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CHAPTER ONE - ANDREW

“Come on, we’ve got this.” Margaret inched closer to the unsuspecting bird as it balanced on the log.

“Keep your pants on Margie; just stay put! It doesn’t look like it’s in a good mood today.”

“You stay put if you want. I’m going in.” Her fingers tightened around the thick rope in her hand. She leapt out of the bushes and attempted to pounce on the red-tailed hawk.

I immediately tackled her to the ground, certain in my belief that the bird would peck or claw both our eyes out if we attempted to capture it at that moment. “Today’s not the day. It looks angry.”

The hawk, startled by our presence, at once took off into the air and soared away from us. Margie flung herself onto the grass. She was overtaken by laughter. “You’re such a chicken shit.” She threw the rope to a side and stood up, a bit winded.

I stood up also and looked at her. I’d only known Margaret Clide for a year but the more I discovered, the more I liked. “For a girl, you’ve sure got a dirty mouth. You know that?”

She twisted her lips in that ‘whatever’ manner and folded her arms.

My hand reached out to playfully pull at her nose. “*Tesoro Mio.*” I put my arm around her shoulders; at age nine, we were about the same height. “Let’s go back to the house.”

She complied but turned to watch me as we made our way out of the woods. “What was it you just said?”

“Ah nothing.”

Her face transformed into a scowl. “You’re always saying stuff I don’t understand. You tell me now, Andrew Clodellio. What does ‘teso lio’ mean?”

My choppers spread out into a wide grin just before my lips pronounced the words slowly enough for her to catch the sounds. “It’s ‘*tesoro mio*’ and I can’t tell you what it means.”

“Why not?”

“Because it has a bad meaning; so bad that if you knew what it was, you’d wallop me.”

“Why would you call me something bad if you knew it was bad?”

I smiled at her as we walked. I was getting on her nerves and I knew it. I loved it too. “Maybe I called you something bad just to see what you would do or say?” Raised eyebrows accompanied my smile.

She was now glaring at me with angry nostrils so wide that I could see into them. “You’re bluffing!”

“OK. When we get to the house why don’t you ask my mom what it means?”

She gave me an indignant “hmmm,” brushed my arm off her shoulder and bolted towards the house which was now in sight.

I ran after her, catching up just as she ran through the huge kitchen’s back door. She was breathless but I knew the words were coming out anyway.

“Mrs. Clodellio?”

“Yes Margie.” My mom was just about to fit a heavy black pot onto a back burner.

Margaret looked at me as she took a few breaths. Then her head turned again towards my mom as she blurted out the question: “What does ‘*tesoro mio*’ mean?”

Sturdy arms released the pot on the burner. “It means ‘my darling.’ Is Drew teaching you Italian?” Sophia Clodellio went over to a cupboard and took out a huge bag of flour. She separated the bag’s contents into two large bowls then turned sideways and smiled at the both of us.

Margie smiled back. “Yea I guess he is.” She turned and scowled at me once more.

“You kids are going to help me today, right? I’m making tortellini from scratch. Go wash your hands.”

“For sure,” Margaret and I echoed together. She grabbed my hand as I led the way to one of the downstairs bathroom sinks. “I’ll get you back for that, Drew.”

I snickered, already excited at the thought of what her payback might be. “I know you will.”

CHAPTER TWO – ANDREW

As I stood across the street, I saw my *tesoro* step down from the bus. She wore only ordinary stone wash jeans and a dark flannel shirt but the walk said it all; that girl had attitude: the kind of attitude I would bleed for – the kind of attitude I would kill for. She eyed me with a cocky smile and swayed those hips all the way over to my side of the road. Exactly when Margaret had developed hips, I couldn't tell you. Maybe if I hadn't been so obsessed with the tits she had developed at an early age, I would have noticed when the hips had come in. In any case, they were now here and I wanted them for myself. She stood in front of me, tall and classy, with her red curls flying in the strong breeze. Think of something to say, idiot. Don't let her notice you sizing up her body. "Why'd you make me wait so long?" I smiled down at her, expecting a sharp response. She always has those ready, especially for me.

Margaret looked down at the wristwatch which I had gifted her with last Christmas. "I'm exactly on time, Drew. Or else this watch is a piece of junk."

My smile widened even more at her pursed lips and folded arms which were now directed at me. "I know but it would have been nice to see you sooner."

She unfolded the arms and rewarded me with one of her warm hugs. God, she felt so tender in my arms; almost like she should stay there forever.

She finally broke free from me and looped an arm in mine. “Ready to wolf down some exquisite Italian cuisine?”

“Always.” I led us to the restaurant which I had had shut down for the afternoon just so we could enjoy the time alone in complete peace.

“I hope your stomach is empty, Andrea.” She poked my ribs sideways along with her teasing.

At the mention of my name in Italian, I smiled and shook my head. My brothers had all been given such masculine names: Pietro Clodellio (Petie), Salvatore Clodellio (Sal), Antonio Clodellio (Tony). Then my parents decided to go off track and name yours truly, Andrea Clodellio. I know in Italy, Andrea is the male form of the name ‘Andrew’ and that pop had named me after his belated brother Andrea who had saved his life; but that still didn’t make it right. My mind backtracked to the first semester of school when Bruce Chandler, jealous of the new class favorite, had decided to dig up some dirt on me by secretly going through my personal school file. The only thing he had gotten was the girly first name yet that had him teasing me until I humiliated him in a boxing match. To be honest, it had only gone on for three weeks; but three weeks of being called “Andrea sweetheart” by my rival was still too long for me. Margie and I crossed the four laned street then quickly headed for the restaurant at the end of the alley where the guard was standing, ready to usher us in and begin his protection duties for the afternoon.

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I sat there admiring the hell out of her as she rifled through her belongings to find a credit card. Having finally retrieved the card from her purse and put it on the table, she pulled her eyes away from the bag and proceeded to cut up the food on her plate. This was her usual habit. Her ritual, as I like to call it. The food would first be sprinkled with a small bit of pepper. After this she would cut everything into rectangular, bite sized pieces, then load up the fork with equal portions of either meat and vegetables or staples and vegetables. As she now combined pieces of carrot, cucumber and beef for her first taste of the afternoon, she spoke to me. “Was it really necessary to bring Cousin It along? You could have left him at home just this once.” She delicately inserted the food into her mouth and began chewing away.

My head tilted slightly to the side to observe Igor Vergara, ‘Cousin It’, standing at the restaurant’s main entrance with his back to us. Igor was one of my father’s standby men and my ‘go to’ guy for situations like these. He was formidable enough to handle any situation yet calm enough to appear non-threatening. Whenever Margaret was with me in public places, I always had Vergara in toe. Not that I didn’t feel secure in my own ability to protect Margie and myself. It just made me feel comfortable knowing that she had more than adequate defense, should defense become necessary. And having a bodyguard provided an additional benefit. I could concentrate less on safeguarding this incredible beauty and more on enjoying her company.

As she swallowed her first mouthful, I continued the conversation before starting in on the dishes which she had specially selected for me. “How’s your food?” I asked this question, hoping to receive a positive response.

She gauged what was in the back of my mind and smiled. “Excellent. Your dishes?” She watched me take small samples of everything, before narrowing her eyes.

“They are also excellent Margie. No need for a repeat of last time.” I swallowed and prepared to ingest more foods. My eyes observed her smile of contentment and the relaxation of her shoulders as she loaded the fork with another bite. I shook my head in amusement. Margaret had gotten us kicked out of more than our fair share of restaurants over the years. She was a culinary wonder and unfortunately expected upscale restaurants to live up to her own standards- many however, didn’t. When they didn’t, she wasted no time in making her opinions known to the head chefs. In an attempt to play down my father’s influence I would never reveal who I really was and we would therefore get the same treatment as ordinary people would, in these types of situations. This particular restaurant, however, knew exactly who I was and so had to endure Margaret’s harsh criticisms from time to time. During our last dining experience here, she had marched into the kitchen and re-cooked our *mulincianeddi chini* to perfection before giving the chef some unpleasant words and marching back out with our dish. But for this birthday dinner, she had called ahead and given them strict instructions on how to prepare these particular traditional Sicilian dishes. As such, they had all come out great.

“To the now twenty-one-year-old Andrew Clodellio.” She raised her glass. “Happy birthday.”

I raised mine also and made contact with hers. “Thanks for the dinner, babe. Everything’s perfect.”

“It better be.” She gave the waiter standing in the corner a vicious look.

My throat burst into laughter as I prepared to drink some of my glass’s contents. “Marg, will you please leave these people alone? Damn girl!” We both drank and placed our glasses back down. We looked at each other, hands eventually accompanying the visual connection. I loved the feel of those hands. They were soft and dainty to the touch. I tried to maintain a neutral, relaxed stare; yet the more I rubbed her fingers, the more lost I got in her eyes and the more her eyes searched mine. They were searching for answers... for explanations; explanations which I could not give just yet. Her orbs pried into mine, mine getting weaker with every passing second. Finally, I gave her a fake smile and made a clean break by grabbing my fork and stabbing one of the foods on my plate. She sat there, watching me in frustration for a minute, then released my other hand and continued with her own meal. These tense stares were becoming more frequent between us. And I knew that eventually there would need to be some explaining on my part. Margaret wasn’t the type to just let things go. She would get the truth out of me even if she had to pin me to the ground and drag it out. But how could I explain this? So many thoughts and feelings had been going through me for the past year.

Heaven knows I loved Margaret. I wanted to touch her. I wanted to do more than just touch her. But so far, I hadn’t been able to do anything. Every time I was about to, something made me stop. I felt like I was about to taint her; like she was this flawless and pristine essence which should

never be messed with. Crazy, right? Especially considering that the girl's body looked like it was built to be messed with. I mentioned the hips before. But what I didn't mention were all the things which were attached to those hips. Those hips came with a pair of b cups which were elevated with perky nipples at the end. My brothers were all obsessed with big breasts, which is not surprising since this is what we all grew up seeing on my mom's chest. But I myself had smaller preferences. I liked the in-between pairs: Not big but also not small. And Margaret's breasts were the perfect fit for my palms. She was a statuesque redhead with perfect breasts, broad hips, tiny hands and feet and a complete personality. At night I lay in bed wondering if she knew how much I wanted her. Of course, with her level of intelligence, I suspected she already figured out I was attracted to her. But had she gauged just how much? Other than the occasional glances when she was walking up the six flights of steps which led to her mom's Bronx apartment or when she was walking towards me, I hadn't given her much to go on. I kept my ogling for when she would fall asleep next to me in my father's den, when she would be absorbed with her science text books or when her attention was taken by something else. She eventually broke the short silence which had made its way between us tonight.

“What have you got planned for tonight? Bedding the skank?” She took another sip of wine and eyed me authoritatively, like she a boss who was waiting for an answer from her employee.

I smiled, knowing all too well the mountain of jealousy which had motivated this slight shift in her mood.

“My bed is not for skanks, my love. I’ve never shared my bed with anyone but you.”

Her demeanor softened a bit. “Nice twist on my words. But you’ve never really shared your bed with me, have you Andrew?”

I sighed, wondering how long I could keep up this high wire act. Why couldn’t I just tell her? More importantly, why couldn’t I just take her? I began going down one of my newly found pathetic paths, knowing that she would cut me off before I reached the end of it. “Margie, let’s just...”

She jumped in. “Yes. Margie let’s just...right? Let’s just pretend like nothing’s going on. Let’s just pretend that nothing has been going on between us for the entire fucking year.” She loaded her fork again quickly. “You know you can talk to me, Andrew. You’ve always been able to do so in the past.” Her teeth seized the food from the fork which had just been brought up to her lips. Energetic chewing began.

I glanced at my plate in frustration, picking at the foods like a four-year-old. She was right, of course. But I didn’t know how to talk to her about this. Not yet. I finally decided on a chunk of Sicilian pasta and brought it up to my lips. I bit in, chewed and swallowed quickly. “Margaret sometimes there are things in my head I can’t really get around to explaining. I promise we will talk about this...someday.”

She finished the last bite on her plate. “Someday soon?” The tone of impatience was vehemently clear.

“Yes tesoro, someday soon.”

At the mention of my term of endearment for her, the usual sweet temperament returned and I had my loving yet feisty Margaret back again. She twisted her lips then smiled. “It should be soon. I’d hate to have to knock the truth out of you.”

A grin spread across my face. Only she could threaten me with violence and get away with it. “Get over here.” I took one of the chairs from behind and put it next to mine.

She sat there, bearing a smile and tapping her fingers on the edge of the table for a few seconds.

My smile was equally as bright as we stared at each other again. I beckoned her obedience with my finger. “I said get over here, Clide.”

She leaned forward, smiling even more and still tapping lightly on the table’s edge.

I abandoned the fork on the plate and leaned forward as well. “Please cara mia. Come to me.”

Shaking her head, she gently arose and glided in my direction. Her body filled the chair. Those red curls entranced me, forcing me to draw closer to her. She eyed me sideways and broke into a small laugh. I shook my head, chuckling a little and pulling her much closer.

She rested her head on my shoulder and gave me the sigh. It was the usual signal that her contentment had set in.

I nuzzled my cheek onto the top of her head. “It’s you and me kid. Best friends till the end.”

She took my hand into hers as we both listened to the sounds coming from outside the restaurant.