… take care?” As he studied the floor, his ears turned red—obviously as embarrassed as I was about the subject matter.

“My mother explained the basics. No matter what you might think… I am not an unchaste girl just because I live on the street.”

“Of course not—you are far too young for such things. I was speaking with the future in mind… you must be careful as you age and start to feel your body… stirring.”

I shifted, completely uncomfortable at discussing such things with a man. “I know this… I will be good.”

“All right then.” He looked relieved, perhaps thinking he’d done his duty as an elder by passing down advice that was morally sound; his eyes flicked to the bag in my hand, his brow wrinkling. “You saw where the laundry facilities are. Go tend to your soiled things, then join us in the kitchen, please.”

“I will wash them when I get home.”

“By then they will be unsalvageable, chavi—put them in the sink downstairs to soak in cold water overnight and you can wash them when you get here tomorrow.”
“But—”

“That is an order, Wanda.” He smiled to take the sting out of his words, but still, I bristled; after almost three years without supervision, I did not like being ordered around.

“Can I ask you something? About what you said earlier?”

“Certainly.” He cocked his head to the side, raising a shaggy eyebrow—waiting expectantly.

“Why did you say I was… unclean?”

“I am sorry… I did not mean it the way you thought. When we are small, we learn things that lodge themselves in our minds—they reappear in our heads at the strangest times.” He looked wistful for a moment, as if he were lingering in his memories. “My mother was Roma—she carried out her traditions and beliefs even after she married my gadjo father. For the people… when a woman or girl has her time, she is considered ‘unclean’. She is not to be touched until her time has passed and she has cleansed herself in running water.”

“Mama always said she and Papa had Rhusia blood,” I said softly, toying with the hem of my skirt. “But Pietro and I never got to learn anything about the culture.”

“I could tell that about you, little one… you have the look of the people. I think it is very fortunate we met, yes? I can pass on the things I remember… teach you the old stories and songs that my own mother taught me.” He rubbed the tattoo on his arm—a gesture that seemed almost unconscious. I wondered if talking about the blood he’d inherited from his mother stirred up painful memories. “Run along now—soak your pants. I may not know much about cleaning, but I certainly know how to deal with bloodstains.”

The way he phrased that disturbed me greatly, but I shoved it aside, hurrying downstairs to follow his directions; while I was at it, I grabbed one of the baskets of dirty clothing and sorted through it, tossing a load in the washer before retracing my steps to the kitchen. Almost all the books were gone—but even more amazing, Pietro stood at the sink, scouring out the pans I’d left to soak with a piece of steel wool. He looked up as I entered, his eyes widening—the pot in his hands slipped from his grasp and clattered into the sink.

“There she is! Doesn’t your sister look pretty, boy?”

Pietro continued to stare at me for a moment, then he slowly shook his head; the gesture drained away the happy confidence I felt, making my chest tighten painfully—but when he spoke, his word were more than enough to make my heart take flight and my cheeks flush with pleasure. “Pretty is not nearly a sufficient word… my Wanda… she looks beautiful.”

I ducked my head down, forgetting that I’d tied my hair back—there was no way to hide away my enjoyment at the compliment. “Thank you… it is the dress. You did a very good job picking it out.”

“Ridiculous. The dress is like… like a picture frame. It is nice, but it is just an accent to the beauty within it.” He blushed, dropping his eyes to the sink as he retrieved the pan and began scrubbing at it furiously.

“Leave that for now Petya… come, sit down. I want to talk to you both.” The professor settled himself at the head of the table, gesturing to the empty chairs.

“Petya?”

“It is a Russian nickname. I think it suits him very much… except perhaps when he is prickling like a
I covered my mouth, trying to smother the laughter that bubbled up inside me; Pietro scowled as he slipped into the chair beside me. “And what about her? She gets prickly too.”

“Hmmm… let’s see—”

“I have a nickname already,” I said, folding my hands in my lap and sitting up a little straighter. “It is Pietra.”

“Ah, but that is not a Russian nickname, chavi” The old man cocked his head, tugging at his beard. “You shall be Petushka.”

“That is ridiculous! The nickname is even longer than my real name!”

He shrugged. “It is the way things are done in Russia—and since I am passing you off as my kin, people will expect me to use Russian endearments for you.”

“But… we’re not kin.” Pietro frowned, slouching down in the chair; the movement pressed his leg against mine, making a delicious little tingle dance along my skin. “Why would you even want to lie about such a thing?”

“You saw how easy it was today, yes? I introduced you as my great nephew who’d come to help me out, and the pharmacist asked not a single question when I added your name to my account. Do you think that would have been the case had I not told a little fib?”

“So… if people ask, we say Yuliana was our mother?” The thought troubled me—it seemed like a betrayal to our real mother.

“No!” His eyes widened, a look of panic shooting across his face. “The people here knew my sister by another… name. Besides, the secret to glossing over the truth in matters such as this is to not go into great detail—that way you will not slip up of forget what has been said. If anyone asks about your parents, just look sad and say you don’t want to talk about it.”

I glanced over, meeting my brother’s eyes; I could feel his confusion at the professor’s panic—it echoed what I was feeling. In lieu of the fact they’d escaped the Nazi’s and had to start all over, I supposed a little paranoia was understandable, but still, it seemed strange. “We can do that easily enough—all it will take is remembering what happened to our real parents.”

He nodded, his face solemn. “I think that your parents deserve the peace of knowing you are not struggling to live… don’t you? That is why I wanted to talk to you.”

“I need to get to work—”

“Later,” he cut me off, steepling his fingers beneath his chin. “First, some ground rules are in order, I think. While you work here, I want you to feel free to utilize the things I have for your own need. Since you will be doing my laundry, you will bring your own and wash it here—”

“No—our laundry tub is adequate. I only went along with cleaning my pants here because you were right about them staining.” I crossed my arms across my chest, leaning back in my chair.

“Wanda… be reasonable. You are going to work here all day then go home and work more? You are too young for this—you should be spending some time enjoying life while you can… and you should be learning the things you need to know to provide for yourself when you are older.” Perhaps realizing I would not be swayed, he turned his attention to Pietro, trying to win him over. “Look at
her hands—do you see how they are? Using my washing machine will prevent that. It will give her poor, cracked skin time to heal. Do you want her hurting, son?”

“Do not attempt to play us against each other! If you do I swear we will give you back your money and the things you bought—we will walk out that door forever!” I snapped, infuriated that he would dare try to crack the solidarity that Pietro and I shared.

“Wanda… he is right.” Pietro reached over, capturing my hand, his fingers tracing along the rough skin that covered my knuckles—the gentle brush of them sending chills racing up and down my spine. “What would it hurt to use his machine?”

“It puts wear on it… it uses his water and his detergent… his electricity. All these things cost money, Pietro.” I argued. “We agreed to earn an honest wage—not to—”

“Most employers offer added perks and benefits to their employees’ salaries—restaurants feed the wait staff… hotels offer room and board. What I am offering is no different than those things.”

I stared down at Pietro’s hand, watching his thumb trace a slow path, gently brushing across my skin as I contemplated the old man’s words. “I do not want to take advantage of your kindness—it wouldn’t be right.”

“If you snuck your laundry in without my knowing… that would be taking advantage, chavi. Accepting my offer is simply the intelligent thing to do.” He sighed, his long fingers moving up to tug on his beard again; I was slowly learning to read him—it was a gesture that betrayed his nerves, like my habit of hiding away behind my hair. “There is more… I want the two of you to feel free to bathe here. Good hygiene is very important, especially now that you have begun your cycles. And I want you to prepare your meals here, even if you take them with you to eat later at home. I meant what I said about food poisoning this morning—the way you have been eating… it is very unsafe.”

“Professor—”

He held up his hand to silence me. “Let me finish, please. I am going to be completely honest with you both, in hopes that will make it easier for you both to make up your minds. I am an old man and my children cut me out of their lives decades ago. I thought that might change when I wrote to tell them I was sick… but they do not care. I told you that I feel that there is a reason you were brought into my life… but I did not tell you why. I have always feared dying alone—I think that Yuliana guided the two of you to me so I would not have to face that fear.”

I studied him for a moment, disturbed by the sudden turn the conversation had taken; Pietro tensed beside me, his hand tightening around mine. I could feel his unease, and I knew instantly that he was putting himself in the old man’s place—imagining spending his final days without me there to comfort him.

“You may be old, but you are still strong,” I said softly, “You still have many years left in you to make peace with your children.”

“I do not—I have cancer, chavi, and it is very advanced. There are days when I can barely find the energy to climb out of bed… I am hoping the two of you will be willing to help me when I reach the point where I am too weak to look after myself. In exchange for this, I will make sure you have what you need to survive when I am gone—”

“I think that you need to take more time to reflect on this, sir.” Pietro said slowly, shifting in his chair so that his leg pressed more firmly against mine; I glanced over at him—his words were a direct contrast to the feelings I sensed welling up inside him. He wanted to help the man, but like me, he
was afraid of forming attachments to anyone else; we knew firsthand how hard it was to lose someone to death—despite the professor’s generous, kindhearted offer to assist us, helping him could very well end up costing us a great deal emotionally. “You only just met us—you might change your mind in a few days, and besides… we do not want to take advantage of your generosity.”

He glanced over at me, seeking approval; I confirmed it with a small nod, squeezing his hand.

“I will not change my mind, son. When I realized you were twins… it is too great a coincidence to be simply chance. I’ve long prayed for a sign that the things I have always believed in are true and just—that I would find something to give me a sense of purpose during the time I have left. Don’t you think it is odd that I spent my life teaching—something that can benefit you both? If I help you with your education, I will not be a useless old man, wasting away in this house all alone. I will be a teacher again—helping the two of you while doing something I have always loved. I think you will both agree that you need more of an education than you have, yes?”

I glanced over at Pietro, thinking about all my dreams for him; as a professor, the old man was certainly qualified to teach him enough to enter a good university. “If he studies with you… would he be able to further his education later? Would he be—”

“I don’t want to go to university, Wanda,” Pietro huffed. “I can support us without it just fine. I can learn a trade—”

“What? Mechanics? Woodworking? You are too smart for that, Pietro! And you won’t be the only one working so get that idea out of your mind right now—”

“Many young people are educated at home, by tutors who are accredited. I can write letters confirming I worked with you both, and then you would simply have to pass the entrance exams. But chavi… you should not push your brother if university does not appeal to him. A man who does something he does not enjoy is a man who is destined to spend his life in misery. I have seen far too many young men and women who were pushed into a field they hated simply for want of pleasing their loved ones. It is important to follow your heart’s path in all things—that is the secret to truly achieving happiness and success.”

Pietro shot me a smug look that made me roll my eyes. “Is that what you did sir? Is that why you want to teach us?”

“I suppose that is part of the reason, yes. Educating young minds has always been important to me, but even more than that I was driven by the desire to open their eyes to the truth.”

“The truth about what?”

“The way society views things, I have doctorates in anthropology and religion—I spent my life studying cultures and their practices, trying to determine the root of the taboos that modern society so desperately clings to. When I was a young man, I dreamed of changing the way people reacted to such things… but it was a lost cause. I could not even succeed in broadening my own children’s minds.” He scowled, running his fingers through his beard, two spots of color appearing on his cheeks—his temperament betraying how strongly he felt about the issue.

“But surely if you used logical arguments,” I began—only to be interrupted; the old man’s voice was harsh, as if lecturing the masses he condemned.

“People tend to stop listening when you point out that ninety eight percent of what they’ve been taught is right is nothing more than simple ancient teachings that were enacted to keep the populace under the thumb of those in charge,” he said, cutting me off. “The rules have never been the same for
those in power as for the people under them—but to acknowledge these things would mean accepting that civilizations have been manipulated since before the time of Abraham. No one has nearly as much freedom as they believe, if they did they would fight against the brainwashing they’ve received since childhood and form their own thoughts and opinions based on factual evidence.”

Pietro abruptly released my hand, looking extremely uncomfortable. Moving his leg away from mine, he ignored the questioning look I shot him—shifting to the other side of his chair. I frowned, wondering what his problem was—I could feel the frustration and confusion welling up inside him, but I did not know their cause.

“So… what do you think? Do we have a deal?”

“My sister and I will discuss it tonight… if that is acceptable with her?”

“What?” I scowled, irritated by his sudden mood swing. “Can I get to work now?”

“No you may not. I think we have all done enough work for one day.”

“What?” I shot him an incredulous look. “I moved one lousy stack of books!”

“As you pointed out earlier… there is quite a bit of dust. We have stirred so much up it is already polluting the air—if any more is stirred up I won’t be able to breathe at all.”

“I can’t cook until the kitchen is cleaned—”

“He bought a meal while we were in town… to celebrate your becoming a lady. It is warming in the oven,” Pietro mumbled.

The old man seemed to sense I was on the verge of a hissy fit, immediately trying to smooth things over before I lost control. “I had a craving for roast chicken. It was on sale at the delicatessen—lucky, yes? You will bring the food to the table please, little miss.”

Muttering under my breath about the inherent sneakiness and conniving of men, I did as he asked, but I made my displeasure known by slapping each plate down on the table as loudly as possible—though I was careful not to break them.

Not even the delicious food was enough to improve my brother’s sudden bad mood; he remained sullen and unresponsive throughout the meal, speaking only when spoken to and pointedly keeping his eyes locked on his plate. His behavior made me lose what little appetite I had—after choking down a few mouthfuls, I managed to convince the old man to at least let me do a cursory cleaning of the kitchen. He could hardly argue since he’d bought enough food for a small army and all of it needed to be properly put away so it wouldn’t go to waste. While I busied myself, Pietro and the professor returned to the basement to finish organizing the books—I only hoped my brother’s foul mood would not make him surly and disrespectful if the old man tried to spark up conversation.

As I scrubbed the counters and wiped down the cabinets, I made a mental list of things that would be helpful in making the kitchen more functional for a man with limited skills; at first glance, there wasn’t much that was lacking—his wife had left it well equipped, but I wanted to make sure it was more accessible for the professor. Things like a set of microwave dishes as opposed to the fine china I’d found in the cupboards would make it easy for him to heat up leftovers, assuring he would be able to eat something other than frozen dinners on the days we were not there.

I’d just started sweeping the kitchen floor when Pietro reappeared; he still looked prickly and irritable, but at least he favored me with a smile. “Are you about done? He said it is quitting time.”
I glanced up at the clock over the stove, surprised to see that I’d lost several hours while trying to set the kitchen right. It was time well spent—the kitchen was spotless, though I still needed to scrub the floor and clean out the oven. “Sure, I can do the rest in the morning. Could you ask him to come up here? I need to show him something.”

I probably should have been more specific—instead of going down to retrieve our employer, Pietro just shouted down the stairs. I rolled my eyes in exasperation, but before I could chastise him about his lack of manners, the professor strode through the doorway—immediately freezing. His eyes widened, a look of astonishment crossing his face as his gaze darted around his kitchen.

“My God! Look at this! It has not been this clean since—”

“It is what you hired me to do, yes?” My cheeks flushed with pleasure at his appreciation of my labor; it was one thing for Pietro to sing my praises—as my brother, it was expected—but I’d never had a stranger compliment me on my ability to organize and clean. “There are still a few things I need to do, but they will keep until tomorrow.”

I opened the refrigerator, pointing to the wrapped container I’d left on the top shelf. “Two minutes in the microwave—whatever dishes you use go in the sink, not back in the cabinet. That is the only microwavable dish you have in the whole house, so we need to get a few more, I think.”

He nodded. “I hope you wrapped some up to take with you for your dinner?”

“I did, thank you. There is still quite a bit left—I fear you will be eating chicken for the rest of the week, but I know a few different ways my mama used to prepare it, so I will make sure it does not go to waste.” Grabbing my bag, I retrieved the container of leftovers I’d prepared for us, shoving it inside. “If you have a note pad and a pen, tonight I will write down the things I need to make meals for the rest of the week.”

While the old man rummaged through a drawer Pietro shifted restlessly from side to side, impatient to get home. “Remember… we cannot work on Saturday.”

I nodded. “I know—I will prepare enough to see him through the weekend.”

“You could still come by to visit—you don’t have to work. I could get a cake, perhaps some ice cream?” The professor held out a steno book and a very fancy looking pen; I took them, adding them to my sack—shaking my head at the offer. “Thank you, but we have a birthday ritual that’s just for the two of us.”

“I see… well, if you change your mind, the offer will remain open.”

I glanced up just in time to see him wink at my brother; the secretive grin my brother shot him in return faded when he met my eyes. “And what is that about?”

“Nothing… nothing at all. The old man tugged at his beard, nervously, further arousing my suspicions. “Now be sure to write down everything you think you will need, chavi—tomorrow we will go through the cupboards and mark off the things I already have.”

“I certainly hope you realize I am not fooled at all by your distraction techniques.” I narrowed my eyes, scowling.

“You wound me, girl—I was doing no such thing.”

“You were—it was as obvious as the nose on my face,” I huffed. “When was the last time you actually bought anything other than frozen dinners? Spices and things have a shelf life, you know.”
“Before my wife died, I suppose. The only things I’ve bought since are the staples—salt and pepper… sugar for my coffee and tea.”

“And how long ago was that?”

A year, six months and fifteen days ago.” It was so soft I almost missed it—his voice sounding broken and lost.

Immediately, my heart twisted; the fact he was so precise made it painfully clear that he was still drowning in grief. “I am sorry… I didn’t mean to—”

“I know child—it’s not your fault. You see… living without her does not get easier, if anything it gets harder to bear with every day that passes. We always assumed we’d leave the world at exactly the same time, wrapped up in each other’s arms.” He forced a smile, but it did nothing to mask the sorrow that was practically oozing out of his pores. “Let me grab you something to keep you warm on your walk home—it is far too chilly to be out in nothing more than a dress.”

I watched him as he wandered off down the hallway towards what I assumed were the bedrooms; his words troubled me, though I could not put my finger on exactly why that might be. Glancing over at Pietro, I could see he was troubled too; his brow was wrinkled and he chewed at the corner of his lip—a gesture we both tended to use when faced with any sort of puzzle.

“What?”

He shook his head. “It’s nothing really… I just can’t imagine feeling so strongly about anyone but you.”

I stared at him a moment, then slowly shook my head. “That’s it… I just couldn’t figure out what it was about it that bothered me.”

“Maybe he’s getting things mixed up in his head again—he did it a few times while we were downstairs working. One minute he’d be talking about his sister, and then he’d say something about his wife.”

“He did that with me too—the day I met him. He said that when you get older things sort of run together.”

The sound of the wooden floor creaking pulled my eyes back to the hall; the professor had reappeared with a black woolen shawl in his hands. “This should keep you warm enough, yes?”

I looked at it for a moment, hesitant to touch it. “I can’t—I’m afraid I might hurt it. I am sure your wife’s belongings are very precious to you—”

“It wasn’t hers—it was made for our daughter in hopes that someday she would return home to us to claim it. I think it would please my wife very much to know you were getting good use out of it.” He draped the garment around my shoulders, smiling. “It is just wasting away here, like so many other things… consider it a gift, child.”

I tilted my head, brushing my cheek against the softness; it held the faintest lingering hint of some spicy, exotic perfume—one that I found extremely enchanting. “I will take very good care of it… and if your daughter does show up—”

“She won’t. It is yours to keep. Run along now—I don’t like the idea of the two of you out wandering the streets alone after dark.”
“We’re not alone,” Pietro said, brushing past me and heading for the door. “We have each other—that’s all we’ll ever need.”

“Be that as it may, I am an old man—we tend to worry about the young.”

I followed my brother down the hall, watching as he retrieved his bag from where he’d left it beside the door; I eyed it suspiciously—it was nearly as bulky as mine was. “What have you got in there?”

“I told you—the professor bought me a birthday gift too.”

“Well? What is it?”

“That’s for me to know and you to find out,” he teased, holding open the door for me.

“That’s not fair! You saw mine!”

“Wanda… let him have some privacy, yes? Boys need it just as much as girls do.”

I huffed, tossing a look of irritation at the old man, readjusting the garment draped around my shoulders. “I would think that you would know that the rules about such things are entirely different for twins.”

“Twins need their privacy too as they grow older—and it is very important that you remember to respect that, little one.” He chuckled, completely missing the haughty look I shot him as he shut the door.

“You heard him—and you need to be doubly respectful since I am older than you,” Pietro teased.

“Chronologically, maybe—but maturity wise I am years older than you are,” I shot back.

“That is ridiculous—”

“It is not! Everyone knows girls mature faster than boys,” I said primly, pausing to readjust the bag on my shoulder—every time I moved it shifted the shawl, threatening to knock it loose.

“Here, give me that—” he reached for the bag, but I sidestepped away from him, sticking out my tongue. “Come on Wanda—you shouldn’t be carrying that.”

“Why, because I’m a lady in a fancy dress?” I teased.

“No… because the professor said I should make sure you do not overexert yourself.”

“I see… and did he happen to say why I must not do this?” I watched him furtively, out of the corner of my eye—more than a little curious about the conversation that had passed between them.

“You will be tired and cranky,” he replied, “and your body needs time to get used to the changes that are occurring.”

“It hardly seems fair, does it? That girls have to go through this and boys don’t.”

“I said the same thing… but he told me that I will have things I have to deal with too.” His cheeks turned bright red.

I could feel his unease at the discussion, but it was not nearly strong enough to override my desire to know exactly what he meant. “Like… what?”
“Wanda—”

“You know all about what’s going on with me—I deserve to know the same things about you, Pietro.”

He sighed, staring straight ahead. “He said that I will start to feel… different. Things will start affecting me in ways they didn’t before… but such urges are completely normal and I should not be ashamed of them.”

“You mean… like what happened yesterday?” I asked softly. I was hoping he would be willing to talk about why he’d run off and left me so suddenly. I wasn’t stupid—I knew it wasn’t any sudden urge to find me a bra that had sent him bolting up the stairs. I’d felt the reason he’d taken off pressing firmly against my body—I just couldn’t understand why he’d fled because of it.

“I don’t want to talk about that—it’s not proper to discuss such things.”

“Proper does not apply for twins,” I argued. “Twins are supposed to be able to share everything.”

“That has nothing to do with it! There are some things girls aren’t supposed to know about.”

I rolled my eyes. “I know what it was, Pietro. Mama might not have explained everything, but she made sure I understood how babies are made and what has to happen for it to occur. She even drew pictures—”

“She did not!” He glanced over at me, wide eyed.

“Well… they weren’t very good ones. Circles and rectangles to represent the male and female parts… but I certainly got the gist of it.”

He grunted, dropping his eyes back to the ground. “All Papa told me was not to have sex until I got married. When I asked him what that meant… he pointed to my… you know… and said to keep it in my pants and stay away from girls.”

I frowned, disturbed that Papa hadn’t properly prepared him for what he would face in becoming a man. “I can explain it—”

“No!” He flushed again, shaking his head vehemently. “You don’t have to—the professor… he made sure I understood everything.”

“Did he draw pictures?” I prodded.

Pietro rolled his eyes. “No—don’t be dumb, we talked about it while we were walking into town.”

“Well… perhaps that is for the best.” I slid my arm through his, trying to tease him out of his sour mood. “Yours certainly doesn’t look like a rectangle… I wonder if some boy’s do?”

He groaned. “Wanda!”

“Well it doesn’t! And it didn’t feel rectangular—”

“Stop!” Even the tips of his ears were red—he looked completely miserable.

“There is nothing to be embarrassed about—”

He jerked his arm free, moving away from me. “There is! You’re my sister! I’m some kind of freak or something!”
I stopped walking, feeling as he’d slapped me. If he thought he was a freak for his body reacting to me, then what did that make me considering I was just as affected as he’d been? “Did you… did you tell the professor about it? Is that why he said it was normal and not to be ashamed?”

He stopped walking, but he didn’t look at me. “I didn’t tell him exactly what happened—I just said that we were wrestling and it made me feel… things.”

I wrapped my arms around myself, frowning. “And?”

“He said it was basic biology—that people are just like animals when it comes to certain things, we’re just more evolved when it comes to intelligence and such.”

I huffed. “What do animals have to do with anything?”

“People have the same instincts as animals… only animals don’t reason things out the way we do. They just… act without thinking about it.”

“So?”

“My body just… reacted—like an animals would, I guess. To being… uh… stimulated. He said I shouldn’t worry about it.”

“But… what stimulated it?”

“I don’t know, Wanda, okay?” His voice was harsh as his eyes darted up to glare at me before flicking back to the concrete. “I told you, I’m some kind of freak!”

His attitude made my temper flare to life. “Fine—keep your stupid secrets! I don’t care!”

I stormed past him, ignoring the tears of frustration that stung my eyes. We’d never held anything back from each other before—we’d always been open and honest about everything. It hurt that he was so unwilling to talk to me—hurt so much that my chest ached deep inside.

“Wanda… wait—” he jogged up beside me, grabbing my arm and tugging me to a stop. “Look—”

“No, you look—if you think you’re a freak then that means you think I’m one too! How do you imagine that makes me feel?”

He looked confused. “I never said you were a freak—”

“My body reacted too Pietro! You just couldn’t feel it! So if you’re a freak then I’m one too!” I burst into tears, jerking my arm free and shoving him roughly. He stumbled backwards, looking stunned as his rear hit the ground—but I didn’t stick around to apologize. I turned, for the first time in my life fleeing from the one person I had never imagined I’d ever run away from.

I didn’t even make it to the corner.

I let out a shriek as he tackled me; he shifted us as we fell so that he hit the ground first—his body protectively cushioning me from the initial jarring impact. Immediately he rolled over, grabbing my arms and pinning them above my head.

“Don’t you ever run from me again, Wanda.” It was practically a growl.

“Get off me! Right now!” I hissed back, glaring up at him.

“Make me.” He glared right back, tightening his grip on my wrists.
I narrowed my eyes, my lips twisting into a smirk in response to his smug, superior tone. “Do you really want me to do that, brother? Aren’t you afraid I will make you feel like a freak again?”

He lowered his head until his nose practically brushed mine—staring into my eyes from only a few inches away. “Don’t threaten me, sister. Now that I know what to expect I can control it—it’s a case of mind over matter.”

“It wasn’t a threat—it was a warning.” I didn’t wait for another snarly retort; he more than deserved whatever embarrassment he might later feel—it would be a suitable payback for him being such a jerk. I started fighting, straining against his grip as I tried to throw him off me—all the while trying to ignore the surge of excitement that instantly shot through me as my body rubbed against his. The smug look on his face faded almost immediately—he closed his eyes and groaned as his body betrayed him. “Mind over matter, huh? Perhaps you won’t mind telling me what that is I am feeling, Pietro? Because it is most certainly not a rectangle.”

He started to release my hands, but I was faster—I knew him far too well and anticipated his move. I grabbed his wrists as his body lifted off mine, flipping him over and using my knees to pin his arms at his sides. Leaning down, I mimicked his gesture—but he kept his eyes closed tightly. “What’s the matter, brother? Cat got your tongue?”

“Wanda… let me up. I mean it.”

“Not yet—not until we talk about what you are feeling.” I wiggled my hips, making him groan—the movement making things low in my body tighten in a way that made my heart race, stealing my breath. “I do not want to hear any ridiculousness about animals either. If you are truthful with me, I will return the favor—once we talk it out, maybe I will forgive you for hurting my feelings.”

“I didn’t mean to hurt your feelings,” he muttered through grit teeth.

“Oh, I see. I guess most girls like hearing the person they are closest to in the world insinuate there is something wrong with them—my mistake.”

“I wasn’t talking about you!” His eyes shot open, locking with mine. For a moment, I got lost inside them—his pupils were huge, their darkness almost swallowing up the beautiful blue color of his irises. “Wanda… you really do need to move. Someone is going to see us and—”

“In case it escaped your notice, Pietro, we are in the middle of a deserted neighborhood—and even if someone did come along, all they would see is a very upset girl teaching her idiot twin brother a lesson.”

“I am not an idiot,” he huffed, trying to throw me; I guess he’d forgotten that he’d given me a few pointers on protecting myself—including teaching me how to distribute my weight to keep an opponent pinned. My breath caught in my throat as he tried to unseat me by thrusting his hips up; it felt very, very different to have him pressed against me when I didn’t have on jeans.

“I beg to differ—clearly you are an idiot if you think you can throw me off without hurting me in the process. Is that what you want, my brother? To hurt me even more than you already did with your cruel words?” It came out a hushed murmur. He stopped struggling, his eyes full of anguish and confusion as they met mine. “You know what? Forget it. If you want to beat yourself up over something stupid that could easily be solved if we talked, then that’s your choice. I don’t want you talking to me unless you want to.” I rolled off him, grabbing the bag I’d dropped when he’d tackled me to the ground; without another word, I set off for home, not bothering to wait and see if he would follow.
The sound of his footsteps following behind me was all the answer I needed. I did not slow my pace or even glance his way, but it wasn’t because I was trying to be mean or to punish him with my silence—I needed time to think. I had not lied—I was upset, more upset than I could remember being since the night we’d lost our parents. I did not like my brother thinking there was something wrong with him—especially not when it pertained to me. And though I had a vested interest in the problem, my motivation wasn’t selfish at all—it had nothing to do with me enjoying the kisses and the way his body felt against mine; it was purely about the fact he was upset and thinking there was something wrong with what we were both feeling.

The more I thought about the professor had said, the more it made sense—in a roundabout, twisty turning kind of way; animals simply did what nature demanded, giving into their needs when they arose. I could easily remember when old Mrs. Kolinov’s dog had puppies—she’d given away all of the litter except for two; her plan had been to give the remaining pair to her grandchildren when they visited at Christmas. It was a nice idea, but unfortunately for her, the puppies had been born in March—by the time Christmas rolled around, the female puppy had gone into her first heat and been impregnated by her brother. The male hadn’t cared that it was kin—he’d acted instinctively, doing what nature intended. That in and of itself was a pretty easy explanation, but deep down, I knew there was more to the equation that something as simple as basic instinct between Pietro and me—in fact, I was willing to bet that actually played a very small part in the grand scheme of things.

What really troubled me was that for the life of me, I couldn’t figure out why it seemed to bother him so much and me so little; I was used to us feeling the exact same way about everything—this was the first time we’d ever been so at odds with our opinions. I knew that kissing him or getting excited at having his body react to mine was supposed to be improper, but honestly…it hadn’t felt improper at all. It felt right—in fact, the more I thought about it, the more natural it seemed. Why was it easy for me to dismiss the notion that such things were freakish or bad when those very same things bothered Pietro so much?

“Wanda…”

The sound of my brother’s hushed murmur right next to my ear pulled me out of my thoughts; he’d caught up to while I’d been contemplating our problem, but I’d been so wrapped up in my introspection that I hadn’t even noticed. He pointed out across the street—automatically my eyes followed, flicking to the right, wondering what had caught his attention; even in the waning light, I spotted it easily—immediately nodding my head.

He scampered off, crossing the street and climbing over the low stonewall surrounding that yard that housed the heavily laden laundry line he’d spotted; I watched him, enraptured by the way he moved. Over the past year, it had become almost a habit; I’d begun leaving the more physical tasks to Pietro, just so I could have the pleasure of watching him carry them out. As always, the sight affected me, making my insides feel all hollow and trembly. Was it freakish for me to feel such a thing—to appreciate and react to his beauty? I appreciated the miraculous beauty of a spectacular sunrise, lighting up inside with wonder without feeling the slightest bit of guilt; when I saw a rose bud slowly opening its bloom, the beauty of it touched me, tugging at my heart—so why was it wrong enjoy the way I felt when Pietro touched me when God made him too? I searched my heart for the answer to the question, sending up a silent prayer for Divine guidance to assist me. I was surprised that it came almost instantly—and it was the simplest answer of all.

*It wasn’t wrong.*

How could it be when we were two parts of the same whole—that in and of itself was a miracle too. We’d started as one and divided, so maybe that meant the rules were different for us—or perhaps the world was just flat out *wrong* in their decision that certain things were taboo. Whatever the reasoning
might be, I could feel the answer to my prayer resonating throughout my body, confirming what I already knew—the very thing I had whispered to Pietro on the darkened street the night I’d been attacked; there was a certain kind of love that was transcendent—beyond the understanding of anyone but the blessed few that were touched by the pureness of its grace. We had it; it was the root of what we were feeling, and no matter how much we might fight against the way we reacted to each other, somehow...I sensed that those feelings would never fade. They couldn’t—every single part of us was half of what it had once been; we would always be drawn to the other half, seeking the perfection of completion.

Closing my eyes, I murmured a hushed thanks to whatever angel it was that had been listening to my plea. Now all I had to figure out was how to make Pietro understand; I refused to let him feel like anything about us was abnormal or improper—what we had was a gift to be cherished, sent from God above.

I started walking again as soon as he climbed back over the wall; he hurried to catch up, shortening his strides to match mine once he was at my side. As we walked, from time to time our hands or arms brushed, shooting electricity through me each time that it happened. I desperately tried to ignore it, but at the same time, I couldn’t help but wonder if he was feeling it too. My thoughts were a jumbled, chaotic mess as they raced through my mind; no matter how hard I tried, I could not quiet or organize them—I was too distracted by the nearness of his body to mine. My lack of focus added to the frustration welling up inside me; I wasn’t used to bot being able to control the path my mind took—I’d always had the ability to compartmentalize my thoughts, shoving away the things that distracted my concentration, but somehow, suddenly, I seemed to have lost that skill. No matter how hard I tried, my thoughts kept returning to Pietro and the warm rush that surged through me with each tantalizing brush of his hand.

By the time we reached the cottage, my frustration had turned into downright anger; I was still trying to formulate an argument that would open his eyes to what was going on, but my mind refused to cooperate. Despite my dress, I went straight for the wall, ignoring his insistence that I use the basement door—I was in no mood to play along with his ‘you’re a lady’ game. Though I scraped up my knees rather badly on the stones, I managed to make it over without any assistance, quickly crossing the yard and dropping down through the window into the cellar. I headed straight for the books we’d lined up neatly on one of the shelves, and then retreated to my side of the mattress—digging the notepad and pen the professor had loaned me out of my bag. I could feel Pietro’s eyes on me, but I wasn’t nearly ready to talk to him yet; instead, I used the book as a makeshift desk, jotting down notes on the pad.

“What are you doing?”

“What does it look like?” I didn’t look up.

“Making the grocery list?”

“No—I will do that later. This is another kind of list entirely.”

“What kind?”

I glanced up at him, scowling. “If you are going to keep distracting me I will go upstairs to work.”

“It’s not safe—someone could come in.”

“I’m fast—they’d never catch me.”

“Why won’t you just tell me what—”
I stood up abruptly, heading for the stairs; he pushed away from the wall, grabbing for my arm, but I sidestepped him. “Don’t touch me! I might contaminate you with freaky weirdness again.”

“Wanda… stop. Don’t be like that… please.”

“Stop what? It’s the truth. That’s why you didn’t want to kiss me goodnight last night, wasn’t it? You were afraid it would make you feel—” I stopped talking abruptly when his face started to scrunch up; one of the things I hated most in all the world was seeing my brother cry, and the face he was making was a warning sign that he was fighting off tears. Closing my eyes, I sighed. “Look… I am making a list so we can discuss everything, okay? I think what I am writing will help. A lot.”

“Why can’t you just tell me instead of writing it all down?”

“Because sometimes the only way to figure things out is on your own, Pietro. That’s what I was doing on the way home—and I think I came up with a way to help you do the same thing too. But I seriously need to concentrate to do it because I’m not used to writing down exactly what I am feeling and I need to concentrate to find the right words.”

“Can I at least sit next to you while you work? I won’t talk… I just want to be near you right now… I don’t like it when we quarrel.”

“I don’t either. I hate it. It makes me feel… weird. Like off kilter, you know?”

He nodded, hesitantly reaching out to take my hand. I laced my fingers through his, tugging him back towards the mattress; once I’d settled myself and leaned back against the wall, he stretched out beside me, wrapping his arms around my waist, his cheek pressed against my hip.

I sighed, rolling my eyes. “It is going to be a little difficult for me to write with you clinging to me like a monkey, Pietro.”

“Use my head as a desk,” he mumbled, tilting his head to peek up at me from under a tangle of curls.

“If you will give me five minutes to do this, I promise we will have a proper cuddle… after we’ve talked. Okay?”

He huffed, but he released his grip on me, distracting himself by playing with my hair as I returned to my note taking.

I was lucky—once I started writing, the words just sort of flowed out of me. By the time I was finished I had a list of the feelings I’d been having recently—though I honestly didn’t know if I was brave enough to let him read them all. “Okay… sit up please.”

He did, grinning as he reached for the list.

“No—you do not get the list until after we talk.”

He groaned. “I don’t want to fight again.”

“I don’t want to either… but I feel like it is very important for us to clear the air, Pietro. Our whole lives we have always been able to discuss anything and this… you holding things inside and not sharing them… it hurts me.”

“But this is different—”
“Is it more important than the closeness we share?” I asked softly, reaching out and threading my fingers through his. “Is keeping it inside so relevant that you would let it make a wedge between us? One that might just get bigger and bigger over time?”

“No… but it is very embarrassing for me.”

“I’m embarrassed too, you know. Not just about this… but about what happened today… with the blood on my pants.”

“You shouldn’t be though—that’s just a natural thing… part of growing up.” He smiled, squeezing my hand. “It’s a normal sign your body is maturing.”

I arched my brows, giving him a pointed look. “But when our bodies react to one another… that is not normal and natural?”

He shrugged, his eyes dropping to our hands; the expression of discomfort that flicked across his face made my heart clench painfully—it was enough to make me second-guess the epiphany I’d had on the journey home. I started questioning myself—wondering if I might be completely wrong. If he didn’t feel the same things I did, then perhaps his arousal was nothing more than hormones kicking in as his body changed. Maybe he truly didn’t want to react to me at all—maybe the thought of it disgusted him.

“So you… do you wish it was normal?” I bit my lip—my voice sounded horribly weak and pathetic, even to my own ears.

“What does that matter? It’s not like it would change anything.”

I felt a pain deep inside me—my heart was starting to crack. “You’re right… it was a stupid question. This whole idea is foolish—better just to forget about it completely.” I tried to extract my hand from his, but he held on tight; it made me panic. In that moment, more than anything, I wanted to escape his presence—to run upstairs and lock myself away somewhere until the river of tears inside me ran dry.

“Can I have the list now?”

“No! Didn’t you hear me? I said it was a mistake!” I ducked my head down, immediately cursing myself for pulling my hair back in the stupid braid; I wanted to hide myself away behind its dark curtain, so he would not see the shame in my eyes or be forced to witness my heartache as it played across my face.

I forgot that he didn’t have to see it—he could feel it echoing through him, the same way I always felt his emotions when they were exceptionally strong. He took a shaky breath—a heartbeat later, the fingers of his free hand gently lifted up my chin. “Wanda… what—”

“Just leave it alone, Pietro—please!” It was a bitter irony that I was doing the exact same thing he’d done—hiding away secrets deep inside myself, not wanting him to see. But unlike him, I didn’t have the choice of sharing what I felt—I refused to have him change what he believed simply as a means of sparing me the pain I felt.

“What was it you said? That you would be honest with me if I was honest with you?” His voice was hushed—barely a whisper. “Are you going back on your word, Pietra?”

I sighed, closing my eyes. “Do you remember when Mrs. Kolinov gave me that silly book of fairytales? We were maybe… seven… and you teased me endlessly because I carried it around with me all the time, convinced it was full of magic?”
He was silent for a moment. “Yes…”

“One day… I asked Mama if Papa was her Prince Charming. She said yes… so I asked her how she could be sure.” I didn’t dare look up at him; part of me was terribly afraid that if I did, he would be glaring at me the way he’d done earlier on the street. “She said he made her heart sing… and that being with him made her light up inside like fireworks. She promised that when the time was right, my Prince Charming would make those things happen too.”

I took a deep breath, reaching up to swipe away a rebellious tear that had slipped free—wanting to catch it before it trailed down my cheek. “When we kissed… I understood what she meant, Pietro. My heart…it sang so loudly it is a wonder you couldn’t hear it—and it has happened every single time. When we’re kissing, I don’t think about it being bad or wrong or freaky… I can’t because it is impossible to think. All I can do is lose myself in the beautiful song my heart is singing.”

When he didn’t say anything, I tried to jerk my hand free; he tightened his grip in response—so much that it was almost painful.

“Let go. Please.” My voice was a broken sounding whisper, ragged and spiked with pain.

“Look at me, Wanda.”

Hesitantly, I raised my eyes—wondering why his voice sounded so strange. An inch at a time my gaze traveled up, finally locking with his across the bottomless chasm I’d inadvertently opened up between us. I couldn’t read what he was feeling—my own misery and self-doubt were far too loud, drowning out everything else with their howls. His eyes didn’t give away anything either—they were full far too many turbulent emotions for me to understand. Ashamed, I flicked my eyes away from his—and that was all it took.

“Close your eyes,” he whispered.

A few more tears escaped as I complied—glad that I could squeeze them shut and hide away my pain. 

Then… he kissed me.

Chapter End Notes

I noticed from one of the comments I received that a reader seemed confused about a few things regarding Wanda’s maturity level. If anyone else needs classification on this issue, please see my rebuttal comment which should clear things up.

I always welcome constructive criticism, but please bear in mind these are not two pampered children—these are essentially two street kids who have been homeless for almost three years, and as such have been exposed to far more than most children their age. While I completely understand that in middle America suburbia kids might act a little more juvenile, we are talking about an Eastern European country that is at war. The twins aren’t in some cute little village—they’re in the capital city, right in the thick of things where gunfire in the streets is a regular occurrence and the streets and people have fled their homes. Process all that before commenting on Wanda being to mature for
her age—because life on the streets makes you grow up pretty damned fast, and life in a war zone? Even faster.

Namaste
—sws
THE GENTLE PRESS OF HIS LIPS against mine caught me completely off guard; a soft sound of surprise escaped me, muffled by our kiss. Immediately, a burst of happiness infused me—it was a feeling of harmony that washed away all of my troubled, doubting thoughts, renewing the seed of hope that lingered deep inside my heart. But just as soon as I lost myself in the sweetness of the moment, his lips left mine—his forehead pressing against mine as he heaved a weary sigh.

“You were truthful, so I’ll be honest too. I… don’t know what’s going on right now. It’s like my body and my brain are fighting each other or something… and I don’t want to talk about it—I can’t… not even with you, Wanda. I can’t explain things to you that I don’t understand myself… and right now I don’t want to even try to figure it out. I’m not ready to… if that makes sense.”

I didn’t answer him; pulling away, I turned to face the wall, curling up into a tight ball. It was as I’d feared—he’d kissed me to take away the hurting… nothing more.

He didn’t feel the same way I did.

My cheeks were burning hot with humiliation—I felt like a complete fool for pouring out my heart..

“Are you mad?”

“No… I’m just all mixed up too… and I’m tired and kind of achy. I worked too hard today, I think—guess the professor was right about me not wearing myself out.”

“Will you… can you please look at me for a second?” His voice was soft, laced with worry—I could feel his fear brushing against me, and his confusion too.

Taking a deep breath, I turned my head, trying to bury everything I was feeling so it would not reflect in my eyes. For the first time in my life, I cursed the stupid connection between us—hoping his emotions and the numbness I felt inside me would keep him from sensing how devastated I was.

He sat there, not speaking, just watching me with narrowed eyes—like he could sense the mask I was wearing and he was trying to see past it, digging deep to peel back the layers of half-truths to find what was concealed beneath them. Finally, after what seemed like forever, he dropped his eyes.

“Do you need one of the pills?”

“No… it’s not that kind of ache. I just need a little rest.” My smile was shaky, but he bought it—nodding and scooting off the mattress; I was just about to close my eyes when something scurried across the floor—close enough to make me jerk upright and shriek.

“Don’t worry—it’s not a rat. Just a tiny little mouse. I’ll take care of it… go to sleep.”

Reassured, I sank back down; closing my eyes, I began the arduous task of stilling my restless thoughts. I concentrated on my breathing—keeping it deep and steady, mentally counting out each one when I exhaled. It was slow, and soothing, working in tandem with my exhaustion, quickly lulling me to sleep.

*It was raining.*
The sun was hiding behind the thunderclouds, making the dim light that filtered through the dirty window at the end of the hall seem as gloomy and gray as my mood. I’d been banished from the apartment as part of my brother’s punishment for slacking off on his chores; in a rare fit of temper, Mama had refused to let me help him catch up—demanding I visit with Mrs. Kolinov until she came to collect me.

But Mrs. Kolinov doesn’t answer my knocks—she isn’t home.

Daring Mama’s wrath, I crack open our front door—the coast is clear. Scurrying over to the coat closet, I grab my beat-up roller skates, quietly closing the door behind me as I hastily retreat to the hall. Despite being upset about Pietro’s punishment, I can’t help but feel excited as I fasten the leather straps that secure the old metal contraptions to my shoes; the concrete floor is smooth and perfect for skating—nothing at all like the crumbling, cracked sidewalks outside.

At first, it’s hard—I fall down several times; I’m used to having my brother catch me when I falter off balance—usually I cling to his arm for security, to keep me steady. It takes a while, but eventually I get the hang of it—my moments are less jerky, and I don’t have to shove off the wall as much to get started rolling. I glide down the hall—slowly at first—figuring out how to use my feet to push me along as I move. Back and forth, from one end to the other, picking up speed—from time to time daring to turn in a circle or two. I try skating backwards—I can do it!—giggling at the thought of how surprised Pietro will be when I show off my new tricks.

I’m turning around—wobbling a little—then suddenly, I can’t breathe! Something’s covering my nose and my mouth as I’m jerked into the shadowy stairwell.

“Did I scare you little mouse? I’m sorry, I was just playing.”

I relax, recognizing the voice; it’s not some stranger come to steal me away, just Karolina’s older brother Kaspar, from downstairs.

“I’m going to move my hand—I just wanted to surprise you without having you scream like a banshee, okay?”

I nod, wrinkling my nose; his hand stinks—like the cigarette butts in Papa’s ashtray when I clean it.

“Where’s your brother, little mouse? I don’t think I’ve ever seen you without him.”

“Doing his chores.” I toss back my hair, giving him a haughty look. “I’m not little—I’m taller than your sister!”

“Yeah, she’s short… that’s why I call her shortcake.” He laughs, reaching out to tuck a strand of hair behind my ear. “You’re little mouse because you’re so quiet—and you’re littler than me.”

“What are you doing up here, anyway?” I grab on to the bannister for balance, sinking down on the top step. “I thought you were visiting your Uncle or something.”

“Well, they told everyone?” He sank down next to me, shrugging his backpack off. “I took off for a while—had some problems to take care of. I was headed up to the roof for a smoke when I heard your skates—thought I’d say hi.”

He smiles, but it’s kind of weird looking—like the smile he gets when he watches Karolina and me playing. I don’t like it—it makes me uncomfortable. Almost as uncomfortable as I got that time he tried to make me sit on his lap at Karo’s birthday party.

“Hey, you know what I’ve got?” He digs in his backpack, pulling out a bottle—holding it out,
offering it to me. “Fruit punch—it’s your favorite, right?”

I eye the bottle, nodding slowly.

“Well? Have some—there’s plenty for both of us. I bet you’re thirsty after all that skating, huh? You’re getting pretty good at it.”

“How would you know?” He’s right—I’m actually kind of thirsty. I just didn’t realize it before. It’s hot and stuffy in the stairwell, making my skin feel sticky and gross. My mouth is suddenly as dry as cotton as I stare at the red liquid sloshing around inside the bottle.

“I was watching through the window.” He gestures towards the small panel of glass on the door with the bottle, chuckling when I reach over and snatch it from his hands. “See? I knew you were thirsty.”

I don’t answer him—I’m too busy drinking; the fruit punch is sweeter than it is when Mama makes it, as if he used more sugar. It’s so good, I can’t stop drinking it—before I know it the bottle is empty, my face immediately heating with embarrassment at my rudeness. “I’m sorry… I didn’t mean to drink it all—”

“No sweat, little mouse—I can make more later.” He leans back on his elbows, stretching his legs out in front of him, watching me with that strange little half smile on his face. “So… I seem to remember Karo telling me you just had a birthday. How old are you now—thirteen? Fourteen?”

I giggle, shaking my head. “You know I’m the same age she is.”

“Huh, really? I’ll be damned. You look older… maybe it’s the skates.”

“What do the skates have to do with anything?” I make a face to show him how silly he is.

“They make your legs look longer, for one thing.” His hand moves, fingers brushing the hem of my shorts, tickling as they travel down my leg towards my ankle. “And the way you move when you’re skating—swinging your hips back and forth… that’s something older girls do. I think maybe you’re more grown up than you know, little mouse.”

“How come?”

“Mmmm… I don’t know, call it a hunch.”

“That’s not an answer,” I point out, scowling. He doesn’t answer right away—he closes his eyes. He’s silent for so long I shift, prepared to get up; I’ve wasted at least fifteen minutes waiting for him to speak up—time I could have been skating.

He grabs my wrist, stopping me.

“You’re pretty mature for a kid—not like Karo at all.” He takes the bottle from my hands, shoving it back in his bag. “Come on.”

“Huh?”

“It’s too hot in here—and besides, I’ve got something I want to show you.”

“Where?”

“The storage room—it’s nice and cool down there, especially when it’s rainy.”
“What do you want to show me, though?” There are spiders down there—I hate spiders, the thought of them makes my skin crawl.

“Karo’s cat had kittens. That’s what they do, you know—find someplace away from everyone so no one will bother the babies. I found ‘em this morning when I was putting some stuff down there for mom.”

The prospect of kitties is more than enough to make me brave a thousand spiders. I jump to my feet, forgetting about the skates in my excitement—almost tumbling down the stairs as my feet shoot out from under me.

He laughs, grabbing me just in time. “Slow down before you break your neck—they’re not going anywhere. Better take those off first, huh?”

I cling to the bannister as he unbuckles the skates, tossing them over by the door. He scoops up his backpack, lacing his fingers through mine, leading me down the stairs. “There’s five of them. All black except one white one—”

“That’s the one I want! Does it have blue eyes?” I stumble, leaning against him—feeling kind of dizzy.

“It sure does—blue as the summer sky.” His arm slides around me, holding me up. “You okay little mouse?”

“I feel weird… my brains all fuzzy all of a sudden.” My voice sounds slurred and funny; it makes me laugh as I look up at him.

He smiles, muttering something under his breath, but it’s too soft for me to hear. My vision is almost as gray and cloudy as sky rain outside—I blink, and somehow… I lose track of time. One minute we’re on the third floor, the next we’re in the basement; I blink again, and I’m sitting on the floor beside him—he’s playing with my hand, his voice soft as he tells me to be gentle while I’m stroking the kittens so I don’t hurt them.

I blink repeatedly, trying to clear my eyes—everything’s all blurry and doubled, like a picture snapped by a camera that’s out of focus. “I can’t see—”

“Here—I’ll help you. Just close your eyes and relax—you don’t want to scare them, right?”

I feel something brushing against my palm, only it’s not furry at all—then I’m drifting off again… there but not really there—as if my brain is taking a nap or something. When it wakes up again, I feel something tugging at my waist—it takes me a few seconds to realize it’s Kaspar’s hand, trying to unfasten my belt.

“Wha—”

“Shhh… it’s okay, little mouse… I just want to pet a kitten too—”

Somebody screams—a shrill, loud sound that goes on forever, coming from far away. I want to tell them to hush before they scare off all the kittens, but I can’t make my mouth form the words—

“Wanda! Wake up!”

I jerked awake, still screaming—immediately fighting against the figure that loomed over me in the darkness. “NO! Don’t touch me!”
“Wanda—it’s me! You were screaming in your sleep!”

As I processed who it was that was speaking, I stopped struggling—trying to fight off the panic that was clawing its way out of my chest. “I… nightmare.”

His jaw tensed. “Which one?”

“Kittens… basement,” I mumbled, pulling my legs up to my chest—burying my face in the hollow spare between my body and my knees.

Pietro cursed softly, wrapping his arms around me. “Papa should have killed him.”

“I think he might have if he’d actually… you know.” I didn’t state the obvious—had it not been for Mrs. Kolinov showing up when she did, Kaspar would have undoubtedly done far, far worse than just use my hand to pleasure himself.

“I should have been with you—”

“You bear no fault in it—in fact… your belt probably saved me. Tonight… I remembered that part for the first time—he couldn’t figure out how to unfasten it. It slowed him down before he could do anything other than make me touch him.” I glanced up at him, already knowing his eyes would be full of anguish; no matter what I said or how many times I said it, Pietro would never believe that he was not at fault.

“Yes but if you’re just remembering that… what else will you remember, Wanda? What if he touched you—”

“He didn’t. Mrs. Kolinov got there before he could. I think he was waiting for me to completely pass out… so I wouldn’t know what happened.” The sleeping pills the punch had been laced with had left me unable to remember a lot, but that was one thing I was sure of. “I don’t want to talk about it anymore, okay? It’s in the past… I just want to pretend it’s nothing more than a bad dream.”

“If I ever see him again—”

“You won’t. He’s long gone—probably thinking the police are still waiting to nab him, yes?”

“He better pray to God they find him before I do,” he muttered, pressing his forehead against mine.

“Pietro… would you mind if we went and sat in the garden for a while? Being down here… after the dream—”

“Of course—but you should put on something warmer first. Here—” he untangled himself, rolling off the mattress to grab something—smiling as he pressed it into my hands. “You never did ask me what I snagged from the line today.”

“I was too busy thinking about—” I glanced down, gasping. “Sweats! What else?”

“That’s it… but there were several pairs on the line—I grabbed all of them.” He smiled, obviously pleased with himself for providing something that I’d wanted for a very long time. “Get changed while I reheat the leftovers—we can have a midnight picnic, yes?”

“You don’t have to reheat it—cold chicken tastes good, and we know that it’s fresh. Grab the glasses though—we can get water straight from the well.” I started to tug my dress off—instantly stopping when I realized that the stupid pad in my underpants would be extremely visible. I’d completely forgotten about it, and now that I’d remembered, I found myself facing an entirely new problem—
how was I supposed to dispose of such things? I needed to change it, but I couldn’t leave it in the bucket—the thought of Pietro seeing it was absolutely horrifying… which meant that I couldn’t put it in our empty trash pail either.

“Change your mind?”

I glanced over at him, my cheeks heating. “No… I need to… uh… take care of something first.”

“Ah. They’re on the shelf—I thought that would make it easier for you since it’s closer to the closet.”

“Thanks.” I glanced around, looking for the notepad I’d dropped on the floor before my nap—figuring I could at least wrap the soiled pad in a sheet of paper for discretion—but it was nowhere in sight. “Where’s my notepad?”

“I put it back in your bag… and I even hung it up—mine too,” he said proudly.

I could not hide my surprise.; Pietro never hung up his bag—he usually just dropped it near the window and left it there until I picked it up. “Are you feeling okay?”

He scowled, grabbing the bag from the nail it hung on—shoving the container holding the leftovers from lunch and our plastic tumblers inside. “Ha ha—very funny. I was trying to be more helpful, but if this is how you show your thanks—”

“You’re right, I’m just surprised, that’s all.” I crossed the room to grab the notepad from my bag—staring down at it for a moment, frozen in place as I realized the top page was missing. My carefully thought out list was gone. “You didn’t!”

“Didn’t what?” His face was the picture of innocence, but I knew him far too well for such an act to work on me.

“Read that list after I specifically said it was a mistake!”

“What list?” He widened his eyes in a dramatic show of confusion; I blushed furiously—I’d included those huge blue eyes on the list of reasons he was wonderful, comparing them to the beautiful color of the springtime sky.

“You can cut the innocent act—”

“And you can stand here and continue arguing or you can get changed and come have a picnic, sweet sister—the choice is yours.” He smiled smugly, grabbing up the blanket off the floor and tucking it under his arm as he headed for the window.

I glared at his back, not moving until his feet had disappeared through the window. I had no intentions of missing our picnic, but I certainly wasn’t about to let him know that. Knowing he would start to worry about his actions if I didn’t join him quickly, I took my time changing my clothes and seeing to my body’s needs—all the while trying to think of where he might have stashed my list. The logical place was rather obvious—the small cigar box that sat on the makeshift shelf he’d constructed out of two cinder blocks and a board on his side of the mattress—though I couldn’t imagine that he wouldn’t realize it was the first place I would look since it was where he stored the things he treasured. Still, it was the only place I could think of offhand—and no matter how much I wanted to find the stupid thing and rip it into shreds, I really did not feel up to ransacking the entire basement in the process.

There were only three things inside, and my list wasn’t one of them. The first was a small photograph of our family that had been taken on our tenth birthday; it was the only picture we had
left of our parents. I ran my fingers over it, thinking how lucky we were to have it—had it not been in Pietro’s wallet when the shells hit, we would have lost it too.

Returning it to the box, I moved on to the next item—the inexpensive wristwatch that had been the last birthday gift he would ever receive from our parents. Its face had been badly cracked when the building had crumbled down on top of us—but still, he’d worn it every day, right up until the battery inside had run out. I could still remember the look on his face when he realized it had stopped working—he’d cried as he took it off and stored it away, as if the mechanical failure was a betrayal of some sort, severing the final tie to our former life.

The final item was one that made my heart twist—two intertwined locks of hair. The sight of his curl wrapped around one of my wavy strands dimmed my irritation—touching me so much that I decided to give up my search completely. I sighed, replacing the box on the shelf, immediately heading for the window.

The blanket had been spread beside the largest tree in the garden; he was at the well, drawing up the bucket—I froze in place, watching him move as he turned the crank. He was completely focused on his task—so much so that he did not notice me; that was probably a good thing since my cheeks were flaming hot. What was it about seeing him working that turned my brains to mush? It was something I needed to figure out fast, since it was obvious that hiding the path my thoughts took would prove to be an impossible task.

Forcing myself to move, I hurried over to the trash pile, depositing the paper wrapped pad—kicking some of the refuse over it to hide it from his view. From the corner of my eye, I saw him return to the blanket, carefully setting the glasses down—sprawling his long, lean body out beside them. He looked up as I approached, his lips curving up in a lazy sort of smile.

“Your eyes are like springtime too, you know.”

I didn’t respond as I settled myself beside him; immediately I felt the brush of his anxiety—he took my silence as anger.

“Don’t you want to know why?” He persisted, reaching over to claim my hand, his long fingers playing with mine.

I arched a brow, glancing over at him.

“You know how in the spring… when there’s a soft, gentle rain… it leaves the world looking brighter afterwards? Your eyes are like the grass after one of those rains—all shining and clear. Looking in them makes me feel the way the rain does too.”

“And that would be?” I asked softly.

“That the world is a beautiful… and that anything is possible,” he responded, in a matter of fact tone.

“Is this your way of admitting to me that you read my list?” It was impossible to ignore the way my heart raced in response to his sweet words. “Trying to butter me up so I won’t be mad?”

“Perhaps… or maybe I just felt like you deserved a little more honesty from me than what I gave you.”

“Well… thank you for that—but I am still very cross that you snuck it like that, Pietro.”

“I’m sorry… I just really wanted to know what you wrote.”
I could have easily argued that I wanted to know things too—things he refused to discuss—but in all honesty, I did not want to argue. I wanted to lose myself in the beauty of the cold, clear night, driving the lingering remnants of the nightmare from my mind.

“No plates? You are a heathen, my brother.” I grabbed a slice of the carved chicken from the container between us, wrinkling my nose at the greasy feeling it left on my fingers.

“Less to clean up—it is more efficient,” he said, grabbing some for himself and shoving it in his mouth. I pointedly nibbled on mine in a dainty fashion—he rolled his eyes to let me know what he thought of my display.

We fell silent as we ate, however, it was not the companionable sort of silence we normally shared; it was thick and uncomfortable, making me even more regretful of the things I’d said. My heartfelt declaration was obviously the cause, but I wasn’t quite sure how to fix it. Mama always said that the problem when speaking without stopping to consider the consequences was that there was no way to erase your words once they’d been said. She was right—the prickly feeling between us confirmed it.

“What are you thinking about so intently? Your face is all scrunched up like a prune. It is too pretty a night to be so grim and gloomy, Wanda.”

“You’re right—” I said, ignoring his question as I turned my attention to the sky above us. “—I don’t think I’ve ever seen so many stars before. They’re so clear… like we could just reach out and touch them.”

“Close your eyes. Go on—do it!” I shot him a questioning look, but did as he asked—squeezing my eyes tightly closed. “When you open them… focus on the first star you notice and make a wish, Pietra.”

I opened my eyes slowly, zeroing in on a star—wishing with all my heart that someday we’d have a real home again; one with running water and electricity… with a refrigerator full of good food for us to eat. A place that was really ours—where we could be happy for the rest of our days.

“Well?”

“Well what?” I turned my head, raising my brows. “I can’t tell you what it is—if I do it won’t come true, silly.”

“I bet I can guess,” he murmured, his gaze intent—dropping from my eyes down to my mouth. I blushed, looking away—more than a little confused. Did he mean to run his tongue across my lips when he stared at mine, or was it an unconscious gesture? “You might be surprised—maybe I wished that the curls would jump from your head to mine.”

“You could always just cut them off again—make yourself a wig…” he said, laughing softly. I couldn’t hide my horror at the thought. “I would never! I feel bad enough for cutting them off the last time!”

His laughter trailed off abruptly, his fingertips gliding across my cheek. “I’m so sorry, sister.”

“For eating the last of the chicken?” I teased. “Don’t worry, I’m used to your appetite.”

“No… for triggering the nightmare. I wasn’t thinking when I said that about the mouse—”

“Pietro… I know that. I know you would never do that intentionally. Honestly…” I was so focused
on trying not to dwell on the other stuff that I didn’t even notice you said *those* words."

“What other stuff?” His voice was soft as he tugged the rubber band off the end of my braid; he gently untwined the plait, combing his fingers through my hair—playing with the strands.

“What you said earlier… about being mixed up and not wanting to talk about it until you figured things out. I think… I think you are right.”

His hand stilled on my hair. “How so?”

I shrugged. “All the things I’m feeling… I don’t really understand them either. I remember mama saying once that teenagers were all crazy—that their hormones were out of control, boggling their brains. I think that there is probably a lot of truth in that, judging by the roller coaster my emotions have been on the last couple of days. I’ve been feeling really… strange—could you just try and forget what I said earlier? Please?”

“If that’s what you want.” His voice was flat, and lifeless—but I could not let it dissuade me or allow my hopes to stir.

“It is. We’ll just chalk it up to temporary insanity to from an overload of hormones, yes?”

He didn’t respond; a wave of heart wrenching sadness slammed into me—so strong it stole my breath away as his arms slid around me, pulling me back against the solid comfort of his chest. I tried my best to ignore it and to not wonder why it existed—I could not hang my hopes on foolish wishes and girlish dreams. He believed what I’d said—that was the only thing that mattered.

I could only hope that in time, if I constantly repeated the wretched lie to myself… I’d start believing it too.
Chapter 8

I WOKE TO THE SOUND of birds chirping somewhere overhead; for a minute, I thought I was still asleep and dreaming. It’s funny, the things you think of when you’re lingering in that hazy state between sleep and waking up—for a moment I actually wondered how on earth so many birds had gotten into the basement. It was only when I opened my eyes that I processed we were in the garden.

It certainly wasn’t the first time we’d slept outdoors, but for a moment it left me disoriented; I was struggling to remember why we were outside when I noticed something that was far more important—so important that it drove everything else completely out of my mind. Though the morning air was cold, I felt incredibly warm—thanks to the fact I was curled up in Pietro’s lap, cradled against his strong, lean body.

He held me so close that my cheek was pressed against his neck—with every breath I took, the heady scent of his skin filled my lungs, making my heart beat faster. I could feel his pulse fluttering against my cheek—an even, steady rhythm that made me overly conscious of how frantically my own was racing. I felt the strangest desire to know how that fluttering would feel against my lips—I couldn’t stop myself from turning my head just a little to press my mouth against the spot where I could feel it beating the strongest. He didn’t stir, though the beat of his heart sped up just a little; I repeated the gesture, this time allowing my lips to slowly linger, brushing against his skin.

He made a soft sound in response—startling me.

I pulled back, studying his face—searching for some sign that he might be waking; when he didn’t stir, I allowed myself to nuzzle along his skin—daring to let my tongue swipe out to see if he tasted as good as he smelled.

It was a mistake—I shouldn’t have pushed my luck.

His pulse raced against the tip of my tongue; a split second later he shoved me off his lap, right onto the ground. “Wanda! What are you doing?”

The look on his face and his tone of voice expressed far more than his words. He was angry—with me. I blinked, my mind racing—I wasn’t used to having to explain myself, especially not to him. Rubbing my eyes, I tried my best to look confused and half asleep. “Huh?”

“What—”

“There was a bug… its legs tickled my cheek and woke me. You were holding me so tight I couldn’t move my hands—I tried to brush it away with my nose so I could go back to sleep,” I mumbled, ducking my head, peering out at him from behind the tangled strands of my hair.

He stared at me a moment, his cheeks slowly flushing as he dropped his eyes to the blanket. “You… I thought… never mind.”

A wave of guilt welled up inside me—so fast I had no time to squash it; he caught it, his head jerking up, blue eyes narrowing as they locked on my face. I stood up and stretched, bending to gather the things we’d used—trying to distract him before he started asking the kind of questions that I did not want to answer. “I’m sorry I made you come out here last night—I didn’t mean to fall asleep. You should have woken me up.”

“You were exhausted,” he said, still studying me intently. “I only intended to let you sleep a little—I didn’t mean to doze off.”
His tone was a direct contrast to the kindness of his words—it was gruff and belligerent sounding, confirming the anger I sensed lingering inside him. I forced myself to ignore it as I tugged at the blanket beneath him. It was a hint for him to move so I could shake it off—he ignored the gesture. “Hopefully we won’t catch cold—that’s the last thing we need.”

“What kind was it?”

“Huh?” I shot him a confused look.

“This bug that woke you. What kind—”

“Honestly Pietro! Do I look like a bug expert? I have no idea—I was still half asleep! I’m sorry that I didn’t investigate it more thoroughly—I had no idea you’d even care!” My voice betrayed me—I sounded defensive and on edge. My cheeks heated with embarrassment—he’d caught my lie. “We need to get ready for work—I don’t have time for quizzes on stupid bugs.”

Without waiting for him to respond I stormed towards the window; I was irritated that he could read me so easily—and more than a little furious with myself for giving in to the stupid urge to kiss his neck in the first place.

It would have been easy to write off the entire incident as the early morning grumpiness that was bound to accompany being sore and cranky from sleeping in an uncomfortable place, but the truth was, neither of our moods improved—our crankiness only seemed to grow stronger with each minute that passed. There was an uncomfortable silence between us as we set off for the professor’s house—though I tried my best to pretend like it was a day like any other, and that nothing was amiss. I reached over, lacing my fingers through his, leaning against his arm the way I often did—a gesture which normally brought comfort to us both, no matter how foul our mood, but judging by the way he reacted, it was the wrong thing to do.

He jerked his hand away, scowling at me—increasing the distance between us. It shocked me so much that I stumbled to a stop, but he didn’t even slow his pace. He sped up, shooting me a reproachful look over his shoulder—his gaze was so cold that it turned my blood to ice.

“Stop goofing off and come on—you’re the one that was so insistent on taking this stupid job, remember?”

Hot tears pricked my eyes, but I refused to let them fall. I swiped them away, fixing my gaze on the sidewalk, slowly following after him. I hated myself more in that moment than I ever thought was possible—berating myself for ruining the perfect, easy companionship we’d shared. My stupid confession had changed everything in unforeseen ways; now he was taking even the simplest things—gestures we’d shared for years—in the completely wrong way.

When I dared to let my eyes dart up from the cement to his back, I could tell from the way his shoulders sagged that he was experiencing my misery; I tried to wall it up as best I could—I did not want him to realize how much it hurt me to have him pull away. No matter how he was acting, he was still the most important person in the world to me—I didn’t want him suffering the way I was.

He kept his distance, not even waiting for me to catch up before he knocked on the professor’s door. I was still almost a house length away, but I could clearly hear the surprise in the old man’s voice when he opened the door and realized I wasn’t at my brother’s side.

“Pietro… where is your sister?”

“Dawdling. She’ll be along in a minute or two.”
I gritted my teeth in an attempt to keep from shouting out the truth—that he’d been walking far too fast for my shorter legs to keep up; only the fact that I did not want our employer to know we were quarrelling stilled my tongue. Speeding my steps, I jogged the rest of the way; Pietro had already gone inside—only the professor waited by the door.

“Chavi… is everything alright?”

“Everything is fine—my brother is just being a jerk today,” I said loudly—knowing my voice would carry down the hall—shrugging off the shawl he’d given me. “He’s been a grouch ever since he woke up—”

The scoffing noise Pietro made carried all the way down the hall. “HA! You’re the one acting all weird and—”

“Enough! I don’t need the two of you bickering this morning—I have a headache.” The old man took my shawl and bag, hanging them on the rack that hung beside the door. “Into the formal dining room, please.”

“I wanted to finish up the kitchen first thing—”

“That can wait—we have something much more important to do first.”

I hadn’t explored the house thoroughly yet—the ‘formal’ dining area was a room I had not yet seen. A long, rectangular dark wood table sat in the center of the room, with three two chairs on either side and one at either end; an elaborate candle holder had been moved to one side, with a table cloth pooled around it, as if he’d just shoved them both out of the way. Unlike the other rooms, there were no books in sight, but there obviously had been—their outline was clearly imprinted in the thick layer of dust on the sideboard.

Pietro entered from the door on the opposite side of the room, holding a donut in his hand. He groaned when he saw what was waiting for us on the table. “I’m here to work—not to study!”

“It’s not studying—it is a placement test that will show me where you stand so I can determine what you need to work on.” The professor steered me towards the table, pointing at a chair. “Sit across from each other, please.”

A flicker of excitement shot up my spine as I eyes the stapled stack of paper. “Will it be timed?”

“It’s not studying—it is a placement test that will show me where you stand so I can determine what you need to work on.” The professor steered me towards the table, pointing at a chair. “Sit across from each other, please.”

A flicker of excitement shot up my spine as I eyes the stapled stack of paper. “Will it be timed?”

“Don’t worry about that—you have as long as you need. I believe the official time for the test is around two and half to three hours, but that doesn’t matter in this instance.”

“Oh…okay.” I frowned, my excitement dimming just a bit.

Pietro snorted as he slumped down in the chair across from mine. “She wants it to be timed—she is always complaining about not being able to challenge herself.”

“Then why don’t you time… oh. No watch, of course.” The old man studied me a moment, then turned and left the room, returning with a stop watch in his hand. My excitement skyrocketed so much I almost bounced in my chair—finally, I was going to get to work out my mind. “All right… no helping each other—keep your eyes on your own test. When I say begin you may pick up your pencils.” He settled himself at the head of the table where a cup of coffee and a book awaited him. “Ready? Begin.”

I grabbed my pencil up, turning to the first page, my eyes flicking over the questions—immediately starting to fill in the little bubbles beside the correct answers. Schoolwork was easy for me—too
easy, truth be told. It was the actual act of sitting in a classroom and learning that was hard. I’d always had the strange ability to retain whatever I read—it didn’t matter what the subject matter might be—and I was a fast reader, too. Within just a few minutes I was completely submerged in the test—in what our father had called ‘the zone’—completely focused on the stack of papers in front of me, lost inside my mind. It wasn’t until I filled in the final bubble that I slowly became aware of my surroundings again. Glancing over each page to make sure I hadn’t missed anything, I set my pencil down and slid my test down the table towards the professor.

“It’s front and back, chavi,” he said, not looking up.

“I know—I’m done.”

His eyes jerked up from the book, darting to the stop watch; they widened—his gaze locking with mine. “That’s impossible… it’s only been forty five minutes—“

“Clearly it isn’t.” I tapped the completed test, trying not to look smug.

“She’s advanced—they tested her when we were nine. The counselor at our school called her a genius,” Pietro mumbled. “They wanted to advance her to a higher level, but they couldn’t.”

“Why ever not?” The professor still looked shaken.

“We got anxious when we were separated.” I shrugged. “Neither of us could focus if we weren’t in the same classroom. He scored high too—only they said he was borderline ADHD. That makes it hard for him to focus at times.”

“Not nearly as high as you though.” My brother scowled down at the test in front of him. “I may have gotten the curls, but you got most of the brains.”

“Now I am curious… do you remember what your scores were?” The professor started looking over my test; I tried not to watch—I was beginning to worry about how many I might have gotten wrong, wishing I’d taken a bit more time.

“Pietro got one fifty five…but they only gave him two tests,” I said, chewing on my thumbnail.

“One fifty five is a very good score—that’s only five points shy of genius level. Einstein had an intelligence quotient of one sixty.” His eyes flicked to me. “I assume you are in the one sixties, yes?”

I blushed. “No sir—”

“Two hundred and ten,” Pietro said, cutting me off.

“Excuse me?”

“She scored two hundred and ten—they gave her five different tests. She was off the chart on all of them but one.”

“Is this true Wanda?” The old man looked stunned; I wondered if he’d assumed we were ignorant because of the school we’d missed.

I shrugged. “I do not believe that a person’s intelligence can be measured solely by standardized testing. There is too wide a margin in the different ones they use—and they don’t take into consideration important things like life experience. From what I understand the scores often drop if retaken when older… which really makes no logical sense—as you age and experience things, surely you learn more.”
“Verbal reasoning was your highest area, I assume?”

“How did you—”

He chuckled. “You are very well spoken for someone of your age—that is usually a sign that indicates a higher mental age than actual chronological age. When speaking to you, it is hard to keep in mind that you’re not even thirteen.”

I rolled my eyes, huffing. “I will be in one day—besides… age is just a number. One that people put far too much importance on.”

“You liked school even though you should have been moved higher? You didn’t find it too easy?”

“Honestly? It was awfully boring. I always finished ahead of everyone else, but the teacher wouldn’t let me read or work ahead—I just had to sit there and wait for everyone to catch up.”

“And you Pietro? Did you—”

“I hated it.”

“Why?”

He shrugged. “I understood everything well enough… but it was hard to concentrate. And the material… it did not hold my interest. The teacher never made it fun the way Wanda does.”

“Fun?”

“I change things up—he does not do well with sitting still and focusing on one thing for an extended period of time. It has to be broken up, you know? Like this test… if you had given him a couple pages, then let him do something else for five minutes then given him two more pages and kept repeating that… he would be done much faster. When we are studying on our own… I make a sort of game out of whatever we are working on by switching it up.”

“I see… and how did you know this would work?”

It was a ridiculous question—who could know Pietro better than me? “He is my brother… I know how his mind works.”

The old man nodded, returning his eyes to the test in front of him. “Pietro—if you’d like… you may go work on the books for five minutes and then come back.”

Pietro jumped up so fast he almost knocked the chair over backwards. “Can I have another donut too? I’m still hungry—Wanda didn’t make me breakfast.”

I scowled at him. “You threw out what we had! How am I supposed to make something when we haven’t gone to the market yet—”

“We will take care of that today—I want to make sure you have non-perishable items for the days you don’t work. And surely you’d like something special for tomorrow?”

I chewed at the corner of my lip. “Maybe we could work tomorrow—I don’t know that either of us feels like celebrating anymore.”

“Don’t be stupid—of course we do. That’s what brothers and sisters do—celebrate each other’s birthdays, right?” Pietro glared at me before turning to stalk out of the room.
I felt my cheeks flush; I dropped my head, squeezing my eyes tightly closed. It seemed rather obvious by the way he’d stressed the words *brothers* and *sisters* that he was making sure I understood exactly how he felt. All my happiness over the test I’d taken drained away, leaving me feeling hollow and empty like a dried up husk.

“You only missed one question… I think perhaps we should try something else. Wait right there.”

I didn’t open my eyes as the professor got up and left—I was still trying not to cry. Folding my arms on the table, I rested my forehead against them, trying to ignore the misery that was eating away at my insides. I didn’t like the way Pietro was acting—it wasn’t like him at all. He never behaved in such a manner towards me; even when we’d quarreled as children, we’d never gone out of our way to be hurtful or mean. His actions left me confused—our relationship was the one constant, stable comfort in my life. Pietro had always been my anchor, but now that I’d lost the closeness we’d shared I felt adrift—like I was in uncharted waters on a stormy, turbulent sea.

He returned before the professor did. “What’s wrong with you today?”

I glanced up just as he was sinking back down in his chair, licking the leftover donut glaze from his fingers. “What’s wrong with *me*? You’re the one being hateful!”

He rolled his eyes. “You are overly sensitive—he said that might happen. Since you’re hormones are all messed up.”

“My hormones are just fine,” I snapped, glaring at him. “They have nothing to do with you being flat out *mean* to me.”

“I am not!”

“You are!”

“I am—” the sound of a computer printer kicking on down the hall distracted him. “He better not even think of adding to this stupid stack.” Scooping up his pencil, he drummed it on the table as he scowled at his test.

“If you concentrate on one of them at a time you will get done faster,” I muttered, glancing over to see what number he was on. He glared at me, moving his arm to cover the paper from my view.

“Excuse me for trying to help. Jerk.”

“I’m not a jerk—”

“Here we go—” the professor reappeared in the doorway; reclaiming his chair, he slid the papers in his hand over towards me; my nose wrinkled—they smelled funny, the ink still warm from his printer. “Start on that while your brother finishes up.”

I looked over the questions, making a face—they appeared to be almost as simple as the first ones had been. I wasn’t about to complain though—I was just happy to be working on something educational. No matter how easy the work might be, it was a welcome distraction from trying to decipher my brother’s puzzling behavior. I flew through the stack, only pausing when I had to ask for an additional piece of scratch paper for the mathematics section. I finished it almost as quickly as I’d finished the first, though I suspected I got a few of the math problems wrong.

Glancing over at Pietro, I saw he was only a little more than halfway through. It made me hesitate—I was torn between wanting the professor to see how capable I was, but at the same time, I did not want to make my brother feel bad for needing more time than I did. From the corner of my eye I caught movement—my eyes flicked to the old man as he glanced down at his stopwatch. He looked...
up, giving me a slight nod and winking. I smiled and began doodling on my scratch paper, pleased that he’d noted my time without embarrassing Pietro.

“I need another break. Please—I keep reading the same question over and over and it’s not making sense.”

“I suppose we could go into town now and you can finish when we return—that will give you a chance to stretch your legs and work off some of that energy, yes?”

“I went yesterday—I don’t want to go again. It is a long walk… I will work on the books while you two go.”

I stared across the table at him, confused. “What? But you said you didn’t want me being alone—”

“I changed my mind—I trust him. And besides… you still need to get me a present.” He shot me a smug smile. “I already bought yours yesterday—you can hardly surprise me if I am with you when you pick it out.”

“What do you mean you bought my present?” I narrowed my eyes; for the past two years we’d made each other presents out of whatever we could find.

“I used my half of the money—”

“Pietro! That was our food money! For things we need!” I stared at him in horror, aghast that he could be so irresponsible.

“I know that—you need a birthday present! I haven’t been able to give you a proper one since Mama and Papa died! Isn’t the point of working so that we can have a normal life again? Buying birthday presents is normal!” Two bright spots of color appeared on his cheeks, but it wasn’t from embarrassment—I could feel his anger over my outburst slapping against my mind. “There’s plenty left over—it wasn’t just our wages. Remember that pouch? It had money in it too!”

For a minute I just stared at him, completely confused; he raised his eyebrows, staring back at me, waiting for me to catch on. “The alley, Wanda… the dumpsters where we found the food?”

It suddenly hit me what he was getting at—in the aftermath of everything that had happened, I’d completely forgotten about the things we’d taken from the man who attacked me. “Why didn’t you say anything?”

“I didn’t want to upset you by talking about what happened that night—”

The professor cleared his throat. “Would either of you care to enlighten me on what it is you two are referring to?”

Pietro and I locked eyes for a moment; he shrugged his shoulders—leaving the decision up to me. I glanced over at the old man, frowning. “The day we met… when you asked if someone had hurt me… it had happened the night before. In the alley behind the stretch of businesses on Hizgov Street—we were only looking for food, but a man claimed the alley as his own. We found a leather pouch in a cardboard shanty… the man who owned it attacked me.”

Much like the first time when he’d heard I had been attacked, he bristled, his face turning red with anger. “We must report this man to the police—”

“No.” My voice was firm.
He stood up, beginning to pace. “And what if he attacks some other young girl? What if he comes after you—”

“That will not happen,” Pietro muttered, his eyes dropping down to the table.

“You cannot be certain—”

“I can—I took care of it.”

The old man faltered mid step; his head snapped around, narrowed eyes locking on Pietro. “What does this mean? You ‘took care of it’?”

“He put his filthy hands… his mouth on her body! He was about to rape my sister right in front of me! I stopped him—I made sure he would never hurt Wanda again! Can you tell me you would do any less if it was your sister he was mauling?” Pietro’s voice shook as he shouted; I clenched my hands fighting against the urge to reach out and calm him.

“You didn’t… you are just a boy… you couldn’t have…”

Pietro’s eyes shot up, locking with the old man’s; I could see that he was fighting to stay calm—his body was rigid, muscles tensed. “I did what I had to do! I would do it again if I had to—I am supposed to keep her safe and I led her straight into danger! I don’t care if I burn in hell forever—she is worth it!”

Suddenly, I could barely breathe; his emotions were boiling inside of him—rage and self-hatred, with an equal measure of intense guilt over what he’d done thrown in the mix too. “Pietro—”

“Don’t.” He didn’t look at me—his eyes were still locked on the professor. “Just go to the shops with him, okay? I need some time on my own.”

“I can’t leave you! Not when you are feeling like this!” I stood up, prepared to crawl across the table if I had to—I would do whatever it took to chase the bad feelings away.

“Wanda… get me some water please. In the green glass—it is the one I always use.” I shot the old man a look of astonishment—he ignored it, jerking his head towards the kitchen. “Please… my throat is very dry.”

Glaring at him, I shook my head—he responded by jerking his head again as he slowly moved towards my brother. Pietro was gripping the edge of the table so tightly that the skin over his knuckles was turning white. I darted around the table, reaching out to him, but the professor grabbed my arm in an iron grip—physically dragging me out of the room.

“Let me go! He needs me!” I shrieked, struggling to break free; for an old, sick man he was remarkably strong—he didn’t even flinch when I elbowed him in the stomach.

“Any fool can see that he’s trying not to break down in front of you girl! Now go in the kitchen and stay there until I come for you!” He growled, pushing me towards the kitchen.

I opened my mouth—prepared to huff indignantly at his thinking he could know what Pietro needed better than me, however the door slammed in my face before I could speak; a split second later, the sound of the lock turning added to my already considerable outrage. I banged on it, pressing my face against the crack—furious at being kept away from my brother when he was in need. “Pietro! Tell him to open the door!”

Neither of them answered. I flew into a rage, trying to break down the door. It didn’t work—the
wood was far too sturdy and I was far too small—all I succeeded in doing was hurting myself in the process. Cursing under my breath—using words that would have made my mother wash my mouth out with soap had she been alive to hear them—I pressed my ear against the door, trying to hear what was going on inside the room.

The muffled sound of Pietro’s sobbing hit me like a blow; at the exact same moment, his intense agony rushed through me—so strong that I collapsed to my knees. I couldn’t breathe—I couldn’t think. All I could do was claw at the door like an animal trapped in a cage, desperately trying to reach my twin so I could take away his pain.
THERE ARE CERTAIN TIMES… certain events when intelligence flat out fails you. Your emotions rage so strongly that they drown out the voice of wisdom, turning you into a fool. The day our parents died was a prime example—despite the fact I knew we were in danger, all I could do was stare down into the hole that had swallowed them, screaming with mindless terror. Pietro had been the one to overcome his fear, grabbing my arm and running for our bedroom—rolling us under the safety of the bed just as the second shell hit.

Huddling outside the locked door, I was pulled into that empty space inside my head again—trapped by the weight of our emotions, unable to think. Had I been properly able to assess the situation, I would have simply stood up and walked down the hallway, cutting through the living room to the other door we’d used to enter the dining room—but logic and reason had fled, completely replaced by mind numbing fear for what my brother was feeling. Never before in our lives had I been separated from him when he cried—I was always there to wrap my arms around him, kissing and cuddling away his tears.

At that moment, I hated the old man—hated myself for bringing him into our lives. I had no idea what he might say or do—he could be telling Pietro to turn himself over to the police, or calling his friend the Inspector himself. Had that happened, I honestly think I would have tried to kill the old fool myself; his strength and size would not matter in the slightest—not when faced with my rage. The longer I sat there, the more my fury grew—it was a scalding, vicious thing, boiling my insides and making my cheeks burn, increasing by the second. I could not tell who I hated more—the old man who kept me away from Pietro, or the rich American man with his disgusting weapons of war who’d stolen away our parents.

The click of the lock turning behind my head made me jump to my feet; my muscles tensed as the door slowly opened—immediately, I attacked.

My blows did not affect him—they were feeble, and weak, which only made me madder. I didn’t want to claw and slap like a petulant little girl—I wanted to fight like a man, but I did not know how. Balling up my fist, I punched him in the stomach as hard as I could, following up with an equally ineffective blow to the center of his chest.

“Wanda! Calm down!” He grabbed my wrists, holding them tightly—not disturbed in the slightest by my punches.

“Where is he? What did you do—”

“He’s fine—he’s in the bathroom, washing the tearstains off his face. If I let go, do you promise to stop acting like a little hell cat?”

I glared up at him; if looks could kill, he would have been a dead man. “Don’t you ever keep me away from my brother again old man! If you try… I swear I will find a way to make you regret it for the rest of your days!”

“We will discuss it on the way to town—come… he needs some time to himself.”

“I’m not going anywhere until I talk to him!”
“Chavi… he specifically requested to be left alone… if you love him, you will honor that request and give him the time he needs. Didn’t he do the same for you when you needed it? All the way into town he fretted about leaving you alone—but he did it because you asked him to… doesn’t he deserve the same respect that he showed you?”

I didn’t respond—I refused to admit that he was right. I couldn’t—not when every single part of me was aching to see Pietro. “This is different—”

“Not really… boys need private time too—time alone so they can deal with the things they are feeling, just the same way girls do.” He arched a brow, leaning against the door frame, crossing his arms across his chest. “The best thing for you to do is to give him the space he needs. We will go into town and do our shopping, then you can make him a delicious meal, yes? He intends to get all the books shelved today—I think he will certainly need the sustenance, don’t you?”

I chewed at the corner of my lip. “Is he… all right?”

“He is better… your brother carries a burden that is very heavy, little one. He is very young to feel the weight of so much responsibility—but as I said… we can discuss it on our way. We need to get there before the housewives have picked over the best of the produce, don’t you think?”

“I want him to tell me he is okay—that’s the only way I’m leaving this house.”

“Wanda—”

“No—I mean it. I am worried about him—he isn’t acting like himself at all. It is not like him to be so trusting… to tell a stranger about something so serious—”

“I would not tell anyone… I wouldn’t do anything to harm the two of you—”

“You say this, but why should we believe you? We don’t know you! He just told you something that could get him in a lot of trouble!” His dark eyes filled with hurt—I looked away, wrapping my arms around myself. “We are here because you were a twin—we decided to trust you… to take you at your word—but he shouldn’t have told you about what he did that night.”

“He had to tell someone—it was eating away at him.” He studied me a moment, then nodded his head. “Wait right here… I will go tell him what you are requesting—but Wanda… please do not take offense if he ignores it. I think neither of you realize the impact that his actions that night have had on him.”

“I would appreciate it very much if you would stop implying that I don’t know things about my brother. I know him better than anyone ever has or ever will—he is my other half.” I said, not caring that I sounded haughty.

“That is not what I meant at all.” He shot me a reproachful look as he turned—I stuck out my tongue at his back.

Shifting, I leaned back against the wall, waiting impatiently for Pietro to appear. When he did, his posture mirrored mine—his arms were wrapped around his body, eyes locked on the ground. I could still feel his misery, though it wasn’t as strong as it had been before.

“I’m okay Wanda… really.”

I pushed away from the wall, moving closer to him; he took a step back, keeping me at a distance. “Obviously you’re not—”
His eyes darted up to meet mine; they were red from crying, making the blue even more vibrant than usual. “I don’t want to talk about it—I told you I’m okay and I mean it.”

“But…” I bit my lip, trapping my words inside myself. I wanted to ask why he wouldn’t let me hug him—why he was keeping me away, but I didn’t want to risk setting him off again. “Okay… if you’re sure…”

“I am. I’ll be fine while you’re gone, really. I just want to try and focus on getting some work done—taking that test has fried my brain and I’m barely halfway through it.” He smiled—it looked forced, but I tried my best to return it.

“Pietro…. I love you, just remember that, okay? No matter what… all I ever want is to help you… to make you feel better and be happy.”

“I know.” He turned away, heading for the basement; right before he disappeared from view, he glanced back at me. I waited, my lips turning up in the barest hint of a smile—for a moment I’d been worried he wasn’t going to say he loved me too. “See if he will buy some potato chips—I haven’t had those in a long time.”

My smile died the moment the door closed behind him—my heart cracking in two. No matter what the professor might say about Pietro, there was something really wrong between us.

“Satisfied now?” I jumped at the sound of the old man’s voice behind me—spinning around to glare at him. He held out my shawl to me, smiling. “That is a horrible expression for such a lovely face to wear, chavi.”

“Someone needs to tie a bell around your neck. It is impolite to sneak up on people,” I huffed, grabbing the garment and wrapping it around my shoulders.

“Come now—surely the popping and creaking of my old bones is louder than any bell.” He bowed his head, gesturing towards the door.

I rolled my eyes at the gesture, brushing past him—still furious about the high handed way he’d separated me from Pietro in his time of need. That anger stilled my tongue as we walked—I didn’t talk, I simply stared straight ahead of me, not even so much as glancing at him until we’d walked a couple of blocks.

“I need to go by our house… if you would rather not wait, I can catch up with you.”

“Don’t be ridiculous—I told your brother I would look after you and not let you out of my sight. I will come with you.”

I frowned—in truth, I wanted a few minutes to myself, but even as angry as I was, I could not just come out and say it. “Fine. Tell me… do you know how much watch batteries cost?”

“Not very much at all… why?”

“I want to replace the battery in Pietro’s watch for his birthday—it was a gift from our parents.”

“That is a very thoughtful gesture—I am sure he will appreciate it.” When I didn’t respond, he sighed. “Are you going to give me the cold shoulder all day, chavi?”

“I am very angry with you,” I said bluntly.

“I am sorry I was harsh with you Wanda, but in this instance you are entirely too close to the
situation to see what your brother needs.”

I glared at him. “I do not care how harsh you were—I care that you kept me away from Pietro! I know what he needs—I can feel how upset he is. Who better to help him—”

“Someone who has experienced with exactly what he is dealing with… who can assure him that what he feels is normal and that things will work out—”

“I have experienced everything he has—”

“No Wanda—you have no idea what it is like to be in his shoes. To feel the pressure and responsibility for being the man of the family at such a young age and to shoulder the weight of the burden that carries. To worry about not being able to protect your sister and provide for her, giving her the sort of life she deserves. I understand those things—I lived them.”

I ducked my head down so he would not see how hurt I was by his words; it never occurred to me that my brother might see me as a burden. “We protect each other.”

“Sometimes we know things…but that still does not change how we feel, Wanda. For boys…young men…we are taught that as the bigger, stronger ones, it is our job to protect our sisters from the bad things, yes? He feels like he has failed you but he cannot let it show because he does not want to appear weak in your eyes.”

“I would never think that of him!” I protested, glancing over at him. “He still fears it—having you see him that way.” His cheeks flushed as he looked over at me. “He told me what happened before… with the boy in the basement… don’t you see, chavi? He faults himself for that too.”

“It was my own stupidity that got me in that situation—he wasn’t even a part of it. He was in the apartment, finishing his chores.”

“He thinks that if he had been with you it would not have happened… that perhaps it happened because he was being punished. Tell me… did you ever spend much time with the headmaster of your school?”

I arched a brow. “No—I never got in trouble. Pietro was the one that acted up in class… why?”

“It would appear that the man is the worst kind of educator—one who uses his position as a pulpit to brainwash young minds with his twisted ideals. He told your brother that being bad and misbehaving was a sin—one that God would punish in the worst possible way.”

I blinked, trying—and failing—to comprehend what he was getting at. “What does that have to do with—”

“He told Pietro that the sins of the fathers would be paid for by their children…and likewise, the sins of brothers would be paid for by their sisters. That was a very evil thing to tell a small boy—it deeply imprinted itself in his mind.”

My mouth fell open; my brother had never even hinted that he believed such a thing. “But… that is ridiculous! God would not do such a thing!”

“I said as much…but Pietro is terrified. He is positive that God will punish him for breaking one of the commandments…and he is afraid that his punishment will affect you as well.”
“God would not punish him for that—the man was evil… the things he planned to do…” I shivered, remembering the threats he’d made. “And I am hardly innocent of wrong doing—I’ve stolen. That’s a commandment too, and a sin is a sin—one is not greater than the other.”

“I agree. I think that many of the things that people today consider a sin are things God does not concern himself with—a child stealing to live… a boy killing to protect his sister from being violated… these are things that are easily forgiven in the grand scheme of things. I told him this… but whether or not he will take my words to heart I do not know. But these things that he was told by the headmaster… they play at his mind, adding to the pressure he feels. They are things he thinks he should not burden you with, Wanda. He feels guilty about so many things—you not having a real house… missing out on school—”

“I don’t need school—he does. I just pretend I do—that I am worried we are falling behind—to get him to study.”

“Wanda… that second test I gave you… it was an entrance exam. You only missed three questions.”

I paused, caught off guard by the sudden change of subject. “The last three in the mathematics portion?”

He nodded.

“I suspected I would miss those—I get bored with numbers, so I rushed through them.”

“You realize that means there is probably not much I can teach you that you cannot learn from reading?”

“Probably—I tend to retain whatever I read. But I have to act like you are teaching me—otherwise Pietro will make a fuss about studying.”

“Photographic memory… I thought as much. Tell me… how fast do you read?”

“I never timed myself… but when I was in school I usually had my textbooks read within the first few days.”

He was silent for a moment. “Is there anything in particular you want to study?”

I thought about it. “The classics… and I think I would very much like to learn the subjects you taught as well.”

He looked surprised. “Are you sure? You might find them a little boring—most people do.”

“I’m not most people… I like reading. And really… can you think of a better way to convince Pietro how wrong that wicked man was? If I study the Bible, I can counter the things he said with logical arguments.”

He smiled. “Well… that is true—and honestly… I think you are probably the only one who can make him see the truth.”

“Professor—”

“Grigori,” he corrected me.

I rolled my eyes. “Is there anything else you said to him that I should know? I do not want to mistakenly contradict something you said that might have helped him.”
“I told him that a man should always listen to his heart—that it would never lead him wrong. If he believes something and feels it in his heart, then it is surely a sign from above.” He smiled sadly. “That is what my father used to say to me when I was small… in following that advice, I have never been steered wrong.”

We’d reached the corner of the street where our house was located, I turned, heading towards it, then realized he had fallen behind. “Well? Are you coming?”

“I did not want to intrude…”

“You already know where it is—” I pointed out, “—so you might as well come on.”

He smiled broadly, following after me—pleased, I assumed, that I was allowing him back into our meager home.

“Wait by the front door—I have to unlock it.”

“I could just follow you in—”

I snorted. “You wouldn’t fit through the window, let alone make it over the wall.”

“Ahhh. No wonder you chose this place—I imagine it is hard to access, even for vandals.”

“Yes. Almost all of the windows on the first floor are small and narrow—I can fit through them easily enough, and so can Pietro, but it is starting to be a tight fit for him. One of the bigger ones has a broken latch though—we need to figure out a way to fix the lock.”

He looked up, eyeing the noticeable damage on the upper level of the house as we approached it. “How bad is it?”

“I’m hardly an expert on construction,” I pointed out. “But honestly, I would think the owners could fix it fairly easy if they were willing to lose the rooms that were destroyed. They could knock down the remaining walls and put up a railing… lay some tiles and have a nice outdoor sitting area. I think that would be less expensive that rebuilding what is damaged, wouldn’t it?”

“Yes, such a thing wouldn’t cost a great deal—especially not if they were handy and could do most of the work themselves.” He tugged at his beard, his brow wrinkling. “It would appear the second story was added at a later time—do you see how the mortar is crumbling? The ground level is more structurally sound—built to last for generations.”

“You are an expert in architecture now?” I teased; his gaze drifted over to me, one eye fluttering shut in an exaggerated wink.

“This cottage and I… we are two of a kind. Reminders of a time that no longer exists, stubbornly clinging to the past as everything around us changes.”

“Then I suppose it is good that I prefer older things to newer ones, yes?” I asked, smiling as he chuckled in response.

“A very good thing indeed.”

I left him on the front walk—quickly scaling the wall and hurrying into the house to let him in. When I opened the door, he was still staring up at the second level with a look of concentration on his face.
“If you’d like to go upstairs and get a closer look you can.” I offered, wondering what was so fascinating about torn up stone and wood.

“I think I will, thank you.” He walked past me, looking around with interest. “I didn’t really get to see much the last time I was here.”

“Be careful—the floor near the messed up rooms isn’t very sturdy. Pietro almost fell through the day we found it.”

I will certainly keep that in mind since I outweigh him. Are you going to chaperone me?” He teased, smiling as he started up the stairs.

“No, I will come find you in a few minutes.” I left him to his exploration, returning to the basement to retrieve Pietro’s watch and my portion of the money. Shoving the mattress aside, I pried up one of the broken flagstones; to my surprise there was a little over fifty euros tucked underneath. Subtracting the twenty that were our wages, I had at least thirty to spend on my brother’s gift.

Replacing everything so that our secret spot was hidden again, I backtracked through the house to collect the professor. He was in what we’d assumed to be the master bedroom, poking around in the small desk that sat in front of the window.

“I’m ready—”

“Wanda… how long have you lived here?”

I chewed the inside of my lip, trying to recall. “Four months… no… five. It’s the longest we’ve been able to stay in one place. Why?”

“Just curious. Tell me… in all that time, no one has come around?”

“No… the entire block is deserted—that’s why we came searching here in the first place. We figured the farther out we were from our old apartment the less chance there was of being discovered or running into trouble.” I shrugged. “It was just common sense to look in the sections that were hit hardest—until people start rebuilding, it’s the safest place for us to be.”

“And if the owners showed up tomorrow? What would you do?”

I frowned; it was a very real threat—one Pietro and I had spent hours discussing about. “Fill our bags with as much as we can and look for another place. We’ll have to start all over again, leaving most of what we’ve collected behind.”

“The two of you could always move into my house—”

“No—it is a very kind offer, but we need a place of our own.”

“But you must see that it would ease the burden both of you carry—especially your brother…”

“Feel free to ask him—I guarantee his answer will be the same as mine.” I said, fully confident that Pietro would agree with me. In a way, we had become wild, feral things—like pampered housecats that had been dumped on the street. We’d lost the shiny veneer of domesticity, quickly adapting to having no rules or bed times or being told what to do; we were free—after experiencing such a thing, there was no way we would relinquish it.

He sighed, fingers combing through his beard. “In the very least you can store some of your things at my house—just in case you have to move again, yes? The things that are most important to you…"
that you could not bear to lose.”

I thought about it for a moment; it made sense—especially once the weather started warming. It was hard finding winter clothes—most people did not utilize outdoor laundry lines in the colder months, so we rarely had clothing appropriate for the season; if we stored the warm clothing we’d gathered at his house, we would have it on hand without having to worry about hunting down more. My little box of treasures would be safe there too, as would Pietro’s cigar box of keepsakes—those were the things we truly cherished most. “That we can do—thank you very much.”

“We will clear out one of the bedrooms just for the two of you—I will not venture inside without your approval.” He smiled; folding up the paper he was holding, he tucked it away in his pocket, closing the drawer he’d been perusing.

“What—”

“Nothing important, chavi—just something I want to look into. I will return it, I promise.”

I eyed him for a minute, wondering what use he might possibly have for anything he’d found; we’d searched the desk thoroughly, looking for things we could use—the only things it held were invoices and unpaid bills along with a dozen or so rubber bands. We’d snagged the rubber bands for my hair, leaving the rest as we’d found it. “We should get going—I don’t want to leave Pietro alone for very long.”

“Yes, of course… I’ll wait out front—I assume you want to lock everything up again?”

“I should just leave it wide open so the vandals can destroy the house while we are gone?”

“It was unlocked the other day,” he pointed out. “I’ve been meaning to talk to you about that. It’s not safe—”

“We’re not idiots,” I huffed. “Normally it is kept locked—Pietro used it when he left.”

“He should not have left you here alone with the door unlocked—”

“It was the first time he’s ever done it,” I snapped, scowling.

“It only takes one time for something bad to happen, Wanda.”

“Thank you for enlightening me—I never would have considered such a thing.” I said, sounding more than a little snarky; I couldn’t help it—I didn’t like the implication that my brother had done something foolish.

“He needs to remember to lock it—”

“He came back and found me gone—he was worried.” I snapped, scowling at him. “In light of that, I’d say he gets a pass on being forgetful, don’t you think?”

“I am simply worried about your safety, chavi—is that such a horrible thing?” He paused on the bottom step, glancing over his shoulder at me. “If you remind me, I will bring my toolbox over the next time I stop by and we will change out the locks—that way you will both have a key. Pietro can help me.”

“If the owners come back and find the locks changed they will call the police—”

“I don’t think that will happen—and it will give me peace of mind to know the two of you are
relatively safe. I can fix the latch on the window as well—it won’t take more than a minute or two. Perhaps it is foolish of me, but I worry about leaving the two of you here all alone—bad things happen to young girls in times of war… I’ve seen it firsthand.”

He slipped out the front door before I could respond, but really, I couldn’t argue with him. It would make me feel safer knowing that the window lock worked—to say otherwise would be an outright lie. I often fretted over what might happen if vandals got inside while we were at home—and in all likelihood, they’d try that window first since it was the largest one on the first floor. Pietro tended to be very territorial—I knew instinctively that he wouldn’t be able to resist the urge to protect our home if something like that occurred. He was impulsive too—he wouldn’t stop to consider how many intruders there might be or whether or not they were armed—he’d just charge upstairs, ready to fight them off bare handed in an attempt to safeguard our claim.

By the time I joined him on the front walk, I was starting to feel restless; being away from Pietro was starting to take a toll. I wasn’t used to not being with him—it made me anxious and more than a little uncomfortable to not be by his side. The problem was, recognizing the source of my irritability didn’t make it easier to deal with—I knew from experience that the muddled, disoriented feeling wouldn’t go away until we were together again. It would linger inside me growing stronger—the same way it had when we were in school when they’d tried to assign us to different classrooms.

As we began the long walk into the heart of the city, the deep, nagging sense of unease distracted me; the professor was an entertaining enough companion—asking me questions about what I liked to read and offering suggestions on books he owned that I could borrow—but my mind was only half on the conversation. Wandering the city without Pietro filled me with a heavy apprehensiveness that made it hard to think; it felt unnatural, and strange, as if I was missing an integral part of myself—I felt an actual physical ache, like I’d lost a limb.

Had I been more attentive I might have realized sooner that the professor was leading me into one of the more affluent areas of the city; I slowly became aware that the windows on either side of the narrow, winding street held the type of expensive merchandise I could never hope to own. Gazing at the clean, well maintained storefronts, it was hard to believe that less than a dozen blocks away the streets resembled a war zone. An invisible line divided Novi Grad in two—the unrest in the low and middle class neighborhoods had not yet managed to breach the northernmost part of the city; the wealthy citizens and tourists that patronized the shops seemed completely unaffected by the plight that so many of us faced. Even the sidewalks and the streets were well maintained, without any of the cracks and deep potholes that were abundant in the southern parts of the city.

“It’s like we’re in an entirely different place,” I murmured.

“You are seeing physical proof of how a corrupt government operates, chavi. The politicians care nothing about what the average citizen needs—they only care about satisfying their rich friends and the acquaintances that line their pockets with bribes.”

“I thought President Medvedǐk was supposed to be an honest man… that’s what they taught us in school.”

“If he was honest would he be trying to undo all the freedom we have gained since the Velvet Revolution, Wanda? Not everything that is leaned in the classroom is pure truth—that poppycock the headmaster told your brother is proof of that.” He gestured around us, frowning. “These establishments have been given a tax break on the luxury goods they sell simply so the rich can be provided with the foolish things they think are life or death necessities—further proof that Medvedǐk cares only about those he deems worthy.”

Looking up at the whimsical placards that jutted out over the sidewalk bearing each establishments
name, I mulled over his words; the thought of using my money in a store that benefitted from such an unfair privilege disgusted me. “Surely there are other shops—ones with less fortunate owners. They would be less expensive too—”

“The owner of the shop I am taking you to does not receive the same perks the others do, Wanda. Medvedík would hardly give such a boon to a Romani—he would purge the country of anyone with the blood if he could find a way to do so. And I promise it will not be nearly as expensive as you think. Hanzi will give us a good price—he must.”

“How do you know?”

“I have sent him business many times in the past. He lost his grandparents in the camps… when he saw the mark on my arm, he asked me about the time I spent with the Nazis.” He stopped walking, glancing down at me, his eyes full of compassion. “Your parents did not teach you our ways—this saddens me. In time… I hope you will let me teach you our customs; upholding them helps us remember who we are—it gives the People the strength to stand tall and proud, no matter how much the world looks down on us.”

“I would like that very much… I have always curious about my parents past, but they never wanted to talk about it. Mama always looked so sad when she talked about her childhood.” Hesitantly, I reached over, slipping my hand into his. “I want to be strong and proud—to honor my ancestors by upholding their ways.”

“For some of the people… it is hard to assimilate—perhaps that is why your parents chose to raise you in ignorance of the culture. Even now, in this enlightened time, Romani are driven out of their homes… called ‘Gypsy scum’ and thieves for no reason other than the blood that flows through their veins. In the streets of Pristina, the Gadje set fire to the skirt of one of our women who was carrying her infant in her arms. In Ireland they stoned a young girl to death for just walking down the street. We are the People who have no real home—they try to chase us out wherever we go.” He squeezed my hand, unshed tears sparkling in his eyes. “For all its faults, this country has given us a place to live in relative peace for a time. It has enabled Hanzi to set up a beautiful shop, and given his sister a chance to open a restaurant that serves up good, filling Romani dishes—those are things that are not easily achieved in other parts of Europe or even in America.”

I racked my brain for a way to steer the conversation away from such sad, emotional things; I didn’t like seeing him upset—he was far too kind a man for me to let him suffer. “How can he stay in business if he doesn’t receive the benefits his competitors do?”

My subtle manipulation worked—I was far better at sidetracking than he was. He chuckled, steering me towards a bright green wooden door—it definitely stood out when compared to the plain, tinted glass that the other boutiques had as entrances. “He makes up for the difference by marking up the merchandise he sells to the Gadje. Rich people are fools—they think that spending more money on something will elevate their status among their peers.”

Pulling open the door, he waved me inside—immediately calling out what I assumed to be a greeting in the musical sounding language he sometimes used. I glanced around, taking everything in, my eyes wide with amazement—it was completely unlike anything I’d ever seen in my life.

The left side of the store was simplistic and understated—the walls were a soft, neutral shade of beige, and the dark hardwood floors were polished to a high shine. Long, waist high glass display cases filled with jewelry ran along the entire length of the room, and there was a lovely little chaise with a low table in front of it where customers could sit while they waited. The right side of the store was the complete opposite—riotous color jumped out no matter where I looked. Low wooden display stands and clothing racks overflowing with merchandise were crammed together, forming
narrow, crooked walkways that wound from the front of the store to the back. The floor was scuffed, the wood looking parched and dry, and each wall was painted a different, vibrant shade—one red, one blue and one green, but it was the floor to ceiling mural on the back wall that immediately caught my eye.

Moving carefully so as not to knock anything over, I made my way closer, studying the intricately detailed painting; it depicted what I assumed was a Romani encampment in days long gone by. The brightly colored wagons and colorfully clad figures completely enchanted me—when combined with the light, spicy incense that scented the air, and the soft violin music that played in the background, it set the atmosphere perfectly, transporting anyone who walked in the store to another place and time.

“I know it looks rather tacky—it is all a show for the tourists,” the professor said, coming up behind me. “There are certain stereotypes that they expect to see when they do business with the People. Gadje cannot seem to grasp the concept that not all Roma live in caravans, dancing around bonfires.”

“I like it,” I said, walking closer to a rack that held long, full skirts in every shade of the rainbow. “It is very… festive, yes?”

The old man rolled his eyes. “That is certainly one word for it.”

I shot him a look, moving over to a low table that was pushed up against the wall—my eyes locking on the large, clear globe that sat in the center of the table. “Is that—”

“A crystal ball? Yes—I told you, he caters to the tourists. They expect all of us to tell fortunes and see glimpses of the future. A ridiculous notion, yes?”

“Always the doubting Thomas, Professor Mirga—” the voice came from behind me, startling me so much I jumped—there had been no one there a moment before. “Some truly do have the sight—my old bibi is one of the blessed.”

“This is an argument you will never win, Hanzi—if your great aunt has some sort of prophetic gift, then why did she not warn her own sister that the Nazis were going to burst down her door?”

“It is not a constant thing, my friend—it comes and goes like the wind, with a will of its own.”

While they engaged in their verbal sparring, I took advantage of the distraction their bickering provided to study the man who owned the shop. He was short for a grown man—not much taller than me—and almost as wide as he was tall, with swarthy coloring and a thick black beard that matched the tuft of hair showing at the collar of his shirt; the fact his body was so hirsute was almost comical, considering his head was as bald as an egg.

“Excuse me—wherever are my manners? Wanda, this is Mt. Rozencov—he owns this shop. Hanzi, this is my great niece, Wanda.”

I held out my hand, but instead of shaking it, the short man raised it to his lips—kissing the back of it. “Now this is a pleasant surprise—such a pretty little thing! Tsura has a son close to her age… a strong, handsome boy. Perhaps we should discuss a match, Grigori—there are far too few eligible girls in Novi Grad.”

I jerked my hand back, scowling. “I am no one’s property to be bargained away, sir!”

He didn’t seem offended by my outrage; raising his eyebrows, he gave me an appreciative look. “Fiery too—a promising combination. Too often pretty girls are docile—a woman needs to have some spirit.”
The professor looked uncomfortable at the turn the conversation had taken. “She’s far too young to discuss such a thing—”

“Ridiculous! My Lena was fourteen when I married her—come November we will be celebrating our thirtieth wedding anniversary.”

“Nevertheless, I am afraid talk of matchmaking is not welcome at this time.” To my immense relief, the old man’s voice was firm—a good thing, since I was on the verge of bolting for the door.

“Such a shame! Tobar would treat her like a queen—he is a very kind boy.” The shopkeeper sighed dramatically, shaking his head. “Well… then what can I do for you today? I did not expect to see you again so soon. Was there a problem with—”

“No, not at all—” the professor cut him off, shaking his head. “Wanda has a watch that needs a new battery, so I brought her to you.”

“Watch batteries I can do—though I must warn you, if the back is pressure sealed, I might not have the proper sized die for the press. If I have to order one, it would take a week or so to arrive. Let me get my glasses—” To my surprise, he turned and headed straight for the mural, opening a door I had not spotted—it was painted into the design on the wall.

“That is very clever,” I murmured.

“I think perhaps he likes to pop out and scare the tourists,” the old man whispered, guiding me over to the jewelry section of the store. “He tends to favor melodramatics.”

“I heard that—” the short man reappeared, hurrying over to the counter and holding out his hand. “The watch?”

I fished it out of my pocket, handing it over; he studied it for a moment, turning it over in his hands. “I have a die this size…but I must be honest—replacing the battery will probably end up costing you more than the watch is worth. That isn’t the only repair it needs—do you see how the crystal is cracked in this cobweb pattern? More likely than not when I put it on the press to open the back, the pressure involved will make it shatter completely off the face—so it would need to be replaced…and look here at the strap…it is almost completely worn through at the clasp. Wear it for a week…two at most…and it will snap—you need a new band too.”

My heart sank, but I tried to hide my disappointment at the news—the professor was watching me intently; he patted me on the shoulder in a reassuring manner, frowning at his friend. “What would you suggest?”

“If you were a regular customer… I would advise you to have it repaired—the labor alone would cost more than the parts used.” Hanzi raised his eyebrows, laying Pietro’s watch down on the counter. “But for you? I will be truthful—you can get a much nicer new watch for a fraction of the repair cost.”

I couldn’t stop myself from frowning at the suggestion. “That would defeat the whole purpose of the gift though. I wanted to fix it because he loves that watch—it was the last present our parents gave him before they died.”

“I am very sorry for your loss…” the merchant looked uncomfortable, shifting restlessly on his feet. “I did not mean to insult your parents by implying that the watch was cheap—”

“No offense was taken, I’m sure.” The professor said smoothly, drumming his fingers on the counter. “Perhaps you could give us a moment to discuss things? Go ahead and pull a few new ones for us to
look at—ones that are suitable for an active thirteen year old boy, yes?"

“I know just the thing—take all the time you need, my friend.” Hanzi winked, hurrying over to another display case.

The old man waited until he was out of earshot before turning his attention to me. “Wanda, if you really want to have it repaired—”

“It doesn’t matter what I want—I cannot afford it,” I said bluntly.

“The cost does not matter—I would gladly make you a loan for the difference, but have you stopped to consider that he might not want it repaired? If Hanzi does all those things to it… makes so many changes… it will hardly be the same watch anymore. And besides that—if he were to wear it again… it might make him sad chavi, thinking about what you have both lost. Sometimes the best thing to do—the smartest thing—is to put whatever reminds you of such sadness away so you do not see it and dwell on it every single day.”

I stared pointedly at the plain gold band he wore on his third finger. “I think you offer this advice, but you do not follow it yourself.”

“That is an entirely different sort of situation,” he huffed. “Wearing my wedding band shows that I still consider myself married—committed to my wife even though she is gone. You are too young to understand, but someday you will meet someone that completes you, Wanda. Once you’ve had that… nothing else… no one else can ever make you feel that way again.”

“I’m not too young! I understand about soul mates! It’s like—” I cut my indignant outburst short, horrified to realize I was on the verge of blurting out ‘like Pietro and me’.

His eyes narrowed. “Like what?”

“Like they write about in novels,” I mumbled, dropping my eyes. “Someone who is everything… who can make your world brighter with just a smile—the person who makes your heart sing.”

“Well? Have you reached a decision, or should I busy myself in the back for a while longer?” The shopkeeper set several boxes down on the counter, his eyes flicking between the professor and me.

I glanced over, grateful for the interruption. “A new one… maybe.”

“I have a few here you might like—I can pull a few more classic models, but most teenage boys prefer something more sporty… like this one.” He opened the box, holding it out for me to see. “I actually gave my nephew one very similar for improving his grades—it has all the extras that young people today seem to need.”

I eyed the watch skeptically; it was sleek looking, with a sturdy band—and judging by the amount of buttons on the sides, loaded with features that would keep Pietro entertained. I wasn’t a fool—I knew that more features meant more expensive; undoubtedly it cost much, much more than I could afford.

“That’s the one he was looking at yesterday—”

I jerked my head up. “What—“

The professor sighed, leaning against the counter. “You have an exceptionally big mouth at times, Hanzi—she did not know I brought her brother to see you.”

The shopkeeper flushed bright red. “I am sorry! It slipped out—”
“Why did you bring Pietro here?” I demanded, scowling at both of them. “I do not like secrets—”

“To purchase your birthday present,” the old man said softly, resting his forehead against the heel of his hand. “It was supposed to be a surprise—”

“What did he buy?” My eyes flicked between them.

“Don’t look at me—I have already said too much.” Hanzi threw up his hands, stepping back from the counter.

“He bought a birthday present—that is all you will get out of me.” I scowled—the old man chuckled. “I should not tell you this…but your brother and I made an agreement yesterday. He took out a small loan to cover the difference in what he purchased and what he had on hand. I will do the same thing for you—”

“How much of a loan did he take?” I frowned; I didn’t like the thought of Pietro doing such a thing without discussing it with me first.

“I will not tell you that—it would betray the trust he showed me. Now… do you want to get him the watch? Or would you prefer another style?”

Returning my gaze to the watch, I reached out, trailing my finger along the buttons.” He was really interested in this one?”

“Yes… he seemed to like the fact it could function as a stop watch. I didn’t understand why that seemed so important to him at the time…” the old man’s lips twitched up in amusement, “now I know the reason.”

My heart fluttered in my chest; there could be only one reason Pietro would care about such a thing—he’d been thinking about me. “How much is it?”

Hanzi opened his mouth—the professor cut him off before he could speak. “That does not matter—leave it to me. I know how to finagle a good deal, chavi—I wasn’t born yesterday. Go look around while Hanzi and I barter for an acceptable cost.”

I stared at him a moment, then dug in my pocket, pulling out my crumpled money and depositing it on the counter. “I want to know the exact difference in cost. In writing—so I can keep up with how much I owe you.”

The shopkeeper let out a loud burst of laughter at my determination. “The more you speak the more determined I am to pair you with my nephew, little miss—I think you will be a very efficient wife, keeping the household expenditures in line.”

Ignoring his comment, I scurried back over to the overcrowded side of the store, anxious to distance myself from his suggestions—intending to peruse the racks of clothing displayed. Most of the things offered were far too ostentatious for me—I couldn’t ever imagine wearing things so brightly colored, or adorned by tiny bells that would jingle every time I moved. It was the plainer items that attracted me—the long flowing skirts and loose, flowing off shoulder blouses that were similar to what the women in the mural wore. I could not help but wonder if Pietro would like them; since he’d been so pleased to see me wearing a dress, I suspected that he would.

My interest did not escape Hanzi’s notice; as soon as he and the professor finished bartering, he appeared beside me, gesturing to the clothing. “You have good taste, little miss. My bibi spends hours on those skirts—"
“Balderdash,” the professor scoffed. “He buys them wholesale.”

“You wound me, my friend.” Hanzi pulled a skirt off the rack, flipping up the hem—the gesture revealed a small red ‘x’ embroidered near the seam. “I did not say she makes them—but she does add a touch of the People to their construction.”

“So you can claim they are hand stitched,” the old man argued, “without it being an outright lie.”

The merchant shrugged. “Semantics. The tourists want authentic Romani items—I provide them… more or less.”

“Our girls are chaste—they do not wear things that expose themselves. By selling these things you feed into the Gadje stereotypes—”

“Some girls do wear such things—it all depends on how traditional their parents are,” Hanzi pointed out good-naturedly. I was beginning to understand that the two of them actually enjoyed debating with each other.

“No matter who makes them, they are very pretty,” I said, running my fingers along the skirt he held. “I think that whether or not they are traditional should not really matter—not if they make the person wearing them feel pretty.”

The shopkeeper’s eyes ran over me from head to toe; flipping through the hangers, he produced a bright red skirt, then moved to another rack, selecting a red top trimmed with deep green ribbons. “These would look wonderful with your coloring—”

“They are lovely, but I cannot afford—”

“No! It is a gift… I have made you uncomfortable during your time in my shop—it is customary to make reparations for such things.” He held them out to me, smiling. “Tell her Grigori—”

“It is true… the People have a code that must be followed. He must make amends.”

I eyed the garments, chewing on the corner of my lip. “I… not red. Could I have blue?”

“Of course… but the red would look beautiful—”

“Blue is my favorite color,” I responded—not bothering to mention that my brother favored it too.

Swapping out the blouse and skirt for blue ones, he carried them back over to the other side of the shop, folding them neatly and sliding them into a bag. I reached over to retrieve Pietro’s old watch, but he stilled my hand with his. “An important keepsake needs to be stored in something special, even when it has outlived its use.”

I watched as he reached beneath the counter, rooting around for a moment before producing a small, plush velvet bag. Sliding the battered watch inside, he pressed it into my hand with a wink. “No charge, little miss.”

“Thank you very much.”

“You are welcome, pretty girl. Your receipt for the watch is in the bag—I am sure he will be very pleased.” He said, handing the bright green decorative bags containing our items over to the professor. “I hope you will come visit me again Wanda—perhaps on a Wednesday. That is the day that bibi is here reading palms.”
I didn’t have the heart to tell him I didn’t believe in such things; nodding politely, I followed the professor out of the store—waiting until we’d reached the end of the street before demanding to know the final cost. “Well? How much do I owe you?”

“Forty four Euros,” he responded—sounding quite smug.

“Don’t lie to me—”

“I’m not—I convinced him to knock thirty percent off for spoiling Pietro’s surprise. That was on top of him already taking ten percent off since I am a repeat customer. Sometimes it simply a matter of telling people what you expect to receive, chavi,” he said, holding out the bag.

“Could you hang on to it for me? Pietro has been very sneaky lately—I don’t want him finding it and spoiling the surprise. It is the nicest gift I have given him since… you know.” I bit my lip, averting my eyes—my thoughts instantly turning to the last real birthday celebration we’d had.

“Certainly… I actually have an appointment in here in town tomorrow night—I can drop it off on my way, if you’d like.”

“Thank you—that would be perfect.” My curiosity was piqued about the appointment he mentioned, but I did not wish to pry. For a moment I toyed with the notion that he might have a lady friend, but I dismissed the thought almost as soon as it occurred. From everything he’d said, it was quite obvious that he loved his deceased wife far too much to ever let another woman take her place.

This time, I was far more observant as we crossed over the invisible boundary line that separated the rich from the poor like wheat from chaff; I let my eyes wander as we headed back towards the parts of the city that I was familiar with, feeling a deep sense sadness over how much things had changed in the last two years. Graffiti was everywhere—not just on the buildings and dumpsters, but on the traffic signs too; the narrow strips of lawn that the city was supposed to maintain were scraggly and overgrown, littered with stray paper and discarded bottles and cans—and that was just in the middle class neighborhood we strolled through. It was even worse in the areas where the people earned less money—the once graceful, stately old buildings were turning into tenements and slums.

I spotted a very familiar landmark—it was one of the first places we’d sought shelter after abandoning our home. It had been damp and dank—the walls of the basement were covered in dark patches of black mold, and the floor always squished underfoot. It’s one saving grace was an old woman on the ground floor with a fondness for alley cats—she’d always thrown out scraps for them in the evening. At that point, finding food outweighed our personal comfort—we’d eaten well until the maintenance man discovered us and we’d been forced to move on.

“We lived there for a while—when we first took to the streets.” I pointed out the building as we passed it.

“Oh? Was your home near here?”

“No, we lived on Shandor—in one of the older apartment buildings. It didn’t seem safe to stay in our old neighborhood—someone might recognize us and turn us in.”

“You’ve had a very hard time, haven’t you? When my sister and I were on our own… it was different. People were friendlier, and more trusting—willing to help us out once they heard we’d been in the camps.”

I shrugged, tilting my head back as the sun peeked out from behind the clouds, letting it warm my face. “It doesn’t matter how hard it is—what matters is us staying together.”
“You are very close…aren’t you?”

“Of course—we are twins. We have always been close—never having secrets and rarely quarreling.”

I frowned, amending my statement. “Well.. up until the last few days, at least.”

“What do you mean?”

I glanced over at him; his brow was wrinkled, his face full of concern. “Lately it seems like everything I do is wrong.”

“How so?” He nodded his head towards the grocer we were passing, changing our course.

I froze, not moving when he opened the door—making a point to lag behind him as he entered; he tilted his cap to the woman behind the counter—she nodded, her smile fading when her eyes flicked over to me. Hunching my shoulders, I avoided her eyes—she’d caught me trying to smuggle out a loaf of bread once. I’d narrowly escaped by kicking her in the shins and running for my life.

“Wanda?”

“What? Oh… uh… he’s just been really grouchy lately.”

He scooped up a hand cart, frowning at what I said. “Everyone has off days now and again, chavi. I’m sure—”

“Yes, but he’s never acted like this to me.”

“Becoming a teenager is a difficult thing for everyone, Wanda—girls aren’t the only ones who go through changes,” he said, gently. “In fact, I dare say that in some ways things will probably be far more difficult for Pietro. You must trust me on this—I was once a young man too.”

“I don’t see how it could be harder,” I argued. “He doesn’t have the embarrassing bleeding or the aches and pains—”

“There are different kinds of aches child—some that cannot be cured with a few tablets.” He averted his eyes, the rims of his ears turning red. “I wish Yuliana were here to talk with you… there are some things that are improper for a young girl to discuss with an old man.”

I contemplated asking exactly what he meant, but I had a strong suspicion I wouldn’t get a straight answer—something about his tone clearly broadcast that it was best to leave well enough alone. I dug out the list I’d hastily scrawled out before we’d left for work, turning my attention to the task at hand. Weekly trips to the grocer with my mother had taught me how important it was to be a smart shopper—being thrifty when buying food meant there would be more money for other things we’d needed, like clothes, and shoes. Following the example she’d set for me, I carefully compared the marked cost of each item offered before adding it to the cart.

“You do not need to be quite so particular, chavi—I am not a picky eater.”

“I am not being particular—I am comparing the prices,” I replied, eyeing the selection of spices on the shelf.

“I am hardly a poor man, Wanda. Don’t worry about the cost—”

“Clearly you have never properly shopped for grocery items—see here?” I held up a bottle of paprika, pointing to the price. “With this brand you get twice as much for cheaper.”
“Perhaps the more expensive one is better quality—”

“You do realize that you are being just as foolish as the rich people you complained about, yes?” I rolled my eyes in exasperation, wondering if all men were so impatient and unwilling to take the time to do it right—if so, it was quite obvious why women were far more efficient at running a household. “A spice is a spice. What matters is how you use it, not how expensive it is.”

Combing his fingers through his beard, he nodded slowly. “Hold on a moment—”

I watched him, slightly alarmed at his bizarre behavior; he backtracked up the aisle, pulling a small notepad out of the pocket of his sweater; my confusion grew as he retraced our steps, examining the shelves and the contents of our small basket—making notes on his pad as he walked.

Following after him slowly as he moved from aisle to aisle, I finally could not hold my tongue. “What are you—”

“Satisfying my accursed curiosity,” he said, winking at me. “All right—carry on.”

“All you need now is some meat and vegetables. Perhaps a loaf of bread—I don’t know how to bake… Mama didn’t teach me that yet.”

“You are a smart girl—you can teach yourself. There are plenty of recipe books at the house—and you will have two hungry men to test your creations out on.”

I made a face, but secretly I was pleased that he had confidence in my ability to learn what I’d always considered a rather difficult skill. I silently vowed to find the books he’d mentioned and start practicing as soon as I’d read them—a part of me wanting to prove to him that his faith in me was not misplaced. The talk of baking made me feel a pang of longing for my mother; she’d been an amazing baker—so good that people from up and down the street paid her to make pastries or tarts for special occasions. She often said that her baking was the reason Papa’s waistline kept expanding—but he’d certainly never wasted one second complaining. Wrapped up in my thoughts, it took me a moment to realize the professor had moved on to another aisle; I hurried to catch up to him, frowning as I caught him adding things to the cart.

“That’s not on the list—”

“True—but since I am the one paying the bill, I can add whatever I want, yes?” He shot back.

“Not if it’s something that is not good for you! You said you were sick—”

“The next thing I know you will be demanding a list from my physician of what I’m not supposed to eat,” he teased.

“That’s not a bad idea—”

“Don’t even think about it, chavi. I am old and set in my ways—”

“Stubborn as an ox,” I muttered under my breath; he heard it, letting out a snort of amusement.

“My wife would have said stubborn as a jack… well… never mind. Let’s just say she’d agree with your assessment.”

He turned down the next aisle, this time adding a bag of potato chips—I narrowed my eyes in suspicion. “You like potato chips?”
“Certainly! You don’t lose a taste for this sort of food once you hit middle age, child,” He arched a brow, glancing over at me. “I suppose you think I should be eating bland porridge three times a day?”

I blushed, feeling properly chastised. “I never said that—”

“But you thought it.” He winked, waving me off. “Go get the bread—two loaves. I’ll meet you there in a minute. I can’t think with you hovering behind me like an anxious mother hen.”

Scowling, I stomped off; I was beginning to understand why my brother seemed to like talking to him so much. They were two of a kind, both having the ability to frustrate me with their pigheadedness—and without having to exert much effort to do it. I grabbed two loaves of the crusty bread that the baker had out on the cooling racks—tapping my foot impatiently as the minutes ticked by and he did not appear. Finally, tired of waiting, I moved on to the butchers counter, selecting a week’s worth of meat. Balancing it all carefully in my arms, I prepared to hunt him down.

It was a medium sized store—and he was a rather large man—so it didn’t take me long to find him. To my dismay, the hard cart was almost overflowing with extras he’d added in the brief time I’d been gone. “Professor! I have meals planned for a week… you don’t need all that—and the more you buy, the more we have to carry—”

He ignored me completely, heading for the checkout line; I followed after him, vowing under my breath that in the future he was staying at home when any shopping needed to be done.

“Good morning Mrs. Kedzierski—or should I say good afternoon?” He greeted the sour faced woman behind the counter cheerfully as we approached the register, handing over the basket—completely oblivious to the way she was eyeing me as he began unloading my arms. “How are you today?”

“As well as can be expected with the state of things, I suppose,” she muttered, grimacing as she began ringing up the items. “My husband said he saw more military trucks heading into the woods last night—I swear they are not going to be satisfied until they start World War Three.”

Automatically, I tensed; it was one thing to live with sporadic fighting in certain sectors of the city—another thing entirely to contemplate the skirmishes escalating even more. If Novi Grad fell under military control, in all likelihood they’d start picking up boys off the street, forcing them to train and fight. Fear for Pietro’s safety welled up inside me, making me feel lightheaded.

“You all right girl? You’ve gone white as a sheet.”

“She lost her parents—talk of war upsets her.” The professor reached over, rubbing my shoulder. “Do I know your family? You seem very familiar…”

I shook my head, shifting to hide behind the old man’s large body. He caught my discomfort, answering the question on my behalf. “I don’t see how you could—they lived in Sznava. This is my great niece—she and her brother have come to stay with me for a while. It is the way our family does things—the young and able look after the old, feeble ones.”

She snorted. “If this is old and feeble I hate to imagine what you were like when you were young and spry, Professor Mirga.” Her eyes flicked to me, her surly expression softening a little. “Taking care of family is an honorable thing—not many youngsters today would do it. God knows my own children certainly wouldn’t.”

“I think perhaps it is a generational difference, madam. Most people do not teach their children the
ways of the past,” he offered. “I remember when I was small, we looked up to the elders in our family—they were our ideals and heroes. The youth of today look up to movie stars and musicians—they consider old people to be a waste of their time.”

“You’re probably right,” she looked at me again, then reached over, grabbing two bars of chocolate from the display beside the register, holding them out to me. “Here—for you and your brother… no charge.”

I glanced at the professor, seeking his approval; he nodded, smiling, so I hesitantly reached out, taking the candy. “Thank you madam… it is most kind of you.”

For the first time since she’d set eyes on me, she smiled. “So polite… your parents raised you well.”

I ducked my head down to hide the tears I felt welling up in my eyes—our parents had raised us well in the limited time they’d had. We might not have had much money, but our home had been full of happiness and love. We learned to appreciate and be thankful for what we had, and the smallest unexpected treat—like a bar of candy or a rare can of soda—were things we cherished greatly.

It wasn’t until he’d paid for the purchases and we were back on the sidewalk that he mentioned the notes he’d been taking. Guiding me over to the bench in front of the store, he deposited the bags he was holding, pulling out the receipt and comparing it to the notepad. “You saved me almost seventeen Euros with your careful shopping, Chavi—I will deduct that from the amount of your loan.”

“I did it to save you money! Not to—”

“Money I would have spent without thought. I can’t take it with me”—he pointed out, tucking away his notepad and reclaiming the bags “—and I certainly don’t intend to leave it to my children. Not after they broke their mother’s heart.”

I frowned, wanting to argue, but it would be a waste of breath. Shifting the bags I held to distribute the weight more evenly, I chewed my lip as we started walking—wondering if I dared offer my opinion on what he’d said. “Surely you could make amends with them—”

“I have tried—they will never understand that there are some things we have no choice in…things that are decided for us by God long before we are ever born. Sometimes… those things do not match up with what people deem as right, or proper. When it comes right down to it, I refuse to apologize to my children for how I lived my life—and since I have never tried to tell them how they should live theirs, they should give me the same courtesy.” His voice was strong, and firm, but his shoulders slumped, as if weighed down by a heavy burden.

Perhaps things simply got blown out of proportion in the heat of the moment—”

“The way they acted… the things they said, chavi—they were beyond cruel. And for them to have done it knowing she was sick… that is something I will never be able to forgive. Night after night I held her while she sobbed, feeling her body grow thinner and thinner as she wasted away—you cannot understand how helpless that makes a man feel. No matter how much I wanted to, for the first time in our lives I couldn’t give her what she wanted. I couldn’t help her, or ease the sorrow that gnawed at her soul. Do you know they did not even show up at the funeral? They did not have the decency to mourn the woman who gave them life and loved them with all her heart.”

“People mourn in different ways, sir,” I said softly. “Pietro and I… we focused on our anger—it has helped us get through everything and stay strong. Perhaps that is what your children did as well.”
“They were angry long before she died—”

“Anger can be very helpful—it is a multifaceted emotion. It is very useful for hiding behind, yes? I do not know what happened with your children—it is not my business—but I know for me… it was far easier to let my rage burn than to have to face my fears.”

“Fear of being separated from your brother?”

“Mhmm… among other things. Anger kept the nightmares away. It helped me forget what it felt like being trapped underneath all the rubble. It burned away the memory of staring at the shell, waiting for it to blow Pietro and I into tiny pieces.”

He stopped walking, his brow furrowed as he turned to face me, his dark eyes searching my face. “The shell that killed your parents?”

I shook my head. “No—that was the first one. A second hit a minute later—Pietro… his quick thinking saved us both. He rolled us under the bed in an attempt to protect us from the blast, but it didn’t go off. We were trapped for two days with it right there beside us… just waiting for it to explode and kill us.” My voice trembled, but I focused on the accursed name imprinted on the weapon to rouse the heat of my anger, burning away all the terror the memory evoked. “We watched our parents die… then we waited to join them.”

“I am sorry chavi… I had no idea—”

“It is in the past… my point is that you should consider the possible motives behind your children’s actions before you write them off completely. I am sure your wife would want you to keep trying—if you find a way to mend things with them… I think it would give her soul the peace she wasn’t able to achieve before she died.”

“Maybe you are right… but they have to bend a little too.” He started walking again, glancing over at me from time to time—studying me like I was a puzzle that needed solving. It made me feel even more anxious—not a good thing, considering I was already a bundle of nerves at being away from my twin.

Before we’d gone a dozen blocks, I snapped, losing my patience. “What? Why do you keep staring at me?”

“I’m sorry… I didn’t mean to make you uncomfortable—”

“You’re staring at me like I’m a lab specimen or something—”

“You’re just… a very complex girl, Wanda.” He averted his eyes to the ground.

“’I am not!’

“You are—for one thing… you are normally very outspoken, yet in the shop you seemed almost withdrawn—”

“There is nothing complex about that at all—she caught me shoplifting once. I was afraid she would recognize me and remember what happened that day.”

“Ah… I see.”

Something about his tone angered me—it seemed almost chastising. “No—you don’t. Her husband caught us rifling through the dumpster behind the store—after that he started pouring bleach on the
trash when he dumped it so we couldn’t eat what was inside. It was the first winter we spent on the streets and we didn’t have a good shelter—Pietro was sick… he needed to eat to keep his strength up, and that horrible man begrudged us eating his spoiled produce and moldy bread. I’d never stolen anything in my life before that… but he deserved it!”

“Wanda, calm down. I do not judge you for what you did… and you are right about her husband—he’s not a nice man. I’ve long suspected that he—”

The rest of his sentence was lost, drowned out by a rapid burst of loud, staccato pops that sounded from the intersection a few yards away. White hot pain exploded through the right side of my face—I shrieked, dropping the bags I held, clutching my cheek; the professor dropped his bags, tackling me to the ground.

“Stay down,” he growled, completely shielding me with his body.

I couldn’t speak—all that came out was a moan; warm wetness coated my palm—I couldn’t breathe. In that moment, despite the intense pain I felt, my thoughts weren’t of my own safety; my mind was full of regret that I would not get to see my twin again before I died. The longing I felt to be with him overrode the pain and terror—stronger than any emotion I’d ever felt.

No further shots were fired—in the distance the sound of approaching sirens could be heard. We laid there, barely breathing for several minutes—until the sirens roared down the street; the professor moved, cursing loudly as his eyes ran over me.

“Were you hit?” he pried my hand away from my face—I was shocked to see there was so much blood that it had soaked the cuff of my sweatshirt. His breath hissed out as he glanced around, his voice a low, rumbly sound that was hard to hear over the ringing in my ears. “Ricochet—it must have been a piece of stone.”

“The soldiers?” I closed my eyes as he pressed his handkerchief against my cheek, trying not to wince.

“No. Rabble rousers, I think—trying to stir up a rebellion of some sort. The fools haven’t learned that peaceful protests make more of an impact than guns.” He moved the material away from my cheek, tilting my chin up to peer intently at the wound. “It’s not deep—I think stitching it up would leave more of a scar than if we applied a butterfly bandage or two. Unless you’d prefer I take you to the hospital—”

“No—I just need to see my brother. Please.” I tried to stop trembling—afraid he would insist on the hospital if I didn’t get it under control. “I want to go home.”

He looked surprised—his frown slowly fading. “Then that is where we will go. Home. Though I might just drop you off on the doorstep and go hide myself in your basement—I think your brother will be very angry that I am bringing you back injured.”

“If he even cares at all,” I muttered as he helped me to my feet, holding his handkerchief against my cheek in an attempt to stop the bleeding. Though I knew it was childish of me, I couldn’t help but wonder had something far worse happened to me, would Pietro have regretted not telling me he loved me before I’d walked out the door?

“Don’t be ridiculous,” he said, gathering up the bags—waving me off as I bent to help him. “If I were to hazard a guess I would say he cares too much…but I do not judge him for that—it would be extremely hypocritical if I did.”
I shot him a questioning look—he ignored it. This time, I refused to let him off the hook. “I would think it was impossible for siblings to care too much. Surely it is a good thing to care about family more than anything.”

“You are right, of course. Family should always come first, second only to God above,” he responded. He seemed on the verge of saying more, but refrained. The mysterious, unspoken words hung between us, taunting me.

I persisted. “So how can he care too much?”

He sighed. “No matter how intelligent you are… you are still a child in many ways. There are things that I cannot discuss with you—this is one of them.”

“That’s not fair! You can’t—”

“Was it fair for your parents to be killed, leaving you homeless and destitute? Fair that my beloved sister died before me, leaving me here all alone?” His voice was harsh—sharp and biting, like the crack of a whip. “Life is not fair, Wanda—you of all people should know that. The world doesn’t care about fairness in the slightest—when you realize that, and understand it… then you will be mature enough for the answer.”

I slowed my steps, lagging behind him—feeling foolish for saying something so childish in rebuttal; he glanced over his shoulder at me, his expression one of remorse. “I’m sorry, chavi—I should not have spoken to you in that manner. You did not deserve it—”

“I did… I’m sorry for pestering you,” I mumbled, still dragging my feet.

“You were not pestering me… you are naturally curious—that is a good thing. It’s just hard for me to talk about some things—much like your brother, I would like to spare you from as much of the world’s cruelty as I can.”

I nodded, standing up straighter—lengthening my stride to catch up. “I’m sorry that you lost her. I can’t imagine what life would be like without Pietro—I think I would surely die too.”

“I wanted to—” he murmured, “—I tried to. I stretched out beside her and vowed I would not get up again. When they came to take her body, I fought them—I escaped being arrested for assault because they knew I was grieving. The day they put her in the ground… I lost my mind completely. I was on the verge of taking my own life... but I swear to you, I felt her whispering through my mind. She reminded me that if I committed suicide I would not be allowed to join her in Paradise. The threat of never being with her again stilled my hand.”

I tried to mask my reaction, not wanting him to see how disturbed I was by his words; his suffering was far greater than I’d imagined—and no matter how much I might want to help him, there was no way I could ever hope to ease the heavy weight of sorrow that he carried.

“I’m sorry… I shouldn’t have said that. You certainly don’t need to hear such a thing—”

“You were being honest,” I said softly. “Personally, I would rather hear the truth, no matter how harsh might be—and I appreciate that you chose to confide such a thing to me.”

He grunted in response, quickening his pace.

I tried to keep up at first, but his legs were far too long; eventually I fell behind, watching him as we walked—pondering his situation. I was slowly starting to see that in taking my brother and I under his wing, the old man was trying to reclaim a bit of what he’d lost. I wondered if deep down he saw
Pietro and I as representations of the grandchildren he’d never seen. The thought of such a thing probably should have bothered me, but in truth, it didn’t; my brother and I had never met our grandparents—they’d died long before we were born—so in a way, we were being given the chance to experience something we’d always longed for too.

Ahead of me, the large broad body suddenly veered to the left—an unexpected detour since we needed to go straight to reach his home. “Hey! Where are you going?”

He stopped, glancing back at me—looking startled at how far I’d fallen behind. “Wanda! You should have told me to slow down!”

“It doesn’t matter—I’m used to being small. Why did you turn—”

“You need to return Pietro’s old watch before he discovers it is gone, yes? And we need to drop off your portion of the groceries—it makes no sense to carry them all the way to my house when you’ll have to just bring them back again.”

I stared at him, trying to fight back my initial impulse—which was to flat out refuse. The plain simple truth was that we needed food—if he wanted to help, accepting them graciously was the proper thing to do. I needed to quit fighting against his generosity and allow him the pleasure of treating us the way he would treat his kin. “Okay.”

“Just like that? No arguments?” He asked, looking surprised.

I shrugged. “Correct me if I am wrong, but the way I see it… you seem to have taken on the role of surrogate grandfather for Pietro and me, yes?”

His cheeks flushed. “Well… yes, I suppose you could say that—”

“And these things you are doing… helping us out… it makes you feel good?”

He looked wary—like it was a trick question. “It does…very much.”

“Then the kindest thing I can do is accept your help, Professor. To do otherwise would make me a foolish, ungrateful girl.” I hastened my steps, catching up to him—pointedly ignoring the beaming smile he shot me. “As long as you don’t go overboard, I promise I will not argue about your helping us—but if that happens, all bets are off.”

“Hmmm… well what exactly is your definition of overboard, chavi?”

I thought about it a moment. “Anything that is not an absolute necessity.”

He smiled—rather slyly. “That is acceptable—mind you… people’s ideas of what is necessary can vary quite a bit.”

“Whatever you are contemplating… don’t,” I said, pointing towards the front door. “I suppose I’ll have to let you in again, though I hate to reward you for being sneaky.”

He rolled his eyes, chuckling. “I was not sneaky at all—you simply fell for my excuses. I abhor potato chips—I cannot stand the grease they leave on my fingers.”

I scowled ferociously as I stormed off, fleeing from his smug amusement at having fooled me so completely.

My sour disposition did not improve once we were inside the house; I watched with dismay as he
unloaded what he’d bought us, regretting my promise not to argue. For a smart man, the Professor seemed to have no common sense. We had no way to store milk or eggs—even as cold as it was in the basement, they would spoil far too fast. The potato chips and crackers were good choices—but we had no way of opening the canned soups or tinned meats.

“Professor… in the future perhaps you could just stick to things that are non-perishable… we have no way of storing things like milk—”

“I’m sure you’re safe enough using the refrigerator I saw upstairs—”

“There’s no electricity,” I pointed out. “It doesn’t work.”

He stared at me for a moment, looking confused. “I… didn’t think of that.”

“And the canned items… they are a good idea… but we have no can opener.”

He sighed. “It would be much simpler if the two of you just moved—”

“No. Please do not mention it again.” I began shoving things in our cooler, returning the milk and eggs to the bags containing his groceries. “I appreciate your helping us, but we will not move into your home.”

He watched me in silence, not speaking until I’d finished with the groceries. “I have a hand opener at home that you can have.”

I moved across the room, returning Pietro’s watch to the box and depositing my new skirt and blouse to our stack of clothing. “Thank you. I can heat soup easily enough over the fire—it is a good, filling meal.”

“I didn’t mean to try and force you to—”

“I know, but I am sure that deep down you must understand… this is our home. It is the first place we’ve really made ours.”

He nodded slowly, perhaps finally grasping that our basement home actually represented something important to us. “I promise I will not bring it up again.”

As I escorted him back through the house and locked the door behind him, I couldn’t help but speculate over the obvious—wondering how long it would be before he slipped up and mentioned moving again. He was stubborn, and determined—just like me; I had no doubt that he would have as much trouble keeping his promise as I was having with mine.

Had I been thinking more clearly, I would have taken the time to change my bloodstained sweatshirt and wash my face thoroughly before we set out again—but as it was, the notion escaped me. There were far too many things going on in my head for me to spare a thought for myself or my appearance—as a result, I believe I gave Pietro the fright of his life.

The first thing I spotted when we turned down the street was his familiar figure; he was sitting on the front porch of the old man’s house, head buried in his knees. I could feel the faintest prickle of his anxiety brushing against my own; he sensed mine too—his head jerked up, his eyes widening as he spotted me. Instantly, terror slammed into me—so strong it made me stumble; he bolted to his feet, sprinting towards me—pulling me into his arms.

“I felt it! Felt how scared you were… then it just vanished—” his voice broke; he buried his face in my hair, his body trembling as he clung to me. “—I thought…”
“I’m okay,” I whispered, hugging him back. “It just bled a lot.”

He pulled back, his eyes sweeping over my face—fingers gently grazing along the edge of the wound. “What happened?”

“Ricochet—” the professor said, moving past us. “—from the building we were standing next to.”

Pietro spun around, bristling with anger. “You were supposed to watch out for her! I trusted you—”

“Pietro… he did. He threw himself on top of me to protect me from the bullets,” I murmured, reaching out to lace my fingers through his—trying to diffuse his anger.

“He… what?” His eyes flicked from the old man to me. “Really?”

I nodded. “He didn’t even hesitate—as soon as the shots started he tackled me. “

His anger eased back; he followed after the old man, tugging me along. “Professor… thank you—”

“Think nothing of it son. If you will take these into the kitchen, I can clean up that wound.” He held out the bags—Pietro hesitated for a moment before releasing my hand and moving to take them.

“While you’re in there, fetch some ice—wrap it in a dishcloth, they’re in the drawer by the sink.”

I allowed him to steer me down the hall, thinking he was leading me to the bathroom, but to my surprise he walked right past it, opening the next door down. “You can rest in here—”

“I don’t want to rest—I need to get to work,” I protested as he gently pushed me into the room.

“You need to ice that cheek—it’s already swelling.” Hovering by the door, I watched as he cranked open the window a few inches. “I am sorry it is so musty—this room has not been used for a very long time.”

I hesitated, reluctant to move further into the room; it felt strange—like I was invading someone’s private space. “I could just as easily ice it sitting at the table while Pietro finishes his test—”

“As if he could finish it while fretting about you? He can do it later—after you’ve rested. I will be right back—by the time I return you had best be stretched out on the bed.”

I sighed, my eyes wandering around the room; it was obvious it belonged to a girl—cosmetics were scattered across the top of the dresser, almost obscured by a thick layer of dust, and the window seat was full of long discarded stuffed animals that were just as coated with grime. I walked over to the bed, grabbing hold of the quilt that covered it—giving it a hard shake; it was a mistake—immediately I started coughing on all the dust I’d stirred up.

“I would have brought you another cover, chavi,” the old man said, reentering with a small first aid kit in his hands.

“Your daughter’s room?” I asked softly as I sank down on the bed.

He nodded. “I have not been in here since the day her brother took her to the states. My wife cleaned it for a while—hoping she would come back to us—but eventually… she stopped.”

“I’m sorry—”

“Stop apologizing child—it happened a very long time ago.” He set the kit on the nightstand, rifling through it.
I eyed him as he ripped open a small packet, pulling out a tiny white square. “What is that?”

“Antiseptic wipe—we need to make sure it doesn’t get infected. This will probably sting—” I bit my lip as he swiped it along the wound—it burned like fire. “All right… now try not to move around too much while I put the bandages on—I need to get them straight. Some people call these ‘butterfly stitches’ because they hold the wound closed like a stich would do—but there is much less chance of scarring.”

Pietro appeared behind him, hovering over his shoulder—watching carefully as the old man smoothed the bandages along my cheek. I focused on his presence to take my mind off the pain, watching as his eyes flicked away from me , sweeping around the room. He was just as observant as me, taking everything in—but unlike me, he kept his curiosity tightly leashed, not asking questions. I admired that ability—in fact, I often wished I possessed it—but I was cursed with an empathetic nature that made it impossible for me to hold my tongue. Pietro wouldn’t pick up on the sadness our employer tried to hide away; for me, it was impossible to ignore—I could practically sense it surrounding the old man like a shroud.

“There—that should do it. Mark my words—by the time we take those off you will be good as new.”

Without a word, my brother squeezed past the old man, plopping down beside me; as he leaned back against the wall, I automatically shifted, sliding myself underneath his outstretched arm. Pressing the makeshift icepack against my cheek, he frowned when I winced. “Does it hurt much?”

“Terribly—the whole side of my face aches,” I mumbled.

“I trust you will make sure she rests a bit while I put the groceries away?” The old man didn’t wait for an answer—he smiled at us fondly as he left, pulling the door partially closed behind him.

“This room is like a shrine or something,” Pietro muttered, resting his head against mine.

I cuddled against him, closing my eyes. “I know… it feels weird being in here—like we’re trespassing on a ghost or something.”

“I wonder what happened… to make his kids turn against him, I mean. He’s hardly a tyrant—not the type to be overly harsh or cruel.”

“It’s not our business… you know what Mama would say—curiosity killed the cat.” I sighed; the ice actually seemed to be making my cheek throb even more, but I wasn’t about to admit it—snuggling with him more than made up for the extra pain.

“Still… I could see doing something that upset one of them, but all three?”

“How do you know there are three?”

“The picture—didn’t you notice it? “ He nodded towards the nightstand. “See—three of them.”

I reached over, grabbing the photograph—pulling it over into my lap as I studied the three smiling faces; their resemblance to their father was obvious—the two boys looked exactly like him, and the girl had his deep, expressive eyes and full, pouty lips. “They look happy…”

“Mhmm. Who’d have thought the professor would have such a cute daughter?”

I tensed at the comment; hearing him say such a thing made my stomach tighten in a very unpleasant way—I didn’t like it one little bit. “It’s a very old picture—she’s got to be older than mama by now.”
“True—but she could have a cute daughter,” he pointed out.

I scowled, dropping the picture on the nightstand before I lost control and smacked him with it. Scooting down, I rolled over to face the window—presenting him with my back; it seemed the prudent thing to do since anything I said would be decidedly unfriendly.

Ignoring the obvious hint that I was irritated by what he’d said, he scooted down too, wrapping his arm around my waist and snuggling up against my back. “I’m sorry.”

“For?” I bit my lip, hoping he didn’t notice how prickly I sounded.

“Not being there to protect you today. I should have been… I’m supposed to keep you safe.”

I didn’t answer—I was trying to stifle the urge to wound him the same way he’d inadvertently wounded me; though I tried my best to resist, my hurt feelings made it impossible to let the opportunity slip by. “You could avoid the burden of having to look out for me all the time, you know. It could very easily be made someone else’s problem.”

His whole body tensed. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Apparently I’m old enough to have a match made now. The professor introduced me to one of his friends today—the man wants to pair me up with his nephew.”

His arm tightened around me. “You are way to young for anything like that! The professor has no business—”

“He said the same thing,” I admitted quickly—not wanting him to confront the old man with what I’d said. “But the fact of the matter remains that if I were to agree to such a thing, you wouldn’t have to look out for me anymore—”

“The hell I wouldn’t!” He sat up, sounding absolutely furious. “I can’t believe you would even consider—”

“It would certainly leave you time to spend with cute girls,” I snapped, unable to hold it in any longer. “And you certainly can’t blame me for thinking such a thing—not with the way you’ve been acting!”

“I haven’t been acting any way, Wanda—you’re the one who keeps having mood swings,” he snapped back, scowling as he stood up and stalked towards the door. “You say one thing then change your mind then pretend it didn’t happen!”

My anger flared in response to his. “Well then I guess it’s too bad it was only ricochet that hit me today—if I’d gotten shot you wouldn’t have to worry about me or my moods any longer!”

He froze in the doorway, his shoulders stiff with tension. When he spoke, his voice was practically a growl—his fury was a palpable, terrifying thing. “The fact that you would think such a thing—let alone say it to me—knowing how I feel for you… proves exactly what I mean.”

Remorse for what I’d said formed a lump in my throat—I wanted to take it back, to erase the trouble I’d stirred. “Pietro—”

Before I could choke out an apology, the door slammed behind him—cutting me off.
This took longer to get up than I originally estimated, for a couple of reasons, but I won't bore you with the personal stuff—I'll just give the main one. What was originally about 4,500 words in my handwritten notes turned into 16,209 when I actually sat down to type it up. Wanda kept adding things—I couldn't shut her up.

The edit on this was super fast and extremely rough since I wanted to get it up tonight—and I didn't want to add more to it, which tends to happen when I edit, lol. Hope you enjoy it, and as always, thanks for the comments and kudos—they mean more than you'll ever know. I'll try to respond to the most recent ones before the night is up. ;o)
MY MOTHER ONCE TOLD ME that tears were precious things—brewed of pure emotion, they were as unique and individual as snowflakes, each one shed more priceless than all the gold in a sultan’s treasure. It’s a pity that wasn’t true, for the ocean of tears I shed would have certainly made me a zillionaire. I do not know how long I cried; it felt like hours—it’s funny how time seems to pass so slowly when you are drowning in grief. My tears were mercurial things—governed by the moodiness than had taken over my life, seasoned with anger and bitterness, with a dash of absolute misery thrown in for good measure.

Pietro… was right—at least partly; I could acknowledge the part I’d played in the problem, and own it, but that didn’t magically diminish the turmoil between us—and it didn’t automatically absolve him of guilt either. He wasn’t totally innocent—he’d played a part in creating the problem too. He could claim I knew how he felt, but how could I know such a thing when he refused to talk to me about what was going on?

One thing was obvious—my attempt to retract my statement and act like nothing had changed between us wasn’t working, and our ridiculous quarrelling certainly wasn’t accomplishing anything either. For the first time in my life, my emotions had gained the upper hand; I couldn’t access my ability to step outside the box and logically analyze how to proceed—the way I was feeling overpowered my ability to think rationally.

I buried my face in the musty smelling pillow as an all too familiar feeling joined the turmoil churning inside me. I wanted Mama back—I wanted her beside me, stroking my hair and telling me how to fix the damage I’d caused. She’d been the backbone of our family—always able to smooth ruffled feathers with nothing more than a few soft spoken words. My father—like Pietro—had an impulsive, stubborn streak; he was quick to anger, though it never lingered—and it was never directed at our family. Papa would explode and rant about the fighting in the streets, or the fact he was severely underpaid for the hard work he did, eventually lapsing into silence to stew about the things that bothered him—it was a trait that I was beginning to realize my brother had inherited.

When Papa was like that, there was only one thing that could chase away his mood; Mama would sink down on the arm of his chair, leaning over to whisper in his ear—I don’t know what she said to him, but it always made his cheeks flush bright red. Within minutes, her kisses and cuddles would win him over, vanquishing his anger completely. I couldn’t do that—I was fairly certain if I did, it would only make the situation worse. However, thinking about my mother brought to mind a piece of wisdom she often spouted—one that she used more than once on Pietro when he was in a snit: ‘the difference between a wise man and a fool is this—one stubbornly refuses to listen while the other chooses to hear’. It wasn’t much, but at least it was something I could use—hopefully to my advantage.

Decision made, I sat up, scrubbing my face with my palms, then I went to find my brother.

I stumbled across the professor first—he was sitting in the same chair he’d occupied while administering our tests, but Pietro wasn’t there. I started to turn away from the door, prepared to look elsewhere, but the old man looked up and smiled, halting me in my tracks.

“Wanda… I certainly hope that doesn’t feel as bad as it looks—you have a nasty bruise forming.”

I shrugged. “It still hurts… but I can deal with it. Where—”

“Come—look at this. He finished his test… the results are rather surprising—”
“How many did he miss?” I moved closer, glancing down at the papers in his hand.

“That’s the interesting thing. He answered 22 questions incorrectly, but if you look closely at the ones I circled, you’ll see that he initially marked the correct answer but then erased it, changing his answer to the wrong one instead—”

“I told you—he has trouble concentrating. It makes him second guess himself.”

“I wasn’t finished speaking, chavi—you interrupted me.” He chastised me gently, turning the page. “If we ignore the ones where he changed the answer… the only ones he actually got wrong happen to be the same ones you missed.”

I didn’t see the relevance. “So?”

“I would wager that your brother’s IQ is probably comparable to yours—he simply couldn’t focus when they tested him.”

“Do you think I don’t know this? That’s why I have been trying to work with him—why I want him to go to University. He is far too smart to become a tradesman—he is meant for better things. At our school… our teachers weren’t exactly willing to give him extra help. Every year they kept insisting he should be medicated, but Mama and Papa refused—they didn’t like giving us anything other than aspirin unless we were really sick.”

“I can’t say I disagree—some of the drugs they prescribe can have very nasty side effects.” He laid the test down, stacking it neatly with mine. “I think it is safe to assume that you feel he still needs to study?”

“Yes—he missed out on a lot when we were in school, and he doesn’t like reading the way I do.”

“Then I will make up a lesson plan tonight—I trust you will be willing to assist me in working with him? Since you know what he responds to best?”

“Of course. We just need to make it interesting… and entertaining.” I chewed on the corner of my lip, glancing towards the door. “I need to talk to him before I get to work…”

“He’s in the basement… he seems to enjoy organizing things quite a bit—I suppose it is yet another thing you have in common, yes?” His lips twitched up in a smile, but his expression was anything but happy—he looked melancholic, as if something about his statement made him sad. “Yuliana and I were very different than the two of you in that aspect. We did not share many of the same traits… and I am beginning to see that the bond you share with your brother is much stronger than the one we had. I suppose that is because there are only two of you—we had other siblings that were always vying for our attention and time.”

“I do not think I would like that very much… sharing Pietro with others, I mean. I suppose that sounds very selfish, doesn’t it?”

“Not really… I think it is only natural since all you have had is each other for such a long time. You are two separate people… but you are very much a unit—I can see it in the way you move… hear it in the way you speak—”

“What—”

“You mirror each other, without even realizing you are doing it. It is really rather fascinating—to the best of my knowledge, Yuliana and I never did such a thing. And the way you gravitate towards each other… it’s like watching a magnet and iron filings as they slowly draw together.”
“We have always been like that—I don’t see what is so fascinating about it.”

“Perhaps because you are used to it.” He leaned back in his chair, studying me intently. “What he said outside… about feeling how scared you were… does that happen often?”

I frowned. “Couldn’t you sense what your sister felt?”

“Sometimes… but again, I suspect it wasn’t quite the same thing as what you are experiencing.”

“I… it is always there, though sometimes it is nothing more than a… well… a faint buzz in the back of my head. It grows stronger when our emotions do,” I said softly, chewing on my thumbnail.

“Interesting…” He reached up, gently tugging my hand away from my mouth. “Wanda… you realize that as you get older… you will have to come to terms with not wanting to share your brother’s attentions and affections. Right now it is just the two of you, but as time goes by, you will have to overcome it. Part of growing up is growing away from each other. Someday you will both meet someone special and—”

“Is that what happened to you and Yuliana?” His words reawakened the strange unease in my stomach; it was an empty feeling, like someone had scooped out my insides and left me an empty shell.

“As I said before… Yuliana and I were different than you and Pietro. Different than most twins, in certain ways.”

“How so?”

“Ah… that is a long, complicated discussion—one best left for another day. Run along and talk to your brother while I put the room back in order, then perhaps after you patch things up we can throw something together for a late lunch.”

I bristled. “Did Pietro say something to you about our… discussion?”

“I believe you mean disagreement, chavi— he did not… other than to inform me that my matchmaking skills were not needed or appreciated.”

My cheeks heated. “I told him you said I was too young—”

“Judging by his reaction to the mere thought, I sincerely hope you did not plan on finding a husband before you are at least thirty—” he said, wryly, “—otherwise, you will be very disappointed.”

“Perhaps I am meant for a life of single blessedness,” I said as I turned away, “that would certainly solve a lot of problems, I think.”

His laughter followed me, echoing down the hall, but my own mood was far from amused; I did not like the wisdom the old man had offered in the slightest—the thought of Pietro falling in love with someone else made something deep inside my chest tighten painfully. I fought against the surge of irrational jealousy, shoving it aside as I entered the basement; I’d examine my feelings more thoroughly later—I didn’t want Pietro to sense them when he was in such a mood.

Descending the stairs, I was purposefully noisy, my loud footfalls giving him plenty of warning; it wouldn’t be smart to blindside him—with him acting so prickly, surprising him was the worst thing I could do. He sat on the floor, surrounded by books, neatly lining them up as he alphabetized the spines. I cleared my throat, pausing a few feet away, but he didn’t turn around to look at me.
“Pietro… I need to speak with you—”

“I don’t want to talk,” he muttered, “how many times do I have to say it?”

“Do you remember what Mama used to say to you—about the difference between foolish and wise? I promise you do not have to talk… I just want you to listen.” I leaned against the desk, crossing my arms over my chest. “Though I would greatly appreciate it if you would look at me while I’m speaking to you—or is that too much to ask?”

Heaving an overly dramatic sigh, he turned his head towards me; his brow wrinkled with worry as his eyes flicked to my cheek. “Does it—”

“That doesn’t matter right now,” I said, brushing off his concern. “What matters is the way we’ve been acting.”

He bristled. “I haven’t—”

“Pietro—please! Just listen. This is hard for me, so please, let me get it out, okay?” I waited until he nodded before continuing. “I admit I haven’t been myself lately, but you haven’t either. Over the last week… it’s like we’ve completely changed. I know a lot of that is because of the stupid things I said…and I am truly sorry it upset you and made you uncomfortable. I was… confused—the last thing in the world I wanted was to make you upset.” I ducked my head down, hiding behind my hair. “You said I’ve been saying one thing and doing another… but you are guilty of that too. You kissed me…. but then you started acting like you can’t stand to be around me anymore. It hurts… it really, really hurts— I feel like I am slowly losing the only person in the whole world that I care about… and it’s tearing me up inside.”

His turbulent emotions slammed into me, making it hard to think. “Wanda—”

“I’m not done.” I glanced up, frowning at him. “You said I know how you feel… but Pietro… I don’t anymore—this morning when I said I love you… you didn’t even say it back! Sometimes I think you are starting to hate me—”

“Don’t be stupid! I could never hate you—you’re a part of me. You’re more than just my sister… you’re my best friend.” He mumbled, cutting me off—rubbing his eyes wearily.

The gesture made my heart ache—it was one he’d often used when we were very young; I clenched my teeth, trying not to ask questions—if I did he would only get angry, since I’d promised he wouldn’t have to talk. Of course, he could sense the frustration that was welling up inside me; leaning back on his hands, he stared up at the ceiling, avoiding my eyes.

“I want to enjoy our birthday—I don’t want us quarrelling, Wanda. So… I will make a deal with you—if you will let all this go for now… I promise I will try and answer whatever questions you have after we celebrate, okay?”

I narrowed my eyes, regarding him suspiciously for a moment. “No matter what they’re about?”

“Yes… but you’ll have to do the same thing too,” he pointed out.

I rolled my eyes. “Fine, it’s not like I have anything to hide—”

“Not even about the ‘bug’ this morning?” He asked, sounding smug.

I dropped my eyes; sometimes my mouth is far too big for my own good. “I was half asleep… I might have still been dreaming—”
“We can discuss it *after* our birthday—just remember, you have to tell the *truth.*”

I huffed, spinning around and stalking towards the stairs before I said something else that might give him more ammunition against me. I was halfway to the door when he called out my name—I paused, glancing back over my shoulder; he was standing on the bottom step, looking contrite.

“I was distracted this morning…thinking about what the professor said to me. I’m sorry I didn’t tell you that I loved you back.”

“Do you?”

He snorted. “Yes—of course.”

I turned around to face him, leaning against the wall. “How?”

“How what?”

“How do you love me?”

His lips quirked up in a sly, teasing sort of grin that made my heart skip a beat. “Already breaking our agreement? No questions, remember?”

“You are perhaps the most frustrating boy in the whole, entire world, Pietro,” I huffed.

“Of course I am—but that is completely your fault.”

“Wha—how is it *my* fault?”

“You happen to be the most frustrating girl—as your twin, I have no choice but to match you.” He shrugged, flashing me another heart stopping grin.

I made a face. “I think you have that in reverse—”

“I most certainly don’t—everyone knows that girls are more frustrating than boys.” He ran his hand through his hair, shooting me a stern look. “Now go on—stop distracting me. I need to finish the books.”

“I was leaving! I hardly think my climbing the stairs is a—”

“Trust me—it is.”

“Fine—go back to your book shelving. Who’s stopping you?” I teased, tossing back my hair as I turned, sashaying up the remaining stairs; when I reached the top, I couldn’t help but glance back over my shoulder—he was still standing in the exact same spot, staring up at me.

I watched his tongue slipped out, swiping across his lips; seeing that… seeing the look on his face… it did things to me—made me feel something that was hard to understand. I was slowly getting used to the fluttery, tight feeling in my stomach—but this was so much more than that; the physical sensations were there, of course, but this new feeling… it was almost *mental.* The out of control, hopeless feeling that had been plaguing me vanished completely, replaced by a surge of self-assurance; in that moment, I felt like anything was possible—as if I could conquer the whole entire world—just because of the look on his face.

His gaze moved up, automatically locking with mine; I smiled at him—the slow sort of teasing grin that he often gave me. He blushed, tearing his eyes away from mine, quickly turning away. His abrupt dismissal didn’t upset me—I was in far too good a mood to let anything bring me down. By
the time I got to the kitchen and started pulling things out of the refrigerator, I was actually humming a happy tune.

It was a good thing I had cooking to keep me occupied—otherwise I might have been driven half mad anticipating the talk Pietro and I would soon be having. Though I wanted answers to the questions that plagued me, they weren’t nearly as important to me as the fact we’d be communicating again—talking things out, and in doing so, hopefully dispelling everything that was responsible for the discomfiting distance that had sprung up between us.

As I washed the vegetables off, I tried my best to focus on what I was doing; I couldn’t allow anything to distract me while preparing the meal. It had been three years since I’d helped mama in the kitchen—and even then, at ten years old, I’d been limited in what she had allowed me to do. It was a struggle to remember the ingredients and the way she’d carefully explained the best ways to use them—but thankfully, she’d been a very patient, thorough teacher. The time we spent together in the kitchen had been important to her; she’d been grooming me to be the best wife I could be—repeating the same lessons her mother had once taught her.

My task was made more difficult by the professor’s frequent interruptions; he kept wandering in, watching over my shoulder as I tried to work, making me very nervous. I almost cut myself several times while chopping things due to his presence.

“Did you lurk like a vulture when your wife cooked?” I glared at him as I added the diced vegetables to the butter I had warming in the pan.

“Sometimes. It is nice to have the kitchen used—hearing someone bustle about…it makes the house feel like a home again.”

I sighed; I could hardly snap at him when he said things like that, tugging at my heartstrings. “Well if you are going to be in here, you might as well help—stir this while I see to the beef.” I moved aside as he stepped up to take my place, watching him for a moment to make sure he knew what to do.

“No—you have to keep stirring so it all cooks evenly—”

“What is this that I am frying?”

“You are sautéing onions, bell peppers and celery. Mama put it in practically everything—she called it the holy trinity. It always made the apartment smell so good when she cooked it that Papa never once complained, even though he hated peppers.” I moved over to the counter to coat the stew meat in the spice-laced flour I’d prepared.

“What will the finished product be?”

“Saturday stew. It’s what we ate every Saturday before…” my voice trailed off—tears pricked my eyes. “Before we lost her.”

“I am sure she is proud of you, Wanda—proud of how well you look after your brother.”

I nodded, swiping at my eyes. “Whenever something seems impossible…I ask myself what she would do. No matter how tight money was or how bad things seemed, Mama never let it get her down. I try very hard to be like her.”

“I wish I had the pleasure of meeting her—she sounds like a remarkable woman.”

“She was—and she was very brave too. One time when we went to the market, a soldier harassed her in the street—calling out nasty, suggestive things. Do you know what she did? Marched right up to him and asked if he would dare say such things to a woman if his mother was there. He got all red
faced and tried to mumble out an apology, but she wasn’t having any of it—she said that if she ever heard him catcalling women again she would cut off his privates and mail them to his mother.”

He laughed so hard he started wheezing. “That is enough of a threat to reform even the worst of the Gadje scum.”

“That word… you use it a lot. What does it mean?” I shifted to toss the meat in with the vegetables he was stirring.

“Hmmm? Gadje? It is a broad term… one with many meanings—in essence, it simply means someone who is not one of the people.”

“So… it’s not an ugly word? Not racist?”

“Heavens no!” He looked shocked that I would think such a thing. “We use a word that calls them non-Roma—the things they call us is far, far worse, chavi, with horrible, cruel meanings. The word ‘Gypsy’ in and of itself is a racial slur—that is why I do not use it.”

“I did not know that,” I admitted, carting the stockpot over to the sink to fill it with water.

“Most people don’t—and they don’t realize the word ‘gipped’ plays on that racial slur either. All they know is it means to cheat someone, so they use it freely, not realizing it is offensive.”

I continued my preparations as he talked, adding tomato sauce and spices to the water—straining to carry the heavy pot over to the stove. Within a few minutes, the conversation faded away; he grew bored with the constant stirring—I’d anticipated he would. That was another trick I’d learned from my mother—put a man to work in the kitchen and within minutes, he will suddenly remember something important that requires his attention. I set the flame on the burner to low, leaving the stew to simmer as I quickly cleaned up the kitchen, moving on to tackle the disgustingly filthy bathroom down the hall.

It took almost two hours, but by the time I was finished, it was spotless; the fixtures gleamed, and there was no sign of soap scum anywhere in the room. I’d even scoured the tub, scrubbing it so thoroughly that it looked almost brand new. When it came to cleaning, I was in my element—taking care of a home was what mama had trained me to do.

I was sitting on the bathroom floor, taking a break and trying to decide what room I should tackle next when Pietro appeared in the doorway, his eyes wide with a hopeful expression on his face. “Is that smell what I think it is?”

“Bleach?”

He rolled his eyes. “The food smell, Wanda. Is it—”

“Your all-time favorite thing? “ I cocked my head to the side, raising my brows. “Come on Pietro—did you really think I’d make something else the first time I cooked? I’ve been listening to you moan for three years about how much you crave it—”

He let out a whoop of joy, reaching down to jerk me to my feet. The next thing I knew he hoisted me up in the air by my waist—I giggled as his excitement, clinging to his shoulders as he spun us around in a circle. “Does this mean you approve of the menu?”

“How long until we eat?” He demanded.

“It’s probably ready now—Pietro! Put me down!”
He ignored me, heading straight for the kitchen with his arms wrapped around my waist. “Can’t stop—not when Saturday stew is waiting!”

“You are being very silly,” I said fondly, resting my chin on the top of his head. “But I am glad you are so happy about it.”

The sound of metal clattering made me turn my head; the professor stood beside the stove. If the guilty look on his face hadn’t been enough to betray him, the spoon on the floor by his feet certainly would have given him away. “I… uh… was going to stir it for you.”

“A likely story,” I huffed—shooing him away from the stove as soon as my feet hit the ground. “You were going to sneak a taste—”

“I wasn’t! Well… maybe just a little one.”

“Go wash your hands—both of you. By the time you are back I will have the table set and ready.” I narrowed my eyes, prepared to stare them both down if they protested, but to my surprise, they didn’t—they hurried off, leaving me alone to finish my last minute preparations.

By the time they’d returned, the small table in the kitchen was set—each place had a bowl of stew waiting and a thick chunk of buttered bread. I hovered—ridiculously nervous; I wanted the old man to like it, of course—but more importantly, I hoped that it tasted enough like Mama’s stew to satisfy my brother’s cravings. Trying not to stare at Pietro, I watched as the old man took a taste, worrying my bottom lip with my teeth; his eyes widened, flicking from the bowl up to my face.

“It is Janija!”

I frowned. “Does that mean you like it?”

“Your Saturday stew…it’s real name is Janija—my mother used to make it when I was small. Yulina tried to duplicate it, but she never quite got it right. This…it is perfect chavi!”

“Janija,” I repeated, rolling the strange word around on my tongue. “I wonder why Mama didn’t call it that?”

“Perhaps she did not know the proper name—it is a Romani staple, passed down from mother to daughter. She carried on the tradition, teaching you how to make it.” He reached over, taking my hand—giving it a gentle squeeze. “Thank you for making it—you have no idea how happy I am to taste it again after all these years.”

I blushed, ducking my head down—finally allowing myself to take a seat; glancing over at Pietro I saw his dish was already almost half empty. “Pietro? Is it okay?”

“It is perfect—just like Mama’s,” he said, cramming another spoonful in his mouth.

“If you continue to prepare food like this, I think I will have to pay you more,” the old man said, dipping his bread into the stew. “My stomach will never forgive me if you decide to quit—you are an excellent cook.”

“Of course she is—Wanda is the best cook around. She even manages to make the scraps we find taste good,” Pietro boasted; the pride in his voice filled my heart to bursting.

“Well there is plenty more—I made enough to last a good while. You might get sick of it by the time it’s all gone.”
“Never—I could eat it every day for a million years and still want more.” Pietro grinned, sopping up the last of the stew with his bread. I started to rise—prepared to get him more, but he shook his head, standing up. “You eat—I can get it, Pietra.”

Hearing the nickname pleased me—it was almost like a sign that the pointless bickering between us was finally coming to an end. Hiding my smile behind my hair, I reached for my bread, and dug in.

I half expected the feeling of contentment to vanish when Pietro and the professor disappeared into the basement at the end of our meal; it didn’t though—it stayed with me for the rest of the day, growing stronger as I resumed my chores. As I dusted the pictures in the hallway and vacuumed the long carpet that ran the length of the hallway, I allowed my mind to wander—indulging in the sort of silly daydreams I’d often had as a child; I pretended I was fully grown and it was our house I was cleaning. I knew it was ridiculous—we would never be able to afford a fine home like the professor’s, but for the span of one single afternoon, I allowed my imagination to run free.

By the time the old man decided to call it a day, I’d completely cleaned the large living room, including moving the remaining stacks of books that were scattered about—lining them in neat stacks along the wall beside the basement door. I was still deeply ensnared in my game of pretend—thinking up names for children while I finished up polishing the dark wooden table in the dining room where we’d taken our test—so wrapped up in my thoughts that I was completely unaware I had an audience. If I’d known, I certainly wouldn’t have started trying the names out to see how they would sound.

“Pietra Mayra Maximoff… Mayra Pietra Maximoff…”

“The first one has a better flow—“

I gasped, spinning around—Pietro was leaning against the doorframe, watching me with a little half smile on his face; immediately I felt my cheeks flush, betraying my embarrassment. “Don’t sneak up on me like that! It scares me!”

“Are you planning on changing your name or something?” He asked—not at all offended by my snapping at him.

“No… I was daydreaming,” I murmured, gathering up the cleaning supplies I’d used.

He leaned his head against the doorjamb, watching me intently. “Children’s names?”

I shrugged. “Just something to pass the time while I worked.”

“And what name did you chose for a boy?”

“Pietro Django,” I muttered—mentally tacking a ‘junior’ on the end.

“Matching names… twins?”

“Of course—what else?”

“I don’t know, Wanda…it might not be safe. From what I’ve read, having twins is hard on the mother’s body—”

“I don’t care about that. I want twins—that’s what I will have,” I said, sounding more than a little bit stubborn, even to my own ears.

“But you’re probably not going to be as big as Mama was—”
“I might grow more—and height has nothing to do with anything. I think by the time I am ready to have children I will have the hips for it.” I argued; his eyes dropped lower—I could almost feel his gaze traveling down my body like a physical caress.

“Any particular reason you chose those names?”

“They happen to be my very favorites—and it is customary to name children after people you respect and admire… or after family members, yes?”

His brow wrinkled; the tiniest flicker of emotion flickered through him, prickling against my skin, but it vanished before I could lock on to exactly what it was.

“You’ve forgotten one thing,” he said, turning away—heading down the hall. “They won’t have your last name—they’ll have their fathers.”

I didn’t bother telling him he was wrong—I hadn’t forgotten any such thing; the simple truth of it was that the father I’d been thinking about already shared his last name with me.

In all honesty, I anticipated his good mood would vanish like a wisp of smoke after our exchange. In a way, I was right—the lighthearted teasing completely disappeared; he as almost somber as we took out leave from the old man and headed back home. He didn’t speak at all at first—he just stared down at the sidewalk, lost inside his own thoughts.

It was hard to fight against my natural urge to help him; automatically I wanted to do whatever I could to cheer him up and chase away his glum mood, but our recent disagreement was still far too fresh in my mind—I refused to do anything that might risk the fragile peace we’d reached between us. I was slowly learning that when it came to discussions that danced around prickly issues, I was ill prepared—I didn’t like the off kilter feeling of having to weigh my words for any possible offense they might cause before I spoke. It was far safer to hold my tongue and attempt to send him supportive feelings through our bond than to open my mouth and inadvertently start another fight.

“I’m going to regret making that deal, aren’t I?”

I glanced over at him quizzically. “Why do you say that?”

“You’re quiet… that means you’re thinking, Probably compiling a mental list ten feet long of things you want to ask me tomorrow, yes?”

“Really Pietro—” I scoffed, cutting him off; there was no way I was going to admit I’d been thinking about him, “—you make me sound pathetic. As if I don’t have anything better to occupy my mind other than thoughts of you and your secrets?”

I watched him out of the corner of my eye, trying not to smile when he scowled. “So… if you’re not making a list…. Why are you so quiet?”

“Perhaps I am thinking about your birthday present,” I replied, shooting him a teasing grin. “And the truth is… I already thought about all my questions earlier, while I was cooking.”

His sour expression faded, replaced by the barest hint of a pleased smile. “Are you going to give me a hint?”

“And the present… or the questions?”

“Either. Both.” He glanced over at me, his smile fading as his gaze dropped to my cheek.
Immediately, I was self-conscious; I ducked my head, my hair spilling over the swollen, bruised skin and the bandage that covered the laceration, hiding it from his view. “Hopefully it won’t scar.”

“It wouldn’t matter if it did—you would still be the prettiest girl in all of Novi Grad,” he said.

Hearing the hint of wistfulness in his voice made my heart speed up so fast that I felt almost light headed; I dared to sneak a peek at him—his cheeks were flushed bright red. “You’re hardly the most unbiased judge of such a thing… you have to say that since I’m your twin.”

“I wouldn’t say it if I didn’t think it was true—I don’t lie to you Wanda.” He hesitated a moment, hunching his shoulders forward—as if he was trying to make himself smaller, or to disappear. “If anything… I wasn’t completely truthful in saying that—I think you’re the most beautiful girl in the whole world. No matter how bad things get, the beauty of your soul shines through and makes everything better.”

I was left speechless—not just from his words, but also from the intensity of the emotions that surged between us. He truly meant what he’d said—every single word of it. “So… does that mean you think I am prettier than the professor’s daughter?”

He rolled his eyes, shooting me an exasperated look. “Of course—you completely misunderstood my meaning. She was cute… like a puppy, or a little kid—not cute as in I’d like to meet her.”

“Then why did you say she might have a daughter—”

“Because of your reaction when I said she was cute.” He dropped his head forward, hiding his face from me. “You got all… I don’t know… tense and prickly. It made me wonder…”

I waited thirty heartbeats, but he didn’t finish his sentence; reaching over, I brushed his hair back, tucking it behind his ear. “What did you wonder, Pietro?”

“If you were jealous,” he mumbled.

I answered honestly—he deserved the truth. “Yes… I was.”

“Why?” He turned his head, blue eyes locking with mine.

“You know why.” It was a whisper; the conversation was straying into a very volatile dangerous place—I didn’t want to step on a land mine.

His hand brushed mine, fingers searching—sliding in between mine as they entwined. “Maybe I want to hear you say it…”

My mouth was as dry as parchment—I tried to swallow, but my throat refused to work. “Ask me again tomorrow when we have our talk—that way you’ll know I’m being truthful.”

His jaw tensed; for a moment, I thought he was going to argue, but he remained silent, dropping his eyes from mine.

I frowned when he chuckled a few minutes later—it wasn’t a happy sound. “What?”

“I never thought anything could be harder than living on the streets… I was wrong.” His hand tightened—the pad of his thumb brushing along the back of my hand. “Trying to ignore my heart is the hardest thing I have ever done.”

I held my breath, fighting against the surge of hope that flared up in my chest—terrified to let it grow
too strong. When I spoke, my voice was soft and gentle, not betraying how strongly his words affected me. “Mama would say that’s a sign you should stop ignoring it and listen to what it has to say.”

He didn’t respond—in fact, we didn’t speak the rest of the way home—but the distance between our bodies slowly lessened, our arms brushing when we moved. Every step we took, the hope inside me grew, but I refused to loosen the reins—determined to be cautious with my tender, fragile heart until after we’d had our talk.

When I slept that night, my dreams were far from pleasant; Nightmares plagued me, filling my mind with haunting images of losing my brother and being left all alone. Even in sleep, Pietro and my happily ever after eluded me—drifting further and further out of my reach.
“WANDA…WAKE UP.” Pietro’s fingers danced along my side, tickling me.

Ignoring his impatient sounding voice, I rolled over, but those evil, persistent fingers poked me in the ribs. I groaned, attempting to pull the blanket over my head—it was far too early for Pietro to be so energetic. He’d fallen asleep before me—fingers laced tightly through mine—but I’d lain awake for hours, enjoying the way it felt to have our palms pressed together.

“Pietro—stop! I’m tired!”

He huffed. “You’re going to sleep our whole birthday away!”

“Our birthday doesn’t officially start until ten thirty nine tonight!”

“No—my birthday starts at ten thirty nine, yours doesn’t start until ten fifty one,” he said with smug superiority.

I pulled the cover off my head, glaring at him—grouchy from my lack of sleep. “Don’t you ever get tired of reminding me you are older?”

“No—why should it?” Grinning, he scooted closer to me—jerking the covers away before I could hide beneath them. “Seriously… get up! Do you want me to be miserable and lonely all morning?”

I opened my mouth to protest, but it turned into a massive yawn. “Five more minutes? Please?”

“No—you won’t wake up for hours. Come on—don’t make me tickle you again…”

“Fine! I’m awake! See?” I forced my eyes to open as wide as possible; he chuckled at my expression.

“Good… now what do you want to do today?” He played with a strand of my hair, brushing it against my cheek.

I arched my back, stretching—fighting against the overwhelming desire to fall back asleep. “I don’t know… what do you—”

“Ohhh no! I asked you first. Tonight… there is something I want to do… so it is only fair that we do what you want during the day.”

I eyed him suspiciously. “What are you up to?”

“We are going to dinner—in a restaurant,” he said proudly. “I thought it would be nice to celebrate it the way we used to, now that we are earning wages.”

I rolled over to face him, threading my fingers through his—my memories overwhelming me. Eating out on our birthday had been a tradition our parents always insisted on, even when money was tight. Papa would pull double shifts for several weeks, just to earn enough to treat us to dinner and buy us each a special gift. “I think that is a lovely idea, Pietro. And it will be honoring their memory, too.”

He looked relieved, as if he’d somehow imagined I wouldn’t like the idea. “That’s sort of what I
thought… it will be like they are still with us in spirit. But we have hours and hours before then… so what do you want to do?”

Several suggestions sprang to mind, but since they all revolved around cuddling and kissing, I held my tongue; I refused to risk him turning into a grouch when he was in such a splendid mood. “The only thing I really care about doing is having that talk you promised—”

“Later—” he made a face. “—after dinner.”

Rolling my eyes, I sighed—most of the things that we’d usually occupy ourselves with were things he wouldn’t want to do on our birthday—like studying—or things we no longer needed to do now that the professor was helping us out. “Maybe… if the weather is nice… we could spend the day outside? You know… cleaning up the garden and getting it ready for planting?”

His face scrunched up as he contemplated the idea. “It would be nice to have it already done and waiting… but we don’t really have what we need, do we? We need tools and stuff to do it properly.”

“We could see if the professor has any,” I offered hesitantly. “He said he wanted to show you how to fix the window… maybe he could do it today, if you wanted to.”

His eyes lit up with excitement at the prospect of carpentry. “I don’t mind—he and I can do that first.”

I couldn’t help but smile at his enthusiasm. “I knew you’d like that idea.”

“I can run and ask him—I need to go over there anyway, since I left your present there for safekeeping.”

Giggling, I reached over, tickling his stomach. “I left yours with him too—I didn’t want you snooping.”

“I don’t snoop!” He huffed indignantly, latching on to my wrist to keep my wiggling fingers at bay.

“Clearly you do—you read my list when I told you to forget about it!” I slid my other hand between us, catching him off guard as my fingers tickled his armpit.

“That was about me—it doesn’t count as snooping! You’re the one being nosy about everything that goes on in my head!” He snapped.

I stopped trying to tickle him, jerking my hand back—stung by the accusation. “Pietro… I was only kidding.”

“It didn’t sound that way,” he growled, “you made it sound like I did something wrong… something dirty.”

He sat up abruptly, moving to the edge of the mattress; for me, the gesture signified so much more than the simple physical act conveyed. All the progress we’d made the day before had vanished in the blink of an eye—all because he imagined there was some hidden meaning to what I’d said. Pietro was slipping away—even though he was right there beside me, the distance between us was a tangible thing, growing stronger every single time he pulled away. No matter what I tried to do… no matter how tightly I clung, I couldn’t stop what was happening; my brother was retreating into his own little world, leaving me all alone—just like in my dream.

It was too much; it pushed me over the edge, shattering my resolve to stay strong. Before I could stop myself, I burst into tears—rolling over to bury my face in my makeshift pillow, I fought against the
panic that was writhing up inside—the fear of losing him was so strong that I could taste it, like metal pressed against my tongue.

“Stop that!”

The gruff command only served to make my tears flow faster; I began to shiver—almost mindless from the weight of the uncontrollable emotions that were trying to tear me inside out. He cursed softly under his breath. The mattress shifted—his hand touched my shoulder. “Wanda… stop.”

I tried to hold in my sobs, but that made my throat constrict—suddenly, I couldn’t breathe.

“Wanda!” I could hear the fear in his voice as he grabbed my shoulder, forcing me to roll over on my back—but compared to the terror that I was fighting against, his seemed a paltry thing. It had been almost a year since the last time a panic attack had consumed me—fighting this one off was taking every bit of my strength.

“Attack,” I choked out, squeezing my eyes closed.

The word conveyed fathoms—he wrapped his arms around me, pulling me into his lap, cuddling me close to his body. I pressed my face against his neck, trying to relearn how to breathe. “It’s okay… we’re okay. We made it out, Pietra.”

He repeated the words over and over, as he rocked me from side to side; it was a familiar liturgy—one he’d often used in the days and weeks following our narrow brush with death. Back then the attacks had been frequent—sometimes hitting two or three times in a single day; we’d learned how to cope with them as best we could, sitting with our arms and legs wrapped around each other, foreheads pressed together, sharing our breath.

Little by little, the panic ebbed back—I won before it could fully take control. Fighting it off left me mentally and emotionally drained—I felt as limp and wrung out as an old dishrag, and my mind was in a foggy haze—but it was a price I was glad to pay; had the attack won out, I would have felt a million times worse.

“I’m sorry… I’m so, so sorry… I didn’t meant to trigger—”

“You didn’t… not really.” My voice was hoarse and weak; it was a struggle to form the words—my brain felt like it was trapped in quicksand. “I dreamed about it last night… only this time, you fell too. Your hand slipped out of mine—I couldn’t help you. When we started fighting and you pulled away… it reminded me of the dream.”

“I’m not going anywhere, Wanda… I’m right here—”

“For how long? A week? A month? Every day I lose a little more of you—”

“Don’t talk like that!” His voice was sharp, and biting; it was completely at odds with the way his arms tightened around me—as if I were the one drifting away a little at a time.

“I can’t help it—it’s how I feel. Do you hear yourself when you talk to me? Hear how harsh you sound? You never used to speak to me like that, Pietro—it hurts.”

He pulled back, his fingers brushing my tears away; I winced involuntarily—the gesture sent pain shooting up my injured cheek. “I’m sorry… my temper has been getting worse lately—it’s getting harder for me to control it.”

Closing my eyes, I took a slow, deep breath; reluctantly I slid off his lap, stretching back out on the
mattress; I felt completely spent and drained, wanting nothing more than to sleep for a week. After hesitating for a minute or two, Pietro did the same thing—scooting right up next to me, sliding his arm around my waist. I tensed—afraid if I made the slightest move he would pull away; when he didn’t, the tension slowly drained out of my muscles. I allowed myself to relax into the familiar comfort of his embrace—rolling over to nestle my head underneath his chin.

“This is just what I need right now,” I murmured, closing my eyes. “I’ve missed cuddling with you.”

He chuckled. “You act as though it has been months and months—”

“That’s what it feels like,” I said softly. “It feels like we’ve lived a lifetime in the past week… so many things have happened.”

“We haven’t changed though… not so much that we can’t comfort each other when we need to.” His fingers combed through my hair, soothing me. “We can stay right here all day if you want to—we don’t have to do anything today.”

“No… I still want to start on the garden—it will keep my mind occupied. I just need to rest a little first.” My words were slurred—I was already drifting. “You can go get the professor… just stay with me until I fall asleep. Please?”

“I’m not going to leave you, Wanda. Not after—”

“I’ll be fine… I refuse to let our day be spoiled. Promise me you’ll go get him?” Truthfully, I didn’t want him to leave, but I wasn’t about to let my ridiculous fears ruin his day—not when he’d been so excited at the prospect of learning how to fix the window.

I could feel his emotions brushing against me—not a pleasant sensation considering the frazzled, battered state my own were in. “Are you sure?”

“Yes… and besides, I’ll feel better knowing the window is secure.”

He shifted, propping himself up on his elbow; I opened my eyes, peering up at him—he was studying me intently, curls falling into his face. Automatically I smiled at the sight, reaching up to tuck the strands behind his ear. The strangest expression flicked across his face—he leaned forward, hesitating a moment before pressing his lips against my cheek. “I promise I will fetch him once you fall asleep.”

My stomach trembled; I was far too drained for the butterflies to take flight, however I did feel a deep pang of yearning—the corner of his mouth had brushed the edge of mine. “I’m sorry… I’m just so tired…”

“I know… don’t worry about it. Besides, maybe you catching up on your beauty sleep is a good thing—I want you well rested for tonight, yes?” He sank back down, pulling me even closer—I was half sprawled across his chest; the warmth of his body and the sound of his heartbeat increased the lethargy that rode me.

I dozed off briefly, though I stirred when he slid out from under me—my body missed the close comforting contact with his. With bleary eyes, I watched him moving about the basement—confident that my tangled hair obstructed my eyes from his view. He stoked the fire, then tugged off his sweatshirt, splashing cold water from the bucket on his face—a halfhearted attempt at washing up, I assumed. Though I couldn’t actually see the droplets run down his neck and chest, my imagination was far too fertile for my own good; mentally, I could picture them clearly—I could see myself tracing the trail they made with my fingertips, feeling the contrast between the coldness of the water
and the warmth of his skin.

Biting back a groan, I rolled over, pulling the blankets up over my head—the only surefire way to prevent my eyes from wandering again. The images running through my mind made it impossible to drift off right away; they fought against my weariness—it wasn’t until the window thumped closed behind him announcing his departure that the longing inside me stilled. It did not fully vanish, but it subsided enough so that sleep could finally reclaim me—chasing away the confusing turmoil of my thoughts and giving me peace.

When I woke again, the sunlight filtering through the windows was bright—I’d managed to sleep away the morning. It took me a moment to grasp how much time had passed; I’d forgotten the odd, disorienting feeling that lingered in the wake of an attack—an after effect of the intense emotion and adrenaline that had flooded my system. My head felt so heavy and achy that for a moment I contemplated rolling over and going back to sleep—I might have done just that had it not occurred to me that Pietro hadn’t returned. I rolled off the mattress, swaying a little on my feet as I hurried up the stairs; to my relief, the bolt was undone—a sure sign he was home.

Assured he’d made it back safely, I retreated down the stairs to take care of my needs before hunting him down; the fact he was upstairs in the house, presumably with the professor, playing handyman, made it far easier for me to dispose of my sanitary pad—which, for the record, I was already beginning to hate—without him seeing me. Bundling it up, I climbed out the window, intending on heading for the trash heap.

I stumbled to a stop after only two steps.

The temperature outside was actually rather pleasant—not exactly warm, but not quite as cold as it had been in recent weeks; it was the type of day that only occurred at the very beginning of spring—when the sun was desperately trying to burn away the worst of the cold, reawakening the earth from its long sleep. In contrast to the bright rays, the air was brisk and cool, but the chill had not been enough to deter my brother from losing his shirt.

He was turning over the soil with a hoe in one of the overgrown beds near the wall—and he’d obviously been at it a while since he’d worked up a sweat. It glistened on his upper body, coating his chest—disappearing into the waistband of the sweatpants that hung dangerously low on his lean, narrow hips.

The sight of his body entranced me—like mine, it seemed to be changing more and more every day. Living on the streets and scavenging for food had removed the soft plumpness of childhood from both of us fairly fast—going without food tends to do that—but this was something else entirely… something I’d glimpsed often enough, and noticed…but never really seen.

Pietro was losing the last vestiges of the boy he’d been—the body I’d known as well as my own was slowly disappearing, replaced by broadening shoulders and sinewy cords of muscle that gave hint to the man he would one day become. As he moved, the sunlight picked up colors in his hair—natural highlights that I’d somehow overlooked; his shiny curls weren’t just dark brown—there was chestnut and auburn interwoven in the strands. He glanced up at the sky, squinting his eyes—trying to gauge the time by the position of the sun; it was a gesture I’d seen him make hundreds of times—but this time…it affected me deeply. He was so handsome it made my chest hurt—far too beautiful to be real. Faces like Pietro’s belonged on museum walls or in fine art books, representing angelic beings and saints—not living in squalor on the streets of Novi Grad.

As I watched the light play across the sheen of sweat on his skin, the longing to touch him returned—stronger than ever before. It was so intense it left me trembling—consuming me as it made me forget all sense of time and place. My reason for venturing outside was forgotten—I was completely
oblivious to everything except the amazing sight before me.

"Wanda! Are you alright, child?"

I jerked, startled by the sound of the professor’s voice—he seemed to have appeared out of nowhere. Heat flooded my cheeks as I tore my eyes away from Pietro—dropping my head to hide my embarrassment. “I… you startled me.”

“I’ve been talking to you for at least five minutes, chavi… you were in a daze.”

“I’m sorry… I guess I’m not fully awake yet—”

“So my sleeping beauty has finally stirred?” Pietro grinned, leaning on the hoe. “We didn’t want to wake you with hammering, so we got a head start out here.”

“How long have—”

“A few hours,” he said, looking extremely proud. “We’ve got most of the beds cleared out—I wanted to surprise you.”

I glanced around, quite impressed by the amount they’d gotten done. “You’ve certainly succeeded at that—I didn’t even realize you were out here.”

“Grigori says we need to gather up the leaves and spread them over the soil and wet them—it will prepare it for when we are ready to plant.” He looked over at the old man for confirmation; the professor nodded, looking pleased.

I could not help but smile at the enthusiasm in Pietro’s voice—it was a side of him I’d never seen. “Perhaps I will have to reshape my dreams for your future—it seems like you would rather be a farmer than a businessman.”

“I would,” he said, voice earnest. “I like this—it is hard work, but there is a purpose to it. It will provide us with the food we need.”

“And it is physical work—using up some of his abundant energy is a good thing, yes?” The professor winked at me. “If the two of you had a farm, it would suit both of you, I think—one to do the labor and the other to mind the bookkeeping.”

“You could finally have animals, too!” Pietro chimed in, his smile widening. “Wanda has always wanted a pet.”

“I wanted a puppy or a kit—” I cut myself off, not wanting to awaken the bad memories that occurred because of my wanting a kitten. “I didn’t want a barnyard animal.”

Pietro frowned, automatically knowing the path my thoughts had taken. “We will get a dog then—a great big one.”

I found myself warming up to the idea. “Big enough to scare off anyone who shouldn’t be there?”

“Of course—you will need protecting while I am working in the fields, yes? I would not like leaving you all alone.”

A surge of happiness shot through me—not so much at what he said, although that was wonderful. It was what he hadn’t said that set my heart aflutter—there’d been no mention of another girl joining our household. Pietro’s dreams for the future were just for the two of us.
“We need to move all the weeds to the trash pile... since you enjoy cleaning I thought maybe you __”

I made a face. “Let me get rid of this first and put on a different shirt—I don’t have the luxury of undressing outside when I get overheated.”

“That is a very unfortunate thing.” Pietro’s smile changed—so subtle that I almost missed the way one corner of his mouth quirked up until a burst of unexpected sensations flashed across our bond.

I wasn’t sure how to classify the emotions, but I recognized them instantly—the hot, achy feelings were exactly like the ones that filled me when I felt his hardness pressed against my thigh. Blue eyes locked with mine—he opened his sly, smiling mouth to speak, but immediately closed it, his eyes flicking from me to the professor before darting down to the ground.

Averting my eyes lest they betray me, I hurried across the yard to the trash heap, discarding my parcel—immediately returning to the basement to splash cold water on my flushed face. The prudent thing to do would be to completely ignore what had happened—I knew I should go back outside and pretend I hadn’t sensed a thing. The problem was, it was the closest Pietro had come to admitting he reciprocated my feelings—and I was far, far too giddy to play it safe.

Pulling off my sweatshirt and dropping it on the bed, I eyed our stack of clothing, selecting a long sleeved white t-shirt from the very bottom of the pile. It was one that had never fit either of us properly—too small and tight even for me. Forcing myself to move before I could change my mind, I reached back, unfastening my bra with fumbling fingers—sliding it off and tossing it on top my discarded sweatshirt, tugging the t-shirt over my head. It was even tighter than I remembered—snuggling fitting across my breasts, the material straining at the seams. Glancing down at my chest, I wondered if Pietro would notice; I smiled, heading for the window—I had a sneaking suspicion the answer would be yes.

Of course, in my excitement, I completely forgot that there was another person outside; it wasn’t until I stepped out from behind the hedge that I remembered the professor’s presence—seeing him made my new found confidence vanish in the blink of an eye. I began to second guess myself—on the verge of slipping back inside to reclaim my bra and put on something less revealing. I might have done just that had Pietro not looked up—he froze, eyes dropping from my face, locking on my chest.

Oh yes... he definitely noticed what I’d done.

My lips twitched up in a grin that mirrored the one he’d worn earlier; unable to stop myself, I laced my fingers together, stretching my arms up over my head—intently watching his reaction. His mouth dropped open as he stared, wide eyed—a faint flush traveling across his cheeks and neck when he flicked his eyes back up to my face; his embarrassment at being caught staring prickled across the space between us.

“Oh—you’re back! If you’ll start collecting the... chavi? Are you daydreaming again?”

Blinking rapidly, I turned my attention to the old man—trying not to huff at the amusement on his face. “No—I was just... gathering my thoughts.”

“Perhaps you could gather some weeds instead?” His smile was good natured—well matched to his teasing words.

I peered suspiciously at the piles of weeds they’d made, on the lookout for nettles—they grew in abundance along the back wall, and I didn’t want to get stung.
“Here—” Pietro dropped the hoe, tugging off the oversized gloves he was wearing as he approached and holding them out to me “—you can use these.”

I slid the coarse material on, holding up my hands and wiggling my fingers; they looked ridiculous—like something a cartoon character would wear. “I feel like a child playing dress up.”

“They were big on me too.” He lowered his voice, glancing over at the professor—making sure he was out of earshot. “Don’t feel bad… he’s just abnormally large.”

I giggled, eyeing the old man—he seemed completely oblivious to us, fully focused on drawing the bucket up from the well. “He is extremely tall.”

Pietro shifted, leaning forward to whisper in my ear. “I do not want to grow as tall as he is… I prefer to be closer to your size.”

“Oh really? And why might that be?” I never realized how sensitive the skin along the ridge of my ear was—not until his lips brushed against it when he spoke.

He moved closer—so close that his chest grazed my breasts; it sent a jolt of electricity through me, making my breath hitch. “We’re meant to fit together perfectly, yes? If I grew to be a giant that would not be the case.”

My mind was racing so fast that it was hard to focus on what he was saying; I wanted… no… I needed to feel the sensation again. I shifted my shoulder, the movement causing our bodies to brush—he exhaled loudly, his breath warm against my ear.

“Wanda…” his voice was low, and ragged—like his breathing; there was no anger or scorn present—it almost sounded like a plea. His face turned towards me—immediately I was swallowed up in the bottomless blue of his eyes. I was drowning in the nearness of him; the heat radiating from him slowly drew me in—the scent of the sweat on his skin smelled better than the finest of perfumes. Only a scant few inches separated our lips… I leaned closer, narrowing the distance—needing to feel the press of their softness against mine.

“Pietro—” The professor’s voice broke the spell we’d fallen under—my brother jerked backwards, increasing the distance between us. “Can you help me please? This is harder than I thought…”

The old man grimaced, sinking down to the ground—we both moved at once, rushing to his side. I crouched down beside the professor, trying not to panic at how pale he looked—his skin was ashen, almost gray. “Pietro—get some water!” Pietro moved to the crank, turning it as fast as he could. “Are you alright, sir?”

“Don’t fuss over me—I’ll be fine in a moment. I had a pain… I simply need to catch my breath—”

Pietro hefted the wooden bucket to the ground beside me—I plunged my hands in the icy water, patting the old man’s cheeks in an attempt to give him relief. “Is it your heart?”

“If you are asking if I am having a heart attack… no. I am old… my heart is not as strong as it once was—I forget that sometimes… over exert myself to the point of feeling dizzy and weak.”

I glanced up at my brother—our eyes locked, shared worry circulating between us. “Run and get me a rag from the scrap pile—no… get two.”

He nodded, hurrying for the window—a quicker route than using the back door. I returned my eyes to the old man—he was studying me with a strange, determined look on his face.
“The two of you… you are heading towards a very difficult path, chavi. “ His voice was soft—almost a whisper. “One that is far more perilous than it seems.”

“Our path has been difficult for years, Professor—”

“That is not what I mean and you know it.”

My cheeks flushed; I wondered what he’d seen. “You’re not making sense—the sun has baked your brains.”

“Perhaps it has… that doesn’t change the facts. You need to be cautious—when you play with fire, someone always winds up getting burned.”

“You are speaking in riddles—”

“Fine—I will be blunt. Right now the two of you are experiencing the first rush of hormones—and neither of you are adequately prepared to deal with the fallout your actions will cause.”

“What are you even talking about?” I tried my best to look completely innocent, widening my eyes with confusion.

It didn’t work.

“Pietro is your brother… but he is also a young man, Wanda. One who’s body is changing in ways that neither of you understand.” He cleared his throat, his eyes dropping from mine; I could tell he was uncomfortable by the restless way his fingers were tugging at his beard—jerking so hard that it was a wonder that the scraggly hair didn’t fall out in his hand.

“Whatever you have to say… just say it.” My legs were starting to cramp from squatting—I shifted, stretching them out in front of me as I settled on the ground.

He glanced over at me, frowning. “It would make things easier on you both if you were more modest in the way you dressed. I know I sound horribly old fashioned, but it is hard for boys to resist temptation when you put yourself on display.”

I pulled my knees up to my chest—cheeks so hot they felt like they were aflame. “I don’t have a lot of clothes. I didn’t want to mess up the ones that are in good condition with yard work.”

“There are clothes at my house you can have—things that belonged to my daughter… or we can get you new ones if you would prefer.”

I remained silent, hiding behind my hair.

He sighed. “Now you are upset with me… don’t you see I am only speaking up because I care? I don’t want to see you do something that you are not ready for, Wanda. I don’t think you have fully considered the consequences of your actions. I suppose I am trying to say… don’t risk the wonderful bond you share with your brother until you are both really sure about your feelings. Some things… they cannot be undone once they are set free. I don’t want either of you to end up hurt.”

My forehead dropped to my knees—I was unsure of that I should say, or do. There was no way he could know about my feelings—not unless Pietro had told him, but I knew without the slightest doubt that my twin would never betray me in such a way. “I don’t understand why you feel the need to speak of such things to me. Do you honestly think it’s okay to fake being sick like that?”

“I do—I needed to speak with you alone, without your brother overhearing. Call it… a hunch—”
“Here—” Pietro’s voice startled us both; without thought my head jerked up, before I could mask my feelings. The sight of my expression froze my brother in his tracks. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing son, we were just—”

“I wasn’t asking you—“ Pietro’s eyes were locked on my face “—I was asking my sister.”

I shook my head, trying to shove my tumultuous feelings deep down inside. “Nothing, honestly… I’m just worried about him feeling faint.”

His eyes narrowed. “Don’t lie to me—was he telling you what I said?”

I jumped to my feet, blinking back the stupid tears that sprang up in my eyes. “You told him? Pietro… I trusted you! How could you do that to me?”

“You think I would do that to you? That I would betray you so easily?” I could feel his shock as clearly as I could see it on his face.

The professor let out an ear-piercing whistle. “Stop! You are both jumping to ridiculous conclusions—take a breath and think about how ridiculous you sound. Wanda—your brother and I talked about becoming a man… that is all. Pietro… I said nothing to your sister about out talk—I simply told her that she needed to dress more modestly—”

“I didn’t bring you here to upset my sister on our birthday!” Pietro exploded, hurling the rags he carried at the professor. I moved between them—more than a little afraid he would attack the old man. “You have no say in how she dresses! She looks just fine the way she is—how dare you make her feel bad about herself!”

“Do not stand between us Wanda—if he is foolish enough to attack me for caring about the two of you, then he is welcome to do so.” The old man got to his feet, gently pushing me aside. “It was not my intention to upset her, boy—I was pointing out that it would be easier for both of you if you weren’t having to battle hormonal mood swings all the time.”

I crossed my arms over my breasts, storming towards the window—past the point of caring whether or not Pietro punched the old man. I felt horribly ashamed and foolish for attempting to get a reaction from Pietro by displaying myself in such a manner—it was a cheap trick… one I shouldn’t have pulled.

Pietro called after me, but I ignored him; sliding behind the hedge, I dropped down through the window, practically ripping off the shirt and hurling it to the ground. Impatiently swiping away the tears that streamed down my cheeks, I grabbed my bra, putting it back on—struggling to fasten the hooks behind my back.

The window squeaked—I froze at the thumping sound of Pietro’s feet hitting the ground.

“Wanda… don’t be upset, please. He’s an old man with old fashioned ideas… I think the shirt looked very nice on you.”

“It didn’t—it looked trashy,” I muttered—resuming my attempt to fasten the stupid hooks.

“Maybe to him… but not to me.”

“Because you are a boy—you can’t help but like it. I shouldn’t have—”

“Shhh.” He stepped up behind me, brushing my hands away—fastening the hooks that tormented
me. “You are developing a beautiful figure—I meant what I said out there… it is very unfortunate that you don’t show it off more often.”

“It’s not right for me to do it around you though… not when you’ve made it clear you don’t want to—”

“Stop worrying about that, okay? I promise you… I don’t mind seeing you like that.” His hands moved away from my back; I glanced back just as he pressed his lips against my shoulder—tingles danced up and down my spine. “Why don’t you make us some lunch—I’ll pick up the weeds. It will give you time to cool off, yes?”

“I certainly don’t feel facing him again right now,” I agreed, reaching for a new shirt as he moved towards the window. I tugged it on, glancing over at him just as he reached the window. “Pietro… thank you.”

He looked surprised. “What for?”

“Taking up for me… I appreciate it.” It was on the tip of my tongue to confess that seeing him bristling with outraged anger on my behalf was a very enticing thing, but I didn’t want to push the limits of his tolerance. “I’ll bring the food up in a bit… we can have another picnic, yes?”

He smiled, nodding—then he was gone.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: I planned on posting all four chapters covering the twins birthday at once, but so many people on tumblr have requested I update that I went ahead and posted the two I have typed up. Hope you enjoy them. ;) Chapter 13 should be up by tomorrow (hopefully) and Chapter 14—the one with ‘the talk’—by Thursday, fingers crossed.
Chapter 12

TO SAY THAT our lunch was unconformable would be a serious understatement. Still feeling prickly over the comments the old man had made, I sat in sullen silence, speaking only when spoken to. At first, Pietro tried to carry the conversation, but it was hard for him to remain cordial with my hurt feelings flowing into him. The tension that hovered between the three of us kept growing, but I refused to pretend like nothing was wrong; I was upset—with good reason—I didn’t like being made to feel as if I’d done something wrong. Nibbling on one of the cheese sandwiches I’d thrown together, I tried to tune out their conversation—not trusting my ability to hold my tongue.

“I think we’ve done all we can out here until the weather warms more,” the professor said, glancing around the large yard. “A few of the trees have dead limbs that need removing, and they all need to be cut back a bit, but we can’t do that right now—we have to wait until after the first shoots appear.”

“So we can do the window after we eat?” Pietro asked, unable to contain his excitement.

“Yes—and we can change out the locks on the front door as well. When we go into town later I will get the keys duplicated so you each have one. The hardware store should still be open around supper time.”

That caught my attention—it was the first I’d heard of him going into town with us. “I thought you had an appointment—”

“I do… with your brother. I agreed to play chauffer so the two of you would not be out on the streets of the city after dark.”

“I believe you mean chaperone,” I said haughtily, “since chauffer means a driver.”

“Which is what I will be—I do have a car, Wanda, I just chose to walk places since it is better for my health,” he replied, frowning at me. “It’s sitting out front right now—we used it to cart the tools over this morning.”

I huffed. “We are perfectly capable of looking out for ourselves—”

“I asked him to do it… I don’t want you out walking after dark anymore.” Pietro said softly. “It’s not safe… I don’t want a repeat of what happened in the alley.”

I scowled, dropping my sandwich. “I will not be treated like some fragile porcelain doll, Pietro Maximoff. You should have discussed this with me first!”

“It is my job to keep you safe,” he insisted. “That’s what I intend to do, even if it means you get angry at me.”

“We’ll see about that,” I muttered, getting to my feet—needing to distance myself from both of them.

“You barely ate anything! Where are you going?” Pietro protested, trying to grab my hand as I walked past him.

I sidestepped, avoiding him. “There are things I need to do—like the wash.”

“That can wait chavi… we will take it to my house later and—”
“Stop telling me what to do!” I shouted, my temper snapping as his words pushed me over the brink. “You have no right to tell me what to do—no say in how I spend my time or how I dress! I don’t take orders from anyone!”

They both stared at me with wide eyes, surprised by my outburst; it made me feel stupid for exploding over such a little thing. The looks they shot each other clearly indicated what they were thinking—they were chalking it up to female hormones—which heightened my irritation. I took a deep breath, closing my eyes as I tried to calm down before I started ranting or pitched a fit.

“Wanda… I am sorry that what I said earlier upset you. I truly did not mean to hurt you in any way…I don’t want there to be bad feelings between us.” The old man said softly. “We have not known each other long… but it would break my heart to lose the two of you—I’ve already lost so much… having the two of you in my life gives it meaning again.”

“I would not write you off over something so insignificant, Professor. I am not like your children.”

“Then why—”

“I know what you are thinking… both of you… and you’re wrong. I’m not having a mood swing. I just… feel antsy. I need to keep busy—I planned on working out here… but you left nothing for me to do.”

“Oh! She is trying to keep her mind occupied!” Pietro piped up, his eyes flicking from me to the old man. “That’s why she wants to do the wash while we work—she almost had a panic attack this morning and is afraid it will rebound on her if she doesn’t stay busy.”

I shot Pietro a dark look—not at all pleased with his oversharing; the professor’s bow wrinkled with concern at the news. “Do you have them often, chavi?”

“I used to have them all the time… this was the first one in quite a while.”

“After I lost my wife, I had a few attacks of intense panic. I was… worried about the state of her soul. My doctor prescribed me some pills to calm my nerves, and they helped quite a bit. I have some left—if you would like I will give you a few of them to keep on hand.”

The thought of never again having to experience the black, mind numbing panic was too great a temptation—it doused my anger far more effectively than his apology. “I would appreciate that—thank you.”

“Since you are so much smaller than me I would suggest only taking half of a tablet… but mind you that is only a suggestion—not an order. Far be it from me to tell such an independent young woman what to do.”

The fact the old man winked when he said it was his only saving grace—had I thought he was being sarcastic or snarky, I would have gone off on another tangent. As it was, I managed to curb the sharp retort that lingered on the tip of my tongue; with as much haughtiness as I could muster up, I shot him a scornful look before retreating to the quiet solitude of the basement.

The quiet did not last long—they apparently took my departure as an indication that lunch was over, setting to work almost immediately. In an attempt to escape the racket they were making, I decided to cart the washtub outside—a decision that was partially motivated by the fact I didn’t want to admit that I wasn’t strong enough to cart all the water that I’d need down the basement stairs.

Logically, I knew that it made more sense to wait and wash our bedding using the professor’s machine; it would definitely get the sheets much cleaner than I ever could by hand—but I wanted to
take advantage of the sunshine and the breeze outside. Something about the scent of linens that dried on a line appealed to me—perhaps because mama had always dried our bedding on the fire escape. If I lived to be a hundred, I would never forget the wonderful scent of the small linen closet in our apartment—even in the middle of winter it smelled springtime fresh.

I was stretching up on my tiptoes to hang the last sheet when strong arms wrapped around my waist, hoisting me up off the ground. “Need a lift, little one?”

Trying not to giggle, I glanced back at Pietro, looking stern. “You take that back—I am not little.”


“I still have time to grow—”

“Don’t grow too much—I like being able to pick you up.” There was something in his voice—an almost dreamy quality—that set my pulse to racing. “Now hurry up and finish before I drop you—we need to go.”

“Now? But it’s nowhere near dinner time!”

“The professor politely suggested that I should shower at his house since I stink to high heaven. I took him up on the offer—I figured you wouldn’t say no to another bath.”

“I think you smell good,” I murmured, securing the sheet with a stolen clothes pin. “In fact, I would bet that no matter how sweaty you get, you’d still smell better than half the men in Novi Grad.”

“Only half? You wound me, sweet sister. My feelings are very hurt.”

“Well… I would have said all of them, but I don’t want your ego to get too inflated,” I teased—wiggling a little to let him know I was ready to be put down.

He didn’t take the hint. “I am not bigheaded in the least… well not normally. Today happens to be an exception to the rule.”

“Oh? And why might that be?”

“Tonight I will have the most beautiful girl in the city on my arm… that makes it hard to be humble.”

My cheeks flushed with pleasure at the compliment. “I don’t know… I still say you are biased.”

“I’m not—it’s true.” He lowered me to the ground slowly, but he didn’t release his hold on me right away; since we were hidden by the sheets on the line, I let myself enjoy the sensation of being so close to him without worrying about the professor’s spying eyes.

“Are you excited?” He asked softly. I glanced over my shoulder at him, surprised by the question—he flushed, realizing how it sounded. “About tonight…” he stammered, “eating in a restaurant, I mean.”

“Yes… and I am excited for you to open your present… and for our talk too.”

He looked nervous at the mention of the talk he’d promised me. “About that…”

“Oh no—no backing out Pietro! We made a deal!”

“No… No, I wouldn’t do that… but I think you probably won’t want to talk about that… thing… yes?”
My mouth dried out at the thought—he could only mean one thing; surely he wasn’t planning to ask
about that on our birthday. “No… I don’t want to even remember it.”

“Okay, that will be off limits—so it is only fair that I have something like that too, don’t you think?”
His fingers slid along my spine, tracing soothing patterns—it felt good, but I refused to let his touch
dissuade me.

“I don’t want to talk about the basement because it is a horrible memory, Pietro. That is entirely
different than trying to avoid—”

“I know the professor told you about what Headmaster Široký said to me… that’s what I don’t want
to discuss… it gives me bad memories the same way remembering the basement does with you.”

Unease coiled in the air between us, like a serpent stretching out to bask in the sun; I frowned,
wondering exactly what had happened to make him feel so unsettled. “Pietro… he didn’t… he didn’t
touch you, did he?”

“No! God no—nothing like that” Shock replaced the unsettled feeling as his arms tightened around
me. “He just… said things. Things I want to forget. That’s all.”

My eyes searched his—looking for some sign that his denial was a lie, but there was nothing to be
seen. Still, I wanted to question him—to find out what it was that haunted him enough to put such
shadows in his eyes, but I refrained. “Alright… honestly, it never crossed my mind to ask you about
it… not until now.”

The corner of his mouth twitched up in a wry smile. “I promise you that one day… when I have
come to terms with things… I will tell you all about it.”

I nodded, though his words confused me. “I wish I could make the same promise to you, but it’s
like… there are blank spots in my head.”

“I know.” He kissed my forehead, then pulled away from me, taking my hand. “Come on, before the
old man decides to leave without us and I lose my chance at a hot shower.”

My mind instantly conjured up memories of the last shower he’d taken—one that I had shared with
him. We’d been covered head to toe in mud from roughhousing in the vacant lot behind our
apartment building—Mama had taken one look at us and ordered us into the shower; Papa had
protested—saying we were getting too old to be sharing, but Mama just rolled her eyes, pointed out
dinner was almost ready and we didn’t have time to spare. Pietro and I had made a mess of the
bathroom, splashing water everywhere and goofing off until Mama pounded on the door and told us
to settle down; after that, we made quick work of getting as clean as we could—washing each
other’s backs and hair the same way we’d always done when we were smaller.

Forty-five minutes from the time we walked into the apartment, our mother called us to dinner—then
both of our parents were gone, and we were huddling together under the bed, cowering from Stark’s
shell.

Pietro’s eyes met mine; I could tell he was thinking the exact same thing—his emotions were as
sorrow filled as my own.

“You’ll have to wash your own back this time,” I said softly, squeezing his hand.

“No… it will just have to stay dirty.” He shrugged, swinging out hands. “Too hard for me to reach.”

I shot him a stern look, not sure if he was teasing me. “Pietro! You have to wash it properly!”
His lips curved up in the barest hint of a smile. “If you are so concerned about it then I guess—”

“Pietro—come help me load the tools up, please”

At the sound of the professor’s voice we both glanced towards the back door; he was watching us with a smile on his face—waving before heading back inside. Releasing my hand, Pietro sped up—jogging across the yard.

“Wait! What were you about to say?” I called after him. “You guess… what?”

He turned around, walking backwards—his grin widening even more. “I guess you’ll just have to wash it for me.” With that, he turned around, sprinting for the door, leaving me staring after him, open mouth and astonished—completely unable to tell if he was serious or not.

Either way, it didn’t matter—his cheerful demeanor was contagious, leaving me in an excellent mood; I had to take a moment to compose myself—waiting for the excited flush that heated my cheeks to cool before venturing inside.

It took a while to gather our things and make sure the house was secured. Pietro volunteered to lock up the house and basement—scaling the wall to meet us out front at the old man’s vehicle; I expected to see a beat up panel truck or perhaps an old Citroen parked at the curb—not the sleek, shiny black sedan that was waiting for us.

“That’s your car?” I couldn’t hide my surprise—I didn’t know much about automobiles, but the insignia on the grill was one that even I could recognize.

“You were expecting an old rust bucket perhaps?”

“No… well yes… but that’s not what I mean. I never thought you of all people would purchase one of those.”

“It is practically a sin to glare at a Mercedes-Benz like that Wanda,” Pietro said as he approached us, reaching over to take his bag from the professor’s hands. “Wait until you see the inside—”

“I refuse to ride in that,” I said bluntly. “I’d rather crawl all the way to the heart of the city on my hands and knees.”

“Wanda!” Pietro looked shocked. “You are being rude—”

“No… let her speak, chavo.” The professor eyed me a moment, then leaned against the car, crossing his arms over his broad chest. “Elaborate, Wanda. You agreed to help me teach your brother—explain to him the reasoning behind your statement.”

Shrugging my bag off my shoulder and dropping it on the ground, I straightened my posture, clasping my hands in front of me the way the teachers always insisted we do in school. “Daimler-Benz was one of the most avid supporters of the Nazi regime, receiving arms contracts and tax breaks as well as laborers for their factories from Hitler. They used thousands of Jewish and Romani prisoners from the camps in Poland as slaves—often killing them from over work or overtly cruel treatment. Additionally, it is said that the corporation was trying to design mobile gas vans as a more efficient way of eradicating Jewish and Roma people—they were to be driven into heavily populated areas, gassing unsuspecting families without warning in their homes.”

“Very thorough.” He nodded, running his hand along the hood of the car. “You see Pietro… your sister wonders why I would drive an automobile that was built by a corporation that supported genocide. She does not see the irony in my owning such a vehicle… does not realize that I had
family members who were forced to work in the Daimler-Benz plants. My Uncle Yorga was one of the men who was beaten to death by an SS officer who was touring the facility—for daring to look him in the eye.”

“All the more reason why you shouldn’t have given them your money!” I huffed, reclaiming my bag.

“Ahhhh but Wanda… can you not imagine the outrage those bigots must feel? Even as they burn in Hell, my driving this car torments them far more than Satan ever could—scalding their racist souls like acid. Me… a man who was once a dirty, starving Romani boy in their camps…driving a machine that was originally intended for only their ‘chosen’ race. They must be gnashing their teeth and clawing out their eyes in dismay.”

“It is your way of getting back at them,” Pietro said quietly. “The same way that Wanda and I want to hurt the man who made the missiles that killed our parents.”

“Yes… but that was not the only reason I chose to purchase the car. My wife always wanted one… she saw it as physical proof that we were just as good as they were. I refused to buy her one while she was alive—I shared Wanda’s sentiments… but after she died, I deeply regretted denying honoring her request. I bought this car in her memory, and I only drive it on very special occasions.”

It was far easier for me to understand that sentiment; Mama had always longed for an expensive bottle of Joy perfume—I planned to own one before I died, even if I had to steal it. I eyed the car for a moment, scowling—then jerked open the back door, climbing inside and perching on the very edge of the seat; I would ride in it—but I wouldn’t allow myself to enjoy it for a single minute. Pietro surprised me by climbing in beside me a moment later—I scooted over, casting a curious look in his direction.

Leaning over, he whispered in my ear. “Earlier he told me the passenger seat is reserved for his wife.”

I frowned, wondering if the old man was perhaps a little senile; the thought made me shove aside my determined judgment to avoid relaxing against the plush leather seats—wearing a seatbelt for safety sake suddenly seemed far more important than standing by my principles. “Put your seatbelt on… just in case.”

“In case what?” Pietro looked puzzled, but did what I’d asked.

“In case he’s not a good driver—you know… if he’s touched in the head he might forget things.”

“I heard that.” The old man slid behind the wheel. “I am not crazy Wanda… just a sentimental old fool.”

I blushed. “I didn’t mean—”

“You did… but that’s alright. It’s smart to be cautious—automobiles can be very dangerous things.”

I slumped down in the seat, embarrassed to no end that I’d been overheard; Pietro reached over, taking my hand—soothing waves brushing against me. He played with my fingers to calm me—something he’d always done when we were young.

“Do you remember our thumb sucking phase?” he asked, smiling when I glanced over at him.

“Of course I do… Papa fretted because it went on for so long.”

“It’s not unusual for children to suck their thumbs,” offered the professor.
“We didn’t suck our own thumbs,” I said, giggling, “we sucked each other’s. Pietro used to reach over and grab my hand, popping my thumb in his mouth as if he owned it—and I’d do the same to him.”

“I do own it—we share everything, remember?” He teased, lifting my hand to his mouth and nipping at the pad of my thumb.

Suddenly, the light, happy atmosphere changed; the space between us felt thick—like the heaviness that so often lingers in the air, warning of an approaching thunder storm. Pietro dropped my hand as if it scalded him, turning towards the window—I did the same thing, scooting further away from him on the seat.

Thankfully, the ride was not a long one; what would have taken ten minutes—or more—of walking was covered in a fraction of the time. As the old man slowed, pulling over to the curb in front of his house, his eyes met mine in the rear view mirror. “So? What do you think? It rides much smoother, yes?

“I wouldn’t know—it is the first time I’ve ever been in one,” I answered truthfully.

“I meant compared to other types of cars, chavi.”

“I know what you meant, but I have nothing to compare it to—this is the first car I’ve ever ridden in. Papa couldn’t afford one—if we needed to go somewhere that was out of walking distance we used public transportation.”

Something flickered through the old man’s eyes—I realized it was pity; until that moment it had obviously escaped him that for us, poverty was a fact of life—something we’d lived up close and personal with long before the shells stole away our parents.

“Well… I hope you enjoyed it then,” he said softly.

“It was very nice.” I grabbed my bag off the floor, climbing out of the car; he stopped me, sticking his hand out the window—holding out a key.

“What is this for?” I asked as I took it.

“I have a few errands to run before dinner—make yourselves at home while I am gone. Pietro—you may use the bathroom attached to my bedroom… please feel free to use any toiletries I have that you might need.”

“I don’t think…” I stared down at the key—overwhelmed by the significance of his gesture. “You trust us in your home… alone?”

He smiled, reaching out to stroke my cheek with his fingers. “Of course I do Wanda… you have both earned it.”

“But—”

Before I could protest he gunned the engine, making me jump back; “I’ll be back soon—we need to be at the restaurant by seven thirty at the latest.”

I watched with wide eyes as he sped off down the street—Pietro took advantage of the distraction, snatching the key from my hand. “He drove much slower while you were in the car—maybe because you are a girl.”
I huffed, following him up the walkway. “What does that have to do with—wait a minute… are you telling me he drove like that with you in the car?”

“Mhmm… I didn’t mind—it was fun. He promised to teach me to drive when we turn fifteen.” He glanced over at me, frowning—sensing the worry I felt at hearing such news. “It’s not like there’s any other cars on the street out here Wanda—what’s he going to run into?”

“I don’t like him taking risks like that with you. What if he lost control or—”

“You fret too much… but if it will make you feel better, I promise I will tell him to slow down next time, okay?” Stepping aside so I could enter first, he shut the door, locking it behind us. “We need to hurry—I want to be ready by the time he gets back. So he doesn’t have to wait, yes?”

“Won’t he need to get ready too?” I shifted from one foot to the other as he set off down the hall, opening a door and tossing down his bag. “Pietro! What are you—”

“This is my room—you’re supposed to use the girly one. This morning he said we can clean them out if we want—he even offered to let us redecorate them.”

Automatically I tensed—remembering how persistent the old man had been about Pietro and I moving in with him. “Is there something going on here that I don’t know about, Pietro?”

“Huh?” He brushed past me, moving further down the hall—opening the door at the very end. I followed after him, trying not to overreact. “You aren’t planning on our moving in here or something… you?”

“No… but he told me he talked to you about our storing stuff here—”

“Storing some clothes and keepsakes is not something that requires two separate rooms, Pietro,” I pointed out, glancing around the room as I followed after him; it was obviously the professor’s—there was a picture of his sister on the nightstand. “We barely have anything—we don’t even need one room. A couple shelves in a closet would do.”

“Maybe he’s just trying to make us feel welcome, Wanda—or maybe he’s thinking ahead… he said he wanted us to take care of him when he started to get sicker, right? It would make sense for us each to have a space of our own if he ever needs round the clock care.”

He had a point, but I still felt uneasy. I sank down on the edge of the bed. “Even then we could share a room—”

“True—but he might think it would be nice for us each to have our own special place.”

“I just… I don’t know… feel like he’s being sneaky. Trying to play us against each other or something.”

He rolled his eyes. “That’s ridiculous—”

“Is it? Then why is this the first I’m hearing about us having rooms here? I specifically told him—”

“That we wouldn’t move in… that we needed our freedom—I know, he told me. And he told me you said he should feel free to ask me how I felt about it—he did.” Pietro moved into the bathroom, flipping on the light.” I said the same thing you did, Wanda—no one is trying to trick you. We discussed all this today—when I came over here to get him. It’s not like we’ve been discussing things behind your back—you were at home… asleep.”
I ducked my head down, feeling incredibly foolish. “I guess I’m just being paranoid, huh?”

“Yes… but that’s okay—we’re not used to people helping us out. A little suspicion is to be expected, but shouldn’t you think about showing him a little bit of the trust he’s showing us?”

“I have! He knows our names… where we live…”

“He deserves more than just that, and you know it. He hasn’t asked us for anything more than our company, yet he’s giving us food and clothes… trusting us alone in his house.”

“We aren’t exactly just being companions, Pietro—we’re working for him too.”

“Yes but we haven’t done nearly enough work to equal what he’s done for us Wanda—and we both know it. That’s all I’m saying.”

“Fine… I’ll try not to let my suspicions get the best of me, okay? That’s the best I can do.” I stood up, intending to head for the other bathroom; he called after me—stopping me before I reached the door.

“That’s all I’m asking… and it wouldn’t hurt for you to be a tiny bit nicer to him—okay?”

Pietro! I’m always nice! You’re the one who—"

“I think you have the disposition of the sweetest of angels… but sometimes you come across harshly when you don’t meant to—Mama used to be the same way.”

I thought about it for a moment, smiling a little at being compared to our mother; much as I loved her, I had to admit that there were times she sounded sharp and impatient. “There are worse people I could be like… but I will keep what you said in mind.”

“Good. You know… you should always listen to my advice anyway, even if you don’t agree with it… since I’m your older brother—”

“Oh!” I groaned, “Twelve lousy minutes does not count—”

“It does—now go take your bath, little sister.” He shut the door—I was willing to bet he was leaning on the other side, chuckling at my outrage.

I didn’t leave right away; his words about washing his back were running through my mind—taunting me. Waiting until I heard the shower turn off, I crept across the bedroom, slowly turning the knob—testing to see if it was locked.

It wasn’t.

Jerking my hand back, I chewed on the corner of my lip—wondering if I dared to walk in and call him on his bluff. I must have stood there a good five minutes, shifting from one foot to the other nervously—trying to decide what I should do. I changed my mind half a dozen times before curiosity won out over my better judgment; reaching out I quietly opened the door—and immediately shrieked.

Pietro was standing right there, fully dressed—leaning against the wall with a smirk on his face. “Did you need something Pietra?”

Judging by the heat that flooded my face, I must have turned at least twenty shades of red. “I… uh… thought… never mind!” I turned, fleeing across the bedroom—tripping over the rug in the hallway
and slamming into the wall.

“Wanda! Wait a minute—”

I didn’t—I couldn’t. My embarrassment at being caught in such a way was far too great.

Bolting for the other bathroom, the fierce pounding of my heart was almost strong enough to drown out the outraged little voice inside my head that was telling me not to run.
PIETRO DID NOT FOLLOW ME; I sank down on the floor of the bathroom, leaning against the
door, filled with a churning stew of conflicting thoughts and feelings. On one hand, I wanted to hide
myself away until my embarrassment had run its course, but on the other… I wanted him to chase me
—to grab me by the arms and force me to tell him exactly what it was that had prompted me to open
the door. It was a no win situation to be in—and the fact he let me go so easily didn’t help matters; it
wounded my pride and bruised my fragile self-esteem.

Eventually, I forced myself to move—I didn’t have time to sit and wallow in self-pity; I had to get
ready—though truth be told, in my current frame of mind, going out to dinner was the last thing I
wanted to do. Unfortunately, soaking in the tub did not help my mood—the quiet stillness left me
with entirely too much time to think about my situation; it was one of those times when all I wanted
was to shut my mind off completely, but that was impossible to do. Though I tried to move past the
melancholy that had arisen within me, it refused to let go; it clung to me like a fat, bloated leech,
draining away my happiness—replacing it with a nagging sense of self-doubt. Being naked in a
bathtub is perhaps the very worst time to feel such things—it was far too easy to spot my obvious
flaws since they were clearly on display before me.

I stared down at my body, comparing it to other girls that I’d seen in passing on the street—girls who
had access to the kind of cosmetics and fancy, stylish clothes that enhanced their natural assets,
increasing their beauty. Their arms and legs weren’t scrawny like mine—they were well toned and
shapely, their figures drawing boy’s admiring eyes wherever they went. Their hands and feet weren’t
scarred up like mine with ragged, broken nails—their fingernails and toenails were well groomed,
painted in pretty colors that were pleasing to the eyes. Their skin glowed with good health—cheeks
rosy and lips glossy as they flashed their flirty smiles, whereas my skin was pale from years of
inadequate nutrition. Their hair was shiny and sleek, not a dull and limp looking mass of split ends—
my mental list went on and on, hammering home one thing. No matter how I looked at it, I could
never compete with them; even worse, they all shared the one card that would always trump my
hand, guaranteeing them victory every single time.

They didn’t share one single drop of familial blood with Pietro; he could have his pick of the prettiest
ones without fear of social taboos.

The despair inside me thickened—so strong it almost choked me; as the anguish grew and my
stomach clenched painfully, I let out a hushed sob that echoed back at me off the porcelain tiles.
Sliding my head under the water, I held my breath—an attempt to stave off further useless cries; I
didn’t come up until spots of gray danced behind my eyes.

A split second before I surfaced, when the burning in my chest became too great to bear, a thought
occurred to me—the symbolism of the moment cementing itself in my mind. Jerking upright with a
splash, I gasped down greedy lungfuls of air, swiping the water out of my eyes; as I caught my
breath, I contemplated the ironic parallels between the love I felt for my brother and my body’s need
for oxygen.

Pietro was my air—if I let society dictate who I should love… then I would surely drown.

If left up to me, I would proudly proclaim to the world that I was in love with my brother; the
problem was… he—like everyone else—thought that I was wrong for feeling the way I did. He
might flirt and tease me, but when push came to shove, the fact he kept retreating proved that he
couldn’t return my love—not in the way I wanted him to. No matter how much I might want to
change that, I couldn’t—that was the true root of my despair. I could tell myself I was envious of
other girls for the way they looked or for their clothes and the things they had such easy access to, but the truth was... the only thing they had that I coveted was their ability to be with Pietro in a way that I never could.

Heaving a weary sigh, I climbed out of the tub, wrapping myself in a towel—quickly straightening up the mess I’d made. Scooping up my bag, I traversed the distance to ‘my’ new bedroom—hoping there was some kind of lotion buried in the dusty clutter that I could use before getting dressed. As I passed the room my brother was to use, the door jerked open—I ignored it, hurrying my steps.

“You okay?”

I paused, one hand on the doorknob. “Why wouldn’t I be?”

“I felt how sad you were... then I heard you crying—”

“Don’t worry about it... it was nothing,” I said, not meeting his eyes as I dismissed his concern.

He moved out into the hall, leaning against the door frame; I forced myself not to let my eyes wander—all he had on was a towel wrapped around his hips. “Come on, Wanda—don’t be like that. If you’re upset about something... just talk to me—”

“You mean the way you’ve been so willing to talk to me? I’ve sensed how you’ve been feeling too—I’ve begged you to talk to me about it, but you refused, remember?” It came out sharper than I’d intended—but that was good; anger kept the ache of longing at bay... for a little while, at least.

“I told you we’d talk tonight—”

“Fine—then tonight I’ll tell you what upset me,” I said, shoving open the door.

He reached out, grabbing my wrist—immediately I reacted, trying to jerk my hand free. I didn’t stop to think that the movement might dislodge the towel I was wearing—not until it hit the floor in a crumpled up heap by my feet. Immediately I dropped my bag, snatching the towel back up and holding it in front of me—an embarrassed flush racing across my face and the swell of my breasts. “I’m sorry—”

“What are you sorry for?” He asked; his voice sounded husky, and thick.

“Pietro... I can’t put my towel back on unless you let go of my wrist,” I pointed out softly, still staring at the floor.

“I know.” His grip on my wrist tightened. “Answer my question... what are you sorry for, Wanda?”

“That you were just exposed to the disgusting, forbidden sight of your sister’s naked body,” I spat out, resuming my struggle to break free.

He flinched back as if I’d slapped him, eyes wide—a torrent of fear poured across our bond. “What... what... why—”

“It’s the truth isn’t it? You play it off, trying to appease me... but deep down inside you are sickened by the things I’ve said and done,” I whispered.

“Don’t do this... not today—”

“I am sorry that my feelings are inconvenient and don’t match up with your birthday timeline! You asked me what was wrong—”
“I think you are beau—”

“In a brotherly way.” I sighed, shaking my head. “Let me go Pietro… please—”

I gasped as his hand snaked out, snatching away my towel; his jaw tensed with determination as his eyes slowly dropped, traveling over every single inch of my exposed skin. A look of yearning slowly replaced the anguished expression on his face. “I think you are the most beautiful thing God ever created, Wanda—and I’m not saying that as your brother.”

For a brief moment, I caught a glimpse of everything I’d ever dreamed of seeing in his eyes, but then he released my wrist, dropping my towel on the floor—storming back into his bedroom and slamming the door before I could respond.

I stood there for a moment, shaken by the look he’d worn on his face—too shocked by his actions to move a single inch; he’d looked at me… actually seen me as a girl, not just his twin sister… and approved of what he saw. Taking a deep breath to shake my daze, I scooped up my towel and bag, wandering into my room, quietly closing the door behind me; as I moved towards the bed to spread out the clothes I planned to wear, my reflection in the mirror over the dresser caught my eye. Two spots of color lingered in my cheeks, enhancing my face with a natural, rosy blush—one that even the bruise on my face could not detract from; my eyes were sparking and despite my pallor, my skin glowed—the happiness I felt lighting me up from within.

I didn’t need makeup to look pretty—all I needed was the slightest hint that Pietro might love me, just a little.

A short while later I was fully dressed—perched on the edge of the bed, glaring down at my feet; the grimy canvas sneakers that I’d been so grateful to find in the garbage had become the bane of my existence. Out of all the miniscule problems I’d encountered while trying to get ready, my shoes were the one thing that just couldn’t be solved with a quick fix.

My skin was soft and sweet smelling thanks to the bottle of rose scented body lotion I’d found; it had been almost completely dried up, but water from the tap in the bathroom and a great deal of vigorous shaking had rehydrated it, making it as good as new. My lovely new blouse was supposed to be worn off of my shoulders, but for the life of me I hadn’t been able to figure out what I was supposed to do about my bra straps; a few bobby pins borrowed from the dresser had secured them to the elastic that ran along the shoulder part of my shirt—securing the straps out of sight. The skirt… dear God.. the skirt; it had hung down over the tops of my feet. Searching the shelves on the wall had produced a small sewing kit—a few careful stiches had it adjusted to the perfect length in no time flat.

But my wretched shoes looked absolutely horrible—the single flaw in my appearance.

A gentle knocking interrupted the murderous thoughts I was directing at my sneakers. Scowling, I glanced up at the door, instinctively knowing it wasn’t Pietro—he would have just barged in. “Yes?”

“May I come in and speak with you for a moment?”

“It is your house—you don’t have to ask.” When he didn’t come in, I sighed, amending my statement. “I am decent, if that’s what you’re waiting on.”

He cracked open the door—just enough to peek inside. “While you are here this is your room, Wanda—young ladies need their privacy.”

Kicking off my shoes, I crossed the room, jerking the door open—dramatically waving him inside.
“Have you considered that your daughter might not appreciate my taking—”

“Stasia lost all rights to this room the day she looked me in the eye and told me that she wished her
mother and I would drop dead,” he said bluntly. “I would rather have you enjoy it than have it sit like
a shrine to an unappreciative, ungrateful woman.”

“She actually said that?” It was hard for me to wrap my head around a person being so disrespectful
to anyone, much less one of their parents.

“She did—they were the last words she ever said to me.” He sank down on the edge of the bed,
patting the mattress beside him. “Please… sit down for a moment.”

I moved over, perching beside him—wondering if he was about to lecture me on something else I’d
done wrong.

“When my daughter was your age… she became quite a handful. Her friends were all older than she
was and though she desperately wanted to fit in… we had certain rules that made it difficult for her.
We weren’t strict, mind you, but she still felt like we were being terribly unfair by refusing to let her
wear the shorter skirts and high heels that her friends were wearing—and I refused to let her wear
makeup until she was sixteen.” He sighed, glancing around the room—remembering the past, I
assumed. “On her thirteenth birthday my wife convinced me to bend a little… to allow her to wear
clear gloss on her lips. I feel certain she would want you to have the same thing… so I got you this.”

I stared down at the narrow box he pulled from his pocket—it was wrapped in pretty pink paper,
with a tiny silver bow. “You shouldn’t have—”

“I wanted to. I don’t want to make the same mistakes Wanda… God has given me a chance to do
better this time around—it would be a sin to waste such an opportunity, yes?”

A wave of remorse filled me as I thought about my brother’s words regarding my behavior; he was
right—the old man sitting next to me just wanted… no.. just needed children to love. “Professor…
Grigori… I am very sorry that I have been so rude and ungrateful—”

“Shhh—none of that,” he said softly, his lips curving up in a gentle smile at my using his given
name. “I understand Wanda—now open your birthday gift.”

Swiping at a stray tear that was sliding down my cheek, I carefully peeled back the wrapping paper
—intending to add it to my box of keepsakes when I got home. The lip gloss inside was sheer, with
just a hint of pink—the exact color I would have chosen for myself. I turned, throwing my arms
around his neck, stretching up to press a kiss against his cheek. My exuberant outburst startled him
—he almost tumbled off the bed.

“Easy now! I am an old man… very breakable.” He chuckled, patting my back.

“Thank you… thank you for everything. I promise you that I will never ever speak harshly to you
again,” I murmured before hopping up and crossing to the mirror—excited to make use of my gift.

“I got your brother something too... I know how it is with twins—one feeling guilty if they receive
something their sibling cannot share.”

“That was very nice of you.” I glanced back at him smiling. “Do I look okay to go to a restaurant?”

“You look lovely—that color is very becoming on you… but you forgot something, I think.” His
eyes dropped to my bare feet.
“I know… I was putting it off… they look so horrible—”

“That’s easy enough to fix.” He pushed himself up off the bed, moving over to the window. “I told you earlier that you are welcome to any of Stasia’s things… that means her shoes too, chavi.” Pushing the stuffed animals to the floor, he tugged at the window seat—it opened, the base a cleverly disguised storage space. “You might have to hunt for a pair that fits, but I am sure you will find something—she was a pack rat, never throwing anything away.”

I peered inside, amazed to see at least twenty pairs of shoes in all different colors. “So many… I think I will have to keep an eye on you—you seem to have a habit of spoiling people.”

“That is very true—she would bat her eyes at me, requesting a new dress or handbag and I would buy it the next day. I could never resist—I would have given her the world… for all the good it did me.”

“Well I assure you that Pietro and I really do appreciate it,” I said softly, leaning down to pull out a pair of black flats. They fit me almost perfectly—there was only a little extra space at the toes.

“Perhaps tomorrow you can come over and go through the closet—though I warn you, you won’t find many slacks or blue jeans. In my day… pants were not appropriate for young girls to wear out in public—one of my rules was that she could only wear them around the house.”

“I’m starting to like skirts and dresses… they make me feel like a proper young woman.”

“I am the same way—I feel more like a gentleman when I am dressed nicely.” He tugged on my braid—picking up the black shawl I’d draped across the foot of the bed. “Come on, let’s see if we can light a fire under that brother of yours—my stomach is starting to rumble.”

Draping the shawl around my shoulders, I followed after him, hovering at his side as he knocked on the door to Pietro’s room; it jerked open a heartbeat later, and Pietro stepped out—immediately, the gentle fluttering butterflies in my stomach transformed into what felt like a flock of eagles as my breath hitched in my throat. Never in a million years would I have imagined that a day would come when I would see my brother wearing a sports coat and tie—though the latter was still undone, draped underneath the collar of his crisp white shirt.

“I don’t know how to fasten it,” he mumbled, eyes locked on the ground.

“Don’t worry, I can do it—I will teach you how to do it yourself when we have more time.” The old man squatted down, his hands moving so fast that I couldn’t keep up with what he was doing.

“Thank you, sir.” Pietro glanced up, his eyes widening as he caught sight of me—his mouth dropped open in surprise. “Wanda… you look so beautiful!”

I smiled, dropping my eyes demurely—glancing back up at him from underneath my lashes. “Thank you… you look very handsome too—like a movie star or something.”

He preened at the compliment, standing up straighter. “This is my birthday gift… I asked for a nice outfit to wear so I that could take you out to dinner.”

He sounded so proud of himself that it made my heart ache—I moved closer, pressing my lips against his cheek. “It is a wonderful gift… for both of us, yes?”

“Ach—now you’ve left a lip print on him—run and wipe it off son, then the two of you can exchange your gifts before we leave.” As Pietro hurried off to wipe away my sticky lip gloss, the professor held out his arm—automatically I grabbed it, doing my best to help him straighten up. “My
knees are complaining that I’ve mistreated them today—growing old is hell on the body.”

“Papa always said that you are only as old as you feel,” I offered, “so just tell yourself that you feel twenty one—maybe that will fool your knees.”

He laughed, steering me towards the front room. “I think they are far too smart for that, chavi. Sixty they might buy, but not twenty one.”

I didn’t answer—I was distracted by the sight of two wrapped packages sitting on the sofa. “You wrapped it for me? Thank you—I didn’t even think… we haven’t been able to wrap presents for a while. We just hand them over since it’s usually food or something special we found while scavenging.”

“You won’t have to do that anymore, I promise.” He chuckled, sinking down into the easy chair that sat adjacent to the long couch. “I wish the two of you had come into my life before Christmas… it has been far too long since I played Father Frost.”

“Do you put up a Christmas tree?” Smoothing my skirt daintily, I sat down between the packages, unsure which one was mine. “That is something we have managed to do—the tree lots throw them away once they start to wilt. We made paper chains out of newspaper… it was very pretty—Pietro even found a star to put atop the tree.”

“I have not had one since my wife died… but next Christmas I will—now I have a reason for decorating, again.”

“Present time!” Pietro practically sang out, flashing me a secretive smile as he hurried into the room. “You first—I have been waiting days for you to open it.”

I glanced at the packages—neither had a name tag. “Which one is it?”

“Blue bow for you… green bow for your brother—those are your favorite colors, I believe?”

“Yes,” Pietro answered for both of us, plopping down next to me on the couch. “Hurry up Pietra! I am dying here!”

“So impatient,” I teased, grinning at him—unwrapping the gift as carefully as I had the one the professor had given me in the bedroom. “Good things come to those who wait, remember?”

“Yes… yes they do,” he murmured, ducking his head down—hiding his face.

The wrapping paper fell away, revealing a plain black box—the sort with a hinge on one side of the lid. Widening my eyes I looked over at Pietro—I knew a jewelers box when I saw one. “How much did this cost—”

“It doesn’t matter… just open it!” It was almost a shout.

I cracked it open—gasping as I saw the beautiful silver necklace inside. “Pietro! It is too much!”

“No it’s not,” he said happily—pleased with my reaction.

Carefully I extracted the delicate chain from the padded interior, holding it up so I could better see the pendant; it had an odd shape—sort of like an oblong puzzle piece with rounded edges.

“You don’t know what it is, so you?”

“I know it is beautiful—”
Pietro laughed taking it from my hand as he reached into the collar of his shirt, extracting a thin silver chain with a matching pendant—the mirror image of the one he’d given me. “Watch…”

My eyes widened as he snapped the two pieces together—a squeal of delight escaping me. When joined together it was easy to see that the two abstract pieces were actually the shapes of two people—embracing so tightly that it looked like they were melding into one single person.

“Separately… they make no sense—their shapes don’t match up to anything else in the world. But when you join them with their other half, it all becomes clear,” he said softly. “One into two and two into one… just like us, Pietra. Two halves that have to be together to make a perfect whole.”

My eyes filled with tears—I brushed them away impatiently. “It is perfect… so very perfect Pietro. Thank you… I love it so very much.”

He blushed, running his fingers over the figures. “Do you really? I wanted to get you a gold heart shaped locket… but then I saw this and—”

“It is the best present I ever received, I swear. I didn’t know anything like it existed—so perfect for twins!”

“The guy at the shop said it was one of a kind—he designed it and everything,” he said proudly. “Somebody custom ordered it, but they changed their mind and didn’t want it—it’s like it was meant for us, yes?”

“Put it on me?” I turned to the side as he separated the figures—moving my braid out of the way so it wouldn’t interfere. He slid it around my neck, fumbling with the tiny clasp—his fingertips trailed along my skin for a brief instant before he removed his hand.

“Okay… can I open mine now?” He bounced on the couch cushion, looking eager.

“Yes… it’s your turn.” Realizing that my hands were shaking, I clasped them together tightly in my lap; I was suddenly overcome with nerves—his gift for me was so thoughtful and unique that it made the watch I’d bought him seem far too practical, almost boring in comparison.

Pietro showed no hint of concern for maintaining the wrapping paper—he tore into it like a five year old, scattering bits of paper on the floor; his enthusiasm made me giggle, though my laughter faded as soon as he opened the box.

“Oh my God! Wanda! How—this is exactly the watch I wanted!” He jerked it out of the box, staring at it in awe—happiness and amazement surging between us.

“I wanted to get yours fixed… to put a new battery in it, but Mr. Rozencov said it would make the facing fall apart—”

“No—this so much better! I love it!” He reached over, pulling me into his arms—squeezing me so tightly that I squeaked.

“I’m sorry it is so practical,” I whispered, “I just wanted you to have a nice watch again.”

“Really Pietra—I swear this is exactly what I wanted. I tried it on and everything—Grigori offered to buy it for me but I told him no.” His smile was radiant—lighting up his face; I just wished I could make him feel such happiness every single day of his life. “Look—it’s even got a stop watch function! Now I can time you when you want to test yourself.”

His words made a something click inside my head.
“That’s why you took me there, isn’t it?” I asked softly, glancing over at the old man; he was watching us with a smile of contentment on his face. When he nodded, I glanced down at the pendant that hung between my breasts—the perfect representation of the unbreakable bond between twins. “And this? It was you… wasn’t it? You were the one that ordered it then changed your mind.”

“I did. It was to be a present for Yuliana—she died before it was completed. I could not bring myself to collect it when it was finally finished,” he said softly. “It has been sitting in the display case all this time—Hanzi was thinking about melting it down and casting something else. When Pietro told me he wanted to buy you a nice piece of jewelry—” he shrugged, his smile widening”—I took it as a sign.”

The thought of the beautiful piece being destroyed was horrifying—my hand clenched around it protectively. “I think you are right.”

“Well I think I am starving,” Pietro announced, holding out his arm and tapping his watch, “and it is seven fourteen, which means we are running late.”

The professor chuckled, pushing himself up from the chair. “Let me grab my hat—”

“Don’t you want to take a shower first?” I asked, my eyes flicking over his outfit—there were mud stains on the knees of his trousers from working in the garden.

“No—I don’t have a pretty young lady that I am trying to impress tonight,” he teased, winking at me as he gestured towards my brother.

“That has nothing to do with it at all!” Pietro’s cheeks turned bright red. “It is our birthday—our parents always made sure we put on our nicest things for our birthday meal.

“That is true—though I have to admit you look very different that you did in blue jeans and a clean t-shirt,” I murmured. “I think Mama must surely be looking down from Heaven and bursting with pride at how handsome you look.”

“Me? What about you? You look like a princess in a fairy story—”

I waved my hand, dismissing the comparison. “You were her favorite—she’s certain to be far more impressed with you than me.”

“I wasn’t!” He looked horrified at the thought that our mother loved him more than she loved me.

“You were.”

“Was not.”

Pietro, honestly you were…” I reached over, wrapping my finger in one of his curls. “It’s okay though, I understand how she felt since you happen to be my favorite too.”

He rolled his eyes. “I’m the only brother you have—”

“I meant my favorite person,” I said lightly, releasing the curl as I stood up—moving to join the professor in the entryway. When I got to the door I paused, glancing back over my shoulder—my lips curving up in a grin at what I saw; he was watching me again, with the same dazed look on his face. “Well? I believe you promised me dinner out Pietro Maximoff—or you just planning on sitting there all night?”

I didn’t wait for an answer or even for him to standup—I sashayed out of the room, adding an extra
little wiggle to the sway of my hips, confident he was still watching.
TO MY RELIEF the professor drove cautiously on the way to the restaurant—a good thing, since I was prepared to lecture him about safety at the slightest hint he was starting to speed. As we entered the heart of the city the traffic increased, impeding our progress; I allowed myself to sink back into the comfortable leather seat—we were celebrating, so I could set aside my grudge against the automobile manufacturer for one night. Nighttime in Novi-Grad was very different when traveling by car—I could better appreciate how lovely the lights of the city looked as we drove by, and the streets didn’t look as grimy as they did when one was on foot. We were moving far too fast for my eyes to linger on the trash in the gutters, and the graffiti on the buildings was nothing more than an indecipherable blur of color. As I stared out the window, enchanted by the view, Pietro kept himself occupied by playing with my hand—gently tugging on my fingers.

“May we listen to some music, please?” He asked, glancing towards the front seat.

“Of course… but none of that caterwauling that passes for music nowadays—I only play real music.” He punched a button—I smiled as the haunting sound of a violin filled the car; it was familiar… soothing—the kind of music Papa sometimes played when he dug his battered old fiddle out of the closet.

“Papa’s music,” I murmured.

“What was that?” The old man turned the volume down, glancing at me in the rear view mirror.

“Our father sometimes played like this… he loved music—he was named after a famous musician.”

“Oh? Which one?”

“Django Reinhardt—that’s Pietro’s middle name too. Django, I mean.”

“A good Romani name… it means ‘I awaken’. I have some of Django and Stéphane Grappelli’s music at home—my wife had a fondness for jazz.” The professor glanced back at us for a moment before returning his eyes to the road. “And you? Do you have a middle name, chavi?”

I made a face—I hated my middle name almost as much as I hated my first one. “Vadoma.” He started chuckling—I huffed. “It’s not funny—I know it’s horrible!”

“I am laughing because it is so fitting, Wanda—it means ‘knowing one’. Given your IQ, I would say your parents named you well.”

I glanced over at Pietro—he seemed completely oblivious to the conversation; his jaw was set, eyes tightly closed, making it look like he was wrapped up in the music. He wasn’t—I could feel waves of sorrow and remorse lapping against my skin. I scooted closer—automatically he slouched, sinking lower in the seat so I could rest my head against his shoulder without stretching.

“What’s wrong?” I asked—confident the old man couldn’t hear my whisper over the music.

His head tilted, leaning against mine—he laced our fingers, squeezing my hand. “Wanda… about earlier…”


I tensed; it was inevitable—I should have known he’d say something to negate what had passed between us. It was foolish of me to hope that this time would be any different. My chest tightened, heart already preparing for the inevitable ache that was coming. “What about it?”

“I’m sorry if I made you uncomfortable. I… I should have asked before I did it.”

“Oh… I thought you were going to say it shouldn’t have happened.” It was a good thing it was dark in the backseat—it hid the flush of embarrassment that raced across my cheeks. “It’s okay… it didn’t bother me.”

“Why not?”

“I like having you see me… it makes me feel good,” I answered, my voice as soft as his.

He slid his arm around my shoulders, pulling me closer. “I just… I don’t want you to think I would force you to do something you didn’t want to do… that’s all.”

His worry brushed against me; it was cold and clammy, like snowflakes melting against my neck on a winter day. “I know that Pietro… I trust you implicitly. I don’t think I’ll ever trust anyone nearly half as much as I trust you.”

“Okay… I’m still sorry though. I should have asked—”

“Don’t be ridiculous—”

“If you two weren’t so busy whispering back and forth you would be out of the car already.”

I looked up, surprised to find the car had stopped moving; the professor was peering at us over the back of his seat. “Sorry, we were just talking about… uh…”

“The last time we ate at a restaurant.” Pietro finished for me, opening up the door on his side and climbing out—without releasing my hand. Laughing, I scooted out after him, smoothing down my skirt as I slid out into the crisp night air.

“It’s a half a block up—this is the closest parking,” the professor said, gesturing further up the street; in the distance I could see sparking lights outlining the awning of the restaurant. “Now I must warn you… on a Saturday night it might get a little loud—it all depends on how many gadje customers are inside.”

“What do they have to do with—”

“If the patronage is all Romani, there will be singing and perhaps even dancing, but that won’t happen if there is a single gadje in their midst. The old songs and dances are for Roma only—it is our culture, not theirs.”

The thought of being expected to participate in such a thing made me anxious; I shivered, leaning closer to Pietro. “We don’t know how to dance.”

“Do not worry chavi—you don’t have to if you don’t want to. If you would like to learn though, I can teach you both. Dancing is a marvelous thing—a celebration of the beauty of life.” He tugged open the door, waving us inside—we lagged back, not wanting to enter first. Arching a brow and shaking his head, he stepped inside—Pietro released my hand, grabbing the door to hold it open for me.

A pretty dark haired girl stood behind a long wooden counter just inside the door; she looked
downright bored as her eyes flicked from the professor to me—however the petulant expression she wore slid away as her eyes moved to my twin. Suddenly, she was tossing back her hair and smiling in his direction as she leaned further over the counter—completely inappropriate behavior since she had to be at least eighteen.

“Table for three?” She practically purred it, playing with one of her glossy dark curls as she batted her eyes at Pietro; I glared at her, moving closer to his side.

“No—we want our own table,” he said, reclaiming my hand. “A table for two—”

“Well! Look who it is! Come to celebrate your special night?” I tore my eyes away from the hussy—Hanzí was standing in an archway that presumably led further into the restaurant, holding back a beaded curtain. “I will take care of them, Terese—they are my friends.”

“But—” she protested, leaning forward even more—her ample bosom practically spilling out on the counter as she tried to catch Pietro’s eye.

“Come—this way.” Hanzí ignored her, gesturing for us to move.

I shot an icy look at the girl—forgetting for a moment that my brother could clearly feel the prickly irritation that was racing up and down my spine; he tightened his grip on my hand, holding me back as the professor moved towards the archway.

“What’s wrong?”

“She should be ashamed of herself—acting like that towards a thirteen year old,” I muttered, cheeks heating.


“That… woman... was flirting with you.” I scowled at her—she was watching us intently.

“Wanda! She wasn’t!”

“Clearly she was—” I snapped, jerking my hand free to follow after the professor; Pietro wasn’t having it—he slid an arm around me, pulling me close to his side.

“Well she’s wasting her time,” he muttered, casting a cold glare in the direction his admirer—I couldn’t resist shooting her a triumph over my shoulder, pleased that he was as irritated as I was at her behavior.

Pietro’s head ducked down, lips tickling my ear as he whispered. “Don’t be jealous, little Pietra.”

“I am not jealous in the slightest,” I huffed, ignoring his pleased grin. “I am indignant—there is a difference.”

“Perhaps so, but I distinctly feel a bit of jealousy in there too,” he teased.

“What you are going to feel is me pinching you if you don’t stop,” I threatened, watching him out of the corner of my eye.

Hanzí stopped beside a long table, gesturing towards the chairs; the professor shook his head. “We will need two tables—I am simply acting as chauffer tonight. With all the trouble on the streets I do not want the children walking out alone after dark.”

I glanced over at Pietro—immediately ducking my head when his eyes met mine; it would not do to
have him realize the path my thoughts had taken—if he even suspected that I felt like we were on a
date he would probably insist on turning around and going straight home.

“Children? Preposterous—they are nearly full grown.” Hanzi scoffed, glancing around the room—
moving towards a smaller table. “If you are intending to eat alone then I must insist on joining you—
bibi Simza’s cooking is meant to be eaten amongst friends.”

The professor smiled, nodding, but his acceptance of the offer did not quite reach his eyes—his smile
looked forced; it was a safe bet that he’d planned on a quiet meal—not one spent with a raucous
companion.

Stopping at a small table in the corner, Hanzi pulled out one of the two chairs in an overly dramatic
fashion, gesturing for me to sit. As Pietro settled himself across from me, the merchant winked,
steering the professor to another table several feet away. I let my eyes wander around the room,
feeling a little out of place; all the other diners were middle aged people—which meant we stuck out
like a sore thumb.

“What do you think?” Pietro whispered. “It is very nice, yes?”

“It is… it is actually much fancier than I expected it to be,” I replied. For some ridiculous reason, I’d
pictured Hanzi’s sister would own something far simpler, mirroring the side of his shop that held the
clothes. Instead it was almost elegant, with highly polished floors and crisp white tablecloths—even
the chairs were plush and expensive looking.

My gaze fell on a teenage boy that was heading in our direction—he was balancing a tray that held a
large carafe and two fancy looking glasses. He reached our table at the exact same moment as Hanzi;
the merchant looked far too pleased by his timing for it to be mere coincidence.

“This is Tobar, my nephew—my sister Tsura’s son.” He slapped the boy on the back, his smile
widening as his eyes flicked from his nephew to me. “Tobar, this is the young lady I was telling you
about—look at her! Isn’t she a pretty little thing?”

The boy’s dark eyes ran over me before darting to Pietro; if looks could kill the scowl on my
brother’s face would surely strike him dead. “It would appear she is already—”

“No! No! This is her brother. She is unmatched—”

“And she will stay that way.” Pietro’s death glare switched from the boy to the older man; Hanzi
seemed quite unheeding to the unspoken threat that lingered in the words—Tobar, on the other hand,
had the good sense to take an enormous step back.

“Yes, yes I know—such talk must wait until later. Though I am sure now that she has seen what a
handsome boy he is—”

“We came here to eat—not to talk.” Pietro reached across the table, grabbing my hand. “We need
menus—”

“There are no menus at Bucali Burato. We serve in the old way—the same meal for whatever weary
souls that might wander in. Though I suspect Tsura and bibi Simza might just whip up something
extra just for you… something special once they hear you are visiting us tonight.” Bowing his head,
he wandered back over to the professor’s table, plopping down in the chair across from the old man
and stretching his legs out in the aisle.

Tobar glanced between us, looking almost nervous—probably because Pietro was still glaring at him
with fierce, angry eyes; his hand actually shook as he placed the glasses and carafe on our table—
water splashed over the sides.

“I’m sorry,” he muttered, swiping at it with his apron.

“It’s fine,” Pietro growled, “now go away.”

“Pietro!” I frowned as the boy fled, putting as much distance between himself and my brother as he could. “Be nice—please!”

“That’s him, isn’t it? The one Hanzi wants to match you up with?”

“I suppose so… he said it was his sister’s son.”

“He doesn’t look very smart”—he muttered, glaring at his retreating back “—in fact… I’d say he looks downright dumb.”

“Stop,” I murmured, trying not to laugh—not wanting to encourage him, but at the same time, strangely pleased to see him so worked up.

“What? It’s true! Did you see his forehead? He looks like a caveman!”

“Pietro!” Despite my resolve, a giggle escaped—the sound pleased him, wiping away his scowl.

“I bet he can barely spell his own name—”

“Is the table to your liking sir?” The low, throaty voice caught us both off guard—it was the girl from the entrance to the restaurant. Resting her hand on his shoulder, she leaned over—obviously trying to make sure her cleavage was on display.

Every single muscle in my body tensed as I fought against the urge to knock her hand away. “Our table is fine. Thank you.”

Her dark eyes flicked over to me, an expression of irritation crossing her face; it disappeared when she returned her gaze to Pietro—she practically cooed in his ear. “If you need anything… anything at all… just let me know and I will be glad to—”

“If we need anything—” I said, mocking her simpering tone perfectly “—we will let Hanzi know.”

Her eyes narrowed. “There is no need to be rude—”

“There is no need to throw yourself at someone who is clearly uninterested either,” Pietro said, knocking her hand off his shoulder. “What I need is for you to leave us alone.”

Finally getting the message, she tossed her hair back, swinging her rear end in an exaggerated fashion as she walked away. I was so angry that I actually felt hot—an angry flush that matched my mood colored my cheeks.

“Try to calm down,” Pietro murmured, reaching over and grabbing my hand again. “The professor is watching us.”

I glanced towards the old man’s table—he and Hanzi wore matching expressions of worry. I averted my eyes as Hanzi stood up—instinctively sensing he was coming to see what was wrong.

“Is everything alright over here?”

His hand touched my shoulder lightly—I glanced up, speaking before I could stop myself. “No—that
“I am sorry little one—I will ask my sister to speak with her right now.” His hand stroked over my head as he flashed an apologetic smile. “She is not one of us—she is Lom. They are far less adherent to the old ways. I told Tsura that hiring her was a bad idea… her behavior proves I was right, yes?”

“We don’t particularly care what she is—I just want my sister to enjoy the night,” Pietro said. “This is part of her birthday present—if she can’t enjoy herself here we will go somewhere else.”

“No! You cannot—Tsura would be very upset. It will be taken care of—it I promise.”

“Just… make sure she doesn’t come over here again. Please,” I said, tucking a strand of hair behind my ear—irritated at the merchant for touching my braid and dislodging it. The movement made my pendant swing forward, catching his eye.

His smile widened even more. “I am glad to see you liked the soul piece—when Mirga’s wife died I was afraid it would never be worn.”

“Wife? I thought it was a gift for his sister?” I glanced over at Pietro for confirmation—he nodded, looking confused.

“Hmmmm… perhaps I am remembering wrong, but I could have sworn it was for his wife. Either way, it looks very lovely on you. Now if you will please excuse me, I must speak to Tsura about Terese—she will not bother you again.” He strode off, entering a swinging door that I assumed led to the kitchen.

“That was…weird,” I murmured, watching him head to the front. “I wonder why he—”

“Maybe this wasn’t a good idea—we should go somewhere else. I wanted to take you to that fancy café on Griosha, but the professor said we should come here—”

“It is fine Pietro—and besides… this is our heritage. It is nice to finally get some idea how Mama and Papa grew up, don’t you think?”

“I suppose… but if she comes back, we’re leaving. We can walk to the café and Grigori can pick us up when he’s done with dinner.”

“Or I could just smack her into next week,” I muttered under my breath.

He laughed, giving my hand a final squeeze before sinking back in his chair. “I wonder if the food will be like Mama’s? I hope—”

Tension oozed along my skin. “Pietro?”

“This is unbelievable.” His eyes narrowed—he reclaimed my hand.

“What’s—”

“Miss… I am sorry to interrupt, but Nano Hanzi says it is your birthday…” I glanced up, startled by the unexpected voice; Tobar set a red carnation down on the table beside me. “I hope you have a good birthday.”

“I—” before I could say thank you, he scurried back to the kitchen, his face as red as the flower he’d given me.

“That’s it—we’re leaving.” Pietro shoved his chair back—almost knocking it over.
“Sit down, please.” I said softly, staring at the flower.

“No! I want to—”

“Pietro, please.” I glanced up at him, frowning. “It is just a flower for my birthday, that’s all.”
He looked like he wanted to argue, but he sat back down. “I don’t like it!”

“Don’t—”

“What? You can complain but I can’t? That hardly seems fair.”

I sighed, returning my eyes to the accursed bloom; it was a nice gesture—although a completely unwanted one. The polite thing for me to do would be to show some admiration for the gift, but I was far more concerned with soothing Pietro’s ruffled feathers than with what was mannerly.

He bristled when I picked up the flower—his agitation nipping at my skin; ignoring it, I snapped the stem off—reaching into the neckline of my top to retrieve one of the bobby pins.

“Wanda!” He sounded scandalized—it made me smile. “What are you—”

“This.” I said, leaning across the table to pin it to his lapel like a makeshift boutonniere. “There. Every handsome gentleman needs a flower in his lapel, yes?”

The icy anger melted—happiness overpowering the prickly agitation; it was as warm and soothing as the summer rain. “It was meant for you… not me.”

I rolled my eyes. “As if I want some strange Neanderthal giving me flowers? Besides, it was a gift, so I can do whatever I want with it—and I want to give it to you.”

His lips twitched up at the corners. “So… you agree that he looks like a caveman?”

“He is not my type at all—you of all people should know that.”

He cocked his head to the side, studying me. “What is your type, Pietra?”

“Like I said… you should know that.” I said, playing with my necklace. “If you don’t… then you are very dense, don’t you agree?”

“I think perhaps…” His voice trailed off as a large, middle aged woman approached our table, carrying an enormous basket on her arm.

We watched with wide eyes as she produced two small decorative goblets from the basket; setting them before us, she filled them from a dark glass bottle—retreating without a word. Both of us eyed the glasses suspiciously—neither of us sure what the liquid inside might be; I glanced over at the professor—he was drinking the dark liquid down.

“Bottoms up, I guess,” I said, reaching for my glass.

Pietro did the same—casting me a look that clearly indicated he thought that it was a bad idea. “Should we sip it… or…?”

“The professor drank it all at once,” I whispered, sniffing the contents of the glass and wrinkling my nose before leaning across the table to clink my glass against his; I brought it to my lips and started swallowing—immediately fighting back the urge to spit the liquid out. It was warm, and thick—burning a sour path all the way down to my stomach.
Pietro made a face, slamming his empty glass down—looking like he was trying not to choke. “UGH! What was that?”

“Shhh! She’s coming back!” I nudged his leg under the table—a warning not to be rude.

This time, she didn’t have the basket—she was carrying two plates. I glanced up at her, gesturing towards the glasses. “What was that, please?”

She stared at me, brow wrinkling. “Yertisar ma?”

“This,” I said, tapping the glass then shrugging my shoulders and trying to look quizzical. I felt silly—like I was playing charades.

“Ah! Dzov’arpa bravinta!” She smiled, setting the plates down. “For’shava, hai?”

I just stared at her, then nodded—completely at a loss. She patted my cheek, laughing as she turned away.

“Well… that was less than helpful. I hope I didn’t just ask for a refill,” I muttered, watching her stop off at the professor’s table.

“Wanda! There are weeds in this!” Pietro hissed.

“Don’t be silly—“ I glanced down at my plate—it had what I assumed was supposed to be some sort of salad. He was right—it looked like weeds. “Are those… dandelions?”

“I think so,” he muttered, poking through the weird looking greens. “Mama never served us weeds—where is the lettuce?”

“Maybe they taste better than they look,” I offered. “It can’t be any worse than what we’ve scavenged, right?” Picking up my fork, I speared some of the leaves, bravely taking a bite as he watched me with wide eyes.

I was wrong—so… so wrong. It was much worse than anything we’d ever eaten from the trash. My eyes started watering as my natural gag reflex kicked in—it tasted bitter, reminding me of the time I’d mistakenly chewed an aspirin as a child. The dressing didn’t help any either—it was hot and oily, making the greens feel slimy in my mouth as I tried to chew.

Pietro took one look at my face and set his fork down, shoving his plate away.

I grabbed my glass of water, draining it in one long gulp, trying to mask my distaste as I glanced back down at my plate. “It’s… different—that’s all. It has a stronger taste than lettuce.”

“Since I am not particularly fond of the way lettuce tastes, I’m not exactly sure why you think I want to eat something that’s even stronger.” He scowled at the salad as if it had offended him.

I pushed the greens around on my plate, racking my brain for something that might convince him to eat—I didn’t want to inadvertently offend Hanzi or his sister, and I didn’t want to embarrass the professor, either. I might not know anything about Romani culture, but I was fairly certain that returning full plates to the kitchen would be very offensive to the cook. “You realize that if you do not eat… it will only serve to convince Hanzi that I should feel honored at the thought of a match, yes?”

His eyes narrowed. “What do you mean?”
Forcing myself to eat another mouthful of the wretched salad, I shrugged—making him wait while I chewed. “They are big on tradition. If he thinks you don’t appreciate our heritage or that you are not a big eater, obviously he will assume that by having me spend time with his nephew I will come to see the differences between you and decide that I would rather cook for a big eating husband than a finicky brother.”

His jaw tensed; reclaiming his fork, he speared the salad, shoving a huge bite in his mouth. I couldn’t help but giggle at the way he grimaced while he chewed.

“See? Not so bad, is it?”

“It is disgusting—not even fit for a goat,” he huffed, loading up his fork again.

“And yet you are eating it,” I murmured, trying not to smile.

“No one will ever appreciate you like I do, or love your cooking more than me—if I have to eat ten helping of this slop to prove it, I will.”

“It is a learning experience—yes?” I smiled at him, taking another bite. If he could brave it, then I certainly could too.

“If you say so.” His expression didn’t change, but his emotions did—regret and unhappiness hung around him, each equally as strong.

“Pietro… you don’t have to eat it… really—”

“It’s not that… I just… I wanted to take you out for a nice meal and instead we are sitting here, eating weeds and grass.” He glanced up, his blue eyes full of misery. “This isn’t at all what I had planned… I’m sorry.”

I dropped my fork, stretching out my arm to touch his hand. “It doesn’t matter where we are or what we eat, Pietro… this is the best night ever because you are here by my side. We could be sitting in the gutter eating moldy bread and I would be happy that we are able to celebrate our birthday together.”

“Do you mean that?” His fingers slid up over mine, tracing along my skin.

“I do. Every birthday I have is a good one because I get to share it with you.”

“Even if it means eating weeds and drinking… warm sludge?”

“Even then.” I grinned, sliding my hand out from under his—retrieving my fork and cleaning my plate with a gusto that was completely feigned. Every bite was as torturous as the first, but I didn’t want him feeling disappointed; I vowed to myself that no matter how bad the next dish was, I would hide my revulsion and pretend to enjoy it for Pietro’s sake.

When Tobar came to take away our empty plates, I excused myself to visit the ladies room; some of the oily dressing had gotten on my hands—I wanted to wash them before I got it all over my clothes. Since I knew that my speaking to the boy was likely to set Pietro off again, I stopped at the professor’s table, getting directions to the lavatory from Hanzi.

Of course, as luck would have it, the last person I wanted to see was in the bathroom—slathering bright red lipstick all over her pouty lips. She narrowed her eyes, glaring at me as I walked over to the next sink.
“Thanks so much for almost getting me fired,” she spat out, watching me in the mirror.

“You deserved it,” I shot back, thoroughly lathering up my hands. “You should be ashamed of yourself, sticking your boobs in a thirteen year old’s face.”

Her eyes widened in the mirror—she turned around, eyeing me. “You’re lying—there’s no way he’s only thirteen.”

“Technically he’s not even that—he’s twelve for a few more hours.” I said, smiling sweetly.

“I thought he was older… fifteen at least,” she muttered, crossing her arms and leaning back against the sink; I brushed past her without commenting, heading for the door. “Still… I could teach him—it might be worth it, I hear old Mirga is very, very rich. I might actually be able to quit working in this dump if I play my cards right.”

I froze with my hand on the doorknob. “If you touch my Pietro… you will regret it.”

She laughed a me—she shouldn’t have. “What are you going to do about it, little girl?”

I turned around slowly, staring her down—something in my eyes must have betrayed the rage I felt welling up inside; she shifted nervously, averting her eyes from mine. “I’ve lived on the streets of Novi Grad for three years—I’m a street rat, just like he is. I know all the dark, secret places where the real rats hide—they will eat the flesh from your bones after I slit your throat from ear to ear.”

She paled, backing away from me—not stopping until she hit the wall. “That’s not funny—”

“Oh I know it’s not—but I am not in the mood to waste my night trading insults with someone like you. I don’t believe in wasting time with idle threats when the truth is far more terrifying. Now you know what to expect from me if you are foolish enough to try and lure Pietro away from me.”

“You can’t go around threatening to kill people—you’re crazy!”

“Are you not listening? It is not a threat—” I stepped closer to her, enjoying the way she flinched; her fear was intoxicating—I wanted to drink it up and leave her husk drained. As I moved, I realized that her fear made me feel strong… invincible—it was almost as exhilarating as Pietro’s kiss. “—it is a warning. As for my being crazy…” I shrugged, my smile widening. “Two days trapped with a live missile is bound to make anyone go a little mad, don’t you think? Buried beneath the rubble, knowing that bodies are rotting somewhere in the bricks and mortar… just waiting for your time to come… it does things to the mind.”

She bolted for the door—I stuck out my foot, tripping her as she passed; she sprawled to the floor—there was a sickening crunch, then she started to shriek. Clenching my hands into fists, I waited for her to rise; she was older, and bigger—but I was driven by an all-consuming rage, determined to protect what was mine.

“My nose… you broke my nose you crazy bitch!” Blood streamed down her face, decorating the white tiles beneath her; she choked, spitting out a mouthful of it—crawling towards the door.

“You broke your own nose when you tripped over my foot.” I walked past her—careful to avoid the trail of gore she was leaving, jerking open the door. “Next time you come near me or Pietro, I swear before God Almighty I will do a thousand times worse.”

Slamming the door in her face, I took a shaky breath; adrenaline was singing through my veins—demanding I go back and finish what had been started, proving Pietro was mine. I shook my head to clear it, my legs wobbling as I headed for the table. Pietro took one look at me as I approached and
jumped to his feet.

“Wanda—what…” his eyes searched my face, wide and confused “what is that I feel?”

“I don’t know how to describe it,” I whispered. “I feel… indomitable.”

A woman gasped loudly—Teresa was running for the front door, scattering droplets of blood as she went; Pietro’s mouth dropped open—his eyes flicking back to me, locking with mine. “Did you—”

“We had words. She tripped and fell.” I pulled away from him, sitting down—staring at the plate of cabbage rolls that was awaiting me.

“What kind of words?” He persisted, reclaiming his chair.

“No question until later, remember?” I looked up at him—his eyes widened. “She goaded me, okay? I… I had to let her know that I would protect what was mine.”

“But…” I could practically sense the wheels turning in his head—he was weighing his curiosity against his desire for us to finish the remainder of our birthday dinner in peace. “Never mind. We’ll talk about it later.”

“Are they any good?” I asked, pointing to my plate—trying to change the discussion.

“I waited for you,” His foot brushed against mine under the table—a faint blush coloring the tops of his cheeks. “It would have been rude to start without you.”

I smiled, arching a brow. “Or else you just wanted me to taste them first—which is totally not fair since I did that with the weeds.”

He rolled his eyes, picking one up and cramming it into his mouth; I watched as his eyes lit up—he reached for another, even as he chewed. “They’re good—like Mama’s!”

That was all he had to say; my plate was cleaned off almost as fast as his.

Coarse after coarse, the food kept coming; some of it—like the cabbage rolls—we recognized, while other things that were set before us were strange and unfamiliar. The bread wasn’t like any we’d ever seen—it was flat, and chewy, but it complimented the spicy meat filled dumplings that floated in the thick, rich stew. Thankfully it was all delicious—nothing at all like the salad; by the time our dessert was set in front of us I was filled to bursting, but since I had a fondness for poppy seed cake, I managed to make room.

Pietro shoved his empty plate away, groaning loudly; it was a sentiment I shared. “I think I don’t want to eat for at least a week.”

“It was delicious though… now aren’t you glad we came?”

He tilted his head, pretending to think about it as he rubbed his stomach. “Yes, though I could have done without the—”

A loud commotion from somewhere in the back distracted him mid-sentence; I recognized one of the voices as Hanzi—the other voice was female, and twice as loud as his. I glanced over at the professor—he’d stood up and was moving towards the door that led into the kitchen. It swung outward, narrowly missing slamming him in the face—an old woman stormed out, followed by a red faced Hanzi.
“Ervzadova!” She said loudly, pointing to our table.

I sank down a little in my chair, wondering if I was about to get in trouble for the bathroom scene.

“No bibi—” Hanzi grabbed her arm—she smacked him across the face.

“Ervzadova! Ervzadova!” She stomped her foot, scowling—waving her finger at Pietro and me. Grabbing his arm, she towed him towards our table; he smiled apologetically, looking embarrassed by her display.

“I am sorry… This is my old bibi…my great aunt Simza. She oversees the kitchen—she overheard me ask them to make you a nice dessert in honor of your birthday. She… well… she insists on knowing your age.”


The old woman waited while Hanzi translated, her stern look melting into a gap toothed smile. “Binak?”

“Yes bibi.” He glanced at us, smiling. “She is happy you are twins—among the people it is a blessed, lucky thing to be.”

“Ervzadova!” She let out a stream of rapid words that I couldn’t understand, turning towards the kitchen and barking something out that sounded harsh and angry.

I glanced over at the professor—he was leaning against the wall with a mischievous smile on his face. The door beside him swung open—narrowly missing him again; a throng of women streamed out of the kitchen—chattering amongst themselves as they circled our table, ignoring Hanzi completely as he tried to calm them down.

“I am so sorry,” he said—sounding resigned—it was the tone of voice that belonged to a man who knew when he’d been beaten. “She insists.”

“Insists on what?” I asked, confused.

“Ervzadova—it is a custom… a traditional rite of passage.”

“Enough! This is woman’s work—tell Tobar to fetch his violin. Daca—get the sticks.” Another woman joined the throng, pushing her way through to reach the table. She was tall—younger than the Simza, but obviously older than Hanzi; her dark hair was shot through with strands of silver—her black eyes sparkled with excitement as they met mine. “I am Tsura—this is my restaurant.”

“How do you—Hey!” I winced as she jerked the rubber band off the end of my braid. “Stop that!”

“Your hair must be down—long and lose,” she muttered, her fingers roughly combing through the strands I’d woven so carefully. I watched in confused fascination as she deftly unhooked a bright green piece of material from the voluminous multicolor skirt she wore—draping it over my head. “Do you know any of the old songs?

“I… what songs?”

She sighed, shaking her head. “Can you dance?”

“Look, I don’t know what this is about—”

“Grigori says your parents—God rest their souls— were Ruska… so we give you what they cannot.
A tradition of your people.” She reached over, snatching a woven baskets from one of the women—emptying it on the table before shoving it into my hands. “Today you officially leave childhood behind—you stand on the very cusp of the great wheel turning. This will prepare you for the next phase of your life.”

“But—”

“In times past we would have moved through the encampment, visiting each woman to gather things for your dowry—now… we must make do with what we have.” She glanced over her shoulder, nodding at her son—he raised the violin to his chin and began playing a beautiful tune; a moment later, another sound blended with the melody, the low, hollow tapping sound adding a rhythmic beat.

“I will start.” Pushing up her sleeves, Tsura examined the many bangles that lined her arms, pulling one off and dropping it in the basket—tugging another swatch of material from her skirt and draping it over the basket, covering up what was inside. “Come.”

Swaying to the music, she tugged me along after her—waving her free hand in a graceful serpentine motion that complemented the shifting of her hips. I shot Pietro a helpless look—he grinned at me in return, appearing completely swept up by the strange turn our night had taken.

“When we dance, we raise our hands up to the great mother, opening ourselves to her power—letting her spirit move within us.”

I found myself getting caught up in the music—my body moved automatically, shifting to the melody as I tried to mimic the movements Tsura made. We circled the restaurant once, then began again—approaching each table; the men averted their eyes while the women smiled, slipping tokens into the basket I held, hiding them away beneath the bright sapphire fabric.

It was an enchanting experience; while the music was playing and Tsura’s low, throaty voice filled my ears as she sang along, I felt the strangest sense of belonging—like I was a part of something bigger. It was all encompassing, humming along my skin, making me feel revitalized and alive. The hypnotic melody and rich alto voice wove together in a spellbinding way, and though I could not understand the words of the song, I somehow felt them resounding deep inside me.

One by one we stopped off at each of the women who worked in the restaurant, until only one remained—bibi Simza, who’d been so insistent about the rite. She pulled off a ring, sliding it onto my thumb—pressing a kiss on my forehead before whispering a stream of words in the strange, musical language.

“She says ‘welcome to womanhood, little sister—you will come back so we can teach you the ways of our people,” Tsura translated.

“How do I say thank you?” I asked, smiling as I examined the ring; it was far too big, sliding around on my thumb, but I would find a way to make it fit—it was a beautiful piece.

“Gestina.”

“Gestina, madam Simza,” I said, bowing my head to her; she laughed, pinching my cheek.

It wasn’t until Tsura led me back to my table that I realized my brother wasn’t there. I glanced around—the professor was gone too. “Where—”

“He has his own rite of passage to fulfill—a boy, becoming a man.” She smiled, eyes darting from my face to somewhere over my shoulder as she took the basket from my hands. “Don’t worry—he will return soon.”
“What kind of—” My question turned into a shriek as I was snatched right up off the ground—the world turning upside down around me.

“Hurry,” Tsura hissed, pointing towards the kitchen, “before he comes back!”

“Put me down! Pietro!” I screamed, terrified out of my mind. “I want my brother!”

“Stop wiggling—I don’t want to drop you.” Tobar said gruffly, striding into the kitchen.

“Let me go! Please—”

“I’m not going to hurt you—just shut up! Don’t make me gag you!” The bright lights and white floor of the kitchen disappeared, replaced by cement paving and darkness as he burst out into the alley.

Panic clawed at my chest—images of the basement flashing behind my eyes. “I don’t like this, I want my brother!”

“Relax, it will be all right.” He swatted my rear end—the lingering press of his hand shattering all vestiges of my control.

The stairs… so many of them—I can’t make it; my knees buckle and I slide down to the ground in a heap.

He kneels beside me talking—I can’t understand a single thing he is saying; the words are all a mumbly, jumbly mess of sounds.

Something is touching me—his hand is on my chest; I try to squirm away, saying NO—his hand covers my mouth as he grabs me, hoisting me onto his shoulder. I’m scared—the stairs seem so far away… everything’s upside down.

He won’t put me down—he just keeps on walking; I’m afraid to move—if he drops me I’ll tumble down the stairs. Hands… his hands… he won’t stop touching me! My bottom, my thighs—between my legs where it’s secret and private, the place where no one is supposed to touch.

The door squeals—the musty smell of the basement fills my lungs.

I scream.

“You don’t understand!” I started sobbing. The lost memories surfacing so suddenly were a catalyst—I didn’t have the strength to fight off the panic attack that was roaring through me, determined to claw its way free. “Pietro!”

My scream was a pathetic, broken sounding thing.

“I told you to shut the hell up! You’re better learn to listen fast or else—”

His words were drowned out by a bellow of pure, primordial rage.

I hit the ground hard, immediately scuttling backwards as a tsunami of anger poured into me, making it hard to think. Blinking rapidly, I tried to focus on that was happening—two figures were rolling around in the darkness a few feet away from me. I could not see the person who’d come to my rescue, but I didn’t need to see him to know who it was—I could feel every emotion that poured out of him slamming into my mind.

My twin’s fury was terrifying in its intensity—so strong that it shattered my panic attack, grounding its shards into dust at my feet. Huddled against the wall, I watched Pietro pounding his fists into
Tobar’s face—I’d never seen him so out of control, not even when I’d been attacked in the alley.

“No. One. Touches. My. Sister.” He panted out—the bloodlust riding him was so potent that I feared what the outcome would be.

“Grigori! Come quick!” Hanzi appeared at the back door, shouting over his shoulder as he ran towards the scuffle; he grabbed Pietro’s shoulder, trying to pull him up—it was a mistake. Pietro’s fist slammed into his chest, followed immediately by a blow to the head; for the second time that night, I heard the sickening crack of cartilage breaking—Hanzi’s nose was flattened to his face.

The older man screamed in pain, backing away—immediately Pietro dropped, returning his attention to the boy on the ground—his threatening words giving way to mindless sounds of rage.

“What in God’s name! Pietro!” The professor darted into the alley looking shocked—skidding to a stop a few feet away. He held his hands out, approaching Pietro slowly—the way a person might do with a rabid dog in an attempt to avoid getting bitten. “Pietro… calm down… look at your sister… Wanda is crying—she needs you.”

“He scared her,” Pietro snarled, “She was terrified out of her mind!”

“She still is son—she is shaking with fear. She needs the comfort of your touch to calm down.”

Pietro froze, his fist drawn back—his arm shaking as he fought against the fury, trying to rein it in. “He ran off with her… he ran off with my sister.”

“He did what?”

“Adolescent fun, my friend, nothing more,” Hanzi said quickly—the tremor in his voice gave him away, belying what he’s said.

“Do not try that with me! I am not some gadje to be fooled by slick talk! I know the ways—I told you she was too young!”

I stood up slowly, taking a shaky breath; Pietro’s head snapped around at the sound. He was on his feet in less than a second, sprinting over to engulf me in his arms.

“You disappeared,” I whispered, burying my face in his chest.

“I’m sorry… I swear to God and all the Blessed Saints I will never leave you again,” he murmured, tightening his grip.

A loud, mournful wail jerked my head up— Tsura tugged at her hair, shaking her head as she dropped down beside her son; I watched, feeling empty, without a shred of compassion in me as she pulled him into her arms, swiping at his bloody face with her skirt.

“I brought these children here tonight to spend time among the people—not to be accosted!” The professor’s hands were clenched into fists—he was quivering with anger.

“Accosted! Look what he did to my Tobar!” Tsura screeched.

“What happened here tonight is a blight on your good name—you have shamed your family and the people, woman! I should go straight to the Rom baro and demand a kris!”

“You are Ruska—the only one in Novi Grad that is of age. You have no say in the dealings of our vitsa— the Rom baro will not heed you!”
“I still have friends in the Motherland—Domoravich will come if I call for a divano,” the old man said softly—his lips twisting up in a truly frightening smile. “My vitsa’s Rom baro is power hungry—wanting far more than he has. What do you think will happen, Tsura, when the mad Siberian gets to Novi Grad to speak with your leader and render judgment? He will not leave quietly—he will see what the Roma here have and immediately send for his clan. They are metalworkers, like your brother… they will demand everything he owns as payment for the insult paid to me and mine… and then they will demand more.”

“More cannot be demanded when all is gone,” Tsura hissed.

“In the Motherland, mistreatment of a young girl has one penalty that cannot be avoided—blood price. Your son will be slaughtered in his bed in the middle of the night for what Wanda… a young Ruska maiden… suffered at his hands tonight.”

The woman paled, her eyes flicking to Hanzi; she began weeping—shouting at him in their native tongue.

“I want to take my sister home,” Pietro said—only to be cut off when the professor shook his head. Hanzi moved to his sister’s side, eying his nephew. “Tsura wishes to make restitution for the misunderstanding—”

“What could be proper restitution for terrorizing a young girl? One who was attacked by a gadje in an alley very much like this one only a few nights ago?”

Tsura’s dark eyes flicked over to me, her brow wrinkling. “We did not know—”

“You knew I refused Hanzi’s offer! You disrespected my authority as an elder and Wanda’s guardian. I think Domoravich will not be happy at all… he might even demand even more atonement than just Tobar’s life.” The old man spoke with certainty—the threat in his words hung ominously in the air. “He might decide to wipe out your entire vitsa because of your foolish actions.”

Pietro stiffened, shifting so that his body blocked me from Tsura’s view—attempting to soothe me by combing his fingers through my hair. “We will be home soon,” he murmured softly, pressing his lips to my cheek.

From the door of the kitchen, the old woman—Simza—barked something out that made Hanzi shake his head; repeating the phrase, she disappeared back inside the restaurant.

“Restitution will be made,” Hanzi said, his voice tinged with worry as he tore off a piece of his sister’s skirt, pressing it to his flattened nose. “We can settle this here—there is no need to involve anyone else.”

“We shall see…” I watched as the professor approached us, his large hands moving to Pietro’s shoulders—stilling the restless movement of his fingers in my hair. “Pietro… what do you think would be fair compensation—”

“You ask advice from a child?” Tsura scoffed.

“You ask it of a man—one who defended his sister’s honor, protecting her by beating an opponent several years older and twice his size,” the old man shot back. “You should be thanking me—had I not intervened, you would have lost your only son in this alley tonight.”

Tsura’s eyes widened—she pulled her son closer, cradling him to her breast; Tobar let out a low pain filled moan at the movement. “He was only obeying me! There are no young girls of the blood left in
“Then you should have taken him to Rasvista or Scapev to barter a bride instead of instructing him to snatch a young girl off her feet! That practice has been spurned for two generations!”

Pietro’s eyes narrowed, his fingers digging into my back. “Why did he grab her? You will tell me now!”

“In the old days… if a family did not agree to a match, sometimes the young man who had been spurned would kidnap the girl they wanted, taking her as his bride without anyone’s permission. He would take the girl someplace where her family could not find them… only returning after she had been… sullied. It is a way of forcing a family to allow a match—girls must remain pure until they are wed. If the girl’s father or brothers catch them before she is deflowered, they can still find her a good match—or the young man can try and fight them for the right to wed her.”

Pietro’s anger surged, stoked higher by what the professor said; even though I was trembling again at the realization of what would have happened had Pietro not come to my rescue, I stretched up, whispering in his ear—trying to calm him down. “Pietro… it is alright…nothing happened—I’m okay.”

“If he ever comes near my sister again, I will kill him… and it will not be quick or painless.” His voice was a direct contrast to the fiery emotions rolling inside him; it was icy, and flat—the voice of someone who could torture a man without blinking.

Immediately, the professor was in motion—he moved a few feet away, positioning himself between Pietro and Tobar. I could tell by the look on his face that he was wary—afraid my brother’s control would snap and he would attack the boy again, this time finishing him off.

Tsura laid her upper body across her son—protecting him as best she could from the promise of violence that lingered in the wake of Pietro’s words. “He will not even think of her again… this I swear.”

Hanzi reached down, placing his hand on her shoulder. “We must negotiate restitution—there will be time for coddling your boy la—”

“I have not given a gift to our visitors yet.”

The voice was heavily accented, making it obvious that Sokovian was not the speaker’s first language; it wasn’t loud or harsh, but it rang with an authoritative power that commanded the attention of every single person in the alley—including Pietro and me.

Bibi Simza had returned—but she wasn’t alone. An ancient looking crone stood at her side, one hand resting on Simza’s arm; in the other hand she held the basket I’d carried during the rite—I’d forgotten all about it in my panic.

As they moved forward, entering the alley, a stream of people followed them out the door—it seemed like every single person in the restaurant came pouring out, murmuring quietly amongst themselves as they lined the wall of the building, staring at the newcomer with worship in their eyes.

Simza and her companion reached the outer edge of the pool of light that was produced by the fixture above the door; the crone lifted her head, eyes locking with mine—I gasped, unable to hide my shock at what I was seeing. A thick, moldy looking growth covered both her irises, turning them white as milk—she was blind, but somehow… I felt like she could see me.

“It is not pretty, I know. A present from the butchers at Auschwitz,” she said. “They blinded me
when I predicted that Hitler would die by his own hand and their precious Nazi regime would fall.”

“Drabarni… you should be upstairs,” Hanzi said, stepping forward. “You will catch a chill—”

“I go where the goddess moves me,” she snapped, “I have been commanded to commune with our guests.”

Simza murmured something, gently tugging her towards the spot where Pietro and I stood; the crone released her arm abruptly, setting down the basket and veering off to the side—coming to a stop right in front of the professor. “Grisha Mirga… you did not believe when I told your sister that the path to escape could be found in telling the guards you were twins. I am glad to see that she heeded my words, even as you scoffed.”

The professor did not respond—he took a step back, increasing the distance between them, casting a nervous glance our way as the crone turned to face us. “I am Tebera… the seer, though many call me Drabarni—the sorceress. They are not wrong.”

Pietro’s arms tightened around me. “There are no such things as sorceresses.”

“Yet here one stands, right in front of you. You must learn to open your eyes, young man… to embrace what you feel and not what you have been told to believe.”

I believed her—she certainly looked like a sorceress, with her long scraggly hair and gaunt, drawn face; when she smiled I could see she was missing most her teeth—her mouth was full of blackened stumps. “Pietro… don’t argue. Please.”

He held his tongue, but his eyes were locked on Tereba as she extended her hands our way; I automatically tensed—not wanting her to touch me. She didn’t—her hands hovered a few inches above our heads, her eyes darting from side to side as she started to sway.

“Twins… but more than that… twin flames,” she murmured. “Appropriate.”

I pressed myself against Pietro, wishing with all my heart we’d never come to such an accursed place. His lips pressed against my temple, but it did not soothe me—I could feel the tension in his muscles; he was as anxious as I was.

“When our children are born, they are given two names. One to use with the gadje… and one to use only amongst the people—that is the name that represents the truest self—”

“We have two names,” I said softly.

“It does not count—the gadje know the names your parents gave you. I gift you with names that no one outside the Roma may ever know. Tchin and Genia—the names of the first of us.”

The murmuring of the crowd along the wall grew louder—Tsura gasped, her eyes widening as she raised her head. “It is marimé!”

Tereba shook her head. “The goddess has shown me—the time for the great wheel to turn is at hand. Two flames dance in my mind… they will become legends. They will win respect and admiration for the Romani—a new start for us all!”

I shivered, resting my cheek on Pietro’s shoulder, completely confused by what was going on. His hands slid up and down my back—a way to comfort us both at the same time.

Simza touched Tereba’s arm, muttering something that made the old crone chuckle—she responded
in their native tongue, nodding in our direction. Immediately Simza scooped up the basket and moved forward, depositing the basket at my feet. Murmuring something softly, she held out her hand, wearing an expectant look on her face.

I glanced over at the professor, waiting for him to translate—he just stared at me, looking as befuddled as I felt.

Making an impatient sound, she grabbed my hand, tugging off the ring she’d placed on my thumb. My confusion grew stronger when she didn’t replace it on her own hand—she held it out to Pietro, repeating the same phrase she’d said to me.

Pietro glanced from the ring to the professor, frowning. “What—”

“No one can translate—this is Simza’s quest. If she wants to restore honor to the family, she must complete it on her own,” Tebera murmured.

Simza huffed, throwing up her hands in frustration; her face scrunched up as she pointed from the ring to my hand. “You… give. Put… on.”

“Okay…I guess.” Arching a brow, Pietro grabbed the ring, sliding it back into place on my thumb.

Simza smiled nodding her head once—glancing over at the old crone. “Is… fixed.”

“Finish it” Tebera said softly, closing her eyes.

Grabbing my hand and one of Pietro’s, Simza pressed them together, palm to palm. “Match made… bride won.”

Chapter End Notes

I swear that the talk will be in the very next chapter, lol—unfortunately when I enter my handwritten chapters into pc, they tend to be much, much longer than I thought—there was no way I could fit it all into one without having it end up being 20,000 (or more) words. ;o)
Chapter 15

SIMZA’S ANNOUNCEMENT WAS MET with absolute silence; Pietro and I stared at each other—both still thoroughly confused. One by one, the onlookers started whispering; their hushed reverence of the old crone seemed to be fading away—their voices grew louder with every second that passed. Whatever they were muttering amongst themselves, it appeared to give Tsura confidence; gently sliding her son off of her lap, she stood—pointing her finger towards the entrance to the alley as she spat on the ground.

“Go! You are no longer welcome here—all invitations are revoked. You are marimé—polluted! Unclean!”

Tereba opened her eyes, holding out her hand. “Tsura… come, child.”

Holding her head high, the younger woman approached, stepping up to the crone’s side; with a speed that I would not have believed such an ancient body could possess, Tereba backhanded Tsura across the face—the blow so strong that she stumbled back, almost falling to her knees.

“You forget everything I have taught you,” she hissed, “when the legends are lost, our people will be no more! You forget your place! How dare you so such disrespect to me—the last true chóv’háni!”

“She meant no disrespect Drabarni, but what you suggest… it is forbidden!” Hanzi shifted—taking two steps towards his sister; Tebera murmured something under her breath, twitching a finger. Immediately, he froze in place. “Please Drabarni… you must understand… it is—”

“How we began!” The old crone spat out; immediately Hanzi sunk to his knees, bowing his head. “I am the eldest—one hundred and five! The goddess speaks through me—my word is Her law! You will listen and obey or face Her wrath!”

“What do you will, old mother?” Tsura said softly, staring down at the ground.

“From you? Nothing—I have no use for fools.” Her unseeing eyes flicked over the people gathered along the wall. “I want our children to be happy, and well fed. To have warm clothing and safe beds to rest in. I want them to play and walk down the streets without fearing for their lives. For our women to not be faced with forced sterilization! When Tchin and Genia return, the Tchingene will rise, becoming a great nation. It has been foretold since the dawn of time—I have seen it in vision myself.”

Her shoulders sagged; even from where Pietro and I stood, I could hear her breath grow raspy. Simza moved—reaching out to offer aide, but before her hand made contact, Tebera rolled her shoulders, straightening up; when she spoke, her voice seemed deeper—flavored with a strange, dreamy quality that brought goose bumps to my skin. Pietro’s arms tightened around me—I turned my face so that my cheek pressed against his neck, the touch of skin on skin easing back the unease we both were feeling.

Slowly, Tebera raised a single hand—palm facing up towards the sky. “It is time the people return to the most ancient of ways… to forget the gadje proscriptions that have taken root in our minds, corrupting our thoughts and beliefs. They want us to assimilate… to lose who we are—they want to take away our culture and be like them. The great wheel is turning…I see it in her mind, even as I
speak—the happening we have awaited for centuries is at hand. If you choose to disregard our prophecies… if you choose the gadje interdictions… the wheel will not turn for us again.”

“That is enough! We are leaving—come children.” The bizarre words she’d spouted spurred the professor into action—he moved towards us, pointing towards the entrance to the alley… then Tebera spoke again.

“Mark and remember these words Grigori Mirga—had you taught your children to honor the ancient ways they would still be at your side!”

The professor stumbled, all color draining from his face—he would have fallen had my brother not released me, darting over to his side. Before my eyes, the old man’s tall, powerful body sagged—when he looked up, I could see something broken in his eyes.

“Take it back,” I said softly, my hands clenching into fists.

“I speak the truth—”

“No… you don’t.” My eyes darted from the professor’s face to Tebera—she was staring right at me. Instinctively, I wanted to cower and hide, but I could not allow her to hurt the one person who’d shown kindness to Pietro and me. Even as I struggled not to drop my eyes, my mind was whirring—common logic giving me strength; she was stating an opinion as if it were a fact—entirely the wrong thing to do with someone as analytical as me. “The truth is not so simple—in reality it has many sides. You speak the truth as you see it, but do you take into account every single facet? Examine it from every angle before saying such things? What appears to be truth to you may not be to someone else—you have no idea of the exact aspects that shaped the final outcome.”

From the corner of my eye, in my peripheral vision, I could see the professor straighten up, his hand running over his face. “Wanda... it is fine. Let’s go—”

“No—it isn’t fine! She had no right to say such a thing!” The heat of my anger chased away the last of the chilly fear I’d felt from the old crone’s stare. “Things aren’t just black or white—there are shades of gray in between.”

The professor moved towards me, bending to scoop up the basket. “Her words are just that, Wanda… words, nothing more—”

“Don’t be disrespectful,” Tereba snapped, “I am the Drabarni!”

“Before respect can be given it must be earned,” I shot back. “If this is what it means to be one of the people… forcing young girls into marriage and venerating a cruel old woman, then I want no part of it!”

“You have the people to thank for the ring on your hand, girl. A cruel old woman to thank for—”

“What happened here was set in motion long before this day—our path was set by God on the say he sculpted our soul. You have no control over our fate or destiny, Madam—you are nothing more than the instrument God chose to use to bring about this moment in time.” I snapped, cutting her off.

“You think you have all the answers, don’t you?” She moved closer to me, her hand snaking out to hover a few inches from my arm, as if she meant to grab me. “You are wrong. When the wheel turns you will realize that you need me, little—”her fingers touched my skin—her words turning into a long, drawn out moan.

The noise she made propelled the professor into motion; shoving the basket in Pietro’s hands, the old
man darted over, grabbing my shoulders—jerking me away from Tereba’s hand just as her moaning transformed into a haunting, singsong chant. Scooping me up as easily as he’d grabbed up the basket, he practically ran for the end of the alley; I peered over his shoulder, watching the old crone—she dropped straight to her knees, pressing her forehead to the dirty pavement as she muttered the same two words over and over again.

“She’s crazy! Do you hear what she’s saying?” Pietro asked—catching up the professor’s long strides as we spilled out of the alley on to the street. “She’s asking them to kill her!”

“That’s not what’s she’s saying at all, son,” the old man wheezed, slowing down to set me on my feet; he leaned over, bracing his hands on his knees, struggling to catch his breath. “She’s saying—” He cut himself off, pointing to the car. “It doesn’t matter right now—you’re right, she’s insane. I never would have brought you here had I known Hanzi had taken her in.”

“She hasn’t always lived here?” I asked, peering back over my shoulder; unease danced along my skin—I felt like we were being chased. “I thought she was a related to them… she said she was the oldest—”

“A distant relative—but close enough that she can claim the rights of seniority. And no—the last I heard she was living in the mountains. Pity she didn’t stay in her cave. She wasn’t born into Hanzi’s vitsi—when we met in the camp she told us she was Lowara tribe. She must have married into his kumpania, slowly infecting it… insisting things be done the Lowara way—with women holding all the power… bringing in extra money with their superstitious foolishness.” He muttered, resting his hand on my back—speeding my steps. “Let’s get to the car—hurry. God only knows what she’s up to.”

Despite my anger at Tebera, I bristled; I didn’t like the unspoken implication in his words—as if women having a say in things was wrong or unnatural. “Are you saying that you think women should stay silent and in the background?”

“That is the Roma way… it is how things were done in my home before the Nazis came—”

“Well let me tell you something—it is wrong! Men are not better than women—and women are not better than men. The two are equal—each should have a voice of their own! Mama might have demurred to Papa, but he always asked her opinion and sought her approval on decisions—they made them together, as helpmeets, the way God intended!”

“You have a very bad habit of interrupting Wanda—it is not very polite. Had you let me finish my statement I would have said just that—a man must treat his wife with respect and admiration, seeking her wise council on things, and she in turn should do the same. That is not Tebera’s way—she has placed herself on a pedestal, convincing the superstitious fools that they must obey her or face the wrath of the spirit world. Do you think what you saw tonight is right?”

My prickliness eased back a bit. “No… I don’t.”

“A wise man once said that power tends to corrupt and absolute power corrupts absolutely… what happened during the war proved he was right. One little man was behind the murder of millions—and I am not talking about the soldiers in the battlefield. These were innocent civilians that he deemed inferior to his so called ‘master race’—he decided they were nothing more than animals that should be put down. Tebera saw that… she lived it the same way I did—and she is letting the power Hanzi’s vitsa has given her corrupt her in the same way. She has set herself up as a mouthpiece for the spirits of those that are gone…and it sickens me.”

The thought of someone having that much power over others troubled me greatly—I couldn’t
imagine how a person could manipulate people and things in such horrific ways just to satisfy their own terrible desires. Suddenly, I felt extremely grateful that the world was so very big and that Pietro and I were nothing more than two tiny, insignificant people. We would never have to worry about the things the professor had lived through; we could live out our lives peacefully, on the fringes—two inconsequential people amongst the multitude, never standing out enough to attract the attentions of men like the evil furor the professor spoke of.

“They didn’t seem to be obeying all that well to me,” Pietro mused, glancing back towards the alley. “Perhaps they aren’t quite as superstitious as you think.”

“A leopard cannot change its spots, nor can a mouse grow wings,” the old man murmured cryptically in response.

Pietro threw me a quizzical look, arching a dark brow; I shrugged, at a loss. “Are we supposed to decipher that… or?”

“Some things cannot change—they never will, no matter how much you might want them to. The gadje believe that our people have some sort of mystic ability—that we sit around casting curses and brewing up love spells in cauldrons…and unfortunately… far too many of our people believe that too. For years I have hoped that they would be enlightened to the truth, but I am beginning to see that day will never come. As long as there are Lowara and Lom those beliefs will continue to exist, slowly spreading out to infest one and all. Those fools in the alley are a perfect example—in case you did not notice, she reined in them in almost immediately by resorting to dramas. She is a master at pretending to channel spirits and such—just by changing the pitch of her voice and making obscure gestures she convinces them that a higher power is speaking through her.”

We rounded another corner—the alley we’d exited had been at the far end of the block, leaving us with a long, chilly walk to the car. As soon as it was in sight, the old man reclaimed the basket from Pietro, hurrying ahead of us to stow it in the trunk; I couldn’t understand why he’d bothered grabbing it in the first place—I certainly wanted no part of the wretched thing. Any happiness I’d felt during the ritual had been ruined the moment Tobar touched me—the entire thing had been tainted, all part of some elaborate scheme to pair me up with him against my will. Sliding into the backseat, I felt a rush of angry remorse; I’d foolishly trusted Hanzi because he was the professor’s friend—in return, he’d abused that trust in the worst possible way, allowing his sister to use my own naivety about the Roma lifestyle and customs against me.

Pietro climbed in beside me, immediately taking my hand; his eyes dropped down to the ring on my thumb, then flicked up to my face. Shifting, he pulled me closer to his side, worrying his bottom lip with his front teeth; I knew what he was thinking—I was wondering the same thing. Before I could give voice to the question, he spoke, his gaze moving to the front seat. “What’s the deal with the ring? Why—”

“The Roma do not ‘date’—they may socialize with the opposite sex in chaperone groups, but nothing more. A match is made by the parents—when terms are agreed upon, a small token is given to the girl by the young man’s family. Her wearing it indicates to the other members of the tribe that she is matched and unavailable. When Simza took the ring back… she was erasing what Tobar did when he tried to claim Wanda. She restored honor to her family by giving the ring to you—acknowledging that you beat Tobar in a fair fight.” His voice trailed off—he drummed his fingers on the steering wheel, glancing back at us with an almost nervous expression on his face; he didn’t speak until his eyes returned to the road. “When she had you give the ring to Wanda… well…” he sighed “there is no easy way to put this other than bluntly. It cemented the fact you won the right to claim her as the fights victor—when you slid the ring on her thumb and she didn’t take it off… the match was made. In essence… in the eyes of the Roma community… the two of you are engaged.”
I opened my mouth, but all that came out was a strangled sound as my eyes darted over to Pietro; instantly, my first thought was that the news would set him off, making him retreat back behind the sullen, prickly persona he’d been using all week—undoing all the progress we’d made. I could feel shock radiating off him in waves—I tensed, waiting for him to release my hand or pull away from me, increasing the distance between us. My hotheaded brother surprised me by doing neither of those things—instead, he ran his thumb over the gold band he’d placed on my hand, staring off into space. When he spoke again, his voice was calm, but I could feel the icy anger that lay beneath his words.

“It was all a setup, wasn’t it? As soon as he heard I had a sister… he started plotting things. That’s why he kept mentioning that stupid restaurant and saying we should come by.”

“That was all my fault, son—I shouldn’t have suggested it…but when he kept bringing it up… I took it as a sign.” the professor sighed. “I thought it would be good for you to celebrate among the people. I wanted you both to experience the food and music… to embrace that part of yourselves for just one night. I thought you would be more comfortable there than at the café you suggested.”

“You took us there in good faith,” Pietro countered, “it was Hanzi that did the rest.”

“And his sister.” I added. “Honestly Pietro… I am not happy with Hanzi either, but I have a feeling he wasn’t as involved in the plotting as you think. He seems very straightforward— you saw how persistent he was about things… why would he do that if he had taken part in planning some elaborate scheme?”

“He got nervous when I said we would leave—remember? He said it would upset his sister—that alone indicates that in the very least he suspected she was planning something.”

“He got nervous in the alley too, when the old crone appeared—”

“Probably because she’s as nutty as a fruitcake, Wanda!” Realizing he’d raised his voice, he shot me an apologetic look. “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to snap at you—”

“I know. It is understandable for you to be on edge, given everything that’s happened,” I offered gently, eyeing the giant man in the front seat. “Professor… if I ask you a question about what the old hag said… will you answer me truthfully?”

“Yes… but Wanda—”

“Did she really tell your sister how you could escape?”

“She did… however I don’t believe for a single second that it was any psychic gift that gave her the knowledge. She could have overheard the guards talking, or perhaps obtained the information from another prisoner. The Nazi’s fascination with twins was well known—especially Romani twins, since they were trying to find proof of the occult and they believed the people had ties to that sort of thing.”

“If you don’t believe she has a gift… then why did you get so upset when she said that about your children?” I asked softly—not wanting to upset him, but needing to make sense of all the conflicting information floating through my mind.

He sighed, his eyes flicking to the rearview mirror—gaze locking with mine for a single heartbeat before returning to the road. “It is what her kind does, chavi. They play on a man’s worst fears in an attempt to convince him that only they can set things right. A lover can be returned… an illness cured… a baby conceived… but only at a price. When that price is paid… it is not enough—the spirits say another ritual is needed… another reading… another cure, stronger this time, at a higher
cost. Tebera and those like her are the reason gadje think we are all swindlers and cheats."

“But …” I bit my lip, not wanting to rub salt on the open wound the crone had clawed across his heart, but wanting to fully understand. “…how could she know your children abandoned you?”

“The Roma community here is small… people talk. My wife sought answers from Simza’s cards from time to time after our children left,” he said softly, “hoping for some sign they would return to us.”

I thought about what he said—thought about the old woman who’s ring was on my thumb; out of all the people we’d met tonight, she’d seemed the most genuinely pleased to meet us, and her determination to fix things made it hard for me to believe that she’d had anything to do with Tobar’s actions. “Do you think she knew what Tsura was doing?”

“Who—Tebera?”

“No… Simza. She seemed so… nice,” I said, “so happy about the way things turned out. Not like the others, I mean.”

“Simza… is different, Wanda. She was raised Lowara, like Tebera and like Hanzi’s own grandmother. Many years ago, when Simza’s husband died… she was all alone in the world—she came here, hoping to join Hanzi’s vitsa since there was familial blood. They were very hard on her at first, but eventually they accepted her, however she never fully assimilated to their ways.”

“What do you mean… they were hard on her?” Pietro leaned up between the seats, tugging me along with him—it was a very tight fit.

“That question requires a very long out, detailed explanation, chavo—you have to understand the differences in the tribes for it to make sense. I think it is best if we discuss that at a later time—tomorrow… or the next day, perhaps.”

I studied him, taking in the guarded expression that had slipped over his face; he looked uncomfortable and ill at ease. “Do you dislike her too?”

“No… I consider her a friend, I suppose. When we first moved to Novi Grad, my wife was very lonely. She didn’t speak Sokovian… and we didn’t know anyone here. One day at the market she heard someone speaking the old tongue—it was Simza. Simza was just as lonely as my wife—this was long before her acceptance. They became very good friends.”

“But… surely your wife couldn’t have been too lonely—she had your sister for company, didn’t she?” Pietro asked.

“Mhmm.” The professor grunted, gunning the engine. “Sometimes you need friendships from outside sources, Pietro—that is something you will learn in time.”

Satisfied with the answer, Pietro sank back, gently tugging my arm to pull me away from the front seat; I resisted, still watching the old man—there was something else I wanted to know. Huffing at me under his breath, my brother resumed his fiddling with the ring on my hand—spinning it round and round my thumb. “Why did they all get so upset by the names Tebera gave us?”

“It doesn’t matter—it is all foolishness based on archaic superstition and legend. It is swato—an old tale to be told around the campfire at night, nothing more.”

“If you truly believed it was nothing, then you would tell us, I think—since those old tales are a part of our heritage, yes?”
He didn’t respond.

Letting out a sigh, I scowled at his obstinate behavior. “Fine then—I will find the answers myself.”

“You won’t find the tales in any book, Wanda. Perhaps an obscure reference or two exists somewhere, but our stories are not written down— they are passed orally from one generation to the next, and each teller has their own distinct version. There is an old saying— ask twenty Roma a question and you will get twenty different answers, ask one Roma a question twenty times and you will get the same. Our stories are fluid—they live and breathe. They are more than words printed in a book.”

I ducked my head down, unable to stop my lips from twitching up in a smile; he’d unknowingly given me the perfect opening without even realizing it. “That is foolishness! If they aren’t written down then there is a risk they could be lost forever—”

“That is why the elders tell their grandchildren the stories, chavi—to keep our culture from withering and dying.”

“If you ask me… it is a shame,” I said, sinking back beside Pietro. “None of us in this car will be able to honor that tradition.”

“Hmmm?” The professor glanced back at me, arching a brow.

“You have no contact with your grandchildren… and Pietro and I don’t have grandparents. We don’t know the old stories and you have no one to share them with, so none of us will be able to fulfill our obligation to the people by keeping our culture alive.”

He chuckled softly, shaking his head. “Well played, Wanda—with that sly tongue of yours, you should think about becoming a lawyer, or perhaps a politician.”

“I only pointed out the obvious.” I turned my hand over beneath Pietro’s, lacing my fingers with his; he was strangely silent, but I could tell he was watching me from the corner of his eye.

“If you will let me focus on driving, I promise I will tell you about Tchin and Genia once we stop moving, alright? There is a proper way to tell the old tales, and I cannot do it now… not unless you want me to risk having an accident in the process.”

I eyed the old man, automatically suspicious. “As long as you don’t try to get out of it. I fully intend to keep bringing it up until—”

“I did sense that. I’m old—not ignorant,” he retorted dryly.

Huffing, I dropped my head to Pietro’s shoulder, closing my eyes; he slumped down a little more in the seat—the movement made his hair tickle against my nose. Without thought I reached up to tuck it behind his ear—he flinched, jerking back from my hand, startling me half to death.

“I’m sorry! Your hair was tickling—”

“They pierced my ears,” he whispered, sounding proud. “It is a sign that I am a man now.”
“They what?” My screech was so loud that it startled the professor; the car swung across two lanes—the sudden, unexpected movement toppling me over onto the floor.

“It’s okay Wanda—”

“It most certainly is not okay Pietro Django Maximoff!” I huffed, climbing back up onto the seat—shoving his hair to the side so I could see the damage they’d done. “You are bleeding!”

“It is a rite of passage, chavi—a tradition.”

I glared daggers at the back of the professor’s head, outraged. “You knew about this?”

“Of course—I stood in for your father.”

“What does that even mean?” I snapped, on the verge of throwing a hissy fit of epic proportions.

“I am the one who provided the earrings in his ears.”

“It’s okay Wanda,” Pietro tried again, shooting me a pleased look. “I wanted them to do it—really. They gave me the choice—”

“The choice to mutilate yourself?” I hissed, staring at the blood that was oozing around the gold studs. “It is barbaric!”

“The symbolism it represents is very beautiful,” he said softly, reaching out—fingertips brushing against my ear. “Tell her Grigori, please?”

The professor glanced over his shoulder at me, frowning. “I don’t know, son… she looks as though she might attack me at any moment.”

“Wanda… just listen. Please?” Pietro pulled me closer, his fingers combing through my tangled hair. “For me you will listen, yes?”

“Fine.” I said, sulking just a little. “I will listen, but I can tell you right now that nothing I hear is going to justify what I see with my own eyes right in front of me.”

The old man shot me another wary look before clearing his throat. “When a Roma boy is born, his ears are pierced with two tiny gold studs like the ones you see in your brother’s ears. When he is of marriageable age… ready to settle down with a match… he will remove one of the earrings, piercing his bride’s ear with it. For the rest of their lives the earrings will remain in place, each wearing a single one—symbolically showing the connection of their hearts.”

“You… you don’t have an earring,” I pointed out—stuttering as Pietro’s fingertips slid down, gently caressing my earlobe; the light, teasing touch made me tremble.

“I buried my earring with my wife—a symbol that I was burying my heart beneath the earth with her, never to remarry.”

“Do you see now why I wanted it done? It is a very wonderful idea—I like the thought of one day giving my earring to the girl who has my heart.” The husky murmur of his voice as he talked about claiming some strange girl ripped apart my heart; I turned away, pretending to look out the window so he wouldn’t see the sparkle of the tears that sprang up in my eyes.

“It is a very pretty notion,” I mumbled, shifting to increase the distance between us on the seat; the hurt I felt was so strong that I could barely breathe.
“Wanda… did I… did I say something wrong?” He reached for my hand—I evaded the movement, lacing my fingers tightly together, placing my hands in my lap.

“Not at all. I am just… overwhelmed by all that happened tonight, I think.” I glanced down at my hand, eyes lingering on the gold band. “I guess when the time comes you will have to give her the ring too… perhaps I should take it off and put it away for safe keeping.”

The look of worry on his face faded, his lips twisted up in an irritated scowl. “Don’t be dumb, Wanda.”

The hurt inside me doubled; I looked away again, not at all understanding why he was getting angry with me. “Whatever. When your stupid ears get infected and start rotting off, don’t come crying to me.”

“They won’t!”

“Will.”

“Won’t.”

From the front seat, the professor’s low chuckle drew my attention his way. “You think it’s funny that my brother’s ear is going to fall off?”

“No… I think it is amusing that one minute the two of you seem wise beyond your years, then the next you turn into bickering toddlers.”

“We aren’t bickering,” Pietro informed him—huffing at the thought.

“We are having a difference of opinion.” I finished the statement for him, scowling at the old man.

Pietro glanced over at me, nodding; just like that, everything was okay—all hurt feelings and irritation set aside as we united against the professor. “That is completely different than bickering.”

“Yes, it is,” I agreed.

Pietro’s arm slid around me, pulling me close to his side again, leaning over to rest his head against mine. “Are you really mad at me for letting them pierce my ears?”

“Our ears don’t match anymore,” I muttered, scowling. The chuckling from the front seat turned to a full out laugh—I stuck out my tongue at the back of the professor’s head.

“They didn’t really match before,” Pietro pointed out, “mine are a little bigger than yours.”

“Yes but there weren’t any earring holes in them,” I countered, “now yours have them and mine don’t.”

“Yours will too someday,” he murmured, fingertips brushing my ear again.

He was wrong—I would never let some strange Roma boy claim me; my lower lip slid forward as I sulked. “That’s not now though.”

“Well… you have a ring and I don’t.”

“That is hardly the same thing—a ring doesn’t change my body,” I argued. “How would you feel if I went and like… pierced my nose or something without telling you?”
He chewed his lower lip, frowning. “I wouldn’t like it very much… I think your nose is perfect as it is.”

I rolled my eyes. “That is my point entirely. You didn’t need them—”

“I did—it is a symbol that I am a man now. You had your dance—I got earrings. That’s the way it works.”

“I already sort of thought you were a man,” I murmured. “I have for a very long time.”

His eyes widened—I could feel surprise flickering between us. “Since when?”

“The day you rescued me.”

“That’s hardly a long time. It’s been barely a week—”

I shook my head. “Not the alley… I meant what you did that day in the apartment. When Mama and Papa died.”

“I just did what anyone would do—”

“No—most people would have thought of themselves first. You didn’t—you thought of me. That is the day you became a man, Pietro—not today. Not because of any silly ritual… it was your bravery that did it.”

When he didn’t respond, I shot him a quizzical look, arching a brow; he stared at me, wearing the most adorably silly grin on his face. Biting my lip in an attempt to stop the giggle I felt welling up inside me, I returned my eyes to the passing scenery—pretending I couldn’t feel the weight of his gaze as he continued to stare.

“Is that why you put ‘brave’ on the list?” He asked softly.

I thought about playing dumb—pretending I didn’t know what list he meant, but there was something in his voice—a sort of… hopefulness—that touched me; he deserved better than silly games—he deserved the full truth. “One of the reasons,” I replied, still staring at the lights as they flashed by the window.

“I’m not really brave, Pietra… sometimes… a lot of the time… I’m scared out of my mind,” he whispered, ducking his head as I turned to face him.

“About… what?”

“Not being able to find the things we need… us getting caught and separated…” his fingers brushed against the back of my hand “…my feelings.”

I held my breath, waiting for him to go on—hoping he would elaborate, even just a little. He didn’t—he continued hiding behind his hair as his fingers danced along my skin. “Being scared doesn’t mean you aren’t brave, Pietro—the fact you don’t let those fears cripple you just proves how brave you really are.”

“She’s right—in fact… I think you are both perhaps two of the bravest people I have ever met.” The professor’s soft voice floated back to us, startling me—I’d thought our conversation was far too hushed for him to overhear. “Most children would have taken the easy road, letting adults decide what happened to them… they would have chosen having food and shelter provided for them as opposed to trying to find those things on their own. But you two? Even now… you refuse to do that.
As much as I hate to give Tebera credit for anything, she chose the names she gave you well. Tchin and Genia were very brave children… it is part of the reason we still remember them.”

“We will have to take your word on that since we don’t know the story—”

“Patience is a virtue, chavi,” he said, slowing the car to a stop in front of the curving front walk to the cottage. “A few minutes more and you will have all the answers you seek.”

Glancing over at my brother, I didn’t have the heart to tell the old man that the answers I wanted most were ones that he couldn’t give me—and they didn’t have anything to do with some silly old legend.

Chapter End Notes

Please don’t kill me. The lead up to the talk ended up being 12,541 words so I split it into two chapters (15 and 16). The talk is happening in chapter 17 and I am typing it up right now. Sorry for the delay—family issues (mom sick plus sister’s birthday) made it hard to get anything accomplished. :o)

(Ch 16 will be up in next 30 min or so)
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

I REMEMBER ONCE OVERHEARING Mrs. Kolinov and my mother when they were talking in our kitchen; laughing, the old woman said that any task a woman gives a man is sure to end up taking five times longer than it would have if she’d just done it herself. I was slowly learning how true that statement could be—men seemed to like to figure out the most complicated ways to solve the simplest problems.

As soon as we disembarked from the sedan, Pietro froze. He just stood there, staring down at his new clothes with a horrified look on his face. I nudged him with my shoulder—an attempt to get him to move—but he continued to stand there like a statue.

“Pietro? What—”

“If I climb the wall in my new clothes… they’ll get messed up. We can’t get in, Wanda.”

“Of course we can—we have a new key, yes?”

“Not to the basement! We have to climb the wall to get in and unlock the cellar door—”

“No we don’t—” I began, only to be cut off.

“It’s alright chavo… we will simply go back to my house for the night. You can return in the morning in your old clothing.” Finally finished rooting around in the glove box, the professor joined us just in time to put in his two cents worth.

“No… we can’t. We still have… birthday things to do.” Pietro’s eyes met mine; I knew what he was thinking—our promised talk certainly couldn’t take place under the old man’s roof. “I suppose I could take everything off but my underpants—”

“You’re wearing underpants?” I asked, unable to hide how impressed I was; like me, he refused to wear someone else’s used underthings, preferring to go without.

“Mhmm… he bought them for me.” His cheeks flushed with color as he averted his eyes, his embarrassment at discussing such things tickling against my skin.

“That is hardly proper—and you could hurt yourself, son,” the professor argued. “It is far easier to just come back tomorrow, yes?”

“It’s not like anyone would see—”

“Your sister would and—”

“We’ve been seeing each other naked since we were born, it’s nothing new—”

Trying not to roll my eyes at their obliviousness, I held out my hand to the old man, interrupting their back and forth haggling. “May I please see the keys to the new locks?”

“What? Oh… yes, of course. I had copies made for each of you while I was out this afternoon.” I tapped my foot on the sidewalk while he dug around in his pocket—producing two metal rings, each holding two silver keys.
“Thank you.” Without another word, I marched up the walk to the door, ignoring Pietro’s exasperated sigh.

“We still can’t get in the basement—”

“If you would stop huffing and bickering, you might realize that we clearly can,” I shot back at him over my shoulder as I unfastened the locks, stepping into the house.

The interior hallway and the rooms beyond seemed so much darker that the street outside; the absence of the moon’s bright illumination made me feel as if I was walking into a vast, unending void of blackness—one that pressed against me from all sides like a tight, encasing glove. I closed my eyes for a minute, letting my eyes adjust to the absence of light before moving straight to the kitchen and out the back door—muttering all the while about men who couldn’t see what was right in front of their face.

I don’t know what finally prompted them to move from the front walk—maybe it was curiosity, or perhaps fear for my safety when I didn’t come back out. I certainly wasn’t about to go get them—as far as I was concerned, I’d told them we could get in, so if they chose not to believe me they could just stand out there squabbling all night. Besides, I had better things to do—like lighting the fire and then unlocking and propping the cellar door open before posing prettily on the blanket stretched out across the floor. That’s where they found me when they finally ventured inside—Pietro’s eyes just about popped out of his head when he ran down the stairs.

“How did you—”

I smiled sweetly. “The window, of course. You do realize you can access it by going out the back door, yes? Without having to climb the wall.”

He blushed ten shades of red. “I… didn’t think about that.”

“I did. You wouldn’t listen,” I said.

“And that, my dear boy, is a very good lesson about the fairer sex. They are far superior to us in their wisdom—and they have the unique ability to let us know that they think we are idiots with nothing more than their voice’s tone.” The professor brushed past Pietro, lowering himself on to the wooden crate I’d set beside the fire.

“Not idiots… just too wrapped up in unimportant details to grasp the most obvious solution,” I countered, kicking off my shoes and tucking my feet beneath my full skirt. “Pietro… fetch the professor some water, please—Papa always said story telling was very thirsty work, remember?”

Nodding, my brother moved to the bench where the water bucket sat, only to pause with his hand on the ladle. “It is a special occasion, yes? I think we can do better than water.”

Confused, I watched him walk over to the shelf—my eyes widening as he grabbed the bottle of vodka we’d stolen from the bum. “Pietro… I don’t think—”

“Nonsense! Papa and Mama always had a drink when they celebrated. We will do the same thing.” Moving to the blanket, he held out the bottle to the old man as he shot me a challenging smile. “We are going to toast our birthday properly.”

The professor’s face crinkled up in a smile as he let out a sound of delight. “Russky Lyod! Where ever did you get this? It is the best my homeland has to offer—as smooth as honey on the throat!”

“We found it,” I murmured, nervously picking at a loose thread on the hem of my skirt. “I don’t think
we should drink it… Pietro and me, I mean. You can have all you want… as long as it won’t impair your driving.”

“I am Russian—I could drink the entire bottle without blinking an eye.” The old man shot me a disapproving look. “Your brother is right—it is a special occasion. A small sip won’t hurt—in fact…it will help relax your nerves after everything that’s happened.”

Even though I was still hesitant, I pushed myself up off the floor, moving to grab the plastic glasses; since I didn’t want to spoil Pietro’s happy mood, I would partake, but I wasn’t enthusiastic about it at all. I could still easily remember the sounds that carried down from the apartment above ours on Saturday nights when Mr. Marković stumbled home drunk from the tavern; his angry shouts and his wife’s cries of pain had kept Pietro and I both from sleeping on more than one occasion. And the incident with the bottles former owner certainly hadn’t improved my thoughts on the negative aspects of drinking alcohol.

“If either of you get belligerent or violent, I will leave,” I warned, setting the tumblers down on the floor beside him before reclaiming my seat. “I would rather spend the night outside than deal with loud, drunken behavior.”

“I have never been drunk in my life,” the professor scoffed, “except perhaps when I had my first drink at fifteen.”

I eyed him as he sloshed two fingers worth of the clear liquid into each of the glasses, hesitantly taking one when he held it out to me.

“I don’t know any toasts,” Pietro admitted, sniffing the contents of his glass.

“Then I will make it—I know just the thing.” Raising up his glass, he gestured first to Pietro, then to me. “Vyp'yem za to, chtoby mechtys polishingis' ne tol'ko v den' rozhden'ya.”

I took a deep breath, downing the contents of the glass—choking at the strong taste it left as it burned its way down my throat. “That tastes nothing at all like any honey I’ve ever had!”

Pietro smacked his lips, making a face. “Perhaps it wasn’t really vodka at all—maybe… kerosene?”

“Heathens! It is heavenly—like ambrosia.” The old man scowled at both of us, refilling his glass.

“What did we drink to? Burning our stomachs up from the inside out?” I rubbed my tongue against the roof of my mouth, trying to get rid of the wretched aftertaste.

“May your dreams come true not only on your birthday,” he replied, taking another sip before setting his glass on the floor beside the crate. “And now—”

“Our story—you promised.”

“Yes, yes, I know—but first I must prepare. I told you there is a proper way this must be done.”

I watched as he produced a small leather pouch from his pocket—pulling out a strange looking pipe and a small sack of what I assumed was tobacco. “You shouldn’t smoke—”

“If you want the story, then I smoke while I relay it—that is all there is to it. My babushka smoked this very pipe when she wove the tale for me—I will do the same, honoring her memory as I share the things she told me.”

Huffing at him, I leaned back on my elbows, stretching my feet out towards the fire; Pietro shifted,
scooting around behind me—offering his lap as a pillow. As his fingers combed through my hair, we watched the old man pack his pipe, striking a match on the stone floor to light it.

“All things in nature… in creation… have an opposite half that balances them. The earth has the sky—the day has night… and the sun has the moon. This tale is about the sun and his sister the moon… about the creation of the stars that shine in the heavens. This is the tale of how the people who wander came to be.” He drew deeply on the pipe, his eyes fluttering closed as he exhaled—a perfect ring of smoke floated in our direction.

“Long ago, when the earth was new… the world was a very different place. People cared about being good and kind to each other—about minding the ten holy laws that the Most High Del set down for everyone to obey. In those days there was a beautiful land called Szandau, which means ‘place of peace’. The land was fertile—abundant with fruit trees, the soil rich with nutrients that were beneficial for crops. It was ruled by a great king named Amano—he was much revered by his people; like his father before him, he was a kind, fair king, always putting the needs of the people in Szandau above his own. If a harvest was not plentiful, Amango provided them with food; if the winter months were long and drawn out, he would send his men into the surrounding forests to fell trees, providing them with wood. And so for the first twenty years of his reign, when the people in Szandau said his name… it was with the same reverence they used when uttering the name of the gods.”

He paused to take a drink; Pietro’s hands ceased their combing, moving down to trace patterns along the bare skin of my shoulders. I shivered at the feather light touch, closing my eyes as I waited for the professor to continue his tale.

“Amango’s wife Laminka gave him six children during those twenty years—three beautiful daughters, and three strong sons. As was the custom in the great dynasties of old, in the manner of Pharos and the Emperors in the far East, they were matched within the immediate family—insuring the lands and riches of Szandau would remain in the hands of their line. For every match, there was a plentiful feast that lasted several days, with music and revelry and dancing—even the servants in the palace lost themselves in the abundance of food and drink. These things… eventually, they drew the unwanted attention of Beng.”

“What is Beng?” I asked softly.

“Not what—who. He is none other than the devil himself, child. The devil was jealous of how good and pure Amango and his people were, so he decided to interfere, planting seeds of misfortune and misery that would change the everything in Szandau forever. You see… it just so happens that Laminka was heavy with child when Beng started this meddling, and he knew that the easiest way to tarnish the purity of Amango would be to strike down the beloved queen. As soon as he thought it, Laminka went into labor, but the revelry was so loud that no one could hear her screams. Unfortunately, the devil had sensed two hearts beating inside her womb and he knew that meant her labor would be very hard… and very dangerous for a woman of her advanced years.”

“Twins,” Pietro murmured—so soft I almost missed it.

The professor refilled his glass, taking a long sip; we watched, impatient for him to get back to the story.

“Perhaps had Amango thought to check on his wife, things might have turned out differently—but he thought she was sleeping peacefully on the other side of the palace. As a good host, he could not leave their guests—not until the very last crumb of food had been eaten, and every single drop of wine drained from the flasks. For hours on end the poor queen lay screaming out for help, but her cries went unanswered… right up until Del decided to intervene—”
“Who—”

“God—now stop interrupting.” The professor pointed at me with the stem of his pipe, looking stern. “As I was saying, Del tried to reach out to the king, gently brushing against his mind—but the king was too wrapped up in his celebrations to pay attention. It was the same with all the other people in the palace—one by one, Del tried to reach them, but in their drunken revelry, they ignored the voice of God whispering in their ears. The only one he could reach was a young child who was sleeping in the kitchen—he filled her dreams with images of the screaming queen and the two tiny, crying infants she’d delivered all on her own. Of course… by then it was far too late to save Laminka—by the time the girl awoke and ran through the palace… the queen was already toeing death’s door.”

“She died?” I whispered, horrified by the sudden, unexpected turn the tale had taken.

“Yes, but she managed to hang on long enough for the servant to arrive. Laminka whispered out the names she’d given her twins—Tchin, for the sun, and Genia, for the moon. With her final breath, the queen blessed the young servant who’d tried to render aide—from that day forth the girl and her descendants would be endowed with holy abilities and prophetic dreams.”

I reached up to brush away the tears that had slipped free, but Pietro’s hand got there first; he peered down at me, his brow wrinkling with concern—trying to soothe away the sadness that I was feeling. “It is only a story—”

“I know… but it’s just… so heartbreaking,” I whispered back, sitting up. I shouldn’t have—it was a mistake—the room seemed to move with me, making me a little dizzy. “Oh!”

“It’s okay… just the vodka. Here—lean against me.” His arm slid around me, pulling me close to his side—I rested my head on his shoulder, closing my eyes to blot out the off kilter way the walls were swaying.

The professor was oblivious to our exchange—far too wrapped up in his tale to notice our whispers; he was still talking—I thought about asking him to repeat himself, but as I listened, it was obvious I hadn’t missed much.

“From that moment on, Amango changed. He was a different man than he’d been before—when he buried Laminka in the earth, his heart turned into a cold dead stone. His kindness and compassion vanished, replaced by cynicism—and avarice took root within his soul. When the people cried out that they were hungry or cold, he turned a deaf ear to their pleas—why should he help them when his beloved queen rotted away in her grave? Why should he care about them when not a single one had helped his Laminka in her time of need?”

“But one did—the servant girl,” Pietro protested.

“Ah yes, but you see, Amango had forgotten about her completely—just as he’d forgotten that he too had failed to help the queen. The king had skewered the events in his mind, replacing the guilt he felt with outrage and anger against the people of Szandau. It was far easier to blame them than to admit that he was in the wrong too, yes?”

Pietro nodded, frowning. “But if God saw all this, why didn’t he help?”

“It is not his way to constantly intervene in the workings of men, chavo—he has given us intelligence and morals, so he expects us to figure things out on our own. In time, eventually he did give Amango a chance to redeem himself—but that is another tale altogether, for another night. Tonight you asked about Tchin and Genia… and now we are to the part of the legend where their story truly begins.”
He took another drink, then relit his pipe with a twig from the fire. “Though Amango’s heart had been hardened against the people for the part they played in Laminka’s death, he never harbored any feelings of ill will towards the twins who’s birth had ended her life; he couldn’t—with their silky dark hair and large, soulful eyes, they looked just like his lost beloved. Out of all his children, they were the two he favored most—he constantly showered them with gifts of fine clothing and jewels and other fancy things; but instead of becoming spoiled by his pampering, or enamored by worldly goods… Tchin and Genia chose to give away the presents to the needy people in the kingdom. Unlike their older siblings, they did not hide away behind the walls of the palace surrounded by their fathers expensive tapestries and works of art—they preferred to be out among the people, enjoying a simple life surrounded by the beauty of creation. They were happy, kind children—much like the man their father had been before Beng filled his empty heart with greed; all who knew them loved them, exalting them far more than they ever did the king.”

“Bet he didn’t like that,” Pietro muttered.

“He did not know—he never left the palace after his wife died, so he had no idea what the people of Szandau spoke of in the streets. He was too wrapped up in trying to increase his treasury—determined to gain more riches… more lands—hoping they would fill the vast void in his soul. That is the problem when you let Beng get his claws in you—it is nearly impossible to break free.” The old man drew on his pipe, puffing out more smoke rings. “Throughout the twin’s childhood, their father had managed to claim the lands that surrounded Szandaus borders through cunning and political subterfuge, replacing the monarchs with pairs of his children… but still… it was not enough. He wanted more—the question that plagued him was how could he achieve it? He could send out men armed for battle, but he could not bear the thought of spending money on such a campaign; he could barter more lands—but again, the thought of dipping into the treasury made him gnash his teeth in rage.”

I narrowed my eyes suspiciously, my mind already connecting the two separate threads of the story, despite the vodka haze that kept trying to interfere. “He wouldn’t dare—”

“Ohhhhh yes… he would… and he did, as you will learn in but a moment.” The professor chuckled—shooting me an appreciative smile. “Out on the streets, the people were preparing—the time was approaching for the twins to be matched, and out of all the pairings of the royal children, this was the one that they wanted the most. Unlike their siblings—who had all wed as ordered simply to please their father—Tchin and Genia were truly in love; it reflected in their eyes and their voices—it shone on their faces for everyone to see. You have to remember that the twins had shown the people the charity and altruism that Amango lacked… and as a result, they were very loved—their people wanted them to be happy, and they longed for the day when the twins would take the throne. Beng knew this—and he knew that he would never be able to gain control over the twins as he had with their father… so he began whispering poisonous things into Amango’s ear.”

Pietro pulled me even closer—I was practically in his lap; I nestled my head under his chin, trying to fight back the urge to beg the professor to stop the story. If I didn’t hear the rest, I could pretend their dreams came true—that they married and grew old together after a long life of happiness and peace. I could pretend that old Tebera had foreseen the same things in my future, and that my dreams would come true too.

“Suddenly, the king knew the answer to the puzzle… a way he could kill two birds with one stone without spending a single piece of his own gold. He would go against the old traditions, finding a match for his youngest children outside of the family—far from the kingdoms boundaries, increasing his land holdings by twofold while extracting a high bride price for Genia’s hand.”

“He can’t do that!” I spoke without meaning to. “Not when the people want—”
“Haven’t you been listening, chavi? He did not care what the people wanted, he was so far gone in his greed that he did not even care that his plan would break the children’s hearts. All that mattered was gold and jewels—cold, material things that would never die and leave him all alone.” The professor leaned over, emptying the ash from his pipe, slowly packing it anew. “And you have to keep in mind that poor Tchin and Genia had no idea what Amango was scheming—they were busy making plans for their shared future. All of their siblings had been given lands to rule, so naturally they assumed that Szandau was meant for them; they’d grown up hearing stories about the paradise it had once been, and they longed to bring back the age of peace—when the wealth of the kingdom had been shared by all.”

“He was a wicked, horrible man,” Pietro muttered, slowly sliding his hand up and down my back—the gesture soothing us both, chasing away the sorrow we felt for the poor twins.

“Amango’s plan might have succeeded, except for one small thing—he knew nothing of the blessing Laminka had given the young girl who’d tried to save her life. She’d fled the palace, afraid of the king’s wrath and had spent the years in anonymity, living a peaceful life in the forest all on her own—making a living by using the gifts of the queens blessing on those who sought her out. For the first time since the night of their birth, the twin’s images began haunting her sleep; she dreamed of the misfortune that was slowly drawing near. Her sleeping mind filled with wails of sorrow, and oceans upon oceans of tears—then the world turned to blood as she watched young Tchin and Genia take their own lives, unable to face being separated forever.” The old man cleared his throat, staring off into space—for a moment I wondered if his mind had wandered away from the tale… but then he spoke again.

“She snuck into the palace to warn them—an attempt to change their fate. Heedless of the risk to herself, she crept into the chamber they shared, and spilled out her prophecy—completely shocking the twins. They were inconsolable—their happy future crumbled to dust in the blink of an eye, ground out of existence thanks to their father’s greed. With nothing more than the clothes on their back, they fled the palace—running to their favorite meadow where they collapsed on their knees, praying… begging… the Most High to intercede and soften their father’s heart.”

“But you said he wouldn’t—”

“Ach—what I said was that He did not constantly intercede, chavi. But you see… He was particularly fond of Tchin and Genia—they were faithful and devout like their mother, with pure, untarnished souls. But at the same time, Del knew that their father’s heart was a polluted, corrupted thing—tainted by Beng’s influence. Amango would not be swayed from the path he had chosen…and so, Del must find another way to save the two children that he loved. Sending a warm summer wind to dry their tears, he waved his hand over the meadow, coaxing the flowers to emit a sweet scent that would lull the twins into a state similar to sleep. Finally, he whispered instructions for them to follow—telling them to go to the bank of the nearby river where one of his messengers would be waiting. With that, he turned his eyes and attention elsewhere—leaving them with the choice to take control of their own fate or to spend their lives suffering in misery.”

“I don’t understand why he didn’t just make Amango do it. God is all powerful, yes?”

“He gives us all freewill, Wanda—to live our lives as we chose. And you must remember, the world is the Devil’s playground—each and every one of us are tested again and again throughout our years. Tchin and Genia were no different—this was one of their trials. Now… do you want to guess what they found when they woke and hurried to the river?”

“An angel,” Pietro predicted, playing with a strand of my hair. “Like the one God sent to talk to Abraham or to Lot, right?”
“No… but you are very close—it did have wings, and feathers. An enormous goose was waddling on the bank—the biggest one they’d ever seen.”

“A goose?” I said, shocked at the very idea. “Oh come on! Why would—”

“I’m getting there chavi… just hold on.” He chuckled, brushing aside my disbelief. “Now I do not know if you’ve ever been around geese… but let me tell you… they are not the friendliest of creatures—at times they can be downright mean, delivering wickedly painful pecks with their sharp beaks. So naturally, the twins were hesitant to approach such a creature—it was as big as an ox, with bright blue eyes that looked quite unsettling sitting in its gray face. Even more frightening, when is spotted them it stretched out its long neck, hissing like a serpent. Genia instantly burst into tears, burying her face in her brother’s neck—her petite body trembling with fear… and poor Tchin? Well… he was beside himself—completely unsure what to do. His eyes darted around the riverbank looking for a weapon to use against the creature—he was afraid too, of course, but his first thought was to protect his beloved sister.”

“That’s what I would do too,” Pietro said, nodding. “No way I’m going to let a giant goose eat Wanda.”

“Geese don’t eat humans—they eat plants and maybe some small fish.” I pointed out.

“But this is a giant monster goose, Wanda—I don’t blame him for playing it safe.” His arms wrapped around me—as if he were protecting me from the giant beast in the tale.

“What I want to know is how the goose got so big in the first place,” I muttered, scowling—I couldn’t help myself, my mind had automatically locked on to the most illogical, unlikely aspect of the legend.

“It was a Divine messenger, chavi—remember?” Most likely it was one of the Host—an angel in disguise.”

“Yes… but—”

Pietro’s hand slid over my mouth, silencing me. “Just ignore her and finish the story, please.” I licked his hand—he jerked it away, scowling at me. “Behave! I want to hear the rest of it!”

“Where was I? Oh yes… Tchin’s eyes flicked around, looking for a large stone or perhaps a sturdy piece of wood, but suddenly the wind grew stronger, whispering softly that there was nothing to fear; like Del, the wind had a soft spot for the twins—it loved the sound of their happy laughter, and the gentle soft sighs they made when they kissed. While it tried to calm their fears, the goose waddled into the river, drifting in the shallows as it groomed its plumage—from time to time fixing them with a glare from its beady eyes. The hateful looks did not help the situation—the twins hesitated, still unsure what to do. Again, the wind whispered ‘it will take you down the river—far from this place… it is an answer to your prayers.’” He shifted, stretching his legs out in front of him and pretending to yawn—I rolled my eyes, irritated by the long, drawn out pause.

“Unfortunately, the wind’s words did nothing to calm the twin’s nerves, since neither one had ever had the chance to learn how to swim. They might have stood there forever, too frightened to move had it not been for the sound of raised voices coming from the woods; an eavesdropping guard had heard the warning they’d received, immediately running to inform their father—he’d gathered up a group of his men to hunt them down and drag them home. It was the shouts that spurred Tchin into action; he scooped up his sister, plunging into the river. Genia clung to him as he summoned up every single ounce of his courage, wrapping his arm around the long neck of the goose—then they were off, the goose paddling into the mighty current, moving far faster than a man could run.”
stopped—his eyes flicking back and forth between our faces; despite my disbelief about the giant goose... I was hooked.

“Well? What happened?” It was practically a screech.

“As they rounded the bend, Tchin and Genia could hear their father’s voice carrying out across the water... cursing them for all their days—and all of their offspring too. He swore his allegiance to Beng, screaming out that they would be forced to roam the earth for all their days to escape his vengeance—never welcome in any land since they’d abandoned their home and their duty.”

“But they made it out of the river safely?” Pietro asked softly, every muscle in his body tense.

“Oh yes—the goose delivered them to a safe inlet, far, far away from Szandau. An old man in rags sat waiting on the shore—another messenger from above. As they stumbled out of the river, exhausted and soaked to the bone, he instructed Tchin to remove one of his gold hoops in his ears, placing it in Genia’s. Joining them together, hand in hand, he pronounced them mates and the mother and father of a new nation—a chosen, blessed tribe that would bear then name Tchingene. And though Tchin and Genia began their new life with nothing more than the clothes on their backs and the sandals on their feet... they were happy all of their days—for they had each other, and that was all they would ever need.”

Tugging at his beard, he studied us for a moment, then set down his pipe, holding out his hands; I glanced over at Pietro—automatically we moved, clasping his outstretched palms at the exact same moment.

“There are three important lessons in this story that you must remember and pass on to the next generation—how you weave the tale does not matter... as long as the lessons remain true. The first is one I shared with you on the day we met, chavi—it is one of the most important rules of the people. In the manner of Tchin and Genia, who charitably gave away all that they had to aide others... we must help when we can. The second lesson is to always have faith in the Father Creator; even when things are bleak and hopeless—that faith will see you through the same way it did with the twins who were mother and father to us all.” He squeezed our hands, smiling sadly; I could see the shine of tears spring up in his dark, haunted eyes. “Finally... when you look to the heavens, remember where we came from—the shining sun represents Tchin, the glowing moon Genia; just as Tchin was bound to Genia with unbreakable love, the sun is tied to his sister the moon, following her across the sky. When you see the stars, remember that they are their children—the representation of our people... always bright and beautiful, no matter how dark and cold this world may seem. We are never truly alone—the stars are the souls of all the Romani that have passed on...they are watching over us, waiting for the day when we take our place among them.”

He released our hands, bowing his head—I didn’t realize I was crying until Pietro reached over and wiped my cheeks. Out of everything the old man had said, it was the last lesson that had the most profound effect on me. It was a beautiful sentiment—one that I knew would resonate within me forever.

“That is a very nice story... but it doesn’t explain all the rambling that crazy old bat was doing.” Pietro glanced over the professor, arching a brow.

“Ach... that is another story all together, my boy. Tchin and Genia lived a long blessed life—they never had much more than they started with, but they didn’t need much more than the love they had for each other and the love of their many children. Their only regret was the curse that would pass down from one generation to the next—that curse is why the people wander to this day, without a true homeland of our own. It is why we are regarded with suspicion and bigotry wherever we try to settle.” He sighed, eyeing the bottle of vodka—forgoing the glass, he raised it to his lips, taking a
long pull on the bottle. “Eventually, when the twins were very old and very gray headed, they sensed that their time to move on to the next plane of existence was drawing near; they called their large family together to say their final goodbyes—there were so many people there that the house could not hold them all… they spilled out into the street, pressing against the windows to hear. Tchin and Genia spoke as one, making a most solemn vow. No matter if it took five thousand lifetimes, they would find a way to break their father’s curse and set their people free. When the time was right and their people needed them the most, they would return to lead them to their true home.”

“But that has nothing at all to do with us,” I murmured.

“Consider this…how many twins have you encountered in Novi Grad—Roma twins at that? Tebera has her signs and portents… perhaps it was simply a case of your being in the wrong place at the wrong time.” His brow wrinkled—for a second I thought he would say more, but he remained silent, tugging at his beard.

“Professor…” Pietro said almost hesitantly, “the servant girl… what happened to her?”

The old man sighed, rubbing his forehead. “Remember in the car when I said I would explain all about Simza in a day or two? I promise I will tell you the rest of the servant girl’s tale when we have that talk—it all ties together with some of what happened this evening… in a roundabout way.”

“Well it was certainly a very memorable experience, to say the least,” I said, trying to lighten the atmosphere in the room. “I never quite imagined our birthday dinner would end like that.”

“I really am sorry things got so out of hand—I only wanted you to experience a bit of your heritage.”

“It is not your fault… and your wonderful storytelling more than makes up for everything that happened.”

“I still have a mind to demand a kris,” he muttered, scowling as he got to his feet.

I forced myself to hold my tongue and not ask questions. I still didn’t understand half of what had happened, but there was one thing I knew for certain; we’d seen a very different side of the kindly old professor—and though I was grateful he had defended us, I wasn’t entirely sure how I felt about how easily the horrible threats had rolled off his tongue. I couldn’t help but wonder if he’d ever snap, turning the dark side of his personality on Pietro and me.

“It is getting late… I should go. You will come by tomorrow, yes? To start going through the clothing… cleaning out the rooms?”

“Yes… sometime before lunch so I have time to heat up the leftover stew.”

“I’ll walk you out.” Pietro stood, shooting me a smile as he followed the old man up the stairs; I managed to wait until the door closed behind them before bolting for the window.

Outside, the temperature had dropped, but the sky was clear—lit by the bright glow of the moon overhead; it illuminated the garden with a silvery sheen that made it look almost magical—a place where fairies and nymphs might play hide and seek between the blades of overgrown grass that tickled against my bare feet and calves. Tilting my head back, I stared up at the stars, thinking about Mama and Papa—wondering if they were truly up there looking down at me, pleased to see that I was learning something about our heritage.

He found me like that—standing and staring up at the stars with a sad, wistful smile on my face; he didn’t ask what I was doing or what I was thinking—he was my twin… he already knew.
An arm slid around my waist—his chin dropped to my shoulder; pointing directly at the two stars I’d been contemplating—his whispered words tickled against my cheek. “Definitely those two.”

“Why?” I leaned back against him, comforted by the press of his chest against my back.

“They’re two of the brightest—and they are directly over us. The reason they shine so brightly is because they are happy we’re thinking about them… happy that we are still together, the way we were meant to be.”

“Do you really believe that, Pietro?” I turned my head—his face was so close that my lips brushed against his cheek.

His jaw tensed, but he didn’t move away; a few seconds passed, then the corner of his lips twitched up in an impish smile. “I know so—after all… I’m the oldest. That means I have a better grasp of certain things.”

His teasing words didn’t irritate me—in fact, they made me smile. “Older and wiser, huh?”

“Getting older by the second.” As he pulled away, he captured my hand, brushing his thumb along my skin where it met the metal edge of the ring. “Come on… it’s time.”

I didn’t have to ask time for what.

I was his twin.

Deep down in my heart… I already knew.

Chapter End Notes

As Professor Mirga told the twins in this chapter, Romani legends are passed down orally from one generation to the next; they are fluid—ever changing—with each story teller weaving their own threads into the loom. Factually, the story Grigori shared is based on four scraps of legend that have endured over the years—all four have one common theme: a relationship between a brother and sister being the root of the Roma people; the scraps are:

1) The Romani started with a brother and sister named Tchin and Genia.
2) The siblings were saved by a divine messenger in the form of a great goose. [For some Roma, Vasilyovden—the Romani new year—is celebrated by roasting a goose in honor of ‘the saviour goose’.
3) The land where the people once dwelled being ruled by a wicked king; Del destroyed the king and his subjects in a manner that is similar to the story of the parting of the Red Sea in the bible, leaving only a blind woman and a beggar alive. They married and had children—a son and a daughter, who then married each other, starting the Romani people.
4) The sun and his sister the moon being in love, and their children, the stars representing the Romani—the brightest of all God’s children.

In this chapter, I tried to honor my heritage by weaving all four of those scraps into one epic tale; the base facts are the ones listed above—the rest is my poor attempt to fill in the blanks and hopefully entertain with my version of the telling.
:o)

—SWS
Chapter 17

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

AS WE CROSSED THE YARD, I lagged back, slowing down his pace; suddenly, I was nervous—a million knots formed in my stomach, tightening with every step we took. By the time the night was over, I would know the complete truth—no matter what it might be.

The problem with having an analytical mind is that it never truly shuts down; it locks on certain things—be it facts, statements or numbers—at the most horrendous times, playing them over and over on a loop inside my head. I already knew the odds of the outcome were split smack down the middle—I didn’t need to have it flashing in my head like a giant neon sign. I wanted to hang on to my hopes and dreams, forgetting about the fact that there was just as likely a chance that those dreams and my heart might be shattered beyond repair before our talk was done.

Pietro slipped through the window first; as soon as his head vanished, I followed—but I didn’t make it all the way through… at least, not on my own. His arms locked just above my knees, holding me in place.

I tried to peer through the opening, but my body was blocking my view. “What are you—”

“Helping… I’ve got you… let go of the frame.”

“Pietro—”

“You’re wearing a skirt—I don’t want you scraping up your legs on the crates.”

“You realize I already did this once tonight, right?” Sighing at the ridiculousness of his logic, I let go of the frame; he pulled me through, completely oblivious to the fact that as he slid his arms up to lower me to the ground, my skirt was moving too—riding up, bunching around my hips. Blushing furiously at the thought of the bulky pad in my panties, I shoved the skirt down, hiding my face behind my hair.

“Why are you so embarrassed?” His voice was soft—only a few inches away.

“I didn’t mean to flash you,” I mumbled, trying to step around him. “Sorry.”

“You are starting to sound as prudish as the old man—we never cared about that kind of thing before… what does it matter now?” He sidestepped, blocking my path.

“It’s just… different. I can’t explain it.”

“Try. Consider it a warm up exercise for our talk.”

“Pietro… I don’t want to talk about it… it’s gross.” My eyes flicked up just in time to see a hurt look flick across his face.

“You mean… I’m gross. For making your skirt do that.” His voice was low—not quite a whisper.

“No! I mean… right now it’s gross down there.” My face felt so hot that it was a wonder my blood didn’t boil my brain. “You know.”

“Clearly I don’t know or I wouldn’t have asked.” Long fingers caught my hair, tucking it behind my
ear. “I would like you to use your words and explain.”

The phrase was bittersweet; it brought to mind the long ago days of our childhood—back when we’d chattered back and forth in a language all our own; it was what Mama said when she grew weary of listening to our ‘twin speak’, insisting we talk using words she could understand. “I’m still bleeding down there, “ I mumbled, dropping my eyes to the floor. “The pad is gross—I don’t want you seeing it.”

“Wanda… look at me.” His fingers slipped under my chin, tilting my head back as his eyes locked with mine. “I don’t ever want to hear that again. Nothing about you is gross—certainly not a natural bodily function. You don’t get embarrassed about me emptying the bucket, right?”

I actually did… but I wasn’t about to admit it. “It’s not the same at all—the bleeding doesn’t bother me much… it’s the pads. They are bulky and ugly… like a diaper. It’s even worse when they’re… you know… dirty.”

“Is that why you haven’t been leaving them in the bucket? Cause you don’t want me seeing them?”

I nodded, dropping my eyes. “Yes. I just… I can’t explain it. They make me feel gross… I didn’t want you thinking it was gross too.”

“I wouldn’t… but I don’t like you thinking that about yourself. Tomorrow we will take some of our wages and go to the pharmacy to get you something else—something that won’t bother you as much. They had a whole aisle of things for ladies. Okay?”

“I shouldn’t waste what I already have—”

“Yes—you should. I don’t want you feeling bad about yourself like that.” He smiled, fingertips brushing along my cheek. “Now come on—there’s something we have to do before we talk.”

I eyed him for a minute, slowly nodding—letting him tug me towards the blanket. “What exactly are you wanting to do? Arm wrestle?”

“No—we both know that I’d win. We have to lay out the ground rules—”

I scowled at him as I sank down, crossing my legs in front of me. “Are you trying to weasel out?”

“Of course not—I’ve just given this a lot of thought. I think the best way to do it is take turns, that way there’s less chance of one of us getting upset.” He sat down across from me, copying my pose.

I thought about it for a minute—it made sense. “Okay. What else?”

“Well… obviously we don’t talk about the two things that are off limits…” his face scrunched up as he thought about it. “Start out with small things and work our way up to the big ones?”

“Huh?”

“Instead of starting off immediately with something like… me asking why you were crying in the bathroom… I’ll ask about the bug. Something small instead of something big.”

My scowl returned—I should have known he’d bring that up. “I already told you why I was upset —”

“Did you really? The whole honest truth?” He arched a brow.

“Well… no. Not all of it.” I admitted.
“I didn’t think so… which is why I added it to my list.”

“Who goes first?”

“You can.” He smiled, looking smug.

I narrowed my eyes. “What are you up to?”

“Nothing! Honestly!”

I didn’t believe that for a single minute. “Fine. So I go first… um… why—”

“Wait! I have to do something first!”

“Well hurry up!” I huffed. My irritation was quick, and fleeting—it abruptly turned to anxiety when I realized exactly what he was reaching for. “Pietro! No!”

“Tomorrow we can pour the rest out if you want, but tonight I’m going to need it. If you want to do this then I’m having another drink—besides… I barely felt the first one at all.” Shooting me a defiant look, he raised the vodka bottle to his lips—I fought back the urge to knock it out of his hand. “Ugh—I still say it tastes like kerosene.”

“Then why drink it?”

“Papa used to call it liquid courage,” he said softly, recapping the bottle and studying the label.

“He didn’t!”

“He did. Whenever he had bad news about money or his hours getting cut back, he’d stop off and have a drink on the way home.”

I frowned—it was the first I’d heard of such a thing. “How do you know that?”

“He told me—when he talked to me about becoming a man. He said sometimes it’s hard to find the courage to be truthful with the one you love most—and at times like that, a shot of vodka gives a man liquid courage to face those things.”

“Mama didn’t tell me anything like that.” It didn’t seem fair that he’d gotten better information than me.

“You don’t need liquid courage—you are always very forthright.”

“Yes… but sometimes even forthright people find it hard to be truthful—especially if they’ve tried it once and been hurt or pushed away,” I pointed out softly.

“And sometimes forthright people completely misread things, taking them the wrong way,” he countered.

I eyed him. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Exactly what I said.”

Without meaning to, I bristled. “I’m sorry, but when I try to hold your hand and you jerk away and walk off, there is no misreading the rebuff!”

Closing his eyes, he rubbed his temples—it looked like he was struggling not to snap back at me.
“Wanda… are we going to needle each other all night or talk? If you’re going to get upset and defensive at everything I say then I might as well just go to bed.”

“Fine—we talk.” I huffed, racking my brain. The problem was… all my questions were things I knew he would consider ‘big’ ones. “Where do you keep going when you run off and leave me all alone?”

He frowned, looking confused. “I don’t run off—”

“You do—you left me for hours and hours after we were wrestling. And you did it after you gave me the bra, and—”

“Wanda!” His groan cut me off. “You promised to start small!”

“That is the smallest thing I could think of on the spur of the moment! All the other ones are really big!”

“That’s a big one too,” he scowled, playing with the vodka bottle.

“Well you have to answer it anyway! If you’d mentioned this big small business before I could have more properly prepared—”

“Upstairs. I go upstairs.” He blushed, ducking his head.

I narrowed my eyes—his embarrassment was so strong it practically felt radioactive, which was odd, considering his answer. “That’s it? You go upstairs? How is that a big—”

“I answered your question—now it’s my turn.”

“What? No way! That’s—”

“One question each turn—you agreed,” he said obstinately. “Was there really a bug on me?”

I scowled, my cheeks heating. “No.”

“Then why—” he bit his lip, cutting himself off before he could break his own stupid rule.

“Why do you go upstairs?” I fired at him.

“To have private alone time.” He smirked.

My scowl deepened—obviously if I wanted real answers, I would have to find a way to phrase the questions in a manner that didn’t allow wiggle room for him to dance around the answers with vague statements.

“Why did you lie and say there was a bug?”

“Because I knew you’d be mad if I didn’t.” Ha! I could play the same infuriating game he was. I leaned back on my hands, smiling sweetly—drawing out the silence to make him uneasy.

“It’s your turn—”

“I know this.”

“So go already!”
“Pietrooo…” I said, drawing out his name in a teasing manner, “what is it that you do when you run off upstairs for this… private alone time?”

He glared at me, two bright spots of color blooming on his cheeks. “I touch myself! I go upstairs and touch myself, okay? Happy now?”

My mouth dropped open—I certainly hadn’t expected to hear anything like that. “What?”

“You heard me Wanda,” he growled, ducking his head down.

“But—”

“You had a question already—it’s my turn.” He uncapped the bottle, taking another small swig. “Why did you put on that shirt today—we both know it’s always been way too small for you.”

Now it was my turn to duck my head down. “I wanted to see if you would notice… things.”

He muttered something that I couldn’t quite catch—it sounded a lot like ‘It worked’, but that could have just been my own wishful thinking. I worried my lip with my teeth for a moment, afraid that if I pushed him too far he would call a halt to the talk. “Why do you go up there to touch yourself?”

“Wanda!”

I arched a brow. “Answer me.”

“When I get… uh… worked up… it’s the only way to take care of things.” He mumbled, hiding behind his hair.

“What do you mean… worked up?”

“I’m not answering that—you’re deliberately ignoring the rules.”

My frustration spilled over—words rolling off my tongue before I could catch them. “Pietro—this is stupid! You promised me we’d discuss things—this isn’t discussing! It’s playing twenty questions!”

“Clearly it’s not—we aren’t limited on the amount of questions… though maybe we should be!”

I didn’t like the sound of that at all—not when I was having to ask multiple questions to get a clear answer. “No! No changing the rules—that’s not fair!”

“You promise you’ll stop asking out of turn?”

Our eyes locked for a moment; my lips twitched—despite my irritation. Dropping my gaze to the faded pattern of the blanket beneath us, I nodded. “Yes—I do.”

“Okay then… why were you—”

“It’s my turn—not yours.” My eyes darted up to his face, my smirk breaking free. “You already asked your question.”

“I did not!”

“You just asked if I promised to stop going out of turn—that is clearly a question,” I said smugly, “so it is my turn.”

“That doesn’t count and you know it Wanda!”
“It does—it was a question. Your silly rules didn’t say anything about it only applying to certain questions.” He looked so put out by my logic that I couldn’t help but giggle. “You are very lucky that I am such a wonderful sister… I will let you go out of turn.”

“No—rules are rules. Go ahead.”

I rolled my eyes. “Pietro… I was just trying to make a point. Go on…take your turn.”

“And if I do, you will claim you get to go twice in a row to make up for it—I know how you think.” He said stubbornly, scowling at me. “So go.”

I waited a few seconds, just in case he changed his mind, but I should have known better—he was just as bullheaded as me. “What do you mean… when you get worked up?”

“Sometimes my body… reacts… to… things… whether I want it to or not. The professor explained it to me though… he said it’s a completely normal thing that happens to men.” He sounded nonchalant, but the redness in his cheeks betrayed him. “We get aroused without meaning to sometimes.”

Staring down at my hands, I chewed at the corner of my lip, trying to ignore the disappointment and hurt that welled up inside me; I’d thought maybe the way his body reacted was because of me, but if it was a normal thing that happened to all men, then obviously, I was wrong. The realization that it could have happened with any girl made a pit form in my stomach.

“What’s wrong?”

The soft sound of his voice drew my eyes up—he was watching me, his forehead wrinkling with confusion. “I thought… never mind… it doesn’t matter.”

“You have to answer,” he said, almost gently, “those are the rules.”

I sighed. “I thought maybe… you got worked up over me. “I shrugged, glancing away as heat flooded my cheeks. “I didn’t realize it would be the same with any random girl that happened to wrestle with you.”

He didn’t say anything at first—he just took another drink before clearing his throat. “Your turn.”

“I… just give me a minute, okay?” I shifted, trying to discreetly wipe my eyes before the wetness I felt gathering could turn into full-fledged tears. Although I’d known all along that our talk might end up shattering me, deep down a part of me had persistently refused to believe it would happen. That part of me had been very, very mistaken.

He nudged my arm; I glanced over—he was holding out the bottle, his eyes locked on my face. “Here… perhaps you need a little courage.”

I didn’t respond; taking the bottle from him, I gulped down a swallow, praying it would numb the ache I felt in my soul. “Take the turn you missed.”

“No—”

“Pietro… just do it.” My voice betrayed how weary I was—I was tired of the game. It had been foolish of me to think that talking would erase the strange discord that was slowly growing between us.

He sighed. “Fine… are you upset I interfered tonight?
I glanced up, confused by the question. “What?”

“If I hadn’t stopped that creep… you could have had a home again… had a family.” His jaw tightened, an undecipherable expression flickering across his face. “He kept watching you, even after you gave me the flower… he would have pampered you, I think. The way you deserve to be pampered, with real presents… not with stupid pebbles and feathers. He would have given you beautiful, expensive things—”

“At what cost, Pietro? Do you think having someone I don’t know or love force himself on me—stealing my virginity— is worth a few stupid gifts?” I said hotly, fresh tears pricking my eyes. “How can you think I would be upset that you prevented that?”

“That’s not an answer,” His eyes darted away from mine—he stared at the fire, jaw clenched. “You might have loved him eventually—”

“I wouldn’t! I will never love anyone other than—” I bit my lip, cutting the words off before I humiliated myself again by blurting out that he was the only man I’d ever love. “No—I am not upset that you saved me.” I raised the bottle to my lips again, hoping the horrible liquid would burn away the panicky feeling that was blossoming in my chest the same way it burned my throat; coughing, I wiped my mouth off, thrusting the bottle back at him. “Why have you been so angry with me lately? It seems like I can’t do anything right—”

“Because you changed your mind!” He mumbled, cheeks flushing.

I stared at him, brow furrowing “Wha… about what?”

“It’s my tu—”

“No! You answer me right now, Pietro Maximoff!” I snapped. “I’m tired of half answers and drawing things out. Speak plainly—what do you mean?”

“You don’t like me anymore,“ he muttered, glaring down at the blanket; his voice sounded sullen, but there was something else there too… a lost quality that haunted me, tugging at my heart.

“Don’t be ridiculous—I love you more than anything on earth!” I said, flabbergasted that he could think such a thing.

“I mean you don’t like me… as a boy—you took it back.” It was a whisper, but the quietness of his tone did nothing to hide the hurt that colored the words. His lips twisted into a scowl. “You changed your mind—told me to forget about it.”

I blinked, trying to process what I was hearing. “You mean—”

“You said I made your heart sing and wrote those wonderful things then just changed your damn mind, Wanda,” he snapped, looking furious. “It may be easy for you to forget it, but I can’t! I think about it all the time!”

“I only said that because I didn’t want you upset!” It spilled out of me before I could catch it. “I didn’t want to take it back—I just didn’t want you to feel uncomfortable about it!”

His head jerked up, his blue eyes full of surprise as they locked with mine. “You’re not just saying that?”

I shook my head, “No—I meant every word I said… it’s why I got so upset today.”
“I… what?”

“In the bathtub… I was thinking about all the things other girls have… things that make them pretty… that make their hair shine and their skin soft… then I realized that even though I didn’t have any of those things… the only thing that I was truly envious of… well… it’s the fact they can be with you… you know… that way.” I blushed, dropping my eyes. “Thinking about you being with other girls… it hurts my heart. More than that… it makes my soul ache.”

“Is that… is that why you got upset when I was talking about my earring?” He asked softly.

I nodded, not saying anything—bracing myself for a lecture on how freaky it was for me to feel such things.

“Wanda…” he stopped, shaking his head. “I’m sorry… I went out of turn.”

“What?” I asked, incredulous—I’d laid my heart bare before him again… and he was thinking about the stupid game.

“I asked two questions in a row… I didn’t mean to,” he murmured, staring at the fire. “It’s your turn.”

Anger sparked, rousing my temper; for a moment I forgot all about being ladylike—my mama’s lessons about being proper vanished in the blink of an eye. I threw out the most forbidden curse word of all—not caring one tiny bit that it would shame my mother to have me utter such a thing.

“That’s all you have to say to me? That it’s my turn?”

His head whipped around, eyes wide with shock. “Wanda!”

“You shouldn’t talk like that!”

“I’ll talk however I damn well please,” I snapped. Each vulgar word I uttered strengthened my resolve—or perhaps papa had been right and it was the vodka fueling my courage. “You want a question? Fine—did you like kissing me, Pietro? Being close to me that way, despite the fact I am your sister?”

He continued to stare at me—but eventually, he slowly nodded his head.

“I’m sorry, what was that?” I drawled sarcastically. “You’ll have to speak up, I couldn’t quite hear you.”

“Yes… yes I—”

“Do you want to kiss me again or not?”

His cheeks flushed, gaze dropping down to linger on my lips. “Uh… I… uh… yeah.”

“Then why—”

“My turn,” he growled, interrupting me—eyes locked on my face. “Why do you like me that way? Why me?”

“Because… I just do! You saw my list—”

“Wanda… I just… I have to be sure… I’m supposed to protect you from boys who want to take
advantage of you! I’m… ugh!” He let out a sound of pure frustration—shoving his hair back out of his face. “I need to ask you something and I’m sorry if it upsets you—”

“Just ask and get it over with!” I said, taking another swig from the bottle.

His eyes locked with mine, his expression so solemn it scared me. “I don’t want double talk or tricky answers—I want the cold hard truth. Is the reason you want to be with me… that way… because you’re scared of other guys? Because of what Kaspar did in the basement?”

It felt like he’d punched me right in the stomach. I stared at him, not blinking… not even breathing—unable to believe that he of all people would think such a horrible thing. I didn’t realize I was shaking—not until the bottle slipped from my hand. In the back of my mind, some detached part of me wondered if was going into shock. I had all the symptoms—my insides felt ice cold, and there was a painful ache blooming in the center of my chest. The pain bled outward, leaving a weird sort of numbness in its wake.

I don’t know what he sensed across our bond—maybe nothing… maybe it was simply my expression that indicated something was wrong; whatever it was, he shifted, reaching out for me, but I scuttled backwards to avoid his touch.

“Wanda—”

“Don’t you dare act concerned after asking me such a thing. I thought you knew me, Pietro—I believed you were the only person on earth who could truly understand the way I feel, but clearly I was wrong. You don’t know me at all!”

“Don’t say that,” he whispered.

“You think I’m some pathetic, broken thing? Too damaged to allow anyone else to touch me? Is that it?”

“No! I just—”

“You just—” I mocked—my hands fisting so tightly that my fingernails dug into my palms. “You just what? Grasped on to a good excuse to explain away my unnatural, freakish feelings? I’ll tell you what you just did—you threw away the most pure form of love that you could ever hope to have!”

A sound escaped him—one that was inhuman; it was the sound an animal would make if it’s leg were caught in the steel jaws of a hunters trap. Anguish… pain… terror… they hammered into me, the sheer intensity stealing my breath—making it hard for me to think.

“You want to know why you?” I whispered. “Because I truly believe with all that I am, right down to the center of my soul that God made you just for me. When you hold me, it fills me with peace, even as it sparks a fire deep inside me. I feel like I’m basking in a sunbeam that God is shining down on me—one that he created just for me, made up of love and happiness and everything good that exists. I feel whole… complete—”

“Wanda—”

“I’m not finished!” I shouted, my face hot with fury, “If you think I feel this way because of what Kaspar tried to do then you are a fucking idiot Pietro Maximoff! I’ve felt like this for as long as I can remember—only I forced myself to pretend it was something else! I forced myself to forget about it because it was wrong for me to think of you that way! Does that shock you? Are you horrified and disgusted by the truth of who I am?”
He drew his legs up to his chest, wrapping his arms around them—hiding his face away; he was shaking, just like I was, but I was far too angry to be gentle with my words.

“Answer me!” My scream echoed, the stone walls amplifying the sound.

“You should have told me,” he choked out, still hiding his face from my view. “You should have told me as soon as you knew—”

My bitter laugh cut him off, making him flinch. “I only realized it the other day… when I was dreaming up names for our children. I realized it wasn’t the first time I’d done it—my whole life I’ve been putting your face on my future husband… dreaming up babies that looked like you and me. Go on and argue that a little kid can’t feel those things or think that way, but I did! I didn’t understand it, or know what it meant—all I knew was that being with you felt right and made me happier than anything and I wanted it to be like that forever! I still feel that way, only now I understand what it means! I can’t help the way I feel Pietro! I can’t hide my feelings away any longer… it’s tearing me up inside. So go on and hate me and think I’m gross and twisted and screwed up in the head—”

“You should have told me, Wanda! “His shout startled me—I jerked back in surprise. “You should have told me! I’ve always felt the exact same thing!”

“I just explained why I didn’t—” I stopped—the full extent of what he’d said slowly penetrating the angry red haze that was clouding my brain; for a moment I wondered if I was drunk—imagining things he hadn’t really said. “What did you say?”

“You heard me—I said I feel the same thing,” he mumbled.

“Don’t you dare lie to me! Don’t you pretend—”

“I’m not!” His head shot up—his gaze furious as his eyes met mine. “I wouldn’t say it if it wasn’t true—God above knows how hard I’ve been fighting it! I’ve been praying—asking him to take away the feelings if they are truly as wrong and evil as people think.”

I returned his gaze, my heart thudding so fast and loud that I could hear it roaring in my ears. “And He hasn’t taken them away—so don’t you think that means that everyone is wrong? That love… any kind of love that’s shared between two people freely… is good?”

He didn’t answer. His head dropped back down, his shoulders shaking—it took a moment for his heavy sorrow to reach out to me across the bond; his sobs were hushed, almost silent—spurring me to move close enough to reach out and stroke my hand along his hair.

“Pietro…”

He didn’t respond.

I moved closer, trying again. “Pietro… look at me. Please.”

For a moment, I thought he wouldn’t—that he’d ignore my request, pretending I wasn’t there; I twirled my finger in one of his curls, so close now that I was practically leaning against his side. “Pietro… whether the feelings are wrong or right… I don’t care. All I know is that my heart will be yours forever, even if you don’t want it. I will never love anyone else—God made me for you.”

Slowly his head rose, tears shining in his beautiful eyes. “Do you swear it? On Mama and Papa’s souls?”

I nodded, leaning forward an inch at a time—closing the distance between us. “I do. I love you
Pietro… really truly love you with every single piece of me.”

“I love you more,” he whispered back, resting his forehead against mine.

His words… those beautiful, beautiful words… they lit me up inside, but before I could unleash my heart and allow it to soar free, there was something I had to know—one question… the most important one… still remained unanswered.

“How do you love me,” I murmured—so close now that my lips almost brushed against his as I spoke.

His mouth curved up at the corners—it was the barest hint of a smile. “As my sister, of course… and my best friend… and as the girl that will one day wear my earring. You’re the whole reason I did it, Pietra… as soon as I heard the custom I thought about you.”

It was all that I needed—everything I had been longing to hear; I pressed my lips against his, finally setting my heart free—allowing myself to revel in the perfect love that I’d dreamed of my whole life.

My prayers had been heard and answered—my hopes and dreams made tangible in the blink of an eye.

Pietro’s love… was mine.

Chapter End Notes

Hope their little talk was worth the wait! ;o)
WHEN PIETRO AND I were very young, we often snuck into the kitchen when our mother was not looking; once we were sure she had not spotted us, each of us would steal one of the sugar cubes that were reserved for our father’s evening cups of tea. We never chewed our stolen treats—we relished them, letting the sugar slowly melt on our tongues, gradually making our taste buds explode with forbidden sweetness. That’s what it felt like when Pietro yielded to me, his lips moving against mine.

As inexperienced as I was, I realized something in that moment—there are very distinct differences whenever you share a kiss. I mean… when you actually consider the act itself, a kiss on its own is not really that intimate of a gesture. People kiss their family and their friends quite regularly—and business acquaintances often share a kiss on each cheek in greeting. You don’t even have to like someone to kiss them—it can be an act of betrayal, like the treacherous kiss Judas Iscariot placed on Jesus Christ’s cheek. What turns the simple act into something larger than life is the emotion and intent behind the gesture—that’s what gives it meaning. When you kiss someone you care about, it is a wondrous thing… but when you kiss someone knowing that they share your feelings… it is pure, unadulterated magic. As much as I’d enjoyed our kisses before, knowing that Pietro loved me enhanced the experience, making it so beautiful that there are no words to describe the feeling.

There are certain moments in your life that stay with you forever; they imprint themselves in your memory with such clarity that when you look back on them, you actually relive that brief span of time, no matter how long ago it occurred. When that happens, the years melt away—you fall into the past as the same emotions and sensations you once felt overwhelm your senses, tightening your stomach and stealing the breath from your lungs.

This was one of those moments.

He pulled me closer—our noses bumped, making me giggle; smiling against my lips, he moved, pulling me into his lap. With that one simple gesture, the dynamic between us shifted; I’d always been the aggressor, but now it was Pietro’s turn. His lips became more demanding as they moved against mine—the sweet tenderness was still there, of course, but it took second place to an entirely new sensation that consumed us both. As close as we were, it wasn’t enough—I squirmed against him, my pulse racing as my breath hitched in my throat.

I shifted, maneuvering my body around—all my earlier worries about my skirt riding up and the bulky pad I wore vanished into thin air; I straddled his lap, wrapping my arms around his shoulders—pressing my body right up against his without breaking our kiss. He made a sound against my lips; his hands moved up, brief, fleeting caresses along my spine before finally tangling in my hair.

We moved as one—instinct guiding us; I clung to him, legs wrapping around his hips as he rose to his knees, moving towards the mattress. Releasing him, I reclined backwards as he advanced to hover over me; gazing up at him in the dim, flickering light from the fire, my hands traveled slowly along his body—exploring the firm, lean muscles that were hidden underneath the stiff new fabric of his shirt. I could feel his body reacting to my touch, but this time he didn’t pull away—though he tensed, as if contemplating fleeing.

“It’s okay,” I whispered against his lips, “we’re a part of each other—your body knows that.”

He didn’t answer me—but he didn’t stop kissing me either. Slowly I could feel the tension drain out of him, his muscles relaxed beneath the gentle caress of my hands. Our lips continued their tantalizing exploration—his hips moved against me; automatically I bent my knees so that he was
pressed against the part of me that was aching the most. He groaned against my mouth, pulling back, but I wrapped my arms around him, hanging on for dear life; I bumped my hips up against him, earning a low moan in response.

“We have to stop,” he mumbled—however, he gave up trying to escape.

“We will,” I murmured back, “soon.”

“I can’t—”

“I can,” Hooking my leg around his, I rolled us over so that I was hovering over him; I pulled my lips from his, sitting up—my fingers going to the buttons on his shirt.

“What—”

“Hush—I just want to look at you.” I bit my lip, spreading the material open—my eyes roaming his chest.

“Why?” His hands slid up to my hips, fingers digging into my skin.

“Because you are beautiful,” I murmured, allowing my fingers to trace along the ridges and indentations of the muscles that had formed—marveling at the feeling of his skin beneath my fingertips.

“Boys aren’t supposed to be beautiful,” he huffed indignantly, but his breathing hitched as my fingers slid across his skin; when I raised my eyes to his, I found they were full of the same swirling emotions that I’d glimpsed when I’d pinned him on the street—only now I could easily identify them, since I was feeling them too.

“Of course they are—the archangels are boys and they are beautiful and fierce.” I rocked my hips against his experimentally; he let out a hushed moan that made my lips curve up in a smile. “You like that?”

“Yes… but don’t do it again—”

I ignored him, moving my hips again. “Doesn’t it feel good?”

“Yes! That is the problem entirely! It—” another moan escaped him as I repeated the gesture. “Wanda! Enough! Please—we have to stop. Seriously!”

“Do you really want to stop?” I whispered, brushing my lips against his—all the while knowing that no matter what he said, I wouldn’t give up without a fight. I was hungry for his touch—starved for the kind of closeness we were sharing; now that I knew the truth… that he loved me… I was determined to make up for lost time.

“No… but we have to. We have to be—” his voice trailed off, turning into a soft sound of pleasure as I began traversing the length of his neck with my lips.

“We have to be together—it is how we were meant to be,” I murmured, bypassing his ppor pierced ear lobe—moving my lips to the ridge of his ear.

“I know this,” he whispered. His hips moved up—a direct contrast to his half-hearted protests. “But we have forever… we need to take things slow.”

“Pietro,” I groaned, pulling back so I could look him in the eye. “I am not intending for us to… you
know... go all the way tonight—"

"You’re not?" His brow wrinkled, confusion brushing against me; it was finely edged with the tiniest bit of hurt. "Why aren’t you?"

He sounded so offended that I almost laughed. "Because you are right—we do need to take things slow. But we can kiss each other... touch each other without it automatically leading to sex, can’t we?"

He looked intrigued by the notion. "We can? But... I thought those things meant you wanted to do it now—"

"I want to be as close to you as possible... and a part of me does want it, but I’m not stupid—I know we’re not ready for that yet. Everything is still brand new. Maybe in a week or two—"

"Wanda! We have to wait much longer than that!"

"Two weeks is a very long time," I huffed, frowning.

"Yes... yes it is... but we still have to wait until we are older. And we can’t do this kissing and touching all the time—"

"Other kids our age do it—"

"They don’t live together though—they see each other in school or if they hang out or something. If we’re going to do this, at least we can do it the right way."

I stared down at him, perplexed. "That is ridiculous—"

"It’s not—we will do things the way other kids our age do. They don’t kiss and stuff at school—only when they are alone... and that’s usually just every once in a while, on a date or something. And we can’t do it at work either—so Saturdays will be our ‘couple’ time."

I scowled, rolling off him to stare up at the ceiling. "What about Sundays? We don’t work on Sundays."

"I don’t think you are supposed to do that sort of thing on holy days... especially not people like us."

"People like us? You mean freaks?" I threw the ugly word at him; it really hurt that he seemed unable to dismiss the idea our feelings for each other were different than those of other boys and girls felt.

"I didn’t mean it like that—" he said softly, frowning. "I just meant that we are already breaking the rules—"

"Adam and Eve were twins, you know—and that’s where we all came from," I shot back.

"Wanda," he groaned. "No they weren’t—"

"They were—Mrs. Kolinov told me so. She said twins were blessed because they are formed from the same mold as Adam and Eve—"

"Mrs. Kolinov was a little bit crazy, Wanda."

"Not about things like this! Her brother was an Archbishop so she would know—and Mama often talked with her about religious things."
“She did?”

“What did you think they talked about over tea? Recipes?”

“Well… yeah… you know… girl stuff.”

I rolled my eyes. “Mama was a very smart woman—she had very strong opinions on things… they liked to talk about the Sunday sermons, debating their merits.”

“Huh. Well I still don’t think she was right about them being twins.”

“Fine then—how did God make Eve, mister smarty pants?”

“From Adam’s rib—everyone knows this.”

“That’s right—he made one into two,” I said smugly, “just like he does with twins. They were the very first set.”

His mouth dropped open in surprise; he blinked rapidly, trying to process what I’d said.

“Furthermore, every single person alive descended from them and their children—so twins are really more important in the grand scheme of things,” I pointed out. When he just kept staring at me, I frowned. “Are you in shock?”

“No… I just… I never really considered it.”

“Well now you know.”

“But… then why—”

“Are you seriously wanting to talk about this right now?” I frowned.

“Yes… it is helping me control myself.”

My frown turned in to an outright scowl of irritation. “Pietro… when you had your little talk with the professor, did he happen to mention that it wasn’t very smart to tease hormonal young women?”

“What does that have to do with anything?”

“I happen to be very hormonal right now. In fact, I am aching—”

“Do you need one of your pain pills?” He sat up, prepared to run and fetch them—I grabbed his wrist to still him.

“It’s not that kind of an ache.”

“Well what other kind of ache is…oh. You mean… like what happens to me?”

“I don’t know… does it ache when it gets hard?”

He blushed. “It’s not exactly an ache… more like… ugh—I don’t know how to describe it, okay?”

“Like you need something very badly, but you’re not sure what? So badly that you can’t think about anything else?”

He nodded slowly. “That’s it exactly. It’s like… an itch that is driving me crazy, that I have to scratch if I want relief.”
“Then yes—that’s exactly what it’s like… only it’s not just in one place on me.”

“Well… where is it?”

Biting my lip, I sat up, watching him out of the corner of my eye. “Do you really want to know?”

“Of course—I asked, didn’t I?”

“Perhaps you are just being polite…I don’t think you really care how much it is aching.”

“I do so! I don’t like you suffering you know!”

I moved quickly, straddling him again—his eyes narrowed. “Wanda—”

“I have to show you,” I insisted, “otherwise I can’t explain it properly.” My cheeks flushed as I rocked my hips against him. “Right there… it aches something fierce. And here…” I moved my hands up to my breasts, cupping them in my palms. “They hurt.”

He blushed when he realized what I was doing. “Don’t—”

“Could you touch them just a little? Please?” I gazed down at him, my lower lip sliding out in a pout. “I mean… you rub my back when it’s sore, right? I think it will make them feel better—it will take away the aching.”

He chewed at the corner of his lip for a moment. “Fine… but the other part is just going to have to ache, okay?”

I nodded my head, watching his face as his hands started exploring my new curves; he looked completely fascinated as he gently massaged my breasts—his eyes widening when his actions pulled a soft moan from deep inside me.

“It feels good?”

“Mhmmm… Wonderful.” I closed my eyes, letting my head fall back—getting completely lost in the amazing sensations his caresses awakened inside me.

One hand moved; his fingers slid under my shirt, brushing against my tummy—nervous uncertainty flowed across our bond. “Can I… um…”

I opened my eyes, smiling at the hopeful look on his face. “It is only fair, I think… after all… I got to look at you shirtless, yes?”

His mouth dropped open in surprise as I reached down, grabbing the hem of my blouse—I tugged it over my head, tossing it to the side. But I wasn’t done—not by a longshot. His tongue snaked out, swiping across his lips as I reached back, unfastening the hooks on my bra; shrugging my shoulders, I let the material fell away, baring my breast for his view.

“So beautiful,” he whispered, fingers slowly trailing along my stomach; his touch was gentle—like a feather brushing along my skin, raising goose bumps in its wake. I was trembling with anticipation long before his palms found my breasts—the slow, teasing torment of his touch making it hard for me to think.

“Pietro…” it came out a whisper.

“Yes?”
“Stop teasing me—”

“I’m not! I am taking my time—the same way you did,” he mumbled, fingers sliding along the outer swell—moving to trace along the faint blue veins that were barely visible underneath my skin.

I shuddered, digging my fingers into his shoulders; his tentative caresses made the funny tingle between my legs grow stronger. A moment later, I gasped as his hands cupped my breasts, thumbs grazing my nipples; the tingle turned into a steady throb that echoed the frantic pounding of my heart.

“You like that?” He asked softly—his thumbs brushed against the sensitive nubs again.

“Yes…” it came out sounding breathless—it was hard for me to think. “Don’t stop… please… if you do, I think I will kill—” His fingers moved, tracing along the pebbly skin—the threat died on my lips, turning into a low, husky moan.

“Lift up—just for a minute.”

“No! You just started!” I huffed, opening my eyes.

“I’m not stopping—I just want to sit up… so I can kiss you while I touch you,” he explained patiently.

“Oh… well that’s okay then.”

He shifted, leaning back against the wall—pulling me closer once he was settled; the feeling of my breasts flattening against his chest pulled another soft sound from me—one that was muffled by the delicious press of his lips as his mouth reclamed mine. Wrapping my arms around his neck, I rocked my hips—trembling at the delicious friction the movement caused; his fingers dug into my back—lips moving to travel along my jaw. I whispered his name, tangling my fingers in the softness of his curls.

“You make it hard for me to be good, Pietra.” His lips caressed my neck; I sighed—his warm breath brushing against my skin made me shiver.

“We have suffered for three years—surely we deserve something good in exchange for all the bad. God would not begrudge us this happiness,” I murmured.

It was the wrong thing to say—I realized that the moment his body tensed; he froze—panic and fear slammed into me, clearing away the foggy haze of passion that permeated my brain. “Pietro?”

“We’re moving too fast… we have to slow down.”

“We’re not moving fast at all—we’re just kissing.” I was half drunk on his nearness—and the vodka I’d consumed added to the dreamy, surreal feeling that rode me. Tilting my head, I recaptured his lips, sucking gently on the lower one—rubbing my body against him as I tried to erase his unease.

It worked—he kissed me back, his hands sliding lower, exploring the curve of my hips before sliding down to grasp my rear. Our lips clung—I relished the way they fit so perfectly together—parting only long enough for us to draw ragged breaths before rejoining again. The movement of his mouth contradicted his insistence we go slow—the kiss conveyed the depths of his passion; his tongue brushed my lips, gently probing—I parted them, daring to let my own tongue snake out, gently caressing his. The soft moan he made in response sent a surge of excitement rushing through me, and it awakened something else too—a strange feeling that was unlike anything I’d ever experienced; it was tense and tight, way down deep inside me—a sort of hot, clenched feeling, starting in my lower body, slowly radiating outward.
I could feel his heart pounding where our chests were pressed together—my own was racing just as fast; his hips moved up, making his arousal press more firmly between my legs—my body tensed even more, something inside me coiling up like a spring. My breath caught in my throat as I countered his movement—the tension increased, making me groan against his lips. I needed more…it was all consuming; Pietro’s comparison had been perfect—it was an itch that I had to scratch, but it was unobtainable, hovering just out of my reach. The same sensations I was feeling echo from Pietro, lapping at my skin like an electric current; they were primitive, and raw—an urgent need that was all consuming, smothering rational thought.

His hips moved again—and this time… he didn’t stop; his body rubbed against mine, pressing against me repeatedly—my breath caught in my throat as the hot pressure inside me grew. It was as if my body was a balloon—one that was so full of air that it was on the verge of popping; his hips moved faster—something inside me exploded, bursting me in to smithereens. My soul burned white hot—colors flashed behind my eyes; I tried to move, but I couldn’t—my muscles were rigid as I trembled above him.

I opened my mouth, but there were no words—just an indecipherable sound of absolute euphoria; a heartbeat later, his voice joined mine as his body thrust up against me. Then, as suddenly as it had begun, the rapturous feeling ebbed back. The tension in my body drained away in a rush, leaving me as weak as a kitten—I collapsed against him, my mind floating in the clouds, basking in a golden, hazy glow. Lips touched my forehead—my closed eyelids… my cheeks—he pulled me closer, stroking my hair as he murmured soft, sweet words. Gradually, my heart stopped racing; my breathing slowed—I felt languorous, and drowsy—completely content to stay right there in his arms for the rest of my life.

“Pietro… what… what was that?” I asked.

“Love,” he said simply, resting his chin atop my head.

“It was… amazing—”

“It was,” he said softly, cutting me off, “but we can’t do it again.”

I frowned. “Why not?”

“The more we do… the more we will want, Pietra—and the more we give in… the harder it will be to hide our feelings.”

“I don’t want to hide them!” I protested, pulling away from him—unable to disguise how hurt I felt at the suggestion. His words dulled the edges of the happy, glowy feeling that filled me. “I love you—that’s not shameful or wrong—”

“I don’t want to hide it either… but we have to—especially around Grigori,” he murmured softly, brushing my hair back behind my ears. “He is very observant… very smart. I don’t know what he would do if he suspected that—”

“Maybe he’d understand—he told us the story, didn’t he? Obviously in the olden days it wasn’t looked down on the way it is now—”

“This is real life—not a story, Wanda. Think about how he keeps harping on things being improper—he could insist we move in with him so he could monitor our behavior… to keep us from… you know.”

“He can’t force us to do anything—”
“He could turn us over to the authorities if we don’t do what he wants. You know they won’t let two thirteen year old orphans live on their own—they would force us into a group home… or worse, send us to different families…”

“If he did that, we would run—move somewhere else. There are plenty of sectors that are practically abandoned—”

“He knows our habits… he could find us easily—or tell children’s services where to look for us.” He sighed, his fingers tracing along my jaw—his beautiful eyes full of worry. “Besides… you love this place, yes? It would break your heart, I think, to lose it.”

He was right; from the moment I spotted the run down cottage, it had called out to me, touching something in my heart, reawakening my fantasies of the perfect little home—but some things were far more important than childhood dreams or stones and mortar. “My heart would be far more broken if we were separated Pietro. We’d find another place and make it just as special—you mean more to me than any stupid house.”

“I’m very glad to hear it,” he teased, his lips curving up in a grin, “because as horrible as separation would have been before… it would be even harder on me now. I think… I think it would kill me.”

I propped myself up on my elbows, my hair falling around us like a curtain—shutting out the rest of the world, cushioning us in a protective cocoon. “And why might that be?”

“You know why…” The tops of his cheeks colored with a faint blush, but he didn’t look away—his eyes stayed locked on mine, glistening with emotion.

“Perhaps I need to hear you say it,” I whispered, “so I know this isn’t all just a cruel dream.”

“Because I love you… and now I know you love me too. What just happened… it is a special thing… one I don’t ever want to share with anyone but you.”

Hearing him say it made me absolutely giddy; giggling, I collapsed against his chest, pressing a soft kiss on his throat where his pulse fluttered the strongest. “I do love you, and I will for my whole life and beyond. You are mine… and I am yours—that is how God means us to be.”

“Just remember… today is an exception to the rule,” he warned me, sounding stern. “We can’t do that again for a long, long time… and we can’t be kissing and cuddling all the time either—we have to show control and maturity about this.”

“We have always cuddled Pietro Maximoff!” I argued. “It is as natural as breathing!”

“Yes… but cuddling with you … it makes it difficult for me,” he mumbled.

Realizing what he meant, I frowned, worrying my bottom lip with my teeth. “So no cuddling at night? I honestly don’t know if I will be able to sleep—especially if we do not kiss goodnight. We have been doing that all our lives… it is a tradition—”

“A chaste goodnight kiss is okay, I guess… and if you really have trouble sleeping, we will try and work something out. But only if you really can’t sleep—no tricks… or else.”

“Or else what?” I eyed him, not liking the sound of that one bit.

“Or else no Saturday boyfriend girlfriend time,” he said smugly.

“You can’t do that!”
“I can—I am the oldest, so I’m responsible for our behavior. It is my job to keep us both on the right track.”

“I think if you can so easily give up a day of kisses then you must not love me nearly as much as I love you,” I huffed, scowling.

“You’re wrong—it won’t be easy at all. It will actually be a punishment I don’t deserve, but I will suffer it to make sure we do this the right way.”

“You keep saying that… ‘the right way’… but I still don’t understand what you mean,” I complained softly. “There isn’t a right or wrong way to be in love—it is about feelings and emotions, two things that aren’t ruled by logic at all. Those things are completely unpredictable, Pietro—”

“First off, we are not going to rush things the way we just did—we are going to take it slow. The things worth having are worth the wait, yes?”

I couldn’t argue that—I just grunted non-committedly.

“We’re not going to take advantage of the fact we have no supervision, or that we are twins, either. When we are older one day, and get married… or even when we just tell people we are together, I know what they will assume, Wanda—that it is because we’re messed up in the head over everything we’ve been through. You and I know that’s not true…but they won’t believe it—especially if we rush into things. By behaving maturely about it, we can truthfully tell them we did things the way any other couple does… our relationship growing and strengthening over time.”

“I don’t care what other people think or say, Pietro—”

“I don’t either, but isn’t it easier to change someone’s way of thinking by subtle means rather than by being belligerent and up in their face? Think about it—it will go a long way towards convincing them that we’re serious and that it isn’t just a rebellious thing, or experimentations based on nothing more than physical needs.”

I remained silent, tracing my fingers along his collarbone—thinking about what he’d said.

“I just… I want us to experience the things other kids do when they first get together. I want to be more than just your brother, Wanda—I want you to fall in love with me as a man.”

“I am already in love with you that way—”

“Let me talk—please?” He chewed at his lip, cheeks flushing as his gaze dropped from mine. “I want to do all the things a boyfriend does to show how much he cares for his girlfriend… to be respectful… to woo you the way Papa did with Mama. Remember how happy and giggly she used to get when she talked about all the little things he did while he was courting her? Twenty years from now… I want to see you light up that way when you remember the things I did to win your heart.”

“This is important to you?” I asked softly, tossing my hair back over my shoulder as I studied his face; I already loved him in that forever after kind of way, but if he truly felt like he had to win my love… to prove himself to me in some way… then I couldn’t deny him the chance to do what he needed.

“It really is—it is something I have thought about for a very long time,” he said, his eyes flicking up to mine. “Do you understand this?”

“I understand you need it—that is what matters.” I murmured, smiling. “I would never begrudge you something you need, Pietro—I hope you know this. If differentiating between being my twin and
being my boyfriend for a while helps you adjust… if that is what it takes for us to be together like this… then I promise you I will do my best to behave appropriately. I don’t like the idea not kissing and cuddling… but I won’t argue about it anymore.”

His relief brushed against me—a bit of the worry faded from his eyes. “You know there is another reason why we have to be responsible too, right? You’re a woman now… you could have a baby if we slipped up.”

I sat up, eyeing him. “You don’t want us to have babies?”

“That’s not what I said, Pietra—I want us to have lots of babies someday… a whole family of our own. But when we can properly take care of them. When we are older, so I can get a good job and provide for us—so we can have a nice apartment and all the food and things that a baby needs. Would you really want our baby living like this?” He gestured around the basement, shaking his head. “With no proper heat or running water? You would need access to medical care and so would our little one—”

“I know all this Pietro… I know we are far too young to be parents, but there are things we can do to prevent it—”

“Pills you have to get from a clinic—ones that they won’t give to a thirteen year old without parental consent,” he pointed out. “or prophylactics. Those things cost money… and when we… you know…” his cheeks turned bright red, “I don’t want anything between us, do you?”

My face was as red as his—we were young, but neither of us was naïve; digging through peoples garbage had exposed us to plenty of used condoms—not to mention the ones that littered the alleyways in the rougher sectors of the city. As thin as the material they were made out of seemed, I couldn’t help but agree with him; when we eventually took that step, expressing our love in the most intimate of ways, I wanted to experience it completely—to feel *him*, without any barriers between us. “No… I don’t want us using those—you’re right.”

“That’s why we have to wait… and why we can’t be doing what we just did. It could be dangerous… we could get carried away. You don’t know how hard it was for me to—”

“I do—really. The feelings… they make it hard to think,” I murmured.

“If we are frugal and save our wages… when we are sixteen we will have enough saved to afford an appointment to the clinic and the pills. Maybe by then we can make the professor see how much we love each other and he will agree to take us and act as your guardian.”

“Look at you… thinking ahead.” I shifted, sliding off of him—snuggling up to his side. “What has happened to my impatient brother who hated the very idea of waiting for anything?”

“You are the most important thing in the world to me, Wanda… like I said, the best things are *worth* waiting for.”

“Will you swear to me that you won’t let some pretty girl sweep you off your feet and lure you into her bed before then?”

He rolled over on his side, hand moving to cup my face; as his thumb stroked along my cheekbone his fingertips brushed my earlobe. “Wanda, I swear to you before God and the angels and our parents—you are the only one I see… the only one I want to share my body and my soul with.”

I turned my head, brushing my lips against his palm. “When Mama and I had our talk about growing up… she told me that when two people make love, they give each other a part of their souls—she
said that’s why it is important for a girl to understand the importance of being chaste until her wedding night; she said that it is important to find a man who understand that too—one who has saved himself for his marriage bed too. I don’t want anyone having a part of my soul but you—that is how God meant it to be.”

“That’s how I feel too—like it would… I don’t know… dishonor the connection we share if we were with other people. God might even take it away as punishment if we debased it that way.”

We both fell silent; though sharing our feelings and emotions was sometimes a pain, the thought of losing that bond terrified me—I could sense that Pietro felt the same way too. It was something we had been born with—losing it would be losing an integral part of who we were. Mama often told us the story of the night we were born; from the moment Pietro emerged from her body, he’s screamed nonstop, for twelve minutes straight—not stopping until I emerged from her womb and was snuggled up at his side. Even my earliest memory revolved around the connection we shared; when we were toddlers, Mama accidentally pricked Pietro with a diaper pin—I felt his pain, adding my wails to his at the exact same minute he started to cry.

“What are you thinking about?” His whisper pulled me out of my thoughts—I shook my head, smiling. “Come on… tell me.”

“I was thinking how lucky we are, being twins,” I murmured. “How our lives are meant to be spent like this—side by side.”

“This is true.” He grinned at me, then abruptly moved—rolling over on top of me, pinning my arms at my sides. “Want to know what I was thinking?”

I giggled, squirming beneath the weight of his body. “It better not involve tickling, Pietro—”

“Not even close—I was thinking that we still have thirty six minutes until midnight… which means it is still Saturday. And it is still our birthday... the one day that is the exception to the rules.”

I stopped giggling, staring up at him. “Do you mean what I think—”

The rest of my sentence was lost as his lips claimed mine, but I wasn’t complaining—the feeling of his body pressed against mine was all the answer I needed.
Chapter 19

CRIME OF PASSION is a phrase that is often used by people who seek to absolve themselves of their own mistakes and transgressions; they claim that in the heat of the moment, the strength of the emotion laid waste to all sense of self, completely shattering their control and making it impossible to differentiate between right or wrong. I can certainly understand getting swept up in the moment, but I think that is hardly a proper excuse for committing murder or cheating on your spouse. Such injudicious behavior is a choice that one makes, yet these people try to disassociate themselves from responsibility under the guise of temporary delirium—which is a completely ridiculous notion. If anything, passion heightens one’s awareness, eroding all the inconsequential details—it strips away all assumption and illusion, baring the absolute truth of your soul. You might forget your surroundings or lose all track of time in moments of complete abandon, but even then, the bottom line is this—passion forces you to see yourself more clearly than ever before. At least… that’s how it is for me. Pietro is my anchor, grounding me firmly in reality; his love for me, and the passion we share is the light in the darkness that always guides me home.

How easy it would be for us to blame our actions that night on passion. We could claim that the emotion made us forget the fact we were siblings, or that the physical needs of our bodies overrode all logic or reason, but that would be an outright lie—which in and of itself, is a much greater sin than the love we share. Society would say that it is far better to deny the beautiful connection between us, excusing our actions with deceit and half-truths, but that is something I will never do. If loving my brother is a sin then I will go to my grave proudly proclaiming my guilt—to do otherwise would be to deny the fundamental truth that is ingrained into my very soul.

The kisses and caresses we shared until sleep claimed us were almost tame in comparison to our earlier exchange; we’d taken the edge off the burning need that resided in both of us, which made it a little easier to control. Our kisses were less frantic—more about comfort and closeness than hunger; we were learning and discovering—enjoying our ability to explore this newest way to express our love. When we finally dozed off, it was wrapped in each other’s arms, sharing the warmth of our bodies; my last conscious act was to press a gentle kiss over Pietro’s heart before nestling my head beneath his chin; lulled by the sound of his soft, even breathing, I drifted off to sleep, completely content for the first time in years.

I would like to say that we woke up the next morning still deeply swathed in the blissfully happy bubble we’d fallen asleep in, but unfortunately… I can’t. Instead, we were jerked abruptly awake by a loud, incessant knocking on the cellar door. Immediately, I groaned—the noise echoed thought me like the pounding of a base drum, causing pain to radiate through my head.

“Pietro… make it stop,” I whined, pulling the blanket over my head; my head was throbbing with every beat of my heart—the booming sound of the knocksmade it seem a hundred times worse.

Groaning, he rolled off the mattress—a moment later I heard his feet slapping against the stone floor as he padded over to the stairs, then the horridly loud squeal of the latch as he unlocked the door.

“Are you both alright? It’s nearly two o’clock”—the old man’s voice trailed off abruptly. “Pietro… you shouldn’t be walking around like that, son.”

I rolled over, peeping out from under the covers—my brother hadn’t bothered to put his pants on. “He has underpants on—he is decent.”

The professor’s eyes flicked to the mattress as he frowned. “It’s not proper—”
“It is more comfortable than sleeping in jeans,” Pietro mumbled, leaning against the wall; his face was pale—he looked like he might be on the verge of vomiting. “I don’t feel good.”

“Do you have fever?” The professor reached out to feel his forehead, looking worried.

“I think perhaps it was the vodka,” I mumbled, trying not to gag at the memory of the taste of the liquid. “We should have stopped with what you served us—I don’t ever want to see any again as long as I live.”

“Vod—you didn’t! Tell me you didn’t drink more!” His eyes darted between us; I groaned, hiding my face again—even the murky light coming through the basement window hurt my eyes. “I should leave you both to suffer so you learn a lesson from this… but I am not that cruel. I will run and fetch something that will help—please try to be dressed properly by the time I return, yes?”

I didn’t uncover my head—not even when the mattress sagged from Pietro flopping back down beside me; tugging at the covers, he snuggled up against me, his breath warm on my neck. “Roll over.”

“It hurts too much to move,” I mumbled.

“Please? I don’t feel well either.”

Sighing, I uncovered my head, rolling over to face him. “Better?”

His arms snaked around me, pulling me so close that my breasts flattened out against his chest; pressing his forehead against mine, he made a contented sound. “Mhmmm. I still feel horrible… but having you close makes it more bearable.”

Despite how lousy I felt, I smiled at his sweet words. “But it is Sunday, Pietro… I thought we weren’t supposed to—”

“Shhh… technically, it is still our birthday until tonight. A day has twenty four hours in it, so our birthday lasts from the time we were born until that time the next day,” he mumbled, brushing his nose against mine. “Birthdays are special days… the normal rules don’t apply.”

I wasn’t quite sure that was how it worked, but I certainly wasn’t going to argue—how could I when all that I could think about was how close his lips were to mine? “I love you, Pietro,” I murmured, testing out his reaction to the words—seeing if he’d be as receptive to hearing them without all the vodka muddling his brain.

“I love you more,” he whispered back, lips tickling against mine as he spoke. His mouth met mine—tender, and sweet—his kiss chasing away my worries that the light of day would make him regret what we had done.

“I thought perhaps you would take it all back today,” I murmured softly against his lips. “You know… tell me it was all a mistake and you didn’t mean what you said.”

“I think that was your own guilty conscious bothering you,” he said, grinning. “It is punishing you for making me think you didn’t like me anymore.”

“I told you why I—”

“I know—I’m only teasing you.” His fingers found a strand of my hair, playing with it as he spoke; he trailed it along my arm like a paintbrush, tracing out the shape of a heart. “I know this sounds rude… but I don’t want to go to the professor’s house today, Pietra.”
“That’s understandable… you don’t feel well—”

“It’s not that… I sort of want it to be just us today.” He blushed; his hand abandoned my hair, moving to play with my fingers.

My heart skipped a beat at the confession. “And what would we occupy ourselves with all day long?”

“Anything… I just want to be with you a while longer without having to hide away what I feel. We could just lay here and talk, or we could go for a walk into town and use some of our wages to buy lunch from a street vendor and eat in the park… whatever you want to do.”

“I think that sounds wonderful.” I turned my hand over, lacing my fingers through his. “We’ll simply tell him we don’t feel up to doing anything today—I’m sure he will understand.”

“I just… I don’t want to disappoint him, you know?” I don’t want him to be lonely, or sad… he’s a nice man.”

“You have a big heart, my brother… I forgot to add that to the list,” I said softly, brushing my nose against his. “That is another reason I love you so very much.”

“I don’t… not really. If it was anyone else I wouldn’t particularly care—but he was a twin… and now he is all alone. It’s not right—I cannot believe God would do something so horrible and cruel.”

“God didn’t do it—the devil did. It’s like in the story he told us, only the devil took everything from the professor—his sister… his children and his wife. He saw a good, kind man and he thought he could get his claws into him by taking away the things that mattered the most.”

“If he did that to me… took you away—”

“Hush—don’t think of such things. He can’t—Mama and Papa are up with the angels, watching over us. They won’t let that happen.”

Anxiety brushed against me—I frowned as he pulled away, increasing the distance between us. Tightening my grip on his hand, I tried to keep my voice calm, not wanting to upset him even more. “What’s wrong? What—”

“Mama and Papa must be very upset with me right now,” he mumbled, “hating me for what I’ve done.”

“That is ridiculous—”

“Is it? I told you before, Wanda, I’m supposed to protect you from boys taking advantage of you… and yet I did it myself.”

“You were the one telling me to stop—if anything, I took advantage of you.” I pointed out.

“Yes, but if I’d yelled at you the very first time you kissed me… if I’d told you it was wrong—”

“Because yelling at a girl who was almost raped a few minutes before is the smart thing to do, right?” The sarcasm that laced my voice was thick, and sharp. “Obviously I was right—you’re having second thoughts and regretting everything!”

“I’m not!”

“Well it certainly sounds that way to me!” Tears filled my eyes as I tried to let go of his hand—an
impossible task, since he clung to mine like a leech.

“T’im not! I swear, Wanda—there are just things you don’t know… things that play at my mind.”

“Then tell me—”

“I can’t… not yet,” he said softly. “I have to fight my own demons and conquer them before I can talk about it.”

I chewed on the corner of my lip, afraid that if I pushed him too hard he would revert to distancing himself from me again. “Pietro… you know I understand, right? About it being hard to talk about some things. I know what it’s like to have something horrible and scary happen—to not want to face it, much less acknowledge it, or talk about it out loud.”

“Yes… but what happened to you… you don’t remember it all. I think that makes it easier for you to lock it away, Pietra. That’s not how it is for me—it’s like… well… a voice or something, in the back of my mind. It repeats the same things over and over again—like it wants to make sure I don’t ever forget.”

“Last night… right before you saved me… I remembered more.” My voice trembled, but I couldn’t allow my fear to control me; if hearing the things I’d experienced would help my brother overcome whatever plagued his mind, then I had to talk about it, whether I wanted to or not.

He froze for a moment, then his arms slid back around me, holding me so tight that it was hard to breathe. “Do you want to talk about it?”

“No,” I said honestly, “but I think I need to. I think we both need to get these things out, Pietro. It’s like poison… I need to draw it out of me, and the only way I can do that is by talking about it.”

“Okay… what did you remember?”

“Being carried down the stairs—he tossed me over his shoulder the way Tobar did last night.” I bit my lip—hard—trying to keep a firm grip on my emotions. “He touched me—you know… running his hands over me… then he touched me… down there. Between my legs.”

His breath hissed out. “Someday… I will kill him very, very slowly.”

“That’s all I really remembered… him touching me. Being scared that if I tried to fight or if I moved too much that I would fall.”

He didn’t say anything—I buried my face in the warm curve of his neck, trying to slow my breathing. “I didn’t want him to do it—”

“Shh… you don’t have to tell this, Pietra… I already know.”

“I… it is just important to me for you to know… to understand that I’ve never wanted anyone to touch me like that. No one but you, I mean.”

His hand moved—gently rubbing my back. “Do you feel better now, after sharing it? Did it help you at all?”

I thought about it—turning the regained memory over in my mind; it was still horrible—it always would be… but the heart racing panic that I felt before was gone. “Yes… it really did. It’s like… I don’t know… telling you helped me take away some of the power it held over me.” I propped myself up on my elbow, gazing down at him. “Does that make sense? I don’t really know how to
describe it—I feel… lighter. Like a weight has been lifted off of me or something.”

“It makes perfect sense,” he said softly, reaching up to tuck my hair back behind my ear. “I’m glad I could help, even if it all I did was listen.”

I laid back down, resting my head on his chest—listening to the soothing beat of his heart. “Can I ask you something?”

“You just did,” he teased, combing his fingers through my hair.

“Pietro! No teasing… I’m being serious. I… I’m just wondering… is this thing that bothers you the reason it’s so much harder for you to be with me? For me… it’s easy to set aside the fact that you are my brother… it just feels like a natural extension of the way I already feel, you know? I love you so much that nothing else matters. I just don’t…” My voice caught in my throat—I took a deep breath, trying to choke out the words. “I don’t want to force you. I mean… if you’d rather not act on how you feel… I will understand. I don’t want you to be unhappy.”

“Being with you makes me happy, Wanda. Happier than anything else.” He sighed deeply, his hand stilling. “Do you remember my first fight?”

“Of course,” I mumbled “I was terrified you were going to get hurt… I couldn’t understand why you were so angry with Filip… he was your friend. Then when the others joined in—”

“It was over you,” he murmured softly. “He said you were going to be his girlfriend when he was older… and I said you couldn’t be… because you were already mine.”

“You didn’t! Pietro—”

“I did. He told the others… they started teasing me, so I fought them. I was winning too until old man Dolina showed up and broke up the fight.”

I didn’t say anything, though I wanted to; there are some situations when words do more harm than good, no matter how well meaning they might be. I could feel how hesitant he was… how hard it was for him to open up; the emotions rolling off him were the same ones I felt when I talked about the basement. If I spoke, he might lose his nerve—he might bottle it all back up inside him, never talking to me about it again.

“In Headmaster Široký’s office… he asked what had happened—Professor Dolina told him we’d been fighting… that the others were teasing me… then he repeated some of the things he’d heard them shouting.” Beneath me, his body tensed; I lifted my head—his eyes were wide and haunted. A wave of fear lapped against my skin—it was cold and icy, making goose bumps rise up on my skin.

“Stop—you don’t have to talk about it anymore. You’ve said enough for one day.”

“No—I have to tell you. I want you to understand why I’m so messed up. My heart… my soul… they tell me one thing, and I know they’re right and I should listen… but the voice in my head… it is like a demon.” His eyes met mine, searching for something—there was so much pain in them it broke my heart. “You have to know what happened so you can help me silence it forever, Pietra.”

I stared at him, unable to believe how perfectly his description fit the inner torment that plagued me—the way the memories had a life of their own, taking over the mind. He was the only one who could keep my terror at bay—I prayed that I could do the same for him, too. “I will—you know that I would fight Lucifer himself to keep you safe.”

“My sweet little sister… so ferocious,” he said softly, fingers tracing the curve of my cheek. “It’s my
job to protect you… not the other way around.”

“We protect each other—that’s how it is supposed to be.”

“I don’t like the thought of you putting yourself at risk—”

“How do you think I feel? Every time we go out, it scares me, Pietro—if someone tries to hurt you… I am useless! I am too small and weak to help you—”

“You are the strongest person I know, Pietra.” I started to scoff—his fingers pressed against my lips, silencing me. “There are different kinds of strength. Yours is in your heart… and in your mind.”

“Logic and reason won’t protect you if the soldiers grab you, and neither will love—”

“They will. I’m not scared, because I know you would think of a way to stop them. Remember when that crazy dog attacked me behind the coffee shop? I was prepared to fight it, but you were the one who thought to throw it the food that we’d found. You distracted it before I could get bit—I never would have thought of doing that.”

“Because you are a boy… you tend to ignore the obvious—”

“You do too sometimes,” he whispered, tracing the rim of my lips with his finger.

“I most certainly do not—”

His mouth pressed against mine, silencing my indignant protest before it could pick up steam. Our lips fit together like puzzle pieces, caressing tenderly as he cupped my face—his touch was gentle, like I was a fragile flower he feared he might accidentally crush.

“It is very obvious that I’ve wanted to do that every time you smile at me,” he whispered as he pulled away, “but you ignored it.”

“That wasn’t obvious at all, Pietro,” I mumbled softly, my cheeks heating with pleasure at his confession. “Believe me, if I’d known… I would have taken advantage of it.”

I lowered my head, prepared to make up for lost time, but he stopped me, holding me still. “Kisses later… I still haven’t told you the worst of it, Pietra.”

My lower lip slid forward petulantly before I could stop it—he chuckled, brushing his thumb along my pout. “Behave.”

Sighing, I kissed the pad of his thumb—laying my head back on his chest. “Fine… go on. I’m listening.”

“Široký… he seemed more upset by the things they were saying than by the fact I’d started a fight—”

“What exactly were they—”

“Nasty things, Wanda—it doesn’t matter.” He said it so firmly that I knew trying to convince him to tell me was a completely lost cause. “Anyway… Široký exploded—he said it was evil to even think such things, much less say them. Filip… he interrupted and told him what I’d said… you know… about you being my girlfriend. That made all the difference. He told them to get out… and he made me stay behind.”

Beneath my cheek, his heart sped up—I turned my head, pressing my lips against his chest. “It is in
the past... it can’t hurt you, Pietro.”

He didn’t respond—he just kept talking, as if he hadn’t heard me. “As soon as we were alone... he said there was a special part of Hell reserved for brothers and sisters that indulged in evil, unnatural acts. That they were tortured by Satan himself in the most painful ways imaginable—tied side by side, hearing each other’s screams for all eternity.”

His body trembled; I lifted my head up—the expression of terror on his face shocked me. He’d gone pale as a ghost. “Pietro—”

“I don’t care if the devil tortures me, Wanda, but I can’t bear the thought of him hurting you like that. You’re good and pure... an angel straight from Heaven—”

“None of it is true! It’s all horrible, ugly lies he made up to frighten an impressionable young boy!”

“You don’t know that!”

“I do! God wouldn’t let that happen to us—not just because we love each other! Love is His greatest gift!” I grabbed his face, forcing him to meet my eyes—my anger against the repulsive man who’d tormented him was so strong that it overpowered the all-consuming fear that was flowing from him to me. “It was his attempt to brainwash you into sharing his beliefs—that’s all.”

“But what if it wasn’t? He said other things too—things that have come true, Wanda! He said that God wouldn’t wait for Hell to deliver punishment—he’d do it here on earth too! He said that God doesn’t waste time protecting sinners—that if I didn’t get rid of those evil kinds of thoughts, I would be putting you at risk! That the evil in me would destroy the ones I loved!”

“Listen to yourself—Don’t you hear how foolish this all is? Remember what Mama always said—God loves us so much that He sent His only son to die for us, Pietro! Does that sound like the act of someone who would make bad things happen over the way we feel?”

“But don’t you see? No matter how hard I tried... I couldn’t stop wishing that we could be together... I couldn’t stop thinking of you that way, so God did punish me! Three times men almost abused you! Can’t you understand, Wanda? It’s because of me.” His words were thick—so full of terror and agony that it was hard to understand them. “What if Mama and Papa died because of the things I felt too?”

Something inside me snapped—a tidal wave of pure fury roared to life inside me at the thought of my brother believing such things. “Don’t say that! Don’t you ever blame yourself for what happened to them, Pietro Maximoff! Our parents died because of the stupid political maneuverings of fools—because a rich American decided it was more profitable to make weapons of war than to use his money help those in need! Your feelings... my feelings... they had nothing to do with what happened that day!”

“But—”

“But nothing! If you believe that wicked old man’s lies, then follow the logical outcome! If God decided to punish you through me, I wouldn’t have been almost raped Pietro—He would have made sure I was violated, and nothing on earth could have stopped it! God would punish you by killing me in the apartment, not Mama and Papa! He would have made you suffer the worst thing imaginable—the loss of your twin!”

I could actually see the effect my words had on him—the look of despair faded from his eyes as he processed what I’d said. “If God was punishing you, Pietro, He certainly wouldn’t leave the two of
us alone together like this—in a situation where we are free to act on what we feel. If He thought it was wrong for us to be together, he wouldn’t continue to allow us to be here right now—He would have separated us the day they dug us out of the rubble.”

I released his face, but kept my gaze locked with his—hoping he could see the depth of my conviction in my eyes. “If God truly wanted to punish you, he wouldn’t let you save me time and time again. If He wanted us apart… then He would have let Tobar succeed in claiming me as his wife last night. But He didn’t, did he? Instead… he allowed you to beat an older boy three times your size to protect me.”

Closing his eyes, he took a shaky breath. “You’re right—”

“Of course I am! And I swear before God above that someday I will make Široký pay for every lie he told you. I will make him regret the day he ever tried make you doubt how much God loves you.” My voice was low, and even—it didn’t betray the depth of my fury, or the fact that I would do everything in my power to make sure my words came true. There was no doubt in me—someday, I knew I would look our former Headmaster in the eye and make him beg for mercy. I would be the weapon God used to deliver vengeance for the abuse Široký had inflicted using His name.

He moved suddenly, sitting up and pulling me closer—burying his face in my hair. “Thank you, Pietra… you were right. It feels like a weight has been lifted off of my soul.”

“I am sorry I let you suffer for so long… sorry that he used me hurt you like that,” I said softly, blinking back tears.

“Don’t—it’s not your fault. I didn’t want you to know. I was afraid that if you knew how I felt… you’d be disgusted.” His breath was warm as he whispered against my ear.

“No more secrets—promise me. When something bothers you, no matter what it is… you will tell me.” I pulled back, staring him in the eye—wanting him to see how important it was to me.

“I swear on Mama and Papa’s souls… but you have to swear too.”

I nodded, wrapping my arms around his neck. “Secrets will only serve to tear us apart in the long run, and the greatest revenge we can ever have against that evil old fool is to allow our love to grow and flourish. He tried to destroy it before it could even bloom… we cannot let him succeed. We must be happy, and believe that God has blessed us.”

“What you really believe that, Wanda?”

Closing my eyes, I rested my forehead against his—smiling he nuzzled along my cheek. “I do—I feel it deep down inside of me. God always meant for you to be more than just my twin, Pietro… that’s why He made sure we share the same soul.”

“Then I need you to promise me something too. When the voice in my head gets too loud to ignore and I start acting weird… don’t give up on me. Remind me of what you just said… and please… remember that even when I’m struggling with things… I still love you, okay?”

“I will… I promise—even if it makes you cross with me.” Twisting one of his curls around my finger, I gave him a hopeful smile. “Does this mean we can forget about the stupid rules and… you know…not take things quite so slow?”

He chuckled, pushing me off his lap. “It does not. My wanting to do things the right way has nothing at all to do with the things Široký said.”
Curling up beside him, I sighed. “Well… it was worth a try.”

“Perhaps if you behave yourself, we can have a few days that we let the rules slide—just a little,” he offered, smiling in amusement at my sulking.

“Define what you mean by ‘a little’—kisses and cuddling… or sleeping without shirts?” His cheeks turned bright red—his eyes automatically dropping to my chest; I giggled, unable to resist the urge to stretch—displaying my body for his fascinated eyes to peruse.

“Maybe all three,” he mumbled, “but only if you don’t try and make me misbehave.”

“I wouldn’t dream of it—in fact…” I reached down, tugging the elastic waistband of my skirt up, turning it in to an impromptu dress to cover my bare breasts. “There… see? I’m being good already.”

“I didn’t mean today,” he huffed, looking more than a little devastated that I’d hidden my chest from his view. “Today doesn’t count!”

I bit my lip, trying not to smile. “I see… so does that mean you were planning on me parading around all day with my bosom on display?”

“So what if I was?” His blush deepened even more. “I like looking at you—you are the most beautiful thing I’ve ever seen… and besides, being naked isn’t sinful. God was just fine with Adam and Eve being naked, remember? They’re the stupid ones who got all embarrassed and put leaves on to cover their parts up.”

His logic pleased me—it reassured me that his own natural desires could overpower the thoughts Široký had planted in his head. “Then maybe when the weather gets warm we can spend our Saturdays in the garden… like Adam and Eve, before they made such a foolish decision. It will be our own little piece of Eden, yes?”

His scowl faded at my suggestion, but he still didn’t look completely pleased. “Summer is ages away, Wanda… I don’t know if I can wait that long.”

“I didn’t say we had to wait for summer, silly—I said when it gets warm. The temperature outside yesterday was nice, yes? So next Saturday, it might be warm enough for such a thing.”

“Oh… “ His brow scrunched up as he considered my words—he glanced over at me, giving me a lopsided smile. “Well that’s good… but that doesn’t mean I can’t enjoy looking at you today too.”

“Pietro… we have to get dressed—the professor will be back soon,” I pointed out. “I can hardly walk around like that in front of him—he would have a conniption fit.”

“No one will,” I murmured, trying to soothe him. “After he leaves I will get comfortable again—really… all I want to do is curl up beside you. I honestly don’t feel up to doing much today other than being lazy—my head hurts… and I keep getting waves of queasiness.”

“Me too. I’m sorry about the vodka… I didn’t know it would make us feel sick.” He sighed, climbing off the mattress; I watched him pull a pair of sweatpants off our stack of clothes—my eyes traveled over his body as he pulled them on.

“Here… put this on.” He tossed a flannel shirt at me.
I scowled at the shirt; it would be warm, but the material was itchy—the thought of wearing it when I was feeling ill was hardly a pleasant one. “I’m already decent, I don’t need—”

“You do…” he blushed, ducking his head down—hiding his face behind his hair. “There is a mark just below your collarbone… from where I was kissing you last night. If the professor sees it…”

“A love bite?” Now it was my turn to blush; my stomach fluttered at the memory of his mouth moving over my skin—gently nipping and sucking as his lips explored my neck and chest. Forgetting about the itchy material, I pulled the shirt on, buttoning it up all the way to the collar. “At least it is in a place that is easily concealed, yes? You will have to be careful to keep them all low so the professor does not spot them.”

“I didn’t mean to do it—”

“It’s okay… I like the thought of having it there… it sort of marks me as yours,” I murmured softly.

He looked up, his eyes full of surprise. “You do? Really?”

I stood up, wrapping my arms around his waist. “I do—”

There was another knock at the door—more reserved this time, as if, perhaps the old man was trying to spare our aching heads. Pietro scowled—his fingers digging into my hips as he pulled me closer. “Kiss me quick—and make it a good one since it will have to tide me over until he leaves.”

Stretching up, I pressed myself against him, brushing my lips against his—soft and teasing at first, before drawing his lower lip between mine. I sucked on it gently for a moment, smiling at the hushed sound of protest he made as I pulled away. “How was that?”

He blinked, looking a little dazed. “That was…” he blushed, stepping away from me, “very stimulating. Can you let him in? I need to… um… go to the bathroom.”

He bolted before I could respond, practically running towards the closet. I giggled, calling out to him softly. “Are you going in there to touch yourself?”

“Wanda! Behave!”

As the door slammed shut behind him and I headed for the stairs, my soft laughter faded; I suddenly realized we were about to face the most difficult test of our lives—one we hadn’t had time to properly prepare for. The professor was the most observant man I’d ever met—his wise, shrewd gaze seemed capable of ferreting out all our hidden thoughts and secret feelings. I paused with my hand on the latch, taking a moment to send up a silent prayer—asking for assistance in keeping the fragile new love we’d found safely locked up in our hearts where the old man’s prying eyes wouldn’t see it… then I tugged back the bolt and stepped aside, letting him into our safe haven.

Our trial by fire… had begun.
Chapter 20

THERE ARE TWO TYPES OF people in the world; those who cannot successfully tell a lie, and those who glibly spin a web of deceit so believable that Saint Peter himself would swear that their words were the pure, unmitigated truth. My mama was one of the former—on the few occasions when she tried to offer up some excuse for not visiting a neighbor or helping out at an event sponsored by the church, her conscious would get the better of her within minutes, filling her with so much guilt that she immediately came clean. My father… he was the opposite—he could look a person in the eye and tell the most blatant of lies without a smidge of remorse or the slightest hint of guilt eating away at his soul. Pietro and I… we are a blend of both our parents; we can lie as easily as drawing breath when it is required, never admitting the real truth—but doing so weighs on us heavily, leaving a nagging sense of aching contrition that takes days… sometimes weeks to fade. It is a skill neither of us realized we possessed until we took to the streets when we lost our home—before that, we were honest to a fault. Like learning to steal, we had to adapt and learn how to lie—we had no choice if we wanted to survive and stay together.

Out of the two of us, I happen to be a much better liar than my brother; it is the one area where my intuitive, empathetic sense actually comes in handy. It has always been fairly easy for me to read peoples moods by their gestures and expressions—I can tell when their suspicions are reared and when they are allayed, which makes it easy for me to say the right words to make them believe, embellishing or retracting my deception to just the right fit… all the while hating myself for doing it. Sometimes at night when I curled up in the dark, trying to fall asleep, I could almost hear my mother’s soft voice gently chastising me for my actions.

“Every time one of the sacred commandments is broken, it hurts God’s heart, Wanda—I want you to remember that the next time you think of telling a lie.”

On the days when I fibbed or stole, I often wondered if God was looking down on me with his face full of sad disappointment; that’s why, as a rule, I always stick to half-truths whenever possible—the burden of guilt is not nearly as bad when the truth is simply misdirected rather than completely concealed. I latch on to the closest possible thing I can, merging it with the facts to weave a slightly skewed version of reality—and my method has never failed to work… however, I had a sinking suspicion that my normal tricks wouldn’t work on someone as sharp and wily as the Professor.

“Ah! I was beginning to wonder if the bedbugs had eaten you up,” he teased as soon as I tugged open the door.

“We were getting presentable—“ I retorted. It was the truth, in a manner of speaking. “—we have to take turns using the closet.”

“Is that where your brother is?” His dark eyes flicked around the murky dimness, searching for Pietro—nodding, I turned and headed down the stairs, trailing my hand along the stone wall for support.

“Yes—he is taking care of his morning bathroom business.” I flopped down on the blanket, groaning—the longer I stood up, the more the walls of the basement seemed to sway around me.

“I am sorry you feel poorly chavi… but at the same time, I hope this has taught you an important lesson.”

“It has—never to listen to an old man when he tells me it is okay to drink,” I muttered, rubbing my temples.
His laughter was far too loud for my head—almost as booming as the knock that had originally disturbed our sleep. “Poor girl—don’t worry… my concoction will help. Once you drink it, I suggest the two of you try and get more rest. Sleep is the best cure for a hangover.”

“If this is what people feel like when they drink, it is a wonder anyone does it,” I grumbled.

“Some find it a small price to pay for losing their inhibitions so easily,” he replied.

“They deserve to feel sick—I personally would rather feel inhibited.” Even as I said it, I knew it wasn’t completely true—for the kisses and caresses I’d shared with Pietro, I would gladly drink a whole gallon of vodka and suffer a hundred times worse than what I was feeling. I ducked my head, hiding my face—afraid my expression would betray the path my thoughts had taken.

“Remember that then next time you feel inclined to—”

“We won’t be doing it again,” I said firmly, my eyes flicking up to meet his. “In fact… I am going to pour the rest of it out when I feel better.”

The look of horror that crossed his face was almost comical.” That is a terrible waste of fine Russian vodka, chavi—”

“Then you take it—but only if you promise me will drink it in moderation.”

He chuckled, moving back towards the stairs. “You are quite the mother hen, little one—always looking out for those around you. It is a very mature quality in someone so young.”

I shrugged. “It is what I am meant for… like my own mama was before me.”

The old man froze with one foot on the bottom step, his head snapping around—eyes stabbing me with a piercing gaze. “What do you mean by that, chavi?”

“I have known since I was small what my purpose in this world is—to be a good wife and mother, like mama. It is all I have ever wanted—”

“Wanda, it would be a sin to waste your intelligence like that.” His voice was reproachful—I scowled, not liking his tone. “You should continue your studies—

“That is absurd—it is like saying a man has to become a soldier because he is big and strong, even if the idea of war disturbs him. Or saying a woman must become a model or showgirl just because she is beautiful and has a nice figure, completely overlooking and ignoring the fact that in her heart she wants to become a nun and devote herself to the Church.”

“But think of all that you could achieve—important things you could do that might benefit others!”

“Being a housewife and mother is just as important as being a doctor or a lawyer or a scientist, Professor, and it is a million times more important than being a politician—raising children and teaching them to be good, decent people is the most important job of all. Neither of us would be here right now if it weren’t for women who chose to have babies, you know.”

“Yes I am aware of that, thank you—” he muttered sarcastically, tugging at his beard. “I just mean that with your intelligence… you could cure diseases, Wanda… come up with astounding new theories in the sciences or mathematics or discover a way to solve problems that no one has considered—”

“I couldn’t—you have to be driven to make those kind of discoveries, and my heart would not be in
things like that. It would distract me with longing to be taking care of my home and family. Just because I am smart doesn’t mean those things interest me—they bore me to tears and leave me frustrated. I will use my intelligence to help my children grow and thrive—that’s what God intended for me.”

“You should still go to University, Wanda. You might change your mind later—”

“For a while I wanted that, but realistically… it would be a waste of time and resources. You and I both know that anything they could teach me I can learn on my own—you said as much, remember? Why should I take the place of some person who has worked hard because they want to be there? I should perhaps monopolize the Professors time as opposed to letting them work with students who have the desire to achieve those things you said?” I scoffed, shooting him a pointed look. “Surely that in and of itself would be a far greater sin than my doing what I know in my heart is the right thing.”

He sighed, tilting his head back and gazing up at the ceiling as if it were Heaven and he a Saint whose patience I greatly tried. “Is it possible to ever win an argument with you, chavi?”

“If it makes you feel better… just imagine how much harder it would be to best me if I actually studied debating techniques—surely that alone is enough to make you grateful that I prefer the life of a housewife.” I smiled sweetly as he groaned at my logic.

“If anything that makes me more determined that you should go—I’ve said it before and I will say it again… you would make an excellent attorney or politician. You could fight for social issues… make a real difference not just in this country… but in the world.”

“I don’t want to fight and argue—I want to be a homemaker. Do you know what makes me happy? Finding things that make this place nicer and improve our living situation. Preparing a meal for my brother, knowing that I am taking care of him and his needs. My mother… she used to sing while she cleaned—her voice full of happiness.” I glared up at him, all trace of good humored teasing gone from my voice. “How dare you imply that something she enjoyed was worthless!”

“Calm down—”

“I most certainly will not—If I’d known you were coming over just to berate the things I dream of and harp at me, I would have chosen to stay in bed.”

“I am not harping, child. I’m expressing an interest in your future—that is what you are supposed to do when you care about someone.”

“Well I wish you would care enough to remember I have a splitting headache—you are hardly going to change my mind when I feel cross and sickly.” I grumbled, making a face.

“Alright, alright—I promise I will let it go… for now.” He made a face right back at me, moving towards the stairs.

“Are you leaving? I thought—”

“I have to get the things I brought—I didn’t want to waste time unloading the car if the two of you were dead to the world again.”

“Let me help you—” I started to push myself up off the floor—he waved me off, scowling.

“I can do it—moderate exercise is good for me. You might check on your brother though—he is taking an awfully long time in there, yes?”
Since I could very well imagine exactly what Pietro was doing, my face heated with embarrassment; I ducked my head down, but thankfully he was already out the door, unable to see my red cheeks. I scampered over to the closet, knocking on the door, my voice little more than a hushed whisper. “Pietro… hurry up in there! He is wondering what is taking you so long!”

The only response was a muffled moan—I bit my lip, fighting to ignore the way my stomach fluttered in response to the sound. I knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that I should shove the sound from my mind; the Professor would be back within minutes—it was hardly the time to be letting my imagination wander. Unfortunately, I was slowly starting to learn a very important lesson—in some instances, biology… or rather, hormones… trumps logic every time.

“You stop that right now Pietro Maximoff,” I whispered fiercely, pressing my lips up against the crack in the door. “If I have to be aching then you do too—it’s only fair!”

He didn’t answer; huffing, I moved away from the door before he could make another sound that might stir my body even more. Pacing, I glared at the closet, just waiting for the door to open—hoping he’d come out before the old man returned so I could give him a piece of my mind. To keep my thoughts from straying to his activities, I focused on mentally reciting the most boring thing I could think of—the periodic table of elements was sure to numb my mind, chasing away the images that kept trying to take root. I was all the way to Lanthanum before the Professor reappeared at the top of the stairs, his arms completely full—I hurried up the steps to help him, freezing when I saw what was hidden beneath the bags.

“You left this in the car last night, chavi,” he held out the large basket I’d carried through the restaurant—I scowled, backing up a step.

“I don’t want it—”

“Don’t be silly. You know, thanks to all the hullabaloo last night, I didn’t notice it’s weight. I think perhaps Simza might have added some goodies from her kitchen before she brought it out to you—I can’t imagine the women in the restaurant having more than trinkets and baubles on them.”

I eyed the basket warily, still not wanting any part of anything that had ties to the horrible incident. “You should take it back to them.”

He shook his head, brushing past me—heading down the stairs and straight for the blanket in the middle of the floor, plopping it down where I’d been sitting. “They wouldn’t accept it, chavi—that would mean their recompense had not been paid.”

I followed after him, glaring at the hateful thing for a moment before turning my attention to the other bags he held. “And what is all that? I thought you were just going for aspirin?”

“Ach—I never said that, child. I said I was going to get something to help you feel better.”

“And this requires three bags?”

“Well… no, not exactly. I might have brought something else as well.” He flashed me a sheepish grin, holding out one of the bags. “It cost me nothing, so don’t get your tail feathers ruffled—I had them at home.”

I shot him a disapproving look before pawing at the contents of the bag—a soft sound of excitement escaping me. “Nightclothes! You brought us real nightclothes!”

“They might be a little big, but they’ll do—far more proper than sleeping in undergarments, yes?”
“Pietro! You have real pajamas again!” I called out excitedly, moving to upend the contents of the bag on to our mattress. Grabbing one of the nightgowns, I held it up in front of me; it hung all the way down to my toes, but I didn’t care—the fuzzy flannel material would keep me toasty warm. “Thank you sir! I haven’t had a real nightgown since… well… you know.”

“Remind me when the weather gets too warm for those and I’ll bring over some made of lighter material—I told you there are tons of things wasting away at my house.”

Though there was no reproach in his voice, I felt ashamed that we’d stood him up; he’d probably been looking forward to having our company, only to have us disappoint him. “I’m sorry, Professor—we really did intend to come by today.”

“Don’t worry yourself about it,” he waved off my apology, dropping one of the remaining bags beside the nightclothes I’d spilled out on our makeshift bed. “I was just concerned… afraid something had happened. I wish there was a telephone here… then I wouldn’t worry so much.”

“There is one,” I pointed out. “It is upstairs, in the kitchen.”

“I meant a working phone, Wanda.” He muttered, looking vexed. “A nonworking telephone is as useful as one made with a string and two tin cans.”

“I was being facetious,” I said, drily.

He arched a bushy brow. “In my day… we called it being cheeky.”

“Perhaps if I’d meant it disrespectfully—but I didn’t. I was simply teasing you.”

“Ah. Well, therein lies the problem. You will have to excuse me—it has been quite a long time since I was on the receiving end of such tormenting from a teenage girl.”

“Tormenting?” I scoffed. “You know, I am beginning to think you are prone to being overly dramatic. Pietro… he does this too. Is it a thing all men share?”

“I would say that depends on who you ask. A man will say no, while a woman would say most definitely.” He chuckled softly. “My sister… she used to say that I regressed from a full grown man to a fussy toddler when I was ill. She never realized I was acting weak and feeble so she would pamper me.”

“Did you ever stop to consider that she might not have been as naïve as you think? Perhaps she did realize it was all an act, but she simply enjoyed doting on you far too much to call you out on your actions,” I said primly—feeling the need to take the side of his absent twin. “I know that I definitely like taking care of my brother, especially when he whines and acts pitiful—it makes me feel good to know that I am seeing to his needs.”

“There you have the crux of the whole issue, chavi—as siblings mature, we poor brothers replace the doll babies our sisters have outgrown.”

“Don’t be ridiculous—I only had one doll, and it was a girl. And I certainly never had time to outgrow her—she was lost in the rubble along with everything else we owned.” I retorted, glancing over my shoulder at the sound of the rusty hinges squeaking on the closet door.

“What are you two bickering about out here?” Pietro shot the Professor an angelic smile—I rolled my eyes, still quite irritated that he’d been able to satisfy the itch we both felt while I’d been left suffering.
“We aren’t bickering—we are discussing things about siblings.” I moved over to the blanket, sinking down beside the basket—having Pietro near me soothed away the unease I felt about accepting anything even remotely tied to Hanzi and Tsuru; it was replaced by the anticipation that always accompanied opening presents—a childlike sense of excitement that is pure and unrestrained, holding no prejudice about the circumstances surrounding the gift or the people involved in its giving. Pietro sat down beside me as I tugged away the scarf covering the contents of the basket; immediately his hand shot out—I swatted it away, scowling fiercely. “This is my surprise—you got earrings!”

“Selfish!” He huffed, his lower lip sliding forward, jutting out in a sulky pout.

“I am not! You know I’ll share whatever is inside, but at least let me have the first look. I didn’t get a chance to even peek last night before I got grabbed.”

He shot me a remorseful look. “Sorry… I didn’t think about that.”

“It’s okay… besides, there’s probably nothing much to see. It’s not like they would have anything we could really use in their purses.”

“You might be surprised—after all, jewelry can be sold,” the Professor offered.

“True. If we can find an honest shopkeeper who will give us a fair price.” My gaze fell on the ring that decorated my thumb; it was the single thing I wouldn’t sell, no matter how much it might bring—the strange, makeshift ceremony Simza had performed using it to bind Pietro and I together insured that I would cherish it forever.

Tearing my eyes away from my hand, I examined the contents of the basket; immediately, I glanced up at the old man who’d transported it, eyeing him suspiciously. “I think perhaps Simza is not the only person who added to this basket. Maybe it is just me…” I held up a package of toothbrushes, “but I cannot see a lady carrying this on a dinner date.”

“Toothbrushes!” Pietro grabbed the package, practically bouncing with excitement. “I get the green one!”

“ Toothbrushes that just happen to be in our favorite colors,” I pointed out, still staring suspiciously at the Professor.

“I have no idea how that got in there,” he said, not bothering to hide his smile, “nor the toothpaste.”

I made a humping noise, peering back into the basket—my eyes flicking over the items scattered inside; there was much more than I anticipated. Several scarves in bright, cheery colors… bracelets and rings—even two delicate looking silver combs that I could use to pull back my hair. I grabbed a small gold compact, fumbling with the catch—pleased to find a miniature sewing kit inside instead of the face powder I’d anticipated. “Look! Isn’t that clever?”

Pietro glanced at it, making a face. “If you say so. Hey… what’s this?”

“It looks like some sort of herbs… or maybe tea?” I reached over, taking the oversized bottle from his hand—trying to decipher the spidery handwriting on the label. “Professor… do you speak the language this is written in?”

He leaned over, studying the label—only to snatch it from my hand a moment later. “You won’t need that until you are older.”

“Why? What is it?” I peered up at him, confused at the blush that rushed across his cheeks.
“Simza is a healer of sorts… people go to her for herbal remedies.” He tucked the bottle away in his pocket.

“So… it’s medicine?” I persisted.

“Not exactly.” He tugged at his beard, frowning. “It is what a married woman takes when she wants to postpone having children.”

“Oh… you mean… okay.” I dropped my eyes, trying to hide behind my hair—trying to busy myself with the baskets contents until my embarrassment faded.

“Yes… well… as I said, you have no need of such things now. I will have to have a word with her when I see her again… it is scandalous, her giving such a thing to a child.”

My rooting fingers brushed against paper; I pulled out the scarves, setting them aside—eyeing the large bulky envelope that was buried in their midst. A rubber band wrapped around it, holding a note in place—one written in the same handwriting that I’d seen on the bottle. “And this? Does this need to wait until I’m older too?”

Frowning, he took it from my hands, his brow furrowing. “It says… ‘a girl’s chastity is more priceless than gold—I am sorry that this compensation for the threat made against yours is so unworthy.

“Well that’s truthful, at least.” Pietro scowled, scooting closer to me—sliding an arm around my shoulders. “They had no right to—”

“Holy mother of God!”

Our heads jerked up at the old man’s startled exclamation—he was staring into the envelope with a look of shock on his face. “She must have emptied out the safe!”

“What—”

“It’s money, chavi—there must be over two thousand Euro in here!”

“She stole from her niece?” I asked, too shocked at the thought to properly process what he’d said.

“No—Tsura passes herself off as the owner, but Simza is the one who put up the money to start the restaurant. They are partners, in a manner of speaking.”

Pietro’s grip tightened on my arm—his anxiety bit at my skin like a swarm of angry gnats. “Are you sure it is to make up for what happened? Perhaps the old woman thinks to buy Wanda—”

“She wouldn’t do that,” I said softly, interrupting him.

“You don’t know that—”

“I do. I don’t know how I know… I just feel it, Pietro. I trust her—out of all of the people there… she is the only one who truly wanted nothing more than to give us a special celebration. I don’t think she had anything to do with the other stuff… remember, she went and got the crone… and Hanzi certainly didn’t seem to want her there.”

“She’s right son—bride snatching… it is not the sort of thing Simza would approve of. She was raised to be an apprentice to the chóv’háni—it is a position that gives women a stronger voice among the tribe. In her heart, she will always believe that a girl has the right to choose her own destiny—
without men having any say in the matter. It seems clear to me that is why she involved Tebera last night… it was her way to insure that Tsura would not instigate grabbing Wanda again in the future.”

“Perhaps… but we want no part of their filthy money,” Pietro growled, glaring at the envelope. “You take it—as payment for what we owe you.”

“Pietro… it is far more than—”

“No… he’s right,” I said softly. “We have agreed to let you help us with things… over time, I am sure that will end up costing far more than the amount in your hand.”

“I am not helping you with expectations of repayment, Wanda—”

“Give what you can—that is the very first lessons you passed on to me. Right now, for the very first time ever… we can do that sir. Please don’t take away our chance at honoring the memory of the first of us by following in their footsteps.”

His eyes moved between us, his mouth compressing into a thin, grim looking line; I could tell he was weighing my words—contemplating their merit as he tried to find a plausible argument for declining the money.

“It is truly what I want, Professor. I won’t change my mind.” My voice was firm—no matter how good Simza’s intentions might be, I agreed with Pietro; I wanted no part of any money that Tsura might have claim to.

He sighed, riffling through the bills. “Fine… I will accept it on one condition. Tomorrow morning, I will go to my bank and open a new savings account—one that yields a high rate of interest. The money will remain there, untouched, until a day comes when you need it—”

“We won’t touch it—”

“Chavi… I am an old, sick man. As much as I would like to promise you that I will be here to help the two of you until you are fully grown, the reality is… I won’t. The way my doctor is talking… it will only be by the grace of the Most High that I will be able to spend a single Christmas with you both. When I am gone… you will need this money and the interest it collects.”

Hot tears filled my eyes—I ducked my head down as they slipped free, hiding them from his view; automatically, Pietro pulled me closer, stroking my hair in an attempt to soothe me.

“Shhh Pietra… it is alright. Doctors… they don’t know anything. They don’t believe in miracles—but we do. We will have faith and you will see… with our prayers and his medicines… he will be with us for years to come. Trust me.”

“I am sorry little one… I did not mean to make you cry.”

“She is very sensitive.” My brother’s voice was gruff and protective—I clung to him, burying my face in the warmth of his neck. “My sister feels things too deeply—Mama said it was a as much a curse as it was a blessing. The thought of an animal dying is enough to put her out of sorts—thinking such a thing about someone she cares for? It is a million times worse.”

“I did not think she would care so much for an old man who is little more than a stranger—”

“Well I do,” I mumbled, choking back a sob, “and the more time we spend with you… the harder it gets to think about you dying.”
“I suppose I have been very selfish… inserting myself into your lives when you have lost so much already.” Pietro tensed—a moment later, I felt the strong press of the old man’s arms as he knelt down, enveloping both of us in an embrace. It was a bittersweet moment—the first time since our parent’s deaths that we’d felt the shared comfort of being embraced as one. “Please know that when I leave this earth… I will finally be at peace. I know my Beloved is waiting for me, just on the other side of the veil. She is impatiently counting down the seconds until I hold her in my arms again. From the moment she left me… I have been only half alive. You see… when she took her last breath, she took part of me with her. Since then… I have wanted nothing more than to be with her… to be whole again, the way God intended us to be.”

“Surely your sister waits there too,” Pietro offered softly. “Seeing your twin again must be far more important than seeing anyone else. I would want to see Wanda more than anyone… even more than Mama and Papa.”

“Of course—it goes without saying that Yuliana is always the most important person to me, chavo. At times I can almost feel her presence, as if even now she lingers, unable to enter the gates of Paradise without me by her side—” His voice broke, trailing off; he cleared his throat, pulling away—perhaps not wanting us to see the unshed tears that sparkled in his deep, dark eyes. “Enough sadness—I believe I am supposed to be making you feel better, not worse, yes? May I borrow your workspace to prepare my special tonic, chavi?”

I swiped at my cheeks—casting a wary look in his direction. “Are you sure aspirin won’t do the trick?”

“Unfortunately, it won’t—it would help your head, of course, but not your queasy stomach. Now which one of you will help your decrepit old friend to his feet?”

Pietro and I moved as one, each reaching for opposite hands; the old man chuckled as we tugged him up—immediately heading to the workbench with his remaining shopping bag. “No peeking—this is an old family recipe. I will call you when it is ready.”

“In case you have not noticed, you are right out in the open—we can’t help but see what you’re doing,” I pointed out.

“This is true, but you can occupy yourselves with something else while I work, yes? Just pretend I am not here and do whatever you would be doing in my absence.”

His words were a catalyst—immediately, images of what I wanted to be doing flared to life in my head; my cheeks heated as my eyes met Pietro’s—his face was flushed too, telling me that his thoughts had taken the exact same route as mine. Shoving aside my yearning for the sweetness of his lips, I hid behind my hair, stooping to grab the basket off of the floor. “I should put these things away—Pietro… do you feel up to fetching us some water?”

“I don’t know… I’m still a little wobbly… but if you were to help me I think I could manage—the burden isn’t nearly as heavy for two as it is for one.”

His eyes flicked over to the old man, checking to make sure we weren’t being watched before his gaze returned to me—the look on his face clearly expressing that there was more on his mind then the chore we were discussing; biting my lip, I nodded slowly—perhaps it was a foolish risk to take, but there was no way I could resist. “Of course—we make a good team.”

His lips quirked up in a mischievous smile as I set the basket on the shelf, moving to grab the pitcher from its place on the workbench.
“Ah! I said no peeking, Wanda!” The old man waved me away, trying to hide the bottles he’d set out before him.

“I am only getting the water pitcher,” I huffed—sticking out my tongue at him as I headed for the stairs.

As we moved through the kitchen and out the back door, a strange, unfamiliar tension lingered between us; it was more than just nerves about the risk we were taking in stealing a few minutes together with the Professor near—rather, it was a sort of eager expectation, speeding my pulse so much that I could hear my heartbeat echoing in my ears. I was hyper aware of Pietro’s lithe, lean body moving beside me—the brief space between us felt heavy and dense, charged with electricity that danced along my skin, leaving me aching for him to close the distance, even if it was simply to brush his hand against mine. Only when he did just that a moment later, it did not relieve the heaviness—it somehow increased it, making it a hundred times worse.

“While I draw up the water, wander over like you are inspecting the work we did yesterday. Head for the willow—it’s not visible from the house,” he whispered, his hand claiming mine for a brief second—giving it a gentle squeeze.

I nodded, glancing over my shoulder at the house—half expecting to see the old man had followed us up to linger in the doorway; it was a groundless fear, of course—but it was better to err on the side of caution than to risk exposing our secret to prying eyes that might be unfavorably judgmental.

Though I tried my best to appear aloof and nonchalant as I wandered among the freshly tilled beds, my shoulders remained as stiff and unyielding as a wooden plank, refusing to relax; I could not say for certain whether it was the looming threat of being caught or the all-consuming need I felt for Pietro’s touch that had me wound tighter than a spring—though if I were to hazard a guess it would be the later of the two.

Ducking beneath the ends of the drooping, twiggy limbs of the large tree that dominated the garden, I leaned against the trunk, gazing up at the skeletal branches that formed a cage around me; in the spring and summer when the tree was covered in soft green leaves, it would be a perfect place to hide away from the world and daydream, but as it was, the poor tree looked quite pathetic. I truly might have thought it dead had it not been for the hard, tiny nubs appearing on the bare boughs—in a few weeks, new shoots would start to appear.

My musing over the tree had a purpose—it was an attempt to distract me from the fact my brother labored nearby. I couldn’t let my mind—or my eyes—wander towards Pietro; I was already too worked up—watching the play of the muscles in his arms as he worked the crank would most assuredly shatter my meager control, and I couldn’t let that happen… not with the old man visiting.

“What are you thinking about, looking so serious and stern, sweet sister?” I jumped at the sound of his voice—he peered at me through the tangled branches, his lips curved up in a teasing smile.

“Nothing really,” I answered honestly, returning his smile with a coy one of my own. “I was simply trying not to watch you.”

His smile faded even as his brow wrinkled up—I could feel his confusion lapping against my skin. “Why?”

“Because seeing you work… it makes me feel things.” I dropped my eyes, cheeks heating with an embarrassed flush.

“What kind of things?” I could hear the clattering of the branches as he moved through them, but I
didn’t look up—not until his fingers gently brushed against my chin, tilting it back so that our eyes could meet. “Wanda?”

“Naughty things,” I whispered, stretching up to kiss his cheek.

His smile returned, wider than before. “This means... you like watching me do these things?”

“Oh yes… very much. You are well on your way to becoming a very strong man,” I murmured, nuzzling against his jaw.

“As strong as Papa?”

“Even stronger.” My words tickled against his lips as he turned his head; he slid his arms around me, pulling me closer as he sighed.

“We can’t stay out here too long… he’ll come looking for us.”

“I know… but I must have one proper kiss before we go in,” I said, playing with the buttons on his shirt. “Otherwise I will be very disappointed.”

He chuckled, his fingers gently kneading my lower back in a way that made me shiver. “Well we certainly can’t have that—I don’t ever want to disappoint you, Pietra.”

“Then stop talking and kiss me already—”

His mouth claimed mine, abruptly silencing my demand; I made a happy sound against his lips, leaning into him—losing myself in the heavenly sensation of his mouth moving against mine.
Chapter 21

IF I LIVE TO BE a hundred and fifty, I will never be able to find the words to describe the heart stopping wonder of Pietro’s kisses. From the way that our lips fit so perfectly together—like matched halves of a whole—to the fluttery feeling in the pit of my stomach that slowly spread outward, turning in to tingles as it coursed from the top of my head to the very tips of my toes… it was magic, pure and simple—the sort that fairy tales are made of.

When we pulled back, my breathing was raspy—my heart pounding as if I’d run a whole mile; I giggled softly as Pietro took a shaky breath, stroking my fingers along his flushed cheek. “You feel it too, yes?”

His eyes met mine—they were shining with happiness. “I do… what—”

I placed my finger against his lips, silencing the question. “I am fairly certain it is love.”

“But I already love you… this feels… I don’t know… different.”

“Because it is different, silly.” I smiled, reaching up to tuck a curl behind his ear. “One love doesn’t replace the other—it adds to it. What we have… it’s like double love, you know? You said you wanted to experience the whole boyfriend-girlfriend thing, yes? I think that is what we are feeling—it is starting to attach to what is already there.”

He was silent for a moment—his brow wrinkling as he processed what I’d said; I could tell when it finally clicked in his mind—his eyes widened even as a feeling of surprise slammed into me. “Wanda! Is this what it means to be falling in love?”

I nodded. “I believe so—I mean… the feelings… they match the things in those old songs Papa used to sing, don’t they?”

“Mhmmm…” he worried his bottom lip with his teeth as he thought about it. “But does this mean that I’ve been falling for a while now? I’ve been feeling these things… but trying my best to ignore them.”

“That’s how it’s been for me too,” I admitted. “Honestly… I think maybe that’s part of the reason it feels so overpowering right now though—because we’ve finally stopped fighting against it, you know? It’s sort of like it doesn’t want to be reined in or something…” I blushed, ducking my head. “I can’t stop thinking about you in a romantic sort of way, even though I know it’s not smart to do with the Professor here.”

“Giving in is much better,” he said solemnly. “Being standoffish all the time… it made me miserable.”

“Then I guess I will have to make certain you never do it again,” I said softly, “because it made me miserable too.”

I started to pull away from him, but he refused to let go; his fingers tightened in the fabric of my skirt, pressing into my skin. “Just a minute more—please. I’m not ready to hide it away again.”

“Someday we won’t have to hide it—I promise,” I murmured soothingly, resting my head against his chest. “We will go someplace where no one knows us and start over.”

“It is a very pretty thought, but we need papers for that, yes? Passports… birth certificates…
identification—those are things we don’t have, Wanda.”

“You are right, but I think you overlook a very important fact, my brother. In a way… we are very lucky there is so much turmoil and unrest here. When homes and government buildings are destroyed by bombs, the records they contain are lost forever. It will be a long, long time before the dust and debris are cleared away… and I am willing to bet that we will be listed among the dead. They have no way of knowing the names of the children who ran away that day, right? I doubt anyone even remembers it happening with everything that was going on.”

“But we’d still need—”

“As long as we stay in Sokovia we won’t need passports—and as for those other things… we can be truthful, up to a point. Wherever we go… we will say that we fled the warzone after our home and all we owned was destroyed—including all of our identification and our marriage license. We will not say that we are twins… just a young married couple looking to start over.” I tilted my head back, smiling up at him—pleased with my ingenuity. “If you wanted to… I mean.”

“Of course—but do you really think it will be that easy?”

I shrugged, pulling away from him—we’d lingered far too long for safety; immediately he grabbed my hand, threading our fingers together. “If not, we will figure something out. I am sure there are ways to find what we’ll need… for a price. Thanks to Simza we have some money… and I’d be willing to bet Hanzi knows how to find the sort of person who can make papers.”

“No… we don’t want to owe him any favors,” he huffed. “We will find what we need on our own.”

“We could… but it will be much easier if we know where to look, yes? And really… he wouldn’t be doing us a favor—we’d be doing one for him. The old witch was very angry with his family, right? So… helping us would be a way for him to get back into her good graces,” I pointed out. “I am sure if we insinuated as much that he would jump at the chance—they certainly seem to put a lot of stock in what Tebera thinks. Or we could just ask her for help—I’m sure that would please her.”

“You must love me quite a bit if you are willing to face that old bat again,” he teased.

“I love you more than anything—you should know this,” I huffed, shaking my hand free of his. “Doubting me already… I think I should be very offended.”

“I was only playing, Pietra—’

“So you say—but it seems to me you think my love is a flighty, fickled thing.” I dropped my eyes and pouted—watching him from underneath my lashes; it was a completely calculated move, made in hopes that it would earn me another toe-tingling kiss. “Perhaps that is how it is for you, but it’s not like that for me.”

Letting out a sound of frustration, he grabbed my shoulders, his lips smashed down on mine—kissing me so thoroughly that it left me trembling; when he pulled back, a soft sound of protest escaped me—making his mouth turn up in a self-satisfied sort of smile. “I guess that proves how I feel, yes?”

“I… think I need just a little more convincing,” I whispered, stretching up to reclaim his lips—only to be interrupted by the warning squeal of the hinges on the back door.

Immediately, we were in motion; I darted behind the trunk of the tree—peeking out to watch as Pietro slipped through the branches. He bolted towards the house, disappearing from view just as the old man’s voice called out from the porch.
“Pietro? What’s taking so long—”

“Wanda is hiding. She thinks she is very clever… but I exactly where she is.”

I rolled my eyes at the lame excuse—but surprisingly, the Professor seemed to buy it. “Well hurry and fetch her like a good lad—the tonic is ready and it needs to be drunk straight away.”

“I heard you—I’m not deaf,” I said loudly, earning a chuckle in response as I hurried to join them.

“Playing hide and seek?” The old man reached over, pulling a small twig from my hair.

“More like testing out a good place to hide with a book.” I shot Pietro a secretive smile. “Sometimes when I am trying to read, my brother pesters me. He doesn’t like reading so he doesn’t understand how frustrating it is to be disturbed at the best parts.”

“Well… perhaps he simply hasn’t found the right sort of reading material to hold his interest,” the old man said diplomatically, ushering us inside. “My sons always enjoyed epic stories—the sort where a hero goes on a quest, battling monsters along the way.”

To my surprise, Pietro actually perked up, looking intrigued. “We don’t have any books like that. All we’ve got are the girly kind—you know… with people kissing on the covers.”

I blushed bright red—embarrassed to have my reading material criticized. “Because that’s all we’ve found! It’s hardly my fault that ladies throw away romance books!”

“Don’t worry chavo—I have some books you can borrow. We’ll start you off with Greek Myths—Perseus battling a sea monster and Hercules fighting a giant lion… how does that sound?”

“Are you going to test me on it?” Pietro glanced over his shoulder, eying the old man warily—almost tripping on the stairs.

“No, this isn’t school work—it’s about entertainment, son. If you enjoy them, we’ll move on to another Mythological Pantheon… perhaps the Norse—tales of the Vikings and their gods, or maybe the Celts.”

“I could read them with you… if you wanted,” I offered. “You know… we could read aloud to each other.”

“Like bedtime stories.” He nodded, smiling. “We will read one every night, like Mama used to do, yes?”

“As long as you don’t get too stirred up by them when we’re supposed to sleep,” I warned. “If you start getting hyper and trying to act out the fights or something, I’ll hide the books.”

The old man brushed past us, moving towards the workbench. “Now, before the two of you kick up a fuss, you must understand something about this mixture.”

I watched him suspiciously. “Why would we—”

“Because it doesn’t exactly smell very good. You see… a hangover is God’s way of letting us know we’ve overindulged—gluttony in any form is a sin.” He said, glancing over at us. “However, like any good parent, God is not cruel. He doesn’t like seeing us suffer, so he gives us the ability to make a cure for the sickness—but still we must pay a penitent price for our actions. The smell… that is the price you must endure if you want to feel better.”
“Giving the mixture a final stir, he poured it into our tumblers, handing one to Pietro and one to me. “You must drink it all at once—in one big gulp.”

I sniffed the concoction—automatically gagging. “I can’t—I will vomit.”

“Then you will continue to suffer, chavi—the choice is yours.”

“You can do it Wanda,” Pietro said encouragingly, even though he was holding his glass as far away from his face as possible. “On the count of three. One… two… three!”

Grimacing, I downed the contents of the glass, trying not to retch as I swallowed. It was the worst thing I’d ever tasted—oily and thick as it slid down my throat. I squeezed my eyes closed as a multitude of flavors hit my tongue—ginger and anise battling with something almost acidic, like vinegar; as foul as the combined taste of those three things, it was the fourth that made my stomach churn in a sickening way. It was a taste I remembered far too well from childhood, back when Mama made Pietro and I take a spoonful of the horrid liquid every single Sunday, insisting it would keep us healthy. I burped—the thick, fishy taste of the cod liver oil was too much—I dropped my glass, bolting for the stairs with my hand clenched over my mouth, not stopping until I was out the back door.

Leaning over, I emptied the contents of my stomach in the bushes—a heartbeat later, my brother was right beside me, doing the same thing. I retched until my stomach completely emptied all its contents, leaving the sour, foul taste of bile on my tongue.

“I guess now we know why he put toothbrushes in the basket,” Pietro grumbled, scowling as he shoved his hair back out of his face.

The thought of the minty, medicinal taste of toothpaste made me gag. “Stop—please. I don’t want to think about tasting anything for a while.”

He reached over, pushing my hair back—gathering it all over to one side. “I think he is trying to kill us with his concoction.”

“Don’t be ridiculous—” at the sound of the old man’s voice, I glanced over my shoulder towards the back door—he was leaning against the frame, watching us.”—the only way to truly feel better is by completely emptying your stomach. Didn’t your mother ever tell you this?”

“Mama wanted to keep us from getting sick—she didn’t try to make it happen,” Pietro snapped, scowling up at him.

“Well I don’t imagine you were consuming large amounts of vodka back then… or am I wrong?”

The mention of the horrible alcohol made me heave again, but there was nothing left inside me to come out; I spat out a mouthful of saliva, sinking to my knees and groaning. “I feel worse than I did before.”

“Because you’ve purged all the bad out—now you need rest with a cool cloth on your head and some broth… perhaps a few soda crackers if you can keep them down.”

“We don’t have—”

“I do.” The old man ignored my brother’s fierce glare, moving over to crouch down at my side. “Do you feel strong enough to walk to the car?”

I whimpered at the thought—I felt too weak to move a muscle. “We’re not going anywhere—”
“Wanda, be reasonable—right now neither of you is in any condition to look after yourselves. Let me help you—”

“I can look after my sister just fine,” Pietro argued, wrapping his arm around my shoulder, “even when I feel sick.”

“I’m sure you can, son, but it would be foolish to try when you could just as easily save your strength and spend the afternoon recuperating at my house—if you are feeling better and want to come home tonight, then you can. Is it really such a hardship to let me look after you both until you are back on your feet?”

“Did you do this on purpose?” I glared at him, wondering if he’d stoop so low to get what he wanted. “So we would have to come to your house?”

“I would never do that—and honestly I am offended you would think such a thing. That is the very same concoction my wife gave our oldest boy when he snuck out to attend a party and came home drunk as a skunk—it made him vomit but within a few hours he felt as good as new. If he hadn’t drunk it, he would have spent the whole weekend nursing a hangover—I was trying to help you the same way.”

I glanced over at Pietro—he shrugged, deferring to me. The paleness of his face and the rheumy look of his eyes were enough to drive any objection I might have right out of my mind—had it been just me, I would have insisted we stay put, but I couldn’t stand to see my brother suffering. “I don’t think I can secure the basement—I feel too weak to climb out the window…”

There was more to my statement than what I actually said—I wanted to know if he felt too weak to do the task, but I sensed that if I asked him outright, he would be upset that I questioned his strength.

“I can do it—I’ll be right back.” He kissed me on the cheek, then stood—immediately grimacing; I almost told him to forget about it when I saw how he swayed on his feet. “Should I bring anything?”

“I have everything the two of you need—”

“Including a spare set of keys, apparently,” I muttered sarcastically, irritated at his presumption in keeping a copy for himself.

“Only in case you lose yours,” he said gently. “I wouldn’t have used them today, but when you didn’t show up… I worried.”

“ Toothbrushes,” Pietro muttered, heading through the door. “We definitely need those.”

“I have more at the house—just lock the basement and don’t worry about anything else, son.”

I craned my neck, watching Pietro until he disappeared from view. “I hope you realize I do not normally oversleep like I did today. Normally I am up at dawn to tend to the fire and my chores…but we were up very late.”

“Obviously, considering the amount of vodka you consumed.”

I ducked my head, picking at a loose thread on the hem of my shirt—trying to keep my expression completely blank. “We didn’t just drink for fun… it was for courage—so we could talk about the things that have been troubling us.”

He didn’t say anything at first—not until I glanced over at him. “I see… and did it give you both the courage you needed?”
“It did. Pietro… he told me about the problems he had with our Headmaster… how he tried to mess up his head with ugly lies. I understand now why you said he felt so responsible for me… and why he has been so moody lately.”

“Do you feel better now that you cleared the air?”

“Yes… and we agreed to talk about things that bother us in the future instead of keeping them bottled up inside. That way we can help each other work through them,” I said, softly.

“Then I suppose it was worth the drinking and feeling sick, wasn’t it?”

I opened my mouth to respond, but at that moment, the sound of retching carried across the yard. Trying to ignore the way my stomach rolled in response to the sound and the shakiness of my legs, I stood, hurrying around to the side of the house, sinking down beside the kneeling form of my brother. His face was far paler than it had been before he left us—I rubbed his back as he vomited the way our mother used to do, holding back his hair with my other hand.

“It’s the cod oil… I keep tasting it,” he mumbled, sounding completely pitiful as he wiped his mouth on his sleeve. “I always hated it—”

“I know,” I crooned softly, stroking his cheek. “But if it will make you feel better, it is worth it, yes?”

“No—I hate fish,” he grumbled, scowling.

It was a sentiment we shared—not a good thing, considering how much Papa loved fishing; it was even more unfortunate that he was a very able fisherman—always catching enough to last at least a whole week every time he went. Several times a year we’d suffered through seven straight nights of our least favorite food—when you factored in the oil Mama gave us, it was more than enough to put us off fish for the rest of our lives.

“I’m truly sorry Pietro… had I known you disliked fish so much I would have used castor oil instead.”

I glanced back at the old man—he looked truly remorseful. “That sounds just as bad—Mama made us take that as punishment when we were sassy mouthed.”

“I was much sassier,” Pietro mumbled, sitting up—his lips curving up in a faint smile as his eyes met mine, “but Wanda… she always insisted on taking it with me—so I wouldn’t suffer alone.”

“And did you return the favor?” The Professor held out his hands, helping us both to our feet.

The look on my brother’s face clearly conveyed how idiotic he considered the question. “Of course—I even offered to take it for her when she was naughty. I’d rather be sick myself than have Wanda feeling bad.”

“In case it has escaped your notice, I happen to be feeling exceptionally bad right now—and it’s getting worse by the second. If were going, we need to do it, otherwise I’m going inside to lay down,” I leaned against him, closing my eyes as another wave of vertigo hit me.

“We’re going—while you rest I will heat up some broth. If you can keep that down, we’ll try something more substantial later.” The professor steered us back into the house, locking up behind us as we went.

I didn’t argue anymore—as bad as I felt, the thought of being taken care of seemed suddenly too good to pass up, and riding in the back seat of the car only increased my nausea. I spent most of the
trip with my eyes closed and my face buried in the curve of Pietro’s neck—hoping the scent of his skin would distract me enough to keep me from focusing too much on the movement of the vehicle. Unlike the preceding day, the professor didn’t park on the street; driving past his house, he traversed the entire block, slowing to turn in a narrow paved alleyway that I hadn’t noticed before. I sat up a little straighter, glancing around as he backtracked towards his property, pulling up to a large metal gate.

“Pietro, do you feel up to—”

“Yes sir!” Ignoring the sound of protest that I made as he moved, he disentangled himself from me, hopping out of the car and jogging towards the gate—or rather, towards a small keypad that I hadn’t noticed sitting off to the side. I watched with amazement as he punched something in and stepped to the side as the gate slowly swung inward. Grinning proudly, he climbed back into the car beside me. “He trusts me with his code.”

“I can see that,” I murmured, arching a brow. “I didn’t know this was back here.”

“You haven’t seen anything beside the interior of the house, chavi. When you feel better, I will give you a proper tour of my wife’s gardens.” Smiling, the old man pulled the car through the opening on to a gravel driveway—the gate swung shut behind us all on its own.

“It has a sensor,” Pietro whispered, sliding his arm around my shoulder. “He is very serious about protecting his property.”

“I have to be, considering the state of the neighborhood. People see vacant houses and get up to all kinds of mischief.” Pulling to a stop under a covered carport, the professor turned, shooting me a mischievous smile. “Would you believe that just the other day I spotted a young girl slinking about, climbing through a window across the street?”

I made a face at him, rolling my eyes. “If I’m the most mischievous person you’ve seen then I think your property is pretty safe.”

“That remains to be seen, little one—after all, you do have a temper.” He winked, climbing out of the car. “Come now, straight into the house—I will give you a proper tour of the garden when you are feeling better. Perhaps you will want to try and salvage some of the herbs for your cooking, yes?”

I glanced towards the yard as he shepherded us along a pretty paved walkway, towards the side door—my eyes widening as I tried to process what I was seeing. “It’s so big! How—”

“My wife loved to garden… so I made our neighbors an offer they couldn’t refuse, chavi. I paid them far more than their properties were worth—foolish, perhaps… but we do strange things for love, yes? Someday, when I am gone, I have left instructions for the houses to be leveled and a large park built in her memory.”

“I own all four houses on this side of the street—that is why the yard is so big. When I bought the other three, the first thing I did was knock down the walls between them—planning that my children would one day occupy the houses with their families.” His smile faded, his expression turning mournful as his gaze dropped to the ground. “When they refused… well, I rented them out for a time… but the tenants left one by one, thanks to Medvedík’s war mongering.”

“She was right… you must be very, very rich,” I murmured, without thinking.

“What was that?” He glanced down at me, frowning.
“The hostess in the restaurant last night… when I saw her in the bathroom, she said you were very, very rich.” I blushed, dropping my eyes—hoping he would leave it at that.

“I see… and why would she say this to you, I wonder?”

I sighed. “She said she wanted to quit her job and that she might be able to if she took up with Pietro. So… we had words.”

“Words that resulted in her running out of the restaurant with blood streaming from her nose?” He looked taken aback at the very thought.

“I didn’t break her nose—she did that all on her own! All I did was trip her—”

“Really Wanda!” Despite the stern look on his face, the corners of his mouth were twitching. “I think perhaps I will have to watch you far more closely than I thought.”

“She was being confrontational! What was I supposed to do?” I huffed, my face heating as my temper flared.

“Shh, it’s okay Wanda…” Pietro wrapped his arms around me, shooting the old man a murderous look. “She doesn’t feel well—stop upsetting her!”

“She was an evil, hateful girl,” I muttered, resting my head against his chest. “She deserved it for the things she was saying.”

“I never doubted that, Wanda—you are hardly the type of girl who goes about provoking fights with strangers. To be honest, I am more disturbed to hear that she was speaking of my finances…” he frowned, moving towards the door. “… it makes me wonder who it is she heard talking about such things behind my back.”

“I think the answer to that is rather obvious, yes?” Pietro scowled, ushering me inside; I barely glanced at the room as we moved through it—though as we emerged into the hallway, I did make a mental note to remind myself to fully explore the house the following day.

“Well… yes… that is why it is so troubling, son—up until last night, I thought Hanzi was a fine, upstanding man. Now I find myself having to second guess everything about him.”

I remained silent, not offering an opinion on the matter—my sudden burst of anger had faded as quickly as it had appeared, leaving me feeling far more fatigued than I’d felt before. All I wanted was to be curled up in bed beside my brother, sleeping away the afternoon—if I opened my mouth, I knew a debate was sure to ensue, which would only delay our rest. Of course, I suppose I should have realized that keeping my mouth shut wasn’t nearly enough to insure things would go smoothly; as soon as we approached the bedrooms, the professor tried to steer us to ‘our’ separate bedrooms—bringing my self-imposed silence to an abrupt, screeching halt.

Crossing my arms across my chest, I planted my feet firmly—refusing to move a single step further until we resolved the issue at hand. “We will share.”

The old man frowned, shaking his head. “There is no need, chavi. You will be able to stretch out and relax much better if—”

“We will not. We have never slept in separate beds in our whole, entire lives—we are not about to start now.” I said obstinately, glaring up at him. “If that is not acceptable to your proprieties then we will go straight home, even if we have to walk.”
“Wanda, you are being ridiculous. You napped in there fine without him just the other day—”

“I didn’t! I was antsy the whole time—tossing and turning! The only reason I fell asleep at all is because I cried myself out!”

“She’s right sir… I won’t be able to relax if she is in another room—especially when we are feeling sick. I will spend the whole time fretting.” Pietro moved closer to me—automatically, I shifted, leaning against him, drawing from his strength.

The professor’s stern expression softened as he studied our defiant, upturned faces; for just a moment, there was a hint of sadness in his eyes, making me wonder if perhaps he’d been swept up in long ago memories of when he’d been young and separated from his twin in the camps. He sighed, rubbing his eyes—slowly nodding his head. “Fine… but on one condition. You must change in separate rooms. You are no longer children… you are at an age where modesty is a very important thing.”

“We don’t need to change clothes to nap—”

“You do—it will make your queasy stomachs feel better to be in less restrictive things, yes? There are still some nightclothes in the dressers in your rooms—I left a few things here in case you ever decided to sleep over.” He moved past us, back towards the kitchen—pausing to glance back at us with a sad smile. “The spare toothbrushes and mouthwash are in the bathroom, under the sink… just make yourself at home.”

Not quite trusting how easily he’d given in to our demands, I shot him a suspicious look, grabbing Pietro’s hand and dragging him into the bathroom; he watched me shut and lock the door with an amused smile on his face. “What—”

“He might try and talk you into sleeping in another room,” I muttered, jerking open the cabinet and grabbing the mouthwash.

“You think I would be so easily influenced?” He asked wryly, taking the bottle from my hand.

“He is very persuasive… I refuse to risk him saying something that might make you start being standoffish again.”

“I don’t think you really understand—it’s not like that. The things in my head… they’ve got nothing to do with sleeping beside you. That is as natural as breathing… it is all I’ve ever known.” He poured out a capful of the blue liquid, passing it over to me then refilling it for himself.

I thought about what he said as I swished the liquid in my mouth—it didn’t quite make sense; I spat in the sink, waiting for him to do the same. “So… why did you get all weird the other night?”

A faint blush appeared on his cheeks. “I was thinking about… other things than sleeping.”

“Things like… last night?” I asked in a soft whisper, reaching out to stroke his cheek as he nodded. “Pietro… is that what you were thinking about when you went into the closet this morning? Our kissing and touching?”

He groaned, pushing me towards the door. “Yes—now go on… get out.”

Immediately, I bristled. “You promised you wouldn’t get all weird again Pietro Maximoff!”

“I’m not! I just have to pee!”
“Oh… well that’s all right then.” Mollified, I nodded. “Hurry up though… no closet stuff.”

“Wanda!”

“I’m going, I’m going…” I slipped out of the bathroom, shutting the door behind me.

For a brief moment, I was tempted to linger, listening for any telltale sounds that might indicate he was indeed touching himself again, but for once, common sense won out—the old man’s home was no place to be caught eavesdropping at doors. The problem was, our brief discussion had caused a new question to pop up in my head—one that I desperately wanted answered, but would have to wait to ask. I forced myself to move, shoving aside all the naughty thoughts that tried to take root in my mind.

Wandering into the bedroom the professor had designated as mine, I went straight to the dresser, opening drawers until I found the one that was empty save for a couple of neatly folded nightgowns and a heart shaped sachet that still held the slightest scent of lavender. I changed quickly, neatly folding my clothes—depositing them beside the ones I’d left behind the day before, stacked neatly on the hope chest at the foot of the bed. After taking a moment to turn down the covers and fluff the pillows, I returned to the dresser, eyeing the cluttered top for a moment. Scooping up a hairbrush, I tugged out the dusty hair wrapped around its bristles as best I could before retreating to the bed—sinking down on the edge of the mattress to wait for Pietro to join me.

Running the brush through my hair, I closed my eyes, wondering what it must have been like to grow up pampered and spoiled like the girl who’d once owned the hairbrush I used. Even if Papa had lived, he never would have been able to lavish me with beautiful things—he was a hard worker, but the money he’d made had barely been enough to keep a roof over our heads and keep us clothed and fed. Most of the meager wardrobe we’d owned consisted of second hand items from thrift stores; the only brand new things we ever had were underwear and whatever clothing Mama made on the old sewing machine that Papa found in a junk heap and restored. It was hard for me to imagine how it must feel to be able to ask for a new dress or shoes just because they caught your eye—harder still to process the amount of money the professor must have spent on all the items that sat wasting away in the room around me, some of which still looked brand new, despite the dust that covered them.

“Here… let me do that.”

My eyes shot open at the husky murmur of Pietro’s voice—I hadn’t heard him enter. Passing over the hairbrush, I sighed contentedly as he began running it through my hair. It was a familiar ritual between us—one repeated hundreds of times throughout our childhood; Pietro was always careful not to hurt me—gently removing even the most stubborn knots and tangles with a kind of methodic precision that our mother never had. She was often in a hurry, getting frustrated when I winced or cried at the way she yanked the brush through my hair; she never understood how tender headed I was… but Pietro… he always did.

“Your hair is so soft… like corn silk.” His whispery breath against my ear made me shiver with delight. “Sometimes when you go to sleep… I spread it out and rest my cheek against the strands… it helps me fall asleep.”

My cheeks heated with pleasure at the confession. “It used to be softer… back when we had real shampoo—”

“Nonsense. It is just as soft now as ever. I know you wish you had mine, but I prefer yours… I like to feel it sliding between my fingers—I couldn’t do that with curls.”

“You just say that to make me feel better,” I demurred, glancing over my shoulder at him—fluttering
my lashes just a bit.

“I say it because it is the truth,” he protested, tracing his finger along the curve of my cheek. “Your hair is like an angel’s—”

“What’s this? You two are supposed to be resting, not chattering away like magpies on a telephone wire.” The professor admonished from the doorway, “If you can’t do that together—”

“We will! You don’t have to say it!” I snatched the brush from my brother’s hand, scampering over to return it to the dresser. “I’m sorry, I couldn’t resist—I haven’t had a proper hairbrush for a very long time… half of the bristles are missing from the one I use.”

“Ah… I see. Well perhaps you should take that one home with you, yes? Or we will get you a new one. Now in to the bed, both of you…stop behaving like naughty toddlers trying to avoid their nap time.” I climbed in, scooting over to make room for Pietro—trying not to giggle as the old man tucked us in. “I will be back to check on you soon and you’d best be fast asleep—no giggling and whispering.”

“I think you are enjoying being bossy almost as much as my sister does,” Pietro grumbled, poking me in the side as I huffed at the comparison. “Roll over so I can cuddle.”

Shooting a dark look at both of them, I rolled over, facing the window; he wrapped an arm around my waist, curling himself around my back. Immediately, I relaxed against him, letting out a soft hum of pleasure as a feeling of warm contentment chased away my irritation.

“Like two peas in a pod… what a lovely picture this would make,” the professor mumbled softly, almost under his breath. A moment later a floorboard across the room squeaked, followed by the groan of the door hinges.

I counted to one hundred in my head—just to make sure the coast was clear—then rolled over to face Pietro, ignoring his groan of protest.

“Wandaaaaa… I just got comfortable,” he whined, giving me a sulky look.

“I’m sorry but I’ve got something on my mind… and you know how I get,” I murmured, pushing his hair back behind his ear. “Unless you want me to be restless and fidgety on top of being sick?”

He sighed. “Don’t worry… next Sunday we will make an exception—it can be a special make up day for today.”

“That’s very good to know… but it’s not what’s bothering me.”

He opened one eye, peering at me. “It’s not? But… why not?”

“Well… as soon as he insisted we come over… I sort of figured that’s what we’d do since we can hardly have special time here,” I explained patiently.

“So you just assumed I’d bend the rules?” He scowled at me, offended.

“No… it just made sense that we’d do it another time… but if you don’t want to—”

“I didn’t say that,” he cut me off quickly, “but I don’t want you thinking we’re going to be breaking rules all willy nilly.”

Since answering the question that was still plaguing me would most assuredly involve bending his
stupid rules, I didn’t respond—I simply rolled back over, staring out the window; he took my silence the wrong way—his worry brushed along my skin, but I ignored it, heaving a deep, unhappy sigh.

“Don’t be like that… tell me what it is that’s bothering you. Please?”

“Nothing,” I mumbled, worrying my lip with my teeth. “It’s stupid… just forget about it, okay?”

“I won’t—not until you tell me.” He tugged at my shoulder, trying to turn me back over.

“I can’t… you would consider it—”

“Let me be the judge of that, yes? Come on… don’t be all prickly.”

I stopped resisting, letting him turn me over—my eyes flicking over to the half closed door; it wasn’t a stalling tactic—I was just having second thoughts, not wanting our conversation to be overheard.

“Well?”

I returned my eyes to his, then shifted, leaning closer so I could whisper in his ear. “Does it feel better when I touch you… or when you touch yourself?”

He tensed. “Wanda—”

“I’m just curious!” I mumbled defensively. “When I touched myself the other day it felt okay… but nowhere near as good as it felt when you touched me.”

He propped himself up on his elbow, staring at me with wide eyes. “You touched yourself?”

“I did… why do you sound so surprised? You said you do it—”

“I didn’t realize girls dis that sort of thing… I mean… you don’t have the same parts. What did you touch?”

“My bosom, of course—why… what did you think I meant?”

His face turned bright red. “Um… well… there are other parts to your body you know.”

My cheeks heated so much that I was sure they must match his. “I only touched them because I felt… strange. Sort of achy after we wrestled… so I rubbed them a little to see if it helped. That’s all.”

“I think you might like it more if you touched yourself… down there.”

I frowned, contemplating the idea. “I don’t think I would… the thought isn’t appealing at all—not exciting like when I think about you touching me.”

“Really?” When I nodded, he puffed up with pride. “Well… maybe it is different for girls.”

“Mhmm… I guess you’re right.” I said, chewing at the corner of my lip.

“A least you know if they ever get achy again… I can help with that.” He laid back down, closing his eyes—obviously assuming that our little talk was over; I sighed, reaching over to play with his hair—in truth, I was trying to figure out the best way to propose what I was thinking.

I waited a few minutes before softly whispering, “Pietro… I was wondering something else…”
“Hmmm?” He scooted closer, sounding drowsy as he nestled his head in the crook of my neck; drowsy was good—it meant he might answer my question without too much thinking.

“Well… you never really answered my question… so I think perhaps I should touch you. You know… to see which feels better to you.”

That woke him up—and fast. He pulled back, staring at me with suspicious eyes. “What do you mean… touch me?”

“You know… the way you touch yourself,” I mumbled, feeling my cheeks flame up again.

“You can’t do that—”

“Why not? It’s the only way to know for sure—”

“Because I don’t have pants on when I do it Wanda!”

“Oh.” I chewed on my lip again, more than a little confused—not quite understanding what the problem was. “Well… you know… I’ve seen you naked a million times—”

“No Wanda. That would be moving way too fast.”

“Then can’t I just do it with your pants on?”

“No… you—”

“Why not?” I frowned. “You had your pants on last night when we—”

“That is nothing at all like what I do in private,” he whispered fiercely, cheeks turning red.

“How so?”

“Wanda… stop, okay? We shouldn’t be talking about this here.” His eyes flicked to the door.

“Fine—I won’t say anything else,” I huffed, rolling back over to face the window.

“It’s just he might overhear us—”

“I said fine, Pietro—go to sleep.” It came out far more sullen than I’d intended, but I didn’t care. Closing my eyes, I tried to still my restless mind, ignoring the hurt that welled up inside me at his rebuffing my offer.

“We can talk about it more when we get home,” he murmured, wrapping his arm around my waist, snuggling up against me again.

I scowled, refusing to allow his cuddles to ward off my grumpy mood. “What’s the point if you are just going to hem and haw and not give me a straight answer?”

He sighed, tightening his grip around me—his hand moving higher, thumb grazing against the underside of my breast. I tensed automatically—when he repeated the gesture again, it confirmed that it was no accident; when it happened a third time, I growled.

“Pietro…”

“Hmmm?”
“Stop that,” I hissed—his touch was a teasing torment.

“Stop what?” His voice was full of feigned innocence—I groaned softly as his whole hand slid up, cupping my breast in his palm.

“You won’t answer my question but you will do this?” I huffed indignantly.

“Voices carry… but being under blankets hides things from prying eyes,” he whispered softly.

“It’s not fair if I don’t get to touch you to!”

“Says you,” he murmured—his amusement tickled along my skin. “My hand is cold—I am simply warming it against your flannel nightgown. Now hush and let me sleep.”

“And how am I supposed to sleep with your hand… getting warmed?”

“I’m sure you will figure something out, Pietra… you are a very smart girl.”

Though I huffed at his teasing words, my irritation was completely feigned; deep inside, there was a warm fuzzy feeling that grew stronger by the minute—one that had awakened the moment he’d pressed his hand against me in such an intimate way. Long after he dozed off, I lay awake, gazing out the window, basking in contentment—daydreaming about how things would be once we were fully grown; for the first time ever, my dreams were tangible—they weren’t just fantasy based on hidden desires, but things that actually would come true. Pietro loved me the same way I loved him—there would be no strange girl stealing him away from me, slowly taking my place in his heart. No matter what anyone thought or said, we would find a way to marry—our life on the fringes practically insured we would have the anonymity we needed to make that dream come true. Eventually, the sound of my brother’s low, even breathing began to pull me under; I drifted in and out of sleep, each blink lasting longer and longer, until my eyes stayed closed and my subconscious latched on to the images I’d been playing through my head, filling my sleep with the happiest kind of dreams—the sort I always prayed would find me.
Chapter 22

Sleeping off a hangover is a very weird, surreal thing—the sort that leaves your body and mind at complete odds with each other, locked in a battle that neither can ever really win. My body needed rest to properly recuperate from the toxic liquid I’d consumed, but my contrary mind was far too active to let that happen. As if to punish me for overindulging in alcohol, it kept jerking me awake—right when I was getting to the very best part of my dreams. The fact I fell back asleep almost immediately didn’t make it any less frustrating—if anything, it only left me feeling off kilter and strange since I started a brand new dream each time I nodded off. The fifth or sixth time it happened, I heard the hinge on the door squeak; groaning, I rubbed my eyes—still feeling listless and drained, though thankfully the nausea was gone.

“I’m sorry chavi, I didn’t mean to wake you—”

“What time is it?” The sunlight that had filtered through the window was long gone—the room was illuminated solely by the dim light from the hall, trickling through the half open door.

“Almost eight. I came in earlier with broth, but your brother was very insistent that I let you both sleep.”

The fact Pietro had turned down any sort of food was a clear indication of how poorly he felt; I frowned, rolling over to place my hand on his forehead—to my relief, it was cool to the touch. “He must be really tired.”

“I can bring you some if you like… I left it warming on the stove.”

“I don’t want to disturb him,” I said softly, sliding out from under the blankets. “I can eat in the kitchen.”

“There is a robe on the inside of the closet door… it will be a little big, but you can roll up the sleeves.” He smiled, retreating from the room—presumably returning to the kitchen.

Tiptoeing across the room and opening the closet as quietly as I could, I grabbed the robe, not bothering to pull it on until I crossed into the hallway; it was more than a little big—the hem trailed the floor like the train of a ball gown, but it covered me up enough to meet the old man’s requirements for proper attire—that was all that mattered. I stumbled into the bathroom to relieve my bladder and splash some water on my face before venturing into the kitchen—my stomach let out a loud rumble as soon as I smelled the broth, making the old man smile.

“You can have it on a tray in the family room if you would like, chavi—we could watch some television,” he offered.

I shook my head, sinking down at the table in the same seat I’d used before. “We never watched much TV… only when Mrs. Kolinov—our neighbor down the hall—had a special movie for us to see.”

“It was good that you had a neighbor who was nice enough to loan you movies, yes?”

“Mhmm… only we didn’t borrow them—we watched them at her apartment. We didn’t have a TV. I mean… we had one once, when we were really little, but when it broke Papa couldn’t afford to get it fixed.”

“I see…” He set a bowl down in front of me as well as a plate of soda crackers, then sank down in
the chair beside me. “I think perhaps your family was far worse off than I thought… am I right?”

I shrugged. “Papa worked hard, but he didn’t make much.”

“Probably because he was one of the people—that is why many of us are forced to hide what we are. If the administration had known I was Romani, I never would have gotten tenure.”

I glanced over at him, unable to hide my surprise at his comment. “But… you are so open about—”

“I am now—that wasn’t the case when I was young and starting my career,” he said, tugging at his beard. “I learned early in life that it is better to keep secrets than to face discrimination and bigotry. Yulina and I… we were very lucky—we could pass as Caucasian.”

“That wouldn’t have worked for Papa—Mrs. Kolinov always said he was very swarthy. Pietro and I have Mama’s coloring.”

“But I bet you turn very tan if you spend much time in the sun, yes?”

I nodded. “We don’t ever burn, but Mama was always very concerned about it. In the summer she didn’t like us playing outside for more than an hour or two a day.”

“Probably trying to keep your skin as light as possible… that is what we did with our children. Yuli—” he stopped, clearing his throat. “My wife was always slathering them with sunscreen—the boys fussed and moaned about it something fierce.”

I didn’t like the thought of Mama trying to hide the truth of our heritage—it bothered me, thought I wasn’t sure why. I frowned, staring down into my bowl of broth—trying to form the things I was feeling into coherent words. “I don’t like thinking about her doing that… it makes it seem like she was trying to turn us into something else. I mean… you saying you passed for Caucasian… well… it sort of seems like being ashamed of who you really are, you know? That would mean Mama… she was ashamed of us because of what we are.”

“Mhmmm… I can understand why you would think that… but Wanda, you’re very mistaken. What you seem to be overlooking is this…” his long fingers stroked over the faded ink on his arm. “I was almost put to death for no reason other than the blood that flows through my veins. Had we not escaped, Yulina and I would have most assuredly become the subject of Mengele’s experiments. Do you know the kind of atrocities that monster did to Romani twins? I remember two boys, barely four years old… Mengle sewed them together back to back, trying to create conjoined twins by connecting blood vessels and organs. Those poor boys screamed for three entire days until gangrene set in and they died. That could have been my sister and I—I think about that. I know what it is like to be drug from the safety of my home while men point guns at my face… to be treated as less than human, having my family wiped out by butchers after they branded us like cattle. I learned the hard way that sometimes the only way to survive and protect the ones you love is to hide the truth.”

A wave of horror at my thoughtlessness rolled through me, stealing away my meager appetite; I set down my spoon, blinking back the tears of shame that filled my eyes. “I am sorry sir… I didn’t think…”

“No, you didn’t—if you had, you would have realized that in their own way, your parents were hiding the truth simply to protect you and your brother. If they hadn’t been, I am sure they would have shared the history of our people—the rich stories and beautiful songs that remind us of who and what we are.”

The gentle, soft tone of his voice as he chastised me only served to make me feel even more horrible
about my comment. I opened my mouth, prepared to apologize again, but before I could speak, he reached over, taking my hand. "The important thing, Wanda… it isn’t whether or not the gadje know we are Roma. It is knowing it in our hearts and passing on our culture to our children so that they in turn will do the same, insuring that the ways of our people will not be forgotten and lost in the sands of time. That is something that our elders instill in us when we are small—it must have been very hard for your parents to ignore that, but I am sure they were trying to do what they thought was best. Do you understand what I mean?'"

I nodded, squeezing his hand. "I do… but it hurts that they didn’t have time to teach us those things."

"I think perhaps it wasn’t just Yuliana that guided me out to talk to you that day… maybe your parents had a hand in it as well, chavi. As I said… it is the way of our people for the elders to teach the young—I feel honored that I am the one who will pass the great knowledge of our ancestors on to you and Pietro."

"I can’t believe he’s still asleep—" I said, steering the subject towards something far less troubling, "—normally he’s awake within minutes of my getting up… though he pretends to be sleeping so he can stay all curled up and warm."

He laughed. "How do you know he’s pretending? Maybe he really is sleeping—growing boys require quite a bit of rest."

I shrugged. "I can just tell. It’s like… I can sense it—the way you sometimes sense a storm is coming, you know?"

"That is very interesting. With my sister and I… our connection, it wasn’t so much a feeling as a… well… a sort of sound—like a soft hum that was always there in the back of my mind, no matter where I was. The very moment she died… it disappeared completely." He studied me for a moment—the intensity of his gaze made me feel extremely self-conscious, as if I’d said or done something that revealed far more than I’d intended. "Tell me something… last night when that boy grabbed you… did you scream?"

"Of course I did!" I glared at him, irritated by the question. "You think I wanted to be manhandled like that?"

"No… I ask because we were two flights up—too far to even hear the music from the restaurant, much less the sound of your cries… yet somehow, your brother knew you were in danger. He bolted from the room without explanation, as if the devil himself were nipping at his heels."

Before I could stop myself, I made a face. "I told you… we are very in tune with each other—it wasn’t simply a figure of speech."

"It’s not that I didn’t believe you Wanda… but it is a very remarkable thing, even for twins. To see the… hmm… intensity, for lack of a better word, firsthand… it is quite amazing. Such a thing goes so far beyond my own experiences with Yuliana… surely you can understand why it peaks my interest?"

"I can—but at the same time… it is all that I have ever known," I said, taking a spoonful of broth; it was plain and unadorned by seasoning, but still my stomach clenched up in protest. "For me, it is hard to imagine siblings not having the kind of connection that Pietro and I share, you know?"

He nodded, stroking his beard. "That is a very valid point—we only know our own experiences. Reading about something or even seeing it and studying it firsthand… it isn’t quite the same things as living with it every day."
“Exactly.” I reached over, snagging a cracker off the plate—hoping my stomach would react more kindly to it than it had to the bland broth.

He sat back, taking a sip of his tea—eyeing me over the rim of his teacup. “Speaking of interesting things… I would very much appreciate it if you would tell me exactly what transpired between you and that young woman in the restroom at the restaurant last night.”

I nibbled on the corner of the cracker, dropping my gaze to the table. “I already told you all there is to know.”

“No—you dropped a bombshell in my lap, and I was kind enough not to press the issue since you felt ill.” He set the cup down, crossing his arms across his chest—looking rather stern. “Since it involves me, however indirectly, I need to know everything, Wanda. I am an intensely private man—I am sure you can see how disconcerting it is that a strange woman knows about my finances.”

“I’m surprised that you need me to explain anything—it is quite obvious exactly how she heard about it.” I shoved another cracker in my mouth—buying myself time while I chewed.

“Perhaps to you, but I am quite in the dark about it—”

“You said last night that the Roma community here is small… that they knew your children had abandoned you.”

“I did… but I don’t see—”

“For a wise man, you are sometimes very slow, I think.” I sighed, toying with my spoon. “You introduced me to Hanzi as your great-niece, Professor—I assume you introduced Pietro the same way?”

“I did—”

“And I told him that our parents were dead. So he knows your children are estranged—and he thinks that we are the only other members of your family.” I glanced up at him, frowning—waiting for him to catch on and put the pieces together. “A sick old man who has no one else… if we were really the only living relatives you were in contact with… who would you leave your worldly belongings to?”

His eyes widened as the implication of my words struck home. “My God! You think he—”

“I think he saw a young girl that he considered of marriageable age—one he assumed would be coming into a great deal of money and property—and he saw an opportunity for his family.” Setting down my spoon, I leaned back in my chair, trying not to let my emotions interfere with what I was saying. “I think he and his sister arranged to have me grabbed in hopes of getting their hands on whatever you might leave me. They probably discussed it at the restaurant, not realizing that horrible girl was listening in—she saw Pietro and decided to try and get a little something for herself the same way her employers were planning on doing.”

He stared at me, not speaking—his brow furrowed as he contemplated what I’d said. I returned his gaze levelly, waiting for him to speak.

“This means that I am far more at fault than I thought,” he finally murmured, pinching the bridge of his nose. “I am so sorry that they tried to—”

“I don’t blame you, sir… I was simply telling you what you demanded to hear. As I said… that girl told me point blank that she planned on seducing my brother so she could get to your money.”
“She actually said that?”

“She did… she was very vulgar about it too, saying it didn’t matter if he was young—she could… you know… teach him things.”

“And so you tripped her?” He reclaimed his cup, raising it to his lips.

“No… that happened later. She laughed at me when I told her she wouldn’t touch him… so I threatened to feed her to the sewer rats.”

He choked on his tea—coughing so much he spilled half of it down the front of his shirt. “You did what?”

I scowled. “I told her that I would slit her throat and feed her to the rats if she didn’t stay away from Pietro. And I meant it too.”

“Wanda… you can’t go around threatening to kill a girl just because she shows an interest in your brother—”

“She was more than just interested in him… she wanted to use him. And obviously I can—it worked, didn’t it?” I said smugly. “She was terrified of me.”

“Yes, but don’t you see… you can’t do that every time a girl casts her eyes his way. How would you feel if he behaved like that?”

“I would be very grateful that he cared so much—” my voice trailed off as a wave of anxious worry slammed into me, stealing my breath and making it hard to even think. I tensed, partially turning in my chair to look towards the door.

“Wanda? Are you all right—”

“Pietro is up,” I mumbled. “He is not used to waking up in a strange place without me.

A moment later, my twin appeared in the doorway with a sullen, sulky expression on his face; his eyes were still blurry—his voice still thick with sleep. “Why didn’t you wake me?”

‘You were sleeping so soundly that I didn’t want to disturb you,” I offered apologetically.

“I did try to wake you earlier, chavo… you told me in no uncertain terms to leave you be,” the old man chimed in, rising from the table. “Sit down, I’ll fetch you some broth—”

“I don’t want any—my stomach still feels weird. I just want to sleep some more.” Pietro leaned against the doorframe, yawning.

“Does this mean that you are willing to stay here—” the professor’s eyes flicked between Pietro and me, his voice sounding hesitant, as if he feared I might react badly to the question “—just for tonight?”

“Is that what you want, Pietro?” I asked softly.

“Well… the bed is very comfortable…” His voice trailed off as he ducked his head down—shooting me a hopeful look from beneath the tangle of his curls.

I worried my lower lip between my teeth, unsure of what I should say; I didn’t much like the idea of staying over—it seemed like it could lead to unneeded problems, like giving the old man false hope that we might change our mind about moving in. But at the same time… I didn’t want to deny my
brother when he wasn’t feeling well—who was I to begrudge him a night of peaceful sleep in a warm, comfortable bed? Sighing, I met Pietro’s eyes, slowly nodding my head. “Okay… just for tonight.”

His lips curved up in the heartbreaking smile that never failed to warm my insides. “Are you finished eating?”

“I suppose so… I’m not really hungry either.” I pushed my chair back, prepared to return my broth to the pot, but the professor reached over, touching my arm to still me.

“You need to eat—you’ve barely touched it, chavi.”

“It’s making me feel a little queasy again,” I said, pulling away and picking up my bowl. “I promise I’ll eat it tomorrow… it won’t waste.”

“I’m not worried about a can of broth wasting, child.” He took the bowl from my hands, moving towards the stove. “Run along back to bed—I’m perfectly capable of putting it away and washing up on my own.”

I scowled, immediately protesting. “You are paying me to—”

“Not tonight—you are my guests.” He pointed towards the hallway, shooting me a stern look. “Now scoot!”

Before I could argue, Pietro grabbed my hand, towing me down the hall—not stopping until the bedroom door was firmly shut behind us. I unbelted my borrowed robe, moving towards the bed, but he grabbed my arm, spinning me around—pulling me into his arms.

“Pietro! What—”

His lips crushed against mine, silencing my question.

Automatically, my arms slid up around his shoulders—my fingers twining in the softness of his hair; when he finally pulled back, I was left unsteady… almost dizzy—I took a shaky breath, reeling from the unexpected kiss.

“I’m sorry… I shouldn’t have done that—not here,” he murmured, his fingertips brushing against my face. “I couldn’t help it… I had a bad dream and then I woke up and you were gone…”

His voice trailed off—his eyes were full of fear, haunted by whatever it was he’d seen in his dream. I smiled up at him, brushing the tip of my nose against his—trying to chase the shadows out of his beautiful blue eyes. “I am always up before you, silly—seeing to the fire and tending to my chores.”

“But you’re still with me… right there, in the same room, so I know that you are safe. I can see you… watch you work…”

“You do that?” I was unable to hide my surprise. “I thought you just liked to pretend to sleep so you could linger in the bed and postpone having to get up.”

“No… I enjoy watching you tend to things… it reminds me of Mama—how she used to wake up extra early so everything would be ready when we got up.”

“I wish I could make us breakfasts like she did,” I frowned, automatically thinking once again how disappointed she must be with me for all the things I didn’t do; she’d always told me that it was important to make big, filling breakfasts to help fuel the bodies of the people you loved—it was yet
another thing that was impossible for me to do.

"Someday you will be able to—I promise." He laced his fingers through mine, leading me to the bed—taking the robe from my hands as I slid it off and laying it across the foot of the bed, then waiting for me to climb underneath the covers before crawling in beside me. "Someday I will find a way to provide you with a house that has gas and running water… electricity, too."

"A little place—I don’t want anything fancy or grand," I said, snuggling up against him—nestling my head in the curve of his neck.

"Not too little—we will need room for Mayra and Pietro Junior, yes?" His voice was soft and teasing.

The embarrassment I’d felt at being overheard that day returned in a rush, heating my cheeks. "Don’t tease—they are perfect names for twins."

“They are… provided the name Maximoff follows them,” he whispered, combing his fingers through my hair.

“That happens to be exactly what I was planning, though I couldn’t very well tell you that when you were acting all standoffish and prickly. You would have said something mean and made me cry,” I huffed.

“I’m sorry, Wanda… really. I didn’t ever want to be like that… to hurt you so… I’ve just been confused,” he murmured contritely, pressing his lips against my forehead. “I was trying to do the right thing… to be good—”

“Following your heart is always right and good, Pietro—it is when you start ignoring what it is trying to tell you that things go horribly wrong.” I tilted my head back, my eyes meeting his. “It doesn’t matter what anyone else says—if we are happy… why in the world should we care about their opinions?”

“You’re right.” He pulled me closer, resting his cheek against my hair. “I promise I’ll never run from the way I feel again.”

“If you do… I’ll just chase after you and force you to face it.” I threatened, wrapping an arm around his waist. “If you think for one second that I’ll let the things I’ve dreamed of slip away from me without a fight, then you are a very foolish boy.”

“And these dreams… they involve me?” His teasing voice held the faintest traces of grogginess—the hazy mists of sleep were slowly reclaiming him.

“Of course—all my best dreams are about you.”

“Share one with me—give me something wonderful to dream about too.”

I hesitated for a moment, simply because my dreams always involved him working in the sort of profession that required a degree. I didn’t want to force my idealized notions on him—not when he’d made it abundantly clear that he had no interest in those sort of aspirations. To do so… it would make me no different than the people who would condemn the love between us for no reason other than the fact that it strayed outside their preconceived boundaries of what was just and good—forcing us to live by their ideals instead of our own. With that in mind, when I began to speak, I compromised, blending his dreams with my own; I started by describing the little shop he would own, a place where he would work with his hands—crafting fine, beautiful furniture out of wood while I tended our home, minding our brood of children.
At first, he made happy sounds of agreement as I spoke, though they soon trailed off into soft snores—
I cannot be sure exactly when he drifted off, though I suspect it was around the time I started
contemplating the odds of our having three sets of twins as opposed to just one or two. It is hard to
say for certain since I kept nodding off myself, right in the middle of talking—only to jerk awake a
few minutes later, resuming my rambling as if I hadn’t dozed off. Gradually, his soft snores
deepened, so I finally gave in, allowing sleep to claim me—though I made a mental note to ask him
in the morning if the sound of my voice had carried him into sweet, happy dreams.

When I awoke, the midmorning sun was filtering through the window, bathing the room in a warm
soft glow—a very nice change from the murky light that filtered through the windows of our
basement. I groaned, shifting to snuggle closer to Pietro—only to be startled by the sound of paper
crackling beneath my cheek. Rubbing my eyes, I sat up, scowling—irritated by the absence of my
brother’s warm, firm body beside mine in the bed; snatching up the slip of notebook paper, I tried to
force my bleary eyes to focus on the words—a monumental task, thanks to the messy scrawl of
Pietro’s handwriting.

Sweet Sister,

I hope you had a good night’s rest and the pleasantest
sort of dreams. The Professor needed to visit his bank to
deposit our money, and since he insists on walking and he
is far too trusting for his own good, I am tagging along to
make sure he does not get robbed along the way.

Hopefully we will be back long before you have time to miss
me, but I did not want you to worry when you woke and I was gone.

All my love,

Pietro

Giggling softly at his dramatics, I folded the note up carefully, leaning over to set it on the nightstand
—it would go in my little box of keepsakes once we returned home. Though I knew I should rise
and get a head start on the cleaning, I couldn’t resist the urge to flop back down, cuddling up against
the pillow he’d used—filling my lungs with the faint scent of him that lingered on the pillow case.
It’s funny how certain smells imprint themselves on your mind—triggering memories so vivid that
your body responds to the mental stimulation. I lost myself in a daydream of the kisses and caresses
we’d shared in the darkness of our basement—my body aching as I remembered the hushed sounds
he’d made as I nuzzled the soft spot just behind his ear. My memories combined with the scent of his
skin were a very intoxicating thing—far more potent than all the vodka we’d consumed and a
thousand times more addictive.

For the briefest moment, I toyed with the idea of remaining right where I was—waiting for him in the
bed we’d shared, hoping he would rejoin me; if he found me gazing up at him with longing—my
skin flushed with arousal…would he give in, or would he have the strength to refuse? I knew it
couldn’t happen, of course, but still… it was a pretty thought—the sort of thing that I knew I would
end up fantasizing about all day.

Closing my eyes, I stretched languorously, like a contented cat basking in the sun—imagining that
Pietro was standing by the bed watching me; in my mind I could clearly see his lips curving up in a
slow teasing smile as he moved closer—climbing up on the bed to join me. I would reach for him, my lips searching for his as my hands slid downwards to—

An echoing gong boomed out—the loud sound startling me out of my reverie, jerking me upright with a shriek; I froze, staring at the open bedroom doorway wondering what it was and where it had come from. When it sounded again, twice in rapid succession, I processed what the sound was—almost chuckling with relief. It had been so long since I’d heard a doorbell that for a moment I’d actually forgotten such things existed.

Grabbing the robe off the foot of the bed, I slid it on, belting it as I hurried down the hall; the professor said he never had visitors, and Pietro’s note had mentioned they were walking, so it seemed obvious to me that the old man must have absentmindedly forgotten his keys.

Smiling, as I opened the door, I couldn’t resist throwing out a good natured taunt. “So you can remember our keys, but not your own—”

The teasing comment died on my lips.

It wasn’t the Professor—or my brother.

I moved to slam the door shut, but Tobar was far too fast—he stuck his foot in the way, using his shoulder to force it back open.

“Get out of here before I scream for my brother!” I threatened, trying to sound confident so he wouldn’t call my bluff.

“Scream all you want… your brother isn’t here—I saw him in town with your Uncle. I know you’re all alone… that’s why I’m here.”

I turned, prepared to run for the bathroom to lock myself inside, but my legs got tangled up in the oversized robes fabric, slowing me down; before I could regain my balance, he grabbed my arm, tugging me back against his chest—pinning me against his body with his arms. I shrieked, struggling as hard as I could, but despite my best efforts, he was much, much too strong for me to ever break free. That realization was all it took to trigger me—the panic welling up inside my mind broke free.

I was in serious trouble.

And this time… Pietro wasn’t there to save me.
Chapter 23

I’VE HEARD THAT IN moments of extreme distress, a person’s true colors come out—exposing the nature of their character for all the world to see; if this a legitimate fact, then I am sorry to admit that deep inside I am a frightened, pathetic creature, incapable of rational thought—similar to a rabbit trapped in a hunter’s snare with no hope of breaking free. Perhaps one could assume that the trauma I experienced at such a young age eroded away any strength I might have had before it could fully form—supplanting it with the terrifying panic that claws away at my brain, but in the end, does it really matter? No matter what the cause, the outcome remains unchanged—in moments of duress I am left mindless, helpless and weak.

If it is possible to find a redeeming aspect in my fear, I suppose it would be this: in that moment, I wasn’t just afraid for myself—I was afraid for Pietro too. I think perhaps that in and of itself is the only indication I will ever have of what my truest nature would be—if excavating beneath the panic and terror happened to be a conceivable thing; when push comes to shove, I care more about the one I love than I do about myself.

Even as the fear of being violated raced through me, another fear prevailed; my brother would blame himself for whatever happened—he would see it as a punishment for our falling in love. That realization…it did something to me—it sparked a fire deep in my soul, and those flames gave me strength. It wasn’t physical, of course—I could never hope to overpower a boy three times my size—rather, it was a sort of… mental clarity; like the toll of a deep, brass bell echoing through my mind, it cut through the cobwebs of panic, returning the tiniest portion of my sense of self. No matter how hopeless it seemed, I did have one thing that Tobar could never hope to beat—I just had to move past the panic and fear so that I could use the only weapon I possessed against him.

My mind.

“There is no reason for you to do this!” I stopped thrashing, going completely limp—choking out the words between sobs. “Let me go… please!”

“Stop crying,” he demanded gruffly.

“You’re hurting me!” I didn’t even attempt to stop my tears—the fact they disturbed him might give me an unexpected advantage against him. “I don’t like being touched—it reminds me of bad things!”

His grip loosened just a little—then immediately tightened again. “If I let you go… will you stop crying? And swear you will not run—”

“I swear… just please… don’t rape me—”

“Rape? Is that what… I’m not going to hurt you! I just want to talk to you!” His voice was full of shocked horror at what I’d said. His grip slackened even more than it had the first time—I jerked away, crumpling to the ground in a heap. “I didn’t mean—”

“You wouldn’t have grabbed me if talking was all you were after!” I sidled away from him, not stopping until my back hit the wall; I had to stall him—to buy as much time as I could—praying that it would work, and that my brother and the professor would be back soon. “You wouldn’t have said such a threatening thing—”

“I was angry! You tried to slam the door in my face… I couldn’t talk to you through a closed door or
if you were running away!”

“Fine—say whatever it is you came to say and leave!” I couldn’t stop shivering; wrapping the voluminous folds of the robe around me, I wished with all my heart that the fabric could make me disappear from his view.

“Not like this… I need you to listen.” He frowned, his cheeks flushing. “Do you want to get dressed? Would that convince you that I’m not here to… force myself on you?”

I eyed him warily; getting dressed would mean removing my nightclothes—leaving me even more vulnerable than I currently was for the brief time it took me to change. “Why should I trust you? Twice now you’ve grabbed me!”

“I just let you go,” he pointed out, “I didn’t have to do that.”

“You didn’t have to manhandle me either!”

“You were acting like I’m some kind of monster—”

“You tried to kidnap me the other night! How am I supposed to react?” I snapped; it was a good sign—the panic had receded enough for my temper to rear its head.

“I didn’t want to do it—my mother made me!”

“Do you do everything your mother tells you to do?”

“Of course! She’s my mother—I am supposed to honor her above all else!”

“So if she told you to jump off a bridge—”

“Don’t be stupid! She wouldn’t do that—”

“Did she send you here to try and steal me away again?”

“No! I came here to apologize!” He shouted.

I stared at him, not speaking; red faced, he fidgeted, as if my gaze had a physical weight that crushed him. “I’m sorry… I shouldn’t have raised my voice to you. Honoring women is important.”

“Wait outside,” I said softly, pushing myself up off the ground. He started to turn away, then frowned, glancing back at me. “You’re not going to do something stupid… like call the police or—”

“I am going to get dressed… and then I will listen to whatever it is you came here to say.”

“Swear it by the great mother.”

“That would be pointless since I have no idea who that is.” I frowned, thinking about it a moment. “I swear it on the love I have for my twin.”

He nodded slowly. “That is a good oath—I believe you.”

I waited until the front door clicked closed behind him to move—tiptoeing over to turn the lock as silently as I could; I would honor my vow and speak with him, but I did not trust him in the slightest—actions always speak far louder than words, and twice he had touched me against my will.
As I scurried down the hall, I cursed myself—I knew I was a fool for taking such a risk; the smart thing to do would be to stay safely inside, protected by the locked door—however, he had let me go, and once my panic had abated, my natural empathetic nature began kicking in, immediately going into overdrive. For a brief moment, when he’d looked me in the eye, I’d glimpsed a sort of… trapped look that haunted me; perhaps I was too kind hearted for my own good, but I couldn’t in good conscious ignore someone in pain—I just wasn’t that sort of person.

Dropping the robe on the bed, I hesitated for a moment—indecisively eyeing my clothing; I wasn’t at all comfortable with the thought of wearing my own things. The bulky robe made me keenly aware of one very important thing—I would rather hide my body away beneath layers of clothing, using the fabric as armor to hide my figure away from Tobar’s eyes. Bypassing my clothing completely, I moved straight to the closet—it was time to take the professor up on his offer. Pawing through the rack, I found a faded pair of jeans hidden away in the very back—so baggy that I had grab a belt to keep them from sliding off my hips. I rolled the hems up—a precautionary measure, so I wouldn’t trip if I needed to run, then pulled on a thick, bulky sweater that hung almost to my knees. After shoving my feet into my beat up canvas sneakers, I checked the mirror—pleased to see that the outfit completely concealed the curves I didn’t want Tobar to see; however, even though I was fully dressed, I wasn’t quite ready to face him—there was one more thing I needed to feel secure enough to unlock the door.

Detouring to the kitchen, I grabbed the smallest knife in the drawer, clenching it tightly for confidence; it couldn’t be seen, thanks to the fact the sleeves of the sweater were far too long for my arms—instead of pushing them up I left them hanging down over my hands, completely obscuring my makeshift weapon from view. Still, I hesitated—wondering if keeping my word was worth unlocking the door; the urge to hide myself away in the smallest possible spot—one out of reach for a boy Tobar’s size—was almost overpowering. Only one thing forced me to move—that completely ridiculous, deep-seated superstition that so often reared its head within me. I’d sworn an oath on my love for my twin—I couldn’t renege; to do so would be to tempt fate—to risk something bad happening that might tear us apart forever.

Cracking open the front door, I peeked outside; my unwanted guest was sitting on the front stoop with his legs drawn up to his chest—his head resting in the hollow made by his knees. In that moment, he seemed more like a sad, lost little boy than anything else—I frowned, trying my best to hold on to my anger as I slipped out the door, shutting it behind me. No matter how pitiful he looked, it wouldn’t do for me to let my guard down, even for an instant.

“Are you alright?” I asked, leaning back against the doorframe.

His head shot up; I winced—for the first time I was fully able to process the extent of the damage Pietro had done. Tobar’s face was a mass of bruises—his nose buried beneath a mound of plaster and tape. “I’m okay… I just don’t like you being scared of me.”

“You gave me reason to be scared,” I shot back, crossing my arms across my chest—careful not to inadvertently stab myself with the paring knife.

“I know… I really am sorry. My mother…” his voice trailed off into a long, defeated sigh. “It doesn’t matter.”

“Obviously it does—you came all the way out here to talk.” Hesitating for a moment, I sighed—unable to ignore the sadness that hung about him like a gray, brooding storm cloud. Pushing away from the wall, I moved over to sink down beside him on the stoop. “You realize if you are here and my brother gets back… he will probably kill you.”

“Guess I deserve it,” he mumbled, staring down at his hands. “My Bibi… she is very angry with me
—she says you were attacked. I wouldn’t have touched you the other night if I’d known that.”

“You shouldn’t have touched me either way—you had no right.”

“I know… but my mother… she is very determined for me to marry.”

“There are other girls… like the hostess. She seemed very… friendly—I am sure she would not
object to your grabbing her.”

“Terese?” He frowned, shaking his head. “She is hardly the sort of girl a mother wants for her son.”

“Because she has no rich uncle?” I asked, my tone laced with venom.

He blushed bright red. “No… because she is not chaste—Mother thinks she is a whore.”

I made a face, rolling my eyes. “You know, there are more important things involved in a
relationship than whether or not your mother approves. If you like her then you should—”

“I don’t like her—she’s not my type.”

“Oh, and I am?” I muttered sourly.

“No—you’re not.” He said, matter of factly. “I don’t like girls.”

I glanced over at him, wide eyed. “You mean… uh… you’re… uh…”

“Yeah—exactly.” He stared off into the distance, scowling.

“But… you groped me—”

“I was trying to make it look like I was enthusiastic in case Mother had anyone watching in the
kitchen,” he muttered, ducking his head.

“Oh.” I chewed at the corner of my lip, completely at a loss. “So… I guess that means your mother
obviously doesn’t know?”

“If she did I would be cast out—such things are forbidden. You saw how she reacted to things that
are marimé.” Catching my confused look, he blushed bright red. “Marimé is anything that is unclean.
Forbidden, taboo things—like you and your brother, or me and my… friend.”

I arched a brow. “You have a friend?”

He shot me an outright defensive look. “Is that hard to believe or something? You think I’m too ugly
or stupid to—”

“Actually I was just wondering what your friend thinks about your mother making you kidnap a
wife,” I said, cutting him off. “I would think that it would upset him terrible… thinking of you with
someone else.”

“He doesn’t know—he wouldn’t understand… he’s not one of us. He is gadje.” He buried is face in
his arms, sighing deeply again.

I hesitated for a moment, then reached over, rubbing his shoulder—it wasn’t much, but I couldn’t
bear to sit by and watch him suffer. “Tobar… why are you telling me all this?”

He lifted his head—just a little—peeking out from the cradle of his arms. “My Bibi… she sensed I
needed to talk to someone. She said you would understand.”

“Me? Why would she say that? She doesn’t even know me!”

He made a scoffing sound. “Bibi has the gift of sight—she can see the truth in people’s hearts. And even if she couldn’t… I have eyes.”

I frowned, pulling my hand back. “What does that mean?”

“I saw the two of you together at the restaurant… you and your brother.”

“What is it that you think you saw?” I asked softly—hiding behind my hair as my cheeks heated.

“The same thing Bibi did—you love each other as more than just siblings. You stare each other like a man and woman aching to be one. Bibi… she says your souls chime to the same harmony—that is why she helped you… it was the same for her when she was young. You know what it is like to love where it is forbidden, Miss Mirga—that is why I am here.”

Suddenly, it all made sense—why the old woman had insisted on the ritual, placing her ring on my hand. Why she’d brought the old crone down to the alley to intervene. She’d known what was coming, and done her best to set it right. “The professor said that the people weren’t very accepting when she moved here… was it because she loved like me?”

“Sort of… it was her cousin, though—not her brother. After he died… she came here, but what is acceptable to some is not acceptable to all. The family had to wait for the taint of marimé to fade before welcoming her as kin.”

“So does that mean you could go somewhere else and be accepted?” It seemed like a simple enough solution to me.

“I would have to leave my family—I could never do that.” His eyes flicked away from mine—his whole demeanor changed as he fidgeted, looking almost nervous. “That is another reason I have come to see you.”

“Huh?”

“Well… I really did want to apologize and talk with you… but more important… I was hoping you would talk to my mother for me. She would listen—”

“Are you crazy? Your mother hates me now! She wouldn’t listen to a single word I said!”

“She would… they all would. They have no choice.”

I eyed him, wondering if perhaps the beating Pietro had given him had messed up his brain. “That’s ridiculous—”

“It isn’t! Didn’t you hear what the Drabarni said when you were leaving?” He looked as confused as I felt.

“Not really… I mean… Pietro did, I think. He said she was asking them—”

“That is very rude—you should listen when the elders speak.” He scowled, shooting me a disapproving look.

“I was a little upset at the time—she was being very hurtful to the Professor,” I snapped, scowling right back at him.
His brow furrowed. “Why do you call him that?”

“It is proper to use a person’s title—”

“Uncle is a far more important title—one that deserves respect. Being a professor was just his job—Uncle honors the blood between you.”

“He is not a blood uncle—just… a guardian one.” The lie rolled off my tongue with ease—a necessary evil. For once I knew I would not be plagued by my conscious—Tobar and his family did not deserve the whole truth. “He was close to our parents and agreed to watch over us for them.”

“Oh… I thought—”

“I am well aware what your family thought—I’m not stupid. I won’t be inheriting a single cent from him, and our parents were very poor, so there is no money there either. Your mother thought she was having you snatch a bride that would be very rich…but she was wrong—I am a pauper.”

“I didn’t care about any money—”

“Sure you didn’t—”

“I didn’t! I told you I didn’t want to do it. I don’t want a damn wife!”

“That is all well and good but the fact of the matter is, I still have no reason to trust a single word you say,” I said bluntly.

“Whether you trust me or not does not matter—it is the truth,” he shot back, looking stubborn. “And it does not change the fact that if you speak on my behalf, the family must listen.”


“You shouldn’t make fun of people just because they are old—it is disrespectful.”

“I’m not—I’m making fun of her because she is crazy. If your family chooses to put their faith in a woman who begs them to kill her then that is their business—”

“She wouldn’t do that—why would you say such a thing?” He looked perplexed.

“I told you, Pietro heard her! As we left she was shouting ‘kill me’,,” I said, shooting him a triumphant look. “You probably don’t remember because of the beating.”

His forehead wrinkled even more. “That’s not what she said at all, Miss Mirga. She was calling out to the great mother—rejoicing.”

“It’s Maximoff—not Mirga,” I said, frowning. “You keep mentioning this great mother like I should know who she is. Do you mean the blessed Virgin?”

“You should know this—it is part of your heritage. You really know nothing about our history…our culture…do you?”

“That is hardly my fault!” I said—my face heating as my temper flared. “Our parents didn’t talk about it other than to say they were Ruska.”

“Because they wanted to pass as gadje—like your Uncle does with his fine house and fancy car.” His voice was bitter—almost as bitter as the sour look on his face. “Not all of us are so lucky as to be able to walk among them, accepted as one of their own—”
“Lucky? You think not knowing who you are is lucky?” I stared at him, incredulous that he would say such a thing. “Not knowing the truth about where your parents are from or how they were raised… not even knowing if you have extended family? Pietro and I… we’re stuck right in the middle—knowing we are different without understanding why. We’ll spend the rest of our whole lives walking between two worlds, never really belonging to either one—never fitting in!”

His expression softened. “You can learn—”

“Learning is not the same thing as living,” I shot back. “You were raised knowing exactly what you are… you have a sense of being part of it… of belonging to something wonderful—we will never have that. No matter how much we learn, we will always be on the outside looking in.”

“I am sorry, Miss Maximoff… I never considered such a thing. For me… you are of the blood—that means you belong. Even those who are polluted and cast out… they are still a part of the great family. It doesn’t matter the tribe… we are all one.”

“That is exactly my point, Tobar—you may think we are lucky… but really, you are the lucky one. You have the sense of being a part of the people—Pietro and I don’t. We don’t have a great family… we only have each other.”

“You have your Uncle… and if you will accept it, you both have me too—I would like to be your friend,” he offered, smiling hesitantly.

“You offer this friendship, even after what happened? Most boys would hold a grudge against my brother… they would let their embarrassment over getting beat up fester away inside them.”

“Honestly… I would have done the same thing in his place. I mean… I was trying to take away more than just his sister,” he said softly. “If someone tried to make off with Zygfryd… I would kill them.”

“That is your friend, I assume?”

His lips curved up in a gentle sort of smile that completely transformed his face—he practically glowed with happiness. “I call him Zyg.”

I let him bask in whatever thoughts he might be having for a moment before bumping my shoulder against his. “You realize that you never answered my question, right? Is it the Virgin you are speaking of?”

His smile faded. “Bibi could answer that much better than me—you are supposed to learn these things from an elder.”

“You are older than me—“ I pointed out. “—that makes you my elder, yes?”

“Yes… but I cannot tell you about the goddess—”

“Goddess?” My voice betrayed my unease at the word. “So… you are a pagan?”

“Hardly—I was baptized by a priest.” He rolled his eyes, making a face.

“You can’t believe in God and other deities—that’s not how it works,” I argued.

“Why not? Nowhere in scripture does God say there aren’t other gods… in fact, he clearly states in the commandments not to have other gods before him. He wouldn’t say that if there weren’t other deities—He just happens to be the most powerful.” He shot me a pointed look. “The old gods still
exist, Miss Maximoff, they just bow to Del the same way we do, because he is Supreme.”

“But… in church they teach us—”

“What they want us to know, and no more. There are books of the Bible they don’t even acknowledge—does that mean they do not exist?” He spoke slowly, as if I were too dumb to grasp what he was saying. “We worship God, but we honor the Great mother too—it is only right since male needs female to exist.”

I frowned; it made sense—in a blasphemous sort of way. The analytical part of my brain could not ignore the logic, despite the way I’d been raised. “Okay… so tell me about this goddess then.”

“I can’t—like I was saying before you interrupted me… it isn’t right. It has to come from—”

“An elder—and we established that you are older.” I smiled smugly. “So talk.”

“It isn’t proper—I am a man. It has to come from—”

“That is ridiculous—I mean… I can understand you not telling me about whatever mumbo jumbo you believe because of your customs—or how you worship… but surely you can at least tell me her name. She does have one, right? This isn’t some goddess your family made up—”

“Don’t be sacrilegious!” He glared at me ferociously. “We didn’t make anything up—She has been a goddess since ancient times—not just for us, but for the Hindu religion too!”

I grinned triumphantly, tossing back my hair—mentally patting myself on the back for getting under his skin. “I am sure the professor has a book on Hinduism inside… so you can either tell me about it or I can go inside and start hunting through his library—”

“Fine! Her name is Kali—that is what your brother heard the chóv’háni calling out! She reveres Kali as the font of her gifts.” He bit his lip, glancing down the street—shifting nervously from side to side. “I shouldn’t say anymore—”

“Why not” Because you’re not an elder? That’s stupid, Tobar—”

“It’s complicated Miss—”

“Wanda. My name is Wanda,” I said firmly. “I am sure it is not nearly as complicated as you think—it is all a matter of explaining things.”

“It is supposed to come from a woman who has been trained and blessed.” He sighed. “Tebera is the last chóv’háni… there is never more than one at a time. Before the old one passes on to the next life… the goddess chooses another to take her place. When Bibi was younger, Tebera thought for certain that she would be the next, so she trained her in all the old ways—preparing her to harness the great mother’s gift. It was all for nothing though—the goddess did not choose Bibi… she wasn’t the one.”

“I thought you said your Bibi has the gift,” I countered.

Of sight—that is an entirely different thing,” he shot back. “You don’t listen very well—the sight is a blessing. Because she has it and because she served as an apprentice to the chóv’háni, she is the proper one to talk about these things.”

I rolled my eyes. “Well if the old crone didn’t want people discussing it then she shouldn’t have been shouting—she should have kept it to herself.”
“She couldn’t… she was overcome. Mother said Tebera tranced out a little… that she was talking about prophecy. When she touched you… it pushed her over the edge.”

“Are you implying it’s my fault she flipped out?” I asked, not believing what I was hearing.

“Has anyone ever told you that you jump to conclusions way too much?” He huffed. “You interrupt a lot too—it’s not very polite.”

I scowled. “I’m only reacting to what you said.”

“I didn’t say it was your fault—and I didn’t say she ‘flipped out’ either. If you aren’t going to listen to what I actually say and stop interpreting things the wrong way, then I might as well leave.”

It was on the tip of my tongue to tell him to do just that, but my curiosity was far too strong for my own good; forcing a smile, I tried to look apologetic. “Fine… I will try not to interrupt.”

“Mother and Bibi both told me the same thing—the Drabarni said she heard the voice of the goddess when she touched your skin. You have been chosen.”

My smile faded—unease danced up and down my spine, raising goosebumps on my skin. “What does that mean? Chosen for what?”

“Chosen by the goddess—when the time comes… you will be the next chóv’háni,” he said solemnly. “You and your brother… you are the one that were foretold. You will be the saviors of all.”
IT IS A VERY STRANGE THING, dealing with someone who is clearly delusional; one moment you think they are completely sane and normal, then the next they are spouting out the sort of outlandish things that make you wonder exactly how crazy they might be. The thoughts racing through your mind vary, flicking from one thing to the next; should you humor them, pretending to believe what they say—all the while praying they’ll go away peacefully? Or perhaps would it be better to force them to confront their hallucination head on—hoping they don’t turn violent when faced with logic and reason? I really had no choice in the matter—there was no way on earth I could play along; the things Tobar was saying were far too ridiculous for me to even try to pretend I agreed.

To make matters even worse, I felt the irresistible urge to laugh at how solemnly he was discussing such a completely ludicrous notion; a giggle escaped me before I could catch it—he scowled, visibly prickling at my amusement.

“What’s so funny?”

“I’m sorry… you just… do you realize how ridiculous that sounds?” I had a hard time forming words around my laughter. That is the problem with giggles—once they start, it is next to impossible to chase them away.

“It is not! It is the truth!,” he snapped, jumping to his feet—pacing the walkway in front of me. “This is why I shouldn’t have spoken—I should have left it to Bibi!”

“If you think I would believe such a thing from anyone you are very mistaken,” I said, biting my lip in an attempt to rein in my mirth. “It is quite possibly the stupidest thing I have ever heard—”

“Stop being so narrow minded!” He bent down—practically shouting right in my face. “You admitted you don’t know anything about our culture—you don’t understand how important a thing this is! You were chosen and touched by the goddess before you were even born—”

“You are as crazy as Tebera if you believe that.” My amusement vanished; I edged away from him slowly—prepared to bolt back inside.

“I am not! And the fact she fell into prophecy when she named the two of you—”

“I already had a name,” I snapped. “I am Wanda—that is all. I do not care about having a Romani name—”

“You are jumping to conclusions again,” he said, shaking his head. “The fact you were named after the first of us is very important—it means that this time… for the first time the goddess might honor more than one with her gift, Wanda. When the Drabarni touched you… she felt it—you will be the greatest since the beginning of the line. You will become the very essence of the mother… her vessel here on this earth. You being a twin means it is a double blessing—”

“Your brain was addled by the beating Pietro gave you—you don’t know what you heard that night.”

“I told you, Mother and Bibi relayed what happened.” He fidgeted nervously, shifting from side to side. “Truthfully, you are right—I don’t remember anything that happened after he attacked me. But Bibi would not lie… and my Mother… she wouldn’t dare lie about something like this. Not about
the goddess.”

“I don’t believe in your goddess,” I snapped, “and I don’t believe in sorceresses or prophecy either! I want nothing to do with any of it.”

“That doesn’t matter in the slightest—it doesn’t change what will be,” he said obstinately. “You can ignore it and pretend it is not real all you want, but the day will come when you’ll see how wrong you are. When you are filled with the great mother’s gifts… you will need the elders to help you… to teach you how to—”

“I will never ask them for anything—”

“If you don’t… you will lose your mind, Wanda. No mortal can harness the power of a deity—especially not when the deity in question has the ability to shape worlds,” he said softly, crouching down in front of me.

“You realize you just countered your entire argument, right? You keep telling me Tebera isn’t crazy…but at the same time you say these gifts make a person insane—”

“You don’t listen, chóvi’hánni… you are the one that was foretold when we were banished from our place of peace. The amount of favor the mother has shown Tebera is a trifling, inconsequential thing when compared with what you will receive.”

“Don’t call me that!” I glared at him, getting to my feet. “I am a child of God alone—no pagan creature has any right to try and claim me! I don’t care what the old crone said—she was wrong!”

“She isn’t. Tebera is finally at peace—she has waited a very long time for this, Wanda. Now she knows that she will soon be able to pass from this life to the next. She is old and tired—ready to move on. Now that you have been declared the chóvi’hánni, she is secure that her time as the chóv’háni is coming to an end.”

“What is the difference between—”

“One is the greater…the other the lesser—her heir… so to speak. I suppose it is sort of like how there were once princes and kings in a way; when the old king dies… the prince takes his place—that is how it will be for you when Tebera passes on to her next journey.”

I played the strange word over in my mind—the inflection between the two was slightly different when he said them. “What does it mean, anyway?”

His lips quirked up in a smile. “You probably won’t like it… I mean, considering your reaction to pagan things.”

“Don’t be difficult—I do not have the patience for it today, Tobar.”

“It means she is our enchantress… and you are the little witch who will one day take the prominence of her position.” His face took on an almost obeisant expression as he spoke. “But you will be so much more than that. Don’t you see? One day Kali will fill you with her power—that is why my mother has to listen to you. She wouldn’t dare risk offending the great mother in any way.”

“So… what, are you wanting me to tell her I had some sort of prediction or something?” I shot him a pointed look, wondering if he had the slightest idea how fanatical he sounded. “I haven’t got any abilities like your Bibi or Tebera. Aren’t you afraid that if I lie about such a thing, your goddess might choose to punish you?”
“I suppose I shouldn’t be surprised you’re a little dim witted—pretty girls aren’t known for being smart,” he muttered, making a face.

I scowled—for a moment I actually contemplated slapping him for the insult. “I will have you know I happen to be extremely intelligent—”

“Obviously not since you still don’t get it.” He huffed, sinking back down to the step. “Kali is the keeper of the wheel—she shapes and un-shapes reality with her thoughts… and she has chosen you, Wanda. You will be her voice. If you say it… it won’t be a lie—someday it will come to pass.”

The chills returned, stronger than they’d been the first time; I didn’t have to believe in his goddess to be terrified of the thought of such a thing. “I don’t want to be her voice—I just want a quiet, simple life!”

“Perhaps that is why she chose you,” he offered; his voice was soft, and soothing—as if he could sense how much his words had scared me. “She knows that you won’t abuse her great gift by using it for your own gain. Maybe there is something about the two of you that suits her needs in a way that no one has since the time of Tchin and Genia.”

“What do they have to do with anything?” I sat back down beside him, rubbing my temples—my head was starting to ache from all the twisted, convoluted things I was hearing.

“I really can’t explain it since you don’t know the old stories—”

“I know about them… the professor told us that much.”

“Then you know about the queen and the young maiden?” He asked, eyeing me with a skeptical look on his face.

“Yes… and about the goose and their escaping and being the first of the people.”

“Then you already know the answer,” he said irritably. “The blessing the queen gave wasn’t supposed to go to the girl at all—the great mother intended it for the twins.”

“But if it had gone to them, the girl wouldn’t have been able to warn them about their father,” I pointed out.

He sighed, rolling his eyes. “They wouldn’t have needed her warning if they’d been given the mother’s gift, Wanda—they would have seen what their father was planning the same way the girl did. The queen’s mistake altered the fate the mother had planned for Tchin and Genia, and she doesn’t like it much when things don’t play out the way she wants—I mean… look at what happened to Szandau as a result of the King trying to change things.”

“I don’t know what happened,” I admitted, glancing over at him. “The professor only said that the king cursed them as they fled—nothing about what happened to the kingdom after that.”

“The mother wiped our place of peace off the face of the earth completely—Bibi says there aren’t even records of its existence anymore.”

I stared at him, horrified at the thought. “And you respect this goddess? One who would kill so many good, innocent people?”

“When Tchin and Genia fled… the people changed. They lost all hope and eventually allowed their king to lead them astray. The devil got ahold of them.” He shrugged, leaning back on his hands and staring up at the sky. “What she did… it is not so different than what God did, you know—there was
a great flood and when the waters receded... the evil was washed clean. I am sure innocent little children died when He chose to save only Noah's family, but that doesn't make you turn away from Him, does it?"

“They all drowned? Just because she was upset?”

“Yes... but there's more to it than just that. Don't ask me to tell you the story, either—if you want to hear a swato, you must ask an elder. I am not skilled in telling tales—I tend to forget things and leave important parts out.”

“In the very least you could tell me the basics—”

“I think not—you are already looking at me like I belong in an asylum or something.” He scoffed, sounding haughty. “If I were to say that when the king stained the grass of the meadow with the serving girls blood, the great mother used a milkweed to gather up every single drop, reclaiming the wasted blessing, you would probably run inside and bolt the door, thinking I was a madman.”

I snorted. “You see? When you say outlandish things like that it doesn't help your case at all—it only adds to my disbelief. Why would an all-powerful being waste time doing such a thing?”

He smirked. “Because old tales are supposed to explain the things that we can't understand to us, Wanda—milkweeds scatter. She used the winds of fate to spread her gift across the centuries, each seed touching a different woman’s path in a different time—that’s how the chóv’háni came to be.”

I stared at him, completely speechless—unable to comprehend how anyone could spout out such a farfetched thing with a straight face.

“See? I was right—you are looking at me like I am crazy.” He sighed, reaching over to tug at a strand of my hair. “It wouldn’t kill you to believe in magic just a little—you might find it helps you keep life from getting you down.”

“I believe in what I can see and feel,” I shot back, frowning at him—jerking my head to pull my hair free from his grasp as I amended the statement. “And miracles... I believe in those of course.”

“So you can believe in miracles and not magic?” His lips twisted back into the self-satisfied smirk that was starting to get on my nerves. “That really doesn’t make sense at all.”

“I’ve never seen magic, but I’ve experienced a miracle first hand—that makes it impossible not to believe in them.”

“How do you know it was a miracle? It might have been magic, only you didn’t realize it—”

“It wasn’t magic that saved us the day our parents died—it was Divine intervention.” I snapped, “We not only lived through the bombing, but we didn’t get crushed in the rubble, though we were trapped for days. We could hear the building crumbling to pieces around us... but our little cubby stayed safe, no matter how much the wreckage shifted around us. That is a miracle. Our surviving on our own for three years without money or food or shelter... without the authorities catching us and dragging us into an orphanage... those things are even more proof that miracles exist.”

He chewed on his lower lip, studying me for a moment before nodding his head slowly. “Okay... you are right... those things are miracles—but you have experienced magic, Wanda... you just don’t realize it.”

“Don’t be ridiculous—”
“Love is the most magical thing there is,” he said triumphantly, “especially a love like yours… one that blooms in a field not meant to be reaped.”

I narrowed my eyes. “Love is a miracle… a gift straight from God. Everyone knows that.”

“Maybe you are right…” he shrugged, flashing me a lopsided grin, “or maybe miracles and magic are the same thing, just in different forms—did you ever stop to think about that?”

“No—because magic isn’t real. If it was, people could wave their hands and give themselves all the money in the world. They could make themselves emperors… turning everyone into slaves,” I argued. “It is one thing to have faith in your deity, Tobar—but another thing altogether to expect me to do the same when none of it makes a bit of sense and goes against everything I believe and have been taught.”

“I’m probably explaining it all wrong—that’s why it is supposed to come from someone who has proper knowledge and can answer questions in the right manner.” His grin faded, twisting into a scowl as he tugged at a stalk of grass that had stubbornly shoved its way up between the steps. “Bibi could tell you better—”

“I think you are still overlooking the most obvious proof that Tebera was wrong—I know nothing about healing… and I certainly don’t have any of the so called ‘gifts’ that your Bibi and the old crone claim to have,” I said gently, pointing out the most noticeable flaw in his delusion.

“You are different—that’s what I’ve been trying to tell you! Besides, you don’t have to know about healing—that is just how it manifests for some. Bibi knew nothing about healing until Tebera taught her—and now she is one of the best.” He huffed—clearly exasperated by my logic. “You don’t show signs of a gift now because the time has not arrived—that doesn’t mean it won’t manifest in the future, Wanda. The mother will bless you when she determines you are ready—not a single minute before. Her time is different than ours… after all, she is responsible for fate and destiny, shaping the reality around us with every turn of the wheel.”

I stared off into the distance, considering what he’d said—not the nonsensical part, of course, but the one thing he’d uttered that truly caught my attention. The professor had mentioned Simza’s healing skills as well; I didn’t believe for a second that it was any sort of magical ability—but holistic healing through herbs was a very real, very old practice. “These things your Bibi does to heal people… do her concoctions or whatever actually work?”

He frowned—confusion flickering across his face at the way I’d changed the subject. “What do you mean?”

I sighed. “Are the remedies she makes real… or are they fake? You know… to fool people into spending money?”

“She wouldn’t do such a thing!” He looked completely offended by the question. “She helps people… it is her calling.”

“Can she cure… anything?”

To give him credit, he actually seemed to think about it before answering. “They have always worked on me—and I cannot think of an affliction they have not eased. Even the ones that aren’t completely cured… it helps the worst of the symptoms, improving and extending the sick person’s life.”

“Even something like… cancer?” I asked softly, glancing over at him.
His brow wrinkled. “I cannot swear to that... but only because she does not discuss her clients with me. I know there is one old woman who comes to see her twice a year... I waited on her in the restaurant once and she told me that Bibi saved her. She said the doctors told her there was no hope to be had... that she would probably only live a few months—and so she started visiting Bibi. That was five years ago—Bibi has not cured her, but she certainly prolonged her life with her healing, don’t you think?”

I didn’t say anything—I was too busy trying to ignore the surge of hope that had flared up in my chest; it was a stupid, foolish thing to put faith in some old woman’s kitchen brewed medicines—when they failed, I would surely sufferer even more heartache than if I simply accepted the professor’s impending death.

“Wanda... why are you asking me this?”

I stared down at my lap for a moment, weighing the chance I’d be taking—deciding in an instant that whatever the risk was, it was one I had to take. “Can you get me in to see Simza without your mother knowing? I need to talk to her.”

“Sure... you can go up the fire escape—the entire top floor is hers, devoted to her work. Mother never even sets foot on the stairs—she is forbidden from entering Bibi’s domain.”

“But you’re allowed?” I’d need a translator—it wouldn’t do any good to visit if the old woman and I were unable to understand each other’s words.

He blushed. “I am... she is teaching me to be a healer. Someday... I would like to study medicine."

I was unable to hide my surprise—obviously he was far, far smarter than I thought. “Then maybe I don’t need her at all. You could—”

“I couldn’t... she is far more skilled than I will ever be. I’ve only learned the simple things... setting a bone... straightening a broken nose...” his hand moved up, touching the plaster on his face. “What you are wanting is something she will never teach me—it is forbidden. That kind of healing requires a gift... it Is the sort of blessing the mother only bestows upon our women.”

“How much does she charge for these things... the medicines she makes?”

“It depends.”

I rolled my eyes—not at all happy with the evasiveness of his answer. “On what, exactly?”

“There isn’t an exact answer. It depends on different things... if the tincture requires something hard to get... whether she has the ingredients... how long it takes to prepare it... what they can afford to spend...” his voice trailed off as he glanced over at me, studying me for a moment—as if he was hesitant to go on. “But the most important thing she takes into consideration is the message she receives when she takes their hand.”

“I should have known there was some sort of mystic mumbo jumbo involved somehow.” I muttered, scowling.

“There isn’t... not really. But she can sense a person’s need... their intentions, you know? It wouldn’t do for her to make someone something to help them sleep if they actually planned on using the whole amount to kill their wife or drug someone against their will. If she senses there is anything but pure truthfulness in their heart, she sends them away, no matter how much they are willing to pay for her services.”
“Does she ever… um… let people pay in installments?” It would be easy enough to pay her out of our weekly wages—or to simply give her back the money the professor had deposited into savings—the hard part would be convincing the professor to take whatever it was that Simza brewed.

“You haven’t answered my question… what is all this about?”

“The professor… he is sick. Cancer is eating away at his insides—he says he probably won’t live another year,” I said softly, my eyes filling with tears. “I was wondering if I could buy something from your Bibi that might help him.”

“No… you can’t,” he said bluntly, shifting to tug a handkerchief out of his pocket—pressing it into my hand.

His words made the tears flow faster. “But you just said—”

“I mean she won’t sell it to you. You are our chóvi’hánni, Wanda—she will do it for free… though she will probably make you help her so you can learn to brew it yourself.”

I swiped at my eyes, my mind racing; if taking part in their fantasies was what I had to do to help the old man who’d shown Pietro and I such kindness, it was a price I would gladly pay—though I would have to beg God to forgive me for the blasphemy. “I told you… I don’t have those sort of gifts. I can barely bandage a wound.”

“And I told you… you don’t need a gift—just a desire to learn a few simple things about healing and alternative medicines. You are lucky that you are a girl… I would give anything to have Simza teach me such things. That kind of knowledge would benefit me if I ever get to attend—” unexpectedly, he stopped short, cutting off his sentence; I watched him worry his lower lip between his teeth, his eyes darting away from mine—and for just a moment… I could almost swear I felt something brushing along my skin.

Guilt.

Sudden comprehension slammed into me—so strong that I didn’t stop to ponder what I was sensing; there had been far more motivating Tobar’s actions at the restaurant than just his mother’s demands. He’d lied to me outright—unaware that my own instinctive nature would clue me in to his betrayal. “That’s why you agreed to do it… isn’t it? It wasn’t just about pleasing your mother… you did know about the money she thought I’d inherit—you thought you could use it for schooling.”

“I already told you I didn’t know anything about any money—”

“Don’t keep lying to me, Tobar,” I said, narrowing my eyes—unable to stop my lips from curving up in a sardonic smile. “After all… your goddess might not like it if you do.”

The restless movement of his hands stilled—he actually paled, staring at me with wide, frightened eyes. “I’m sorry… you are right. Horrible as it was, I thought learning to help people would make up for it. I thought… in time… you might understand.”

The tremble in his voice filled me with shame—he was wrong for what he’d done… but so was I. I’d used his belief in the worst possible way—as a weapon to fill him with fear, bending him to my will; it was a horrible, ugly thing—the sort that a religious charlatan might use to keep their flock in line. I swore to myself then and there that I would never again stoop to using someone’s faith to terrorize them—my mama had not raised me to be a cruel, treacherous bully.

“If you’d succeeded, you wouldn’t have lived long enough to learn that I was a pauper,” I said, calmly. “Pietro would have torn you limb from limb for touching me.”
“I guess I should just go and leave you be…” he said, sounding mournful as he stood.

“You guess wrong—you’re not going anywhere.” I reached out, grabbing his arm as I got to my feet. “At least… not without me.”

“But… you said… I lied to you.” His eyes flicked from my hand to my face—I chuckled softly at his confusion.

“You did… but you also came clean—if you hadn’t I wouldn’t still be talking to you.” I let go of him, tilting my head back to meet his eyes. “You are taking me to see your Bibi—it is the only way you can earn my forgiveness for what you did.”

“But… your brother—”

“Don’t you worry about Pietro—leave him to me. And besides…” I shoved up my sleeve, revealing the knife in my hand, “…he isn’t the only one you have to worry about, Tobar. I am not nearly as helpless and meek as I appear.”

He eyed the knife for a moment, looking skeptical. “Wanda… do you even know how to use that thing?”

“I know how to aim… would you like to know what my target would be?” I brandished the blade, flashing a completely fake, saccharine sweet smile. “I will give you a little hint… it is an outward appendage you have that I don’t.”

He winced, dropping his hand to shield his private parts—as if he were perhaps imagining how painful it would be if I made good on my threat. “Okay… I believe you… now stop swinging that thing around—you’re making me nervous.”

“Good… maybe it will teach you not to underestimate girls,” I shot back, feigning a jab towards his nether regions.

“Seriously! Stop!” He jumped back, eyeing me. “If you put it away… I’ll give you something better… the sort of knife you can carry with you all the time. If you cart that thing around you’re only going to end up stabbing yourself.”

I arched a brow at him. “If I put it away I would have a hard time getting to it if I needed it.”

He rolled his eyes. “I already told you I have no interest in you that way. Here… see?” He reached into his pocket, pulling out a thin, black oblong object—tossing it on the grass between us. “You can have that… I have a few more at home.”

“What is it?” I stooped down, scooping it up—never taking my eyes off him; it would take more than a few apologies and a present to earn my complete trust.

“A sliding switchblade… see the end that’s got a slit? Point it away from yourself and press the button.” I pushed the button, letting out a gasp as a wicked looking blade popped out—he laughed at my amazement. “That one is a double action blade… if you push the button again, it will retract the blade.”

I repeated the gesture—sure enough, the blade disappeared completely. “I didn’t know such things existed… are you sure I can have it?”

“Of course… like I said, I have more. I sort of collect knives… it is the kind of thing my mother expects a son to do. I could give your brother one too… if he doesn’t kill me first. Honestly… it’s not
safe to wander around these days without some form of protection.”

“I would appreciate that… it would ease my worries,” I admitted, shoving the slim knife in my back pocket. “I have to lock up—go down to the end of the street and up the alley. I’ll meet you in the back.”

“Why—”

“I don’t have a key and I’m not about to go off and leave the front door unbolted—I can throw the latch on the back doorknob and it will lock behind me.” I turned to the door, not waiting for him to agree. “And I have to leave a note for my brother and grab my shawl—”

“You’ll need more than a shawl—the wind will chill you right down to your bones,” he called after me; I didn’t bother responding—Pietro and I had suffered from far colder weather than any stupid breeze might bring.

Securing the dead bolt behind me, I grabbed my shawl off the hook, retreating to the kitchen; after I returning the paring knife to its place, I scribbled out a quick note to my brother—propping it up on the counter by the donuts. It wasn’t until I pulled the back door closed behind me that I realized there was a gaping hole in my plan—if Pietro and the professor weren’t back by the time I returned, I would have no way of getting back in. I glared at the doorknob for a moment, then shoved my worries aside—it was far too late to rectify the problem, so there was no point in allowing myself to fret over what was already done.

As I crossed the yard, I tried not to dawdle, but it was difficult, considering I had yet to investigate the broad expanse of the garden that surrounded me. In truth, the only thing that kept me from being distracted was the knowledge that Pietro’s feelings would be hurt if I explored without him by my side—there would be time enough for us to discover it together, later.

I stopped just short of the large metal gate at the end of the driveway, trying to determine the best way to get through—I didn’t know the code, and the bars didn’t offer any crevices that I could use to help me scale it. The same went for the wall that surrounded the yard—whatever it was constructed of had been covered by a thick layer of some sort of stucco, obliterating any toeholds that I might have used. I was in the process of studying the nearest tree, looking for any branches I could use to drop over into the alley when the sound of Tobar’s voice on the other side of the gate distracted me.

“I think you are small enough to squeeze through the bars if you turn sideways, Wanda.”

I eyed the gate again—irritated that I hadn’t considered his suggestion myself. “I don’t know… it’s awfully narrow.”

He made a dismissive noise. “So are you.”

I bristled at the insinuation, but held my tongue, attempting to do what he suggested; I am not ashamed to admit I felt a surge of triumphant pleasure when my rear end got stuck halfway through. “Clearly your estimations are wrong—”

“Oh stop your crowing and give me your hand—it’s not my fault your backside is bigger than your front,” he muttered.

“You are lucky I need your help getting unstuck, otherwise I might slap you.” I grabbed his hand—groaning as he jerked it. “Don’t dislocate my arm!”

“Well help me out then! Wiggle or something… you know… to work your way free!”
“It is a little hard to wiggle when I’m stuck, Tobar,” I snapped. “The metal is digging into my—ouch!” I let out an angry shriek as he jerked me again—this time with enough force to pull me free; we tumbled to the ground, landing in a heap on the pavement.

“Get off! I’m not a landing pad,” he growled, shoving at my shoulders.

“Well if you hadn’t pulled so hard—”

“I got you loose, didn’t I? Women! Always harping and never bothering to thank a man—”

“Thank you,” I said sarcastically, “for getting me out of the mess your bright idea got me into.”

Ignoring my tone, his lips twitched up in a teasing sort of grin as he climbed to his feet. “Don’t blame me—blame your ass, Wanda—”

“Enough with the cracks about my body! I am self-conscious enough about it as it is—you are going to give me a complex,” I snarled, shaking the dirt and gravel out of my shawl.

“I told you that thing wouldn’t be enough to stay warm—don’t you ever listen?”

I opened my mouth to respond, but at that moment I noticed something that had completely escaped my attention before—he was climbing onto some sort of motor scooter that he’d left leaning against the wall. “What… is that?”

“My bike,” he said, smirking. “I thought you said you were smart.”

“Shut up—I am smart! I just thought…” My voice trailed off as I studied the contraption. It honestly never occurred to me that we might not be walking. For me, the concept of a young person having transportation of any form was a completely foreign idea—the sort of thing that only happened in the movies, or in far off, exotic countries that I would never see. “I didn’t see it out front, that’s all.”

“I parked around the corner—I didn’t want you hearing me pull up… you might not have opened the door.” He shrugged off his jacket, holding it out to me. “Here… my sweater is enough to keep me warm.”

“I can’t take your—”

“Yes you can… come on, I haven’t got all day. I’ve got plans tonight… I’ll have to bring you back and still have time to get ready.” He shook the jacket impatiently.

Chewing at the corner of my lip, I hesitantly took it—my mind racing as I slowly pulled it on. I was suddenly torn—wanting with all my heart to help the professor, but riding Tobar’s bike would mean I’d have to get far closer to him than I wanted. I would have to lean up against him, holding on to him with my arms—and I didn’t want to be that close to anyone but Pietro.

Tobar made a choking sound—one that was suspiciously close to disguised laughter; I crossed my arms, glaring at him as he faked a cough. “Is something amusing?”

“You are very transparent sometimes, Wanda—I can tell what you are thinking. I promise I’m not going to suddenly start liking girls just because you sit close to me. Trust me… I am completely immune to whatever charms you might have—as a matter of fact I seriously doubt they even exist.”

“That has nothing to do with it at all… I just don’t like touching anyone but my brother,” I huffed. “Especially not being so close to a person… no offense, but just the thought of it creeps me out.”
“Well I’m sorry, but you’re going to have to suck it up—you get on or stay here… but either way, I am leaving,” he said, twisting his hand on the handlebars—revving the motor. “The choice is yours.”

“You can’t just leave… you promised to take me to see—”

“Watch me,” he shot back—taking off down the alley, leaving me standing there staring after him.

“Tobar! You get back here right now!” I shouted, running after him.

He stopped about five feet away, smirking back at me over his shoulder. “Last chance, Wanda… are you coming… or not?”

Cursing him under my breath, I clambered up onto the bike—letting out a startled shriek as he gunned the engine; we sped off so fast that I wrapped my arms around him without thought—but I did make a point to pay him back by squeezing him far harder than I needed to.

**TRAVELING ACROSS NOVI GRAD** by motorbike was a heady, thrilling thing—far, far different than riding in a car; the rush of air against my face, whipping my hair back… the way Tobar maneuvered his machine, leaning into the curves, then accelerating, taking us to even greater speeds… everything about it made my pulse race with the strangest mixture of fear and excitement, sending surges of adrenaline skyrocketing through my system. It was like flying—and I just knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that Pietro would love the sensation even more than I did. He was a natural daredevil at heart—he loved going fast and doing risky things, like climbing the tallest trees to swing from their branches, or doing handstands on top of our wall. I swore to myself right then and there that somehow I would find a way to get my twin a motorbike of his very own someday.

“Well? What do you think?” Tobar called over his shoulder—slowing down as we turned into the alley behind his family’s restaurant.

“It is wonderful,” I answered breathlessly, reaching up to shove my windswept hair from my face. “Do they cost very much?”

“Quite a bit if you buy them brand new… but you can get a second hand one for maybe six or seven hundred Euro and fix it up—that’s what I did with this one.” He slid off the bike, holding my arm to steady me as I did the same—flashing me a teasing grin. “Thinking about buying one after just a single ride?”

“Maybe someday… Pietro would love it.” I returned his smile, tugging off his jacket and passing it over to him.

“My uncle has been promising me a real motorcycle for my birthday… if he comes through, and you manage to help me with my mother, I could let you have this one for say… three hundred. That’s a steal—believe me.”

“I wouldn’t take advantage of you like that,” I protested, watching as he secured the bike to the railing of the kitchen steps with a chain. “Besides… he would need a permit or registration of some sort to drive it… yes?”

“Not necessarily—” he grinned, “—I don’t have one.”

“But that is against the law!” I protested, following after him as he moved further into the alley.

“Gadje laws don’t apply to us, Wanda—they don’t consider us to be people, so why should we care about their rules and regulations? We have our own laws, and they say absolutely nothing about driving motorbikes.” He jumped up, hooking his fingers on the overhead ladder to the fire escape—it
slid down with a rusty sounding groan of protest. “If you are going to start visiting Bibi I will ask the trash men to move the dumpster over here. That way you can climb up on it and reach the ladder on your own.”

“I don’t know if I’ll be coming again… it is a very long way from home.”

“All the more reason for you to buy my bike—you’ll come again… you will have to when you run out of medicine.” He waved me up the ladder. “Ladies first—all the way to the top. Don’t look down as you climb—it might make you dizzy and I don’t want you falling on me again and crushing the life out of me.”

“Thanks a lot,” I muttered, beginning to climb. It only took a minute or so for me to be suddenly grateful for the extra-long sleeves of my borrowed sweater; the higher I went, the harder it was on my arms—had it not been for the material covering my hands, the rusty metal would have surely abraded my palms quite painfully.

We were perhaps three quarters of the way up when an unexpected squealing sound from somewhere above us startled me so badly that I misplaced my foot, losing my balance completely; terrified, I tightened my grip on the rung above me, desperately trying to find the ladder with my feet. I cursed my pitiful strength as my grip began to slip; when my fingers started to cramp, I let out a terrified scream—positive I was about to tumble all the way down to the ground.

“Wanda! Hang on!” The ladder shook, increasing the pain in my fingers—a moment later, Tobar moved up right behind me, pinning me between his body and the ladder. “It’s okay… I’ve got you. Just take a deep breath—the rung is right beneath your feet. You just can’t feel it because you are holding yourself too high. Relax… I promise I won’t let you fall.”

Closing my eyes, I fought against the panicky thoughts that were insisting I was about to plummet several stories; I stopped kicking, letting my arm muscles loosen just a bit, and sure enough, the slack was all it took—my feet landed firmly on the metal rung.

Above us, a torrent of angry sounding words made me tilt my head back—Simza was leaning out the window above us, glaring down with a fearsome expression on her face.

Tobar sighed. “She is angry at me for putting you in danger.”

“It’s not your fault… tell her that.” As he called out to her, I took a deep breath, then began to climb again, concentrating on each rung—not moving my hands until I was sure both of my feet were firmly planted. Simza made a dismissive sound from up above me—I paused for a moment, watching her as she climbed out the window with the agility of a much younger woman; as soon as I was close enough, she crouched down, her hands latching around my wrists in an iron tight grip—one she didn’t release until I was safely on the landing.

Speaking softly in that strange, musical sounding language that I didn’t understand, she pulled me into her arms, hugging me tightly as we waited for Tobar to catch up and join us.

“What is she saying?” I glanced over at him, not attempting to mask my confusion.

“Bibi… enough. She cannot learn from you if she cannot understand what you say.” He rolled his eyes as his great aunt hissed her displeasure at his statement. “She can speak Sokovian, Wanda… though it is broken at time—she just chooses not to.”

“This is a joke, yes? Why on earth would anyone—”

“People speak freely around those who do not understand,” the old woman said, releasing me. “One
I stared at her, shocked to hear my native tongue coming from her mouth; she spoke slowly, measuring each word, and her accent was very thick, but still, I could understand her. “But… the other night—"

“There are some in my family that require this special listening of mine.” She chuckled, smoothing back my hair. “My niece does not think I am sharp enough to master any tongue but my own—she is wrong.”

I studied her for a moment, suddenly understanding something that had escaped me. “Is that why the professor wouldn’t translate? He knows this, doesn’t he… that you speak Sokovian. Is that why you got so flustered?”

“It is sometimes a difficult thing… needing to speak, but not being able to. Tebera was testing me, little sister—to see if I could maintain my discipline, even when my family was in peril.” She smiled, steering me towards the window. “I passed her test.”

“Still… that wasn’t very nice of her, putting you in such a position.” I huffed, following after her as she disappeared through the window.

“It is not the Drabarni’s job to be nice—she is our teacher in all things. That night I learned the importance of communicating without speech.”

I didn’t answer—I was too distracted by the room around me to even process what she’d said. Every available surface was covered in bottles and jars or strewn with old looking books, making it look like some kind of alchemist’s laboratory. In the center of the room, a long farmhouse table was covered in bundles of herbs; there were several mortar and pestles, as well as large copper bowls, and what could only be described as a witch’s big black cauldron hung on a spit in the fireplace.

“Wanda… your exceptionally large caboose is blocking my way—move!”

Tobar’s snarky comment snapped me out of my stupor—I spun around, glaring down at him as he crawled through the window. “I told you to stop making fun of me!”

“You see nephew? I told you that the two of you would be great friends. Already you are teasing each other.” Simza chuckled, moving over to the fireplace—grabbing a wooden spoon from the mantle to stir the contents of the cauldron. “Your tonic is almost done, little sister… it only needs a few more things.”

“My… tonic?” I blinked, wrapping my arms around myself in an attempt to stave off the chill that raced up and down my spine. “You know what I came for?”

“I do… it has been brewing since the night we met.” She glanced over at me, her dark eyes studying me—as if she could sense my unease. “You do not believe me… that is alright child. Your natural abilities are still not fully formed.”

“I don’t know what you mean—”

“I think you do.” She returned the spoon to its place, heading for a smaller table that was shoved against the wall. “Sit. We will… how do you say… discuss this.”

I shook my head. “There is nothing to discuss—”

“Intuition… empathy… feeling your other half’s emotions—are you telling me you do not feel these
things? That you do not get the tiniest sense of the things that the people around you feel?”

I stared at her, not speaking—slowly crossing the room to sink down across from her. “How do you know these things?” It came out a whisper.

“I feel it hovering around you… it is like a halo, little sister. I sensed it when I gazed upon the two of you wrapped in each other’s arms in the alley. It is a double sided gift, is it not? He has it too… that is sometimes how it is for our twins.” She held out her hand—her gaze flicked down to mine pointedly, darting back up to my face. “May I?”

“You just touched me outside... why do you need to do it again?”

“I did not… reach out. To be invasive in such a manner would be abusing the mother’s gift.”

Slowly, I reached out, sliding my hand into hers; she closed her eyes, her breathing speeding as her grip tightened on my hand. “So much sorrow for one so young… it is a heavy burden you carry, chóvi’hánni, and there will be great pain along your path…but it is not without purpose. It is all part of your trial by fire… when you step from the flames, every part of your being will thrum with the mother’s grace.”

“I do not mean to be disrespectful to your beliefs, Madam,” I said softly, “but I only worship God above.”

I could see her eyes moving beneath her closed lids—flicking back and forth so fast that I couldn’t keep up with them. “Does a good mother become envious when her child loves another, little sister? Maternal love is unconditional—no matter what her children do, it does not lessen what she feels for them. She is hearth and home… the very essence of womanhood—all she wants to do is love.”

“Well… that is very nice to know… but I still—”

“It does not matter what deity you worship, chóvi’hánni… it does not matter what name you pray to, be it Del or Allah or Yahweh or Kali… all that matters is that you believe that there is a higher power guiding us all—one that is good and just, using kindness and love to combat evil. You believe this… she senses it in your heart.” Her brow scrunched up—she took a shaky breath, her hand tightening around mine even more. “The only thing she will ever ask of you… is what is already embedded in your heart and soul.”

Immediately, I jerked my hand free, my temper flaring to life. “There is only one thing embedded in my heart and soul—and she cannot have him!”

Her eyes flicked open—immediately, I froze; for a moment, they reflected the dancing flames of the fire in them in an eerie way, making a golden glow appear in their depths. “I am not talking about your other half… you will need him to still your mind when your gift begins to grow. He is the Shiva to your Kali… when the mother loses herself in frenzy, it is only her consort that can calm the madness within her—likewise, it is only her touch which can soothe away the quickness of his mighty rage exploding.”

“We are not Hindu—”

“Neither are we… that is but one of the faiths that honors her. The Greeks called her Moerae… she was Mut to the Egyptians, and Uni to the Romans. She has many names to many different people…” her voice trailed off—her lips curving into a sly, knowing smile. “One of the oldest versions of her name is Leva… and so the Hebrews called her Eve.”

“You are speaking blasphemy,” I whispered, staring at her with disbelief. “Eve was not a goddess—
she was made from Adam’s rib!”

“The Bible has been translated many, many times, little sister—the Church of Rome has hidden away books… adjusting the ones that remain to suit their patriarchic needs, reflecting but a small portion of the truth. There are far older tales that say Leva was the first… she gave birth to Idam, earning the very same title that Eve carries in the Old Testament—Mother of All Living.”

“I will not listen to any more of this!” I stood up so abruptly that my chair toppled over backwards, hitting the ground with a crash. “The Bible warns us not to listen to false prophets—”

“Tell me child… does a man’s body swell as it nurtures new life, growing inside the womb? No—without woman… man is a barren, desolate thing. Females are the givers of life… think on that before you go quoting incomplete scripture to me. I simply offer an alternate version of a tale you already know for consideration.”

I stared at her a moment, fighting an internal battle—the superstitious part of me was demanding I flee from the sacrilegious things she was saying, but her words had stirred the logical part of my mind, and it insisted on examining all sides of the equation to better determine what was true. Bending down, I righted the chair, sinking back down on the cushion. “I am sorry for my rudeness… I just… I do not like to hear such things.”

“To be chóvi’hánni is to be a seeker of truth—that is why you remain here, despite your desire to run. You cannot help it… the instinct is woven into the very fibers of your soul.” She leaned back in her chair, watching me with a knowing sort of smile on her face. “If I speak… are you prepared to listen? Or will you let others decide what you believe?”

“I will listen… though I cannot promise to keep quiet,” I muttered.

“That is enough… for now. Nephew… brew us some of my special tea—this is not for male ears.” She waited until the door closed behind him, only leaning forward to speak when the sound of his feet pounding down the stairs echoed through the quiet stillness of the room. “First… you must understand the nature of the great mother. She is creation… preservation… and she is destruction, chóvi’hánni. Ours is but one of the universes that rest upon the vast darkness of her body, rising out of her womb… and one day it will remerge into the elemental chaos contained within her being. She devours time itself, constructing and deconstructing reality with the slightest of thoughts as she turns the great wheel.”

“God alone is responsible for creation,” I argued. “Even the story about Tchin and Genia agrees.”

She chuckled, shaking her head. “The tale speaks of Del being the most high… it says nothing about him singlehandedly creating, child. Again I say to you… that is what men want you to believe. It is a half truth—omitting the part female played to make us subservient. Del brought about creation from the very elemental chaos that is Kali—together they made life.”

I rubbed my temples, trying to ease the pounding of my head. “What you are saying is heretical, Madam. The sort of thing that people used to get killed for repeating.”

“It is untold truth. Recorded on clay tablets in Sumerian, thousands of years before the book of Genesis existed.” She stood up, moving over to the cauldron, peering down into its depths. “It does not matter which version you choose to believe, chóvi’hánni… but it is important that you acknowledge that the female played a part too, since male cannot exist without it—if there is no Kali… then there is no Del. It is as simple as that.”

I sighed. “Please do not call me that… I am not—”
“You will be,” she said firmly, grabbing a small jar off the mantle and emptying it into her brew. “Even if you turn your back on learning the ways, the title will still be yours—we did not choose you... the mother did.”

“I am not a healer or a seer, Madam... I have no wish to be greater than I am.”

“You path does not pertain to those things, child—you are meant for far more important things.” She glanced over at me, her face solemn—I was relieved to see that the strange luminescence was gone from her eyes. “For centuries our people have been degraded and despised—treated like animals, or worse. The gadje think we are all thieves and criminals, capable of nothing more than begging in the streets. They ignore the fact that their refusal to hire our people for decent jobs leaves no choice but to beg or starve. They sterilize our women... burn our houses down with children still inside. These are the things that you and your brother will make the world see.”

The conviction in her voice... the fervent look on her face... they had a startling effect on me; for one bright, shining moment, I wanted to believe in what she was saying. I wanted to believe that Pietro and I could have such a profound impact on people, but even more importantly, I wanted the acceptance such a thing would undoubtedly bring; if what she said was true, people might look upon us and see the beauty in the love we shared instead of thinking it was a twisted, sordid thing. Though I wasn’t foolish enough to believe we would ever be more than we were, the intensity of our love was far more powerful than anything I could imagine—perhaps that bond in and of itself would be the force that instrumented such things, the same way it had done for the twins in the old legend.

“Madam...” I paused, racking my brain for the word Tobar had used with such reverence, “draba—”

Her soft laughter cut me off. “I am no Drabarni, child. I am an old woman with a few small gifts and a knack for healing.”

I frowned, more confused than ever by the twisty turning meaning of the strange sounding word. “But... you see things...”

“A Drabarni is a woman who has fully dedicated herself to her skills—she must be willing to put her arts above everything else, using it to enlighten and help those who seek her aid. I would never do that—I loved my husband far too much to turn him aside in order to pursue such things.”

“Oh...” I thought about it for a moment. “So in a way... it is like being a nun?”

“In a way, I suppose... but there is far more to it than just that. For her gifts to be strong, a Drabarni must remain free of all the temptation this world offers—she must live a life in constant communion with nature itself, in tune with the rhythms of the earth. This is why Tebera makes her home in the mountains, far from anything that might lead her to stray from her path. Nature itself provides her with all that she needs.”

Instead of explaining things, her words only confused me more—as she carried the cauldron over to the table, I got up, moving over beside her so that I could better see what she was doing. “Your nephew told me that you said I was to follow in Tebera’s footsteps... but you are wrong. I will never put anything above my brother.”

“You are not meant to be a Drabarni, Wanda. Here—grind this for me.” Grabbing a bundle of dried up twigs, she thrust it into my hand. “It must be very fine—like powder.”

“And how do I do that? You can’t grind up sticks—”

She made a tsking noise—I huffed, eyeing her as she pointed to one of the mortars. “Remove the
leaves from the stems and crumble them with your fingers, child—then pulverize them in a
clockwise motion. Forward is for healing—backward is for… other things.”

I followed her instructions, surprised to find that it was a strangely satisfying task to perform; the
sound of the leaves being crushed beneath the marble pestle was soothing in an almost hypnotic way.
“That is my first lesson then?”

“No—this is helping an old woman with her work. You are too young for lessons yet.”

I bristled at the insinuation. “I am very advanced for my age.”

“Perhaps, but you are still in the first phase of womanhood—a girl untouched. When you pass on to
the second stage… that is when my lessons will begin.”

Since I wasn’t particularly keen on learning anything that might be considered pagan, her answer
should have suited me just fine… but I didn’t like being told I couldn’t learn—it seemed like an
offhand insult, implying I lacked intelligence. “That is ridiculous—if you start learning young you
have longer to master the subject matter. Everyone knows that.”

“Don’t be contrary—there is a proper time and place for everything, chóvi’hánni, not just reaping
and sowing. Isn’t that what it says in your Bible?” Her voice was soft—she reached over, taking a
pinch of the powder I’d made between her fingers and thumb, adding it to the brew. “Your time for
learning is not yet here.”

“It is rude to mock the Good Book,” I huffed, scowling at her.

“I’m not mocking anything, child—I believe in God. However, as a woman, I simply look around
me at all this world has to offer, and I see the undeniable touch of a feminine hand as well.” She
glanced over at me, the corners of her mouth twitching up as she reached for an empty bottle. “There
are many women who feel the same way I do, but they hide it for fear of offending God. Jules was
very interested in such things, but she hid her desire to learn more, afraid her Grisha would
disapprove.”

The name sounded familiar—I’d heard it before, though I couldn’t quite place it in my mind. “I do
not know these people you mention… is it a tale, like the one of the twins?”

“You do know one of them—your desire to help him brought you here for the medicine I am
making.”

“The professor?” My eyes widened as it clicked in my head—he’d mentioned then name on our very
first day of work and I’d refused to use it. “Jules… was that his wife’s name? He’s never mentioned
it.” I watched her pour the thick looking concoction through a strainer, slowly filling the bottle.

“A woman is called many things throughout the span of her life—daughter… sister… wife…
mother. What she went by when I knew her was not the only name she owned.” She moved a cork
through the flame of the candle beside her, sealing the bottle with it once it had charred. “When we
met… she was very much like you. Young and smart… caring about only one person in the world—
and she refused to consider anything that was contrary to what the Bible held when it came to
religion. When she lost her children… it opened her eyes to how warped the church has become with
regards to certain things. Instead of teaching about love and acceptance, they teach intolerance and
bigotry. It says in scripture not to judge… but for some reason most Christians believe they are
exempt from that rule.”

I frowned, disturbed by the thought of the professor’s wife being led astray from her beliefs—the
notion that spending time in the old woman’s company might eventually lead me to do the same thing was troubling, weighing heavily upon my soul. Yet… at the same time, I could not deny that I was guilty of doing exactly what she’d described—and it shamed me. My cheeks heated—I ducked my head down, hiding my face from her view. “I am sorry… it is not my place to judge your choices or—”

“I did not mean you, little one—you are young, and the things I say are strange and brand new. A little skepticism is never a bad thing as long as it is tempered with tolerance and the acknowledgement that each person walks a path that is different and solely their own.”

“He misses her very much, you know,” I murmured, glancing up at her. “It eats away at him… being all alone.”

“He is no longer alone… he has you and your brother to comfort him when he needs it most. I think—” Her voice cut off abruptly—she went completely still, the bottle slipping from her hands. I dove for it, catching it before it could shatter on the floor.

“Madam are you—”

She began to laugh—the strange stillness fading as suddenly as it had set in; reaching over, she grabbed my hand, wheezing as she tried to calm her mirth. “I think our tea will have to wait for your next visit, child.”

“But surely—” my words turned into a gasp as my senses kicked into overdrive, completely stealing my breath—a wave of white hot rage sprang up inside me, boiling me from within. My hand tightened around the old woman’s as I struggled to fight against the overwhelming feelings that were slamming into me, narrowing the world around me down to one single, solitary thing.

*Pietro.*

He was near… and judging by the strength of his fiery, turbulent emotions… there was a very real chance that my irritating new friend Tobar was about to be attacked by my twin.
DO YOU EVER HAVE ONE OF those strange, surreal moments when your mind slips into a
daydream of sorts, leaving you adrift? A feeling takes root deep inside your chest as you’re filled
with a strange sense of knowing; it is similar to the feeling that is often called déjà vu, only the things
flashing through your mind are whispered hints of moments that aren’t your own. You know beyond
a shadow of a doubt that the vague, fuzzy images are things you’ve never experienced before—
rather, they’re like lingering, half-forgotten dreams that you can’t quite shake. Logically, you know
the things you are feeling are not real—they don’t belong to you at all, however the impressions are
so intense that your imagination takes flight, making you wonder if you’re remembering a former life
in a faraway place.

The sudden surge of unexpected emotion was a catalyst—in the blink of an eye I was reliving
Pietro’s fury in the alley as he pummeled Tobar’s face; his anger swirled around me like a cyclone—
stealing the breath from my lungs, leaving me gasping at its intensity. Before I could stop myself, I
threw back my head, letting out a shriek of rage.

A palm cracked across my cheek. “Snap out of it girl!”

The harsh voice tugged me back from the brink; I blinked, trying to focus on the woman who was
shaking me. “Wha—”

“You say you have no gifts… I say this is a lie,” the old woman said, flashing a gap toothed smile.
“What did you see?”

“See? I… nothing. I…” I slumped against her, blinking rapidly—drained by the intensity of my
twin’s emotions. “I didn’t see anything… I feel Pietro.”

“See… feel… these are nothing more than two different words for the same thing. Separate facets of
the same precious stone—the sixth sense. I think perhaps it will not be so difficult to teach you as I
first thought, little sister.” Wrapping her arm around my shoulders, she steered me towards the door.
“You must soothe the savage beast before he decimates this building, yes? Still so young yet Lord
Shiva moves strongly within him—it is a blessing.”

“He’s… I’ve never felt so much anger from him… not even on our birthday—it’s like it’s taken over
him or something,” I whispered, searching for the right word to describe what I felt and coming up
empty handed; anger was a pitifully small word for the enormity of what flowed into me.

“The connection between you is a great one.” She nodded slowly, releasing my shoulders—moving
her hand to grip my arm tightly as we started down the stairs. “Perhaps when you realize that only
you can calm the storm… you will begin to recognize the truth in all I’ve said.”

I didn’t respond—it was taking every single bit of concentration I possessed to make my way down
the narrow, winding staircase. The surges of emotion were growing stronger by the minute; twice I
almost lost my footing—when my knees buckled, only the old woman’s grip on my arm kept me
from tumbling down the steps to the landing. The closer we got to the ground floor restaurant, the
harder it was for me to focus—as we hit the first floor landing and the sound of raised voices reached
us, Simza jerked me to a stop.

“You must do whatever it takes to calm him, little one—do not give thought to anyone else… not
even Grisha, if he is there.”
"But—"

“I promise I will do what I can to keep your secret safe—I will distract Grisha if need be.” Before I could respond she was moving again, guiding me down the remaining flight of stairs—jerking open the door that separated the residential part of the building from their business.

We traversed a short, dimly lit hallway—when she opened the door at the end, we emerged in the small, recessed area off the dining room that held the restrooms. Though my legs were still trembling, I pulled away from her, headed for the source of the commotion—Tsuru rounded the corner in a rush, skidding to a stop at the sight of me.

“You!” She reached out, latching on to my wrist, glaring at me with undisguised contempt on her face. “I should have known you were the cause of this! Get that animal out of my restaurant before I—"

“What, call the police?” I jerked my arm free—wobbling unsteadily on my feet—glaring back at her with just as much venom. “Go ahead—I will be glad to tell them how you ordered your son to kidnap and rape me! If anyone is to blame for this it is you, madam!”

I did not flinch when her hand drew back to strike me—I refused to cower to any bully, no matter who it might be; a split second before her palm met my upturned cheek, Simza grabbed her niece’s arm, aborting the blow. Tsuru’s eyes narrowed as they flicked between the old woman and me; Simza uttered one word that was universal no matter what the language.

“No.”

“WHERE IS MY SISTER?”

The sound of Pietro’s furious shout snapped my head around—brushing past Tsuru, I rushed into the large dining room, staring in shock at the wreckage around me. Tables were upturned—broken shards of the dishes and glasses they’d held littered the floor.

“You’d best be glad we’re not open for lunch, otherwise he’d already be in jail,” Tsuru shouted from behind me—I ignored her, my eyes locking on the only person that mattered as I rushed across the room.

“Pietro! I’m okay—” my voice failed me as he spun around, his gaze locking with mine. I’d been sure that seeing I was alright would quell the fury inside him—but it didn’t. Instead, a myriad of new emotions sprang to life, intermeshing with the first. Pain… so much agony that it my chest started to ache, edged with sharp, barbed spikes of betrayal that tore into my soul. The emotions were so strong that it made me dizzy—I swayed on my feet, reaching out to grab his arm, but he shoved my hand away forcefully.

“Why didn’t you tell me, Wanda? You didn’t have to lie to me! Why did you make me believe—” his voice cracked—words turning into a torturous sound that clawed my heart to ribbons.

“Pietro… what are you—”

“YOU SHOULD HAVE TOLD ME THE TRUTH!” It came out a ragged shout—he sounded completely broken, but I didn’t know why.

Tears sprang up in my eyes, spilling down my cheeks—I did not attempt to stop them. “Pietro… my brother… I do not understand why you are upset with me….”

“You lied to me! Told me you loved me then decided you preferred him!” His hands fisted at his
sides—blue eyes flicking around the room, as if seeking the object of his rage.

“Wha… NO! You are wrong! I do love you—”

“I am not talking about as a brother Wanda!” He shouted, his face red with anger.

“Neither am I!” Daring to try again, I reached out, wrapping my arms around him; he struggled against me at first—then went limp, letting out a painful sounding sob.

“I love you! Love you so much it hurts—and you chose him! I don’t understand! What did I do wrong?”

“Nothing,” I murmured, squeezing him tighter. “You are perfect… you are the one I want, Pietro… he just brought me to see Simza—that is all. I swear I will explain, but we will talk in private,” I said quietly, stroking his back.

“Why should I believe you? After this… you coming here with him after he dared to grab you—”

“Because you know me, Pietro Maximoff—you know I would rather die a thousand horrible deaths than cause you a single ounce of pain,” I snapped—my temper flaring in response to his. “If anyone should be hurt and angry it is me! You must really have a low opinion of me to think these things!”

I started to pull away, but he stopped me—his arms clasping around me like a vice. “Don’t presume to know what I’m thinking—”

“I don’t have to presume anything, brother—your actions and the things you say to me make it as clear as if you were shouting your true feelings from the rooftops! I came here to get medicine for the Professor—the old woman is a healer and I thought perhaps she could help him!”

He tensed, for a moment, not speaking; to my relief, his anger ebbed back, confusion dousing its flames. “What?”

“You heard me, Pietro,” I shifted, my lips brushing against his ear as I lowered my voice to a whisper. “You are the only boy I see... the only boy I ever want to see.”

“Swear this—on Mama and Papa’s souls.” His voice was low—practically a growl as his arms tightened even more, pulling me flush against him; suddenly, I found it hard to breathe again—albeit for a very different sort of reason.

“I swear that everything I have said is true—may God strike me dead on the spot if I am lying.”

The angry red flush vanished from his cheeks—all the color draining away as he paled. “Don’t say that! Don’t ever say that—“

“I did nothing inappropriate—” Tobar offered from the kitchen doorway. “I was a gentleman—”

“No one asked for your input!” Pietro shot him a dark, angry scowl—his anger beginning to flare up again almost immediately.

Behind me, Simza rattled off a stream of harsh sounding words—I glanced over my shoulder at her, frowning as she gestured dramatically in the air with her hands. “You know very well that I cannot understand a single word you are saying—”

“She wants me to take you upstairs to my room…” Tobar edged out of the kitchen, watching my brother warily. “So you can have privacy to talk.”
“We don’t need privacy,” Pietro snapped. “We need to go home, where we belong—”

“Good God! What happened in here?” The sound of the Professor’s voice drew my eyes towards the entrance; he gazed around at the destruction with a look of shock on his face.

“Your monster of a nephew happened, that’s what!” A better question would be who is going to pay for the damages, Grigori Mirga! How am I supposed to open tonight when he has shattered most of my dishes?”

My brother tensed at Tsurra’s outburst, his eyes flicking from me to Tobar. “Okay… maybe we do need to go upstairs.”

“Pietro… did you do this, son?” The old man frowned, his gaze locking on my brother.

“I did… but she tried to stop me from looking for Wanda. She said my sister wasn’t here when you can see she clearly was,” Pietro said indignantly, glaring at the woman. “She told that man to teach me a lesson and then kick me out—he tried… that’s when I started fighting and breaking things.”

I glanced over at the man who hovered beside Tobar’s mother—he looked to be in his thirties, and was portly, to say the least; I was pleased to see that his eye was swelling shut—he deserved far worse for daring to touch my brother.

“I cannot believe you were foolish enough to try this again, Tsurra,” the old man growled, spinning around to face her. “Did you think my threats were hollow? That I wouldn’t follow through—”

“No—she didn’t know.” I pulled away from Pietro, shaking my head; I didn’t like the woman, but I could not allow her to be falsely accused. “We went up the fire escape, straight to Simza’s rooms.”

He opened his mouth to respond, but before he could speak, Simza let out another long, angry burst of words; nodding, he moved over to the closest table, bending down to grab an overturned chair—setting it upright, he settled himself in it, crossing his arms across his chest. “Tsura, you will get whatever is needed to tally up the expense while the children go upstairs and try to mend fences—I will pay for the damage my nephew has caused… as well as sweetening the sum with a little extra for the inconvenience you have suffered. This is acceptable?”

Tsura stared at him for a few seconds, then nodded—glancing over at her son and barking out an order in their mother tongue; Tobar glanced over at us, jerking his head—an indication we should follow.

“I don’t like this,” Pietro muttered—though he didn’t hesitate to stick to me like glue as I followed Tobar across the room. “You are too trusting—”

“Not so trusting that I didn’t arm myself before going out to talk to him when he appeared at the door,” I shot back, digging in my pocket to produce the fancy knife Tobar had given me; his eyes almost popped out of his head when I pushed the button and the blade sprung out.

“Where did you find that?”

“He gave it to me—he said it was safer than carrying around a paring knife.” I held it out to him, trying not to giggle when he eagerly snatched it from my hand. “He said he’ll give you one too… he wants to be friends.”

“He’s probably trying to lull you into a false sense of security—”

“He can hear you,” Tobar called out over his shoulder as he reached the landing, his voice thick
with sarcasm. “You broke my nose… not my ears—they work just fine.”

“There’s still time enough for that—”

“Pietro… be nice.” I pleaded, reaching out and grabbing the knife from his hand—I didn’t want him armed if things spiraled out of control before I could properly explain the truth. “Please. I promise once we talk you will understand everything.”

“I still say it was stupid, taking such a risk. He might have finished what he started the other night.” He stopped walking, glaring at Tobar’s back—suddenly whirling around, slamming his fist into the wall; I cried out at the sharp sting of agony that shot through me—bright red blood oozed from his knuckles where they’d split against the brick.

“Pietro! Stop! You’ve hurt yourself!”

“You hurt me far more than this ever could,” he growled, though he didn’t pull away when I grabbed his injured hand—raising it to my lips to kiss away the aching.

“I told you that you assumed the wrong thing—”

“What was I supposed to think when I read your note, Wanda?” He whispered.

I frowned. “I told you where I was going—”

“No—you said Tobar stopped by and you’d be back soon, not to worry. That was all,” he grumbled. “It told me nothing, Wanda. It made me think—”

“I told you that you are the only boy I see,” I said softly. “I meant it.”

“Look, could you two do the whole kiss and make up thing later? I don’t have all day.”

“Antagonizing him isn’t helpful,” I snapped, spinning around to affix Tobar with a ferocious glare. “If you want to be friends, stop baiting him—I would think that you would be a bit more appreciative that I didn’t blurt out the truth downstairs in front of your mother!”

“What truth?” Pietro’s eyes darted between us, his brow furrowing up with concern.

“You can tell him inside,” Tobar hissed, pointing to the door that presumably led to his room; doubling back, he peered over the railing of the stairs.

I rolled my eyes at his dramatics. “You are far too paranoid—”

“When you’ve walked a mile in my shoes then you can lecture,” he huffed, ushering us into the room; I glanced around, unable to hide my surprise at the décor.

He hadn’t been kidding when he said he collected knives—one wall was covered with a large display case, the shelves covered by different kinds of blades; the opposite wall had two huge swords hanging with their blades pointed towards the ground—the remaining wall space was covered by shelves of neatly stacked books, intermingled with small potted plants, similar to the ones I’d seen upstairs in his great-aunt’s domain. The small, narrow bed was neatly made, covered with a plain gray woolen blanket that looked like it would be scratchy and uncomfortable to touch; across from that sat a desk—with its jumble of scattered papers and open books, it was the only messy thing in the room.

Brushing past us, completely oblivious to how impressed I was by the neatness of his living space,
Tobar moved straight to the display cabinet, opening the glass fronted door and selecting a knife from the back of the second shelf—holding it out in offering to my brother. “Here… you can have this one.”

Pietro eyed it—stubbornly shaking his head. “I don’t want anything from you—the price is one I’m not willing to pay.”

Frowning, Tobar pushed the button, as if showing off the blade might change Pietro’s mind. “There is no price—it’s a gift. Come on… don’t you want to ease your sisters mind about your safety?”

“I would rather have her worried and at my side than to lose her to you because of my ignorance over some stupid primitive custom,” Pietro shot back. “For all I know, accepting that could mean I’ve agreed to let you have my sister.”

“He doesn’t like me that way, Pietro,” I said, reaching out and taking his hand. “As a girl, I mean.”

Pietro looked completely offended at the very thought. “Of course he does! You are beautiful and sweet… the kindest person in existence. You are an excellent homemaker too—what more could anyone want?”

“Things she doesn’t have,” Tobar said, smirking, “unless she’s really a boy in disguise.”

Pietro stared at him in surprise—then took a giant step backward. “Uh… okay.”

Tobar snorted—shaking his head as he closed the blade. “You two are really something else—I don’t think I’ve ever met anyone more conceited in my life. I hate to break it to you but the two of you are not irresistible. The fact I like guys doesn’t mean I’m going to jump you—you’re not my type either.”

I huffed, indignant at the insinuation that Pietro was somehow lacking. “Then you’re an idiot! My brother is handsome and strong and—”

“Wanda… it’s okay. I’d really prefer he not be attracted to me,” Pietro said gently, squeezing my hand.

“Oh… sorry.” My face heated with embarrassment at how ridiculous my outburst was. “I didn’t mean—”

“It’s okay… I get it. I think Zygfryd hung the moon too,” he said, tossing the knife on the bed. “Look, if you want it, its yours—no strings attached. Like I told your sister, I have several—every time a relative comes to visit they bring me one for some reason.”

Pietro chewed the corner of his lip for a second, then reached over, scooping the knife up. “Thanks. But if you try to—”

“If I touch her again you can use it on me, okay? Just… consider it a peace offering.” Shrugging, Tobar moved over to the desk, plopping down in the chair. “I apologized to her for what happened—I my mother made me do it. If it makes you feel any better, there is no way in hell I would have actually forced her or anything. I thought that maybe I could bluff my way through the aftermath… you know… sort of pretend she was too embarrassed to really admit what had happened between us or something. It was stupid… but all I can do is apologize and try to make amends.”

Pietro studied the knife for a moment, then glanced over at me. “You have accepted this apology?”

“I have. His family does not know the truth, my brother… they would not approve. Because of
that...” I shrugged, playing with his fingers. “He understands the way we feel about each other Pietro. We don’t have to hide it from him.”

He reached up, stroking my cheek—his grim look slowly fading. “You say he understands... but does he approve? Or does he think we are freaks?”

“I’m still right here—you could ask me that yourself. Or are you so wrapped up in her that you forgot I was in the room?” Tobar leaned back in his chair, propping his feet up on the desk. “I don’t particularly understand falling in love with a sibling... but I don’t think you are freaks. I mean... there are people who would call me a freak for being gay, you know? What right does anyone have to tell us how to feel... who to love? This... the way we love... I think it is the truth we are. It’s how Del and the great mother made us to be—there’s nothing freakish or depraved about facing the truth and embracing it. In fact, I think I would go so far as to say our ability to do that makes us less freakish than all the people who hide away their real natures, pretending they don’t exist, if that makes sense.”

“It does.” Pietro pulled away from me, eyeing him for a moment. “I am sorry I broke your nose and hurt you... but I will never be sorry for protecting Wanda.”

“You shouldn’t be—it is your job to do so. Now more than ever, yes? You must protect her not just as her brother, but as her promised. You have all the duties of a husband, even though you will not reap the rewards until you—“ Tobar’s voice trailed off, his cheeks turning bright red. “Sorry... it is not my business what you do. I should not try and force our customs on you.”

“It’s okay,” Pietro said—his cheeks flushed with embarrassment too. “They told me about that when they pierced my ears... though they did not know it was my sister that I was thinking of. I know I must be respectful and proper until then.”

Plopping down on the bed, I rolled my eyes at their hemming and hawing—the way they tiptoed around the topic was almost comical. “I am beginning to suspect that many of the customs of our people are rather patriarchal—all this stealing brides and claiming them. I do not know that I like this—women are not property to be bartered away.”

“The father is losing his daughter—she will no longer be in his house, pulling her share of the weight her mother carries. Shouldn’t he be recompensed for that?” Tobar asked.

I made a face, not liking his explanation in the slightest. “You are aware that you’re making it sound like his daughter is nothing more than a slave, yes?”

“It’s not like that at all,” he retorted, frowning. “Women are our greatest treasure—you ensure that we will carry on and not die out. A daughter is a priceless jewel—the bride price could never be enough to make up for losing her, but it serves to prove that her future husband understands that and deserves her... that he can adequately take care of her and provide for her needs.”

“Well the groom’s family is also losing a child—shouldn’t they get something in return too?” I countered.

“No—they don’t lose anything, Wanda, they gain the daughter. The couple will live with his parents after they join.” He took a long pull on his cigarette, smirking at me. “And besides, a son is not nearly as valuable as a daughter when it comes to carrying into the future.”

“That’s ridiculous—”

“There is no absolute certainty that a man’s children are actually his—he does not carry them within
his body as they grow. With a woman there’s no mistaking it—you see her body swell as the babe inside her flourishes. You’re the givers of life—you guarantee our survival. That’s why the highest form of marimé is for one of our women to marry a gadje—a woman that does this is turning her back on her responsibility to the ancestors. She would be banished… cut off from the people completely for the rest of her life.” His smug smile wilted—his eyes filling with sadness as he ground the cigarette out. “She would be dead to us… her name never spoken. All pictures of her burned to ash… scattered to the wind.”

“It sounds as if you know this from experience,” I said softly—the haunted look on his face confirmed it, making my indignation slowly dissolve.

“I had an older sister once.” He cleared his throat, swiping his hand across his face. “She made her choice—she loved the idea of a gadje life more than she loved her kin.”

Pietro sank down beside me, pulling me close to his side—we both needed the comfort of closeness to dispel the horror we both felt at hearing such a thing. Hot tears pricked my eyes—I buried my face in the curve of my brothers neck, clinging to him with all my strength.

“I am very sorry for your loss,” he mumbled gruffly, stroking my hair. “Surely you could sneak away to visit her?”

“I can’t—I told you, it’s forbidden. I shouldn’t even be talking about it at all.”

“I would never let anything keep me from my sister—”

“Your sister didn’t willingly abandon you—mine did,” Tobar snapped. “She was my best friend and she didn’t even bother saying goodbye—she just snuck off in the night to be with one of them!”

His harsh words tugged me out of the murky depths of my misery—frowning, I pulled away from Pietro, wiping away my tears. “If she didn’t say goodbye… how do you know she did this forbidden thing?”

“She left and never came back… never called. She knew she would be turned away in shame,” he growled.

“That doesn’t answer my question—did she pack up her things?”

“No—”

“So she just left with nothing more than the clothes on her back? And no one found this odd?” Pietro’s brow furrowed—his confusion mirroring my own.

“I told you—”

“What you told us is that your older sister is missing… and no one bothered looking for her,” I said. “There could be other reasons she didn’t come home—did you ever stop to consider that?”

“You don’t know what you are talking about! She—”

“She had a serious boyfriend that wasn’t Roma… and your mother allowed this?” Pietro glanced over at me—I shook my head, astounded at how clueless the older boy seemed to be. He seemed to have no concept of the danger a girl alone might face on the streets.

“Of course not—she kept him a secret,” Tobar growled.
“Did Simza see her with this secret boyfriend in a vision, perhaps?” I tried to ignore the icy lump that was forming in my stomach; the situation was far too similar to one of my greatest fears—that the soldiers would scoop Pietro up and steal him away forever.

“No… look, I don’t want to talk about this anymore. I could be punished for even mentioning her.”

“Your sister vanished, and you’re worried about yourself,” I whispered. “Did you ever stop to think something bad might have happened to her, Tobar? She could have been kidnapped… raped… even killed—and none of you thought to call the police when she never came home?”

“The police do not help our kind.” His voice was heavily laced with the worst kind of bitterness—the poisonous sort, that erodes away at the soul. “We have our own system of justice—”

“Yet your mother threatened to call the police on my brother earlier,” I said, sarcastically. “When she would not call them to look for her own flesh and blood.”

“She wouldn’t have done it—it was an empty threat to scare you. She knows you are like Professor Mirga—”

“Oh really? How so?” I arched a brow, not happy with how dismissive the comparison sounded.

“The gadje world is so loud that it mutes your spirit. You are more in tune with their world than ours.”

“I’m beginning to think that is not entirely a bad thing!” I snapped. “When I thought my brother was missing I had the Professor call the police—I would rather trust them to find him than risk losing him forever because of some stupid us versus them mentality! If he was hurt or in jail or stolen away by the soldiers I would do whatever it took to find him and bring him home! I wouldn’t just pretend he never existed to satisfy some horribly misguided ideal of betrayal!”

“Wanda—” Pietro said softly, gently touching my arm.

“Don’t Pietro! He needs to hear this!” I shook off his hand, scowling. “You claim your sister was your best friend, Tobar, but clearly that friendship was one sided—and I don’t mean on her part, either! You sit here and tell my brother it is his job to protect me, but did you protect your sister? I may be young, but I know what can happen to girls in this city! I’ve seen the teenage girls working the streets and the men that make them sell their bodies—did you ever stop to think maybe one of them got your sister?”

“She isn’t a prostitute, Wanda—and she’s not dead, or kidnapped or whatever crazy notion you might dream up in your head.” He grabbed the pack of cigarettes, lighting up another one—glaring at me furiously as he exhaled. “She is alive and well—working as a barmaid at that tavern on Plicórtta street. I saw her through the window one night when I was passing by.”

His announcement took the angry wind right out of my sails; I slumped against Pietro, falling silent.

“I know it must be hard for you to understand a sister turning her back on her brother,” he said, “but that’s what happened. Despite what you think, I didn’t just accept she was gone—I questioned her friends. I wanted to make sure she was okay—I could barely sleep or eat for weeks after it happened.”

“I’m sorry—I shouldn’t have jumped to conclusions,” I said softly.

“It’s okay… you aren’t familiar with our way of life yet. In time… you will understand these things.” Tobar took a long pull on his cigarette, casting an appraising glance at Pietro before holding it out in
offering; I was beyond shocked when my brother reached out, taking the horrible thing and raising it to his lips.

“Pietro! Don’t you dare—” My outraged protest died on my lips—he started coughing, choking on the noxious smoke.

“Ugh! That’s horrible!” He wheezed, his face scrunching up in disgust.

“You’ll get used to it—”

“He most certainly will not!” I grabbed the cigarette from my brother’s hand, jumping up and grinding it out in the ashtray—glaring at Tobar. “He had weak lungs as a child—keep your death sticks to yourself!”

“He is a man now—he must learn,” Tobar said suddenly. “It is a sign he has left childhood behind.”

“Another ridiculous custom? Next you will be claiming he has to drink and curse like a sailor, maybe?” From the corner of my eye, there was a furtive movement—I spun around, affixing my sternest glare on Pietro; he’d moved closer and was reaching for the pack of cigarettes with a determined expression on his face. “Don’t you dare, Pietro Maximoff!”

“Don’t nag—I can handle it,” he said, scowling at me as I batted his hand away from the pack.

“If you do you certainly won’t be handling anything else,” I threatened. “I want your lips tasting like you—not like disgusting smoke!”

He eyed me a moment, then slowly retracted his hand. “That is cheating, Wanda.”

“I am being completely truthful—you would rather I lie and pretend it doesn’t bother me?”

“Of course not, but it is still rude to cheat,” he grumbled, flopping back down on the bed.

“Henpecked already?” Tobar taunted. “I guess I was wrong about you—maybe you’re still just a boy.”

“If you thing you can goad me into doing it you are wasting your time,” Pietro shot back. “Her kisses are for more valuable than your stupid opinion.”

My cheeks heated with pleasure at the comment; retracing my steps, I reclaimed my spot, cuddling up next to him—rewarding him with a kiss on the cheek.

“You shouldn’t treat him that way—interfering in his business in front of other people.” Tobar scowled at me, propping his feet up on his desk. “You must wait until you are alone to—”

“I will never sit by and let him do something that is bad for his health—if that makes me less in your eyes, so be it,” I said firmly, taking my brother’s hand. “The first winter we were alone he got very, very sick—it settled in his lungs and he almost died. Your cigarettes will hurt his lungs again—I won’t allow it.”

The sour look on his face faded, just a little. “That is understandable… but there are other ways to let him know you are displeased when other people are around. It doesn’t matter so much when it’s just me, but if you act like that in front of the others it will make it hard for him to find his place among us.”

I frowned, feeling completely torn. On one hand, I very much wanted us to learn more about the
culture our parents grew up in—to honor them by embracing it fully, but at the same time, the more I learned, the less appealing that notion seemed. We were used to being completely free—unhindered by the constraints of society’s rules and regulations; though our people also seemed to eschew those things, it was clear they had very strict guidelines of their own—ones that would cage us in a completely different way, curtailing our freedom.

“From everything I’ve heard here today… I’m not really certain that finding our place among you is the best thing for us,” I admitted slowly. “The things you are saying are very different than what the Professor has told us. You make it sound like the people think women should be seen and not heard… like the men control everything and the women are nothing. Our parents… they weren’t like that. Papa was the head of the family, but Mama was in control of our home. They treated each other as partners—he wasn’t her master.” I glanced over at my twin for support—he nodded, squeezing my hand.

“Wanda is far too bossy to accept such a thing.” He flashed me a teasing grin before I could huff. “And I would not want her to—I love her spirit. She is my equal—in all things, we are one.”

Tobar rolled his eyes, making a face. “That is obvious—you both share the same bad habit of not listening.”

I bristled at the accusation. “I’ve listened to every single thing you’ve said. Girls are their father’s property to be sold away to husbands. They shouldn’t chastise men… they are cast out—treated as dead for daring to make their own decisions regarding love. All those things equal women being dominated—having no voice of their own!”

“Does my mother seem dominated to you, Wanda? Seriously?” He asked, sarcasm lacing the words. “Does bibi Simza? Or Tereba?”

“No…” I admitted hesitantly. “But—”

“There is no ‘but’. They are in charge and the men in my family know it—but even so, my mother would never disrespect my Uncle by pulling the kind of crap you did in front of other Rom. Because every kumpânya is different—she would not dream of lessening his power in the eyes of men who might be more traditional in their ways. She loves and respects him far too much to risk damaging his status or hurting his pride. Not every vitsa is the same—there are some who are so strict a woman cannot even walk in front of a man, while there are some that do not care. Some accept people like me… or you… not considering us polluted, while some do not. Our people are as vast and varied—one has no way of knowing how strictly they stick to tradition—so my mother would play it safe, the same way you should do.”

“So… you are saying that your… group…” I glanced up at him, unsure if I was using the proper term, “is that the right word?”

“Depends on what you mean group. If you are referring to my direct family, it is my vitsa. If you mean the people we consider to be our clan… who gather under the same Rom baro in what the gadje would call a tribe… that is kumpânya.”

I frowned. “This is far too complicated. I do not know all these terms.”

“I just explained it—did you listen?”

“Yes!” I snapped. “But now you have me unsure of what I actually mean! It would be much simpler if I didn’t have to try and determine who I need to include—”
His burst of laughter cut me off. “I’m sorry our culture isn’t to your liking, Wanda—perhaps you should just pretend to be gadje… though I understand some of them have cultures more complicated than ours.”

“Oh just shut up and let me think!” I glowered at him, trying to put my thoughts in order. “Are all the Roma here in Novi Grad one group?”

“Obviously not—as a Ruska, Professor Mirga isn’t.”

“Okay… what about the people who work here, in your family’s restaurant?”

“Yes—they are part of our kumpânya.”

It was starting to make sense. “And there are other… kumpânyas in the city?”

“No. There used to be… but they have gone,” he said, sadly. “That is why my mother was so excited about you… there are no other unmarried girls of the blood near my age.”

“Don’t get me sidetracked—I’m figuring it out,” I huffed. “So the members of your group—sorry… kumpânya—are less chauvinistic. Yes?”

“The professor told us that, remember? On our birthday. “Pietro offered. “He said they were… uh… infected.”

“What the hell does that mean?” Tobar asked angrily. “We aren’t diseased—”

“I don’t think he meant it like that,” Pietro said, frowning. “He was talking about that crazy old woman… he said something about her infecting it… like… changing it, you know? Because she was different. Lower or something.”

“Lowara?”

“Yes! That’s the word he used.” Pietro said, looking relieved. “He said she was making women more powerful—Wanda got angry with him about it.”

Tobar’s brows shot upward. “You did?”

“Mhmm… I thought he was implying men were better than women.” I shot him a pointed glance. “It was similar to the argument we are having here today.”

“The only reason we are arguing at all is because you have poor listening skills.”

“He said that too… that she didn’t listen.” Pietro grinned at me—I stuck out my tongue in response.

“He is wrong about Tereba. I mean… she has a lot of influence, don’t get me wrong, but we were already less traditional when she joined us. When I was small, things were much stricter, but when Bibi came here… my grandmother became much more outspoken. Then Bibi set up a shop and started making lots of money from the tourists—that’s when things really started to change. I don’t really remember everything… like I said, I was really little… but that’s when my grandfather sort of stepped back and my grandmother took over. She and Bibi were raised differently than he was—it happens that way when the bride is from a different nàtsiya.”

“That is different than the other things you listed?”

“Yes. Take Professor Mirga for example—he is Ruska. That is a different nàtsiya than mine. The Lowera are another. My family’s…” he shrugged, his cheeks flushing. “We used to be Kalderâsha…
but now we are not—we are blended.”

“I would say that is a good thing—women deserve to be treated equally,” Pietro offered.

“Agreed.” I chewed the corner of my lip for a moment, thinking about everything I’d heard. I respected my brother more than anything—and I certainly did not want to do something that might embarrass him, or make him look bad in front of others. “You said there are other ways to show my displeasure… like what?”

“There lots of ways—I think you don’t realize the power women have, even in the most traditional of groups.”

I rolled my eyes—I’d had all the lecturing I could take for one day. “I don’t need to know about other groups—just tell me what your mother would have done, okay?”

“Well… I remember one time when Mother and Uncle were having a disagreement over redecorating the interior of the shop—Hanzi wanted the whole thing to be elegant, but mother thought that part of it should be rustic. They were downstairs in the restaurant, and there were other people all around, you know… the waitresses and the busboys and the guys who work in the kitchen… so mother couldn’t express herself as freely as she would have done if they’d been alone. Uncle knew this and got cocky—he tried to gain the upper hand by getting loud, asserting his authority as her older brother and the head of the family… so she jumped up from the table and heisted up the side of her skirt, flashing her thigh. That shut him up fast.”

Pietro and I glanced at each other—confusion flowing between us; whatever the point of his story, it had clearly escaped us both. “Uh… okay. Why?”

“Why what?”

“Why did it shut him up?” Pietro asked slowly.

“And what exactly does that have to do with my question?” I added.

He sighed, making a face. “She said nothing that might challenge his rights as head of the family—yet she still won the argument and got her way. That was my point.”

“But how did she win? I can’t exactly do something if I don’t understand what I’m supposed to be doing, can I?”

“If she didn’t take it back and word spread,” he drew out the words, as if our confusion meant we were simple minded, “he would be branded impure and lose his honor… no one would talk to him for fear the contamination might spread.”

Pietro blinked, looking even more confused. “I still don’t get it.”

I heaved an exasperated sigh. “I don’t either.”

“I just explained it!” Tobar said, scowling.

“No you didn’t! We have no idea what you mean,” I huffed, frustrated by his inability to answer clearly. “What did she take back?”

“The pollution!”

“What pollution?” It came out louder than I’d intended—practically a screech.
“Some things are polluted—not clean. The lower half of the body is one of those things—and a woman’s lower half even more so… you know… because of the monthlies.”

“My lower half is very clean, thank you very much,” I sputtered indignantly—trying to ignore the heat that flooded my cheeks. “I bathe very thoroughly!”

“Look… it’s a spiritual thing—”

“That is utterly preposterous! The virgin mother was very spiritual—she had the Christ. Are you saying she was still spiritually unclean just because she menstruated?” Pietro glared at him; I bit my lip, dropping my eyes—hiding behind my hair. The truth was that it was far too easy for me to grasp the concept—the bleeding made me feel gross and disgusting, and no matter how much I bathed, that dirty feeling didn’t go away.

“It doesn’t just apply to women—if they knew about me, I would be declared polluted because I am gay. You two being together… you know… romantically… that is something that is considered polluted too—”

I glanced up at him, shaking my head—afraid the implication might weigh heavily on Pietro’s mind. “The old crone said—”

“Don’t interrupt! Pollution can sometimes be overlooked or forgiven, depending on the circumstances. Tereba declared you absolved… so you are—she is the oldest and has the final say. In the situation with mother and Hanzi, she polluted him by showing him her thigh—no one is allowed to see any part of a woman’s lower half except her husband. She made him unclean—doing so is one of the ways women have power over men. Understand now?”

“Yeah… but that’s stupid. Why didn’t he just pretend not to see?” Pietro asked; I shot him a proud smile, pleased that he’d latched on to the most obvious flaw.

“Other people were there—he couldn’t deny what happened. Lying about it would make the situation even worse.”

“Be that as it may, Pietro has a good point,” I countered. “You’re telling me to flash my legs instead of speaking up—”

“I don’t want you flashing things, Wanda,” Pietro growled—he looked like he might implode at the mere idea.

“I wasn’t planning on it,” I reassured him. “I’m just saying it’s a dumb idea—I mean what if you weren’t looking at me or paying attention to what I was doing?”

“I always pay attention to you,” he pointed out. “Even when you think I’m not doing it.”

I sighed. “You could have your back to me or be across the room—”

“Do you have to make everything so complicated?” Tobar asked, clearly disgruntled. “It was just an example!”

“Well it wasn’t a very good one.”

“To say the least.” Pietro eyed him suspiciously. “I would rather she confront me outright that go flashing her body parts in front of people.”

“Fine! Frankly, I don’t care what you do—I was just trying to give you both some pointers to help
you out. If you want everybody thinking you’re pussy whipped—"

My brother was on his feet as soon as the words left Tobar’s lips—practically snarling in his face. “Shut your filthy mouth! You don’t talk like that in front of Wanda—she is a lady!”

Tobar shrank back in his chair, the color draining from his face. “Sorry! It’s just an expression!”

“A vulgar one—I won’t have my sister subjected to gutter talk,” Pietro snapped, his hands balling into fists at his sides.

I jumped up, grabbing his arm—a fear his temper was about to snap again. “Perhaps we have talked enough for one day, yes? I think maybe it is time for us to go.”

“I think you are very right—I’ve had all I can take of him.” Grabbing my hand, he tugged me toward the door. “If a person truly wants to be friends with someone then they don’t act offensive and insulting.”

“I didn’t—”

“You certainly did—you’ve implied my sister is ill mannered and dirty and that my respect for her makes me less than a man,” Pietro shot back over his shoulder.

“That wasn’t my intent at all—I was trying to help.” Tobar followed us out into the hall, however it was fairly obvious that he was trying to keep a safe distance between himself and my twin by the way he stuck close to the wall. “If my explanations weren’t enough to clear up misunderstandings then I’m sorry—I told your sister I was no good at that sort of thing.”

“He did say that,” I admitted softly. “He said I should be asking Simza things, not him.”

“What ever,” Pietro grumbled, scowling. “That doesn’t change the fact I am irritable and I want to go home.”

I didn’t say anything, instead I just squeezed his hand—a silent acknowledgement that I understood the unspoken meaning behind his words; when he was in such a prickly state, being around people would only serve to increase his agitation—the only sure way to chase away his foul temperament would be for us to be alone so he could brood.

I’d hoped that the thick, tense atmosphere in the restaurant would dissipate in our absence; it was foolish, perhaps, but I’d been sure that the professor’s offer of recompense would somehow lull Tsura into a less antagonistic mood. As soon as we passed through the door, it was instantly clear how mistaken my assumptions were—the old man was grim faced, his jaw tensing when his eyes flicked our way. The look Tsura shot us was full of loathing—I pressed myself closer to Pietro’s side, thankful that he seemed oblivious to the murderous expression on the woman’s face.

“Can we assume since no one is bleeding that the three of you have resolved your differences and come to an understanding?” The old man asked, leaning back in his chair. “Simza assures me that there was no scheming this time—that her great nephew only wanted to extend an olive branch. Pietro… you understand this? That he simply wanted to apologize for scaring your sister?”

“Whether he understands or not is completely irrelevant,” Tsura spat, gathering up the papers that were strewn about the table. “My son will not be associating with them—they are never to set foot on this property again!”

“They have to, mother, Bibi is going to teach her—”
“Silence!” Tsura stood up so fast her chair upended, clattering against the floor. “You dare to disagree with me after what you’ve done today? Going to see her… sneaking her into our home?”

As she spoke, she stalked towards us—Pietro stepped in front of me, but his protectiveness was unwarranted; she bypassed us completely, heading straight for her son.

“I meant no disrespect, Mother—”

“Liar!” She shouted right in his face. “What have I done to deserve such disobedience from my only child?”

“Do you think she actually believes her own lie?” I muttered under my breath to my brother, making a sound of disgust.

“What did you just say?” She spun around, glaring at me. “I never lie, girl—”

“Clearly you do—or have you forgotten the daughter you gave birth to?” I shot back without thinking—it wasn’t until I say the look of horror on Tobar’s face that I realized my mistake.

“You spoke of the forbidden to them” She shrieked, lashing out at her son—her palm cracked across his poor, bruised cheek, so hard that his head rocked back, slamming into the wall.

I tensed as her hand drew back to strike him again—guilt and anger rolling through me; It was my fault he was being abused in such a manner—only I could fix it. I darted forward, locking my hand around her wrist before she could strike him again—drawing her attention to me.

She turned, her eyes narrowed, directing her rage at me. “You dare to interfere? You want the same, perhaps—”

“If you strike him again, I swear you will regret it,” I said, my soft voice countering her shout. “Maybe not today, but I swear this to you on the souls of my parents—someday I will make you pay.”

“You?” she scoffed dismissively, trying to shake me loose. “What could you do to me, little girl?”

“I will not always be little,” I snapped, trying to summon the steely resolve I’d seen the old crone use in the alley. “You forget perhaps what I am, yes? I have been named chövi’hánni— I understand what that means now.”

“Wanda—stop. You don’t know what you are saying.” The professor rose to his feet, his face pale as his eyes flicked between Tsura and me. “She doesn’t mean it… she is only a child—”

“I most certainly do mean it, and I do know. It means the ancient goddess has chosen me to help people—that is what I am doing… what I will do when I am grown.” I said, tightening my grip on Tsura’s arm. “She has a path for your son, madam… one that is different than what you have planned for him.”

Behind me I heard Simza gasp, but I did not dare look away from the woman in front of me.

“Wanda, don’t! Please!” Tobar begged. “Not now—”

“I am not speaking as Wanda—in this room, among the people, I have another name, do I not?”

“She is Genia.” Pietro stepped up beside me, reclaiming my free hand—lacing our fingers together tightly; his irritation at Tobar was as strong as ever—I could feel it radiating through him—but his
hatred for bullying far outweighed his grudge. “The old sorceress said so.”

“Tobar is to be a healer, combining the old ways with the new. When Madam Simza teaches me… he will be right there learning by my side.”

“I forbid this! It is woman’s work!” Realizing she couldn’t shake me loose, Tsura attempted to pry my fingers off her wrist. “He will follow in Hanzi’s footsteps and take over the family business. He will be a goldsmith—”

“No. He will be like his Bibi… a great healer. That is what must be.” My eyes flicked over to Tobar—he was staring at me with a look of amazement on his face. “His path is not the same as other men’s—I feel it in my bones.” It felt strange, admitting such a thing out loud… but it was the truth. A weird, heavy feeling was welling up inside me, and somehow… I just knew that something important hinged on whatever path Tobar’s like would take. I had no idea what it might be, or where the feeling was coming from, but those were minor details that did not matter in the least.

“It cannot happen—you don’t understand anything! It is not allowed.” Giving up on my fingers, she reached over, pinching my arm, hard; it didn’t work—I hung on like a guard dog, ignoring the sharp, biting pain.

“The crone named me to follow in her footsteps—a girl who knows nothing about what is proper or the old ways of how things are done. Perhaps this is why, madam—maybe to bring about all she claimed to see… changes must happen. The old ways are clearly not working—if you want them to survive at all, it is time to adapt and evolve a new way of doing things. That which does not evolve ceases to survive, yes?”

“Like survival of the fittest,” Pietro offered, his fingers brushing along the pinched spot on my arm, soothing away the sting.

“Exactly.” I nodded, finally releasing the woman’s wrist and stepping back. “Tobar will play a part in that—melding the old and the new into something that will carry on… and perhaps in time that will help us turn Novi Grad into our own Szandau. We will find a way to end the turmoil in the streets and we will have a new place of peace like the one we once lost.”

“You overstep your bounds—” Tsura began, only to be interrupted by her Aunt; Simza let loose a stream of loud chatter, pushing away from the wall—moving to pull Tobar into her arms.

“What is she saying?” I demanded.

“She stands with you, chóvi’hánni,” Tobar said softly, hugging the old woman back, “and as elder she says that anyone who doesn’t must leave and find another kumpaniya.”

Tsura shook her head. “No—we will not. She cannot—”

Her voice trailed off, eyes widening as the staff members moved across the room—lining up beside the old healer and Tobar. One of the women positioned herself between Tobar and his mother—I recognized her, she was the one who’d patted my cheek on the night of our birthday. “The chóvi’hánni promises us peace—that is what we chose.”

Tears filled my eyes, but I blinked them away, not wanting to appear weak; Tsura glanced over at me, her brow furrowing—her face full of confusion. “You stand up for my son… even after what happened here?”

“Yes,” I said simply. “It is the right thing to do. To stand by in silence, looking the other way when something wrong is happening… that is inviting the devil in… letting evil take root.”
“Perhaps Tereba was right and I was wrong,” she said softly. “Maybe there is more to you than meets the eye.” She reached out, her fingertips barely brushing against my cheek—Pietro tensed beside me.

The professor cleared his throat, looking even more frustrated than he’d been before—something I didn’t understand since everything seemed improved. “We should be going—I have things I need to do this afternoon.”

Narrowing her eyes, Tsura took a deep breath, turning to face him. “No money has exchanged hands—the negotiations we made here are void, Grigori Mirga. No restitution is needed—instead… the girl owes me two favors.”

“Tsura, you cannot be serious—she is a child, for God’s sake,” he said, his voice heavy with exasperation.

“A child who has acknowledged and accepted being Tereba’s heir.” She arched a brow, glancing over at me. “If she does this… I will not stop Tobar from following the Mother’s path—and I will stand with her and her brother. They will be welcomed as family in my home… without argument.”

“If you will forgive the damages Pietro did, agreeing Professor Mirga will owe you nothing,” I repeated, wanting clarification. “And you swear to accept whatever choices your son makes, no matter what they might be… then I will accept your terms, Madam.”

“Wanda,” the old man groaned.

Tsura spit on her hand, holding it out towards me; I eyed it a moment then spit in my own, clasping hers firmly. “What are the favors, then?”

“Since you are so concerned with my family’s affairs then you must fix things. First, as chóvi’hánni, you will rescind the gonimòs that Tereba and her bèshiben placed on my firstborn…” her lips curved up in a slow, sly smile, “then you must find my daughter, convincing her to leave the gadje and come home.”

I studied her a moment, then glanced over at my brother—he nodded, showing his support; we had the chance to reunite Tobar and his sister—there was no way I could say no. Tightening my grip on her hand, I returned her sly smile with one of my own; clearly, she thought she was giving me an impossible task—she was wrong. “Very well, Madam… consider it done.”
Chapter 26

THE PROVERBS SAY THAT ‘Pride goeth before destruction and arrogance before a fall’—there are certain times when I truly feel like that verse was written just for me. Whether it is due to my habit of acting without thinking or something else entirely, it all boils down to one thing—just when things seems to be starting to look up, something else happens and I get knocked right off my feet again. Perhaps the problem is fate itself—there are those who say it can be the cruelest of creatures; I think that must be very true—it seems to me that fate intentionally weighs the moments of happiness we experience on some kind of cosmic scale, just so it can be sure to balance them out with equal portions of grief. I understand, of course, that both things are necessary in the grand scheme of life—after all, without the bad times, we might not truly appreciate the good things that happen. But I, for one, would like to embrace happiness just one time without accursed trouble nipping at the back of my feet, catching me completely off guard.

I will admit that I was more than a little smug as the Professor led us from the restaurant—but in that moment, as far as I was concerned, I had good reason to be. With a single handshake, I’d solved all Tobar’s problems, assuring him acceptance when he decided to share his secret, while at the same time managing to guarantee that he would be able to go after his dreams. I’d secured a place for my brother and I within the local community, winning over a room full of strangers with nothing more than an impromptu little speech—and I’d saved the professor money to boot. Even more importantly, my brother was casting looks of adoration my way, gazing at me as if I’d hung the moon—impressed beyond reason by the way I’d held my own against Tsura. All in all, I was so puffed up with pride that it is a wonder I didn’t float away like a helium filled balloon.

Which, of course, meant that fate couldn’t resist the temptation to knock me down a few notches—it just had to intervene.

As we exited the building, I was surprised to see that the sky was dark—gray, angry storm clouds had rolled in during my time inside. The air was thick and heavy in that strange way it gets when a heavy rain looms on the horizon, but has not yet begun to fall. Cool wisps of misty condensation dampened my skin—I shivered, despite the thickness of my borrowed sweater. Immediately, Pietro slid his arm around my shoulders, pulling me close to his side.

“The lot was roped off—I had to park three streets over,” the Professor mumbled, buttoning up his cardigan and setting off; his steps were long and fast, making it hard for me to keep up—I tripped, stumbling over my own feet.

“Do we have to walk so fast?” Pietro asked, tightening his arm around me in an attempt to keep me upright.

“Yes—I have far more to do today than I planned, thanks to your sister,” the old man snapped.

I frowned, stopping in my tracks—jerking my twin to a stop beside me. “Me? What did I do?”

“You interfered when you should have kept quiet, that’s what!”

“You interfered when you should have kept quiet, that’s what!”

“I did not! She was talking about me—that is hardly interfering! And I saved you money—”

He spun around, retracing his steps—grabbing my shoulders in an iron grip as he glared down at me, tugging me away from my brother’s side. “Every time they pin their hopes on something and it does not happen, it drains away a bit of their souls! You promised them Szandau—something you cannot deliver! How do you think they will feel when they realize you played them all for fools?”
“I didn’t! I—” My voice trailed off as he gave me a shake.

“You did! But you couldn’t stop with just that—oh no! You had to take it a step further by casually agreeing to dismiss a decision made by the local Kris—effectively _thumbing your nose at their authority!”_ He punctuated each word with another hard shake—I was starting to get dizzy.

“Get your hands off my sister.” The low growl of warning made the hair on the back of my neck prickle—now was not a good time for the old man to test Pietro’s control; as much as he respected the professor, I could sense how close his temper was to snapping—his nerves were frayed, leaving him far more tempestuous than usual.

“I’m not hurting her—”

“You’re _touching_ her,” Pietro spat, his hands fisting at his sides. “Upsetting _her_!”

“Tsura didn’t mention this thing at all,” I said, trying to blink back my tears—knowing the sight of them would only serve to make my brother more irate. “I don’t know what this thing… Kris… means.”

“She _did_ mention it, albeit by another name,” he growled, releasing my shoulders; Pietro pulled me into his arms—I buried my face in his neck. “They oversee problems within the community—they are our version of the _law_, Wanda. When Hanzi informed Tebera of Terezie’s running away, she immediately had the Kris convene to render judgment on the girl—they _banished_ her for _life._”

“But Tebera named me to follow her… surely that means—”

“Not every Roma shares her superstitious beliefs, Wanda! For every twenty that do there are ten who see it for what it is—complete and utter _garbage_. The members of the Kris are rational men—they won’t care about that ridiculous title any more than I do. Instead they will see a young girl who thinks she is above their law and assume that means she thinks she is their better—they will set out to teach her a lesson, putting her in her place!”

“They can’t do anything to her,” Pietro scoffed. “They have no power over us.”

“You have no idea what they are capable of, son. I wonder If you would be so flippant about it if your sister came up missing—grabbed off the street and bartered away to a faraway kumpaniya in another part of Europe? Or if the authorities were alerted that you were orphans and they took you away, sending you to different homes?” The old man shook his head, tugging at his beard—there was a wildness in his eyes that scared me. “They will wait, and watch, learning all they can—then they will strike, seeking retribution.”

“Tobar said Ruska is different from their group… that there are different rules.” I said—my voice shook, betraying my fear. “Doesn’t that mean they can’t—”

“You are Ruska without a _vitsa_ or kumpaniya here in the city, like me. You have no Rom baro in Novi Grad to protect you from their wrath,” he snapped. “And you obviously still don’t understand! The Kris is only _part_ of the problem, you foolish girl! You have no idea what you’ve set into motion today!”

“I set Tobar’s feet on the path to achieving his dreams,” I shot back. “I helped when I could—isn’t that what you said we were supposed to do? Wasn’t that one of the lessons you shared?”

“This has _nothing_ to do with the boy and his family, Wanda! Before witnesses you accepted the title of chóvi’hánni!”
“So what if I did? What does it matter if Simza and Tsurung think I believe in the superstitions—”

“It is not just them, Wanda—there were others present! The wait staff… the men in the kitchen—you saw how they responded! They will go home tonight and share the news with their kin and neighbors who will then turn around and pass it again—by the end of the week every Rom in Novi Grad will know what you said today. The word will pass from one to the next… spreading slowly from kin in this place to kin in that place, traveling from city to city among those who still wander—soon everyone in Sokovia will have heard.”

I blinked, trying to fight back the unease that was creeping along my spine. “Why would anyone even care?”

“The children of Israel waited more than four hundred years for the deliverer of prophecy to set them free and lead them home—our people have waited almost two thousand years for the exact same thing! Tebera has made it known that only the reincarnation of Genia herself can succeed her as chóv’háni—in tying yourself to her and pretending to believe her raving delusions, you’ve given credence to everything she has said. Our people will believe that the old prophecies have finally come to pass—that Tchin and Genia have been reborn and walk among them once again, to set them free from the persecution and hatred of the gadje, leading them to the promised land. Do you understand what that means, little chóvi’hánni?” He drawled the word out, his voice full of mocking derision. “The superstitious will seek you out, like petitioners making a pilgrimage to a holy shrine. They will come to you seeking help for problems you cannot solve—seeking miracles that only God above can provide!”

His words were like a slap—finally I realized the enormity of my mistake. “I only wanted to help,” I whispered. “I did not think—”

“Oh that is quite obvious,” he snapped. “Do you know what happens when our people gather together, Wanda? Because they will gather, I promise—it is inevitable now, thanks to your little oration in there. It won’t happen right away, but I guarantee you before a month or two pass, it will happen. One or two at first, then when they see it is relatively safe they will send for their families. Kumpaniya after kumpaniya will camp around your borrowed house, filling the neighborhood overflowing until eventually word of their presence will reach the ears of the police. What do you think will happen then, little girl? Have you thought that far in advance?”

“Professor… I—”

“Is that a no, then? Fine, let me enlighten you. In the very least the police will respond to the rumors about two orphans squatting in an abandoned, run down house—they will investigate and discover your parents are dead and there is no family around to claim you. You will be shipped to an orphanage—lodged in a girl’s dormitory, far away from your beloved twin. They will put you to work in the kitchen—a preferable treatment to what Pietro will receive, I think, considering they usually make the boys do hard, manual labor. That is, of course, unless of course they decide to arrest you for squatting and vagrancy, in which case you will be sent spate detention facilities—”

“Stop,” I whispered tearfully, “please—”

“I’m not finished—there are others who will suffer. The people who have flocked to the chóv’hánni for assistance and protection will certainly not be allowed to leave the city unscathed. In case it has escaped your notice, our justice system is quite corrupt—they are in cahoots with the unscrupulous military units that sweep the streets, forcing young men into their ranks… and I am not talking about just the official army, but also the barbarous independent militias that have slowly been taking over the city. They will come and collect every single Roma male they come across. In helping one you have condemned God only knows how many—possibly even your brother if the police decide to
turn him over to them. Those that resist will be beaten… arrested… then probably tortured until they are broken beyond repair. Their wives and sisters and daughters will be harassed—some raped and killed. Their campers or whatever shelters they erect will be burned to ash, possibly with helpless children inside—”

“She asked you to stop!” Pietro snarled as I started shaking. “You don’t know that any of this will happen—you are being overdramatic, just like the old crone! Assuming the worst and spewing it out as truth!”

“I do know—I have seen it time and time again, boy! It is why I have hidden the truth of who I am for most of my life!” The old man’s face was blood red as he shouted. “It is what Yuliana and I fled from over and over until we found this city and remade ourselves so we could have a normal life!”

“We will leave,” I said abruptly, pulling away from Pietro. “We will pack up or things and—”

“That will save your skin and your brothers, but what about all the innocents you’ll leave in your wake? Another Porajmos might be beginning because of your thoughtless words and all you care about is saving yourselves!” Fast as an adder, her moved, practically jerking me off my feet as he shook me again—this time so hard that my teeth rattled against each other, biting into my tongue. “Do you honestly think all the Nazis are dead and gone, girl?”

“Let me go—” I choked out, trying to break free of his grip.

“Not until you understand! The Black Legion still exists! They are everywhere, hiding their true allegiances… pretending to help achieve peace—but it is all lies. Their evil purpose has not changed—and this time they will not stop until every Romani on the planet is piled in one of their accursed unmarked graves!”

Before I could respond I was yanked backwards out of his grasp—Pietro stepped between us, practically bristling with anger. “If you ever touch Wanda like that again I will kill you old man.”

“Pietro—”

“No! You belittle her for this predicament without even asking why she went there today!”

“Because the reasoning does not matter!” The old man snapped.

“Tell him, Wanda…” Pietro growled, “or I will.”

I reached into my pocket, pulling out the bottle, holding it up for him to see. “I wanted to help you… with the cancer. Tobar said Simza has extended people’s lives with her medicines… I couldn’t bear the thought of us losing you like we lost Mama and Papa.”

“You see? My sister cares about people—your angry assumptions about nameless, faceless strangers torments her.” Pietro’s voice was low and menacing; his hands fisted at his sides—a clear sign of how hard he was struggling to control his anger. “I am not my sister… I do not care about what happens to anyone but her, and I will not stand by and let you disparage her for doing what Mama taught her to do— listening to the compassion within herself!”

My heart skipped a beat at the impassioned way he spoke; he looked heartbreakingly beautiful in his fury—like one of the ferocious archangels from the stained glass windows of a church… far too ethereal to be real.

“I should not have let my temper get the better of me,” the old man mumbled, scrubbing his face with his palms. “I am an old fool—haunted by the horrific things I have seen over the course of a
“Can’t I just tell Tsura that I did not understand what she was asking? That will erase both problems, yes?” I turned around, intending to march right back to the restaurant and do exactly that.

“It won’t erase anything,” he said, grabbing the back of my sweater and jerking me to a stop. “What’s done is done—a deal was made, girl. If you back out now you will lose the support of Tebera’s followers—right now their belief in you is the only thing in your favor. The kris will be wary of acting right away—they won’t want to risk having such a large group revolt against their judgment when Novi Grad is in such a state of unrest. It would be too easy for them to pick up and move to another city where there is peace… to choose another Rom barò to lead them. They will be very cautious in how they proceed… careful not to incur Tebera’s wrath. And the kris’ will want to avoid attracting the attention of the gadje—that is another point in our favor.”

“But you just said—”

“I was simply trying to impress upon you how serious the situation is, Pietro.” The old man sighed, tugging at his beard. “Acting without thinking caused this problem—we cannot afford to make matters worse by repeating the same mistake. I need time to figure things out… to come up with a foolproof course of action to solve both problems at once—one that doesn’t include having your sister back pedal on her sworn word.”

A clap of thunder sounded, so loud that it made me flinch—as if God above were voicing his opinion on the issue; it was the only warning sign we received—the lurking storm was upon us. A fat raindrop hit my nose, followed by another—the old man groaned, glaring up at the sky.

“Come—we don’t have time for squabbling now. I am far too old to risk getting soaked to the bone—and I don’t relish the thought of dealing with pneumonia settling in and taking up residence in my lungs alongside the tumors.”

Pietro grabbed my hand, steadying me as we ran for the car; for an old, sick man, the professor was very fleet—but then, his long legs certainly contributed to his speed. Even running, we barely made it—the heavens opened up just we reached the car. By the time Pietro tugged the car door closed behind us, we were soaked to the skin, thanks to the sky letting loose a torrential downpour—one that was so heavy that it was hard to see out the windows.

As the old man put the car into gear, I chewed on my lip, hesitant to continue the discussion—but the urge to set things right was gnawing at my insides. “Professor… maybe I could—”

“Wanda, Please! I need to concentrate on the road.”

“Don’t snap at her!” Pietro growled, leaning up to glare at him. “This isn’t your problem—it is ours. It doesn’t concern you at all!”

“Ah yes, because I am the type of man who abandons children when they are in trouble—especially when one of them was trying to help me.” Sarcasm laced the old man’s words as he glanced in the rearview mirror. “Besides of which, it does concern me—I’m the one who took you there in the first place. If it weren’t for me, you wouldn’t be in this mess—you can’t deny that. I’d hoped to give you a sense of who you are… a connection to your parents—not for you to get roped in to nonsense and archaic superstition.”

I tugged on Pietro’s arm, gently pulling him back—shooting him a silent plea with my eyes; he sighed, sliding his arm around my shoulder—his body was still tense with pent up anger, like a bow string drawn too tight. “That still doesn’t give you the right to treat her rudely… she was only trying
“I appreciate the medicine, son, but that does not mitigate things, Pietro. She shouldn’t have meddled in their family affairs—the situation with Tobar was not her concern. If that boy wanted to be a healer so much then it was up to him to stand his ground—it was not your sister’s place to speak for him.”

“That’s not the only reason I did it,” I said, resting my cheek against my brother’s neck. “He is different—he asked me to help him make his mother accept that.”

“Of course he’s different than you—he was raised believing in fairy tales,” he shot back. “What I can’t for the life of me understand is why you would agree to assist him after what he tried to do to you—”

“He doesn’t like girls, Professor,” I blurted out, hoping that Tobar would understand my betrayal of his confidence, given the circumstance. “He went along with his mother’s demands thinking it would keep her from finding out that he is… you know… homosexual.” My voice was soft, but it was obvious he heard me from the sound of surprise he made. “That I why I made her agree to accept all his choices… not just the one about learning healing.”

“Dear God above… it just gets worse and worse,” he muttered under his breath.

Closing my eyes, I sighed—there was no point in trying to make him understand; a thick, oppressive silence filled the car—it was broken only by the sound of the tires as they moved across the wet cobbles of the street. Pietro gave me a little squeeze of support that somehow made me feel even more melancholic—hating the fact that I’d caused so much strife without meaning to, I shifted, stretching my neck to press my lips against his ear to whisper. “Do you think he will ever forgive me?”

“Of course—he is just in a snit,” he whispered back. “I bet by the time we—”

The car abruptly swerved, skidding across two lanes—I shrieked, clinging to Pietro, my terror so strong that it took me a moment to realize we’d come to a stop. “What—”

“Stay in the car—I won’t be long,” he said gruffly, climbing out of the car and slamming the door behind him.

“Did we hit something?” I asked, loosening my grip on my brother—craning my neck to try and peer out the window through the sheet of rain obscuring the back window, praying that the old man hadn’t hit some poor stray dog or cat.

“I don’t think so—look, he’s going inside.” Pietro clambered over me, peering out the window. “What—”

“I pressed my face against the glass beside his, studying the building—trying to ignore the pang of worry that welled up in my stomach. “Maybe he’s planning on going away until it all blows over… to visit his children or something.”

“No way—he doesn’t talk to them, remember?”

I gnawed on my thumbnail, contemplating the comment, then shrugged. “He could have changed his mind—maybe Tsura wanting to see her daughter got him thinking about things.”

I flopped back in the seat, heaving a deep sigh; thanks to all the tension and stress, my head was starting to ache something fierce. “I hope he hurries—my head hurts… and it’s getting stuffy in
“Yeah… and you stink,” he grumbled, cracking open the door.

I was so relieved at the cool, damp air filtering in that I didn’t huff at the insult—it was hard for me to take offense when what he said was true; the strong, pungent scent of the incense that burned in Simza’s rooms lingered in the fabric of my clothing—the acrid smell was definitely a contributing factor to the throbbing in my head.

“Maybe he’s planning on smuggling us out of the country,” he said, tossing me a lopsided grin. “You’re small enough to fit in a suitcase, I think.”

“I am not! And for your information, I still happen to be growing!” I shot back, scowling.

“So am I—which means you will never be as big as me again. Only fitting since I’m the oldest.”

He looked so smug I almost reached over to give him a good hard pinch. “Don’t start that!”

“Why not? It’s the truth. I will always be your older, bigger brother, no matter how tall you get, forever and ever—that’s never going to change.”

The unexpected chill that crawled up my spine had absolutely nothing to do with the cold air coming through the door; it was the same sort of eerie feeling I’d had when I’d stared into the blackness of the alley on the night I was attacked by the bum—only much, much worse. All of a sudden, I couldn’t breathe—a sharp, crushing pain welled up in the center of my chest, like my heart was caught in a vice. I closed my eyes, fighting against the sensation—saying a silent prayer that God would help me chase the dark feelings away.

“I was only teasing, Pietra…honest.”

The gentle press of Pietro’s hand on my cheek was proof that God was listening—I let out a sigh of relief as the bad feelings ebbed away. Opening my eyes, I forced a smile—wanting to erase the guilty look on his face. “I know… a goose walked on my grave, that’s all.”

He frowned at the idiom, immediately tensing. “Don’t say that—not ever.”

“I just meant—”

“That’s what Mama said, Wanda! Don’t you remember? Right before… you know.” His jaw tensed—his gaze dropping from mine.

I felt like I’d been punched right in the stomach—for a single second… I’d forgotten one of the most important things of all… the last words our mother had spoken before she’d vanished through the floor. Hot tears pricked my eyes, making his face blur—I didn’t try to hide them. “I… Pietro… I forgot. How could I forget that?”

“It’s okay… maybe you put it out of your mind,” he said gruffly, still avoiding my eyes. “Just don’t say it again—it’s bad luck.”

“It’s not okay,” I whispered. “I don’t want to forget anything about them, Pietro—I want to remember everything… not just the big important things like that, but the little ones too—”

“It probably just slipped your mind for a minute. You said it instinctively, you know? The way she used to do all the time.” His voice softened, his gaze finally returning to mine, but I refused to be soothed.
“And what if the next thing that slips my mind is the sound of her voice? Or the way her hair felt against my cheek?” I demanded, my voice breaking. “Or maybe the way Papa’s arms felt when he scooped us up and held us close, dancing around the room? How long until it all fades away and I lose those things forever?”

“Wanda! You need to calm down! A lot has happened today—you are clearly overwrought and tired… and you said yourself that your head is aching, yes?” He pulled me into his lap, wrapping his arms around me. “It doesn’t mean you forgot Mama.”

“But—”

“There are no buts—if anything I would think you saying it means subconsciously Mama was in your thoughts.” Frowning, he glanced out the window, then pressed his lips against mine in a quick, chaste kiss. “If you calm yourself and stop fretting… I promise I will give you a proper sort of kiss later, when we are alone.”

Thankfully, the furtive, completely unexpected press of his lips against mine surprised me so much that it snapped me out of my panic before it could firmly take root; in fact, it was so effective that I was determined to have another kiss—fully embracing the notion that his kisses might possible drive all my worries completely out of my head.

“We are all alone right now,” I murmured, trying to reclaim his lips.

“He could look out the window to check on us,” he said sternly, tilting his head so his mouth was out of my reach. “If you can’t behave then you cannot sit on my lap.”

“It’s raining too hard for him to see and you know it,” I huffed, wrapping my arms around him—clinging to him so he couldn’t move me back onto the seat. “And anyway, that is not a rule.”

“It is now—”

“You can’t just make up random rules on the spur of the moment, Pietro Maximoff!”

“Yes I can—I’m the oldest. That’s how it works, little sister,” he shot back.

“Papa was older than Mama but he never bossed her around,” I pointed out, pouting.

“That is entirely different—she was his wife,” he argued.

“I thought that’s what you wanted me to be someday when we are fully grown… or am I mistaken?” I asked, my fingertips teasing the soft skin at the nape of his neck that was hidden beneath his curls.

“I do want that…” his voice softened, “more than anything.”

“Well then the two things clearly will not be mutually exclusive—after all, I will still be your sister even then, yes?” I murmured, my fingers straying up to play with his curls. “So since I will be both, don’t you think it is better not to form such bad habits now?”

His brow crinkled up with confusion. “What do you mean?”

“This making up rules on the spot business… if you get into the habit of doing it now then you will most likely do it later too, when I am more than just your sister—”

“You’re already more…” he said softly, running his fingertips along my cheek. “You are my
promised, remember?”

“Of course I do.” I blushed, ducking my head down—pleased almost as much by the reverence in his voice as I was by the look of longing on his face. “I’m just saying that unless you plan on being a bossy tyrant of a husband to me when I am your wife—”

“Wanda! I wouldn’t ever be like that!” Hurt danced along my skin—he was wounded that I would even imply such a thing.

“Then you must break the habit now, yes?” I murmured cajolingly, glancing up at him from under my lashes—fluttering them a little.

“Trying to get your way with soft looks and sweetness… are you using your womanly wiles on me, Pietra?” He murmured—his voice was husky as his hands strayed down to grip my hips.

“Perhaps…” My lips twitched up in a smile as I wrapped my fingers in the thick silkiness of his curls. “I suppose it all depends on whether it is working or not, doesn’t it?”

He nuzzled the tender skin behind my ear—his words were a warm, soft whisper against my skin. “I like your wiles very much… use them some more, please.”

I giggled, turning my face—rubbing my nose against his. “I am sorry to disappoint you, my brother, but I only know about that one because I saw Mama use it on Papa. I don’t know any more wily tricks yet.”

“Well… I guess that means we will just have to discover them as we go, won’t we?” His fingers moved, gently kneading up and down my spine. “We could start trying to figure them out now… I am fairly certain your lips are just as sweet as your words, yes? I do have quite a weakness for sweet things…”

“Wouldn’t that be considered against the rules?” I teased, brushing my lips against his cheek; the corner of my mouth barely grazing his before I pulled back—flashing him a smile of completely feigned innocence.

He chewed at the corner of his lip for a moment—remaining silent; I sighed, untangling my fingers from his hair—shifting to slide off his lap, back onto the seat. “I’m sorry… I didn’t mean to push when you said to wait.”

He frowned, but still, he did not speak; instead, he just leaned over, tugging the car door closed.

“Hey! It’s going to get all stuffy in here again!”

Ignoring me completely, he moved again—stretching over the middle console and leaning across the driver’s seat; there was a faint clicking noise, then he sank back beside me with a smug little smile on his face.

I eyed him. “Pietro? What are you up to?”

“He told us to stay in the car—surely he wanted the doors all closed and locked for safety’s sake.”

“Yes… but—”

“If the doors are all closed, the windows will get foggy from the stuffy air, yes?” His smug little smile widened into a full out grin. “And if they are locked for safety reasons… the Professor will have to take the time to unlock them.”
I made a face at him. “What does that matter?”

“Wanda… for someone so smart, sometimes you can be very slow about catching on to things,” he teased, pulling me back into his lap. “Foggy windows means he won’t be able to see inside, even if he is standing right beside the car—though we should probably slouch down, just to be safe—and the sound of the door unlocking will warn us that he is back.”

“That really doesn’t explain anything,” I said crossly, my lower lip sliding forward as I sulked.

He chuckled, tracing my pouty lower lip with his finger. “Why would I go to so much trouble, sweet sister? If you think about it for a moment… I am positive you can figure it out.”

I blinked as I slowly tried to processed the meaning of his actions—my eyes widening as it all clicked into place. “You mean this? Really? Don’t tease me if you aren’t serious—”

His mouth claimed mine, silencing me—his lips soft and teasing; just as my head started spinning from the deliciousness of his barely there kiss, he pulled back just a little, his breath warming my lips as he whispered. “Some people say that rules are made to be broken, Pietra… and just for today… I happen to agree with them.”

End Notes

Fic I'm writing to go along with my Wanda Maximoff RP Account. If you're a shipper of the twins, I'll be posting lots of head canons and graphics and such, so if you want to check them out, its http://chovihanni.tumblr.com/ ;o)

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!