

Chapter 1

Emma

Knuckles already white, Emma clutched the steering wheel even tighter. She cursed as a driver cut in, missing her fender by a hair. She never yelled such obscenities in her own language, but her Italian vocabulary could rival a sailor's as crazy Roman drivers swarmed around her.

Remaining docile in the right lane never helped. The drivers still cut in erratically, while others remained stubbornly glued to her rear bumper.

The scooters swarmed around her like locusts, not always traveling in the correct direction. It was impossible to gauge their intentions when they often didn't appear to know themselves. Emma had long been convinced the blinkers never gave out in Italian cars, since no one ever bothered to use them.

Of course, the traffic was more annoying today following the meeting at Chiara's school. Her teenage daughter was in trouble. Again. Her grades were slipping, and she was talking back to teachers. She'd even skipped an afternoon of class and forged Emma's signature on the note.

Headmistress Green had been kind but firm during their meeting. "I've known Chiara since the first grade." Despite her decades in Italy, Mrs. Green's harsh American 'r's and open vowels never faded when she pronounced Italian names. "She's always been such a sweet girl, and so bright. I've seen how good she is with her brothers, too. But she's changed this past year. We've been understanding because we know ..." She turned to the window, distracted by a tree branch scratching the glass in the gentle October breeze. "We know this year hasn't been easy on her."

When she turned back, the intensity of her grey eyes made Emma squirm. She felt like a teenager called into the principal's office.

“This can't continue, Mrs. Rinaldi. She's disruptive, and we have many students to prepare for the International Baccalaureate program. We would be sorry to see Chiara go, of course ...”

Emma's heart hammered in her chest. Her palms were sweaty. She wiped them on her Armani pantsuit. *Don't cry, don't cry.* She couldn't break down before Mrs. Green. She just couldn't.

“But if she doesn't *truly* wish to be here, it may be the best thing for her as well.”

Oh, damn. She went ahead and said it. Chiara's being kicked out.

Those grey eyes continued to examine her. “Generally, I prefer having these conversations with both parents present, but we haven't seen Doctor Rinaldi at school for some time, and I hope you appreciate how urgent it was to speak in person. Your husband's ... pardon ... ex-husband's schedule, I garner from his secretary, did not offer much availability.”

Emma willed her face to remain placid. For the first time in her life, she regretted not having succumbed to nerve-deadening Botox treatments.

“Yes, Mrs. Green. You were right to schedule a meeting with me. I would have preferred Chiara's father to have been present, of course, but bearing in mind his busy schedule.” *Screwing a procession of girls only a couple of years older than Chiara.* “It's best we spoke right away. Rest assured that my ex-husband and I speak with one voice when it comes to raising Chiara, and we *will* find a solution. I promise you.”

The corners of Mrs. Green's lips tilted upwards, but her stern grey eyes remained unconvinced. "I'm pleased to hear that. Too often, divorce can lead to decreased involvement by one of the parents. But in these cases, it's our experience that two parents working in partnership can turn a situation like this around."

She stood, signaling the end of the meeting. Emma scrambled to her feet.

"I hope to hand Chiara her diploma on graduation day. Don't hesitate to call me if you or Doctor Rinaldi have any concerns you wish to discuss."

Just shake hands with the woman and make it to the door without crying.

She followed Mrs. Green to the door, her Prada heels clicking with each uncertain step. She blinked rapidly, a desperate attempt to stave off the tears. She offered a weak smile to Mrs. Green at the door, and another to the receptionist, before exiting the office and walking out of the building.

The fresh air calmed her. It was a glorious autumn day, unseasonably sunny and warm for mid-October. The tourists were still wandering around the city's historical center in shorts and tank-tops, wondering at the tropical temperatures compared to Stockholm, or London, or Hamburg. Usually, Emma was pleased to visit this campus, with its lush green yard and rolling hills, always finding it hard to believe this peaceful countryside was still, technically, a part of Rome. But today being on campus afforded her no pleasure.

She hurried down the hill to the entrance gate as fast as her fashionable but impractical heels would carry her. *Please don't let me bump into Chiara or the twins.* She kept her head low,

as if that could mask her identity should her children cross her path on campus, on their way to lunch or gym class.

“Emma! Why, it’s been ages!” A voice rang out when she’d nearly reached the school gate.

Emma turned on her heel to see a woman she knew had been one of Dario’s patients on more than one occasion. Her nose had been redone, her lips plumped, and cheek implants strained against artificially tight flesh.

“Margherita! What a pleasant surprise.” Emma stepped forward and kissed the woman on each silicone cheek. “It’s been ages. My fault. I need to contact you to see when I can help out with PTO activities. Isn’t the international luncheon coming up?”

Margherita waved her hand, attempting a smile on skin that was no longer elastic. “Oh, that. We all do what we can. I know how hard it’s been for you, what with ...” she lowered her voice. “The divorce.”

The horrified expression accompanying her words would have been equally suitable for “your drug conviction” or “the mafia killings you ordered.”

Divorce was surprisingly rare at the Fairmont School, as Emma was quickly learning. “Oh, it’s fine. I forget about it half the time.” Dragon Lady didn’t need to know the truth.

Margherita sighed. “But still, so tragic. I always thought you were such a perfect couple. Although, I must admit,” she chuckled. “I never would have pegged *you* for a plastic surgeon’s wife. Although that was always part of Dario’s charm. He’s known for creating perfection on his patients, but never demanding it from his own wife.”

A steady throbbing began behind Emma's right temple. "I'm over it, really. Thank you for your concern."

"I'm sure you are, my dear. Especially if Dario could ... sweeten the pot, shall we say, with his departure. It's important we hold them to their financial obligations, eh?" She winked. "But still, it's a shame for Chiara. Lucrezia tells me how upset she is, how she always complains the divorce ruined her life." She shook her head. "You know how dramatic teenagers can be." Margherita stood, expectantly, her head tilted.

Emma silently counted to five. "Thanks for your concern. It was tough for Chiara at first, but I think she's starting to accept it."

Margherita's lips formed a dainty little 'o'. "That's not what I heard. But I'm always behind on these things. How nice that everything is going swimmingly, and I've been misinformed." There was a hard glint in her eyes. "Let's be in touch for the international luncheon. Bye, Emma dear." With quick kisses on the cheek, she turned on her heels and made her way up the slope to the school.

Emma watched the receding figure, her head still spinning. A double whammy of Mrs. Green and Margherita. Surely, things couldn't get any worse. She greeted the guard at the exit and made her way to the parking lot. She scrolled down her mobile to Dario's number. It had to be done. She pressed the call button and tapped her foot as she waited for him to respond.

"Emma, what is it?" His voice was breathless, as if he'd just woken.

Emma glanced at her watch. Noon. Surely her early rising ex wasn't still sleeping? But then she picked up on that familiar smooth, smoky quality to his voice. She heard a high-pitched giggle beside him. Was that a rustling of sheets?

Oh, God. Catching Dario in a postcoital moment. She grimaced. Abundant sex with bimbos or not, he was still a father, and she was sick of him getting a free pass on his parenting responsibilities.

"I'm at Chiara's school." Her voice took on the harsh edge it often had when speaking with her ex. "Headmistress Green discussed the possibility of Chiara's dismissal."

"What?" Dario's voice bellowed, the hazy spell following vigorous sex apparently short-lived. "After all we've paid that school? Three kids there, for Christ's sake! And how many times have I volunteered free consultation sessions for the annual raffle? Those mothers are plastic surgery addicts—I've given away countless billable hours in support of Fairmont."

And raked in countless more after the initial consultations. Emma's mind flashed back to the pinched look of Margherita's face, the same look that graced countless other Fairmont mothers' faces.

"This isn't about you. It's about Chiara. She's struggling. She's acting out. And frankly, you haven't been helping out much since the divorce."

"Oh, that's just great, Emma." His voice rose. "Blame it all on me. Aren't you the one staying home with the kids? You wanted custody, you got it. And now you're whining it's too much for you."

A female voice whispered beside the phone. Emma bit her lip. She'd forgotten Dario wasn't away on business, but on a little getaway in the Sardinian villa that had gone with him in the divorce. She imagined the silicone breasts lounging beside him in their old bed. How she'd loved that villa. And now it was a spacious love nest for his latest conquests.

She took a deep breath. "I'm not saying it's too difficult, but it's getting harder, and one parent isn't enough. I need you to take an active role. We need to work together with Chiara, otherwise she's just playing us off of one another and getting away with bad behavior. She's gone from an A to a C student in less than a year. Surely that's a clear sign something's wrong?"

"Damnit, it's not a sign that I'm a bad father. Let's not forget who's financing this family. If Chiara can't cut it, she can go to public school. Like I did. Maybe it'll prepare her for real life. Anyway, I thought divorce would mean an escape from your constant nagging. In the future, call me only for emergencies. I have better things to do. This can all be discussed when I'm back."

Dario ended the call. The silence on the other end taunted her. "*Bastardo di merda!*" she screeched into her cellphone.

Behind her, there was a sharp intake of air. She turned to see a mother all decked out in Prada holding a nursery school-aged child by the hand. The woman dramatically held her hands over her child's ears, looking appalled. *Oh, please lady. Your daughter's delicate ears, my derrière. I've heard your husband the Parliamentarian use far more colorful language on your run-of-the-mill political programs on TV.* But Emma smiled sheepishly and shrugged. "Those annoying telemarketers. What can you do?"

She ducked into her car. No doubt her outburst would keep tongues wagging at the next PTO meeting. Those endless meetings where coddled, bored housewives debated how the tone of the school was being lowered by certain other parents, who would go unnamed.

She couldn't think about that now. She placed the key in the ignition and maneuvered out of the parking lot and onto the chaos of Rome's beltway. The cars and scooters raced by at death-defying speeds as she worked through her mental checklist.

The twins had separate activities this afternoon—fencing for Marco, soccer for Valerio, and Chiara had invited her friend Stefania over with her parents for dinner. Emma still had to shop. At least she'd prepared the tiramisu that morning. Her mother would probably call this evening with some new complaint about her luxurious retirement community back in Annapolis. Her complaint calls always seemed to coincide with dinner parties.

Emma breathed in deeply through her nose, trying to channel relaxing thoughts as her doctor had advised her when handling stressful situations. It never worked, but Emma kept trying. She stepped on the accelerator after glancing at the dashboard clock and panicking once again.

If only she could be like her ex, spending the day—hell, why not the whole week?—in bed with some barely legal boy, forgetting all her family obligations and telling Dario to shove off if he called her, concerned after receiving news their daughter might be kicked out of school. A car cut her off, causing her to slam on her brakes and releasing a slew of choice Italian profanities.

She breathed a sigh of relief when she pulled off the beltway and made her way through the Roman streets back to Aventino. With any luck, she'd still be in time to shop at the vegetable market and stop off at the butcher's.

She turned onto Viale delle Terme di Caracalla and swept aside her anger for a moment to admire the sharp blue sky forming a backdrop behind the fluffy, umbrella forms of the towering Mediterranean pines. The jagged, red ruins of the ancient baths of Caracalla loomed up from the ground on her left. *This* is what she needed to do more. Live in the moment. Look at the bright side of things.

So what if her ex-husband was always shirking his responsibilities, leaving Emma to pick up the pieces when he disappointed their children once again?

Only a few months ago, he'd promised to take all three kids to a musical they wanted to see. He cancelled at the last minute, claiming an important operation had to be rescheduled. To make it up to them, Emma took them to a movie that evening. How could she imagine she'd spot Dario in the lobby, groping his newest conquest? So much for urgent work keeping him from the children. She turned the twins away fast enough, but Chiara caught a glimpse of her father and a woman close to her own age. The hurt and betrayal marring her daughter's face was still etched in Emma's mind.

Emma hadn't brought it up with Chiara, and Chiara never mentioned it. She suspected Chiara kept her anger bottled inside. But after that night, a period of rebellion began. Increasingly, Chiara took those frustrations out on her mother.

Today was simply the umpteenth example of Dario withdrawing from his responsibilities, leaving the grunt work to Emma. But how could she handle everything alone?

Her eyes filled with the tears she'd been longing to shed ever since leaving Headmistress Green's office. She breathed in deeply to stem their flow, but her efforts were useless. Her vision blurred as she saw a scooter, driving the wrong way up the street, headed towards her car.

It all happened so fast, the rider coming at her with a long cascade of dark hair, a flippy skirt all the high school girls were wearing that year. A girl like Chiara.

She screamed and swerved to the left to avoid the scooter, but her relief was short-lived. She smashed straight into the passenger door of a grey Fiat. The sickening thud of metal on metal clanged in her skull.

*How could this be happening? Why is it happening to me? And the kids? The dinner?
How will I get to the market on time?*

She flinched at pounding on her window.

“What the hell were you thinking? Are you blind? You slammed right into me! You could've killed my mother!”

The large man loomed over her window. Her eyes flickered to the car's passenger seat, at the elderly woman looking as dazed as Emma felt. Emma's hands shook on the steering wheel. She wanted to curl up into a ball, close her eyes tight, and make everything go away.

“Hey, lady!” The man rapped on Emma's partially open window.

She stared ahead with glassy eyes.

“Oh, great. Another lunatic out on the roads. Lady, I'm calling the police.”

Caught behind two disabled vehicles on the busy Viale delle Terme di Caracalla, the drivers began honking their horns. It sounded like one, horrendous wail echoing in her brain, threatening to shatter her skull.

Make it go away. Please make it go away.

Rocking back and forth, Emma began to sob. The distant wail of a police siren grew closer, but she kept swaying, ignoring the confusion, the pounding in her head, the pain in her shoulders. She jumped at a second rap on her passenger window.

“*Signora*, I’m going to have to ask you to hand me your driver’s license and papers.”

Emma looked blankly at the policeman. Dark brown eyes stared back at her.

“Didn’t I tell you she’s a nutcase?” said the driver of the grey car as he approached the officer.

“Shhh, sir. Please step aside and gather your documents.” He turned once more to Emma’s window. “Ma’am, if you are unable to get out of the car, please open the window all the way and hand me the documents.”

The tears flowed down Emma’s cheeks. Her rocking grew faster, she clutched her head tightly in her hands. “No!”

“Ma’am,” said the officer, his voice firm. “Please roll down your window.”

Emma looked up into the officer’s face. She reached for the window switch.

“There now,” said the officer. “That’s better.”

She fumbled in her purse for her driving license, tears cascading down her cheeks. Her sobs grew louder. “I didn’t need this. First the school, and now this.” Her words dissolved into sobs. She looked up into those dark eyes. “He doesn’t care, you know? Off with someone else, he couldn’t care less about obligations.” She reached out for the officer’s sleeve and clutched hard. “But they need him. My husband needs to stay involved.”

The officer shook his head, confused. “*Signora*, you’ve been in an accident. Let’s call someone to help you.”

Her eyes grew heavy. She struggled for air.

“Give me your cellphone, ma’am.”

Emma looked up, but those dark eyes were swirling. She blinked twice. No better. She handed the officer the phone and clutched her head again. The throbbing was like a jackhammer in her skull.

“Your husband’s name, ma’am?”

Focusing her gaze was an effort. His face was fuzzy around the edges. Her eyelids grew heavy. She laughed, the vicious cackle of a witch. “My husband of twenty years? ‘Til death do us part and all that crap. *That* guy?”

He sighed. “Yes.”

“The illustrious Doctor Dario Rinaldi. If I’m scarred and hideous, he can even fix me up. Special family discount.” Her eyes grew heavier. Maybe sleep would dull the pounding.

“Dario. Got it.” He pushed call as she tried to focus on him. “Yes, Doctor Rinaldi, this is Officer Bonardi of the *Vigile urbana*, Rome. Your wife’s been in an accident. She’s not hurt, but she’s acting strangely ...”

Emma stared at his mouth moving, trying to summon forth the words to stop him, but none came. Who was he speaking to? Certainly not Dario? Had she called Dario her husband? She couldn’t hear his words any longer. Could he wrap it up so she could buy the food for the dinner? Would she be back in time to get the kids from the school bus stop? She needed to go. The throbbing was unbearable. Maybe if she closed her eyes only for a moment, it would stop.

Her eyelids fluttered down. A moment later, the officer’s voice and the din of honking horns faded.

