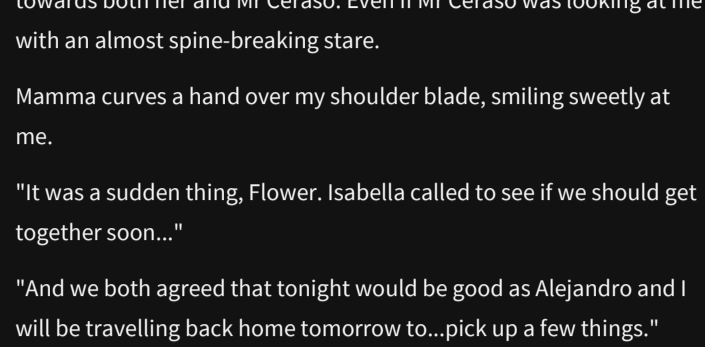


Chapter Five



"Hey baby," Mamma stands with an almost guilty smile—as if silently telling me she's sorry for not mentioning that we were having the Ceraso's for dinner.

"Hey..." I frown, glaring at her through my lashes.

With the feeling of all eyes on me, I become uneasy. My gaze travels around the room, landing on the other boy who happens to be staring straight at me. This was the nephew, he looked a lot like Isabella, as I assumed that was the side of the family he was from.

I noticed the curious look in his eyes and the way his expression became intrigued.

Suddenly Mrs Ceraso stands, catching my attention as her bright, loving smile greets me as well as her hand. "Hi, darling. Good to see you again."

Hesitantly, I take her hand and shake it, smiling a little to be polite towards both her and Mr Ceraso. Even if Mr Ceraso was looking at me with an almost spine-breaking stare.

Mamma curves a hand over my shoulder blade, smiling sweetly at me.

"It was a sudden thing, Flower. Isabella called to see if we should get together soon..."

"And we both agreed that tonight would be good as Alejandro and I will be travelling back home tomorrow to...pick up a few things." Isabella finishes, smiling down at me.

I nod slowly, my gaze travelling all around the room again—but never skimming toward the beautiful boy with blue eyes.

My eyes finally meet Papa's from across the table. I was able to find some sort of comfort at this time as he gives a smile of comfort.

"Vieni..." Mamma says, holding open the only empty seat at the table. Translation: "Come."

Moving toward the opened seat, I sink in it and briefly catch the minimum scent of cinnamon.

Mamma moves away and sits back in her seat, conversation strikes up again around the table.

I bite the inside of my cheek as I tilt my head to the side, looking down at the glossy, black dress shoes resting underneath the table beside me.

Bringing my gaze up, loose black dress pants were now accompanying those shoes with a tight, black turtle neck he wore right after.

The cotton clings to his very muscular arms, dimmed shoulders, and tight chest. The blank stare he wore under the strong lighting complimented his attire, it brought out the dark in him.

Suddenly our gazes meet once again, and my breath falls, unnoticed by all except him and I.

The conversations blur out as my senses become only watching away for him. I turn my body straight again, turning my attention away from him completely.

I needed to get my crap under control.

It was hard to do so when I felt his large hand touch the small of my back, making me freeze completely in time. As if I were paralysed, I hadn't felt a nerve twitch.

His cool breath comes next, hitting the back of my neck as he then speaks in his dark, dark voice.

"Staring isn't very nice, Fiore"

His whisper was deep, thickly laced with his accent similar to my own. His words digest as he leans away and the warmth of his hand is removed from my skin, what a hypocrite.

Shining my body slightly, I glare at him subtly, ignoring the way his emotionless appearance remains in place. It was as if he were a statue.

"You're one to talk," I mumble, staring at his half-obscured neck. My gaze moves away when I realise I was staring at his perfectly cut jaw for a little too long.

His blinks were slow and sluggish, and that was his reply to me.

Or so I thought.

He appears to look at something in front of him, adjusting himself in his seat. I watch the way his hips thrust up and his legs spread wider—my, oh, my.

"And you're too pretty not to stare at."

Heat rises throughout my body, I look around the table to see if anyone noticed the not-so-subtle conversation between us, but found everyone utterly consumed in conversation still.

And you're too pretty not to stare at.

His words linger in my mind, it lingers and repeats, over and over again. His whisper becomes one of my favourite sounds—and then I find myself glaring at him, again.

By the lingering smirk on his most luscious lips, I couldn't tell if he knew that he was playing with my mind or if he was simply just amused by my reaction.

"Serenity, love," My eyes snap up, looking at his seat. Ceraso, "You haven't officially met my nephew," Shining in my smile, I look from Isabella to the nephew, surprised to see his gaze on me already.

I send him a small smile—a polite smile—not speaking yet

"Elijah Ceraso." He holds out his hand for me across the table, his brown eyes switching between mine. Taking his hand, I shake it slowly before retrieving it.

For some reason, I find myself being more comfortable around Silver than this Elijah guy. But even Silver I wasn't as comfortable with, yet

"How was your first day, Serenity? I heard you're attending college here like Silver." Isabella said, her words causing havoc in my lungs.

Luckily, my mother was quicker than me to respond—appearing shocked herself.

"Silver is attending too?" She frowns, looking with interest.

Isabella smiles, placing her wine glass to her purple, painted lips.

"Yes," She swallows, "In his second year now."

"What are you majoring in?" My breath comes out so — helpless I find my gaze peeling up, they connect momentarily as he runs his tongue over his bottom lip, talking while looking down at his glass.

"Business and English." Inside the room, his deep voice echoed with power and grace, and he exuded dominance that I'm sure was obvious to practically everyone within feet of him.

"And you, Serenity?" Speaking again, Silver stretched his legs out—as if he weren't already sitting so lazily enough—he decides to sip the dark liquid past his perfectly plump lips—

"Just an Art and English major," I reply so ly, keeping my attention away from him and the others. I was uncomfortable with all the attention, but with my family I'm fine. Simply not with strangers sitting at my dinner table.

Isabella laughs so ly, conjuring up the table's attention towards her. I watch as she places her half-filled wine glass down, her bright smile pointing at Silver and me.

"I remember when you two met. After you felt that day Serenity, Silver wouldn't shut up about how incredible your drawing was. If I remember correctly, I'm sure it was a turtle—"

"Whale." Silver interrupts, correcting her with his unfazed stare. He looked bored, utterly bored.

It was whale. And I remember the very interaction when he looked down at the coloured paper and complimented it. I'm shocked that he even remembered at this moment, now

"See," Isabella laughs, along with my mother too. "Such a shame we didn't get you kids to get together more..." She smiles at me, looking at Silver too. Though the stare that she sent him was equal but almost too different.

It could've been all in my head and my stupid overthinking, but the look that was portrayed had seemed personal between them. Even if Silver looked not even the slightest bit interested.

My father clears his throat, sitting up straight and possesses an arm around my mother.

"Serenity, we've arranged something with the Ceraso's."

My heart suddenly speeds, anxiety and curiosity take over me.

"Yes?" I answer quietly, lingering my glance back and forth between the Ceraso's and my parents.

"Taken that they've moved to town, and will be staying for more than a year necessary, we've agreed on partnering up temporarily." My mother speaks and I feel myself inwardly collide between walls as if feeling faint.

This only meant more of Silver, more of feeling the way I feel for a man that probably has girls left and right—or more like down between his legs.

Yet, now he'll be going to school with me too.

Maybe it won't be as bad as it seems with him. Maybe we could be friends and get along.

"That's great news," I whisper again, my overly sweet smile shouldn't give away the fact that I'm resenting this idea.

"It is," Isabella agreed, taking her wine glass once again between her lips.

Conversations swirl around the table as dinner arrives, thankfully anything to do with me, college, or Silver, was demolished and not brought up again.

As for Silver and I, we remained silent and I personally kept all limbs aside from touching his.

It was boring by the time everyone was deciding to call it a night, we all stood at the door, greeting each other goodbye as they placed on their coats and retrieved bags and belongings.

I watched Silver from my place against the wall. He so effortlessly slid on his black trench coat, those muscular arms wrapped up in the thick cotton, his hands retrieved a pair of car keys from one pocket while the other shook my father's hand.

My lip was between my teeth, chewing nervously as I waited for him to move over to me.

Though a body appears in front of my gaze, blocking my sight of Silver.

A classic white dress shirt appeared in my sight, trailing up higher, Alejandro's almost natural scowl greets me just as much as his hand does when placed in front of my body.

"Good seeing you, Serenity." His rough voice filled with Italian caressed my ears just as his hand does with mine too.

"You as well, Mr Ceraso."

He nods at me sternly, removing his large hand from my hold.

Next was Isabella, this time she gave me a light hug. As much as I didn't love physical touch, I didn't decline and only lightly hugged her back.

"I hope you and my son will reconnect, especially going to the same school and all, it'll be nice to know someone familiar."

Isabella gives me a longing stare, one of those intense ones that look deeply into your soul. She eventually moves away, looping her arm through her husband and trailing outside with my parents.

My breathing was becoming heavier as now the next person to dis-greet was the nephew, Elijah.

"Nice meeting you, Serenity." He had an accent too. Though it was faint, it was still noticeable. I tried to ignore the way he spoke, almost as if what he was saying was supposed to be secret.

"You too, Elijah." I fake a smile, holding my hand out for him to shake.

He takes it into his palm and shocking me for the tenth time tonight, Elijah decides to lean down and kiss my hand with his lips.

My smile fades at the contact, and my reaction grows as I notice Silver's hard glare shooting bullets into the back of Elijah's head.

I snap my gaze back to the male in front of me, giving him a small, tight-lipped smile and remove my hand from his hold.

I'm definitely washing my hand a few times now.

"I'll be seeing you around, gorgeous." He bows his head with a light smirk, turning around and walking away oozing with confidence.

Once he left through the front door, my body turns anxious, now with my last interaction for the night.

Gradually, I move my gaze up realising we were now alone between the threshold.

He stares down at his shoes while walking over to me, swinging his set of keys repeatedly around his pinky finger.

"Looks like I'll be seeing you often, huh?" He tilts his head to the side, blinking his blue eyes directly at me.

When our eyes lock, I get an uneasy, squirmish feeling in my stomach. I shiver my feet awkwardly, getting closer to the wall behind me while trying to control my erratic heart-beat. It seemed that only when he was nearby, did I become my most tense self.

I swallow, "I'm sure you'd love that."

I tilt my head to one side as I assessed him too. He lets out an amused breath, shaking his head with a little tilt of his lips.

With his cold eyes, he looks down at me, traces of hair falling below his brow like dribbling black ink.

"Sure," He looms over me, like a dark shadow, "not if I can't help it." The tension only increased as her words; the trance or our stare was like a staring contest, except I was more focused on the beauty of his skin. Those diamond-like freckles adorned his cheeks just as much as I liked looking at them.

As if it were compulsion he'd put me under—a hypnotised state. I found it difficult to look away, but instead, I found myself finally able to speak—only to get rid of him.

"Have a good night." I abruptly stick my hand out, patiently waiting for his hand to fall into mine—definitely nothing about the expectation to feel the same sparks and tingles once felt before.

Silver stares down at it, and then carelessly places his cold hand in my own.

"You as well..." He smirks, I watch him lean his head down to reach my ear, his lips a hair's breadth away from touching my skin, "gorgeous"

Everything in me comes to a halt. I watch him turn amused as he smoothly pats my hip once with his hand, mocking me, and then disappears through the front door.

"Holy shit," I mumbled under my breath, feeling my heart accelerate and melt into goo.

Unknowingly, my hand comes trailing to the spot on my hip, rubbing my fingers where his hand had been placed.

Tonight was eventful, it made my brain scramble and I still had to actually process all that had happened. Meeting Elijah was quite different, he seemed like an obvious flirt—AKA, fuck boy.

Not that I found any interest in him, or whatsoever any boy the moment. All except Silver it seemed. But I assumed it was only attraction, he was fairly beautiful—

More like the most gorgeous boy you've ever seen.

He wasn't an option though, no one was. I don't want any part in his boys and their drama and all that shit—simply I would love to just paint, listen to music, and drink my honey herbal tea for the rest of my life.

Butterscotch comes out of the spot he's been hiding in for the past hours, wrapping his furry body around my leg.

I hush in delight, picking him up and nestling him between my arms—much like a baby.

Rubbing his stomach, I smile down at him, pecking his forehead while deciding to lead us back up to our rooms.

"You're the only male I'll accept, Butterscotch."

And let's see how long that'll last.

The next day came as fast as the rain was hitting the surface. It was absolutely pouring here and in our town, the water droplets swam down fast along the window, and I watched them far too intensely.

"What's on your mind, Serene?" Hayden cautioned. He always drove slower in the rain, he thinks his fear of driving in the rain was apparent because of a 'past life experience'.

"Nothing much," I sighed, dragging my eyes away from the window, "Did you know that Silver was over for dinner last night?"

Hayden gasps but I continue before he could comment, "He's working with my father," another gasp, "And he's also studying here, with us"

He hits the brake hard, making both of our bodies jerk forward. We stop just before the lights turn red, our gazes wide and my heart beating erratically.

"Hayden, what the fuck—"

"Holy shit!" He practically shouts, scaring the living life out of my soul, "Sexy boss-man—AKA, childhood friend/lover—will be studying with you working with your parents, and you sat at a dinner table with him last night!?"

Dumbfounded, I blink once, then twice.

"Yes..."

"And how do you feel about all of this?" He presses his hand on the accelerator, swivelling his way into the campus parking lot.

"Truth or lie?"

He scoos, turning the car into a spot just outside the grounds. "Truth, obviously."

Rubbing my hands down my sweats, I lick my lips moist and look up at my best friend with hesitance. "I'm fine," I lie and he rolls his eyes, "but I'm also not."

"And why?"

"Because I hardly know Silver and he makes me feel nervous and tingly—like my heart is going to explode."

"It's a good thing, Serenity. You're finally showing some male interest." He grins, locking his hand through mine, "Like Mamma Bella says, just allow things to happen. It is what it is."

My mother said that to us as kids. It was a conversation completely unrelated to this but it stuck with us ever since. And so now we go through life quoting what Mamma says, even if it's what it isn't really enough to help me.

As we exit the car, rain falls on us as we glide across the wet concrete. It was the trip on a step while running up, but Hayden does fall and collides with the person behind him.

Cackles implore from me and I try hard to keep in my unattractive laugh.

"Shut the fuck up," Hayden shouts at me as he helps up the small girl he tackled.

The girl was frowning as she collects her books and I felt horrible for laughing, so I helped her out a bit. Luckily they were under shelter so none of the books had gotten wet.

As I hand her one of them, she looks up at me as her mouth moves to speak but stops immediately when her eyes lock on me.

Suddenly, her face turns pale, and her frown deepens into something resembling fear, her eyes widen and divert from mine.

She snatches the book out of me, looking down as she scrambles away—leaving me to sigh with confrontation.

My identity was known to most, leaving me to be feared from rumours of how 'ruthless' I am and how 'I'm truly the daughter of two powerful Mafia leaders. This was all in high school and now college too.

"Shit we're late," Hayden grumbles, guiding me up the stairs again. The next twenty minutes or so flew by. I was now sitting in class, listening but not. My ears were taking in the information, but my mind and gaze were at the far end of the room, staring at the back of black messy locks.

There he was, Silver Ceraso.

Muscle legs spread lazily under the desk, head tilted up at the ceiling in a daze of boredom. A pen dangled uselessly from between his full lips, only reminding me of the cigarette that was placed there probably one too many times.

My eyes were slit into a concentrated glare, I tried looking away numerous times but I was just caught under. He was a few rows away from me on the same level, he was just far at the end where I was placed in the middle.

He'd been staring at that ceiling for a few minutes now, well technically for as long as I had been staring at him.

Shaking my head, I run a hand around my cheek and sink into my seat further. Don't look again, Serenity. Curiosity can be held aside for now.

Silver was distracting and if this continued, I was one-hundred percent not going to pass this class.

When I glance over again—for the last time—I was surprised and mostly startled to find him glancing over at me just as I did.

I lose my breath for a quick moment, he looks away just as quickly as our gazes meet and he doesn't look back once—as if he never even saw me.

"Asshole," I mutter under my breath.

Looking away, I keep my head forward and eyes down at the teacher. Stupid, blue-eyed specimen.

Ignoring the way I so relentlessly got pushed aside, my hand finally begins writing and my brain cooperates with my subconscious to actually start working.

Being wrapped up in the space of notes and information, but also in the thought of how my cursive writing came out wonky and the urge to start over again corrupted me—I never realized that the boy I was secretly eye-stalking before was now pulling out a seat beside me.

The smell of cinnamon gave that away.

Slowly moving my gaze to his figure, I almost lose it when I find him in the same position he was in before.

"You stare too much, Serenity." His voice came out low, a hum close to a deep, rumbling whisper.

"Did you come all the way here to tell me that?" I keep my tone as low as his, sounding passive-aggressive compared to his lowkey voice.

He chuckles darkly, I see his dark gaze travel as his head lowers too. "I didn't." He smoothly twirls a pen between his fingers, my gaze follows his movements.

"Thought you needed some company," He states.

I scoo uncontrollably and roll my eyes at his words, I move my body up to view the class better. "And you thought you were that company?"

"No," He whispers, leaning his right elbow behind his chair, and then stretching his arm around the back of my chair. I fall unsteady, slowly parting my lips when his own fall near my ear. "I knew was going to be that company."

I swallow heavily, feeling weak in my legs and head.

Turning my head, I realise how close our faces were apart. With his arm still being wrapped around my chair, and his lips centimetres from mine, my words get caught stuck.

"I'm willing to continue being your company, Serenity," He breathes in a whisper, his eyes that are heavenly blue but still so empty to captivate me.

"Only if you're willing to be mine too."

"Explain what you mean by company?" I would've been embarrassed by the way my voice was below a whisper, but it sounded just like my normal quiet tone.

"Friends..." He states slowly, "Like what we were supposed to be, hm?" A finger of his loops around one of my curls, twirling it around in an endless loop.

"You mean as kids?" I still couldn't believe that we were having this conversation in the middle of class, or simply just conversing about us being friends, again suppose.

He does hum in response, and I could feel his eyes on me, burning through my skin.

"Okay..." I frown, turning in my seat to face his body properly, "So you want to be friends? That's what this is?"

In a lazy, slow motion he nods twice, all the while watching his fingers move round and round with my so curls, allowing them to bounce and then permitting them to wind again.

This was confusing me, but I somewhat and somehow complied with his request. As simple as the question was, I needed to think over it.

He was distracting me, the past two days he had been. But maybe, just maybe, if we became friends the attraction would die down and I'd only see him as another being walking earth.

It is what it is, I guess.

"Okay," I exhale and his eyes finally snap up to mine, "Friends then." I held out my pinky finger—stupidly something I did whenever I made friends. It was for good luck, I suppose. Promising luck was always a gift to me.

Without questioning it, he loops his larger pinky finger through mine and stares at me emotionlessly.

"Friends."