

CHAPTER TWELVE

Marina Dazzo

January 19, 1988

“Heart and Soul,” the Hoagy Carmichael and Frank Loesser song from the giant keyboard scene in *Big*, bled through the lime green band room door. Chattering voices, girls giggling, and guys making mock grunting, farting, and roaring sounds also came to my ears throughout the lunch period, along with snatches of marching band music, hair metal covers, and big band tunes. Yes, the band kids were having a grand-old time eating lunch and playing their instruments behind the green door, far from the cafeteria’s horrors. *It would be more fun for me if they’d let me in, too.* Still, I wouldn’t be accosted by nitwits while I ate here. Band members alone had reason to be in an isolated hallway that housed only the auditorium and music room. I sat cross-legged on the hall floor, reading *Garfield* and *Far Side* comics, eating a salami and provolone sandwich. I wiped sandwich crumbs off my Reba McEntire T-shirt, relieved no mayonnaise or bits of salami had stained it.

The green door opened. An Amazon emerged. Tall, buxom, and big-hipped, she wore a safety orange blazer over a low-cut black t-shirt, black dress pants, and black dress shoes. She had a prominent Roman nose, brown eyes, bushy eyebrows, and an uncombable mass of shoulder-length brown curls. She smiled down at me and spoke in perfect English with a light Italian accent, making me wonder just how “fresh off the boat” she was. “It *is* you. I hear you’ve been having a terrible year in chorus. And everywhere else, really.”

I scrunched my eyebrows together. Now I was as aware of my own bushy eyebrows as I was hers. “Who told you about all that?”

“Kyle Ahearne heard it all when it was happening. He told Salty Margaritas. Salty told us just now. We were all just talking about you in there because we couldn’t figure out what you were doing sitting on the floor in this hallway . . . *like a weirdo!*”

Embarrassed, I cleared my throat. “I didn’t mean to alarm anybody.” I made a mental note that I should find Kyle Ahearne and introduce myself. He was one of the few boys in chorus, but so quiet that I hadn’t

given him any serious thought.

“Why don’t you finish your lunch in here? Vitali is gone for the rest of the period, so you probably won’t get thrown out on your ear. Unless you like sitting out here on the floor . . . *like a weirdo* . . . losing all the circulation in your legs.” Smiling more broadly at my reluctance to stand, she waved me up off the ground. “Annamu!”

Tiny bee-sting prickles moved up and down my legs, warning me that my legs had, indeed, fallen asleep. I pulled myself up, massaging my legs to improve circulation. “Thanks.” When I straightened, I realized that Marina was a full head taller than me. “Whoa. You’re tall!”

The girl feigned shock. “Am I? Nobody’s ever told me that before!”

I looked around for a mouse hole in the wall I could crawl into. “Sorry.”

She chuckled. “I get it. Italians usually come in three sizes: small, smaller, and smallest! But I’m a Redwood! Crazy, huh? And I see you’ve got some height on you, yourself.”

“Do I?” I was hoping I’d wind up tall. “I haven’t hit a growth spurt in a while, but I’m a quarter German and all the Germans in my family are tall as André the Giant.”

“You’ve got Danny DeVito beat. Oh! I’m Marina Dazzo.” Marina extended her hand.

I accepted it. “Damien Cavaleri.”

“After Saint Damien of Hawaii?”

“Actually, my dad named me after Damien Thorn.”

Marina shook her head. “Okay, I’ll bite. Who’s Damien Thorn?”

“A horror movie villain from *The Omen* trilogy. Sam Neill played him in *The Final Conflict*. As cool as Sam Neill is, I’d have preferred it if Dad had named me after a *Dark Shadows* character, like Barnabas or Quentin.”

“I bet all of that would be really interesting if I had any idea what the fuck you were talking about.” Marina waved me inside. “Hey, everyone. This is my little Damien-poo. He’s this lost little lamb wandering the halls, frightened of wolves. I think we should adopt him.” She gestured towards each band member individually, introducing them in turn. Among the group was Eric Indelicato, a steroid-enhanced Italian boy in a black muscle shirt who played electric guitar. There were three other

Italian girls who appeared eternally stationed at Marina's side: Ludovica Saviano, Jennifer Raffone, and Julia Puglia. Ludovica took an instant liking to me for no discernable reason, Jennifer looked like she wanted to throttle me at first sight, and Julia was radically committed to being indifferent to my presence. The non-Italians in the room included my old bus-route buddy Tuesday Phapant on keyboard, a slim Black girl with a Jheri Curl permanent wave hairstyle named Alisha Clark on clarinet, and a Greek named Salty Margaritas, who was in the back of the room reading a biography of John F. Kennedy, sporting a *Michael Dukakis 1988* t-shirt, and eating a gyro he had brought from home.

"Thanks for telling them my sad story, Salty," I called over to him.

Salty farted in reply and kept reading his JFK biography. A Greek nationalist, Salty was an observant member of the Greek Orthodox Church and famous in school for drinking three full bottles of ouzo every evening after dinner. His birth certificate read Demosthenes Margaritis, but everyone called him Salty Margaritas. Hence, the tattoo of a salty margarita on his left shoulder that he paid for at nine-years-old without telling his parents. The barrel-chested Greek had also shaved his head so he could look like Mr. Clean. He was an interesting and provocative dude.

Marina placed a hand on my shoulder. "My fellow Sicilians are treating you like dirt!"

"Pretty much. Though I guess Bobby Mammolito has his moments."

"I'm glad. He's my boyfriend. And he told me a bit about you, too. Are you a Sicilian?"

"Actually, I'm Neapolitan." I offered her an apologetic look. *Ha! When I'm dealing with assholes, I'm proud I'm not Sicilian, but when I meet a gorgeous giantess, you're goddamn right I'm sad I'm not Sicilian! Wait. Bobby Mammolito is her boyfriend? I'm having trouble with that.*

Marina gave a theatrical tut and sad shake of her head. "Ah! Too bad! Too bad. But nobody's perfect." She grinned.

I made a show of looking her up and down. "I dunno. You're looking pretty perfect from where I'm standing."

"Aw, shucks." Marina gave a little hip wiggle of joy. "Thank you, ya big flirt."

Tuesday Phapant rolled her eyes and grunted in exaggerated disgust. “*Un*-believable.”

“She’s a whole lotta woman!” Salty roared. “Built like a brick shithouse! Makes Samantha Fox look like a tiny, starving Ethiopian!”

Marina showed her open palm to Salty. “Talk to the hand, Salty.”

Tuesday moaned and dropped her head in her hands.

“Not your day?” I asked her.

“Fuck you,” said Tuesday.

Marina smiled. “Anyhoo, *you* need a taste of some *Italian solidarity!*”

“It would make a nice change of pace,” I agreed.

“Group hug!” Marina’s shout was a pre-arranged signal to Ludovica, Jennifer, and Julia to circle and embrace me in an extended, perfume-scented hug. Jennifer participated in the group hug with enormous reluctance, Julia hugged away with ironic detachment, and Ludovica and Marina showered me with genuine affection and sympathy. When the hug ended, I was feeling warm and safe. “I needed that,” I blushed. “Thank you.”

“Getting group hugged by a buncha girls with big boobies is the best feeling in the world,” Salty declared from the back corner of the room. “It is the only reason I enjoy going to church sometimes. The kiss of peace. ‘Christ is in our midst!’ ‘He is and always shall be!’ You get lotsa kisses and hugs from girls with big boobies. In *sweaters!* Hubba, hubba, hubba.”

Marina beaned Salty off the head with a magically produced rolled-up ball of paper.

“Come on, man,” I called back at Salty. “Don’t spoil it.”

Salty laughed. “He’s worried I decreased his odds of getting another Sweater Girl hug.”

Marina held up her flute. “We’re about to have a little contest. See who can play the opening bars of Europe’s ‘The Final Countdown’ the best. Since you’ll be an impartial judge, Damien, you get to decide who the winner is.”

Salty put his JFK book down. “How’s *he* gonna be impartial? You just smooshed your huge knockers against his chest! If he doesn’t crown you the winner, I’ll eat my flat hat.”

“Stop talking about my boobs!” Marina yelled. “God! All day every day everybody’s talkin’ ‘bout my boobs!”

“They’re the hugest fun bags I’ve ever seen,” Salty replied. “And what else is worth talking about in life, besides boobs? Pretty much nothing.”

“Hey!” I called back to him. “Go back to reading about that idiot JFK.”

Salty, who spent most of his time trying to offend others, was himself affronted. “‘That idiot JFK?’ He saved the world during the Cuban Missile Crisis!”

I waved Salty away dismissively. “JFK caused the Cuban Missile Crisis in the first place! You don’t get credit for solving a problem that you create yourself. And he and his brothers murdered Marilyn Monroe and that chick in Chappaquiddick. The only good thing JFK ever did was rescue some crewman when P.T. Boat 109 sank. I couldn’t care less about JFK, son of Joe Kennedy, the Prohibition-era bootlegger! Give me President Al Capone junior, instead. At least he’d be an Italian gangster president, not an Irish gangster president.”

Salty placed his hand upon his heart and looked grave. “Wow. I had no idea you were so Republican. Maybe we should kick your ass back out into that hallway again. You Italians. You’re like the Irish. You forget your immigrant past. Not like us Greek Americans. We remember. We haven’t sold our souls to the GOP yet. We began leftist. We *remain* leftist.”

“Ah, I don’t give two fucks about politics,” Marina said. “I try to vote pro-life if I can, but I don’t really understand the issues.” She added in a low whisper, “Good deflection.”

Tuesday Phapant cut off any further debate by playing the opening keyboard riff of “The Final Countdown” on her Yamaha. I’d never heard the song before, or of the Swedish rock band that wrote it. I was surprised how much I adored the riff. “This song is badass.”

“My turn.” The muscular Eric Indelicato played the same riff on his electric guitar.

“Your playing is incredible,” I marveled.

“I have to go *after* keyboard and electric guitar? That doesn’t seem fair.” Marina lifted her flute to her lips and played a gentle-but-

up-tempo rendition. When she finished, she said diffidently. “Not a keyboard, I know.”

“I loved it,” I said.

“He’s gonna pick Marina,” Salty said loudly to Eric Indelicato. “Just so you know.”

Tuesday stared daggers at me, daring me to pick Marina. “So, who’s the winner?”

“I can’t figure this guy out,” Alisha Clark said to Tuesday. “Is he a bit smarmy?”

“I don’t know if that’s the right word,” Tuesday replied, “but you’re getting warm.”

I chose to ignore that last exchange and focus on answering Tuesday’s question. “Why do I have to pick a winner? You were *all* great. I’m half a communist, so I don’t like competitions. I kinda think everyone should win.”

“You’re a half-communist Republican?” Salty asked, completely incredulous. “That’s the stupidest thing I’ve ever heard. Who are you, and why are you so strange?”

“The original riff is a keyboard riff,” Eric said firmly. “Tuesday should win, because she played it well on the right instrument.”

“I wouldn’t know,” I said to Eric. “I haven’t heard the original.”

“*Boobs*, Eric,” Tuesday decided. “He’s gonna vote for the *boobs*.”

Marina arched her eyebrow at me. “You’ve never heard it?”

“My parents don’t like it when I listen to music that came out after the British Invasion. They think everything louder than Frankie Valli is too loud.”

Salty chuckled. “Does that explain the horrendous Reba McEntire t-shirt you’re wearing? You’re a New Yorker and you’re listening to a country music singer from Oklahoma?”

I gestured at Marina. “I gotta say, considering you were playing against some flashy instruments, your classic sound came off great. You might have been my favorite, by a hair.”

“I’m shocked! Shocked!” Salty cried out, imitating Claude Rains from *Casablanca*.

I wagged a contradicting finger at him. “You predicted I’d choose Marina. That made me want to pick *anyone* but her, but I legitimately

think she did the best. I'm not letting you use reverse psychology to scare me away from picking the right winner. I refuse."

Salty massaged his chin as he stared at me. "You're telling the truth. At least, you think you are." He returned to reading. "And yet, you have no credibility whatsoever, because you're desperate to suckle her. And put where you pee where she pees."

I scowled. "What's this crap about me not having credibility? I'm the most honest person I know! I tell the truth, and I've got no poker face!"

"Ah, your mother," Salty shot back.

I had no idea what "your mother" meant, so I replied, "Yeah? Your grandmother!"

"Don't you talk about my grandmother!" Salty yelled back.

Am I talking about his grandmother? I don't even know what the hell I'm saying!

"Never mind Salty." Marina hugged me. "Thanks for picking me."

"There you go," Salty muttered to himself. "That's what he was after. Another press against the sweater pies. And I don't blame him one bit."

I was about to get very angry. Then Mrs. Vitali walked in. "Oh! We have an interloper!"

I waved to her and gave her my crooked smile. "Greetings, Mrs. Vitali! How are you this fine afternoon?"

"You are not in band, Mr. Cavalieri, so you do not belong here. Vamoose."

Interesting that she knows my name. I wonder how? "I hear you," I replied.

Salty gestured to the door. "Get thee to Oklahoma, foul Reba McEntire fan!"

Marina smiled sadly at me. "Sorry you have to go. I can't change the rules, though."

"You sheltered me as long as you could, and I really appreciate finally getting some Italian solidarity." I started to leave, but then stopped. "Marina, I want to tell you a line from one of my favorite movies: 'Beauty fades eventually, but a kind soul remains forever.'"

"Oh, that is nice. I like that."

I threw a dirty glance at Salty. “Don’t listen to Salty. Your flute playing is beautiful, and you’re beautiful, but your big heart may be the most beautiful thing about you of all.”

Salty moaned. “Oh, my God! I’m gonna hurl.”

I waited for the heckling to end and continued. “Don’t let Salty tease you for being gorgeous. Don’t let him reduce you to your lovely figure. You’re beautiful through and through.” Marina blushed. Tuesday clutched at her own throat with one hand and held her nose with another. Mrs. Vitali cleared her throat loudly. “Okay, that’s enough of that. Begone, Romeo.”

I scooped up my saddle bag of comic books and ambled into the hallway.

“Yo, Damien!” Eric Indelicato called out.

I turned back. “What?”

“What movie was that line from?”

“*Captain Kronos: Vampire Hunter*.”

Mrs. Vitali shut the heavy green door in my face.

That night, Marina and I made love in an outdoor hot tub surrounded by redwood trees.

I awoke covered in my own semen. *Oh, no!*

I’d never ejaculated before. *God damn it!*

The sticky, cold mess in my lap glued my pajamas to skin. *Gross, gross, gross.*

It had a nostril-scorching stench that made me want to retch. I ran to the bathroom and scrubbed myself down with a damp, soapy washcloth. Even after I dried myself off with a second washcloth, I felt clammy and soiled. I took as hot a shower as I could bear, hoping the sound of it wouldn’t wake anyone. After the shower, I put on a fresh pair of pajamas. *What the fuck do I do with my other pair of pajamas and the used towel and washcloths?* The crotch was soiled. So

was the bottom portion of that pajama top. My semen sure traveled. I took the gooey laundry downstairs, hurling it directly into the washing machine. I worried about the possibility of someone in the family accidentally brushing their fingers over cum-damp clothes, so I draped a few additional pieces of dirty clothing over them. Starting the wash up would be the safest thing to do. Too bad I had never done a laundry. How come neither parent had ever showed me how to do a fucking wash? Was this secret knowledge, reserved only for Freemasons? I considered giving it a try, but the first bottle I picked up said “bleach” on it, and that was enough to frighten me away. I dithered and cursed myself for another five minutes, before deciding there was nothing more to do. I sprinted back up to my bathroom, hoping the carpet would muffle the sounds of my middle-of-the-night footfalls. I stared at myself in the bathroom mirror. “You moron! She clearly likes you as a friend. She’s not *remotely* interested.”

I pulled the elastic waistband of my fresh pajama pants out with my thumb and stared down at my limp, satisfied penis. “What’s with you?” I whisper-yelled at it. “Taking liberties like that! I didn’t give you permission to think about her in that way! Neither did she! I’m so disgusted with you!” I sat on the area rug, staring glumly at the toilet bowl. *Does this mean I’m in love? Is that the sign? The night pants thing? Because that is so not good. Let’s not punish her for being kind. She doesn’t need some pimply, half-blind, allergy-ridden, comic geek having weird ass dreams about her just because she was a little nice to him. No, I can’t be in love. This is just a crush. I should be able to nip it in the bud.* I pressed my eyes tight together and chanted to myself. *You are not in love. This is just a passing fancy. You’ll be yourself in the morning.*

After ten minutes of chanting and staring at the toilet, I had the sinking, crushing realization that I had fallen in the love for the first time.

“That is so fucking stupid,” I whispered aloud to myself. “You talked to her for a handful of minutes, tops! No time at all. This better not be how I feel from now on.” I stared back down at my crotch. “If you’re sticking me with a Marina Dazzo obsession for the foreseeable future, I’m not getting you anything for Christmas.”

My penis failed to respond.

“So, Salty was right, huh? Those were some fantastic boobs, weren’t they?”

My penis stirred.

Yeah, yeah. You’re no help at all, are you? And there’s no way on God’s green earth she fell in love with me after two hugs and a musical interlude. No way in the world. So, I’m not saying nothing. I am not telling her how I feel. I’m keeping this our secret.

Friday, February 12, 1988

Marina found a single red rose taped to her locker, with an unsigned note attached that read: “Happy Valentine’s Day, Marina. And thank you.