

## 12. Indecision

I packed my clothes quickly and abruptly; taking more care with the paperwork that was nestled carefully away. They were priceless right now, the fruits of my labors. They made this trip worthwhile. My dance with death had purpose. I wondered if I should try to find her before my departure. Then I thought of Caine's warnings and thought better of it. This was love, and this was loss, all at once. My body didn't know how to hold it. My mind was very confused in itself. I discovered something great, something wonderful and worth saving for all eternity. And in that same breath, it was snatched away from me. I packed and decided to leave at night. I'd spend my last few hours wandering just as I was always fond of doing. There was a race tonight as well, I thought about it. Caine was scheduled to be playing a show, accompanied by Deacon, at one of the local watering holes. I could do it all. I deduced that I'd make the most of this, my last day and night in my home away from home. I would go hear the kids play for a while, listening to those forlorn guitar chords echo amidst rooms filled with smoke and conversation. Then move off to catch the festivities of the races, see who came out on top. And after that, in the wee hours of the new day, I'd take my bags and hop the first bus home. As I walked out of the little inn, I dropped my mail in the box, one of which was a letter to Mr. Wolfe, the owner of the inn, with a check for my occupancy. I didn't want to hand it to him directly, since he disputed my paying anything at all. In that way, everything was clear.

I walked with my hands in my pockets, smoking as I went, over to the place that the kids were playing at. Caine was off talking to the barkeep, Deacon was sitting fiddling around with her guitar, making sure everything was in tune. Her face seemed to light up when I came in, she jumped up and ran over to me.

"Hey, what's up?"

I looked around, confused, bewildered. "Huh?"

She laughed, like a child. She seemed reborn, a completely different from the girl I used to know. I don't know if Caine changed her, or sobriety, but she wasn't the sullen girl that lived next door, who moved from chemical to chemical, guy to guy, day after night and so on. She just seemed so much...happier. She was free. I smiled back at her, shaking away the confusion.

"Hey, um, nothing. You?"

"Come for the show?" She tilted her head a little, moving her eyes over to Caine. He was straightening out a few last minute details; he looked over and smiled at us both, a slight wink in Deacon's direction. I was happy for them both. There was love everywhere. Shirley and Moe. Deacon and Caine. And yet here I stood, my life completely forbidden. Figures. I thought of Irish, how alone she was, how she didn't seem to mind it in the slightest. Maybe you didn't need anybody to make it in this life. Then again, it's nice to have company. I thought of Damiano's warm skin, her soft touch...and I threw all of Irish's theories out a window. I nodded back at Deacon as I zoned in, coming back to this moment.

"Course, wouldn't miss it for the world. Going to the races?"

She nodded back. "Course. Wouldn't miss it."

And we both laughed, like there was some sort of secret joke that only we shared. There was some sort of underlying feeling of discomfort, but overall, here we were. Years of isolation as both of us hid in plain sight and we were both reborn. I felt closer to Deacon now, standing here, talking about nothing, than I ever had before. Her troubled past, her case history, everything, it all seemed to slip away and she became just a carefree girl, no – young woman. She looked so much happier; I couldn't believe the physical glow she had to her now.

The beginning of something more. Of something more than this. The past was dead and gone, and we were all reinventing ourselves. It's what us artists specialize in. I thought about when I got home, looking into opening a gallery, I'd invite Deacon to showcase her work with me. I wondered if she ever intended to go home. Somehow, I doubted it. Then again, stranger things have happened in this world. Every day, the standards get tested. And every day, lines are bending, breaking, and reforming elsewhere.

I sat down in the back of the place, settling myself down to a drink and a smoke while the two kids sat up front on stools, guitars balanced across their knees. And they played. They played with heart and soul, in perfect harmony, working off of one another brilliantly. I couldn't keep a smile off my face, even as they sang their tragic melodies of loss and hardship. Maybe I'm truly insane underneath it all, maybe I'm insincere, I don't know. But that's how I felt. I can't explain it entirely, but that's just how it was.

I was sitting there, listening, for a good hour or so when my attention seemed to divert elsewhere. A vague scent flooded over me, then I found my eyes blocked by two hands. My vision all turned to black, my body shaking slightly.

"Guess who?" The voice was soft, spoken in my ear. I could feel her breath on my neck as I pulled her hands down and pulled her into a chair next to me. Damiano was dressed as normal as she could appear, devoid of anything that would make her seem out of the ordinary. She had on jeans and a coat that covered most of her, so to the general public, she was nothing to be noticed.

"You might be as mad as I am," I whispered, trying to keep my eyes front while the music continued. I didn't want to create a scene. She merely smiled, leaning in to respond in my ear again.

“Might be?”

“We have to talk.”

I could feel the frown pull at the corners of her mouth; her whole body seemed to slump in the chair. I wanted to pull her out of here and explain everything. Caine’s warning – how I wasn’t prepared to die for her but I did love her. I wanted to rant and rave until there was nothing left in me. But I couldn’t. I sat there, my hand gripping her tight, my best way to tell her not to leave me. And she stayed. The kids took a break for a while, and I took that as a cue to clear things up with her. I grabbed her and ran outside, behind the building, holding her by her shoulders against the wall. It was only now, as the light hit her face, I could see the bruises, freshly made.

“What have you got me involved in?” My voice was stern, my eyes hard and unfeeling. She shrugged, pulling me closer to her.

“Trouble. Isn’t that what guys like you are always searching for?”

I shook my head, pushing myself away from her. It hurt, but I had to. She was a living siren, pulling me to my own destruction. She was the epitome of trouble walking. This was my death – right here, all sex and seduction. I took a few more steps back. “And Marco? I didn’t come here searching for him.”

She frowned again, but turned it into a sort of half-smile. “Scared?”

“Damiano...I heard some disheartening things today. About Marco. About the Wicked. I’m leaving tonight.”

She smiled again, creeping closer to me. “Funny. So am I.”

“What?” My mind was doing back-flips again, the possibilities

raging through. She took a few steps around me, looking me up and down.

“I’m leaving. What part of that are you having trouble understanding?”

“But...why? I thought this was your home.”

And she laughed, a laugh very similar to Deacon’s. “Home? Girls like me don’t have homes. We have temporary sanctuaries. It’s time that I move on.”

“And what brought this sudden change of heart forth?”

She smiled wider. “Not you, if that’s what you’re thinking. I hate to wound your precious ego, but no, there are other reasons to get out of this haven.”

I nodded, taking the blow slightly to heart. She crept closer to me. She locked eyes with me, pulling me closer to her again. I wrapped my arms around her, slowly, as she placed them there. And as my fingers slide onto her back, she jerked, her eyes closing slightly as a slight hiss escaped between her teeth.

“That’s the deal breaker.”

“Marco...”

“Beats me?” Her reply was very...matter of fact. Like this happened all the time, like I should have known all along. “Course. He’s protecting what’s his.”

I shook my head and held her to my chest, careful not to squeeze too tightly on what could have been cracked ribs. I felt guilty, for creating this situation. I wanted to face Marco, one on one, deal with this like a man. But I knew I couldn’t, and wouldn’t. The noise inside hinted that the break was over and the music would continue soon. She pulled away from me and turned to run off.

“You’ll come to the race?” My voice was desperate as I yelled after her.

“Course. I’m expected.”

“And then?”

She smiled, coming back to me and kissing me softly. “And then we run away.”

I smiled back. “I thought this had nothing to do with me.”

She laughed. “The timing had nothing to do with you. The new location has everything to do with you. My mother always said that when opportunity falls into your lap, make the best of friends with it.”

I kissed her, letting her go again. “After the race, bus station.”

She looked over her shoulder as she left, smiling back.

And the bottom of my stomach dropped out once more, my faith was restored, and all was well in the world. I could have died right there, a happy man, without achieving anything great, without any sort of merit to my name. Simply because Damiano Morrow loved me. Right there, right then, I believed in love at first sight, in all the fireworks, the bells and whistles, everything. If you told me you’d seen Cupid, I would have asked you how many arrows he had left these days. And with a heart reborn yet again, I walked back into the saloon and listened to the rest of the show with ears newly blessed.