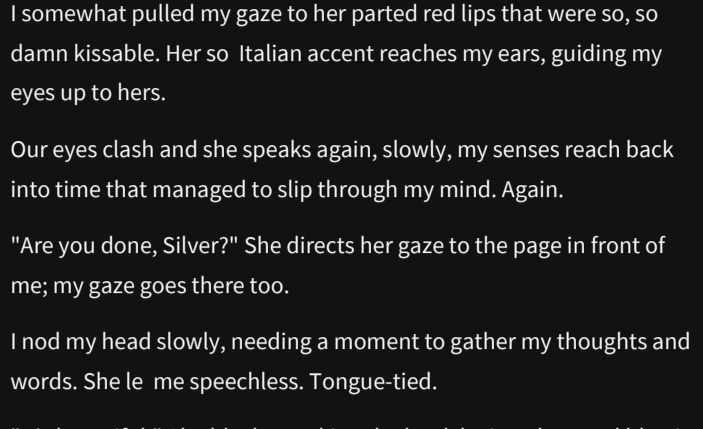


Chapter Thirty One



The sunlight gleamed o of her perfect skin, highlighting her stormy, grey eyes that shone with so much delight.

Happiness radiated o of her in invisible ripples, transixed on her aparts. Baby strands of hair fell on the sides of her olive skin; the harmony of her cheeks were rosy from being ill, but it selfishly made her all the more stunning.

Discreetly, I place a palm over my erratic heartbeat. I couldn't look away.

She tilts her head to one side, directing it at an angle that would suit her while she moves her hand fast along the pad. I suck in my lower lip, playing with that to keep my mind at the surface and not anywhere behind or below.

I somewhat pulled my gaze to her parted red lips that were so, so damn kissable. Her so Italian accent reaches my ears, guiding my eyes up to hers.

Our eyes clash and she speaks again, slowly, my senses reach back into time that managed to slip through my mind. Again.

"Are you done, Silver?" She directs her gaze to the page in front of me; my gaze goes there too.

I nod my head slowly, needing a moment to gather my thoughts and words. She le me speechless. Tongue-tied.

"It's beautiful," She blushes, taking the book by its edges and blowing her cool breath along the paper to discard the shavings of pencil from the paper.

Her eyes look in the art that wasn't even all that good, but somehow she made it seem like it was the most incredible artwork she'd seen.

It was like that with nearly everything. She looked at everything with such admirability. And I admired that.

"—I love the orange and the green in the background," So murmurs fall from her, drawing me closer and closer with each sound.

"And the blend between the blues on the flower, it's so pretty."

A smile tugs up onto my lips, something uncontrollably upon me.

"You can keep it," I say, folding my hands behind my head. Her eyes snap towards me, curiosity in them.

"Really? Can you sign it?"

The sarcasm in her tone makes me laugh, really laugh. This was what I admired about her. Her sarcasm and her ability to put me in my place when needed too.

"But I am keeping it. It's too pretty for you to keep it for yourself." She gave me a sidelong glare and ripped the paper out of the book, placing it on her side of the table.

I took this chance to look at the sketch she'd spent so much time on, giving it so much of her attention too. It was ridiculous to be jealous of an object, to be so hateful to something that had no mind of its own.

But as toxic as it was, I wanted all of her attention on only me.

What she had drawn was partially coloured but realising what it had been was what drove me insane.

The page was split in half, and the lower half of a male face was drawn precisely according to reality. Colour of ivory skin, a nose, and a prominently shaped jaw and cheeks. And his lips were sketched full on both the bottom and top, curled into a smile.

I clenched my fists at my sides, keeping them at bay from the shock I tried my best to keep hidden. The shock was something I wasn't used to. I expected the expected. Not with her though, never with her. It had been that way since the very start.

When I looked back up at Serenity, her expression was one of confidence, placing her sketch between our bodies.

"You have a beautiful smile, it would be cruel not to draw it."

Her gaze begins to twinkle, and my beating heart pounds beneath my chest.

Was it possible to feel so intensely for someone?

Her drawing of me simply intensified something inside of me. Whatever it was had my chest almost heaving; I hid it well, but the way my eyes held onto hers in dignity was strong enough to expose my virtue.

Her art was simply unique, but beautifully unique. One thing I liked about art was the ability to create anything and have it be justified as art. In this world, you can create something so little and have it be something distinct.

And Serenity's techniques were more than justified as special. They were remarkable.

I take the sketch into my palm, grazing my thumb along the outlines of the sketch, embracing the page on which she drew me.

This possessiveness crawled its way into my veins, wanting to keep this drawing between us only. I didn't want any other set of eyes viewing something so intimate, something so precise of what had been made for me.

When I met her gaze again, I could see the same determined look in her eyes. The same demand I wanted. Both of our sketches were simply made for the two of us.

The flower I drew reminded me of her. The hibiscus was something I always thought of when looking at Serenity. She was this flower, always ready to bloom. The hibiscus represented delicate beauty. Which was exactly what she was, inside and out.

"Do you like it?" Innocently, she asked.

Her head tilted to the side, exactly what she always did when she was asking a question.

"Yes," I reply profoundly, finding my voice only coming out as a weak whisper. "It's incredible, Serenity."

She smiles sweetly, her full, kissable lips beckoning me to pick her up and lock her in my arms, never letting go. Over the past few weeks, whatever feelings that had erupted were only increasing daily.

Hourly.

It was to the point where my mind would only think about her only. When I'd grow bored, she'd come to mind. When I was in a meeting, on a mission, at the gym—it didn't matter where, either way, she would always consume my mind.

"You keep zoning out, Silver. It's unlike you," Her eyes so en as she speaks, her sketch was placed in front of her now, concern growing between her brows while her so palms rest on the side of my arm.

Her touch drove me crazy. I craved it daily. Whenever I had the chance, I'd make sure that my hands or my arm—even if my leg was just brushing hers—would help revolve the desperate desire for her skin on mine. And it wasn't physically that was the desire, more so emotionally.

Her touch was something that relaxed me. Something a cigarette would do for my oncoming anger or impatience, I don't get any of that when I'm with her.

"Just thinking," I reply a er a while, rolling my shoulders back from the sti ness in them.

"What about?" She perks her hands under her chin, gazing up at me from the desk.

Only if she'd allow me to fuck her against it.

Clearing my throat from the thoughts, I shi in my position again and face her.

"You."

A redness coats her cheeks, grasping her hands to them in an attempt to calm them down from the flames. I loved it when she reacted to me. It made me think that maybe she felt just as intensely as I did, maybe her heart was racing just as fast as mine.

"Good things, I hope," She mutters so ly, her Italian accent more profound on some words she expresses, something that I love. Her accent was a mix of American and Italian. Sometimes she would sound fully American, but other times she sounded fluently Italian. The way her so voice curls when pronouncing words, my name in particular, was something I adored.

A similar faint smirk made its way to my mouth, and thoughts of only good or more devious things about her filled my mind. And she seemed to get the picture right away.

"Silver!" She lightly hits my shoulder with the back of her hand, giggling right a er scolding me. I shrug casually, enjoying the way she smiles so e orsally.

I looked down at my watch, glancing at the time briefly and noticing that it was much past ten in the morning. "You aren't going to school?"

Serenity shakes her head, scooting her chair closer to me, and li ng her knees to her chin. "No, I'm studying from home today since I still don't feel all that good."

I nod slowly in response.

Something seems to swirl around in her mind, her eyes flicker with something unpredictable, her lips pursing as if to seal whatever she wanted to say. And all I wanted to do was assure her that she could tell me anything—whatever was on her mind, whatever was bothering her, I would be the one to listen and respond.

"When is your first class?" I asked, instead of saying whatever my strong instincts wanted to say.

She taps the face of her phone, clicking her tongue as she looks at the time that said exactly 10:02 A.M.

"Now," She admits, and then glances at me sheepishly.

I kept in my chuckle, giving her a disappointing look instead. She stands from her stool, glimmering her grey eyes down at me.

"Are you busy right now?" Her voice turns quieter, resembling that same tone she used with the people she barely knew. I stand with her, needing to wrap both my arms around her to bring her closer to me.

"No," I lie, "You want me to stay?"

Barely a second goes by before her lost smile turns into something bright. Her eyes shine as she leans into me, palms pressed against my chest, and her chin tilts up at me.

"Yes," She turns pink, "If you don't mind."

I shake my head, barely wrapping my head around the fact that her palms heated my skin—burning even through the fabric of my shirt.

"I don't mind." Pecking her cheek, she grins more, her dimples digging further into her skin.

"Come on then," Her small hand laces through mine, electrifying shocks running all up to the veins of my arms, coursing right to my shoulders, and down my chest to my heart.

Leading me out of the room, our sketches are long forgotten within the dew of her so voice and the precious circles of her thumb coursing along my wrist.

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I spent half the day with Serenity. Which all consisted of helping her study, and sneaking in a few kisses here and there.

When I le , I made a few calls to rearrange the meetings I had scheduled for another time later this week. There was a bigger mission I had on tonight, regarding a location far out of the town we were in.

Briefly, I had told Serenity. She just didn't know the dangers of it, or that the mission was regarding her psycho of an ex.

Roman Agnello made arrangements for me to take the lead for this mission, even though our teams were working together temporarily, they still only went by their own leader's demands. Whereas tonight, both armies would be going by my demand only.

Alias was still hiding in the shadows, arranging all these erment gangs to do his dirty work for him. Tonight would be di erent for him. Live footage of Alias staying in a hotel downtown has been assessed by my men. It appears he's been there for a few days now and his last sighting was this morning.

There are people still currently watching his whereabouts when he enters or exits the hotel. Live updates come from the men looking a er that footage, but now we know he's there and we plan on taking him down—if nobody screws it up.

But if somebody does, we'll just try again.

Alias hasn't realised just how protected Serenity was, how willing her father was going to go to destroy him. How far I was willing to go. I wouldn't let him lay a single fingerprint on her, not a footstep near.

With an empire as large as his, it was unsurprising to see a host miserably he was falling at this without a mafia background or family.

As I pull into the underground garage, I park my car farthest away from the others, knowing well enough how careless my cousin was in the way he drives.

Entering the building, I pass by the elevator, taking the stairs to take up less time. One of my many childhood homes comes into view, the marbled floor polished to the shine. The frames of artworks made by nameless artists sit along the wall, never decorated with a pinch of dust.

And the kitchen, never holding anybody else other than the chefs, they hire.

My mother would give o the impression of her being a much more normal or stereotypical Italian mother.

Spending her time kneading dough or shredding di erent pasta in the kitchen. She wanted everyone to think her part in the world was this perfect mother that only wanted the best for her only son, who only wanted happiness for him.

Although in the real world—in our world, instead, she'd sit behind the kitchen counter, barking orders at the cooks or maids hanging about. Talking calls that would require more demands. Always impatient for something that wasn't going to come any faster than her needs wanted it to.

From across the hall, I could already see her red hair swinging back and forth as she paced the kitchen floors. A white business suit attired her figure, which told me that she'd just come from a business meeting, now preparing to attend another.

Her phone pressed against her ear, eyes narrowed into slits—just edging to how angry she was. Ignoring my presence, I slipped into the kitchen without a word, as always, and managed to tick a bottle of water out from the fridge.

Just when I entered, I see Elijah who had been inside the kitchen too, exit. Never once bearing my presence.

"Mr Ceraso, I've made fresh rolls for you,"

The deeper voice that spoke from behind me slowly had my attention pulled away from my incessant mother. The chef gestured to the freshly baked cinnamon rolls, stacked with syrup in the middle of the counter.

I reach my hand out for one immediately, giving him a slight appreciative nod in return.

"Grazie."

He nods back with a small smile, going back to the cleaning he had been previously doing.

Finally, I hear my mother end her phone call angrily and toss it away recklessly on the counter. I bite into my cinnamon roll, blankly meeting her gaze.

She narrows in on my cinnamon roll and sco , looking over at the chef behind me.

"Colin, you need to stop feeding him all this merda, it'll make him put weight on."

Translation: Shit

Shoving whatever was le into my mouth, my mother scowls at me further while I simply just swallow and follow up with some water.

This has been my whole life. My appearance, my actions—nearly everything she'd have control of. Once I reached the age that I realised how manipulative she actually was, I stopped doing things for her but me.

Forcing me to eat healthy all of the time, to work out at unnecessary times—such as, if I eat something with more than enough calories to her satisfaction then my punishment would be having to do as many sit-ups as what I had eaten. 250 calories equal 250 sit-ups.

"We need to talk, Silver," She runs a frustrated hand through pin-straight hair, looking down into the corridor. "Come into the study and we can talk—"

"No," I say, walking around the island to stand in front of her. "I have other things to do, important things. If it's about her again, I don't want to hear—"

"Everything is about her, Silver!" She suddenly cuts me o , her neck reddening from her outburst. "This man is getting closer, this mission you have tonight proves it."

My gaze never leaves hers, finding not a single care in the world about Serenity, but only about herself.

When she realises that I wouldn't be commenting further, she continues with her rant. "Tell me you have someone watching her tonight? We can't have any—"

"Yes," I sigh, already forming a headache from her unnecessary stress. "She'll be safe wherever she is."

Serenity wasn't aware that it was happening, her father was the one that hadn't wanted it mentioned. He didn't want to get her hopes up if it failed.

My mother makes a sound, something resembling relief.

"Good, good," She murmurs and paces the hallway now, annoying me further. "When are you leaving to prepare?"

I glance down at her and then glance back to the door behind her.

"Now."

There was a bag in the study that I needed to obtain, it consisted of files that needed to be looked over thoroughly before, continuing with the mission tonight.

She nods again, moving to the side so I could pass, and willingly, I did so.

As soon as I entered the room that smelled of burnt cigars, I collected the bag needed, briefly glancing inside at all the papers piled into sorts with staples.

When I exited, my mother was the one to stop me again. Her hand hovers above my arm, and I quickly move it away from her, my gaze fixed on the shock in her eyes.

Quickly it was removed, her mask falling back into place. A cold look settled on her, matching my own.

"I hadn't known you were going to see her this morning?" She asks the question as if I was supposed to tell her about every move I made, as if every time I was around Serenity, I was to inform her that I was a step closer to disclosing their freedom.

A moment passes through me, something flashes in front of my sight. A sight of Serenity in my arms all morning, laughing at my mockery and drawing patterns along my thigh to distract herself from the world.

Another memory passes through, her ear pressed against my chest, listening to the living proof of how badly she a ected me. How real this was.

"I hadn't known that every encounter was to be recorded?" I raise a brow while shoving my hands deep into my pockets, fiddling with the folded paper that was the sketch Serenity drew of me.

My mother closes her eyes in defeat or exasperation, not wanting to argue with me again. She takes her palms to my cheeks, ignoring the disdain on my features not even enduring her so-called motherly touch.

"Silver," Her voice whispered my name, a slowing tone of seriousness enclosing us, the walls evaporating as she spoke. "We are so close now. Don't screw up."

A tick in my jaw has me pulling away almost instantly a er I comprehended her words.

My mother thought that she knew me inside and out, it was clear that my current a ction for her Serenity a ected her reliability for me.

Whether she knew that or not, her warning proves she had some sort of intuition that I had developed feelings.

What she didn't know, was that I had fallen deep even before she could turn me into the monster she always planned to be.

"I'll see you later."

Her voice calls out to me in pleas as I stride o without a second glance. I make my way down to the parking garage, finding myself trapped between what was right and what was wrong.

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The van was packed with men and women, protected in bulletproof vests and lethal weapons.

Everyone stays silent, the majority go over the tasks and figurative plans.

Roman Agnello sat down on the other side of the van with his wife, he spoke fewer words while she visibly murmured away to him, concern frowning upon her which didn't hesitate for me to think that whatever it was they were talking about was to do with Serenity.

Alone with my father on one opposite side of the van, he spoke vigorously over the phone to the people guarding the area where the mission was set to happen.

An hour of driving had passed already and I couldn't help but think about the less amount of time it would've taken for me to get there. Nearly being on the verge of taking over the driver's position just to end the hostility of waiting.

Updates came every twenty minutes, with no signs of the male in sight. But it was confirmed that room 2903 was where he was staying.

The van was parked just around the corner of the hotel and had the doors opened immediately a er.

Part of our team began to work their way into positions, blocking every entrance or exit of the building. The front entrance would remain unblocked to seem less prying to the pedestrian gaze, although we still had security around to make sure there wouldn't be any escapes.

Inside the van was the tech team, receiving calls, locations, statics of everyone's whereabouts. Roman and Arabella stand with my father, along with me, lighting a cigarette—mentally ready to tear this guy down.

"And are we sure he's inside?" My father speaks over the phone, side-glancing at me in return. I clench my jaw at the irking feeling settling deep within me.

Something was wrong.

"Si, Grazie." He hangs up, gripping his phone tightly and I step forward, listening to the conversation between Roman and him.

"He hasn't le the building all day, other than this morning before returning to his room again. He's up there now."

I look to my watch, observing the three minutes le that we had.

"I say we start," Inhaling the cigarette, I look at Roman. "What do you say?"

Roman agrees with a nod of his head, wrapping his arm around his wife and looking back at the building behind us.

"Get them ready."

The cigarette burns from between my lips as I situate the remaining members. They gather themselves behind me, I nod towards my father, Roman and his wife, setting my gun into my hand.

The sidewalk was eerily quiet, although this part of town was quiet either way. It had a reputation for its secretive lurkings, drug deals, and other associates with illegal alternates. The mafia had much to do with these little towns, unless the people got involved themselves.

Once we enter the building, all heads were kept down, knowing who I was already. The elevator ride up to level 29 was spent over everyone preparing their weapons and stances.

The doors opened with a ding, and the march up to the room began hastily.

I dropped the cigarette underneath my foot as we approached the door, two of my men began to body-slam it open, not even bothering with a knock.

I wait against the wall, digging my hands into my pockets with my pinky finger hanging loosely onto my gun.

As everybody enters, I hear the sounds of muddled voices.

"Where is he?"

"Shouldn't he be in here?"

"Have you checked every room? Under the beds, in the closet—"

"Yes, we have. He's not here."

Briefly, I close my eyes and shake my head.

I should've known it wouldn't be that easy.

I'm about to enter the room myself, only to be stopped by the humming of my phone.

Receiving two incoming calls, one from my mother and another from Serenity.

Without thinking twice, I expect Serenity's voice to fill my ears the second the phone was pressed against it.

Only for it to be the sound of another's. A deeper male voice fills the silence behind the phone, heavy breathing coming from a di erent, so er tone.

"I've got you now, Serenity."