



MAFIA
Grace

Amazon Bestselling Author

DIANE PORTMAN-RAY

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Chapter 1

I was flushed and sweaty, still covered in the evidence of our sex, laying on top of a king size bed. The bed was the only thing in the room except from our naked bodies. No dresser, no nightstand, nothing except from the washed-out grey walls and *our* bed. Salvatore got this apartment for us to use almost two years ago, but he never bothered to put any furniture in it except from the kitchen table, two chairs, and this exact bed we were in right now and we made love on all of them.

Salvatore had his face hidden in the pillow whilst I was staring at the ceiling, safely tucked under his strong arm. I was already missing him, even if he was right there, but knowing that our time was coming to an end – *again* – was like a knife to the chest.

Every time we were together, I swore to myself it would be the last, but when he called, I always came running. I craved his presence. I craved his eyes on me. When he wasn't in the room, I wasn't completely alive. That was my cross to carry. I couldn't be with him, but couldn't live without him.

Feeling too hot for my own good, I pushed my body up and walked into the spacious bathroom to find a towel and clean myself off. I took my time taming my hair and washing my face with ice cold water before going back into the bedroom.

“Grazi, come back to bed.” Salvatore growled. He was just like I'd left him, flat on his stomach, naked, every single

one of his muscles exposed. His body was the stuff of Greek legends, all ripped and hard, inch by inch covered in muscles. His back was covered entirely by a tattoo – the map of Palermo with two red roses marking the Fiori palazzo and my father’s estate. The city we loved, his home, and mine.

I kneeled next to him on the mattress and traced a line from one rose to the other. I was with him when he got it, on my sixteenth birthday. *La nostra vita sulla mia pelle*^[1], that was his present for me.

“I should get back home.”

“No.”

“I said I’ll be there for dinner, Salvatore. It’s almost six.”

Out of nowhere, I was pulled back into bed and trapped under him, the skin of his chest sticking to my breasts. There was no point in trying to escape. He was built like a mountain.

“Your father and brothers are still in Aquino. I don’t think they’re going to show tonight.”

“How do you know that?”

“How do you think?” He must have put a tail on them. Crazy man.

I squeezed my eyes, trying to focus on my breath and not the fears. I should have been used to living under a cloud of danger by now, but it never got easier. Not for me. I feared for him more than anything because if my father were to find out about this, the gates of hell would open.

“Salvatore if they find out...”

“They won’t. Don’t I always take care of you?” I hated that the answer to that question was yes.

My life began with Salvatore. He was there by my side since I was just an infant and he *always* took care of me. He kissed my scraped knees when I’d fallen off the bike, held my hand on my way to school, sat through countless hours of ballet rehearsals, and taught me how to handle a gun. He stood

behind me even when he was ordered to stay away. The only thing that Salvatore *didn't* do for me, was let me go.

“We need to stop,” I whispered. There was no conviction behind my words.

“Stop what?” He asked while kissing down my neck. The sensation of his lips was so familiar, it was almost part of me. Every day, I was walking around wearing him on my skin, his presence more permanent than the tattoo on his back.

“You know what I’m saying.”

“I think you want me to stop kissing your neck so I could move on to your beautiful tits, *Tesoro*^[2]. Is that it?”

“I’m being serious.”

“So am I. My cock is calling for you.”

“Salvatore!”

“Say my name like that again.”

I was so helpless in front of him. Salvatore Fiori was everything that made me weak. I knew the right thing to do was to end this and I promised myself every day that it was the last time, but all it took was one soft touch, one look, one kiss, and I was a slave to his desire. The chains he put around my wrists thickened with time and sometimes I wondered if there even was a chance for me to escape. Was there a point in trying to fight him, or should I just let go and wait for whatever fate had in store for us?

“Salvatore, please.”

“There’s my good girl.” His hand traveled down slowly until he made it to the junction of my thighs. “How can you say you don’t want me when you’re so wet, Grazi?”

“I never said I don’t want you. You know we shouldn’t see each other anymore.”

“Bullshit.”

“It’s dangerous.”

Completely ignoring my comments, Salvatore brought his lips to my ear.

“I’m going to fuck you until you can’t take it anymore, Grazi. I’m going to put my mouth between your legs and...” he was stopped by the grave ringtone of his phone. “Shit! Wait here, I’ll be back in a second.”

He found his jeans on the floor and fished the phone out, growling a response. “Fiori. Yes. No. Yes. Got it.” He barked the words to the person at the other end of the call. When he turned back to me, his face was marked by anger. “I have to go, Grazi.”

Saved by the bell.

“Ok. I can walk back home.”

“No. I’ll drive you.”

“It’s only a few minutes away.” He bought this place especially because it was close to my house and I could sneak in and out to meet him, without anyone noticing I was gone.

“Get dressed, Grazia.” He was not willing to negotiate. Typical for a Fiori man. They were cold-hearted, stubborn people. I was the only one in this world who – *sometimes* – could make Salvatore do something he didn’t want. In his words, he had to let me have it my way once in a while or else I’d stop loving him. Only if it was so simple to stop, I wouldn’t have been here right now.

I found my lingerie and the other pieces of my outfit and put everything back on quickly. There was no mirror in the apartment, so I wasn’t sure of how I looked, but hoped I was proper enough so people would think I was on my way back from the dance studio.

Salvatore came from behind me and bit my shoulder.

“Ouch!”

“Delicious.” His hands played in my hair for a little bit. “Your hair is like a river of chocolate and smells like one too. New shampoo?”

“Yes, you like?”

“I like everything about you.” Nothing I haven’t heard before. The swirl of butterflies in my stomach wasn’t new either. “Come. It’s time to go.”

He walked me to the car and opened the passenger door, waiting for me to get inside.

“Why do you have to go, anyway?”

“Family business.”

“That’s all I get?” Of course it was, there was nothing he could discuss with me, just like I couldn’t discuss with him what was happening behind the closed doors of my home.

“Yes, Grazi, that’s all you get. Don’t nag.”

“I’m not nagging, but you just expect me to believe you.” I shrugged while getting in the passenger seat of his Maserati. “For all I know, it could be a woman you’re meeting.”

“You’re insane.”

“Sure.” I was looking for trouble, waiting for that exciting kick I got every time we fought.

“When did I ever lie to you, huh? When did I do you wrong?” *Never*. Instead of answering him, I looked the other way. “Exactly. Never, so keep your mouth shut.”

He was red-blooded, always quick to get angry, but I never mind his words, not even when he was harsh, because he didn’t mean it. He didn’t want me to keep my mouth shut; he only wanted me to fight him some more. It was our aphrodisiac. I was looking for disquiet, he was waiting to get make up sex.

I needed this – to fight him, to battle his will – so I could lie to myself and say I didn’t want this. Like this, I could say that he trapped me, and I didn’t give myself to him willingly, going against my own blood.

“Do not talk to me like that.”

“Only when you deserve it.”

He pulled up at the far corner of the tall fence that was guarding my house and killed the engine. We both knew that for him to go any further than that and risking being seen by my father's guards would be stupid. It would mean going to war for nothing.

"You drive me crazy, Grazia Caputo." He said while I was getting ready to step out.

"It's not easy to be around you either, jerk."

"Give me your hand."

"Why?"

"Give me your damn hand and stop being stubborn." I put my hand in his big paw and he took it straight to his lips. "I'm going to meet cousin Pietro. We have a ship coming at the docks tonight." He confessed.

"You didn't have to tell me, Salvatore."

"I know, but I don't want you to think stupid things. Why would I need other women? I have you." He had pieces of me, at best, and I wanted those back too.

"I don't belong to you, Salvatore Fiori."

"Funny girl." He chuckled. "There's not an inch of you that's not mine."

"This is the last time, Salvatore, I mean it. I can't see you, anymore."

"Don't make me mad. You know how I get when I'm mad." He kissed my hand again, this time lingering more. "Go now. You know the drill. Flicker the lights of your bedroom twice so I know you got in ok."

"There's no need for that. I can..."

"Do it or I'm coming inside the house to check." My heart stopped and dropped in my lap. I didn't believe he could be so reckless, but I'd never risk it.

"Ok, fine. Let me go now." He gave me back my hand and despite my words, I wanted to get back into his arms the

moment I stepped away. I was too dependent on Salvatore Fiori to feel comfortable.

I walked through the gate and went towards the old and majestic villa sitting up on a rock above the Tyrrhenian that was my home ever since I could remember. *Babbo*^[3] got this house from his grandfather, who bought it from a rich Spaniard before the Great War. It's been in our *famiglia* for over a hundred years and even if tradition dictated that my oldest brother, Giovanni, should inherit it to raise his family here, when he got married to his wife Rebecca, Daddy gifted him a new home. He was keeping this one for me, his youngest, because he knew how much I adored it. The Spanish inside court, the tall ceilings and frescos on the walls, I loved everything about it. It was big enough to hold our entire family – all *eight* kids – and now that all seven of my brothers moved out, it was too quiet.

Growing up with seven brothers was chaos. Between them and Salvatore, I was under watch every moment of every day. I wasn't just the only girl, but I was the youngest too, which made them even more overprotective. They were my brothers, my friends, my guards, and on some occasions, my pain in the ass.

When I walked through the main door and started climbing the stairs to my bedroom, Delfina appeared behind me out of thin air.

“There you are! Your father is not coming for dinner.” Seemed like Salvatore's people were right. “Do you want to eat upstairs in your rooms?”

Delfina was my maid, which was my father's way of saying I was a few months short of twenty-three years old and still had a nanny. She was hired when I was seven, one week after Mama passed away, and now she was keeping a maid position, looking over the house. Truth was, Delfina was vital for me and I'd be lost without her.

“I'll eat upstairs, but I need a shower first. Rehearsal was more intense than I thought.”

“Aha, ok.” She stopped and looked at me. “That’s where you were? The ballet studio?”

“That’s where I said I would be, didn’t I?”

“Yes, I think I heard you saying that to your father, but I thought you’d run away again to meet Salvatore Fiori.”

Yes, Delfina was my partner in crime. I had tried my best not to involve her until it was strictly necessary, but she saved my ass a few times, like when I got locked outside in the middle of the night and she helped me get back in the house without a fuss.

“No.”

“Right. Then why are you flickering the lights?”

“Don’t ask questions you don’t want the answer to, Delfina.”

“I’m just saying, be careful. One of these days you’re going to run into your father and ay, ay, ay, the things he’s going to do to that boy. I don’t even want to think about it.” Yeah, I didn’t want to think about it either.

“Dad has no reason to have me watched. I’m not doing anything except for going shopping or to the ballet studio, there’s peace in the streets, his business is good. I’m in no danger.”

“My dear,” she put her hand under my chin, “I think you’re in more danger than you understand.”

“Salvatore would never hurt me. He’s capable of many things, but not that. Not even if his father would ask him to.” That was the one thing I was sure of.

Salvatore Fiori was dangerous. For many, he was lethal, but not for me. It didn’t matter that he had a gun on him all the time or that the force in his arms could snap me in half, when we were together, I never felt an ounce of fear.

“I just have this nagging feeling, Grazia, like you’re going to hurt yourself.”

I turned my head and looked out the window just in time to see a navy-blue luxury car cruising down the street with the lights off. I couldn't see Salvatore, but I was sure he was watching my window like a hawk. Yes, Delfina might be right. I might hurt myself because my heart was my biggest enemy. I wanted to break my bond with Salvatore and the damn traitorous bitch was working against me. The only solution that I could think of was stab myself in the chest.

“Delfina, did you have dinner?”

“Yes, but I'll stay with you if you want.”

“That would be nice. I'm going to take that shower first.”

I needed the water to flow down my body and take at least some of the Salvatore away with it. God, I was in so much trouble.

This was supposed to be simple, Salvatore and I. We were born in the same life, both under the siege of the mafia world, from fathers that for the most part of their lives lived like brothers. We were raised together, promised to each other in marriage when we were children. Salvatore and I were supposed to be a safe bet, but it turned into a life and death game.

The Caputo *famiglia* has grown alongside the Fioris for decades. Every dirty deal was done together, every pile of money was split equal, every kill was a burden for both and that went on for years. The city was protected by the mafia, not treated like a battlefield. All that changed four years ago when something that broke our ties happened. No one saw it coming. One day we were fine and the next, everything fell apart, just like we were struck by lightning.

Adrian Fiori, the *Don* of their *famiglia* and Salvatore's father had stolen from us. What did he steal? I was never told, but one day my father called me and my brothers in his office and told all of us that all the ties we had with the Fiori family were to be severed immediately. My engagement with Salvatore was broken the same day and *Babbo* asked for the ring Salvatore gave me on my eighteenth birthday to be sent

back. When I refused to give it up, he had my brother, Garon, hold my hand while he removed it. It was heartbreaking.

I wasn't the only one who suffered. My brothers lost Salvatore too and they were all thick as thieves. They've lost friends because they were associated with the Fiori family. Goliath, one of the twins, had to break things off with his girlfriend, Chiara, because she was Adrian's niece.

The break between our families has caused a lot of pain and it made a wave through the city. It was hard for two mafia *Dons* so powerful as my father and Adrian Fiori to coexist in the same turf and split their business. More than once, gunshots echoed through the streets when lines were crossed. Things got better after a year or so, but the tension remained and now no Caputo was welcomed on the Fiori's side of the harbor and vice versa.

That should have been the ending of the childish puppy love I had for Salvatore, but he didn't make it easy for me. Just one day after we were ordered to stay away from each other at all costs, he was waiting in the dressing room of my ballet studio. He took me in his arms like nothing had happened and reminded me I was his. When I'd told him to leave, he refused. When I'd told him my father broke the engagement, he laughed. When I'd told him that I'd start to date other guys, he vowed to skin them alive. Ever since then we've met in secret and ever since then I'd been trying to break it off.

My father was a great man. Fabiano Caputo, the lion, the strongest Don in Sicily. Even now, in his sixties, he was respected and feared by all. Not even the *Carabienieri* dared to bother him. He fathered eight children and loved us all, made all our dreams possible. When I told him I wanted to be a ballerina, he brought me the greatest dance maestros all the way from Paris to teach me. He found a place close to our home and bought it to open the studio where I was dancing now, just so I would be happy.

This thing I was doing with Salvatore was ripping me in half because I never wished to go against my father's word. The choice was impossible, though. I was trapped between

two men that were such big parts of my life, letting go of either would make my world fall apart.

Salvatore Fiori would bring hell into my life if I couldn't find the strength to break myself free from him. Someone's blood will be spilled and it terrified me that it might be Salvatore's. None of my brothers would let the offense slip without asking for retribution, I knew that. My father would look at me with disappointment for going to his enemy. If we'd get caught, it would really be hell. For both of our sakes I needed to be the strong one and never see Salvatore again. If a broken heart was the price I had to pay to save all of us from that fate, then so be it.

I looked down to look at my own tattoo. Two red roses with their stems growing around each other. It was on my right hip and no one except Salvatore and I knew what they meant. It was us. We were supposed to be forever, but it was time to tore the roses from their roots.

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CHAPTER 2

We watched the ship being anchored into the harbor in silence, but I could feel Pietro fidgeting at my side. He hated night duty and I wasn't a big fan either, but someone had to do it, and when it came to transports as big as this, we couldn't just send soldiers out to check it.

"It smells like fish." Pietro stated the obvious.

"Really?" All I could smell was chocolate. Grazia's aroma was imprinted on me.

"Yes, really. This whole damn ship smells like fish. Are you sure this is the one we're looking for?"

"Shut up, Pietro. Enjoy this fine summer night."

"How the hell are you so happy? Where's your mind at?"

"At a brunette with blue eyes." And dimples, and perfectly round tits, and full, lush lips, and the most amazing taste. *My Grazi.*

Why was I so lucky that God has sent the most stubborn of his creations to be mine, I had no idea, but she was mine to deal with. Sometimes her little tantrums drove me crazy, but I couldn't go more than two days without one. I had

to see her constantly, fight with her, fuck her, hear her laugh. I'd take anything she was willing to give as long as it was something.

She was promised to me when I didn't even understand what that meant, but I didn't need anyone to *give* Grazi to me. She was simply mine, it was in the order of things, just like the sun rises in the East. Eventually, I'll marry her and all this sneaking around and nights sleeping alone will come to an end.

Things would have been much easier if it wasn't for that damn bastard Fabiano Caputo and his greedy nature. He fucked us all when he decided to touch what wasn't his and steal from my father. He tried to take my Grazi away, like I would have allowed anyone – man, god, or devil – to do that crime. If it wasn't for Fabiano, I would have married his daughter the day she turned eighteen and now I wouldn't be here knowing that all that waits for me at home is an empty bed.

“Oh,” Pietro pulled me back to reality, “and you still answered my call?”

“Since when do you know me to ignore my responsibilities?”

“For Grazia? You could ignore the second coming of Christ.”

“I've never said I was with her.”

Pietro snorted. He was the only one who knew I kept seeing Grazi and that only happened because the fucker spotted me with her last year.

“Right. How are the Seven Gs? Is it bad that I miss those assholes?” I wasn't surprised he did. We shared a life with everyone in that family.

“The last time I spoke to one of the Caputo sons was that night at the Apollo club when we almost pulled our guns out.”

“But Grazia? Is she good?”

“Mind your fucking business. Grazia is not your concern.” It didn’t take much to get me angry and usually a man – any man – speaking my girl’s name was enough. Short temper and all that shit.

“She shouldn’t be your concern either. Adrian didn’t sniff you out yet?”

“She’s mine. No one gets a say in that, not even father.”

“Whatever you say.”

Someone whistled in the dark and I turned my head to see the ship captain waving at us. Finally, something to do that would make Pietro keep his mouth shut, or so I hoped. The quiet lasted for about two seconds and then he elbowed me.

“Are you sure this thing is legit?”

“Yeah. The captain is a friend of my father. He’s bringing us this shipment straight from Caucasus.”

“What’s in it?”

“Let’s get on board and see.”

The captain was waiting for us and after exchanging a handful of pleasantries, he made us follow him below deck where he had stashed some big wooden cases.

“Open, please.” He said and handed Pietro a crowbar.

Pietro didn’t lose any time and popped one of the lids open to uncover a huge pile of freshly caught herrings.

“What the hell, man!” Pietro cursed. “I told you it smells like fish. We’re wasting our damn time here.”

The captain put his hand up and showed us a Swiss knife.

“Wait, I show you.” He grabbed one of the fishes and cut it open on the belly, revealing a plastic bag. “Here. Russian stones.”

“Well, well,” I said and opened the bag to find a small diamond. “Where did you get these?”

“Can’t say, but no one is looking for them.”

“How many?”

“There are a hundred fish in that box and there’s three boxes. Some stones are bigger.” Even if they were the size of the one in my hand, we were looking at one million in diamonds, maybe more. “What’s this worth to Adrian?” Captain asked.

I nodded to Pietro and he handed him the bag with money we brought. It was a lot a cash in there, but still a bargain. The captain counted every single euro and when he got to the end, he smiled, pleased.

“Are we good, Cap?” I asked.

“Yes, son. I also have something else, it’s in my cabin.”

“Why isn’t it here?”

“This one is very special. I don’t know if it’s worth much, but sure as hell is pretty.”

“Are you selling it or not?”

“Not for market. Personal use only.”

“Now, Captain, what gives you the impression you can tell me what to do with my merchandise?”

“You’ll know when you see. Come.”

Pietro and I both walked behind him in the cramped and badly smelling cabin and watched him pull out a small leather pouch. He signaled me to open my palm and when I did, a princess cut large rock fell on it. It was a grayish-blue color that I’ve never seen before in jam, just in Grazia’s eyes.

“What is this? Sapphire?”

“Blue diamond.”

“Goddamn!” Pietro raised his voice. “If you don’t take it, I will.”

“No.” I said. “It’s mine.”

“But,” the captain interrupted me, “for personal use only.” He probably stole it and didn’t want to risk going down

if it'd show up in a jewelry store.

“Don't worry, Cap. This one is for my girl.” I've been looking to get a ring for Grazi for a few months now to replace the one I gave her when she was eighteen. I even went to a few stores, but nothing seemed to fit. It had to be as special as she was and this? The blue diamond? This one was for her. “How much do you want?”

“A hundred thousand?” It was a question, which meant he knew as well as I did that it wasn't worth that much, but today was his lucky day, because there wasn't any amount of money I wouldn't give for Grazia.

“I'll send someone with the pay in an hour.”

“Always good making business with a Fiori.” We shook hands. “Until next time, Prince.”

When we left the ship, Pietro was looking at me from the corner of his eye.

“What is it?”

“What are you doing, Salvatore?”

“Meaning?”

“You're giving her a ring now?”

I stopped walking and rubbed the back of my neck.

“Seems like you have a problem with that, Pietro. Spell it out, will you?”

“Do I have to? I know what Grazia meant for you. I knew you grew up thinking you'd end up together, but things have changed. We have changed, brother.”

“Grazia and I didn't change.”

“Yes, you did. You won't be with her. You sure as fuck can't marry her. One of the Caputo brothers will put you in a grave before you get the chance to take her to church.”

“They sure as fuck can try.”

“Palermo is not a big city, Salvatore. Have fun with her if you must, but don't entertain any dangerous ideas.”

Have fun with her?

Pietro should have shut up and walked away when he still had the chance. He should have run before he made my bloodstream boil. In the next moment, I had him by the collar and slammed his body on a nearby metal container.

“Say that again.”

“Wow, calm down.”

“Say. It. Again.” I spoke through my teeth. “Say Grazia is a whore.”

“No, no, I never...”

“Have fun with her? You think she’s like those easy women that keep you company?” The more I thought about it, the redder my view became. “She’s a mafia princess and will be my queen. I won’t let anyone offend her, not even you.”

“I didn’t mean it like that.”

“Don’t talk about Grazia.”

“She’s yours. None of my business. Got it.” I let him go and he arranged his clothes. “I was just trying to look out for you.”

“Grazia is none negotiable.”

“Are you willing to die for her?”

“I am.”

“That’s what scares me. Come on, let’s go home. You have to find a ring for that blue diamond.”

He was right. I needed a band to fit the stone and I needed it soon because there wouldn’t be long until I’d go and take what was mine. I’ve put up with this situation long enough, it was about time I start correcting it.



Chapter 3

Miss Rosa Mariano-Vitale was in great shape today. At her honorable age of seventy-three, she afforded to be as eccentric as she wanted, so the fuchsia dress, the sharp red nails, and the bejeweled cane were part of her daily appearance. When I was younger, she scared me into practicing more by threatening to use that cane on my *derriere* and turn it red. It was very efficient. Miss Rosa was an amazing prim-ballerina back in her day and only returned to Italy after she retired from stage. She became my teacher six years ago, and no one had taught me more than she did. It wasn't just ballet that she passed on to me, but stage presence and industry secrets too; everything from how to behave at an audition to how to properly take care of my pointe shoes. Tough, but always with my best interest in mind, Rosa Mariano-Vitale had made me a dancer.

We were in the studio for almost five hours, but Miss Rosa didn't give any sign that the lesson was over, so I kept moving to the rhythmic thumps of her cane.

“Chin up, Grazia.”

“Yes, *Madame*.”

“I want you to go from a perfect *arabesque* to a *grand-jete* followed by *pas de bourree*. Go.” She kept beating the rhythm and I did the moves, flowing across the floor. “Ok, and pirouette.”

I turned, and I turned, and I turned effortlessly. My feet were hurting, probably bleeding too, but after fifteen years of ballet, you learn to mute the pain and just go on. I couldn't remember the last time I felt my legs from knee down and today was no different.

I didn't care about the pain one bit as long as I was getting to dance. I didn't even need music, just an open hardwood floor and the freedom to move the way my body was made to. It came with such relief, such calmness. My dancing was part of my soul – of my being – and every time I was spinning like this, in what seemed to be an endless pirouette, I was happy. I really need this today.

Nine days, that's how long it's been since I last saw Salvatore. In all my years of being alive, I've never went nine days without seeing his piercing eyes. I missed looking at his green irises, sprinkled with gold freckles, but it had to be done. He called, and I kept blowing him off, telling him about how busy I was and how Daddy wanted me around more. It worked because for a while now, my phone was silent. There were no more missed calls and no new voice messages asking if I'm ok. He had finally given up.

I did my best to not think about it – about him – at all, but it was damn hard. Salvatore Fiori was not someone people just forgot. He was a warrior god with dark hair and killer abs who was a beast in bed. Trust me, if there was an easy way to forget Salvatore, I would have found it by now.

“Good, Grazia. You were glorious today. My best student.” She came and placed one finger under my chin, gently, as if she was touching a crystal ornament. “Your pirouettes are always so beautiful.”

“All due respect, *Madame*, I'm your only student.”

“Now you are, but I helped model hundreds of talented ballerinas back in my day. You are amongst the best I've

seen.”

“Thank you.” I said, humbled.

“Have you decided yet?”

“What, *Madame*?”

“What you’re going to do with this incredible talent of yours? After you’ve graduated high school, have you thought about Joffrey School?”

“For a while, yes, but I can’t fly across the ocean for school. I can’t be that far from my family.” It was true. Miss Rosa couldn’t understand, but my bond with Italy went beyond blood. Here I was home, it was my safe haven. Here, I was the daughter of a *Don*, but out there, I was an easy target. Also, I couldn’t bring myself to leave Salvatore behind. “La Scala, maybe.”

“Ah, what a fabulous academy that is. I’ve danced in Milano many times. You’d love it.”

“Yeah, I guess it’s time to think about applying.”

“You’re not getting any younger and neither am I.” She said, and raised her boney shoulders. “Twenty-three years of age must be the beginning of life for some, but a ballerina? You should have been on stage for a few years by now.”

“I’m not twenty-three yet, *Madame*.” I remind her. “Do you think I have a chance at making up for the time I’ve lost? That is, if I apply and get it, of course.” Money and relations could only take you so far. After all, Academia Teatro Alla Scala was one of the world’s most famous ballet companies. Getting in would be no easy task.

“There aren’t many young dancers with your technique, my dear. Yes, I believe that all you need is to dance in front of the right people to make a name for yourself, so think about what you want to do next.”

“I will, *Madame*.”

“Ok, then. We’re done for the day. I have a dinner reservation that is waiting for me. You’re dismissed.”

“Thank you. I’ll go to the concert room and do a few more steps.”

The Palermo Ballet School had seventy-four ballerinas age four to twenty-five and twice a year we had charitable shows held in our own private concert hall. Sometimes, when no one else was around, like tonight, I liked to go there and dance up on the stage. Miss Rosa knew it was something I needed to do and she was encouraging every extra hour of practice.

“Go then.” She pushed me towards the door.

I found an abandoned tutu that wasn’t mine, but fit, to put over my black leotard and turned the lights on in the hall. I didn’t want to pick a classic song or some piano track, but instead went for Maneskin’s *Torn A Casa*, one of my favorites. The raspy voice of the singer started pouring from the speakers and my arms exploded with goosebumps. I could dance to anything, but this one had such a soft flow, allowing me to follow the notes with spins and jumps, feeling every second of the song.

I was so taken by the feeling of being up on a stage and so lost in my steps, I had no idea when the three minutes and forty-nine seconds passed. I also hadn’t noticed that I was being watched, not until I fell on the hard floor on my knees when the last measure of the melody ended and I heard the slow clap coming from the back of the room.

At first, I thought that maybe Miss Rosa had decided to stay and see what I was up to, but it took less than two seconds to spot the massive, dark silhouette that was looking at me from the shadows. *Salvatore*.

“Every time I see you dance, I’m mesmerized, Grazi.” He was wearing one of his dashing suits today, a navy-blue one, and he looked incredible in it. He must have had a meeting.

With my chest rapidly going up and down, I went to sit on the edge of the stage.

“What are you doing here?”

“Me?” He stepped into the light with a smile on his face, like he had no care in the world. “I came to see why my girl thinks it’s ok to run from me for over a week.”

“I’m not yours.”

Salvatore walked closer and placed his hands on my knees. “Grazi, don’t start.”

“I’m just speaking truth.”

“You’re speaking stupid things.” His lips found mine. It was so soft and familiar, I almost melted. He was pushing at my defenses again and I did nothing to stop him.

I was such a hypocrite, saying one thing and then falling at his feet, but my ties to him were so strong, I couldn’t fight them. When he was close, he had power over my stupid heart.

“I told you we need to stop sneaking around, Salvatore.”

“Right, so let’s stop.”

“You’re here. I’m trying to end it and you refuse to let go.”

Salvatore’s laughter echoed in between the walls of the empty room.

“I meant stop sneaking around, not stop being us. I’m just a man, I can’t stop destiny, *Tesoro*.”

“Now who’s talking stupid things?” Salvatore knew as well as I did that there was no other way. He was Adrian’s only heir, the prince of the Fiori mafia. When his father will be no more, it would fall on Salvatore to carry the grudge against my blood, just like it would be Giovanni’s responsibility to hate the Fiori when he takes over for *Babbo*.

“Still you. How long have you been in the studio?”

“What time is it?”

“Ten past seven.”

“Going on six hours.”

He leaned in and kissed my forehead. “My diligent girl. Your feet must be sore.” He knew my struggle. More than once I went home after endless hours of practice and cried in his arms because of the pain screaming in my joints.

Salvatore fell on one knee and took off my dancing shoes, and used his handkerchief to wipe away the few drops of blood on my toes.

“You know, Grazi, if I wouldn’t know how much you love to dance, this would make me really mad. I can’t stand to see you hurt, not even when you’re doing it to yourself.”

“It’s a small price...”

“...price for perfection.” He finished the motto I’ve learned from my first ballet instructor. “I know.” His hands started to stroke my feet and calves slowly, releasing the tension that accumulated during the day. There was no pain he couldn’t make better.

“Salvatore, you don’t have to do that.”

“Yes, I do. You’re mine to take care of.”

“I’m not...”

“Stop it, Grazi. I’m not in the mood today.”

“Something bothering you?”

“Yes.” He never peeled his eyes away from where his hands were massaging me. “You’re bothering me. You stopped answering your phone.”

“I was busy, I told you so.”

“Don’t take me for a fool. You always answer when I call, just like I always make time for you.” That was redundant. I was never the one to call him. “You tried to hide this week. It irritates me.”

“Salvatore, we had this talk before.”

“And I’ve told you over and over again that you’re mine and nothing would change that. Why do you keep fighting me?”

“We’re being careless and stupid, and we’re going to get burned. I’d rather stop before that happens.”

“Don’t you trust me to protect you?”

“I’m not scared for me, Salvatore!” I unintentionally raised my voice. It was true, the fear was not for my own person. *Babbo* would not hurt *me*.

“But?” He chuckled.

“I don’t want to put you in a position where... there’s too much bad blood. We can’t fight it.”

“Let me worry about that.”

“Why?” I slapped his chest. “Because I’m a woman? You and my brothers all think the same thing, that I don’t have your brilliant minds for decision-making. Testosterone-filled idiots. You know what, it’s you men who started this stupid feud between our families.”

“Easy, my lioness. No need to get your claws out. I was just saying that you don’t need to worry. I can carry it for both of us. Not because you’re a woman, Grazi. I know how fucking strong and hard-headed you are, trust me. I’ll do this just because I can, so there’s no need for you to lose sleep over it.”

“Whatever. You’re a jackass.”

“Watch that mouth. I’m here trying to be nice after you ignored me.” Yes, he was, but nice wasn’t something we did.

“Well, Salvatore, you can take that nice and stick it right up your ass.”

“Are you trying to pick a fight with me?”

I leaned in and grabbed his jaw with one hand.

“What if I am?”

“Watch it. Our fights end with me inside you. I haven’t made you come in days. I have no patience right now.” He took my legs, put them around his waist and crooked his neck to kiss me on mine. That was my weak spot and Salvatore often spent hours torturing me with his mouth like this.

“We can’t.” I tried, but despite the protest, my arms were around his shoulders.

“You want me.” There was no question there.

“I... yes, but I should go home.” Instead of taking his hand off, Salvatore climbed on the stage and put me flat on my back with his hard body pushing me into the floor. “No.”

“No?”

“We need to stop this.” My voice was breathy, giving away how turned on I was by the touches of his tongue.

“Agreed.” But his actions said exactly the opposite. I was talking, but my words were flying right past his ears, so I decided to push it.

“I will go to Milano soon.”

“I can take you.”

...and push it.

“I want to move there, Salvatore. For good. There’s a ballet academy...”

“We’ll move there if that’s what you want. Whatever makes you happy.”

...and push it until I took it too far.

“We should see other people.” I knew what I was doing before the words left my mouth, so what happened next didn’t surprise me.

Salvatore’s eyes were flooded with anger almost immediately and his fist was smashed on the wooden floor surface, somewhere close to my head. I didn’t even flinch. His rage was always intense, always the biggest thing in the room. Everyone feared Salvatore when he was in such a state, but not me. He’d shoot himself in the kneecap before using his hands to hurt me.

“Now, Grazi, I’d say you want to make me jealous.”

“I told you we should end it.”

“Is one of us dead?”

“Salvatore...”

“Answer the goddamn question.”

“No. No one is dead.” *Yet.*

“Then nothing is over. Move to Milano if you want, dance, whatever makes you happy, but if I ever see you with another man, someone *will* die.”

“You’re being irrational.”

“But you know I’m right. You don’t want anyone else, Grazi, but you’d go out with some loser just to play with me because that’s who you are. You live to push my buttons, so I’m telling you exactly what’s going to happen.” He took a deep sniff along the skin on my chest. “It would never work. Your body knows it belongs to me. Your lips would never open for another man; you could never take another in your arms; your pussy won’t get wet if I’m not there to take care of it.”

“Damn it, Salvatore.”

“Now, shut that infuriating mouth of yours before I stuff it with my cock and let me make love to you.”

He pushed the straps of my leotard down and freed my arms, so he could roll the thing down and have free access to my breasts. The moment they were out, Salvatore rolled his teeth around my puckered nipples and marked me. He liked to leave love bites all over me, so the signs would remain when we’d be apart. The thought of me with someone else must have really gotten to him.

“Ouch, Salvatore.”

“Shush it. You like it when it hurts.” That was the downside of being with someone who knew my body better than his own. I could never lie, not when we were like this. He knew me in ways I didn’t even know myself and he understood every piece of the broken puzzle that I was. It was a scary thing – to have someone so completely under your skin, there was no room to keep anything to yourself.

Salvatore grabbed one of my breasts hard and used his mouth as a suction cup on the other. I could feel the edges of his teeth pushing against my skin and it made me arch my back and moan. Yes, he was right, I loved it when he was a little rough and it turned me on when I got to see the bruises on my skin. It was like reading into a book of us.

“You could conquer the beauty of the Goddess Venus, *Tesoro*.”

“Are you trying to be charming?”

“I don’t need to charm you, Grazia. I have you already!” He roared and his eyes were burning with passion. “I’m telling you what I see.”

“You talk like this to all your other women.”

He laughed and the vibration tickled my skin.

“I love your jealousy. It proves to me what I already know.”

“And what is that?”

His hand slowly and methodically pushed my leotard to the side and he placed his erect cock at the entrance of my body, but didn’t push his way in. “That you can’t live without me, Grazia Paulina Caputo.” Oh, he got my middle name involved. This was serious.

I didn’t get to respond because he impaled my body with the entirety of his glorious length and I lost my breath. A million times we’ve shared a bed and every time was like the first. So intense, beyond the scope of simple words. After so many years, I still couldn’t get used to being with a man like him.

Before I got time to get used to the intrusion, Salvatore rolled around and suddenly, I was on top of him.

“What are you doing?”

“You,” he pinched my nipple, “have been exasperating in the past few days. You didn’t answer when I called, you talked all that bullshit about ending us. You don’t deserve to be fucked, *Tesoro*.”

“Excuse me?”

“Work for it.”

“*Excuse me?*” I repeated, fighting the urge to plant my fist into his aquiline nose.

“Move your ass and make yourself come on my cock or walk away. The choice is yours.”

I couldn’t fucking believe the nerve on him. Work for it? Who the hell did he think I was to talk to me like that? I was the princess of Palermo, the daughter of a powerful *Don*. I was Grazia Caputo and no one got to treat me like a whore, not even Salvatore Fiori.

Calling his bluff, I pushed myself up from my knees, ready to walk away, but of course, his hands caught me by the hips and pulled me back down.

“You didn’t really think I’d let you go, did you?”

“Then don’t be an ass to me.”

He raised his torso and smashed his lips over mine, kissing me with a fearless possession. I fought him with my tongue and we ended up melting together in the middle of the flames.

“Sometimes I wonder, Grazi, if you’re really mad or just enjoy the fight.” It was the fight. Challenging Salvatore was always my drug and the thing that made me burn for him. I needed it. I craved it. Fighting Salvatore was making my blood run.

“Are we doing this or not? I don’t have the whole night, Salvatore.”

“Say you want me.”

“No.”

He rolled his hips and I felt a jolt of pleasure going from my gut straight through my head. It was like getting electrocuted.

“Say it.”

“Salvatore, don’t stop.”

“Why?” He moved again, this time slower, more agonizing.

“Just move, please.” I tried to ride him, but his hands were not willing to let me move an inch. “Stop torturing me.”

“Why is it torture if you don’t want me?”

“Fine, damn you! I want you! *Sasa*, please!” I used the nick name I had for him when we were kids. That was his Achilles’ heel. Every time I called him *Sasa*, he turned to clay in my hands.

“Damn it, *Tesoro*! Hold on to my shoulders and move.”

With my nails anchored in his muscle-covered shoulders, and I began riding him furiously. I wanted to feel him fast, enjoy the strength of his body, the power coming from him.

Salvatore was a man who could take on a tiger with his bare hands and win and in this moment, I had him tamed between my legs. There was a certain satisfaction in that which couldn’t be matched by anything else.

He put his hands on my ass cheeks, supporting me every time I raised my body and helping me move faster. We were one, hearts beating the same, both so close to crushing into an orgasmic bliss. I could read the signs of his body – the sweat on his forehead, the vein in his neck – the same way he knew all that I felt. We were aiming for climax, so I locked my knees to the floor and kept moving. His hands were clasped so tightly on the back of my thighs, I was sure there were going to be bruises tomorrow, but didn’t mind.

“Salvatore.”

“Yes, *Tesoro*, I feel it. Come for me.”

The command threw me over the edge of a heart-shattering orgasm. My entire body exploded in a splash of color, sensations, and sounds. Salvatore didn’t make it any easier. While I was cracking into pieces, he held me in place and moved his hips until his own orgasm hit and he filled me

up with his essence. Everything was happening all at once. I could feel a million things. All. At. Once.

“*Figlio di puttana*^[4].” He cursed under his breath. “You’re going to be the end of me.”

If I could answer him, I would have told Salvatore Fiori to go screw himself, but my chest was still burning and the air didn’t seem to be able to make its way into my lungs. Five minutes had to pass for me to be able to move and push away from his chest.

“I have to go. It’s late.”

“Right.” He muttered. “I’m getting fucking tired of going to bed without you, Grazi.”

A flashback from the last time I got to sleep in his arms crossed my mind. There was a terrible storm outside and Salvatore came to my house just to check if I was ok. He sheltered me in his arms from all the raging noises of the unleashed rain and I slept feeling like nothing bad could ever happen to me. Ever. For the longest time, he was my safe place.

“It is what it is.” I tried to build an indifferent façade, not liking where this was going.

“For now.” It gave me chills when he spoke like that. “Don’t shower.”

“What?”

“If I can’t have you in my bed, I want to know my smell is on your skin. Come, I’ll drive you home.”

“I can...”

“Shut up, Grazi. You’re not walking. Take your things.”

“You’re going to have to wait. I need to lock the studio up. I’m the only one left.”

“Waiting for you is all I do. Go.”

I had to go change and then check a few things; make sure all was in order. With every step I took, I felt watched –

which I was. Salvatore stayed in the shadows, completely silent, and looked over me. It wasn't something that freaked me out. I grew up with people watching over me – my father, my brothers, guards, and then, when I was sixteen, Salvatore took that responsibility upon himself. He never stopped watching ever since. I could recognize the feeling of having his eyes on me even when I couldn't spot him.

“Ready, Grazi?”

“Yes, I am.”

“The car is outside.”

He was driving a different car today, a sporty one with only two seats. It was sexy and with shiny black paint. It must have been new because I've never seen it before, but it wasn't a surprise. This man loved good cognac and fast cars with a smoldering intensity and he spent piles of money on both. He went ahead and opened the passenger door for me.

“New toy?”

“Toy? Baby, this is a McLaren.” He jumped behind the steering wheel with a proud look on his face. “You like?”

I looked around the slick dashboard and then at Salvatore. “I'm not really impressed.” I told him with a shrug.

“It costs half a million. It's hard to please you, Grazi.”

“I like the Maserati better.”

“You want it?” I dismissed him with a laugh, but Salvatore didn't let it go. “If you want it, it's yours. I'll have it sent to you tomorrow.”

“I *don't* want it.”

“Why not? You can drive.”

“*Babbo* doesn't want me driving and how would I even explain getting it.”

“Say it's from me.”

I threw my hands in the air.

“What's gotten into you today?”

“Don’t you want to be with me?” He sparred my question with a different one.

Did I want to be with him? My heart was bleeding every minute we were apart, but it was a pain I had to learn to live with. “I’m here, aren’t I?”

“Then why are you fighting me on this?”

“What are we even fighting about?” There was nothing to debate here. Things were the way they were. Our families were divided by an anger that couldn’t be washed away.

When Adrian Fiori will die, Salvatore will step in the place that was being kept for him, as *Don* of his family, but when my dad will be no more, my brothers will carry both his legacy and his hate. It will never stop. We were doomed to be apart and we both knew it. Why Salvatore felt like putting salt on open wounds, I had no idea.

“Grazia, listen to me...” Whatever it was, I really didn’t want to.

“Just drive me home, please. I’m in a hurry already.”

“Why?”

“I’m going out tonight.” His hands clenched on the steering wheel until I heard the leather making a cracking sound. He didn’t ask a question, but sure as hell was expecting an answer. “I’m going to a club with Ariana and Pina. Tomorrow is Ari’s birthday.”

Ariana and Pina Bernoulli were my closest friends. Ok, they were my only friends. Growing up between seven brothers, Delfina and Salvatore, I really didn’t need any other people. Ari, Pina, and I were close because our families were. So much in fact, Ariana was my mother’s goddaughter and wearing her name, so in many ways, they were family.

“A club, huh? Which one?”

“I don’t know yet.” I just didn’t want to tell him and get some soldier of his on my tail all night.

“Sure you don’t.” He didn’t believe me for a second. “How old is Ariana now? Twenty-four?”

“Twenty-five tomorrow.”

“Damn, she’s really grown up.”

I looked out the window. “She used to have a crush on you.” Ariana never said it to my face, but she and Salvatore were closer in age and every time she came around and he was there, I caught her drooling over him. More than once I wanted to slam her face into the table because of it. There was something in the way she looked at him that rubbed me the wrong way. He was a man that turned the heads of women, it always happened, but Ariana didn’t just look with admiration; her eyes carried possession. I never appreciated the way she looked at what was mine. *Used to be mine.*

“Are you telling me this because you want me to be her present or what?” I slapped his chest. “Ouch. It was a joke, Grazi.”

He made it to my house and parked in his usual spot, but this time, when I stepped out of the car, so did he.

“Salvatore, what the hell are you doing?”

“Saying goodbye.” He chained my waist with his strong arms and I felt all his hardness pressed against me. Salvatore wasn’t just good looking, he was buffed, every inch of his body worked in the gym until his muscles turned into stone. His beauty could put gods to shame.

“Someone could see us.”

“Relax.”

“You are being exasperating today.”

“Look at me.” I did, and his green eyes were waiting. “Are you going to behave tonight?” Oh, so that was what he wanted.

“I’ll do whatever the hell I want.”

“Don’t push it.”

“You don’t get to tell me what to do. If I want to get drunk and dance on a bar with my top off, then that’s exactly what I’m going to do.”

His grip tightened.

“I’m going to let this slide. Are your brothers going to be there?”

“No. It’s just girls tonight.”

“What?”

“Calm down. It’s just a night out.”

“What the fuck is Fabiano thinking letting you wonder all over the city at night, alone.”

“I’m not going to be alone, I’m going to be with friends. Plus, I know how to fight, remember?” Salvatore was the one who taught me. “*Babbo* trusts me, because I’m not a kid.”

“You’re not as old as you think, Grazia, and you’re too fucking precious to be left unguarded.” The intensity in his voice made me shiver and suddenly, I didn’t want to fight anymore.

I placed a gentle hand on his face.

“*Sasa*, I’ll be fine.” Usually his frustration would please me and make me feel like I still had some control, but tonight I had to let it go for him. I didn’t want him to worry, especially when there wasn’t a reason.

“You promise?”

“I give you my word. I really have to go now or else I’ll be late.”

“Sure. Go.” But I only got two steps away when he called my name again.

“What?” He came close and kissed me.

“Damn you, Salvatore Fiori, we’re in plain sight!”

He smiles and wiped my lower lip with the back of his hand.

“I get to kiss what’s mine. Go now, *Tesoro*, before I change my mind.”

I left him behind before he could *make* me change my mind.

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Chapter 4

I hated clubs with a passion. Everyone was sweaty, pushing on each other, people rubbing off on me. There was nothing about it that I found desirable. Ariana has insisted on inviting every single person she considered a friend, so our party was a little over fifty people, another thing that didn't thrill me. Ari was a popular girl ever since we were kids and unlike me, she enjoyed it. She liked the spotlight and didn't appreciate anyone who tried to steal it.

Ari and I were... different. Everything I did seemed to be the exact opposite of what she'd do, and sometimes it made me wonder why she stuck around for so long.

Her father was loyal to mine. A fixer. If a job went wrong, or my brothers were in trouble, *Babbo* would send Martino Bernoulli to take care of it. The Bernoulli family has grown alongside mine – parties, weddings, funerals, police interventions – they were always close. It was only natural that Ariana, Pina and I become friends. After all, we carried the burden of mafia daughters together.

Ariana was older and she always looked at Pina and myself like we were her little disciples. She always listened to my problems and she was helpful if it was in her power to

help, but as I said, she never liked to be shadowed. Because I was the *Don's* daughter, sometimes I got attention that I didn't want or deserved. My Caputo blood drew people to me and that never sat well with Ariana. The fact that she and I were both ballerinas didn't help either because every time I got a lead in a recital, I saw some envy in her eyes that didn't have any place between friends. In the end, none of that mattered because we were *famiglia* and that bound us beyond petty rivalries.

Walking through the crowd gathered around our table, I found Pina—the younger Bernoulli sister—looking as happy with the scene as I was.

“Hey! What are you doing here alone?” I yelled so she could hear me over the insanely loud techno music.

“What?”

“What are you doing here alone?”

“I'm praying for my eardrum not to burst.”

“Same.” I tugged at her arm. “Come on, let's step out for a second. My head hurts.”

Pina agreed and we walked to the back of the club. One of my brothers owned the place, so no one stopped us from going through the staff entrance and getting to the alley behind.

Palermo was not a city for luxury clubs, except the few that belonged to my family, or at least that's not how I saw it. The real fun was not in closed rooms, it was in the streets, when the music would fill out the night and everyone was dancing and singing along. That was my kind of night out, but it wouldn't have fit with Ariana's idea of glamor.

“Finally, some fresh air.” Pina said and inhaled. “You have no idea how glad I am you're here. Some of Ari's friends have arrived yesterday and spent the night at our house. I was forced to listen to them talk about how to correctly apply foundation all day. Apparently, there are multiple techniques to spread brown paint on your face.”

I crossed my arms and giggled. I knew all the techniques, but of course Pina, with her flawless sun-kissed face and her hate for girly things, didn't care. "It's what girls do, right?"

"Girls with no other interest in life, maybe, but not me. And this party, ugh! I tried to convince Ariana to go to a restaurant instead, but since your brother offered to give her that VIP table, there was no talking to her, so it's all Gianni's fault."

"Of course Gianni gave her the VIP tables. You guys are family."

"Are they here tonight? Your brothers, I mean?"

"No. Giovanni called last night to tell me that him, Gianni and Guido are leaving to Amalfi with the wives for a week, Giorgio has a business thing, and the twins didn't return from their trip to Qatar yet."

Pina blinked a few times and swallowed hard. I knew exactly why.

"What about Garon? Is he out of town too?"

My smile widened. Garon, the youngest of the Caputo boys, was very popular around here, especially with the ladies. Pina was one of them. She carried a torch for the blue-eyed devil ever since we were kids and pretty much everyone knew it. The twins – Goliath and Gaspino – have teased her relentlessly about it.

"No, he's around. Actually, he's coming to the house for dinner this Sunday if you want to join us."

Pina rolled her eyes. "Why would I do that?" From her purse, she got a pack of cigarettes and lit one. "Want one?"

"Sure, but let's move next to that wall." I pointed somewhere behind her. "I don't want the cameras to pick me up. Gianni would kill me."

"Are you sure your brothers don't know you smoke? They know everything."

“They would have ratted me out to *Babbo* by now and I don’t smoke. It’s only a social habit.”

“Sure.” She rolled her eyes. “You were saying Garon is coming to dinner.”

“Oh, God, you are so smitten with him. Why don’t you try to ask him out or something?”

Pina laughed in my face. “It will never happen.”

“Why not? Don’t you want to be my sister?”

“First of all, he calls me pigtails. He thinks I’m a kid.” For fifteen years, Pina’s mother had made her wear her blonde hair exclusively in pigtails. No one could blame Garon for giving her that nickname.

“Second, and don’t get mad at me for saying this, your brother is a slut.”

“Pina!” I tried to sound offended, but laughed. Yes, Garon’s conquests were the stuff of legends in Palermo. When he was out to have fun, men would lock their wives in the house. “Ok, maybe he’s had more than a few girlfriends, but you can never know.”

“Sure, I’ll be the one who turns Garon Caputo into a one-woman man and then pigs will fly.”

“You are too pessimistic.”

“Didn’t you hear when I said he still calls me pigtails?”

“You’re twenty years old Pina, not fourteen. There’s only a four year difference between you two. It can work.” It was the same difference between Salvatore and I and God was witness we could have worked so damn well.

“Why are we talking about this?”

“You asked about him.” I shrugged.

“Can we get back to complaining about being forced to spend the night in this club, please?”

I looked to her and winked. “I have a plan.”

“You do?”

“This is what we’re going to do. We’re going to load up on expensive champagne and then get to dancing. Make the best out of a bad situation.”

“I don’t like to dance and have people stare at me.” Pina replied. She was a shy girl, more of a watch from the shadows type or even better, stay home and read a book. That’s why she was my favorite person to hang out with.

“You can’t leave me to dance alone.”

“In that dress?” She nodded at me. “You’re going to find ten people who want to dance with you in a minute.”

The dress was a simple black satin, but it was tight and very short. Dressing sexy wasn’t something I put my efforts into, but something in me wanted to rebel against Salvatore. I knew that if he’d see me in this, he’d lose his mind.

“We’ll see.” I put out the cigarette and we walked through the same door we used to get out.

Back inside, the party was in full swing. Ari was on the table, showering her friends in thousands of euros worth of champagne, people were dancing and throwing back shots. The DJ started playing a remix of *Like a Prayer* and when Madonna’s voice boomed from the speaker, the entire club roared.

I was not a fan of the clubbing crowd, but the energy in here was pretty appealing. Or maybe it was because I threw back two flutes of champagne like they were filled with water. I let my body move to the flow of the music and slowly got lost between the dozens of bodies doing the same thing. I closed my eyes and just danced; it was what I loved to do most. I didn’t care for the people around until I felt a pair of hands landing on my shoulders before traveling down my arms. I turned on my heel to see who it was and an unfamiliar face was staring back at me with a wide smile on his face.

The man was handsome, with blonde hair and a sharp jaw, dressed in a white suit. He was very Michael Douglas in his youth. I would have remembered if I’d have met him before.

“*Ciao, Bella.*” He spoke and I could tell by his accent he definitely wasn’t Italian.

“Hello.”

“Dance with me.”

“I’m sorry, but I don’t know who you are.”

“My name is Viktor. Ariana is a friend of mine and I was on my way to say hello, but couldn’t help noticing you.” He took my hand and spun me around. “Come on, let’s move our hips.”

The song went on and Viktor and I started moving together. I was pleasantly surprised to find out he was an amazing dancer, maybe even a professional. The rhythm in his feet was in sync with mine and soon we were moving like one. I tried to keep some distance between us but with every step he took, Viktor came closer until there was only a thin strip of air separating us.

“What’s your name, pretty girl?”

“Grazia Caputo.” There wasn’t much of a reaction on his face, so he definitely wasn’t from Sicily. “You’re not from around here. How do you know Ari?”

“I’m here to look for some business opportunities and she was nice enough to show me around.” He looked me up and down. “Are you looking for a job, *bella* Grazia?”

“A job?” I laughed. “No, I’m good.”

“Too bad. I work with beautiful women and you... well, if you need to make some money just find me.” I recognized a bad intention when I heard one. I’ve grown up around bad men, so I could sniff one out from a mile away.

“That won’t be the case.” I assured him.

“Ok then, if not for business,” he pulled me into his arms, “then for pleasure.”

“Viktor...” my sentence was cut short by his hands that traveled down to my ass and squeezed it shamelessly.

“So hot.”

“Stop. No one gave you permission to touch me.”

“Oh, come on. You look like a girl who likes to have fun.” What a fucking jerk he was.

“Not with you. Now let me go.”

“That’s gonna cost you one kiss.”

“This is not funny anymore. Let go...” I stopped because two huge shadows appeared behind him, “me.”

The two massive men with buzzcuts pulled him away suddenly and I was free again, no hands on my ass anymore. At first, I thought they were bouncers, but neither of them was wearing the club uniform, and because there was a light behind them, I couldn’t see their face clearly. Either way, I was grateful for the assistance.

One of them positioned himself between me and Viktor. “Leave the lady alone, or you’ll go home with a broken arm.”

“We were just dancing.” Viktor replied.

“Leave before I cut off the hand you touched her with.” It didn’t take more than that for Viktor to turn around and get lost in the crowd.

The man that set me free moved so I could see his face and I’ve recognized him right away. Yannis Judas. Salvatore’s enforcer.

“You have to be kidding me.” I threw my hands in the air and yelled over the music.

“Are you alright, Miss Caputo?”

“Yes, and I didn’t need your help.”

“Seems to me like you did.”

“What are you even doing here?” He raised his brow. What a stupid question this was. “Where is he?” He couldn’t have been in here, right? In my brother’s club?

“Bar at the end of the road.”

“Damn it.” Why did Salvatore have to make everything so hard lately? “Thank you, Yannis, you can go now.”

I didn’t wait for a reply, I just bolted for the corner where our table was and started looking for my purse. I found it next to Pina who completely gave up and was on her phone, scrolling through pictures of herself.

“You’re done dancing?” She asked when she noticed me.

“Yep.”

“Are you ok?”

“Yes. Some guy just got too handsy, but it’s fine now. How mad do you think Ari will be if I take off?”

“You’re joking, right? We’ve been here for only an hour. It’s not even midnight yet.”

“I know, but I really have to go. I need to, umm, do a thing.”

“Do a thing? Now?”

“Meet someone, ok? I have to meet someone now. Don’t ask questions.”

Pina’s mouth opened a couple of times before she was able to speak again. “A man?”

“I just said no questions.”

“You dirty, dirty girl. Ariana won’t like it.”

“Yeah, well, she’s going to have to.”

I found the birthday girl taking shots of flaming tequila with a few of her friends and I pulled her to the side.

“Grazia, *amore mio*^[5], here you are. Do you want a shot?”

“I’ve had a few glasses already. I’m fine.”

“Are you having fun? Oh, Grazia, *I’m* having such a great time.” She was obviously tipsy. “I love the present you gave. That bag must have cost a fortune.”

“Don’t mention it. You deserve it.” I smiled, genuinely happy that she enjoyed the Prada bag I had sent to her house earlier. It was a collector’s item and it took Delfina and I over a month to find it. “Look, Ari, I have to tell you something, but please don’t get mad.”

“What?”

“I know you wanted us to party tonight, but something happened and I have to go.”

Her jaw dropped and I clearly see the insult on her face. “You want to leave my *birthday* party?”

“Ari, come on, you know I’d never do it if it wasn’t important.”

“It’s my birthday party. *I* should be the most important thing today.”

The impulse to roll my eyes was almost overwhelming.

“Yes! Yes, you are but...” there was no way I’d tell her the truth, “Ari, Garon texted me. He says it’s urgent.” What good was to have older brothers if I couldn’t use them as excuses?

“Oh. Family stuff?”

“I don’t know, but I have to check it out. You know how my brothers can get.”

She was not pleased, but what could she say? No one said no to a Caputo.

“Fine then, but you owe me one.”

“Absolutely. Hey, umm, maybe make an effort to spend some time with Pina. She doesn’t know any of your friends and you know she’s not so comfortable with big crowds.”

“Grazia, I’ve spent half my life babysitting her and I had no say in it. Tonight is about me.”

“Ari, come on.”

“Yeah, yeah, I’ll make sure she has fun. The two of you always gang up on me.”

I kiss her cheek and then fight my way to the door through a sea of restless, half-drunk people. The moment I stepped outside I realized my ears were ringing because of the music. It didn’t stop me from marching down the street. There were only a couple of bars around here and one was an Irish pub. Salvatore wouldn’t be caught dead in one of those.

With every step I took, my anger grew. I fought my father for months so he won’t give me an armed guard because I could take care of myself in our damn streets. Salvatore had no business sending someone to watch me. And in my brother’s club? He sent *his* men in my *brother’s* club? Didn’t he know how insanely stupid that was?

I was not a possession to be kept in a vault, neither was I a child that needed supervision. It infuriated me to no end that Salvatore of all people would treat me like one. He sent his damn lap dogs to hover over me and hold my hand while he comfortably sat a few steps back, like a fucking puppeteer playing everyone from the shadows. I was many things, but not a damsel in distress. Sure, Viktor was making me uncomfortable, but I could have gotten away from him without assistance from the two mountain men Salvatore sent to lurk.

The bar was called *Il Bicchiere Pieno* – The Full Glass – and they only served wine. It was a nice place with live music and tables outside. I pushed the doors open with much more force than I anticipated and the windows rattled. There were a lot of people inside too, but the atmosphere was more welcoming than it was in a club.

Determined to get to Salvatore while my anger was still simmering, I went straight to the bar and slapped my hand on the wooden flat top to get the attention of the redhead behind it. She was busy pouring a glass of white to an elderly couple, but it seemed my tantrum was effective because she came to see what the hell it was about.

“Are you in a hurry, Miss?” She asked, irony soaring in her words.

“Sorry for that. My name is Grazia Caputo.” Her eyes grew like an owl’s. Good. I didn’t like using my name like that, but sometimes it was just necessary. “I’m looking for someone. A man – tall, handsome, muscular, lots of tattoos, he tips in hundreds and probably flirts with the waitress. His name is Salvatore.”

Red bit her lip. “I don’t know any names, but there’s someone that fits that description here. Back patio.”

“Thank you.” I slipped a few bills in her tip jar and went on my way.

The moment I stepped out on that patio I knew Salvatore was there. I didn’t have to see him, I felt the hairs stand up on my body and that was enough. When I turned, he was staring at me, unmoved by my presence. He knew I’d come.

I went straight to his table and knocked the glass of wine in front of him down like I was a pissed off cat. By the annoyed look on his face, I’d say he *didn’t* know I was going to do that. Well, at least I still had the ability to surprise him.

“You have a lot of nerve, Fiori.”

“Something bothering you, Grazi?”

“I don’t remember asking you for protection, so maybe you want to explain why your gorillas were following me?”

“Ah, come on, Yannis is a sweetheart.”

Not caring that a lot of heads will turn our way, I raised my voice to get him to stop with the damn jokes. “I’m fucking serious!”

“I told them to stay back unless there was a problem. Was there a fucking problem, Grazi?”

“No.” I lied through my teeth. “I was dancing. With a handsome man. I was having a great time before Yannis ruined it.”

Salvatore’s color started to change gradually from neck up. The blood was slowly rising to his head and he smashed his fist on the table. He rose to his feet and came to look down

at me. I was more turned on than intimidated by his power move.

“You wanna repeat that, Grazia?”

Oh, you bet. “I was dancing.” I dragged my words. “With a handsome man.”

“Did he touch you?”

“How is that any of your business?”

“No one touches what’s mine.”

“Oh, my God!” I threw my hands in the air. “You are impossible. Your possessiveness is out of control. How reckless could you be to send your men to follow me in Gianni’s club? Do you know how easily someone could have recognized him...”

“So what? What is Gianni Caputo gonna do to me, Grazia?” He leaned in closer and I could smell the wine on him. He’s been here a while. “I’m not scared of your brothers and no one could stop me from taking care of you.”

“I didn’t ask you to take care of me, Salvatore! I’ve asked you the opposite. I keep telling you it’s time for us to stop... for you to let me go, but you don’t listen. You push yourself into my life, you send people after me!” I only stopped for a second to fill my lungs with air. “You need to let me go. For good.”

I wanted his claws out of me, now more than ever. All I could see was red fog, everything in sight tainted by raw anger. Our history? My feelings? The vows we made? In this moment they meant nothing.

“Never. Stop talking stupid.”

“I’m not yours, Salvatore!” I screamed in his face and the words sounded more like glass shattering around us. “I’m not your fiancé, I’m not your girlfriend, I don’t even think I’m your friend. I do *not* belong to you!”

I needed to stand my ground, now more than ever.

Salvatore's face darkened and he turned into stone. He wasn't angry, he was raging, turning into something I've never seen before. His eyes were pinned on mine. He didn't care about the people around, about anything else – *just me*. We fought a million times before, it was what we did. Some people have relationships with flowers and candlelit dinners; we get turned on when we butt heads. I've said some harsh things to Salvatore, called him some horrible names, but I've never seen him like this. This was the first time his reaction made me take a step back instead of running towards him, but the moment I tried to put distance between us, he cuffed my wrist with his hand.

“Walk.” He gave me a one-word command.

“Where?”

Instead of answering, he started moving, dragging me along. We left the bar without him even bothering to pay his bill and marched down the busy streets of the old city. He pushed everyone out of his way like a tank moving through a battlefield. There was no stopping him, not until we made it to his car. We didn't get inside, like I thought we would, but instead he pushed me on the hood, coming to chain me with his arms, so there was no way to escape. When I found the courage to look up at him, I didn't see eyes, I saw two pits of hell burning unleashed. My entire body shivered. I was in danger. I was lost.



Chapter 5

I've been stabbed seven times. There was a bullet in my arm still from a shootout last year. Countless scars were spread on my body, hidden by the ink of my tattoos – my battle scars. None of it had hurt as much as her words. No sword could cut as deep. No bullet could make me bleed as much as Grazia's rejection. I felt like a wild animal wounded in the forest and everything in me was yelling that it was time to strike back.

Grazia didn't try to resist when I took her out of the restaurant, but it didn't matter because I was ready to pick her up and carry her on my shoulder. Fighting with her was ordinary, but I always won and she always came back to me. Saying anything different was vindictive and I wasn't going to let it slide like it was nothing.

I had no idea where the fuck I was going, all I knew was that I had to have her for myself, so I kept walking down the street until I spotted my car. She wanted to get in, but instead, I grabbed her hips and threw her ass on the hood.

“Look at me.” I gnarled.

Grazia opened her eyes, but stayed silent. It was a rare sight. She was not a woman to hide or pull away and she was *not* scared of me. I loved that, the power, the stubbornness burning inside of her. There was nothing sexier than a brave woman.

“Salvatore...”

“What gave you the impression you can talk to me like that, Grazia?”

She flinched because of my sharp tone, but her face remained neutral.

“You’re the one who had me followed.”

“Yes, Grazia, I had my men follow you. It’s not the first time, it’s just the first time you saw them.” I slammed my fist into the hood so hard, it dented. “I have to, woman, because I can’t be there to watch you myself. Do you know how that feels?”

“Sasa...”

“No, you fucking don’t! I can’t sleep because you’re not there on the pillow next to mine. I can’t focus on business if I don’t know where you are and what you’re doing. It makes me sick with anger that I can’t come to see you dance or take you to a fucking club.”

“I know.”

“Really, Grazi? You know? You know and your response is to tell me we’re nothing? That we don’t matter?”

She tried to look away, but I didn’t let her.

“What do you want me to say, Salvatore?”

“You’re mine and that won’t change until the day I die.”

“Our engagement was broken. You refused to let it go and so did I, but maybe it’s time. We’re not kids anymore.”

The lion in my chest roared in pain. If I didn’t have Grazia then what was left? The family? The money? Fuck it all, I didn’t need it. There was a mafia empire waiting for me

to rule it, but not without her. All could burn and turn to ash if my Grazi wasn't with me.

“What happened to the woman that took a blood oath to stay by my side?” I asked, my eyes burning holes in her.

“I wanted to, Salvatore. You know how much I...” she stopped herself before saying the words, but I didn't need to hear them. I knew. “My father's words are set in stone, you know that. He won't let his only daughter run into his enemy's arms. There's nothing I can do. There's nothing *anyone* can do!”

To underestimate me was a mistake, and Grazia should have known better. I was Salvatore Fiori – I could move mountains, I could part seas and Fabiano was not going to stand in my way.

“Don't you trust me, Grazi?”

“This is not about trust! You're being impossible again.”

“I've let your old man think he can break us up and keep you away for too long. It's time I take you back.”

“Stop talking about me like I'm a piece of furniture, jackass!”

“Damn it, Grazia, there's no winning with you.” The frustration bubbled up my throat and I choked on it. “Why do you have to be so damn difficult?”

“Me? You're the one who refuses to face the reality.”

“There's no reality in which you're not mine. Get that into your damn head!”

“Salvatore, our families can't stand each other anymore! Our fathers have sworn death to one another!”

“So let it be war! Whatever it takes for you to be my wife, I'll do it.” The words boomed through the street, followed by a thick silence. If Fabiano Caputo wanted blood in exchange for his daughter, then I would drown Palermo in his. He had already taken something from me and my father, something priceless. I wouldn't let him take Grazia too.

“How selfish can you be, Salvatore Fiori?” I could read the pain on her face, but had no idea where it came from. It was a view I despised.

“Selfish?”

“You’re talking about my family, about my *brothers*. Do you think I could ever forgive myself if anything happened to them because of me? Would you really put me through that hell because of your ego?”

I choked on my own tongue when I heard her. Ego? My ego had nothing to do with it. It was something more powerful that drove me.

“It’s not about pride, Grazia.”

“Of course it is about pride! I know you, remember? Always the golden boy, the best, ahead of everyone. You will be *Don* soon, Salvatore, we all know it. You will have the power, but you were promised a princess too. You just don’t want to let *Babbo* have the last word.”

“Are you serious, or are you trying to be funny, Grazi?”

“You’re too scared to look weak to let go of me.”

I looked up to the sky, feeling at the end of my fucking tether. “Jesus Christ, this woman is insane.”

Her soft hand smashed against my chest, but I felt nothing.

“Don’t call me insane.” She snapped.

“Then don’t talk like a crazy person.” I barked back. “You think I want you so I can prove something? You think I’d put up with your tantrums, sneak around like a fucking teenager to see you, for the fun of it?”

“Then *why*?” Oh, now she was just poking the tiger.

And then it hit me. She was doing it on purpose, trying to make me break that stupid barrier she put between us, so I filled my lungs with air and screamed the words in her face. “Because I fucking love you!”

Her palm connected to my face at lightning speed. I didn't even blink.

"I love you too!" Her voice broke in the night darkness. "You weren't supposed to say it. You promised." She forced me to make that promise after I bought our apartment. It was Grazia's way to try and protect her heart, like there was any of it left that wasn't mine yet.

"You're going to have to forgive me this time, *Tesoro*."

"We should leave or something. Anyone could see us here."

After the show we just did, I'd be surprised if no one did already.

"Get in the car then." She slid in the passenger's seat while I jumped behind the wheel.

"Where do you want to take me?"

"Our spot."

Grazia didn't say anything, but her entire body shook because of a shiver. *Our spot*. It was a virgin shore outside of the city, one of the few patches of land that didn't become a restaurant or the backyard of some hotel. Some asshole investor had tried to buy it from the city last year and turn it into a money-making place, but I put my foot down. Between his offer and my bribe, the mayor made the right choice.

I drove to the end of the path that was leading to a cliff that Grazia loved. It had a nice view over the sea – not that it was much to see in the middle of the night – and it was sheltered by lemon trees. I used to take her here for picnics, but it must have been at least a year since we last came together to look at the sea. I was pleasantly surprised to see nothing has changed.

Grazia threw her sandals on the back seat and jumped out of the car.

"Careful, *Tesoro*. You might cut your feet."

"I'll watch my step, don't worry."

She walked around through the grass for a few minutes, before going to sit next to the old lemon tree that was growing almost at the edge of the cliff.

“Look,” she pointed to the tree, “our initials are still here.”

I’d carved them with my pocket knife a long time ago. If I remembered correctly, it was right after Guido’s wedding. Grazia was the maid of honor – she was so stunning that day, all I could think about was how my heart would take it when she’d be the one in the white dress.

“Yeah, I see.”

“I missed this place. It has such a pretty view when the sun is up.”

“You never come here?”

“Not without you. Do you?”

“Sometimes. Last I was here it was on your birthday.”

“Why?”

“Your brothers threw you that big party in Giovanni’s villa. I couldn’t see you for a week.”

I went to sit down on the ground next to her and Grazia pulled me in for a kiss. The taste of my girl traveled through me and ignited a fire like a match stick thrown into a puddle of gasoline. I took her wrists captive and rolled my body over hers.

“Damn you, Grazi, you’ve put a spell over me.”

“You too. When you talk like that to me, when you’re soft and loving, it makes me so happy, I could cry.”

Her choice of words made me chuckle. “You’re the only person that can say I’m soft and loving.”

“I know, it’s what makes it so special.”

“I’m not following.”

“Salvatore, I’ve seen you break someone’s kneecaps with a pipe.” And I’d apologized for forcing her to witness

that for a month. “You’re a very bad man, but you’re good to me.”

“You know why.”

“I do.” She smiled but it seemed a little empty. “Why is it so hard?”

“What is?”

“You and I. Our engagement was the only thing that I could count on and one day it was just... over.”

“Goddamn it, Grazia.” I was tired of hearing that word. *Over*. It was poison.

“Oh, stop! It’s the truth.” She pushed me away. “Can I ask you something?”

“Shoot.”

“Why?”

“More words, Grazi.”

“My dad never told me the whole story. I don’t even think he told my brothers what your father took from him. What was so important that they couldn’t agree on after thirty years of brotherhood?”

Shit. Fabiano didn’t just kept part of the truth from her, he rewrote the narrative. I could see why. The black stain on his cheek would bring a shame so dark, no blood family in Italy would turn his way again. It’s one thing to steal, to cheat, or to kill, but to break brotherly honor was an offense people didn’t let go so easily.

“Grazia, it was a closed doors business. No one told you for a reason.”

“But do you know?”

“Yeah, I do.” Every single fucking detail.

“Is it money? Gold?” She kept going. “I know Adrian and he’s many things, but he’s not greedy. Can’t he just give it back and make truce?”

“Grazi, drop it.”

“Maybe I could talk to him. He always liked me.”
Father didn’t *like* her, he loved her like she was his own daughter.

“There won’t be any talking to my father.”

“Umm, how is he? There’s been... rumors.” Sure there were. His enemies were waiting for him to crack like hyenas gathered around a crippled antelope. Fabiano was one of them.

Father did a great job hiding his illness for years. His body didn’t show weakness until a few months ago. He went to Rome to sit in the *Sacra Corona Unita* with the heads of the last ten crime families still standing in Italy, the greatest *Dons* of our times all at one table together. I told him not to go, but the old man was as hard-headed as a ram. The travel, the nights he’d lost drinking, it all must have been too much for him. He started coughing blood and it was enough for one man to see him for the word to spread.

“He’s doing well.”

“He really is sick, isn’t he?”

“Yes.” I answered reluctantly, because this wasn’t what we did. We didn’t talk about family because it didn’t matter. None of it could come between us. “Cancer is eating his lungs.”

“Oh, God.” She touched my knee. “Salvatore, I’m so sorry.”

“He’s getting treated.” I tried to look at the positives, which wasn’t something I did often. “He has at least another year.”

“I feel terrible for not being able to see him. I bet *Babbo* does too.”

“Doubt it.”

“Are you really not going to tell me why they fought?”

“It shouldn’t come from me, *Grazi*, and I don’t want to lose any time speaking about them.” *I didn’t want to be the one that knocked her father off the pedestal he sat on in her eyes.*

“I’m just curious, that’s all.” She bit her lip. “Tell me something else. Do you think it was worth it? The thing that split our families?”

That was one hell of a question. When the feud split the city between Fiori and Caputo, everyone around us paid a price. To break thirty-something years of tradition was a crime, but our fathers did it. Actually, mine did. He looked Fabiano Caputo in the eyes and told him to leave or take a bullet to the back of his head. Did I think it was worth it?

“Yes.” And it was on me to hate her kin when dad would be no more. “It’s almost three in the morning. I’ll have to take you back soon.”

“I know. Can you just hold me for a while?”

“Come here.” I opened my arms and she climbed into my lap, nestling. “Now tell me, who the fuck let you leave the house in this dress?”

Grazia’s laugh rang through the night.

“You like, Fiori?”

“You know I do.” I let my hand travel down the curve of her hip. “I like it a lot.”

“Then stop nagging me about it. You sound like an old wife.”

“It’s too short. How many men have stared at your ass in that club?”

“I’m sure Yannis will give you a full report about that.”

“Yes, he will.” I crooked my neck and licked her collar bone. “I could devour you whole in one bite.”

“Don’t even think about it. I’m still mad at you.”

“No, you’re not.”

I kissed her some more and she sighed, relaxing in my arms. “No, I’m not.”

“Then let me make you feel good.”

“No.”

“And why not?”

“Because I *can* say no to you, Salvatore.” Playful little witch.

“You’re drunk on power, *Tesoro*.” I whispered in her ear. “You don’t want me to put my hand here?” I touched the creamy inside of her thigh.

“No.” She whispered, not convincing anyone.

“You don’t want me to bite your neck and drag my teeth along your skin.”

“No, you’ll leave a mark.”

That’s exactly what I did, I left my damn mark.

While I was kissing the curve of her neck, my hand sneaked behind the lace barrier of her panties and I opened her slit with one finger. Grazia let out a soft moan in response.

“You don’t want me to touch you here?”

“No.”

“Grazi...” I warned her, “don’t play with me.”

When I moved my finger, her body jerked and she got up on her knees facing me, hands anchored in my shoulders.

“Salvatore, please.”

“Ah, look who’s coming around.”

“Stop being an asshole and make me come already.”

“Whatever the princess wishes.” Always. She could ask for the moon and I’d shoot it down from the sky for her.

I leaned back on the tree and Grazia dragged herself closer, eager to have me make her pussy throb. All I needed were two fingers and a little patience. I knew her body inside out, she had no secrets left, and I knew how to awaken her pleasure.

I pushed my fingers in, moving them fast inside her pussy while I used my thumb to press on the clit. The sound that came out of her chest was raw and sexual, born from the

tangible pleasure building in her body. It made my chest swell with pride.

“You like, *Tesoro*?”

“Damn you, Salvatore. Why do you have to feel so good?”

“Because you were made for me and I was made for you.”

My fingers played her like the keyboard of a piano, tingling every nerve. I knew she was close by the way her muscles tightened. I could keep her on the edge if I wanted to, but that would have given her one more reason to tell me what an asshole I was, and we had enough name calling for one day.

A minute later, a fierce orgasm washed over Grazia and her body arched back with the grace of a ballerina that has worked all her life to move like that. Even when her primal instincts took over, she didn't lose an ounce of elegance. Watching her come was motion poetry.

“Salvatore, *mio cuore*.^[6]”

“I got you, *Tesoro*.” And I did. I held her through every spasm and listened to her every cry until she finally settled down. “I got you.”

“You always do.”

“That's right.” I kissed her forehead. “I always do.”

“Can you hold me for a while?”

“Yes.”

I took off my jacket and wrapped her naked shoulders in it, to shield her for the chilly night breeze, and chained her to my chest. She nestled like a kitten, looking all soft and well behaved.

Her hand went to my face and she touched my cheek with a feather-light touch.

Qualcosa non è giusto.^[7] My Grazi was never so calm. She likes to push and shove and playing nice bored her to death.

“Grazia, what is it?”

“What?”

“You seem different.” *Unusually calm.*

“It’s the orgasm, I guess.” But instead of facing me, she looked away, and when I grabbed her chin and made her look back up, I saw how her intoxicatingly innocent blue eyes were filling up with tears. One rolled down – bitter, and unexpected – and I turned to stone.

“Talk to me, *Tesoro.*”

“It’s really nothing. I just got emotional.”

“I hate seeing you cry.”

“I know. I’m sorry.”

“Don’t apologize, just tell me how to make it better.”

“Everything is good.” She placed her head on my shoulder and sighed. “It would be perfect if you wouldn’t talk so much, so shut up and let me enjoy this.”

I chuckled and turned to kiss her soft, blushing cheek. “That’s my girl.”

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Chapter 6

We stayed unmoved ‘till morning. Salvatore fell asleep and I enjoyed listening to the even sounds of his breaths. When he was sleeping, it was the only time he was peaceful and there were no frown lines on his face.

Salvatore wasn’t just a guy. He was a mafia prince and the only son of a very powerful man. Ever since we were kids, there was a heavy responsibility placed on his shoulders and I’ve watched him carry it without complaining. He never really got to be a kid, or a normal teenager, or just my boyfriend. Because of his duty and his blood, he grew up too fast, but in moments like that he looked so care free, and for a change, he actually showed his age.

I felt the tears rushing back knowing this might be the last chance I get to see him like this.

Or see him at all, a voice whispered in my head.

We were ill-fated. The books would call us star-crossed lovers, Pina would call it insane stubbornness, and my father would say it’s an abomination to keep meeting with Salvatore. Despite all of that, I let myself cling to him for all these years, never strong enough to tell him goodbye. Always harboring a

hidden hope that one day *Babbo* and Adrian would find a way to move on from their disagreement.

In our world, there was nothing above honor and respect. If you lost those, there was no power left in a *Don's* hands. Fear could put you on a throne, but it would never be enough to keep you there. As long as our fathers didn't share respect and there was no honor amongst thieves anymore, everything was in vain. Whatever Adrian did was an offence to everyone in the Caputo house and I couldn't pretend it didn't affect me, just like Salvatore couldn't say his father's sins weren't his own.

Earlier, when he said Adrian was not well, I felt a jolt of pain. Adrian Fiori was always good to me, like a very dear uncle, but I couldn't help from imagining a world where he was gone. Salvatore would have a chance to mend things with my family if he'd want that, but he was damn clear. He wasn't going to ask for forgiveness and try to push this mess behind us.

"Tell me something else. Do you think it was worth it? The thing that split our families?"

"Yes."

Yes.

Yes.

Yes.

The word echoed in my head over and over again. It wasn't fair to expect a different answer from him, I knew that. Family was sacred and he had to stand behind his own, but hearing it killed that fragile hope that was hiding in a corner behind my heart.

There would never be peace for us or anything more than stolen moments. This affair couldn't last forever and it was clear now that we'd never get a happy ending. There wasn't anything else left for us.

Turning away from him, I looked at the first ray of sunshine shyly teasing the dark sky. The night was over. It was time to go.

I woke him up with a soft kiss and he growled something unintelligible.

I laughed hearing how pissed he sounded. All the calmness was gone.

“Good morning, *dormiglione*^[8].”

“How long was I out?”

“Only an hour.” I kissed him again. “It’s morning. Time to get me home or they might send out a search party.”

“Yeah, in a second.”

“Since when is it hard for you to wake up? You go to the gym at six in the morning.”

“It’s not, I just like waking up with you.”

God, this was torment. He was making an impossible situation a million times harder.

Looking down at him, I knew one thing – it didn’t matter where we’d end up, my heart would never recover from Salvatore Fiori. There won’t be anyone else like him.

“Don’t even think about getting handsy with me. I need to get home and my back hurts from sitting on the ground all night.”

“I sat on the ground, you sat on me.”

“Well, your chest is hard as a rock, so same thing.”

“Fine.” He got up, pulling me along. “Let’s go, *Tesoro*.”

I followed him in silence and climbed in the car. He held my hand the entire drive and I let him, memorizing the way his skin felt on mine, wordlessly vowing to never forget that feeling.

“I’ll stop here.” He said when we made it to the corner of my street. “The guards at your house are gonna change soon

and they might be patrolling around.”

“Right.”

“Be good, Grazi. Don’t do anything stupid when I’m not around.”

“Kiss me.”

He pulled me to him over the console and filled my mouth with his commanding tongue, going as deep as he could. I was overwhelmed by the force radiating from him and when we broke it off, I caught his lip between my teeth. The bite was not meant to be playful and I tightened my jaw until I felt the taste of blood on my tongue.

Salvatore didn’t make a sound, but when I pulled back, he took his fist to his mouth to wipe the blood.

“Why so rough, *Tesoro*?”

“So they know you are mine.” I lied.

“They?”

“The women drooling over you.”

That mark was not for them, it was for me. *My goodbye.*

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Chapter 7

I walked into the house to find it completely silent, no soul in sight. There were guards out by the gates and walking the grounds, but I couldn't hear anyone. It was rare to see this place so peaceful, between all my associates and the medical staff that came in and out to look after my father.

Walking up the stairs, I took my hand to my nose and inhaled the last traces of Grazia's sweet smell. I had to hop in the shower and whatever was left of it would fade until next time. Fuck if I wasn't so damn tired of this shit. Every time... I had to let her go every damn time, drop her home, and pretend she wasn't in my life and for what? The ego of an old man and the broken heart of another? I was sick of it.

I let the spray of the Turkish shower fall down on me and quiet the angry roar. There was always rumbling in my chest when Grazi was away – worry, longing, frustration, the lines between them got blurred. Grazia had a father, yes, and seven brothers that were not to be jerked around, but I couldn't trust any of them to watch her – to *protect* her – the way I would. We had enemies, maybe not here on the island, not in the borders of our city, but everywhere else. Our families were feared, but we were also hated. The underworld, the lawmen,

the people that we screwed, they all wanted a piece of us. I didn't trust anyone else to shelter Grazia from that.

I turned the water off and wrapped a towel around my middle, ready to jump in bed and let this day pass when I heard the polite knock on my door. I didn't need to open it to know it was Totto. He was a butler in this house since before I was born. I could recognize the way he walks, breaths, or knocks at any time.

"What is it?" I asked through the cracked door and he looked at me with a solemn expression.

Despite the early hour, Totto was still dressed perfectly proper. Sometimes I wondered if he ever slept like a normal person. "It's your father, Salvatore. He's had a rough night."

"Why wasn't I called?"

"Your phone is off."

"Right." I'd turned it off when we made it to our spot to avoid interruptions. "How bad?"

"He was unable to eat and the coughing was worse than usual. Leona Ricci has stopped by and hooked him to oxygen, but he's stubborn. I only could convince him to keep the mask on for a couple of hours." Dr. Ricci was the only one who could make that impossible old man do what he was told so she deserved every fat paycheck I signed for her.

"He's not asleep yet?"

"He's in the library. He was up all night."

I nodded. "I'll be right there."

I found a pair of jeans and a t-shirt, got dressed and went back down the stairs. Of course he was in the library; that was his hiding spot. God, how I hated that room. Nothing good has ever happened to me in that fucking library. That's where he told me how my mother had died, where he retreated to mourn her for years on end, and where he told me that it was decided to break my engagement with Grazia. Yes, I hated those four walls and couldn't wait to take a sledgehammer to them.

I opened the sculpted door and walked in the poorly lit library. It was a tall room packed with books to the brim, all my mother's. Father was behind the desk, looking up to the ceiling and trying to steady his breath. He was so focused, he didn't notice I was there.

"Are you in pain, Dad?"

"Huh?" He lowered his head and saw me standing in the doorway. "Ah, it's you, my boy. It's nothing, just a little burn in the chest, that's all."

"A burn that keeps you up at night."

"I'll sleep when I'm dead. Come in, pour yourself a scotch."

I found an opened bottle of Courvoisier in the drinking cabinet and put a couple fingers in the glass.

"Why aren't you wearing your oxygen mask?"

"I did and I feel much better now. Stop acting like a mother hen and sit down."

"You feel like chatting?" That was somewhat of a good sign.

"What else is there to do? I can't leave this cursed house for half an hour without needing a nap. This," he waved his hand around, "it's my grave."

"When did you turn into such a dramatic bitch, father?" Him and I, we loved to banter.

"When my damn lungs decided to turn against me! You should at least allow me some dignity..."

"Father," I raised my hand, "I'm not going to shoot you, so stop asking."

"Well, who's the bitch now, boy?"

We both laughed and I tasted the cognac, playing with it in my mouth before swallowing. The burn from the amber liquor was very much welcomed.

"You really feel better?"

“Eh, a little. There’s nothing anyone can do about it. You were out?”

“Yes.”

“How’s the business going?”

“Smoothly, Father. Don’t worry about it.”

“Don’t worry?” He released a low laugh. “I was sixteen when I started stealing, did I ever tell you that?”

“Yes.” But that didn’t stop him from continuing his story.

“I started with wallets then I realized that if I take suitcases from the tourists and sell their clothes, instead of picking their pockets for change, I can make so much more. Sixteen.” He sighed deeply. “I haven’t had a moment of peace since then. I’ve worked like a dog to build you an empire – the *Fiori* empire.”

“And you did.”

“Yes. Now, I know the man that you are and I know the *Don* that you’ll be, son. You don’t need me to lead, but I still worry. Our *famiglia* is as much my child as you are.” Correction, the *famiglia* was much more. If anything, it was his favorite child. “You’re still set on buying that new venture?”

“Yes.”

“What is it again?”

“A power-plant.”

“What’s wrong with the good old fashion business?”

“Nothing. Actually, we’re waiting for a shipment from Tajikistan to arrive in a couple of weeks. Rocket launchers, military grade.”

“Where are you sending them?”

“Namibia. The rebellion is paying us good money for it as long as we can secure transportation and we can. My guys are ready. Every coast guard agent from here to the African

coast has been paid off. We're in the clear." I ruffled my hair frustrated that we were having this discussion for the third time. "I told you, I'll make you proud, but power-plants don't just go on the market, Father. This buy is an opportunity."

"You pulled some strings?"

"Everyone who's anyone in this country got a bag of money as a present."

"Is it really worth it?"

"Yes. We're talking about millions of euros in profit every year."

"We already make millions."

"For now we do. Father, the world has changed since you were picking pockets in Brancaccio. We can't just hide our cash in the basement anymore and hope the *carabinieri* won't find it. The best thing about this power-plant is that it's above board. Pietro has put together the best legal team in Europe to take care of it."

"So what's your plan, son?"

"The restaurants we own can only clean so much money, but this power-plant? This will put all my accounts on the right side of the law."

Father sat back and then I saw his smile. A rare sight.

"I never doubted you because you're my son, but I can die in peace now. You'll do good by our name."

"Right." I was the only one he had to carry his legacy. The only son. The *Don*. I knew that since I was a kid and he started grooming me for the job. I was raised to finish whatever my father had started, but there was one thing that I intended to do differently.

"Father?"

"Yes, son."

"I ran into someone tonight while I was out." I paused and he waited. "Grazia Caputo."

He stopped – stopped moving, stopped blinking, he even stopped breathing for a long second. The name Caputo has not been spoken in this house for years.

“Salvatore, she’s your past.” *And present and future.*

“Father...”

“Fabiano Caputo is poison.” He raised his voice. “And so are his spawns.”

“Don’t,” I told him through my teeth, “talk about her like that. *Never.*”

“Grazia.” He whispered her name. “She’s innocent, I know, but she is a Caputo no less. I know you were fond of her.”

“You could say that.” I answered him with irony. Grazi was the blood in my veins.

“So was I. She was so sweet and beautiful, like her mother. Grazia would have been good for you, son, if not for her father. You know I’m right.”

“Listen to me...” but he didn’t. Instead, he slammed his fist on the desk, making my cognac glass rattle. He still had some strength left in him.

“You can’t mix your blood with those who killed your mother. Remember what Fabiano did to me, Salvatore. *He* put her in the ground. Your mother! My Christina... my...” Just like that, I’ve lost him. Once my mother came up in a conversation, father was more consumed with her memory than anything else, but I still had a few things to make clear.

I finished my glass and got up on my feet, knocking on the desk to get his attention.

“I won’t hate Grazia for something Fabiano Caputo did and neither will you.”

“Stay away from her. Look at history, boy. There’s no war that’s worth fighting for a woman.”

The old man got some nerve to school me when he would have moved mountains for my mother. He would have

fought wars, maybe even worse, for a woman who wasn't even completely his.

“Go to sleep, Father. You need it.” I turned around and left him with the memory of his wife.

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Chapter 8

My *Pas de Basque* was wobbly and Miss Rosa wasn't pleased with it. I didn't know what it was, but I couldn't engage the muscles of my legs to do what I was telling them to. I blamed it all on Salvatore and his stupid distractions. Ever since he took me to our spot, something in me has never recovered. That night, the past four years seemed just a bad dream and we were us again – two kids in love. Not betrothed, not broken apart, not mafia – just Grazia and Salvatore. He gave me a few hours when I didn't carry the weight of the family honor on my shoulders and he wasn't the son of a thief. Nothing has felt quite the same ever since. Whatever I did, my mind would turn back to those moments and on top of that, I was exhausted because every night I woke up looking for Salvatore in the bed and the disappointment of not finding him there kept me awake for many hours.

The feeling of waking up alone was a million times worse now that I knew it was over. I saw him everywhere, at every damn corner. The memories were overwhelming and I couldn't focus on anything else. I needed some room to breathe. I needed to put something between Salvatore and I and for the first time, dance wasn't enough to keep me focused.

“Grazia!” Miss Rosa's voice boomed through the studio along the sound of her cane tapping the wooden floor.

“Yes, *Madame*.”

“I’ve trained you for years. I’ve seen you dance so beautifully, the gates of Heaven would open for you so why – *oh, why!* – are you moving like an amateur doing a flash mob at the mall?” By the end of the question, she was screaming. Miss Rosa was harsh and she was never shy to give me a piece of her mind, but it was fine. I was used to it and right now, I knew I needed it.

“I’m sorry, *Madame*.”

“You should be. Today was embarrassing.”

“I’m just... my head is not into it.”

“Is this it? Are you done?”

“What?”

“I was wondering when this moment will come. I have to say, I’m disappointed, but it happens.”

“*Madame*, what are you talking about?”

“You’re on your way to quitting.”

“Quitting ballet? I would never...”

She didn’t let me finish. “No? You don’t take it seriously anymore. Look at you, spinning around like a child with two left feet after all the years I’ve spent training you.”

“I’m off today, that’s all.”

“You’re going to keep being off until you take your dancing out of this theatre.” Was this about me going to Milano again?

“*Madame*, Palermo is my home. My family is here.”

“Then don’t call yourself a ballerina. Ballerinas, *Grazia*, are made for the stage, not for the eyes of their loved ones.” Miss Rosa shook her head. “I’ve taught so many girls who would have killed to have your grace and your skill. You’re the only one that gave me hope that you’ll shine one day. It’s a shame.”

“Stop it!” I turned around, not wanting to face her. Raising my voice to my ballet teacher wasn’t something I’ve ever done and I was torn between anger and shame. “You know who I am. You know who my father is.” I’ve never tried to hide the rumors from Miss Rosa and she knew exactly who the man that could afford to pay to move her extravagant Parisian life all the way to Palermo just so his little girl would have a ballet teacher was.

“Yes.”

“My father has done a lot so I could have access to the best dance teachers in the world, but I’m not sure he’d just let me move to go to a dance academy.”

“A dance academy? Scala isn’t just a school, it’s one of the biggest stages in the world.” She stopped and raised a daring eyebrow. “And they’re auditioning in three months. Now, of course no one has heard of you, but a recommendation from me could open a few doors.”

When I blinked, the possibilities flashed on the back of my eyelids. I saw a room filled with people. I heard the orchestra. I felt my body moving in a never-ending pirouette.

“Don’t think, *Madame*, that I don’t know what a privilege that would be...”

“But you won’t take it. Shame.”

“It’s not up to me.”

“Have you ever brought it up? Talked to your father about it.” I shook my head. “Well, Grazia, you should. He’s a man of many resources. I’m sure you could be taken care of in Milano as well as you are here.”

“I...”

“But this is not just about him, is it?”

I flinched. “My brothers too.”

“Right.” Her guttural laugh raised to the ceiling. “I’m talking about the man that keeps sneaking in here to see you.”

“What?”

She shrugged. "I notice things, dear."

"Right."

"Don't let men dictate your fate, Grazia."

Easier said than done.

"I'll think about it." I said in one breath. "About leaving to Milano and advancing my career."

"Good, because Palermo might be your home, dear, but it's not mine. The world has so much more to offer and let's be honest, I'm running out of time to enjoy it."

"What?" I gawked at Miss Rosa. "What do you mean? You want to leave?"

"I've taught you the best I could, Grazia, and I did it well. You're ready to move on, and so am I."

"Wow, so you're leaving me? Is it about money?" She just laughed. "You can't leave me. You're my mentor."

"There's nothing more to teach you here. You did it, Grazia, you're a dancer. What you do with that from now on, is up to you."

"When do you want to go?"

"A few weeks, maybe a month." She stepped closer and placed a soft finger under my chin. "You can always come visit, but I'd much rather come to see you dance." It sounded to me like she had everything figured out already. Her decision was made.

"*Madame...*" a lump formed in my throat and I couldn't control my voice anymore.

"Oh, don't get all sad, Grazia. I will see you for practice on Monday. If your *Sissonne* is as bad as it was today, I will put this cane on your behind."

"Alright then."

"I was thinking..." oh, man, that couldn't be good. Rosa Mariano-Vitale doesn't *think* about things, she makes decisions, "starting Monday I want you to start rehearsing a

solo from the Swan Lake. We're going to focus on that for a while."

"Why? We put that on stage last year. The director told me we'll do Coppelia for the Autumn festival."

Miss Rosa rolled her eyes. The Autumn festival was a very dear recital to me, but she was not so impressed with it. For seven days, the Palermo dancing school was open every night. I was the lead ballerina of the show for five years in a row, and sure, maybe that had something to do with my father, but I still loved it.

"Just in case, Grazia."

"In case of what?"

"If you decide to go and try out for a ballet company, wherever that may be, you're going to need an auditioning number. If I leave, I want you to be ready for anything. Monday morning, eight thirty," she pointed at me, "be ready."

"Yes, *Madame*."

"Go now. I'm tired of watching you move around like a graceless duck. We'll try again next week."

"Yes, *Madame*." I repeated myself and walked into the locker room where a few young girls were spinning around trying to nail an *En-dedans* pirouette. My classes were private and usually would prolong until Miss Rosa and I would be the only ones in the studio, but it wasn't so late today.

The two girls saw me and stopped. They couldn't have been older than ten, juniors, and they looked adorable in their little pink leotards and pigtails. Nowadays, I preferred black to pink and kept my hair in a tight bun, but there were some pictures above the fireplace in my house, where I looked just like them.

"Flex your leading leg and keep your back straight," I told them, "It will help you keep your balance."

One of them tried it again and it was better. Still not great, but better.

"I did it."

“Almost.” I smiled and patted her head. “Keep practicing.”

“Can you show us?” The little girl batted her eyelashes.

“Don’t you have an instructor to help you?”

“We do. Miss Patricia Valentine, but she says it’s too early. We only started a few months ago.”

“Oh, ok.” They were old to start just now, so that’s why they were behind. I started at four years old and even had some three-year-olds in my class back then. “I can show you.”

I could spin on my left leg for an hour without trembling once. There was no harm in dancing around for a second. I got up on my tiptoe, put my arms in position and started spinning. I only did six rotations before stopping, but by the way the girls were looking at me, all wide-eyed and excited, someone could believe I just did a back flip.

“Wow,” one of them whispered, “you are so good.”

“I had many years to practice.”

“Can you be my teacher?”

Her question made me giggle. “I’m afraid I’m still a student.” At least for a little while I was, “Miss Patricia is great. You’ll do it better than me soon enough.”

They left smiling and whispering something about how my legs looked. I couldn’t hear, but hoped I left them with a good impression. I was almost done gathering my things, ready to walk out when my phone started ringing and I saw my sister-in-law, Rebecca, was calling. Three out of my seven brothers were married and I liked all their wives, but Rebecca and I were closer. Maybe because she used to live right down the street from us and maybe because she was the one who held my hair back the first time I found my father’s stash of vodka. I didn’t get to see her so often since they moved outside of the city, but we still talked a few times a week.

“Hey, you!” I answered her enthusiastically.

“*Ma che fai, mia sorella?*^[9] You don’t have weekend plans, do you?”

“No. Why, what’s going on this weekend?”

“Ah, not much. Giovanni is having the guys over for some poker and I’m going to take the kids to visit my parents in Lake Como.”

“Didn’t you just come back from a vacation?”

“Last night, yes.” She said and I laughed. My brother would better find some new ways to make more money, so he could keep up. “My mom has been talking my ear off to bring Emiliano and Victoria so she could see them.”

“That’s nice. What do you need me for?”

“I was thinking that maybe you want to join me?”

“Oh.” A weekend in Lake Como with my favorite people in the world? “Sure, I could do that.”

“See, I knew you would. All our other dear, dear sisters turned me down because they’re tired. Can you believe it?”

I rolled my eyes. “Not many people can keep up with you, Becca. I’m surprised my brother does.”

“He’s doing just fine. Oh, by the way, I have a present for you.”

“Ah, it’s an apology for not inviting me to vacation with you?”

“*Amore*, we wanted to, but Giovanni thought you’d get bored while we went to all those couple activities. You know how much your brothers love you.”

“Yeah, yeah. I was just kidding. When should I be ready to leave?”

“Tomorrow morning. I’ll send a car to pick you up.”

“Ok, then. I’ll pack a bag, but I have to be back by Sunday. I have a ballet class first thing next week.”

“Yes, of course. Ok, *Amore*, I’ll see you tomorrow.”

This was just what I needed. A few days to lay in the sun with a drink in my hand, away from everything that was going on here. I needed that. Desperately. Rebecca threw me a life line and I grabbed it with both hands, eager to just get away and feel free from everything for a while.



Giovani ended up picking me up and driving me to the private airdrome outside the city. He was my favorite brother. I knew I wasn't supposed to pick one, and God was witness that my heart was equally split between them, but Giovanni was always the one in my corner. Maybe because he was older and was raised to be a fair leader, but he was the one who always listened. I knew that whatever problem I had, I could bring it to Giovanni and he'd still have my back. If I'd open my mouth right now and tell him about Salvatore, he'd be mad, but he'd still look out for me. He was the best brother anyone could have and he brought me coffee, so he got extra points for that.

"Thank you for going with Rebecca, Grazia." He said and stroked my cheek.

"Going to Lake Como for the weekend is not exactly a chore. Don't thank me."

"Still, I appreciate it. I don't want her traveling without me right now, but she couldn't say no to her mother." His words triggered an alarm in my head.

"Why can't she travel alone? Is everything alright?"

"Yes, don't worry. It's just... Rebecca is... she's in a delicate state." Maybe I was groggy because it was so early in the morning, but I didn't understand him right away.

"Is she ok? Giovanni, if something happened..." and then it hit me, "oh, my God! You're going to have another baby?!"

"Yes." His smile was beaming. "In seven months."

“Gio, that’s... wow. Baby number three. Can you pull the car over so I can hug you?”

“We’re almost there, just hold on for a few more minutes. Grazia, no one knows about this and Becca doesn’t want me to tell.”

“So you want me to keep my mouth shut.”

“If you could. She wants to share it with the family after the first trimester.”

“I get it. Do the kids know?”

Emi and Victoria were only one year apart and were very close, but this was going to be an adjustment for them.

“Not yet. Just you, me, and my wife.”

I covered my mouth to stop the sounds of excitement while Giovanni parked the car next to the hanger where my father’s plane was waiting for us. Rebecca and the kids were already there waiting in her SUV and Giovanni went straight to her, taking his wife in a protective hug. Oh, this was going to drive her crazy for the next seven months. With every pregnancy, I’ve watched my brother grow more and more protective, but Rebecca didn’t particularly like to be *protected*. She and I had that in common. It was going to be fun to watch her once again bicker with Giovanni about how many men had to stay outside their house if he was not there.

While they were in the middle of a kiss, the kids jumped out the back seat of the SUV and came running to me for hugs. I went down on one knee and opened my arms.

“Hey, you guys! I’ve missed you.”

“We missed you too, *Zia*.” Victoria said to me. She was the sweetest thing in the world, literally an angel, compared to her troublemaking brother. “My *Zia*.” Her small arms hugged me tighter. The nickname was given to me back when they were too little to say my full name and I loved that it stuck.

“Emi did you miss me too?”

The boy, who was the spitting image of my brother, just smaller, shrugged. “Not really.” My mouth dropped. “Hey,

don't get mad. I've been busy."

"You're six, Emiliano."

"Papa got me a new videogame." He explained.

"Well, I've missed you and now we're going on a trip together. Isn't that fun?"

"Yay!" They both cheered and I took their hands in mine, guiding them to their parents.

"Come on, Becca, let's go. I didn't wake up at the crack of dawn to watch you two make out."

"Shut up, Grazia." My brother said, but didn't take his eyes off his wife. God, he was so in love, it almost turned him into a crazy man. "You two take care and call if you need me."

"We're going to my mother's, Gio. I won't need you. Have fun with your brothers."

"Will do."

He walked us to the stairs of the plane and the flight attendant helped Rebecca get in, while I took the kids to their seats. They had a table prepared in advance with Legos, games, and coloring books to keep them entertained. My dad had the plane kid-ready ever since we first took a trip to Prague with them, and they spent the entire time poking at his face and climbing on his shoulders to kill the time.

The flight was short and peaceful. Rebecca and I had breakfast and chatted over coffee – and by that, I mean we gossiped about everything and everyone – and before we knew it, we were landing.

Her parents lived outside of Como, in one of the small towns along the *Via Regina* called Moltrasio. It was one of the many towns alongside the lake shore where a small community of financially potent people owned some very impressive villas. It was only natural that Rebecca's father would decide to live his retirement years here, rubbing elbows with some of his very rich friends, after all, he was in top ten most rich people in Europe. There was a rumor that he wanted to get into politics and run for president, of course, before his

daughter decided to run away and get married with a man from a family *allegedly* tied to organized crime. Like any good father he tried to stop it, but he changed his mind when Giovanni walked into his office with an Ak-47 and made it very clear that Becca would be his wife. Say whatever you want, but men from Palermo just had a way of making romantic grand gestures with a gun in their hands.

Rebecca's parents were excellent hosts. They had a private room ready for me and after I took a quick shower, I changed into a white bathing suit, ready to go to the pool. Sure, we had a pool back home and the sea was only minutes away, but I could never get enough water, so I was excited. When I was on my way out, I caught a glimpse of myself in the mirror and stopped. I bought this bathing suit on a shopping spree Pina and I went on last month. It was immaculate white with golden metallic accents and it made my breasts look amazing. My cheeks turned red thinking of the things Salvatore would say if he'd see me in it. He always had such an intense way of talking about my body, with flames in his eyes and hunger in his voice. It made me feel the most beautiful woman in the world. I owed most of my confidence to him and the way he was always so honest about how I made him feel.

Becca was waiting for me already and she preferred to sit in the sun while I went to play an epic game of tag in the water with Emiliano and Victoria. I won. I grew up with seven brothers who never let me win just because I was a girl and the youngest, so I wasn't going to do that for their kids.

By dinner time, everyone was pleasantly tired, but the kids wanted to go for a boat ride, so Becca's parents took them, leaving the two of us to enjoy dessert on their beautiful gazebo by the lake.

"I'm so full." I sighed, patting my stomach.

"My dad's chef is the best. You have no idea how many times I've tried to bribe him to come and work for me."

"I can see why. That creamy tomato rigatoni might have been the best thing I've put in my mouth."

“He sundries the tomatoes himself. I’m telling you, the man is a genius. Oh, look,” she pointed at the man who served our food, who was coming with the dessert, “wait until you taste his espresso panna cotta.”

“I don’t think I can.”

“Trust me, you need this. It’s my favorite thing ever.” She winked. “Tastes better than my husband.”

“Ugh, Becca!” I half laughed, half moaned. “That’s disgusting.”

“I know, but you’re my friend too. We should be able to talk about boys.”

“Not when your boy is my brother.” I leaned over and tasted the panna cotta. Damn she was right, it was good. Amazingly good.

“Fine, let’s talk about your boys.” She wiggled her eyebrows. “Anyone in the picture?”

“Did Giovanni put you up to this?”

“No.” She wanted to say more, but was cut off by the server who came to us with a bottle in his hands.

“I’m sorry to interrupt, but can I serve you two with a digestif?”

“What’s that?” I pointed to the bottle.

“Mandorla, brought this morning straight from the Bassano village.”

“Oh, sure, I’d love some.”

He poured the liquor in the glass very ceremoniously before turning to Rebecca. “For you too, Mrs. Caputo?”

“Oh, she can’t.” My mouth said before my brain could stop it. “I mean, not... well... I... it’s just...”

When I saw Becca looking at me with big eyes and her mouth slightly open, I just dropped it and let my head fall down.

“You know!” She accused.

“I’m sorry, I wasn’t supposed to say anything. Gio told me when he picked me up.”

“He just can’t keep his mouth shut. Damn it. He knows how superstitious I am about these things.”

“Yes.” I offered her a guilty smile. “Can I hug you now? I had to stop myself from doing it all day. It’s torture.”

“Come here.”

I wrapped my arms around her as tight as I could. To say I was happy was an understatement. Giovanni was the only one of my brothers who had children and of course everyone spoiled them rotten. The first time I’d learned Rebecca was pregnant, I was so happy, I cried for two days and I wasn’t far from bursting into tears now either.

“I’m so happy for the two of you, Becca.”

“I know, baby. You know, Gio and I were talking.” The widest smile spread on her face. “If it’s a girl, we want to name her Grazia.”

I sucked in a breath. “What?”

“We’d like you to be the baby’s godmother. If it’s a boy we’ll name it after your father, but the offer still stands.”

“Oh, my God.”

“Too much.”

“I need a tissue.”

“Don’t start crying.” She warned.

“Too late,” I said, with two tears rolling down my face.

“No one loves children like you do, Grazia. You’re going to be an amazing godmother.” She caught my hands into hers. “And one day you’re going to be an even better mother.”

“Not anytime soon.”

“So there’s really no one in your life? No cute boy to make you think about marriage and babies.”

Just one.

“No.”

“Is it because of your brothers? Are guys too scared to ask you out to dinner?”

“Maybe, I don’t know. I don’t pay any attention to men, you know that.”

“Salvatore.” Hearing his name rolling off Rebecca’s tongue made me flinch.

“What?”

“You’re still hung up on him.” That was one way to put it. “I get it, he was your first love.”

My first, my last, and everything in between.

“It’s in the past.” I lied through my teeth. Lying was not something that came natural to me, like it did for everyone else in my family, and I didn’t feel comfortable doing it, but for Salvatore, I’ve done it over and over again. So much so, it became habit.

“I’m just saying that I understand. He was familiar. I imagine it’s hard moving on to date someone else, but at some point, you’ll have to do it.”

“Rebecca, stop!” I didn’t mean to snap at her, it just happened. “I’m not going to...”

“Oh, Grazia.”

“Don’t look at me like that. You lived with your grandparents for years, right down the street from us. You knew Giovanni all your life. You loved him since you were in the third grade. Could you move on from that?”

She weighted the question a long time before answering. “No.”

“Then don’t ask me to.” My eyes drifted away. “Just because I’m not with him, doesn’t mean I have to be with anyone else.”

“Grazia, but that’s terribly sad.”

“Yeah, well, it’s the life *Babbo* and Adrian Fiori decided for us.”

“Salvatore didn’t fight for you.” It wasn’t a question, but a statement, and a completely wrong one too.

“Rebecca, I really don’t want to talk about this.” The wound in my heart was still fresh, still bleeding, and this discussion was not helping one bit. How could I begin to heal when reminders of Salvatore were present at every corner?

“All I’m saying, *mia sorella*^[10], is that it’s not fair for you to nurse a broken heart while the Fiori boy is living his life.”

Rebecca has memories of a young Salvatore – a taciturn prince waiting for his crown, not paying much thought to things that bothered him, but he was different now. Salvatore wasn’t a stranger to fights and sure as hell he was no *boy*.

“My heart is no one’s business but my own, and so is Salvatore Fiori. Please, do not worry for me, Becca.”

“It’s hard not to, *Grazia*. Don’t get mad at me, please.”

“I’m not mad, but Salvatore is...” she had no idea how complicated things were between him and I, “the engagement is a sensitive subject and I don’t like thinking about it.”

“I understand that.” She cracks open a bottle of Aqua Panna and poured it over ice and lime slices. “*Giovani* can’t help but be a little bit concerned about you, and I don’t blame him. He loves all his brothers, but you, *Grazia*? You’re his little sister.”

It was a reflex, I didn’t mean to, but my palm smashed on the table, making all the crockery rattle. Rebecca was taken aback by my gesture and so was I.

“I’m sorry, Becca, I didn’t mean to do that, but it’s infuriating. *Giovani*’s worry is not welcomed when the arrangement between Salvatore and I is concerned. He is my eldest brother, *Babbo*’s heir, and he stood there and didn’t say a word while a fight between two stubborn, old men has ripped the only future I have ever known away from me.”

“Grazia, that’s not fair. Gio could never...”

“...go against our father’s wishes.” I finished her sentence. That was the credo in the Caputo family. We were united, we were powerful, we respected the *Don*, but just once I wished for my brothers to stand up and take my side instead.

That morning when I was told the betrothal was broken – an engagement that I’ve carried with me since birth – I’d asked them to say something, but instead, *Babbo* had my brothers hold me still whilst he took my ring off. It was the one thing I could never forgive them for, not that I have ever said a word about it.

Giovani sat with me for a week after that day, comforted me while I was nursing a broken heart. He took my side the only way he knew how, but it wasn’t enough.

“Gio just wants you to be happy.” Rebecca reinforced her argument. “And so do I.”

“I know, *sorella*, and I love you both for it, but I am content with what I have. I’m thinking of trying out for a ballet academy.”

Picking up on the fact that I really wanted to move on from that subject, Rebecca followed.

“A new school?”

“Yes, but like this I can actually get casted in recitals, perform in front of an audience bigger than a hundred people.”

“It’s been your dream to dance at the Paris Opera since you were seven. I’m glad to hear that didn’t change.”

Ballet wasn’t just a sport for me, it was the only thing that gave me complete piece of mind. The Grazia people saw on stage wasn’t the Caputo mafia princess or Salvatore’s girl; she was just a girl. A dancer. A dreamer. I didn’t dance for others, I loved dancing just for me.

“Maybe one day.” I said, not believing my words. It wasn’t that I didn’t trust my talent, but I didn’t trust my heart to be strong enough to leave Italy behind. “I was thinking about Milano first. Miss Rosa thinks that Scala would be a

good match and is very confident that I could take the auditions.”

“Oh, Grazia, but that’s amazing.”

“Don’t you dare say a word to Giovanni yet. I don’t want a whole lecture about traveling to Milano on my own. I will talk to him when I make a decision.”

“For what it’s worth, you have all my support. I think it would be great to put some distance between you and all the things that have happened here in the past few years.” She winked. “Also, if you move to Milano, I have an excuse to go there for shopping more often.”

“God, your personal shoppers must love you.”

“They make quite a commission, yes.”

We both laughed and the echo rose to the starry sky. At least we were ending dinner on a good note after digging through all my feelings for Salvatore.

Any other day, someone bringing him up wouldn’t have set me off like that. Ariana did it quite often, randomly mentioning his name, but now I was still fighting with my desire to pick up the phone and call him. I was a drug addict in withdrawal and Rebecca’s comments rubbed me the wrong way.

Filled with delicious food and feeling tired after such a full day, I walked Rebecca to her bedroom before retiring to the one that her parents assigned me. I had to remember to thank them for the hospitality. The place was ritzy, with green walls and butter-colored furniture, and the fluffy pillows on the bed were calling my head. The moment I put my head down on them, I was fast asleep.



Chapter 9

Someone was playing a trumpet. Or so I thought until I realized the noises were coming from the neatly sculpted Lois XIV nightstand, where my phone was going off like crazy. I know I didn't set an alarm, so I tried my best to ignore it, but the calls seemed to go on forever until finally, I peeled my eyelids open.

My screen was filled with notifications, but I didn't get the chance to read any of them because Pina started calling me. Was she the one who blew my phone up all morning?

"Hello?" My voice sounded groggy and confused.

"What the hell, Grazia?" she hissed, sounding aggressive.

"Huh? What? I was asleep."

"Well, *I* wasn't. I woke up at dawn to go and walk Panini." Panini was the Bernoulli's family dog, a high maintenance Frenchie with a wonky walk that required lots of attention and at least an hour at the park every morning. But how was that my fault? "You are just so lucky that I'm on dog duty today and not Ari."

“You make no sense. Why are you calling me so early?”

“Ah, let’s see. Maybe I’m calling you because I was in the middle of my morning walk when I’d been assaulted *in our own streets* by no other than the Salvatore Fiori and that gorilla of a right hand he has. What’s his name? Ian?”

“Yannis.” I answered mindlessly because my heart dropped to my feet and a swirl of fear took my stomach by storm. Pina always liked to go to the park near our house because, in her words, it wasn’t infested with joggers. That was too close to my house. “S-Salvatore... why was he there?”

“That’s what I wondered. I kid you not, I thought I was having visions when they cornered me.”

“Cornered?” It wasn’t like him to get violent with a woman, and what could Salvatore have against Pina?

“That’s how I felt, so I politely asked what are they looking for so far in your father’s territory. You want to know what the answer was?”

“Pina!” I had no time for her sarcasm or mockery.

“Fiori was looking for you. He said you didn’t answer your phone in days and he’s tired of playing hide and seek with you – whatever that means.”

“*Dio mio.*^[11]” I whispered out in one breath. Suddenly, I was fully awake, all my senses on high alert and the hairs standing on the back of my head. He was insane. Salvatore must have slowly, but surely, lost his mind.

“I think it’s funny that he expects you to answer your phone when you haven’t spoken to him in what? Four years?” She was expecting some kind of explanation, but I stayed silent. “I cannot believe you! *Grazia Paulina*, have you lost all the common sense that the great God put in your stupid brain? This is... it’s... there are no words. No words!”

“Pina, stop.”

“Behind your father’s back? With his enemy’s son?” She puffed into the phone. “I swear, it couldn’t have been

worse if you would have sunk to Ariana's level and jumped into bed with your guards."

What? It was the first time I was hearing about that? At least now it made sense why her father was changing her bulls so often. Not that it mattered right now.

"Pina, this is enough!"

"Is it? Because I was just told that you've betrayed your entire bloodline and I don't know how I'm feeling about this. This is why I don't like being told secrets."

"I didn't..." her words hurt me, even if I should have been prepared for hearing them. "It's much more complicated than you think. *Merda!*^[12] I can't believe he was so stupid to come and talk to you."

"You know what, Grazia, this is a conversation for another time. We will sit down and you are gonna explain to me exactly why you keep seeing this man who was supposed to be everything you hate." Wasn't it obvious? "But not now. Salvatore has a message for you – he asked me to tell you that he will be waiting for you at your favorite bistro for lunch and he also said that if you don't show up, then he's coming to collect you himself. Get dressed and go there because I'm afraid some kind of bloody war is about to start."

"I can't."

"Grazi, *ti amo, davvero*,^[13] but don't make me come there and slap you. I don't know what the deal is between Salvatore and you, I have no idea why you've kept in contact with him, but you are being stupid right now. I remember Salvatore well enough and when he says he'll do something, he means it. This is not the time to play hard to get."

"No, I mean I can't because I'm in Como. Rebecca invited me to her parents for the weekend."

"Well, you have to fix it and by the look on my watch, you have about two hours."

"I will. I... you can't say a word about this to anyone."

"Obviously."

“No, I mean it. Not a whisper, not even to Ariana.”

“Ha!” She snarked. “Ariana is the last person I would go to talk about this to. She is the worst gossip I know and she loves to talk about the *Fiori son*.” She liked him a little too much.

“Pina, thank you. I will explain everything, I promise.”

“Just because I don’t understand your stupid puppy love doesn’t mean I don’t have your back, but you really have to calm that man down.”

“I will. Thank you! Thank. You.”

I had to trust that Pina was honest and would keep her mouth shut. We were friends from cradles and were supposed to stay like that until grave, but I was asking a lot. She had to lie for me, hide something that would make her father – and mine – spit fire. It was a heavy burden to place on someone’s shoulders.

The moment she closed the call I looked at all the other notifications on my phone. Every single one was from Salvatore. He started calling last night, but my sleep was so deep, I didn’t hear it. After a few missed calls, he started texting. His messages moved up the ladder from sweet to threatening, the last one being an exact repeat of what Pina had told me. There was no way out, but call him and put an end to this.

I could barely hear one ring before he answered.

“You like to play with my fucking nerves, Grazi.”

“I don’t even know where to begin.” It was the truth. For the past couple of days, I thought that maybe he finally saw how stupid it was for us to hang on to something impossible, but now he pulled this shit?

“Start with an apology for making me chase you so hard.”

If he would have been in front of me, I would have hit him, probably in the parts he loved most about himself.

“You are insane! *Completamente pazzo*^[14], I’m telling you! What was in your head to go after Pina? Can you even begin to understand the kind of misery you could have brought for both of us. I’ve talked Pina down, but I can’t know she’s going to shut up forever.” One life lesson you learn in the mafia is that friends are loyal until they need something from you. Pina was one of the best people there were, but no one could know for sure.

“Let the girl speak her truth.” *This idiot!* “Little Bernoulli sister is all grown up now.”

“Really? You liked what you saw?” What was I doing? That was none of my business and I wasn’t done yelling at him.

Salvatore laughed – actually, really laughed.

“If you’re trying to pick a fight, come here so I can finger an orgasm out of you when we’re done.”

I hated how easily my body submitted to him. Even when we were hundreds of kilometers apart, I couldn’t stop the shiver that shook my body.

“I’m serious, Salvatore.”

His sigh sounded heavy, almost like something exhausted him.

“No, Grazia, I don’t want to fuck Pina.”

“Then why the hell would you go to her?”

“Why?” He barked and I knew that if we’d be standing face to face, he’d punch a wall. I could read him like an open book. “You rejected my calls for days, *Tesoro*. I gave you space because capricious women sometimes just need to cool down, but you never came back. How long did you think I’d wait?”

Wait? That’s why he stopped pushing in the past week; he waited for me to go to him willingly.

“Oh, Salvatore.”

“Explain yourself, Grazia Paulina.” Why was everybody using my middle name?

“*Sasa*, when you took me to our spot, it was...”

“An amazing night.”

Yes!

“That too, but it was eye opening.” Raising from the bed, I walked on my tiptoes to the large windows and opened them, hoping that the fresh morning air would help keep my mind clear. “We can’t keep doing this.”

“Not again, woman. I’m done listening to that bullshit. Get dressed and come to the bistro. I’ll order you some pasta.”

“You’re not listening to me.”

“Come and say it to my face.”

“I can’t, Salvatore. I’m not in Palermo. Rebecca and I left for a weekend getaway.”

“*Ripetilo.* [\[15\]](#)”

“We’re at her parents’ house. I don’t know when I’ll be back.” I was going to be in Como only for one more day, but he didn’t need to know that.

“You left town without telling me? You left! Without saying a fucking word?” I could feel his anger even if I couldn’t see it in his eyes.

“I don’t report to you.”

“You’re mine. You don’t get to put space between us without talking to me first.”

“I am not yours!” I yelled to the phone, not giving a damn that I was so loud, the whole damn house might have heard me. “This is what I keep telling you Salvatore. You and I? We are caught in a lie and it’s time to burst the bubble. We’re never going to have peace. There’s no future, no promise, and there won’t be anything more between us.”

“Shut. Up.”

“Don’t talk to me like that.”

“I don’t want to, *Tesoro*, you know I don’t, but you’re forcing my hand. There’s only so much impertinence that I can take from you.”

Prepare yourself, Salvatore Fiori, because there’s more where that came from.

“It’s time to face the music, Sasa. Fiori and Caputo will never make peace, they are too stubborn for that. And the future? You forget that I know you better than I know my own heart. When our fathers won’t be anymore, you’re not going to come and ask forgiveness from Giovanni, not even for my sake. You are too proud.”

“I have no reason to ask for forgiveness from your brother or any Caputo man...”

“See! That’s our reality. Just listen to me for once. I didn’t go silent in the past days because I needed space, I did it because it’s too painful to see you when we both know our story is ending. It’s easier to just let go.”

“No, it’s time for you to listen. I would rather let you put a dagger in my heart than give you up.” Well, his words were a dagger in *my* heart.

“You have to.”

“Sometimes you make me want to snap your beautiful neck.”

“I won’t let you talk me in circles this time. You will listen to my words, you stubborn man.”

“Stop it! I said to you time and time again that I’ll take care of this, but you refuse to trust me. When did that happen, Grazi? When did you stop trusting that I would never let anything hurt you?”

“You are hurting me!” Tears started sliding down my cheeks and my voice cracked. “It’s you who’s causing me pain, Salvatore.”

“No, it’s your mind. You keep thinking stupid things.”

“You can’t even see it. I’m torn apart between you and my family. Being with you all this time was such a betrayal

and I have to live with it. If they ever find out..." I couldn't even imagine that scenario. "I love you, Sasa, but I love my brothers too, and I can't keep doing this. It's killing me."

Long silence, that's what I've got in return.

When he finally spoke, his words felt like a slap across the face.

"So this love you pretend you have for me it's weaker than your bond with your brothers." *Pretend?*

He had a right to be angry. How many times have we vowed to each other than no one would come between us? We swore it in blood and I was breaking that promise.

"They're blood." And blood conquers all. It's all I have known all my life.

"*Bene*^[16], Grazia. Tell me what you want. Spell it out if you have the courage. You know I'd grant you every wish. No matter how big. No matter how stupid."

The pain I felt was overbearing. I felt buried under a heavy rock, my lungs losing the capability to let air get it. For the first time, I've cracked his stubbornness. Maybe it was because he couldn't get to me and make me submit with his sexual antics.

When Salvatore Fiori said that he'd give something to me, he never failed to keep his words. This wouldn't be any different.

"I want you to let me go, Salvatore. It's time."

"Because I'm hurting you."

"Because this situation hurts me." I clarified.

He sighed. I've never heard him sound so... weak and disappointed, and it almost knocked me off my feet.

"I swore on my mother's grave that I would never do something to hurt you, and if this is what you need, Grazia, I will provide. *I'm letting you go.*" Four little words, but hearing them was agonizing.

Be careful what you wish for because it might come true, right?

I didn't want to lose him, but it wasn't up to me. When I was born, I was placed on a golden pillow. I've enjoyed the finest things this life had to offer, but the price was this. My destiny was written by others and I had to break my heart with my own hands to follow it.

"*Grazi,*" he whispered my name almost like he was begging me, but I bit my tongue and stood my ground. The only thing that escaped me was a sob. "You're crying."

"It's hard."

"It's what you want."

"It's what has to be done."

"I'm still here, *Grazia,* for everything you need. Whenever."

I should have taken the win and closed the call, but couldn't.

"For now, yes."

"Forever." One day he'd move on, find someone, marry, and forget about me, and then there won't be anyone to make me the center of their world.

In this moment, and just for a second, I hated my blood and cursed the Caputo name, for if it wasn't for this, I could have run to him.

"Goodbye, *Salvatore.*"

He didn't answer, so we just listened to each other's breaths in silence for minutes in a row before I finally found the courage to press on the screen, cutting the line.

The moment I couldn't hear him anymore, I threw the phone away, slid down to the cold marble floor and cried what felt like a river.

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Our last day on the lake dragged along. Rebecca tried her best to keep me busy, but no activity could pull my thoughts away from Salvatore. How many times have I told him it's over? Ten? Twenty? A hundred? I never bothered to keep count, but this time felt different – this time his words had substance.

*...if this is what you need, Grazia, I will provide. I'm letting you go.*

I could hear those phrases like a never-ending echo ringing in my ears. My anger and sadness had no foundation when – as he said – he was just providing something I've asked for time and time again. It was finally over. Salvatore and I were history.

*I'm still here, Grazia, for everything you need. Whenever.*

If I'd need him, he would come, I had no doubts. It will take time for us to forget each other, and a half of my heart would forever be tucked in Salvatore's pocket.

The only positive was that now I was free of the lying. I didn't have to look into *Babbo's* eyes and find excuses for my whereabouts, Delfina didn't have to stay awake and wait for me every night, and I didn't have to live with a constant fear that someone would find out and hell would break loose. I didn't feel quite the release that this situation was supposed to bring, and surely something was visible on my face because Victoria abandoned her dolls and came to sit next to me in the rose garden.

“Why are you sad, Zia?”

“Me? Sad? Now why would you think that?”

“You don't smile. I like when you smile.”

I took her little chin in my hand and brought her nose close to mine.

“You're perfect, do you know that? *Un dolce angelo*<sup>[17]</sup>. I'm fine, just tired, that's all.”

Victoria shrugged. “I am too. Emiliano kicked me all night because of bad dreams.”

“You still don’t want to sleep in your own room, huh?”

“I like to sleep with him, but not when he kicks me.”

“Where is your brother now?”

“Packing with Mama. I don’t want to go home.”

“Why not? Don’t you miss your daddy?”

“Why can’t he come here and we could all stay and play with the water.”

Her sweet innocence made me giggle. “We have water back home too.”

“This water is prettier.” She put her cheek on my leg. “Don’t be sad anymore, Zia.”

“I won’t.” I promised both to her *and* to me. “Come on, let’s find your mom and brother. We need to leave and catch our flight.”

I took Victoria’s hand and walked to the front of the house, where a valet was already loading a car with our bags, and Becca was waiting with her son in her arms.

“There you two are. Emiliano and I were one minute away from sending out a search party. Everyone ready to go back home?”

“Yes, *sorella*.” This time I forced a smile to show Victoria I was better. “I love it here, but I can’t wait to sleep in my own bed again.”

I really needed my silk pillow case to cry into and Delfina’s creamy milk chocolate to help me get through this. I had no plan going forward and no intention of thinking about it, because that would mean thinking about a life with no trace of Salvatore in it and that was scary. All I wanted now was to make it back to my city and go to ballet practice first thing in the morning.

Miss Rosa has texted, informing me that she won’t be in due to a nasty cold, but that didn’t mean I’d miss it too. I

needed dance now more than ever to keep myself together and not crumble like a sand castle forgotten on the beach. I had to be in the studio first thing in the morning and not leave until my feet would get bloody.



After getting home, I cried myself to sleep, getting some small relief from it, but as soon as the morning came around, I felt just as miserable as before. Despite Delfina's vocal protest, I skipped breakfast and ran straight into the studio and locked the door of my practice room. Today, I needed no interruptions, no distractions, no one to talk to me.

I wanted to dance with my heart, so I picked out the music mindlessly. I didn't realize what the orchestra was singing until I was in the middle of the room, ready to start. *Giselle*. It was one of my favorite ballet operas growing up. While most little girls love Swan Lake, I always found the theatrical pain in the role of Giselle to be much more beautiful to watch. Miss Rosa didn't like that routine so much, so I never got the chance to go through it, but it was fitting now.

Giselle died of heart break when she realized she couldn't be with her lover. The gut-wrenching story has brought me to tears more than once and now it was time to be part of my healing. Salvatore was my Duke Alberch and every step I made, every pirouette, carried all the sadness in my heart.

I ran the routine over and over again until my legs gave out. My muscles were too sore to carry me anymore, so I dropped on my knees after one too many hours of dancing. I didn't realize I had tears rolling on my face until one fell down and stained my tights. Damn it!

Sniffing and wiping my face clean, I leaned onto the mirrors and took off my leg warmers. I was too hot and didn't need the extra protection anymore. My poor heart was

struggling in my chest, beating thorough the waves of pain and hollowness, keeping me afloat.

*Will it be like this forever?* I've asked myself, but in all honesty, I didn't want to know the answer. I couldn't live my life with a hole in my chest, so I had to believe that one day it will close up. The crack was made the day *Babbo* called me in his office to tell me how he decided to break ties with the Fiori *famiglia*. All these years, Salvatore had kept me together even when I didn't want him to. Now, all that was left was ruin and memories.

When I regained some force back, I took off my pointe shoes and they peeled of like a layer of skin. The pain was stabbing. There was nothing unusual about sore feet and blisters. No ballerina has ever known a pain free life, but today I've pushed myself to new limits. I didn't even stop to drink water.

I got up and struggled to walk to the locker room, trying my best not to step on my toes.

Mondays were slow and only a few private classes were scheduled, mine included, so I'd expected to find the locker room deserted, but when I stepped inside, I almost bumped into a red-faced, angry Pina.

"*Gesú Cristo*<sup>[18]</sup>, you scared me! What are you doing here?"

She crossed her arms and frowned.

"I went by your house looking for you and Delfina told me where to find you. We need to talk."

"Couldn't it wait?"

"What do you think?"

All I could do is sigh in defeat. "Fine, Pina. What do you want to say?"

"Let's start with Salvatore Fiori? When did you start talking to him again?"

Turning my back on her, I walk to a bench and throw myself on it. How was I supposed to do this? Was there any



point in lying more now that she knew?

“We never stopped.”

Her eyes grew like those of a cartoon character and she covered her mouth with both hands.

“*Yoh mmm mmmm me.*” Whatever that was, I couldn’t tell.

“You have to take your hand away, Pina. I couldn’t hear you.”

“You have to be joking!”

“You wanted to know.”

“How... how is it even possible? Fabiano...”

Yes, I was aware of my father’s position in all this.

“Salvatore. He made it possible.”

“Meaning?”

“I saw him whenever I could. He has an apartment nearby here that he got for us and he’d text me when he was there. If I could make it, fine, if not, he’d still wait to see if I’d show up.” I didn’t tell her that Salvatore was there almost every night, or that I learned all the blind spots of the cameras in my house so I could sneak out and see him. “We never went out and talked as little as possible.”

“For four years?”

“Yes.”

I didn’t like to explain myself to anyone, especially about what Sasa and I did, but I owed it to Pina in exchange for her silence.

“Grazia, this is madness.”

“Don’t you think I know that? I lived it, Pina. All the madness, the secrets, the guilt, I’ve been through all of it, so if you’re here to lecture me, this is really a bad time.”

“I’m here because I’m worried! I’ve heard the stories, Grazia. Fabiano would rather shake hands with the devil than

ever touch someone from the Fiori family ever again. Can you imagine what would happen if he'd hear about this?"

I stayed awake many nights imagining what would happen. Her warning was not necessary.

"Are you going to tell him?"

She stepped back and her mouth opened in shock. I had to ask.

"That's a death sentence, Grazia. Do you really think I could do that to you?"

I shrugged. "Ariana would say that the *Don* comes first."

"Ariana is a little too selfish for her own good. We are *famiglia*, but we're also friends. You're my *best* friend."

"You too, Pina."

She took my hand and came to sit next to me.

"I still don't understand what happened? If you and Salvatore don't talk, why is he asking for you in the middle of the day, close to your house, like no one wants to kill him around here?"

"He's been acting weird the past few months – more possessive, taking more risks. It's why I had to leave Ari's birthday party early. Salvatore knew I was going out and sent Yannis to watch me."

"Why is he doing that? He of all people has to know how dangerous this is. He'll be *Don* soon."

"Oh, he knows, but he's stubborn. Trust me, we fought a lot about it."

"I can't believe he came to see me. Why would he do that? Grazia, I love you, but if someone would have seen me with Salvatore and told my dad..." it would have been ugly. She didn't have to say it.

"I know and I really am sorry for that. I broke things off and he got... a little crazy, I guess."

“It’s over?”

“It’s over.”

“And how do you feel about that?”

My eyes fell to the floor.

“Like someone cut me a million times with a very small blade.” It wasn’t quite the right description, but it was the best I could think of – sharp, cutting pain. “Look, I know everyone expected me to forget him the moment *Babbo* said so, like a good little daughter, but it wasn’t so simple. He is part of me – part of my heart – and that will never change.”

“I know. I could tell you loved him since you were six. And he... oh, boy, the way that man looks at you? The way his eyes change when he talks about you? There’s no wonder every girl we’ve ever known was jealous of you. Not only that you had the Fiori prince promised in marriage, but half of them can only dream about someone loving them like that. It used to drive Ari insane.”

“Pina, you’re really not helping.” I didn’t need her to tell me what I had to give up. I knew it. Salvatore and I were not just two people pushed into an arrangement. God made him for me.

“Sorry, girl. I’m still reeling.” She hugged my shoulders trying to cheer me up. “Whatever you decide to do, I’m here to help.”

“The decision is made. It’s over.”

“Then I’m here to help you through it. How about we go hit the shops, buy something nice?”

I looked down at my feet and laughed.

“You’re asking too much from me.” Slowly, I started peeling off the bloody shank wraps off my toes and Pina gasped.

“Oh, *Cristo*, that looks bad. Do you need anything?”

“Just some ice water and analgesic ointment.” When I would leave the Studio to meet Salvatore, he always waited for

me by the door, picked me up, and carried me to a bubbly bathtub to look after my feet. He would sit on his knees and clean me up, no words, nothing. Every time it happened, my heart swelled in my chest.

“My driver is waiting outside if you want a ride.”

“Yes, that would be nice. Thank you.” Usually, I’d look forward to the walk home, especially when it was so nice outside, but today I didn’t have it in me.

Pina waited patiently while I gathered all my things and put them in the gym bag, and then we walked out together, climbing in the backseat of her mother’s favorite car.

“Hey, Pina, what did you mean when you said Salvatore and I used to drive Ariana crazy?”

She looked at me and then bit her lip.

“Ah, you know.”

“Your sister had a crush on Salvatore. Was it that bad?”

“You know Ariana. She likes to feel... entitled. Her and Salvatore were the most popular in their class in high school. I guess she always thought that your engagement was more of an obligation and she’d get to brag that *il principe*<sup>[19]</sup> was a notch on her bedpost.” Over my dead and buried body maybe. “It’s a status thing, and I know you and I don’t care about that stuff, but Ariana does. It’s mom’s fault, she raised her like that.”

“I see.”

“Ari cares about you, just like I do, but you were born a level above us, and she just wants to be the one on top all the time.”

“I’m happy to give her my place on the throne, Pina, but she’ll never get Salvatore.”

“I don’t think you have to worry about that. He already turned her down three times, even when she walked in on him naked. I don’t think anything would change now, even if you’re not in the way.”

If Pina would have told me she had six nipples, I wouldn't have been so shocked. She mentioned that thing about Ari like it was common knowledge, but it was the first time I was hearing about it.

“What do you mean he turned her down? When did that happen? Why was she naked?”

“I... you said you know.”

“I know about the crush. A stupid childhood crush! Ariana tried to sleep with Salvatore?”

“Oh, Grazia, I'm sorry. I should have kept my mouth shut.”

“No, I should have known this. When?”

“I don't know.”

“Pina!”

“I'm really not sure. Back when the families were on good terms.”

When I was with him. When the whole world knew he was to be mine. Ariana was lucky she wasn't in front of me because I could have snapped her like a twig. Rage was blinding me.

“Your sister likes to play along some dangerous lines.”

“It was a stupid thing she did when she got too tipsy. Please, don't say anything. It doesn't even matter. He said no.”

“It matters, Pina. She's supposed to be my friend!”

“It's just who she is. Can you let it go? For me?”

I didn't want to, but I was in debt to her. A secret for a secret. I think what made me so angry was that *Sasa* never said a word about it. He could rarely keep something from me, or so I thought.

“Fine. I'll let it go. Like you said, it's in the past. And I have a whole future to focus on.”

A future where I had no right to question who tried to sleep with Salvatore Fiori. There will be other women and I'd

know. Palermo was not as big of a city as some thought. *People talk, rumors spread.* One day they'd tell me he had someone new on his arm and then I'd have to learn to bite my tongue and move on.

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## Chapter 10

After ten days I've become numb to the throbbing ache in my chest. It wasn't better, but at least I could function. I kept myself busy with dance, going with Rebecca and Ruby – one of my other sisters in law – to some charity events, and kill time with Pina.

Rosa Vitale and I had some serious talks last week when she tried to persuade me again to summon up the courage and audition for a ballet academy, so we compromised, and I agreed to go visit *La Scala*. My father was ok with me traveling to Milano as long as I agreed to take Garon with me. I had no problems with that.

Miss Rosa called in some favors for me to be allowed to attend some classes while there which would keep me busy anyway and besides that, Garon was not the type of brother to breathe down my neck. He said he'll come to watch over me, but we both know he was more excited for the clubs, the booze, and the women.

I walked down the stairs of my house, ready to leave and meet the Bernoulli sisters, but I didn't make it to the door because I heard my father's voice calling for me from his home office. I found him on the couch, looking over the new issue of *Il Giornale*<sup>[20]</sup> with a cup of espresso in his hand.

“You called, *Babbo*?”

“Come sit with me for a second, my dear.”

When I got close, he took my hand and kissed it. My father, the one and only Fabiano Caputo, was a man made of steel. He was knocking on seventy and people still feared him on every corner of the peninsula. He was *Don* first and father second, and I was used to things being like that. I respected my father, loved him, but didn't get to see him as much as I got to see Fabiano the *Don*.

“Is everything ok?”

“Yes, Grazia. I just wanted to check on you. Something's not right.”

I frowned. “What do you mean?”

“Just because *you think* I don't pay attention, doesn't mean I don't, daughter. You've not been yourself lately.”

I wasn't so sure he was the one who paid attention to me. Guido slept here at the house a couple of nights last week and he tried to put on a movie night for us, but I just wasn't in the mood. If I'd have to guess, I'd say that either him or Delfina brought this to my father's attention. It was ok, I was used to it. We were eight kids and *Babbo* was a busy man, looking over an entire *famiglia*. Most of the time, all his attention was focused on Giovanni, for he was the heir of the family.

“I'm ok.” I lied, blinking at him.

“Are you? Because I don't hear your laugh anymore. The house is too quiet without it.”

“I'm just tired, that's all. Miss Rosa really put me to work lately.”

“I don't want you to exhaust yourself for those damn dance lessons. I'm happy to pay for your hobby, my dear girl, but don't let it become too much. I brought Rosa Vitale here to take care of you.”

“She is, *Babbo*, you don't have to worry. And it's not just a hobby, you know that.”



“Yes, yes.” He dismissed me with a wave of his hand. “If you think it’s important to spin around on a stage, then I’ll be happy to make it happen. Have you sorted things out for your trip to Milano?”

“Garon is taking care of everything. We’re leaving at the end of the month.”

“Good. Your brother will take care of you.”

“I know he will.” I said, even if I wanted to tell him – *again* – that I didn’t need anyone to take care of me. I could watch my own back and win my own battles, but my father never agreed with that. In his eyes, I was the only one of his eight kids that was born with a disadvantage – I was a woman.

“So this school? Rosa Vitale tells me it’s a big deal.”

“It’s *Scala, Babbo*. One of the best in the world. You’ve been there.” My mother was a lover of the fine arts and she dragged him along all the time.

“Yes, yes. Is this visit like a test? To see if they want you?”

“No. I’ll just go and see how things work, take some classes. They don’t hold auditions for a few months and maybe I’ll try out then.”

“If you want to go, I can make it happen. I don’t like thinking about my little girl leaving me, but if it makes you happy, just say the word. I’ll buy you a spot.” He wasn’t saying it to sound like a jerk, but for once I’d like him to believe in me a little more.

“No, *Babbo*. If I go, I want it to be on my merit. I have a chance, you know? I’m good.”

“You are fabulous. So beautiful on that stage.”

“Do you need me to stay around? I’m meeting with Ari and Pina.”

“Ah, you’re going out?”

“Ariana wants to go shopping.”

“Where?”

Oh, boy.

“*Politeama-Liberta.*” That quarter of town was the heart of Palermo and home of a glamorous fashion district. At the same time, it was where the Fiori and Caputo territories were merging. “I will be fine.”

“Maybe you should take a guard.”

“The girls are with me and their driver will be there too.” He frowned, still not convinced, so I tried some more. “Dad, I’ve been down town a million times and never had any problems.”

“I know. I just worry.”

“You know... there are rumors.”

“About what?” He snapped at me.

“Adrian is not well, *Babbo.*” People chattered, but Salvatore confirmed it. His father was wasting away. “I know it’s not my place, but maybe it’s time to try and talk to him.”

“Don’t speak like that under my roof.”

“He’s dying. He was your brother for so many years. Can’t you try and forgive his sin?”

“I’m not God, Grazia. I have no power to forgive, and Adrian deserves to go to hell. He’s going to leave that devil son of his to try and fight us.”

“He would never...” I don’t know what I was thinking, defending Salvatore to my father, but I didn’t get very far.

“Don’t you dare start with me, Grazia. That chapter is closed.”

“I’m sorry.” I let my head fall down. “I just thought you’d regret not talking to Adrian one more time.”

“I can’t wait to see him in the ground and spit on his grave.” He drank his coffee in one gulp and threw the cup across the room, turning it into shards of porcelain. “I’m sorry, *bambina.* Don’t concern yourself with Fiori anymore. Go, meet your friends. Do you have enough money?”

“Yes.”

“Buy yourself something nice. Something to make you happy again, ok?”

“I told you I’m fine.”

“Your sparkle is dim, my dear daughter. I’ll do whatever it takes to bring it back.”

I rose from my seat and went to kiss him on the cheek. In his stubborn, old-fashioned way, he meant well.

“I’ll go now. The girls will be here any moment.”

“Both of them?”

“Yes, why?”

“Just asking. Ariana seems too old to hang out with you.”

I frowned. “It’s only a few years.”

“Right. Go now.”

I said goodbye one more time and left. Just as I was walking under the arch of yellow roses that was growing around my front door, Ari was parking the car on the curb. It looked like she decided to ditch the driver for the day and take out her hot pink convertible. It was a BMW her father customized for her to look like Barbie’s car.

Santo, the lead guard, was waiting for me by the gate with a smile on his face. He was one of my favorites.

“Have a good day out, Miss Caputo.”

“Thank you, Santo. Just so you know, Delfina is making *Bomboloni* today.” I knew for a fact he loved those doughnuts and I was sure he had a thing for Delfina too. I’ve been trying to bring them together for a while now.

“Ah, I should make sure to go and see her then.”

“You should.” I nodded to the flowers around us. “Pick out a rose for her. She’ll love it.”

“Thank you for the advice, Miss Caputo.”

He opened the gate for me and I ran across the street to where the girls were parked. The moment Ariana saw me, she threw away her glasses and cheered.

“Grazia, look at you! You are so pretty today!” She was exceptionally cheerful.

“Thanks. Umm, you too.” It wasn’t a lie. Ariana always looked her best, with her icy blonde hair and deep brown eyes, but ever since I had that talk with Pina, I just felt like there was a block of ice between me and Ari.

“I hope you two are ready,” she continued, “because I need to find the perfect dress and it will take us some time. I don’t want to hear any complaints, *comprendere?*”<sup>[21]</sup>

“Yes! I didn’t have a ballet class today, so my feet are perfectly rested. I’m ready to march.”

And we marched! Ari dragged us to every single one of the stores. From the local boutiques at the entry on *Via della Libertà* all the way to the big brand shops. At least when we made it to the Gabbana store, she got twelve dresses to try while Pina and I got to sit down for a moment and enjoy some champagne.

“This one is perfect, Ari.” I tried my luck with the pink cocktail dress she was parading around, hoping we could finally be done shopping. I was hungry and tired.

“No, it’s not short enough.”

I looked along her long, uncovered legs.

“Oh, I think it is.”

“Didn’t you hear when I said I have to find the perfect dress? This one is too sweet. I need something that can drive any man crazy.”

Pina lost interest and turned to her phone, so it was on me now.

“Oh, are you going on a date?”

“No, just a party outside of town.”

“Far?”

“No. It’s a wine bar opening in Aspara. A friend owns it and it’s such a romantic place.” She found my eyes in the mirror in front of her and I saw a spark. “I’m not leaving that party alone.”

“You’re going on a hunt.”

“You bet I am. And this dress won’t do. I saw a black one that might be better.”

“You don’t mind if I run across the street really fast to get some ice cream, do you? I’m hungry.”

Ari rolled her eyes. “Sure, but you don’t have to rub it in my face that you can eat all the sugar you want and not get fat.”

“I’m not. Do you want anything?”

They both said no, so I took my bag and went to the gelato shop. I would have loved to have a more substantial meal, but it looked like Ariana was nowhere near done.

I was waiting in line, trying to decide between pistachio and raspberry when someone bumped into me, almost knocking me down to the ground.

“What the...”

“Sorry, sorry! I’m so sorry.” The familiar womanly voice said and I turned to find a woman scrambling to gather all her bags from the sidewalk. “Oh, Grazia. Oh, my God!”

“Chiara! This is... hi!”

“Oh, my God!” She repeated and pulled me into a hug. “It’s been so long since I’ve seen you.”

It’s been four years. Chiara Fiori was Salvatore’s cousin. Her and her brother, Pietro, were the close like siblings with him and even if she was older, we always got along great.

“You look amazing.” Her Fiori chestnut hair was cut to her shoulders, perfectly styled, and even if she was a mom now, her body was still as amazing as when she was nineteen. This girl stopped aging a long time ago and no one could convince me otherwise.

“You too. Look at you! You’re a grown woman.” She gave me another hug. “I know I’m not supposed to say this, or whatever, but I’ve missed you so much. All of you.”

I couldn’t help but bite my lip. Her and Goliath were a couple – the type that makes you look away blushing – before the big fight.

“We missed you too. All of... us.”

“It’s ok, you can say his name.” She rolled her eyes. “I’m not angry anymore.” But she was. *Oh*, she was so angry. She tried to set Goliath’s house on fire. With him inside.

“You had every right. Trust me, I understand.” Chiara and I were in the same boat, both being forced away from the men we loved.

“Yeah. Two old men start fighting and you and I had to pay the price. How is that fair?” She exhaled, a flash of regret crossing her beautiful face. “Anyway, it’s all good now.” She showed me her ring finger where a massive rock was resting.

“I’ve heard. Married and a son too. I’m happy for you.” A few months after Goliath had to leave her, Chiara got pregnant and had a shotgun wedding. I’d never seen my brother as miserable as the day she walked down aisle to marry another man.

“How is he?”

My eyebrows raised. “Goliath?”

“Yes. I mean, I hope he’s fine.”

“Ah, well, both Goliath and Gaspino just came back from the Middle East, but he’s alright. Still recovering.”

“Yeah, right.” Chiara crossed her arms. “He recovered four years ago when he took Tatiana Erivo out.”

“Stop, you know it wasn’t like that.”

“Well, it’s in the past. I really hope he’s happy. And Gaspino, oh, how I miss him.”

I laughed, thinking about Goliath’s twin, the goofiest of all my brothers.

“Well, you can have him if you want. I’m tired of his pranks.”

“I wish. I was in love with Goliath, but Gaspino never failed to make me laugh. I could use some of that.”

Huh?

“Everything ok, Chiara?”

“Sure.” She smiled, a little too wide to seem genuine. “My son, Francesco. He’s three and it’s tiring, that’s all.”

I knew from Salvatore that her son was non-verbal, but otherwise happy and healthy.

“I’ve heard he is a handsome little boy.” Sasa loved to brag about his nephew.

“The light of my life. Grazia, I’d love to stay more, but I really have to go. I’m already late.”

“It’s ok.”

“I’m sorry again for walking into you. I parked too far away and I was rushing to the car.”

“Why are you on the run?”

“Ah, I have to go home and get ready for a party. My husband is opening a bar tonight. It’s his first venture on his own. Kind of a big deal.”

Well, that was... odd.

“That sounds amazing. I wish you both all the best. If it’s here in Palermo maybe I’ll have a chance to check it out.”

“It’s in Aspara. A beautiful wine bar on the coast with a very good selection. If you get the chance, make sure you let me know.”

Aspara... a bar... a party. That was where Ariana was headed.

“Umm, will your family be there? Tonight, I mean.”

“If you want to know how Salvatore’s doing, just ask.”

“I shouldn’t. It’s none of my business.”

“We both know it’s not that easy. Yes, he’ll be there tonight. It’s a shame you can’t join us.”

“Indeed.” I answered her, but my mind was already somewhere else. “I’m happy I got to see you, Chiara.”

“Oh, me too. I wish we could do this more often.”

She hugged me again, and I felt the warmth in her gesture. Chiara was always such an amazing girl. It was a shame that my brother didn’t try harder to find a way to be with her.

We said our goodbyes and I sat there while she walked away. Suddenly, my appetite disappeared and a huge knot formed in my throat. Ariana was going to the same party Salvatore would be at. Was that why she was looking for a dress that screamed sex from a mile away?

Pina had already admitted that Ariana has tried to get with him more than once so why would tonight would be any different? Just like the rest of us, Ariana was not allowed to get anywhere near the Fiori family, but no one could keep up with her partying schedule, so most of the time she just ended up doing whatever she wanted. I was sure her parents had no idea where she’d be tonight or with whom and she was sure there was no way I’d find out either, but here we were.

I couldn’t just pretend the dots were not connecting.

I didn’t realize someone was calling my name until Pina grabbed my arm.

“Grazia, are you ok?”

“Yes. I, umm, was just thinking about something. Is Ariana ready?”

“Yes. Do you want to go and grab something to eat.”

“I...” no! “can’t. Delfina just called and I’m needed home. I can take a taxi.”

“No way. We’ll take you. Let’s go.”

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I walked up and down my bedroom so many times, there was a path on the marble floor. I just couldn't stay still. With every hour that was passing, I became more restless.

I thought about calling Salvatore to ask him to stay away from Ariana tonight, but I couldn't bring myself to do it. I was sure that if I'd ask, he wouldn't even look her way, but if I did that, I might end up crying myself to sleep. Plus, for the first time, I've actually got Sasa to listen to me and walk away. A phone call might be all that was needed for him to come running back and we'd end up right where we started.

My father's face when I'd mentioned Adrian came into my mind. He wasn't ready to forget the offense and he might never be. It didn't matter how much I wished for things to be different, there was no hope. Nothing was going to change and thinking otherwise did nothing but hurt us both. I couldn't risk going through this heart ache again, or worse.

No, I wouldn't be calling him, but I also couldn't stay here waiting for my friend to sleep with *my*... with Salvatore. There had to be something I could do.

"Delfina?" I called from my bedroom door, my voice echoing through the entire house. "Delfina!"

"Yes, yes! I'm here. What do you need?"

"Is *Babbo* home?"

"He just returned. He's in the garden with Santo."

"Thank you." I said, rushing downstairs and out through the back door.

The gardens were my mother's favorite project around here. She had spent hours looking over every bush, every flower, every patch of grass, and dad indulged her passion for plants. The gardener was doing a pretty good job at maintaining it, but it just wasn't the same as when she was alive.

I found Father in the gazebo, sharing a brandy with Santo.

“Hello.” I said, letting them know I was there.

“Grazia, dear. How was your shopping?”

“It was good. Umm, *Babbo*, can I talk to you?”

“Now?”

“Yes. I don’t want to interrupt, but I have something on my mind.”

Dad looked at Santo and the guard got up. “I can go find Delfina and beg her for more sweets while you talk with Miss Caputo.” He said, and walked away.

“What’s bothering you, Grazia?”

“You.”

He looked at me confused and slightly annoyed. I had to stir the pot a little to get what I wanted.

“Explain, daughter. What have I done?”

“I was just thinking about our conversation.”

“What about it?”

“You really don’t care about my ballet, do you?”

“What? Of course I do. I have built you an entire school.”

“I know you did, but now you don’t care. You talk about my trip to Milano like it’s just a weekend getaway. You rarely come to see me dance... When Giovanni was playing soccer, you were much more excited.”

“Grazia, that’s not fair.” But it was true. I didn’t care, but I needed the leverage.

“It’s ok, *Babbo*. You’re busy, I know, but it would be nice to see you actually are proud of me.”

“I am!” He sighed. “Tell me what I have to do to show you. Do you want me to buy you something?” That was his answer to every problem I ever had.

“You don’t have to do that, but maybe, I don’t know... we could have dinner.”

“Dinner?”

“Yes. We could call the boys and the Bernoulli family. I just think it would be nice to have you call a gathering for me for once, and not one of your sons.”

“Would you stop with that? I love all my children. I’ll tell Delfina to have a banquet fit for a queen in your honor. Be ready at eight.”

Before I knew it, I was jumping in his arms.

“Thank you!”

“Anything for my daughter.”

Truth was, I wasn’t asking for much, but I needed this. If there was one person in this world who would never take no for an answer, that was my dad. He’d call Martino Bernoulli ordering him to pack his family and come here and like that, I could contain Ariana. She’d be stuck here instead of chasing Salvatore.

Suddenly, I felt in the mood to celebrate, so I went upstairs and made myself pretty. I picked out a white dress and high heels, done my hair, and put diamonds around my neck. At eight o’clock on the dot, I was ready and going down the stairs.

The moment I put my foot on the ground floor, Garon picked me up and spun me around the foyer.

“There you are! The guest of honor.”

“Hello, brother. I’m surprised to see you came.” Garon was the busiest between nine P.M. and eight A.M. Every club, every party, every *orgy* he was there to enjoy them all. And he didn’t bother to hide it.

“Dad ordered me to show up. He said it’s a dinner for his little girl and I couldn’t miss it.”

“Well, thank you. It’s nice to see your face.”

He and I were the closest in age, so I’d spent the most time with him growing up.

“Is it true that you threw a fit?”

My mouth dropped.

“Did *Babbo* say that?” Garon nodded. “It wasn’t a fit. I just pointed out that he gets excited when one of you sneezes, but never cares about my achievements.”

“Bullshit. You know you’re our baby.”

“I’m not a baby. Put me down.”

“No. Babies are not supposed to walk.” He teased me and carried me to the back patio where the table was set. The twins – Goliath and Gaspino – were there too. “Sorry, *bambina*^[22], but only the three of us could come on such short notice. The rest of them are caught up on business.”

“It’s ok.”

I went to the twins and hugged them, lingering a little bit more in Goliath’s arms. The meeting with Chiara really made my heart ache for him.

Garon came back and threw a hand around my shoulders. Since Gaspino was on the phone, he turned his attention to our other brother.

“Goliath, big boy, you should go get the door. Martino Bernoulli just parked his car and dad is not ready yet.”

“Why don’t you go?”

“I want to spend some time with my favorite sister.”

“Lazy pig.” Goliath muttered under his breath and went to the door.

“Hey,” I poked Garon in the ribs. “Be nice to Pina tonight.”

“What are you talking about? I’m always nice.”

“Don’t tease her. And it wouldn’t kill you to say she looks beautiful.”

“Grazia?” He narrowed his eyes. “What are you trying to do?”

“Nothing.” I played it like I was innocent. “She could use a confidence boost and I would really appreciate it.”

“Fine.” He shook his head. “But I know how your voice changes when you’re up to something.”

We were interrupted when father, Goliath, and all four Bernoullis entered the room. The men were already chatting about God knows what, while Mrs. Bernoulli was trying to correct Pina’s posture so she’d walk with more grace. I wondered if she’d ever give up and admit that she didn’t have two delicate princesses for daughters and that Pina was perfect just as she was. Luckily, my friend was saved by Garon who went and pulled her into a hug.

“Hey there, *Pigtails*.” Idiot. “I mean, Pina. Look at you. So beautiful tonight.”

I saw my friend’s eyes growing like Garon just grew a second head right in front of her before she turned the color of ripe tomatoes.

“H-hello.” She stuttered. “You’re, umm, nice. I mean it’s nice to see you.”

“Come on, let’s grab a seat.” When he took her hand, I knew that her night was made.

At least I made her happy because on the other side of the room, Ariana looked like her puppy got rabies and bit her ankle. I have to admit, I wasn’t sorry about it.

“Hey.” Gaspino tapped me on the shoulder. “Giorgio is on the phone. He wants to talk to you.”

I took the phone and stepped away from the crowd to be able to hear him.

“Hello, big brother.”

“Hello, ballerina. I miss your face.”

“I miss yours too.” I haven’t seen him in a couple of months which was unusual because even now when all my brothers left the house, I got to meet with them constantly. On the other hand, Giorgio was always a little bit of a rogue who loved his alone time.

“I’m sorry I didn’t make it tonight, Grazia. When dad called me, I was already at the airport.”

“Where are you going this time?”

“London. I’m meeting some friends to work some things up.” He was as cryptic as I’d expected him to be.

“I don’t know what travel bug has gotten into you guys, but I swear to God, this family has not been in the same country all at once in over a year.”

“Life is short, Grazia, we have to enjoy it while we can. Anyway, I called to tell you how proud I am of you.” I rolled my eyes knowing that dad has instructed them to do all these things. I really made a big fuss just to keep Ariana from going out. “I don’t know what you want to do next, but the world is not ready for you. You’re one of a kind.”

“Thank you.”

“Any ballet school would be lucky to have you. Now tell me I’m your favorite brother.”

“Umm, I don’t know, the competition is kinda brutal.” I teased him.

“Little witch. You will change your mind when I come back and give you a custom made, handcrafted, pure silk pair of ballet shoes from Freed of London.”

My mouth dropped. Frederick Freed’s turn-shoes were legendary and they were in such high demand, it was almost impossible to get on their waiting list.

“You’re kidding.”

“I called Rosa Vitale and she gave me the specification. I’m picking them up before I fly back home.”

“Oh. My. God! I love you! Giorgio, I love you so much. You’re my favorite brother!”

“I told you! Talk to you later, kid. Get back to your party.”

“I will.”

Those shoes were worth all the trouble. I had to remember to thank *Babbo* for going through all this trouble just because I threw a little tantrum. We both knew he cared to

make this right because my remarks weren't entirely off mark, but I still appreciated it.

When I turned back, everyone was around the table except for Ariana who was pouting with a glass of champagne in her hand a few steps away. I felt a pinch of guilt so I went to her.

“Ari, thank you for coming.” She smiled and nodded. “Are you ok?”

“Don't take this the wrong way, but you know I had other plans tonight.” Oh, yes, I knew that. “What is this party about anyway?”

“I'm going to Milano to visit a ballet school in a few weeks. I guess *Babbo* just wanted to celebrate the occasion.” *Lie*. “I told him not to make a big deal.” Another lie. I was getting good at this.

“You should have told him twice.”

“Ouch!”

“Sorry, but I was looking forward to that party.”

“I know.”

“I'm happy for you and all, but what are we even celebrating here? You didn't audition anywhere yet.”

She had her fangs out tonight for sure.

“Rosa Vitale insisted for me to go because she is sure I have a real shot at Scala.”

“Oh, how nice.” Ariana drank the rest of her drink and rolled her eyes. “Another thing you're better than me at. Ballet.”

“Excuse me?”

“I'm sorry.”

“You said that before.”

“Well, I don't like the reminder that I'm two steps behind you at all times.”

“Are we in a competition, Ari? Because I wasn’t informed.”

She looked at me before forcing her lips to smile. “Of course not. We’re like sisters. I’m just pissed at Daddy for making me stay in.”

“Well, maybe he’s doing you a favor.” I hissed, reaching my limit.

“Huh?”

“We both know you shouldn’t go there, Ariana, and we both know why. I don’t think Martino would appreciate the company you’d have at that party.”

Her jaw dropped and she looked at me with something much stronger than merely surprise.

“How do you know who’s going to be there?”

“There are many things that still tie me to Salvatore, Ariana. Get that through your head.” I should have left this out, but couldn’t stop myself. “It doesn’t matter how I know, but I do, and if I can find out, then so can your father. The last thing you want is him knowing that you’re going against the wishes of *his Don*.”

“You sneaky little bitch.”

“*Excuse me?*”

“Whose idea was this party?” She questioned me.

“I told you, father wanted to...”

“Yes, that’s what you said, but I’m starting to believe that’s not true at all. It was you, wasn’t it?”

She’s got that right.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.” I said, aware of the fact that my words sounded as empty as they were.

“You got pissed off that I get to see Salvatore Fiori while you have orders not to and you pulled the strings to keep me here.”

“There’s a little too much fiction in your story, Ari. Salvatore and I are too much of an old story for anyone to care. I just wanted to point out that what you’re doing is dangerous.”

“Wow, I didn’t think you had it in you.”

“I’m terminating this conversation.”

“Why? It just got interesting.”

Right on cue, Goliath stepped in between us.

“Ladies, everything alright?”

Ariana showed him her sweetest smile.

“Yes. I was just on my way to taste the antipasti.” She left without another word and I started to believe that maybe scorning Ari like this wasn’t the best idea. I should have kept my mouth shut and let her sulk in silence.

“What was that about?” Goliath asked me.

I shrugged. “No idea. She’s been moody all day.”

“All day?”

“Yes. We’ve been out shopping together.”

“How was it?”

“Actually...” I bit my lip and looked up at him. I don’t know what it was with me today, but I couldn’t stop from meddling in everyone’s business. “I ran into someone.”

“Friend?”

“Of yours. In a way.”

“In a way? I have friends and enemies, Grazia. Nothing in between.”

“I saw Chiara. What category does she belong to?” He turned into an ice sculpture right under my eyes. “Sorry. I shouldn’t have said anything.”

“No, it’s good. I was just surprised that’s all. You know you shouldn’t...”

“...talk with any of them. I know, but we literally bumped into each other. She was very nice and it’s not like Chiara was going to shoot me. I wasn’t in any danger.”

“You can’t be sure. She’s unstable.”

“She was hurt, Goliath. That’s all. We had a very lovely chat and if you want to know, she wished you all the best.”

“How fucking nice of her.”

I should have stopped after that. I really – *really* – should have.

“I don’t think things are good between her and the husband.”

Goliath frowned, staring me down.

“That’s none of our business. She chose the song and now she has to dance to it.”

“Did she? Dad and Adrian split the families and you left...” when I looked up at him, I knew I was two words away from being yelled at. “You’re right, it’s none of our business.” I corrected myself.

“That’s right. Let’s go eat and enjoy tonight. I think Gaspino wants to have a toast for you.”

“Hey,” I caught his arm before he could walk away, “I’m really sorry I said anything.”

“I’m not mad. *Il passato non ha potere.* ^[23]”

“Right.”

We returned to our guest and the night passed by, eventually washing away all the awkwardness that I had created. Ari had never come around from her terrible mood, but Pina, my brothers, and I had a very nice time, and even if my motives were not the best ones, I was happy that they were all called here tonight.



Chapter 11

I couldn't say if the bitter taste in my mouth was from the hangover, the anger, or just my liver finally giving up on me. The past two weeks were so close to what the priests describe hell to be like, feeling like shit started to become my reality.

I didn't sleep for days because Grazia's words haunted every minute of silence I had. Her crying voice telling me I caused her pain will be the one thing that will chase me until my death. It took the strength of ten men to stay away from her for so long, but I had to let things cool down.

Making sure Grazia was happy was my only goal and when she told me *I* was standing in the way of that, it gutted me. What the hell could I do if not give her some time and space, waiting for her to come back to me?

She will come back. It was the one thing that kept me going all these days. Grazia knew she was mine and there was no other way, she just took longer to accept the inevitable. I didn't give a shit about what her family wanted. Her father was nothing but an old piece of shit who only cared about himself and her brothers? There was a time when all seven were sworn brothers to me, but anyone who'd dare to stand between me and my woman would end up biting my bullets.

I had to wait for Grazi to find her own way back to me and when she'd come, it would be forever. It had to, because

my life was about to change forever.

It's too soon. The doctors have told me time and time again that father had another year, but in the past couple of days, his time was cut short. Dr. Ricci and her team didn't leave his side, pumping him with meds to make him comfortable, but they all said the same thing. There was no use moving him to a hospital, there wasn't much they can do, and that I should be ready to say my final goodbye.

Last night, I thought that was it. He had an attack so harsh, I thought he'd end up coughing out a lung. To see a man that once ruled an empire so weak, with one leg in the grave, it scared me to death. Adrian Fiori – my father – was dying, and I couldn't do anything about it, so I ended up drinking my weight in vodka. It was only fair that now I was being punished with a headache from hell.

I raised my head and opened my eyes only to see I was on the bathroom floor, naked. I must have passed out, not that I remember anything, and I was grateful for it. For a few hours I got a break from the pain of losing my father in slow motion. I had no plan of getting up, but Tutto's insistent knocking forced me to.

I wrapped myself in a plush robe and opened the door.

“What do you want?”

“You should get downstairs, Salvatore.”

“What now?”

“He's getting worse. Dr. Ricci thinks he'll be gone soon.”

I felt my chest constricting and fire spreading.

“It's too soon. She said he has more time. The medicine they gave him...”

“That was last night. You've been out for hours.”

“What time is it, Tutto?”

“A little over nine.”

“Nine?” Damn it. My father was on his death bed and I was in a damn comma for twelve hours. I looked at the window to see that Totto was right and the sky was dark again. “I’ll be right there. Give me a moment to shower.”

“Can I get you anything?”

“Water, please.”

He nodded and disappeared just like a ghost.

I washed off all the alcohol, sweat, regrets, and fears. While the rest of the world could afford to show weakness when they lost a parent, I didn’t.

The king is dead, long live the king. Every eye in the *famiglia* would be on me and they expect to see a new leader. Our enemies would look for any weakness and I wasn’t planning on giving them any.

The moment my father would close his eyes, I would be *Don*. All his legacy would be on my shoulders. All his rivals would become mine. I was prepared for this moment my entire life and we were all ready for it. Pietro would become my second in command, father’s lieutenants would swear alliance to me, and the Fiori name would continue to rule and prosper. Only one thing was not how it was supposed to be.

Grazia. Grazia Caputo should have taken my name by now, be by my side in all this, but she wasn’t. A predictable wave of anger shook me from head to toe, like it always happened when I thought about Fabiano Caputo and the wrongs he has done. Father was right to spit in his face and break the brotherhood, but I couldn’t settle with the fact that Grazia was not with me because of it.

Between his love for my mother and my love for the only daughter Fabiano Caputo had, my father had chosen the former, letting me deal with the aftermath.

And now I’m alone.

My fist connected with the shower wall making the granite crack under pressure. I needed her now more than ever, for only Grazia’s gentle touch could get me to the end of tonight with my mind still intact.

Knowing there wasn't anything I could do right now, I got dressed ready to go downstairs. If I'd call, she probably won't answer and I couldn't leave my father in his last moments to go hunt Grazi down.

At the end of the stairwell, I found Pietro and Chiara waiting for me. She came straight to me.

"Totto called us. He said we should be here."

"Yes."

"How bad is it?"

"The doctor doesn't think he'll make it through the night. All we can do now is keep him comfortable and wait." Mindlessly, I hugged her tighter, grateful for the comfort. "Where's Francesco?"

"With the nanny. You don't look very well, Salvatore. Have you eaten anything?"

"I'm not hungry."

"You still have to eat something. I've brought some soup. I'll go get you some."

"Chiara..."

"I won't take no for an answer. Now more than ever we need to look after one another." It was the last thing she said before aiming for the kitchen leaving me with Pietro.

"She's right, you know." Pietro said. "We're here to look after you as much as we are for Adrian."

"I don't need looking after!" I roared, knowing damn well he didn't deserve to be yelled at.

"Then what do you need?"

I needed my father not to die so young. I needed more time. I needed Grazia here with me, but I couldn't have any of it. I didn't have to say the words, Pietro knew what I was thinking.

"Nothing you can give me, cousin."

He grabbed my shoulder in an encouraging gesture. “Go sit with your father, Salvatore. I have everything under control.”

“Right. People will call and have questions, but don’t say a word until he’s gone. I don’t want anyone else coming here.”

“I won’t.”

I turned and walked to the room in the back, the one that used to be a study, but for the past year has become my father’s bedroom. I didn’t want him to go up and down the stairs every time he needed something, so the best solution was to move him here, close to Totto’s quarters.

Father was on his back with his eyes closed, but his chest was still moving. He was still here. He didn’t react when I opened the door, but he mumbled something when he heard me sitting in the chair next to him.

“Don’t try to talk, old man. Keep your strength.”

In typical Adrian Fiori fashion, he didn’t listen, but instead he scrambled to push the oxygen mask down.

“I’m not so old, son.” His voice was just above the sound of a whisper.

“Put the mask back on.”

“Why? I’m dying anyway.” Hearing it from him was like a punch in the gut. “I know it’s coming and so do you. You’re ready for this, son.”

“What if I’m not?” How could I be? He was my father, the best man I’ve ever known.

“*You have to be.*”



Chapter 12

Miss Rosa was waiting for me by the door of the studio while ten little ballerinas were exiting the room. It was the junior class where the two little girls I'd seen a few weeks ago were enlisted.

"I thought you left, Grazia."

"I tried, but one of the teachers called in sick and these girls were already here for rehearsal."

"You took over the class?" She was surprised and for a good reason.

It was just a coincidence that I was passing by just when Mrs. Mariucci, our studio's manager, was complaining about having to send all the girls home because there was no one there to teach them.

"Yes." I said, hesitantly. "We checked and there wasn't any other teacher available. The girls were so excited to wear their new tutus, I couldn't say no."

"I see."

"It wasn't that hard." I winked. "After all, I've learned from the best."

“That is true. I am the best. I just never pictured you in my shoes, that’s all.”

“Me neither, to be honest.”

I’d told Mrs. Mariucci that I will teach the class trying to be helpful, but I have to be honest and say that helping little girls find their love for ballet was such a lovely thing to do. I had an amazing time and when the two hours of class ended, I felt disappointed that I didn’t have more time. I saw something in those girls, a spark that I used to have, an eagerness, and harvesting it felt amazing.

I pulled out my phone to check the clock and see it was already past nine.

“I should really go, Miss Rosa. I need to meet my sister-in-law first thing in the morning and it’s getting late.”

“Be on your way, child. I’ll stay around some more.”

“At this hour?”

“You’re not the only one who enjoys a quiet stage, Grazia.”

“Oh,” was that why she was here? “You want to dance, *Madame?*”

“I have to stay in shape, don’t I?”

I’ve never seen Rosa Mariano-Vitale dance, except for when she wanted to show me the correct way to do a step or on some of her old tapes, but I knew she wouldn’t let me stay and watch, so I didn’t bother asking. I got changed, got my things, and walked out into the street.

It was quiet tonight and the air smelled sweet, like flowers and citrus. Palermo summers nights had something quite magic about them between the sounds of the sea that were traveling down the streets and the light of the moon. This was my favorite time of the year.

I was enjoying the walk, looking down at my phone when I felt the strong arm pulling me into the shadows. My first instinct was not to scream, but to kick and reach for the gun that was tucked in the side pocket of my bag. In the next

second, I was looking into the familiar green eyes of a man and holding a gun at his temple.

“Damn it, Grazia.”

“Pietro?”

“Yes, it’s me!” He hissed. “Put the fucking gun away.”

“W-what in the name of God are you doing here?”

I had my suspicions that Salvatore had told his cousin our secret, but was never sure about it. Pietro and I have not seen each other in years, so why was he here now?

“I need to talk to you.”

“I can’t possibly find a reason why.”

“Drop the act, Doll. I know you kept seeing Salvatore.”

Damn them both!

“Not for a while.”

“I know that too, but this is important.”

“Pietro, I don’t care. We’re done, as we should have been a long time ago. Do you know how stupid it is for him to send you here?”

“He didn’t. I came on my own.” Pietro walked in a small circle and put both his hands in his hair. “You have to come with me.”

For a second, I thought I didn’t hear him right.

“Come with you? I’ve told Salvatore loud and clear – we are done! You can tell him to go screw himself. Go, Pietro! Get out of here before anyone sees us.”

I turned to walk away and he grabbed my arm hard enough to leave a bruise.

“Uncle is dying.” He said and the words stood suspended between us. “The doctors say he won’t make it ‘till dawn.”

Cristo. When I've asked Sasa he'd told me that his father still had a few good months ahead of him, maybe a full year. When did that change?

"I'm sorry to hear that, Pietro. Despite all our differences, Adrian was very dear to me." That man was like my uncle too and I cared about him deeply. My heart was breaking for him.

"He's alone, Grazia. He is losing his father and he has no one."

Sasa. I felt tears stabbing my eyes.

"He has you." They were cousins – *sworn brothers* – and Pietro should have been by his side, not here, telling me all this.

"Well, he needs you!" The jarring words made me flinch. "I'm sorry, I shouldn't have shouted."

"I don't know what I could possibly do."

I felt powerless. Salvatore was hurting and there wasn't much comfort I could give him.

"Let me take you to him."

"Pietro..."

"I know what I'm asking." To my surprise, he chuckled. "Do you know how many times I told him – begged him – to cut things off with you. An affair is not worth starting a war, that's what I kept telling him, but Salvatore won't listen. *He would set the world on fire for you.* I know that if you come with me tonight and one whisper gets back to your family things won't be pretty, but I have to ask."

I coughed lightly to break the knot in my throat and be able to speak again. Pietro was right, I had to go. Salvatore would never let anything stop him from getting to me and I owed him the same respect. He was the man who had my heart and I couldn't put loyalty to my blood above him in a moment like this. For once, I had to put him first.

When I looked up to Pietro, I could feel flames in my eyes.

“Take me to him.”

I didn't have to ask twice. He walked me through the alleys until we reached his car. We didn't exchange any other words during the ride and I could tell Pietro was on edge about taking me to the Fiori house. I was too. I've been to that house a million times before, I practically grew up there, but when we got in front of the gate, I suddenly felt out of place.

The house was impressive – a true palace fit for a king, with a long driveway and luxurious gardens.

I flew out of the car the moment Pietro hit the brakes and ran through the front door. I knew my way around with my eyes closed, I didn't need anyone to give me the tour. I ran across the spacious foyer, throwing my bag on the floor, and I would have kept running if Chiara hadn't have crashed into me. Again.

“Ouch!” I said, rubbing my forehead where we bumped heads.

“Wow, twice in a week. We need to stop meeting like this, Grazia.”

“Yes. Sorry, umm, Pietro brought me. I...”

“I'm glad you're here.” She cut in. I could see she had questions, but now is not the time. “Salvatore is in the room at the end of the hall.”

“Thank you, Chiara.” I said to her over my shoulder, already halfway to the door she'd shown me.

I walked into the room on my tiptoes, making no sound, and the image shocked me. Adrian was in a hospital bed hooked to what looked like ten machines and there was an oxygen mask covering his mouth and nose. Seeing him like this immediately brought tears to my eyes. I haven't seen him in four years, but the man lying in that bed was not the one I remembered. Time was cruel to him.

Salvatore was next to the bed with his head down and his eyes closed, holding on to his father's hand, so I walked to him slowly and placed a hand on his shoulder with gentleness to not startle him.

“*Sasa.*”

His eyes snapped open when he heard my voice and he jumped up on his feet.

“You’re here.”

“Yes.” I chained his neck with my arms and pulled him to me. “Yes, I am.”

“How?”

“Pietro found me.”

Salvatore took my face in his hands and looked at me like he couldn’t believe his eyes. “I’ve been praying for you to come.”

“Oh, *Sasa.*” I pushed him back in the chair and sat in his lap. “Last time we talked, you said you’ll be there for me whenever I need it.”

“Yes.”

“Now you need me.”

His arms squeezed me. Hard. “*Mio tesoro.* [\[24\]](#)”

“How is he?”

“Not well. It’s a waiting game now.”

“I’m so sorry, Salvatore.”

“It is what it is. At least he’s not in pain.” He took my hand to his lips and kissed it. “How long can you stay, *Tesoro?*”

“As long as you need me.”

The corner of his mouth raised in a sleek side-smile and I realized that I stepped into a trap.

“Did you pack a bag, *Grazi?* Because I need you *forever.*”

I sighed, melting in his arms. He made things so much harder. It didn’t matter if we were fighting or making love, he always managed to say things like this – things that weakened my knees to the point where he had to carry me.

“Do you need me to get you anything, Sasa?”

“No.” He looked at the vitals monitor next to his father’s head. “His heart rate is slower by the minute. Can you stay here while I make a phone call? It’s time to let the *famiglia* know.”

“I’ll stay with him.” We got up together and he brushed his lips over mine. “Salvatore, no one can know I’m here.”

“I wouldn’t let that happen.”

“Ok.”

He left the room and I took his place by his father’s bed. A million memories come to my mind from my childhood years and Adrian was in every single one of them. He was the one who bought me my first bike and taught me how to ride it, the one who took my side when I broke Garon’s nose with a rock because I had a poor aim. He taught my brothers how to fight and watch their backs. He got them out of trouble every time. We were all losing someone tonight, no matter what my father said the other day.

My lids became heavy and when I closed them, warm tears gathered under my chin. I tried to control myself, but my sobs were loud enough to wake Adrian and he made a growling sound. When he started to fight the mask, I put my hand over his trying to stop him.

“No, you shouldn’t do that.”

Of course he didn’t listen.

“I’ll be damned. I must be dead already.” There was a sparkle of amusement in his eyes, but his voice was weak and hoarse. “Why else would I see an angel standing next to me?”

I smiled and leaned down to kiss his cheek.

“It’s good to see you, Uncle.”

“Is that why you’re here? To see me?”

“I came for *him*.”

He coughed and the entire room shook.

“Ah, Grazia, you see what son I’ve raised. He’s going against my word even when I’m on my death bed.”

“It wasn’t him who called for me, Uncle.”

“You don’t have to call me that anymore.”

“What? Uncle?” I’ve never known him as anything else. “I won’t if it bothers you.”

“You were always such a gentle soul. The spitting image of your mother.”

“You should save your strength.”

“I’m dying, my dear. There’s nothing left to be saved. Where’s Salvatore?”

“He had to make a phone call. I can go and get him if you want.”

“No, let him take care of the business. He’s a *Don* now.”

“Not yet.”

“Soon enough. He ran the family on his own for a while now. Salvatore knows it’s his responsibility to take care of our people.”

“Someone needs to take care of him too.”

His eyes were drowned in sadness.

“Not you, Grazia Caputo. My son doesn’t need another target on his back. The best way you can take care of him is by staying away.”

His truth was callous, but it was true regardless.

“I know you’re right.”

“You know I love you, child, like you’re my own, but you come from foul blood.”

Me? He was the one who broke out the alliance with his greed. He betrayed his friend and his honor when he stole from *Babbo*.

I wasn't going to argue with a dying man, so I wiped away my tears and cleared my throat.

"I can go if you don't want me here."

"I think it's the best thing you can do for everyone."

I just nodded and got up. I would have respected Adrian's wishes if Salvatore wouldn't have walked into the room.

"Sit back down, Grazi."

"I shouldn't."

"I said sit down." He eyed Adrian with a frown on his face. "Don't talk to her like that, Father. I won't allow it."

"Son, it was not ill will."

"I don't care. Our fight is with Fabiano, not Grazia."

"She is his daughter. He took..." a cough stopped him, "he took my wife! My precious Christina."

He? *Babbo*? I didn't take his words to heart because he must be having a hallucination. Salvatore's mother died a few weeks after she gave birth. She was sick. It had nothing to do with my dad.

"Father, stop. Grazia is staying and you need to rest."

"No time to rest, Salvatore. I don't have any more time."

"Then don't waste it with stupid things." He answered his father with too much hardness and I couldn't help feeling guilty.

"You're right. Come here, son. Take Grazia and sit with me while... while I go."

I followed Salvatore and all three of us sat together in silence. While time passed, Adrian struggled more and more to inhale the air that was keeping him alive. The sounds coming from his chest were horrendous, but I didn't dare move.

Salvatore had one hand over my knee, squeezing my leg. I've never seen him so defeated and I knew it was because

this is the one fight he couldn't win. No one – it didn't matter how brave – could defeat death.

When things got worse and we knew it was time, I went to call for Pietro and Chiara and the four of us stayed guard until Adrian Fiori, one of the strongest men I've ever known, took his last breath, finally finding his peace and hopefully, forgiveness for all his sins.

There wasn't anything any one of us could do anymore, so after an hour, I took Sasa by the hand and walked him to his bedroom to have a moment for himself. Chiara and Pietro were not in good shape either, so I spoke to Totto, the butler, and checked with him if arrangements have been made for Adrian to be moved to the church for his *famiglia* to say goodbye. It wasn't much, but it was something I could do to help Salvatore before returning to his quarters with a bottle of water and some biscotti.

“Salvatore, you think you can eat anything?” He didn't say a word. He just sat on the edge of his bed like a statue. “Tell me what do you need?”

“I... Father is gone.” He looked up with his face stunned and eyes red, and then I knew what I had to do.

I turned off all the lights, locked the door, and closed the blinds to every window. A man like him would never dare shed tears in front of anyone else, not even me, but he needed a goddamn moment to mourn his father and I wanted to give it to him.

“I'll be out on the terrace, Sasa.”

Again, he didn't answer, so I took the biscuits and nibbled on one while nestling in one of the chairs he had out on the balcony. It took less than thirty minutes for him to appear and collect me. He was still solemn, but the crushing silence was gone now, tucked away from the preying eyes.

“Let's go to sleep, Grazi. I'm not letting you leave tonight.”

“I'm not going anywhere.”



I woke up in pain because Salvatore was crushing me. His arms were wrapped around my body like an anaconda trying to kill its prey. My chest cavity was probably bruised, but I was reluctant to move. He remained awake for many hours after we went to bed, and the moment he was going to open his eyes, he'd step into a world where his father was dead.

I sneaked out as gently as I could and left him sleeping in the bedroom. The house seemed different now that Adrian was gone, it seemed hollow. This place was always a little bit too quiet for me, maybe because I was used with living with seven loud boys, but also because ever since I've known him, Adrian grieved his late wife.

Christina Fiori.

He took my wife! My precious Christina. Those were Adrian's exact words from last night. I thought his mind might be weakened because his time was coming, but now, I couldn't help but wonder.

Salvatore didn't get to meet his mother, he was only a baby, but we both knew she died soon after giving birth because of a bleed. Adrian didn't make any sense last night, but the pain and hatred in his words was too real to be just a hallucination. It made me wonder what he was talking about, but now was not the time to dig into the past. The present was hanging over our heads heavy enough without those shadows.

I tiptoed to the kitchen hoping no one would hear me to get something put together for Salvatore. I knew he would fight me on eating, but the next few days would be hell for him and I couldn't stay to make sure he was taken care of. I needed to do as much as possible before returning home.

It was early, only a few minutes past six, but to my surprise, Chiara was already downstairs looking straight into an empty cup of coffee.

"Hey," I said softly, but she still jumped a little.

“Grazia.”

“How are you feeling?”

“Numb. I thought that maybe coffee would help.”

My eyes drifted to the table. “The cup is empty.”

“Right.” She was not the spirited Chiara I got to know. It was like someone emptied her of energy. “I came here to make some coffee and then I started thinking about other things.”

“It’s ok, I’ll make you some.” I took the cup from her and turned on the espresso machine. “Sugar no cream, right?”

Chiara chuckled.

“You remembered.”

“Yeah, it’s not hard.”

“Right. Goliath takes his coffee the same way.”

“Every day at eight thirty. His life is much more... *settled* now.” Goliath is one of the most serious people I’ve ever known, acting well beyond his age. Chiara was the only one who broke his routine.

“We were terrible for each other, weren’t we?” She said, a bittersweet smile on her face.

“There was a lot of yelling.” They fought as hard as they loved. “But I wouldn’t say that.”

I gave her the cup of coffee and fixed one for myself.

“Thank you, Grazia, for what you did for Salvatore. He really needed you here.”

“Of course.”

“But why?”

Why? Because he was Salvatore Fiori, the one I’ve loved since I was in kindergarten, no matter how hard I’ve tried not to.

“He needed me.”

“Yes, but something doesn’t add up to me. You haven’t spoken to him in four years and then my brother decides to bring you here?”

“I...”

“You two are still in contact, aren’t you?”

“It’s complicated.”

“Love often is.” She looked at me over the rim of the cup. “At least you two decided to fight.”

Unlike Goliath. She didn’t say it, but we both knew that’s what she was thinking.

“I should go wake Salvatore. I have to get out of here soon. If anyone finds out...” Me being seen here was the last thing anyone needed right now.

“They won’t. Pietro is waiting outside to drive you home in an unmarked car and everyone else is at the chapel. The whole family will go to pay their respects to Adrian today.” She shook her head in disbelief. “I can’t get used to the idea that he’s gone.”

“It’s too soon.” I wasn’t a stranger to the pain she was feeling. When my mother passed, it took months for me to stop crying. Salvatore sat with me every night until all my tears were dry.

She cleared her throat. “He walked me down the aisle, you know. When Bruno – my husband – came to take my hand from his, Adrian pushed him back and asked me if I still wanted to do this and if I didn’t, he’d take me out for ice cream.”

“You were his favorite niece.”

“He made me feel protected. God, I don’t know how I’m going to break this news to my son. He adores Adrian.” Not knowing what else to say, I placed my hand over hers.

This version of Chiara, the married woman who was so calm and vulnerable, was foreign to me. The girl I knew was explosive and fierce; she was always headstrong and snapping at everyone. The girl I knew tried to set fire to my brother’s

house when he broke up with her. She was grieving now, yes, but there was also something else that had changed, something in her eyes and I couldn't tell if it was a good or a bad thing.

I walked away from her and pulled out a few things from the fridge. Salvatore was my priority and I only had a few more minutes to spend with him. I said goodbye to Chiara before going back upstairs, knowing there was a chance I won't be seeing her again for a long time.

I found Salvatore awake. He was still in bed, staring at the door and when I walked in, he exhaled deeply and his shoulders slumped.

"I thought you left."

"Not yet, but soon, Sasa."

"I know. I have so many things to take care of, I wouldn't even have time for you."

I put the panini I made for him in his hands and he looked at me.

"You have to eat, Salvatore."

"Thank you, Grazi, but I'm not hungry."

"You *have* to. Remember when *Mamma*^[25] died and I almost got sick because I refused to eat? I don't want that to happen to you."

"Fine. I'll eat and then take you home."

"Chiara said that Pietro has everything covered. Don't worry about me." I sat next to him and put my head on his shoulder. "We won't see each other for a while."

"Not for long."

"Salvatore, we can't fool around anymore. Things have changed."

"Nothing between us changed, Grazi."

"We're not just some kids. You're *Don* now, the *Capo de Tutti Capi* of a family that has sworn to never mix with my

blood again and I might be just the daughter of Fabiano Caputo, but I'm his blood no less."

"I don't care about that."

"Are you going to make peace with my father? Apologize for what Adrian did?"

Salvatore turned into stone.

"I have nothing to apologize for."

"What does that mean?" He stayed silent. "Adrian said something last night, about your mother. What happened, Salvatore?"

I've never asked because I wasn't supposed to. What happened that night when Adrian stormed into *Babbo's* office was never discussed – never explained – and I never spoke of it again. I was raised to believe my father's words were heavier than the law, so I've never dared to question him when he said his friend had ruined our family bond. Now? Now I had a crushing doubt on my chest.

I was haunted by Adrian's empty eyes when he spoke to Salvatore about his mother. The way he said those words, like he was ready to die and meet with her again, have shaken my core and I couldn't stop the echo in my ears ever since. But where did my father come in? What part did he play in that gripping pain I saw on Adrian?

"Don't, Grazi. Today of all days, I can't do this."

Do what? Instead of asking the question, I bit my tongue and leant down to kiss his cheek.

"I have to return home." Delfina was covering my absence the best way she could, by saying I was in poor health and keeping *Babbo's* glass filled with bourbon in hopes that it would keep him too distracted to ask for me, but soon, Palermo would wake up and when it does, the news would spread. The entire island will know Adrian Fiori has closed his eyes forever and when that would happen, I had to be home.

"I fucking hate this." Salvatore growled and jumped up, knocking me back with his shoulder.

Without a warning, he walked to the closest wall and smashed his face in it. It was a lost fight, the wall didn't move, but my heart broke and filled my chest with blood. Salvatore was still standing, but inside he was kneeled by everything happening around him.

I walked to him on the tips of my feet. When my hand touched his back, I could feel the angry ripples of his muscles.

"Sasa." I whimpered, silently begging to have the power to take his pain upon myself.

"I hate it, Grazia." He turned to me and I was touched by the blazing flames in his eyes. "Letting you go over and over again is my hell and I can't keep living in it."

"Oh, Salvatore."

He tried to walk away, but I chained him with my arms, trying to quiet the storm.

"Stay with me, *Tesoro*."

"What?"

"Don't go home." For a second, I believed he didn't hear his own words. "I have to put my father in the ground today, and I need you with me."

"You don't need anyone. You're the strongest man I know."

Salvatore Fiori was the closest thing to a god that I've ever known. I had seven brothers and they were all strong, fearless men, but Sasa always towered above them. In my eyes he was untouchable.

"Not for this."

"Yes, for this. You are ready." I said, loud and clear, believing every word. "You were born to be a king, and now it's time to take your throne."

"We should have been married by now."

My blood froze. This was not the time for us to debate a childhood fantasy that was lost years ago. There was no point.

“You’ll be fine without me. I have to return.” My eyes slid to the clock hanging on his wall. “My father will expect to see me at breakfast.”

“Your father.” After repeating my words, he chuckled, but it was a very bitter sound. “They always come before me. Fabiano, your brothers, even the Bernoulli girls, you always run to them first.”

“Salvatore, that’s not fair.”

“Don’t talk to me about fairness, Grazia. What in our world is fair? I’ve put bullets in people for looking at me the wrong way, so no, I’m not a fair man, but fuck it, Grazia Paulina, I’ve always been fair to you.”

A lump formed in my throat stopping my response from coming out. Yes, he was right, I was always special to him. Back when Salvatore never missed any of my ballet practices, my brothers used to tease him and say that I was his master – that I could make him dance to my tune. He always indulged me, even when I was a capricious bitch, but that didn’t give him the right to throw it in my face.

“I don’t understand what you want from me, Salvatore.”

“I want you to give me a sign that you still care. It’s supposed to be me and you, not you and your father.”

“I wasn’t given a choice and you know that. It was our parents...”

“Fuck that, their time has passed. My father’s dead.”

But mine wasn’t. Mine was on the other side of town, waiting to have breakfast with his daughter.

“That doesn’t change anything, Salvatore, it just makes everything worse. You’re not just the son of an enemy now, you *are* the enemy.”

He stopped from pacing the room and looked at me. The impact of his eyes almost kicked me back.

“*Che cazzo mi hai appena detto?*^[26]” He spoke low. Terrifyingly low.

“Salvatore, what I mean is...”

“Repeat the fucking words.” I didn’t. I just sat there like a deer staring at the hunter’s shotgun. “I’m your enemy?”

“No! *Maledetto*^[27]! I’m just saying that now you’re the Don of the Fiori family – one of the most powerful people in this country. Today, you inherit power, and respect, and a loyal brotherhood ready to serve you and you also inherit my father’s anger.”

“Fuck your father!” He yelled – roared – like I’ve never heard him before. Salvatore had an unmatched temper, everyone knew that, but until this minute, I’ve never feared him. “Say the damn words again.”

“What words?”

“I’m your *enemy*?” The mocking sarcasm was dripping down his tongue and the worst part was the smile. I’ve never seen him like this and it was horrifying. “I’ve loved you since you were put in my arms when you were brought home from the hospital. You keep telling me how stupid we’ve been to keep seeing each other when everyone told us not to? I’m not a teenager, Grazia, I know the danger. Any of your brothers would shoot me if they’d know I’ve been sleeping with you under their nose because that’s the orders they have. I fucking know that, but I don’t give a shit. I chose you despite the danger. I’ve lived my entire life for you, so don’t you dare tell me I’m the enemy.”

I felt like Venus. Not the goddess; the statue, frozen in time, gripped by fear. This was not just a fight, it was frustration and anger, anguish and despair, years’ worth of feelings cascading over me. I felt ambushed and put down for no good reason.

“Salvatore, today is not the day.” He was emotional and we both knew that outside of the door he had to bottle everything up, and I was willing to do many things for him, but being a punching bag wasn’t one of them.

I moved back slowly to the table where my gym bag and my phone were forgotten last night, keeping my eyes on

Salvatore like he was some kind of wild animal. To be honest, he wasn't far from it.

When I got closer to the bedroom door, he snapped again.

“Don't you dare go out that fucking door.”

“I have to leave. You know I have to.”

“You don't have to do anything, you're just making a choice, *Tesoro*, so choose wisely.”

“Are you threatening me?” I hissed.

“*Gesù*^[28], woman, sometimes you leave me stupid with your words. If you leave, I'm done.”

“Done with what?”

“*With you.*”

The words hit me in the chest like an unleashed wrecking ball. I couldn't say why. I've been waiting to hear them for years.

No, you lied. The treasonous voice whispered from a hidden corner of my mind. *When you don't want someone, you don't go to them every time, over and over again.* But Salvatore and I were like magnets. For years, we defied every piece of the wall that others built to separate us. *Abbiamo sfidato il destino*^[29]. And every step of the way I lied to myself I didn't want it.

“Salvatore, I have to go back home and you have to go be with your cousins, and your people, and say goodbye to your father. Look at me, please.” He stubbornly kept his head turned, so I walked to him and forced his eyes to look at me. “Today is the worst of your life. Tomorrow it will be a little better. We can talk when it's a little better.”

“Nothing will be better tomorrow, *Grazia!*” The howl filled the room. “Tomorrow, I will have more enemies than ever before who will want to see my head off my shoulders. Tomorrow, I'll get up on a throne I'm not ready for and you should be by my side.”

“You’re asking me...”

“I’m asking you to be mine. For good. Forever.”

“You’re asking me to start a war. A war with my family... my brothers!” I don’t know when the tears start, but they were feverish and thick rolling down my cheeks. “A war where you’ll take your gun and aim it against them.”

“I’d choose you over anyone, over my life. For once, I’m asking you to do the same.”

“Salvatore.” He was transformed, I could hear it in his voice and see it on his facial features. *Sasa* was gone, now I was speaking to the *Fiori Don*, and he was merciless. “You can’t ask me to leave my family. It’s insane, stupid and heartless, and the Salvatore Fiori I know, has a good heart in his chest and a good head on his shoulders.”

“I don’t care if it’s insane. It’s your father or I.”

“It’s not just my father! I have *seven* brothers, and sisters in law, and nieces and nephews and you’re asking me to just... leave them. You really think I could do something like that? With no warning?”

“You did it to me. When Fabiano ordered you to break the engagement, you just did.”

For him to bring up that part of our life was a low blow. Those were not good days for anyone. It was chaos.

“I tried to talk to him.”

“Sure.” His eyes shifted swiftly to the door. “What’s it gonna be, Grazia Paulina Caputo? Me or them? Whose heart are you willing to break?”

Whose indeed.

“Rebecca is pregnant.” I said, in a weak attempt to plead my case. “Giovani is waiting for a daughter to name her after me. My brothers are my pillars, they keep me standing up straight. For you to think I could...” I didn’t finish. I couldn’t, because I could see every word was carving deep cuts in his already weakened heart.

“Leave.” He didn’t yell, but somehow the severity of that one word echoed through the room; maybe even the house. “Get out and go to them.”

“Salvatore, you want me to do something reckless. Stupid and reckless.”

“I’m asking you to marry me! I’m not going to give you an empty promise and tell you I’ll try to patch things up with Fabiano because truth is, Grazia, I hate him as much as my father did. Your brothers are good men, but you’re right when you say they’re extensions of your father and they will try to widow you as soon as you take my name. No, you won’t be able to see them, or your nieces, or anyone else, or maybe someday you will. I don’t fucking know! The only thing I’m sure of is that right now, you either stay with me or leave for good.” He stopped to take a breath. “I won’t chase you again. I won’t sell my soul for cents to you anymore. I won’t try to make a queen of a girl who’d much rather stay a princess in the shadow of her brothers.”

Ahia^[30]! That last one hurt. This man knew me better than any other living soul, some days he knew me better than I knew myself, and he looked straight into my depths to find the most painful things he could and threw them straight in my face.

I was a loved child. My mother used to call me *un dono di Dio*^[31]. She wished for a girl for many years until I finally came along and that’s why they ended up having so many children. My father loved me because I was his child. My brothers? I didn’t lie when I said they were the ones keeping me standing. I lost my mom too early and *Babbo* was always a little too busy running the *famiglia*, but the bond I had with my brothers was made out of the strongest steel. It didn’t change the fact that I wasn’t equal.

Father will always believe that a man in his position was represented by the kids who could carry on his name. *Sons*. To my father, I’ll always come last, and Salvatore knew that.

“I’m more than a pretty face to hang on your arm or decorate my father’s house.”

“I know that. Stay with me so I can make your dreams come true. I’ll get you on the biggest stage of the world because I don’t want you to *look* happy next to me. I want you to *be* happy.”

That seductive promise was tugging at my heart because in his wild dreams I got everything. A life with him where I could do what I love most – dance – and many years of happiness.

He wasn’t going to accept half measures anymore and frankly, we both deserve better than stolen moments of fleeting passion and a love that had to stay hidden. We deserved better. We deserved more. But...

“I can’t.” I whispered and bowed my head. I had no reason to feel humiliation, but still, it was suffocating me.

In silence and without looking back once, I left, feeling the dagger of jade eyes deeply pushed in my back. I lost him.

We’ve finally lost each other.

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Chapter 13

Delfina marched into my bedroom seconds after I snuck in. The place was quiet, but of course she was awake, waiting for me.

“Now is not a good time, Delfina.”

“Yes, it is. Where the hell have you been?”

“There was something I had to do.”

“It’s that Fiori boy. He’s going to get you in trouble and I won’t be able to help you, Grazia. You are so lucky Fabiano was tired last night and the alcohol knocked him out fast.”

I exhaled. Yes, I was lucky that happened. My father might trust I was a good girl never chasing trouble, but he wasn’t a fool.

“Delfina, I’m sorry I put you in that position, ok? It won’t happen again.”

She sighed, shaking her head.

“Are you ok?”

“Yes.” The answer choked me.

“Go change into your pajamas. Fabiano will be awake soon. It would be nice if he could see your face before

leaving.”

“Leaving?”

“I heard him talking on the phone last night. I think he’s going to the summer house for a few days.”

The summer house was more of a villa than a house, on the other coast of Sicily. We used to go there, all of us, every summer, but that tradition died years ago. I was surprised to hear he was going there, but if it was business, it made sense. The golf course he built around the house was legendary, or so he told me, and his men loved it. I found the sport to be dreadfully boring.

“I’ll clean myself up and be ready for breakfast soon.”

I wasn’t hungry, but it was better than locking myself in this room and crying until I perish. I wasn’t ready to revisit that horrible fight Salvatore and I had. I wasn’t ready to dissect every word and live through it again, so I just blocked it out.

Going on autopilot, I showered and washed my hair, cleaned my face and found some comfy clothes to slip into. I chose to think about complex ballet steps, and curtain calls, and beaten-down pointe shoes carrying me around a stage in an effortless pirouette. Dancing was my shield and it worked just fine.

I waited for the time to pass before finally going back downstairs. Father was already in the breakfast room in his usual seat, reading the newspaper.

“*Buongiorno, Babbo*^[32].”

“Ah, *mia figlia*^[33].” He checked his watch. “Late morning?”

“Yes.”

“Are you feeling better today? Delfina told me about the headache.”

“Much better. I think I was just tired.”

“I would think so. You spend too many hours in the dance studio. After all these years, what is there left to learn?”

I rolled my eyes and tried to smile. He never quite got the whole dancing thing.

“I need to keep rehearsing, *Babbo*. Practice makes perfect.”

“You are perfect already, otherwise I wouldn’t get calls from Rosa Vitale urging me to get you to Milano.”

“What? When?”

“Yesterday. I will arrange for you to leave soon.”

“Yes, please.” Milano meant that I would get to train alongside a real ballet company. Milano meant I was going far away from here to a city where Salvatore’s shadows were not waiting for me at every corner. “I think I should leave a few days early. I want to enjoy the city before visiting the school.”

“Then I will make a few phone calls today and arrange the trip for you.” I was surprised at his lack of resistance. Usually, it would take me much more effort to convince my father that just because I was a girl, I was able to take care of myself when he wasn’t around. “How long do you plan on staying?”

“Miss Rosa has arranged for me to attend classes there for a week.”

“Ok, I will find you a nice, secure place to stay.”

“Is Garon still coming to babysit?”

“Yes, but he will stay out of your way like we’ve discussed. I have some things for him to take care of up North.”

“So this is a business trip?”

“For him it is. It’s time my youngest son gets more involved in his *famiglia*.”

Garon was a party boy and he got to enjoy that side of life every single day since he was sixteen. *Babbo* has tried to

rope him with responsibilities multiple times, but he failed. Garon was too wild to fall in line with dad's wishes.

I decided to change the subject. "So, I've heard you're going on a trip."

Babbo's eyes fixated on me before muttering, "The damn walls have ears around here. Yes, I'm leaving but only for a couple of days."

"I think it's nice you're going to the summer house. It's been a while since we visited that place."

"You can't come along." He hurried to add in strange fashion, almost like he didn't expect me to know his destination. "I'm sorry, *Grazia*, but if you want to go to the summer house, it will have to be on a different occasion."

"Don't worry, *Babbo*, I wasn't planning on..." I was cut off by the sound of the double door of the breakfast saloon being slammed to the wall.

Giovani entered with his chest forward and his head down, and I knew exactly what news he was about to deliver. It was time.

"Father, we need to talk."

"Ah, Giovanni. What brings you here so early, son?"

"There's something you should know."

His serious tone got our father's attention.

"Shall we go to my office?"

Giovani looked at me and shook his head.

"*Grazia* should hear this too, I think." My brother took a deep breath and fixed himself a glass of imported whiskey before taking a seat across the table from me. "Adrian Fiori died last night."

The information was received with crushing silence. I think that for a moment, my father had stopped breathing, that's how silent the room was. I focused on looking like I was too shocked to say anything.

“He’s dead?” *Babbo* asked, staring at *Giovani*.

Before answering, *Giovani* cleared his throat. He was visibly uncomfortable talking about this like it was a business meeting when someone we knew all our life just died. “His body is at the *Fiori* family chapel right now. The funeral will be in two days from now.”

“Funeral. I see.”

I don’t know what I was expecting from my father. Maybe not sadness, but some regret of losing the chance to talk with the one he called brother for the most part of his life. Instead of showing any of that, he *laughed*. A joyful, screeching, almost malefic sound that made me still in my chair.

“*Figlio di puttana*^[34], he is finally dead! *Delfina!*” She popped in the doorframe right away. “Bring us a bottle of champagne.”

The woman hesitated.

“Champagne, *Don?*”

“Yes. We need to celebrate.”

Celebrate? The suggestion made me feel sick to my stomach.

Delfina complied to his request reluctantly, while *Giovani* and I sat frozen in our seats, looking at each other in disbelief.

Babbo filled three glasses with champagne and gave each of us one.

“What are you two waiting for? Drink up.”

“Father...” I whispered, but he laughed again.

“This is a good thing, *Grazia*. Our enemy is dead. Why aren’t you happy?”

“Because he wasn’t just an enemy. He was *Adrian, Babbo*. He was your friend.”

“He was a danger to our family.”

“Please, stop.” I begged him.

“Why stop? Explain to me, daughter, why shouldn’t I be happy that a man who wanted all of us dead is now gone?”

“Adrian never wanted any of us dead. You two had your problems – whatever those were – but he never tried to hurt anyone. No Fiori did.”

“Don’t fool yourself, Grazia. Every Fiori hates you.”

Maybe Salvatore did now, but my father’s reaction was still wrong and disturbing.

“Please, *Babbo*, sit down.”

“Raise your glass. We’re toasting for this good news.”

“No!”

“Grazia, don’t you...”

“I won’t be drinking because someone died and I won’t sit here watching you do it.”

I got up too fast and my chair fell back on the marble floor and the echo followed me while I made my escape into the back yard.

Cristo, I was so angry, I couldn’t breathe, even when I was out in the open. Today was... I gave up a chunk of my heart when I walked out on Salvatore. I left him the day his father died and I needed some empathy. I needed a sign that I did the right thing.

Delfina came running after me.

“Oh, dear.” She whispered. “That’s where you were last night?”

“Don’t ask me that.” I hissed.

“Fine. Your father is expecting you to go back and finish your breakfast.”

“He ruined my appetite.”

Giovani appeared in the doorframe too and he kindly asked Delfina to leave and give us a moment.

“Grazia, are you ok?”

“No. I can’t believe he laughed.”

“I know.” He put his hands in his pockets. “That was pretty weird.”

“It was rude and disrespectful. It’s bad enough that we can’t even say our goodbyes, and *Babbo* acts like that? I thought life should be respected. Isn’t that your code? You kill someone, you respect the life they lived?”

Giovani looked at me with his eyes round, debating if he should answer that. “It’s different in business.”

“It’s still death, only now, it should mean something. Adrian was like family and we shouldn’t laugh because he died after fighting a very painful disease. We shouldn’t laugh at what just happened to Salvatore.”

“I know, you don’t have to claw at me.”

“Well, I have to claw at someone.”

I found a wood bench to sit down on and my brother followed me, but instead of sitting, he started to inspect the rose bushes.

“Is that why you’re so unhinged, Grazia? You worry about him?”

“Adrian?”

“Don’t play stupid with me. I’m talking about Salvatore. *Don* Salvatore Fiori.”

“Yes, I’m worried. He doesn’t have a mother, he doesn’t have seven brothers, he doesn’t have me, and he just lost his father. I’m worried about a lot of things.”

“There are many things one could say about Salvatore. He is an asshole, he doesn’t know how to lose, he always thinks he has the biggest pair of balls in the room. All of that might get him in trouble now more than ever.” I frowned, trying to figure out what the point of this was. “*But* he is a strong man. I know how Adrian raised him. Salvatore has honor and strength and he will be a great *Don*.”

I couldn't help a shy smile. "Like you. It will be fun to watch you and your two huge egos trying to split this island in half."

"I'm not the *Don* yet and I don't wish to be." Because that would mean that our father would have to be dead.

"You're the head of the *famiglia*, Giovanni. Everyone knows that." I cleared my throat. "Will you, umm, talk to him? Salvatore, I mean."

"Why would I do that?"

"It's tradition. Adrian was part of the Sacra Corona Unita and our family is too. All the Capos are going to go to the funeral. I know you can't go, but maybe you could send flowers."

"I... Grazie, I can't. I'm sorry."

"You should. You should send white daisies. They were Cristina's favorite." Adrian used to get the same flowers for me on my birthday.

"If Father would hear, he'd have a seizure. You've seen the way he just reacted."

"You *should* send flowers." I repeated through my teeth. "Salvatore deserves to know you care at least a little bit. He's alone, and angry, and hurt, and..."

"Don't." He glared at me. "Don't speak like you know how he's feeling. Right now, you sound like he's told you."

"N-no. That's not what... it's not." My stuttering was not very convincing. "I just know. I know him better than anyone."

Giovanni sighed deeply. "I'll see what I can do. Does that make you feel better?"

"A little bit."

"Ready to get back to breakfast?"

"No. I don't think I can look at *Babbo* right now. I'll just avoid him until he leaves."

“Leaves?”

“Yes. He’s going to the summer house.”

“Really?” He was as surprised as I was when I heard. “We haven’t used that place in years.”

“I thought maybe he is taking some friends.” I shrugged. “I don’t know what’s gotten into him.”

“Weird. Anyway, I want to know you’re fine.”

“I’m great.” I lied effortlessly. “I have to talk to Garon. We need to make arrangements for the Milano trip.”

“Garon is hangover on my couch waiting for Rebecca to feed him breakfast. I can take you to him.”

“How so?”

“He got stupid drunk last night and wandered into my house, probably thinking it was his.” We both giggled because it wasn’t the first time that happened, and probably won’t be the last since they lived only a few houses away. “I need to move him onto a different street, especially now that the baby is coming.”

“Is that still a secret?”

“Yes, but Becca is starting to show so we want to announce it next week.”

“Oh, thank God! I didn’t like keeping that secret.”

“You only have to be strong a few more days. Come on, I’m taking you to my house.”

“I can stay here.”

“It’s a bad day for everyone and I don’t like the mood you’re in. At my house you can talk to Garon and I can keep an eye on you.”

“You don’t need to worry about me.”

“Rebecca would love the company. She has to stay inside now that she’s hiding a baby bump.”

“Nice. Using your pregnant wife to make me behave, very nice.” I pushed my finger in his chest. “I’ll be ready in

five minutes.”

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Chapter 14

“*Don?*” Pietro said from behind me.

After twelve days, I still wasn’t used to being called *that*, especially coming from him.

“What do you need?”

“Just checking on you. I’ve been informed that you’ve been staring at that room for an hour.”

Damn Totto and his big mouth. Yes, I’ve been sitting in the doorframe of my father’s library for a while, trying to decide where to start. This damn room needed to disappear. It was too depressing to stay like this.

“I need a sledgehammer. Find me one.”

“What for?”

“I want to start redecorating.”

“We can call someone to do that for you.”

“No. I feel like smashing something.”

Pietro took the whiskey glass from my hand and emptied it for me.

“Are you drunk, Salvatore?”

“No, but give me half an hour.”

“It’s only ten o’clock.”

It was all Grazia’s fault. She left and turned my world upside down, and of course, like it happened with every broken heart, her absence made honey taste bitter and whiskey taste so damn sweet.

“I was here to tell you that Don Pepito of the Calpura *famiglia* has called. You forgot your phone in my car.”

“Good call?”

“Oh, yes. He was good friends with Uncle, but Pepito couldn’t make it to the funeral. He’s in some legal trouble.”

“House arrest?”

“No, but he can’t leave Rome. He’s under investigation for murder after that shooting in Tripoli.”

He did it. He shot dead seven men of a rival gang that dealt in his territory without permission. I knew it, the Carabinieri knew it, but they still had to prove it which was a damn hard job. Pepito always burned down all the traces. For a fifty-something year old man with a weak heart, Pepito was still dangerous. That’s why my father kept him so close.

“Rome became a police city. The Calpura family has problems all the time.”

“Yeah. Pepito extended an invitation for the next time you go to the capital. He wants to sit down with you.”

“Damn it. I have to go, don’t I?”

“You don’t want to insult one of your strongest allies, so yes. We can take a flight in the morning, be back in twenty-four hours. Old Pepi just wants a night out downtown.”

“And we will give him one, but first I need to take care of this fucking room.”

“You’ve already moved the books up into the attic. Why are you so obsessed with his office?”

“It always felt too much like a crypt to me. All my life, he retreated here to mourn his wife, like this room was some kind of grave. He sat at that desk and drank his weight in

vodka in hopes to pass out and see her. I'm just..." afraid that I will do the same. Start coming down here, shut the door, and drown in liquor, because it was better than living life without Grazia.

"Sledgehammer it is. I'll go find us a couple and we can start tearing down the walls."

"I don't need the company."

"You've been drunk for the past ten days, Salvatore. You need the fucking company."

"Watch it, Pietro. I'm the *Don* now. I can do whatever the fuck I want. I'll drink if I want to drink."

"To the rest of them you are the *Don*, to me, you are my damn cousin."

"My father is dead. I can take a moment to get my head straight and drink my sorrows."

"And you had it. Now, you need to get yourself together." He put his hand on my shoulder and pressed his fingers hard enough to make me look straight at him. "No woman is worth drowning at the bottom of a bottle."

Red. I see fucking red and only some godly force stops me from lunging forward and kicking his teeth out. It was a knee-jerk reaction to anyone mentioning her.

"Get out, Pietro."

"Look, Grazia is..."

"Keep your fucking mouth shut. If I don't get to have her in my life, then none of you get to have her name on your lips. Now get the fuck out of my house before I forget we share blood."

My animal-like snarls have scared him enough to do what he was told. I counted on Pietro to not hold my asshole outbursts against me later. He knew better than most how that woman had her claws deep in my heart and the damage her absence was doing was rough.

My cousin stopped in the doorway and talked to me over his shoulder.

“I would never speak ill of her, but that doesn’t mean I like seeing you down like this. Go easy on the booze, *Don*.”

My title was said as a reminder of who I was and the responsibility I was carrying on my shoulders. I was royalty – king over filth, malice, and violence – and Pietro was urging me to wear the damn crown. I wasn’t afraid to lead, I was born to do it, and father watched from the sidelines for a few solid years before he died. Adrian Fiori was in the ground for only days and I’d already made enough deals to keep this family rich for a long time. I had the money, I had the respect, but there was space for two on that throne, and my *other* decided to leave when I’d asked her not to.

I went upstairs and opened the drawer of the nightstand, almost ruining the hinges, and took out the ring that was carefully laid to rest on the velvet cushion. My thumb followed the intricate pattern of the band – olive and lemon branches, like those found on our favorite spot – all the way to the blue diamond surrounded by smaller stones in brilliant white color. On the inside, I had the jeweler brand my name, to remind Grazia that she was mine. This wasn’t a ring for a *ragazza*^[35], like the pearl trinket I gifted her when she was sixteen, this was made for a *moglie*^[36]. Every time I looked at it, I felt more pain than when I was fucking shot.

Angered, hurt, and fed up with this day already, I found and opened a bottle of Chivas and gulped it down. It was time to forget.



I woke up with a headache so bad I could feel it in my teeth. I could handle my booze just fine, but when a gulp turned into two bottles, I got knocked down. It didn’t take me long to realize that I was in the middle of my bedroom floor and I wasn’t alone.

“Chiara.” I gnarled her name. “Did Pietro go crying to you because I didn’t want to play with him today?”

“Pietro called me because he is in Catania to look after a transport and he didn’t hear from you in a day and a half.”

“What are you talking about? He was here this morning.”

“Salvatore, he came to you yesterday.” I looked at her confused and Chiara nodded her head. “You drank yourself into a coma.”

“*Fottere*^[37].”

“That’s right. What do you plan on doing, Salvatore? Do you want to drink your weight in wine one night and never wake up?”

Damn her and her flare for the dramatics.

“Chiara, stop overreacting. Pietro and I spent half of our life tipsy. It’s no big deal.”

“It is a big deal.” Her palm connected with my chest and it wasn’t a soft, playful pat. “I haven’t seen you sober in over a week. You wake up with a glass in your hand, go to sleep with a bottle to your lips. It’s getting out of hand.”

“Stop nagging.”

But she continued with no hesitation.

“You don’t get out of the house anymore. Do you have any idea how many people have tried to talk to you since Adrian died? Pietro is drowning taking care of the whole business alone while trying to convince everyone you’re fine. You ignore friends and family and don’t even see what’s going on around you.”

“Why would I care?” I asked more to myself than to Chiara.

“Maybe you would have noticed the bouquet of flowers Giovanni Caputo has sent over to Adrian’s grave the other day.”

“Did he now?”

Giovani Caputo, heir to the family. He was my counterpart. Fabiano's oldest son and one of the best men I know. While our fathers were busy running an empire of crime, Giovanni always stood behind and watched from the shadows. He sharpened his skill and mind, turning himself into fine *Don* material. He wasn't *in* the Mafia, he was *it*. Every code, every credo, he took it to heart.

I admired Giovanni – he was older, wiser, and taught me how to shave. We also pursued some *other* activities together that he agreed to keep to himself, involving some hard drugs and a few ladies eager to please. But that was a long time ago. More recently, he was the one Fabiano put in charge of informing me I was forbidden from seeing Grazia again and ever since, he made it on my shit list.

“He did. What do you have to say about that?”

“Nothing. It was something he had to do.”

“Maybe...” she left the sentence suspended, like I was supposed to guess her thoughts.

“Where are you going with this, Chiara?”

“Salvatore, I love Grazia, trust me when I say that I do, but I hate to see you like this because of her.”

“It's not because...”

“Yes, it is, so either go get her back, or get yourself together, because this,” she gestured to the forgotten bottles next to me, “can't keep going on.”

“I'm fine. Can you give me a fucking break?” She wasn't my mother and I didn't need her worries too. I had enough of my own.

“No, I can't, Salvatore, because you're all we have left. Adrian is gone, our parents have been dead for years, all Pietro and I have left is you. All my son has is you! And I won't sit back and watch you destroy yourself trying to glue a broken heart.”

“I could do worse.”

“Well, I’m not willing to let you get there. You had a week to mourn and self-destruct, but now it’s over. Either you start living your life again, or I’m moving here.”

“Excuse me?”

“I’m not joking, dear cousin. I’ll take my son and move us both into your guestroom to keep an eye on you if I have to.”

She sounded determined and that was scary.

“Woman, what’s gotten into you?”

“The *famiglia* needs you and so do I.”

“Is everything alright?”

“Yes.” She smiled. “But you have to be alright too. Grazia can have your love, but she doesn’t get to ruin you.”

A bitter chuckle escaped me.

“Too late.”

“I know a thing or two about being left behind by a Caputo.” *Goliath*. “And I also know a thing or two about building yourself back. No more alcohol poisoning, no more moping around, no more hiding.”

I wasn’t going to run away and marry the first idiot that crosses my path like she did. Chiara was not healed, she just got good at covering her misery.

“You won’t let this go, will you?”

“Nope.”

Chiara was older than me, but she always was the object of my protection. Pietro knew that if this tirade would come from him, we’d probably end up boxing in the back yard, but instead, he sent his sister here with her doe eyes and sad smile, knowing she was my weakness.

“Chiara, how do you feel about tearing down some walls?”

“Come again?”

“I want to start changing father’s old library. Are you in?”

“Oh, yes, please! I really want to hit something.”

Of course she did. All the heart to heart, all the soft and lukewarm was a new face she was showing to the world. The Chiara I grew up with was all fire and recklessness and I missed that. Her marriage toned down that spark in her eyes and it was one of the many reasons I didn’t like her husband one bit. I didn’t trust him as far as I could throw him either, but one day my cousin showed up with him at my door and he was family.

I blamed Goliath Caputo for that.

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Chapter 15

A world of fine arts and expensive taste inside the walls of a city – that’s Milano. You could see its history at every corner, feel it’s energy in the air. I loved Milano, but never realized how much until I got to live here and do the thing I love most. It’s only been a few days, but this city has done wonders for my broken heart.

No, I wasn’t healed – there was no healing after Salvatore Fiori – but I was better. I was functional and not thinking about him non-stop. I wasn’t thinking about my father either and the distance has dialed down my anger with him. Right now, it was me, myself and ballet, and the men in my life were not allowed to burst my Milano bubble.

Except Garon.

We were walking on the Piazza del Duomo when I heard him growl for the millionth time today.

“What now, you grump?”

“Why do we have to do this, Grazia?”

“Do what? Go for a walk?”

“Do the things tourists do. Look around, it’s only foreigners with cameras hanging around their necks. We’ve seen the Dome a hundred times before.”

“You really can’t appreciate the beauty of this place. Why did you come? You could have stayed in the apartment.” The place my father arranged for us was big enough to host my entire family, not just Garon and I, and it was minutes away from where we were standing.

“Because I’m supposed to be taking care of you.”

“Oh, really? Because I heard you sneaking out last night and I heard you coming back.” I crossed my arms. “At seven in the morning.”

“I don’t need to sneak off, I’m not a baby.” He muttered. “If you think I’ve abandoned you to go to some wild party, think again, because I spent the night with dad’s old pal, Andrea Vivere.”

“Vivere? Never heard of him.” I knew most of my father’s friends, at least by name, but didn’t recall hearing of an Andrea Vivere.

“That’s because he’s a hermit. Lives in the shadows, never shows his face, no paper trail, nothing. He and our father pulled a few jobs back in the day, before you and I were born, and they stuck together ever since. Until now.”

Oh, no. That didn’t sound so promising.

“Garon, did you do something?”

If there were two words always used to describe my brother, they were stubborn and handsome. Actually, *impossibly* stubborn and *devilishly* handsome. Father wanted him involved in the family business, that was no secret, and Garon just wanted to live his best life and enjoy the huge pile of money he inherited when he turned eighteen, that was no secret either. Maybe this was the time father learned that his kids were even more stubborn than he was and Garon could ruin a partnership just to show daddy that he only works on his terms.

“That thing that father and you were fighting about before we left Palermo?” *The Fiori famiglia*. “It’s about to get way worse.”

I flinched and spun on my heel to look at him.

“What do you mean?”

“You know how we control the port and sometimes ships bring in ‘products’... and we distribute it?”

Yeah, right.

“You mean *Babbo’s* smuggling network?”

“Shut up, you’re a little girl, you shouldn’t know about that.” He smiled, knowing damn well I’d eavesdropped at Father’s door since I was five. I was more up to date on how the business was doing than he was. “Andrea Vivere is our distribution line in all the North territory and he’s making us more money than we can count.”

“I still don’t understand what that has to do...”

“Salvatore is expecting his family business. He’s building on Adrian’s legacy big time. I got word that he’s expanding in the mainland, tightening his relationships with every damn *Capo dei Capi* in this country. He is buying a damn power-plant for crying out loud.”

“That sounds... impressive.” I cleared my throat in an attempt to hide my emotions. “Why do you care? Are you scared his piggy bank is going to be bigger than yours?”

“His piggy bank is already bigger than mine. He just inherited an empire and I’m one of eight kids. The useless one.”

“What?”

“We all know it, Grazia. Father is just trying to fight it, like my failure is his or something.”

“That’s not...”

“We were talking about Fiori, not me. Salvatore is putting his money to work to make more and that power-plant? That’s a damn goldmine. He’s going to move money so damn easy in and out. Everyone wants a piece of that new Mafia order your old boyfriend is building.”

My heart skipped beats, many of them. Salvatore will shake the underworld with his power, I always knew that, and

now we were about to see it. Hearing the admiration in Garon's voice, sprinkled with that faded hint on envy, made my heart swell with misplaced pride.

"Salvatore is a force." I said, keeping it vague.

Garon's grin covered half his face. "Giovani will have to work his butt off to catch up. They should be working shoulder to shoulder now, if it wasn't for that fight." Yeah, they should have. "It's so weird to think about it. You would have been married."

"I... yes."

My twentieth birthday. Salvatore declared that would be our wedding day years ago. He'd told me that he wanted me to have some time to enjoy life, but twenty years was a wait long enough. He used to sneak into my bedroom at night and describe to me in great detail how he was going to make me a bride. It was one of my favorite things.

But my twentieth birthday came and went and now we were here. And Salvatore couldn't even look me in the eyes anymore.

"Garon, we were talking about Father's business, remember?"

"Well, father's business is shrinking. Vivere wants to jump in the boat with Fiori and take dad's advantage with him. The old man is going to throw a fit when he hears it."

"Oh."

"Yeah."

"Can't he... I mean, did you ask why not do business with both sides. He's not affiliated right?"

"No *famiglia*, just some acolytes, but he won't risk Salvatore's wrath to work with dad."

He looked at me like there was more to be said about that, but he didn't know how to get around it.

"Garon what is it? You can talk to me."

“What Vivere said made me curious, so I made a few calls. Also, I made Giorgio and Guido make a few calls too. It’s not good.”

“What’s not good?”

“Now that Adrian is gone, people are starting to pick sides, and our father? He is a respected man, but he’s part of the old guard. Most of the family leaders that he built relationships with are stepping down and even if the name Fabiano Caputo still strikes fear in his enemies and admiration in our world, he might not be the popular guy he used to be anymore.”

“Because of Salvatore.”

All Garon was saying made sense. Our Father and Adrian were a duo, ruling all Sicily together and when that alliance was broken, people still looked at them as equals, but now? Adrian was not there anymore and everything was changing.

We always knew Salvatore would be great, we all did. Adrian, *Babbo*, Giovanni, the entire Italian mafia knew that one day he would rise to be remarkable. In Rome, there was a chief inspector, Mario Fabrini, who we knew was watching Salvatore from the dark for years because even the *carabinieri* knew he will lead his family like no one did before. It was why when I was born, it took my father less than a year to suggest an arranged marriage. Sure, he wrapped his proposal in nice words about family and brotherhood, and how Salvatore marrying me would make our families one, but truth was my dad saw something in him and he had one bargaining chip. *Me*. He bothered telling me that much when he broke my engagement.

“No, because of Dad.” Garon corrected me. “He wants all of us, his kids, to step up and take over – God knows he’s been on my ass for years – but he doesn’t really want to let Giovanni take charge. He’s too scared to let go of the man he used to be and that is dragging all of us down.”

“Giovanni is his heir.” It was the only response I could think of.

I liked to think that I wasn't just a spoiled, oblivious mafia princess. That I knew the world we were living in and I knew what happened in my family, but maybe I was wrong, because in the past five minutes I've heard the most confident man I know call himself useless and watched him talk pretty harshly about *Babbo*. It made me wonder if it was just Garon I didn't pay attention to, or was I so caught up in my secret affair with Salvatore that I missed things about everyone else.

We were raised to respect our father and take his words to hear, beyond God, or anything else. The fit I threw when we talked about Adrian was not only out of the ordinary, it was outrageous in our household, or so I thought, but now I was sitting face to face with my brother and watching the disgust on his face. When I fought with my father, instead of yelling and putting me in my place, Giovanni talked me down and took me to breakfast. Was there tension between them too? Were they fighting? Was my family, once united and harmonious, breaking into pieces?

"Garon, how bad is it?"

"The business? We'll live." He dismissed it with a flicker of his wrist. "Giovanni can make money out of stone, our clubs are thriving, Giorgio is the biggest arms trafficker in this country, Goliath is running every train, bus, and ferryboat in Sicily. We're not going to starve, don't worry."

"That's not what I mean." I wasn't worried one bit about money. I haven't touched my account once since it was given to me when I was eighteen and all eight of us could live on that alone comfortably for the rest of our lives. "You and dad? Are you two fighting?"

"No." He answered too quickly and his eyes shifted away.

"Garon!"

"Fine, we aren't on the best of terms, but I'm not supposed to say anything to you."

"Why not?"

"The guys don't want you to worry."

“The guys?” My jaw dropped. “So not just you?”

“Grazia, damn it. Our mother, blessed be her soul, has gave birth to eight stubborn children, it’s not just you. There’s no surprise Father has a hard time coming to terms with the fact that we won’t let him pull our strings.” He chuckled and threw his arm around my shoulders. “I think you were his last hope for an adoring child. Little Grazia, always a good girl, until you screamed in his face.”

“I didn’t exactly scream.”

“That’s not what Giovanni said.”

“He likes to exaggerate.”

“Don’t tell him we talked about all this shit, ok?”

I walked a few steps away before throwing my hands up in the air, feeling overwhelmed with exasperation.

“I don’t get it. Why not include me? Because I’m not a man? I’m your sister too, Garon.”

My brother put his hands up and looked at me with amusement. “Wow, easy, tiger. Because you’re not a *man*?”

“Father holds it against me.”

“Yeah, well, we’ve already established that we and Father have pretty different opinions. Giovanni didn’t want to involve you in our problems because he wants you to live your life. You should be focusing on ballet and just be happy right now, not get caught in the family drama. Again.”

“I can handle it.”

“You shouldn’t have to. Dad has gambled with your future twice. When he decided to marry you to Salvatore and then again when he decided that wasn’t going to happen anymore. The guys and I have a pact of sorts.”

“A pact?”

“Yes. We won’t do it, Grazia. We won’t put your happiness at risk for the sake of the family.”

My heart climbed all the way up into my throat and settled there.

So maybe if it was Giovanni sitting in the chair at the end of the table – the Caputo *Don's* chair – he would understand that it was not peace, or freedom, or ballet that I truly want. It was Salvatore.

Maybe...

No, I couldn't hang on to a maybe when I wasn't even sure Salvatore wanted me anymore. He clearly said he won't ever come after me again.

“Garon, is our family falling apart?”

“What?”

“All those things you said, your fights with *Babbo*... the fact that we don't gather together like we used to, it all seems so... I don't know. It feels like we're breaking apart.”

“God, no! I don't know if you've met our brothers, but there's no way of getting rid of them. Trust me, I've tried. We are not breaking apart and I think that's what's driving the old man crazy.”

“What do you mean?”

“There's eight of us. We have a tribe. He can't control us the way he wants to because of it. He can't tell me I have to get involved in the business when Gaspino and Goliath are there to have my back. He can't tell Giovanni he's never going to be as good a Don as he is, when Gianni and Guido are there to say otherwise. And sure as hell he can't say you're not enough because you're a girl when all seven of us love you like crazy.”

He ruffled my hair – something he knows I hate – and smiled down at me. It was one of those brilliant, all-teeth smiles that could make any bad day instantly feel so much better.

“You know, I'm glad *Babbo* picked you to come here with me. You're the fun one.”

“That's right.”

“You and Gaspino, of course.”

“He is not funnier than me.”

“Umm, he is. Just a little bit.”

Garon shook his head before checking his watch. “Shut up and get moving, Grazia. You have that dance class in an hour.”

“Oh, shit! I forgot.”



The Scala Ballet Academy was not located in the big opera house that everyone knew, but a few doors down, in an equally impressive old building that a few hundred years ago served as a nobleman’s home. Now it was a vast ground for rehearsal rooms and all kind of facilities for some of the best dancers in the world. Well, dancers in training. The real names were traveling around the world right now, dancing on all the stages of the world before returning home for the autumn season.

Rosa Vitale has arranged for me to take some classes and sit in on a few rehearsals, so I could see how things work around here. I have to give props to Miss Rosa, the past few days were incredible. It wasn’t just me alone in the class every day, now I was surrounded by people who felt about ballet the way I did. Everyone here understood that the pain of long hours on pointe shoes were worth for the freedom of becoming one with the music. I didn’t make many friends – actually, I didn’t make any – ballerinas aren’t the most warm and welcoming bunch, but just being close made me feel like I belong.

The teachers were good too, each and every one having a very specific set of skills and together shaping some of the most gracious dancers I’ve ever seen. Since I was Rosa Vitale’s protégé, I got to sit down with a few of them and watch them teach. Even if I wasn’t part of the Academy, Rosa’s word weighed heavy in these circles.

It was because of Rosa Vitale that today I was allowed – again – to sit and observe the special neoclassical barre class held by Franklin Walsh. Everyone who knew anything about ballet would recognize that name and get goosebumps hearing it. He was one of the best maestros out there and a few times a year he was invited to select the most promising ballerinas at the Scala Academy and teach them for a few months.

This year's group was small – and I mean really small – only four girls were in the room jumping and turning at Walsh's command. I wasn't allowed to participate, but Mr. Walsh welcomed me to watch in silence for the second time since I came to Milano and it was amazing. The man was smug and always looked just a little disgusted with everyone around him, but he was amazing at his job.

When the class was over – well, better said, when Walsh decided it was over – he clapped his hands a couple of times to dismiss the dancers and walked out of the room without another word.

I wasn't sure what to do, so I just sat on the floor, in the corner, thinking of where to go next. I guess I wasn't as relaxed as I thought I was, because one of the four girls came to me. She had a smile on her face and that put me at ease.

“Hello.” She said in broken Italian. “I'm Petra.”

“Hi, Petra. I'm Grazia.”

Petra looked younger, but her dancing was advanced. She was good and to me she looked determined to get better.

“I've seen you here in our last class. Why?”

Ok, so she was direct.

“I'm visiting the school so I can decide if I want to apply here.”

“Oh, you get to decide. That's nice.”

“You didn't?”

“I'm from a small town in Serbia. Getting into any ballet school would have been a blessing. Getting a scholarship here was a miracle.”

I rose to my feet and looked her up and down. Strong legs that still had grace, perfect posture, and a steel determination in her eyes.

“You got that scholarship because you’re good. Walsh selected you for his special class too. That means something.”

“Oh, I’m very good.” She smiled. “I’m glad to see you’re not one of those spoiled vipers that usually wander the halls around here.”

“I’m glad to see you’re not one either.”

She looked over her shoulder and nodded.

“The other three are ok too. Well, Melanie talks too much about her new diet, but if you can look past that, you’re good.”

“Good to know.”

She started walking towards them and pulled me along too.

“Hey, this is Grazia. I know we were all wondering why she’s spying from the corner. She’s here to decide if she wants to apply here at the Academy.” All three of them waved and I did too. “Those are Melanie Chive, Nathalie Kirk, and Elena Morales.”

“It’s very nice to meet you all.”

Elena – a beautiful redhead – straightened her back before speaking. “If you need any information about the school, we’re happy to help, but not now. We have another class in twenty minutes.”

“Thank you. It’s ok. I have to head out too, my brother is waiting. I just have to go to the bathroom first.”

“Oh.” Elena blinked. “Ok, I can come with you.”

“You don’t have to...” I wasn’t exactly sure how to turn down companionship to the bathroom from someone I’ve never seen before.

“She’s coming with you.” Petra declared. “It’s not good to be alone in a small room while you take your clothes

off.”

I found that comment odd to say the least, but Elena started showing me the way before I could ask any more questions. We talked a little, mostly about the school, and she didn't tell me anything new, but I didn't have the heart to stop her from blabbing.

“Hey, Elena?” I said while washing my hands. “Why did you want to come with me?”

“To the bathroom? We always come in pairs.”

“Petra... why did she say that?”

“Ah. You know how it is in ballet schools. A lot of young girls, mostly male directors and teachers all over. It's better if we're not alone.”

My eyes found hers in the mirror and I froze. I felt like someone poured a bucket of ice water over my head.

“What?”

She shrugged. “It's better to be safe rather than sorry. It's one of the first things they teach young ballerinas.”

“Not me. My school was private and my father owns it.” I spit out. “This is not right.”

“Oh, it's ok. It's not like we're in danger all the time. Times have changed and now dancers get more respect, but sometimes...”

“Sometimes it still happens? Is that what you wanted to say?”

“Yes.”

“Here? In the damn Scala?”

“Men are men, I guess. It's happening everywhere.”

“No, not everywhere. Not in my city.” I was shaking with anger. “In Palermo, every woman and child can walk alone at night. Girls go to parties with no fear, mothers let their kids play in the street because no one would dare to do anything so despicable.”

Elena looked at me like I was an alien and blinked rapidly. “Really?”

“We didn’t hear of a rape in years.”

“What’s the secret?”

I smiled, not knowing how much I should say. “For years, my family persecuted every man who laid hands on a woman. No one wants to mess with my brothers, trust me.”

It was a rule in Sicily, enforced by father and Adrian when they took control – you hurt a woman, you leave to see hell on earth. Everyone knew it.

“How many brothers do you have?”

“Seven.”

“Ok, that’s a lot.”

“Yeah. The Caputo clan is big.”

“Caputo? As in Caputo cr... the family, the...”

Blestemmie^[38]! I’ve said too much. I wasn’t ashamed to be a Caputo, no matter what people thought about that, but this was the first time I wasn’t just the *Don’s* daughter and I’ve just ruined that.

“My brothers own multiple businesses, yes.” I cut in before she got to say anymore.

“Yes. I’ve heard of your family. I heard of your family all the way in Spain. Look, Grazia, you seem a nice girl, and I’m happy you never had to walk into a room filled with men and be scared of them, or go to the gym across the street from your ballet school to shower because it feels safer, but this is not Palermo. I’m not trying to scare you, I’m just saying take someone with you when you go to the bathroom.”

“Thank you for the advice.” I hated that she had to say that to me. I hated that they had to teach her that.

We’ve returned to the rest of the girls and the conversation moved to a safer place. We were about to go our separate ways when Walsh came back into the room.

“Miss Caputo? I’m glad you didn’t leave yet. I just got off the phone with Rosa Vitale. Can I keep you for a minute?”

“Yes, Sir.”

“The rest of you are dismissed.”

All I heard before we were left alone in the room were a few fainted goodbyes. The man surely could strike fear into his students, but I had years under my belt with Rosa Mariano-Vitale. I could take it.

“Rosa has talked my ear off about you. It’s not like her to brag about a student.”

“She’s been my teacher for a long time, Sir. I’m glad to hear she’s proud of my progress.”

“She believes in your potential and has asked for me to evaluate you.”

“Evaluate?”

“So I can give you a recommendation. It could go a long way no matter where you decide to apply.”

“That’s very kind of you.”

“Anything for Rosa. I watched her on the stage when I was a kid. She inspired me for a long time. Come on, get in position.”

“N-now?”

“Yes. All I have to see is a few pirouettes and a couple of steps.”

I found the dance shoes in my bag and put them on as fast as I could. Walsh didn’t care that I was in jeans and my hair was down, so I didn’t either. If all he wanted was a couple of steps, I would make sure to execute them perfectly, and so I did.

I listened while he barked names of steps at me and did every single one. It was harder without music, but my body was so used to this, it took control, and when he was done talking, I was very pleased with myself.

Walsh smiled from one ear to another and stepped in front of me. His hand came under my chin to make me face him.

“Flawless.”

“Thank you. I owe it all to Miss Rosa.”

“She did a good job. You could be a little younger to start with a company, but I’m sure she’s right about you. You will make a great dancer.”

“That means a lot, Mr. Walsh.”

“Wherever you decide to go, I have to train you. I’ll send my recommendation to Rosa right away.”

“I’m sure that will please her.”

“And you?”

“Me too, Sir.”

“Good. How long will you be in Milan?”

“Just a couple more days, I’m afraid.”

“I’ll be here again next month. Please, come along. I would like to get you involved in my special classes next time.”

“I-I have to talk...”

“...to Rosa? I did. She asked me to tell you that if you’re not here when I start classes, you’re going to regret it.” He sweetened his words with a smile.

“I’ll see you next month then.”

“Yes. Now go before word gets out I’m giving private lessons.” He fluttered his hand. “They’ll never leave me alone.”

He shook my hand before letting me go. It was good to hear such good words from someone who wasn’t Rosa.

Ballet was the only thing in my life that was going well.



Chapter 16

Ballet was the only thing in my life going well. The only one damn thing.

When Garon texted, he said he was going to wait for me at the cocktail bar a few buildings down. What I didn't expect was to find him being hauled into a police car with three *carabinieri* holding him down.

"Excuse me!" I yelled from across the street. "Stop! That's my brother."

"Stay back, Grazia." He growled at me when I walked in front of them.

"He is right, Miss," the officer said to me, "you need to stay back. We're taking your brother in for a statement."

"Why?"

"Violent altercation."

I looked down at Garon's fists to see they were covered in blood and I knew it wasn't his. My brothers knew how to fight. A few steps away I spotted a man talking to some other policemen and he looked like a bus parked right on his face. There was also a *woman*. Crying.

I punched my brother in the chest. “You got into a fist fight for a woman?”

“I didn’t know she was married. The guy talked too much shit and I got angry.”

“You got angry? You let yourself get *arrested!*” It wasn’t just a bar fight for us. While girls like Elena thought to not go to the bathroom alone, I’ve learned some other skills. Don’t leave your fingerprints where they don’t belong; don’t talk too much to people you’ve never seen around before, don’t answer questions unless you’re sure no one is listening and *don’t get arrested.*

My father used to say that over and over again. They arrest you for a traffic stop and they can hook you with a hundred different things. This is how our people end up in cages for years.

“I’ll be fine, Grazia.”

“I’m calling the lawyer.”

“Don’t. I don’t need dad...”

“I am *calling* the lawyer. I’ll take a cab and be right behind you.”



Police precincts gave me the oddest of feelings. It wasn’t quite fear and it wasn’t quiet sadness, but it was something that made my skin itch. Every time my father ended up in a precinct, he was taken away for years at a time. Every time Salvatore was in a precinct, he walked out with bruises all over his face. My brothers did a good job of staying out of them until now.

I was so relieved when I heard that Garon won’t be charged and he will be free to go in a minute, but I knew the irking feeling won’t pass until we were out of this place.

My brother came out carrying a plastic bag with his phone, wallet, and watch.

“Finally.”

“I can’t believe you called that damn lawyer when I told you not to.”

“No! You don’t get to school me about what I should or shouldn’t have done. For a woman?”

“Stop with that. I don’t care about that woman; I don’t even know her name. A beautiful woman came to me asking for attention and I was happy to give it to her.” Like always. He’s always a little too happy to pay attention to the wrong women. “Her husband showed up and pulled out a gun. If we’d be in Palermo, I would have returned the favor.”

“But we’re not in Palermo. We’re in foreign territory where you don’t know anyone. The *carabinieri* don’t know you here like they do back home. You can’t always bribe yourself out of it.”

“I just did, didn’t I?”

“No, our family lawyer did.”

“Thank you for that, little sister. I can’t wait to hear what dear old Father has to say about this.”

“He would have found out anyway.”

“Maybe. Maybe not. I’m so pissed at you, Grazia. I told you to stay put.”

“You’re about to get even more pissed. I called Giovanni too.”

“Grazia!”

“His jet is waiting to take us back home.”

“Why? You have two more days at the school.”

“I’ve excused myself. I was invited to return next month.”

“Grazia, I know what this dance school means to you. We don’t have to go.”

“I want to. Seeing you in handcuffs... I just want to go home.”

Garon wrapped his arms around me tight and I relaxed.

“Then let’s go home.”



The plane ride back home was stale. Garon slept the entire time and the book I was reading the past couple of days was back in the apartment in Milano with the rest of my luggage. The only thing I could find to keep me entertained was an old crossword puzzle that was left behind by either Goliath or Gianni, and when that was over too, I had nothing else to do other than look out the window and count clouds.

We landed in Palermo just when the night was falling down over the city and there were two SUVs waiting for us. I recognized both drivers, I’ve seen them standing guard at the house before.

Giovani sent cars for both of us thinking that after so many days with me and an arrest, Garon was eager to go to his home, but instead, he instructed the drivers to take us to the big house. Maybe he was ready to face *Babbo* now and get it over with, or maybe he was just looking for more trouble.

We were about to walk inside when Garon’s phone rang.

“Go ahead, kid.” He winked. “Give daddy a warm hug. I’ll be right behind you.”

Maybe not a hug, but I needed to talk with my father eventually. I was right to be angry with his reaction. That joy, that gloating in his voice when someone died was not something to be proud of. Maybe I shouldn’t have yelled, or turned my back on *Babbo* when he was calling for me, but all I could think about was Salvatore’s pain. His heart was crushed that night in more ways than one and no one should laugh at that.

I kept working on the speech in my head while marching to Father's office, but I stopped when I heard his laugh coming from the living room. It was a light sound, relaxed, something rare coming from Fabiano Caputo.

I followed that sound, expecting to see a smiling man at the end of it. Maybe *Babbo* was watching a nice movie, or was enjoying a glass of expensive wine that made him laugh, or maybe Delfina was cracking one of her legendary meaningful jokes. That's what I expected to see.

What I didn't expect was Ariana Bernoulli wrapped in lace lingerie and expensive jewelry, her blonde hair cascading down her back, her breasts floating out of her bra in my father's face. His hands were all over her, following her curves and pulling at her panties like they were insulting him. It took my brain a long time, but eventually I realized that it wasn't just a relaxing night in. I've just stepped into the middle of my father's affair. With my friend.

I was too stunned to say or do anything. The anxiety crippled me, left me immune to what my brain was telling me to do. I could hear the blood rushing through my veins and my lungs burning, but I still couldn't make a sound. It was my tempestuous breath that finally signaled I was in the room.

Ariana's sneaky eyes lifted and she looked straight at me. There was no remorse there. No shock, no shame, nothing except coldness and a displaced superiority.

"No, don't stop, *Bella*." My father growled with his mouth on her skin and I almost threw up on my feet. "What...?" And he turned. And he saw me. And all hell broke loose.

"Your daughter is home." Ariana stated the obvious.

"G-G-Grazia. *Mia figlia*. You were supposed to be-be-be..."

"In Milano." The words crawled through my clenched teeth. "I was supposed to be in Milano, but I come home to see this?! What is this? What are you doing with *her*?"

That was a stupid question. He was shirtless and Ariana was dressed like a hooker. There was no room for interpretation.

“I didn’t know you were going to be home so early.” At least he had the decency to look embarrassed unlike his *paramour* who dropped in one of the leather chairs like she owned the place.

“That’s all you have to say to me, Father? That you didn’t know... That’s all you’ve got? So what I wasn’t here? So what if I was in Milano?! How could you do this? And with Ariana? She’s almost my age!”

“Grazia, listen to me,” his commanding voice was losing its power because I was in no mood to listen.

“She was supposed to be my friend!”

“Grazia!”

“She is mom’s goddaughter!” My voice boomed. Loud and screeching, making every piece of glass rattle. “She has mom’s name. How could you?”

Of all the people in the world, he chose her. Of all the women who would be happy to please *Don* Caputo, all the women he could pay for a few nights, he picked up the one that carried my mother’s name.

Betrayal wasn’t a taste I felt on my tongue before and I sure didn’t expect to have the first taste coming from my own blood – from my father – but that’s how I felt. The hurt made my knees buckle, but I wasn’t going to fall. I didn’t kneel to Salvatore, I damn sure wasn’t going to do it in front of Ariana. Ever.

I heard the front door opening again. Garon’s phone call was done.

“Giorgio talks a lot.” He said and then walked into the mess in our living room. He looked, he stopped, he blinked. “Having fun, old man?”

“This is not the time for your stupid jokes, son. Get out.”

“Get out? That’s how you welcome your youngest son back?”

“This. Is. Not. The. Time.” Father looked over his shoulder at Ariana. “There’s a woman indecent here.”

“Don’t get on your fucking high horse and lecture me about morals. Look at Grazia!” My brother lost his temper and that was rare. Garon was care-free, he was always calm, smiling. “Your daughter has walked in on you trying to fuck her friend. You have no right to look down on me anymore!”

“I have all the right; I am your father!”

They shouted and they kept shouting, until I wasn’t even sure what they were shouting about anymore.

“Enough!” I stepped between them, right in their faces to make sure I was heard. “This can’t be happening now. She needs to go. Father, tell her to leave.”

There was a long moment of silence, and then there was his answer. “No.”

“Excuse me?” For the first time in my life, I didn’t believe my ears.

“Ariana and I are not done for the night.” He declared, like this was just another conversation.

“Is this a joke to you?”

“Grazia, I am your father and this is my house. My guest can stay in my house if I say so.”

My throat was too sore to yell anymore. “Father, if she’s not leaving, I am.”

“No, you’re not. I forbid it. It’s about damn time you start acting like an adult.” So now I was an adult, not his little girl. “Ariana, let’s go upstairs.”

She rose to her feet and approached me with a twisted smile on her face.

“Looks like I finally found something I can do and you can’t.” Her voice was intoxicatingly sweet, like poison.

“Why would you do this?”

“You’re always in my way. I had to get to the top somehow. Now, I have to go take care of Fabiano. Move over, little girl.”

The nausea returned, only this time it wasn’t just a wave. I was overwhelmed and my stomach was convulsing.

Garon jumped forward and caught Dad by the arm. “You’re going to let your mistress talk to your daughter like that?”

“Listen to me, Garon Caputo...”

And the yelling started again, but I was done. I said all I had to say. If Ariana was *invited* to stay, then I was out. My father’s words were law – or so I was taught – and he dictated that his pleasure was above the pain and sheer humiliation it was causing me.

I turned on my heel and started running because I was done being caught in the middle of a circus. I was done being my father’s afterthought.

So I went to the only place I knew it was safe.

To the only person I wanted to see.

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Chapter 17

“The new study turned out nice.”

“It did.”

The designer I brought in did a good job. White marble and clean-cut dark furniture opened up the room, and the enlarged window finally let some light in here. No more books, no more darkness, no more feeling like I was walking into a cemetery. I was rebuilding my life starting with this fucking room.

Pietro stretched in the leather armchair. “You’re making big waves, *Don*. Once this sale is closed, our numbers are going to spike really high.”

“And when would that be? I’m tired of the fucking lawyers and their delays.”

“You wanted this power-plant to be completely legit. The paperwork takes time,” he scratched his chin and made a grimace. “Are you sure this is the right move for us?”

“You sound like my father. He didn’t believe in this idea either.”

“I’m just asking. Adrian was anything but stupid. Did he have any reason not to believe?”

“He was an old school guy. What’s your excuse?”

Pietro’s face hardened. “When you get in the energy business, you get in bed with the government. Is this wise? Energy is regulated and controlled and everyone from the minister all the way to the top will be looking at you.”

“Let them regulate. I’m not looking to cheat the law with this business, cousin. My plan is to use it to my advantage.”

“I can see the potential.”

“Then what bothers you? Talk to me, Pietro.”

“The price tag is bigger than anything you’ve ever bought and you can’t just pass this thing to someone else. It needs to stay in your name and if something happens...”

If I end up behind bars, that power-plant, the account tied to it, and everything else that has my name on the property title would end up being seized.

“It was pricey.” More than that. It took almost my entire clean money reserve. “It’s going to pay off. We get a money laundering monster that also makes profits. It’s fully staffed and we don’t even need to lift a finger.”

“Right. I still don’t like the idea of you having to work hand in hand with the government. It’s not who we are.”

I got up from my chair and walked to the window. The sea was restless tonight and the waves were biting into the shore ferociously. It was a mirror of the way I was feeling inside for days.

This power-plant wasn’t just smart business it was something I needed. Something big – a boom – to keep my mind busy. Something to make me feel again. Excitement, fear, anything was better than hollowness. Pietro was not wrong to think I was walking on a thin line between our world and the one existing on the good side of the law, but I was craving that thrill.

“The government already knows who we are. They fear Fiori already, and watch us like hawks, but we know who

has what price tag hanging on their ankles. With this business we can pay their shares above board.”

“Bold.” He came closer and punched my shoulder. “You’re one hell of a *Don*.”

“Thanks for the compliment.”

“You’re welcome, *princess*.”

“Watch it, asshole.”

“I’m serious, Salvatore. The *famiglia* is talking.”

“About what?”

“About you. Two weeks and you already made us more money than we can count.”

“I’ve made money for this family for years.”

“*Veritico*^[39], but you’ve been the head of the organization for days. It’s a good thing that you have your lieutenant’s respect and loyalty.”

“Was that ever in question?”

“Sometimes it happens.”

He was right, sometimes it did, but I wasn’t going to let this family crumble under my reign. Anyone in the organization that didn’t have respect and loyalty for the Fiori name was taken care of. There was no shovel strong enough to dig them back out.

“Anything else I should know, Pietro?”

“Do you plan on getting back into the world any time soon? Your men are itching to drink with you.” Fuck. That was the last thing on my mind. “And you have a few business calls from some interesting people.”

“Like?”

“Andrea Vivere.”

I knew that name. “He’s one of Fabiano Caputo’s tools.”

“It looks like he’s looking for new employment.”

“Go meet with him.”

“You want to piss Caputo off, huh? I’m in. He’s a piece of shit.”

Yes, he was, but Pietro and I were hating his guts for different reasons. My cousin was angered on behalf of my father, but I got a first-hand hit. Fabiano Caputo had Grazia, so I intended to have *everything else*. Andrea Vivere was just the start.

“I think I have a buyer for that new shipment we bought from Cuba?”

“The guns and grenades?”

“Yes. It’s double their market price.”

“And why don’t I have that money yet?”

“The buyer. Ivanov Gorchinsky.”

“Never heard of him.”

“He’s an Al-Qaeda empowered Chechen separatist.”

“No. We don’t sell to terrorists.”

“I thought so.”

It was a standing rule in the Italian mafia. In this fucked up world there are bad people and there are shitty, miserable, power-hungry cockroaches. The latter you either can find in fancy offices occupying official positions, the other half were in the other side of the world unleashing terror and war over innocent people. I wasn’t a fan of either.

“Are you staying for dinner, Pietro?”

“I can’t. Chiara and her boy are at my house and I don’t like leaving her alone in there. She’s too nosey.”

“They’re still at your place?”

“Yes.”

“What’s that about?”

“I don’t know, man. She doesn’t talk to me. Her husband is out of town and she said she needs some family

time, but I don't buy it."

"Look into it. If she has problems with Bruno, bring him to me." Chiara got married too fast and Bruno still had to win me over to his side.

Pietro left and the whole house turned silent again. Totto was somewhere in the kitchen lecturing the French chef I'd hired last year on how to boil the pasta properly, but that was on the other side of the house. Here, it was just me.

My nights have never been so quiet. I was always out to a club or in my apartment across town with Grazia. I didn't miss the nightlife, but fuck, I was missing her. I gave my word to never chase her again and I was going to keep it, but I still craved her with every cell in my body. I was dying to feel her skin drag across mine, her lips on my neck. Damn, I'd settle to hear her voice...

"*Sasa!*" The front door was slammed open and Grazia's voice traveled to every single room of the house. If she wouldn't have called for me a couple more times, I would have believed it was just an echo in my head.

I ran to the foyer to convince myself she was there and stopped the moment my eyes found her. Yannis was there too, holding Grazia up by her elbow and she looked like she was about to collapse if it wasn't for him.

"What the fuck happened?" I asked Yannis, but my eyes were on her.

"I found Miss Caputo running a few streets away from here. She was looking for you. I figured I should give her a ride before she gets herself into trouble."

"Good thinking. Leave us."

"Yes, *Don.*"

Yannis left and closed the door behind him and only when he was gone, Grazia looked at me. Her beautiful blue eyes were red-rimmed. She'd been crying.

"Why are you here?" I didn't move. Something in me was still stunned she was here and I didn't want to spook her.

“Salvatore, I know you don’t want to see me...”

“Why are you here? What happened to you?”

“I’m sorry, *Sasa*. I was in Milano. He... I’m sorry.”

“*He* what?” I explode, my mind thinking about all the bullshit that could have brought her to me in this state. “What the fuck happened to you?”

“I walked in on my father having sex with Ariana.”

My jaw dropped. I was not one to be fazed by gossip, but this was unexpected.

Damn that Bernoulli girl. She always looked for ways to fuck with Grazia’s head. God knows I had to peel her off my cock a couple of times.

“Grazi, come here.”

She didn’t need convincing to hide in my arms. The moment her head landed on my chest, I felt my heart beating again. It was good and terrifying. I knew for a long time Grazia was mine and I was hers, but I never understood the power she had over me until I lost her.

“Oh, Salvatore, I’ve made a mistake.”

“Someone saw you coming here?”

“I don’t know. I don’t care. I left you.” She hid her face in my shirt. “Do you know how many nights I was awake feeling guilty for seeing you, thinking that I was betraying Father? I hated that.”

“I know.”

“I asked him to kick her out Salvatore, and he said he’s not done yet. He picked her over me while I’d picked him over you. That was my mistake.” Her voice broke and so did my heart.

Fabiano Caputo was a piece of shit. I knew it, the Mafia knew it, even some of his sons did, but in Grazia’s eyes he always remained a hero on a pedestal. I could never bring myself to shatter that admiration in her eyes when she spoke about him.

All the patience I had with Fabiano has just run the fuck out. It was time for him to pay for all the women in my life that he had hurt.

“Stop crying, Grazia. It makes my blood boil.”

“Did I ruin everything, Salvatore? Did I lose you for good?”

“No.” I answered in one breath. “The world could end tonight and you’d still have me, Grazia Caputo. You’ll always have me.”

I took vows in church that weren’t as true as that. Grazia was my air, my life. She was my world. The sun that showed up in the sky every morning, the fog rolling down the city on autumn nights, the wildness of the sea, she was all that beauty. She was mine.

Some other men might love some other women, but what we had put love to shame. We could make each other happy more than anything and we also could bring each other so much misery, it was unbearable. We were one soul split in half.

“I can’t go back there, Salvatore.”

“Why didn’t you go to one of your brothers?”

She turned to ice.

“You want me to leave.”

“No, but I want to know why did you come here?”

“Why... because I needed... because...” she was choking on such a simple question. Maybe because she avoided the words I was expecting to hear like the plague for the past four years. “I j-just wanted to get out of there and I need you.”

“Why me, Grazia?”

“Because you’re *you*! Because you’re the only one that has ever made me a priority.”

“Grazia.” This was her last warning.

“Because I love you, Salvatore. Is that what you want to hear?”

“It’s a start.”

She opened her giant doe eyes, blue like polished turquoise stones and pinned me down with them.

“I didn’t have to say the words for them to be true. I gave you my heart, my body, and everything in between. That should be enough.”

“Don’t get sassy with me now, Grazi. I know you do, but it feels damn good to hear it from your lips.”

Speaking of her lips...

I lowered to her level and pulled her mouth over mine. A lost man in the desert finding water would not feel all the things I did when I touched her. Her unmistakable aroma poured on my lips like summer rain.

One of my hands grabbed her jaw and kept her in place while I devoured every drop of desire off her lips.

“I’ve missed you, *Tesoro mio*.”

She jumped in my arms effortlessly and circled her legs around my waist.

“Salvatore, I need you. Take off your shirt.”

“No.”

She pulled back, uncertainty all over her face.

“No?”

“You’re sad and you’re angry, Grazia. I will take you to bed to sleep and we’ll talk tomorrow.”

“I want you. I want to make love to you. What is there to talk about, Fiori?”

“I meant the words I’ve said to you, Grazi. I’m not chasing anymore. Not you, not anyone.”

“I came to you, didn’t I? I’m here.”

“But will you stay?” My voice was too harsh and I bowed to kiss her forehead to soften the words. “Next time I take you, you will be my wife.”

“Oh, Salvatore.” She exhaled.

“We’ll talk tomorrow. Let’s get you to bed.”

I carried her up the stairs and neither of us said anything anymore. We had enough time to fight and disagree, because I was planning on giving her my entire damn life, but tonight, I just wanted to take her to bed.

~ ~ ~

I woke up because Grazia was shaking me.

“What do you want, *Tesoro*? It’s early.”

“Totto has brought us coffee and someone is calling you.”

I opened my eyes and found her face only inches away from mine. She was most beautiful in the morning, with sun on her skin and messy hair.

“*Buongiorno, Tesoro.*”

“You should really answer. It’s been ringing for a while.”

I looked at the damn thing and decided to ignore it. “Tell me you love me, Grazia.”

“I love you.”

“Tell me you’ll marry me.”

She sighed. “I want to, but...”

“No. I want to hear a definitive answer.”

“Salvatore, I’m just afraid that we’re reckless. In our world, problems are not resolved in court rooms. It’s guns and bullets, Sasa, and I don’t want others to get hurt.”

“Fuck that. If you want to keep my hands clean, it’s a little too late for that. You know the rule.”

A man that wasn’t stained by blood, couldn’t lead a famiglia. It was written in a code, we both knew it.

“Yes, but that’s not what I mean. I don’t want to cause trouble. For anyone.”

“Grazia, this is about you and me. Just us. Marry me.”

“Salvatore...”

“Marry. Me.”

“So is this it? Either I marry you, or you send me back to my father?”

God was witness that I adored this woman, but she had the gift of driving me insane.

“Do you really think I would let anyone hurt you? Upset you? If you don’t want to see Fabiano ever again, I’ll take care of that. Wanting to marry you – like I should have years ago – is something else entirely.”

“Salvatore, I love you. I want to be with you. I’ve never wanted anyone else. I just...”

“No. No but, no just.” The hesitance on her face was killing me. “My phone keeps ringing, Grazi. It’s probably Pietro, and Yannis, and every lieutenant in the *famiglia* calling to say that your brothers are looking for you. It’s been long enough, they know where you are. By now the entire city knows where you are. There will be war, there will be yelling, there will be fights, and there will be men going at each other’s throats. That was decided when you came to sleep in my bed. Even if you go back to Giovanni now, he would still want to put a bullet in my knee out of principle. Fuck, Giorgio would probably want to do it for the fun of it. I’m ok with all that shit, but I want you to wear my fucking name and be my fucking wife when we get out there to face the world.”

“I’m scared. I love you and I love my brothers and I don’t want you to start shooting at each other!”

“It happened before.”

“That was just ego. What you’re proposing is war.”

“*Mio cuore sanguine per te, Grazia*^[40]. In how many ways do I have to say it for you to understand? You said yes to me a thousand times before. You promised to be my wife. What the fuck do I have to do to make you say it one more time? Marry me.”

She looked up at the ceiling looking for answers. Her body stiffened on the mattress next to me and she even stopped breathing for a few seconds. That short moment, so short it didn’t count in a lifetime, was the most excruciating I’ve ever lived.

Finally, the wait passed and Grazia took a deep breath.

“Yes.”

That’s all I needed. The church, the vows, that was just formality. Grazia Caputo has just become my wife. Here in this bed from where she left me only days ago.

“Tell me again.”

“Sasa.” There were sparkling tears, but no sadness, or regret. Finally, she was free of all that, and for the first time in years, I saw the Grazia I grew up loving looking back at me. Completely in love. Completely mine.

My chest fucking cracked, opened, and sucked her in next to my heart.

“Tell me, Grazi.”

Her hands grabbed my face.

“I will marry you. No matter what happens, I’ll marry you.”

She kissed me, but it wasn’t anywhere near enough.

“It was about time you came to your senses, *Tesoro*.”

The perfect harmony in the room was broken as fast as it appeared, when Pietro bulged in like a bull at the corrida. He was red in the face, definitely angry, and I was ready to wipe off that ugly look he was giving Grazia.

“*Che cazzo*^[41], Salvatore?” He barked with hostility.

“It’s too early for your moods. Get out.”

Grazia had a hard night and she didn’t need anyone else to add to that.

“You should get out of the bed, cousin. There are seven bullets out there waiting to get in the back of your head. I would have told you as much on the phone if you’d have bothered to answer.”

“I can handle her brothers. Later.” I stressed the last word in hopes he’d get his face out of my fucking bedroom.

“No, *Don Fiori*, it doesn’t work like that. You don’t get to stir shit up, send us into a war with another crime family, and not talk to me about it. I’m not leaving.”

“The only reason you’re still here standing at the end of my bed is that Grazia isn’t naked. Otherwise, I would have kicked you out through the fucking wall.” I looked at my side to see Grazi trying to make herself small under the covers. “You didn’t say hello to her, Pietro.”

His jaw locked. “I know I didn’t.”

“Pietro.”

“She *shouldn’t* be here. You two fucking things out in secret for years is one thing, but playing with everyone’s lives because princess is bored is very – *very* – different.”

It took a split second for me to turn into an animal. I saw red and charged Pietro before he even saw me getting out of bed.

“What did I tell you before, cousin?” The growl came out through my teeth. “Back on the docks, what did I tell you?”

He wasn’t scared – we wrestled every time we had something to settle, sometimes until our noses got bloody – but he knew he crossed a line.

“Not to talk about Grazia like this.”

“Yes.”

“Get the fuck off me.” He pushed back. “Grazia, I’m sorry.”

“It’s ok.” Her answer didn’t please me because I saw a flash of sadness on her face. “Pietro is right, Salvatore.”

“Yes, I’m right. There was a shooting last night. Gaspino sent people out looking for you, they run into some of our guys and it turned ugly. Grazia, you two need to break this off before we have a massacre in our back yard.” Pietro got closer to the bed to look down on Grazia. “Are you willing to risk that? One of your brothers getting hurt? Or Salvatore?”

“No, of course not.”

“Then leave this house and never come back. I like you, *piccino*^[42], but you’re the enemy.”

I felt my blood freezing. Pietro was on my side. He lived his life being on my side and if there was one thing he had problems with, it was sharing. Especially with a Caputo. He had problems sharing his sister with Goliath, he was always a little bothered with how high the pedestal I’ve put Grazia on was, and I let it slide for most of our lives because he was still green. Still had things to learn. But now he jumped the fence and I wasn’t going to give him a chance to do it again.

“Pietro Leon.” The sound of his name echoed. “Don’t *make* me cut off your tongue. You’re my brother, Pietro, and my second in command, and the only motherfucker that can get away with this bullshit you’re throwing at me and still live to talk about it. I’ll always listen to your opinion and I respect your advice, but when it comes to Grazia, you really need to learn to keep your fucking mouth shut.”

“Salvatore...”

“Don’t interrupt me. She’s not leaving this house. I don’t care how many Mafiosi armies I have to fight. The damage is done, Pietro. Our decision is made.” *She said she’ll marry me.* “Fight by my side or walk away.”

“Yeah, sure, I can leave. I can pack my bags, move somewhere in the mainland, maybe open a fucking bed and

breakfast.” He punched my shoulder. “We don’t leave family behind, motherfucker, but I still don’t like this. You don’t need this now. You just stepped in as *Don*, you have a lot in the works. And I don’t like the idea of having to shoot her brothers, man. I used to like them, I don’t want to be the one to kill them. Maybe just Goliath.”

His mood lightened, but in the corner of my eye I saw every ounce of color drain from Grazia’s face.

“Easy, Pietro. We’re keeping the guns cold.”

“You took Grazia. They’re going to want retribution.”

I was sure about that. My hope was that Giovanni would prefer fists over pistols, because I could never aim at someone Grazia loved, but I wasn’t sure they had a problem aiming at me.

“We’re going to manage.”

“And Fabiano?”

“If Fabiano wants to go head to head with me, then I will have no problem ending his miserable life. It should have been done a long time ago.” I said too much. My anger and hate were going beyond what he did to my Grazi and this wasn’t the time to burden her with all that misery from the past. “Call the lieutenants, I want to meet all of them tonight at restaurant Primavera. I need to talk to my people.”

“Sure thing. What else do you need from me?”

I glanced at Grazia. “Find me a priest, one that can be here tomorrow. And find yourself a tuxedo.”

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Chapter 18

Every girl grows up imagining how her wedding would be, or so some people think. When I thought about my wedding, I had a million scenarios in mind. Sometimes I would imagine a carpet of red roses, sometimes all white, sometimes fireworks and a golden chariot. Just one thing always stayed the same – the man at the end of the aisle. In every version, in every scenario, I knew that Salvatore would be there waiting for me.

My wedding day was nothing like what I'd imagined growing up. I had on an off-white dress that Chiara pinned in the back to fit me, not a Chantilly lace princess gown; there was no string quartet, no doves, no grandeur. There was no one on my side of the room. Seven brothers and none of them was there to give me away to the man I was going to spend my life with. *That* was breaking my heart more than anything else, but I shoved it down. Tomorrow I will think about how I had to get married alone, but today I had to allow myself to be happy.

After all these years, after we'd been broken apart, after I'd pushed him away and ran back to him a million times, he was still waiting for me at the end of the aisle. Well, he was waiting for me in his living room with a priest, Pietro, Chiara, and her adorable son, Francesco.

I kept waiting for the doubts to kick in, or the guilt of putting my happiness above my family to show up, but it never happened. I was ready to run to him one last time.

A knock on the door made me look that way and Pietro walked in. There was no tuxedo, but he still looked dashing in jeans and a crisp, white shirt. Most days Pietro looked like a GQ cover model with his green, sparkly eyes and chiseled jaw and today was no different. There was a shadow over his face though.

“Grazia?”

“Yes.”

“Umm, the priest is ready to start. We’re waiting for you.”

“Ok.” I nodded, gripping the white daffodils Totto got me for a bouquet. “Let’s go.”

He didn’t move.

“It’s ok if you need another second.”

“No, I’m ok. We can go.” But when I wanted to walk past him, Pietro caught me by the elbow and kept me in the room.

“Grazia, how sure are you about this?”

“What?”

“How sure are you, because once you step in there and say those vows, there’s no way back.”

“Are you really asking me this now?”

“Look, your family is pissed, but if you go back right now, the dust will settle eventually. Giovani will ask Salvatore for some money to let the family know a debt was paid and that’s it.”

“I-I don’t even know what to say to this.”

“I’m just thinking about my cousin. He’s one and you have seven brothers.”

I tensed. What he was saying was that Caputo and Fiori were strong *famiglias* – equals – but if seven powerful, rich men put a target on Salvatore’s head, a lot might volunteer to do the dirty job and put a bullet in the man that was about to become my husband.

“Look, Pietro, I get it. You don’t like me and I understand why. I would hate anyone who puts Salvatore in danger too, but you need to stand down.”

“Stand down?” He was really offended.

“Yes. I lived over twenty years worshiping a man who threw me out of my own home to fuck his whore. I love my brothers, I do, but after all the things I’ve learned about my father, I just don’t... the only one who ever loved *just* me is Salvatore. And I love him and for once I’ll just think about our love and not anyone else.”

“Grazia, I know you do. You love him and Salvatore adores you, but this goes beyond the two of you.”

“Don’t you think I know that? Don’t you think that for the past four years I’ve been terrified of someone finding out about us?” I had to stop to inhale sharply because the rant ate up all the air in my lungs. “I lost sleep over it. I cried over it, but here we are now. I know what marrying Salvatore will mean, but I also know that I would never let him fight my battles alone. If my brothers or anyone else would try to put a bullet in Salvatore, they’d have to shoot me first.”

“Grazia, listen.”

“No, you listen. You have it in your head that I’m just throwing the man I love – the only man I’ve ever loved – to the wolves, just because I had a fight with my daddy, but remember that I came into this world ready to marry him. *Adrian* thought I was good for Salvatore because he knew that I will always have his back. This is what I will vow today and I intend to keep that vow until my dying day.” My eyes locked on his. “I’m starting to question if you’d do the same.”

He stepped back like I’d just started spitting fire in his face.

“Tread lightly, Grazia. You’re not married to my *Don* yet.” If words could cut, I’d be bleeding. “Salvatore is not only my boss, he’s my cousin. He’s blood. He’s family. Don’t you dare...”

“What? Say you won’t stay by his side? I’m sorry Pietro, but you look like you’re about to bolt out the door.”

“I just lost my uncle. I don’t want to put another Fiori in the ground.”

“If that happens, Pietro,” I swallowed to lubricate my throat, “bring two coffins because I’ll go down with him.”

We stared each other down for a long time. It felt like forever. I wasn’t sure if it was a battle of wills or he was just trying to convince himself to let me go past the door. Whatever the case, I won. Pietro exhaled, let his head down, and walked away from the door.

“Grazia.”

“Yes.”

“I don’t have an ounce of resentment for you. I know it seems like I don’t want you and Salvatore to be together, but it’s my job to worry about him.”

“As his second in command?”

“As the only family he has left.” He put a hand over my shoulder and pulled me into an awkward hug. “Now he has you too, *piccino*.”

“Yes. Should we go now?”

“Oh, we should. He’s going to take down the door looking for you any minute .”

He led me to the living room and the atmosphere felt lighter between us. I found Salvatore with my eyes as soon as I walked into the living room. He had a crisp black suit on and Chiara was fixing his bowtie. My heart slammed into my chest wall like it was trying to get to Salvatore and letting myself go with the pull, I walked faster.

There was no place for formality at a living room wedding with two guests, so instead of patiently waiting for me, Salvatore pulled me into a hug as soon as he could reach me.

“*Tesoro.*” He whispered in my ear.

“Hello, *Sasa.*”

“A few more minutes and you’ll be my Mrs. Fiori.”

Just thinking about it sent a shiver down my spine and I wasn’t sure if it was a good or a bad thing.

“I think you forget how long a catholic service lasts. It’s going to be more than a few minutes.”

“Father Primo agreed to give us a shortened version. Are you ready for this, Grazi?”

“What? Be your wife or tear Palermo in half between organized crime leaders?”

“The only people that matter today are you and me.”

“Then, yes, *Sasa.*” I took his face in my hands. “I’ve been ready to marry you for a long time.”

He nodded, I did too, and then he called the priest in front of us. The service was shorter, just like *Sasa* said, but even like that I didn’t hear one word because I felt locked up in a bubble. A bubble where just Salvatore and I existed. His hands held mine the entire time like he was afraid I’d start running for the door any moment, but my feet were bolted to the floor. I couldn’t leave him now, not even if the sky would fall down upon us.

We said I do, he kissed the bride, and that was it. We were married. We were husband and wife who vowed to never leave each other’s sides, *in sickness and in health, to love each other, to honor each other, to comfort each other, forsaking all others.*

What surprised me the most was how normal it all felt. I’d expected something to change – something to feel *different* – but it didn’t. Our kiss felt just the same. It was possessive

and consuming like always. I didn't feel like I belonged to Salvatore more than I did before. Everything was the same.

Everything was the same because I've always been his. Everything was the same because our souls were married for two decades.

"My Grazi." His voice vibrated through me. "My wife."

"I'm your wife."

"You're my wife."

We spoke the words into existence.

"What now, Sasa?"

"We're Italian, *Tesoro*. Now we eat." I glanced to the dining room to see that Totto and Salvatore's chef had put together a table fit for a royal banquet.

"Will you dance with me, *husband*?"

"Dance with you?"

"No pointe shoes, don't worry."

He laughed. I haven't seen him so truly happy in a long, *long* time.

"I will dance with you, Grazia, but first I need to make a phone call."

"Now?"

"I need to call Giovanni and let him you're my wife."

A little arrow of worry and sadness made its way into our bubble. My father would be angry but my brothers? Sure, they'd feel anger too, but also betrayal that I've excluded them from this moment. It was the price I had to pay for getting the man I love.

I doubted the fact that my feelings for Salvatore were right for many years. I feared to feel all the love I had for him because I didn't want to put my family through this, but after what happened when I came back from Milano, there wasn't anything that I was surer was right. For my father, I was last in

line, coming right behind his mistress. I knew my brothers loved me just as I loved them, but they had wives, and problems, and a crime family to run.

But here? For Salvatore I was the only one, just like he was for me. I would never regret what we did today. I was Grazia Fiori, and I was damn proud to stand by my husband. I just hoped that my family would have a teaspoon of compassion for me and one day we'd be able to look each other in the eyes again.

“Ok, Sasa, let's make that phone call.”

“I can manage, Grazi. You don't have to be there.”

“Yes, I do. I have to be the one to tell him. I owe them that much.”

“You don't owe them...”

“Salvatore, please.”

“Anything.” His lips touched my forehead. “Anything for you, *Tesoro*.”

Chiara and Pietro offered to walk out the priest while we retreated into Salvatore's study. He sat in the chair behind the desk and I settled in his lap. I knew Giovanni's phone number by heart, so I just dialed, not willing to lose any more time.

“Caputo.” He answered briskly.

“Gio, it's me.”

There was a long moment of silence before he spoke again. I heard the mumbled voices in the background dialing down, so he probably walked somewhere private.

“Grazia, I swear to all that's holy, when I put my hands on you...” he stopped to catch his breath. “*Sorella*, I know what happened with Father. Garon told me everything, and I understand. You had to get out of there.”

“Yes, I did. He was with Ariana, Giovanni. Ariana! He took my childhood friend in his bedroom to have sex with her.”

“Trust me, Father and I had a screaming match about it. He knows he’s in the wrong.” He sighed. “You should have come to me, Grazia. When you walked out the house, you should have come straight to my place. I don’t know what devil has pushed you to go exactly the opposite way, *on the other side of town*, but it was a very bad move.”

“It wasn’t a bad move. I need to feel safe and wanted and... it wasn’t a bad move.”

“Care to explain why a man you *haven’t seen* in almost five years made you feel all that, Grazia?”

A knot formed in my throat but I had to push through it. “You don’t want me to answer to that, Giovanni.”

“Right. I fucking don’t. It’s my fault. I should have kept my eye on you not just trust that father would take care of you.”

“Giovani, I’m fine.”

He breathed and I could hear the relief on the other side of the phone. “That’s all that matters. Is *Don Fiori* there?”

I looked at Salvatore and he took over the conversation.

“I’m here, Giovanni.”

“My sister is fine?”

“She is. Whatever the problems on the table are, I would never hurt her.”

“That’s your saving grace. She needs to come home right now and then we can figure this out. Like men.”

Like men. He means with bullets, and screams, and fights, and egos.

“She’s not coming.”

“Fiori, don’t make this mess worse.”

“She. Is. Not. Coming.”

“Salvatore, listen to me. *I know.* I know why our families split and I feel the same anger about it as you do.”

“This is a conversation we should have had a long time ago.” Sasa replied to the cryptic words my brother had said.

“Yes, but we didn’t and now things are complicated. Grazia is the most important person in this family and I want her to be happy, I want her to feel safe and wanted, but not with you. That can’t happen. It’s my job.”

“Giovani!” I cut in. My courage gathered slowly and I was worried that if I didn’t say the words now, I’d just lose it. “Salvatore and I got married.” There was no immediate reaction from Giovanni and I knew that was worse than yelling.

“Grazia Paulina Caputo, this better be a very bad, unfunny joke.”

“It’s Grazia Fiori now, Gio.”

“It’s going to be the Fiori widow soon. Salvatore is this true?”

“It’s true. Grazia and I got married today.”

“How fucking dare you?” Giovanni growled. “My sister? You married her? I had sympathy for you, motherfucker! All these years I tried my best to keep our families at peace and stay out of your way because I thought of you, and your pain, and the fact that I’ve watched you grow up. I kept shut every time I had a reason to roll over you like a damn hurricane, even when your father...”

“My father did nothing!” Salvatore was starting to lose his temper too.

“Adrian tried to get Giorgio in prison for ten years when he was under investigation for arms smuggling. He called the prosecutor on the case and offered information to have my brother locked up to hurt Father. I did nothing then, but I won’t let you drag my little sister into a marriage.”

“Watch your mouth, Caputo. I married Grazia because I love her and I won’t let anyone change that.”

“You love her, that’s your excuse?” His voice got low and I knew Giovanni well enough to know that he had reached his limit. He was beyond furious. “You just cut her ties with

her family. My children are asking to see their aunt and now that won't happen, because years of hate can't just disappear. In a few months, Rebecca will give me another child and my sister won't be there. She's your wife, but she's orphaned now. How is that love?"

I didn't realize I was crying until Salvatore brushed a tear away from my cheek.

"Gio, you're my brother."

"Yes, and you didn't care about that. You ran away and got married to a man you were forbidden from seeing. I can't turn the other cheek, Grazia. Not to this."

"So what does this mean?" I asked him, my voice breaking with every word. My heart too.

"Fiori." He called for Salvatore. "Consider the Caputo *famiglia* hostile. I suggest you stay in your side of town or start learning how to look over your shoulder."

The line went dead and I flinched. My brothers were never violent with me but that conversation felt a lot like a slap across the face. I wasn't surprised, but it didn't hurt any less.

"*Tesoro*, are you alright?"

"Yes."

"That's why I didn't want you to be here for this call."

"I knew this would happen and I will be sad about it tomorrow. Today is our wedding day."

"One day I'll give you the wedding that you deserve. With flowers, and music, in front of the whole world. When all this bullshit with your family is over, I'm going to give you that."

I leaned down and kissed my husband, feeling his rough lips on mine and allowed myself to enjoy it because this *was* our wedding day. The both of us was all that mattered.

"I don't need another wedding. I just need my husband to dance with me."

“Let’s dance then.”



Salvatore danced with me to six Andrea Bocelli songs, each more beautiful than the other and he hated every single one. Sasa liked to watch me dance, but both his legs were made of wood. He still did it though. *For me.*

I didn’t have much of an appetite, but enjoyed the cake that was served because it was raspberry mousse and Sasa remembered it was my favorite. Chiara forced me to have two slices and she gave a speech, even if Salvatore and Pietro encouraged her not to, but I appreciated her kind words. Ariana and Pina were the only friends I was allowed to have growing up because their family was associated with mine and they were trustworthy enough, but now Ariana was entertaining my father after dark and I didn’t dare to call Pina yet. Chiara was the only one I had left. It was one more thing that pissed off my brothers, and by that, I mean Goliath.

When the night started to fall, Salvatore practically kicked his cousins out of the house and while he walked them to the door, I snuck upstairs to his bedroom and locked myself in the bathroom. Chiara did as much last-minute shopping as she could all day, but I only had a few changes of clothes. The one thing she did manage to get me was a beautiful set of white lace lingerie with a balconette bra and thigh high stockings, so I slipped into that and threw the matching silk robe over it.

“Grazi?” Salvatore called for me from the bedroom.

“I’ll be out in a second.”

I washed my hands and checked myself in the mirror. I was no blushing bride, but by my standards, I looked good enough. There was no sadness in the blue of my irises, no bags under my eyes, and my dark hair – even if a little messy – looked nice the way it cascaded down over the virginal white.

I took a deep breath and finally turned the knob to open the door. Sasa was on the other side, his back turned to me, and he was taking off the cuffs of his shirt. I couldn't help but admire the way his muscular back filled the fabric. God gave him humanly beauty, but the gym turned him into a beast and now all of him was mine. Irrevocably mine. The thought ignited the flame of desire in my gut.

“Sasa.”

He turned on his heel and stopped breathing. He looked at me just like that a million times, same hungry eyes, same flared nostrils, but that look never failed to make me feel the most beautiful girl in the world. He wanted me and he didn't bother hiding it one bit.

“Come here, *mia moglie*.” I walked closer and he caught my hands in his. “Every time I look at you, Grazi, you take my breath away. You're my first and my last.”

“You're my first, *my only*, and my last.”

He didn't add to his comment like I did and that was alright. I didn't want to know and it didn't matter.

My arms circled his waist and I let my head fall back to give him access to my skin. His mouth found the right spot on my neck, the one that made me turn into a puddle, because no one knew my body like my husband.

Salvatore tilted my chin up to look at him and I felt my cheeks burning.

“This is crazy.” I whispered. “I don't know why I'm nervous. It's us. You and me. We've had sex hundreds of times.”

I expected him to laugh, but instead, he kissed me softly.

“Yes, it's us, it's you and me. But you never had sex with your husband before.” His playful wink made me smile. “Your husband that loves you like a mad man and would give you the stars in the sky if you'd ask.”

“Sasa.”

“Tell me you love me.”

“I love you.” I said in one breath. “I’ve always loved you.”

His hand traveled from my collarbone to my breast and he traced the contour of my bra before taking my tit into his fist. He squeezed and rubbed his thumb above my nipple. That was all it took to soak my panties.

“Are you ready for me, wife?”

“I always am.”

“Nervous?”

“Not when you touch me like that.” Getting up on my tiptoes, I attacked his mouth, caressing his tongue with mine and realized I was wrong before. Something did change. I never felt so complete. I never felt so much a part of something as I felt in this marriage.

“Grazi.” His voice was low and thick. He couldn’t wait anymore.

“Kneel in front of your wife, *Don.*”

He was the Don. Outside this room he would never take an order, but in here he was slave to our marriage.

Salvatore lowered to the floor on one knee and took my panties down with him. He lifted my leg and threw it over his shoulder before burying his face between my thighs. His tongue made its path over my clit and I cried out his name. Every stroke of that blasphemous tongue weakened my knees little by little.

“Salvatore! *Amore mio!*”

“Talk to me, Grazi. You know I love when you do that.”

I was panting, but forced a few words out. “W-what do you want to hear?”

“How good you feel. I want to hear my wife scream her pleasure. Wake up the house, *Tesoro.* Wake up the whole damn city.”

He opened up my lips with his fingers and started devouring me again. He was eager, like an inmate having his last meal, and it electrified every nerve in my body.

“Sasa, I feel like my whole body is on fire. This is what you do to me. Every time. You make me burn!”

“Burn then. Come on my mouth, *Tesoro*.”

His commanding voice and the flicker of his tongue sent me down the path to climax. I whimpered and sunk my nails in his shoulders to be able to keep myself up.

“Grazi, I need to fuck you.”

“Yes.”

Salvatore got up to his feet. We started walking to the bed in a tangled embrace and he fell over me, pushing my body down into the mattress.

“Sasa, take off your pants.”

“Why the rush?”

“I need you inside me. It’s been so long.”

“Too long.” He lost all his clothes and came back on top of me.

“Do we need a condom?” I raised my eyebrow. Maybe it was only too long since he’d been with *me*, so I had to ask.

“What? No. Are you getting jealous now?”

“We were apart for a long time.”

“Don’t piss me off. Not today, Grazi. Tomorrow you can start to fight with me again, question why I come home late, all of that. I can take all your crazy. I love your crazy, but save it for tomorrow.”

“No other women?”

Salvatore growled. “I have my hands full with you. I don’t have time for other women.” He kissed my lips and I smiled. “Open your legs for me.”

He guided his length to my entrance and penetrated me slowly. The moment his hips touched mine I felt whole. I

haven't realized how many days have passed since the last time we'd been together or how much I've missed it. The intimacy wrapped around me and my heart swell with joy.

"Move faster, *Sasa*."

"Not tonight."

"No? Why?"

"Do you have any idea how long I've been waiting for this? To have you in my bed, my wife, forever? No, we won't rush tonight. I don't have to give you a quick fuck in that small apartment before sending you back home, or make you ride me in my car between ballet classes, because tomorrow you'll be in my bed. So we're making love. *Slowly*."

"Slowly." I repeated. I wanted him rough but I also wanted to savor this moment. We both needed time to feel this.

Salvatore moved on top of me and I waved my hips to meet him every time he entered my body. The pleasure built up slowly with every thrust and I felt it all over. I was filled with goosebumps and my nipples were tightened. The tension was stretching me out to new limits I didn't know I could reach.

Sasa was a god on top of me. His muscles were glistening, covered in a sheer sweat, and he was piercing me with his eyes. I felt the love in them and I saw the visceral pleasure I was giving him.

"Salvatore, I need you to come inside me. I want you to mark me. Make me your wife in the way no vow could."

"Damn it."

He wasn't going to let go until I did, I knew that. He always was a generous lover and he knew exactly what spots to hit to make me lose my head. It took him less than a minute to fuck me into orgasm again and I came, arching my back and grabbing the sheets underneath me.

When the second wave of pleasure hit me, Salvatore crumbled too. He exploded and I felt his hot jet inside of me. It felt petrifyingly perfect.

“I love you, *mio marito*^[43].”

“I love *you*, Grazia Paulina *Fiori*.” He kissed me harshly. “You’ll be here when I wake up.”

I smiled and rolled my eyes. “If I don’t change my mind over night and ask for an annulment.”

It was a bad joke and I knew it the moment I saw a vein pop on his neck.

“Grazia, I’m not above spanking your ass red.”

“Calm down.”

“Don’t tell me to calm down when you talk stupid!”

“Don’t yell at me on my wedding night!” I shouted back in his face. Instead of keeping the fight going, he started laughing. “What’s so funny, *Fiori*?”

“I’m still inside you and you’re fighting me.” Still laughing, he moved under the covers and tucked me in with him. “You’re going to make my life hell, Mrs. *Fiori*.”

That sounded like a plan.

I flexed my neck to be able to reach his nipple with my mouth and bit it. “Yes, I will. And you’ll love it.”

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Chapter 19

When I woke up, I was scared to open my eyes. A part of me was petrified that yesterday was a dream, but then I felt Salvatore's hand brushing over my forehead.

"Are you watching me sleep, Sasa?"

"I'm waiting for you to wake up so we can go."

"Go?" My eyes snapped open. "Where are we going?"

He cupped my face and kissed me.

"*Mia bella ragazza.* [\[44\]](#)"

"Salvatore where do you want to take me?"

"Honeymoon." That didn't explain much.

"We can't go anywhere. You have your business and other... problems." My family. My family was the other problem.

"The business can wait, but my wife can't."

I giggled, delighted with his words. "Sasa, I really don't think it's the right time. Plus, I only have a couple changes of clothes."

"Good." He stretched to the nightstand, grabbed his wallet, and pulled out a credit card. "You can shop where we're going."

“And where is that?”

“You’ll see when we get there. Now go get yourself pretty, baby.”

“No morning sex?”

He smirked and I could read the promises in it. “Grazi, I’ll fuck you until your knees give out once we’re on the plane. Move it.”

Since I only had a few pieces of clothing, packing was not a problem, so we were out of the house pretty fast. Salvatore drove us to the private terminal of the airport and we were escorted to a plane that was on standby. Yannis and a few of Sasa’s men were there too.

“We’re taking guards on our honeymoon?”

“No.” He frowned. “I can take care of you.”

“I know you can.” I turned to the guys. “Hello, Yannis.”

He smiled. *Smiled*. I wasn’t sure his face muscles could do that.

“Good morning, Grazia Fiori.” He was taking it much better than Pietro. “Congratulations on your wedding, Boss. It was risky, but it’s also worth it.”

They shook hands and then Salvatore sent me to the plane with the flight attendant that was waiting for us. That meant Yannis wasn’t here just to congratulate us, they had business to talk. There was no need for him to ask me to leave and be discreet. I was raised in the house of a *Don*, I knew the drill.

I was looking through a movie list when Salvatore came back, but I couldn’t decide because I didn’t know how long the flight would take.

“Are you good, *Tesoro*?”

“Perfect.” I glanced out the window. “Was that important?”

“I just had some instructions to give him and he was in the area. Nothing important.”

“It never is.”

Salvatore’s brows gathered into a scowl. “You have something to say, Grazia?”

“Hmm?”

“You seem pissed.”

“I’m not.”

“Don’t start our honeymoon with a lie. Talk to me.”

“It’s nothing. I just... I always wanted to be married to you, but I never loved the idea of spending my life with a *Don*.” He stilled and I waved my hand to dismiss that fear. “It doesn’t matter. I just know what this life means. The secrecy and the police raids, I know their coming. The business in the house is what I hated most, especially when I was little and I could hear some poor guy who missed his payments screaming from our basement. Please don’t do that.”

“I won’t.” He answered right away. “Our house is your kingdom, baby. You’re the *Don* there.”

“Right.”

He sighed.

“What now?”

“What about the other things, Salvatore? Will I just sit home and wonder where you are for the rest of my life? I hate that. I need more.”

“More?”

“You told me you want me to be your queen, so I need you to let me. Don’t keep things from me.”

“*Tesoro*, if I keep something from you it’s because I don’t want you to worry.”

“I can handle it. My father and brothers never talked to me about their lives and look where we are now. I just want to feel like I’m your partner, that’s all.”

“You are.” He sighed. “Yannis was here because a few days ago we got wind that there’s some movement in Rome. A new General Prosecutor was appointed and they’d probably look into doing some arrests. We’re cleaning the warehouses and keeping it down for a while just to be sure there won’t be any problems.”

My stomach dropped. “Oh, my God.”

“That face you have is exactly why I don’t want you to know about the business. It’s nothing. The *milizia nazionale*^[45] sweeps through Sicily once in a while, but I know how to handle it. You don’t have to think about that, especially now. The plane will take off in a few minutes.”

“You still haven’t told me where we are going.”

“Because it’s a surprise, woman. Stop nagging.”

“I won’t be able to think about anything else until we arrive.”

“What if I give you something to think about?” Oh, that sounded promising. “What if I put my cock inside you to keep you busy, huh?”

“Big words, *Don*.”

He picked me up from my chair and threw me over his shoulder without a word, walking to the back of the plane. The same small and cute flight attendant that helped me settle cut him off.

“Mr. Fiori, you should go back to your seat and buckle up.”

“Out of my way, Agatha. I’m going to make love to my wife now.”

I blushed, but I did nothing to try and stop him.

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We landed in Paris a few hours later and I was already exhausted. My legs – used to hours and hours of hardcore training – were like jelly under me after Salvatore’s intense love making. So much so, he carried me out of the airport, all the way to the stretched limo waiting for us.

“I could have walked.” I said when Salvatore climbed in the car and placed me in his lap.

“Really?” His half smile was too cocky for his own good. “It looks to me like I’ve fucked all the strength out of you.

“You have a very high opinion of yourself, Fiori.”

“How could I not when my wife just shouted my name from the top of her lungs.”

I laughed and bowed down to kiss him. It was playful and light. Maybe Salvatore was right to arrange a few days away from everything. There was a world of hell waiting for us back in Italy and it would be there when we’d return. We should enjoy this trip.

“Paris, huh?”

“I will take you somewhere tropical as soon as I have the time.”

“You don’t have to. I love Paris.”

“I know you do.” He kissed both my hands.

“Do you remember why?”

Sasa chuckled. “How could I forget?” We kissed passionately. “I’ve got us an apartment on Rue Jean Rey, looking down at the Eiffel Tower. It’s close to that little café you dragged me to every day when we were here.”

“Castel Café.” I was genuinely surprised he remembered that detail. It’s been years since we visited. Adrian had a few deals in France and asked Sasa to come along. He invited me and of course I said yes. It was before our fathers had the fall out. We spent a week in Paris – our first getaway – and that’s when I gave him my body for the

first time. It's where Salvatore Fiori inserted himself under my skin for good. "How long are we staying?"

"Only three days, but we'll make the best out of them." He opened a compartment that was hidden in the seat and pulled out a chilled bottle of Veuve Clicquot and two crystal flutes. He put a strawberry in my glass, filled it up, and handed it to me. "To you, Mrs. Fiori."

"And to my husband." The champagne was tart and peachy on my tongue, but it wasn't strong enough to erase Salvatore's taste. "I still can't believe it."

"What?"

"That we got married. You and I seemed impossible for so long."

"Impossible." He scoffed. "You should have listened to me. I was never going to give you up."

I felt an arrow going through my heart. "The last time we spoke..."

"That was anger, Grazia. You should forget those words."

"I did."

"There wasn't a moment when you belonged to someone else. Just me."

He went for my neck and I startled him. My hips moved out of instinct but the pair of jeans I had on didn't help much. I wanted to feel more of him.

"Sasa, please!"

"I've just fucked you before we landed and you need more? Is it because I'm losing my vigor?"

I laughed because his words were ridiculous.

"It's because I want you too much."

"You're going to have to wait, *Tesoro*. I'm not about to start something I can't finish."

I glanced out the window to see we were nowhere near Rue Jean Rey.

“We still have a few minutes.”

“No. I only had quick fucks with you for years. I hated it.”

I pulled back and put a hand on my hip. “You hated being with me?”

“I hated having to let you go every time. I hated the stolen minutes. No more. We’re going to get to the apartment and I’m going to take care of you for hours. We have a bed, and couches, and floors to screw on. We even have a balcony.”

He clutched my jaw in his big hand and took my lips again. It was possessive and devouring, taking away more and more of my heart – if there was anything left to be taken. I would have kissed him for a million years and never got enough of it.

Salvatore was right when he said the past few years were hard. Meeting in secret and walking away from him almost every day was a special kind of torture and I was happy it was over. The price I had to pay was high, but we’ll find our way out of this mess.

When the limo came to a stop, I sent out a prayer because I couldn’t wait anymore. Salvatore got out of the car, grabbed the one suitcase he packed for both of us and gave me his hand.

“I really need to get you some clothes, *Tesoro*. Ready to hit the shops?”

“No.” I jumped in his arms and held him tight. My legs circled his hips so I would have stability. “Bed.”

“I always knew you are going to be the death of me.”

He didn’t rent a hotel room, but a private apartment, so we didn’t need to stop kissing on our way to the elevator. Salvatore carried me like I was just a feather, with one hand under my ass, and he didn’t even break a sweat. *My powerful*

*god*. He was so strong – so almighty – and I was getting turned on because of all that power.

We walked through a door and crossed a few empty rooms but I was too preoccupied to look around. I felt like my panties were melting down my thighs and I desperately needed for him to lose some clothes before I'd lose my mind.

My ass hit a hard surface and I opened my eyes to see I was in what looked like an open space living room, on top of a twelve-person dining table. I looked at Sasa with my eyebrow raised.

“The bedroom is at the end of the hall. I can't make it so far after you grinded on my dick all the way from the airport.”

He opened his shirt and unbuckled his belt with frenetic hands while I pushed down my jeans. In another minute, we were both naked, skin to skin. I wanted him inside me right away, but Salvatore took one of my nipples in his mouth and sucked slowly.

“Sasa, I need you.”

“I know, *Tesoro*.” He said, his hand around the base of his cock. “Open for me.”

I spread my legs with the ease and flexibility of an experienced ballerina. I'm sure that's not what Rosa Vitale had in mind when she made sure my joints were lax, but damn if it wasn't helpful.

When he filled me, I moaned his name, finally fulfilled. Finally *home*. Finally *happy*.

He pulled back and pushed back inside me forcefully. The abrupt move sent my head spinning and I fell flat on the table while he repeated it over and over again. Short, sharp, rhythmic moves that made my body explode with pleasure.

“You asked me if I remember the last time we went to Paris? Our first night together?” A feverish breath descended over me. “I remember every second. You snuck into my bed after my father explicitly told you to go to sleep. You slipped under the covers. Remember what you said to me?”

“Y-yes.” I was breathless.

“Tell me.”

“I said that I’m yours and I’m done having barriers between us. And I asked you to make me your woman.”

“That’s right. The look in your eyes, Grazi, it was a fucking drug. The want I saw there almost made me come in my pants.” He chuckled. In my memory, he had an outstanding performance that first time. *My first time.* “I was petrified. I wanted you so bad, my balls were burning, but I didn’t want to hurt you.”

“You were very gentle.”

“It took everything in me. All I wanted was to pin you down and take you like an animal.” He put his hands around my neck and squeezed. “You drove me crazy that night. And every night after that.”

“Do it now.” I whispered. “We’re here, back in Paris, together. *Married.* Don’t hold back this time.”

I saw his jaw flexing.

“I could still hurt you, Grazi.”

“Even in pain, all you’re giving me is pleasure. Please, Sasa. I want it all.”

He listened and he provided. His hands pushed my knees up into my chest, allowing him to get deeper than I’ve ever felt him before. His massive cock stretched me out to the limit. I couldn’t move and I couldn’t speak. I could barely fill my lungs with air. I was hopeless in front of his overwhelming hunger and all I felt was excitement. I wanted to be taken and ruined by Salvatore Fiori. By my husband.

Fast. Hard. Powerful. Sasa took me like a barbarian. There were no more stops to be pulled between us. The pleasure built up fast and mercilessly, and when I came, it was sublime. The Earth shifted, the sky cracked, and the world shattered around us. Nothing else mattered.

My orgasm was prolonged by his caressing hand and I screamed until there was no more sound in my throat. He

emptied me of everything I had and replaced it with pure, unfiltered love between a man and a woman. The peace followed right after.

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## Chapter 20

*She gives me strength to breath. She is the fucking life in me.*

The thoughts played on repeat in my head while we lay on top of the chestnut table, which was now all scratched because my girl went all lioness on it. I didn't give a shit about the furniture. It was just another reminder of how fucking good we were together. If there's a God up there like the Pope says, then he made the world, and in the seventh day he made Grazia and I. He made us just right – incomplete apart, but perfect together.

Even her heart I could feel beating in sync with mine. Was this love? Because the word seemed too damn small to cover it. I needed more than four fucking letters to explain the way my chest expanded when I looked at her, or how when she walked out the room, she seemed to take the colors with her. She was my light.

When I looked down and saw the sparkles in her eyes, I knew I didn't have to say all that girly shit. She knew.

I pulled myself from underneath her and sat up, but didn't get too far because the little sneaky temptress circled her graceful legs around my waist and pulled me back, gluing my back to her breasts.

“I’m not ready to let you go, Sasa.”

“I’m just going to get something out of the suitcase.”

“Give me one more minute.”

I nodded because I was ready to give her the rest of my life.

Her hands started traveling on my back, tracing the lines of my tattoo. I knew she loved it, she told me when I got it. She leaned down and bit my back, surprising me.

“Ouch, woman.”

“What are you going to do about this?”

“About what?”

“This tattoo.”

“Meaning?”

“The two roses are on the opposite sides.”

Right. The roses were marking the Caputo mansion and the Fiori palace on the map, but now her home was my home.

“Do you want me to change it?”

“We’re not on separate sides of the city anymore. I’m not a Caputo anymore.”

Now that made me choke on some badly timed laughter.

“*Tesoro*, I made you mine in every way I could think of, but I’m not fool enough to think I could exorcise that bad blood out of you.” I felt her flinching and I turned to look at her face. “I just meant that you’re stubborn and look for trouble all the time, just like your brothers.”

“I don’t look for trouble.”

“You fight me at every damn corner. How is that not looking for trouble?”

“It doesn’t mean I have bad blood.”

“You’re perfect.”



“Then what did you mean? Are you going to tell me?”

“Tell you what, Grazi?” She was digging for something and I knew I wasn’t going to like it.

“What happened? When Adrian died, he talked about my father and so did Giovanni the other day. Why did my brother talk about your *suffering*?”

“Grazi, this is really not the time...”

“I want to know. Why did *Babbo* and Adrian turn to enemies after so many years?”

A long, heavy sigh escaped me. There was no good time to tell her this, so it might just as well be now. I hated the idea of letting Fabiano’s bad decisions ruin this getaway, but she wasn’t going to stop pressing me.

“This is not a discussion to have while we’re naked.”

“Salvatore, I need to know.”

“And I will tell you. Let me just find us some clothes.”

I went to the suitcase and pulled out a pair of grey sweatpants for me, and one of the robes Chiara got for Grazia the day we got married. Once we were both dressed, we sat on the couch, looking at each other. She was waiting for me to start talking, but I wasn’t sure where to start. What the hell was the beginning of all the mess Fabiano created?

“This whole story, it’s about my mother, Grazi.”

“Your mother?”

“Yes. More specifically, the way she died.”

Fuck, I hated hearing this story when Father told me, and I hated even more to be forced to tell it to Grazia. Fabiano deserved every ounce of shame, hate, and disgust, but I knew what I was about to say will sadden her, and that was a hard pill to swallow. I wanted my wife smiling all the time.

“I thought she passed away from complications after your birth.”

“In a way, yes. She died nine weeks after I was born and for the longest time, that’s all father knew – complications after birth – but it was more complicated than that.” I sighed again. “My mother was the love of his life. When she died, he did too. It was only his body that went on.”

“I know. I still don’t understand. Our fathers had been friends for years after Christina died.”

“Right. As I was saying, father was crushed when the hospital called him to say that my mother had died, he couldn’t handle it. At that time, he relied a lot on your father to handle everything, and I mean everything. Fabiano had to take care of the paperwork, the funeral, all of that, and your mother took me in for a couple of weeks.” I paused and Grazia nodded. She was still with me. “Cristina Fiori died because she bled out and it was because she was vulnerable after birth – I was a damn big baby – but she took a pain killer that day which triggered the bleeding.”

“Oh. Oh, I’m sorry, Sasa. I still don’t get why...”

“I know. Just bear with me. The day she died, my mother was out of the house for the first time in weeks. She was supposed to be on bed rest still.”

“Nine weeks is a long time. Rebecca recovered much faster.”

“Yeah, that’s my fault. I was indeed a big baby and it was a hard birth. She was discharged, but there was some damage. Anyway, she told my father she had a doctor’s appointment that day and he just assumed that she wasn’t feeling well, that she had bleeds after the birth, and that was why she died.”

“It wasn’t?”

Fuck me, I was not doing a good job of telling her the truth.

“It was, but she wasn’t at a doctor’s appointment. It wasn’t until a few years ago that someone in the Palermo *Carabinieri* found a buried police report that had the whole story of that day on it. Because mom died in the hospital, they

had to report it, but that piece of paper never made it to my father until four years ago.”

“What did it say?”

“That she wasn’t at the hospital when she started bleeding. She was in a hotel room and the ambulance was called after... well... after a sexual encounter.” I remembered my father’s face when he told me the same words. He was livid and crushed with pain, and I didn’t feel an ounce of that. Maybe it was because I didn’t get to know my mother, or maybe just because if something wasn’t about Grazia, I was a block of ice. I wasn’t hurt, but my ego and my trust were still tarnished by the devil Fabiano Caputo was.

“She... not with your father?”

“No, Grazi. *With yours.*”

She jumped up like something had burned her, her lips opening and closing back a couple of times before she was able to put together a few words.

“He didn’t. Sasa, no.”

“They had an affair. From what I got from my father, Fabiano admitted it started a while back, even before she got pregnant.” I looked at the ceiling, exasperated. “It wasn’t a love affair, just fucking. He was just fucking... my mother.”

“I’m... I’m going to be sick.”

“Do you need me to get you anything? Water?”

“No, I need you to finish the story. Adrian said my father killed Christina. Is it true, did he hurt her?”

“No, not on purpose, but he pressured her to meet with him that day even if she wasn’t fully recovered. That’s why she took the painkiller. The pill had something in it, some kind of blood thinner and she wasn’t supposed to,” I cleared my throat, feeling more uncomfortable than when Grazia’s mother talked to me about condoms, “have any *romantic* contact. She started bleeding, Fabiano called an ambulance a couple of hours after that, but by the time she got to the hospital, her blood pressure was through the roof, she was bleeding

internally, it was a mess. The medical report said that she lost over sixty percent of her blood volume.”

Grazia fell back on the couch and covered her face with her hands. Her chest was rising rapidly and she was biting her lip, and I knew she was trying to control her tears. This was exactly why I didn't want to tell her a damn thing. I didn't want to see her like this.

“She wouldn't have died.” She whispered to no one in particular. “If she didn't meet Father that day, she'd still be alive. Adrian... why didn't he kill him?”

“Because I didn't let him.”

“What?”

“There was a fight, a big one. Fabiano was not even decent enough to apologize and that sent Father into a spiral. He pulled out his gun, but I stepped between them.”

“Why?”

“Because as much as I hate him, he has seven kids. Your mother was gone and he was all you had. After that day, our families split.”

“It was because of him. All this time he told me Adrian was the one who stole something from him, but it was the other way around. He's the thief. He took everything from the one man he called friend. Who does that?”

*Fabiano Caputo.*

“It's in the past now. Father is gone, and you're my wife. As long as Fabiano stays out of my way and doesn't try to take you from me anymore, my business with him is done.”

“Oh, my God! No!” She jumped back on her feet. “You s-s-said... you said they started sleeping together before Cristina got pregnant with you, so he could... he could...”

“*Tesoro*, no.” I rushed to grab her hands and pull her to me. “*Christ*, no. My father and I got tested. Adrian Fiori is a hundred percent my father and you and I are not related.”

“Oh, thank God. I think my heart stopped beating for a second.”

“How do you feel knowing all this? Too much?”

“Like an idiot.” Her answer was unexpected. “When we were in Milano, Garon said something to me and I figured he and Father are having problems. Giovanni knows what kind of man he is too, Giorgio has almost all his business abroad even though Father tried to forbid it and keep him tied to home. It all makes sense now. They all knew. None of my brothers respect him. I was the only one who looked at Father like he’s a saint.”

“Grazi, we all tried to spare you the sadness.”

“I’m not going to thank you for that.” She said sharply. “I’ve let my brothers treat me like a baby for too long and now I know you did too. No more of that.”

“You know the truth now.”

“I needed to know the truth a long time ago. I needed to know the truth when I walked away from you to go back to my father. I needed to know the truth when I felt ashamed for seeing you in secret, when I felt guilty because I was lying to him. And I needed to know the truth when my father ordered two of my brothers to hold my arm while he pulled the ring you gave me off my finger!”

“I’m sorry.” I wasn’t. I would do anything to keep her from all that dirt. “It’s over now, *Tesoro*. Let it go.”

“It’s not that simple. I was raised by a man with no honor.”

“He was a good father to you, otherwise I wouldn’t have let him keep his miserable life.”

“He had sex with my friend! He’s disgusting.” Her face turned white. “Cristina. He cheated on my mother with her.”

Oh, fuck me. There was more harsh truth.

“I’m sorry, Grazi. He cheated on your mother many times.”

“W-what? How do you know that?”

“It’s not a secret. You were young and didn’t notice things, but he never bothered to hide it, not even from Ariana. She was too good of a woman for him.”

Grazia’s mother was a saint who was dealt a bad hand when she chose her husband. She was the closest thing to a mother I’ve ever known and she didn’t deserve that disease that took her away. I don’t know what God decided to let Fabiano live instead of her.

“Oh...”

“Your brothers know. The tensions between them and Fabiano existed since they were old enough to understand what daddy was doing in the back rooms of striptease clubs with the dancers. You’ve just started to see them now.”

“Damn it, Sasa!”

“I don’t blame them for not telling you.”

“I feel like my heart is breaking. How could I have been so blind?”

“Grazia, stop it.”

“I can’t stop it. My family is broken and I had no idea.”

“What are you talking about? Fabiano’s mistakes don’t reflect on your brothers.”

“There was so much hate in that house and I was oblivious to it.” She shook her head. “Why is Giovanni still carrying his orders? I don’t understand. He didn’t say it on the phone, but let it be no mistake, my brother disowned me. He called me an enemy.”

“He called *me* an enemy, Grazi, not you. Giovanni was in charge for many years, but your father is still *Don*. The mafia credo goes beyond family. If Giovanni would side with you, your father would retaliate. Why do you think none of your brothers said anything about the problems they had with Fabiano?”

“That’s what I’m trying to understand.”

“Because a *famiglia* that doesn’t respect its *Don* is vulnerable. It’s divided. *Giovani* can’t afford to seem weak.”

“Is it worth turning his back on me for a man he doesn’t even respect? For a man who dishonored us all?”

“It’s what he has to do.” It’s not pretty, but it’s the world we were born into, where power and the *famiglia* come above those we love. It’s what forced Grazia and I apart for so many years and now what’s made her family side with the man who broke her heart. “Grazi, this talk is over. I need you to come back to me so we can enjoy our honeymoon.”

“I want to, but all of this is a lot to swallow.”

That’s exactly why I didn’t want to tell her. Not now. Not ever.

“Do I need to fuck you again?”

She blushed and finally smiled again.

“I don’t think I can.” She put a hand over her lower abdomen. “Too sore.”

“Did I hurt you?”

“Not in any way I didn’t love. I just need an hour to recover.”

“Then,” I murmured and kissed her neck softly, “I have something else that might make you happy.”

Lowering her onto the couch, I started scouring through the suitcase until I found the velvet box and placed it in her hand.

“A ring?” She guessed without opening it.

“A *wedding* ring.”

“Oh.” When she pulled the lid back, I saw her eyes fill with tears, but no sadness. Good. “It’s stunning.”

The blue diamond I got a while ago was now cut and encrusted on a platinum band, surrounded by what looked like a hundred other stones. It was a massive ring, something that

Grazia would typically turn down, but I was very specific with the jeweler when I had this made. I wanted something big, something no one could miss. A message to every man, woman, and child that looked at her. She was taken. She was mine.

“Blue diamond. It’s not as rare as you, but it will do.”

“It must have cost you...”

“Stop.” I cut her sentence short. “It doesn’t matter. Look on the inside.”

She examined the ring with patience. “*Honor cum nulla lege.*” She read. It was Latin – *honor with no law*. Next to that, was my name. “It’s your family’s motto.”

“You’re a Fiori now, *Tesoro.*”

“Your wife.”

“My wife.” We both said it at the same time, like we couldn’t believe it was true.

Grazia shivered when I slipped the cold ring on her finger and looked at it for a long while before she directed her gaze at me again.

“It’s beautiful, but I don’t think I should wear it in public.”

Now that was a joke if I’ve ever heard one. Her words were so ridiculous, I had no choice but to laugh.

“You’re not taking that off until I’m dead, or give it to our first son to propose to his wife. End of. You’re not allowed.”

“Don’t bark at me. All I’m saying is that I wouldn’t want to lose it.”

“It fits you perfectly, you won’t lose it, and if you do, fuck it. We’ll get you another one.” I took a deep breath to calm myself down. “I need to see that on your finger every day.”

“Is that an order?”



“Damn right it is, *moglie*.” The familiar want started to rumble through my gut. “You don’t want to make the *Don* mad.”

“Oh, no? What’s *the Don* going to do?”

“He will take you by the neck,” I did just so, “and push you down to your knees.” She slid to the floor with no resistance. “How many times did I tell you, Grazi, that if you talk stupid, I’m going to punish that damn mouth you have on you.”

“You love the damn mouth I have on me.”

“Damn straight.”

I tapped on her chin and she opened up for me. My cock was already hard like a rock when I took it out and stroked it a couple of times before pushing the tip in Grazi’s mouth.

This wasn’t something we did often. No matter how much I loved having her mouth on my cock, she was too dignified – too important – to ask her to take the knee in front of me. Her mouth was something I only took when it was offered, and even then, she wasn’t like this, on the floor. She was my wife, but fuck me, she was a vision. I could see the curve of her ass under her robe, and the valley of her breasts. Her blue eyes were serene and wide, looking up. How will I live without having her like this every day?

“Fuck, *Tesoro*.”

She pulled back and took a big gulp of air. “Do it.”

“What do you need?”

“Fuck my mouth. Take my mind off of everything. Make me remember it’s just you and me here, not my family or anyone else.”

She was really pushing my buttons today with her sexy, *sexy* words. Grazi was fragile – my little, sweet ballerina – but she enjoyed dancing with the beast lurking inside of me.

If she wanted to be taken, then who was I to deny her wish? My hand tangled in her chocolate hair, twisting it in my

fist and I lunged forward, going deep down her throat. There was no choking, or resistance, just pure bliss. Overwhelming amounts of pleasure descended down on me.

“You’re a little tease, Grazi. It’s time to live up to your words.”

I saw a challenge in her eyes, but she couldn’t vocalize it because her mouth was full of my cock. I felt beyond powerful, beyond a god. She awakened things in my body I didn’t even know were there.

“Fuck.” I said when I flexed my hips again and she did a circle with her tongue around the shaft. “I can’t hold it anymore, Grazi.”

Grazia looked up with widened eyes. She was used to me being able to go for long numbers, but not this time. Seeing her on her knees made me lose control over my damn body. I was gone before I knew it.

Grazi tried to pull back, but I pulled her by the hair.

“Where do you think you’re going? You started this, so finish it.” She blinked up at me. “You’re going to swallow.”

I worked the base of my cock with my fist while she sat frozen waiting for the release. My Grazi was good at taking instructions and she cleaned every drop of cum that landed on her tongue. She sucked me dry. *Literally.*

~ ~ ~

“Grazia, can we go now?” I said to the door of the fitting room.

We’ve spent two days walking around the city and shopping. Any other day, I would love to sit and watch her parade in tiny dresses in front of me, but now I had somewhere to be.

“Just a second.” She opened the door and I gulped. The golden nightgown she had on was devilishly hot. “I just had to try this one. What do you think?”

“Do they have other colors?”

“Black and red, I think.”

“Buy them all. Two of each.” I couldn’t wait to peel those scraps of satin off and fuck her stupid. “We need to go, *Tesoro*. I have to be somewhere. You can buy whatever else you need when we’re back in Palermo.”

After going through every store and boutique Paris had to offer, she finally had some of the things she needed. I had to send most of the luggage back home separately because they were too heavy. She got perfumes, and face creams, and a hundred more things she didn’t need, but I was happy to spoil her.

“What’s so urgent?” She looked at me over her shoulder while slipping back in her dress. “Business meeting?”

“I wouldn’t do business on our honeymoon, Grazi. I want to take you somewhere.”

“Sasa,” she nested at my chest and hugged me, “you’ve done enough for me.”

“One more thing. I’ll go pay while you get your sandals on.”

I picked out the nightgown and asked the clerk to find me the other colors before going to the register. The girl behind the counter took my card with a smile on her face.

“Your girlfriend is a lucky girl.”

“Wife.” I corrected her proudly. “She’s my wife.”

“Oh,” The cashier bit her lip, “so no chance of you coming to this store when you’re single.” Only after she said that did I notice the way her eyes were sliding up and down my arms.

“Not a chance in hell.”

I took the shopping bag and walked away before Grazi could figure out what was going on. We didn't have time for her to throw a tantrum.

Our driver took the shopping bags and threw them on top of the others while Grazia and I climbed into our seats in the back of the limo. She rested her head on my shoulder with her eyes out the window and didn't say a word. The tiredness of the past few days was starting to settle in. That was my fault for keeping her awake all night.

We drove past Palace de la Concorde and the Louvre, all the way to the eleventh district, and the limo came to a stop when we got to Rue de Lyon.

“We're here, Grazi.”

I got out first and helped her follow.

“What are we looking for?”

“That.” I pointed to the impressive building with gold decorations that I was sure she was familiar with.

“The national opera?” She giggled. “It's not opened yet, Sasa. The shows start in the fall.”

“I know, but I had something else in mind.”

“Like what?”

“A tour?”

“A tour of the opera?”

“Yes.” I took her hand and walked up the stairs, through one of the arches guarding the façade. There was an older man dressed in a black suit waiting for us there.

“Mr. Fiori?” He asked when he saw us approaching.

“That's me. You are Mr. Glossier?”

“Yes, sir. The custodian of the building.”

“This is my wife, Grazia Fiori.”

After he kissed her hand, the man returned to me.

“Everything is ready for your tour, just as you instructed. I have to say, *monsieur*, it was an unexpected request.” And it had an unexpected price tag attached to it, but I knew it would be worth it. “Follow me.”

He walked in front of us talking about the history of the building, about every painting, statue, and fresco. Grazia listened to every word while I just moved along, impatient to get to the end of the journey. Finally, we made it to the main concert room.

Glossier opened the door and signaled Grazia to go in first.

“Should we be here, Mr. Glossier?”

“Absolutely. Mr. Fiori has arranged everything.”

A small orchestra was ready, and Mr. Glossier found the package I’d arranged to be delivered.

“Salvatore,” Grazia turned to me, “what’s happening?”

I passed the package to her with no words and she opened it, taking out the tutu and pointe shoes.

“Feel like dancing, *Tesoro*?”

“H-here?” She eyed the massive stage behind us, not believing what was happening.

I stepped closer and stroked her cheek. “You always dreamed of dancing on the big stages of the world. I’ll make your dreams come true, *mio tesoro*, one stage at the time.”

“Sasa, this is... how?”

“I know some people who owe me a favor. They happen to be benefactors of the Paris National Opera.”

“I have no words. I don’t think I can do it, Sasa.”

“Of course you can. You’re the most talented ballerina I’ve ever seen.”

Her arms crossed under her breasts. “I’m the only ballerina you’ve ever seen.” Correct. If she wasn’t on the stage, then I didn’t care to watch it.

“Do you need help breaking in the shoes? They’re new.”

She picked them out and handed them to me. Mr. Glossier offered to take her somewhere private to change while I took care of the shoes. Grazia taught me how to stretch pointe shoes out so they would be comfortable a long time ago, and she had me doing it quite a few times since I had strong arms. At least that was what she said to me.

When she came back, she was dressed in pink and white, her hair in a bun, and the widest smile on her face. I’ve done my job well. She sat at the end of the stage while I put the dancing shoes on her.

“What now, Sasa?”

I glanced at Glossier. He was in a seat close to the orchestra.

“We’re ready when you are, Mr. Fiori.”

I nodded and the music started at my sign. I had no idea what symphony, what dance, or whatever that was, but Grazia clearly knew it. She got up and picked up the rhythm right away, turning and spinning.

Watching her was like seeing magic. Her body was so graceful, like that of a swan gliding across the mirror of a calm lake and I couldn’t take my eyes away. I was the only one in this huge room, but I knew that if it would be a full house, no one could breathe because of how beautiful she looked out there.

The talent Grazi had, the way she moved, that ease and perfection could not be taught. She was gifted. I was just lucky enough to get a front row seat at her beauty.

A song turned into two and then into three and with every dance she lost herself deeper into the music. I sat back, careful to not make a sound and watched the lithe movements of her arms and sensual curves move seamlessly across the stage.

*My Grazi.* So young, but so wise. So strong, but still, so graceful. Seeing her like this anyone would say she was

born to be a world-known ballerina, not a mafia queen, but my ring was sparkling on her finger.

I had to give her this – this day, this dance – because I knew she wanted nothing more than to dance. I just wasn't sure I will be able to share her with the eyes of the world. Her dance felt too intimate and all of that was mine. Just. Mine.

When the music stopped, Grazia fell to her knees in a dramatic pose. Her chest was going up and down rapidly and her skin was sparkling under the light. She came straight to me, jumping into my arms.

“I love you!” She said, half-laughing.

“You are damn beautiful.”

“I just danced at the Paris National Opera.” She kissed me, leaving us both out of breath. “This was the best thing you've ever done for me, Salvatore.”

“The way you feel right now, Grazi, I will give you that every day.”

“You do, Sasa. You do.”

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## *Chapter 21*

Palermo waited for our return peacefully. I don't know what I was expecting, but since we came back things have been calm and I didn't hear a word from my family's side. I got the courage to charge my phone and checked it for the first time since I returned from Milano. There were many messages from my brothers, they were mostly concerned, but all were dated before I called Giovanni. All communication has seized after that. The only one that kept calling me was Pina, but when I tried to return the call, I got no answer. I really needed to talk to her because I didn't even know if she knew what Ariana was doing. *With my father.*

The past week has passed by us in relative normality. Salvatore was mostly out of the house because he had business to handle, so I got bored and started to redecorate. Chiara joined this effort and she helped me pick up new furniture for our bedroom. When that was done, we moved downstairs to the living room and kitchen which were currently under construction. Salvatore didn't mind my domestic activities as long as I didn't ask him for opinions about wall colors and decorative pillows.

Chiara stopped by almost every day with her son and we got really close which wasn't hard. We were friends once. Goliath used to bring her by the house all the time before they



broke up, so we picked it up right where we left off. She was also my ears to the outside world since I couldn't talk to many people yet.

The Fiori *famiglia* was a little restless to hear that their Don got married with a Caputo, but Chiara has told me that none of his lieutenants or associates made a big deal about it. Mostly because they would never question Salvatore's decisions, but our history was also important. I knew all those people, their wives, and their kids, and for most of my life they'd expected me to marry Salvatore. At the end of the day our marriage was shocking... but not really.

Soon, I would have to show my face next to my husband, take his aunts out to lunch, and go to his friends' parties, but for now, Salvatore didn't think it was safe for me to go outside the house where I had guards at every corner. He wanted to know about where my family was standing before letting his guard down. I would say that all the precautions and the extra security, and the small artillery Salvatore had all over the house were over the top. I had no doubt my brothers were angry with me and that I've lost their good graces, but nothing could ever make them hurt me. I refused to believe anything different.

My father... well, that was something I didn't want to think about. I got all those filthy images with Ariana grinding on him, all the pain, all the heartbreak, everything that Salvatore told me about his past, put everything in a box and pushed it deep down. It was too much. Not thinking about it was the only way I could get any sleep at night.

I rolled around in bed only to find out the pillow next to me was cold. The clock hanging on the wall said it was nine already, so Salvatore must be somewhere in town meeting his people.

Since I couldn't get to my ballet studio for morning practice anymore, there was nothing left to do but enjoy very lazy mornings. I found my robe and threw it over what was left of my lingerie after Salvatore pulled at it with his teeth, and walked downstairs. Totto was at the end of the spiraled

stairs waiting for me with buttered toast and a cappuccino. I took the cup gratefully.

“Thank you, Totto. I’d be lost without you.”

He smiled, but kept his proper stance. There was not one thing not in order with him, from the tip of his shiny shoes to the white gloves he was always wearing. “You’re very welcome, Grazia.”

“Do you know what time Salvatore will be back today? He left before I woke up.”

“He’s in the back garden.”

“Oh.”

“There are a few of his men here.”

So he did have business to take care of, he just chose to take care of it at home. I had mixed feelings about that.

I left Totto in the house and walked outside knowing that if they were talking about something I wasn’t supposed to hear, he would have met the men in a restaurant or behind the closed door of his office. Whatever this was, it was casual.

I found them around a table by the pool and recognized everyone. Pietro, Yannis, Lorenzo Lombardo – one of Salvatore’s uncles on his mother’s side – and John Black – the British guy who was Adrian’s lawyer for most of his life.

I shielded my eyes from the sun and called Salvatore’s name and he immediately came to me, but no one else moved. They didn’t even lift their head from the breakfast spread in front of them.

“Good morning, Grazi.” His lips descended over mine powerfully.

“Good morning. I missed you when I woke up.”

He nodded his head to the men. “There were some documents that required my attention. We’re in the middle of a big transaction.”

“Is this about that power-plant?”

His eyebrow raised. “How do you know about that?”

“I wasn’t supposed to? Is it something you don’t want to tell to *the wife*?”

“No, Grazi, I’m just surprised.”

“Garon heard about it. Apparently you made quite a stir.”

“You’re married to a very ambitious man.”

“I know that.” I was very proud of him. “Hey, what’s up with them? Why is everyone so shy?” I at least expected Pietro to say hello. I thought him and I were good after the last talk.

“Adorable.” He chuckled before taking my face in his hands and kissing my forehead.

“What?”

“Grazi, you really think there’s a man in this country that would dare to look at my wife while she’s half naked and just rolled out of bed? Not while I’m still alive.”

“Ah, I see.” He threatened them when he saw me coming out of the house. Salvatore was always possessive of me, but it was so much more intense since we got married. I loved to know he was so crazy about me. “So they won’t look?”

“No.” He growled.

“So if I do this,” my hand sneaked down the length of his body and I cupped him, “no one would see.”

“Grazi.” There was warning in his voice, but there was also pleasure.

“What if I take down your zipper?”

“You look hot, wife. We should get you cooled off.”

With no warning, he picked me up from the ground and threw me in the pool. The water got into my mouth and I fought my way back to the surface.

“Salvatore!”

He squatted at the edge of the pool with a smug smile on his face.

“Look at that, *Tesoro*. It worked.”

“I hate you!”

“I love you too. Listen, Pietro and I need to make a trip to Aspara, but I’ll be back before dinner. Make yourself pretty.”

I was so excited by his news, I could jump up and down. I was running out of rooms to remodel around the house.

“What for?”

“I’m taking you out tonight. The world needs to see my beautiful, sexy wife.”

“You think it’s safe?”

“Grazi, I don’t want you wandering around town alone, but no one would dare to breath in your direction when you’re with me.” He helped me get out of the water and found a towel to wrap around me. “Don’t I always take care of you?”

“You do.” Always. “I’ll see you tonight.”

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I found the deadliest dress. Scarlet red with no straps, it was covering me from tits to knees, and had a slit going down from my right thigh. I found it in one of the shops in Passage du Havre and Salvatore wasn’t there when I tried it on. I knew it was going to knock him off his feet the moment he’d see me.

By six P.M. I was ready and waiting for my husband, so I went downstairs. What I didn’t expect was to sit on the couch for almost two hours, going from one TV channel to another. By the time I heard the knock on the door I was hungry and pissed off.

I hurried to open the door, expecting my husband to be on the other side, but instead I found Chiara who was carrying her son in her arms.

“Wow, Grazia.” She looked at me from head to toe and giggled. “That’s *a* dress.”

“I was expecting Salvatore.”

“I can tell.”

Francesco jumped from his mother’s arms and came to hug my legs. He petted my hip gently. He didn’t speak, but I knew that was his way of telling me I’m beautiful.

“Thank you, *bambino*^[46]. I think there’s some chocolate cake in the kitchen for you.”

He ran past me and started looking for Totto. Francesco was a sleek little guy and I was sure Pietro and Salvatore would lose no time turning him into a true mafioso. If anyone thought he was at disadvantage because he didn’t find his voice, they’d be dead wrong. He was a smart kid, always observing everything around him.

“Really, Grazia, what’s with the outfit?” Chiara asked. “Special occasion?”

“Your cousin was supposed to take me out tonight.” I said, insipidly.

“He didn’t show.” She concluded.

“Nope.”

She took my hand and pushed me to sit back on the couch and then found a bottle of dry rosé in the wine fridge.

“Grazia, if Salvatore missed your first night out as a married couple, something important must have come up.”

“It would have been our first date in over five years.”

“Oh,” she threw me a glance while pouring us some wine, “that’s right. Well, we both know he’s going to make it up to you.”

“Right. What brings you here?”

“Boredom. Francesco and I were alone, so we went for a walk. We were nearby and decided to stop and see what you’re doing.” She shrugged, trying to dismiss the whole thing like it wasn’t a big deal, but I was starting to have my suspicions. Chiara spent a lot of time at our house and she was always welcomed, but I haven’t seen her husband once. He never called, never came to pick up his wife and son, nothing. I’ve only seen her texting with him a couple of times.

“Bruno’s out again?” I kept my voice leveled, trying to not seem so nosey.

“Like always.” She laughed and rolled her eyes.

“He will get an earful from you, huh?”

“No, not really. We don’t fight.”

“You don’t... ever?”

“Don’t look so surprised.”

“It’s pretty hard not to.” I don’t think I’ve ever seen Chiara and Goliath in the same room without yelling at each other. Their relationship was pretty hard to understand for outside people. All I knew was that they were crazy about each other and fought like mortal enemies.

“I’m someone’s wife and someone’s mother now, aren’t I? Not just a jealous girlfriend.” She emptied her glass and immediately filled it up again.

“Yeah, I just remember you as the girl who burned my brother’s house down hoping he was in it.” It was a bad break up. No, actually, it was the right break up for them.

My words made her gulp down the wine. Again.

“I’m not going to say that wasn’t a little crazy, *but*,” she got up and pointed a finger at me, “it was your idiot brother who always got the worst out of me. He drove me crazy!” Her voice echoed all over the house.

I covered my smile with the glass. “That’s more like the Chiara I know.”

She sighed and put both hands in her hair. “I guess he still gets the worst out of me.”

“Is it different with Bruno? Is it better?”

She picked up something in my voice. When she looked at me, her green eyes were cutting like glass.

“I don’t know what you’re asking, but stop. I’m fine with my husband and not everyone is like you and Salvatore.” And there went another glass of wine. “Let this be the last time we talk about Goliath, please. It doesn’t matter anyway. I became disgusting to him the moment I got pregnant because he hates kids.”

“He doesn’t *hate* kids. He just doesn’t want any.” And for the longest time, Chiara didn’t either. Bruno did change a lot of things for her. “You’re right, I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have brought him up.”

Francesco came running back with his face covered in powdered sugar and I took him into my arms.

“Look at you, so messy.” He showed me the chocolate muffin in his hand and smiled. I kissed his adorable little cheeks. “You’re so sweet now, Franci!”

Chiara’s phone chirped and she showed it to me.

“It’s Bruno.”

“Is he coming to pick you up?”

“No, but he found your husband. They are at a restaurant in Aspara.”

“He had business there earlier.”

“Yeah, apparently business turned into a glass of wine, and that turned into a few bottles. Pietro and Salvatore got a little tipsy.”

“Excuse me?”

Chiara dismissed me with a flick of her wrist. “You know how it is. Men will be men.”

Not my man.

“He got drunk instead of coming to take me out? Where is he?”

She tapped something on the screen and then the phone chirped again.

“A place called *Bocca di Lupo*^[47].” I found my shoes and she looked at me with wide eyes. “What are you doing?”

“Going to bring him home.”

“No way!” I felt her hand wrapping tightly around my wrist. “No, you can’t. He’s with, you know, people who work for him. You can’t just show up to school him for being late.”

“I’m not, but he promised me a night out and he doesn’t want me go anywhere without him, so *Bocca di Lupo* it is. And you have to let me go because you tried to kill my brother and you owe me.”

She did let go of my hand. “I was pretty sure he wasn’t in the house.”

“I love you, but *pretty* sure is not good enough.”

I walked to Salvatore’s office and found the keys to his Maserati. He did say I could have it once, so I was going to take him up on that offer. I only had a couple sips of the wine, but that reminded me...

“Hey, Chiara, you’re not driving back home, right?”

“No, we walked. I’ll call a cab.”

“Talk to Totto. He’s going to make sure one of the guards will take you home.”

She said something else I didn’t catch because I was already rushing to the garage. That beast of a car was looking at me with its mean headlights and I started second guessing my big idea. It’s been at least a year since the last time I drove and that happened because Giovanni got tipsy at a party and someone had to take his car home. Salvatore would be pissed when he sees me, I didn’t want to add scratching his car to all that.

Looking around the garage, I tried to decide if there was a better option, but the Maserati was the safest bet out of the six supercars he owned. I took off my shoes because those heels were not meant for driving and got going. Luckily, the GPS said it was only a twenty-minute drive to the restaurant and I got there with no problems.

Bocca di Lupo was a rustic Italian place, decorated in tones of earthy green. There were two hostesses greeting people by the front door and they both looked stunning in their green uniforms.

“Do you have a reservation, Miss?”

“I’m meeting someone. Salvatore Fiori.”

“*Si.*” One of them smiled with all her teeth. “Mr. Fiori and his party are in our sunlight salon, by the gardens.”

“Thank you.”

It wasn’t hard to find the room. It was the loudest. The few bottles turned into a full party and I couldn’t help rolling my eyes. I’ve seen it happening a hundred times before. Poker games turn into days-long drinking sprees, backyard barbeques turn into celebrations with too many people. I’ve lived in this life for too long to not be used to it, but I wasn’t going to let Salvatore make a habit of leaving me home to rot on the couch while he smokes cigars and throws back dreams with his lieutenants.

I walked in the salon and waved my hand around to cut the thick smoke. The music was pretty loud, but the voices were even louder. Everyone was too busy to talking to each other to notice me.

Salvatore was pretty easy to find in the crowd. He was sitting at the far end of the room and almost everyone at his table was up singing to *Sara Perche Ti Amo*, Pietro included. My husband, on the other hand, he couldn’t sit up straight. Maybe it was the booze, or he was tired, or *maybe* it had something to do with the big-boobed redhead sitting in his lap, pinning him down in the chair.

The redhead was dressed in the same uniform as the hostesses in the front and she was just as smiley. I watched while she slowly raised her hand to trace Salvatore's jaw and then she whispered something in his ear.

Anger hit me so rapidly, I started shaking. I crossed the room and heads started to turn my way. At least some people got to see my dress since Salvatore seemed so damn preoccupied. On my way to him, my mind wondered to that night at the club when Yannis saw me dancing with a man. Salvatore was raging like a bull – *uncontrollable* – and now for the first time I understood exactly how he was feeling. A violent shiver traveled through my every pore watching that woman put her hands on *my* husband.

He's letting her touch him. The thought went as fast as it came. The pain would come later. Right now, every other emotion was consumed by a scorching fury.

I made it to his table and pulled out the chair in front of him, lowering myself into it with ease and crossing my legs with the same grace I would do a *glissade* on stage. He saw me, we locked eyes, and everyone around us stilled, but no one said a word.

“Grazi.” He said my name and rubbed his eyes. “What time is it?”

“Late.” I said sharply. He tried looking at his watch, but with no luck. “You're drunk.”

“I had one too many. I forgot to check the time. I was supposed to pick you up.”

“Yes, that's right.” My eyes fell on the redhead. “You forgot you're married too.”

“Stop talking stupid.” He growled and pushed the girl slightly, but she didn't leave his lap.

I snapped my fingers in front of the girl and she looked at me.

“What's your name?”

“Maria.”

“Maria, you have two seconds to get off my husband before I take the gun he has in his jacket and shoot you in the knee with it.” Again, she didn’t move, so I kept to my word and found the custom glock from the inside pocket of the jacket hanging on the back of his chair and took off the safety. Maria jumped up and ran away.

“Grazi.” Salvatore tried to say something again, but stopped.

With a sweet smile on my face, I showed him my left hand. “Give me one reason to not take this ring off right now.”

Something flashed in his eyes and he sobered up in a second.

“Don’t you dare.” He smashed his fist on the table making everything rattle and got up on his feet, towering over me. “Throw a tantrum, fight me, hit me if you want, but don’t ever say that again.”

“What are you going to do? Go grope another waitress?”

Salvatore threw his jacket on and took his gun back. “We’re going. Now.”

“Already, *marito*?”

“You obviously need to blow off some steam. If you either want to fight or to fuck, we can’t do it here. Get up, Grazia.”

He didn’t wait for me to comply. Instead, he grabbed me by the elbow and started dragging me to the door.

“Don’t treat me like this in front of your people.” I said and pulled my arm back.

“I’m treating you just like you deserve right now.”

What did he deserve then?

“I should have stayed home.”

“Yes, you should have!” He barked back.

There wasn't anything left to say. Nothing I *wanted* to say anyway. I turned to the door and started walking, leaving Salvatore behind. He started chasing me and we walked out of the restaurant together.

"Grazi, wait a damn minute."

"No."

"You wanted a fight, so let's fight."

"No, Salvatore. I wanted a night out with you. I wanted to go out in public holding your hand after five years. That's what I wanted." I pushed a button on the key of the Maserati and the headlights turned on. "I'm going home."

"Grazia, wait." He stepped in front of me. "I'm sorry."

"You think that makes it better? I've spent two hours making myself pretty and picking out this dress because I thought I was going to dinner with my husband and you didn't even look at me."

"I'm sorry. Listen, Grazi, I know I fucked up. I will make it better."

"I found you with another woman in your lap!"

"Stop."

"Stop?" I was appalled. "We've been married for eight days! What happened? Five years I couldn't get rid of you and now that the chase is over, you're bored? How could you?"

"How could I what, Grazia? How could I *what*?"

"You've been drinking and Maria looked damn comfortable in your arms."

"If you want to say something, Grazia, spit it out."

"If I hadn't have come, would you have returned home in the morning smelling like her perfume?"

"Fuck!" He roared and started boxing the dashboard with his left hand. He hit the plastic over and over again until it cracked. His hand was bloody too. "Do you have any idea how fucking crazy you make me, you beautiful woman?"

“Sweet talk won’t get you anywhere.”

His eyes turned soft and he grabbed me, dragging my ass across the console and into his lap.

“I came to Aspara to check on the warehouse I have here and when we were done Pietro got a call from Carlo Noriega, remember him?”

“Yes, he works under you.”

“He, Yannis, and the guys came here for a drink and it turned into what you saw inside. I lost track of time. The reason you saw that woman in my arms is because I got teased for being the only *Don* that got married without a bachelor party and they tipped her to play the stripper.”

“Right.”

“I drank, Grazia, but there’s no liquor hard enough to make me forget how stupidly in love I am with you.” He clasped my jaw in his hand forcing me to look straight into his endlessly green eyes. “Nothing could.”

“If I ever see another woman’s hands on you...” I spoke through my clenched teeth.

“You won’t. I don’t want anyone else. You’re the only one, *Tesoro*.”

“Good, because when you told me the truth about Dad, I made a vow to myself. I’d never live the life my mother did. I didn’t marry you to be a trophy you take out of the house only when it’s convenient for you. Either I’m your equal, or I’m nothing to you.”

“You’re my everything.”

I shivered, starting to melt in his arms. He was talking with such conviction, it was impossible not to see the truth behind his words. He vowed to love me. He vowed to love *only* me and he never gave me a reason to believe otherwise.

“Then don’t treat me like less, Salvatore Fiori.”

“I would put you on a pedestal and cover you in gold if that would make the world understand how much you mean to

me, *Tesoro*. I'm so sorry I've ruined your night."

"You forgot we had plans?"

"No, I forgot to check my damn watch. The only reason I indulged my men tonight is because they wanted to celebrate our marriage."

"Ok."

"Tell me you love me."

The whispered words dripped down on my skin like soft summer rain.

"I love you."

"Tell me you'll never take off my ring."

"Never."

"Good." His lips found my neck and I breathed out his name. "You were wrong before. I saw this damn dress you have on. I saw it, *Tesoro*, and I also saw the way the material tightens around every single curve of your body."

"Salvatore."

"You never have to worry about me wanting someone else, *Grazia*. All I see is you. I'm obsessed, baby." He bit my collarbone and I cried out, arching my back.

"You like?"

"Harder." I mumbled.

Salvatore hiked my dress up until my ass was uncovered and squeezed it.

"You still need to be fucked, *Grazi*."

"Yes."

"You're going to ride my cock and then we're going back inside so I can show my wife a good time." He ripped my underwear to shreds and threw them in the back seat. "Get to work, *Tesoro*. The *famiglia* is waiting for us."



Chapter 22

She was sparkling tonight, even more than usual. There was something in the way she looked in those dancing tights that made her legs seem a mile long. Her hair was up in a tight bun and my eyes were pinned on the curve of her neck. I wanted to sink my teeth in her smooth skin, but interrupting her first rehearsal in weeks would make Grazia kick me in the balls.

The room I secured for her didn't measure up to the old dance studio, but I was already looking for a new building for her. This rented space would have to suffice until I had everything ready for her.

"Grazi." I spoke loud enough so she could hear me over the delicate song that was playing and she turned around on the top of her toes.

"Oh, I didn't hear you, Sasa." She came and chained my midsection with her arms. "Did you sneak in?"

"I love watching you dance. I didn't want to stop it."

"But?"

"It's almost five, you've been in here all day."

"Oh, we have to hurry to get to Pietro for his birthday dinner. I'm sorry. I know I said I'll be home in time, but I lost

track of time. I haven't danced since our honeymoon."

"No problem, *Tesoro*."

"I'll go change and meet you at the car, ok?" She kissed my lips for just a second and disappeared out of the room skipping without waiting for an answer. Looks like I've been given a command by my wife and it didn't bother me in the slightest.

I waited so long for this. I craved to have her just as we were now – intimate. There were no boundaries between us, no walls. Grazia and I, we were two hearts beating at once. We shared love, passion and anger and I wanted it all.

My wife was not just queen of the mafia, she was my partner. She was not shy of our world and I didn't need to hide from her. At the end of the day, I could come home, sit at my dinner table, and talk to my wife about my problems. It was a luxury a few men in my circle had.

I went to the parking lot and sat next to the Maserati until Grazia walked out of the building. She had a short skirt and a cute top on, and now her hair was let free to flow down like a chocolate waterfall. She did that for me. On hot summer days like this one, she preferred her hair up in a ponytail, but she knew how much I loved it falling down over her shoulders.

She jumped in the passenger seat before I got a chance to get out and open the car door for her.

"Do you want to drive, *Tesoro*?" This was her favorite car.

"No, it's ok. My legs hurt. Hey, do you have any idea what Chiara will be wearing tonight? I don't know what dress to pick."

"It's a family dinner at Pietro's house, Grazi. No need for dressing up. What you're wearing is fine. We're already late, so we're going straight to the party."

"But I need things from the house."

“Grazi, you look fine, and Pietro’s gift was delivered to his house this morning.” I grinned, remembering the sexy, custom-made Colt Walker pistol I got for him. For a gun collector like Pietro, that gift was better than pussy.

“I bought some things for Francesco and I was hoping we would have time to grab them.” I loved how much she loved my nephew.

“We can’t. I have to make a business stop and we’re already running late.”

“Ok.”

I looked to the passenger seat to see her pouting.

“Grazi, what’s wrong? You can tell Chiara to bring the kid to our house tomorrow to get his gifts.”

She sighed. “I know. I just wanted to make him happy.”

“He’s fine. What is this really about?”

“Not important.” Her shoulders raised in a quick shrug.

Not important? Everything about her was important. Vital.

“Tell me.”

“I miss Victoria and Emiliano, that’s all. The kids store I got those gifts for Franci is their favorite place when I take them out shopping.”

“Giovani’s children.” Grazia talked about them all the time. “I’m sorry, baby.”

“It’s not your fault.”

“I married you.” My name pulled her away from her kin; that was just a reality. She was better off without a father like Fabiano Caputo, but I knew she was suffering because of her brothers and it was fucking killing me.

Grazi never let it show or talked about missing them, but I knew this woman better than I knew my own heart. A

part of her bright spirit was withering because she was married to me and that was keeping me up at night.

My hand itched to go to the gun I had tucked in the glove compartment. One bullet in the back of Fabiano's head and I could feel the sweet taste of revenge. If he'd be dead, then Grazia's brothers wouldn't have any reason to keep their backs turned to her, but I knew she wouldn't let me. It didn't matter if Fabiano deserved it – if he owed me a life for the one he took – my wife had a gentle soul and she wouldn't go to sleep in peace next to the man that killed her father.

“Sasa, stop.” Her small hand landed on top of mine. “I love my family, but if they never speak another word to me again, I still won't regret being your wife.”

I pulled her palm up to my lips and kissed it, praying that she would feel the same for the rest of her life.

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Chapter 23

Salvatore parked the car in the back alley of a building where two restaurants were open. I knew one belonged to him and it was pretty popular in Palermo, especially with the tourists, so Adrian used it as a front for many years. Our families used to gather here for drinks when we were kids because it was convenient. This place was filled with informants and was built like a fortress, so our fathers took advantage of that.

When he got out of the car, Sasa made a quick phone call and then told me to wait a minute before he disappeared inside of one of the supply doors, but that was at least twenty minutes ago. I was starting to feel impatient.

A bored woman is almost as bad as a scorned one, that's what Gaspino says all the time, and Salvatore was about to learn the truth behind those words. Rolling my eyes at his nerve of leaving me to wait in this miserable alley when he made such a big deal about being late, I took off the seatbelt and went straight for the door I'd seen him walking through. I only made it two steps inside the building when I noticed the gargantuan looking man crammed behind a wood table, fixing himself a blow of coke. He was huge, with tattoos on his arms and face, and when his eyes got fixed on me, I saw his right hand slowly reaching under the table.

“I’m looking for Salvatore. I assume you’re his muscle.” The man didn’t answer, but I heard the click of the gun under that damn table. He was not friendly. “I’m Grazia, his wife.” I showed him my ring.

“Oh. Boss didn’t say you’d show up too.” His voice was so low, I could feel the vibration in the floor.

“I was in the car. I need to speak with my husband.”

“Yes, Mrs. Fiori. He’s in the office with the boys.” I didn’t move and he sighed. “Two doors down that way.” His thick finger pointed me to a corridor on the right and I walked that way without another word.

I heard Salvatore’s voice and followed it to a wooden door that was ajar, but it was enough for me to hear the conversation inside. I could tell he was with a few of his men and they were talking business, something just for their ears. That should have been my signal to turn around and walk away, but I didn’t. Instead, I leaned in to hear better.

“Are you sure?” Salvatore asked.

“Yes, *Don* Fiori. I got word a couple of hours ago. Someone from inside vouched for this information.”

“And what do you know for sure?”

“There’s a new prosecutor at the *Agenzia Nazionale Antidroga*^[48]. He’s young and hungry and is looking for a big score. They’re going to bust Guido Caputo tonight. The fucker might be on the island already.”

My heart turned into a block of ice when I heard my brother’s name and I bit down on my tongue to stop myself from making a sound.

“They’re going to try and catch him at his club?”

“Yes, *Don*. Everyone knows he sells all kinds of powders and pills there.”

The club was a hub of pleasures that my brother used to unpack his contraband; yes, everyone knew this, but he also had police protection.

“Right. Caputo has the *carabinieri* on his side.” Salvatore pointed out.

“This guy is bringing the National Guard with him. Straight from Rome. I think they have a chance to take Caputo down tonight.”

My pulse was frantic and irregular, making me feel dizzy. It wasn't the first time my brothers were under the lens of an ambitious law man. They all had opened cases and charges, but nothing ever stuck. What if this was the day their luck ran out?

I couldn't see the face of the man that was talking, but judging by his voice, he took this new prosecutor very seriously, and if it was enough to concern Salvatore's men, then my brother was in real danger. Someone was out to get Guido's head and he had no idea but *I* did.

My palms started sweating and I turned on the top of my toes, walking back, following the same steps I took when I came inside. The huge guard wasn't at his post anymore, so I could slink to the car without any questions or weird looks. The moment I was back in the passenger seat of the Maserati, I let out a huge sigh, finally allowing myself to breathe.

That conversation was not for me to hear, I knew that, but I couldn't take it back. I took a deep breath in hopes of clearing my head, but I didn't get the chance to do so because Salvatore showed and opened the car door.

“All done. I'm sorry you had to wait, *Tesoro*. It was important.”

“Oh.” I waited for him to keep talking, but it didn't happen. “Is everything ok, Sasa?”

“Yes.” He answered shortly while getting back into traffic. “Grazi, no need to look worried. It was just a business stop.”

I flinched. He could read something on my face and I pushed it away. I couldn't tell Salvatore I listened at his door without facing his anger for such childish, dangerous behavior, and I wasn't sure it would help. He didn't care about my

brother and why would he? Giovanni made it clear for everyone – we were at war and my husband was a good man, but he was no saint. He wouldn't go out of his way to help the enemy.

By the time we made it to Pietro's house, I got my emotions under control, but my mind was racing. There were a million things going through my head all at once and I was once again, ripped in half between Salvatore and my family.

I had to let Guido know what was going down tonight – I had to – but doing so was a betrayal to my husband and the Fiori *famiglia*. *My famiglia*.

“Grazi, are you good?” My husband asked when he came to open the car door for me.

“Yes, sorry. My mind was somewhere else.”

He took me in his arms, calming the storm raging inside me, and brushed his lips on my cheek.

“And where is your mind, wife, if not with me?”

“Rosa Vitale.” I lied, looking for an excuse.

“Your ballet teacher?”

“Yes. I need something from my old studio and she could send it to me.”

“Grazi.” He warned. It was not wise for me to have any ties with that part of my life. It wasn't safe.

“It's my favorite pair of pointe shoes, *Sasa*. Please. I'll call her and she can take care of everything. She has no relation with my father, or anyone in the family.” I plead with him. “It's very important to me.”

His forehead frowned and I knew I had him. He only had one weak spot – *me* – and I hated using the love between us to go behind his back, but I was trapped between a rock and a hard place.

“One phone call, Grazia. Keep it short.”

“Yes. Thank you.”

“Don’t thank me, *Tesoro*. If it’s in my power, I’ll give you anything you want.”

Except peace of mind. He knew what my brothers meant to me and still decided to stay back and watch one of them go down in flames.

“We should go inside, Salvatore.”

“Right. My dear cousin is waiting.”

We walked in without knocking and Pietro rose from his chair to welcome us. Salvatore was right, this was a small gathering. Only Yannis and his girlfriend, and Chiara and her husband were there.

My eyes landed directly on Bruno Angeli. This was the first time I got to see him up close. Even if Chiara and Francesco were a constant presence in Salvatore’s house, her husband was not so much. I caught a few glimpses of him on the rare occasions he came to pick Chiara up.

When we walked in, he was talking to Yannis and they both stopped to look at Salvatore and I.

“You look good, *Don*.” Bruno said and then pointed at me. “Is this her? Is this your wife, or someone you keep on the side?”

I froze and Salvatore pinned him down with a dirty look.

“Be very careful how you speak to my wife, Bruno. It’s very thin ice around her and your jokes are not appreciated.”

“Relax, cousin.” Bruno then stretched his hand towards me. “Grazia Caputo, it’s very nice to finally meet you.”

He could have met me a long time ago if he’d had bothered to come to dinner every time his wife was invited.

“Fiori.” I corrected him. “It’s Grazia Fiori now.”

“Right, because of the marriage.” Something in his tone irked me, but I was too consumed by worry to read between the lines.

“It’s very nice to meet you, Bruno. I’m surprised you never came to visit us with Chiara and Pietro.”

“I’m a busy man.”

“You sure are.” I matched his cold voice.

Chiara came next to me and I met her with a hug.

“There you are,” she giggled, “you two are late.”

“Blame it on your cousin. He had to stop for business.” I timidly looked to Salvatore who was now sat at the table waiting for me to join him. “It must have been something important because it was longer than expected.”

Salvatore frowned my way, trying to grasp the point.

“Routine.” He answered just with one word. He wanted me to close the subject, so I nodded and sat in the chair he pulled out for me.

“So, Grazia,” Bruno winked at me from across the table, “you get along with my wife.”

“Yes, we go way back.”

I’d never seen someone lose their smile as fast as Bruno after he registered my words.

Salvatore threw his arm over my shoulders and pulled me closer to him.

“Easy, Grazi.” He spoke in my ear, but I was sure I heard a smile in his voice. “Pietro, I’m sorry we’re late, cousin.” He quickly changed the subject.

“All good. The food was just delivered before you came. We wouldn’t even be having this dinner if my sister wouldn’t be so pushy.” Pietro pointed an accusing finger at Chiara and she winked. “Is everything good in the city?”

“Yes.” My husband said. “We weren’t late because of business, we were late because when I went to pick Grazi up she was dancing and I watched her longer than I should have.”

“Ha!” Pietro scoffed. “You know, I thought that *finally* being married to her would cure you, but you have it bad.”

Salvatore pulled my face to his and kissed me unapologetically. “Yes, I do.”

I blushed, I couldn’t help my reaction. Pietro was right. I waited for that crazy attraction to tone down when we started spending every day together and went to sleep in the same bed every night, but it never happened. We were married, there were no more walls to keep us apart – none that Salvatore didn’t bulldoze down – but I still reached for him every minute. I still bit my lip and hid my eyes when he called me beautiful. I still woke him up in the middle of the night just to kiss me. I had it bad too.

Salvatore’s phone started ringing the same time Pietro’s did and everyone at the table looked at them. It wasn’t just a coincidence, it was business.

Yannis cleared his throat and nodded at my husband. “All good?”

“A rat just arrived on our island. Nothing that concerns us.”

Just like that, my heart climbed into my throat, choking me. The cavalry was here to arrest my brother while I was having a nice candlelit dinner with my husband and his cousins.

“We should eat.” Salvatore said like nothing happened.

A cold shiver crept up my spine slowly. Someone put some lobster on the plate in front of me, but I had no appetite for food. It was pretty clear to me that the information Salvatore got earlier was true and he wasn’t going to lift a finger for Guido. He just sat in the chair next to mine, relaxed, talking to Yannis about the last game AS Roma played.

Feeling suffocated, I pushed my chair back and rose to my feet.

“Grazi, are you ok?”

“Yes, Sasa. Just...” I had to come up with something. “I’m just going to go and wash my hands.”

Chiara told me where the bathroom was and then everyone returned to their conversation. As soon as I was behind the bathroom door, I locked it behind me. Pulling out my phone from the back pocket of my jeans, I dialed Guido's number twice, but didn't get any answer, so I tried calling every single one of my brothers. Not a single call went through. There was no way no one saw I was calling, but they choose not to answer, because I wasn't their sister anymore. I was just Salvatore Fiori's wife. Trying to call my father was out of the question, so the only one I had left was Pina. I haven't talked to her since I was in Milano and I hated to mix her up in this mess, but what was I to do?

I pressed on her name before I had a chance to talk myself out of it and finally someone answered.

"Oh, my God, Grazia." She whispered my name.

"Yes, Pina, it's me. I really need to talk to you."

"You called me." This time her voice was high-pitched and cracked.

"Yes I... are you crying?"

"I just didn't believe you'd speak to me again."

Ariana. With everything that happened, I never stopped to think how this affected her.

"I wanted to, Pina, but I couldn't. I couldn't risk calling you."

"I know. This is all so... I'm so sorry. What she did... Ari... no one can believe she moved into your father's house. My parents can't leave the house because of the shame they feel."

Moved? Into his house? Ariana was living in my house? Flash images of the Spanish court and the rose garden my mother planted came rushing to my head and now to think Ariana was there... the nausea took over my stomach and I grabbed onto the sink counter to keep myself on my feet.

"Pina, none of that matters right now. I need you to do me a big favor."

“Anything.”

“I’m going to text you an address and I need you to come pick me up. Fast.”

“Umm, ok. Salvatore didn’t give you a car?”

“I need to get to Guido’s club without him knowing.”

“Oh.” Yeah, that was about right.

“I know it’s a lot to ask from you.”

“No, it’s not. I’m already in the garage. Text me where I have to be.”

“Thank you.” I said in one breath and finished the call so I could text her.

I had less than ten minutes until Salvatore would start looking for me, so I had to think fast.

There had to be a way I could get out of here without anyone noticing me and I had to find it fast. The front door was out, because Pietro had a clear view from his spot at the table, but the house had a garden, so there had to be a side door. I didn’t see any guards when we came in, but there were cameras in the driveway, so my safest bet was to jump over the fence.

Damn it, Grazia Paulina, this is a bad idea.

It’s stupid and reckless, and dangerous.

Guido is my brother, yes, but I had no guarantee he won’t slap me across the room when I show up at his door.

Plus, Salvatore is going to break my neck when I return.

There is a chance I might get out of here, but he’ll know what I did and he will be furious.

I still have to try and do something.

The thoughts poured into my mind cascading in a fraction of a second. I knew what I was doing and I knew that I would have to face my husband’s rage, but at the end of the

day he had to understand that the call of blood was just as strong as the love I carried for him in my heart.

I snuck back into the hallway and started moving deeper into the house, looking for a way out. I spent years glued to the barre to perfect walking on my pointes, and never once had I thought that I would use this skill to sneak around like a thief, but here I was, doing it twice in the same day.

It didn't take me long to find the other exit. Pietro's house wasn't so big and it was a classic Italian building. Most of them were built the same. I snuck into the back yard and didn't lose any time to check around me if there were more cameras or any people, I just ran to the fence and jumped over it. I was grateful Pietro decided on a metal one that was easy to climb, nothing like the fortress concrete walls that were surrounding the Fiori house.

I only had to jog ten minutes before Pina called to tell me she was close to the neighborhood. She must have broken every speeding limit known to man to come all the way across town so fast and we were both lucky that she wasn't stopped by the police.

When I spotted her cherry red convertible, I exhaled, feeling relief.

"There you are." She said when I jumped in the passenger seat.

"Drive. Salvatore's probably looking for me already."

She pushed the gas all the way down to the floor and got lost in traffic on *Viale della Regione*.

"Where are we going, Grazia?"

"Guido's strip club. It's in *Pallvicino*. I don't know the address, but I remember how to get there. I'll give you directions."

"What the hell is going on?"

I exhaled. "It's complicated and the less you know the better. I overheard Salvatore talking and it's very important."

“You... you’re giving away information from his house.” Pina’s eyes grew wide like I’ve never seen them before.

“No! It’s not like that.”

“I have no place in judging you, *amica*^[49].”

“It’s really not. The police will raid Guido’s club tonight. I have to tell him, Pina.”

“I understand.” She said in her specific nonchalant way. I looked over to see she was in tights and an oversized hoodie, with her blonde hair up in a ponytail, and the image made me smile involuntarily. She was the first familiar thing I saw in so long. “To be honest with you, Grazia, this is the first thing in weeks I understand.”

“Oh, Pina.”

“I keep glancing your way, but I don’t think I can look you in the eye.”

“Why? It’s not your fault.”

“She’s my sister!” Pina exploded, hitting her fist in the steering wheel. “That whore has dragged us all down with her and for what?”

“She wanted the attention.”

“She wanted to be you. That’s all Ariana ever wanted, Grazia. She wants to be the mafia princess, with seven brothers who would give their life to protect her and a mafia Don that loves her like she came down from heaven.”

“What?”

“Why do you think she acted the way she did for so long? She took ballet classes because you did. She couldn’t have your brothers so she tried to fuck her way through them, but that didn’t work. She only came close once.”

“Excuse me? Pina what are you talking about?”

“Ariana has hit on every single one of your brothers, *amica*. Even the married ones, but they took pity on her and never said anything. Gianni is the only one who said a word to

my father about her behavior because Ruby wanted to kill my sister.” Yes, my dear sister-in-law Ruby was very quick to anger.

“What do you mean she came close once? With who?”

“Garon.” She said and her jaw tightened. “She caught him drunk one night and he fondled her a little.”

“*Cristo*, I’ve been so blind to so many things.”

“I wasn’t. I saw all of this. She was always jealous of you, but I thought it was just that, stupid jealousy because she’s vain. I think lately it turned into something else. Something ugly.”

“Desire for my father?” I couldn’t think about anything uglier than that.

“Obsession. *Don* Fabiano was the only one who gave her something to hold on to.”

“And now she lives in my house.”

“Yes. I’m sorry.”

“He should be sorry, Pina, not you. That house holds every memory I have from my mother and he brought my so-called friend there to be his mistress.” I was shaken by a mix of anger and disgust. “Sometimes I wake up in the middle of the night and Salvatore is sleeping next to me. I stay there wide awake missing my family and thinking that maybe I should have thought twice before starting a war with them, but then I hear things like this and know I have no reason to regret my decision. Salvatore loves me to the point of madness. He would never humiliate me like my father did and he would *never* take anyone’s side against me like my brothers.”

“Grazia, your brothers have to protect the *Don*. It’s our law.”

“Right. Can we change the subject, please? I can’t think of Ariana living there. I just can’t.”

“Sure. I have another very interesting subject I’d love to hear about.”

“What is that?”

“Salvatore Fiori. Your *husband*. Why? How?”

My marriage was not up for debate, but Pina was coming from a good place.

“After I walked in on Ariana half naked, I asked my father to kick her out and he told me they weren’t done, so I left instead.” I cleared my throat. “I went to the only person that I knew would make me feel safe. We got married the next day.”

“You knew he would take you in? With all that history?”

“Pina you’re not stupid and I know people talk.”

“Grazia Caputo, you fooled us all.”

“Fiori.” I was getting tired of correcting people.

“Grazia Fiori. If it’s any consolation, when Ariana heard about your wedding, she had a nervous breakdown.”

“Why?”

“Who do you think she’d rather sleep with? Your hot, rich, mafia respected young husband, or *Don* Fabiano? I think she realized that even now, when she was sleeping with the most important man in the Caputo *famiglia*, she still had to compete with you.”

She was competing against herself because it wasn’t a race I ever wanted to be part of.

“She can sleep with my father if that’s what she wants but if she ever thinks about looking at Salvatore, I will kill her myself and it won’t be a clean kill. You talk to her often?”

“With Ariana? God, no! I’m scared that if I’m alone with her for too long, I’ll snap and take her eyes out with a fork.”

“That’s a lot of anger, Pina.”

“I have a lot of things to be angry about. She ruined our parents, she made sure I’ll have no future in this city

because who wants to hang around the sister of the dirtiest whore in Italy? And she hurt my only friend.” She grabbed my hand while maneuvering the car through traffic. “I was the one who told her about you and Salvatore because we were fighting when I met her so I could drop off some of her clothes. I also had to inform her that my parents have only one daughter now. Lucky me.” Oh, poor Pina. Her parents were nice people, but extremely overbearing, especially her mother who loved everything glamorous while Pina was the exact opposite.

“Oh, look!” I pointed to a street in front of us. “Right there on the left. That’s the club.”

7th Heaven got its name because when Guido opened this place, he gathered seven of the best strippers in Europe and brought them to dance here. They were known as the naked angels. The name was now shining in neon lights day and night and it was full around the clock. It became Guido’s most profitable business, and not only because of the stripping. He had many things going on under the roof of that club and that was exactly why he was about to become a target.

“Pina, I have to go. I don’t have much time.”

“Wait!”

“What?”

“Are we still friends?”

“You and I? Of course we are.”

Her face relaxed for the first time since I saw her. “When you didn’t call, I thought...”

“I tried once, but you didn’t answer and after that, I didn’t call because Salvatore doesn’t think it’s safe for me to keep in touch with anyone yet and you didn’t need the extra trouble.”

“Maybe you can call me late at night when you lay awake.”

“I will.”

“I’ll wait here in case you need me when you get out.”

I checked my phone to see that Salvatore has called me four times already. “I think my husband will find me by then, but thank you.”

“Go.”

I crossed the street, circling the building until I found the staff door, and stopped to turn off my phone before walking in. The building was most probably jammed, but I didn't want to take any chances.

As soon as I stepped in, I saw a familiar face.

“Mattia!” Mattia Ramazoti was only a few years older than me, but he had a solid spot in the *famiglia*. Guido, Gianni, and Giovanni took him under their wings when he was only fifteen and now he was a fixer, one of the best. When he saw me, he stopped breathing.

“*Ragazza*, I like seeing your face you, but leave.”

“I have to see Guido.”

“You have to go, Grazia. If you turn around right now I can pretend I never saw you. Please, I don't want to be forced to do something I would regret.” He was a friend, but he would hurt me if Guido would order it.

“I'm here, Mattia. I have to talk with Guido right now. It's important.”

“He's busy.”

“I always admired how loyal you are to my family, but you have to step aside. Guido's in the office, right?”

“Don't do it.”

“Are you going to stop me?”

“If the boss asks me to.”

“So let's go ask him.” I walked passed him and went down the stairs going into the basement. I wasn't allowed to come to this club for obvious reasons, but Guido brought me a couple of times to visit, so I knew my way around.

“Grazia, wait.” Mattia tried to stop me one more time before I pushed the door open.

As soon as I walked in I knew I should have listened to Mattia. Guido was there, in his chair, with his shirt opened, and with Maya – his wife – in his lap. She was kissing his neck while he was trying to push up her skirt.

“Oh, God!” I cried, covering my eyes. “Has no one in this family ever heard of a bedroom?”

They both jumped up when they saw me and I rushed to close the door.

“Grazia!” Maya squeaked happily. “Oh, *mia bambina*, you’re ok! I was so worried.”

She came running and I opened my arms to hug her. She held me so tight, I almost started crying.

“I’m ok.”

“Are you coming back home? It’s ok, Grazia, everything can be undone. You can come stay with us. You *should* have come to stay with us in the first place.”

“I missed you too, Maya. I missed all of you.” My voice shook and I cleared my throat. “That’s not why I’m here. I need to talk with Guido.” My brother was looking at me with a face carved out of stone, silent. “I wouldn’t have come if it wasn’t important.”

“Maya, please *Amore*, give us a moment.”

“What? No! I missed her.”

“Maya.”

She rolled her eyes, unimpressed with his harshness.

“Grazia, I will be at the bar grabbing a coffee. Don’t leave without saying goodbye. We have a lot to talk about.”

“I know.” I sighed. She finally left the room. “Guido, something’s happening.”

“What the fuck is that man who has the audacity to call himself your husband thinking? What in God’s name are you

doing here?”

“He doesn’t know, Guido. He will be furious with me for coming here.”

“He should!” He shouted and I answered accordingly.

“I had to come!”

“You felt like taking a fucking walk?”

“I came to tell you that you will get arrested tonight! You need to clear the club!” He looked at me with his mouth hanging open. “I overheard Salvatore speaking with one of his informants. I’m here betraying my husband’s trust for you so don’t you dare yell at me.”

“That’s why you came?”

“Yes.”

He dragged a hand down his face and chuckled.

“No one is getting arrested.”

“There’s a special prosecutor coming...”

“I know.” He cut me off and came closer, taking my hands in his. “You’re agitated. Come sit down.”

We walked together to the couch and he never let go of my hands.

“You know?”

“Yes, *Sorella*, I know. The club is clean. Actually, we cleaned the whole damn city. No hookers, no drugs, no guns. Everything is over the table tonight.”

“Oh.”

“You could have saved yourself a trip.”

“I called you.” I said and I felt my eyes starting to sting. “I called all seven of you and no one answered.”

“Don’t pout. You know why we don’t take your calls.”

“Because I married Salvatore.”

“Because you broke our trust and brought shame to the Caputo name.”

I flinched, burned by that word. *Shame.*

“I did that? How dare you?”

“You made mistakes. You wanted to piss father off and took it too damn far.”

“Father took a mistress half his age in the same bed our mother slept in and because I married Salvatore when I didn’t feel safe in my own home, you all pushed me aside. You say I brought you shame?”

“It’s not easy for us either, Grazia.”

“Next time you feel ashamed that I am your sister, just remember that none of you wanted to speak to me today, but when Salvatore was ordered to stay away from me, he always answered when I called. Every single time.” I pushed myself away from Guido. “That’s why I married him, not to piss of Father.”

He let his eyes down. “Grazia, I didn’t mean to upset you.”

“I’ll leave.”

“Wait.” He came and caught me. “I spoke without thinking. You’re our sister and we love you, no matter what, but it’s messed up. All of us want things to settle down so we could have a sit down with Fiori, but Father is very vocal about wanting blood.”

“What?”

“Salvatore took away his little girl. He wants war, Grazia, and all of us are trying to force him to step down and let Giovanni take his place as Don.”

“You can tell Father that when Salvatore bleeds than so do I. Is he ready to have all that blood on his hands?”

“No one in this family would hurt you.”

“Won’t you? You already refuse to speak to me because your *Don* commanded. What’s going to happen if he

wants me out?”

“He’s your father, kid. I know you’re angry, and you have the right to be. I am too. Father doesn’t have a friend in any of his kids right now, but no one wants to hurt you.”

“Just my husband.”

“It’s complicated.”

“It’s ridiculous, Guido. Father is the one in the wrong. He is the one who had an affair with Cristina Fiori.” I waited for his reaction.

Guido sucked in a breath and jerked his head to see me better.

“Salvatore Fiori needs to learn to keep his mouth shut around his wife.” He mumbled.

“He told me the truth because I asked him to. I should have known this, brother, but none of you were honest with me.”

“Grazia, we wanted to protect you.” He sighed heavily. “You remember Mother happy, and we didn’t want to taint those memories.”

I couldn’t remember my mother not smiling from one ear to another, but I was just a kid back then. I knew nothing.

“She wasn’t, was she?”

“It was a hard marriage. Father wasn’t always true to his wedding vows.”

I puffed and crossed my arms. “You don’t say. I married Salvatore because I know he would never do that to me. Don’t bother giving me a lecture about trusting him too much.”

“I won’t. I know he loves you.” I blinked, surprised with his kind words. “He always looked at you like he wanted to eat you whole. We broke his ribs because of that a couple of times.”

“What?”

“Someone had to teach him respect. Giorgio and I took that task upon ourselves.” He smiled and I mirrored it, feeling my chest warming.

“I missed you.”

“I know.” Guido leaned to kiss my forehead. “Salvatore’s right, though. The smartest thing to do now is stay put and by his side. Your marriage made waves in the mafia and we need to wait for things to settle down.”

“What does that mean?”

“Father has friends and he also has enemies. Everyone knows you ran away to marry a man we don’t approve of. For his friends, you and your husband humiliated *Don Fiori*, and for his enemies, you’re a weak spot because we can’t protect you.” He touched my cheek gently. “People look at Sicily and all they see are Fiori and Caputo, and we don’t know who might want to take advantage of how divided we are right now.”

I grinned. “Are you telling me I should listen to my husband?”

“Yes.”

“I should go. He’s probably going crazy looking for me. I should get home before he finds out where I am.”

Guido went to his desk and looked at his phone. “Yes, you should go. I’ll walk you out.”

“I can’t stop to talk to Maya, can’t I?”

“I’m sorry, kid, but I can’t let you do that.”

“Right.” I tried my best to put on a brave face, but I was hurt. I didn’t care what his reasons were, I wanted my brother to have my back. *I wanted all of them to have my back.*

“Grazia, it’s the...”

“...right thing.” I finished the sentence for him. “It doesn’t make it the less painful thing, Guido.”

“What do you want me to do, eh? Tell my *Don* to go screw himself? Or tell Giovanni that he’s handling this situation *you’ve* put us in like shit? The Caputo family is divided enough.”

“I defied my Don – *my husband* – to help you tonight.”

“I’m sorry, *sorella*.”

“Me too.” We shared a hug that did more damage than good and he kissed my forehead again.

“Grazia, what you did tonight? Thank you.”

“You’re my brother, Guido. Even if you’re too scared to tell Father you want to call me once in a while, I like to think you wouldn’t let me end up in jail.”

“Sarcasm is ugly on you. Out now. I have to work.”

I pulled on the big office door to open it, but as soon as I stepped into the hall, I stopped. The image of my father was blocking my way out. He was walking our way, with his chest puffed like a rooster, and Gaspino, Goliath and Giovanni were all lined up behind him like soldiers.

Not knowing what to do, I looked over my shoulder at Guido for help.

“Hold on, Grazia,” he whispered, “this is going to get loud.”

Just like Guido predicted, Father didn’t lose any moments before pointing at me and starting to shout. “What is *she* doing here?” He said the word *she* like it was something dirty. “How dare you come here? What do you think? Now that you can see what a mistake it was to run away, I’ll just take you back?”

“What?” I blinked. “Take me back?”

“You made your bed, now lie in it.”

“I am. With my *husband*. I’m not here to ask for your forgiveness, Father. I just had to see Guido.”

“No son of mine has anything to say to you!”

“Stop shouting, Father. We all can hear you very well.” I looked at the other three of my brothers over his shoulder and they were standing like statues.

“Lose that attitude, Grazia Paulina. You’re starting to get on my last nerve.”

“How’s your girlfriend? Did you settle her in my bedroom?”

“You have the nerve to come here and be impertinent after everything you’ve done? After all the shame you brought to our family?”

“Me? I brought the shame?” I shook my head. “One day soon you should take a long look at yourself in the mirror.”

“Get out!” My father roared and took one step towards me. He was frightening when he was in one of his moods, but I stood my ground. I’d rather get slapped across the face than back down. “Don’t ever come here or close to this family again. For the Caputo clan, you’re dead. There’s no forgiveness for whores, Grazia, so don’t come looking for any.”

The words were spit out with disdain, but whatever he hoped to achieve failed. I didn’t feel any pain, or sadness, I just felt sorry. Sorry for him for being such a little man and sorry for me for taking so long to see it.

The *whore* remark didn’t go so easily past my brothers. Gaspino pulled me behind him to shield me from the hostility and the other three got into Father’s face. Giovanni pushed his finger into our Father’s chest and pushed him back.

“Don’t you speak to her like that ever again.” Giovanni growled. “This is your last warning.”

“You don’t get to tell me how to speak, boy.”

“I won’t allow you to insult my sister.”

“Your sister is a…”

“Stop.” One word that came from Goliath in his deep and threatening voice, made everyone freeze, including father.

“Don’t get things confused, Father. We all stand with you because the *famiglia* comes first, but you ever insult my sister again, I’m going to put your head through a wall, *Don*.”

I sobbed softly, but Gaspino must have heard me because while everyone was busy fighting, he turned to me and put an arm over my shoulders.

“Don’t let him upset you, *Sorella*. He’s done enough.”

“I hate that they’re fighting because of me.”

“It’s better than you thinking we’ve abandoned you.” His smile shone through the chaos. “It’s your husband we can’t stand, baby girl, not you.”

“Salvatore did nothing to you.”

“He married you. That’s enough. Can you go back safe?”

I was sure Pina was already gone by now, but I could call a taxi.

Guido came to us and answered for me.

“Yes. Her driver’s outside.”

“Oh, Guido, I can’t take one of your cars.” Salvatore would be mad enough without me bringing any extra Caputo associates to his door.

“It’s not one of mine. Goliath will walk out with you. He’s leaving too.”

Someone pushed my Father to a different room and my brothers gave me a quick hug. Goliath took my hand and we started going up the stairs together.

“I’m sorry, *Fratello*.^[50]” I spoke to kill the pressing silence between us.

“For what are you apologizing, *Grazia*? Eloping?”

“No! For what happened tonight.”

“Why are you here?”

“I had to speak with Guido. It was important.”

“Important enough to risk pushing two crime families into a war?”

“Yes, Goliath. I thought my brother was in danger. That’s important enough for me.”

“Guido?” He raised an eyebrow. “Ah, you’ve heard about the visitors that are going to stop by tonight.”

“Yes.”

“It was none of your business.”

“Right. Well, I’m about to face the consequences. Salvatore is going to be so furious.”

“He has a good reason to be. You put yourself in danger.”

“I ruined dinner.” Now that it was over, I started to realize all the ways I’ve screwed things up. “Chiara is going to be mad at me too.”

That made Goliath stop in his tracks and I did too.

“Why?” He simply asked.

“Umm, it’s Pietro’s birthday today. She had a hard time convincing him to celebrate and I think I ruined that.”

“You two are close again?”

“Yes, Goliath, we are. Does it bother you?”

“Why? Because she burned down my house?” He shrugged. “No. I’m just surprised you can handle all her crazy.”

“You loved that crazy.” I reminded him and I could swear he got so cold, the temperature dropped. “She’s different now. I think it’s because of Francesco.”

“Who’s that? The husband?”

“Her son. The husband is not that present.” I saw his eyes shift to me, but whatever thought crossed his mind, he kept it to himself.

He opened the door that led to the back alley for me and we stepped outside without talking anymore. Pietro was

waiting on the other side of the door, looking pissed. When he noticed who was standing behind me, his face started turning red.

“Let’s go, Grazia.” He said through clenched teeth.

The two men rubbed each other the wrong way ever since Goliath started dating Chiara, mostly because Pietro is a very protective brother and my brother was never shy to tell him what he was doing to his sister.

“You don’t even want to shake my hand, Pietro?” Goliath mocked him.

“I’m here to take my *Don’s* wife home. You can go to hell.”

“Still mad?”

Pietro growled under his breath. “Don’t fucking push me, today, Goliath. Don’t.”

“Didn’t your birthday wish come true?”

“My birthday wish is to put my fist in your face, Caputo. Do you want it to come true?” Then he turned to me. “We should go.”

“I know.” I sighed.

Goliath stepped between Pietro and I.

“Take care of my sister.”

“I will. Better than you took care of mine.”

My brother shook his head and started walking away, putting a hand on Pietro’s shoulder on his way.

“Happy birthday, Pietro.”

“Fuck you, Goliath.”

Men. Men and their egos.

The ride back to the Fiori palace was marked by dead quiet. Pietro didn’t say anything, he didn’t even look at me, and I felt pressure to be the one who spoke first.

“Salvatore sent you.”

“Yes.”

“How did you know where I’d be?”

“Guido told on you.”

I frowned. My brother talked to Salvatore?

“Are you mad at me too?”

“I was ordered to keep my opinions to myself.”

“Pietro, I’m sorry, but I had to talk to Guido. You have to understand. I know about that prosecutor who wants to arrest him. I couldn’t just sit and have cake while my brother goes to jail.”

“I admire your loyalty, Grazia, I do, but it would be fucking nice to show the same respect to my cousin.” While he spoke, his fists tightened around the steering wheel. “He risked everything. He has big plans, he had them even before Adrian died. Salvatore wants to write his name in the Italian history and he risked everything to marry you.”

“Pietro, I know.”

“Do you? I think you got so used to having him in the palm of your hand, you take him for granted. His reputation is shit now, because everyone questions the honor of a man who’d marry a *Don’s* daughter without permission. He lost money and friends – *allies* – because he got in bed with a Caputo. And this is what you do? You run to them?”

“I didn’t run *to* them, I just had to see Guido for five minutes. Please try to understand. If Chiara would be in danger, you wouldn’t hesitate to help her.” He had to understand.

“That’s your problem, Grazia. Your brothers are *your* problem. I just care about Salvatore and you just put a knife in his heart.”

I lost my breath.

There was no point in responding. I was in the wrong, but it wasn’t Pietro’s forgiveness I needed.

He pulled the car in front of the main entrance of the house and put the car in park.

“You’re not coming inside?” I asked.

“No. *Don Fiori* wants to be alone with you.” It sounded like a threat.

As soon as I stepped out of the car, the tires screeched and Pietro was on his way back. I looked at the door in front of me waiting to be opened and felt my guts trembling. My husband was behind that door – the love of my life, the man who loved me more than life – so why was I so hesitant to go in?

Pietro’s words got to me and now I wasn’t so sure of what to expect. Salvatore and I fought so many times before, we made a sport out of it, but back then, I wasn’t wearing his ring. Back then, I didn’t vow to respect and support him ‘till death do us part.

Clearing my throat to break the knot that formed there, I gathered my courage in my hands and opened the door, walking inside the house. It was so quiet, I could hear Salvatore’s breath all the way from the entrance. He was waiting for me in the living room.

The first thing I saw was his back. He was sitting on the couch, looking straight at a glass of amber spirits. I could tell he was tense. Still hesitant, but eager to make it better, I got closer to him and placed my hand between his shoulder blades.

“Would you let me talk before you yell at me, Sasa?”

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Chapter 24

“Talk if that’s what you want.”

The hand she had on my back was burning me through the shirt.

“I overheard you talking earlier, about how they were going to bust Guido’s club tonight.” She exhaled, and her sweet, warm breath rolled down the back of my head. “When you said those people were already in Sicily... Salvatore I had to go and see him. I had to warn him. He is my brother. I know – *Amore mio*, I know – that he’s also my father’s son, but I couldn’t sit and watch him go to jail.”

Unable to stay still anymore, I got up and looked down on Grazia. She was so little compared to my body, so fragile, getting entirely swallowed by my shadow.

“And you decided to sneak out and go see him.” I said it with calm, but that calm was soon lost. My temper got the best out of me and I threw the whiskey glass across the room, turning it into glass rain. “You ran away from *me*.”

“I didn’t.”

“Why? You do this over and over and over. It’s a fucking joke.”

“Salvatore.”

“Four years, Grazia. For four years I had to hold on to you with both hands so you won’t slip away from me. I fought you. I had to force you to love me because you kept running away.” My breath started to get loud and I could hear my own blood in my ears. “You finally came to your senses and married me and you’re still running. What the fuck do I have to do to keep you, Grazia? Tell me.”

“You have me.” She showed me her hand where the blue diamond ring was resting. “You have me and my heart. Don’t take things out of proportion, Sasa. I know I was reckless and I know you felt disrespected, and I’m sorry for that. I am, but can you blame me for not wanting Guido to sleep in a cell tonight?”

“Would you fucking stop? This is not about your brother. It’s about you, my wife, who disobeyed every rule we have today. How stupid could you be?”

Her body jerked and her eyes grew round.

“Don’t talk to me like that.”

“I’ll talk to you however I please. You listened to my conversation? Are you insane? People get shot for that, Grazia. You hear too much, you become a problem, you end up in a ditch with a bullet in the back of your head. Do I need to tell you this?”

She was a mafia princess for fuck’s sake. Her father taught her, her mother taught her, I taught her the rules, and now she showed us all the middle finger just because she felt like it. She came to be my wife? To be a Fiori? Fine. Everyone in this damn family has to hold my word above the law, so I will teach her that.

“I’m sorry!” She shouted this time.

“Don’t raise your fucking voice. You’re angry? You?”

“Yes, I am, because I hate the way you’re talking to me right now.”

I hated the way I was talking to her too. This was my Grazi. The woman was my whole universe and then some, and

the last thing I wanted was to hurt her, but I was too angry, and I couldn't let this go.

I stepped closer to her, only a thin strip of air left between us. She didn't move.

“You left to the bathroom and then I couldn't find you anywhere. You were gone when we were in the middle of a fucking war with your father. What do you think went through my head, Grazia? I died a thousand deaths until I realized you left on your own.”

The feelings came back to me. Pietro and I were cracking a bottle of fine wine when Chiara came back to the room red in the face, telling me that my wife was missing. My mind went to a dark place and that fear of losing her is going to haunt me for the rest of my life.

A few tears gathered in her waterlines, but she was too stubborn to let them go.

“I... I... I...”

“You what? You fucked up, Grazia Paulina. *Per l'amor del cazzo*^[51], what were you thinking?”

“I was thinking about my brother.” She stubbornly declared.

“Maybe next time you'll think about me, damn you!” The ugliness crawled up my throat and started bubbling. “I would bend destiny for you, I would fight fate. Is it too much to ask for a crumble of that in return? Is it too much to ask for the woman that sucks my dick every night, not to be my biggest problem?”

“Salvatore, stop it! If that's how you want to act, I will leave. I'm not going to let you put me down for a mistake.”

“Really? What part bothered you? Me asking you for respect, or talking about you sucking my dick.”

She took a step back and I thought she was going to turn and try to run, but instead, her body leaned back enough for her to be able to slap me. Her hand was small, but fuck if it didn't sting.

I touched the burning mark she left with my hand.

“I wouldn’t do that if I were you, Grazia.”

She slapped me again, harder this time. That fire burning was what I loved most about her, and what was going to kill me young.

“What are you going to do, *Don Fiori*? What are you going to do to the stupid woman who shows you no respect? Are you going to hit me back?”

“What?” Her question was like a bucket of ice-cold water poured on my head. “I would never do that.”

“Wouldn’t you? Because right now I’m not so sure. It doesn’t feel like I’m talking to the Salvatore I loved all my life. It definitely doesn’t feel like I’m talking to the man I married because he would never let anyone insult me, not even himself. I don’t know this man standing in front of me and I don’t know what he’s capable of.”

Anger, frustration, more anger, I was dwelling in all of it.

“I will say this once and you should listen. It doesn’t matter what happens, how angry, how tired, or how drunk I am, I would never put my hands on you.”

To test my limits, she hit me again. This time I caught her wrists and kept her prisoner.

“Stop it, woman.”

“You stop it. Stop treating me like this. Yell, scream, be angry, I know I deserve that, but don’t talk to me like that.”

“Like what?”

“Like I mean nothing to you. I can’t bear *that!*”

This was laughable.

“You are my everything. How many times do I have to tell you that?” I told her with no hesitation.

“Then don’t treat me like less. How many times do I have to tell you *that?*”

“What do you expect me to do, Grazia? Pretend you didn’t act like an idiot, betraying my trust, putting yourself in danger, and humiliating me in front of my family?”

Her eyes fell to the floor.

“I knew you would be mad, but I never thought it would hurt you, Salvatore. I would never do anything to cause you pain.”

Pain. She was right, that’s what I felt. I felt pain because she chose someone else. It didn’t matter it was her brother for me, all that mattered was that something else came above us. Pain was fueling my anger.

She was mine. *MINE.* I wanted to roar that so everyone in this damn world would hear it. No one had a right to occupy her thoughts but me. I didn’t care if it was family or friends who took my place, no one got Grazia, but me.

“You are fucking infuriating.”

“I…” I cut her short with a consuming kiss.

The need to have her sprung out of nowhere, spreading through my veins like a river. I had to feel her now.

I had to be inside my wife.

“Salvatore,” she whispered my name while I guided her to the couch.

“Get undressed, *Tesoro.*”

“We can’t.” She said, even when I was already pulling at her shirt.

“*Can’t?*”

“We’re fighting.”

“We can fight later.”

“You’re not angry with me anymore?”

“I am, Grazia. I’m furious. It doesn’t mean I don’t want you. It doesn’t mean I love you any less.”

I pushed her back and she fell over the armrest of the couch, falling on her back with her legs up. My hands moved

quickly to open her jeans and pull them off.

Grazia was wearing black satin underneath, and the scrap of fabric wasn't hiding much. Just looking at the shape of her pussy turned me into an animal. My mouth was watering for her body.

“You are a goddamn enchantress.”

I climbed on top of her and started unbuckling my belt, while my lips were desperately tracing paths on the exposed skin of her chest. A pull made me look down to see she placed her hands on my chest, trying to put some space between us.

“We're both so angry, Salvatore.” She pointed out.

“I'm the only one with a reason to be angry, and,” I swiped my fingers over her underwear, “you are so wet for me.”

“I always am when you're in the room, but I'm still angry.”

Despite her words, she raised one of her gracious legs and hooked it over my shoulders, I freed my cock and guided it inside her. The moment I entered her body, I touched heaven.

I pinched her chin and tilted her head in my direction.

“Use that anger on my cock, *Tesoro*.”

She pushed up, taking all of me in and moaned. This is how we were supposed to be – connected and consumed.

“Sasa.”

“I will fuck you until I'm all you see, Grazia.”

“Please.”

There was no need for begging. I was ready to give her every last drop of pleasure in me. Everything that was in my power to give was for Grazia to have.

Her arms circled my shoulders and she anchored herself into my skin with her nails. She needed to be close too.

She craved *me*. I moved fast and hard inside her, giving into that craving, and making us both growl and moan.

“Tell me you love me, Grazi.”

She hesitated only enough to fill her lungs with air.

“I love you, Salvatore Fiori.”

“Good. Tell me you’ll never love anyone else.”

“Never.” She whispered, searching for something in my eyes. “I’m going to die loving you, *mio marito*.”

The words threw me into a spiral. I wanted more from her, so I took it. I took her body with force and domination, helplessly trying to make us one. Grazi started shivering under me, and I felt my release crippling up my spine. I needed her there with me. An orgasm counted for nothing if I didn’t get to see her burning.

With my fingers, I found the sensitive part of her and caressed it slowly, in contrast with the furious moves of my hips. Every time I moved my fingers, her body jerked, until she couldn’t take it anymore.

The climax took us both at the same time and I received every ripple of pleasure pouring from her body to mine and neither of us dared to move after that. We fell asleep tangled and the last thing I remember is inhaling the sweet smell of her hair. *Paradise*.



I knew she was awake before she moved. There was a change in her breath that gave it away, but her body fit so well in my arms, I didn’t move an inch. We sat like that for a while before Grazi spoke.

“Are you still mad at me?” Her voice sounded small.

“Yes.” I answered honestly and at the same time I leaned in to place a kiss behind her ear. “It will take a while for this to pass.”

She sighed. “I don’t like it.”

“What?”

“You being mad at me. I don’t like it.”

“Then don’t run away and do stupid shit.”

“I won’t.”

“Promise?”

“Yes, Salvatore, I promise. I’m sorry I broke your trust.”

“Broke my trust?” I moved her body so we could look each other in the eye. “There’s no one I trust more than you.”

I saw her frowning and I did too because I didn’t understand what *she* wasn’t understanding.

“Isn’t that why you were so angry with me?”

“I was angry with you because you put yourself in danger. Don’t you understand? Protecting you is my only purpose in life. If anything would have happened to you – if they’d have so much as slapped you with a feather, I would have killed everyone in my way.”

“I’m fine.” She shivered. “I don’t regret marrying you.”

That made me jolt.

“Was that in question?”

“After I spoke with Guido, I ran into my father when I was on my way out. He thought I was coming back and asking them to help me escape our marriage. I wasn’t.”

I flexed, holding her in my arms like she was in a cage.

“I wouldn’t let you.”

Her giggle lightened up the room.

“I love it when you’re possessive. It can be exhausting, but also makes me feel loved.”

“I’m always possessive. That’s why I hate when you run from me to other men.”

“You’re joking.” She studied my passive face. “You’re serious?”

“Dead.”

“Guido’s not another man. He’s my brother.”

“I don’t care. I don’t like sharing with anyone. You’re mine.”

“Sasa, I am. I did something stupid, but nothing could change this.”

She threw a leg over my midsection and I enjoyed the contact with her bare skin. Every part of Grazia was soft and sensual, from the creaminess of her thighs, to the curve of her breasts, to her stunning face. I could look in her blue eyes for the rest of my days and not get bored. I had no need for food or water as long as I had her.

“Are you tired, Grazi?”

“No, why?”

“I want to take you shopping today.”

“Salvatore, I don’t need any more clothes.”

“Maybe not, but I want to see you try some new lingerie. You wouldn’t deny me that pleasure, would you?”

She laughed and bit a patch of skin on my chest.

“We can do that at home. I have a few sets you’ve never seen on me before.”

“I want to take you out. Yannis and Pietro will take care of business today.”

Her sigh felt heavy.

“Pietro hates me. We were finally making friends, and now he hates you.”

“No, he doesn’t.” My cousin and I didn’t talk much the other day, but I didn’t need to hear it from him to know where he stood. “I can’t force Pietro to be your friend, Grazia, but he’s not allowed to hate you. You’re my wife, ergo, he exists to protect you.”

She rolled her eyes at me. “I don’t need protection.”

“You might think that, but you do.” It was my turn to give her the angry eyes. “That protection might turn into a watch if you ever think about leaving anywhere without talking to me first.”

“Stop with that. Is Tutto up yet? I’m hungry.”

“Tutto has the week off. We can grab breakfast before I take you shopping.”

“Why are you so set on that?”

“Because I want to go back to that time on our honeymoon.” Because last night when Pietro showed me the security tapes of Grazia sneaking out of his house there was a second – just one – when I thought she was leaving me. One second when I believed she regretted taking my ring and decided to run back to her brothers. One second was all it took to leave me petrified. I needed to relive that day we spent in Paris and feel close to her again.

“That’s sweet, Sasa. *A volte mi stai sciogliendo il cuore. Lo adoro.* [52]”

She made herself small and glued her body to mine and I held her as tight as I could without breaking any bones. The rupture between us was healing slowly and I felt the strength she was giving me gathering back in my heart. I loved this woman. I needed this woman. And I would never let her leave me.

“*Ti amo, Tesoro.*”

“And I you. Can we go to breakfast now?”

“Whatever you wish for.”

She got ready fast, putting on a strapless dress that happened to be my favorite and matching flats. Expensive clothes and jewelry could make any woman sparkle, but she didn’t need any of that. Grazia’s light came from inside and it captivated me.

We ended up having breakfast at a small trattoria close to the house. I knew the owners and they treated us well, but it

wasn't a place I'd usually frequent. The coffee was not the best, the terrace was small, and the kitchen door was opened and we could hear all the yelling, but Grazia was too hungry to wait to get downtown and I would have settled for porridge if I got to eat it looking at her.

When she decided she ate enough crepes Suzette to last her all day, I carried her to the car and drove to the shopping district. Grazia had no interest for the big-name stores, so we ended up browsing some small shops and they were all cute, but none carried lingerie, so I didn't get a show. She was looking at silk scarves when she noticed I was watching her.

“Sasa.”

“What?”

“You're looking at me.”

“Where else should I look if not at my wife?” I raised my eyebrow and she licked her lips. “Should I look out the window?” No answer. “Should I look at other women?”

Just like an angry cat, she went stiff. “I want to see you trying.”

“Just you, *Tesoro*.” Taking her hand and kissing it, I pulled her to a rack nearby and found a dress. It was black and sexy, and too short to allow her to ever wear it in public, but I had no problem with her wearing it for my eyes only. “Try this on.”

“This one?” She looked at the V-shaped cleavage and then back at me. “It's very provocative.”

“I like it when you provoke me. Go to the changing room.” I sent her away with a slap on her ass and she left giggling. When she disappeared behind a door, I settled on one of the couches that I could bet were put there for husbands waiting on their wives.

Grazia took her sweet time and I got a chance to check my phone. No calls, but Pietro texted me a few times to give me some details about a big meeting with the power-plant people. If all the favors I called in would stay on schedule, those papers were going to be signed in less than a month and

that's when the fun would begin. I smiled to myself thinking about how much I could grow the business and the *famiglia* by the end of the year. If everything would go as planned, I might need to buy a bank soon to keep all that cash.

My good mood was ruined in a heartbeat when a heavy perfume wrapped around me. It was sweet, but not like Grazia. This one was intoxicating, too powerful to be sexy and to pungent to be feminine. When I looked up and saw Ariana Bernoulli sliding her slim body close to me, I realized how fit that perfume was for her.

"Salvatore, it's so good to see you." She chirped. "I was so sorry to hear about your father. How are you feeling?" Her words were accompanied by a touch on my bicep and I felt the coldness of her hand through my shirt.

"I'm feeling fine. Leave." She heard that from me a few times. She should be used to it by now.

"Oh, come on. Don't act like we're strangers. We're old friends."

"No, we're not, you were Grazia's friend."

"You don't mean to say there was nothing between us."

"*Niente*^[53]."

"But there could be." She was sleek as a snake, as always. Too bad I knew all her tricks.

"You should know better, Ariana. I told you last time, no one can turn my head from Grazia. There's no competition when she already won." That struck a nerve and the woman's face turned to stone. I wasn't done with her yet. "I know you like to hang around my men and ride their dicks now and again. Maybe you get off on the danger of getting fucked by people you shouldn't touch, or maybe you think it will get you close to me, but that's over. No one associated with *Fiori* would touch Fabiano's whore."

"Shh!" She placed a finger over her lips in a *very* dramatic gesture. "You don't want Fabiano to hear you talk like that. He gets very angry when someone says a bad word about me."

“He might be angry from dusk ‘till dawn then.”
Something else got my attention. “He’s here?”

“In the Tabaco store next door. I wanted to pick out something nice for him and saw you all alone. Couldn’t help myself but come and say hi.”

“I’m trying to enjoy a day with my wife. Leave.”

If Fabiano was here that meant trouble. He and I never saw face to face since Father kicked him out of our house in disgrace. Clashing with him was a challenge I’d take on any day, but not with Grazia watching. A wife should never see the darkest side of her husband.

Someone as pure as Grazia shouldn’t see the darkest side of me. She knew the man I was better than anyone else, from my honor, to every last stain of blood on my hands. She was born mafia royalty – the Caputo princess – she knew the shadows, but I still wanted to protect her.

“Leave, Ariana, before you stir more shit than you can handle.” Ariana Bernoulli might have been a narcissist, she might have been a bitch and a viper, but she was not stupid. If she came to talk to me, it wasn’t because of some friendship, or to flirt, it was because she was looking to start trouble.

“I just wanted to check in on you and Grazia after you two shocked us all. What a horrible mistake that was.”

It was my turn to tense up.

“If you *ever* call my marriage a mistake again, I’m going to forget you’re a woman.”

Ariana puffed and crossed her arms. “You’re always so quick to take her side. I don’t understand. You could have any woman – a real woman – who would want nothing but to please you, but instead you choose to go to war for a little girl who won’t be with you for more than a year.”

“Leave. Now.”

“Grazia is a ballerina, Salvatore. Pretty, perfect, Grazia, the best dancer in Italy. She wants to go to Milano and

dance. What do you think she's going to choose? You or that ballet academy?"

I got up, ready to drag her out the damn store myself, but Grazia beat me to it. She appeared at my side, dressed in the black dress.

"Get away from my husband." Grazia's voice was acidic.

"Oh, there she is. Grazia, you look good. You know, Fabiano is right outside. I'm sure he would *love* to..." whatever bullshit she was about to spit out, Grazi didn't let her.

"I don't care where my father is or what he's doing. Get away from my husband."

"*Husband.*" Ariana repeated like she was weighing the word on her tongue. "Stop saying it like it means something. You ran away from home because you don't like sharing daddy's attention with me and you want me to think your marriage is so important? I'm sick and tired of hearing about it." The woman threw her arms up in the air and stepped closer to Grazia. "Every day of my life I had to hear about you, and the one time it was about me you ran away to Salvatore and now it's about you all over again. I'm sick and tired of you getting in my way. I'm *sick* and *tired* of you."

Grazia didn't move an inch. Ariana was an icy blonde, tall, looking down at Grazi and trying her best to look intimidating, but all of that was for show. My girl was a queen, and with me standing behind her, no one could ever shake her confidence.

"Great." My wife responded with calm. "Now that you told us your frustrations, I'm going to repeat myself one last time. Get the hell away from my husband, before I put you face down on this floor and step on your neck."

From the corner of my eye, I noticed one of the shop workers, whose eyes were the size of dinner plates, ready to come to us, but I signaled him to go away. I didn't have to ask twice.

“You have some nerve to talk to me like that. Maybe you forget, Grazia, but right now, I’m your Don’s woman and you are just the dirty little thing sucking on Fiori’s...” Once again, Ariana, was interrupted. By Fabiano. If the Bernoulli girl really wanted a show, she was about to get one.

“Ariana.” Old Caputo barked. “Shut it.”

“But, *amore...*”

“I said keep your mouth closed, woman.” Ariana had no comeback to that.

Fabiano moved his attention to Grazia and I grabbed her arm, pulling her closer. I didn’t trust Fabiano, especially around my wife.

“Father.” Grazia nodded.

“You and Ariana need to learn to get along, *figlia*, because when you come to your senses and come back home, she’ll be there.”

Grazia’s laugh was short and high-pitched, but I wasn’t amused.

“It was nice seeing you again so soon, Father,” Grazia lied through her teeth, “but my husband and I have plans. You two should move along.”

“Ha!” Fabiano placed his hands on his round belly. “He’s only fucking you to settle the score, Grazia. A daughter for a mother. He will get bored and when he does and finds another bird to keep him entertained, you’re going to get all sensitive.”

“Enough. Grazia, go get changed. We’re leaving.” I ordered and when she didn’t move, I pushed her behind me, so I was face to face with Fabiano.

“Don’t order my daughter around.” He looked at me with superiority.

“My wife.” I corrected him and got in his face.

Fabiano didn’t back down and I didn’t expect him to.

“Sit down, boy. This power Adrian left you might be going to your head, but remember, Salvatore, I had thirty kills by the time you were born. I’m the last man you want to cross.”

A few bullets in the back of someone’s head could never make a man, that’s what he failed to understand.

“I don’t care about my body count, Caputo, as long as you’re one of them.”

His face slowly turned red from chin up and he leaned closer. When my anger hit a new level, instead of pulling back, I put my forehead on his, pushing back like a ram.

He wanted to fight with me? Fine. I’ve waited for this. My father died waiting for this.

But if Fabiano Caputo thought he could take my wife from me, he was about to see hell before he’s even dead.

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Chapter 25

Sicily shook under us. Salvatore's strength was so overwhelming, it was virtually pushing father out of the room.

The two *Dons* were butting heads – *literally* – and neither looked ready to back down. Salvatore's nostrils flared and he was breathing like a dragon, looking at my father like he was ready to kill someone without hesitation. His arms flexed and he moved his right hand to the gun hanging on his belt.

My reaction was more of an instinct than a rational decision. I stretched my arm and took Salvatore's hand in mine, entwining our fingers, before he could do anything stupid. A second later, I felt the tension in his body melting away and he stepped to the side.

"I like the dress, Grazi. Take it and let's go."

Dad scoffed. "Your woman is leading you by the dick, Fiori."

"You," Salvatore fixed him with a hard look, "should be thanking Grazia because she's the only reason you can walk out of here breathing. Take this as a warning, *Don*. Next time I see you, there will be blood."

My husband didn't expect an answer. He pushed me to the changing rooms and urged me to find my clothes. When

we came back, there was no trace of my Father or Ariana.

“Sasa, are you ok?” I asked when he walked out the shop carrying my bags.

“All good, Grazi.”

“You don’t sound good.”

After the fight we had the other night, running into Father was the last thing we needed. At least the old men didn’t call me a whore again. I don’t think anything could have saved him then.

“How do I sound?”

“Pissed off. Are you mad at me?”

“At you?”

“Yes.” I sighed. “It’s like Pietro said. You stepped in your father’s place and made waves. You, my husband, could be the greatest *Don* in Italy. All I’ve brought for you are problems.”

“Pietro said that to you?”

“Yes, before our wedding.”

“Remind me to kick him in the teeth.” He mumbled. “My business and the Fiori *famiglia* have nothing to do with our marriage, Grazia. I can make a lot of money, I can lead an army of men, but without you, I’m nothing. Problems and all, you’re mine.”

I stopped walking in the middle of the sidewalk, shielding my eyes from the afternoon sun with my hand. The sigh that escaped me was long.

“It wasn’t supposed to be so hard for us.”

“*Tesoro*,” he pulled me to him and crooked his neck to kiss my cheek, “nothing is too hard. I’d fight a thousand wars for you and win them all.”

Warmth flooded my chest.

“You seem very sure of yourself, *Don*.”

“Don’t I always take care of you?” He asked, smiling, and I did too. He asked me that before, always so sure of himself.

“Yes, you do. You always take care of me.”

“So stop worrying. What do you want to do next?”

“Umm, don’t you think we should get home? You should talk to your men about what happened. My father doesn’t let things go, Salvatore. He’ll look to get even for the humiliation he felt.”

“Tomorrow.” He responded, no sign of worry on his face, “Today is about me and my Grazi.”

“Take me to our place then. We haven’t been there in a while.”

“We haven’t been there since you tried to leave me.”

“Right.”

Tried. I’d tried to leave him a million times. I shook my head remembering every time I *tried* to push Salvatore away.

“Thank you for not letting me leave you, Sasa.”

“Didn’t I tell that’s not an option?”

“You did.”

“Didn’t I tell you you’d be my wife?”

“You did.”

“All you had to do is listen.”

“But I didn’t.”

His green eyes sparkled.

“No, so I had to fuck all that stubbornness out of you. Fine by me.”

I fought him so passionately and he used his body to disarm me every time, showing me all the things that bound us. I never stood a chance of winning. He made me his years ago and didn’t let go for a second.

“Let’s go, Sasa. *Your Grazi* needs some more time with her husband.”



He took me to a coffee shop and we picked cappuccinos and éclairs before he drove up to our spot up on the cliff. The lemon tree I loved so much was filled with ripe fruits. Between Salvatore’s strong arms holding me, the sweet smell lingering in the air, and the sounds of the sea cashing on the shore bellow us, it was a beautiful afternoon.

Even now when we were married, I rarely had a chance to enjoy Salvatore like this. He came home every night and shared our bed with me, but he was away on business most of the day, so I savored every second we got to share where it was just us. No family, or friends, or wars. Us. A man and his woman. A *Don* and his wife.

We laid down in the sun, I studied his face and traced lines along his jaw memorizing it, until the contact was not enough anymore. I needed more. I wanted him naked and on top of me, making me scream his name to the gods. As soon as I vocalized my desires, Salvatore carried me to the car and drove back home like we were being chased by the *carabinieri*.

After a couple of uninterrupted hours of pleasure, I was left in bed, on my back, feeling like I was floating on a cloud. Sasa finally peeled himself away to go shower, but I didn’t have the strength to follow, so I just dragged myself in the middle of the bed and looked at the ceiling and around the room.

I almost expected to see the frames on the wall crooked and the decorations on the table to be on the floor from the shock waves we created. The love I felt for him was so wild and irrepressible, so divine and absolute, I was sure it had the power to shake the earth under us. Even if he wasn’t in the room, I could feel him next to me. It was like a soft touch – his

soft touch – refused to leave me. We were one, bound by love, by sex, by God. We were one in every way there was to gift yourself to someone.

Salvatore came back from the shower stark naked, not that I was bothered by the image of my wet, Greek-god looking husband parading himself around, and looked at me while rubbing his hair with a towel.

“You covered yourself.” He noticed and pulled down the sheet enough to be able to see my breasts. “Much better.”

“You had me naked long enough.”

“Ha! Never, *Tesoro*. Look at you.” He grabbed my foot and slowly stroked my calf. “This elegant body was created to be seen.”

“Maybe you’re right. I should be naked all the time.” I bit my lip. “In front of everyone.”

“Grazi.” He warned. I loved that warning tone.

“Maybe I should dance naked.”

“Now that’s an idea, *signiora* Fiori. Get up.”

I laughed and dodged his touch when he reached for me.

“Now?”

“Now. Dance for me, *Grazia*.”

He took my place on the mattress while I got into position. Not feeling the hardness of the pointe shoes on my feet, or the hug of my dance tights was weird, but I couldn’t deny the erotic appeal of doing a dance routine, uncovered, in front of my husband.

I started slowly, stepping from one foot to the other, moving around and doing a few pirouettes. Salvatore’s eyes and candle light were gliding on my skin making me feel not just beautiful, but a goddess.

Standing on my tiptoes barefoot was harder than I thought, so I made a few wrong steps, but Salvatore didn’t care about my technical abilities. He was too focused

following my tits with his eyes. To make sure he was enjoying the show, I transitioned into Allegro, moving faster and jumping around, and when I did a vertical slip, he lost his composure.

He grabbed me and pulled me to his lap, making some animal sounds, so primal, I felt that calling somewhere deep within me.

“You.” He grunted. “You put me under a spell. I never could control myself around you.”

“You’re not so bad.”

He chuckled over my skin, tickling me with his lips. “No? You were too young when I stole your first kiss, but I couldn’t help myself. I had to feel your taste.”

“We were both young, Sasa. We were kids in love.”

“I’m still in love, *Tesoro*. I can’t look at you for more than five fucking minutes without getting hard.” He pushed my hand down to feel his throbbing cock.

“I did that?”

“Don’t play coy. You know the power you have over me.” I did know that, and I enjoyed it thoroughly. I fed on that power. “I always loved watching you dance. When you move, you captivate the world, but this? Having you undressed, dancing just for my eyes?”

“You liked?”

“There is no heaven that could be better than what you just gave me.”

“So?” To accentuate my question, I gave his thick shaft a stroke. “Should we do a *Pas de Deux*^{[54].?}”

“I took you too many times tonight.” He opened me up and touch my center gently, his fingers slipping with ease because I was already wet for him. “I don’t want you to get sore.”

“I won’t. You worry too much about me.”

“I’m your husband. It’s my job to protect you. You’re small, Grazi. Your hips are so narrow.” He grabbed me with his hands and squeezed tight. “It’s going to drive me crazy worried when you’ll be carrying my children.”

I flinched, almost jumping off his lap. For some reason, this felt like a bucket of cold water.

“It’s too early.”

“Is it?”

I froze. Whatever I was feeling a minute ago got lost like mist under the sun. He had to know I wasn’t ready.

“Yes, Sasa, it is. Why are you bringing this up?”

“Lately I couldn’t help thinking how beautiful you’d be with a bump.” He spread his hand across my stomach. “A daughter with your eyes. A son with my temper.”

“Salvatore!” I stopped his daydreaming. “It’s too early.”

“Calm down, Grazia. I didn’t mean now, but maybe next year.”

This made me find my legs and walk away from him. I found a nightgown and threw it over myself. For this conversation I needed some kind of armor.

“A year is not enough.”

“Grazi, you’re running away from me.”

“I’m right here.”

“You’re on the other side of the room. A moment ago you were on my knee and now you’ve run away.”

“We don’t have to touch each other all the time, Salvatore.” I pushed the hair back from my face and let my head fall back exasperated. We were already fighting the world to have our happiness. My family was not talking to me, his family hated my blood. My father wanted Salvatore dead just to heal his evil ego. Why were we talking about children now?

“What did you say to me?”

“We don’t have to...” I didn’t get the chance to repeat myself because Salvatore crossed the space between us, picked me up and pinned me to the wall like I weighed nothing.

“You’d better wanna touch me all the time, Grazia Fiori.” The green of his irises intensified, like someone lighted a fire behind them. “I had to let you go out of my sight for almost years. I couldn’t touch you. *I couldn’t touch what was rightfully mine.* So let me be clear – you’d better be there when I reach for you. *All the damn time.*”

We were cold again. Just like that, in the blink of an eye, we turned from making love to fighting.

Looking down to where his paws where clutching me, I saw his knuckles were white.

“You’re holding me too tight. It hurts.”

Immediately, I felt the force of his grip loosening. He wasn’t physically able to hurt me. Even if he’d want to, his body wouldn’t comply.

“Tell me you understand, Grazia.”

“I understand, but I don’t want to talk about children. Do you understand that?”

“Never?” His voice broke.

“No, not never. Just not now.”

His lips touched mine just briefly before he spoke again.

“You will be such a good mother to our children, Grazi.”

“You know what my mother wanted to do before she had kids? She wanted to open a fashion boutique and she almost did it, but then she got pregnant and had eight kids, becoming a shadow of my father.” I shivered. “I don’t want that to happen to me.”

“Don’t compare me to your father.”

“I’m not.”

“Then what are you so afraid of?”

“I just feel like I still have things to do.” I bit my lip. “I got invited back to Milano.”

“Milano? To the dance school?”

“Ballet Academy, but yes. Franklin Walsh is coming back to Scalla for a few more weeks and he wants to work with me. Prepare me to audition for a spot at the Academy next year.”

“Who the fuck is Franklin Walsh?”

“One of the best danseurs in the world. He oversees every major ballet production in the world and a few times a year, he is invited at La Scalla to teach. It’s a great honor that he thought about me.”

“When did you get this news, Grazia?”

“A few days ago.” I admitted, biting my lips. “He emailed me.”

“He *emailed* you? A man contacted you and you didn’t tell me.”

There it was, the obsessive jealousy I knew will come when I told him about this.

“With everything that happened in the past few days...”

“With everything that happened, the last thing we need is more secrets.”

“Salvatore.” I pushed him away from me to get some breathing room. “Can you be happy for me? This is a big thing. Walsh rarely gives private lessons.”

“And he wants you.”

“He wants to work with me because I’m a good dancer, *stronzo* ^[55]! Don’t make it more than it is. Sometimes you’re just driving me insane.”

“You said you love me possessive. You need to make up your mind, Grazi.”

“I want you to be supportive of this. You’re the one I love most, *marito*, but a close second is dancing. I need you to be proud of me.”

He let out a deep, gusty sigh. “When you dance, Grazia, it’s the stuff of legends. You are so beautiful on a stage, it’s like you’re casting a spell and no one can look away. You think I’m not proud? I’m beaming when I watch you dance.”

My chest got heavy and it was harder to breath.

“You can come and see me dance in two weeks. In Milano.”

“In two weeks?” His voice was leveled. “You can’t go.”

My body jerked. His words might as well have electrocuted me, that’s how I felt.

“*Can’t* go? What are you talking about?”

“I can’t take you in two weeks, Grazia. I have business happening in two weeks.”

“Now you sound like my father. I don’t need you to take me.”

His posture changed, almost like he was trying to shadow me.

“But I need you here. Two weeks from now I’ll sign the papers that will make me the owner of that power-plant. There are important people coming to meet me, state officials and important families. You know how this goes.”

“You want me looking pretty by your side.”

“I want you looking *powerful* by my side. You know this is important. The *famiglia* expects you to show your face and I do too.” He stopped and his entire body tensed up. “Any other time, I’d be happy to take you to Milano, but not now. This is the beginning of my legacy.”

“And going to Milano is the beginning of mine. You can’t force me to stay here.”

“Yes, I can, but I won’t do it. I won’t force you because I’ve promised you the world and my vow to you is set in stone. But Grazi, I’m asking you to stay with me and be my wife.” I didn’t answer, so Salvatore found a pair of sweat pants and put them on. “If you want to leave, I’m not going to stop you.”

But he wasn’t happy either. He walked out the bedroom, slamming the door so hard, the whole house tremored and so did my heart.

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Chapter 26

He said fifty-six words to me in two weeks. Fifty-six words. I counted them over and over again and recited every single one in my head because he starved me. Ever since I told Salvatore I decided to go to Milano and meet Walsh, he turned ice-cold. We slept in the same bed and ate at the same table, but he kept a distance between us on all fronts and it was slowly killing me. Being close to Salvatore and not have his hands touch me was hard and painful, but not having his attention, his eyes, his words, that was too hard of a punishment.

I walked downstairs hoping to see him, but instead, I found Tutto waiting by the front door, checking to see if the two suitcases I've packed were good for the road.

“Is the driver ready?”

“Yes, Grazia.” The butler told me softly. Tutto was aware of the tension in the house and I wasn't surprised. He was the eyes and ears of this place. “Salvatore has arranged for another driver to pick you up in Milano and take you to the hotel.”

My husband made all the arrangements even if he wasn't speaking to me. I still hoped he'd be the one driving me to the airport, but it seemed I wasn't winning that one.

“Totto, where’s Sasa?”

“His study.”

I nodded. He was hiding from me. “I’ll go say goodbye.”

I knocked on the door, but didn’t wait for him to invite me in. Salvatore was writing something on a piece of paper. He heard me coming in, but didn’t look up.

“Can I help you, Grazia?”

“I’m leaving.”

“I took care of your accommodations.”

“I know, thank you. I just wanted to say goodbye.”

“Well, goodbye then.”

“Salvatore, can you at least look at me when you’re pushing me out the door?”

When I saw how bitter his face looked, I regretted my request.

“I’m not pushing you, Grazia. Quite the opposite.”

“I have to go.” He just nodded. “If I could be in two places at the same time, I’d do it.” He nodded again. “You love me and you can’t stay mad at me forever.”

Was I trying to convince him? Or myself? I wasn’t sure.

After an oppressively long moment of silence, he opened his mouth to speak again, but the words were disappointing.

“Is Yannis here yet?”

“Yannis? Why would he...”

Like he was summoned, Sasa’s enforcer walked in and positioned himself behind me.

“I’m ready for the road, *padrone*^[56].”

“The road?” I looked at them confused, but both men ignored me.

Salvatore finally got up and came to shake hands with Yannis.

“The moment she walks out the front door, she’s your responsibility, Yannis.”

I didn’t need any more explanations. He was sending Yannis with me for security. I’d expected him to put a tail on me, but his enforcer? Yannis was needed here, he was one of Salvatore’s most trusted confidants.

“I’ll bring Grazia back without a scratch.”

“Yannis,” I interrupted, “do you mind waiting for me in the car so I could have a moment with my husband?”

“Sure.”

When we were left alone, Salvatore retreated again, putting more space between us, more silence.

“Yannis can stay here if you need him. Another of your men can come with me, I’ll be fine.”

“No.”

“Ok. He can’t interfere with my ballet classes. You need to tell him that.”

Salvatore approved with a move of his head. “When you’re in the hotel room or inside the school, he’ll leave you be. Anywhere else, Yannis is coming too.”

“Yes.” He was worried. I could see the signs on his forehead. “I’m sure nothing bad will happen. No one knows I’ll be in Milano.”

“I’m not taking gambles when it comes to your security. Yannis is going with you and that is the end of it.”

“I wasn’t fighting you!” I shouted, even if it wasn’t my intention. “Although, I think it’s better to fight than not hear a word from you at all.”

He spoke a lot with his eyes in the past couple of weeks, and none of it was kind. He knew what he was doing to me and as a result, we were both miserable.

“It’s late.” He checked his watch to confirm. “You should go, or you might miss your plane.”

“Fine.” What was the point when he wasn’t giving me an inch? “Fine, I’m leaving.”

“Call me when you land?”

“Will you answer?”

“Of course I will.”

“Will you speak to me?”

His jaw tightened. “I want to hear that you’ve arrived.”

“I’m sure Yannis will tell you.”

“I want to hear it from you.”

I waited, but he didn’t give me any sign that he wanted to say more to me, or get up from that damn chair and kiss me goodbye, so I gave up. He wasn’t ready to let go of his anger.

“Very well then. Goodbye, *mio marito*.”

“Goodbye, Grazia.”

I turned and closed the door behind me, leaving him in the companion of his demons. My suitcases were moved and Yannis was already in the passenger seat, chatting with the driver, so I climbed in the back.

“Mrs Fiori,” the driver saluted me, “I’m sorry, I didn’t see you coming. I would have opened the door for you.”

“It’s alright. We’re already late.”

We made it in time to the airport because the young man driving maneuvered the car through the streets like we were in some kind of race. I wasn’t worried, despite the fact that we ran two red lights. If he was assigned to driving me, I was sure Salvatore had him vetted thoroughly.

Yannis and I had seats next to each other, but we didn’t speak much. He watched a movie whilst I spent most of the flight reading. After the landing, he collected all the luggage and insisted to carry everything himself, no matter how many

times I said I was capable of helping. He had orders; that was the response I got.

“I’m going to check us in, Grazia.”

The *Rome Palazzo* was a beautiful hotel. Not big, but lavish, and close enough to Scala to make it possible for me to walk every day which was nice since I didn’t want to be stuck in traffic if it wasn’t necessary. Salvatore booked the best suite the hotel had to offer for me, and got a room nearby for Yannis.

On the table in the sitting area in my room there was a huge arrangement of daffodils waiting with a note hidden between the flowers.

“Everything alright, Grazia?”

“Yes.” I pointed at the vase. “Is this from the hotel?”

“No. Your husband.”

“Oh.” My heart quivered. I smiled to myself and went to get the note. It only had the words *Buona Fortuna*^[57] scribbled on it, and it wasn’t Salvatore’s writing, but the flowers spoke volume.

“Yannis, do you mind if I ask you to give me a moment. I need to call Sasa.”

“No problem. I have to call my girl too. She’s not happy that I’ve left her alone. Her birthday is in three days.”

“Oh, God, I’m so sorry.”

“*Padrone* needed me.”

“We can go shopping tomorrow and find a present for your girlfriend. I’m more than happy to give you some ideas.”

“That would be a great help because it’s not my forte.”

Yes, I gathered he was not the best at picking out women’s perfumes and jewelry. Yannis was a quiet type of guy, more comfortable around guns than he was around people. I knew his girlfriend didn’t mind he kept to himself most of the times because she really loved him, but if I could

help him score some points with her with a nice present, then I was happy to help.

I found my phone, dialed my husband and he picked up right away.

“You’ve arrived.” There was no question mark.

“Yes. The hotel is beautiful.”

“I’m glad you like it.”

Again, silence. He wasn’t giving me a crumb.

“Sasa.” I whispered, almost in tears. I wasn’t going to let him make my decisions for me. I didn’t marry Salvatore to become his trophy, but this was torment. “You have to talk to me. You have to say something.”

“I’m talking, Grazia. I don’t know what you want.”

“Is this it? All I get is one mistake and you’re turning your back on me.”

“Don’t let yourself be fooled, Mrs. Fiori, you’ve made plenty of mistakes.”

“You sent me daffodils. I had them when we got married.”

“I remember.” So it wasn’t a coincidence.

“You’re punishing me. Fine, but at least tell me you love me.” He said nothing. “Salvatore, if you hang up the phone and I don’t hear that from you... I need to believe that you still love me.”

“Don’t be stupid, Grazi.”

“Say. It.”

A life time together, four years of secrets and I’ve never once doubted he loved me. Not until he turned into an iceberg.

“Nothing could make me stop loving you.”

A stone the size of my fist was lifted off my heart and I could feel it beat again. It was stupid to need the reassurance. I

had his name, his ring, we were together, but the past few days were so dreadful, doubt dug its way into my head.

“Good.” Was the only answer I could think of. “I love you too.”

“I know. It doesn’t make me less angry with you.”

“So you’re going to keep ignoring me?”

“You’re away and I have a lot to do. You can call me if you need anything.”

“Sasa.”

“Goodbye, Grazia.” His tone was hard, leaving no room for interpretation. He was done talking.

“Wait, we need to...”

“Go rest. I have things to do.” He closed the call before I could argue any further.

I felt a pressing tiredness settling in my shoulders and even if it was still early, I dragged myself to the big plush bed.

Maybe it was a good thing that we had some time apart to cool down. What Salvatore and I had was so intense, it consumed my being all the time. Now that he wasn’t here and he treated me with the same warmth he treated the gardener, I could think clearly about everything.

It wasn’t worth much since I wasn’t sure if he was right to be angry, or I was right for picking something that made me happy over his wishes. Eventually, I fell asleep with no answer, and a foul mood.

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The classroom the Scala has assigned for Franklin Walsh was fabulous. It was twice the size of the one Rosa Vitale used for practice back at my studio, with a tall ceiling, mirrors all around and a *barre* on each side. I trained here for a week, but only today I got to meet with Walsh again.

According to the substitute Madame he sent to work with me – one Rita Aurore, artistic director of the Junior Ballet Company at the London Royal Theater – he was caught up overseeing the preparation of a new production. I had nothing to complain about because Rita Aurore was as much of a household name as Walsh and she really put me to work. She kept me in the studio for six hours every day, no breaks, no cutting corners, perfecting my technique to the point there was nothing to correct anymore.

“I like what I’m seeing, Grazia.” Walsh told me while watching from the corner. “Rita did her job well.”

“Yes, she was wonderful. Also, Rosa Vitale. She mentored me for years as you know.”

“Of course. Fabulous woman, Rosa. I’m pleased to see she not only made you an extraordinary ballerina, but also passed on some of her refined attitude. It’s not every day I get to work with a woman that knows how to conduct herself, and not some clueless teenager in a tutu.”

“Thank you.” Everything he said sounded like a compliment, but I was a little confused by his choice of words.

“Can you show me a *chaînes*?” I started the turn right away. “Good. And a *pique turn*?”

I twirled around him five times and when I stopped, we were face to face.

“You think my turns need work, Professor Walsh?”

“No. Absolutely not. You belong in a music box, my dear.” I blushed. I shouldn’t have, but I did. It was a big compliment coming from a man that was the king of classical ballet. “I’m a little worried about your flexibility though. I think that’s the area that needs improvement.”

“My flexibility?”

“You don’t lack grace, but you’re a little stiff. How often do you do flexibility training?”

“I took gymnastics for four years when I was young and I train once a week for maintenance.”



“I don’t think it’s enough. Do a front split for me.” I glided to the floor just like he told me. “Try to touch the top of your head with the tiptoes of the back leg, please. Go as much as you can.”

I placed myself into position and started arching back. I could feel I was close, but I couldn’t make contact like he wanted me to.

“I can’t arch my back more than this.”

“Ok. I’m going to press on your leg. Let me know if I hurt you.” He applied force to make my leg bend deeper and finally, I felt a touch on my head. It did hurt, but I didn’t say a word. There was no excellence without a little pain.

“Should I enroll in a gymnastics class, Professor?”

“No, that’s not the problem. Your back arches beautifully.” He placed his hand between my shoulder blades and followed my spine all the way down. “The problem is in your hips.”

“My hips?”

Walsh grabbed my hips to emphasize his point. “Your hips are too narrow. Too tight. I’m going to ask you something and I expect an honest answer.”

“Of course.”

“How much sex do you have?” I froze, thinking that maybe I’d heard him wrong and waiting for clarification. “Grazia?”

“I... what?”

“You need more sex to loosen your hips.” This time, the words were almost whispered close to my ear. “There’s nothing to be ashamed of. You’re a young girl, still have a lot to learn.”

“I need to get up.” I said through my teeth. Feeling him almost glued to my back was becoming too much to bear.

If he thought I needed more sex, then he should see my husband. Sex was not my problem.

Walsh let go of my hips and I believed he wanted to help lift me up, but instead, I was flipped on my back on the floor before I had a moment to realize what was happening. Franklin Walsh was on top of me, forcing my legs open with his.

“Professor Walsh, this is not... let me go.”

“There are things you have to understand, Grazia. I intend to offer you a sponsorship at the next auditions for the Academy. I can’t afford you to fail because if you make a fool of yourself, it’s embarrassing to me. If you need to get fucked to take that audition, you’ll damn well listen to me. I know better.”

Not once did he raise his voice and that was the most disturbing thing.

“Get off of me.”

“We all need to make sacrifices for the great art of ballet. Three times a week in my office, and I’ll loosen you up in no time. I’ll be quick and if you ask nice, we can make it about pleasure too, not just business. I know how to make a woman come.” His voice turned hoarse, almost like he was attempting to be seductive. “You’re not ugly. It’s not going to be half bad for me.”

Finally, the shock wore off and I could react again. The paralysis in my limbs washed away and I pushed his chest back.

“I said get off of me.”

“You sound stressed. Should I start now?”

I felt his cold hand going down on my leg and his touch was too much even through the dancing tights. Remembering every lesson my brothers and Salvatore ever gave me, I reacted. I used one of my legs to push him to the side and break free from his clutch and punched him in the throat. Walsh lost his breath and started choking and before he had a chance to regain his strength, I launched my fist again, this time connecting it with his nose. His blood burst and stained my hand.

“Ah, damn you! You stupid cow!”

I ran to the other side of the room, grabbed my stuff and ran for the door.

“Grazia!” Walsh barked like a wounded dog.

“Don’t you ever lay a finger on me again.”

“You broke my nose.”

“You’re lucky it wasn’t my husband who got to you first.”

He growled, trying to push himself up with one hand while holding on to his nose with the other, so I started running, but Walsh was already on my heel. I heard the door of the studio slamming shut and him calling for me and I hurried down the stairs. As soon as I made it out in the open, I felt a sweet release washing down on me. It didn’t last long because two steps on the sidewalk, one of the ribbons of my pointe shoes got loose and I stepped on it, falling down in a clutter of limbs, hair, and pink tulle.

Walsh stumbled through the main entrance too, going down the stairs to come to me.

“People are watching, you stupid woman.” His words were practically spit on me. “What are you trying to do? Ruin my career?”

His hand tried to grab mine, but before he could, a mountain of muscle and anger grabbed him by the throat and lifted him in the air, and his eyes were screaming bloody murder. I’ve never seen Yannis fight, but I knew there was a reason why Adrian Fiori chose him to be his son’s protector, and why everyone in Palermo was terrified of him.

“Grazia, get up. Get behind me.” I did exactly what he asked. “He hurt you.”

“Yes.” My response came like a reflex.

Walsh started struggling, trying to break free. “No. She’s my student. She broke my bloody nose.”

“Don’t talk.” Yannis tightened his grip. “What did he do, Grazia?”

“He... he touched me. He wanted to...” I couldn’t finish. Mostly because of the shock.

Yannis threw Franklin Walsh to the pavement hard enough to turn his organs into scrambled eggs and the professor moaned.

“You,” he pointed at me, “I’m going to call the police. I’m going to...”

Yannis stopped his rant. “No more dancing for you, stupid fuck.”

Two stomps on Walsh’s knees, that was all it took for his bones to shatter and for the man to let out a scream loud enough to draw attention. Two people stopped on the other side of the street and faces started to show in the windows of the ballet studio. One belonged to Rita Aurore, but I couldn’t care less. Walsh deserved to be screaming in pain.

Yannis crouched down to talk to him face to face. “You live just because she’s alright. No one touches Fiori and goes unpunished.”

After that, everything became a blur. I was pulled away and stuffed in a car, my hotel room was cleared, and faster than I thought it was possible, Yannis and I were on a private flight going back to Palermo.

When our plane started to lose altitude and I could see we were a few minutes away from being home, my heart started to beat with fervid intensity. Salvatore and I didn’t exchange one word since our call that first day in Milano. Before we boarded, I overheard Yannis talking to him on the phone and I could tell by the look on his face that Salvatore was fuming at the other end of the phone, but I didn’t care. All I wanted was to see him. If he didn’t want to talk to me, fine, but I needed to see him in the room, to believe I was finally fine. That I was finally safe.



*Chapter 27*

“You did it, cousin.” Pietro shook my hand and pulled me into a bear hug. He was waiting in front of the restaurant for me.

“We did it.”

“I thought this power-plant idea was shit. You’re the one who saw it through. Good move, *Don*.”

“How are our guests?”

“Almost everyone is here already. They’re all waiting for you.”

I glanced toward the restaurant’s terrace and saw people already rubbing elbows. The event planner did good making this place look regal.

There was a lot of power at this party – the mayor, officials from Rome, Capos from all over the country and some from overseas, allies, friends, associates, and Aziz and Dilovar, the two Tajiki investors that just sold me their business.

Pietro did good and spread the word to all of our associates around the country about this move I was doing and everyone was looking in my direction. There were some voices in the *famiglia* that said it was a bad thing for a man in

my position to be so carefully watched, but I wasn't afraid of any spotlight. A Fiori never hides in the shadows.

"How are our guests of honor, Pietro?"

"Dilovar is drunk and Aziz is having the time of his life fondling one of the girls I got for them. All good."

Instead of going towards the entrance, I stepped to the side and lit a cigarette. I needed a fucking moment before facing all of that.

"You can go ahead." I told my cousin, but he didn't move.

"They're waiting to see you, not me."

"I'll be there in a minute."

"You good?"

"Sure." But I didn't feel good. I felt next to nothing.

"It's about Grazia, isn't it?" Pietro scoffed. "That wife of yours makes it really hard for me to not get angry."

I raised my eyebrow and threw a threatening look his way. "Say that again."

"You married her too fast."

"I married her after twenty years of waiting for her to become my wife." The irritation was obvious in my voice.

"When Fabiano and Adrian arranged your marriage, Uncle was told that she'd be raised as a mafia princess. You were promised a wife fit for a *Don*, but you got a woman who is acting like a teenager rebelling against God knows what. I know you love her, brother, I do, but I wish you wouldn't." The coldness settled in my bones. "She messes with your head. You should be in there drowning yourself in whisky after what you just pulled off. You're about to be the richest man in this country and all your money is clean. No one can touch you. But instead of joining the celebration, you're going to spend your day finding excuses for Grazia because she's not here."

"Pietro." The warning flew right past him.

“She’s hurting your business. There’s a *Don* in there who flew from New York to meet you. He can transport anything across the ocean, owns every port and every ship in New York and New Jersey. He is impressed with what you did and wants to work with our *famiglia*, but he respects family men. If you don’t get that alliance today, it’s because Grazia screwed you over to go dance in Milano.”

I reacted before I could think and grabbed Pietro by the throat, pulling him closer to my face to make sure he heard every word I had to say to him.

“I let you say your piece because you’re my cousin and that earned you the privilege of talking freely, but make no mistake, you ever talk about my wife with that look on your face again, I will skin you from head to toe. *Capisce*<sup>[58]?</sup>”

“Someone has to tell you the truth.”

“Your truth means nothing, cousin. You think she’s not fit to be a *Don’s* wife? How fucking dare you? I am your *Don* and I married her. Grazia is impulsive and she has a lot on her fucking plate. Everything she knew for twenty years about her father was a fucking lie and she’s not allowed to talk to her brothers anymore. She’s allowed to act crazy if that’s what she needs. She’s my wife which makes her your fucking queen and if you have a problem with that, be my guest and get the fuck out of my city.” Every word I said was true and Pietro better believe it. “Don’t ever say you wished I wouldn’t love her because that’s what keeps me alive.”

I released him and he started coughing.

“Motherfucker!”

“Did I make myself clear, Pietro?”

“Yes, *Don*.” He massaged his throat to soothe the pain. “Look I’ve known the girl since she was in diapers. She’s very dear to me, but I’ll always be on your side, no matter against whom.”

“Your loyalty is appreciated, but don’t say shit like that in front of Grazia. She already feels you don’t like her.”

“I like her, but I don’t like what she’s doing to you.”

“Just remember that I would take *her* side every time.”

“Yes, yes,” he punched me in the shoulder, “I lost you to a woman. I got it.”

“You’ll see how it is one day.”

“Don’t think so. Let’s go inside, people are waiting.”

“Right. The *Don* from New York you want me to woo.”

As soon as I walked through the door, a glass of champagne was slipped into my hand and Aziz toasted in my name before retreating to his table where a few hand-picked beautiful women were waiting. Wherever I looked I saw people nodding with respect and looking at me with admiration, but I couldn’t enjoy an ounce of it. I couldn’t because my eyes kept looking for Grazia. We had many years in our future, there would be other parties and other occasions for her to stand proud by my side, but I wanted her now. I wanted her to witness what I was doing for our family – for her – and fuck if I didn’t want Fabiano to hear how his daughter held my hand when I became better than he ever was.

*Next time*, the voice that whispered that in my head sounded a lot like Grazia. *I will be here next time.*

I shook my head to clear my mind of those words. Now it was time for business not for sulking.

My walk across the room was cut short by a goddamn viper. A blonde, tall viper that made a habit of keep showing up in my way. Ariana Bernoulli has followed me around like a lost puppy in the past two years, always showing up in the clubs I was at and at parties I went to. She liked fun, booze, and hard drugs, and those were abundant around me, but now it wasn’t about fun. Now she was playing with a flame, about to set us all on fire.

“Salvatore.” She was all smiles, like nothing was wrong in the world.

“How the fuck did you get in here?”



“I have my ways.” That was not answer enough. “I know some of your boys and they like me. Of course they let me in. Everyone knows we have history, Salvatore.”

“History? Are you fucked up in the head, woman? I have history with Grazia. You just happened to stay in her shadow for most of her life.”

“Easy.” She warned, her face changed, turning bitter.

“It’s time for you to leave, Ariana.”

“You don’t mean that. You’re alone and I’m a great companion. How about you take me for a walk across the room.”

One thing she had going for herself was that damn stubbornness. It’s been ten years since she first offered herself to me and she still couldn’t take no for an answer.

“Ariana, somewhere along the way you started to believe that because you open your legs fast, nothing can happen to you.” Discreetly, so we I wouldn’t draw people’s attention, I clutched the napkin she had for a dress and pulled her closer. “I don’t like hurting women, but if sending you to Caputo in a body bag is what I have to do to stop you from bothering my wife, then so be it. Be very sure of this, Ariana, the list of things I wouldn’t do for her is very damn short.”

“She’s not even here. She kept you secret all those years. Why do you keep fighting?” Instead of backing down, she started getting red in the face with anger. “I am better than her!”

“You found your spot next to Fabiano’s dick. Leave. Now!”

“Fabiano doesn’t have to know. We can be quick.”

“Who are you trying to get killed here? You, me, or Caputo?”

“Definitely Caputo, but not the one you think.”

All of my patience ran out. My hand grabbed her arm and I threw her scrawny body into the nearest table making a tower of champagne glasses to fall on her. The way her face

started to melt from the liquid was not a good look and Ariana's eyes were raging.

“Get her the fuck out of my restaurant.” My voice boomed and two of my men rushed to collect Ariana and drag her to the door. “Someone call Fabiano Caputo and tell him to come collect his trash.”

Right after the mess was cleaned and people started to return to their conversations, I saw my cousin walking in from the outdoor patio. Pietro crossed the room with two people on his tail, a man and a woman. I could tell the man was mafia by the way he was walking – with pride but looking at everyone's faces, memorizing every detail.

When the group made it to where I was standing, Pietro nodded my way. “My cousin, Don Salvatore Fiori.”

I stretched my hand and the other man took it. He was a few years older, but no less threatening than I was.

“Gino Nucci.”

I didn't move, but my eyes shifted. I knew that name. Everybody who operated on our side of the law knew that name. The Nuccis controlled most of the East Coast and nothing got into the country without them getting a share. Pietro was right, this was not just another big fish to fry. Gino Nucci was a goddamn whale.

“*Don* Nucci.” I tilted my head slightly to salute him.

“This is my wife, Muse Nucci.” He pointed to the classy brunette at his side. I could tell she was his woman. The *Don* didn't take his hand off her back for a second, like he was trying to shield the woman from the rest of the world.

I took her hand and kissed it softly. “*Piacere di conoscerti*<sup>[59]</sup>, Mrs. Nucci. How do you like Palermo?”

“*E una citta molto bella*<sup>[60]</sup>.” She answered in perfect Italian, taking me by surprise. “We're only staying for a few days, but I'll make sure my husband takes me out to explore it.”

“I can give you some pointers.” I told her politely, then returned to her husband. “It’s good to have you here, *Don*. All the way from across the ocean, huh?”

“We were in Napoli visiting my family’s estate and your *famiglia* extended an invitation. My grandfather did business with your father back in the day.”

“I remember him saying something about that.”

“I’m sorry for your father, *Don* Fiori. He was a great man.”

“Indeed, he was.”

Nucci raised his glass and looked at me over the rim before taking a gulp of amber poison.

“Looks to me that you’re living up to the name he left you. It’s impressive.” I stayed silent, waiting for him to talk. “You’re young, Salvatore.”

“Is that a problem?”

“Not in my book. I’m looking forward to stepping down myself. Next time you have a sit down with the Nucci *famiglia*, it might be with my son Enzo.”

A sleek smile spread on half my face. “Looks to me like the new generation is giving the old one the boot.”

“Nothing wrong with that, son. Just don’t get too cocky. You still have a lot to learn and a few more bullets to bite until you find your way.”

“I’m not looking forward to those bullets.”

Nucci’s wife laughed and when he turned to look at her, his eyes sparkled. He was drinking her image in like it was the first time he was seeing her and it was just them in the room. The most powerful *Don* in America, and he was brought to his knees by a woman. That was something I could relate to.

“I will forgive you for making my wife laugh, Fiori, but only this time.”

“My mistake. Mrs. Nucci, I apologize for my very good joke.”

“Don’t mind my husband, Salvatore.”

“Is your son here too?”

“No.” She answered with a warm look on her face. “He’s on his honeymoon with his new bride. They won’t be back for a few more weeks.”

“Well, that’s a happy event. My congratulations.”

Gino took the lead again. “He found a good woman. Well, she’s Russian, so not perfect, but good. What about you, *Don Fiori*?”

“If you have a daughter you want me to meet, I’m sorry, but I’m married.”

“That’s a good sign.” Nucci approved. “A man is nothing without a strong woman by his side.”

“I can agree with you on that.”

“How long have you been married?”

“A couple of months. I wasn’t able to give her a long honeymoon.”

“Never let work cut in your time with the woman you love. That’s the first lesson you need to learn. I know you’re in a turf war, but don’t forget to go home every night.” As he spoke, his arm pulled Muse closer.

“You’ve heard about my problems on the other side of town.”

“People talk.”

“It’s not about turf. This city has been split in half for years. It’s about my wife.” Nucci raised his eyebrows. “She’s the only daughter of Fabiano Caputo.”

“And you married her.”

“And I don’t ever intend to let her go.”

“Good luck to you then. Are we going to meet your wife tonight?”

Fuck.

“I’m afraid not. She’s a ballerina.” The words sounded too simple. “Grazia Fiori is the most beautiful ballerina in this part of the world. She’s amazing. So beautiful, so... gracious. She’s in Milano, dancing at the Scala.”

Nucci nodded again. He did it quite a few times during our conversation. It was like he was weighing my words and then putting a seal of approval on them.

“Next time then.” *Next time*. This was looking damn good for me.

It was time to talk some business, or that was my intention before my phone started ringing. I would have ignored it if it wasn’t Yannis’ name blinking on the screen. I excused myself and walked into the hallway.

“What is it?” He wouldn’t have called without a good reason.

“I need you to secure a flight. I’m bringing Grazia home.”

His voice was always calm and calculated, but something in his tone didn’t sit well with me.

“Why?”

“One of her teachers tried to... it was bad.”

I looked around to check if I was alone because for a second I thought someone shot me. The pain shot from my heart through the rest of my body and my blood started rushing in my veins.

“He tried to do what, Yannis?”

“Force her. She’s fine, not harmed, but she’s really shaken. Her hand might be needing a doctor.”

“You just said she’s fine.”

“She broke the fucker’s nose.”

She fought. She *had* to fight to get away from a man who put his dirty, filthy hands on her. Some worm who decided he had a right to touch my wife and make her his. The

dread I felt just thinking about it was more intense than anything I ever felt.

She should have been with me. No one could hurt her if she was with me.

“Salvatore, are you there?”

“Yes.”

“She’s really shaken up.”

“Bring my wife home and bring him to me.”

“I took care of it. Her honor is intact. Yours is too.” He answered a question I didn’t dare ask because for the first time in my life I was too scared to do it. She was not touched. She was assaulted, scared, but not broken.

“I want him dead.”

“He’s high profile. There were witnesses and I’m sure the police will start looking soon. You need to clear the air. I can handle it, but the last thing Grazia needs is being dragged into this.”

“I’ll take care of it.” I said, even if my jaw was almost locked from the tension. “I’ll see you soon.”

After I hung up, my fists clenched until the phone cracked under the pressure. Something did the same thing in my chest too.



*Chapter 28*

The same driver that picked me up was back to take me home, but this time Totto was with him too, and the older man rushed to my side.

“Grazia, dear girl.”

“I’m fine, Totto.”

“You don’t look fine. You’re pale and your hands are cold as ice.”

“I just... I’m tired, and I want to see Salvatore.”

“He’s waiting for you. He would have come himself, but he had phone calls to make to clear things up for you in Milano. That’s why he sent me.”

He helped me get into the car and pulled out a bottle of water, but the liquid inside was a milky-white color.

“What’s that, Totto?”

“A tonic. It’s mostly vitamins, but it will help you calm down too.”

“I’d rather have a whiskey to calm myself down.”

“All in good time.”

He handed me the bottle and I took it. It tasted like lemonade.

“Salvatore. How is he, Totto?”

“Shaken to his core. You mean the world to him, Grazia, remember that.” I nodded. “He’ll be angry at first. You know the *Don*. His blood is boiling at a high temperature. He might yell, but don’t let that upset you. It’s just the reaction of man who just found out someone tried to take away what he loves most.”

“Right.”

The driver pulled up in front of the Fiori palace and Yannis went straight to the guards to talk to them. He probably had orders to put the whole city into lockdown to make sure I was fine and I loved Salvatore for that. I never liked being watched by bodyguards and my brothers were pretty permissive when it came to my security because here, in our city, no one would dare to touch a woman like Walsh did. I didn’t need the bodyguards now either, but the thought that Salvatore’s mission wanted to keep me safe was comforting.

I ignored everyone and walked inside, desperate to find my husband. I looked in every room until I finally found him in our bedroom. He was sitting on the edge of our bed looking down, hands crossed behind his head.

“Sasa.” I gasped. Finally, I could feel the tension evaporating from my muscles.

My voice made him jump straight up and he looked around the room frantically until he found me. His body language matched mine. His voice on the other hand, was pure wrath.

“You left and this is what happens!” I did what Totto said and just let him take out his frustrations on me, because if he’d been the one who’d traveled across the country and got hurt, I would feel like I’d just walked through hell too.

“I know, Salvatore.”

“You know?” A bitter laugh crawled up his throat. “You know what I felt when I got a phone call from the man in charge of protecting you to let me know you were hurt. When I had to hear that you had to fight a piece of shit and break his nose to get away. When Yannis told me that another man



wanted to take you with force? You fucking know all of that, Grazia?”

His words hit like shards of glass, but I didn't let the pain shake me.

My legs took charge and I ran the short distance across the room, jumping in my husband's arms and he caught me, holding me close to his chest. I could feel him shaking, so I wrapped my arms around him and held him tight.

“I know you're angry and you have every right, but please, Sasa, yell at me tomorrow. Tonight, I need you to love me.” His hand moved to my hair and he stroked me slowly. “Make love to me.”

“Grazi, you're shaken up.”

“Nothing happened. He didn't... he didn't even kiss me, but he pressed his body against mine and he touched me on... on my leg. No one has ever... no one but you.”

“I know.”

“No, you don't understand. I want it to be just you! Make love to me and wash that touch away. Sasa, please.”

“You don't have to beg me, *Tesoro*.” With his hands fixed on my hips, he lifted me so I could wrap myself around him. “You never have to beg for me to love you.”

He walked me to the bed and threw his body over mine. I embraced the feeling of his weight pushing against me and the shape of his toned muscles. My husband was a beast and he made me feel protected. Ever since I could remember, he was always there looking over me. It was why I loved him so fiercely.

His kiss came down on me like raining fire, igniting my senses. With my mouth wide open, I explored his tongue and welcomed him to taste mine. It's been so long since he touched me last and I got to taste his manly essence. I felt starved and desperate to get as much of him as I could.

We both ran out of air and Salvatore broke the kiss, making me release a weak howl.

“What is it, Grazi?”

“I missed you, that’s all. I want to feel your skin.”

Complying with my silent plea, Salvatore rushed to throw away all his clothes and sit gloriously naked above me. He removed my clothing too and when he returned to the bed, I pressed myself against him, getting high on that feeling of having Sasa all over me.

“Please never do that again.” I whispered, biting back tears.

“Grazi, look at me.” He didn’t wait for me to do it and grabbed my jaw to turn my face toward him. “Do what?”

“Don’t ignore me again.”

“I can’t ignore you. You’re all I see all the time.”

“You didn’t speak to me for two weeks. You didn’t touch me.”

“I was mad.” His nose nested in my hair. “I didn’t want to put my hands on you in anger.”

“Just don’t do it again. It was horrible.”

“For me too. You think I liked pushing my wife way? No, but you just... you keep leaving and sometimes I have to let you go and it’s killing me.” There was a shadow of pain in his words and I felt it in my heart. “I don’t want to kill your dreams, but your dreams are killing me.”

“What?”

“All I could think for two weeks was what’s going to happen when you join the Scala for good, or when people are going to ask for you all over the world. You’re not just a ballerina, Grazia, you dance like an angel. People will sit in line to come worship at your feet and I don’t know how to share you with the world.”

“Oh, my dear,” I took his face in my hands gently, “I’m all yours. I’ll always be just yours.”

The green eyes I loved so much darkened deeply. “Someone tried to take you away from me today.”

“Wash him away. Wash his hands away with yours. Please.”

“Where?”

“My thigh. He stroked my legs, trying to rip my tights.”

What I saw on his face was not anger, it was something much more dangerous – blood thirst and death. I prayed that Franklin Walsh never got to see that because it would be the last thing he’d see on this earth.

“*My Grazi.*” He mumbled and started painting a love tapestry on my skin with his kisses. His lips stared on my neck and kept going south, finding new spots to touch and make me moan.

Before every kiss I could feel his torrid breath caressing the skin. Such a soft thing, but so powerful, I wanted to arch, and twist, and turn. He made it to my hip and sunk his teeth into me like I was desert.

“You taste like sugar, *mia moglie.*”

“You like?”

“I love.”

He touched me everywhere, pushing away every shadow that was left behind. His hands conquered every inch of me until I couldn’t help myself anymore. I stretched my arms and pulled him up by his hair.

I felt the tip of his erection at my entrance and arched towards it. I needed him inside me more than I needed my next breath. More than a desert flower needs water.

“Ready, Grazi?”

I was ready long before he took me into his arms.

“Always.”

With no warning, my legs were pushed up. Salvatore positioned himself and slid inside in one swing of his hips, long and delicious. The intrusion pushed the air out of my

lungs and I gasped, but Salvatore covered my mouth with his again.

I rolled my hips and he growled at me.

“Fucking hell. It’s been too damn long.”

“Yes.”

“Tonight I’m going to fuck you for every minute we spent apart.”

Salvatore stretched me out with slow moves that only left me yearning for more and when he decided I was ready for more, he flipped me on my belly and raised me by the hips.

This time he slammed his cock inside me sharply and I yelled his name. Salvatore stopped holding back and took me from behind hard, exorcising all of our demons. We were finally getting back in sync after so much time. Two weeks might not sound so long, but when one’s heart is starving, it feels like an infinity.

The pleasure built in my groin rapidly, threatening to break me into pieces and I was desperate to feel the climax. I reached back blindly for Salvatore and he took my hand pulling me to him. My back was slammed into his chest and he pulled my hair, so he could have access to my neck. He bit me while he fucked me, I scratched his forearms and sunk my nails into his thighs, both of us wanting to take as much of the other as possible.

I was already on the edge when he snuck one hand between my legs and slid his fingers through my folds. One move was enough to make me fall into the deep and drag Salvatore with me.

The orgasm hit me first and I cried out, trying to get away from him, but I had no chance because his hands were cemented on my hips. He kept me still while he spilled his own pleasure deep inside me. I felt every pulsation of his cock in my core.

We were both consumed and fell down on the mattress still connected, neither of us willing to break off the connection.

“Sasa.”

“Are you good, *Tesoro*?”

“I... I...” there were a million words I wanted to say to him, but all were stuck in my throat. My brain was still scattered after the orgasmic tsunami that engulfed me and I couldn't bring myself together long enough to form a sentence.

“That good, Grazi?”

Catching my breath, I turned to look at his face and found a smug smile there.

“Like you don't know.”

“I know.” He nodded. “Welcome home, Grazia Fiori.”

He left my body and I shivered, instantly feeling the loss, but he opened his arms and let me curl up next to him.

“I'm sorry.” I whispered. I didn't want to ruin the serenity surrounding us in the moment, but at one point we had to talk about Milano. It might as well be now.

“What are you sorry for?”

“For leaving. You were right, I should have been with you. It was selfish of me to leave when you needed me here.”

“There will be other parties for you to look pretty on my arm.”

I pinched his chest and he scoffed.

“I'm proud to be married to a man like you – so smart and fearless and dangerous – and I should have been here to tell you that.”

He placed a soft kiss on my head. “I know.”

“Your father would be proud too.”

“He hated this idea with the power-plant. He thought it wasn't smart to get in the eyes of the government like that.”

“Adrian was old school, but I'm sure he saw the potential.”

“Maybe.”

Tracing circles on his pectorals, I looked up, but he was not paying attention to me.

“Sasa?”

“Hm?”

“I love you.”

“I know, *Tesoro*.”

“Tell me you love me too.”

“I adore the ground you walk on. Stop worrying, Grazi. I was angry and knowing you, I’ll probably get angry a lot in this life, but I will never stop loving you.” I exhaled and Salvatore’s hold around me tightened. “I don’t have to say it, Grazia. As long as there’s blood in my heart, it’s because I love you.”

“I know, but I hated that you didn’t say a word to me for so long. I would rather have you scream.”

“It’s over now. Are you sure you’re ok after everything that happened?”

“Yes.”

“Good.”

“Will there be problems in Milano? People saw Yannis breaking Walsh’s legs.”

“That’s the last thing you need to worry about.”

“I hit him in the nose. He was bleeding.”

“Good. There will be a lot more blood when I get my hands on that motherfucker.”

“Sasa, no. I don’t want you to risk...”

“I said not to worry. You married me and I take care of you. End of, *Tesoro*.” There was no fighting him on that. Now I was talking to my *Don*, not to my husband, and *Don* Salvatore Fiori didn’t let men hurt women. “Try and catch some sleep, ok?”

“Will you hold me?”

“Where else would I be if not by your side?”

His words worked like a spell and I relaxed, my eyelids feeling heavy. Knowing Sasa was there to look over me was all I needed to relax and finally allow myself to rest. I was out like a light in less than two minutes.

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## Chapter 29

I woke up rested and tried to stretch, but Salvatore was wrapped around me like a human cage. I had no way to escape or move until he'd wake up. There was no harm in watching my husband peacefully sleep with his head resting on my breasts.

Still not recovered after being away from him for so long, I let my hands explore the skin of his broad shoulders and sculpted forearms, and eventually, the soft touches brought him back to consciousness.

“Good morning, Sasa.”

“Grazi.” He mumbled my name and his own hand started doing some *exploring*, moving straight between my legs. “How long have you been awake?”

“Only a few minutes. I shouldn't have bothered your sleep.”

His fingers started slowly moving in circles over the place where all my nerves formed a knot, and I softened instantly.

“I'm not bothered, not when I get to wake up on top of my wife who is ready for me.”



There was no warning when his cock snuck inside me, or when he cuffed my wrists above my head. The lovemaking was soft and slow, but deliciously intoxicating.

Salvatore kept me chained to the bed for an hour, loving me under the soft sunrise light, and slowly building our pleasure until it became too much to handle. We climaxed together and I cried out while Salvatore muted his pleasure by biting my collarbone. I felt the pain his teeth inflicted and I knew there will be a mark left, which made me smile.

“Satisfied, *Tesoro*?”

I kissed his cheek and giggled.

“Don’t you always take care of me, Sasa?”

“That I do. I have to leave you alone here for a few hours. Will you be fine?”

“Business?”

“No. I have another woman waiting for me.”

For a second I just looked at him with my mouth open and then I saw his smile.

“Ah, you think you’re funny, *Don Fiori*. If you get other women, then I get other men.”

The joke didn’t make him laugh and his piercing eyes became cloudy.

“Not even if I’m dead, *Grazia*. Not even then.”

“Salvatore, can I ask you for something?” I bit my lip, looking up at him.

“Anything.”

“I have to call Rosa Vitale today, it’s the respectful thing to do.” He let out a guttural sound, but I didn’t give him a chance to speak. “She has nothing to do with my father, Sasa, but she was my teacher for years. She used her reputation to get me to Scala and she deserves an explanation.”

“Fine, but don’t give her any details she doesn’t need to know.”

“I won’t.” I took a deep breath under Salvatore’s hawk eye. He knew there was more coming. “Do you think it’s ok if I talk to Pina too?”

“Woman, you never stop.” He mumbled and threw a hand over his eyes, hiding his face from me. “What more do you have to say to Pina Bernoulli?”

“A lot has happened. The meeting with my father, then Milano, I just feel the need to unload. Pina is my best friend. I know I have Chiara, but she has her own problems, and the wives of your *famiglia* didn’t take me in yet. They respect me, but I can’t count on them to listen to my problems.”

“You feel lonely.” His voice was flat.

I was done hurting his feelings.

“I’m not lonely. I was when you didn’t talk to me, but I don’t need anyone as long as I have you.” Some spark returned to the green of his eye. “I just wanted to have a girl’s chat, that’s all, and you don’t have to worry. Pina has no loyalties to Father, or anyone in my family. Bernoulli is an associate and Ariana is... whatever she is, but Pina doesn’t care about those things.”

Mrs. Bernoulli has plead, and begged, and cried, trying to get Pina to act like a young girl in her position, but it never worked. She preferred sneakers to high heels, jeans to dresses, and hated to be dragged along when her family had to show face. Ariana was the embodiment of a mafia heiress, but her sister was just a girl who happened to have a father that liked to play dirty.

The only mafia thing that held Pina’s interest more than five minutes was my brother Garon.

Salvatore picked me up and made me sit on his chest.

“Enlighten me, Grazi. What do girls chat about?”

“The terrible men in their life.”

“Really? You think I’m terrible?”

He laughed and I did too. Playful Sasa was my favorite.

“I think I’d love you even if you’d be.” I stretched down and kissed him.

“Call your friend, *Tesoro*.”

“Really?”

“Anything to make you happy.”

“You make me happy.”

“You make me happy too, Grazi. Just you.”

On the nightstand, his cellphone started buzzing, demanding attention.

“You have to go?”

“I do. Pietro is waiting for me with the lawyers.”

A coldness crossed through my body.

“Lawyers? Are you in trouble?”

There was always a shadow lurking, an ever-present fear that everything could change in a day. Salvatore was powerful, his *famiglia* was powerful too, but sometimes, the law takes down the *most* powerful.

“Commercial lawyers, Grazi. Just boring bureaucracy stuff, don’t worry.”

“Oh, ok.”

“You’ve lost your smile. Give it back to me.”

“I’m sorry. My mind just went to a dark place for a moment.” The worry came with the job – you marry the *Don*, you fear for him for the rest of your days. I knew that since I was in diapers.

“I’ll never leave you.”

“That’s what Father used to say and then he spent four years in a prison in Genova.” Those were some of the worst years for my mother.

“I am not your father. *Tesoro*, everything is fine.”

“I know.”

His lips found my forehead and lingered there for a few moments before he got out of bed and got dressed in a sharp suit that looked phenomenal on his sculpted body. I glanced at him and I stopped breathing. God really took his time creating this gorgeous man and even if I hated every woman that looked at him, I couldn't blame them.

“What, Grazi?” He asked when he caught me staring.

“You're beautiful.”

The compliment took him by surprise.

“You are too, *Tesoro mio*.”

“Go now, before I try and keep you all for myself.”

Salvatore left the bedroom laughing and that made my heart swell. We were finally good again and it made me so happy, all the fights and the fear from the other day turned into dust and got carried away by the wind. Now, all I had to do was enjoy my little corner of heaven.

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Sasa didn't come back for lunch, so I ate alone on the back patio, looking over the crystal blue water. Totto served me with a fresh spread of seafood, but didn't want to sit and have some himself. I kept telling Salvatore that the old butler was overworking himself and we needed to start planning his retirement, but Totto was so good at taking care of us. He was in the Fiori house ever since Sasa was a kid and he remained loyal through thick and thin. Convincing him to take time off for himself won't be easy.

After lunch, there was not much for me to do, so I did some stretching to release some of the soreness that settled in me after the night Salvatore and I shared and then moved on to making those phone calls. Talking to Rosa Vitale was emotional, to say the least. She listened in silence and when I was done telling her how my bodyguard may have crippled

one of the most important people in modern ballet production, she laughed. I didn't expect that.

To be honest, I wasn't sure what I'd expected from her – anger, disappointment maybe – but instead, Rosa apologized. She talked about how I was sheltered all my life and she should have known better than to throw me to the wolves like I was ready to fend for myself. She mentioned Salvatore too. Rosa Vitale was not one to believe in the institution of marriage and she didn't understand why I would chain myself to a man, but she did say she was grateful to know he'd be taking care of me.

Rosa was not mad that I embarrassed her name at the Scala. More than that, she said she was going to call the director and say her piece about the way the Academy was protecting its students. In Rosa's words, 'it was about time people start speaking out loud about that shit'.

I couldn't see her face, but I didn't need to. I could read in the tone of her voice that she was no stranger to this subject, but I didn't dare ask if anything had happened to her.

We said goodbye as friends and she promised she'd come visit when she returned from her holiday in the South of France. She also promised to drag me to a studio to make sure I wasn't losing my skill because I was paying more attention to my husband than to my training.

I didn't bother explaining to Rosa that while I loved ballet, I needed Salvatore to breath. He was my life. Not many could understand what was between us, because it wasn't just love. We were tied together like a knot and there was no me without him.

When I was done clearing the air with Rosa Vitale, I called Pina, who sounded more than happy to hear from me. The chat we had was light, not dabbling into anything too serious and it was exactly what I needed. A friend. Pina was the closest woman outside my family I had, and even if we couldn't see each other for now, I wasn't willing to lose her.

After that, the day went by slow.

“Grazia?” Totto said my name questioningly when he saw I was spying on him.

“What are you doing?”

He raised the hangers in his hands for me to see them better.

“One of your dresses and Salvatore’s favorite suit were just returned from the drycleaner. I was about to put them in your dressing room.”

“Oh.”

“Do you need anything?”

“I was just getting bored. You don’t happen to know when Sasa will be home, right?”

“Dear girl, you’re more aware of his schedule than I am.”

“Right.”

“Call him if you need him.”

“He has an important meeting today, closing up that big business. I don’t want to bother him.”

“Bother?” Totto puffed. “You have no idea how many nights he spent in his den, looking straight at his phone waiting for your name to show up. Call your husband, Grazia.”

His words put a smile on my face.

“Maybe I should.”

Right on cue, I heard my phone ringing on the nightstand where I’d left it. Chiara was calling.

“Hello?”

“There she is!” Chiara sang happily into the phone. “I’ve been texting you.”

“Oh. I haven’t seen it, I’m sorry.”

“How about I take you out for some early dinner. There’s a new brasserie downtown I’d like to try.”

“Umm, I’m not sure if early dinner works. Salvatore isn’t home yet.”

“My cousin can have his fun with the boys, and we can have ours.”

“Chiara, he doesn’t like me going out alone. Not right now.”

“Nothing is going to happen to you in the middle of Palermo. I’ll text Pietro and he can send a couple of guards.” I bit my lip, trying to decide if I should take her up on her offer. “Come on, Grazia. Bruno is out of town and Francesco has speech therapy for a few hours. I’m not good at being alone.”

Some lingering sadness on the end of her sentence made me frown. Sometimes, things Chiara did or said made me wonder if she was going through a rough patch that she fought to keep hidden, because there were moments when she wasn’t anything like the Chiara I used to know. Time changes people and Chiara said a few times that ever since she became a mother, she left all of that explosive temper she had in the past, but I still wasn’t at ease. It wasn’t my place to meddle, or even worry, but I couldn’t help myself. She was a friend and my husband’s cousin, but for three years, she was also my sister.

“Fine, I’ll go get ready.”

“Good. Meet me in *Alberghria* in an hour.”

“Ok.”

I washed my face and hands before going to get dressed in a cherry red summer dress and some strappy sandals. While I was getting dressed, I tried calling Salvatore twice, but he didn’t pick up and I quit trying because I didn’t want to bug him if there was no reason to do so.

“Totto!” I yelled from the foyer and the butler appeared promptly.

“I’m here.”

I looked at him in the mirror while putting on a pair of hoop earrings Salvatore got for me.

“Can you tell one of the guards that I will need a car ready, please?”

“Yes. Going out?”

“Chiara wants to go to a new restaurant. I can’t get a hold of Sasa. Will you let him know where I am?”

“I will.”

He disappeared into the kitchen and I walked out the front door. To my surprise, Salvatore was just coming up the driveway when I went down the stairs in front of the entry. The Maserati rolled to a stop slowly and silently and my husband looked damn sexy in that car. I stopped moving – I think I stopped breathing too – and watched him park.

“What, Grazi?” There was a shadow of a smile in the corner of his lips. He knew exactly *what*.

“You’re hot in that car.”

“Really?”

Effortlessly, he picked me up with one hand and walked with me until my ass dropped on the warm hood of the Maserati, settling nicely between my legs. The hem of my skirt raised and he looked around, to see that Mariano, one of the guys patrolling the grounds was close. The man took one look at us and disappeared.

“You really like this car, don’t you, Grazi?”

“I like you in it. The way you maneuver all that horse power does something to me.”

“Yes, I know.”

“You know?”

“You like me with fast cars, you like me with guns, because if I can handle that, it means I can handle you. You’re stubborn, *Tesoro*. All fire and fight, but don’t lie and tell me you don’t like to be handled.”

I’ve seen videos of wildfire and the merciless way it spread across the fields, eating up everything with violent rapidity. That’s how I felt. Desire for Salvatore consumed me

inch by inch, cell by cell, with the speed of light until there was nothing left untouched by it.

“Just by you.” I whispered and let my head down, allowing him to get access to the soft skin on my neck.

His mouth landed on the sensitive spot that always made me shiver.

“Just by me.”

I gifted myself to him entirely. He had the essence of my soul in the palm of his hand.

His mouth found mine with ease and started devouring. I wrestled his tongue enjoying the fight and sucked the musky taste of man off of him before trying to push him away.

“Sasa,” I tried to ask him to let me go, but didn’t get the chance.

“Pull your panties to the side.”

“We need to stop.”

“We’re not stopping.” He declared.

“We are outside the front of our house, there are people around here. Tutto could...”

“How many times do I have to tell you? No man would dare to look at you, Grazia.”

“That’s not...”

“I will make you scream right here – they will hear, but no one would look. No one gets to see my Grazi the way I see her.”

“I have to...”

“You have to let your husband put his cock inside you, after you turned him on with your dirty talk.”

“I’m leaving. Chiara is waiting for me.”

I tried to close my legs and get off the car hood, but he pinned me down on it instead, with my wrists cuffed at the sides of my head.

“Grazi,” I knew that warning tone all too well. He used it on me every time I tried to convince him we needed to break up, “you know I don’t take it well when you try to get away from me.”

“I’m not trying to get away, but I made plans with your cousin.” He tried to lick the skin at the base of my neck again, but I didn’t let him. “Look at me.”

“I want you.”

“You have me, but right now you have to share me with Chiara.”

“Screw her!” He growled and I started laughing.

“You don’t mean that.”

Salvatore let his head down and sighed.

“No, I don’t.”

“Francesco has therapy today and she feels lonely.”

“Chiara has friends to keep her company. Or Pietro.”

“You have friends to keep you company too.”

His eyebrow arched.

“Do you want me to do to my friends what I want to do to you?”

It was my turn to growl. “Bad joke, Fiori. If no one gets to see me like this, no one gets to see you either.”

“I’m all yours, *Tesoro*.” He bit my lip to underline his possessiveness. “Tell me you love me.”

“You know I do.”

“Tell me anyway.”

“I love you.” I said it in one breath.

“Now tell me you won’t be away from me for long.”

“Keep your cock in your pants for a couple of hours and I promise you, I’ll make it worth it when I come back.”

That did the trick.

“Fine. No more than two hours.”

“Can I take the Maserati?”

“What’s mine is yours. Do you know the way to Chiara’s home?”

He finally decided to let me go and help me get back on my feet.

“Oh, we’re actually going downtown.”

“What?” The smile disappeared, turning into a worried frown.

“It’s in the city center and Chiara already called Pietro to send one of your men to watch over us. We’ll be fine.”

We stared each other down until he finally backed down.

“Fine.” I did my best to cover my smile, but couldn’t. “What’s so funny?”

“You, Sasa. You could never say no to me.”

Ever since Salvatore was a kid, he was the strongest one around – the most determined. The Fiori prince grew up into a king, and everyone feared him. My husband was tall, scary, and covered in tattoos and muscles, so he didn’t make a habit of bending his will. *Just for me*. He didn’t like to share, but he shared everything with me – when we were kids it was his bike, and now his money, his home, his name. Everything. *Just with me*.

I couldn’t put into words the way that made me feel, but for all the years we were forced to hide, that feeling was what pulled me to him every time. Knowing that I was the only one for him pulled me back every time.

“Damn right I can’t say no to you. It’s my curse. Where are you going? I need to have the place vetted before you get there.”

“A new brasserie.” I showed him the text with the fancy French name and he nodded. “What do you mean by vetted?”

“A few guards, but they will stay back. You and Chiara will have your privacy. Good enough for you, *Tesoro*?”

I wasn't sure I needed any guards, but he wasn't going to budge more than that when we were talking about my safety, and after the past couple of days, I couldn't blame him.

“Perfect.”

With a hand on my back, he walked me to the driver's side of the car and opened the door for me.

“Try not to scratch it, Grazi. They don't make this paint anymore.”

“What if I do?”

“I'll think of a way for you to apologize to me.”

I drove away smiling, thinking about his words. If he meant it as a threat, it didn't work. I was actually contemplating scratching the damn car now.

It took me some time to find Chiara in the busy streets of downtown Palermo. The end of the summer always brought the biggest wave of tourists on this corner of Italian heaven and the city became a little crowded. It was a good thing. Tourists were good for business – *all* business – because tourists came here looking for good food and nice stores, but they also looked for drugs, booze, and women. This city had a market for everyone and my husband and brothers were running it.

Chiara was easy to spot, because she was dressed in a beautiful white skirt suit and her caramel skin was glowing under the sun. She was waiting for me in front of an elegant restaurant.

“You're late.” She accused me, before I could even say hello.

“Blame it on your cousin.”

“Oh, I see. He made you oblige your marital duties.”

“*Cristo*, Chiara.”

She noticed I didn't bother to deny it and laughed, taking my hand and leading me inside the restaurant. We didn't have a reservation, but as soon as the name Fiori was thrown around, the *maître d'* settled us at his best table.

Chiara ordered a chilled bottle of Abruzzo rosé and I settled for a lemonade. She was done with half of the bottle before the appetizers were served.

"You didn't drive here, did you?" I pointed my fork at the rapidly emptying bottle, before starting to play with my Caprese.

"No, of course not. Pietro sent a driver." She nodded towards the street. "He's around here somewhere."

"So are Salvatore's men. He said they won't bother us, but we are being watched."

"After what happened to you in Milano, he will be overprotective for years. It's going to drive you crazy."

I giggled. "I know, but he's the man I married. Crazy and possessive."

"Yes." She smiled, but there was bitterness in it. "Your brother was like that."

Goliath was mentioned a couple of times before, but I was usually the one who mentioned him.

"Yes, he is... he can be intense."

"He can be insane! I couldn't walk down the street without him getting sick with jealousy."

"Well, if I remember correctly, you had no problem putting him in his place."

This time when she smiled, it radiated though the room.

"We kept each other on our toes." That was one way to put it. They kept each other on their toes so much, Chiara might have done more ballet than I did. "No one understood Goliath and I. You get that, don't you? Like no one understands how you and Salvatore made it so many years

when the entire world told you to stay the hell away from each other.”

“I... we didn’t fight the way you and Goliath did.”

“That’s what people didn’t understand. Our fight was not harmful. It was... fuel. We thrived because we knew we could scream, and break furniture, and say horrible things, but neither of us would walk away.” She scoffed. “You know the only time we didn’t fight was when we broke up?”

“I didn’t know that.” Goliath never talked about it. One day he came home without Chiara and he became even more closed off than he was before. None of us dared to ask him for the details, or maybe Gaspino did because he had the advantage of being his twin, but he never shared with the rest of us.

“He came to me to say it was over and we were both... so calm. That’s how I knew it was over.”

“I wish you two would have made it. You made my brother happy.”

“Yes.” *Me too*. I waited for those words to be said, but she chose silence instead.

I kept looking at her, but I wasn’t sure what I was expecting to see. Something just didn’t feel right about her. Maybe I was just looking for problems where there weren’t any. Salvatore was close with his cousin, he would have known if something was not right.

Out of nowhere, she clapped her hands and looked at me. “We should do something.”

“We are doing something. We’re having dinner.”

“Something else, Grazia. Where did you park your car?”

“Down the street?”

“Come on, let’s go.” She took another swig of the wine bottle and got up. “We can lose the guards in this crowd.”

“W-why? Chiara, what do you want to do?”

“We can go to the shopping district and find a salon and get our hair done.”

I laughed it off. “We can do that with the guards.”

“Where’s the fun in that? Let’s be free for a couple of hours.”

“Chiara, Salvatore will get mad.”

“Yes, and you’ll have a lot of fun making him forgive you. Don’t you want to take some time off? From all the drama? From the *famiglia*.”

Mafia takes no days off. Giovanni told me that a couple of years ago when I asked him if I could go away with some friends from school for my birthday. Birthdays were big in the Caputo family, with parties, aunts and uncles coming from all over the country, and all the friends of the *famiglia* gathering for the celebration, but I didn’t want that. I’d asked my brother if we could skip it for once; if my birthday could be about me and not about the Caputos putting on a show for the world. It wasn’t possible because the mafia takes no days off. It’s that simple.

After everything that had happened, yes, I wanted to just be for some time. A few moments where I wasn’t someone’s wife, or someone’s disgraced daughter, where I could be like one of the tourists marching down Palermo.

“An hour can’t hurt.” I gave in. I don’t know why, but her impulsivity was contagious. “When Salvatore finds out, I’m putting all the blame on you.”

“Do it, I’m not afraid of him.”

I left some bills behind on the table and we snuck out with another group of people. When we got to the car, I scanned the street quickly to see if there were any eyes on us, but couldn’t see anyone.

“I think we’re in the clear.”

“Let’s go, let’s go!”

I pressed the gas pedal all the way to the floor and the car launched like a bullet through the traffic.

“Where to now?”

“There’s a nice salon on the other side of the plaza. That’s what we need, gossip, some champagne, and a manicure.”

“Fine.”

Chiara let her head back and laughed. I don’t know why we were thinking this was such a big deal. We could have simply called Salvatore, let him know where we were going and give him peace of mind. Something about doing whatever the hell I wanted felt empowering and I followed Chiara’s lead. I relaxed in the driver’s seat and let go. This hour was for me, to have fun with a friend and gather my thoughts.

We drove around just for the fun of it for a while before Chiara started giving me actual directions to get to the salon she wanted.

“They serve good champagne here.” Chiara pointed at the doors with pictures of beautiful women plastered on the glass doors.

I chuckled and shook my head before putting the car in park. “I’m driving.”

“Oh, come on, you could have a glass. It’s not like any carabinieri would dare to stop one of Salvatore’s cars.”

“I’m still going to pass, darling.”

“Fine, stay boring.”

She got out of the car, disappointed at my lack of recklessness.

“Hey,” I called over the hood of the car. “I went rogue with you, didn’t I?”

She didn’t answer, just took my hand in hers and started walking but I could only keep up for a few steps, because a shiver shook me. Something didn’t feel right, like the air has changed around us somehow, getting colder.

I looked around to see there were only a few other cars in the parking lot and they seemed deserted by their owners.

There was no one there, but something in me was quivering. It was a feeling I'd never had before, but it felt very much like a warning. My heart started slamming in my chest and I started scanning our surroundings, hoping that somehow Salvatore would show up there. I wanted my husband. I *needed* my husband.

Someone showed up in the corner of my eye, but it wasn't Sasa. The man was not very tall, not very handsome, dressed in not so flashy clothes – a chameleon – and I wouldn't have noticed his presence if I wasn't on edge. He looked at me and the hood of his cream-colored jacket fell back, letting his face be visible. I froze.

Silvio Bianchi. Italian born but raised somewhere in Serbia, he was the man the families in Italy hired when they wanted the trash to be taken out without getting their hands dirty. I wouldn't call him a friend of my father's, but he came to many Caputo parties, and definitely, business existed between them.

The focused look in his eye and the gun silencer that was peeking from under his shirt left no room for interpretation. He was here on business. I was the business.

It only took a second for my blood to drain from my face and leave me cold. I knew what was going to happen before he had a chance to move. Shot in broad daylight, that was the fate I was given.

Turning to Chiara, I pushed her with all my strength and she went flying across the concrete, falling on her knees. She might have been hurt, I had no idea, but it didn't matter as long as there was distance between the two of us.

Time moved slow, like fate was being lazy and not wanting to fulfill herself, but no miracle lasts forever. Bianchi raised his hands and his gun shone under the Sicilian sun. With the little time I had to react I tried running behind a car, but I didn't make it far.

My instinct told me to duck. The quiet of the plaza was shattered with one bullet that shattered the window of my car, and echoes attacked me from every direction. My heart

swelled so much in my throat, it choked me, and I couldn't breathe anymore.

There was a moment, after the noises stopped when I thought that it was over, but then I heard Silvio's voice yelling.

"First bullet was a warning, second is for the Caputo name!"

He fired again and I felt sharp, burning metal hitting me in the back. I couldn't pinpoint where, because the pain dripped down everywhere in my body. The fear crippled me and I couldn't think straight. I wasn't scared of the pain, even if it was worse than anything I'd felt before, and I wasn't scared for my life. I was terrified that I didn't have a chance to look into Sasa's eyes again.

I made a mistake and if it would cost me my life, I never got the chance to say goodbye to the man I loved. I broke my wedding vows and left my husband alone.

When I saw black and passed out, I wasn't sure if it was the pain or the guilt that pushed me into the abyss.

And I wasn't sure if my eyes would ever open again.

Second is for Caputo... My name was used against me. For Fabiano Caputo I was no longer just his disgraced daughter. I was a problem, and he hired a mercenary to get rid of me.

God save those who were left behind to face the anger of my husband.



Chapter 30

The courier that came by the house just dropped the package and left. The moment I was told about the ruby that was out on the black market, I wanted it for Grazia, and my jeweler put it in a beautiful pendant. It was fit for an empress and that was exactly what my wife was. I would make her crowns and build her thrones if she'd let me, to show the world how regal she was.

After admiring the gem, I locked in the safe in my office with a smile. I couldn't wait for her to come back and see it.

I lowered back in my chair and relaxed, feeling fulfilled. My life was complete. The *famiglia* was prospering; I had my men's respect, maybe even more than my father, and I had their loyalty. That made me a good Capo. And I had Grazia. That made me a happy man.

She filled every empty space in this big house with her love and warmth, and I got addicted to her presence. My wife has been in my blood like poison since I was old enough to know what a woman could mean to a man, but finally having her fully, was a new heaven I got to discover.

My love for her had no boundaries, it never has. Father once told me that it was wrong to let one person hold my heart with both hands; that it made me weak. It was the only reason

he ever had to doubt the arrangement he made with Fabiano, to have Grazia and I married. Everyone expected us to follow the words of our *Don's*, but no one believed we'd fall for each other the way we did. Father was wrong, she didn't make me weak. I was strong when Grazia was next to me.

A knock on the door interrupted my string of thought and Yannis entered.

"You didn't wait for me to say you can enter." I pinned him with a hard look.

"In your business study?"

"As long as my wife is in this house, everything is off limits. I plan on making love to her on every inch of this damn house."

"Understood. I'll wait next time. Do you want me to leave and come back later?"

"No. Grazia isn't home. She took Chiara out for dinner. What can I do for you, my lieutenant?"

"Pietro sent some men out to try and find out who was tailing you earlier. He will take your car out to try and lure them to us."

I frowned. I had a meeting with the lawyers all morning and had no time to check in with Pietro.

"What are you talking about?"

Yannis frowned.

"No one called you?"

"No."

"Your guards noticed someone was casing your car earlier. They didn't get a face."

"What the fuck did you just say?"

My body turned to ice.

"It's no big deal. Definitely not police."

No, the police weren't on my tail, because they were bought and paid for. I only had one enemy here in Sicily and

that was what scared me.

“There was a tail on my car?”

“Yes. Probably wants to know your whereabouts. It happens. We’ll find out who it is.”

I jerked up to my feet and slammed my fist on the desk so hard, splinters flew across the room.

“Find out now!” I roared.

“*Patrone...*”

“My wife took that car out!” My chest started burning, rapidly going up and down. “If there’s a tail on my car, they’re following Grazia.”

He stayed silent for a second and got up on his feet.

“Is she alone?”

“Samuel and his boys are looking after her. Call them now. Bring her and my cousin home.”

“On it.”

Every fiber in my body was stretched to the limit, the tension spreading like a disease. I felt ready to snap and I knew there was no release until Grazia would walk through the door.

The smell of danger was lingering around me and I didn’t like it one bit. My instincts were too sharp to miss, especially when it came to something so important as my wife. I had a sixth sense for her, and now all the alarms were going off. My palms were itching because I couldn’t touch Grazia, and my head was booming because I had no idea where she was and who was following her car.

Yannis came back in the room and what I saw on his face didn’t improve my mood one bit.

“What?” I said through my teeth.

“The guards lost them.”

“What the fuck do you mean lost them?”

“They were at a restaurant and then, I don’t know, *patrone*. Maybe Grazia ditched them. She drives like a little devil.”

Yeah, she did... in a car that was under surveillance.

“Call every pair of eyes in this city and alert our men. Turn over every damn rock in Palermo until you find her.”

While talking to him I pulled out my phone and dialed my cousin. He answered after two rings.

“Where the fuck are you?”

“Having a beer with a friend.” He said nonchalantly.

“My house. You have ten minutes.”

“I’m with a *lady* friend.”

My anger shot through the roof.

“Grazia went out with the Maserati and she lost her guards. She’s with Chiara, unprotected, and someone is tailing them. You failed to report that to me, cousin.”

“Damn it. How did she lose the guards?”

“I don’t give a fuck about that. You better pray my wife comes back home without a scratch, Pietro.”

“Don’t go crazy. Yes, there were eyes on your car, but it was just surveillance. I’ll call Chiara now, try and get in touch.”

“Find them!” I barked and closed the call. I turned to Yannis. “You’re coming with me. Let’s go.”

“Where?”

“We’ll meet the guards and start looking for Grazia and Chiara.”

“We’ll find them, Salvatore. This is our city.”

Ignoring him, I picked up the set of keys to a Jeep and walked to the garage. I didn’t trust anyone to find her, so I had to take matters into my own hands.

The thin line between worry and anger was blurring and it was clouding my judgment. A *Don* can't afford to be irrational, because it might cost my people their life, but when it came to my wife, I couldn't see straight. I couldn't blame her for wanting to spend an evening with her friend – I married her to make her happy, not to put her in chains – but I hated not seeing her at all times. There were just too many things that could take her away from me and I didn't like to gamble with my happiness.

I jumped behind the steering wheel waiting for Yannis, but he stopped to read something on his phone before rushing to get into the car.

“*Patrone*, drive.”

“What did you hear?”

“Samuel and the boys found your car. They're in *Albergheria*.”

I pushed the gas pedal to the floor before Yannis had a chance to close his damn door. *Albergheria* was too close to the north of the city and that line that separated Caputo's business from mine. Grazia had no business walking on those parts without me by her side.

“What the fuck are they doing there?” Yannis said nothing. “I've asked you a question, Judas. You better fucking talk.”

“I don't know, but we need to get there. Fast.”

“Why?”

“Because Samuel thinks he saw someone else. A Caputo associate.”

“Fuck!”

I looked straight ahead and drove as fast as the street allowed it. At my side, I could hear Yannis loading his gun. This had to be a fluke. Grazia was fine. She'd be waiting for me, as beautiful as she was when I saw her earlier, and I'd be able to take her back home.

“*Patrone*, do you have any heat on you?”

“Yes.” Why the fuck was he asking me that? “What aren’t you saying, Yannis?”

“I just want to be prepared. I’m sure things are fine.”

They had to be. She had to be. I told myself that mantra over and over again, but as soon as I got on *Via Albergheria* and was getting closer to *Piazzetta Settimo*, my blood pressure began to rise because all I could see around was chaos. People were running, there was someone screaming and police sirens wailed in the distance.

“What the fuck?” Yannis mumbled.

I pulled the car to the curb and both of us jumped out, taking off running. I spotted the Maserati through the group of people gathered around it and I choked on air.

“*Patrone...*” Yannis was looking behind at me and that’s when I realized I stopped.

I started running without answering him and got stopped by a man in uniform. Luciano Morelli was the chief of Palermo police for over a decade and he and I were on a first name basis. Our *Carabinieri* learned a long time ago that the best way of serving the people was to work with us, not against.

“Chief, what the fuck is this?”

“*Don Fiori*, stop.”

“My wife, she’s here somewhere.” The other man’s eyes glanced down and I did too only to see I stepped in a pool of red blood. “What the fuck happened here?”

“Shooting.” Morelli clarified. “Grazia Caputo took two bullets to the back.”

The sky above us broke and crushed down on me, and the weight was more than I could handle.

She’s fine. She’s fine. She has to be.

“Fiori. Grazia Fiori.” My voice was shaking. “Where is she?”

“Ambulance left two minutes ago.”

“And the shooter?”

“We have him in custody.”

“Let him go. Send him to me.”

There won't be anyone left unpunished. No one on earth or hell will escape my anger.

“I'll see what I can do, *Don Fiori*.”

Not good enough. I turned and grabbed Morelli by the collar of his neatly pressed uniform and dragged him until our faces were inches away.

“This is not a situation where you get to make some money, Luciano. Someone hurt my wife. You will get them to me, or you won't get to see the next sunrise. Understood?”

I felt him shiver in my hands.

“Yes.”

I let him go and found Yannis. The dread almost kneeled me when I turned to him.

“Take me to her.” I said with the last gram of strength left in me. “I need to see Grazia.”

“She was taken to the Regional Hospital. I'll drive.”

“Yes.”

I wasn't sure I had it in me to control a car right now, so I gave him the keys. I climbed in the passenger seat and looked straight to the car floor, trying to hang on to my sanity for long enough to make it to the hospital.

There was nothing left for me to do, but pray. I remembered every Sunday mass my father dragged me to and hoped it counted for something. If there was a God I needed him in my corner today because if the bastard dared to take Grazi away from me, I would move heaven and earth, and face him. I might be just a mortal, just a man, but for my wife, I was capable of the worst things imaginable. God himself should fear me if he wanted to take away *my Grazi*.



The hospital was silent like a grave when I walked through the doors. They knew who I was and why I was there and every nurse and doctor in sight hid their faces away, except for one – a young man in a white coat.

“Signore Fiori.”

“My wife.”

“My name is Fabio, I’m doctor Argosa’s intern.”

“I don’t give a fuck who you are! Where is my wife?”

The young man squeaked in his shoes.

“Surgery.” He mumbled. “Doctor Argosa is taking the bullet fragments out right now.”

I was breathing. I could hear breath sounds, but I couldn’t feel any air coming in.

“She’s... she’s alive.”

“Yes, for now.” I looked at him with death in my eyes and his face went white as snow. “I mean, Mrs. Fiori will be... Dr. Argosa is doing everything he can. One of the bullets missed her heart, but damaged her lung. She’s in good hands, but we can’t be sure until it’s done.”

“You don’t sound sure.”

“I’m... we can’t be until the surgery is done...”

“Be sure.” I growled. “When you talk about my wife, be sure. And go tell that doctor that she needs to live or I’m burning this place to the ground with all of you inside.”

When the doctor left, he was almost running away and I found the closest wall to lean into and sighed.

“*Patrone.*” Yannis put a hand on my shoulder. “They have a private waiting room ready for you.”

“Where?”

“A few floors up, close to the recovery unit.”

“Take me.”

The room was not big, but it had enough privacy because the windows were covered with thick blinds. Chiara was already there, sitting in a chair and she got up the moment I walked in.

“I’m so sorry. Salvatore, I am so, so, sorry.”

I looked at her face and saw the paths tears had left behind.

“Chiara...”

“I told her we should leave. I... I don’t know what I was thinking. All I wanted was an hour... some breathing room... I had too much wine. I am so sorry. So sorry.”

She hid her face in my chest and repeated those damn words through sobs. I wanted to comfort her, but I only had a little amount of compassion in me and I was selfish with it. I kept it all for Grazia and I.

“Chiara, go sit down.”

“I... I don’t think I can live with this. If Grazia...”

“She will live. Do you hear me? She’ll get through this.”

“Yes.” Her lips quivered. “Yes, she will.”

“Come sit with me.”

I took my cousin’s hand in mine and led her to the couch. The trembling in her mirrored in my chest. We were both on the verge of collapsing.

“Salvatore, what did I do? How could I? I know better. You taught me better.”

“What happened there today? Talk to me.”

“We went out to have some dinner.”

“I know that. What else? How did Grazia get shot?”

“I... I told her to come to the salon with me; that we should leave our guards behind. She was reluctant, but I insisted.”

“Why? The guards were there to protect you.”

She took a deep, long breath and then looked away from me.

“I needed to not be trapped, that’s all. Trust me, I know how stupid it was. Adrian taught me better. We’re not just two girls going out to have fun, we’re mafia wives and daughters. I knew better. And now when you’re on the edge of a war with her family... but I never believed they... how could they...?”

“They? Talk to me Chiara, tell me what I need to know.”

“I don’t know. We were in a parking lot, everything was fine, but Grazia... she must have seen something because she stopped to look around.” My girl was smart and her instinct was sharp. “This guy just showed up and Grazia pushed me. I fell and the next thing I know is I can hear gunshots and she’s on the ground.”

“Fuck!” I roared. Grazia’s pain was echoing inside me.

“It was a paid job, Salvatore. He said something about the Caputo *famiglia*. I don’t remember what but he said it.” I froze and Chiara grabbed my arms. “That man was on a job and he had one target, Grazia, because when I went to him, he didn’t point the gun at me.”

“You did what?”

“I hit him. I think I broke his knee. That’s why the police caught him so fast. He couldn’t walk.”

“How?”

“I... I’m a very good fighter.”

“You are?”

“Goliath taught me.”

Of course. Grazia’s brother was a cage fighting champion and Chiara always picked his worst habits.

“It was reckless and stupid. You could have...”

“You’re not listening to me. He didn’t even try to stop me.”

“Paid job.” I repeated her words from earlier.

“He had only one target. Your wife.”

I saw everything in red. Blood stained my view and all I could think about was murder. I kept my killer instincts under wraps at all times because I knew that a man with as much power and guns as me, could easily lose control and take a life, but now all bets were off.

Fabiano and I kept threatening each other with war ever since I married his daughter, but he had no idea the monster he created. War was a too merciful fate for someone who put a price on my wife’s head. For what they did, the Caputo family will face the Armageddon.

Like someone gave a signal, the door opened and all seven of the Caputo brothers walked through it in a line. *A united front*. They were a force – seven as one, just like daddy taught them – but it would take an army to make me back down.

“Chiara get out.” My cousin and I got up, but we didn’t move other than that. I tried to pretend to not notice how her eyes found Goliath right away, and pulled out my gun, loading it. “Chiara.”

“What?”

“I said get out.”

Giovani stepped in front of me, taking the lead of his family. He and I used to be close. He taught me a thing or two when he was getting ready to be the next Caputo *Don*, but we haven’t been face to face ever since our families parted.

“Your cousin can stay, Fiori.”

“Now who the fuck do you think you are to come here and act like my boss?”

“Easy.”

I glanced through the crack of the door to see Pietro was there too with what looked like half a dozen of my men and I signaled him to stay put. If someone was going down tonight, they were going by my hands.

“Giovani, I have exactly seven bullets in this gun. I don’t need an eighth. Unlike the shitty son of a bitch your family sent after my wife, I don’t miss.”

“Someone in my family?” All of them started breathing like dragons. “You think we had anything to do with what happened today? Grazia is our sister.”

“Chiara was there. Someone pulled the trigger in the name of your family, Giovanni.”

“Stop, Salvatore.” Caputo put his hand up. “None of us would ever harm a hair on her head. You think she’s less our sister because she married you? She’s not. We both know we stay away for her safety, but her blood is not less thick. She’s our *sister*.” He stressed the last word.

“Fabiano?”

Giovani stayed silent and Gianni took the word. “Father is a piece of shit, but he’d never...”

“What? Hurt a woman?” I spit the words. “Maybe you should ask my mother about that.”

That shut them all up and it answered an old question. They knew.

To my surprise, Garon, the youngest, started speaking loud enough to be heard from the street. “Whoever did this will pay. And you,” he pointed at me, “you were supposed to protect her!”

“Are you trying to say I didn’t?”

“She’s on a fucking hospital table with bullets in her lungs.”

Garon was green – a puppy – still learning when to speak and when to shut up. I saw the kid growing up and he was fearlessly loyal to his siblings and I could respect that, but

not today. I grabbed him by the shoulder and made him keep still.

“Out of all seven of you, I like you the best. You have fire inside you, but say I didn’t take care of Grazia one more time and I’ll knock you the fuck out. I would lay my life down for her.”

“Me too!” He yelled. “How is she?”

“She’s...” I dragged my hand across my face, “I don’t know. She has to make it. I’m nothing without Grazia. I fought too hard to keep her all these years when all of you – the whole damn world – tried to take her from me. I won’t let it happen. It can’t.”

I turned my back on everybody in the room to gather my composure.

Chiara started crying and in the corner of my eyes I saw Goliath flinch at the sound, but he didn’t move. His twin, Gaspino, crossed the room and took my cousin in his arms trying to calm her down.

Pietro couldn’t wait anymore and pushed the door open.

“Get the fuck away from my sister.” He growled at Gaspino.

Caputo didn’t take him seriously at all. They were like cats and dogs ever since Goliath started sniffing around Chiara.

“Ah, little Pietro. Looking good, man.”

Pietro dropped it. “Salvatore, we need to talk.”

“Not now.”

“We got Bianchi.” I raised an eyebrow. “Silvio Bianchi, he pulled the gun on Grazia.”

All eyes went straight to Pietro because everybody in the room knew that name. Bianchi was a mercenary and he was Fabiano’s favorite lap dog.

“Where is he?”

“Warehouse outside the city. I got information.”

Gianni – again – spoke for his brothers. “We should all hear it.”

Pietro waited for my signal and I gave it to him.

“Bianchi was hired to take out Grazia. All this time we thought there was a tail on your car, but he was looking for her.”

“Who was behind it?” Gianni pushed.

“Your father’s whore.” Shock flooded the room. “Ariana Bernoulli hired him, but make no mistake, the money came from Fabiano’s off shore account.”

Giovani’s face looked like ash when he turned to Pietro. “You’d better be sure.”

“Bianchi has a paper trail. He keeps it in case anyone tries to drag him down after a job. He wasn’t supposed to kill Grazia, but leave her with a bullet wound. He was aiming for her shoulder, but she ran and he lost the clear shot.”

No one said a thing for the longest time until Giovanni spoke again. “Bianchi is slippery. How did you get to him so fast?”

“The police caught him after Chiara broke his knee.”

Goliath registered Pietro’s answer and lunged forward to Chiara with flames in his eyes. “What!?”

“What?” She asked back, confused.

I recognized one of their screaming matches before it even started.

“You attacked an armed assassin!”

“He shot Grazia!”

“Are you insane? You could have been killed. Silvio Bianchi knows how to finish a fucking fight, you crazy...!”

“Don’t yell at me! You lost the right to yell at me.”

That calmed him down.

“It was stupid.”

“Hit first, think later. That’s what you taught me.”

“To protect yourself, not hunt down armed men.”

Chiara shrugged. “It worked, so it doesn’t matter.”

“Enough!” I yelled over their voices. “Giovani.”

“Yes.”

“You’re right, Grazia is your sister, so if you want to take care of Silvio Bianchi, I can give you that, as long as you and your brothers stay the fuck out of my way.”

“What do you want to do?”

“I will make you *Don* tonight.”

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Chapter 31

The night was silent. Even the sea was calmer than usual. The whole island seemed to be frozen and so was I inside. All I could think about was revenge and bloodshed and I was going to get my fix soon enough.

Giovani and I sat down and talked, *Capo to Capo*, man to man, husband to brother. Neither of us was going to let what happened go without getting retribution. We made a blood oath to make everyone involved pay for what they did to Grazia, so I went back on my father's word and invited the Caputo brothers into my territory, allowing them to kill on my turf and take care of Bianchi. In return, Giovani told all his men to stand down and walk the other way when they see me walk through the gate of Fabiano's home.

I couldn't think about Grazia. For the first time in my life I blocked her from my mind and closed the door, because if I did – if I stopped to ask myself if she'd get to walk off that surgery table – I would crumble. The strong man I am was hanging by threads. Grazia was my glue, the one that held me together, and I couldn't afford to think I would lose her. Nothing else could touch me, but just imagining a life where she was taken from me could kill me on the spot. Now, I had to stay focused. My girl took a bullet and I owe it to her to send it back a hundred times harder.

With my head set on just one thing, I drove to the other side of the harbor, where the Caputo mansion was towering over the streets. Grazia loved that house, I knew she did, but tonight I'd turn it from a home to a slaughterhouse and have no regrets about it.

The massive gates showed up in front of my Jeep and I didn't stop, I was too worked up. I drove straight through, the sounds of metal scraping on metal hurting my ears. When I made it to the door, I got out the car and looked around. No man was anywhere to be seen. Giovanni had cleared my path.

I went to the trunk and pulled out my knives and a loaded Uzi. The firearm was brand new, bought from a nomad Russian dealer. I was saving it for something, and Fabiano Caputo's head was the perfect trophy.

The door was unlocked, so I walked through it like I owned the place, just in time to see Fabiano trying to put bullets in his hand gun. He was shirtless, his hairy back turned to me, and Ariana Bernoulli was next to him, desperately trying to hide her nakedness with a towel. It looked like I caught them in the middle of the action.

My anger blocked my throat and I couldn't form words, but I growled like a wolf ready to bite off the prey's head and Fabiano froze. He turned slowly with the gun pointed at me.

"You were always more brave than smart, Salvatore. I tried to teach you."

"Put the gun down, Caputo. Your arms will hurt from holding it up and it won't stop me from sending you to God."

He decided to keep pushing, trying to intimidate me.

"I don't know how you got into my house, but you won't walk out, son."

I smiled. There was no fun in fighting a man who didn't give something in return. I welcomed Fabiano's threat head on.

"When I married your daughter, I made a vow. That if a drop of her blood will be spilled, I will shed rivers in return.

Are you ready for the flood, motherfucker?"

"This is about Grazia?"

"It's always about Grazia. All my life is about her and you two," I moved the gun in between the old don and his whore, "you tried to take her from me."

"W-what?" His face was blank.

"Her." I nodded to Ariana. "She paid your lackey to shoot my wife down, like she was a deer getting hunted."

"W-what?" He repeated like a fucking parrot. "Ariana, what did you do?"

The woman was shaking, her skin white, like someone had cut her throat and let all the blood out.

"S-she was not... he said he'd scare her. I d-d-didn't know."

Fabiano's attention turned to Ariana.

"You paid someone to kill my daughter?"

"I did it for us. I did it for *you*." She was scrambling to justify her actions. "He insulted you and I. Someone had to do something."

Fabiano's hand slapped her clean across the face. "You don't get to run my family just because you share my bed."

"I had to do something! She always wins! Someone had to put that little bitch in her place once and for all!"

He hit her again, and this time I had to stop him. I had no compassion for Ariana, she'll get her punishment soon enough, but I wasn't here to lose time.

I flexed my finger on the trigger and shot Fabiano in the back of his leg. He went to the floor like a rock, yapping and dropping the gun in shock.

"You shot me."

I ignored him.

"Ariana, sit on the couch."

“I-I-I... what are you going to do? You... you can’t. We’ve been friends forever. Salvatore, you’ve known me since we were kids.”

I had no patience left. I opened fire on the ceiling and she started crying.

“Sit down on the fucking couch before I lose my shit. *Adesso*^[61]!” She listened this time and I crouched over Fabiano who was rolling in his own blood.

“What are you going to do, Fiori? Finish what Adrian never had the balls to do and shoot me?”

“A bullet is too good for you.” I pulled out one of the hunting knives and licked the blade, my eyes fixing on Ariana. “You tried to hurt Grazia. You tried to have her killed. You tried to take my heart from my chest, so now you’re going to watch how I take his.”

I took my first strike at his chest and Ariana gasped, watching the skin crack and blood splash everywhere. Fabiano started choking and I kept pushing until I saw life draining from his eyes.

“*Predare Dio*.^[62]” I said looking him straight in the face. “*Ad alta voce*^[63].” All I heard after that was a faint begging of a bible verse as I tore into him repeatedly.

My knife sliced through muscle and cracked bone until his chest looked like vultures scavenged on it.

And then I did the unimaginable. For my Grazi. All for my Grazi.

I pushed my hand deep into his chest and grabbed Fabiano’s heart in my fist. I felt it beating its last beat before I ripped the organ from its hide out. I squeezed it and threw it at Ariana’s feet. It was done. He was dead. Grazia’s pain was paid for.

I took the knife out of Fabiano and placed it under Ariana’s chin. She was in shock, shaking like she was hit by convulsions, but I needed her to focus on my words.

“I don’t kill women. Fabiano paid because he brought the cancer that you are close enough to hurt my Grazia, but listen to me Ariana Bernoulli, you will leave. I want you out of Italy before the sun sets tomorrow or else you’ll end up just like him. Do you understand?”

“I...”

“Speak!”

“Yes. I’ll leave... I’ll... where...”

“I don’t give a fuck where or how, but if you ever get close to my wife again, I’ll have no mercy left.”

I snatched the towel that was covering her body and wiped some of the blood on my hands and then left. I had nothing left to do here. It was time to go back to my Grazi.

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Chapter 32

I slept. I slept because I was exhausted. I couldn't remember when I got home or much of what happened, but I knew I was tired so I kept my eyes shut.

Once in a while I could hear people. I'd heard Chiara and Pietro, and more than once I thought I could hear my brothers. I was too tired to try and open my eyes to see them, so I kept sleeping.

Most of all I'd heard Salvatore. He would talk to me, say things about his day, say he loved me and hold my hand. When his voice poured into my ears, I wanted to wake up, but the sleep was too sweet and held me in a grip too tight.

"I love you, my Grazi."

I love you too, Sasa.

"I miss you, my Grazi."

I miss you too, Sasa, but I'm sleepy.

"God, please, give her back to me. Don't take her. Take everything, but not her."

I'm here, I'm not going anywhere.

Sometimes his lips would land on mine softly and that's when I really wanted to wake up, but every time, I fell back into the darkness. I slept, and slept, and slept.

Until I wasn't sleepy anymore.

My eyes opened and the light in the room felt like the enemy. The sun was so strong, I started tearing up. It took some adjusting before I could see my surroundings clearly.

I was home – in my bedroom, in my bed – but something was different. There were IV's and machines around me, a tube going into my nose, and one into my vein.

“What...?”

A tall, blonde in a white coat came running from the bathroom and I stared at her.

“You're awake? How?”

“Huh?”

She started checking the machines and looked at my pupils with a light.

“What's going on? Who are you?”

“I'm Dr. Leona Ricci. I am a personal doctor for the Fiori family.”

“You're in my bedroom.”

“You don't remember anything?”

“I was sleeping and then I could hear Salvatore and I wanted to wake up. I'm confused.”

Dr. Ricci sighed. “You were not asleep, Grazia. You were in a deep coma for six days. Sometimes it happens with people during surgery.”

“Surgery?”

“Last week there was an incident...” She didn't get to finish because all my memories came rushing back. It hit me like a train.

“I got shot. Silvio Bianchi shot me.”

“You got shot twice in the back. One of the bullets scratched your lung and they had to do a repair, but everything else is fine.”

“Then why was I in a coma?”

“It’s the body’s response to trauma. I... you’re awake now, that’s all that matters. I have to examine you.”

She made me stand up and looked at something on my back. I looked down to see I was naked under the sheets.

“Dr. Ricci?”

“Yes?”

“Why do you look so surprised? That I’m awake I mean? Isn’t this normal?”

“It’s not...” she stopped to take a deep breath, “You came into my care the day after your surgery. Salvatore insisted for you to be transported here and I took all the steps to make sure your body heals, but more often than not, people don’t come back.”

“I had to. Salvatore was calling my name. He needs me.” The answer came to me instantly.

“Whatever you heard was powerful enough to make you fight. I’ll have to run some blood tests, but all your vitals look strong. Please, sit back and...”

“Oh, no, I have to go.”

“Excuse me?”

“I need to see Salvatore.”

“You need to stay put and let me examine you. You have a six centimeters incision on your back and you need to give it time to heal.”

“No.” Dr. Ricci blinked. “Salvatore and I... we’re not just married. He’s my life and I am his. You’re telling me I was almost dead for six days and all I can think about is that I need to get to him and take him out of the hell that he’s feeling.” I got up and ignored the jolt of pain I felt in my back. “There’s no time for you to run a test, or do whatever you

want to do. I have to go to my husband, because if things were reversed, he would fight death to get to me.”

Somewhere on a chair there was one of Sasa’s shirts and I wrapped it around me. Dr. Ricci didn’t get a chance to say anything else because I was already walking out into the hallway.

It hurt to walk, but I had to push through, even if my back was burning, my chest felt tight when I took a breath, and every single muscle in my body was sore. I slowly went down the stairs and started to hear voices. Definitely more than one person.

Did Salvatore have guests? Was he doing business in our living room?

What I saw when I walked in the room stunned me. Garon, Guido, Giorgio, and Gianni were all there, sipping cognac and Salvatore was standing alongside Giovanni, shaking hands. I looked around expecting to see guns pulled and men ready to fight, but found none.

Eventually, I found my voice. “What is going on?”

Six pairs of eyes turned to me, all in shock, but I only cared for Salvatore. He looked older, more tired, and I wanted to run to him. I didn’t get the chance because my brothers jumped on me like hawks.

Garon picked me up, Guido brought me a chair and they carefully made me to sit down.

“Why are all of you here?”

Giorgio grabbed my shoulders. “Are you alright? Are you in pain?”

“A little. What are you doing in my house?”

“We’re visiting. The twins came yesterday.”

My eyes found Salvatore. “You let them visit?” He nodded.

Giorgio’s grip got tighter. “How are you feeling? You said something is hurting. Where are you hurt?”

“My back, but I’m fine. Giorgio, I’m fine.”

Dr. Ricci came running in. “I’m sorry.” She sounded out of breath. “I told Grazia to stay in bed, but she just left. Stubborn.”

Giorgio laughed and went to give the doctor a hug. “Yes, she is, but she looks fine. She’s awake.”

Dr. Ricci nodded. “As far as I can tell, Grazia is fine and strong. I still want to take her in to the clinic to...”

Salvatore’s voice boomed through the room. “Everyone out.” He eyed Giovanni. “Say goodbye to your sister and leave, Caputo. I need to be alone with her.”

Giovanni agreed with a nod and I was shocked to see there was a smile on his face.

My oldest brother got closer to me and kissed my cheek.

“Never scare us like that, kid.”

“I...” he started moving to the door and I grabbed his hand. “Wait. You’re leaving?”

“For now.”

“Just wait, just for a minute.”

“Talk to your husband, *sorella*.”

The rest of my brothers hugged me and left without saying one more word, leaving me to wonder when I’d see them again.

“*Sasa*, why were you talking with Giovanni?”

“Not now.”

“You two were shaking hands. What...?”

He crossed the space between us in three rushed steps and knelt in front of my chair, wrapping my body in his strong arms. *Home*. He brought me home.

“I said not now, Grazi.” His hoarse voice let no room for dispute, so I didn’t fight him. I just held him as tight as I could.

We were both shaking, both desperate to feel each other and make sure it wasn't a dream. I could have died. I could have died and never seen him again. Thinking about it was horrifying and Salvatore had nothing else to think about for six days. I did this to him.

I tried to push him back and see his face, but Sasa hid his face in my neck. My first instinct was to move because I really wanted to look at him, but then I felt the wetness. He was crying. My man – *my strong, mighty lion* – was crying for me.

“Oh, *amore mio*.” I held him tighter.

“You came back to me. I prayed but I didn't think anyone heard me. I begged you to come back and you did.”

“I always come back to you, don't I?”

“Yes, because you're my Grazi.”

“And you are my Sasa.” I put my forehead on his and looked into those drowned green eyes. “I'm so sorry.”

“Don't apologize, *Tesoro*. You did nothing wrong. You were brave and strong, my dear girl.”

“I left without my guards.”

“It doesn't matter anymore. Accounts have been settled and you are safe now. No one will ever hurt you again. I won't allow it.”

I knew what that meant. He wasn't going to let me out of his sight, maybe forever. Fine by me. I didn't feel like leaving his side either.

“Sasa, what accounts? What did you do?”

“Don't think about that, *Tesoro*. There are more important things. You are more important.”

“I'm your wife.” I took his face in my hand and made him look at me. “We talked about this, Salvatore. No secrets. You don't have to carry burdens alone and you don't get to shut me out.”

He debated it in his head for a few moments before he exhaled, defeated in front of my argument.

“Silvio Bianchi is dead by your brother’s hand.” I nodded. I knew he’d find him and I knew he’d kill him. “There’s more, Grazi.”

“More?”

“Giovani Caputo is the *Don* of his *famiglia*. He took your father’s place.”

“Took his place?” Father loved his power. He would have never let it go. “My father is dead.”

“Yes.”

“You did it.”

“With my bare hands. Do you hate me for it?”

“Never. I couldn’t.” I loved Salvatore Fiori, all of him. I loved the man and I loved the monster behind him, and I made vows to stay by his side forever. In sickness and in health. In richness and poverty. In death. “I wish it would have been different. I wish he would have been a better man.”

“He wasn’t, but Giovanni is a good *Don*. He’s fair and respected and he’s doing a hell of a job cleaning the Caputo name. All of them should feel honored to call him Capo and give him their loyalty.” He stopped and smiled. “I know I’m proud to call him my brother-in-law.”

“Sasa... does this mean... did you reconcile?”

“We did.”

“Oh, my God!” I grabbed his shoulder trying to get up, but he pushed me right back into the chair’s cushions. “I can see my family?”

“Yes. They love you, your brothers. They tried to protect you the only way they knew how which was by staying away and not to provoke your father any further. He’s dead. The fucker is gone and he can’t hurt you anymore. My father is gone too. There’s no reason for Caputo and Fiori to fight.

We can thrive together, run Palermo together. Like it was meant to be.”

Tears started stinging my eyes. Giovanni had six brothers to back him up, but Salvatore was alone. Pietro and Yannis were by his side, but they didn’t have that bond that my brothers did. Now, I knew Giovanni would stand with him no matter what and so would the rest of the Caputo brothers. We were one. We were *famiglia* again.

“You did it, *Sasa*. You unified Palermo again. Adrian would be proud of the extraordinary man you are.”

“I’m just a man, *Grazi*, but I have you. That’s my power. You are my *extraordinary*.”

I started crying, not because I was sad, but because I was overwhelmed with how much he loved me. I tried to run from him, I tried to stay away, I tried to deny it, but he loved me through all of it. He married me when that meant war. He loved me hard enough to bring me back to life when the doctors gave up on me.

“I love you, *mio marito*.”

“I know. I love you too.”

“Never stop saying those words to me, Salvatore. They keep my heart beating.”

“*You* keep *my* heart beating.”

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Epilogue

six years later

I had my espresso on the balcony, looking at the sky. My head was still groggy after last night, but the coffee helped. When the cup was left empty I decided it was time to go back in the bedroom and ask Grazia to forgive me.

My wife was in front of the vanity mirror, dressed in a silky, short night gown with puffy feathers on the rims that was driving me insane. She was putting lotion on her hands and watching me in the mirror. The shadow of a smile I could spot on her lips gave me courage to come closer and hug her body from behind.

“I’m sorry, *Tesoro*.”

“You’re sorry? For what?” Trick question. “You’re sorry that you didn’t come home all night, or that you got drunk like a pig and Garon and Pietro had to drag you home? Which one is it, my dear husband?”

“All of that.” I kissed the curve of her neck, on that spot that always made her weak in the knees. “The guys

wanted to celebrate and they had reasons. Giovani and I had to show face.”

“Yes, but I talked to Rebecca. Giovani didn’t celebrate enough to crawl up the stairs on all fours.”

“I had a little too much bourbon, Grazi, but I had a good reason. It was a good year. Between your brother and I, we cleaned over thirty-five million.” I wiggled my eyebrows at her. “We have a lot of money.”

“I don’t care about the money, Sasa. I care about my husband sleeping on his pillow next to me.”

I wanted to grovel more, but there was a loud bang on our bedroom door before it was pushed open and our daughter marched in like a general leading the troops. The only troop following her was *Biscotto*^[64], the stupid puppy her uncle Gaspino gave her and was now making my life hell.

“Mama. Let’s go. Let’s go now!” For a four year old, she was demanding. Just like her daddy.

She was dressed in a white blouse and a fluffy, pink tutu skirt around her waist. I melted, seeing how beautiful she looked in her small pointe shoes and with that chocolate bun on her head. She had Grazi’s eyes and grace and I loved seeing them together more than anything. My pride and joy – my daughter and my wife.

“I’ll get dressed and we can go in a minute, *bambina*.”

“Where are you two going, Giana?” I asked my baby daughter.

“Ballet class. Mama is teaching me today.”

Grazia’s ballet studio was only a few blocks down the street. We couldn’t find a building large enough for the school she wanted to open, so I built her one. I built her a whole damn sports center, with studios, and fitness classes, and music rooms, and show stages. My wife turned that into a money maker with her passion. She started teaching ballet classes to young girls and then expanded to a full ballet school with female personnel only, so her students could feel safe and comfortable.

Giana grew up next to her mother's leg, watching class after class of girls learning to dance and she fell in love too. I lost both my girls to ballet.

"Baby girl, go downstairs and let Biscotto in the back yard. Mama will come in five minutes."

"You promise it's only five minutes?"

No. Once I had my hands on Grazia, time flew past us.

"I can promise if you give me a kiss."

Giana flew into my arms like a little butterfly and kissed my cheek. Those little moments were everything. Grazia was right, none of us gave a shit about money when we had this treasure in our home.

When she left the room, I stared at the door, smiling.

"She's perfect." I whispered.

"She is."

"I want more." Ten more daughters, if possible.

"You should have thought about that before you let me sleep alone."

"You still didn't forgive me?"

"No."

"Do you still love me, Grazi?"

She turned in my arms and chained my neck. The look in her blue eyes spoke a thousand words. "Don't be stupid, Salvatore Fiori. Nothing could make me stop loving you."

"I know." My eyes fell on the big clock hanging on the wall. "We have four more minutes."

"Too little time, Sasa."

"Every second with you counts, *Tesoro*."

I picked her up and walked to the big bed we spent the last six years in. Grazia took me between her legs, wrapping them around me effortlessly and I got hard. My sexy, beautiful

wife never failed to make me want her and today was no different.

“Salvatore,” she moaned my name, silently begging for more.

“Are you ready for me, *Tesoro*?”

“Always. Are you ready to make up for last night?”

“Don’t I always take care of you?”

I kept my word and made love to my wife, worshiping her with my body. We made love and I felt complete. I planned on feeling like this for the rest of my life, next to the woman I loved.

My wife.

My mafia queen.

My Grazi.

The End!

- [2]. *Treasure*
- [3] *Daddy.*
- [4]. Son of a bitch.
- [5]. My love
- [6] My heart.
- [7] Something's not right.
- [8]. Sleepy head.
- [9] What are you doing, my sister?
- [10]. My sister.
- [11] My God.
- [12]. Shit!
- [13] I love you, I really do.
- [14]. Completely insane
- [15] Repeat that.
- [16] Fine.
- [17]. A sweet angel
- [18]. Jesus Christ
- [19]. The prince.
- [20]. The Journal
- [21] Understand?
- [22]. Baby girl.
- [23] The past has no power.
- [24] My treasure
- [25]. Mommy
- [26] What the fuck did you just say to me?
- [27]. Damn you!
- [28]. Jesus.

[29]. We defied Destiny.

[30]. Ouch.

[31]. A gift from God.

[32]. Good morning, Father.

[33]. My daughter.

[34]. Son of a whore.

[35]. Girlfriend.

[36]. Wife.

[37]. Fuck.

[38]. Curses!

[39]. True

[40]. My heart bleeds for you, Grazia.

[41]. What the fuck

[42]. kid

[43]. My husband.

[44]. My beautiful girl.

[45]. National Police

[46]. Baby. (masculine)

[47]. Wolf's mouth.

[48]. National Anti-drug Agency

[49]. Friend. (f)

[50]. Brother.

[51]. For fuck's sake.

[52]. Sometimes you're melting my heart. I love it.

[53]. Nothing.

[54]. Dance for two.

[55]. Asshole.

[\[56\]](#). Boss.

[\[57\]](#). Good luck.

[\[58\]](#). Do you understand?

[\[59\]](#). Pleasure to meet you.

[\[60\]](#). It's a very beautiful city.

[\[61\]](#). Now!

[\[62\]](#) Pray to God.

[\[63\]](#). Out loud.

[\[64\]](#) Biscuit.

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