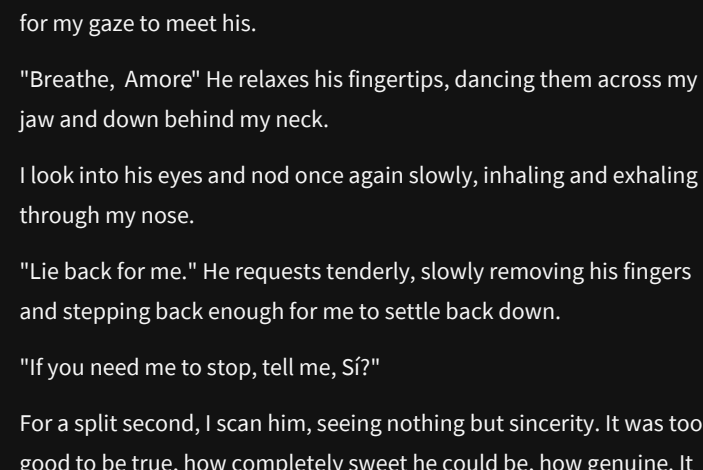


## Chapter Fourteen



My mind runs wild in all sorts of directions as the cool, wet texture hits my skin.

Silver was currently sterilizing the area he was going to tattoo on me. I had no doubts that he'd be more than a professional at this, although my brain was freaking out about how much pain I'd be in. Which was quite stupid where I should actually be worrying about the fact I'll be having ink on me for the rest of my life.

You can always get it layered o .

That'll also hurt like a bitch, Serene.

"Serenity." He calls my name, snapping my head out of the gutter.

"Yes?" I look up at him sheepishly, pursing my lips.

Taking my chin between his fingers, he tilts my head in his direction for my gaze to meet his.

"Breathe, Amore" He relaxes his fingertips, dancing them across my jawline down behind my neck.

I look into his eyes and nod once again slowly, inhaling and exhaling through my nose.

"Lie back for me." He requests tenderly, slowly removing his fingers and stepping back enough for me to settle back down.

"If you need me to stop, tell me, Si?"

For a split second, I scan him, seeing nothing but sincerity. It was too good to be true, how completely sweet he could be, how genuine. It was reducing my highest standards, and the smallest of things made me completely obsessed.

"Si," I reply back, realising that he was waiting for my reply.

The machine turned on, but before he could continue, one of his large hands held up a mirror, revealing the exact location of the tattoo.

"That good there?" Silver arches his brow flawlessly, his black hair above distracting me.

I bite my lower lip, feeling a little giddy as excitement rises in goosebumps.

"Perfect, thank you." A genuine smile graces my lips, and he reciprocates with a small smile of his own.

When he removed the mirror, his face had returned to its emotionless mask. His arched brows were seamlessly relaxed, his eyes focused yet blank, giving the impression that he was bored with what he was doing.

His hair was unruly, falling down his forehead in a trestle of locks—making him look utterly hot.

Each feature of his was structured definably and strong—his cheekbones so defined, his cheeks sunken and hollow, and his lips lushly plump and shaped perfectly between his chin and nose.

I could feel my heart rate begin to pick up from how intimidating his beauty was. Surely he could have anyone in this world, yet here he was in front of me, tattooing my skin.

Funnily enough, his beauty was just so distracting that I hadn't even noticed the needle digging into my skin.

It felt like a pinch to my skin, and each zap became less painful, but it was his hand on my skin that stunned me the most.

The heat of his hand could be felt through the black glove he wore. I could feel his skin touching mine.

Each time his knuckle would graze the area on my chest, it would puncture me more than the needle—especially the hand that was placed above my chin, assisting his other.

"How are you holding up, beautiful?" His rumbling, deep voice came out as smooth as paint against a canvas. The beautiful part had me utterly folding from the inside.

Holy fuck.

Taking in a deep breath, I nod slightly, not wanting to move in case I stu it up for him.

"Fine," I whisper and he makes no motive to show that he heard me, although I know that he did.

Deciding to use him as a distraction, I keep my eyes flowing down toward his appearance. Muscular arms were engraved with ink, his loose shirt allowed only his forearms to be visible—the beginning of his medusa tattoo.

I wondered what the story behind that one was, as he had mentioned before that all of them had meaning.

"Which tattoo hurt the most for you?" I asked him, my gaze still lingering over his arms.

He seemed to have finished half of the heart already, but I didn't want to look down at it just yet—I wanted to keep it a surprise until the end.

"Ribcage." He answers without hesitation, swi i flickering his gaze up at me. As our gazes collided for that brief moment, the ecstatic nature of how flawlessly beautiful his eyes are had me wholly enthralled in them.

The blue was nearly clear, and it was the lightest shade of blue I'd ever seen. With no emotion behind them at all times, they were as unemotional as an object. However, if you looked closely, you could see the darkest of secrets hidden behind them, they weren't there when I first met him—a lot had changed since we were kids.

"Well, I now know where notto get one." I joke to ease my anxiety, and distract me furthermore, his lips curl into one of those devilish smiles that always have my heart beating out of control.

For someone who hardly showed emotion, his apparent smiles made up for it all.

"You're doing good so far, I'm proud of you." He murmurs under his breath, surprising me at most. The praise sent heatwaves through me, including my cheeks.

"If you keep this up, I'm sure you can bear one on your ribs, hm?" The little sparkle in his eyes as they meet mine showed all the mischief dancing in them.

"I won't be getting one there anytime soon," I laugh slightly, immediately sobering up as I realised my body trembled when I did, but Silver didn't mention it.

"We'll see." He smirks a little, moving his skilled hand around in a di erent position.

Glancing away from him, I stare up at the ceiling—the lights dimmed to a natural cream glow, drawing my eyes into a trance.

A powerful zap shocks me and I snap my eyes back down at Silver with my hands clenched into fists.

"Sorry, Amore. This part will hurt a little..." He mumbles and starts to move his hands. I made no response while I grind my teeth together, feeling the powerful sting on my skin—he was colouring it in.

"Squeeze my arm, it'll help with the pain." Silver grips the seat behind me, allowing full access to his stretching biceps, causing my stomach to churn in the most unnatural, sensual way.

Gulping down my arousal, I part my lips and grasp onto his utterly big and hard bicep. My hand doesn't even fit around the muscle, though with what I could swallow up in my palm, I squeezed.

A t er a while, the pain started to stop again and my hand loosened the more it did. I couldn't lie and say I wasn't enjoying the feel of his muscles—my gods, must work out a lot.

You're such a perv.

I roll my eyes and return my gaze to Silver, admiring him one last time before the machine shuts down and the needle stops pinching.

"Don't move while I clean it, Si?"

In response, I hum, liberating my hand from its intruding grip on his arm. My breathing was almost normal now, and I could feel my heart beat slowly improving while Silver finished whatever he was doing.

The location where the needle had been dotting into my skin stung mildly, but whatever Silver was doing at the time was allowing it to sting less.

"Wanna see it before I place the bandage on it?"

My gaze is drawn to him, a warm smile on my lips, and I begin to nod reluctantly. Silver holds the same mirror from before, mirroring it onto the red skin, which is now flawlessly lined in black ink.

The design turned out even better than I had hoped. Silver clearly had talent in a variety of areas, tattooing being one of the top three.

"Woah," I breathe out in shock, rocking my head to the side as I looked at it from every angle possible. "It looks incredible."

A dark chuckle erupts from him, slowly removes the mirror, places it back down behind him and gestures for me to lie back down.

"Happy?" He asks as he wraps plastic over the top of my tattoo.

I grin brightly and bite my tongue to keep from squealing with delight —this was the most thrilled I'd been in a long time.

"Very," I exclaimed happily, expelling some sort of look from him while he caught a glimpse of me—an emotion displaying through his gaze before it vanished just as quickly as it appeared.

The next few moments were quiet, but it was a pleasant silence. I started to wonder how my parents would react, failing to tell them where I'd be a er college—oops.

Butterscotch then comes to mind, I was recalling the last time that I had fed him—which was this morning, so I'm hoping that Mamma had fed him tonight, which she usually does unless she wasn't home —oh, shit.

"Uh, are we nearly done? I need to call someone..." I begin to panic in silence, my eyes widening with every second.

Silver nods and pulls away, sluggishy peeling the black gloves o his skin, uncovering his most beautiful hands.

I grab my phone from my purse and dial my mother's phone number, impatiently waiting for the dials to end.

"Serenity? Where are—"

"Mamma, have you fed Carmello?" anxiously start to tap my foot against the floor, staring at Silver's back tensing as he moved around.

Translation: "Butterscotch?"

"Of course, I have."

The frown I pictured on her face right now brought my heart to settle in its brows—I was probably being dramatic but my baby needs to be fed.

"Oh, good. Thank you." smile through the phone, probably adding to her confusion by the change in tone.

"Serene, are you alright? Do you need me to come and get you? Actually where even are you—"

"I'll be home soon, promettere. I have a big surprise for you and Papa."

Translation: "Promise"

"I'm scared..." She says nervously, but I hang up before she could ask anything else.

Sighing heavily, I glance outside the window and take in the darkness that overlags the town. Slipping my phone back into my bag, I lit t over the opposite side of where my tattoo was and turn back to Silver.

"Is there anything else we need to do?" I shi on my feet, looking up from the ground and right into his piercing blue eyes.

He grabs a few things from a desk, placing what looked to be treating ointment o the few bandages all into a brown, paper bag and then switched o the lights from the other side of the shop.

"Everything you need is in here, a er a few days you can switch to lotion." He explained as he held up the paper bag and moved it around in front of him.

Nodding, I reach out a hand to take the bag from him, only to have it pulled back, leaving me ba led.

When I raise my gaze to him, his blank face remains while a dark look crosses his eyes.

My muscles were tense as I watch him step forward, his tall form seeming even larger now—overtaking all the oxygen around me and appearing rather like an intimidating shadow with the near-zero light falling around him.

Momentarily, his face comes into the light, a concerned utterance plastered on his face despite his expression remaining blank.

"If you feel like something is wrong, call me, yeah?" His fingertips brush against my chin, lit ing my head to meet his gaze. A car's headlights flashed through the windows, shedding light on how close our bodies were.

"Yeah," I breathe out, nodding against his hand, "I will."

He searches my face for a moment, the clench of his jaw pulling my attention there, only to be captured closed as the feel of his warm lips fell onto mine.

Our lips merge into one, so ening my body against his, withering away in his taste and the gentle curve of his lips. I fit perfectly into his hands, which slither up and down the curve of my curved hips.

His contact sends me all over the place, my fingertips clawing at his hair, my lips moulding with his—it was just beyond fireworks.

"You're addicting, you know that, Serenity?"

His voice was raspy against my lips, he pulls back for a second, allowing me to breathe before placing a short kiss against me.

"Hm? Don't go all quiet on me now, Flower."

My breath becomes trapped in my lungs as I hear the harmless nickname, which now sounds anything but normal to me. It sounded like pure magic now that it was coming straight from his lips.

"I think you're just as addicting, Silver." I returned the whisper, letting my hands fall around his neck. He was now strapping down at me from his full height, our lips a good distance apart but still close.

"Hmm," He hums in thought, looking at me with scrutiny and sucking his bottom lip into his mouth while his thumb plays with mine.

"Let's get you home." He pulls away from his trance of awe, and my hypnotic state falls away too.

Knocking his fingers through mine, I witness his hand raking through his hair before opening the door, leaving me exactly behind him in deep, deep thought.

My free hand mindlessly touched my parted lips, mesmerising the kiss he'd just devoured me with.

As soon as the rear of his car ignited, my thoughts were dragged back into the car we were in.

The radio silently hums through the speakers, Silver's silent words and my own silencing yet loud thoughts echo inside the enclosed space. I begin thinking of everything that had just happened, the tattoo, the kiss...it was all so small yet so much in a span of such little time.

"What are you thinking?" His calming, deep voice says aloud, breaking me away from my mind.

"Nothing much." I lie, looking past the windows and out to the sea of cars.

"Will you be in class tomorrow?" Attempting to switch the conversation, it works as he replies vaguely.

"I will be if you're there."

Smooth.

"Of course will." I state soundly, lazily trailing my eyes away from the window and back into the car.

I watch his large hands flex on the gear, conceding the way his veins popped and the tattoos on his skin shi ed when flexing his arm.

"Then I'll be seeing you tomorrow morning."

Glancing up at him, I was surprised to see the genuine look in his gaze —almost promising that he'll be there.

And strangely, I didn't mind it.

Blowing out a breath, some of the strands in my hair float away from my face, finally coming to sense that I'd have to walk into that kitchen and face my two most loving parents.

It had been an hour now that I was home. A er Silver had dropped me home without another word, I thanked him for the night and immediately ran inside my home and straight into my room.

I was so sure my parents were aware I was back, and so, I made no point in hiding anymore. Their reaction wouldn't be a big deal, they wouldn't care as they supported anything I'd do—also the fact that they both had more than one tattoo on them, especially my father.

Holding in my breath, I step forward and enter the secluded kitchen —and so be it my luck that not just my parents were present, but also my grandparents and my Uncle Nicolo.

As I walk in, the conversation dies down, and the first face I see is my mother, who rushes up to me and squeezes me into a hug. Curiously, I hugged her back and patted her shoulder a few times.

"Um, what's wrong?" I asked confused, a worried look etched onto my face. She pulls back and smiles brightly, placing two kisses on each of my cheeks.

"Just missed you..." She murmurs and rubs my cheek gently—but then her eyes flicker down, distracted by the plastic on my skin.

"You didn't!" She exclaims, covering her mouth with her hand dramatically while stepping away.

"Serene! I was wondering when I'd get to see you—"

Grandma immediately gets cut o as her eyes widen looking down at my chest, watching her father stands.

Sighing, I wince as my father approaches from his seat at the counter, glancing straight into my eyes before looking down at the tattoo as well.

"Yes, I got a tattoo," I admit, my cheeks turning a tinge pink from all the attention pinned on me, I see my father slowly smirk, a proud look in his eyes all the while my Uncle gasps and rushes forward in front of everyone else.

"Let me see!" He stands in front of me, holding me firmly by the shoulders and staring down at the spot. "Woah," He grins to himself, shaking his head as if in disbelief, "Our innocent Serenity is finally growing up."

A blank look crosses my features as I stare at him, he only widens his grin and pulls me in for a gentle hug that seemed to go on forever.

I could see my mother's small smile on her lips as she gazed at me, my grandmother following the same expression too.

Flickering my gaze toward my grandfather who still hadn't said a word, he looked directly at me with the blank expression he always exuded.

"You don't like it, Pops?" I ask as I'm finally released from Nicolo's hold and now stumbling through the crowded kitchen toward my grandfather.

As I got closer, I could see the emotion forming on his face, a genuine mix of pride and curiosity all rolled into one. Standing tall, he shakes his head twice and folds his arms across his chest.

"It suits you, Serenity."

And that was all the assurance I needed.

Tilting my head to the side, my mouth breaks into a larger smile. Stepping closer, I open my arms out for him—he reverently gives me hugs.

Rolling his eyes, Pops unwraps his folded arms and brings me into a squeezing hug. I smile into his chest, allowing his grandfatherly warmth to secure me. For some reason, I always felt safest in his arms, as if the world couldn't touch an inch of me.

"You see this?" He pulls away just enough for him to roll up his sleeve and show me one of the many tattoos on his arm. Pointing at a smaller one, in particular, I scan my gaze over the skull and smile a little at how detailed it was.

Vines encased around the skull, allowing flower stalks to grow from the same spot, slithering around the skull until they sank over the top. There was no colour on any of the tattoos, but they looked just as good without it.

I placed the tip of my finger onto it, running over the inked tattoo.

"My first one." He stated, and I look up at him with a small smile.

"How did we even wher you got it?"

A smirk comes across his futile expression, "Thirteen."

"Wow, Pops, you're badass, huh?" I giggle when his smirk drops, he playfully shakes his head at me and pushes my shoulder gently.

Laughing louder, I cover my hand with my mouth when I start to sound like a whale on drugs, bringing my Uncle to start laughing too —actively, my laugh was contagious.

"Alright, alright, everyone ready for dinner?" Mamma called from the kitchen, four full plastic bags of what looked to be take-out food.

Please be Chinese.

"Yup," cheered, immediately taking a seat next to my father at the table. Containers poured out from every end of the table, passing plates down each end of the table too.

Soon enough, we were all digging into our Chinese food—thank goodness—and chatting away amongst each other.

Mamma was talking about how well her art museum was doing, that being said, the conversation switched to me. I was asked several questions about college, classes, and how I was doing with art—I was still painting and drawing—all of that juicy juice.

Papa was quiet most of the time, silently eating beside me, although the small trace of a smile on his lips told me he was just as happy as the rest of us were—especially with his eyes on my Mamma the entire time.

I admired their love—it was most likely the reason why I had such high expectations, to be loved the way they did. It's been years since being together and their love still hadn't died an inch, if anything it had only grown.

It was the same as my grandparents, I could totally believe loving someone for as long as that was possible. Though, they loved me if possible.

"Look at how similar they are? Father like daughter, huh, Bella?" Grandma's voice breaks the conversation down, everyone's eyes now on me and my father.

I frown, my mouth stu ed with fried rice.

Mamma's so laugh he everyone else to smile looking across at us two, my head turned toward my father who appeared just as confused as I was.

"I say this all the time to Roman! They're like twins..." She trails o , smiling widely between the two of us with that loving gleam in her gaze.

Swivelling my attention toward my father, I notice his hand resting on his thigh, drumming his fingertips together. When I looked down at my own hand, it was in the exact same position as his—drumming fingers and all.

Now that I think about it, our posture was the same as well—spines straight, heads held high, and a stoic expression with the corner of our lips turned up just a bit.

The di erence was that his legs were spread, whereas mine were simply crossed over one another, which made me grin broadly in recognition of our similarities.

"Papa, stop copying me, you grande orso!" I flick his arm with the tip of my finger and cackle at his wonderfully shocked expression.

Translation: "You big bear"

Everyone laughed along with me, Papa's narrowed gaze turning so once he placed his eyes on me. Surprisingly, his big arms were wrapped around my body, exasperating a gasp from my lungs as he rocked me side to side, placing small pecks all over the top of my head.

More laughs from each family member above around the room, including my father's low chuckle from above me.

"Alright, I get it, Dad!" My voice came out as an echoed mule from his chest, he pulls back just enough for me to see the bright, full smile on his expression—his dimples that were passed down to me, popping out.

"Love you." Rubbing my hair, th u in annoyance and smack his hand away, not without saying the words back.

"Love you more."

Slowly his smile fades, pulling away from me and gesturing his attention to my food. "Eat." He demands, delivering an eye roll from me from his quick switch-up in demeanor.

Like a woman on her damn period.

"Well, good morning to you my little Carmello." I rasp out tiredly, picking up Butterscotch, and cuddling him to my chest.

Stumbling against my cold floors, I find my way to the bathroom. Switching on the light, it flickers on and my eyes embrace the exhausting bright exposure. Butterscotch sat on the counter, his pretty little cat eyes watching the tap water run over the head of my toothbrush.

An hour was the longest I took to get ready, although today I had taken an hour and fi een minutes—all because of the bothering thought of seeing Silver this morning.

For some inexplicable reason, I had spent more time this morning picking out my outfit with that thought in mind, along with the glossy, pink lip balm painted on my lips.

Of course, the thought of Silver was a mistake; I'd never look better than I did for a boy. And not for Silver, who was slithering his way into my head—it was all for me.

Bullshit.

Quickly, I kiss Butterscotch goodbye and send my Mamma a reminder to feed him in an hour—I swing past the kitchen anyways to see if anybody was around, though as I expected, I find no one.

"I'm leaving!" I call out to nobody in particular, the guard outside already opening the front door for me to exit my home. Hayden was outside, in his big, black car waiting for me with music blasting.

"You're late this time, Pooh Bear." He mentions while scanning my appearance. I stayed indifferent placing my seatbelt across my body and patiently waiting for him to drive.

"We're gonna be even later if you don't get this car running." I grumbled out and he chuckles humorously, giving me a fake salute.

"Yes, ma'am."

The ride to college was unusually slower, even if Hayden was good at driving—speeding should say—we still both were about an extra fi een minutes late to class, permitting me to rush inside like a lunatic without a second thought on my mind other than getting into that classroom.

Hayden was now long gone behind me, directed to his own class and I was now icially in front of mine.

I slowly turn the knob and open the door, all chatter dissolving into thin air as I step forward, leaving the door click closed behind me.

Scanning the room, I see every pair of eyes on me, entitling a wrack of anxiety to run through me. My attention swings toward my regular seat, immediately catching onto the mess of black locks right in the seat beside mine.

Silver sits there, head high but cocked to the side as he stared at me indifferently.

"Miss Agnello, why are you late for my class?" The high-pitched sound of my professor had my whole attention snapping toward her.

"Um, sorry," I whisper, rubbing at the skin of my arm as she stares at me more arrogantly, raising a brow questionably. "Had car trouble..." I trail o , now knowing what else to say.

Leah Levine's gaze pierced through me like pricking needles to my skin. The look in her eyes told me that she had something more than just being late against me—and undoubtedly, this was going to be an issue for me.

"Go and take your seat, I don't want it happening again."

Nodding once, I clutch my bag tighter and practically sprint up the staircase with her loud voice echoing behind me in the background.

Keeping my head down the entire walk to my desk, I slumped my bag down beside my chair first, but just as I was about to take a seat, another hand grabbed mine and I knew exactly who it was just by feeling the words, "Are you okay?"

Looking down, I find Silver's emotionless gaze hinting at concern as he mouths the words, "Are you okay?"

I squeeze the inside of my cheeks and stung carelessly, taking a seat in the chair with his grip on my hand trailing higher.

My lips part as I watch and allow his hand to trail to my forehead, his thumb o rtlessly running over my skin, causing every bump to rise.

Silver ectively leans his arm against the back of my chair and bends his head down, still tracing the pattern along my arm.

I stare directly at the professor as I hear his so, deep voice echo into my ears.

"She's a bitch. Don't let it bother you, Serene."

I feel myself smile a little, his cool breath lingering on the back of my neck as he leaned away. "Si," I agree, "Grazie, D'argento." I smile at him, tilting my head to one side.

He imitates me and rocks his head to the opposite side of mine, not once breaking his soulless exterior—which was entirely adorned onto him most of the time, though the slight emotion he displayed only around me had me thinking that it was all a ruse.

"Welcome, beautiful."

And here come the butterflies, all over again.