

CHAPTER ONE

GEORGETOWN

The first time Adrian Rizzo met her father, he tried to kill her.

At seven, her world consisted primarily of movement. Most of the time she lived with her mother—and Mimi, who looked after them both—in New York. But sometimes they stayed in L.A. for a few weeks, or in Chicago or Miami.

In the summer, she got to visit with her grandparents in Maryland for at least two weeks. That, in her opinion, was the most fun because they had dogs and a big yard to play in, and a tire for a swing.

When they lived in Manhattan, she went to school, and that was fine. She got to take dance lessons, and do gymnastics, and that was way better than school.

When they traveled for her mother's work, Mimi homeschooled her because she had to be educated. Mimi made learning about the place they stayed part of being educated. Since they were in DC for a whole month, part of school meant visiting the monuments, taking a White House tour, and going to the Smithsonian.

Sometimes she got to work with her mom, and she liked that a lot. Whenever she got to work in one of her mom's fitness videos, she had to learn a routine, like a cardio dance or yoga poses.

She liked learning; she liked dancing.

At five, she did a whole video with her mom geared toward kids and families. A yoga one because, after all, she *was* the baby in Yoga Baby, her mother's company.

It made her proud, and excited that her mother said they'd do another. Maybe when she was ten to target that age group.

Her mom knew all about age groups and demographics and things like that. Adrian heard her talking about them with her manager and her producers.

Her mom knew plenty about fitness, too, and the mind-body connection, and nutrition, and meditation, and all sorts of things like that.

She didn't know how to cook—not like Popi and Nonna, who owned a restaurant. She didn't like to play games like Mimi—because she stayed really busy building her career.

She had a lot of meetings, and rehearsals, and planning sessions, and public appearances, and interviews.

Even at seven, Adrian understood Lina Rizzo didn't know a whole lot about being a mom.

Still, she didn't mind if Adrian played with her makeup—as long as she put everything back where it belonged. And she never got mad if they worked on a routine and Adrian made mistakes.

Best of all on this trip, instead of flying back to New York when her mom finished this video and all the interviews and meetings, they got to drive to visit her grandparents for a long weekend.

She had plans to try to negotiate that into a week, but for now she sat on the floor in the doorway and watched her mother work out another routine.

Lina had chosen this house for the month because it had a home gym with mirrored walls, something as essential to her as the number of bedrooms.

She did squats and lunges, knee lifts, burpees—Adrian knew all the names. And Lina talked to the mirror—her viewers—giving instructions, encouragement.

Now and then she said a bad word and started something over again.

Adrian thought her beautiful, like a sweaty princess, even though she didn't have her makeup on because there weren't any people or cameras. She had green eyes like Nonna and skin that looked like she bathed in the sun—even though she didn't. Her hair—pulled back in a scrunchie now—was like the chestnuts you could buy all warm and smelling good in a bag at Christmastime.

She was tall—not as tall as Popi—and Adrian hoped she would be, too, when she grew up.

She wore tight, tiny shorts and a sports bra—but she wouldn't wear anything that showed so much for videos or appearances because Lina said it wasn't classy.

Since she'd been raised to be mind-body-health conscious, Adrian knew her mom was fit, firm, and fabulous.

Muttering to herself, Lina walked over to make some notes on what Adrian knew was the outline for the video. This one would include three segments—cardio, strength training, and yoga—each thirty minutes, with a bonus fifteen-minute express section on total body.

Lina grabbed a towel to mop off her face and spotted her daughter.

“Crap, Adrian! You gave me a jolt. I didn't know you were there. Where's Mimi?”

“She's in the kitchen. We're going to have chicken and rice and asparagus for dinner.”

“Great. Why don't you go give her a hand with that? I need a shower.”

“How come you're mad?”

“I'm not mad.”

“You were mad when you were talking on the phone with Harry. You yelled how you didn't tell anybody, especially some bad-word tabloid reporter.”

Lina yanked the scrunchie out of her hair the way she did when she had a headache. “You shouldn't listen to private conversations.”

“I didn't listen, I *heard*. Are you mad at Harry?”

Adrian really liked her mother's publicist. He snuck her little bags of M&M's or Skittles and told funny jokes.

“No, I'm not mad at Harry. Go help Mimi. Tell her I'll be down in about a half hour.”

She was, too, mad, Adrian thought when her mother walked away. Maybe not at Harry, but at somebody, because she'd made a lot of mistakes when she'd practiced and said a lot of bad words.

Her mother hardly ever made mistakes.

Or maybe she just had a headache. Mimi said people sometimes got headaches if they worried too much.

Adrian got up from the floor. But since helping with dinner was boring, she went into the fitness room. She stood in front of the mirrors, a girl tall for her age with her curly hair—black as her grandfather’s had once been—escaping a green scrunchie. Her eyes had too much gold in them to rate a true green like her mother’s, but she kept hoping they’d change.

In her pink shorts and flowered T-shirt, she struck a pose. And turning on the music in her head, danced.

She loved her dance classes *and* gymnastics when they were in New York, but now she imagined not taking a class, but leading one.

She twirled, kicked, did a handspring, the splits. Cross-step, salsa, *leap!* Making it up as she went.

She amused herself for twenty minutes. The last innocent twenty minutes of her life.

Then someone pushed the buzzer on the front door. And kept pushing it.

It had an angry sound, and one she’d never forget.

She wasn’t supposed to open the door herself, but that didn’t mean she couldn’t go see. So she wandered out to the living room, then the entranceway as Mimi marched in from the kitchen.

Mimi dried her hands on a bright red dishcloth as she hustled through. “For Pete’s sake! Where’s the fire?”

She rolled her deep brown eyes at Adrian, tucked the cloth in the waistband of her jeans.

A small woman with a powerful voice, she shouted, “Hold your damn horses!”

She knew Mimi was the same age as her mother because they’d gone to college together.

“What’s your problem?” she snapped, then turned the lock and opened the door.

From where she stood, Adrian saw Mimi’s expression go from irritated—like it got when Adrian didn’t pick up her room—to scared.

And everything happened so fast.

Mimi tried to close the door again, but the man pushed it open, pushed her back. He was big, so much bigger than Mimi. He had a little beard with some gray in it, and more in his hair, like silver

wings on the gold, but his face was all red like he'd been running. Adrian's first shock at seeing the big man shove Mimi froze her in place.

"Where the fuck is she?"

"She's not here. You can't barge in here like this. Get out. You get out now, Jon, or I'm calling the police."

"Lying bitch." He grabbed Mimi's arm, shook her. "Where is she? She thinks she can run her mouth, ruin my *life*?"

"Get your hands off me. You're drunk."

When she tried to pull away, he slapped her. The sound reverberated like a gunshot in Adrian's head, and she leapt forward.

"Don't you hit her! You leave her alone!"

"Adrian, you go upstairs. Go upstairs right now."

But temper up, Adrian balled her fists. "He has to go away!"

"For this?" the man snarled at Adrian. "For this she ruins my goddamn life? Doesn't look a thing like me. She must've been whoring around, and she's trying to pin the little bastard on me. Fuck that. Fuck her."

"Adrian, upstairs." Mimi whirled toward her, and Adrian didn't see mad—like what she felt. She saw scared. "*Now!*"

"The bitch is up there, isn't she? Liar. Here's what I do to liars." He didn't slap this time, but used his fist, once, twice, on Mimi's face.

When she crumpled, that fear dove into Adrian. Help. She had to get help.

But he caught her on the stairs, snapped her head back as he grabbed the tail of curly hair and yanked.

She screamed, screamed for her mother.

"Yeah, you call Mommy." He slapped her so the sting burned like fire in her face. "We want to talk to Mommy."

As he dragged her up the stairs, Lina ran out of the bedroom in a robe, her hair still wet from the shower.

"Adrian Rizzo, what the—"

She stopped, stood very still as she locked eyes with the man. "Let her go, Jon. Let her go so you and I can talk."

"You've done enough talking. You ruined my life, you stupid hick."

“I didn’t talk to that reporter—or to anyone about you. That story didn’t come from me.”

“Liar!” He yanked Adrian’s hair again, so hard it felt like her head was on fire.

Lina took two careful steps forward. “Let her go, and we’ll work it out. I can fix this.”

“Too fucking late. The university suspended me this morning. My wife is mortified. My children—and I don’t believe for one fucking minute this little bitch is mine—are crying. You came back here, back to *my* city, to do this.”

“No, Jon. I came for work. I didn’t talk to the reporter. It’s been over seven years, Jon, why would I do this now? At all? You’re hurting my daughter. Stop hurting my daughter.”

“He hit Mimi.” Adrian could smell her mother’s shower and shampoo—the subtle sweetness of orange blossoms. And the stink from the man she didn’t know was sweat and bourbon. “He hit her in the face, and she fell down.”

“What have you . . .” Lina took her eyes off him to look over the railing that ran across the second floor. She saw Mimi, face bloody, crawling behind a sofa.

She tracked her gaze back to Jon. “You have to stop this, Jon, before someone gets hurt. Let me—”

“I’m hurt, you fucking whore!”

His voice sounded hot and red, like his face, like the fire burning in Adrian’s scalp.

“I’m sorry this happened, but—”

“My family’s hurt! Want to see some hurt? Let’s start with your bastard.”

He threw her. Adrian had the sensation of flying, brief and terrifying, before she hit the edge of the top step. The fire that had been in her head now burst in her wrist, her hand, flared up her arm. Then her head banged against the wood, and all she could see was her mother as the man lurched toward her.

He hit her, he hit her, but her mother hit back, and kicked. And there were terrible sounds, so terrible she wanted to cover her ears, but she couldn’t move, could only sprawl on the steps and shake.

Even when her mother shouted at her to run, she couldn't.

He had his hands around her mother's throat, shaking her, and her mom hit him in the face, like he had Mimi.

There was blood, there was blood, on her mom, on the man.

They were holding each other, almost like a hug, but hard and mean. Then her mother stomped down on his foot, jerked her knee up. And when the man stumbled back, she shoved.

He hit the railing. Then he was flying.

Adrian saw him fall, arms waving. She saw him crash into the table where her mother put flowers and candles. She heard those terrible sounds. She saw the blood run out from his head, his ears, his nose.

She saw . . .

Then her mother lifted her, turned her, pressed her face to her breast.

"Don't look, Adrian. It's all right now."

"It hurts."

"I know." Lina cradled Adrian's wrist. "I'm going to fix it. Mimi. Oh, Mimi."

"The police are coming." Her eye swollen, half-closed, already blackening, Mimi wobbled up the steps, then sat and put her arms around both of them. "Help's coming."

Over Adrian's head, Mimi mouthed two words. *He's dead.*

Adrian would always remember the pain, and the quiet blue eyes of the paramedic who stabilized the greenstick fracture in her wrist. He had a quiet voice, too, when he shined a little light in her eyes, when he asked her how many fingers he held up.

She'd remember the policemen, the first ones who came after the sirens stopped screaming. The ones in the dark blue uniforms.

But most of it, even as it happened, seemed blurry and distant.

They huddled in the second-floor sitting room with its view of the back courtyard and its little koi pond. Mostly the police in the uniforms talked to her mother because they took Mimi to the hospital.

Her mother told them the man's name, Jonathan Bennett, and how he taught English literature at Georgetown University. Or did, when she knew him.

Her mother said what happened, or started to.

Then a man and a woman came in. The man was really tall and wore a brown tie. His skin was a darker brown, and his teeth really white. The woman had red hair cut short, and freckles all over her face.

They had badges like on TV shows.

"Ms. Rizzo, I'm Detective Riley, and this is my partner, Detective Cannon." The woman hooked her badge back on her belt. "We know this is difficult, but we need to ask you and your daughter some questions."

Then she smiled at Adrian. "It's Adrian, right?"

When Adrian nodded, Riley looked back at Lina. "Is it all right if Adrian shows me her room, if she and I talk there while you talk to Detective Cannon?"

"Will it be quicker that way? They took my friend—my daughter's nanny—to the hospital. Broken nose, concussion. And Adrian has what the paramedic thinks is a greenstick fracture on her left wrist, and she hit her head."

"You look a little rough yourself," Cannon commented, and Lina shrugged. Then winced at the movement.

"Bruised ribs will heal, so will my face. He really focused on my face."

"We can have you taken to the hospital now, and talk there once you've seen a doctor."

"I'd rather go when . . . you're finished downstairs."

"Understood." Riley looked back at Adrian. "Is it okay if we talk in your room, Adrian?"

"I guess so." She got up, holding her arm in its sling close to her chest. "I won't let you take my mom to jail."

"Don't be silly, Adrian."

Ignoring her mother, Adrian stared into Riley's eyes. They were green, but lighter than her mother's. "I won't let you."

"Got it. We're just going to talk, okay? Is your room up here?"

“Two doors down on the right,” Lina said. “Go on, Adrian, go with Detective Riley. Then we’ll go check on Mimi. Everything’s going to be fine.”

Adrian led the way and Riley put her smile back on as they walked into a room done in soft pinks and spring greens. A big stuffed dog lay on the bed.

“This is a pretty great room. And really tidy.”

“I had to clean it up this morning, or no going to see the cherry blossoms and get ice cream sundaes.” She winced, much like Lina had. “Don’t tell about the sundaes. We were supposed to get frozen yogurt.”

“Our secret. Is your mom really strict about what you eat?”

“Sometimes. Mostly.” Tears sparkled into her eyes. “Is Mimi going to die like the man did?”

“She got hurt, but not real bad. And I know they’re taking good care of her. How about we sit here with this guy?”

Riley sat on the side of the bed, gave the big dog a pat. “What’s his name?”

“He’s Barkley. Harry gave him to me for Christmas. We can’t have a real dog now because we live in New York and travel too much.”

“He looks like a great dog. Can you tell me and Barkley what happened?”

It poured out, a flood through a break in a dam.

“The man came to the door. He kept buzzing and buzzing, so I went out to see. I’m not supposed to open the door myself, so I waited for Mimi. She came out from the kitchen and opened the door. Then she tried to shut it again, really fast, but he pushed it open, and he pushed her. He almost knocked her down.”

“Did you know him?”

“Nuh-uh, but Mimi did, because she called him Jon and told him to go away. He was mad and yelling and saying bad words. I’m not supposed to say them.”

“That’s okay.” Riley kept petting Barkley like he was a real dog. “I get the gist.”

“He wanted to see my mom, but Mimi said she wasn’t here even though she was. She was upstairs taking a shower. And he kept

yelling, and he slapped her face. He hit her. You're not supposed to hit. Hitting somebody's wrong."

"It was wrong."

"I yelled at him to leave her alone because he had her arms, and he was hurting her. And he looked at me—he didn't see me before, but he looked at me, and it made me scared how he looked at me. But he was hurting Mimi, and I got mad. Mimi said to go upstairs, to me, I mean, but he was hurting her. Then he—he hit her with—with his fist."

Adrian made one with her good hand while tears began to slide down her cheeks. "And there was blood, and she fell, and I ran. I ran to try to get to Mom, but he caught me. He pulled my hair, he pulled it so hard, and he pulled me up the stairs like that, and I was yelling for Mom."

"You want to stop, honey? We can wait for you to tell me the rest."

"No. No. Mom ran out, and saw him. And she kept saying for him to let me go, but he wouldn't. He kept saying she'd ruined his life, with a lot of bad words. The really bad ones, and she kept saying she hadn't told, and she'd fix it, but to let me go. He was hurting me. And he called me bad names, and he—he, threw me."

"He threw you?"

"At the stairs. He threw me at the stairs, and I hit, and my wrist, it went on fire, and I hit my head, but I didn't fall down the stairs very far. Just like a couple, I guess. And my mom screamed at him, and she ran at him, and she fought with him. He hit her face, and he had his hands on her like . . ."

She mimed choking.

"I couldn't move, and he hit her face, but she hit back, she hit back hard, and she kicked him, and they kept fighting, and then . . . then he went over the railing. She pushed him to get away, to get to me. Her face had blood, and she pushed him, and he went over the railing. It was his fault."

"Okay."

"Mimi crawled up the steps while Mom got me and held me, and she said help was coming. And everybody had blood on them. Nobody ever hit me before he did. I hate he was my father."

“How do you know he was?”

“Because of what he was yelling, what he called me. I’m not stupid. And he teaches at the college where my mom went to college, and she told me she met my father in college. So.” Adrian lifted her shoulders. “That’s it. He hit everybody, and he smelled bad, and he tried to throw me down the stairs. He fell because he was mean.”

Riley put an arm around Adrian’s shoulders and thought: That sounds about right.

They kept Mimi in the hospital overnight. Lina bought hospital gift shop flowers—the best she could do—to take to her room. Adrian had the first X-ray of her life, and would earn the first cast of her life once the swelling went down.

Rather than try to complete Mimi’s dinner plans, Lina ordered pizza.

God knew the kid deserved it. Just like she herself deserved a really, really big glass of wine.

She poured one, and while Adrian ate, broke her long-standing rule and poured a second.

She had a million calls to make, but they’d wait. Every goddamn thing would wait until she felt steadier.

They ate in the back courtyard with its shady trees and privacy fence. Or Adrian ate while Lina nibbled on a single slice between sips of wine.

Maybe it was a bit cool for outdoor dining, and more than a little late to have Adrian fill up on pizza, but a vicious day was a vicious day.

She hoped her daughter would sleep, but had to admit she was a little vague on the nighttime ritual. Mimi handled that.

Maybe a bubble bath—as long as she kept the temporary cast dry. The thought of the cast, and how much worse it could have been, had her longing to top off her wineglass again.

But she resisted. Lina had a good handle on self-discipline.

“How come he was my father?”

Lina looked over, saw those gold-green eyes watching her.

“Because I was once young and stupid. I’m sorry. I’d say I wish I hadn’t been, but then you wouldn’t be here, would you? Can’t fix what used to be, only what’s now and coming up.”

“Was he nicer when you were young and stupid?”

Lina let out a laugh, and her ribs whined pitifully. How much, she wondered, did you tell a seven-year-old?

“I thought he was.”

“Did he hit you before?”

“Once. Only once, and after that I never, ever saw him again. If a man hits you once, he’s probably going to hit you again, and again.”

“You said before that you loved my dad, but things didn’t work out, and he didn’t want us, so he didn’t matter anymore.”

“I thought I loved him. I should’ve said that. I was only twenty, Adrian. He was older, and handsome and charming and smart. A young professor. I fell in love with who I thought he was. And he didn’t matter between then and now.”

“Why was he so mad today?”

“Because someone, a reporter, found out, and wrote a story. I don’t know how, I don’t know who told him. I didn’t.”

“You didn’t because he didn’t matter.”

“That’s exactly right.”

How much did you tell? Lina thought again. Under the circumstances, maybe all of it.

“He was married, Adrian. He had a wife, and two children. I didn’t know. That is, he lied to me, and told me he was in the middle of a divorce. I believed him.”

Had she? Lina wondered. So hard to remember now.

“Maybe I just wanted to, but I believed him. He had his own little apartment near the college, so I believed he was essentially single. Later I found out I wasn’t the only one he lied to. When I found out the truth, I broke things off. He didn’t really care.”

Not fully true, she thought. Screamed, threatened, shoved.

“Then I realized I was pregnant. Later, much later than I should have realized, I felt like I had to tell him. That’s when he hit me. He wasn’t drunk, like today.”

He'd been drinking, she thought, but not drunk. Not like today.

"I told him I didn't want or need anything from him, that I wouldn't humiliate myself by telling anyone he was the biological father. And I left."

Lina edited out the threats, the demands she get rid of it, and all the other ugliness. No point in it.

"I finished out the term, graduated, then I went home. Popi and Nonna helped me. You know the rest, how I started doing classes and videos when I was pregnant with you—for pregnant women, then after for moms and babies."

"Yoga Baby."

"Right."

"But he was always mean. Does that mean I will be, too?"

God, she sucked at this mother thing. She did her best to think what her own mother would say.

"Do you feel mean?"

"Sometimes I get mad."

"Tell me about it." But Lina smiled. "Mean's a choice, I think, and you don't choose to be mean. He was right, too, that you don't look like him. Too much Rizzo in you."

Lina reached across the table, took Adrian's good hand. Maybe it felt too much like speaking adult to adult, but it was the best she could do.

"He doesn't matter, Adrian, unless we let him matter. So we won't let him matter."

"Are you going to have to go to jail?"

Lina toasted with her wineglass. "You're not going to let them, remember?" Then she saw the quick fear, and squeezed Lina's hand. "I'm joking, just joking. No, Adrian. The police could see what happened. You told the detective the truth, right?"

"I did. I promise."

"So did I. So did Mimi. You put that out of your mind. What is going to happen is because there was this story, and then this happened, there'll be more stories. I'm going to talk to Harry soon, and he'll help me deal with that."

“Can we still go to Popi and Nonna’s?”

“Yes. As soon as Mimi’s better, after you get your cast, after I deal with some things, we’re going there.”

“Can we go soon? Really soon?”

“As soon as we can. Just a few days maybe.”

“That’s soon. Everything will be better there.”

A long time, Lina thought, before things would be better. But she polished off her wine. “Absolutely.”