

For all my Italian and Sicilian relatives –
a wild, unruly bunch of totally lovable characters.

For my Dad, who was Sicilian through and through,
but had a Lancashire accent.

And for my Mum; crazy, hot-tempered, strong-willed
and wonderful.

BUTTANA

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CHAPTER ONE

“Ah, that Pietra,” one muttered as she passed. “Used to be such an ugly little thing.”

“Better if she’d stayed that way,” another said, “because now -” She wiped her mouth in an exaggerated gesture and left the sentence unfinished.

Why was it better? What were they talking about? Did they imagine they weren’t overheard? They sat in wicker chairs, or on stools, or on doorsteps - nonnas with brown stumps embedded into their jaws and cardigans draped over curved backs.

“She will turn out like her mother,” a third said. “It’s in the blood.”

Those old ones said that all the time. But what did it mean? Pietra had made the mistake of asking her mother once, only to be shocked back with a great slap which made her ears ring with a blue sound.

She left the scatter of stonewash houses, dipped her head under the low branch of the lemon tree and took the dust track.

“Hey, Pietra.”

Raffaello. Where had he come from?

She ignored him.

“Pietra – look.”

He was holding a rabbit upside down by its feet. The animal’s eyes were wide and staring and she saw a shudder shimmer through its muscles. “What are you doing with that?”

“I’m going to kill it for you.”

She looked at the creature clasped by fat fingers. “Why do you imagine I want to see you kill a rabbit?”

“I can do it in one blow.”

Wasn’t that how you were supposed to do it? She turned away.

“Hey, Pietra.”

This was becoming tiresome. She stopped and faced him. “If you’re going to do it, then hurry up.” What was the sense in tormenting the animal, making it suffer in an agony of waiting?

He stepped forward, waved it in front of her face. Another shudder quivered through its body. “For you,” he said.

She folded her arms. “Let it go.”

His smirk faded. “Are you mad? This rabbit will make a good meal.”

“We have enough to eat, thank you.” Alive, unable to bite, scratch, spit or run, knowing it was about to die. Yes, sometimes she had caught a chicken and twisted its head till she heard the neck snap. But it was sudden, quick. One second the bird was pecking around for the odd insect, the next it was giving its last squawk.

He dangled it in front of her face again. "Watch me."

Maybe if she refused to acknowledge his presence, he'd go away. She edged past him and carried on her way.

But he wasn't one to be refused. He scuttled round, forcing himself into her field of vision. "Look, Pietra." And he brought his hand down in a rapid movement. The rabbit's death seemed to please him immensely, as if he'd done something clever. "Here." He handed it to her, its body now limp and warm through the fur.

Tonight, all she would have to eat was a dish of broad beans, pasta and a little olive oil. But that, at least, was a clean meal.

"You have it," she said, giving it back.

"No, no," he said and those lips too large, slightly slimy, formed an uncertain grin. "It's for you."

She couldn't abide his presence any longer. "Raffaello," she said, recalling a phrase she'd overheard, "you can take your rabbit and shove it up your arse."

A dark colour crossed his features and he edged up even closer to her, where she could smell his breath like sour almonds. "I'll tell you," he hissed, "what I'd like to shove up your arse."

He was breathing in a strange, shallow way. He'd taken a meaningless insult and turned it into something threatening.

She slithered past him and ran.

Pietra's mother set the chair in the middle of the room. No words, just a gesture indicating that she should sit.

"Again?" Pietra frowned. It had only been two weeks. Her hair can't have grown that much. But she knew better than to argue. She'd noticed lately that the triplets of hair that fell to the ground around her were no longer one pale colour; they'd grown darker and had more variation of tone - some strands like dried yellowish grass, others the pale brown of honey. Why must she have it so short? The heat, probably, though her mother wasn't one for explanations.

When she'd first begun to suffer the annoying mess that was to plague her every few weeks, she'd sprinted home in a panic. Her mother had simply shushed with that mouth used to puckering and handed her some torn rags. What was she supposed to do with these?

"But I'll bleed to death."

Her mother only shushed again.

It was only after Pietra had sat and wept silently, face to the wall, that her mother had told her that it was normal and happened to all women.

All women? That couldn't be true, could it? Was this a lie woven to cover up

some sinister truth? Was she, in reality, very ill and in order to protect her from too much worry, her mother had concocted this ridiculous story? Pietra had never been a robust child, skinny-armed, stick-legged. Perhaps this new development signalled a decline in her health.

But she didn't feel ill, nor did she look it. When she had glanced at her reflection in the well bucket, she saw that her teeth had more or less straightened out. This was pleasing to her. She still wasn't happy about being burdened with these uncomfortable breasts, but her arms and legs weren't so scrawny. She'd become taller, stronger and the reflection of her face in the well bucket showed an alert, pleasing face with gently arched eyebrows.

One evening, returning late from the vineyard to find Pietra eating soup, her mother gripped her arm and dragged her from the seat. Face close to face, her words made no sense.

"My...my legs?" Pietra stammered. What had she done now?

"Just don't open them near any boys. Understand me?"

What kind of nonsense was this? For the first time, Pietra began to wonder if her mother were truly mad, for what sensible person would impose such a restriction? Now, whenever a boy approached she would have to shuffle past him. No running in their presence, no swimming, no crouching down to pick the lower clusters of grapes. Disobeying her mother's peculiar instruction didn't enter her head.

"Signora Castello?"

The grip on Pietra's arm relaxed. "Yes. Come in, Gennaro."

He stumbled in through the doorway. What on earth was wrong with him? He was acting as if he didn't quite know them any more. But this was Gennaro Leone, the youngest of the Leones with his floppy, dark hair and straight, strong teeth. Pietra noticed teeth. And feet. Gennaro's feet were smooth and unbunioned, like the feet of an angel sculpture. His pants were rolled up to mid-calf, as if to emphasise the perfection of his instep and long toes.

"My...uh...my father caught some sardines," he said, "and I brought some for you...uh... Signora." They were cooked, yellowish batter sticking to them in places, lead-grey skin showing through in patches. He'd arranged them neatly on a white plate. He placed it on the table and she noticed the purpled bruising of his thumb. "Oh and some for Pietra, of course."

Fish. An unexpected gift, it looked more filling than the thin vegetable soup with its tiny floating pasta stars.

"Thank you," Pietra's mother said, no smile, no warmth in her voice.

"I...I'll be going, then." And yet he waited, stepping from one foot to the other like a lizard on a scorching hot rock.

"Very well. Tell your father, thank you."

"Yes Signora, I...I will." He turned and skittered out of the house.

Four sardines. Two each. Sometimes, to bolster her meagre diet, Pietra went

to the beach and searched for small shellfish which she ate raw. Other times, her mother traded potatoes or beans for squid or mussels or a piece of goat's cheese.

Pietra picked up a sardine and bit through the warm batter and oil into the softness beneath. She could feel her mother's eyes, watching her, choking the fish flesh in her throat as something unsaid communicated itself. Did she not deserve to eat? Had she forgotten that ridiculous instruction to close her legs in Gennaro's presence? She hadn't consciously noted how she'd been standing. If it were so important, she'd have to pay better attention next time.

Her mother glared at her.

For a moment, Pietra contemplated leaving the second fish - but a sense of justice asserted itself. She'd done nothing to feel guilty about. Anyway, these sardines would not taste as good cold.

She plucked up another sardine, faced her mother and bit into it.

Strega seared the inside of Don Roccapalumba's stomach. It helped quieten the excess of acid. He sipped at the last of the amber liqueur, taking his time, watching from the edge of his vision how the skinny little man standing in front of him, fidgeted from foot to foot. Don Roccapalumba's belt was too tight, but he wasn't going to loosen it in front of this fellow.

Gastric discomfort quelled, for the time being at least, he finally spoke. "And what is it you want me to do for you?"

"Don Roccapalumba - I have a wife -"

He snorted. "Don't we all?"

"And she is a beautiful woman."

That was hard to believe. How would a scrawny little lizard like this keep a beautiful wife? Ah, but maybe that was the problem? "Go on."

"Other men give her admiring glances. Some more than that. They touch her, Don Roccapalumba. They squeeze her, pinch her -"

"You want me to punish all the men in the village?"

"No, no, of course not. But there is one man in particular who has taken things a bit further." The little man's head drooped.

"He is giving the salami your wife?" Don Roccapalumba belched silently tasting meatballs and pasta once again. He poured himself another shot of strega. "Who is this man?"

"Paolo Lanzone."

"Lanzone. Yes, I know him. Tall man with a moustache -"

"No, no - that's his brother. Paolo has no moustache." The little man looked down at his feet, as if he'd said something untoward. "Also, he is not tall."

“So you wish this man to be disposed of.” It was a statement, not a question. That’s what they all wanted.

“No, no, Don Roccapalumba. I just want him...warned.”

So the lizard was merciful. “Warned.” Roccapalumba took another burning sip. “Presumably, you want him warned in a way that will make sure he doesn’t do this again?”

The little man’s head was still bowed. “Yes, Don Roccapalumba.”

A glint flickered in the corner of his vision as he moved his hand to place the glass back on the table. For a long moment, he examined his gold ring, the flesh bulging out from the sides. “I can’t afford to do favours for nothing.”

“I realise that.”

“One day I will require a favour from you.”

“Anything, Don Roccapalumba.”

“Do not answer so lightly. I may or may not act upon your request with this Paolo Canzone -”

“Lanzone.”

“After all, you have done nothing for me in the past.”

The little man’s head jerked up. “That’s not true, Don Roccapalumba. I have defended you.”

He raised his eyebrow. “You have?”

“Yes. When everyone else was calling you names and saying you were a vicious mutilator with no mercy and breath smelling of dogshit.”

Roccapalumba belched again, but kept his face turned away from the other man. That fried chicken had been a mite too oily. “So that’s what people are saying about me, eh?”

The lizard looked suddenly doubtful. “Not everybody, Don Roccapalumba. Just...you know...the odd one or two.”

This needed investigating. It indicated a distinct lack of respect. Perhaps it would be a good idea to comply with this gibbering fool’s request. There was nothing like a dose of terror for redressing the balance. He thought for a moment longer, then spoke. “Very well. I will do as you ask.”

“Oh thank you, thank you.” The lizard clasped his hands together. “And what can I do for you in return?”

Roccapalumba gazed over the top of the other man’s head, as he thought it over. “Hm. Perhaps I could meet your wife?”

It took a few moments for Pietra’s eyes to adjust and make use of the trace of moonlight that managed to pierce through the shutters, and in it, she saw that

her mother was slipping silently into her clothes.

“Mother?”

“Ssss. Go back to sleep.”

“Where are you going?”

“Nowhere.”

“So why did you get dressed?”

Silence.

Pietra cast her mind back to the things she’d learned in church – things that people did under cover of darkness. “Are you going to *rob* someone?” Anxiety clutched at her like claws around her ribs. “You’ll go to prison. Stealing is -”

“I’m not stealing anything.” Pietra’s mother wrapped a shawl around her shoulders.

What other commandments were there? Honour your father and mother. Do not tell lies. Do not desire your neighbour’s possessions. Do not commit adultery - whatever that was. “You’re not going to commit adultery, are you?”

She halted. Turned. Her face outlined in a filament of white light. And before Pietra realised what was happening, the slap stung her face, making her teeth ache.

Her mother left.

Where could she be going at this time of night?

This dark ignorance was worse than the stifling blackness in the bedroom; a stumbling amongst shadows, a mind-tearing desire to know what was going on.

She waited until she heard the door click shut, then felt around for her dress and slipped it on.

She shivered in the cool outdoor air. It smelled of decayed woodsmoke and dust.

Where was her mother? Nothing moved behind the wire fence where the hens lay bedded for the night. Nothing rustled among the vines in their straight rows, or disturbed the silence of the trees.

Ah. A flag of hair, a snatch of movement. Her mother was picking her way through the pine trees.

Pietra followed, her bare feet silent against tamped earth. She kept close to the shadows. Her mind hadn’t been entirely idle over the past few months and while she’d been staking the peas, watering the tomatoes and removing withered leaves from the aubergines she’d been piecing together the fragments of information she’d been told, or had observed for herself.

That there was something improper about boys seemed to be a good starting point, though what it was, she didn’t know. She’d never had much to do with them. They played their own stupid games while she climbed the apricot tree near the house, leaning against its rough support and eating its fruit.

Most girls acted foolishly. Their posture and expression altered when boys

looked at them, changing from their ordinary, often bad-tempered appearance to a witless smile, accompanied by thrown-back shoulders and half-closed eyes.

One thing Pietra was grateful for; if it hadn't been for the glimpse she'd once caught of her mother, she would have thought she was turning into a man. Only men had beards, or so she'd thought. But no – women had them too. It seemed a strange place for a beard to grow, but her mother had snarled one day that it was normal and would she for God's sake go away and leave her alone. Breasts Pietra had expected. Her mother had breasts; other women had them, that was easy enough to see. And they had a use. Babies sucked on them. The beard had no use that she could discover, unless it had something to do with her mother's dire warning not to open her legs near a boy. And what, for heaven's sake, did that *mean*?

They'd arrived at the beach. Her mother quickly disappeared down the slope.

From here, Pietra's silhouette would stand out against the sky. She dropped to a crouch. The sand was cold. She felt the little clams and dried shells against her shins and palms and knees as she crawled down towards the sea.

The sea sent out its salt mineral smell along with an energetic breeze. Pietra shivered. Keeping her body low, she watched her mother stride towards a boat, grounded on the shore, with two people crouching against it - two girls, it looked like. Were they planning to travel somewhere? If so, it wasn't fair on the Leones. They needed that boat.

Pietra's mother wasted no time on a greeting. "Are you prepared?"

"I am, but...I don't know, Signora. I'm not sure I want to -"

"Then why did you ask?" A pause. "You have no choice, Rosa."

Rosa. That's who it was. Rosa Altalena - a shy, plumpish girl with curly hair. She sometimes spoke to Pietra when others wouldn't. It wasn't much of a conversation, just a quick greeting and a smile.

"You can't change your mind now," Pietra's mother hissed. "It will ruin your life."

A soft whimper of indecision.

"Do you think I like having to do this? But you have no choice."

"Don't, Signora." Another voice, this time. That of Maria Girola by the sound of it; a friend of Rosa Altalena's and two or three years older. "Can't you see she's terrified?"

"Then let's get it over with. Maria, wash this."

"In sea water?"

"Did you bring any fresh?"

"No."

A grunt.

One slim figure running towards the sea.

"I'm f-frightened, Signora." Rosa's voice sounded thin.

"You should have thought of that, before

you -”

“It wasn’t my fault, he -”

“Ssss.”

More quietly. “He wouldn’t stop.”

“You are a stupid girl, Rosa. Stupid and thoughtless.”

The return of Maria. “Here it is, Signora. Now, what do we do?”

“Give me that.” A pause. “Open your legs.”

“I...I’ve changed my mind.”

“You think you can live with this? Your father will kill you if he ever finds out. You can’t hide it for ever. Sooner or later, it’s going to show and then what will you do?”

“She’s right, Rosa,” Maria said. “Better a little discomfort now.”

A pause.

“Good.” Pietra’s mother said. “Try and relax.”

Silence.

“I said *relax*.”

Rosa whimpered. “How can I when you -?” A yelp. A sob.

“You didn’t expect this to be painful?”

The sound of sobbing.

Pietra’s ribs seemed to clutch at her heart. What was going on? What was her mother doing to poor Rosa? She bared her teeth in sympathy. Should she go down there? Should she go down and stop it?

Maria’s trembling voice. “Is it done?”

“It needs to go in further.”

A wail.

The sound of a sharp slap. “Quiet, for God’s sake.”

Pietra closed her eyes, swallowed. Her throat felt dry. Whatever her mother was doing, it was for the best...wasn’t it?

Another yelp. Shivering, shaking breaths.

Maria’s voice again. “How long is this going to take?”

No answer.

“Are you sure it will work?”

“It may, it may not, but it’s all she has at the moment.”

“Please,” Rosa sobbed, “no more, no more.” And then a scream, like the sharp screech of an eagle.

“Can’t you shut her up?” Pietra’s mother hissed. “She’ll wake the whole village.”

A muffled moaning through closed fingers.

Pietra felt her heart thumping against the sand. She was ready to jump to her feet and run to Rosa’s rescue - only what was she rescuing her from? And what was all that about her father killing her if he found out? Found out what?

Maria’s voice, dulled by dread. “She’s bleeding, Signora.”

“Good. Then it’s done.”

“Rosa?” A pause. “Rosa, are you all right? Answer me.”

“No,” Pietra’s mother said. “Leave her. Better this way. When she comes to, you can take her home.”

So it was done.

Slowly, aware of the ache in her shoulders, Pietra raised herself to her hands and knees and crept back up the slope.