

# The Italian's Passionate Return

By Elizabeth Lennox

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## Chapter 1

"You're not supposed to be here," a small voice stated firmly.

Damien Alfieri looked around, seeing only the mamma dog and a stall filled with what looked like a hundred puppies. Of course, it was probably only five or six fur-balls, but they were wiggling continuously and looked like a lot more.

When he spotted the black haired boy with brown eyes staring back at him, Damien was startled. There was something about the boy that caught and held his gaze, but he couldn't quite figure out what was so...interesting about the boy.

"I apologize if I'm intruding on your solitude, young man," he said, bowing formally but with humor in his eyes. The boy was holding – or trying to hold – two additional puppies. They were both licking the boy's face, but they were wagging their little tails so hard they were about to fall out of his arms.

"What's solitude?" the boy asked, his eyes changing from suspicious to curious as his mind tried to process the new word. Then he realized what he was doing and shook his head. "Doesn't matter. You're not supposed to be in here." He looked behind Damien worriedly.

Damien instantly knew what was going through the boy's mind. "Do your parents know that you're out here?" he asked gently, but with an unspoken reprimand in his tone. He didn't understand why he had included the scolding – he usually left children to their governesses or parents. He rarely had time to interact with children, especially one this young. He appeared to be six or seven, possibly eight years old with intelligent eyes and black, curly hair that was in desperate need of a trim.

"Dylan!" a feminine voice called from outside the barn. "Time for breakfast."

The boy gripped one of the puppies closer, obviously not wanting to relinquish his treasure but unable to ignore the summons. "I gotta go," he said with resignation and put the puppy down gently near his mamma. "So do you," he said and raced to the stall's doors, slipping underneath. When he was standing outside the doorway, he looked up at the extremely tall stranger, his eyebrows pulled down into a frown. "You gotta go too. My mamma doesn't want strangers in her barn. She says it isn't good."

With that, the little boy sprinted out the barn door, straight for the small house that sat at the end of the driveway.

Damien chuckled, liking the little fellow instantly. There was a bark and Damien turned around, remembering the puppies and the whole reason he'd come out to this small farm. A puppy. With a sigh, he looked down at the puppies, his eyes trying to determine which his niece would like the most. Probably the cutest, but Damien was more inclined to choose the least wiggly of the bunch.

"A phone call, sir," his driver said. Damien looked up from the puppies, irritated that business couldn't wait for another ten minutes while he selected a puppy from the brood. But business rarely waited. It was normally what he liked about his work, but today, he wanted some time. He'd never slowed down before, preferring to move quickly and efficiently as he did his

business around the world. But being here in the soft, rolling hills of central Virginia, he could see the attraction of a slower, easier lifestyle.

Inside the house, Dylan climbed up onto his stool and grabbed his spoon before taking a big bite of his oatmeal. "Guy in the barn," he said. "Oh, and Andy's birthday party is this weekend. I can go, right?"

Jemma put the last dish in the drying rack and sighed, wondering how she could scrape up enough money for a birthday present. If only Dylan weren't so popular! The kid was charming and funny as well as frighteningly intelligent. But couldn't he skip just a few of the birthday parties he was invited to? This would be the third one this month! There were only twenty-five kids in his class. How many of them knew her son well enough to really want him at their birthday party?

And then his first comment struck her. "A guy in the barn?" she asked, trying to clarify. "What do you mean?"

Dylan swallowed around the scoop of oatmeal, knowing he wasn't allowed to talk with his mouth full. His mom was weird about things like that. "Yeah. Some guy. I think he wants one of the puppies."

Jemma perked up at that news. Selling one of the puppies would be wonderful! They were pure-bred yellow labs. The proceeds from just one would allow her to buy groceries for the whole month.

"You stay and eat your breakfast," she told him sternly, wiping her hands on the threadbare dishtowel. "I'll go see what this guy wants."

Dylan almost rolled his eyes, but he was too hungry to put much effort into the expression. "I told you, he wants to buy one of Momma Dog's puppies." He looked up at her when she had one hand on the doorknob. "You're not going to, are you?" he asked, his eyes instantly displaying concern.

Jemma sighed, the weight of her son's worry on her shoulders. "We talked about this, remember? I know you love Momma Dog's puppies, but they need to find their own homes."

Dylan's food was forgotten as his worry over losing one of his playmates surfaced. "Yeah, but that was last week. No one came to buy a puppy, so I thought..."

Jemma's heart ached for her young son. "Dylan, just because no one has come to buy them yet, doesn't mean they all don't need a good home. You can't take care of six puppies plus Momma Dog and all of your other chores."

His face took on a disgruntled expression as he thought through the options. "I could forget some of my other chores!" he exclaimed. "That would give me more time to take care of the puppies."

Jemma almost laughed out loud at his excited expression. But she somehow found the strength to hold back. "I don't think so, young man. Eat your breakfast," she told him and opened the door. "I'll be back in a moment."

Jemma walked out of the house and headed towards the barn. She looked towards the front and saw the long, black limousine. Nervous, she hurried her pace. It wasn't the luxury of the

vehicle that caused her heart to start beating frantically. Her reputation as a horse and dog breeder had people from Washington, D.C., Richmond, and as far away as North Carolina and Ohio coming to her farm to buy horses or puppies. The animals loved her farm, enjoying the freedom of the outdoors and the wide, open spaces where they could run around and bark to their heart's content. But there was something about this limousine that hurried her footsteps towards the barn, she looked back at the house to ensure that Dylan was out of sight.

She tried to compose herself before entering the barn. Her thoughts were crazy. There was no way the man waiting for her was....

Jemma stepped into the darker barn area and stopped cold. The tall, dangerous looking man standing there in front of the stall filled with Momma Dog and her puppies once again took her breath away. She couldn't believe he was here, standing in her barn and looking...well, more dangerous! How had he found her? Why was he here? Goodness, he looked marvelous! She tried breathing, tried taking deep breaths to regain her equilibrium, but it was hard. Memories of that one night came back to her, haunting her, causing her whole body to tense with anticipation of what he could do to her, what he could make her body feel. It wasn't possible, she told herself. There was no way this man, this one man who had so completely turned her world around, could be here, standing in her barn not ten feet from her.

And then he turned around. As soon as her gaze collided with his, her knees went weak and her pulse raced. It wasn't possible! Not this man! Not here! Not after all these years! No!

"Go away!" she almost yelled and spun on her heel, racing out the door again. She was torn between many emotions – fighting both tears and the urge to race towards him with her fingernails bared. She wanted to claw at his face, to hurt him so deeply, just as he'd done to her. But there was a part of her that wanted to throw herself into his arms, to feel that incredible strength surround her. To have him create that shocking, mind-blowing magic when he touched her, when he kissed her. And damn him! She also wanted him to do all those crazy, sensuous, pleasure-inducing things to her that they'd done together that one night.

No man, either before or after him, had possessed the power to drive her so out of control. No man had brought her to the brink of heaven, only to carry her over into screaming, passionate climax and then coax her to gently float down into blissful pleasure like he had. She resented him for that. Because ever since that night, she'd never found another man with whom she could experience such incredible bliss. He'd both spoiled her for other men and scared her to even try looking.

Because that one night had resulted in Dylan's conception. And although she'd never regret having that precious boy in her life, this man had changed the course of her destiny. Even as she looked at him now, she instinctively knew that he could do it again.

She'd almost made it through the doorway when a grip like a steel band wrapped around her arm, hauling her back. "Jemma?" he asked, taking her other arm, effortlessly holding her in place even as she struggled to get away from him. "Is it really you?"

No matter how hard she yanked against his hands, she couldn't break his hold. He was too strong and too dangerous. She was shivering when she finally stopped. She wouldn't look up at him though. She simply stood there with his hands still gripping her upper arms, furious with him and scared at the same time.

"It *is* you!" Damien looked down at the woman who had haunted his dreams for years. Even now, he occasionally thought about her, dreamed about her. He'd gotten his security team to try and find her, but since he hadn't gotten her last name, they hadn't had much to go on. But he'd never forgotten her.

They'd met at a night club, their eyes drawn to each other. She'd been twenty years old and one of the most beautiful women he'd ever seen. He'd been twenty-eight and reckless, wanting to live life hard and fast, both personally and professionally. On the personal side, he was a frequent member of the club scene. On the professional side, he was buying up every company that would fit within his mad scheme to build an empire for himself.

In a remarkably short time, the empire had come through hard work, merciless hours and what some called dangerous risks but what he knew were all calculated maneuvers. His one regret was not getting this woman's last name that night.

"Where have you been all these years?" he demanded, moving closer to her. He loved the smell of her, the way she moved. She was like music when she walked and a symphony when she danced. Of course, he'd only had those few dances with her, but he didn't care. He'd compared every lover since against this one woman and they'd all come up lacking.

"It doesn't matter where I've been," she almost growled. "Let go of me and get off my farm!" She yanked again, glaring up at him but she couldn't hide the shivering at his touch. She was furious with herself for feeling anything other than anger towards this man. Oh, the anger was definitely there. Hurt, anger, betrayal...and desire.

No! She did not feel lust! She didn't feel anything but anger. Focusing on that emotion, she kicked his shin, hoping that would get her release.

Unfortunately, he was much more agile than she realized. He laughed softly down at her as he avoided her attempts to wound him, his eyes firing with that strange light she'd dreamed about over and over again. "I don't remember you being this feisty," he said, his voice deepening to a husky chuckle. "I think I like it."

Damien moved closer, pinning her against the rough wood of the barn wall. As he held her hands, he caught the surprise in her eyes and almost laughed out loud with delight. "It's still there, isn't it?" he asked softly, releasing her wrists, letting his hands run up her arms and smiling when she shivered again. "It hasn't abated at all, has it?"

Jemma tried to turn her head away so he couldn't see the desire in her eyes. "I don't know what you're talking about," she said through gritted teeth. She tried not to let him heat up her body with his, pretending that she wasn't affected by the way his hard, muscular body pressed against her softness. "I don't want you. I don't even like you," which was the truth. Unfortunately, she was discovering that her mind didn't need to like or respect a man to desire him.

"I need you to leave. I have responsibilities." With those words, she remembered that Dylan needed to get to the bus stop. "I have to go," she gasped and pushed against him with all her strength.

She suspected that it was more just surprise that caused him to step backwards, but she didn't care. Jemma rushed out of the barn, heading for Dylan. She needed to put as much distance between Dylan and this man as she could. She didn't know Damien well. Okay, so she

knew him intimately but she didn't know his character. Six years ago, she hadn't had the chance to catch her breath after meeting him. He'd literally swept her off of her feet. They'd spotted each other across the room at a club. And as soon as their eyes connected, she had been lost in the magnetic pull of his eyes and his body. As soon as they were close enough, he'd pulled her out onto the dance floor. They hadn't even remembered to exchange names until after he'd kissed her.

She shook her head, pushing memories of Damien out of her mind. She'd been twenty years old and stupid, gullible and a virgin. He'd been twenty-eight, a man of the world and more experienced than she could handle. Their one night of passion had left her shaking from aftershocks.

And two weeks later, she realized that she was pregnant with no way to contact him.

Okay, so to be fair, not being able to contact him hadn't been his fault. She'd left the following morning, walking out of his beautiful penthouse before he woke. She'd caught a cab and went home, shamed to her core that she'd done something so careless.

When she'd discovered her pregnancy, she hadn't been able to find her way back to the man's building. All of them looked the same! Concrete and glass buildings were common in the city, and she'd been so upset that morning, she hadn't noticed any of the exterior details. Only the size and luxuriousness of the inside of his penthouse had left an impression.

Jemma hurried across the broken pathway to her small house, praying that Damien would just go away and leave her alone. She couldn't handle him right now. Good grief, she hadn't been able to handle him six years ago!

"Ready?" she asked, breathless when she stepped into the relative warmth of her tiny house.

Dylan already had his shoes on and his backpack ready. "Don't forget your lunch," she called out to him a moment before he was about to race out the door.

Dylan froze for a split second, then raced back to the counter where his brown bag was sitting. He grabbed it, stuffed it into his book bag – awkwardly, since he didn't want to take the time to take his bag off of his shoulders – then raced out the door.

Jemma followed behind at a slower pace. She knew he was capable of getting to the bus stop on his own since it was just at the end of her driveway, but she preferred to make sure he stepped onto the bus safely. This area was too remote and she was a paranoid mother. So she walked down the tree lined drive, her arms crossed over her stomach because of both the cold and her reaction to seeing Damien again.

Dylan was her antidote, she thought, smiling as he raced to the end of the drive and looked down the street for the bus. He loved school, became irritated with the slower pace of the other students or the teacher but he was still very kind, normally helping his classmates to understand the concepts the teacher was explaining. He was a sweet little guy, but she worried about him not being challenged enough.

With a sigh, she smiled at his excitement when he spotted the bus. By the time it rolled to a stop in front of him, he'd already given her a hug, a cheeky grin and a big, sloppy kiss goodbye. Jumping onto the bus, he smiled to the bus driver who chuckled at his excitement.

“Hi Debbie!” Jemma called out to the bus driver. Debbie waved back even while she pulled the door closed. “See you this afternoon,” Debbie called back to Jemma.

The bus pulled away and Jemma sighed with happiness. Dylan was her life now. He was everything she needed.

## Chapter 2

Turning around, she looked back down the long driveway. She couldn't see the barn or the black limousine because of the trees, but she suspected Damien was still there. If he'd left, she would have seen the car pull out onto the street but, other than the giant, yellow bus, the street was empty. This was rural Virginia, after all. Not many cars passed through this area. That was one of the reasons it was so ideal for her farm. It was quiet and remote, with enough cheap land to give her horses and dogs a chance to run around. She didn't keep her horses trapped in stalls during the day. They came in for grain in the morning and evening, but other than that, they roamed the large, fenced in pasture where they could graze on healthy grasses and bask in the sunshine.

Looking back down her driveway, she squared her shoulders, gave herself a pep talk, and forced her mind and body to calm down. She wouldn't be crazy, she wouldn't lose her cool...she would just walk back, calmly tell him to be on his way and get him off her property.

And if he didn't leave, she would call George, the sheriff, and ask him for help. She'd been on a few dates with George. He was a nice guy and she could picture a nice life with him. What was better, he took his job seriously. If she called asking for help, he'd be racing out here with sirens blaring. He was one of the good guys, she told herself as she forced her feet to move forward.

When she turned the corner of her driveway, she saw him there. Her feet stopped moving while they watched each other. Her heart, on the other hand, didn't! At the first sight of his tall, muscular body, her heart and stomach both did little flips. Her heart was racing and she stood there, several feet away from him, just watching and trying to get her reaction back under control.

Taking a deep breath, she glared at him. "Why are you still here?" she demanded, not taking another step. She was actually afraid of him! He stood there, his dark eyes watching her, assessing. He couldn't know!

Could he?

Suddenly, she was terrified for a whole different reason. Dylan! She had been so wrapped up in her fear of the attraction they had for each other that she didn't realize how much he looked like Dylan. Had he seen the resemblance? Dylan was five, loving kindergarten. Damien was....well, she had no idea how old he was. It was pretty shocking that she'd been so intimate with this man but they had said very little to each other beyond exchanging names before falling into bed. Which was the whole reason she had snuck out the following morning. She'd been too embarrassed by her actions from the previous night and wanted to get away as quickly as possible.

But she was older and wiser now. And she wouldn't let anything happen to her son!

"Why are you still here?" she asked, her stance shifting to belligerence.

One of his dark eyebrows went up and he moved closer. "I would think that was obvious," he commented, his voice silky smooth. "Why are you not accepting it?"

She swallowed painfully, still not sure if he was talking about Dylan or this...thing...between them.

“Perhaps you should state your business and be on your way.”

Damien thought she was beautiful. The past six years had taken away the youthful innocence and left behind a soft, lovely woman filled with confidence and strength. He remembered her having long, brown hair that flew every which way and he'd liked it. Now it was tied back with one of those elastic bands which would normally make a woman look more tomboyish. But on Jemma, it only emphasized the beauty of her face: her high, prominent cheekbones and her beautiful, vulnerable, blue eyes. She was trying to stifle that vulnerability, but he could see it, could almost feel it. Jemma was worried about something and he hadn't had a chance to protect her six years ago. He wouldn't fail her this time.

Nor would he allow her out of his sight until they had worked through whatever had caused her to run away. No woman had ever measured up to this one. No one had ever created the aching, driving need that Jemma had done to him that one night. He remembered seeing her at the dance club, knowing that she was the one. He'd seen her first, had been struck by her long, slender legs and her tiny waist, her full breasts pushing against the thin cotton of her summer dress. And when she'd turned to face him, her eyes had given him a punch to the gut he'd never forgotten. Nor had he forgotten the intense passion between them that they'd generated with just a touch. He hadn't been able to keep his hands off of her that night. Every time they had satisfied their mutual, aching need, she would touch him, or laugh at something he said and he'd want her again.

And damn! She'd been so responsive. Every touch, every sigh, every writhing moment was permanently imprinted on his memory.

Even now, looking at her in the beaten up jeans that were too big for her slight frame and the baggy sweatshirt that did nothing to hide those full breasts underneath, he wanted her.

“I came to buy a puppy for my niece,” he finally explained, forcing his mind to start working again. “She's three and I've been told by multiple sources that you are the person who has the best puppies.”

Jemma thought about shaking her head, telling him that she didn't have any puppies. But he'd already seen them in her barn. That didn't mean she was going to let him get one though. “They are fifteen hundred dollars,” she finally said, tripling her normal price for a yellow lab puppy.

Damien didn't even blink. “Do they have all their shots?”

Jemma thought about telling him he was an idiot for paying that much for a puppy but she stopped herself just in time. If he wanted to pay that much, she'd let him have a puppy. Lord knows she and Dylan could use the money!

“They have all their shots – I have the documentation.” She nodded towards the barn. “You can pick one out, write the check and I'll pull the records for that particular puppy.”

Damien almost laughed. “Will you help me pick one out?” he suggested and almost threw back his head with delight when she practically stomped her foot with frustration because he wasn't doing what she wanted.

"Fine," she finally said. With jerky movements, she walked over to the barn, making a wide circle so she didn't get too close. When they were standing in front of the stall with all the wiggling puppies, most of them golden but a few of them more white than yellow, she stepped inside, picking one up and smiling as the little guy immediately tried to lick her nose. "They are all great little puppies, but none are house trained yet," she cautioned. "You said this was for your niece?"

"Yes, she's three. Or she will be in a few days. This is her birthday present."

Jemma pulled the dog back, almost hiding him from Damien's reach. "Have the parents agreed to the puppy? Puppies are a huge responsibility. They take time and they have so much energy, it will feel like a miracle when they finally sleep."

Damien smiled down at her. "My niece is in my care," he said softly. "Her parents died two years ago. So yes, I'm fine with her having a puppy."

Jemma still wasn't convinced. "Where do you live? How will you get the puppy to her?"

"In a plane," he replied, smothering his amusement at her concern over a dog. She was very protective, which spoke well for her as a human being.

Jemma backed up, shaking her head vigorously. "No. Dogs don't get to go in planes. They go in the cargo hold. And that's just mean! Those areas don't have any temperature control and the dogs get scared and don't understand what's happening to them." He started to open his mouth to speak but she interrupted before he could say anything. "And don't even think about drugging this little guy to get him through the flight! The medicine could wear off and he would need water immediately. If the medicine wears off mid-flight, the dog doesn't have any ability to tell you what's going on. And that's not even discussing any kind of waste issues the dog might have while in flight." She stepped back, cradling the wiggling puppy protectively. "No. Not going to happen. You need to get a puppy closer to wherever it is you live."

"I live in Italy," he replied, looking down at her with laughter unhidden now. "And the puppy won't be in the cargo hold. He can be with me in the main cabin." He stepped closer. "But if you feel the need to protect the little guy, you could come with me. You could hold him the whole trip home." His fingers trailed down her face, tickling her ear and causing the breath to catch in her throat. "Perhaps not the whole time," he corrected.

Jemma looked away, shocked at how quickly he had turned this conversation into an invitation instead of a sale. "I'm not going to Italy. And I doubt any airline would allow you to bring a puppy on the plane."

He chuckled. "I don't fly commercially, Jemma. I have my own plane."

Jemma stepped back, stunned. "Of course you do," she said with irritation. Then she realized she was being irrational. "Fine," she spat out. "Tell me about your niece."

He shrugged. "Why do you want to know about her?"

Jemma refrained from rolling her eyes. "Because each of the dogs have their own personality. For instance, this little one," she said, lifting the puppy to her eye level and receiving a sniff and pink tongue again, "is the most exuberant. He would need a lot of space to run around." She put that one down, not having named any of them because she knew she couldn't afford to keep any of them. "This one, on the other hand, is a bit gentler. Once he

grows up," she explained, snuggling with the new puppy, "he'll be calmer, needing running time, but not as much. Someone who takes the first one I showed you, will need to run around, throw the ball for the puppy throughout his whole life. All of them will need daily walks, preferably twice a day, and even more when they're puppies. But once they mature, their exercise needs change. Just like ours do," she explained.

Damien was impressed. "And you can tell all that about each of them while they are puppies?"

Jemma shrugged one shoulder. "Sure. I get to know them. I understand them."

He looked around, noticing all the horses out in the pasture. "You've built up a good reputation for horses as well. Do you understand them like you do the puppies?"

Jemma put the puppy down carefully and stepped towards the stall door. "Horses are different, but yes. I understand them."

"What do you understand?" he asked when she was once more beside him in the dark confines of the center aisle.

She looked up at him defiantly. "I understand when one of the males needs to be put in his place," she told him with a secret smile. "I understand when they are being too arrogant and need to be taken down a peg or two."

He laughed softly, the sound vibrating through the air. "I bet the males love your soft, gentle hand stroking them." He paused, his hand lifting her arm, his fingers tangling in hers. "I know that I liked it."

Her blue eyes looked down at their fingers, her slender ones intertwined with his stronger ones. She was mesmerized by the sight, remembering their bodies intertwined in the same way. "You feel it too, don't you?" he almost whispered.

Jemma tried to shake her head, but his fingers tightened slightly. "Don't deny it. That won't work because I can feel it right now." His other hand moved higher, his fingers sliding against her waist, pulling her closer. A moment later, his lips were covering hers and he was kissing her. To Jemma, it felt like all of the passion and desire she'd been storing up after their last encounter was rushing out of her as she kissed him back. It was too much and she'd been without a man, without him, for too long. She couldn't hold back any longer, her hands fisting in his shirt as she held him close, kissing him like she might just die if he stopped.

She felt his arms shift, lifting her up against him and she whimpered, afraid he would pull away from her. But he didn't. He only lifted her higher into his arms. She felt the rough wood behind her and the heat of him in front of her and she thought she'd died and gone to heaven. It was just like it had been that one night.

No, she thought when he shifted against her again. It was better. She could feel more, knew what was to come this time and....

"No!" she gasped, her fingers changing from fists to pushing him away. "Damien, stop! We can't do this!" she called out to him. She closed her eyes and groaned when his mouth moved to her throat, nibbling at the sensitive spot she'd forgotten existed. But she was able to pull herself out of that bliss. "Please!"

He heard the desperation in her voice and pulled back, his hands gentle but still merciless as his hands held her still. "What's wrong, Jemma?" he asked, his voice even deeper than before.

She shook her head, begging him to understand. "I can't do this. Not this time," she explained.

"Why not? You're an adult, so am I. We want each other," he covered her mouth when she started to say something, "Don't even try to deny that because we just proved that you're just as attracted to me as I am to you."

"It's more complicated than that. We're not animals," she retorted. "We can't just react to our baser instincts. I did that once and I didn't like myself the next day." She looked up into his eyes, trying to see if he understood. "I don't want to feel that way ever again."

Damien understood. He didn't like it, but he understood. "So have dinner with me tonight. Let's get to know each other."

Jemma almost agreed, wanting to get to know this amazing, dynamic man. But then Dylan popped into her mind and she shook her head. "I can't." With that, she slipped around his large frame and put several feet between them. "Besides, I'm seeing someone else."

Damien almost laughed out loud. The idea that she could be seeing another man after reacting to him like that was ludicrous. "Break it off with him," he told her. "I don't like to share."

Jemma shook her head, astounded that he would command her to do something like that. "I'm not breaking it off. George is the kind of man who is steady and sweet, compassionate."

"The implication being that I'm not."

She didn't bother to answer him, only raised her eyebrow in return.

He laughed and shook his head. "Okay, so you don't know me. I'm willing to get to know you. Let me at least take you to dinner. We can talk, get to know one another, I'll prove my sterling qualities to you and then..."

She almost laughed at that, but the situation was too dire and her body was still on fire for him. "There will be no 'and then' during any scenario with you, Damien. And no, I don't want to get to know you. I thought you were getting a puppy," she came back. "Why don't you just pick one out and bring it back to your niece? I'm sure she'll be thrilled to have one of the dogs. Labs are great with kids as long as the kids are willing to play with them. They're very gentle and kind, but beware if you live near water."

His eyes showed his curiosity. "What's wrong with water?" he asked.

She smiled. "Historically, Lab are working animals, bred to help fishermen. They're also great at retrieving hunting prey. But they absolutely love water. They will dive into water with careless abandon and will look back at you, begging you to get into the water with them." She stopped and looked up at him. "Do you have water around your home?" she asked, not wanting to be curious, but unable to help herself. She told herself she was only asking for Dylan's sake. One day, he might want to know about his father.

"Yes, my home has a pond and other water features. I also have a summer home near the ocean on the Adriatic Sea."

Jemma grimaced. "Water features as in something nice and beautiful with plants around it?" She was more than a little stunned about the "summer home" idea. She struggled to pay her mortgage each month but this man had a "summer home".

"The gardener can replace any damaged plants."

Good grief, the man had a gardener as well? She cleared her throat and looked down, feeling depressed all of a sudden. This man was completely out of her league. Even if they did go to dinner, he would quickly realize that she was country bumpkin while he was city vogue.

She turned away. "If you're willing to deal with the consequences, then choose whichever you think will suit your niece. Keep in mind though that all dogs are pack animals." She turned to look up at him, wanting him to understand this point. "When you adopt a dog, that dog considers you his or her pack. You have to treat that dog like you would family." She watched him carefully, his eyes amused at her warnings. "Maybe your niece would prefer a kitten," she finally said, irritated that he thought her warnings were funny.

"Adriana is allergic to cats. And I believe she has her heart set on a dog. She's even chosen a name."

Jemma thought that was cute since Dylan loved to name the puppies. Every day, each puppy had a new name. "What's today's name?" she asked. It always thrilled her when she came across someone who truly wanted a dog and would treat the animal well.

"Maisey, I believe," he replied and Jemma could see that he was restraining himself from rolling his eyes.

"Is she here?" Jemma asked.

He shook his head. "I travel a great deal. I don't want her schedule disrupted, so she stays with her nanny at my house."

Jemma didn't like the sound of that, but she didn't want to judge. "A yellow lab would be a great companion for her then," she said and started walking out of the barn.

She realized that her knees were wobbly and her body was not completely back to normal, but then again, Damien was still here. Her life wouldn't be normal until he was out of her life again.

"I'll write you a check," he said, following her.

Jemma nodded, continuing into her house. As she opened the door, she tried to pretend like her hands weren't shaking. Jemma quickly realized she should have stayed outside during the transaction. Damien was such a large man, and her kitchen was small. He towered over her and his shoulders were broad, making her kitchen feel even tinier. "The cost is only five hundred dollars," she told him, moving to the other side of the room.

His eyebrows went up with her claim but he pulled a checkbook out of his breast pocket and scribbled out the amount. "Will you help me pick one out?"

Jemma took a deep breath, wanting to be close to him, to feel the sizzle of his energy, but she also knew that would be dangerous. "I can't. I have work to do with the horses," she said.

"How will I know which one is good for Adriana?"

She waved in the general direction of the barn. "I showed you the two that would be good for her."

He chuckled. "I think you have a sixth sense for the animals, but that does not translate to my skills. As far as I could tell, there were golden balls of fur out there with pink tummies. Other than that, I have no idea which puppies were the ones you discussed."

He had a point. She did know the animals. "Fine," she replied with ill-grace. Going right back out there, she led him to the barn once more but stood as far away from him as possible. "Okay, here's a good little lady," Jemma said, handing the wiggling puppy to Damien. There was an awkward moment when his hand brushed against her breast during the transfer, but their eyes collided and she pulled back quickly.

Damien held the ball of fluff away from him, trying to not get licked. It was a pointless effort, she thought. That little puppy was going to get him no matter what. The puppy was just too affectionate.

"She'll do," he finally said.

Jemma sighed with relief. "Great. I'll get her shot records."

Jemma hurried out of the barn, going to her house once more. She pulled the correct records, glancing at the form to make sure that it was properly filled out. When she turned back, she found Damien in the hallway, his eyes captured by pictures of Dylan. Jemma's stomach muscles tightened, terrified that he would recognize his son in those pictures.

"He's very cute," was all Damien said, holding the puppy carefully.

He then turned to face Jemma. "If you change your mind about dinner, call me," he said and handed her a card with his private cell phone on it.

With that, he walked out of her house, and hopefully, out of her life.

Jemma sat down on her worn out sofa. She should be feeling relieved. She'd dodged a bullet in Damien not realizing that Dylan was his son, but she didn't feel very good about it. She felt worse, actually.

But if she'd told him about his son, what would he do?

He had a summer house. And a gardener! And a nanny!

What did she have? Puppies and great horse breeding stock. And a lot of cheap land. There was no way she could fight Damien if he tried to take Dylan away from her.

She couldn't fight him if he tried to take her son. But maybe that was the price she had to pay for keeping Dylan a secret all these years. Okay, so she'd tried to find Damien six years ago and failed. She'd tried desperately hard, driving the streets where the party had been held every night with the hopes that he might be driving around there as well.

She shouldn't have left that morning. She shouldn't have been so scared that she'd had to run away. But in her defense, what she'd felt back then was scary! She'd had boyfriends before, but she'd never allowed them to go beyond kissing after a date. So finding herself in a man's bed was a shocking and humiliating reality.

Despite her reservations, she knew what she had to do. Her parents had raised her to be honest and fair. Granted, the rest of the world didn't always reciprocate, but that didn't mean she should lower her own morals.

With shaking fingers, she dialed the number on the card. He answered almost immediately and she shivered when she heard his "Si?" as he answered her call.

The Italian, coming across the line only adding to his appeal, made her stammer more than she'd like. "Damien, it's me. Jemma."

"So soon?" he laughed. "You've changed your mind about dinner," he said with satisfaction. "I'm glad." That Italian accent was stronger now as his voice deepened. "I'll have a driver pick you up."

Jemma shook her head, her hand sliding through her hair, messing up what used to be a neat pony tail. "No. I need to talk to you. But I can't get a babysitter. Can you come back? I know this is an imposition. And it sounds very strange since you just left but I..."

"I'll be back in five minutes," he told her and ended the call.

Jemma sighed, tossing the phone back onto the counter, wondering how she was going to break this to him. How could she tell a man that had just bought a puppy for his niece that he also had a son? "Surprise!" she said sarcastically to the air. Her house felt stuffy with all of her worries floating through the small rooms. She almost ran outside but came to a skidding stop when that long, elegant limousine turned the corner onto her driveway. Had it really been five minutes? She wasn't ready! She needed more time! She couldn't believe what was happening and turned her back, pacing along the gravel at the top of her driveway.

She had no idea how to tell the man that Dylan was his son. It was strange, crazy. She couldn't believe that she was in this position. When she hadn't been able to find Damien so many years ago, she'd accepted that Dylan was her son, that she would raise him alone. And she'd been perfectly fine with that! She'd turned her parents' vegetable farm into a horse farm and she'd done well enough to support herself and Dylan. So why was she worried now?

She was afraid Damien would take Dylan away from her.

When the back door to the limousine opened and Damien stepped out, she could barely breathe. She wanted to scream at him to go away, to just leave them both alone, but she couldn't. It wasn't right. She should have been honest with him as soon as he'd seen Dylan. She'd been afraid Damien would recognize his son but now, needing to tell him the truth, she felt like she was going to throw up.

Damien looked like he was going to take her into his arms but she stepped back, her terrified eyes looking up at him. "Dylan is your son," she blurted out. Then waited.

She watched the reaction in his eyes, wondering when the anger would explode. But the eyes didn't change much. "My son?" he asked, amusement lacing his reaction. "How nice."

Jemma blinked. "That's it? That's all you have to say?"

Damien shook his head. "What would you like me to say?"

Jemma stood up straighter. Her shoulders relaxed and her face broke out with a smile. "You're not angry?" She looked at him distrustfully. "Why aren't you angry? You just discovered that you have a son that you've never met." With that statement, she tensed again. "I tried to find you. I drove around for hours every night after I got off from work trying to find you." Her hands were fists by her side and she braced herself once again for his anger. "I shouldn't have left you that morning. Goodness, there shouldn't have even been a morning! Or a night! I should never have left with you that night! It wasn't like me to do that." She looked up at him, blushing since she remembered when he'd discovered that she'd been a virgin.

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