



Brunetti's Secret Son (Secret Heirs of Billionaires)

By Maya Blake

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Maisie doesn't know which is more shocking—Romeo's return or his proposal of marriage! She'd do anything to protect her son, but can she risk surrendering once more to the enigmatic father of her child?

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Editorial Review

About the Author

Maya Blake's writing dream started at 13. She eventually realised her dream when she received The Call in 2012. Maya lives in England with her husband, kids and an endless supply of books. Contact Maya: www.mayabauthor.blogspot.com www.twitter.com/mayablake www.facebook.com/maya.blake.94

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The hideous mansion was just as he'd recalled in his nightmares, the gaudy orange exterior clashing wildly with the massive blue shutters. The only thing that didn't quite gel with the picture before him was the blaze of the sun glinting off the grotesquely opulent marble statues guarding the entry gates.

Romeo Brunetti's last memory of this place had been in the chilling rain, his threadbare clothes sticking to his skin as he'd huddled in the bushes outside the gates. A part of him had prayed he wouldn't be discovered, the other more than a tiny bit hopeful that discovery would mean the end to all the suffering, the hunger, the harrowing pain of rejection that ate his thirteen-year-old body alive from morning to night. Back then he would've welcomed the beating his reluctant rescuer had received for daring to return Romeo to this place. Because the beating would have ended in oblivion, and the bitterness coursing through his veins like acid would have been no more.

Unfortunately, the fates had decreed otherwise. He'd hidden in the bushes, cold and near catatonic, until the ever-present hunger had forced him to move.

Romeo stared up at the spears clutched in the hands of the statues, recalling his father's loud-bellied boast of them being made of solid gold.

The man who'd called him a bastard and a waste of space to his face. Right before he'd instructed his minion to throw him out and make sure he never returned. That he didn't care whether the spawn of the whore he'd rutted with in an alleyway in Palermo lived or died, as long as he, Agostino Fattore, the head of the ruling crime family, didn't have to see the boy's face again.

No...not his *father*.

The man didn't deserve that title.

Romeo's hands tightened on the steering wheel of his Ferrari and he wondered for the thousandth time why he'd bothered to come to this place. Why he'd let a letter he'd shredded in a fit of cold rage seconds after reading it compel him into going back on the oath he'd made to himself over two decades ago. He looked over to the right where the towering outer wall to the late Agostino Fattore's estate rose into the sky, and sure enough, the bush was exactly as he remembered it, its leafy branches spread out, offering the same false sanctuary.

For a wild moment, Romeo fought the strong urge to lunge out of the car and rip the bush out of the earth with his bare hands, tear every leaf and branch to shreds. Tightening his jaw, he finally lowered his window and punched in the code his memory had cynically retained.

As the gates creaked open, he questioned again why he was doing this. So what if the letter had hinted at

something else? What could the man whose rejection had been brutally cold and complete have to offer him in death that he'd failed so abjectly to offer in life?

Because he needed answers.

He needed to know that the blood running through his veins didn't have an unknown stranglehold over him that would turn his life upside down when he least expected it.

That the two times in his life when he'd lost control to the point of not recognising himself would be the only times he would feel savagely unmoored.

No one but Romeo knew how much he regretted wasting the four years of his life after the bitter night he'd been here last, looking for acceptance anywhere and any way he could find it. More than hating the man whose blood ran through his veins, Romeo hated the years he'd spent trying to find a replacement for Agostino Fattore.

Giving himself permission to close his heart off at seventeen had been the best decision he'd ever made.

So why are you here? You 're nothing like him.

He needed to be sure. Agostino might no longer be alive, but he needed to look into the heart of Fattore's legacy and reassure himself that the lost little boy who'd thought his world would end because of another's rejection was obliterated completely.

Impatient with himself for prevaricating, Romeo smashed his foot on the accelerator and grunted in satisfaction as the tyres squealed on the asphalt road leading to the courtyard. Unfolding himself from the driver's seat, he stalked up to the iron-studded double doors and slammed them open.

Striding into the chequer-tiled hallway, he glared at the giant antique chandelier above his head. If he had cared whether this house stood or fell, that monstrosity would have been the first thing in the incinerator. But he wasn't here to ponder the ugly tastes of a dead man. He was here to finally slay ghosts.

Ghosts that had lingered at the back of his consciousness since he was a child but that had been resurrected one night five years ago, in the arms of a woman who'd made him lose control.

He turned as slow feet shuffled in his direction, followed by firmer footholds that drew a grim smile from Romeo. So, the old order hadn't changed. Or maybe the strength of Romeo's anger had somehow transmitted to Fattore's former second in command, prompting the old man who approached to seek the protection of his bodyguards.

Lorenzo Carmine threw out his hands in greeting, but Romeo glimpsed the wariness in the old man's eyes. 'Welcome, *mio figlio*. Come, I have lunch waiting for us.'

Romeo tensed. 'I'm not your son and this meeting will not last beyond five minutes, so I suggest you tell me what you withheld in your letter right now and stop wasting my time.' He didn't bother to hide the sneer in his voice.

Lorenzo's pale grey eyes flared with a temper Romeo had witnessed the last time he was here. But along with it came the recognition that Romeo was no longer a frightened little boy incapable of defending himself.

Slowly, his expression altered into a placid smile.

'You have to pardon me. My constitution requires that I strictly regulate my mealtimes or I suffer for it.'

Romeo turned towards the door, again regretting his decision to come here. He was wasting his time looking for answers in stone and concrete. He was wasting his time, full stop.

'Then by all means go and look after your constitution. Enjoy the rest of your days and don't bother contacting me again.' He stepped towards the door, a note of relief spiking through him at the thought of leaving this place.

'Your father left something for you. Something you will want to see.'

Romeo stopped. 'He was not my father and there's nothing he possesses in this life or the next that could possibly interest me.'

Lorenzo sighed. 'And yet you came all this way at my request. Or was it just to stick out your middle finger at an old man?'

Romeo's jaw clenched, hating that the question he'd been asking himself fell from the lips of a man who'd spent his whole life being nothing but a vicious thug. 'Just spit it out, Carmine,' he gritted out.

Lorenzo glanced at the nearer bodyguard and nodded.

The beefy minder headed down the long hallway and disappeared.

'For the sake of my friend, your father, the Almighty rest his soul, I will go against my doctor's wishes.' The remaining guard fell into step behind Lorenzo, who indicated a room to their left.

From memory, Romeo knew it was the holding room for visitors, a garishly decorated antechamber that led to the receiving room, where his father had loved to hold court.

The old man shuffled to a throne-like armchair and sank heavily into it. Romeo chose to remain standing and curbed the need to pace like a caged animal.

Although he'd come through the desolation of his ragged past, he didn't care for the brutal reminders everywhere he looked. The corner of this room was where he'd crouched when his father's loud lambasting of a minion had led to gunshots and horrific screams the first time he'd been brought here. The gilt-framed sofa was where his father had forced him to sit and watch as he'd instructed his lieutenants to beat Paolo Giordano into a pulp.

He didn't especially care for the reminder that it was possibly because of Fattore's blood running through his veins that he'd almost taken the same violent path when, tired of living on the streets, he'd almost joined a terror-loving gang feared for their ruthlessness.

Sz, he should've stayed far away, in the warmth of his newest and most lavish by-invitation-only Caribbean resort.

His eyes narrowed as the second bodyguard returned with a large ornately carved antique box and handed it

to Lorenzo. 'It's a good thing your father chose to keep an eye on you, wasn't it?' Lorenzo said.

'*Scusi?*' Romeo rasped in astonishment.

Lorenzo waved his hand. 'Your mother, the Almighty rest *her* unfortunate soul, attempted to do her best, but we all knew she didn't have what it took, eh?'

Romeo barely stopped his lips from curling. The subject of his mother was one he'd sealed under strict lock and key, then thrown into a vault the night he'd buried her five years ago.

The same night he'd let his guard down spectacularly with a woman whose face continued to haunt him when he least expected it. A woman who had, for the first time in a long time, made him want to feel the warmth of human emotion.

A tremor went through him at the memory, its deep and disturbing effect as potent, if not more so, than it'd been that night when he'd realised that his emotions weren't as clinical and icy as he'd imagined them to be.

He shut down that line of thought.

Maisie O'Connell had had no place in his life then, save as a means of achieving a few hours of oblivion, and she most certainly didn't have one now, in this cursed place. Like the bush outside this miscreation of a mansion, she represented a time in his life he wanted banished for all time.

Because it makes you uncomfortable...vulnerable even? Basta!

'You seem to be under the misapprehension that I'll indulge you in fond trips down potholed memory lanes. Be assured that I will not. If I remember correctly, *you* helped to throw me out of the gates when I was a child. Your exact words, presumably passed down from my father, were—*I see you again, you leave in a body bag*'

Lorenzo shrugged. 'Those were hot-headed days. Look at you now. You've done very well for yourself despite your less than salubrious beginning.' A touch of malice flared in his eyes. 'None of us imagined a boy conceived in the gutter would rise to such esteem.'

Romeo shoved his hands in his pockets so he wouldn't do the unthinkable and strangle the old man where he sat.

'Then I guess it's a good thing I was intelligent enough to realise early on that whether you were born in the gutter or with a dozen golden spoons clutched in your fist, our lives are what we make them. Otherwise, who knows where I'd be today? In a mental institution, perhaps? Bemoaning my fate while rocking back and forth in a straitjacket?'

The old man laughed, or he attempted to. When the sound veered into a bone-jarring coughing spell, his bodyguards exchanged wary glances before one stepped forward with a glass of water.

Lorenzo's violent refusal of help had the guard springing back into his designated position. When the coughing fit passed, Lorenzo opened the box and took out several papers.

'You were never going to go down without a fight. I saw that in you even when you were a boy. But you'll do

well to remember where that intelligence comes from.'

'Are you really suggesting that I owe what I've made of myself to you or the pathetic band of thugs you call a family?' he asked, incredulous.

Lorenzo waved him away. 'We'll discuss what you owe in a bit. Your father meant to do this before he was tragically taken from us,' he muttered.

Romeo curbed the need to voice his suspicions that his father's departure from this life hadn't been tragic at all; that the boat explosion that had taken his life and those of his wife and the two half-sisters Romeo had never been allowed to meet hadn't been accidental, but the target of a carefully orchestrated assassination.

Instead, he watched Lorenzo pull out document after document and lay them on the desk.

'The first order of business is this house. It's yours free and clear from any financial obligations. All the lawyers need is your signature to take possession. It comes with the collection of cars, the horses and the three hundred acres of land, of course.'

Astonishment rendered Romeo speechless.

'Then there are the businesses. They're not doing as well as we'd hoped, and certainly not as well as your own businesses are doing. The Carmelo *famiglia* mistakenly believe this is an excuse for them to start making moves on Fattore business, but I suspect that will all turn around once our business has been brought under the umbrella of your company, Brunetti International—'

Romeo laughed. 'You must be out of your mind if you think I want any part of this blood-soaked legacy. I'd rather return to the gutter than claim a single brick of this house, or associate myself in any way with the Fattore name and everything it stands for.'

'You may despise the Fattore name, but do you think *Brunetti, son of a two-bit whore* has a better ring?' Lorenzo sneered.

It didn't, but in the bleak, terrible hellhole of his childhood it had been the better of two evils. Especially since that greater evil had warned him never to use the name *Fattore*.

'This is your legacy, no matter how much you try to deny it,' Lorenzo insisted.

'You can sit there and rewrite history until the walls crumble around you,' Romeo enunciated with a burning intensity he suspected would erupt the longer he spent in this house. 'But your five minutes have come and gone, old man. And this meeting is well and truly over. Any problems you have with your extortion business and territorial wars with the Carmelo family are yours to deal with.'

He made it to the door before Lorenzo spoke. 'Your father suspected that when the time came you would prove intransigent. So he asked me to give you this.'

For the second time, Romeo froze, his instincts screeching at him to keep walking, but his brain warning that to do as he so desperately wanted would be unwise.

Lorenzo held out a large manila envelope, which he slid across the desk with a smug look.

'I told you I'm not interested in anything bearing the Fattore name. Whatever is in that envelope—'

'Is of a more...personal nature and will interest you, *mio figlio*. I'm confident of it.'

Romeo abandoned the need to remind the old man not to call him son. Lorenzo was enjoying needling him a little too much, and Romeo was fast reaching boiling point.

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