

A ROMANTIC SUSPENSE NOVEL

The Billionaire's Widow

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1: In The Dead of Night



Startled by the ice-cold touch on her cheek, her eyes fluttered, her long, thick lashes flitting, fanning her cheeks. Her clouded mind fought between sleeping and awakening, slowly taking in her surroundings.

The vast room was cloaked in semi-darkness, exactly the way she wanted it. Craved for it, in fact. There was something comforting about the iron-gray hue mantled over exquisite furniture, their silhouette providing texture to the gold edges of the wallpaper's geometric design.

Comforting. . . sheltering, masking the turmoil of her soul.

She inhaled sharply, though, when her vision made out the shadow looming over her.

A huge, ominous black figure contrasting with the gray of her world crouched beside her. Panic started to creep up her throat.

But then, her nostrils caught the scent of sandalwood and musk.

In an instant, her fear and dread evaporated.

She groped for the lamp switch, turning it on without haste. And smiled with relief as she came face to face with her husband of five years.

Of course. She shouldn't have been afraid. He had always loved watching her sleep.

"You look like a sleeping angel, a sleeping beauty, my darling," he had said many times. As an insomniac, she makes his sleepless nights bearable, he'd told her, as he counted the seconds and watched them turn to minutes, then to hours of frustrating, exasperating wait for the elusive sleep to come.

In the last six months, however, driven by his incurable affliction, he had taken to going out at night. He'd told her sometimes, he took a walk in the park, made the chauffeur drive him around town, had some drinks in a bar. Lately, he'd been doing a little bit of gambling at the casino and late-night talks with some business partners and friends from members of the billionaires' circle—a small, intimate group of moneyed men he'd known since his youth. Anything, just so when he came home to her, he'd be exhausted and fall asleep beside her in no time.

She didn't mind. She was confident of his faithfulness to her and to their marriage. She knew

he had lived a colorful, promiscuous life in the past. But when he married her, he had told her he'd found his home, his nest, with her. No amount of temptation will make him break their marriage vows, he had sworn.

Now she cupped his cheek with her palm, finding it wet. Frowning, she raised herself with her elbows from the silk-covered king-size mattress of their huge four-poster bed, her wavy, dark brown hair tumbling down her back.

Peering at the handsome, lined face of her billionaire husband, his thick white hair glinting in the dark, she saw tears streaming out of his red, bloodshot eyes. She gasped at the sight and opened her lips, but he overtook the questions coming out of her mouth.

“My dear, I’m sorry. I am so, so, sorry,” he sobbed horrendously as he kissed her knuckles, his cries heart-wrenching as they were puzzling.

“What’s the matter? Are you. . . are you okay? Are you hurt?” she asked, anxious of his ambiguous words.

“It’s my fault. I should never have. . . Oh, my dear, I’m sorry. I am truly sorry.” He wailed loudly like a little child, oblivious to her queries and to the panic slowly building up again inside her.

“Whatever it is, let’s talk about it. There’s

nothing we can't overcome, as long as we're together," she tried to pacify him by her soothing words even as she dreaded to think what might have happened. Her heart broke at the sight of his anguished face, a complete contrast to the self-assured, strong man she knew him to be.

He shook his head slowly, his despair unabated. "My darling, I'm afraid, this time, there is nothing we can do. I have gone through a lot in my life but this. . . this misfortune is unlike any other."

"What do you mean?" Fear clutched at her heart. Her eyes widened, and she felt very near to fainting at his alarming words.

He stared into her eyes and clasped both her hands eagerly. "Can you forgive me for what I have done? Please, please forgive me. I didn't mean to. I love you so much. I love you. You are the light of my life, and the past five years have been the happiest for me. You have brought me so much joy than anyone else in this world, my darling."

"Of course, I'll forgive you. What is it? Please, tell me," she implored him.

Suddenly, he released her hands and clutched at his chest, wincing in terrible pain. He staggered a few steps backward, before falling with a thud to the carpeted floor of their bedroom, his face

writhing in agony.

Swiftly she got out of bed, punching the emergency button located on the nightstand. Somewhere in the vast mansion, servants were being awakened by the bell she rang, a call for help devised for times like this.

She hurried to his side, her heart thumping fast. She cradled his head in her lap and cooed softly, “We’ll take you to the hospital, my darling. Please hold on. I will take care of you.”

His glazed, tearful eyes focused for but a moment to hers, as he whispered laboriously in between gasps of decreasing air, “But. . . who will take care of you . . . *now*? Oh, my dear, please. . . forgive. . . me.”

Then he closed his eyes, never to open them again forever.



2: Seared



Her husband's two-day wake was largely attended by the billionaires' circle, aside from the people he was in business with and a few political acquaintances. Ramon Cantarella had no blood relative left, having outlived them all at age eighty-five. There was only his wife, now a widow.

Manel Cantarella.

The young widow sat somberly some ten feet away in front of the elegant, twenty-four-carat gold plated casket. The closed coffin, topped and flocked with elegant arrangements of white lilies and orchids, stood prominently at the far end of the mansion's central hall. Behind her, plush chairs sporadically filled with the rich and powerful of Italy and elsewhere in the world were arranged in two columns. Hundreds of funeral flowers lined up both sides of the hall, their scent pervading the nostrils. From time to time, guests and sympathizers approached her, shaking her

hand, murmuring their condolences. They passed like a blur of moving vehicles before her sight, her polite smile pasted on her face as it was on theirs.

She didn't personally know all of them. She knew only of one: Don Alfredo Pierro, another billionaire and her husband's closest friend, who was busy going around, welcoming visitors and seeing to all the funeral arrangements set for tomorrow morning. She was extremely grateful for his help and support, particularly at this time. She wasn't used to these people. Except for occasional, short public appearances, she had avoided mingling with high society, preferring to stay indoors with books as her more enjoyable company.

It wasn't a case of cowardice or diffidence, or even hatred, on her part. It was a mere acceptance of the truth about the wealthy's predilection toward people like her. People they considered lowly.

When Don Ramon married her, the rich and the wealthy, especially the old moneyed ones, frowned at their unlikely union. Why else would a twenty-year-old beautiful girl want to marry an eighty-year-old billionaire? Tongues wagged: of course, it was for the money and nothing else. Having no immediate family, it was inevitable that

she was made the sole heir to all her husband's wealth.

Naturally, all doubts and condemnation were cast upon her. Oh, the rich did not attack her upfront. They behaved impeccably and respectfully toward her, especially when Don Ramon was around. But once out of earshot, they whispered behind her back and wondered what she did to the poor octogenarian to have won his fervently protective, and billions-worth of, affection.

Judgmental eyes and spiteful murmurs abound whenever she was around. To all these, she had remained dignified in her silence, telling herself her energy was best reserved for more worthy battles. Shunning the company of those people was not only for her sanity or peace of mind. No person had the right to make her feel small because she knew the truth: *she truly loved her husband.*

She loved Don Ramon in her own way. Why wouldn't she? He was her anchor of strength. His kindness to her when he took their entire family under his wings will never be forgotten. He had given her everything she needed: education, security, respect, eminence, a rightful place in high society, however cruel and disapproving it

may be.

She was now a far cry from the wide-eyed, hungry, six-year-old provincial lass who lived in the outskirts of Florence, Italy, whom Don Ramon nearly ran over when his car's breaks malfunctioned in the long, winding road leading to their small, shabby house. He took one look at her tattered clothes and dirty face—and smiled. Next thing she knew, she and her brother were transferred to a private school. Her parents got the job of their lives: managing an exclusive vacation villa for the rich which Don Ramon acquired for them. Their worn-out house was bulldozed to the ground, and in its place, a dainty stone chalet stood at the back of the Villa where they were employed. He took them under his wings from then on. He became their considerate employer and a constant visitor on weekends.

Fourteen years after she first met Don Ramon, and before she graduated from college, tragedy struck. One night, when she stayed late in the university library working on a research paper, a terrible fire tore down the villa, and with it, her parents and her brother perished. Suddenly, she found herself without a family and a home.

When Don Ramon offered her marriage, there was no other answer but yes. Like her, he was an

orphan. Two kindred souls found solace in the knowledge that they will not be alone anymore. They had each other.

She had been a good, dutiful wife to him. For all he had done for her and her family, he deserved her love and adoration. She took care of his personal needs, especially his health. She adorned a few of his business parties and transactions with her presence and sometimes, her viewpoints, when asked. She graced their football team's games and their hotel and restaurant openings in his absence—however brief and fleeting—evading small talk.

Her elusive beauty and reserved poise earned her many admirers and, consequently, nasty gossip spread by envious rumor mongers. Through it all, she had held her head up high, refusing to give people the satisfaction of seeing her affected by their wagging tongues and cruel insinuations, neither confirming or denying anything to anyone. She didn't allow herself to stoop down to their level. The Don may have paid for her clothes and her education, but her dignity was hers and hers alone, she had vowed, and she will not let anyone take those away from her.

Especially today.

Letting her eyes roam over the sea of faces, half

of whom she didn't even remember the names, she lifted her chin, blinked her tears away, and made herself strong despite the acute pain in her chest for losing Don Ramon. Deep in her heart, she knew she couldn't find a more kind, loving, and generous husband.

Some people though, couldn't even respect the dead. On her way back from the restroom, she passed by a small group of ladies and heard their spiteful words.

"What do you think she'll do with all those billions?"

"What else? I bet she'll squander it on different kinds of men, now that she's free of the old man. Surely Don Ramon didn't pleasure her enough?"

"I don't know. She certainly pleased Don Ramon, enough to leave her with all his money!" Scattered giggles followed.

Their hushed whispers and stifled laughter abruptly stopped when they saw her glaring at them. Hastily, they adjusted their clothing and walked away as if they did nothing wrong. She wanted to scream at them to get out of her house, but manners prevented her. Outward, she was a picture of calmness. Inwardly, she seethed. How dare they come to comfort her with their sad faces, and then mock her when their backs were turned?

And they called themselves wealthy? All the money in the world will not cover up their iniquitous attitude.

Grief and exhaustion of the past days caught up with her, and suddenly feeling sick of all these hypocrites, she walked out of the central hall, into the carpeted corridors leading to the balcony overlooking the enormous estate where the mansion was located.

She didn't give a damn about the immense wealth she was set to inherit. What she was concerned about were the people under their employ, the common folk who rely on her now to put food on their tables and feed their families. It wouldn't be too hard for her to manage their businesses. She was armed with a Business degree which Don Ramon had insisted she finish during their brief marriage.

She massaged her temples with her fingers. "After the burial, after the reading of the Will, I have to put things to order and reassure the workers and employees that nothing will change," she muttered to herself.

"Would you like a glass of water, Signora Cantarella? You look pale."

The deep voice with the rich, silky tone which came from behind her was like a powerful

summon she couldn't resist. She turned to see its owner smiling at her, a glass of water in his hand. The man was tall, well over six feet, she guessed. He was wearing a black suit which molded perfectly to his taut, muscled body. His face was partly masked by shadows, yet his strong jaw was prominent, as was his aristocratic nose. It seemed not even the dark cannot hide his striking looks.

But his eyes were what held her gaze. They were intense, piercing even, as if searing into her soul. Searing her with something, some power that only he and he alone possessed. How dare a food server looked at her like that? Like he *owned* her?

She closed her eyes, her fingers pressing on her creased forehead. Confused and annoyed at the same time, her voice came out harsh, her words cutting. "No. I'm fine. I'm just tired. Give it to someone else. Please, I'd like to be alone."

"I understand, Signora," came the smooth reply.

When she opened her eyes again, he was gone. She didn't even hear him leave. "Maybe I'm hallucinating," she reprimanded herself. But when she saw the glass of water on the nearby table, she realized the man with the intense eyes had indeed been there.



3: The Reading of the Will



Paolo Gramazio, the Cantarella family lawyer, carefully pulled out Don Ramon's last will and testament from his black attache case and laid it on the table. Presently, they were seated inside the library of the mansion, her favorite place. The burial had gone smoothly the day before. Now that the widow was sufficiently rested, the legal matters had to be dispensed with so that necessary, urgent actions will be taken. The Don had many diverse businesses worth over seven billion euros which needed attending to.

Tired and lacking sleep, Manel smiled at the lawyer, albeit a tad wanly. Bald and thin, Gramazio was an aging solicitor and had been a trusted employee of her husband for as long as she can remember. The reading of the Will today was just a formality. They both knew what was in it. When they got married, Don Ramon's first act was to formally designate her as the sole heir to all his wealth in his Will.

She nodded once, her signal that the Reading can now begin.

Clearing his throat, Gramazio started to speak. “This is the Last Will and Testament of Don Ramon Cantarella. . .”

But before he could continue, the door to the library burst open. Hastily, they both stood up, frowning at the intrusion.

A lanky man with a crop of sandy blonde hair and neatly-pressed gray suit sauntered arrogantly. Trailing behind him, a visibly shaken servant kept on murmuring, “Signor, I told you, you cannot barge in here. Signor!”

The visitor spoke authoritatively. “I’m afraid I have to stop this proceeding, Signor Gramazio, Signora Cantarella,” he remarked as he swept his condescending eyes at them.

“What is this? What are you do...w-who are you?” sputtering, a puzzled Gramazio asked.

“I am Silvio Travaglia and I represent the Firenzo group of companies,” the unwanted visitor solemnly stated even as he shook hands with a scowling Gramazio. Looking on, Manel had the uneasy feeling that there was something oddly familiar about him. But the dashing gatecrasher whose smile never really quite reached his pale gray eyes was a complete stranger to her.

“Yes, yes, I have heard of that name. But the Cantarella conglomerate has no shared businesses with Firenzo,” the older attorney argued, still baffled.

“Oh, but now it does. In fact, we have so much share in yours,” Travaglia smirked as he handed him a blue folder.

Gramazio opened it and scanned the documents quickly. All color drained from his face as he perused it. Then, he slumped down on the chair, mumbling, “No. No. This can’t be. This can’t be happening.”

Uncomprehending but now annoyed, Manel addressed Travaglia. “Signor Travaglia. Please leave. You have no right to be here.”

Travaglia’s smile widened. “Signora, on the contrary, I have all the right to be here.” For a brief moment, his eyes flicked over to the visibly distressed Gramazio, and once again, Manel had the eerie feeling that she had seen him before.

Shaking off her uneasiness, she crossed her hands over her chest and snapped at him, “No, you don’t. You are intruding on a private, legal reading of the Last Will of my late husband, Don Ramon Cantarella. This has nothing to do with the Firenzo group of companies.”

Travaglia’s eyes narrowed. “But it has, Signora.

You see, the Last Will and Testament of your husband, as we know it, was superseded by another, newer one a few days ago. *Before he died.*”

“What?” She blinked. “That’s preposterous! Don Ramon will never do that without telling me, or Gramazio.”

“Oh, but he did, Signora,” the young lawyer spat out. “I assure you, he did. Apparently, he kept it from you and your lawyer. Only he and a handful of witnesses knew about it.”

She felt her strength slowly dissipating, not just from disbelief at his words but from confusion at the attitude of the lawyer. He was angry and frustrated at the same time. What was going on? Was he taking pity on her? But there was no trace of mercy on his face. Why would he? He didn’t know her, and she certainly hadn’t seen him before this day.

Before she can speak again, however, Gramazio beat her to it. “There must be something we can do about this. We can contest this in a court of law.”

Travaglia hissed, “You can’t contest two Wills.”

“*Two Wills?*” Manel’s eyes widened. The room, suddenly, became stifling.

“Yes, Signora,” Travaglia snorted. “Don

Ramon wrote a *Testamento Olografo* before signing a formal will. Two wills, both signed in the presence of the same set of witnesses.”

Gramazio insisted, “If Signor Firenzo notarized this, it’s not valid. As the other party involved, he cannot assume the role of a notary to these documents, even if he’s a practicing lawyer himself. He should know that.”

“As you said, he’s a lawyer and a damn good one, too. He did not notarize this. You do know he has his own Law Firm to do that for him?”

“*You* notarized this?” Gramazio’s nostrils flared, the only sign of anger he had demonstrated so far.

Travaglia’s eyes lowered. “I was in France overseeing one of his mergers. One of his lawyers notarized and registered both Wills with the government *the morning following Don Ramon’s death.*”

When her husband’s body had not even come home from the funeral parlor for the formal wake? What kind of unscrupulous bastard was this Ricco Firenzo?

“This is not possible,” Manel cried. “Even if Don Ramon did this, he did it under duress. I’m sure of it!” She turned to Gramazio for help.

But the fire she glimpsed just a moment ago

had swiftly dissipated from the old lawyer as he shook his head slowly. Manel was appalled at the sudden change in him. He looked his age. Deep lines etched under his gray eyes and his shoulders drooped in defeat.

“Manel, I’m sorry. But these. . . these documents. Don Ramon’s *Testamento Olografo* is already a tough one to counter. Having another Formal document served to reinforce the handwritten Will. And he signed these in front of five valid witnesses. Notarized, then registered. It’s all legal and binding.”

Her throat seized up. “What. . . what does the Will say?” she asked, her lips trembling. She didn’t want to know, but she knew she had to.

Travaglia answered for the old lawyer.

“It says that my employer, Ricco Firenzo, is now the owner of all of Don Ramon’s wealth, properties, companies, employees...everything and everyone that has been Don Ramon’s. *Including you, Signora Cantarella.*”



4: *The Wager*



The world stood still for Manel. White as a sheet, she croaked, not recognizing her own voice.

“How. . . how did this. . . happen?”

“Let’s just say your husband is one arrogant, egocentric bastard who didn’t think twice wagering all that he owned, including his precious little wife. . . *to me.*”

The familiar deep, manly voice which cut through the room came from the door. She hastily turned to look.

Dressed in a dark blue Armani suit, a tall, strikingly attractive man languidly stood there with his back to the door, his ankles crossed, arms over his chest. He looked like he had no care in the world. His dark brown eyes were intensely fixed on her, an odious smile pasted on his lips.

She recognized him as the man from the balcony. The one she’d mistaken for a waiter.

The man with the piercing eyes. The searer of her soul.

“You!” She gasped. “You’re Ricco Firenzo?”

“The one and only,” he replied. He bowed in mockery before lifting his back from the door and striding forward.

Travaglia’s face was impassive as he met his employer halfway through the library. “Signor, I didn’t know you’d be coming over.”

Ricco Firenzo continued to saunter forward, not breaking a step or even throwing him a glance. “I wanted to see for myself what I had won, Travaglia. And I didn’t need your approval to come here.”

Travaglia hung his head, his jaw tight as he placed himself behind Ricco and followed him into the room.

With unhurried steps, Ricco approached Manel, his sharp eyes never wavering from her face. Like a lion encircling his prey, Manel thought. His eyes were the color of deep, dark chocolate, which would have been soothing and comforting, if not for its glacial hardness at the moment as he narrowed them at her. Her cheeks burned, singed from the intensity of his gaze.

“Signor Firenzo,” she swallowed, striving to keep her voice firm. “I think this is all a mistake. My husband did not do heavy gambling. And besides, gambling is illegal here in Italy.”

“Sports-betting isn’t. He bet on his football team. And even if Italy prohibits all kinds of gambling, who would dare go against the billionaires’ circle?” he snickered. “Not the government, Signora.”

“He bet on his own football team?” She searched her memory. “But they won that night!”

“Ah, but he did not just bet on his team. He bet *you* would be there in the stadium like you’ve always done. Cheering them up for one hour, in his absence.”

Manel’s face paled. Horrified, she recalled the events of that night. She had, indeed, been set on going to the stadium as was her practice. But she had woken up from her afternoon nap severely shaken and distressed, haunted by another set of recurring bad dreams.

Dreams which didn’t really go away over the years, contrary to what she had told her husband and her therapist.

That night, for some inexplicable reason, her panic attack didn’t subside in time for the game. That night, for the first time in a long time, she’d been driven to take a sleeping pill to ease her troubled mind. That night, she’d woken up to find the game nearing its end and had to content herself watching it from their television, deciding

not to call her husband about her sudden change of plans to prevent him from worrying about her condition.

That night. That night of all nights. She didn't know her husband needed her as he had never needed her before. *And she had failed him.*

Seeing her stricken face, Ricco gloated, "Ah. You remember. So, you see, Signora Cantarella, I won fair and square. And I have *you* to thank for that."

She choked, both indignant and shocked by his coldness. "Don't you dare twist things. You are the one responsible for my husband's death. He died because of your greed!"

"Tsk, tsk, tsk," the man clucked his tongue, his lips twisted in a cruel smile. "Signora, you are as much responsible for it as I am. *You* were not there at the time he expected *you* to be there. He put all his wealth and your marriage at risk on his faith in *you*. But you failed him. Wait," he paused for effect, "Come to think of it, that puts a more tremendous amount of guilt on *your* part, instead of mine. Because of *you*, he lost the bet that caused him despair, which led to his heart attack. Isn't that the truth?"

She fell silent, his words ringing painfully in her ears. Her heart was pounding loudly against

her chest, her palms were getting sweaty. Hastily, she took several deep breaths and clenched her fists. She would not allow herself to have a panic attack in front of a complete stranger.

Especially a heartless one like this man.

Ricco Firenzo deliberately walked around her, looking her over from head to foot. Cold shivers crept up her spine. He was undressing her with his eyes and he was making sure she knew it. Cheeks burning with anger, she hugged herself, wishing she had put on a cardigan over her plain black sheath dress.

She raised her chin and countered, “You have no right to say that. I was sick in bed, suffering from a migraine that night.”

He sneered. “How convenient that of all nights, you chose to have a migraine that evening. Why was that, I wonder?”

Her blood boiled. “How dare you insinuate. . . you’re a monster! You’re a beast! This is tyranny! You cannot do this!”

“Ah, but I can, Signora. In fact, I already did. The death of Don Ramon is unfortunate, though. I would have preferred him alive to see the outcome of his rash actions. Especially,” smiling broadly, “what I plan to do with you.”

Enraged, she sputtered, “What kind of. . . of

man are you? Have you no heart?"

"You said it yourself. I'm a monster and a beast," he smirked, sounding not the least bit perturbed.

"You cannot own me. You can have all the money, I don't care about it. But you cannot own me! I'm a person, not a thing!"

"But Signora, to your husband, you were. Why else would he put you as wager?"

She squinted her eyes in defiance, clinging to the last vestiges of hope remaining inside her. "I still don't know the complete details of this agreement between you and my husband. I need to see what kind of insane bet you deceptively fished out of him."

His eyes sparkled with glee. "Gramazio, will you do the honors?"

Gramazio read the document, his hand trembling as he grasped the documents. "It says here. . . that in the event Don Ramon loses in the aforementioned bet, all his tangible assets, wealth, properties, businesses and everything that comprise his billion-euro empire, Cantarella Ventures, shall be turned over to the ownership of Don Ricco Forenzo."

She whipped her head over at the arrogant man, saying with a note of triumph, "I don't hear

myself there.”

Smirking, Ricco raised his brows. “Gramazio, kindly continue.”

“It’s. . . it’s in a separate stipulation,” Gramazio stated morosely. Clearing his throat, he continued, “Furthermore, Don Ramon Cantarella shall bequeath Manel Cantarella, his wife, to Don Ricco Firenzo, to be under his custody and employ, to perform domestic duties and act as his personal maidservant for a period of one year. . .”

“What? *No!*” shrieking, Manel interrupted him.

“Why, Signora? Does being a servant repulse you?” Rico sneered at her. “May I remind you that you were not always this sophisticated, educated lady you flaunt yourself to be?”

Her teeth clenched, her fingers digging in her palms. “I know my roots. And I am not ashamed of them. But. . . this. . . this is absurd!”

“No more absurd than your husband agreeing to such conditions.”

“I don’t want any part of this! I won’t allow this!”

“Oh, would you rather go to prison, then? Because *I will send you* to prison if you renege on the contract. It’s also clearly stipulated there.” He added with a sinister smirk, “And once you’re in

prison, I will make sure each day you're in there will be hell. I have many connections there, you know. They would be happy to have someone of your. . . stature."

Her head swelled. She wanted to wake up from the nightmare that was happening. All that she had: a solid marriage, security, wealth, and her dignity, were all stripped from her in one fluid move by this. . . this opportunistic bastard, grinning his bedimpled smile at her, a dimple she noticed only now.

She had no choice. Her husband lost the bet. And with it, she lost everything too.

"Why. . . why do you hate me? What have I ever done to you?" she whispered, her shoulders slumped, defeated.

For a moment, his laser eyes glimmered with something she cannot put a finger to, something dark and sinister. She swallowed the dreadful fear that was trying to consume her.

But when he spoke again, it was with the silky, disarming voice he had used at her that night at the balcony.

"I don't hate you, Signora. You are just a bet I won, which I am now claiming."

Tears threatened to fall from her eyes. She blinked repeatedly, pushing them back. She will

never cry in front of this man, she vowed to herself as she balled her fists tightly. She struggled to compose herself. What could she do? Gramazio had mentioned Firenzo was a lawyer, an educated man. She needed to appeal to his reasonable side, to his logical mind.

Trying to calm herself, she heaved a tremulous breath. “Surely, there is. . . there is a way out of my. . . predicament?”

Gramazio and Travaglia exchanged glances. There was the briefest moment of silence before Ricco’s burst of laughter echoed in the room, leaving her baffled. His shoulders still shaking afterward, his smirk was devilish when he asked, “Why, Signora, are you offering yourself up to me?”

Finally comprehending, her face reddened. She spat out, bristling, “Of course not. I was just asking what do I have to do to get out of the contract. If I work, do I get compensation so I can pay whatever I’m worth to you?”

He scoffed. “I don’t shell out hard-earned money for my rightful winnings, Signora. Even though you’re not that valuable, I expect you to work hard and do your job as required by the contract—without any compensation—for one year. After that, you’re a free woman.”

“So basically, I’m a slave . . . for a year?”

“Yes. *My* slave. Needless to say, if you want to render me *other* services, I’m all up for it,” he countered, grinning from ear to ear.

“I will die first before doing that! I will never be your kept woman!” She declared indignantly, baring her teeth.

In a flash, his mood changed. She took a step back at the black wrath she saw in his eyes. His face furious, his tone scathing, Ricco growled at her. “You flatter yourself, Signora. I don’t take women against their will. And before you speak so highly of yourself, may I remind you that you were a senile octogenarian’s kept woman for five years, pleasing him physically, as required of you, in exchange for wealth and security in life? Stop being such a prude. We all know what kind of woman you are.”

Manel’s eyes filled with tears at his brutal, vicious attack, but once again, she blinked them rapidly back. She dug her nails in her clenched palms, willing herself to control the rage which threatened to burst out of her, and bit her lower lip to prevent the deluge of hateful words she wanted to throw at him.

Her dignity was being stripped of her. Her guilt and emotions were being played. But her inner

courage and strong will prevailed. She vowed to endure the utter humiliation and dishonor forced upon her for one year to be free of Ricco Firenzo.

“This man. . . this beast. . . will not see me weak and begging for mercy,” she seethed inwardly, as she decided to remain unreceptive to his hurtful words. Instead, she met his searing gaze with her own fiery glare.

Which proved to be another mistake, for the second his eyes locked at hers, she felt ignited by the flame from those brown depths, until she was engulfed in a raging fire, very much like a dry piece of wood going up in flames. Seconds passed, and time, and everything, and everyone else in the room became nonexistent.

When Ricco broke the connection by lowering his thick lashes over his magnetic eyes, she felt like a balloon deflating, all oxygen sucked out of her. She had to grip the nearby chair to prevent her knees from buckling.

Smirking derisively, he drawled, oblivious of her state of emotions. “I assume, by your silence, that you now accept the terms of the agreement. Don’t worry, my lawyers will take care of all the legal aspects. You don’t need to do anything. Travaglia, we’re done here.”

He turned to leave, his lawyer in tow. At the

door of the library, he spoke imperiously with his back to her:

“I expect you to be at my mansion early tomorrow morning, Signora Cantarella. Your servant’s uniform is already waiting for you.”

To Manel’s ears, it was a promise of terrifying things to come.



5: First Day in Hell



It was exactly eight o'clock in the morning. Manel nervously stood in front of the gigantic main doors of Ricco Firenzo's equally gigantic Verona mansion. Gramazio was kind enough to drop her off at the outside gates, where Ricco's stoic chauffeur was waiting to take her into the vast estate. As Gramazio's car sped away, Manel felt panic in her very core, anxious for the kind of life she was going to endure for one year.

Ricco's mansion stood in a green oasis, only half an hour from the center of Verona. The entire villa complex was surrounded by a huge garden park. From what she gathered from Gramazio, there was a lake with towering trees at the back. There was also a vineyard and a winery building, all within the five-hectare lot.

Gramazio filled her in about the man who bested her husband and caused his death. Twenty-nine-year-old billionaire bachelor Ricco Firenzo got his wealth by luckily winning the ten-million-euro lottery at age twenty-four, investing it in

diverse businesses which earned him additional fortune. He was well-known as a risky and lucky gambler with a Midas touch in business. At twenty-five years old, he earned his first billion by acquiring fledgling companies, building them up until they grew, then selling them at almost triple his original investment. He was a man driven by ambition and the need for power.

All his money, though, did not endear him well with the members of the billionaires' circle, Manel learned. The snotty, ultra-rich billionaires still put much value on old money—wealth inherited from families, passed on for many generations.

Like her, he was still considered an outcast in the billionaires' society. As kindred souls, they should be allies, drawing support from each other. Instead, he was hell-bent on controlling the Cantarella legacy—including her—for reasons she can only interpret as selfish and heartless. Why?

She had tossed and turned in her bed last night, her mind in turbulence, going over the happenings of the day. She herself had read the documents repeatedly and questioned Gramazio about its authenticity and legality. They both searched for a loophole, an escape clause that can get her out of Ricco's clasp of ownership. But they found none. The witnesses were all infallible,

comprising of the casino's manager and four members of the billionaire's circle. Not surprisingly, Don Alfredo was not a witness. She presumed Ricco made sure he was not there at the time. Had he been there, this wager would not have materialized.

A paradox nagged at her mind. What had possessed her husband to agree to such a wager? Did he think it was a joke? She had never known her husband to be too trusting. On the contrary, he was always suspicious of people. What did he see in Ricco Firenzo, enough to trust him with something like a wager involving everything he owned? It was as if Don Ramon had served his wealth and possessions—including her—in a silver platter to the young billionaire.

But deep inside, she knew. Ricco Firenzo was right. Her husband had faith in her, and she had failed him. Because of that, she lost her husband, her wealth, and her freedom. There was no one to blame but herself.

What kind of person was she?

Shame and guilt swelled inside her and ate her up. It prevented her from seeking help from Don Alfredo. She didn't want to incur his wrath and be blamed yet again for her husband's death once he learned about her part in the wager. She was doing

it fine on her own.

And really, what could he possibly do? Though Don Ramon had been secretive about the company of friends he kept and avoided talks about them, he had mentioned to her in the past that there was an unwritten code of ethics in the dealings done within the billionaires' circle. No man would dare break it. There will be repercussions, both in their personal and business lives. If Don Alfredo even dared to help her, she wouldn't be able to forgive herself if it would cost him anything he valued highly.

It was useless to deny reality. Ricco Firenzo was set on claiming his win. He will not negotiate on any terms. By now, news of her impoverished stature would have spread all over Italy, and those snotty rich women could be rejoicing right now at her misfortune. No one was going to help her. She was all alone.

Somehow, discerning and accepting that fact gave her a boost of strength. A strength she didn't know she needed for the situation ahead.

Just then, a uniformed young maid came rushing out of the doors, hurriedly ushering her inside while anxiously squealing, "Signora, it's good you're here already! But you should've arrived earlier, the Master is already furious!"

“It’s only eight in the morning. Is that late?” she asked, wondering what the fuss was all about.

“The Master awakes at six in the morning, Signora. He likes to be up early, that’s why he would need you from that time onwards. He swims for one hour, then takes his breakfast and prepares for office. I’m Lila, by the way.”

“Oh. I didn’t know that. I assumed when he said early, it’s eight o’clock because that’s when my servants. . . never mind. Lila, thank you for welcoming me. Are we going to my room first to change?” She looked down at herself, dressed in gray square pants, black long sleeve top, and gray ballet flats. She had tied her shoulder-length, chestnut brown hair in a ponytail. She knew she looked plain and all covered up, but she didn’t care. She will never dress up for that monster. She brought only one bag of clothes, all much like the ensemble she was wearing now. All her personal belongings had been hastily stored in the basement of her mansion, to be transferred to a storage facility once Ricco takes over her former home.

“Oh no, no, no, Signora! The Master has instructed me to take you to him immediately once you arrive. You will change into your uniform after he has talked to you, he said. And besides, your

room is adjacent to his dressing room. Upstairs, Signora,” the maid pointed her forefinger up as she continued chattering.

“Please call me Manel, Lila.” Frowning, she asked, “But. . . only valets have rooms adjacent to their Master’s, am I right?”

“Why, yes, Signo. . . Manel. That’s your job now. You’re the female version of a valet,” answered Lila. “At least that’s what I understand. Of course, you will share your room with Miss Pinky, it’s what we call her, instead of Pinketta. She oversees us servants. She’s a wise old woman, sometimes kind, sometimes not. I’d be very careful with her if I were you,” she babbled.

Manel stopped dead in her tracks, the maid’s words ringing in her ears. That meant she would be at Ricco’s beck and call for almost twenty-four hours, seeing to his personal needs and God-knows-what else he has in mind. She bit her lip, trying her very best to be strong. Her mind was screaming, wondering what she did to deserve this humiliating treatment.

Lila took pity on her dismayed face and unexpectedly offered her a warm embrace. Then, she whispered on Manel’s ear, “I don’t understand what’s happening, but please remember you have a friend in me,” giving Manel a glimpse of wisdom

beyond her young years.

They smiled at each other. Lila took hold of her hand and pulled her into an elevator which brought them to the top floor. Once there, she pushed her inside two open majestic doors and promptly closed them behind her, leaving her somewhat out of breath, her eyes adjusting to the burst of light coming from the balcony.

She found herself standing on a thickly carpeted floor of a palatial sitting room. In the middle of it, Ricco sat with his back resting on his black, huge recliner chair, his feet up. It was obvious he was finished with his daily swim and had showered. He was wearing a thick, white robe, and for the briefest of moment, she wondered if he was wearing anything else. Just as quickly, she observed that he was also wearing a very deep, ugly frown, his jaw tensed underneath his perfectly trimmed short stubble.

“You’re late. . . on your first day.” His voice was sharply ominous, like a knife slicing through the stillness of the air.

Manel swallowed her fright. “I had to see my servants off. And besides, I thought a regular servant’s work starts at eight in the morning.”

“You’re not a regular servant. You are *my* servant.”

Flustered at his arrogant tone, she took a deep breath to steady her pounding heart. “As you always remind me. I’m here now, am I not?”

His eyes squinted at her. “Tsk, ts, ts. You think crossing me would shorten your one-year ‘sentence,’ don’t you, *Manel*? Well, you are dead wrong. Because I will just make sure every single day of it will be a living hell for you.”

She struggled not to let him see the terror his words gave her, even as she felt her insides tickled at hearing him call her name. Lowering her eyes down, she murmured, “I will not be late again if that’s what you want.”

He smiled sarcastically. Then with a wave of his hand, he ordered her, “Get me my breakfast. The mini-dining room is in there, you will find the microlift. You’ll see the other rooms on your way.”

Manel stiffly walked away from him, doing as she was told. She went over to the stainless steel microlift at the far end of the dining room. She pressed the Up button. Its huge doors opened, revealing an enormous, elegant bronze serving cart, filled with trays of food covered in stainless steel covers as well as two cups of freshly brewed black coffee.

She pushed the cart into the dining room. Ricco was already seated, working on his laptop.

She carefully opened the food covers, revealing a delicious, delightful feast of eggs benedict, bacon and bread, complete with an assortment of fruits and a slice of chocolate cake. Her stomach noisily grumbled. She quickly looked at Ricco, wondering if he heard it. But it appeared he didn't. She was glad she was spared further humiliation. She had not eaten breakfast yet, overseeing the servants as they walked out of her mansion that morning, thanking them for their loyalty and service, even sharing a few copious tears with them.

Manel stood at the side as he devoured his meal at a leisurely pace, picking at his food with his fork. Looking at him as he ate, her hunger intensified, so she averted her gaze.

After almost an hour, Ricco pushed the tray aside, wiping his mouth with the table napkin.

"You can eat now," he said, pointing to a separate one-plate meal intended for her.

She was still furious at their last word clash. She had a good mind to argue with him and tell him he can't order her to eat like a dog. But her rational mind prevailed. There was no use antagonizing him further. As long as she was under servitude to him, she will always be on the losing end. "Choose your battles," she reminded herself.

Aloud, she said, “Thank you, Signor. I will eat later.”

Ricco raised an eyebrow, as if waiting for her to say more. She remained silent, her eyes lowered somewhere between the floor and the food tray.

The corners of his lips curved upward. “Suit yourself.” He stood up. “I would like to dress for work now.”

She gaped at him, aghast. All her resolve at being passive flew out the window. The words tumbled out of her mouth like the rushing waters of a raging river. “If you think you can make me undress you, think again! I won’t do that, ever!”

There was the briefest satisfying gleam in his eyes, as if he took pleasure at her violent reaction, before he scathingly shot back, equally indignant. “You flatter yourself again, Manel. Only my lovers undress me. Not a *lowly* servant like you. What I want you to do is prepare my clothes and lay them down on the bed for me. And don’t tell me I should hide from you while dressing up. *This is my home. This is my room. And you are my servant.* So, you can either turn around, or go out of this room and come back when I call you.”

His words were accurate, despite having the effect of a sucker-punch in the gut. Properly chastised, she almost ran to his dressing room,

closing its doors and standing there for a few seconds to compose herself, willing the fire in her red cheeks to subside. Then, remembering what she came in there for, she went to his closets and picked a blackish gray Kiton suit, some underwear and socks, and black Ferragamo shoes.

When she returned, she carefully laid down the clothes on his bed. He stood towering behind her as she did so, making her feel smaller than her already short five feet three inches height against his own. The hairs on her nape stood up as she felt his eyes following her every move. She was clearly at a disadvantage, watching her like this, and he knew it.

Afterward, she stepped aside, her heart palpitating madly. He nodded approvingly at her choice of clothing, smirking, "Not bad. Not bad at all." As if regretting that he paid her a compliment, he scowled, waving her away with his hand.

She hastily retreated to his dressing room before he changed his mind and undress in front of her. She spent her few minutes of freedom from his presence by staring around the elegant wood and glass design of the enormous room as she sat primly on the round leather chair at the center. When he called her name, she told herself the butterflies fluttering in her stomach were due to

fear and anxiety, not excitement at seeing him again.

“Put on my necktie,” Ricco ordered as she approached him. Now dressed in a white dress shirt with French double cuffs and black trousers that she picked for him, he looked every bit as commanding as when he was still in his robe—and equally dangerous. His curly black hair, thick at the top and cropped at the sides, was brushed up, giving him a menacing aura which gave her the shivers.

He was still buttoning up his shirt when she stood in front of him, reaching for his tie. From this vantage point, the scent of his minty breath and aftershave drifted to her nose, filling her up with a sensation completely alien to her.

Deftly, she put on his tie. Just as she was finishing, her hand accidentally brushed with his. The electric tingle that coursed through her veins caught her by surprise, making her gasp out loud. “Oh!” Realizing that he had seen her treacherous reaction, she peeked at him and was startled to find him staring at her fixedly with inflamed eyes.

“Are you trying to seduce me, Manel? Because all your efforts will be futile. Girls like you aren’t my type.”

Taken aback by his sudden attack, she asked,

more out of curiosity than anger at his accusation, “What do you mean, girls like me?”

His eyes narrowed into slits. “Golddiggers, of course.”

Manel’s hand lashed out on its own, landing in a loud slap on his face.

But before she can turn away from him, he grasped her wrist and roared at her, “You forget your place, *servant*. Do that to me again, and I’ll see to it that you languish in prison for the rest of your life!”

He let go of her wrist as if he was disgusted by her. She staggered back, her hands grasping the edge of the serving cart, preventing her fall. It caused the utensils and cutlery to tumble down the carpeted floor, creating a big mess.

“Clean that up. *Servant*,” he commanded. Picking up his suit, he strode out of the room, his steps heavy and incensed.

Manel was left shaking, drowning in emotions she couldn’t quite describe. She buried her hands in her face, biting down hard on her lower full lip, but it was no use trying to be strong. Alone and out of his sight, she allowed the tears to come at last. One by one the tears fell, until, unable to control herself, she sobbed hard and loud.

She cried miserably, hating the man whose

home was now her hell, but whose presence and touch made her feel like she was on the verge of heaven.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Mayumi Cruz writes diverse, cross-genre fiction with emotionally-charged and thought-provoking plots. Some of her writings have appeared in Philippines Graphic, Medium, AdHoc Fiction and The Drabble. Her short story, Black Love, won in Bookbed's Fictory Contest in 2017. To date, she has self-published eight books and co-authored three anthologies. An artist and crafter as well, she lives in the Philippines with her husband and three sons.

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