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DESPITE IT ALL, I MADE IT THROUGH

The Origins

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Chapter 1

That summer, I went down to Italy. On vacation.

We had agreed to meet by the sea, to enjoy the beach. Nothing more. No living room, no table where we'd sit across from each other for the first time. Just the beach. It left room to breathe.

The beach club stretched along the shore. Rows of umbrellas planted in perfect lines, all the same color, and underneath, the lounge chairs set out side by side, packed tight against each other. A wooden stand for the lifeguard. At the back,

behind the changing cabins, a pool of a brighter blue, for people who didn't like salt.

The air smelled of sunscreen. Somewhere, a radio was playing an Italian song. Children were shrieking at the water's edge, and mothers were calling them back without much conviction.

The sand burned underfoot. People walked fast, up on their toes, to the nearest patch of shade.

And out in front, the sea. Calm, almost flat, with a light wave that came to die on the sand and slipped away again. Clear near the shore, darker farther out, until it blended into the sky. Immense. It didn't ask anything of anyone.

I was nervous. We already knew each other a little, through our messages. Still, something tightened in the pit of my stomach with every step.

I made my way between the rows of umbrellas, searching for her. Under almost every umbrella, there was a woman. One reading, one sleeping, one

calling her kids back. Which one? Two years of messages, and I didn't know how she carried herself, how she walked, what her smile looked like in real life.

She must have been looking for me too, somewhere, in the middle of all those people.

And as I walked, it all came back to me.

* * *

It all started with Graziella's death.

Dario was the one who told me. Dario is my little half-brother. In this family, everybody is somebody's half-brother, that's just how it is. He and I, by some miracle, had stayed in touch.

One day, he called me.

He told me Graziella had died.

I didn't feel the pain a son might have felt at his mother's death.

And in the same conversation, Dario added:

"Tommaso, you've got an aunt."

"Sorry, what?" I said.

"Actually, it's more complicated than that," Dario said.

"Oh yeah. As usual."

I said it without thinking. My life had always been complicated. I didn't see why this story would be any different.

For her part, my aunt had wanted to find me. She had searched. She had ended up finding one thread, just one, and that thread was named Dario.

* * *

She was the one who wrote to me first.

A message on my phone. My aunt.

What it said, I don't remember anymore. So many messages have piled up on top of it, and it got lost among the others. I remember what it did to me.

It felt strange.

Holy shit, I have an aunt.

A question came to me right away, and it stayed for a long time. Why had she never tried to see me, before?

I came up with my own answers. Maybe out of discretion. Or maybe because she knew I had been adopted, and she had told herself it was better that way. Better for me.

She told me once that she had already seen me. On certain Sundays, when I was a child, at Graziella's.

I don't remember any of it. I was too little.

* * *

For two years, we wrote to each other. Messages going back and forth between France and Italy. Two years of talking without ever having met.

She gave me the family bit by bit, without dwelling on it. I had other uncles, other aunts, apparently. I didn't know them, and it was normal that I had never been introduced to them. She said it simply.

I told her about my travels and my job. About life in France, and about my loneliness, too.

She told me what she did with her days.

And every time, the same question came back:

"So, when are you coming?"

She asked, and I didn't come. She wasn't the one waiting. She was the one calling.

* * *

The third year, I said yes.

She was happy.

"Really?" she said.

"Yes, yes, this time I'm coming. It's time I came to meet you."