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Tutto su di noi
[lit. "Everything About Us"]

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Chapter 3

I made sure nobody would talk about me behind my back. Imagine, someone like Marzia Marziali with her martial stride, one of the few girls who had been doing wrestling and calisthenics in the past few years. I had more muscles than many of those “chest-less” guys, as my mother used to call them. And with arms that looked like harmless tubes, she would add immediately afterwards. The seasonal crushes became a distant memory. I called them earthworms.

I was able to do inconceivable things for a girl. For instance, I could do pull-ups from a bar, or push-ups with my arms on the ground and my legs raised and open. For wrestling, I trained at the gym ASD Borgo Prati, which opened back in 1899. That is where I spent all my time instead of studying. I became incredibly strong by the time I was eighteen years old. I don’t deny it, sometimes I would look at myself naked in the mirror with real admiration. There wasn’t any sign of weakness, not a trace of microscopic cellulite, nothing. I was athletically perfect. I say athletically because not everybody would have wanted a body like that, but I did: I wanted it from the day Franco made me eat sand. I promised myself that nobody would ever manage to do it to me again.

I was part of the youth from the eighties. Few of us did a sport like that. My parents never came to see me when I had a wrestling competition. My mother was scared and my father would get so angry that he couldn’t contain himself. It was more than anger, it was envy. He wanted to be like me, he wanted my courage, my physique, and all the victories I collected. One day, when he came to pick me up at the gym, my coach told him:

“Your daughter is so strong that I don’t know any other girl she can wrestle with.”

“Then make her wrestle a guy,” he answered defiantly.

“There isn’t much to joke about,” my coach replied. “She could beat some of them as well. Certain people have a body that responds in an incredible way. Your daughter is one of them.”

“She might have gotten it from me.”

“Possibly,” he answered kindly. “Maybe if you trained...”

“Could I start now?”

“Sure, there are no age limits at the amateur level. It would do you a lot of good. It’s one of those rejuvenating activities.”

He came with me a dozen times. But he would get out of breath, he was slow, and he expected to achieve results in just a short time. My coach started calling him a hasty cat when I was with him. One day, he whispered into my ear:

“He won’t last much longer. But then you will have to tell me what excuse he comes up with, OK?”

One afternoon, my father and I were leaving the gym together with our bags over our shoulders when he told me: “I’m fed up with it. It’s a shitty sport. I don’t understand why you like it so much. I could understand if it were boxing,” and he threw a few ridiculous punches in the air. “But this tossing around on the ground is an absurd sport.”

“Then switch to calisthenics,” I suggested.

“Are you crazy? I would pull a muscle with that... No, I’ll keep playing soccer and riding my bicycle.”

I winked at him and he seemed content. As if I had paid him a compliment. He never realized when I was making fun of him. He was so happy that he invited me to the bar. He drank two glasses of red wine, one after the other, while I sipped on an orange juice.

The wine immediately went to his head: he was drinking on an empty stomach and after doing some physical activity. At a certain point, he started looking at me with those bright blue eyes in such an intense way that I got scared. I thought he wanted to hit me and I was ready to strike back. But, luckily, I was wrong. He just wanted to open up and share a secret. By quitting wrestling, he ended up reluctantly admitting that he wasn’t good enough, that he was too old and didn’t have the lung capacity after all the cigarettes he had been smoking since he was a kid. And now he wanted to redeem himself in my eyes.

So, out of the blue, while I was drinking my orange juice, he told me with the smuggest expression I had ever seen on his face: “I’ve had a mistress for some time. She’s an elementary school teacher. Someone who studied, you know? And she’s also a very beautiful woman. Classy, from Northern Italy, and she talks well. You would like her a lot. She is much taller than me, blonde, with green eyes. And her ass is something else. Her nails are always long and polished, and her hair is always styled. And she isn’t married, she is all mine.”

I looked at him silently. I quickly took in all the information that he had just provided. A heavy load of distress, almost like a freight elevator, went up and down several times. In the end, I was overcome by an inexplicable sense of admiration. But it wasn’t admiration, it was the fact that he had opened up to me. I felt honored for a damage that I would end up paying dearly. He had managed to pin me down, to turn me into an accomplice. He had tricked me with that woman’s qualities, which was sort of like saying: “Can you imagine? If someone like me can make a woman like that fall in love...” Yes, that was the winning argument. I was proud of something that would soon make me hate him to death for the rest of my life. But not at that moment. He had picked me to reveal a secret like that. It isn’t every day that fathers confide in their daughters in such a way. Sure, it was right after quitting wrestling, but it was his way of alluding that he was engaging in a more interesting version of it with that schoolteacher. And, to top it all off, he even pulled out her picture and showed it to me.

I found myself fiddling with the photo in my hands. I don't remember that much, my thoughts must have been very confused. In the end, the only thing that I was able to say, maybe out of some semblance of solidarity with my mother, was:

"She's fat."

"What are you talking about? She's a shapely woman, soft. But never mind..."

"But never mind what?"

"What can someone like you who reduced her body into a bunch of muscles understand about women, and I mean real women?"

"Mine is the body of the future. Except for a few cases, those from your generation are the flaccid bodies of the past."

"Does it mean that in the future men will like women who look like this?"

"And many in the present too. Believe me."

"That may be," he said smiling, still ecstatic for the burden he had lifted off his chest and tossed entirely onto my muscular shoulders.

That evening, Mom prepared lasagna for dinner. When we opened the door, we were welcomed by its incomparable scent. She never revealed its secret to anyone. But I had discovered in the pantry a small bottle with a strange pink salt and one with pepper, which was also pink. That could have been the reason for its distinctive aroma, but also the fact that besides the ragù she also added some slices of mozzarella and hard-boiled eggs cut in thin slices.

My father rubbed his hands together and went to wash them. Then he took a seat at the table and told her that he wouldn't go to the gym with me anymore. He liked to do a different kind of workout, he said as he winked at her, which made my mother sway her hips out of joy when she went back to the kitchen to get the wine. He even turned in my direction and winked at me. And, while he was at it, he also winked at my unwitting brother.

My mother put an enormous slice of lasagna on my plate, which made me immediately nauseous.

"How many times do I have to tell you that huge portions kill my appetite?" I remarked with a scathing tone.

She apologized and cut off half of it, putting it back in the baking pan since I hadn't touched it yet.

"Why, the athlete isn't sick, is she?" my father said as he stroked my hair. "Show Mom those nice little muscles of yours."

"I don't want to," I replied embarrassed.

"It doesn't matter, I know them," Mom said lovingly. "I wish I had her muscles..."

"Do you want to be a woman of the future?" he asked, smiling.

"Why not? Better of the future than of the past."

That evening I went to bed with an upset stomach and an unhappy heart. After all, I had betrayed my mother. With that confession, my father had put me in a cage, but the bars weren't made of steel, they were made of tears. I felt horrible for having felt a certain pride for being chosen for that confession. Many of his friends knew about it for sure, but he also wanted the complicity of somebody at home. And since he couldn't have my mother's, he chose me. What did it mean? Was he trying to impress me? Weren't his friends enough? Was he trying to prove to his daughter that he was a ladies' man? Or was he telling me that the affair with the schoolteacher was something different, more serious, and that it might also lead to a separation from Mom?

I felt a sharp pain in my head, up on top, in the middle of my cranium. As if someone had hammered a nail into it. How far would it go? Down into my throat or even into my heart? I thought about it and felt my heartbeat slowing down. Of course, I was dying to atone for my sin of omission. Or for not attacking him. What is it about parents revealing something in confidence that suddenly creates a blood pact with them? And whose blood is it? I felt like it was my own that was gushing out, but Mom's blood was also spurting out like mine, just that she didn't know it yet. So, by staying silent, was I bleeding her to death again? Was I her executioner?

I couldn't get out of bed the following day. Mom called the family doctor, who arrived in the afternoon. While he visited me, she stood in my bedroom's doorway, wringing her hands, asking him over and over:

"What's wrong with her?"

And the doctor kept on replying:

"Let me visit her, Ma'am. Let me finish the visit."

Then she would answer with one *of course* after another, as if her entire body were itching. Every now and then, my brother would peek inside my room and she would tell him to get lost. But in a rude way. As if other people's eyes, eyes that weren't my mother's, could harm the diagnosis.

"She seems exhausted," the doctor remarked. "It looks like the beginning of a nervous breakdown."

"Just like that, from one day to the next? She was fine yesterday and today she is exhausted?"

"Breakdowns don't always give a forewarning. We will have to give her some sedatives and let her rest. She will have to eat small portions, and frequently, so as not to strain her stomach. Be ready for a sudden loss of appetite."

"It's my fault," Mom said. "I always fill her plate too much. But my daughter is an athlete. She has to eat, doesn't she?"

"First, we will do some nice blood tests. And once we ascertain that she is in good health, we will do something to get rid of what's hurting her head."

When the doctor left, Mom started pacing around the house with clasped hands, repeating: "What's hurting her head..." For dinner, she gave me a small bowl of broth with a teaspoon of Liebig meat extract. I was able to swallow four spoonfuls and then told her that my stomach couldn't handle any more. I even had a hard time drinking water. I told her that I was feeling something really weird, as if a shutter had been closed, sealing off the access to my esophagus.

"Like the ones you told me about."

"Which ones?" she asked, worried.

"The ones they used to have at the movie theater, they would open them during intermission to change the air inside. Mine is closed. Nothing is getting through."

Thus began the period of endlessly slow mastication. I would chew on pieces of meat until they turned into mush and, in the end, I would spit them out. The same thing happened with any other kind of food. Three days later, Mom bought a baby bottle, which she would fill with some very light tea and a few Plasmon cookies melted in it. I didn't drink much of it, but it was the only nourishment I accepted, after always making sure that the tea was actually light and the cookies in it were few. I started to lose weight. In a few days, I was already a different person. One time, as I stepped out of the shower, I saw myself naked in the mirror and started to cry. Where had Marzia Marziali's muscles gone?

“I want them back!” I started shouting in the bathroom. And then, with a lower tone of voice: “I want them back!”

My father didn’t get it, the fact that I might have a nervous breakdown made him laugh. He would walk by my bedroom door. I could see that midget with his short legs snickering as if I were there making a mockery of them all, and then he would always blurt out the same thing:

“A nervous breakdown at your age. Who’s ever heard of such a thing? Get out of bed and have a little something to eat.”

That is what my father always used to call it: a little something to eat. It was part of his jargon, always full of diminutives. But that day it seemed like he was referring to himself, he was such a small man that he couldn’t even have a large meal.

A few days later, while my mother was in the kitchen making dinner, he came back from work with a package for me. I opened it and found a yellow cotton T-shirt with some orange seagulls flying on it.

“Do you like it?” he asked.

I replied that it was nice. So he came close to me with a conspiratorial demeanor, he narrowed his eyes and lowered his voice: “It’s a little gift for you from the schoolteacher. She cares about you. She told me that she saw you on the street and that you are a very good-looking girl.”

I didn’t make any comments. I folded the shirt and placed it back in its wrapping paper. At that point, however, he called out to Mom.

“Mom,” he said. “Come see the pretty gift that I got for Marzia.”

Mom came running because it was very unusual for her husband to buy presents for their children. She arrived with a worried expression on her face of someone who had only one thought on her mind: he had spoken to the doctor and knew something that she didn’t.

I pulled out the T-shirt. Mom picked it up, touched it, and smelled it.

“Nice,” she said. “Didn’t you get anything for your son?”

“Why? Is he having a breakdown too?”

I couldn’t fall asleep that night because for some time, and for another very serious reason, I had been wishing for that half-pint of my father to die. I wasn’t just wishing for it, I was plotting it. There were many ways to make him die: poisoning his food; or giving him a push while he was leaning out of the window to talk to a friend in the street below; paying someone to run him over with his car; digging a deep hole right outside of the front door so that, when he came back in the evening covered in the teacher’s kisses, he would fall into it and I could bury him alive. This last death, the most unlikely one, was also the one that fascinated me the most. Alive, injured but alive. I would listen to his increasingly feeble voice with my fingers plugging my ears and I would tell him: “I can’t hear you, beautiful siren. I can’t hear you.”

But all that mulling over how to kill him made my heartbeat accelerate so much that I got scared. So I got out of bed and walked into my parents’ bedroom, where I motioned to my mother to follow me to my room.

“What a fright,” she said using one of her husband’s expressions while she measured my heart rate as she looked at the hands of the alarm clock. “I get that you don’t want to talk to your father, but can’t you tell your mom why you’re suffering so much?”

There wasn’t much time to come up with a good reason, so I told her that I was in love but it was unrequited. It was something that happened some time ago.

“And who was it?” she asked with curiosity.

“You’ve never seen him. He wasn’t worth anything.”

“But if you’re still thinking about him...”

“I’m thinking about it now because I didn’t think about it earlier.”

“What an odd rationale. And how do you know that he didn’t reciprocate your feelings?”

“As a matter of fact, I don’t. But I don’t want to know. At this point, I don’t want to know anymore.”

And then I fell asleep with her at my bedside. From that night on, Mom put a cot in my bedroom and always slept by my side.

I felt guilty about this as well. Now the half-pint didn’t have any excuses not to touch her and he could think solely about his schoolteacher. Was I going crazy? What would happen when I also lost all of my muscles?

My mother bought me a bag of what I used to call “little fruits” when I was a child. They were fruit jellies. She got them because I liked them and they were one of the few things I would eat. I would wake up with tachycardia every night, at two a.m. sharp, as if I had a clock inside my heart. Mom would grab a fruit jelly in the dark and put it in my mouth, saying that it was better than a sedative. But one night I closed my mouth and then spat it out, turning on the light. The candy was covered in a bunch of ants. I started bawling my eyes out. My mother laid down next to me and held me close. I felt like I was her murderer. To whom was I loyal? To him for not calling him out or to her for not making her suffer?

What they called a sudden nervous breakdown improved from one day to the next. Something was still boiling inside me every now and then. But I kept it at bay and often told myself: “You are always you, you are Marzia Marziali.”

In mid-August, without saying anything to anyone, I got on a train and went to the mountains, to the Gran Sasso, by myself. I stayed in a hotel that had a giant screen outdoors and another one in the dining room, which were constantly showing songs by The Doors. It was 1985 and I spent almost the entire time sitting on the porch, looking at that rocky landscape and watching Jim Morrison, who was already long dead and a legend. It made me smile. Nobody had ever been a legend for me. The mountains made me really hungry, I especially craved *arrosticini* [t/n: skewered grilled meat], because at the time I still ate meat. Everybody ate it.

One afternoon, I was sitting there with Jim Morrison and those dry rocky mountains; at a certain point, I stood up and started running uphill headed toward the peak. My heart was pounding in my chest, then I felt what was happening, I got my second wind, and I kept on running. When I got back to the hotel it was already dark. I went to my room to take a shower and came down to the restaurant to eat. The dining hall was large, but there were always just a few people who dined there. That evening it was just me and a guy a few tables over who was at most twenty-five years old. I glanced at him and thought that he looked handsome. He must have been very tall. His hair was a nice shade of light brown and his eyes were green. He bit into his *arrosticino* and smiled at me. I did the same. He took his plate, his glass, and his bottle and he came over, sitting down next to me. He didn’t even ask for permission, it was already explicit.

“Why are you here on vacation by yourself?”

“And you?”

“Come on, let’s tell each other.”

“I had some money set aside and everything sucked. But, above all, I sucked.”

“Why, what did you do?”

“It was a matter of reticence. And you?”

“My mother died after a long illness.”

We drank both of our bottles. Then we went up to my bedroom.

“I’m sorry for you, but I’m not a virgin,” I told him.

“It doesn’t matter, nobody’s perfect.”

It pains me to admit it, but I wasn’t with such a handsome man for many years after that. We loved each other for several hours. And it went on like that until the end of my vacation. When we said goodbye, he asked me for my telephone number. I thought about the ending of *Once Upon a Time in the West* and, trying to imitate that wonderful actor, I replied:

“Maybe someday we will meet again.”

“You mean here?”

“No, in Sweet Water.”

He understood perfectly what I meant. I had to get up on my tiptoes to kiss him and tell him that, in my own way, I loved him. He burst out in a beautiful laughter, full of gleaming teeth.

“Let’s take it slow,” he said.

When I got home, my mother was agitated when she greeted me. She told me that she had called the police, that I had aged her by a decade.

My father was sitting in the living room in his usual armchair, reading the newspaper. I walked down the hallway and stopped to look at him. He looked back at me. Then, as he was turning a page, I pretended to raise the tip of a cowboy hat with my right index finger.

“Aren’t you going to say anything?” my mother yelled at him. “Someone like you who doesn’t let anyone get away with anything.”

My father finished turning the page and went back to reading.

I locked myself in my room and made a rude gesture. One of Marzia Marziali’s many famous rude gestures.

I started training again in September; my first match was going to be before Christmas. My athletic heart had started beating regularly again, and even my muscles returned. In the evening, I would go in front of the full-length mirror in my bedroom, lather myself in oil, and stand in bodybuilding poses. The handsome guy from the Gran Sasso had told me while we were making love: “You’re really toned.” He was too, but I didn’t ask him what sport he did. Guys at the time had preposterous bodies: sunken chests, skinny arms, and little thighs that could maybe kick the ball around a couple of times at most. Years later, I can still perfectly trace that man’s body. I could recognize him with my eyes closed, just by touching him. He was also very tan: in the mountains you get that brick-colored tan that went very well with his green eyes. And he also had a pleasant smell.

Throughout my life, I would tell myself at least once a day that he was the perfect man. The reason why I hadn’t given him my number was because I knew that perfection is not of this world.