



*Victory Storm*

I'M NOT  
*like you*  
WANT ME



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*Seven years later*

"How depressing," Breanna sighed sadly as she looked around the half-deserted showroom. "Luigi told me that if this continues, he will have to close down and go back to Italy. Sales are down, we have fewer and fewer customers and there are too many expenses," Lexie added worriedly.

"I cannot lose this job. I have a child to support and an ex-husband who pays me alimony with the dropper."

"Me too. I live alone and I can't imagine going back to my parents' house," I muttered distressed at the idea of being without a salary and ending up under the suffocating sights of my mother, who still didn't accept that I was a vegan, or my father, who still hadn't forgiven me for dropping out of university and preferring

independence thanks to that job as a saleswoman in a furniture shop.

I was twenty-six years old and that was not the life I had dreamed of. As a girl I had seen 25-year-olds as professionally accomplished women, happily married, perhaps in the throes of their first pregnancy.

I had imagined a full and wonderful life, not being on the verge of unemployment, living alone in a one-room apartment with two strays who only used me as a freeloader giving board and lodging according to their needs or the weather.

Not even my love life provided any relief, as I was unable to sustain a relationship without making mistakes or causing damage.

And my friends... Hope worked all day and still lived with her aunt, while Arianna got married and had less and less time for me.

I huffed bitterly.

"Don't worry! I'll take care of it!" exclaimed Laetitia behind our backs.

"I've just concluded a negotiation to furnish an entire Victorian cottage with a sea view on West Hill," she informed us, carefully re-buttoning her blouse that left several square inches of flat, super-tanned belly and stunning cleavage on display.

"Let me guess. Your client was a single man!" speculated Breanna, who by now knew, as we all did, the

pick-up methods of her colleague who always used her body to close deals.

At that moment I was sure Breanna was wondering whether Laetitia's flat stomach or her bra size was more successful with men, since she often complained about her pear-shaped body with narrow shoulders, microscopic breasts, but plenty of hips and thighs. She still wondered what her husband, to whom she had been married for eleven years, found beautiful about her.

"Separated, with two children. He has a mansion in Rye and a penthouse in London, but has recently bought a house here for weekends. He's a bank manager and we're going for drinks tonight. You don't mind, do you, if I leave half an hour early? You guys cover for me with Luigi."

"There's no need for that. You know all is forgiven," hissed Lexie irritated by the boss's special treatment of his favourite, who always managed to make the best sales of the month.

We all hated her and she did nothing to hide her haughtiness.

"I know," Laetitia giggled contentedly.

"I'm leaving a little early too," echoed Patricia, the last employee hired, as she went for coffee in the back.

"Benny's taking me to *Delizia's* tonight!"

"Again?", I asked too overcome with envy to keep quiet. That restaurant was the best and most expensive in town. The reviews were unbelievable and I had always wanted to go there myself, but the prices were out of proportion with my salary. Patricia was very lucky to have such a sweet and rich boyfriend who would always invite her to that fancy place for dinner.

"Yes. Benny will do anything for me. We have been together for five years now and have been living together for two. We are one and the same and he only wants my happiness. Isn't that lovely?"

"Yes," I whispered stifling a groan of self-pity.

Patricia was two years older than me, but at my age she had already achieved goals I could only dream of.

"I'm putting all the photos of the dinner on Instagram tonight. Don't miss them!"

*How could I risk missing your perfect dinner with the perfect man, knowing that I will spend the next hour munching celery to drain excess fluids (like you do on your lunch breaks) and crying about my life of loneliness?*

"Are you planning to work today or stay here and chat? Maybe you also want me to bring you a coffee and biscuits?", rebuked Ivan, the oldest salesman in the showroom who had a passion for Autocad and modular kitchens.

Averting him, I avoided answering as I had already had two coffees and consumed the whole packet of

Oreos I had taken with me.

"Ivan, there are no customers! Look, the salon is empty," Lexie pointed out to him.

"That doesn't give you the right to stand here and do nothing! I warned Luigi to cut staff, but he is too weak to go that far and you guys are taking advantages."

As always, a war broke out between Ivan and Lexie in an instant. Only the intervention of Didier, the architect in charge of designing the children's bedrooms, managed to settle the quarrel.

By now he was so used to the noise and shouting in his section, always full of lively and agitated children, that he no longer flinched at a fight.

I had always believed that the job would never affect him in the slightest, until he confessed to me that after working there for a month he had vowed he didn't want children. He was even prepared to have a vasectomy.

As if the relaxation room reserved for staff was not already too full, here came Dylan with his supermodel walk and a physique so muscular that the tight clothes left little to the imagination.

He nonchalantly put his arm around my shoulders.

"Hey baby, you wouldn't happen to have any Oreos left? I'm so hungry..."

"I'm out of them."

"Even the spare pack?"

"You got me that one days ago."

"And you didn't think to buy another one?" he scolded me with that seductive hardened air that made me lose my mind and irritated me at the same time. I was about to reply that I was tired of his demands, when he pulled away to go and put his arm around Lexie's neck. "Honey, shall we go for a smoke?"

"Only if you're buying," an annoyed Lexie answered him, pulling that windbag off her body.

"I forgot my cigarettes at home."

"Same as always."

"Come on, honey."

"Holler *honey* to somebody else, got it?"

"God, you're so boring!"

Handsome, freeloading and full of himself!

Even though I was his *baby* and Lexie his *honey*, he remained eternally single and only the two of us seemed to understand why.

'Go and annoy Laetitia. I'm sure if you sleep with her again, she'll forgive you for dumping her last time," Lexie dismissed him irritated. "It only happened once and we even risked getting caught, since the bed where we fucked can be seen from the main window."

"It's not that you risked it! You were actually caught by yours truly, who alerted you by banging on the glass as I closed the shop," I reminded him, putting myself between him and Lexie.

"I thought you wanted to join us."



"I'm not that kind of person! Instead of going to the gym, why don't you start doing some exercises to keep those two remaining neurons active?",

I blurted out nervously, trying not to dredge up my teenage memories of getting up to all sorts of mischief, to the point of also bringing about catastrophic consequences for those around me. My behaviour had destroyed my ex-boyfriend's career and since then I had not dared to do anything reckless or out of the box. I had gone from being rebellious and eccentric to being reliable and sometimes a boring good girl.

"What are neurons?"

"Oh God, please get out of my sight!", I pleaded, pushing him away.

Since we were full, as usual, we made everyone another round of coffee.

The salon was empty. The only ones missing were Luigi, the boss, and his daughter Stella, who was in charge of accounting and finance, but was never actually present and used her position to dictate and boss everyone around... even though she was only twenty-two and the youngest of the group. " Now that we are all here, I would like to take advantage of this moment to tell you that I have found out what Luigi intends to do with this shop, as his accountant has advised him to close it," suddenly erupted Ivan, the oldest of the employees and a friend of the boss for twenty years.

In an instant, Lexie, Breanna, Laetitia, Patricia, Didier, Dylan and I were paralysed with fear.

We were all terrified of losing our jobs.

"As you know, Luigi is too good to dismiss us first without trying everything, so he has called in a *temporary manager*, someone who will come here for a while to monitor our work and assess along with his team what measures to take to keep the business running." "Surely he will propose staff cuts!" exclaimed Breanna agitated.

"It is likely. That's why it will be essential to work hard and make as many sales as possible."

"What if we don't succeed?"

"Then *Moduli Arredi* will close by the end of the year. I heard Luigi say that to his daughter."

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