

1

Francesca

Pissing off an Italian chick is only slightly less stupid than angering the Mafia. Sure, you probably won't end up sleeping with the fishes, but you'll still pay. I planted myself at the bottom of some concrete steps, watching Tanner leap catlike from railing to railing. "Let's talk, bello," I said as he landed in a hard crouch beside me.

One look at my face and he bolted.

Tanner parkoured through the industrial park using fencing, squat power boxes, and vehicles as balletic props in his escape. He leapt up, caught the edge of an open corrugated loading bay door, and propelled himself into a double flip. With a twist, he landed on the cement, his toes barely making contact before flying into motion once more.

Impressive, but no one screwed over my cousin and got away with it. "Che testa di cazzo," I muttered.

"What's that, Frankie? In English?" Eli asked. Gravel crunched under his feet as he kicked a few pebbles into the gutter.

I half-turned toward my male BFF, one eye on Tanner getting farther away. "He's a dickhead, Eli, much like you."

“It’s true.” Eli hung his dark head in shame. “I am the head of a *deek*.” His shaking shoulders killed his serious expression. Eli had this sick Pavlovian conditioning, howling with laughter at the way I said certain words.

I elbowed him. “Enough mocking, amo’.” I watched Tanner’s flight as he cleared a low hedge. “Kindly get him so we can resume our conversation.”

“Anything for you,” he mugged. With a streak of movement, he caught up to the fleeing douchebag in a blink.

There were of four types of genetic magic that Cadabras, those of us humans with special powers, could possess. Eli was a shining example of a Bruiser—one whose magic ability manifested as a majorly enhanced physical prowess.

I hurried after my friend, fanning out the front of my beige tank top, already sticky from the Florida morning heat. The complex was dotted with spindly palm trees that failed to provide shade and the faint tang of diesel wasn’t doing my lungs any favors.

Even at a distance, I saw Tanner’s shocked flinch at Eli’s sudden presence. Bruisers’ talents were either über-strength or lightning speed, and Eli had the latter. Not being a Bruiser, there was no way Tanner could outrun Eli. Tanner must have come to the same conclusion because he skidded over the hood of a car, putting it between himself and Eli as, wild-eyed, he searched for a way out.

Tanner’s choices were limited. Eli stood in front of him, while the ten-foot-high fence made of smooth metal poles that enclosed the complex ran behind him. Even

if Tanner managed to climb the fence without being caught—as if—the top of the fence curled inward, meaning there was no way over.

Check, but not mate.

He could still clamber up the single-story roof of the long warehouse next to him, run its length, then leap over the fence to freedom from there.

I shielded my eyes with one hand, watching the jerk scramble up a drainpipe onto the roof.

“Oh, bello, don’t even bother,” I mocked, slowing to a stop beside Eli. “It boggles the mind how people continue to believe they can out—anything a Bruiser.”

I bounced on my toes, ready to get what I’d come for.

Eli shot me an evil grin, before turning back to watch Tanner race along the edge of the rooftop toward the fence. He tracked Tanner’s progress a moment more, then with a quick blurry sprint closer, soared up to land on the low roof.

Tanner yelped and tried to stop but momentum plowed him into my friend. Eli didn’t even budge at the collision. He did, however, glower. Eli could glower with the best of them. Which, combined with his dark floppy hair, intense blue eyes, six foot three of long chiseled perfection from years of playing hockey, and snake bite piercings, a small silver stud on either side under his bottom lip visible through his stubble, was hot scary.

Tanner probably failed to enjoy the “hot” part. Especially since he’d been knocked backward in the crash. Arms flailing, he floundered comically for a second before falling off the roof. Tanner may have rocked parkour

but he didn't have Eli's super sonic reflexes to save himself. Gravity was his queen, and at her decree, he plummeted to the concrete next to me with a hard thud and a whiny moan. While the fall wasn't enough to mortally wound him, the wince-inducing tumble was still highly satisfying.

For me.

"My leg!" Tanner yelled. The swearing went on for a while.

Eli leapt off the roof with feline grace.

Tanner stared up at us all blond hair, weaselly looks, and wiry frame, a dull sheen of pain glazing his eyes as he pawed at his leg.

I knelt down and batted his arm away. With my hand held over his calf, all the organic matter in his body was mine to manipulate. My fingertips warmed with a gentle tingle as I probed his skeletal system with my Bio magic to find his injuries.

Tanner, shockingly, did not appreciate my efforts.

"That hurts." He winced. "What happened to warm and soothing?"

"Don't be such a baby." I poked around a bit more before removing my hand. "Hairline fracture in the lower third anterior surface of the fibula and, sì, some tearing in the fibularis tertius."

"Heal me already," he begged.

I wiped my hand off on my black capris as I stood. "No."

"You have to heal me, Bellafiore," he protested. "You can't *not*."

Watch me. Healing may have been the profession I'd

been trained in from a young age and the family tradition I was expected to continue, but it was also the last thing I wanted to do with my life.

Too bad my moms never ever asked me what I thought.

“Why should I?” I answered. “Because I am a girl? Because somehow, imprinted in my womb is a red-hot desire to nurture? That is stereotyping and insulting.” My hands punctuated the air. “There are a lot more uses for Bio magic than caregiving.”

Tanner dragged himself up into sitting position, his leg cradled in his hands. “You’re crazy.”

“And you’re a douchbagging stalker.” Eli held himself loose but alert, his eyes scanning the industrial park and his hands twitchy. You could take the boy out of the hockey game but you couldn’t take the hockey game out of the boy. Eli lived, breathed, and slept his position as goalie. This was his natural resting pose, ready to catch or block a puck.

He jammed his hands into the pockets of his board shorts, causing his muscled forearms to bulge against his sides. “Frankie doesn’t tolerate that shit.”

Tanner’s face flushed red. “I like Marcella. It wasn’t stalking.”

“You magicked her bedroom mirror to act as a spy cam and then let guys pay to watch her.” I wagged a finger at him in disgust. “There is no definition of ‘like’ in the world that covers doing that, you creep.”

Tanner had been born with Gizmo magic—the ability to manipulate non-organic objects. Some Gizmos practiced transmutation, others, like Tanner, amped up the

essential nature of an object, sometimes twisting its function.

He threw us a cocky grin. “Hey, it got her to notice me, right?”

I sucked in a hard breath. A kernel of rage chafed low in my gut. I’d barely finished my last exams at my Liceo Scientifico in Rome—the equivalent of my twelfth grade finals—when Marcella had called me, bawling. I’d spent all of last week at her place a couple miles away in Miami, handing her tissues as she wept over the public shamefest that had been her junior prom.

I had zero tolerance for Tanner’s sass. “Care to rephrase?”

Tanner laughed, a cruel sound. “Bite me.”

Eli gripped his shoulders from behind as I placed my foot directly over Tanner’s fracture and leaned onto it. “Wrong answer.”

Sweat beaded Tanner’s forehead.

A truck rumbled past. Eli and I shifted closer to block Tanner from view, but the driver didn’t pay us any attention.

“Listen up, ragazzo,” I said, letting up on him. “I am a reasonable girl, which is why we’re going to help you stand so that you can go tell Marcella you’re sorry.” Marcella had a really sweet nature and simply wanted an apology. If that’s what she wanted, that’s what she’d get. It didn’t matter what I thought was an appropriate penalty. “Your ‘sorry’ had better be heartfelt,” I added. “If not?” I gave a one-shouldered shrug. “Capisce?”

Tanner flinched as Eli wrapped his massive hockey

hands around Tanner's arms and yanked him to his feet. "Answer her," said Eli.

Tanner stepped back, favoring his good leg, and gave me the finger.

"Now, that's just rude," I said. I touched *my* finger to his calf and sent in a pulse of magic. *Slice. Snap.* His damaged fibula parted like butter.

Howling, he crumpled to the ground.

I blinked at my finger, kind of shocked at what I'd done. "The bonus of healers?" I said, tossing my head. "We know how to make stuff worse. Now do something right, asshole, and apologize."

I stalked off, Eli close on my heels, torn between not feeling entirely right about how that had played out and totally embracing the deep satisfaction I felt at payback.

"How badass and unlike you," Eli commented. He patted my shoulder. "There's hope for you yet."

"Well," I joked, trying to calm my racing heart, "you know the old Sicilian proverb, 'a leg for a mirror.'"

Eli's jovial mood vanished in a blink. He knocked me to the ground.

I yelped, hugging the hot pavement at the sight of a ninja star hurtling our way.

The star picked up speed, traveling too far for a normal throw. Magic. The weapon grew to hubcap size, its honed edges glinting in the sunlight as it flew straight and true.

I scrunched my neck into my shoulders, as if that could keep my head attached. *The cranium's connected to the cervical vertebrae...* I hoped.

Eli plucked the star out of the air like Mr. Miyagi chopsticking a fly and snapped it in two.

I scooted back from my friend at the deadly glint in his eyes.

Tanner looked like he'd peed himself.

Eli blurred to Tanner's side, tossing the useless halves down at him. Whatever he said left Tanner even paler.

"What was that?" I asked, once he'd returned.

"Me. Ending this now." Eli slung his arm around me. "You okay?"

I nodded. Despite the adrenaline leaving me shaky, I had a smile on my face. Tanner had been dealt with, the sun shone, and I was with one of my best friends. Besides, I was a glass half-full kind of girl.

We sauntered along the neat sidewalk and out of the industrial park, turning onto the busy main street.

Eli studied me with a measured look. "Seeing as you're kicking it hard-ass style now, are you going to talk to your parents?"

"There's nothing to talk about," I said with steely cheerfulness.

"Please," Eli scoffed. "Next week all of us will be indentured slaves to MAGE. And if you start as a healer, that's where they'll keep you. Tell your moms you want to be a boiler."

Named after the "hard-boiled" detectives in old pulp fiction novels, boilers were Cadabra cops who investigated magic-based crimes. They epitomized badass cool. I'd read all the books about them, watched all the shows, and wanted to be one more than anything.

The thing was, growing up, Cad students attended local schools with regular kids, and then most of us studied with mentors, honing our magic skills. For me, that had meant learning everything from anatomy to hands-on healing arts for most of my life. How could I go against everything important to my family?

I couldn't.

"I'm a Bellafiore with Bio magic. That means healer." I put my smile firmly back in place to indicate the end of the discussion.

Eli ignored my obvious non-verbal cue. "You can't keep it bottled up," he said. "You'll snap and it'll spew out of you in some kind of leg-breaking vigilante spree. Nobody wants that."

Least of all me. The year we turned eighteen, all Cads were inducted into MAGE—the Magic Alliance of Guardian Elite—an international organization that oversaw all aspects of Cad life from law and order to health care and higher education. Two days from now in a summer solstice ceremony, my friends and I would start our training, serving our mandatory year helping to keep peace in our magic community. I already knew I'd be slated in as a healer.

I didn't even realize I'd been biting my nails again until Eli smacked my hand away. "Use your words, not your teeth." He scowled. "You're bleeding."

I wiped the bead of blood on my cuticle away. God, I was like an animal gnawing itself to get out of a trap. I folded my fingers over my throbbing thumb. "I'll talk to them."

Eli's face lit up. "Hallelujah!" Five minutes later, he was hustling me into a Vite so I could get to the big family celebration lunch my parents were hosting for me.

Named after the French word for "fast," Vites were magic, driverless taxis that transported passengers almost instantly to destinations all over the world. These large-windowed, black pods in a variety of sizes had "Vite" written in funky yellow letters along the sides.

Everyone used them for long distance travel, even Sapiens, the majority of the world's humans who had no magic. Most Saps were perfectly happy using our magic to make their lives easier. Those with hang-ups steered clear. Their loss.

Eli leaned into the backseat, one hand braced on the roof. "No backing out, because I'm telling Byron and Devi you're doing it," he said, referring to our other two female besties. A subtle threat. Failure to comply would be met with the most evil consequences that my friends could think up. "Good luck. See you at B's party later."

He shut the door and with a couple of quick thumps, waved me off.

My excitement grew in direct proportion to my nerves during the ten minute ride home to Rome. I drummed my fingers on the window, watching the landscape blur-ri-ly change from arid brown to blue-gray ocean and finally to the lush Mediterranean coast.

The Vite slowed to a stop on Corso Vittorio. I tapped my credit card against the meter to bill my family's account, then opened the door and slid out. The door silently whooshed shut behind me and the Vite pulled back into traffic.

My heart surged with joy to be home. No other city in the world could compare to Rome. Besides, now that I'd decided to finally speak up, I was determined to get on with it.

I stepped into a narrow, winding side street, trekking the couple of blocks toward Piazza Navona. The street was crowded with vendors selling everything from kitschy T-shirts, to beer openers adorned with the Pope's face, to fake designer purses spread out on colorful blankets and tiny plaster replicas of Michelangelo's David, cheap only in quality.

I didn't have to cut through the piazza to get to the restaurant, but I loved wending my way between the butterscotch and pale coral buildings that had stood there for hundreds of years, dodging Vespas, only to suddenly break through into the vast light of the frenetic piazza itself.

Strolling by the Fontana del Moro, I continued northwards past exhausted tourists enjoying overpriced gelato. Sounds of life and laughter echoed off of the elegant buildings. It made me feel alive, if sometimes annoyed at some of the more obnoxious tourist behavior. Like German backpackers busking The Beatles on their stupid guitars. Had we not moved past that yet? Perhaps into twenty-first century, non-Coldplay repertoires?

A final turn onto a crooked road northeast of the Fountain of Neptune at the piazza's far end and I saw the small pizzeria where our private luncheon was being held. Its doors were thrown open to catch a breeze and my stomach rumbled at the smell of the dough baking in their wood oven. I couldn't wait to scarf down four or

five square slices of pancetta and arugula pizza. Bad Jew, I know. I wasn't a big pork eater but for pancetta, I happily deviated. Besides, it was almost 2PM Rome time and I was starving. I hadn't been able to grab a snack while tracking down Tanner.

The restaurant erupted in cheers, cheek-kissing, and many hearty congratulations at my entrance. My confidence faltered briefly in the face of so many beaming relatives gathered here to wish me well on my healing career, but I sucked it up. *Seize the day* didn't allow for second thoughts.

I peered over the crowd looking for my parents. I must have gotten my height from the sperm donor who'd fathered me since Mamma, my Italian biological mother Mirella, was, like all the Bellafiores, on the short side.

Mamma waved at me, hurrying my way. She wore her regular outfit of black fitted trousers and a tailored blouse, this one in green and matched with a chunky jade necklace. Her hair hung dark and curly down her back, her make-up natural aside from her bright red lipstick.

She interrupted a chatting group to touch Maman, my French mother Claire, on the arm, motioning that I'd arrived. Maman had recently cut her red hair pixie short, but it suited her perfectly, and with her flowing sundress, only made her look more ethereal.

Despite or maybe *because* of the bombshell I was about to drop, I took a moment to enjoy the comforting sight of them coming my way, their faces lit up with pride.

They each hooked an arm into mine, all the better to tag-squeeze me. Was it possible for every part of me to

simultaneously relax and tense at the same time? Why yes, it was.

“Um, about the induction on Saturday...” I began.

“We promise to gush about you soon and loudly,” Mamma said, “but Zia Rosa is dying to see you. You know how hard it is for her get around so she probably won’t be able to stay long.”

“Of course,” I said, letting myself be led across the room. I couldn’t be rude to my aunt. Or turn down grandmère’s request to find her server and get a pot of hot water for the specially blended tea she carried with her. Or fail to take the time in a hushed voice to let Marcella know that her Tanner problem had been dealt with and she should expect an apology.

It was family. But I was getting anxious that I hadn’t been able to speak with my parents yet.

I skirted the edge of the room, headed for the bar where they enjoyed a glass of wine, wondering which talk would win for most painful. The one where I’d told my moms, “No, I’m sure I like boys,” or this one? That I didn’t want to become a healer and that I wanted to become a boiler instead.

“Can I speak to you, please?” I asked.

“In two minutes,” Mamma said. She tapped a spoon against her wineglass. “May I have everyone’s attention?”

Oh no. I automatically mustered up a smile to cover the dread in the pit of my stomach, as every pair of eyes swung my way. “Mamma,” I hissed.

Maman smoothed down my dark brown, chin-length bobbed hair. “We know how much you hate being in the spotlight,” she teased, “but you deserve it and you’ll just

have to deal.” She motioned for Mamma to continue.

Dread turned to knives stabbing me in the gut. I rubbed my hand over my side.

“As you know,” Mamma said to the crowd, “we’re here to celebrate this new and very exciting chapter in Francesca’s life.”

Her dark eyes shone. Mamma was Healer Liaison to MAGE council and headed the Healing Arts department at MAGE Academy, one of the Cad universities. So yeah, Team Healer through and through.

I opened my mouth to speak but my throat was so dry that I couldn’t choke any words out. Besides, telling my moms in private was one thing. I couldn’t blurt it out here in front of everyone and shame them.

“From day one,” Maman added to the toast, oblivious to my distress, “our daughter took to her healing with all the ability befitting her legacy.”

Well, all the ability I wasn’t secretly honing watching crime shows.

Mamma slid an arm around my waist. “We’re thrilled you could all be with us today to wish our perfect daughter happiness as she enters her adult life.”

Everyone cheered their approval at this statement.

Not perfect. More like a guilt-induced good girl. I bet that held true for the behavior of many so-called good girls, so at least I had company in my cowardice. My smile grew brighter as my heart grew heavier. I could still salvage this, right? Talk to them later?

Mamma picked up a small gift-wrapped box from the bar, pressing it into my hands.

I tore through the paper to find a jewelry box. Oy vey. Nestled against the blue velvet interior lay the emblem of hundreds of years of Bellafiore tradition, hardened into bracelet form.

“The Bellafiore heartstone,” I said, my voice an octave higher than usual.

Luckily, everyone took my shock for surprise that Mamma was passing on this prized possession and *not* my horror that I heard the prison doors of my healer life sentence clanging shut. I tore a strip of cuticle off so roughly that my finger began to bleed.

I sent a healing pulse in to clot the blood, as I tried to muster up a convincing level of enthusiasm for the bracelet.

I’m not sure that words could do justice to how ugly this piece was. All the elements sounded fine—blown Murano glass, inset with semi-precious gemstones, and shaped like a heart. It had been made hundreds of years ago and blessed by a long-dead Bellafiore relative to ensure groundedness and good vibes for generations to come before being set into a wide silver band.

The Bellafiore healers, men and women both, had some kind of slavish adoration for it. All except for me. As a kid, I used to imagine that we’d stolen it from the long boney wrist of a witch who liked to pretty herself up for social engagements with her hideous creature friends. It spoke volumes about my place in the family healer pantheon.

I couldn’t put it on. That would be tantamount to accepting my future. My bejeweled Waterloo. “It’s too special for me to wear every day.”

My family wasn't having any of this. "Heartstone! Heartstone!" they chanted.

My fingers curled around the bracelet. If I'd been a Bruiser, I could have snapped it in half. My moms gave me encouraging smiles and nods.

They'd love me no matter what, right?

"Francesca," Mamma said in a silky voice that was the precursor to her getting annoyed. Right. They'd love me if I did as planned. Otherwise? They'd sit shiva in mourning once they killed me for bucking tradition.

My brain screamed at me to drop the thing like a hot potato, but a lifetime of doing what I was told kicked in. I handcuffed the bracelet onto my wrist, the metal cool against my skin. *It'll be okay.* I'd spent most of my life resigned to this version of my future. And I *was* a good healer. I brushed away the wetness in my eyes.

"Oh, bella," Mamma cooed, misunderstanding my emotional overload. Her and Maman bundled me up in a huge hug.

I inhaled the muskiness of Mamma's Christian Dior's Dune perfume and Maman's vanilla soap. For the first time in my life, those scents didn't soothe me.

"Salut!" my family roared good-naturedly. Glasses clinked.

I looked out at everyone so proud of my future and knew I'd lost my shot at speaking up. So I made myself a promise. *I, Francesca Bellafiore, vow to be the best damn healer my family has ever seen. Be successful and extremely happy.* I twisted the bracelet so hard it dug painfully into my skin. Anything else wasn't an option.