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SICILIAN  
SUNSET

THE TRIPLE FLAME TRILOGY

*Nikita Rose*

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# SICILIAN SUNSET

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THE TRIPLE FLAME TRILOGY - BOOK ONE



**NIKILA ROSE**



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## TIERO'S TRINITY SYMBOL

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For my family.

You are my world and everything beyond.



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## CHAPTER ONE

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### ELLA

“Rapture. Have you ever felt it?” I whisper into the warm morning air as I gaze up at the sky bathed in vibrant shades of orange, pink, and purple.

Deep contentment fills me.

This is magical.

It’s one of the best sunrises I’ve seen in years. Admittedly, I don’t see many—I’m not an early morning person.

“Of course. Usually after an all-nighter with Lex,” my best friend Rhia replies softly, as if not wanting to disturb a soul.

Why are we whispering? We’re the only ones here.

“Hmm... that’s how I imagined it, too.”

Beside me, Rhia sighs. “It’s beyond me how you can go two years without sex. I sure couldn’t. You’re practically a virgin again.”

I roll my eyes at her, and she elbows me in the ribs. “Stop that. You know it annoys me.”

“Why do you think I keep doing it?” I deadpan, earning me a smack on the leg.

“Well, I feel rapturous now... even without getting sweaty between the sheets,” I say. “I guess you were right. This was worth getting out of bed for.”

It’s like the universe is putting on an extra spectacular show for us this morning to remind me just how fabulous it is to be alive.

Does it know I need this today?

Rhia finds my hand and squeezes it in silent support. A contented smile spreads across her face. “I’m always right,” she teases.

“Ha... you wish.” I glance over at her. The rays of the rising sun are illuminating her features, making her red locks glow like smoldering embers.

“You should have given Connor a chance. He asked you out three times.”

Rolling my eyes at her again, it’s me who’s elbowing her this time. “That was eighteen months ago. How often are you going to bring this up?”

“Until you see the error of your ways.”

“I love your brother. Just not like that. Besides, even if I changed my mind, which I won’t, that ship has sailed. He’s happy with his girl.”

“I still wanted it to be you,” Rhia says like a petulant child, making me laugh.

We fall silent then, and I stare back at the effervescent sky—a painter couldn’t have done a better job creating this.

I let the serenity of our surroundings infuse me. The only thing that could make this experience better would be a soft mattress. I shift uncomfortably on the hard boulder Rhia and I are lying on, wishing we had at least brought cushions.

“You know, Rhi, for the first time since the police knocked on my door six years ago, I feel at peace.

“At peace with where I’ve been, at peace with what I’ve been through, and at peace with where I’m headed.”

It’s been a long road to get to this point.

It’s the anniversary of my parents’ death, and I will always remember that day all these years ago, but I’m not letting it rule my life anymore.

I shake my head to clear the memories. It’s too beautiful a moment to think about something so sad.

Realizing where my thoughts have wandered, Rhia sits up and pulls me in for a hug. “They’re here with us, El,” she whispers.

“Yes, I know they are. I can sense them.” And it’s comforting.

“I’m proud of you. This hasn’t been an easy journey, but you got there. Perhaps Aunt Beth’s death wasn’t completely in

vain then,” Rhia says, sounding melancholic. “After all, it was the catalyst for us finally booking this trip.”

It’s depressing it took another tragedy for Rhia and me to get our act together and go on this long-planned trip to Sicily. In an accident similar to my parents, Rhia lost her favorite aunt, who was only forty-five years old.

Her death was a poignant reminder of how temporary life is. Something snapped inside me, and I woke up from my self-imposed stupor, realizing how much precious time I’ve wasted being hung up about the past—a past I can’t change.

The day after the funeral, Rhia and I searched for our bucket-lists and renamed them Fuck-It Lists... because fuck it all, we are going to tick off every item and add a few new ones.

No more delaying what makes us happy!

No more excuses why we can’t do things!

*Carpe diem.* Let’s make the most of every day.

That was a month ago. And now here we are, in Sicily, ticking off the first item on our lists.

My heart takes a leap and then stops for a beat or two, leaving me breathless. I clutch my chest, a little startled.

“Don’t you think this place feels a lot like Mount Parnassus, the Oracle of Delphi?” Rhia asks out of the blue, distracting me from what just happened.

I'm trying to think back to our time in Greece three years ago when we stopped at that renowned site and compare it to here, the Valley of the Temples in Agrigento. Just like at Delphi, I like to imagine us surrounded by the spirits of the wise, filling our minds with profound wisdoms.

"Hmm, it certainly feels mystical here, but there is no gas smell, unless it's odorless. Why? Are you divining a prophecy?"

"I wish. Because I'd really like to know when Lex will have cellphone reception again. It's been ten days since I last talked to him, and I miss hearing his voice. I really hate it when he gets these remote jobs in South America. Honestly. Why do these crooks have to hide their planes in the jungle?" she huffs.

Alexander, her boyfriend of two years, is an aircraft recovery pilot, and is often gone for weeks at a time.

"Probably because a plane is harder to find there?" I offer.

Rhia shakes her head, annoyed. "Talking about prophecies... Do you remember that guy on our Scotland trip two years ago? The one who gave you the prophetic riddle?"

"You mean drunken Gandalf? Who could forget him?"

"What did he say again?" She thinks for a moment, tapping her index finger against her lips. Then, conjuring up the best drunk Scottish accent she can muster, she invokes, "Your soul is not in one but three. Find all parts, you must, to be completely free."

Rhia laughs heartily, but I don't join in. To be honest, it scared me back then, and it still does now. I wanted to brush off the silly man's mysterious premonition, but it struck a cord.

My soul got broken into three the day my parents died. We were a unit, a close-knit one, and to be complete again, I'd have to reunite with them.

And doesn't that mean I'd have to die?

I'm not ready for that. Not after my epiphany about living life to the fullest.

I want to find my forever love first—the kind my parents had, the kind Rhia and Lex share.

Sometimes I'm close to giving up hope. I split up with Marco over two years ago, and there has been no one I wanted to be with since or had even the slightest attraction to.

And why has my best friend found her happily ever after when she never wanted it in the first place?

Perhaps that's the trick—not wanting it? But how can you not want something your heart and soul yearn for so deeply?

Don't get me wrong, I am beyond thrilled for Rhia. It couldn't have happened to a nicer person, and Lex is the perfect match for her. He knows just how to tame her wild inner goddess while giving her wings to fly.

But come on Universe... when is it going to be my turn?





Rhia and I are strolling down a quiet street in Taormina on the Sicilian east coast.

What an amazing place!

The entire city is perched on a cliff overlooking the sea. Its charm is drawing us in like an ice cream stall on a scorching hot day. It's buzzing with tourists who, just like us, seem taken with this quaint city.

“Is Zoe back from her wild night out?” I ask Rhia.

Her sister, who is two years younger than us, has joined us on this trip. Mind you, we've seen little of her. Why she wanted to come along in the first place is anyone's guess, because most of the time she does her own thing.

If ever I thought Rhia was wild before she met Lex, I was sorely mistaken. Zoe is putting her to shame. She's like an errant teenager, unpredictable and uncontrollable—a combination guaranteed to bring trouble, and not just for her.

“Who knows? I didn't check her room,” Rhia says, shrugging her shoulders. “You know, I was hoping Zoe and I would bond on this trip... it's why I agreed for her to come along, but I think I have to face the fact that my sister and I will never be close.” Disappointment fills Rhia's voice, and she looks defeated.

Her aunt's death not only had me re-evaluate my life, but Rhia went through a reflective phase too. She realized how important family is to her and has been trying to get closer to her sister ever since.

"It's too early to give up on her, Rhi. That's not like you. Your determination is what sets you apart. It's why you're such a success. You've got this."

I'm so proud of her. A year and a half ago, she set out on her own business venture and in this short time has grown RB Public Relations to employ three people. Her slogan *Reliable Brilliance* is a promise she delivers on. A flourish of small boutique companies streams to her for help, and it doesn't appear to be slowing any time soon. Being her own boss suits her—she's never been happier. Though Lex has a lot to do with that too.

"I'm not so sure, El. Zoe has no interest in anyone but herself."

"She's only twenty-four. She'll come around... eventually. Once she falls in love, she'll calm down."

"Can't see that happening," Rhia huffs.

"You used to say that. And now look at you."

A wide grin nearly splits my bestie's face. "Yes. Now look at me. Lex is my world. I can't imagine ever being with another man."

It's my turn to smile broadly. I'm so flipping happy for her.

If only *my man* would finally show up.

“There’s a park,” Rhia points to a patch of greenery surrounded by trees. “My feet are killing me. Let’s sit down for a bit.”

I roll my eyes at her. “You insisted on wearing heels. I keep telling you, sneakers are keepers.”

“Shush. The blasphemy. You know I only wear those things to exercise. And as far as heels go, these are flat. They’re only kitten heels.”

My shoe obsessed friend would never be seen in the ballerina flats I’m wearing. Since we hit puberty, she’s refused to wear anything without a heel.

“And so you suffer,” I tease.

We walk to a stone bench by the park entrance, but before I sit down, Rhia pulls me to a stop. “Let’s check the surface first. I don’t want you to sit on anything dangerous,” she says with a mischievous smile.

Immaturely, I stick out my tongue at her, but I scrutinize the seat anyway... just in case.

I blame Rhia for the curse that seems to follow me around.

It all started a few days after meeting her when we were both eight years old. After playing badminton in her garden, we needed a breather. While Rhia sat on the grass, I went to sit on a rock... just that it wasn’t. It was her pet turtle.

At Rhia’s screech, I shot up and went to sit next to her. Unfortunately, in that moment, her guinea pig, Priscila, ran

from her hiding spot underneath the picnic basket and... my bum came down on her.

Miraculously, Priscila was unharmed, but my reputation as an animal sitter was born.

“Have you sat on anything lately?” Rhia asks. And with good reason, because I still do all too frequently.

Over the years, I’ve accidentally sat on many unsuspecting creatures. All, of course, by total accident. A hedgehog and two snakes were the more noteworthy ones. The latter were scary and sent me to emergency.

“You’d be the first to know if I had,” I say.

I’m an animal lover and hate being the reason some get injured. But I can’t seem to help it.

“Are there dangerous animals in Sicily?” I ask, rummaging through my bag to find my phone. “It’s best to be prepared. I don’t want to end up in hospital again.”

This bag is like the Bermuda Triangle—I can never find anything in it. Rhia beats me to it, pulling out her phone, and immediately beginning to type.

“No hospital trips this time,” she says. “We’re on vacation. Let’s not spoil it.”

She scans the pages. “Okay, according to this website, wild boars make the top of the list, but they avoid people.”

“Good to know. What else?”

Rhia reads on, and her brows furrow. That can’t be good.

“What is it?” I ask.

“There’s one venomous snake on the island, the European asp viper. It’s responsible for ninety percent of snake bites and is the only mortal snake in Italy.”

“Crap. Google where the nearest hospital is after all,” I say, only half-joking.

“No. You’re going to think positive... And check any surface before you park your *derriere*.”

I salute her. “Yes, ma’am.”

Rhia keeps reading, her eyes going wide. God, I love her expressive face. I always know exactly what’s going on.

“Have a guess what the national animal of Sicily is?” she asks.

I’m surprised it’s taken her that long to find out. It’s one of the many quirky things she’s interested in.

I puff air into my cheeks and look at the sky for inspiration. “Some type of bird?”

“Nope. A lion rules Sicily.”

“Fascinating,” I reply drily.

“I actually had a dream last night where you were courted by a lion,” she says, tapping her lip with her index finger.

I laugh. “The bizarre things you dream about... What happened?”

“Nothing, really. It was just hanging around you, looking cuddly. I didn’t sense any danger... yet I knew it was a

dangerous animal. Weird, huh? Then I woke up.”

“Talking about lions. Look, there’s one.” Ignoring Rhia’s strange dream, I point to a large fluffy cloud in the sky.

Rhia squints as she studies it. The breeze blows her red locks into her face. They’re such a stark contrast to my own blonde hair. Yet they complement each other—like dark ripe strawberries and custard... an excellent combination.

“It’s sleeping,” Rhia remarks as she tucks her wayward locks behind her ears.

“That’s probably why the little girl floating towards him isn’t scared.” I show her another cloud to the left of the lion.

“Awww, she’s turning into a princess. See the little crown on top of her head?” Rhia asks, getting into the spirit of the game. “And over there is a castle. So she’s definitely a princess.”

“Where?”

“The cloud to the right of the lion,” Rhia says, pointing.

“Wow, it even has a watchtower.”

“I don’t see that,” Rhia mumbles, scrunching up her face as she tries to make out the shape. “I think your imagination is getting the better of you.”

“Hmm, probably.” Her comment doesn’t stop me, though.

The princess and lion clouds are nearly touching now, and as usual, I make up a story.

“As the little princess gets closer to the beast, she admires his beauty,” I say in my best storytelling voice. “And she just can’t resist and touches his velvety fur. Careful not to wake him, she pets him like a kitten.

“Watching him sleep, her eyelids grow heavy too, and she cuddles up to him. He cradles her in his big paws, and they both dance in dreamland together for a little while.”

Rhia smiles and shakes her head. She’s been listening to my cloud stories for nearly two decades and has learned to humor me.

Three chimes of a church bell ring close by. “Impeccable timing,” I remark. “This was the dinner gong from the castle. The little princess startles awake and rises to rush home, but the enormous lion blocks her way. She carefully climbs over him. But... oh no, the lion wakes up and rises to his full height and roars loudly, frightening the little princess.

“For a moment, she’s frozen in place, seeing him for what he really is—a dangerous beast. She runs as fast as she can to the safety of the castle, but the lion is hot on her heels and getting closer by the second.” I rattle down the last bit like the racing commentators do on television.

“I better take over or we’ll be here forever,” Rhia interrupts when I take a breath.

She knows me too well. My stories can be on the elaborate side.

“The princess escapes to the castle and is now safe forever more. She lives happily ever after with the knight who came to her rescue, ready to fight the beast. It roars outside for a while, but then disappears into the clouds. The end.” She smirks at me.

“That’s quite anticlimactic. But fine. The three clouds have merged into one big blob now, anyway.”

We both lean back then and close our eyes, enjoying the warmth of the sun and the light breeze on our skin. It’s midafternoon, but the August sun is still strong.

A deep-seated contentment fills me. If I were at my Oma’s house in the Austrian Alps, I might even twirl down mountains proclaiming that the hills are alive with the sound of music.

I’ve always had a deep love for the mountains. How could I not? My mom was Austrian, and I grew up in the Alps. Then, when I turned eight, we moved to my dad’s home in Dublin, right next door to Rhia’s family.

But since our arrival on the island, I’ve fallen in love with the azure waters of the Mediterranean. It’s so beautiful here. I never want to leave.

Something wet against my leg makes me jump. A black Labrador puppy is licking my shin, tail wagging in excitement.

“Aww, aren’t you a cutie?” I coo as I bend down to pick it up. Searching for the owner, I spot two kids running towards us. “Have you escaped, little one?”



The dog wags his tail and licks my nose, and I laugh, my heart full of joy.

Rhia leans over to pet the little guy. “You just can’t leave work behind, can you? Once a dog trainer, always a dog trainer.”

I shrug. “I can’t help it if they come to me.” With a smile, I hand the puppy back when the kids reach the bench.

“You’re like *the* dog whisperer,” Rhia teases.

“Very funny,” I retort, but I really do love my job. There’s nothing better. The dogs I work with are just the best.

Rhia rises to her feet for a stretch. Craning her neck, she spots something across the street. “I’m just ducking into that shop over there to buy some postcards,” she announces.

“Who still writes postcards these days?”

“I do. Have you forgotten I always send one to nana?”

“Clearly I have,” I reply. “You know, it’s been ages since you and I went on vacation together, and I haven’t visited your grandmother for months.”

Rubbing my chin, I try to remember the last time Rhia took me along to visit her nana, but come up empty-handed. She goes every Thursday for afternoon tea and a game of backgammon—it’s their tradition.

“She’s got this wall in her kitchen covered in postcards, doesn’t she? I’m surprised she still has room for more. Last time I saw it, the wall was full.”

“Yeah, it is. But nana gets so excited when she gets to add a new card to her collection. How could I deny her?” Rhia says with a fond smile. “I’ll be right back.”

*That’s unlikely.*

Knowing her shopping habits, this could take a while. She’ll buy more than postcards and come back with an arm full of souvenirs to give to everyone she knows back home in Dublin.

I lean back on the bench when my attention is drawn to a bird in the sky. I watch as a large, jet-black raven flies overhead, circles the trees, and lands on the grass right in front of me.

It’s captivatingly beautiful. Its obsidian feathers gleam and shimmer in the sun like polished coal.

The raven turns its head and stares directly into my eyes.

The hairs on the back of my neck stand to attention, and my stomach begins to quiver.

*What’s going on?*

Before I can process my unusual reaction, the raven shrieks loudly. It permeates my entire body, and seems to expand into the furthest reaches of the heavens, like the ripples in a still lake when dropping a heavy stone.

A chill follows, my body shivering despite the heat of the day.

I’m overcome with an unusual heaviness, as if an enormous boulder was just dropped into my arms.

I try to shake off the sudden sense of foreboding, but it won't budge.

*Don't be silly. You're not superstitious. Nothing bad is going to happen.*

It's just a bird, right?

It means nothing.

But the unease doesn't lift. I stand abruptly and leave the park in a hurry, my heart beating unnaturally fast.



As I stand outside the shop Rhia disappeared into, I inhale deeply, trying to calm my sudden anxiety. When I take another deep breath, my nose detects something wonderful. Something sweet that makes my mouth water.

More than happy to be distracted by the delightful scent, I smell the air like a bear on the hunt for honey.

I try to figure out where this delicious aroma is coming from and notice a little café on the other side of the street. A few tables are set up in a mini courtyard, surrounded by large potted plants to outline the area. Colorful fairy lights are strung above, which I imagine gives it a romantic glow at night.

An older gentleman is devouring some delightful looking cannoli, and my stomach rumbles in response as saliva pools

in my mouth.

This is definitely our next stop.

I'm about to cross the street when I bump into a guy on the phone. He looks at me annoyed, and I raise my hands in a placating gesture. "Scusa," I mumble and dash over to the other side.

As I walk towards the café to find an empty table for Rhia and me, a burst of heat rushes into every one of my cells.

*Jeez, what is it with my body today? Am I coming down with something?*

And that's when I see him—Mr. Tall, Dark, and Handsome.

*Wowsers.*

My eyes hone in on him like he's the only man alive.

He's on the phone standing by the entrance of the café, listening intently to whoever is on the other end of the call. Unless, of course, he's standing there pretending to be on the phone so that random women like me can ogle him and appreciate his hotness.

The thought makes me giggle. Perhaps it wasn't the cannoli that smelled so divine, but this hunk of a man. He sure looks all sorts of delicious and I bet he smells fantastic, too.

Mesmerized, I let my gaze travel all over him... and oh, do I like what I see.

I bite my lip to stop myself from grinning ear to ear.

Mr. Tall, Dark, and Handsome is what girls' daydreams are made of... and their wet dreams at night.

He *is* hot, hot, hot.

My heart speeds up as I take him in. At a guess, he's in his early thirties with hair just long enough to ruffle and run your fingers through.

Intelligent eyes, a well-groomed three-day stubble, full, kissable lips... perfection.

In his dark, tailored suit he towers over the other pedestrians. His body is strong and well built. For a moment, I let my imagination run wild and picture what he'd look like underneath his clothes. Hard, toned muscles, a ripped six pack and a well-defined V leading to his delicious, long and thick...

*Jeez, get your head out of the gutter, Ella.*

Still, my neglected girlie parts come to life in excitement.

The testosterone wafting from the man has me melting on the spot.

He's the epitome of masculinity and oozes confidence, but my gut tells me he spells danger.

Yeah, he's definitely dangerous to a woman's heart. He probably breaks them left, right and center.

And check out those arm muscles. Not even his suit jacket can hide them fully. Oh, I want to be held by them while we let passion take over.

I bet he could make me feel rapture.

*Jeez, Ella. Seriously?*

I never think about strangers pinning me down and ravaging me. Still, I can't help letting my gaze drift lower. He's probably big everywhere.

A swarm of butterflies launches in my tummy. It's like every dormant nerve in my body has suddenly come alive.

Lucky Miss Italy or whoever someone like him dates. She's probably equally beautiful—a model, or a gorgeous actress. She won't be an orphaned, half Austrian, half Irish dog trainer for the blind.

The object of my ogling now paces the sidewalk slowly up and down, listening more than speaking. Every one of his moves exudes power and command... and severe sternness. It's clear he's not someone you'd want to cross.

I'm horrified when I realize how long I've been standing there glued to the pavement, staring at this stranger. I take a deep breath to regain my composure.

*Come on, Ella. Get on with it.*

For a moment, I forget why I ventured over here, but the scent of the cannoli reaching my nose jolts my memory.

*Right, get a table and order dessert.*

I'm about to pull my phone from my bag to text Rhia where I've gone when I notice a black SUV traveling down the street. It seems to speed up the closer it gets and I don't know why, but an ominous niggling blossoms in my gut.

Mr. Tall, Dark, and Handsome has stopped his pacing and has his back turned to the street. He's talking heatedly into the phone, clearly upset with something.

Walking closer to the café, I'm chewing on my lip as I watch the approaching car.

Then everything is happening lightning fast, yet seems to unfold in slow motion.

The driver of the SUV abruptly hits the accelerator and swerves onto the sidewalk.

Without thinking, I sprint towards the beautiful stranger, yelling, "Watch out!"

He looks up, startled, just as I reach him. Grabbing his arm, I tug him towards me with all my might.

The car narrowly misses his body.

As I pull him, he stumbles against me, and we both fall.

He shifts his body, and with a heavy thud, hits the cobblestone pavement shoulder first. Cushioning my landing, I land on top of him.

I'm stunned. My heart is in my throat.

*What the hell just happened?!*

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## CHAPTER TWO

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### ELLA

**M**y heart is pounding in my chest like a jackhammer, and my insides quiver with its beat.

My body is shaking from the adrenaline rush.

Did I really just run into the path of an oncoming car?

*Holy shit!*

Mr. Tall, Dark, and Handsome is holding my hips in a tight grasp, his touch searing even through my clothes. Liquid heat rushes through my veins, setting my body ablaze.

The man lying beneath me appears stunned. His eyes are glued to the SUV as it races down the street before it turns and disappears from sight.

Suddenly, my brain registers I'm lying on top of a complete stranger, his face only inches from mine.

*He's way too close.*

I roll off him and onto my side, half sitting up. Whoa, my head spins.



*Oh God, I'm going to faint.*

“Are... are you okay?” I hear myself stammer, but the sound comes from far away.

Mr. Tall, Dark, and Handsome pushes himself up to sitting, his suit jacket torn at the shoulder.

Anger is radiating off him. His nostrils flare, and the vein in his neck is engorged and twitching.

People are staring, but no one dares approach us.

Two bulky men in suits run towards us.

*Who are they?*

Bodyguards?

God, I hope so. Given their furious expressions, the alternative would be scary. The man beside me isn't alarmed, so I guess we're okay.

I glance back at the handsome stranger, and our eyes meet.

The world stands still.

In an instant, I'm being sucked into outer space without a ticket to return, and swallowed up into the depths of his soul.

A puzzle piece I didn't know was missing slides into place.

My heart stops and misses a few beats.

I can't breathe... and I don't care.

Warm, hazel-brown eyes are staring back at me, intense as if recognizing me, too.

If it wasn't still happening, I'd roll my eyes and think '*Yeah, right*', the scene too cliché to be believable.

But here I am, my world thoroughly rocked and moved off its axis in a millisecond.

Trapped by the gravity of his gaze, I am laid bare before him. It's as if he can see deep into my soul, and all my secrets are exposed for his perusal.

Good thing I have no secrets... or do I? Nothing seems certain, yet everything is crystal clear.

*How is this possible?*

I don't know how long we stare at each other. Probably no more than a few seconds, yet it feels like an eternity that I'm held locked by this stranger's captivating eyes.

The background noise of cars and onlookers fades into nothing, and this vast universe is only made of two—him and me.

Heat rises in my cheeks. My ability for conscious thought seems ripped to shreds.

Swallowing hard, I drop my gaze, disrupting our powerful connection.

Air rushes back into my lungs, and the world around us comes back into focus.

*What was that?*

I run my hands through my hair and tuck the loose strands behind my ear. I look anywhere but at him.

His eyes are still on me—I can feel their intensity. It does nothing to help my frantically beating heart slow down.

A guy built like a brick house helps Mr. Tall, Dark, and Handsome up. He's wearing an earpiece and is talking rapidly into his phone, scanning up and down the street, clearly on the lookout for more danger.

The gorgeous stranger looks down at me and reaches out his hand. The moment I take it, a jolt of electricity sears my body.

*Seriously? More clichés?*

I honestly thought the whole '*electricity shoots through me at his touch*' was made up to sell books and not something that actually happens.

Apparently, I'm wrong about that.

And just to prove the point, my entire body erupts with goosebumps.

Cue the internal eye roll at myself.

Mr. Hottie, as Rhia would call him, gently pulls me up until I'm standing right in front of him. He's tall... much taller up close than I expected.

I would need to lift my face if I wanted to look at him. I don't though. His eyes are too penetrating, and his presence intimidating.

My breath catches in my throat and I quickly pull back my hand.

Still, his warmth and strength envelop me.

Damn, does he feel this too? Or am I the only one who's thrown out of equilibrium?

Why is my body reacting like this? It never has before.

Desire pools in my abdomen, and I have to fight my body from leaning in closer. Why am I so drawn to him?

*Jeez. Get a grip on yourself, Ella!*

This has to be the adrenaline rushing through my veins... there's no other explanation.

Mr. Tall, Dark, and Handsome places his hand on my lower back, guiding me towards the café, and even through my clothes his touch scorches my skin.

He ushers me into a private room. How are we allowed in here? Does he own this place? He doesn't strike me as a café owner.

So far, he hasn't uttered a single word, and at this stage, I don't know if he speaks English. Surely he would. He looks too sophisticated not to.

Collecting myself, I turn around to face him and ask again, "Are you okay? Is your shoulder hurting?"

"I'm fine," he finally replies.

Thank God he speaks English.

"Are you hurt?" He looks me up and down with a concerned expression on his handsome face. "Your hands are shaking," he observes.

“I’m a little freaked out,” I admit. “No, actually... make that a lot freaked out.”

He approaches Suit Guy, who followed us inside and tells him something in Italian. Not for the first time on this holiday, I wish I hadn’t bailed on the Italian classes Rhia signed us up for when we first had the idea to visit Sicily. But I figured we’d be okay if she knew some Italian, so I skipped the course.

Suit Guy leaves, and as the door closes behind him, the room seems to shrink in the overwhelming presence of this enigmatic man.

*Shit. We’re alone.*

All sound is sucked out, and it’s like the air has been vacuumed from my lungs, leaving me light-headed and flustered.

Mr. Tall, Dark, and Handsome draws in a deep breath. He remains by the door as his gaze slides down the length of my body, taking me in slowly from head to toe.

*Oh. My. God.*

My cheeks turn crimson red. The room feels even more cramped, as the walls close in and breathing becomes a chore.

Jeez, it’s too hot in here. I look around, searching for a window to let in some air.

My attention is immediately drawn back to him, as he walks towards me in determined strides, taking off his torn jacket

and tossing it on a nearby table.

My stomach somersaults at the sight.

Oh my, I wasn't wrong about his arms. He definitely works out... a lot. I bite my lip to stop an embarrassing moan from slipping out.

As I drop my gaze to the floor, I can't help but notice the bulge in his pants. I almost do a double-take. Was that... is that... oh my God... is he hard?

Too much blood roars all at once through my system.

*Fricking hell. Calm the heck down.*

“Have a seat,” he says, pulling out a chair for me.

I gladly comply, my legs too wobbly to hold me up much longer. For a second, I'm at eye level with his crotch—I look away quickly.

*Don't look. Don't look.*

He crouches in front of me, his broad chest expanding with each breath in, filling the space between us. The scent of his aftershave registers in my brain.

*God, he smells good!*

I want to nuzzle into his neck and breathe him in. As if on autopilot, my body is on the move to get closer, but I catch myself just in time.

“Come ti chiami?” Mr. Tall, Dark, and Handsome breaks the silence. “What's your name?”

“Ella,” I reply quietly, swallowing the lump in my throat.  
“Ella Rose O’Neil.”

Why did I answer with my full name? We’re not in school here.

He freezes for a moment. Something like surprise or awe registers in his eyes, but it’s gone before I can put a finger on it.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, Ella Rose O’Neil.” He smiles warmly at me. “I’m Gualtiero Leandro De Marco.”

I repeat his name a few times in my head, happy to give my mind a distraction. I wonder what his name means. It sounds tough and ferocious.

“Your name. It sounds... strong. Do you know the English meaning?” I ask.

He looks surprised by my question. “Nobody has ever asked me this.”

I shrug my shoulders, a little embarrassed. “Few people show interest in the meaning of names.”

“But you do?” At my nod, a tentative smile emerges, and he rubs his chin, thinking.

“I believe Gualtiero means powerful ruler. My middle name Leandro means lion man.”

Lion, the ruler of the animal kingdom... I let his name roll around in my mind.

“There’s a lot of ruling in your name. Are you a ruler?” I wonder out loud. He has the air of one in command—it’s intimidating and reassuring all at once.

“Well, I’m the head of my family and I own several businesses. So yes, I rule,” he tells me.

“And Marco means warlike,” I add.

And where there’s a ruler, there’s usually a war to fight at some stage, I contemplate.

He appears surprised at my knowledge and I explain, “I’m fascinated with nameology. And my ex-boyfriend’s name was Marco. That’s how I know.”

“Nameology? What’s that?”

“It’s the science of names. It’s a coined word, but I think it fits.”

“That’s an unusual interest,” Gualtiero says with a hint of a smile.

“I like knowing if the meaning matches the person’s personality.”

“What does Ella mean?” he asks, studying my face with curiosity.

“Well, in old Greek, it means bright one or shining one. In Hebrew, it means goddess or beautiful fairy maiden.”

“Dea splendente... seems fitting,” he muses, his eyes never leaving mine. They have a tender glow as he watches me.

“Dea splendente?” I repeat, tilting my head to one side.



His hand comes up and cups my cheek, his fingers caressing my skin.

My breathing halts, my heart, yet again, skips a beat before bounding to a frantic pace.

*What is he doing?*

This is too intimate.

Yet I don't stop him.

His touch... I don't think my heart can cope. I'm seriously going to have a heart attack if he continues this.

"It means shining goddess," he translates as his eyes burn into mine.

I blush under his scrutiny. I've never been called a goddess before—it makes me uncomfortable.

To me, goddesses are perfect. They are beautiful and wise, gracious and benevolent. While I believe I'm pretty with my fair skin, angel blonde hair and blue eyes, I'm no goddess. I have plenty of flaws.

A knock on the door has Gualtiero drop his hand, and my brain instantly registers the loss. I shake my head to dislodge the spell he's put me under, confused by what's happening to me.

I eye the exit longingly. I'm in way over my head with this man—I need to get out of here NOW.

"Avanti," Gualtiero calls out as I drop my eyes to the floor, unable to stand his gaze any longer.

Suit Guy enters carrying a tray with a bottle of water and a shot glass of an amber colored liquid—whisky, perhaps? He puts it down on the table beside me and stations himself by the door.

“Leave us,” Gualtiero says curtly, and he complies immediately.

Yep, it’s obvious he’s perfected the ruling trait.

“Drink this,” he commands, handing me the shot glass.

“What is it?” I ask, eyeing the content of the glass suspiciously.

“Puni.” At my raised eyebrow, he explains further. “Italian malt whisky.”

I scrunch up my nose and shake my head. “No, thank you,” I decline. “I’m not much of a drinker.” Particularly not spirits. Last time I had whisky was in Scotland and that didn’t end well.

But Gualtiero doesn’t take no for an answer and pushes it towards me, adamant. “Trust me. You’ll feel better afterward.”

Reluctantly, I take the shot glass from him, our fingers touching. The goosebumps are back immediately and so is the blush.

*God, help me!*

I hate blushing. So not cool!

Why don’t I have better control over my body?

Sweat beads on my forehead, but I refrain from wiping it.

I bring the glass to my lips and down it in one go. The alcohol burns in my throat and all the way down to my stomach, but I take it... welcoming anything that loosens the tension between Gualtiero and me.

Have I ever had such a visceral reaction to anyone? Our connection seems inexplicable, seeing we only just met.

“That was awful!” I exclaim, coughing, pulling a face as if I had bitten into a lemon. Gualtiero chuckles. Oh my, he looks beautiful when he laughs... younger and more carefree, and downright edible.

He uncaps the bottle of water and passes it to me. I don’t hesitate and gulp the water greedily, trying to wash away the burning sensation in my mouth.

Watching me closely, Gualtiero turns serious again. “You saved my life,” he says with gratitude in his voice.

Oh my, my, my. Have I mentioned his voice yet?

It’s rich and deep and velvety, with a slight Italian accent... I melt just listening to the few words he’s spoken thus far.

I imagine myself listening to him reading me a bedtime story—now that’s a delicious thought! Though, I don’t think I’d be lulled into sleep... quite the opposite.

The deep timbre of his voice alone could wake up my girlie parts from their coma... no scrap that. They’ve already woken up and are well and truly alive—my damp panties the proof.

“How can I thank you?” Gualtiero asks, interrupting my daydream.

“You don’t need to.” I’m quick to wave him off. “Any decent person would have done the same.”

He looks at me for a long while, his expression hard to read. “I’m indebted to you, Ella. Let me at least take you out to dinner... as a thank you.”

*Run, run, run...* I tiny voice inside me yells.

He takes the hand resting in my lap into his and brushes his thumb slowly over the back. Strangely attuned to the slightest movement of his fingers, each tiny stroke makes my heart race disturbingly fast.

*Jeez, stop touching me!*

“Honestly, it’s not necessary, Gualtiero,” I push out rather breathily.

It’s the first time I’ve said his name. It feels strangely familiar, and he senses it, too—his eyes sparking the moment his name rolls off my tongue.

“I insist, Ella,” he asserts in a tone not to be argued with, and I get the impression he always gets what he wants.

His gaze simmers with undeniable heat, and I find it hard to breathe. This has to be a by-product of the adrenaline still coursing through my body after our close call, right?

Only now do I realize how much I’ve put myself in harm’s way and shudder in horror. Best not to contemplate this. It would do nothing to calm me, and I’m in desperate need of finding some composure.

Gualtiero is looking at me expectantly. Right, he wants an answer. But no words leave my mouth.

He's too close, his stare too intense. I'm perspiring here.

*Someone help, please!*

Rattled, I let my glance fall to the floor. But all I see are his shiny black dress shoes. Maybe I could count the specs of dust on them to distract myself?

“Ella.” My name falls from his lips like sweet music.

He waits till I lift my eyes. “Ella, have dinner with me,” he says softly.

In the recesses of my mind, alarm bells keep ringing... but why? My muscles tense as if ready to take off.

Is it because I've never had an insane attraction like this to anyone before? Let alone to someone I only met minutes ago?

My gut tells me if I spend any more time with him, I'll be swept away.

Why does it feel like I know him? Know him on a soul level? It makes no sense.

He's so familiar, like I've known him forever.

To be honest, this is rattling me more than the car incident from earlier.

Gualtiero, on the other hand, appears calm and collected. How can he not be affected by what happened? Are attempts on his life nothing unusual? It's peculiar to say the least.

One thing is becoming clearer with every passing second, though. I should stay far, far away from this man. In fact, I should turn around right now and run as fast as I can in the opposite direction.

My body is primed and ready to flee. Yet my feet are glued to the ground.

I'm held by some power emanating from him. Electricity buzzes between us.

I shake my head to snap out of it.

*Say no to his dinner invitation*, I plead with myself.

I gather my courage and raise my head to meet his gaze again. "I can't have dinner with you."

Gualtiero looks at me, unimpressed. Clearly, he doesn't get turned down often—if ever. I bet women jump at the opportunity to be with him. And I would too if my self-preservation hadn't kicked in.

He opens his mouth to speak, but my phone vibrates in my purse.

*Rhia*... she'll be wondering where I am.

Shit, I've forgotten I left her in the souvenir shop.

Knowing her, she'll be beside herself with worry. I rummage through my handbag until I find my phone.

Damn, six missed calls. I hit the call button and press the phone to my ear.

Rhia answers on the first ring. “Where the hell are you?” she shrieks without greeting. “I’ve been worried sick. There’s no sign of you anywhere, and you’re not answering my calls. You better have a damn good explanation,” she rattles on without taking a break or a breath. “You know I have an active imagination and the scenarios...”

“I’m sorry,” I interrupt her, “I’ll explain later.”

“You don’t sound like yourself. What’s going on, El? Where are you?” Rhia asks, alarmed.

“Umm. There was an incident, but don’t worry, I’m okay,” I say. “I’m in the little café on the other side of street. It’s called...” I look questioningly at Gualtiero.

“Tre Fiamme,” he replies in a chilled tone.

“It’s called Tre Fiamme. I’ll meet you outside.” With that, I hang up.

Gualtiero is still crouched before me and has been watching me the entire time I was on the call. His face is unreadable and his eyes have turned hard.

“I have to go,” I stammer. “It was nice meeting you, Gualtiero,” I say, my good manners taking over. “I’m glad you’re okay.”

Gualtiero doesn’t move out of the way when I try to get up. I swallow hard, my throat gone dry.

“Was that your boyfriend?” he asks calmly, but there’s an undertone to his voice I can’t quite place.

*What?*

I blink rapidly at him. Giving a quick shake of my head, I press my hands against my thighs to keep them still.

“Umm... No... That was my friend Rhia. We’re travelling together,” I reply, rubbing the back of my neck to ease the tension there. “I can’t go to dinner with you because I don’t want to abandon her and her sister.”

It’s a weak excuse and Zoe is more likely to desert us, but it’s all I can come up with. Why am I explaining myself to him, anyway?

Something that looks a lot like relief flickers over Gualtiero’s face before he reins it in, resuming his passive expression.

If I didn’t know any better, I’d say he was jealous, but that can’t be right. Now, I’m making things up in my mind. It’s high time to leave before I make an even bigger fool of myself.

He takes my hands in his, studying me. “Your hands are still shaking,” he observes.

*Yes, that’s because you’re too close and keep touching me.*

“I don’t want you to leave yet. I think you’re still in shock.” He rises to his feet and says in a tone that brooks no opposition, “Stay here. I’ll get your friend.”

I open my mouth to protest, but before I can utter a word, he heads to the door and leaves the room.



Dammit, I wanted to use Rhia as an excuse to escape. Now what?!



I pace the room restlessly, trying to make sense of what just happened.

Why am I staying here? I should just go. Someone tried to run Gualtiero over and it didn't look like an accident. Am I even safe anywhere near him?

*What have I gotten myself into?*

I sit down, tapping my fingers against my leg, my mind racing yet not forming one coherent thought.

Frustrated, I stand up again, letting out a long sigh and resume pacing.

I need to calm down.

I try sitting down again. Taking a deep breath, I close my eyes, but all that does is bring up images of hazel-brown, warm eyes staring back at me.

Those eyes...

That man... there is something about him.

And the way he looks at me... so all-consuming.

There's a tug of war going on inside me. My gut tells me to run, my heart urges me to stay... what should I do?

Don't they say follow your heart? But what about your gut instinct?

*God, this is confusing!*

Before I can make up my mind, the door opens again, and Gualtiero enters with Rhia hot on his heels.

Right away, his fiery gaze catches mine and holds it, and once again, I become completely enthralled. My insides tighten and quiver, and my nipples pebble into hard rocks under my shirt.

*Oh please, don't let him notice.*

I'd be mortified if he knew how much he's affecting me.

The temptation to let my gaze travel lower and check for signs of his arousal is great, but I resist—that would be too obvious. So instead, I speechlessly stare back.

The spell is broken when Rhia rushes forward, and my attention goes to her.

She hugs me tightly. “Oh my God, Ella. Are you really okay? Gualtiero told me what happened.”

In the comfort of Rhia's embrace, I take my first real breath since this whole palaver started. I can't wait to fill her in on everything.

How can twenty minutes seem like an entirely different lifetime?!

“Yeah, sweets. I'm good. A little rattled, but that will pass soon enough. I'm not the one who got injured.” Pointing at

Gualtiero, I say to him, “You should have your shoulder checked out.”

“It’s nothing... just a bruise,” he replies, unperturbed.

Again, I wonder how he can be so calm when someone just tried to run him over.

There’s a moment of awkward silence. Gualtiero’s eyes are fixed on me, and for the love of God, I can’t seem to look away from him either.

Rhia misses nothing and raises an eyebrow curiously.

Gualtiero finally speaks, addressing her. “Signorina Rhia, I invited Ella to dinner and, of course, I’d like you and your sister to come as well. I’ll invite my brother and a friend to even out numbers.”

Oh, he’s smooth!

Why is he so determined? Why not just say thank you and move on?

I should feel flattered by his resolve to take me out, but to be honest, I still want to run for the hills. He’s way out of my league. I have no experience with men like him. Both my former boyfriends were sweet and innocent compared to the powerhouse that is Gualtiero De Marco.

I stare at Rhia, imploring her telepathically to decline, but she completely ignores me, a devilish smile spreading over her beautiful face.

“That’s a wonderful idea. Thank you. We’d be delighted.”

*No, we wouldn't be*, I seethe internally. Rhia is the only one who's delighted. She has no problem talking to the most gorgeous and intelligent people. She's never lost for words or shy, and nor is Zoe. I, on the other hand...

"It's settled then," Gualtiero smiles. "I'll take you to my favorite restaurant in Catania. You'll love it. They have the best seafood in all of Sicily."

It appears Rhia has taken over talking on my behalf. "Sounds perfect," she replies happily. "We're looking forward to it."

*Is she for real?*

How can she agree to this without consulting me?

"How does tomorrow evening suit?" Gualtiero asks. "We will pick you up from your hotel at seven o'clock. Where are you staying?"

Rhia gives Gualtiero the details while my heart gallops in my chest like a wild stallion.

*Holy shit, I'm going to see him again.*

I force a smile as I listen to them making plans, but all I want to do is bang my head against a wall and cry.

How am I going to survive a whole evening with Mr. Tall, Dark, and Handsome if twenty minutes in his presence leave me flabbergasted, tongue-tied, and uncontrollably aroused?

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## CHAPTER THREE

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### GUALTIERO

The door closes behind the blonde angel who saved my life as she and her friend leave for their hotel.

“Santino,” I call for my head of security. He enters moments later with a grave expression on his face.

Yes, he has every reason to be worried, but I’ll deal with him and his sloppiness later. What happened earlier can’t go unpunished, and he knows it. Perhaps his dear brother will have to lose a finger or two for Santino to sharpen up again. He cares little for his own life but would do anything for his family.

Everyone has weaknesses, and the trick is to find them. I’m good at it. It helps me to always get exactly what I want.

You don’t get to the top by being careless. And I’m at the top of my game. I’ve perfected it since I took over from my father after his death seven years ago.

“Have the girls shadowed and make sure no one goes near them.” Santino nods and disappears immediately to make the

arrangements.

I can't risk *him* getting anywhere near her.

Most likely, the café is being watched, and he's seen Ella and her friend leave. I doubt he'll try anything with her—she was just a random bystander, after all.

Then again, with him... you just never know. The asshole is unpredictable.

Niccolo fucking Molinaro.

For an old man, he's got guts, I give him that. Well, old compared to me—he's twenty years my senior.

Two years ago, when he turned fifty, something changed for him. He became power obsessed in a way that bordered on desperation—a dangerous combination.

He's become reckless, seemingly not thinking things through. Greed is clouding his vision. He's envied my share of the market for years, and killing me would create enough havoc for him to take over... or so he believes. But it's never that easy.

What a stupid mistake he made in attacking me.

He's messing with the wrong guy.

Anger boils in my blood. Nobody gets away with crossing me. My punishment is swift and not something you recover from.

Molinaro will pay for this. He's a dead man.

When I saw the car speeding off, I knew exactly who had sent it. Violent rage rose inside me like a tidal wave... until I looked into eyes so blue, their depths swallowed me up whole and cooled my fury.

The air was punched out of my body, replaced by an instant calm... an unfamiliar tranquility filling my whole being.

Then my heart, beating ferociously with anger, sped up for an entirely different reason.

And in that moment, I knew.

For as long as papà was alive, he would say, “Son, when you meet *her*, you will know without a single doubt in your mind. Don’t just pick any girl to continue our familia with. This is too important. You wait... you hear me, son, you wait!”

This is what I grew up with even before my mum passed away when I was eight. This is what he taught me to believe. And I do to this day.

Though in recent years, I started doubting papà’s words. Not once has a woman inspired such feelings... lust, yes, frequently. The pleasures of a woman’s body are easy to come by when you have power and money. I’ve got both in spades.

Good looks also help. I’m not vain, but my entire family has been blessed in this department. Especially Mateo uses it to his advantage. His voracious appetite sees him bed one beauty after another. He too is waiting for his one, but until that day

comes, he's determined to enjoy every beautiful woman who crosses his path.

Ella, though, will be off-limits to him because she's mine—the *one* meant for me.

I knew even before I had taken in her gorgeous face and spectacular body. I knew even before she mentioned her name, which, when she told me, left me breathless for a moment.

Every single cell in my body recognized her.

But even with my father's words running in the background, I never expected to know from one millisecond to the next.

In my mind, I'd meet a woman and there'd be something unique about her that would pique my interest and draw me in. And over time, it would become obvious that she was the one.

Not in a million years did I expect a lightning bolt to strike me.

This sort of reaction happens only in Hollywood movies, and I dismissed it as cliché and utterly unrealistic.

I was wrong.

They say the eyes are the window to the soul. And I saw hers.

I saw her beautiful, bright-shining light, so brilliant and pure, it drew me like a moth to a flame—I couldn't look away if I had tried.

Not only that, but I merged with it.



In one bright flash of light, electricity jolted through me, making me feel alive and unstoppable.

Even now, with Ella gone, her soul keeps calling me like a siren's song. Her scent is still invading my nostrils, her touch still lingering on my skin where her fingers brushed against me, even if only for a second.

My senses swim with my awareness of her. Her softness has made me an addict in a heartbeat.

I'm no romantic, so the thoughts swirling in my mind are the biggest surprise of all.

Looking up to the heavens, I salute my father.

*Papà, you were right.*

And Ella felt it too.

I could tell by how flustered I made her. Goosebumps erupted on her skin whenever I touched her... and I wanted to do so much more touching.

The moment I laid eyes on her, I was rock hard... still am, in fact. What a sweet moment it will be when I claim her as mine and later have her grow ripe with my child.

Her instincts told her to run as if she sensed the danger. And she's right—I am a dangerous man. But she can't get away from me—not now, not ever. I've waited too long for her, and now that our paths have crossed, I'll never let her go.

A deep inner peace fills me that comes from finally achieving a lifelong quest.

I'm aware I know nothing about my blonde angel, but Santino will find out every big and small detail about the beautiful Ella Rose O'Neil before tomorrow's dinner.

Time will tell how perfect she is for me, my more pragmatic side reminds me. But deep down in my bones, I feel she's right for me in all ways. And my instincts have never let me down. I trust them with my life.

Ella, my princess, my angel... you don't know it yet, but you are all mine—until death do us part.

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## CHAPTER FOUR

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### ELLA

Rhia and I are sauntering arm in arm along the quaint streets of Taormina. Gualtiero offered to give us a lift back to our hotel, but I finally found my voice and politely declined.

The thought of spending more time with him made my head spin.

He's unlike anyone I've ever met, his presence so mesmerizing it seems to put me under some sort of spell—it's disconcerting, to say the least.

“Now fill me in on the twenty minutes I've missed of your life,” Rhia says impatiently. “I can't wait to hear it all. Did you see the way Gualtiero looked at you? Holy cow. I thought I'd need to fan myself. I was half expecting him to ravish you right there.”

Can anyone tell Rhia is excited?

Since she got together with Lex, she's become an advocate for happily ever afters and insta-love. She's done a complete

one-eighty. Even two years later, I'm still not used to it.

I roll my eyes at her, but can't hide my smile at her exuberance.

“Gosh, Rhia... where do I start?”

“At the beginning, of course, I don't want to miss out on anything.”

So, I fill her in on all the panty melting moments of when I first spotted Gualtiero, and then the heart-stopping details of the near-miss incident.

Rhia listens intently. She stops walking suddenly and pulls me into a tight hug, her playful air gone.

“I was so worried when I couldn't get hold of you,” she mumbles, pulling me closer. “Ella, if something had happened to you, I don't know what I'd do. I can't lose you. I love you! Promise me never to throw yourself in the path of a speeding car again,” she implores, before adding with a wink, “Even if it's saving some insanely hot guy.”

That makes me laugh. “I won't. I don't like the adrenaline rush,” I joke.

“Ella, I'm serious. Never ever do that again or anything else stupid like that. I need you alive and well!”

“The thing is, Rhi, I wasn't thinking. I just reacted. You know me, I wouldn't throw myself voluntarily in harm's way. The fact I did that makes my stomach turn.”

Rhia hugs me tighter, and I can tell her mind is still playing out what-if scenarios.

I cling to her, too. She's always been my rock. The one person I could rely on no matter what.

"I love you, sweets," I tell her, feeling such gratitude to have her in my life. "Never risk your life either, okay? I need you."

She sniffles into my hair, and I pull away and wipe the tears from her cheek.

"Okay?" I repeat. She gives me a shaky nod as we resume walking.

"In a strange way, I'm glad this happened... especially today," I say.

Rhia stops walking again and looks at me as if I've lost my mind. "Gualtiero could have died today. I could have died today by getting involved... or seriously injured. Everyone's life could have changed in mere seconds."

I pause to gather my thoughts. To be honest, even though nobody got hurt, I still have this unsettling sense that my life has changed forever, that I'm on a completely different path now.

"Anyway. This near miss of a hit and run has made me appreciate what I have in my life. And my friendship with you is on top of that list."

Rhia's eyes go glassy again. "Same," she hiccups, pulling me in for another hug.

I think back to when I first met her all these years ago with her two long fiery-red pigtails, reminding me of Pippi Longstocking. “Jeez, Rhi. I’ve known you for most of my life... isn’t that crazy?”

“Eighteen years, to be precise,” she says. Of course, she would know this. She probably could tell me the exact number of months—Rhia just has a brain for data, while approximating is good enough for me.

“We should celebrate,” she continues, and I look at her puzzled. “Our friendship has made it through its teenage years and is now officially an adult. That’s quite something.”

I don’t get it, my mind still too foggy to follow her brain gymnastics. “What are you on about?”

“Our friendship is eighteen years old and at eighteen you reach adulthood. We should pop a bottle of champagne.” God, I love her sense of humor.

“It can vote now,” I say.

“Great,” Rhia replies sarcastically—she has no interest in politics.

“And get legally married without our consent,” I continue.

“Oh, and it can buy a lottery ticket and claim the prize,” Rhia suggests, threading her arm through mine as we walk on.

“That’s definitely important.” I nod, trying to be serious but fail miserably. Giggles break through the tension I’ve been holding, and it feels damn good to laugh.

“You know, it’s a good thing I appreciate you, because I was ready to kill you when you agreed to Gualtiero’s dinner invitation. Why would you do that? You read my mind most of the time. And it was clearly telling you to decline, as did my face!”

Rhia’s mischievous smile is back, and I scowl at her.

“This isn’t funny, Rhi. I don’t want to go out with Gualtiero De Marco,” I say, half panicking again.

“Why on earth not? You just told me how much the guy has rocked your world. And he’s clearly into you.”

She’s so excited about Gualtiero and the connection we shared. How can I make her understand my doubts when I don’t understand them myself? There are too many thoughts and emotions swirling in me, brewing up a storm, and I can’t make any sense of it.

I see Gualtiero’s hazel-brown eyes in my mind—their intensity is breathtaking. It’s like he’s right here with me, calling me to him.

How is this possible?

I’ve never experienced insta-lust—at least not to the extent I did this afternoon when I was watching him.

And then when our eyes met...

Something shifted. Something big... like my life will never be the same again.

Good lord, what am I going to do?

What must he think of me? There's no way he didn't notice how dumbstruck I was. I'm mortified at my lack of coolness all over again.

My brain was fried in his presence, as if he chucked it on a grill that was burning too hot. It doesn't fill me with confidence that I'll be able to hold an intelligent conversation.

I can't face him again.

How do I get out of this? There has to be a way.

Though, if I'm totally honest, part of me is thrilled someone as gorgeous and commanding as Gualtiero De Marco wants to spend time with me.

Under normal circumstances, I doubt our paths would have ever crossed. I don't meet men like him—where would I? I don't frequent nightclubs or bars where I assume guys like him hang out.

And even if I did, I doubt they'd notice me. Rhia, yes. She stands out with her fiery red hair alone, and her feisty personality has always drawn much attention. These days, with Lex in the picture, she ignores it rather than invites it. Zoe has taken over those reigns in glorious fashion.

Gualtiero hasn't just invited me to dinner as a mere thank you, has he? The insane chemistry between us was palpable—surely, I didn't imagine it.

I confess, I somewhat feel flattered and validated as a woman.



“Earth to Ella. Earth to Ella.” Rhia’s voice drifts into my consciousness. “You’re not listening, are you?”

I grimace. “Umm... sorry. You were saying?”

She stops walking and puts her hands on her hips, studying me.

“What?” I ask, imitating her stance and looking at her expectantly.

“I think we need to find a place to sit down and have a good chat. This afternoon has clearly rattled you. You’re not yourself.”

She takes my hand and drags me to a nearby park bench, sitting me down after checking the surface, making me roll my eyes at her.

She shrugs her shoulders. “Better safe than sorry,” is all she says, before going quiet to let me gather my thoughts... there are many.

Here it goes. I open my mouth and let an avalanche of thoughts and emotions run free without taking a breath.

“I’m so confused by my reactions. I’ve never had such a visceral attraction to anybody in my life and at the same time wanting to run the other way so much. I’m intimidated by the man. But why? Who is Gualtiero Leandro De Marco? Some important big shot? I was comfortable ogling him from afar and within seconds, he’s no longer a stranger. And then he’s touching me and not letting me out of his sight, turning up my arousal, making me all hot and bothered. I mean what the?! In

all seriousness, Rhia, I'm in way over my head with this guy! He looks like he wants to eat me alive. It makes me want to run. But I feel I should stay and find out more. But how do I deal with a man like him? The best thing is to just cancel tomorrow's dinner." I finally take a breath.

But wait, there's more. "And then there's the fact that someone tried to run Gualtiero over this afternoon, and he brushes it off as if it means nothing. Who does that? I'm still freaked out about it an hour later while he's as cool as can be."

Rhia listens patiently, not interrupting me once. That's so not like her. It only adds to my confusion. The world really is going crazy today.

"Are you okay, Rhi?" I frown at her. "You normally never let me finish a rant."

"Well, I've been practicing my listening skills with Lex. He gets annoyed when I interrupt him. I'm getting the hang of this, don't you think?"

I smile at her, impressed. "It's amazing you can still surprise me after all these years. That man is a saint! I never thought you were trainable." She huffs indignantly at that. "I've been trying forever and never got anywhere. What's he doing differently?"

Rhia grins, and I might as well admit now that I'll regret having asked that question.

"He gags me... if circumstances allow it."

Narrowing my eyes at her, I ask, "Gags you how?"

With her smile growing bigger, she widens her eyes at me.  
“Are you sure you want to know?”

“Umm, no. I have a pretty good idea what he stuffs in your mouth to keep you quiet. No wonder it never worked for me,” I reply, giggling. “Lex knows how to handle you. He is good for you, Rhi.”

“He is,” she admits her entire being lighting up just from the mentioning of his name. “But this isn’t about me. Let’s see if we can clear up your confusion.”

Rhia pulls her phone from her bag and begins to type. “Let’s start with who is Gualtiero De Marco.”

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## CHAPTER FIVE

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### ELLA

“**H**mm, that’s strange,” Rhia says as she keeps scrolling through her phone.

“What is?” I ask.

“There’s nothing about him on Google.”

“How can that be? Everything is on Google.”

“Well, apparently not Gualtiero De Marco. All it says is that he’s the CEO of the De Marco Corporation with headquarters in Catania, Sicily. That’s it. His company website says nothing about him, either.”

“What does his company do?”

“Lots of things, apparently. Venture capitalism, cyber security, but they also seem to own hotel chains and nightclubs.”

“Bizarre mixture. And there really is nothing about his personal life?”

“Nope,” Rhia confirms.

“That’s weird.”

“He might be a highly private man. That would suit your personality to a tee, wouldn’t it?”

“I don’t see what that has to do with anything. It’s not like I’m dating the man.”

“Yet,” Rhia says mischievously, putting away her phone.

I roll my eyes at her.

“I’ve seen the way he devoured you with his eyes, and you stared back! The air was crackling between you two. Don’t deny it! I’m calling it now. There’s something special between the two of you. I can recognize it these days.

“And to think I was only meters away when you saved that sinfully hot man’s life... completely clueless to what was going on. I’ll never forgive myself that I wasn’t there to witness the moment when my best friend’s life changed forever.” She pauses, grinning widely at me.

“Just imagine, in years to come, when you’re married to Signor De Marco and have half a dozen bambinos with him, you’ll think back to this day and thank me for accepting his dinner invitation because it was the beginning of a great love story.”

I stare at her. She’s really lost it now. “And I thought I was the one with an overactive imagination,” I mutter. “You’re crazy! You know that, right? Absolutely bat shit crazy. This isn’t a Hallmark movie.”

She ignores me. “I wonder where I will be?”

“Well, you’d better be wherever I am,” I say. “You’re in my life for the rest of eternity. So, you better live in the same place!”

“That goes without saying. I think Lex would like Sicily.”

She pulls out her phone again and starts typing, looking pleased with herself.

“What are you doing?” I ask her suspiciously.

Rhia has a devious smile on her face. “Texting Lex.”

“Why?”

Instead of answering, she shows me her screen.

*Rhia: Would you like to live in Sicily with me?*

“Whoa, whoa, whoa. Hold your horses.” I look up at the sky and pray for patience with this devilish lunatic.

“In all seriousness Rhi, what has gotten into you? I’ve just explained my concerns to you, and you ride off into the sunset.”

“El, I’ve never seen you react like this to anyone, and that includes your exes. Gualtiero is completely taken with you. Why wouldn’t I dream big?”

“Why aren’t you more excited?! An outrageously handsome guy wants you. And you’ve admitted you’re attracted to the man, too. What’s holding you back? What on earth are you so afraid of?”

“Rhia, come on. You’re normally a lot more practical. We live in different places, come from different cultures. All this could ever be is a vacation fling. A tryst. An escapade... whatever. And I don’t have those.”

“Do I really have to remind you that my happily ever started as a vacation escapade? If things are meant to be, there’s always a way.”

“Your situation was entirely different. Lex has a job that allows him to live wherever he wants.”

“You’re not chained to Dublin, either. You can train dogs anywhere.”

“Yeah, but I’ve got my entire life set up in Dublin... and Knox wouldn’t like the heat.”

The Highland bull I won in a speed stacking competition on our Scotland trip is like an enormous puppy these days. I keep him at Rhia’s parents’ property and visit whenever I can. He’s really affectionate, but you’d never tell looking at him with his menacing horns. I love leaning against my gentle giant, reading a good book.

“More importantly, you’re there and you can’t easily move your company.”

She waves her hand dismissively. “I can create campaigns from anywhere. Plus, think big, El. I can expand and have subsidiaries.” She gleefully rubs her hands together.

God, she’s really on a mission, thinking about things not likely to ever happen.

“You need to come back to earth, sweets,” I tell her. “I’ve only just met the man, and spent less than half an hour with him, and already I feel I’m in way over my head. Don’t you think it’s premature to plan moving and creating subsidiaries? If... and that’s a big if... we go to dinner with him tomorrow, he might turn out to be a complete jerk. Or he’ll get to know me and lose interest. I’m nothing like the girls he’d usually date.”

“Perhaps not. But that’s what might be so appealing. I’m telling you, there’s something there. But even if it turns out to be only a fling, why not go for it? You haven’t been with anyone since Marco, and you sent his sorry ass packing two years ago. TWO years, El. I haven’t been pestering you about it, because you weren’t even remotely interested in anyone. This guy, however... it’s written all over you. You need to break your drought. Just do it.”

“Rhi, you know I don’t do casual sex and that’s all this could ever be. I can’t keep my heart out of the bedroom.”

“You’ve never tried it. How do you know?”

“Eh... I know myself.”

“You can only say that with confidence if you’ve actually given it a go. Until then, it’s only speculation. You might really enjoy no strings attached.”

“I sincerely doubt that.”

“You’ll regret it forever if you don’t explore where this could go. You could literally have the best sex of your life.



He's a man who will deliver on that promise, I can tell!"

"Even more reason not to go down that path! Because then I would compare every man after this week to him, and if this turned out to be the best sex of my life, they'd all fall short, and I'd be dissatisfied for the rest of my life. Surely, you wouldn't want that for me, would you now?" I counter with a smile that says, *'See, got you. I win.'*

Rhia takes in an exaggerated breath and scowls at me. "At least you'd know what great sex is like, so you don't settle for less," she argues.

As every best friend should, Rhia knows everything about me, including my less than adventurous sex life with my exes.

"Rhi, he'll eat me alive. He's way out of my league. It's just going to be awkward. Why would I want to put myself through that?"

"El, what is the one thing I keep telling you?"

I can't help but roll my eyes dramatically as we say in unison, "Push your comfort zone."

"Exactly!" Rhia exclaims. "You always play it safe."

"And what's wrong with that?!" I interrupt her, putting my hands on my hips.

"It's boring and predictable. What sort of stories are you going to tell your grandchildren one day?"

Pretending to talk like me, Rhia continues, "I met this insanely hot Italian who looked like a god, a gift from above to

the women of this earth. He was ready and set to give me my happily ever after... or at least the best sex of my life... and I ran away scared,” she scoffs.

“You missing out on this opportunity won’t happen on my watch. We’re going to dinner tomorrow with one hot as hell Gualtiero de Marco and his entourage. And God willing, his brother and friend are just as scorching... I need a bit of eye candy. These looks have to run in the family, right?”

I pinch the bridge of my nose, not really knowing how to deal with Rhia’s current level of exuberance. “Undoubtedly. They come from the same gene pool, after all. And the charm seems to be in the Italian blood. Even the ugliest guys we’ve met so far have it in spades.”

“True, true,” Rhia agrees. “Come on. What else is holding you back? I can see it in your face. Gualtiero being too gorgeous and powerful for you isn’t the only reason you’re holding back, is it?”

Sometimes it’s a curse she knows me so well. I can’t hide anything from her. She’s persistent and leaves no stone unturned until she gets the entire picture. Probably one of the many reasons she’s catapulting her PR company to outstanding success.

At other times, though, it’s a relief she can read me so accurately. I don’t have to pretend. With her, I can always be myself.

“There’s also the fact someone tried to run him over,” I admit. “Clearly, someone is out to get him. We shouldn’t get

involved in any of it! What if this put us in danger?”

“Ask him about it. It’s not fair to write him off based on this incident without knowing all the facts,” she objects.

“And you think he’d give me all the facts?” I ask, my eyebrows raised. “Rhia, I’m a total stranger to him. You just told me there’s nothing on Google about him, probably because he’s a very private person. And you think he’d tell me?”

“Well, maybe he won’t give you all the facts, but he’ll have to give you some explanation.”

I look at her deadpan.

“Come on, El,” she says, still buzzing with excitement. “Give it a chance. When will you ever meet someone like Gualtiero de Marco again? He’s a rare specimen! Let’s have an adventure!”

I shake my head at her antics, and with a deep exhale, I confess the thought that has been plaguing me ever since we left the café. “Maybe he’s in the mafia. I’d rather not get involved with someone like that.”

“Oh my god! Ella Rose O’Neil, you didn’t just say that,” she replies, glaring at me.

“What?! It’s a definite possibility. Besides the fact he has bodyguards with him, he runs a family business.” I draw quotation marks into the air to emphasize my point. “And someone tried to kill him in broad daylight.” I look pointedly

at her with raised eyebrows. “That makes him more than suspicious in my books.”

“Just because we’re in Sicily and the man seems to be a rich Italian with bodyguards, doesn’t make him a mafioso. Stereotyping much?! That would be like saying, just because you’re a blonde, you’re dumb. You’ve clearly read too many mafia novels!” Rhia exclaims, her blood pressure raised.

“Jeez. Cool your jets, tiger.” I raise my hands in mock surrender. “One could think I insulted you.” I’m a little surprised by her outraged response.

“Sorry. You know how I feel about pigeonholing people,” she says, her tone softer again. “Come on, El. Live a little.”

Leave it to Rhia to filter out only the exciting bits in any situation, oblivious to anything else. Like so many times in the past, though, her excitement is infectious. It erodes any concerns. By the end, I usually can’t remember what made me hesitate. And when all is said and done, we’ve always had a great time and I have to listen to her gloating *‘told you so’*.

I need to bring her somewhat back to reality, though, or she’ll explode with possibilities of what ifs.

“You do remember, it’s just dinner? We’re not going on an adventure tour exploring the hot lava reservoirs of Mount Etna.”

Have I just agreed to this dinner, after all?

“There’s plenty of hotness to be had with that man,” she says enthusiastically. “It starts with dinner. Then see where it

leads.”

Cocking her head to the side, she adds, “Gosh, the way he was looking at you was melting my panties! Where is Lex when I need him? I’m horny as hell.”

The memory brings back the butterflies in full force, my abdomen twirling and buzzing.

“He turned my brain to mush. Which is exactly why I should avoid him. I can’t think clearly when I’m around him. I’m only going to make a fool of myself.”

“No, you won’t. Remember the Seinfeld episode when George did the opposite to what he’d normally do? That’s going to be you tomorrow night, you’ll play Opposite Ella. Say yes, when you would normally say no. Be touchy feely when you normally would hold back.”

Rhia is on a roll now, and I know better than to interrupt her. She has got a gigantic smile on her face and it’s infectious.

“Here is how I see this playing out. You’ll walk into this restaurant with your head held high like you own the place, oozing confidence and sensuality. You’ll be embracing this adventure... bold, beautiful, sexy as hell, yet still radiating grace and femininity.”

She really has this all worked out in her head—I love this girl with all her exuberance.

“This is your opportunity to try on different shoes, to do things you normally wouldn’t. Nobody knows you here. You

can be wild and unencumbered. A confident bitch who is unashamed to take what she pleases.”

Hmm, sounds intriguing. Perhaps she’s onto something here. What if this is my opportunity to let loose? I’ve always dreamed of walking into a place and owning it. Bask in the attention rather than shying away from it.

Could I pull this off?

Gualtiero seems like the right partner in crime for that kind of adventure.

“All right,” I accept with newly discovered enthusiasm. “Let’s go shopping in the morning. Opposite Ella will need a dress that Normal Ella would never wear, sexy as hell yet still graceful and sophisticated,” I say with a wink.

Rhia claps her hands. “That’s my girl!”

“Does that mean you’ll be opposite Rhia too? All demure and a little shy?” I tease.

“God, no! Not a chance.”



We’re back at our hotel and about to open Rhia’s room door when the elevator pings down the corridor and Zoe strides out wearing only a green bikini and a light sarong wrapped around her hips that does nothing to hide what’s beneath. She’s clearly been to the pool, her wet, red hair dripping down her body.

“Oh my God, this hotel rocks. You two sure know how to pick the good ones,” she says as she walks closer. “I thought you hit the jackpot with the place in Palermo, but this one is even better.”

Until this morning, Rhia and I—and sometimes Zoe—explored the Sicilian west coast and stayed in a quirky little hotel in Palermo.

We enjoy unique places and were so excited when we found that one. It had Vespas artfully displayed throughout—even our suite had a few craftily built into the décor.

The owners, Gabriella and Sergio, were another bonus. In their early thirties and super friendly, they welcome their guests with warm hugs and a bottle of red wine... and lots of insider advice about where to go and what to do around the area. Thanks to them, we explored many things not mentioned in our guidebook and had the best of times.

Their place normally books out months ahead, and we only scored because someone cancelled their suite only minutes before we found the hotel. And it just so happened to have three bedrooms—what are the odds? I guess the stars were aligning, this vacation destined to be.

“I’m so glad you approve,” Rhia replies with a little sarcasm in her voice. “This place is expensive enough.”

This place is a five-story, red-earth colored hotel that’s literally forcing us to live on the edge. It’s built on a cliff overlooking the Mediterranean Sea with terraces offering

brehtaking views from all levels. Even the swimming pool is right on the edge.

“We might have splurged on this place, but we only live once. It’s just money,” I say.

“My thoughts exactly,” Zoe agrees. “And the pool is surreal. Not only does it hang over the cliff’s edge, but part of it has a glass bottom so you can see all the way down to where the waves crash on the rocks... so cool.”

Rhia opens her door and we all filter in. The interconnecting door to my room is open, and so is Zoe’s. But instead of going to our own rooms, we head onto Rhia’s balcony and admire the blue vastness of the Mediterranean.

We always book separate rooms for a multitude of reasons.

Zoe has to have her own space—full stop. Nobody wants to share a room with her. With her unpredictable comings and goings, it would be a nightmare, especially if she was to bring back a guy.

In theory Rhia would be fun to share a room with, but occasionally she talks in her sleep. That in itself has proven quite entertaining... until one night some years ago, when she terrified me waking up screaming and yelling. Apparently she was reliving and, according to her, improving a fight she had with her toy boy of the week.

Then there’s also the fact that Rhia likes to sleep in the nude. Don’t get me wrong, I’m no prude, but I prefer to wear something... even if it’s an old faded Bon Jovi t-shirt with tiny



holes all over. And as much as I love my best friend, I prefer not seeing her private bits.

As an ongoing joke, whenever she has a sleepover at my place when Lex is away, she enlightens me about the apparent health benefits of sleeping naked and feigns mock outrage when I don't want to jump on the bandwagon. Instead, I make her wear a shirt—my house, my rules.

However, the main reason these days for separate rooms is that my best friend likes to get hot and sweaty with her boyfriend over the phone. Those two don't let distance stand in their way and have found ways to satisfy their need for one another, even when not together. And I really don't need a front-row seat for that kind of action.

Before Alexander, or as we like to say BA, she craved variety and wasn't ashamed to go for what she wanted. Relationships just weren't her thing, and she avoided them like the plague. As soon as a guy expressed any interest in anything more than just sex, she'd toss him to the curb... until Alexander. He changed everything.

Good thing he works away regularly or her PR company wouldn't be what it is today. She pours her love and devotion into her business, especially when Lex is on a job. It keeps her occupied and focused, and the results are showing. Her PR company is one of the rising stars in Ireland in its field, with more and more boutique companies seeking her expertise.

“The three of us are invited to dinner tomorrow night,” Rhia informs her sister.

“By whom?” she asks, not taking her eyes off the view.

Rhia fills her in on what happened this afternoon, and of course, Zoe is more than on board to spend the evening with handsome bachelors.

“Hell yes! That is exciting. Maybe I’ll seduce all three of them. I’ve never tried a foursome before.”

Rhia and I look at each other, eyebrows raised, and I’m sure in my case my mouth is hanging open too.

“Zoe, you’re not the main attraction. Ella is,” Rhia says sternly, setting her sister straight. “Not that he would want you, given the way he devoured El. But just to be clear, Gualtiero De Marco is off limits to you. Okay?”

“Oops. Sorry, El. I got carried away there for a second,” Zoe apologizes with a sheepish grin. “I won’t encroach on your territory.”

“Encroach all you want,” I tell her. “You’d probably save me from making a complete fool of myself.”

“Oh El, you innocent little thing. You need to push your comfort zone,” Zoe replies.

My eyes go wide. I can’t believe she just said that.

Rhia smiles triumphantly and gives me a cheeky wink.

“Not you too,” I mutter.

“Yep, me too,” Zoe replies with the same sassy smirk. Jeez, in some things they’re so alike. “You need to get back on the

horse. You haven't been with anyone since Marco, right? And that was years ago. How do you survive without sex?!"

"Oh for goodness' sake," I cry out. "It's not all about getting your rocks off with someone. I prefer to have an emotional connection."

"Sounds like you have one with that guy. Just do it," Zoe says, once again sounding like her sister, who stands by the terrace door, grinning from ear to ear.

"Look, you guys, butt out. The thought of casual sex churns my stomach... and not in a good way. The idea of a one-night stand or a vacation fling makes me break out in hives. I just can't see myself hopping into bed with a stranger."

"He wouldn't be a stranger for long," Zoe giggles.

It probably sounds old-fashioned to most, but taking somebody inside my body is special to me—sacred even. It's not something I take lightly.

"Your sex life is boring as hell," Zoe admonishes.

"What sex life?" Rhia asks.

"Hey, I thought you're on my side now that you know the difference between mere sex and making love."

"I am on your side. One hundred percent. Always. No matter what," she reassures me. "Which is why I want to see you let loose and live life to the fullest in the horizontal department... until you find your forever man. I'm not a fan of your nun-like existence."

I ignore her.

“What have you got to show for all your efforts of not sleeping around?” Zoe asks.

Gosh, are those two ganging up on me tonight? It’s nice that they’re finally bonding over something, but does it have to be at my expense?

“Two two-year long relationships that fell apart when your douchebag boyfriends put themselves first and took promotions abroad,” Rhia answers for me.

Ouch... I hate thinking about Don and Marco and the way things ended. It’s made me wary of entering a new relationship, paranoid that history could repeat itself.

The few times I went on a date, I interrogated the poor guy about his career ambitions and ties to Dublin. Does he have plans to move anytime soon? Where does he see himself in five years? Children, yes or no?

Naturally, that kind of questioning wasn’t appreciated, and my dates ran the other way. Who could blame them? I probably would have done the same, but I wanted to know without having to invest weeks to find out.

As there was no chemistry with any of the guys, it was no big loss. None of them evoked even an ounce of the emotions Gualtiero managed to pull out of me in mere seconds.

Gualtiero... his hazel-brown eyes haunt me, their intensity stealing my breath even just thinking of him.

*Is this normal?*

I stare out onto the sea. The sky is tinged orange with the setting sun.

What if Rhia is right and there is something special going on between us? Would I regret not exploring it? And what if things turned out okay, just like they did for Rhia and Lex?

Could I live in Sicily? I'd have to learn Italian. Oh God, what am I thinking? I'm turning as nuts as Rhia.

"Earth to Ella." Rhia taps me on the shoulder before slinging an arm around me. "You've been thinking of Gualtiero, haven't you? You've got this faraway look again."

I shrug my shoulders. What's the point of denying it? Rhia knows me too well.

"Yeah. He's kind of hard to get out of my head."

I turn around to see Zoe has made herself comfortable on the lounge inside, flipping through the television channels. I must have zoned out longer than I thought.

"Honestly, El. Give it a go. What have you got to lose?"

Everything... if I let him into my heart, I could lose everything.

"I won't do casual, Rhi. That's a heartbreak waiting to happen and I'm over those. All I want is my forever love. My biological clock is ticking."

"You're only twenty-six. You have heaps of time."

"Not really. You know that my life plan sees me married with kids before I turn thirty. And I want to spend a few years

with my man before having babies. So you see, I ought to find him soon.”

Just where do I find Mr. Right?

Gualtiero’s image flashes before my eyes again.

*No, no, no. Go away.*

I need to find my forever love at home. That’s where my life is. That’s where I want to be.

Sometimes I wish things had turned out with either Don or Marco. I could have had two kids by now. But Don was always married to his job, and Marco... well, there are certain things I won’t tolerate—cheating is one of them. Even two years after our breakup, I’m relieved and proud of myself that I walked away.

In the beginning, it stung to be single again, but neither one of my breakups appeared like a terrible loss after a few weeks. My ego was more bruised than my emotions.

I’m yet to fall madly, deeply in love.

In both my relationships, I grew to love them over time, and felt content with what I had while it lasted. But when it was gone, I was surprisingly okay.

There was no crying over bottles of wine or binge eating of ice cream. Life continued as if nothing major had happened.

Have I felt lonely since? Yes.

Have I missed sex? YES.

But it still isn't enough for me to jump into bed with random guys.

“Don't worry, Rhi. I'll go to dinner tomorrow night and try out the whole Opposite Ella thing... minus the jumping into bed with Mr. Tall, Dark, and Handsome. My battery-operated boyfriends get the job done just fine. They've proven far more reliable to deliver satisfying orgasms, and there's no drama attached. And they don't want their balls sucked... that has to be a bonus.”

“I love sucking Lex's balls,” Rhia says. “They're so sensitive and...”

“Let me stop you right there,” I interrupt, holding up my hand. “Too much information, thank you very much. I don't need that picture in my head.”

“This two-year sexual hiatus of yours has to end,” Zoe shouts from inside.

Great. Why not announce my lack of a sex life to the entire world?

“Well, let's hope then Gualtiero sweeps you off your feet and makes you fall hard for him,” Rhia says, winking at me.

Fear grips my heart... as ridiculous as it may sound, it might have already happened.

And it can never lead to anything more.

I'm so screwed.

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## CHAPTER SIX

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### ELLA

**T**he next morning, all three of us travel north to Messina along the spectacular coastline. But I see little of it. I'm so tired, my eyes are half closed.

Once I was in bed last night, I couldn't wipe Gualtiero's face from my mind. It seemed the electricity his slightest touch had produced was still buzzing through my body. All hot and bothered, I debated getting my vibrator out of my suitcase, but stubbornly, I resisted, not wanting to surrender to this inexplicable attraction.

After hours of tossing and turning, I finally fell asleep, only to be woken by a cheery Rhia jumping on my bed a few hours later.

Now, I'm in desperate need of more coffee or I won't make it through the day. Maybe this could be my excuse to cancel dinner?

*No! Think Opposite Ella... No running away.*



“I’ve been invited to a Black Sheet Party,” Zoe’s cheerful voice comes from the backseat.

Jeez. How come she’s in such a happy mood? She’s not a morning person either. Not that ten o’clock is that early.

Zoe is gracing us with her presence today. Mainly because she knows we’re going dress shopping for tonight’s dinner date.

“Why doesn’t that surprise me,” Rhia says, as she turns into the busy streets of Messina. “You’re not seriously considering going, are you?”

“Have you been to one?” Zoe asks, ignoring her sister’s question.

“God no. Definitely not my thing,” Rhia immediately replies.

“But you like dress-up parties,” I say, frowning. “Is this some kind of Greek toga party just with black sheets?”

Zoe breaks out into laughter behind me, and Rhia glances over, biting her lip to stifle a smile.

Am I missing something?

“A black toga party...” Zoe repeats through bursts of laughter. When I turn in my seat to look at her, she’s bending over, holding her stomach with tears streaming down her face.

“I’m glad I’m amusing you,” I mutter.

“You have no idea what a Black Sheet Party is, do you?” Rhia asks, barely holding in her giggles.

I don't reply. It's blatantly obvious I don't and my naivety will be revealed any time now.

"It's an orgy, El," Rhia explains.

My facial expression must be hilarious, because Rhia is laughing now, too. I'm rendered speechless. Would Zoe actually go to something like that?

"Who invited you?" Rhia wants to know.

"My friend Mathilda. You haven't met her yet. I'd like to go." At my shocked expression, she adds, "Don't worry, I don't want to bonk a heap of strangers. I just want to watch." I'm not sure I believe her. Jeez, Zoe really is the wild child of the family.

"Zo, be careful. Once you're there..." Rhia doesn't finish her sentence, she doesn't need to.

Zoe shrugs her shoulders. "Want to join me, big sis? And make sure I don't get into trouble?"

"No thanks," Rhia replies. "I'd prefer you didn't go."

"Gee, you're no fun since Lex wrapped you around his little finger."

Rhia ignores the jab and navigates our little red Fiat Panda to the city center.

"What about you, El? Want to broaden your horizons?" Zoe asks, giggling.

"Leave her alone, you deviant," Rhia replies before I have a chance.

I'm still lost for words that Zoe would even consider this, when Rhia takes another turn, and suddenly cars are driving towards us.

“Rhia, why are there cars barreling down both lanes?” I shriek, panic seizing my body.

She, of course, has no time to answer, as she focuses on the road ahead, while the oncoming traffic swerves around us, honking furiously.

There are angry people sticking their heads out of the window, yelling at us, but our only option is to forge forwards.

Zoe and I are letting out ear-piercing screams. My heart is racing in my chest, and there's a good chance I might pass out for real this time.

For a second day in a row, I feel the adrenaline pumping through my body—fight or flight... just that there is no one to fight and nowhere to flee.

I close my eyes, feverishly praying I'll open them again.

At last Rhia can make a right turn to put us out of harm's way.

She stops the car in a safe spot and lets out a long breath.

We look at each other for a long while before Rhia says dryly, “Holy cow! Italian drivers are psychos.”

“I think the fact we're in an Italian car made people scream less at us,” Zoe pipes in, looking a little pale.

I'm too shocked to speak.

We sit by the side of the road until our hearts have slowed and our hands tremble less.

“This is the second time I’ve tempted fate. I’m worried about tomorrow now... don’t all things come in threes?” I ask.

“That’s a superstition. Let’s not believe that,” Rhia says, not convincingly, I might add. Unease settles in my abdomen.

“Perhaps I really ought to cancel tonight.”

“No!” Rhia and Zoe say in unison. “Nothing bad is going to happen. Relax, will you?”

Easy for them to say.

I glance over at Rhia. “I thought you said you had no problems driving on the right side of the road?”

“It was a simple mistake to make.” She shrugs her shoulders. “And besides, I wasn’t the only car going down that road the wrong way.”

“What do you mean?” I ask, surprised.

“There was another car behind us doing the same. Clearly there isn’t enough signage to mark it as a one-way-street. So, you see, it’s not my fault. You didn’t see it either.”

“Well, I wasn’t looking for road signs. I was half asleep. And you’re the driver.”

“Do you want to drive now?” she asks.

“Well, I’m wide awake now. But no, thank you. I don’t like driving on the wrong side of the road.”

Driving in a country that drives on the right side instead of the correct one is confusing as hell, especially if you have no idea where you're going. If I had to, I could do it, but it would spoil my enjoyment. Rhia, however, is unfazed... most of the time.

“Zoe?” Rhia asks. “Do you want to take over?”

“Nope,” her sister replies, shaking her head.

“Well, I'll try not to do it again.” Rhia winks, puts on the blinker, and merges back into the traffic.

She's already back to her normal self and has shrugged off the incident. She's good like that—leaving her troubles behind without looking back.

She lowers all the windows, turns up the music and starts singing, or rather miming along happily. Before too long, Zoe joins her, and I marvel at how easily those two can let go.

Eventually, their mood is contagious, and the car is once more filled with a carefree vibe.



We're doing all the typical touristy things and after all the sightseeing is done, the girls drag me into boutique after boutique, and I end up spending my entire clothes budget for the year on an array of new summer dresses. There's a reason I hate shopping, but at least now I won't have to for a while.

There's one dress in particular Rhia insists Ella should wear tonight. When I try on the coral red sleeveless dress with a plunging neckline that hugs my curves in all the right places, her eyes light up, and she doesn't let me leave the shop until I buy it.

Paired with the high-heeled sandals we find in the shoe shop next door and the simple thin three-tiered golden pendant necklace, where the last tier nestles beautifully right between my breasts, even I admit I look downright sinful.

Zoe has been bouncing off the walls with excitement all day at the prospect of having dinner with three Italian hunks, while Rhia continues to dream big about my future with Gualtiero. That was fun to listen to in the beginning, but as the day progresses, it grows into a feeling of trepidation.

What if I imagined the magnetic attraction with Gualtiero? Or what we experienced was just because of the adrenaline rush?

What if today there's nothing there? God, this could be awful!

I'm still lost in my thoughts when, on the way back to our hotel in Taormina, Rhia manages yet again to drive down the wrong way in a one-way street. This time though, instead of freaking out, we all just laugh. I mean, what else is there to do? And laughing combats stress hormones, right?

It's late afternoon when we return to our hotel to get ready for our dinner date with the Italian hunks. The closer the clock ticks to seven, the more my stomach is churning with unease.

As we step out of the elevator, heavily loaded with our purchases, I notice we're all alone in the hotel corridor.

How bizarre.

This morning too, when we left, there wasn't another soul around, while the previous day this floor was pumping with activity the entire time.

Hmm, they must be all out exploring.

We slide in the key cards to our rooms and I open my door... and stop dead in my tracks.

*Can this be real?*

Not sure if I'm seeing right, I blink a few times... but what's before me doesn't change. Taking a step back, I check the room number.

407... definitely the right room.

I enter slowly, in awe of the sight in front of me.

My doubts about dinner are momentarily forgotten, when I'm greeted by not one, not two, but three gigantic bouquets of my favorite flowers.

*Wow!*

There's only one person who would have sent these.

How on earth did he know what my favorite flowers are?

You'd think a guy would go for classical, foolproof red or pink roses, but not this man.

What I find in my room are some of the most splendid lilies I've ever seen. With a goofy grin on my face, I walk over to admire them.

There's a vase of spectacular and rare Blue Heart lilies. I've only ever seen pictures of this bloom with its blue buds and blue-veined white flowers. They remind me of a sunny summer ocean.

How did he know?!

Was he looking for a rare species to impress me with? Surely, he couldn't have known how much I love these particular lilies.

The other two bouquets are just as magnificent. One of them has Royal Sunset Lilies bursting with vibrant colors, and the other the more traditional pink Stargazer Lilies. Half stunned, I search for a card. With shaking hands, I open the little golden envelope.

*'Ella, I hope you had a wonderful day exploring this great island I call home. I'm looking forward to our dinner tonight. Tiero.'*

Tiero.

Tiero rolls off the tongue much easier than Gualtiero. It sounds happier, less intimidating. I like it. I like it a lot.

The interconnecting door to Rhia's room opens, and she walks through, about to say something, but she freezes at the



sight of all the flowers.

“Wow,” she says in awe, “Just wow.”

“I know, right?”

“I’ve never seen so many flowers in one place... except at a flower shop.” She comes to stand beside me and takes Tiero’s note from me.

“He really has it bad for you, El.”

We stand there for a moment in silence, taking in the splendor.

“How does he know lilies are your favorite flower? Did you tell him?”

I shake my head. “Nope. When would I have told him? I’ve been asking myself the same question. What are the chances of this being a lucky guess? Especially with the Blue Heart lilies?”

“Where did he even find those? Aren’t they as rare as rocking horse shit?”

“Yep,” I answer, still in awe, “I’ve never seen one in real life.”

“Hmm. You’d think a guy would normally go for roses. Especially given your middle name.”

“Exactly.”

“And how did he get them into your room?”

“I assumed the hotel staff put them here.”

Rhia shrugs her shoulders. “I suppose. It doesn’t really matter, anyway. What matters is that he’s wooing you.”

“Hey girls. Do you think these shoes go with this dress? I’m really not sure if…” Zoe walks into my room and halts abruptly, just like Rhia and I did when first spotting this floral extravaganza.

Her mouth hangs open as she stares at the sea of flowers. “Oh my God. This is insane. I guess I really can kiss my foursome fantasy goodbye.”

“You were serious about that?” I ask.

Why am I sounding surprised? This is Zoe we’re talking about.

“Hell yes, I was. If I’m missing out on this Black Sheet party, this would have been the next best thing.”

“What would you even do with three guys?” I ask, rather naively. “How do you figure out the logistics?”

“Oh my innocent friend,” Zoe pats me on the shoulder. “You have three holes. Why not fill them all?”

A shudder runs through me—and not a pleasant one. I have trouble focusing on one lover at the best of times, and chasing my big O. Throw two more men into mix or even just one extra and I’d be completely overwhelmed.

“How could this possibly be enjoyable? There’d be too much going on to actually feel anything properly.” I glance at Rhia.

“Don’t look at me for answers. I’ve never even got to have a threesome. Lex entered the scene before I could tick that one off my bucket list.”

“Well, let me enlighten you both. Double penetration is frickin’ amazing. There’s nothing like it.”

“Now that part is true.” Rhia smirks. “But you don’t need a second man for that. There are plenty of other ways.”

“That’s hardly the same. Being wedged between two hunks... two sets of hands on you and two cocks inside... it’s just so... so... God, I can’t even describe how orgasmic that is.”

“Well, I’m very satisfied with the way things are. I don’t ever want another set of hands on me. Lex is all I want.” Rhia grins at her sister, who stomps back to her room, muttering, “You two are so boring. The flowers are cool, though.”



The flower surprise slowed down our prepping for dinner, but Rhia and I are now applying the last touches of our makeup in her bathroom.

Zoe hasn’t emerged from her room since she stomped off, and Rhia and I are a little worried about what she’ll wear tonight. My guess is it’s going to be provocative. Her single-minded aim is to seduce.

It's almost seven o'clock and the queasiness in my stomach makes me want to regurgitate the linguini I had for lunch. The heart flutters I'm experiencing aren't helping me to calm down either.

God, I'm a nervous wreck. Is it too late to cancel dinner?

I smooth the front of my coral red dress just to do something with my hands. I watch Rhia, who has finished straightening her hair and looks stunning in her simple emerald green dress with spaghetti straps. It flows beautifully over her flat stomach and the curves of her body, and ends right above her knees. The jewel green tone and her red fiery hair are a match made in heaven. She looks vibrant and full of life. Joyful anticipation is pouring out of her in spades.

While I, on the other hand, look more petrified than alive. The jitters are hitting me hard and my stomach does nauseating somersaults.

"You're going to have dinner with an Italian god," Rhia beams at me in the mirror.

Oh no, here she goes again. I don't know if I can take any more of her excitement. "Holy cow, I'm so excited, I could pee myself!"

I roll my eyes at her. "Calm down, will you?! For starters, there are four other people having dinner with the Italian god, not just me."

"He'll have eyes only for you. And remember, you are Opposite Ella tonight." Rhia looks sternly at me. "Don't be

intimidated by his looks, El. You're just as beautiful, if not more so!"

I scoff at her words.

"And what's more important, you've got the heart to match your beauty. He might be a total douchebag, and not even his looks can redeem him."

That makes me chuckle.

"Seriously, Ella, look at yourself," she continues, pulling me in front of the full-length mirror in her room. "You are stunning. You have the face of an angel, innocent yet alluring. Your skin is like flawless cream and so soft. And your hair... angelic."

I roll my eyes some more at her.

"Will you stop rolling your eyes at me!" Rhia elbows me in the ribs.

"I'm sorry. I just can't help myself. You're being ridiculous," I tease. "Rhia, I'm aware I'm pretty, but angelic... come on."

"You know, if I was Christian Grey, you would have spankings coming your way all day, every day. Your butt would always be red. You wouldn't be able to sit down," she tries to say with a stern expression, but failing miserably, making me laugh.

"I mean it, El. You are angelic with your golden blonde hair," she insists. "Especially if you're standing right next to

me. With my red locks, I'm like the devil... minus the horns and a lot more attractive," she winks.

"And then you top it off with your eyes. One gaze into their ocean blue depth and the man is a goner. He doesn't stand a chance."

She smiles lovingly at me. "Actually, he's a goner already. The flowers are proof."

Tiero's penetrating eyes pop into my mind, and I blush at the memory. Maybe it's me who's already a goner.

The joy wafting off Rhia is contagious, and I marvel at my friend's easygoingness. She always finds the good in every situation. I admire how she's able to enjoy every moment, carefree and going for what she wants, unafraid and unapologetic.

I so love this girl.

Unconcerned about what others might think of her, she always finds her way.

I'm so fortunate to have her in my life, knowing she always has my back one hundred percent. And I have hers, always, no matter what.

Rhia goes to the mini-fridge and retrieves the bottle of champagne we bought earlier in the day.

"A glass of bubbly will help settle your nerves," she says as she pours the sparkly liquid into the tea mugs provided by the hotel.

“Very stylish,” I say as I take my cup from her.

“Here is to our first dinner with the Italian gods.” She raises her cup and clinks it with mine.

“As opposed to the last supper.” I comment dryly, and we burst out laughing.

“We so should see that painting one day. For now, though, let’s hope this won’t be our last supper. I have plans for Lex when I finally talk to him,” Rhia replies just as the dreaded knock sounds on the door.

They’re here.

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## CHAPTER SEVEN

---

### ELLA

**M**y heart leaps into my throat at the sound.

It's seven o'clock on the dot. They're perfectly punctual. It's most unusual for a country where being on time doesn't appear to be a priority. As soon as we landed in Sicily, we learned to be patient and be prepared for delays. The laid-back nature of the people here is something I could get used to.

As if by magic, Zoe appears behind us. She looks stunning. Then again, she always does... and, as expected, provocative.

If I thought my neckline was plunging, it's nothing compared to Rhia's little sister's. The front of her golden mini dress drops all the way down to her belly button, exposing the insides of her breasts to make your mouth water. If that's the effect on me, those men waiting in the corridor don't stand a chance.

Annoyance creeps in... and worry. Worry that Tiero's attention suddenly will go to her.



Rhia reads my mind. “Zoe Iris Bannaghan. I can’t believe you! This is Ella’s gig, not yours! Go change,” she says sternly, pointing at Zoe’s room.

There’s another knock on the door. “There’s no time,” Zoe coos. “Don’t worry, girls. I’m not intending to nab Ella’s man... the other two, though...” She lets the rest of the sentence hang in the air.

Rhia and I grimace. “I guess that’s his first test. He’d better pass,” she mutters as we walk to the door of my hotel room.

I take a deep breath and, with a reassuring nod to the girls, I turn the handle to open it... and oh my lord.

Mr. Tall, Dark, and Handsome is here in triple force. I’m stunned for a moment, and I’m sure my mouth is hanging open. Even Zoe gasps behind me.

Have we died and gone to hot men heaven?

All three men look like they stepped out of the front cover of some fashion magazine.

I immediately recognize Mateo, the family resemblance hard to miss. And yes, the smoldering looks definitely run in the family.

The three men are dressed in crisp, dark gray suits, with only the dress shirts being different colors. Their friend’s is cream, while Mateo chose a blue dress shirt. Tiero’s shirt is dark green, which complements his warm, hazel-brown eyes to perfection.

*Wowsers.*

They're like god's gift to women, and we're unashamedly appreciating the visual feast.

The men, too, run appreciative glances over us. I needn't have worried about Tiero's attention. While he briefly glanced at Zoe, his focus went straight back to me.

"Wow. Ella," Tiero says in a deep, throaty voice, gesturing at me. "You're... breathtaking."

"Thank you," I reply, sounding equally husky. "You too," I murmur as I step aside to let them into the room before closing the door. While still having my back turned to them, I let out a silent long breath, willing myself to calm down. The sight of Tiero in all his handsomeness has sent my pheromones into overdrive.

*Opposite Ella. Opposite Ella.* I chant to myself.

I straighten my back and turn with a brave smile plastered on my face. Right away, my gaze lands on Tiero, who steps closer, taking my hand. My breath hitches at his touch and a jolt immediately ripples through me, leaving me tingling all over.

*Oh no, there we go again.*

My pulse speeds up, the blood roaring in my ears.

Tiero smiles warmly at me as he points at his brother, "This is Mateo, my younger brother by two years. He's also my right-hand man in all my business dealings. He's the person I trust the most." Tiero's gaze is unwaveringly fixed on me. "I really wanted you to meet him."

“Oh, umm...” I stumble over my words, taken aback by this introduction.

Why the heck is he telling me all this about his brother straight up? Is this an Italian thing?

Why does he want me to meet him? I thought Mateo was only here to make up numbers. Does he want Mateo’s opinion about me? But why would that matter?

Puzzled by all the questions running through my head, it takes me a moment to find my manners. Pulling my hand from Tiero’s firm grip, I hold it out to Mateo. “It’s nice to meet you,” I finally say.

Mateo reaches for my hand and pulls me closer to kiss my cheeks, making Tiero scowl at him. “It’s a pleasure to meet you, Ella. My brother has been singing your praises, and he hasn’t exaggerated your beauty. You’re gorgeous,” he says with his hot as hell Italian accent and a panty dropping smile.

*Oh my...*

My face heats and an embarrassed giggle leaves my throat.

Jeez, channeling Opposite Ella is harder than I thought. Italian men are known for their charm, but this is next level.

Mateo’s expression turns more serious when he adds, “Thank you for what you did for my brother yesterday. Both of us are eternally grateful you stepped in to pull him out of harm’s way.”

Still blushing and feeling rather hot, I manage a somewhat intelligible reply. “Umm... I’m just glad I was there at the

right time.”

Daring a brief glance at Tiero, I add, “And I’m glad he didn’t get injured too badly.”

“His shoulder is a little banged up, but all will be forgotten in a few days,” Mateo says.

Taking my elbow and pulling me towards himself, Tiero glowers at his sibling. “Don’t talk about me as if I wasn’t standing right next to you, little brother,” he says sarcastically. “I’m quite capable of speaking for myself.”

That makes us all laugh, and Mateo steps aside, clapping his brother good-naturedly on the shoulder. They look at each other, and something passes between them, Mateo giving Tiero an almost imperceptible nod.

*Hmm, interesting. What’s that all about?*

Before I can analyze any of this, Rhia nudges me gently.

*Right. Where are my manners?*

I point at the girls and introduce them. “This is my best friend Rhia and her sister Zoe.”

Zoe is blushing. What? I’ve never seen her blush or get nervous around guys—ever. What’s going on today? Perhaps all things are truly opposite tonight.

“This is our friend, Romeo,” Mateo introduces the third Italian god.

“Romeo?” Rhia asks, winking at me. “Do you do voice overs?” she asks sheepishly.

Ever since our Scotland trip, we change all our navigation app voices to one with a delicious Italian lilt. It's aptly named Romeo.

Tiero's friend smiles cheekily. "No, but perhaps I should. It's nice to meet you all." He steps closer and kisses Rhia and Zoe's cheeks, but shakes my hand when he gets to me. Hmm, okayyyyy.

Other than holding my hand, Tiero hasn't offered the same type of greeting, which seems unusual in this over-friendly country, and I can't help but wonder why. I look at Rhia, who's also noticed but shrugs her shoulders.

Some small talk ensues, and I quietly observe our little group. Rhia's eyes are twinkling, and I know she's enjoying Romeo's sound. My bestie has a thing for sexy voices. Years ago, she even had to change gynaecologists, because she got turned on too much by her good doctor's deep timbre.

Not surprisingly, Zoe is completely taken by the guys and smiles flirtatiously, especially at Mateo. He's easily as good looking as Gualtiero. A few inches shorter and cleanly shaven, he appears less intimidating. If my first impression of Mateo is correct, he's more easy-going than his brother.

I tear my eyes away from Mateo and study Romeo. He has the classical Italian look, and it's clear he works out a lot. His shoulders are broad, and his muscles are straining.

All three of them are gorgeous. I wonder how often they go out together. I pity all the women they come across. They

probably all dissolve into puddles of lust at the mere sight of them.

Observing everyone else for the last few minutes has given me an excuse not to stare at the man who's standing so close to me. He unnerves me like no other.

I dare a look at Gualtiero, who's been watching me silently the entire time. The intensity of his gaze makes my stomach flip, and a new kaleidoscope of butterflies is doing their best to create the perfect storm in my abdomen.

With a boldness I didn't know I possess, I stare right back, taking Gualtiero in. The top two buttons of his shirt are undone, giving me a peek of his tanned skin. My fingers itch to unbutton his shirt further, to see what else is underneath. Given the heat in Gualtiero's eyes, I have no doubt that if I wanted to, I'd have an excellent shot at peeling off all his clothes.

The thought makes me feel powerful, and the seductress within me, who has been dormant for at least a hundred years, stirs to life. Who knew I had Sleeping Beauty inside me? Is Tiero the prince who will kiss her awake? *Ugh*, that thought makes me nervous again.

*Channel Opposite Ella*, I chime to myself.

"Shall we go?" I suggest to everyone, quickly grabbing my clutch and room key. We head to the door, and Mateo holds it open for us to step through and then closes it.

Two guards are waiting by the elevator. Rhia and I look at each other in surprise but say nothing. When the elevator arrives, our little group steps in, followed by the stern-looking security details. Both are wearing ear pieces, and I wonder who they're in touch with, who gives the instructions. And why is all of this security necessary in the first place?

Who are you, Gualtiero De Marco?

It's clear he oozes power. The meaning of his name comes to mind... powerful ruler... but what is he ruling?

I'm undecided whether to be flattered such a man is interested in little old me or scared of what it would mean to be associated with someone like him. Perhaps it's both.

A slight unease settles over me again, a sense of knowing that I'm in way over my head, that it would be best to stay far, far away.

Too late for that now.

I peek over at Zoe and Rhia, who both beam with excitement.

*Live a little.* Rhia's words echo in my mind.

Well, I guess if I'm out of my depth already, I might as well learn to swim. Rhia is right. When will I ever have the chance again to go out with someone as enigmatic as the man standing right next to me?

Pushing my comfort zone is good for personal growth, I remind myself.

*Jeez, who am I trying to convince?*

How about, just for tonight, I stop overthinking everything and go with the flow? Can't be that hard, right?

Gualtiero places his hand on the small of my back as he guides me out of the elevator and through the small lobby of our hotel. Oh gosh, this does nothing to ease my tension.

As we step outside, a couple of large, black SUVs with heavily tinted windows are waiting for us. Romeo and Zoe head to the first vehicle and slide in, already flirting unashamedly.

A driver who looks just as burly as Tiero's guards opens the backdoor of the second car. There are two rows of seating, and Mateo gets into the front row with Rhia about to follow. At the last minute, I grab her hand and pull her into the back row with me. No way am I going to squirm next to Gualtiero on my own.

The hunky Italian rounds the car, opens the door on the other side, and slides into the back seat next to me. Great, now I'm sandwiched between him and my bestie.

Damn, why didn't he take the hint and sit next to Mateo?

As soon as our doors close, a guard hops into the passenger seat while the other gets into the car in front of us. I notice there're more men already in that one.

Jeez, how much security does Tiero need? And how good of an idea is it to leave Zoe alone with several men? Not that she would complain.



We set off on our way to Catania, which is at least a forty-five-minute drive. It's a little far to go for dinner if you ask me, especially considering we have to travel the same distance back again.

Depending on how the evening is unfolding, this could get really awkward. I mean, I haven't even had a proper conversation with the man yet. We might have nothing to talk about. My nerves spike again, and I take a deep breath and try to focus on something else.

Going to Catania could be good. It might give us glimpses of where to go when we go exploring there in the next few days. According to our guidebook, Sicily's second largest city has cool and gritty bars, abundant energy, and an earthy spirit.

It's also called the black-and-white city because of the black and white stones that were used for the constructions of the city's palazzi. I'm a little skeptical about this. In my mind, black and white seems bleak. I prefer color and lots of it.

Gualtiero's knee keeps brushing up against mine, making me only too aware of his closeness. I wish I could swap places with Mateo. He's stretched out on the entire row, his body turned half towards us with his arm draped over the backrest.

To my relief, the conversation in the car flows easily and evolves around our exploration of Palermo and the west coast on the first few days of our trip.

To our delight, both men know a great deal about the history of the city, which they're only too happy to share. Turns out, Palermo is the most conquered city in the world. Because of

its strategic location on the Mediterranean Sea, the Greeks, Romans, Byzantines, Moors, Normans, and Spanish all took over the city at some stage until it became unified with Italy in the mid-nineteenth century.

Both Tiero and Mateo are passionate about their country and have a fountain of interesting stories to share. Who would have thought these commanding men were history buffs? It's unexpected and adds a level of depth to their characters I didn't see coming.

“Ladies, did you know Sicily is home to not only one, but two of Italy's three active volcanoes?” Mateo asks when we move on from our exploration of Sicily's history. “Stromboli and Etna.”

“What is the third one?” I ask.

“That would be Vesuvius. It's near Naples. It was responsible for the destruction of Pompeii,” Mateo replies, having turned around in his seat to give one of his megawatt smiles to Rhia.

I'm sure few women resist his charm and melt on the spot. But if he's hoping for that, he's going to be sorely disappointed. There's no way in hell Rhia would reciprocate.

Before Lex, my bestie would have been all over this hunk, would have wrapped him around her little finger in no time, but those days are thankfully long gone. Now her entire world is focused on the man who stole her heart.

“Mount Etna is the tallest volcano in Europe,” Tiero butts in before Mateo can continue.

They’ve been stirring each other up the entire ride, competing with their trivia knowledge and making us laugh. Their dynamic has been interesting to watch. Even without Tiero’s earlier introduction, it’s obvious those two share a close bond.

“And pray tell, what would be the highest volcano in the world?” Rhia asks, raising an eyebrow in challenge.

Mateo pumps air into his cheeks before letting it out in an exaggerated manner. Pointing at Tiero, he’s giving him center stage. “Volcanoes are your specialty, dear brother. I don’t want to upstage you.” He smirks and ignores Tiero’s death stare. “You know what the highest volcano is, right?”

“Of course, I do.” Tiero stalls a little. “The tallest volcano in the world would have to be...” he scratches his chin, thinking hard. “It would have to be in South America...”

His facial expressions are hilarious. He has no idea.

“Well, let me enlighten you.” Rhia pulls out her phone and types for a moment.

“You’re correct... it’s in South America, on the Argentina-Chile border near the Atacama Desert. Does that ring a bell? Can you tell me the name now?” She bites her lip to stop herself from laughing out loud.

Tiero squints his eyes, rubs his leg, and gestures with his arm into the air like a conductor at a grand opera. “... I’ve got

nothing.”

We all laugh together. “I don’t blame you. I haven’t heard of it either. It’s called Ojos del Salado and stands at twenty-two-thousand six-hundred and fifteen feet.”

Tiero nods approvingly. “I’ll put it on my travel agenda.”

“Back to Etna again,” Mateo chimes in. “Did you know that about twenty-five percent of the Sicilian population live on its slopes?”

“Wow, that’s brave.” Or incredibly stupid. But I don’t say that out loud, not wanting to offend anybody. “I wouldn’t want to live on or even anywhere near an active volcano.”

“People have learned to live with it. It’s the longest-running active volcano in the world with its lava dated back to one thousand-five hundred BC,” Tiero enlightens us. “On average, Mount Etna erupts every one point seven years.”

“You’re kidding.” I look at Tiero in sheer amazement and horror.

We’re booked on a full-day tour of the mountain tomorrow. I don’t want to be on a volcano when it goes off. Being roasted to death isn’t on my Fuck-It-list.

“When did it last go off?” I ask, the concern obvious in my voice.

“A while ago.” Tiero smirks. “It’s probably time for it to blow again.”

Rhia and I share a look, but then she shrugs her shoulders and moves on to telling the guys all about our planned Etna tour.

Sensing my unease, Tiero takes my hand into his, stroking it lightly. He leans closer and whispers into my ear. “Don’t worry. You’ll be quite safe. I wouldn’t let you go on that tour if I thought you were in danger. There are plenty of scientists who monitor Etna around the clock. They’d close the mountain if there were any signs of trouble.”

His words have the intended effect. My mind relaxes and my fears calm.

However, Tiero’s breath on my neck and his fingers caressing and stroking... it’s having the opposite effect. It sends my pulse galloping and turning my breathing erratic. My cheeks turn red with heat and I dare not glance at him.

Surely, he has to feel this too.

I keep my gaze fixed on my lap, embarrassed by my physical reaction to him, especially when he appears so calm.

I pull my hand gently away from Tiero’s, needing some space from his overwhelming presence. Not that there’s much space to be had in this backseat.

Shit, I need to take a deep breath to calm my racing heart, but I don’t want to be obvious about it. So I opt to hold my breath instead.

Jeez, that’s not a good choice either.

His intoxicating cologne pervades my senses, and I swear I can feel the body heat radiating off him.

Gualtiero and I stay silent for a few minutes while the conversation flows between the other two. Rhia has a natural gift to talk to anyone about anything, and I'm so glad she's here with me. It brings a level of much needed comfort.

We finally arrive at the restaurant. It looks small and non-descript from the outside, but as we enter, it stretches out much further than I expected. Tiero told us it's one of the best places to eat seafood in Sicily, and I'm really looking forward to it.

We wait by the hostess stand for Zoe and Romeo to join us. They walk in arm in arm, both of them grinning widely. Looks like they had a fun car ride.

I study our little deviant, and oh my God, I think her lips are swollen. I stare at her face a moment too long. She notices and winks at me. Yep, she's already been making out with the man.

How on earth does she do it? Go from meeting someone one second and sitting in his lap the next?

"She's so much worse than I ever was," Rhia whispers into my ear.

"We should have challenged her to be Opposite Zoe. God only knows what she'll get up to next. Let's hope she'll behave during dinner," I whisper back.

The hostess leads us to our table. Warm, dimmed lights create a cozy atmosphere, and the top end furnishings and

accessories give the place a sophisticated, classy air. There's an abundance of waitstaff for individualized attention, which creates a relaxed ambience.

Our little procession gathers obvious interest. Gasps and whispers erupt all around us, and I hear someone gasp, "il leone". Gualtiero is clearly known around here, so why is there no information on him on the internet?

With his hand on my lower back, we walk past several women who openly gawk at my hot dinner date. Others smile at him flirtatiously, but he pays no attention to any of them. They eye me up and down with obvious curiosity, probably wondering what this hunk is doing with someone like me. I'm doubly glad now the girls talked me into buying this dress. At least I look the part. Holding my head high, I straighten my posture and pretend I belong by the side of this Italian god.

*Go me!*

Gualtiero pulls out my chair while Mateo and Romeo do the same for the girls. When we're seated, they too take their seats. Gualtiero is to my right, Rhia to my left, while Zoe is flanked by the other two gods, facing us. She's clearly enjoying being the meat in their sandwich.

The hostess hands us our menus, tells us about today's specials and then disappears into the shadows. Like a well-orchestrated dance, a smartly dressed server appears next to fill our water glasses.

"Can I get you anything from the bar while you look over your menus?" he asks, his Italian accent heavy. Gualtiero

looks at me, then the girls. “Would you like champagne or something else?”

“Champagne would be lovely, thank you.” Rhia replies politely and I nod in agreement. I rarely drink, only on special occasions, but tonight I might just need a bit of liquid courage. I’m still nervous and try hard not to show it. God, I hope it’s not too obvious.

*Opposite Ella, shine through me, I invoke.*

The men each order a glass of scotch, and we make polite conversation until our drinks arrive.

A song that Rhia loves starts playing, and her body sways automatically to the rhythm. Mateo notices and rises from his seat. Holding out his hand, he asks Rhia to dance. Without hesitation, she puts her hand in his and lets him lead her to the small dance floor that’s tucked away at the back of the restaurant.

As she leaves, she not so subtly winks at Zoe, who jumps up immediately, grabs Romeo’s hand and drags him to dancefloor too. Both of them are in full flirtation mode. They laugh and touch each other at every opportunity.

*Damn them.*

I stare after them, not wanting to believe they’d desert me like this. Rhia knows exactly what she’s doing. She keeps glancing over, smiling mischievously.

Ah well, might as well make the most of it.



With the four of them dancing, I see my chance to sate my curiosity. But can I be upfront and just ask him? Or should I engage in polite chit-chat first and warm up to the subject? God, how do people do this?

I cross and uncross my legs under the table, my knees bouncing with nerves. Very unladylike, I wipe my sweaty hands on the chair.

Why am I making this so hard? Fuck it, Opposite Ella is here... and she's not afraid.

Taking a deep breath for courage, I go for it. "Can I ask you something?" I carefully begin.

"Of course." He nods with a warm smile. He's been watching me closely and must wonder what's going on in my head.

I pause for a moment, uncertain how to proceed. But I've started, and now there's no turning back.

"What happened yesterday afternoon?" I ask, "The car... why? Why was someone trying to run you over?"

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## CHAPTER EIGHT

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### ELLA

**T**iero's face darkens as I speak, his eyes going cold and unreadable.

For just a moment, he looks like someone completely different, and I'm taken aback. Then he seems to recall who he's talking to, and his easy smile returns.

Shrugging, he says nonchalantly, "I'm a businessman, Ella. I have a few enemies. It comes with the territory."

Trying to lighten the sudden serious mood, he adds with a wink, "This is Italy. People here are passionate. Emotions run high, and people do stupid things when they don't think clearly."

Don't I know it? I've done my fair share of stupid things when I've been upset. Said things I shouldn't have in the heat of the moment, but never did I want to kill someone.

But then, the stakes were never high. It's obvious Gualtiero walks in different circles to me. I push a little more. "Someone wanted you dead. How can you be so relaxed about it?"

“It’s sweet you’re worried for me,” he deflects, giving me a warm smile. “But there’s no reason to, princess. Everything is under control.” Pointing to the table next to us, he adds with a scowl in their direction, “That’s why I have security with me.”

Color flushes my cheeks. He called me princess, and it irks me. It’s like he said it to brush me off, like a child whose opinion doesn’t matter.

I suspected all along that he wouldn’t see me as an equal. He probably uses women only for his amusement... like a real player.

And why not? He’s got the looks, he’s got the money, and he’s got the charm... and I’m falling for it hook, line and sinker. The thought makes my stomach turn.

“They weren’t much use yesterday,” I remark, swallowing down my annoyance. “Aren’t they meant to keep eyes on you at all times?” I ask, while looking at the men sitting at a nearby table.

All of them are large and muscly and despite their suits look a little rough around the edges. They’ve been scanning the restaurant and patrons for any threats, watching the comings and goings continuously. When the others moved to the dancefloor, two of them followed and stationed themselves in the shadows close-by.

“When I took the phone call, I stepped outside thinking I’d only be a minute,” Tiero says, but it still doesn’t explain why he was unprotected.

“They’re normally very good at their job. But maybe I should hire you to look after me,” he winks, and I blush on cue.

God, I wish I was immune to his charms.

“You did a fine job yesterday to keep me out of harm’s way. Thank you again.” He raises his glass to salute me, his eyes never leaving mine.

I clink my glass with his and take a sip. The champagne is delicious, slightly sweet, and refreshing, one of the best I’ve tasted.

My mind is distracted, though. I wonder what the phone call was about. And how did the driver of the SUV know Tiero was unguarded? It can’t have been a coincidence.

I’m about to open my mouth and ask more questions, but Tiero beats me to it and speaks first.

“We should order,” he suggests. “You must be hungry after your exciting day.”

With that, he ends the conversation about what transpired yesterday, leaving me none the wiser, but with more questions running through my head.

“Have you had a full traditional Sicilian dinner since you’ve been here?” Tiero asks.

“That depends on what you consider a full dinner. I usually feel full when I’m finished.” I laugh at my joke.

He chuckles too and then enlightens me. “A traditional Sicilian or Italian dinner typically has five small courses. Would you like me to order for you?”

I nod. Why not? It’s his favorite restaurant, so he’ll know what’s good.

“Is there anything that you don’t like to eat?” Gualtiero asks.

“I’m not a fan of eggplants,” I admit.

Tiero smiles at that. “Well, that excludes a few dishes. But don’t worry. I’ll find things you’ll love.”

“I know I’m in expert hands with you,” I say flirtatiously and give myself a mental pat on the shoulder.

*Go Opposite Ella!*

Flirting... I haven’t done it in so long. I’ve forgotten how much fun it can be.

The others are still dancing, in no hurry to return to the table. So Tiero ends up ordering for everyone. As if by magic, the four of them appear back at our table as soon as the food arrives.

“The first course in any traditional Italian meal is called the antipasto,” Tiero explains. Of course, we’ve heard this before. “Typically, I would have ordered us caponata but as one of the key ingredients is eggplant, and you expressed your dislike for this rather tasty vegetable,” he teases. “I chose this simple but extremely delicious seafood salad instead.”

“Wonderful choice. Thank you. It looks lovely.” And it really does and tastes even better.

We breeze through the primo, which, despite its name, is the second course. Pasta con le sarde tickles our taste buds. Who would have thought that sardine pasta could be so exquisite?

The secondo, which naturally is the third and main course, follows swiftly as soon as we finish the previous one. Tiero has picked very well again. A plate of pesce spada alla ghiotta is served which, thanks to my excellent translator, I now know is swordfish, which was cooked to perfection.

The contorno, which is a vegetable dish, is served as the fourth course. And last but not least the highlight of any dinner in my books, the dolce or dessert.

As I’ve already had my fair share of cannoli, Tiero convinces me to give the traditional cassata siciliana a try, and it doesn’t disappoint. The little round sponge cake, moistened with fruit juice and layered with ricotta cheese and candied fruit, is truly divine. Though it’s the marzipan shell that does it for me. Like every good Austrian, or half Austrian in my case, I love marzipan.

Conversation flows easily, just like on our car ride. My previous trepidations are forgotten as all of us laugh and flirt. Especially after the second glass of bubbly, I’m relaxed and at ease, enjoying the evening tremendously.

Over dinner, Zoe zeroes in her attention on Mateo, while at the same time making Romeo feel like a star. She’s got the multi-tasking of men perfected, the three of them steeling

meaningful glances at each other throughout the night. Seems like she's on course for that threesome.

Tiero seems amused, while Rhia watches her little sister with fascination. She hasn't really seen her in action before. Until this trip, they've spent little time together outside their family's activities.

Growing up, Rhia always adored her older brother Connor, worshipping the ground he walked on. And it was the same for him—he's so protective of Rhia. I tease them both about it. To this day, they're thick as thieves.

Those two share a connection I always envied when I was little, wanting the same for myself. I begged my mother for a sibling for years, but she would just point out it wouldn't be the same for me, given the huge age gap. In the end, I relented. Not that I had much choice. Rhia became like a sister to me, and we've been inseparable from the day we first met.

Maybe that's why she never bonded much with Zoe. She had me and Connor.

Zoe was always the annoying little sister who would get in the way. They argued a lot, and as teenagers, avoided each other like the plague. As we've been getting older, I know their relationship—or lack thereof—has been bothering Rhia. I'm proud of her for trying to heal their rift, even when Zoe isn't making it easy for her.

Shortly after we finished our dessert, Mateo suggests a visit to a nearby club. Zoe and Rhia's faces light up with delight

while I grimace—I hate clubbing. It’s too loud and crowded for my liking.

“No thanks, Mateo. Clubs are not my scene, but you guys go without me. Just don’t forget that the bus for our Mount Etna tour is picking us up at nine o’clock,” I remind them.

“Shoot. I had already forgotten about that,” Rhia laughs.

She normally enjoys pubs more than clubs, but occasionally she likes to let loose on the dancefloor. Tonight, I suspect she wants to go along to keep an eye on Zoe and give me alone time with Tiero, the conniving little devil.

“Rhi, are you sure you don’t want to come back with me?” I ask, hoping she’ll change her mind and won’t abandon me.

A devious smile pulls at her lips. “Yeah, I’m sure. I feel like dancing tonight.”

“Don’t worry, Ella,” Mateo chimes in, “I make sure your friends are back in time.”

He grins like the cat that ate the canary, and there’s no doubt in my mind about what his plans are. Let’s hope they go to his place, otherwise I doubt I’ll get any sleep.

If Zoe is anything like her sister, she’s going to be vocal. Rhia and Lex have had so many noise complaints from neighbors, they ended up buying an apartment that covers an entire floor and has soundproof walls.

I pull Rhia aside. “How will you get back to the hotel given what’s going to happen with them?” I pointedly look at her



sister, who's in deep, flirtatious conversation with the two Italian gods surrounding her.

“Don't worry about me, El. I'll get back to the hotel just fine on my own. You enjoy your time with Tiero.” Looking over at him, she licks her lips. “He's delicious and so into you. Make the most of it. Opposite Ella, remember?”

“Some friend you are. Abandoning me like this,” I complain, making her laugh.

“I've only got your best interest at heart.” She hugs me and makes her way over to the others, waving her fingertips at me as she goes.

*Traitor.*

Tiero is standing with his brother. They hug, slapping each other on the back. Mateo says something, grinning broadly, and then looks at me. Tiero's gaze follows, a warm smile on his face. I feel like I've been caught eavesdropping and quickly avert my eyes.

*Jeez, what was that all about?*

Tiero walks towards me, while the other four disappear into the waiting SUV for what I'm sure will be a night of sexy fun for three of them. Knowing Zoe, she won't get much sleep tonight. Let's hope she'll be able to climb the volcano tomorrow. Then again, she'll probably just ditch us.

As they drive off, Tiero proposes a walk by the sea, which is just a street away from the restaurant.

If I'm being honest with myself, I'm glad he suggested it. I'm not ready for the night to end yet.

My earlier nerves have settled, undoubtedly helped by the slight buzz I have going. Not used to drinking much, the glass of champagne and later the two bottles of wine we all shared, have me feeling relaxed and at ease.

“Where does Mateo live?” I ask.

“He has a few places. He likes to rotate around. His main residence is here in Catania. He likes to be close to the office. He's got another in Palermo and one in Rome,” Tiero tells me.

“What about you? Do you have a place in Catania?” I ask as we stroll side by side along the boardwalk by the waterfront. Warm diffused lights are set into the planks, guiding our way. But even if they weren't there, we'd have no trouble seeing. There's not a single cloud in the sky. The moon and the stars are shining brightly, giving everything a romantic glow.

The night air is refreshingly cool. After the scorching heat of the day, it's a welcomed change.

“No, I prefer the peace of the countryside. I don't mind the time it takes to drive to work. I have a workstation set up in the back of the car. It gives me a chance to answer emails and make phone calls before I get bombarded with issues at the office.”

“Yes, that would be time well spent,” I agree. “Lucky for me, I only have a short commute to work on the bus and I spend that time listening to podcasts and audiobooks.”

“You don’t drive?” Tiero asks, surprised.

“I do, but I prefer the bus. There’s usually too much traffic around to make it enjoyable. It also gives me time to unwind after work.”

“What do you do? I don’t think I’ve asked you yet.”

“I train guide dogs for blind people.” I say happily.

Curiosity lights up his face. It’s not your typical profession, but it’s what I’ve always wanted to do.

I love dogs. Growing up, we had two beagles, Sammy and Max. They were so clever, and I got such a kick out of teaching them new tricks.

I wish I could have my own dog these days, but living in an apartment makes that impossible. Down the road, though, when I own a house with a bit of land around it, I plan to have at least two or three.

“Do you like it?” Tiero interrupts my pondering.

“I absolutely love it.” I beam at him. “To be part of changing someone’s life for the better is so special. Most days are just wonderful. The dogs are so full of joy and keen to serve. You just can’t be sad around them. And the people we help are so grateful for the assistance and companionship the dogs offer. It’s so fulfilling to give people a level of independence they didn’t have before. I really have the best job.”

I sometimes pinch myself, so happy I can combine my love of dogs with helping people in a meaningful way. But there’s

another reason why it means so much to me.

“My job was a godsend when I lost my parents. Their death hit me hard, and the dogs brought me glimpses of joy every day. It would have been a very bleak existence otherwise.

“That and Rhia helped me through my grief,” I say, feeling grateful for the life I’ve built for myself back home.

“You and Rhia are close, yes?” Tiero asks.

The question makes me smile. “She’s like a sister. We couldn’t be closer if we tried.”

We come across a park bench and Tiero gestures at it. We sit down, and I make sure there’s a respectable distance between us.

“Tell me. Why did you become a guide dog trainer? I assume you love dogs?”

A smile lights up my face—it’s one of my favorite subjects.

“When I was little, I loved teaching my dogs tricks, and it’s something I wanted to continue when I grew up. But this would have been a child’s pipedream if it hadn’t been for Herr Schm... oops, I mean Mr. Schmitten. He was a friend of my Opa’s, my grandfather’s. They both worked as mechanics for Niki Lauda’s Formula One team back in the seventies. My Opa is the reason my mum and I always had a love for Formula One. It sort of runs in the family.

“Anyway, one day, there was an accident, some chemical spillage of some sort, and it got into Mr. Schmitten’s eyes. His

sight was severely impaired, and he had to give up work. He was given a guide dog, which helped him tremendously.

“Opa and I visited him often, and I watched when Mr. Schmitt was paired up with his dog, Silvester, and the training they both did. I knew then, it’s what I wanted to do.”

“That’s inspiring. Which Formula One team did your grandfather work for?”

“Ferrari, of course. Could there be a better team?”

Tiero’s eyes light up. “Never.”

“Have you been to a Formula One race?”

“No, I haven’t,” he replies, amused.

“Oh my God, you need to go,” I exclaim. “You really have no excuse. Monza isn’t that far from Sicily. The Italian Grand Prix is in a few weeks. You have to experience it, and immerse yourself in the deafening roar of all these powerful engines. My ma and I used to go to at least one race a year. These days, Rhia and I continue the tradition,” I tell him excitedly.

“We’ve been to the British Grand Prix a few times. Last year we went to the Austrian Grand Prix and combined it with visiting my Oma... I mean my grandmother. The previous years we traveled to the German, French and Spanish ones. They are so much fun.”

He chuckles, enjoying my exuberance. We talk more about fast cars and Formula One, and he asks me many more questions about the ins and outs of my job. I love that he’s

showing so much interest and I love even more talking about it.

There's a moment of silence before Tiero changes the subject. "How did you lose your parents?"

That subject still hits a raw nerve and I turn somber, the happiness from moments ago forgotten.

"They both died in a car accident when I was twenty. It had been a week of rain and there was water everywhere. My parents were on their way home from their weekly date night when a car in the oncoming traffic hydroplaned. The driver lost control and crashed into them, pushing their car off the road. They hit a tree and were killed instantly."

The memories still hurt, even after all these years.

They say *'Time heals all wounds'*. They, whoever they may be, are wrong. Some wounds never heal, the ache just dulls, but it's always there.

"I fell into a black hole with all of my family gone in one swoop. If it wasn't for Rhia and her family looking after me, and the puppies to cheer me up, I don't know what I would have done."

"You were close with your parents?" The question comes out more like a statement.

I see my ma and da's smiling faces. Our small family was always their priority.

"Yes, the three of us were tight-knit. We talked about everything, and they were always there for me. Not having

that love and support anymore is the hardest thing.”

“Were there no relatives to support you during that time?”

“Sadly not. Just like me, my parents were only children. My dad’s parents died a few years before the accident. The only one left is my Oma and she lives in Austria. My mum was Austrian. Oma developed dementia in recent years and is not doing so well. She’s in a home and doesn’t recognize me anymore. I rarely see her now.”

Tiero takes my hand and strokes it lightly. Looking deeply into my eyes, he says, “I’m sorry for your loss. I know the pain never goes away fully.”

He looks out onto the moonlit sea as the waves crash onto the shore. “I lost my parents, too.”

Oh, he truly understands then. I immediately feel closer to him.

“I’m so sorry, Tiero.” I cover his hand with my other one and squeeze lightly.

“Do you mind me asking what happened?”

He returns my hand squeeze before staring into space. “My mother died shortly after giving birth to my sister. She was a stillborn.”

“Oh my God, that’s awful. How old were you?”

“I was eight and Mateo had just turned six. My father was devastated. He was never the same after her death and never

remarried. He always said that my mother was the love of his life and nobody could measure up to her.

“She was a wonderful woman. *Amor di madre, amore senza limiti*.... a mother’s love has no limits. That was her. In her eyes, we could do no wrong. Even the mistakes we made were only ever learning opportunities.”

“She sounds amazing. Did you have any aunties or grandmothers to look after you?”

“My nonna looked after Mateo and I when papà was working, but she was already quite old and didn’t quite know how to deal with two rowdy young boys. We got away with too much.”

“And your papà? Were you close with him?”

Tiero pauses for a moment before answering. “I learned a lot from my father. He was a great mentor. Firm but fair.”

Hmm, that’s a rather diplomatic response—one that doesn’t really answer my question. Or maybe it does.

Did Tiero’s father close himself off from his children after his wife’s death? I’ve heard stories of children looking so much like their mother, the father couldn’t cope with the constant reminders of what he’d lost and sent them off to boarding school. Did something similar happen here?

“What’s the greatest lesson you learned from your papà?” My question has him smile, and he caresses my hand that’s still resting in his.



His eyes locked on mine, he says, “The love he unwaveringly held for my mother... He always told me to wait for my One.”

A wave of heat sweeps through my body, beginning where his skin touches mine. I’m burning up from the inside and suddenly hyperaware of the blood rushing through my body. In my ears, it’s as loud as a mountain stream in spring when the ice has melted and fills it to the brim. And my heart? It has to work doubly hard to keep up with the gushing torrents.

“Is that why you haven’t settled down yet?” I whisper, his intense gaze on me making my stomach flip.

“I’ve never even had a girlfriend because of it.” Tiero winks at me.

My eyes widen and my mouth falls open. I retrieve my hand to cover my mouth in surprise. “You’ve never had a girlfriend? How is that possible?”

He shrugs his shoulders and smirks.

“So you date a lot?”

“I wouldn’t say that either. Dating isn’t really my thing,” Tiero replies.

Ah, the picture is becoming clearer.

“Of course... because you’re waiting for your One who, I presume, you will recognize right away?”

“Are you mocking me, beautiful Ella?” Tiero asks as he pushes a wayward strand of hair behind my ear. It makes my

heart rate spike. I'm frozen like a deer in the headlights. This is too intimate.

"I wouldn't dare," I whisper, my voice suddenly hoarse.

I drown in Tiero's intense gaze. He holds me captive with his sheer presence. It's unnerving and accelerating at the same time.

"My guess is that you don't date a lot, princess," Tiero challenges.

God, is my inexperience that obvious?!

*Duh, you blush at every turn.*

What other conclusions could the man draw?

"You're right, I don't. I hate going on first dates... Hence I have little practice with them. Both my previous relationships evolved naturally without the awkwardness you often get in the early stages."

I was so nervous when Rhia sent me on my first and only blind date after Marco. I cringe just remembering it.

"You'll probably laugh, but I actually Googled '*first date questions*' when Rhia set me up with someone after my breakup."

"Ah, that sounds interesting. Ask me one of those questions," Tiero invites.

I chuckle. "The only one I remember most likely doesn't apply to you."

“You’ve made me curious now,” he says. “Humor me. Ask me anyway.” And that sounded more like an order. His authoritative tone has my insides quiver.

Ah well, here it goes. “If you were given ten million dollars, what would you do with the money after you do the usual, like quit your job, go traveling and buy a house?”

Tiero laughs, “You’re right. It doesn’t apply to me. I’ve got already plenty of money and I would never quit my job... but, if I didn’t have all of my responsibilities, I’d retire with my One to an island and make many babies. I’d be a very happy, relaxed family man,” Tiero muses. “What about you, princess?”

And there is his reference to his One again. He truly seems to believe in the concept. Or is it to justify his playboy ways? Sleep with a woman and then tell her the next morning ‘*Sorry, but you’re not the One*’, so he can move on to the next girl? How many women jump into bed with him in hopes they are his One?

I hate admitting it, but the same hope has crossed my mind once or twice tonight. But I will not sleep with him.

“Well, I wouldn’t quit my job because I love it. And yes, I’d go traveling some more and buy a house. Beyond that, I’d get a massage every week, perhaps even splurge and have one twice a week. That would be really fabulous.”

“You are easily pleased, beautiful Ella,” Tiero says with a smile.

“I take that as a compliment. Often it’s the simple things in life that bring the most joy.”

And I really mean it. Watching a sunset or a rainbow, or even better, a shooting star... it puts a smile on my face that comes from deep within.

“While it would be nice to have lots of money, I don’t need millions.”

“Only people without millions would say something like that,” he teases.

“True, but money doesn’t buy happiness. And isn’t happiness what everybody strives for in life?”

There’s a moment of comfortable silence and I ponder the man sitting beside me. I find it hard to believe he’s never formed any attachments. How is that even possible? I get attached way too easily. Even after only a day, I feel a bond developing with Tiero. It’s not good.

Is he really waiting for his One? Or is he just a commitment phobe? And why does it matter to me? It’s not like I’ll ever see him again after this trip.

“How old are you, Tiero?” I ask to satisfy my curiosity.

He looks surprised at my question. “I just turned thirty-two last week.”

“Oh. Happy birthday,” I say. “How did you celebrate your big day?” You can learn a lot about a person by how they celebrate anything.

“I had a big party in one of my clubs.”

Of course... handsome as sin, probably more money in his account than he can spend, big parties, no commitments but probably lots of hook-ups... I couldn't describe a player better if I tried.

“So you sleep around a lot?” I challenge.

I'm not sure what compels me to ask. Given what I just learned confirms my image of him... and about Italian men in general. I know it's a gross generalization, but it's what they're known for.

He studies me for a while, uncertainty shining through his handsome features of how to best answer this question. “Define a lot,” he throws the ball back into my court.

I laugh out loud. Of course, he's deflecting. It tells me more than if he had actually answered my question.

“Never mind.” I shake my head, still laughing. “You were telling me about your father before we got off track and started talking about dating... or not dating in your case.” It's best to leave this topic far behind. It could only lead to places I don't want to go.

“Oh, yes.” Tiero turns serious again. “Like your parents, my father died in a car accident. A truck crashed into his car. He was critically injured and died in hospital a week later. That was seven years ago.”

We're silent for a moment, and I can tell Tiero is transported back in time. “It was tough for Mateo and I. On top of the

grief, I became the head of this family a lot earlier than I ever expected. Suddenly all the responsibility lay on my shoulders, and I had my hands full with running the business and managing people.”

“I’m sorry, Tiero. That must have been hard.”

“At least it kept me occupied, and I couldn’t think too much about our loss. But it was quite a learning curve despite being raised to follow in my father’s footsteps.”

“I can only imagine the pressure you were under. I’m sorry you had to go through that,” I say sincerely, placing my hand on top of his.

It’s the first time he has shown me anything other than total confidence, and I wonder how much of this came from an attitude of fake it till you make it.

“It just took some time to adjust from a fairly easy-going lifestyle to one of full responsibility... even though I was groomed for the role from birth. I was only twenty-five and wanted to do a few things before taking over. But it wasn’t meant to be.”

“Wow, I don’t envy you. As bad as my experience was, I could not imagine having such a load added to it. I don’t think I could have handled it. At least you had Mateo. You two seem close.”

Tiero smiles. “We are. He can be quite annoying, but we always have each other’s back. He’s the one person I trust completely.”

Silence once again envelops us, but it's comforting and familiar. The sound of the crashing waves is soothing, and I lean back to gaze at the glittering sky above us.

Our conversation has relaxed me, and I feel like I've known Tiero much longer than just a day. The loss of our parents connects us on a deeper level. We understand the pain and darkness that comes with such an experience.

I sense Tiero inching nearer, and my skin tingles. He puts an arm around my shoulder to pull me closer, and I shudder at the contact. Touching my cheek lightly, he turns my face towards him. His eyes find mine, and my nerves return with a vengeance.

The butterflies in my stomach awaken from slumber, but they don't merely flutter leisurely from flower to flower but gather in swarms flapping up a storm.

Oh my god, he's going to kiss me.

My mind goes into overdrive. Opposite Ella is well and truly forgotten.

I want to kiss him... I really do. But unease of where this kiss might lead takes over. He more or less admitted to being a player, and I don't want to be yet another girl in a long line-up of conquests.

Beyond that, though, a vacation fling is a really, really bad idea. I can't separate my heart from my mind, especially after being intimate with someone. It's a guaranteed disaster waiting to happen.

*Shit. I'm so overthinking this!*

Tiero's head is lowering to mine as if in slow motion, the heat of his breath fanning my skin.

And what do I do?

I panic.

*I can't do this!*

As if struck by a lightning bolt, I slide over on the bench to put distance between us. My dress slides up, exposing more skin than I'd like. Suddenly, there's movement up my legs.

And it's not Tiero's hand.

I scream.

Tiero jumps up. "What happened?" I hear him ask, but it's fading into the background. My breath is raspy and my pulse races.

The commotion has Tiero's security team surrounding us immediately.

Where were they hiding? And here I thought we were alone.

Movement near my panties has the hairs on my neck stand to attention. Something has crawled up my thigh, something with lots of legs, and it's hiding near my girlie parts.

Ignoring my sudden audience, I shoot up straight, frantically trying to shake off whatever is underneath my clothes.

Then pain... and heat.

"Oh my God," I yelp. "Something just bit me."





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## CHAPTER NINE

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### ELLA

*S*hit, shit, shit.

What bit me? Why is this always happening to me?

The shock has made my legs go weak, and I'm feeling dizzy. Tiero helps me sit down and lifts my dress immediately.

*What the hell?*

I push my dress back down, but he stops my hands with a growl. "Stop. I need to see the bite," he says, sounding worried.

*Okayyy.*

If he's concerned, this can't be good. Who cares if he sees things he shouldn't?

"A spider... I saw it run off," he says, as if this piece of information will help calm me down.

I've got news for him. Noooo, it doesn't.

"Are there poisonous spiders in Sicily?" I squeak, beginning to sweat.

“Unfortunately. I better get my doctor to have a look at you.”

“What? Why?! Do you think it was a poisonous one?” My voice goes small.

Tiero doesn't reply. I guess that's answer enough.

By now, five burly guards are surrounding us, and they're all staring down at me... with my dress up around my hips.

*Great! Just great.*

“It's too dark to see the bite mark,” Tiero mumbles, and immediately an ever so helpful goon shines a torch right at me.

Momentarily blinded by the bright light, I see nothing. When my vision returns, I spot an angry red mark in my right groin area, and it's rapidly swelling.

*Holy crap!*

Is this the day when my animal sitting proves fatal?

I'm certain I'm going to faint. If not from embarrassment that six testosterone laden men are seeing the small scrap of lace covering my privates, then from the poison that's surely spreading through my veins.

One guard is on the phone already, presumably to the doctor.

Oh my God. This really *is* serious.

Bright spots explode in my vision like twinkling stars at night.

Oh God. Oh God. Oh God.

What if I don't make it before the doctor arrives?

I'm beginning to feel weak, my limbs tingling... is this real or just my fear? I wish I knew.

Tiero hoists me into his muscular arms and carries me to the car, carefully sliding into the backseat with me on his lap.

"Fretta!" Tiero instructs. "Hurry, drive! Ella's hotel."

Oh shit. Why aren't we going to the hospital?

And where is this doctor? Is he coming to the hotel?

My body is trembling, and my breathing shallow. I need to calm the heck down, but it's no use.

If the spider bite wasn't the cause for my hyperventilating, it sure as hell would be sitting on Tiero's lap. It's the closest we've been, and I'm on fire.

His warmth envelops me, his scent infiltrating my senses, and to top it all off, his hand comfortingly rubs my back, but it's anything but soothing. It makes my body fire on all cylinders... or maybe that's the poison?

I need some space.

Pushing against his chest, I try to slide onto the seat next to him, but he tightens his hold, not willing to let go of me.

"Everything is going to be all right, princess. I'll make sure of it," he whispers into my ear.

I let out a sigh, wishing I could believe him. The pain in my groin is getting worse and I'm burning up inside from having him near.

I guess if I have to die tonight, at least it's in the arms of a hot as hell hunk.

*Now that's Opposite Ella!*

Giving up resisting him, I rest my head on his chest, listening to his heartbeat in the hope its steady rhythm will help me relax. But it's racing too, betraying his outer, calm façade.

Wow, he actually cares.

The car speeds through the streets, and by now my heart is beating out of my chest, and my head is woozy. Taking a deep breath, I pull back and dare a glance at Tiero, who's studying me with concern on his gorgeous face.

He cups my cheek with one hand, and I tilt my head into his touch, seeking his warmth. "I won't let anything happen to you, angel," he says softly before kissing me gently on the forehead and pulling me against his chest once more.

Closing my eyes, I nestle into him and let my body melt into his.

For just this moment, everything is right in my world. I feel safe, cared for, and... loved. A bit like home.

The thought startles me, and my eyes fly open.

No! I didn't just think that.

This is far from home... and he's a rich Italian playboy.

*No. No. No. Don't lose your heart here, Ella!*

My attention goes back to the spider bite. It's throbbing in tune with my heartbeat. I sneak a hand under my dress, feeling the area. To my horror, the swelling is spreading down my leg, as is a dull numbness.

What if this is really it? What if I'm going to die?

Who do I need to say goodbye to? I haven't even written my will—not that I have much to give away. Who will look after Knox?

Rhia... I should ring her. But before I even finish the thought, we arrive at the hotel.

How did we get here so fast? It seemed to take much longer going to Catania than coming back.

As soon as the car stops, a guard jumps out to open the backdoor, and Tiero slides out with me still in his arms.

“Gualtiero, put me down. I can walk,” I protest, not sure if I'm telling the truth.

I don't get a chance to find out, because despite my objections, Tiero carries me through the lobby and to the elevator. Thankfully, there aren't many people around. The few that are send curious glances our way.

What must we look like? Me being carried bride-style by a gorgeous man with five men surrounding us who look like boxers on steroids.

Oh God. What if they think I'm taking them all up to my room for a gang bang?

I burry my face into Tiero's shoulder, too embarrassed to look up.

When we get to my room, a guard opens the door, and Tiero walks through and places me gently on the bed.

He immediately goes to the fridge to get a bottle of water, uncaps it, and lifts it to my lips to drink. I'm not that weak that I couldn't drink by myself, but I let him fuss over me. It's kind of nice.

Tiero's hand lifts to my face, and he cups my cheek tenderly, stroking his thumb up and down my heated skin. "How are you feeling, princess?"

His phone rings before I can answer, and he steps out onto the terrace to take the call.

Finally! A moment alone to breathe.

The guards remain outside my door, but it isn't fully closed, and I hear their laughter drift in. What could be so funny? I'm in here dying and they're cracking jokes?

I guess this is hilarious. If they were watching us the entire time, they would have seen Tiero's attempt to kiss me and my more than bizarre reaction.

I can't believe I panicked like that.

And then I was screaming, and dancing on the spot like a woman possessed. Yeah, I'd laugh too if I wasn't the butt of the jokes.

I try to listen to their conversation, and my befuddled brain belatedly registers I can understand them. How? Ohhh... they're speaking German.

Why would they do that?

As I listen to them, it becomes clear. I suspect neither the main security guy, who left our little party right after we reached my room, nor Tiero speak the language. And they don't know I do.

Their accent is strong and I presume they come from the part of Italy close to the Austrian border where German is spoken.

“Ich wette, der gute Doktor sieht ihre Muschi vorm Chef,” goon one says.

“Nein, das lässt er nie zu. Hast du gesehen, wie er sie anschaut? Er lässt da keinen ran... nicht mal einen Arzt,” the other one counters, laughing.

“Wieviel willst du wetten?” goon three asks.

Seriously?!

They're making bets whether the doctor will see my pussy before Tiero? No wonder they don't want to be overheard.

Apparently, they've noticed how Tiero looks at me and goon two is convinced Tiero is too possessive to even let a doctor see my private parts.

I'll be damned, but this *is* funny. It's something Rhia and I would do. Who would have thought these scary dudes have a



sense of humor?

I'm tempted to call out, "Ich wette mit... I'll bet too."

Given I can influence the outcome, it's my kind of bet. But I behave. Who knows what useful information I can glean from them if they think no one can understand them.

Tiero re-enters the room and goes straight to the door, saying to me, "Dr. Agosti is on the way up."

Finally. Perhaps I will survive the night after all.

The guards fall silent as soon as Tiero opens the door. He pays them no attention as he waits for the doctor to walk down the corridor and then ushers him inside, talking to him in Italian the entire time.

"The door," I say to Tiero, motioning for him to close it. I don't need an audience.

"Chiudi la porta," he commands gruffly, and goon number one springs into action.

Tiero sits down on the other side of the bed while introducing the man who entered the room. At a guess, he's in his forties, with silver streaks through his otherwise ebony hair. He looks fit for his age and has kind eyes.

"Ella, this is my personal physician, Dr. Agosti. He'll examine you. He's brought an antivenom along he can give you if needed."

What a relief! I'm glad he's so well prepared. Maybe these spider bites are quite common.

I'm still shaking the doctor's hand when Tiero lifts my dress only high enough for the bite site to be exposed.

*What the?*

I could have done that.

I'm pretty sure I'm a bright shade of pink as I stare at Tiero in surprise.

Was goon two right? Is Tiero worried about the doctor seeing too much? His security saw far more when it first happened.

Tiero's gaze is focused on the doctor, who inspects the bite closely... not seeing one inch of my pussy, I might add.

Yay, I would have won the bet.

Tiero is holding my hand and not shy about having a closer look himself.

God, this is mortifying and so not how I imagined he would get intimately acquainted with my nether regions.

I wish I could pull a blanket over my head until this is all over.

Dr. Agosti prods and pokes the affected area carefully, but I still wince... it really hurts. Sweat beads on my forehead, and I try to wipe it away discretely.

After a thorough examination and checking my vitals, the doctor says to Tiero, "Non è il ragno violino."

Then, looking at me, he translates, "It's not the Violin Spider."

Raising my eyebrows at him, I wait for more of an explanation. I've never heard of this spider before, but I gather it's a good thing I didn't get bitten by one.

"The venom of the violin spider has a necrotic effect on affected tissues."

"What does that mean?" I ask.

"It means that the cells of the affected tissue die off. The area turns black, the tissue gets eaten up."

"Oh," is all I get out, doubly glad it's not what bit me. "So, do you know what kind of spider it was?"

"There's no way of knowing unless we run tests and I don't think that's necessary. You have an allergic reaction, possibly made worse by the shock of it all."

He gently rubs some ointment on the bite area and gives me some antihistamine tablets.

"All should be better by the morning. Please, don't worry about it," he says.

Easy for him to say, but I guess I'll know sooner or later if the doctor's diagnosis is correct. Assuming Tiero employs only the best, I should be able to trust him, right?

The good doctor must read the skepticism in my face and hands me his card. "Just in case things change. I can be here in ten minutes," he assures me. "I'll check on you again at eight o'clock in the morning," Dr. Agosti decrees.

Do none of these Italian men ever ask? And do their women just accept their high-handedness? I feel too tired to roll my eyes, otherwise I definitely would.

Shortly thereafter, the doctor leaves, and I'm alone with Tiero. I'm all too aware that we're both on my bed, and Tiero is still holding my hand.

Not having the doctor here anymore to distract me, my heart goes into overdrive.

He leans over me. "Get some rest, princess," he breathes into my hair before kissing the top of my head.

I nod in response, the lump in my throat too big for words to fit through.

He's close.

So close... too close.

I breathe in his scent, and it makes me light-headed. The air is charged between us, and I clutch the sheet beneath me to stop myself from reaching for him and doing something stupid.

Tiero has been so sweet tonight. The concern and care he showed is melting my reluctance.

Swallowing hard and taking a deep breath, I say, "Thank you for looking after me, Tiero. I sure didn't expect any of that."

"No, me neither. You're the first person I know who's been bitten by a spider," he replies with a slight twinkle in his eyes.

“I’m just glad you’re going to be all right.”

“I’m glad I’m your first,” I say cheekily, realizing too late the sexual innuendo this carries.

I cringe and blush crimson. This is something I’d say to Rhia, but really shouldn’t to a guy I’ve just met and who wants to get into my pants.

*Way to go, Ella.*

Tiero smiles, satisfied. And in his deep gravelly voice that makes desire pool deep within me, he says, “You’re my first in many ways.”

*Wait... what?*

What does that mean?

Before I can analyze his words further, he continues, “I’d like to take you out for dinner tomorrow...” Tiero looks at his watch and corrects himself. “Actually make that tonight,” he says, his gaze as penetrating as ever. “I’ll pick you up at eight,” he declares, as if I had already agreed to the invitation.

I’m momentarily speechless.

I wondered if I would see him again. Part of me is excited that he wants to spend more time with me. How could I not given this inexplicable magnetic pull towards him?

No stranger has ever felt as familiar as Tiero does. At the same time, no person has ever made me so nervous and on edge.

Given we nearly kissed before the spider bite, I'm well aware of Tiero's intentions now, and for my own sanity, I can't go down that path. But it's as tempting as a great dessert.

So tempting!

Fine, I admit it. I do want to see him again... even though he tests my resolve to stay a good girl.

"Okay," I agree with a shy smile. Tiero's face lights up, making him look even more gorgeous.

"Good. I'm looking forward to it."

I smile up at him. He's so charming.

"Are you going to be all right here alone? Do you want me to stay?" Tiero asks.

"No. I mean yes. I'm good." I'm quick to reply. If he stayed, I'm absolutely certain I wouldn't be okay—I'd be a nervous wreck.

"Enjoy your day on the volcano tomorrow... I mean today." He kisses the top of my head once more and gets off the bed, walking to the door.

"Thank you for everything," I call after him.

He turns around and gifts me with a pantie-melting smile.

*Oh my.*

"Of course, princess. I'll look after you. Remember, Dr. Agosti will be back at eight in the morning. If you need anything in the meantime, call me."

With a last glance over his shoulder, he instructs, “Lock up behind me.”

I nod and smile at him.

“Buonanotte, Ella.”

“Buonanotte,” I respond, waving goodbye as he leaves.



*Knock, knock, knock.*

What is that annoying thumping?

I force my eyes open and yawn. After lying awake for hours, it feels like I’ve only just gone to sleep. Surely it can’t be time to get up yet.

*Knock, knock, knock*

The interconnecting door swings open and Rhia bounces in full of beans. It’s obvious she had a good night.

I groan and glare at her. Now is not the time to be giddy.

“Wakey, wakey sunshine,” she sing-songs, as she jumps on my bed, making it bounce a few times.

“What time is it?” I groan.

“Nearly eight o’clock. Time for you to be up and embrace this wonderful day.” I pull my pillow over my head, doing my best to ignore her.

“Why are you in such a good mood?” I whine.

She pulls my pillow away and throws it on the ground so I can't reach for it again.

"Go away," I grumble.

Sadly, it doesn't deter her. "How was it?" Rhia asks.

"How was what?" I ask, pulling up the sheets to hide.

Of course, I know what she's talking about, but it's too early on a Sunday morning to be interrogated by my cheery friend.

Rhia pulls the sheet away from me.

"You slept with him, right?!" She looks at me full of expectations.

"Please tell me you slept with your hot Italian stud!" She raises her hands up to the heavens in a praying gesture.

Is she for real? "Seriously? How long have you known me?" I ask, striving for an annoyed tone.

"Come on. You were Opposite Ella, that's what she would have done. It was the perfect opportunity."

"You must have drunk too much last night. It's given you amnesia and made you forget who you're talking to. What time did you get back, anyway? I didn't hear you come in."

"Zoe and I only just got back."

That gets my attention. "What? You were out all night with your sister and the two Italian gods? Did you..." I can't even get myself to say it out loud.

She wouldn't have cheated on Lex. No. That's just not possible.



But her grin nearly splits her face, and she truly looks like a very satisfied woman.

“Jeepers, Ella. How can you possibly think that?” Like always, she’s excellent at reading my thoughts.

“Don’t blame me. Have you looked in the mirror this morning? You’re glowing like you had sex all night.”

“That’s because I did,” she says, exasperated. “With Lex!”

“What?” I’m confused. “How? I thought he had no reception.”

“He’s back in civilization and rang me straight away. Zoe, Mateo, and Romeo disappeared early on. There are hotel rooms above the club, and Mateo gave me a key for one. I’m sure you can fill in the rest.”

“So Zoe really got her threesome?”

“There was no stopping her. You should have seen how the three of them were making out on the dancefloor... it made me blush. I tell you, Mateo is something else!” She fans herself. “But enough of that. Back to you... we’re not talking about me or Zoe right now. The spotlight is on you,” she says, smirking at me.

“I don’t like the spotlight on me,” I grumble.

“Too bad. Tell me why you didn’t go for it. You’re clearly attracted to him, and it’s more than obvious he wants you. He wouldn’t take his eyes off you all night. At least admit you were tempted.”

“Yes, okay... I was tempted.” I admit that much with an exasperated sigh.

Not feeling in the mood to explain to her why I thwarted his attempts to get closer, I decide to have a little fun with her.

Biting my lip to stop myself from grinning and giving away my game, I lift my nightdress and show her my now enormously bruised groin.

Overnight, the swelling subsided. I fully expected having to cancel our Mount Etna tour this morning, but when I checked throughout my sleepless night, the bite site steadily improved. Now there’s a bruise the size of a fist.

Rhia gapes at the mark, looking confused.

Frowning, she asks, “What happened?”

“Well, unlike your man who knows where to stick his... hmm... thing, my Mr. Tall, Dark, and Handsome did not. He missed the hole altogether and didn’t even notice. And as you can see, I’ve been battered hard. We even had to call a doctor afterwards.”

Rhia’s mouth falls open. “You’re shitting me, right?”

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## CHAPTER TEN

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### ELLA

“I wish I was,” I say, somehow managing to keep a straight face, while on the inside I’m bending over with laughter. The fact she has to ask pleases me greatly. It means she somewhat believes me.

And right on cue, there’s a knock on the door.

*Oh my God, this is perfect.*

I turn away from Rhia to hide my smirk.

“Just a moment,” I call out.

Getting out of bed, I throw on a robe and head to the door. When I open it, Tiero’s physician is standing there with his medical bag in hand.

“Buongiorno Dr. Agosti,” I greet him and step aside to let him in.

Rhia’s eyes widen comically when I introduce my visitor.

“How are you feeling this morning?” Dr. Agosti asks.

“Well, the cream worked miracles. The swelling is gone, though the area looks really bruised.”

“Hmm. Let me take a look.”

I lay down again and show him the bite mark, cringing when he pokes the area. “This rarely ever happens. I’ve only seen it one other time,” Dr. Agosti remarks as he bends lower to inspect it closer.

I watch Rhia’s face as it morphs into absolute disbelief, her eyes nearly popping out of their sockets. Watching her helps me ignore the embarrassing fact that a stranger’s face is in my crotch.

“What the heck?!” Rhia mouths.

Oh, I’m enjoying this. Let’s up the ante.

Turning my attention back to the doctor, I say, “Yes, I was so shocked. I never thought something like this would happen to me. Tiero really surprised me when he called you. I expected him to know what to do.”

“He did the right thing to call me. You don’t want to take any chances. If in doubt, always call a doctor.”

Rhia’s eyes bulge some more as she looks at me in utter disbelief.

“Everything looks good. You’ve got nothing to worry about, Miss O’Neil,” Dr. Agosti assures me. “I’m certain Gualtiero will ensure there won’t be a repeat of this. There could be complications if it happened again otherwise.”

Oh, I'm loving this doctor. He has no idea he's playing along with my little charade. It's perfect... I'm ready to explode.

"Well, he can't really guarantee that now, can he?" I say, and pretend to be a little disappointed.

"He will try his best," the good doctor replies. "I will talk to him."

"Thank you, Dr. Agosti. Is there anything else I need to do?"

"No, you're all good to go. Just keep applying the cream three times a day until the bruising is gone. And best to keep anything dangerous away from the area," he says, completely serious.

With those last words, I nearly lose it and have to cover up my laughter with a very unladylike cough.

I see the doctor out, and turn to face Rhia as she sits down open-mouthed on my bed.

"Are you serious?! That doctor knows how this bruise happened?" She points at my groin, flabbergasted.

"Well, we had to tell him. How else could he determine how serious my injuries were?" How did I manage to say this with a straight face?

Rhia's shocked expression is too much, and my laughter finally bubbles up and over.

“Gotcha.” I cry as I bend over, holding my stomach, tears running down my cheeks.

Rhia, of course, doesn’t understand yet and stares at me, eyebrows raised.

When I’m able to catch my breath, I explain, “Tiero didn’t cause the bruise, silly. It was a nasty little spider which crawled up my dress and bit me.”

Rhia picks up the pillow from the carpet and whacks me with it.

“Bloody hell, Ella. I actually believed you!”

Holding up my arms to protect my head from her hits, I say, “Yes, you did. And I’m very proud of my achievement. It’s not easy to fool you. And you went for it hook, line and sinker.”

She sticks out her tongue at me. “I was horrified that Tiero would be so inept. Now tell me what really happened.”

I fill her in on all of it, and she’s bending over with laughter.

“Oh my God, Ella. Only you!” Rhia says, trying very hard to draw in breath through her laughing fits. “I can’t believe those guys were betting on who’d see your pussy first.”

“Yeah... If only they knew I could understand every word.”

We finally notice the time and frantically get dressed. Our tour starts in fifteen minutes, and the bus will be here soon.

As Rhia throws on clothes, she calls out, “You know, you really ought to stop sitting on things.”

“Hey, I didn’t sit on it. The spider crawled up my leg,” I correct her.

Rhia returns to my room, packing her backpack for the day. “This was your third near death scenario. So you should be in the clear.”

“Huh?”

“Remember, you said all things come in threes. And after the near hit and run with Tiero, an almost collision in the one-way street yesterday, and the spider bite last night... I think you’re good now. Unless, of course, you start another round.”

“I have no intention of going through another set of three... unless this time all incidents are happy and fun.”

One can hope.

Suddenly, Rhia’s face turns mischievous. My brows narrow as I watch her suspiciously. “Now, I want to know, if that spider hadn’t intervened, what would have happened?”

“I’ll tell you on the bus,” I say, trying to distract her.

“Uh, uh. I want to know now,” she insists.

“Nothing would have happened,” I reply stubbornly and revert to telling a little white lie. “I would have been saved by my period.”

“I thought you finished it.” Rhia frowns.

She’s right, of course. I finished it a few days ago, but she doesn’t know that for sure. “And anyway, so what if there’s a bit of blood?” She shrugs as if to say, what’s the big deal?

“Eww, that’s gross!” I shudder in disgust. “I’ll have you know, my period has saved me more than once from doing something I’d regret the next morning. So, I choose to see it as a good thing. Remember? I do NOT do one-night stands.”

“Well, you could have turned it into a seven-night stand... that’s how many nights we have left here.”

I ignore her comment. If I reply, she’ll just keep going. Changing the subject, I ask, “Where is Zoe? Is she coming?”

Rhia snickers. “I don’t think she’ll be coming for a while. She needs to recover first.”

“Huh?” What is she talking about?

Seeing my confusion, Rhia explains, “From what she told me on the ride over, she came so many times, she’s too sore to have sex for a while.”

“Oh my God. What did they do to her?” I ask, horrified. I don’t think I’ve ever felt sore after sex.

“Things she was very happy with,” Rhia reassures me. “Though she could hardly walk and went straight to bed. I don’t think she’s going anywhere today.”

“But the Mount Etna tour was the one thing she really wanted to do.”

“Come on, El. You’ve seen my sister over this last week. She doesn’t really care for sightseeing. Even if she said she wanted to go, it doesn’t mean it’s a priority for her.”



As we walk out of the room and head to the lobby, she tells me all about what happened after they left the restaurant. Zoe and the two hunks appear to be cut from the same cloth with the same easy-going, fun-loving, and adventurous nature.

My thoughts drift to Tiero. Would he be dynamite in bed, too? Given how my body reacts to even the slightest touch, how much would he make my body sing? Just thinking about it makes me tingle all over.

“By the way, Tiero invited me out for dinner tonight. No, actually, that’s not true. There was no invitation. He informed me he was going to take me out,” I correct myself.

“Ah, suits me,” she smiles. “I’ve got a date with Lex. It’s our two-year meet-aversary,” she beams.

“Of course it is. How could I forget? Oh gosh, remember last year? I’m still swooning. That man of yours is so romantic. Too bad he can’t be with you this year.”

“I know, right? Well, at least he’s got cell reception. That’s something.”

“And knowing you two, you’ll make the best of it.”

“Always,” she grins.

I’m relieved I’m not abandoning her. Though even if she didn’t have plans, she wouldn’t have minded. Rhia is more than capable of entertaining herself, making friends easily wherever she goes.

“And hopefully tonight you’ll let Gualtiero De Marco show you a superb time in the sack. Don’t wait, El. Make the best of

what's left of our vacation here.”

“I've got a bruised groin,” I remind her with a wink. “You heard the good doctor. I'm not allowed to let anything dangerous near it.”



After nine hours exploring the Mount Etna region, we arrive back at our hotel. Rhia and I are ready to collapse from fatigue, and in my case, also from mortification.

Overall, our tour to Mount Etna was amazing. The spider bite didn't bother me much, and to my relief, there were no signs of an eruption on Etna.

We marveled at the volcanic landscapes and took the cable car to Torre Del Filosofo at over nine thousand five hundred feet above sea level for sweeping views over the craters and ancient lava flows.

Then we strapped on helmets to explore lava caves and learned a lot about the region's geology. Giuseppe, our very enthusiastic guide for the day, whose love of the subject shone through with every word, made a world of difference to my appreciation of what I was seeing.

After a well-deserved lunch of local delicacies, we continued on to the Alcantara Gorges, home to lava formations shaped over millions of years and to a series of pools and bays hidden among high cliffs.

Again, Giuseppe's knowledge was vast and engaging. We had a swim in the clear cool waters, and it became obvious there that Giuseppe had to be gay. He ignored the bikini-clad women and ogled the bare-chested bodybuilders in our group instead.

The natural water slides at the Gorge were another highlight, though we were a lot less sexy to look at wearing helmets and safety vests for the body rafting.

Until that point, the day was amazing. Then my penchant for sitting on living things set off a chain reaction I won't forget easily. No, scratch that. I will NEVER forget it!

I could have died from embarrassment.

My cheeks burn bright red just remembering... it takes the winning spot for the most humiliating event in my life so far.

And here I thought, last night would take the prize... but no.

Let's hope I'll never top this one!

After our turn of sliding down the slippery rocks in fits of laughter, Rhia and I dragged our worn-out bodies back to the top, where most of our group was sunbathing on large boulders. The only free spot was next to Giuseppe, and I happily took it.

I sat down... and jumped up, screaming the next second.

Drumroll for the inevitable eye rolls, please.

Yes, ladies and gentlemen, I sat on another unsuspecting animal.

A lizard, to be precise.

But that's not where the embarrassment stopped. No, not at all. It's where it started.

*Grrrrrr.*

The lizard, a lovely earth-colored camouflaged one, got the fright of its life and fled as soon as my squashing weight lifted off it. Searching for shelter, it ran for the closest dark spot... it probably thought it was a cave when in fact it was Giuseppe's shorts.

With an unmanly screech, he shot up like a rocket, trying to shake out the lizard—without success.

Protective of his privates, our tour guide panicked and whipped down his shorts, doing a crazy dance as if his feet were on fire. And I, along with the rest of our group, took in the spectacle open-mouthed... he wasn't wearing underwear.

I really wish this is where the story ends, but no.

The little creature, in an attempt to hang on and probably scared to death, bit down with a vice-like grip... on Giuseppe's ball sack.

What a sight!

Giuseppe's dancing went ballistic, pun intended, as he jumped about wide-legged with a lizard dangling from his sack. Half the group, mostly the men, watched on cringing, while the rest bent over laughing. I was in the first group, Rhia, in the second.

Being the closest person to Giuseppe and trying to be helpful, I fell to my knees in front of him and grabbed the tail of the lizard. Trying to ignore the jiggling penis right in front of my eyes, I pulled.

Giuseppe screamed. And the lizard let go. My instincts had me fling the creature as far away as possible... a bit like a frisbee.

The only problem? There was an obstacle in my trajectory path. Namely, an Italian woman in her early thirties.

*Kill me now!*

The frightened lizard didn't land on her clothing. No, worse than that. It landed in her hair. But the raven-haired woman was quick to react and flicked it off without losing her cool.

The lizard shot off over the rocks and disappeared into a crevice.

I watched all this before turning back to Giuseppe... just to come intimately close with his junk... my nose literally being only inches away. I think I stopped breathing, so as to not inhale his smelly, sweaty odor.

We both realized our precarious position at the same time, and he took a step back, lost his balance and fell backward onto a spikey plant... naked bum first.

*Ouch!*

Shoot me now. Earth swallow me up. A lightning bolt strike me down... PLEASE!

Rhia couldn't stop laughing, but I was mortified. I couldn't look anyone in the eye, and when the tour was over, I gave Giuseppe a hefty tip... not that this would make up for what happened.

Let's just hope nobody caught this on film, or I'll become an overnight internet sensation.

The day's activities and the lizard nutcracker incident kept my mind occupied enough to not think of Tiero... well, not too much, anyway.

Now that we're back at our hotel and the evening is drawing closer, my nerves are back. "I think I should cancel dinner," I mumble as I face plant exhausted onto my bed. Rhia follows, stuffing a pillow under her head.

"We're not having this conversation again," Rhia murmurs, exasperated. "No way are you wiggling your way out of this. I want you to get laid tonight. It will help you relax after today's events," she slurs, yawning, fatigue catching up with her. "Let's just have a little power nap. I'll set the alarm."



A loud noise startles us awake, and we sit up in bed. Looking disorientated, Rhia's hair is all over the place, but I'm sure I look no better.

Another insistent knock on the door, has me jump out of bed. Damn, we didn't imagine it.

“Oh my God. Did we sleep through the alarm?” I ask, frantically looking for my phone to check the time. “Shit, this is probably Gualtiero and I haven’t even showered yet.”

“Go,” Rhia urges, pointing to the bathroom. “I’ll distract him.”

I run into the bathroom, the sudden adrenaline rush making me feel more awake than I am. Shoot, I have no clothes in here. What am I going to wear anyway? I look around the room, hoping an outfit will magically manifest... Yeah, I am sleep-deprived.

Calm down. One step at a time.

Get cleaned up first, then worry about a dress.

I’m in and out of the shower in record time, and quickly blow-dry my hair, pulling it up into a messy bun. Securing a towel around my body, I carefully open the bathroom door and stick my head out to make sure the coast is clear.

All is quiet and there’s no sign of Rhia. Has she sent Tiero to the lobby to wait for me there? Gosh, I hope so.

Laid out on my bed is a light-blue summer dress. Looks like Rhia is dressing me tonight, but I don’t mind. She’s the fashionista of the two of us, and I know I’ll look awesome in whatever she chooses.

I walk into her room and immediately stop. An enormous bouquet of colorful roses and tulips sits on the little coffee table. It definitely rivals the ones in my room.

I scratch my chin as I follow the sound of Rhia's happy voice singing in the shower. Tulips in August? They're not in bloom anymore.

When Rhia spots me, she beams at me. "You can relax, El. It wasn't your date. The concierge just dropped off the flowers."

"Why didn't you tell me? I wouldn't have rushed."

She just shrugs her shoulders. "Oops, sorry. I just needed to get ready, too. A car is picking me up at eight. That's in half an hour. So we don't have oodles of time."

"Where are you going?" I ask.

"I have no idea. It's a surprise."

"Are the flowers from Lex?"

Rhia's smile grows impossibly large, her whole face glowing. "Yes. God, I love that man. Read his card," she invites.

I return to the sitting area and stare at the floral splendor in awe. It's like an explosion of happiness. No wonder Rhia is beaming. Lex has done well.

I pick up the card and begin reading.

*Sexy legs,*

*You didn't think I would forget, did you? I might not be physically with you in this moment, but I am and will always be with you in your heart and soul.*



*Two whole years since you changed my life for the better.  
Two whole years since I found a happiness I could have never  
imagined.*

*And as it's been two whole years... there are two types of  
flowers for you today, my trouble-maker darling.*

*Let's start with the roses. In the center, you should find a  
single rainbow rose. Until recently, I didn't know they existed.  
Just like two years ago—I didn't know you roamed and ruled  
the world. And isn't it a beauty?*

*One single rose symbolizes love at first sight. And let's be  
honest, it's what happened the moment I first held you in my  
arms. My body, heart, and soul knew what my mind was  
fighting.*

*Apparently, a single rose is also a reminder that somebody  
—and that somebody is clearly you—is still the one for you.  
You will always be the one for me, Rhianna Lily Bannaghan.*

*And why a rainbow rose? I figured it contains all the  
colors... just like I love all of you. (Yes, I know I sound sappy,  
but hey, how could I not? It's you we're talking about.)*

*All together, there are sixty-six roses. Why sixty-six? In my  
profound Google studies, I learned that this number of roses  
says, "My love for you will never change." Perfect, don't you  
think? Because my love for you is rooted in my soul and will  
live on long after I'm gone.*

*So, of course, there are red roses for love and yellow ones  
for friendship, because besides being my lover, you are my best*

*friend. (Though you might notice the reds outnumber all others by far).*

*Then we've got pink ones for sweetness, white ones for eternal loyalty, burgundy ones for deep passion, and orange ones for desire and, drumroll please, the blue ones stand for mystery and should be given to a person you see as unique and wonderful.*

*As for the tulips, they stand for perfect and deep love. That's what we have, sexy legs.*

*As they are a spring flower (and yes, I had to go to great lengths to find them in summer, but nothing is impossible—remember that), tulips represent rebirth. I was reborn the day you became mine. A better, more wholesome version of me. Well done, trouble. You did the world a favor.*

*Now the colors... just like with the roses, they mean similar things. Red ones mean eternal love and passion, yellow stands for happiness, and pink for affection and caring.*

*Apparently, tulips are the eleventh-anniversary flower... so in only nine more years, be prepared to wake up in a field of them.*

*You have my love, always and forever.*

*Lex*

Oh gosh. This man! He has me melting on the spot.

If that's my reaction, I can only imagine Rhia's giddiness.

As if on cue, she appears behind me, wrapped in a fluffy bathrobe.

“Your man is perfection.” I smile at my bestie and wrap her in a hug. I’m so fricking happy for her.

“He is,” she agrees. “There was another letter that came with a parcel, but that one is for my eyes only. Otherwise, you’d want to wash your eyes out with bleach.”

I elbow her side, and she giggles. “What was in the parcel, or is that a secret, too?”

Instead of answering, Rhia opens her bathrobe and reveals her body in exquisite, moss-green lingerie.

“Wow, you look absolutely stunning in this. Even I’m blown away.”

Fastening her robe again, she nods her head. “He does have excellent taste.”

“Obviously. He’s dating you,” I say. “Did he send anything else, or are you just going to wear a trench coat like they do in the movies?” That makes her laugh.

“No trench coats. That’s too cliché. I’ll find something to wear,” she assures me. “Let’s get you ready first. I want you to knock Gualtiero De Marco’s socks off tonight.”

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## CHAPTER ELEVEN

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### ELLA

“**Y**ou look incredible. This dress highlights all your assets,” Rhia says, gesturing for me to turn on the spot so she can inspect the outfit for the umpteenth time.

“It’s a good thing we’re the same size and can switch and swap clothes. Now you just need the right heels for it.” She disappears into her room and returns with several pairs.

“It’s a good thing for me,” I tell her. “You’re the one with fashion sense. I go for comfort.”

“Which is why I borrow your workout clothes all the time. See, we’re the perfect combination,” she winks as she holds up the shoes at eye level, then squints at the dress I’m wearing, shaking her head. “No, these don’t work either,” she declares and disappears into the closet again. “I know I have the right pair here somewhere.”

I go back to my bathroom and finish putting on make-up, when she enters holding up a pair of blue velvety high heels that match my dress perfectly.

“Here, try these on,” she commands with a satisfied grin.

When it comes to heels, you don’t mess with Rhia. She looks at me expectantly, as if to say, *‘Where is my praise?’* and I oblige.

“You’re a fashion genius, no doubt about it.”

She studies me again, her index finger tapping against her chin. “Something is missing. Come with me. You need a necklace.”

Obediently, I follow her. Her room is littered with shoes. “How many pairs did you bring? It looks like half of your whole collection is right here on the floor.”

“Well, you know how I am with shoes. Besides, it’s not that many... only about twenty.”

“Twenty pairs of shoes?! For a two-week vacation?! You’re unbelievable, Rhia.” I laugh at her, but secretly I’m glad she always packs for all occasions. It means I can carry less while she drags heavy suitcases behind her.

“Yes, I am,” she replies proudly. “And you’re the lucky recipient. So don’t laugh at me. You know, I always need to have the right shoe for the right dress.”

“Really? That comes as complete news to me,” I tease.

Rhia’s love of shoes has been growing over the years. Where ordinary people have a shoe rack, maybe even a shoe cupboard, she now has a shoe room. Yes, an entire room for her shoe collection.

It's her dream come true. It's like her art collection, and if you ever want to make her day, buy her a new pair of expensive heels. Lex learned that early on. Although it's increasingly difficult to keep track of what she's already got.

I step to the mirror and study myself. My unruly hair is straightened to within an inch of its life and falls beautifully around my face and shoulders. My makeup is natural, just highlighting my eyes and lips. Wow, even I'm impressed. I do look rather excellent.

I run my fingers over the blue dress, the soft fabric hugging my figure flawlessly.

"Your eyes are like sparkling sapphires in this dress," Rhia says. "I'm so glad I brought it."

"I feel sexy in it."

"That's because you are. If you don't knock his socks off in this, then I don't know what will."

"Why are you so invested in this, Rhi?" I ask as I rub the fabric of the dress over my thighs.

"I just sense something big. And I'm not talking about his appendage. Even though, I'm sure that's impressive. I want to see you let loose and enjoy yourself. You never know where this could lead.

"Gosh, Ella, yesterday the tension between you and Tiero was so thick, I needed a machete to slice it... That's how palpable it was." She makes a slicing motion with her arm.

“Be open to this and see what adventures will come your way,” she implores, looking so earnest in her request.

“That doesn’t include sleeping with him, though,” I insist.

Rhia lets out an exasperated sigh. “Why on earth not? He’s sinfully hot, you’re attracted to him like no other before, and I can just tell he’ll give you a night you’ll never forget.”

I know she only wants what’s best for me, but it’s coming from a completely different starting point. She’s sexually free and daring, and I’m just not wired that way.

“Rhia, I hear what you’re saying,” I mock good-naturedly with this classic relationship counseling line. “And you’re right with all of it, but you seem to forget you’re talking to me, Ella Rose O’Neil, the woman who to be comfortable enough to jump into bed with a man...” I interrupt myself, tapping my finger against my lower lip in a thinking gesture. “No, jump is totally the wrong word... The woman who, to be comfortable enough to sleep with a man, needs to know him for at least a few weeks, needs to know we’re somewhat compatible and who needs to feel safe enough with him to take the next step.”

Rhia groans in frustration. “Fuck comfortable! Fuck security! Where has it gotten you?! For once in your life, let loose and live life to the fullest!

“The chemistry between you and Tiero is intense. Don’t waste it. It’s rare! I should know, given how many guys I’ve been with.”

There's no point arguing with her. So I pull her in for a hug instead.

"How do I look?" she asks when we pull apart.

She's freaking hot in her silver mini dress. "Tiero might not be the only one knocked off his socks tonight," I state the obvious. "Lex is a very lucky man. Even if he only gets the pleasure of your company on a screen."

"It won't stop us having fun," she says with glee in her eyes. "I can't wait for him to finish this job and come home. I miss him terribly."

"It won't be long now. And at least, I get more of you in that time," I tell her.

Rhia takes my hand, looking at me imploringly. "Just go with the flow, okay?"

"We'll see."

It's all I'm willing to commit to.



It's eight o'clock on the dot when the knock on my door announces Tiero's arrival loud and clear. My heart jumps in anticipation, and those damned butterflies are partying ferociously in my stomach again.

Rhia left a few minutes ago, excited and full of beans. I can only imagine what she and Lex will get up to. If it was a movie, it would be rated R... restricted, eighteen plus.



Thump, thump, thump goes my heart when I open the door, and my eyes land on Tiero. The air leaves my lungs in a rush, and it's like all the oxygen in the world isn't going to be enough.

*Wowsers.*

He looks delectable.

He's dressed casually for the first time since we met, wearing black jeans and a black button-down shirt with the top two buttons undone. The urge to step closer burns in my chest. I want to undo more of these pesky little buttons to reveal more of his sun-tanned skin. My fingers itch, but of course, I behave.

Tiero's gaze wanders over my body like fingertips, slowly undressing me. His eyes darken and fill with desire. The air instantly crackles between us, making my stomach flutter.

He leans in to kiss my cheeks and then pulls me into a hug, whispering into my ear, "You take my breath away. You look incredible."

At his closeness, those treacherous goosebumps betray me again. His breath on my skin spikes my heart rate mercilessly.

"So do you," I reply.

Tiero takes a step back and regards me intently. "Dr. Agosti said everything looked much improved this morning. Are you feeling okay?"

"Yes, thank you," I say, blushing that he had a conversation with his doctor about me. "It's bruised and a little itchy, but

otherwise all good.”

Tiero nods in acknowledgment, and then without another word, takes my hand, waits until I have closed the door and leads me to the elevator, where two of his bodyguards are waiting for us.

They, too, are dressed casually, and I wonder where my mysterious Italian and his security squad go for a casual night out. It seems so unlike him. The thought he’s taking me somewhere just for my benefit warms my insides.

Yet again, there’s not another person to be seen on our floor. Where has everybody gone in the last two days?

We travel to the lobby in silence and walk to the waiting cars. Tiero’s hand nestles comfortably on my lower back, the contact sending waves of heat through me. Even this simple touch challenges my composure.

Like the night before, two black SUVs are parked right by the entrance. Two guards flank the hotel lobby door. I glance briefly at them. It seems Tiero’s security comes in only two sizes—big and bigger.

Why does one man need so much protection? Is he in danger all the time?

They scan the area around us as we get into the backseat of the first car. The bodyguard I’ve seen most at Tiero’s side slides into the passenger seat. I presume he’s Tiero’s personal guardian angel, though there’s nothing angelic about him.

He's tall, all muscle, and with his bald head and a scar running the length of his left cheek, he looks downright scary. I wouldn't want to get on this guy's bad side.

He appears alert and laser-focused, and after what happened the day I met Gualtiero, I'm glad he's with him and on the lookout for danger. The other guards get in the car behind us, and we depart.

"Where are you taking me tonight, Signore De Marco?" I ask playfully.

"Ah, my beautiful Ella, that's a surprise," he replies just as playfully, with a warm smile on his lips.

Today's drive is much shorter, and after only ten minutes we pull up in front of what looks like an ordinary pub. I read the sign above the door and turn to Tiero in surprise.

"O'Seven? You're taking me to an Irish pub in Sicily?"

"Something to remind you of home," he says, amused.

"I've only been gone for a few days. I'm not sure I need reminding quite yet." I laugh good-naturedly, and he joins in.

God, he looks beautiful when he laughs. It completely transforms his face from stern to something devastatingly gorgeous. I can't look away. My pulse pounds in my veins, and I pray he doesn't notice.

"You must have done your homework if you know I live in Ireland. I don't think I've mentioned it yet, and I don't have much of an accent given I didn't grow up there."

Has he done a background check on me? Somehow that wouldn't surprise me, given all the security around him. I doubt he leaves anything to chance.

"It's true, you don't have an accent," Tiero agrees with me, "but your friend does, and she told Mateo all about her company in Dublin."

"Well, that explains it," I say more to myself than him. How silly to think he had me investigated.

"Are you having more security with you today because we're in a packed place?" I ask. "Are you in more danger here?"

For some reason, I care for his safety. And to be honest, I can't really picture Gualtiero De Marco frequenting crowded pubs like this one. It just doesn't seem like his scene.

He nods in reply and adds, "It's just a precaution. Better safe than sorry, right?"

He takes my hand again and leads me through the crowd of people to the bar. "Guinness?" he asks.

"No, Kilkenny please," I reply, smiling at him.

We sit down on bar stools at a barrel table. Tiero's security must have moved people, because when we first entered, there was not a single free table in sight. I guess they do come in handy.

"What would you like to eat?" Tiero asks, and I scan the menu and settle on a nice juicy burger. I haven't had one in a long time and as soon as I spotted it on the menu, my mouth

watered. He raises his hand and a guard approaches. He takes our order and disappears to place it.

“What’s your bodyguard’s name? The one who’s always with you. It would be nice to put a name to the face.”

“That’s Santino. He’s the head of my security,” Tiero explains.

“Santino? Really?” I laugh in disbelief. “That means little saint, doesn’t it?”

“Yes, it does. Lucky for me, there’s nothing saintly about him,” he laughs with me while I study the burly mountain of a man who’s standing by the door a few feet away. Yep, there’s definitely nothing pious about him. His shaven head, well-groomed beard hugging his jawline, and permanent scowl match the scar on his cheek.

“I guess you don’t get anywhere in his profession looking friendly and approachable,” I say, giggling.

“He’s very good at his job, especially if I listen to him and don’t wander off,” Tiero winks.

The subject of security gives me the opening I need to probe a little more about why he’s so at risk. Last night he changed the subject when I tried to find out more, but I want to know who I’m dealing with.

“So... what exactly is it you do?” I ask, trying to keep my voice light and conversational since he was so evasive the last time. “You said you’re a businessman, but that can encompass pretty much anything.”

He regards me for a moment, clearly thinking about what to tell me. A heaviness that wasn't there before settles in my stomach as I wait for him to respond.

“My family’s business stretches over many areas, but we mainly deal in real estate. We own several hotels and clubs throughout Italy and Europe. We also run a shipping company and invest a little in venture capitalism. Our latest interest is in cyber security.”

“Wow, that’s a lot,” I say, somewhat impressed. “Do you enjoy being the head of your family business?”

“I had no say in the matter. As the first-born son, I was groomed to take over from my father. My family has run this business for generations and will continue to do so. My sons will take over from me one day.”

“Wow,” I say again, a little lost for words.

I have no experience with such traditions. Having said that though, my ex-boyfriend Marco worked in the business his grandfather had built. He, too, is expected to take over the reins in a few years. Though they have a board to report to, and Marco’s rise to CEO isn’t guaranteed unless he performs well.

“What about Mateo and his future children?” I wonder if there is a hierarchy similar to that of the nobility. The firstborn son inherits everything, and subsequent children are merely a backup.

“When you’re born into this family, you’ll always work for it in one capacity or another,” Tiero answers a little cryptically.

“Whether or not you want to?” I question. “What about your own dreams and ambitions?”

“They come second to your responsibility to the family. Ella, in my culture family is everything, and you owe your loyalty and heart to them. Any desires or dreams you have... you try to make them work the best you can within those confines.”

“So you never questioned taking over the reins?”

“Never. Why would I? It’s what I’ve been raised to do. It’s our way of life.”

“Hmm, I don’t know what to say.” I’m really dumbfounded by this. It seems so outdated, and I feel sorry for Gualtiero’s and Mateo’s future children.

“It’s such a foreign concept to me to have your life planned out like that. My family just wanted me to find something that made me happy regardless of what it was. My dad never expected me to follow in his footsteps and become a lawyer,” I explain my situation. “What did you have to study to take over? Do you have an MBA?”

“I do, but I learned most on the job. I was twelve when my father first took me along to his office after school so I could learn firsthand.”

Wow, at twelve, I was still playing with my Barbie dolls, the cares of the world far away. No wonder Tiero is serious by

nature. Being introduced at such a young age to the responsibilities of the adult world must have been tough.

“So I guess it would be a stupid question to ask if you want children?” I tease.

“Like every true blood Italian, I want a big family.” Tiero smiles sheepishly at me, then adds, “Do you want to make babies with me, Ella?”

I turn as red as a tomato at the suggestion. We haven’t even kissed yet. Just the thought of his hands on my body makes me go weak at the knees. Good thing I’m sitting down.

My throat goes dry, and I cough slightly to dislodge the frog that has taken up residence there.

Tiero throws his head back, laughing at my discomfort. He tries to reach for my hand, but I quickly grab my glass to drink away my embarrassment. The cool liquid sates my parched throat but does nothing to lower my body temperature or quench the thirst for the man sitting next to me.

Damn it, I’m slipping under his spell more and more.

“You look adorable when you blush, princess,” he teases.

It’s the first time tonight he’s called me that, and while I didn’t care for it much at first, I’ve grown to like it.

“You’re hilarious. Have you considered I might not want any kids?”

“Don’t you?” Tiero sounds surprised, turning more serious.

“Of course I do,” I admit softly. “But not for some time.”



Tiero's smile returns, and he raises his glass and clinks it with mine.

“Are you going to follow in your dad's footsteps and groom your kids for business from an early age?” I ask.

That would be a far cry from what I'd want for my children. I'd want to protect them from the cruelty and responsibilities of our world for as long as possible. Let them be kids.

I'm not sure why his answer matters so much to me, but I'm holding my breath in anticipation.

Am I actually hoping for a future with Tiero past this vacation?

If I'm being totally honest with myself, I think I am. The attraction between us is so strong I can't help but think of what could be. There's a familiarity that shouldn't be there given we don't know each other.

“No,” Tiero finally replies, bringing me out of my reverie. “I want my children to have a childhood filled with happy, carefree memories. Family business is serious and can wait till they are older.”

I sigh with relief at his response and lie to myself that I'm just happy for his future children.

After the heaviness of the previous topic, he asks me what Rhia and I have planned for the next day, and from there conversation flows easily.

The food is delicious, one of the best burgers I've ever had, and it surprises me to have found it in Sicily. Live music drifts

in from outside, making the perfect backdrop for this wonderful evening.

We have several more drinks. We laugh and flirt, and over the course of the evening, we move closer and closer together. By the time we're finished with dinner, our legs are touching, and we're practically sharing the same breath.

When midnight strikes, we make our way back to the cars. Feeling relaxed and slightly buzzed, I snuggle against Tiero's chest in the backseat when he pulls me close. His scent envelops me, and my blood heats.

To distract myself and regain a bit of self-control, I analyze the components of his aftershave. There's a hint of sandalwood... I've always liked sandalwood.

When Rhia and I were teenagers, we dabbled with magic spells and the fragrant incense was always part of it.

Actually, even before that, when I was growing up in Austria, Ma would visit an old lady, Hilda was her name, and sometimes she would take me along. Her house always smelled of sandalwood. When she opened the door, she'd always greet us with a blessing and taught me to bless everyone and everything I came across. She said it creates magic. I never really understood, but it felt nice.

These ideas sprouted more with Rhia's interest in spells. Once, we wrote our wish on a stick of sandalwood and burned it. It was meant to carry our hearts' desires to the heavens on the drifting smoke and set the wheels of destiny in motion.

I had wished for love... and the very next day, I met Donald, my first boyfriend. He rang my doorbell, delivering parcels. It was his part-time job while at university. I definitely believed in magic then.

The warmth of Tiero's arm draping around me brings me back to the here and now. Who cares about Donald or any other man? Gualtiero De Marco is here in all of his glory.

He pulls me flush against him, and I notice the rapid rise and fall of his chest. Good, I'm not the only one affected by this electricity swirling between us.

He gently strokes up and down my arm, leaving goosebumps in his wake. My nerve endings come to life, and all he has done is trace my arm.

Tiero kisses the top of my head, and my breathing falters in anticipation of what might come next. Will he lift my face to kiss me? Would I let him this time?

I drop my gaze, not prepared to face this question.

An unmistakable bulge in his pants greets my eyes, and my cheeks flush with the awareness of how much I'm affecting him too. It makes my stomach tumble like a dryer—round and round it goes.

He's invading my senses, and thinking becomes difficult. My resolve to resist him is weakening. It's melting like the snow in spring when the sun gains strength and reveals the beauty hidden beneath the frosty exterior.

Each stroke of his fingertips against my skin thaws the ice a little more. And the longer I sit next to him, the thinner the barriers become I've put up to protect myself. Soon there'll be nothing left.

With his hard muscles pressed against me, my nostrils filled with his scent, and his ragged breath loud in my ear, he's turning my insides to mush.

Tiero continues to caress my arm, gently stroking up and down. I wish I could help the shivers running through my body, but to no avail. The desire to know what it would be like to have his hands and lips all over me has sprouted. If my body goes into overdrive from just a simple touch, would it send me into the stratosphere if he did more?

His hard bulge is still in my line of sight. I swallow with difficulty, my mouth and throat dry. I itch to run my fingers along his hardness. What would his cock feel like inside me? The thought makes my pussy clench, and my undies dampen.

And still, his fingers dance up and down my arm as I listen to the wild heartbeat in his chest. It matches mine.

I dare not move. I don't know what would happen if I do.

Would he try to kiss me?

I want him to... and yet I don't.

I'm torn...

Forget about being another notch on his player bedpost. I actually don't care about that anymore.

What worries me now is how easily I get attached. His hooks are already in me, but I'm too ginger to risk my heart. This is different from anything I've ever experienced.

If I let him in just one time, it will hurt having to let him go. And if I allow him inside my body, a part of him will stay with me forever.

Am I prepared for that?

With the end of our trip looming, heartbreak will be inevitable if I go down the path of my desire.

My stomach is in knots.

I'm drowning in a chorus of sensations and emotions, powerless against a force that seems like an inevitability.

*What, oh what shall I do?*

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## CHAPTER TWELVE

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### ELLA

**W**e're back at the hotel in no time. The war between my mind and body is still raging. One cautions me while the other demands satisfaction.

Tiero lets go of me and gets out of the car first. While his back is turned, I take a deep breath to steady my nerves.

*Calm the hell down.*

While I slide over to Tiero's side, he turns to me again and takes my hand to help me out of the car. His heated gaze is drinking me in.

The hunger in his eyes has my heart skip a beat. My stomach clenches.

I'm about to go up in flames.

We walk into the hotel, Tiero's hand resting on the small of my back, sending waves of delicious want through my body.

The gesture is possessive, signaling to anybody watching to back off. It's like a claiming of sorts. But there's hardly

anybody around, and the handful of people who cross our path pay us little attention.

“Would you like to have a nightcap at the hotel bar, princess?” Tiero asks, looking at me, his eyes ablaze.

*Decision time.*

I don't want to say goodnight yet. His presence is too intoxicating. For now, my unruly body is winning the war.

He leads us to the hotel terrace. It looks out onto the moonlit, silver shimmering sea, the beauty of it stealing my breath away... or at least it's the reason my mind allows for my difficulty breathing.

Tiero disappears to get our drinks while I step to the railing. I stare up into the star-filled sky. It helps to steady my ever-galloping heart and nerves.

Looking around, I spot only one other couple on the terrace, but they're at the other end and deep in conversation.

Santino and another security guy station themselves by the door after sweeping the area. As always, they look like they mean business, nothing friendly or gentle about them.

Tiero returns with a glass of scotch for himself and a glass of sparkling water for me. As he passes it to me, our fingers touch, and a shot of electricity races through my body, launching my stomach into somersaults.

*Jeez. Why?*

Why does my body react like this?

“Thank you,” I whisper, my voice hoarse as I take a self-conscious sip.

Instantly, his gaze drops to my lips and remains there. His eyes are scorching and set everything in their path aflame. I’ve never had a man look at me like this—the pure, potent desire making it hard to swallow.

The butterflies in my tummy quadruple, doing aerobatics while my chest heaves as I try to breathe normally.

He takes my glass and puts both our drinks down on a nearby table. Tiero steps closer, never taking his eyes off me. The lump in my throat grows bigger, and my heartbeat drums in my ears.

Tiero curls his hands around my waist and pulls my body slowly into his until I’m pressed tightly against him. My face tilts up to meet his eyes. They’ve darkened to near black.

As if on their own accord, my hands come to rest on his strong biceps. I remember when I first ogled him... how I longed to touch his muscly arms. And oh my, I was correct. They feel amazing. Strength, power, and soft skin... it’s even better than I imagined.

Under my fingertips, his muscles twitch. The small contractions travel into my body, making my fingers tingle from the contact.

Tiero’s hazel brown eyes sparkle in the moonlight. Unlike its coolness, though, they shine with heat and unbridled desire.



His head ever so slowly lowers, moving closer to my face, giving me time to move away... if that's what I want.

But it's not.

The last of the ice has melted under his fiery gaze.

I want his lips on mine. I want to experience this moment with him.

Just like the day we met, the rest of the world falls away, and time slows.

I seem to wait an eternity, until, finally, his soft lips brush against mine.

Like a feather dancing across my skin, the kiss is soft, barely there.

*This feels so right.*

All my previous reservations evaporate, the light evening breeze carrying them away on my exhale. And then, as I inhale, nothing but pure desire fills my lungs.

Tiero's hands slide gently to my face, holding my cheeks as if I was the most precious, the most delicate thing in the universe.

He pulls me even closer, a move obliterating my every thought. My hands rise to curl around his neck, one venturing into his soft hair, grabbing it and holding on tight.

Like everything with him, the kiss is strangely familiar, yet strikingly new.

His lips are so soft yet have a firmness to them that's surprising.

I'm lost in the sensations as Tiero licks along the seam of my lips, asking for entry. I moan and open up eagerly, his tongue delicately slipping into my mouth.

The hum beneath my skin kicks up to a buzz when his tongue finds mine. Tentatively at first, growing bolder with each flick, he begins a sensual slow dance—stroking, teasing me.

Succumbing completely, I melt and fall head over heels into this seductive waltz, the rhythm set by the wild beat of our hearts.

The fire that's unleashed burns hot and spreads through my entire body at lightning speed. Most of all, I feel it between my legs.

I let my hands slide down over his broad back, his muscles ripple in response. His arms tighten around me as our kiss deepens. It's still slow, as if he's fully savoring me like I'm the world's finest dessert.

Insatiable longing takes over. I want his lips on every inch of my body, his hands caressing my skin, his husky voice whispering sweet nothings into my ear. My body releases a gush of cream, and the piece of lace between my legs is uncomfortable against my hot flesh.

Tremors rush through me as Tiero's unmistakable erection presses against my abdomen.

*I did this!*

I did this to this powerful man.

The smile spreading across my face is genuine and triumphant as an unfamiliar power surges through my veins. I'm not sure anymore who's seducing whom.

Tiero is melting beneath my touch, and I'm melting right along with him. His lips leave mine, and he grazes them along the side of my neck, his hands still holding me prisoner.

*Oh my, this man knows how to seduce.*

Unexpectedly, that thought triggers me. It's like being doused in cold water.

*What am I doing?!*

The little voice inside my head chooses this moment to warn me of the inevitable heartache.

*I can't do this.*

No matter how good this feels.

With great effort, I pull away. My knees are wobbly, and Tiero steadies me.

Reality crashes back into my consciousness.

And just like that, my reservations are back, returned on the wings of a boomerang.

I clear my throat, looking away in order to gather my wits.

Pretending to straighten out wrinkles on my dress, I mutter, "Umm... it's gotten late. I should get going."

My body is screaming at me, *‘You fool, what are you doing? That was magical. Go back, go back, go back.’*

But I ignore her and instead say with as much composure as I can, “Grazie, Tiero. I had a wonderful evening.”

“So did I, princess,” he says with a voice so husky I hardly recognize it.

His eyes are smoldering, and I need to get away before I do something I know I’ll regret in the morning.

Tiero slips his hands into his jeans pockets as if to prevent himself from touching me further. Still, he leans in and kisses my cheek almost chastely.

“Until tomorrow, my beautiful Ella,” he whispers into my ear.

His eyes are full of desire, and I look away. I can’t deal with this right now.

It’s too much.

It tests my resolve. My resistance to him has already cracked. He’s slipped inside the fortress and, with the enormity of his being, split it open altogether. I have to find some mortar and patch the cracks up fast.

We say goodnight without further touches or lingering looks. Mainly because I flee the terrace.

I hurry into the hotel on unsteady legs. When I reach my room and close the door behind me, I fall against it with my

heart beating out of my chest. Taking many deep, calming breaths, I will it to return to its normal pace.

*Jeez!*

That kiss! It was magical.

I've never been kissed like that before and probably never will be again. Sure, it's been enjoyable but never so all-encompassing, never leaving such a hunger—a hunger for more.

He's ruined me for any other man... with a kiss.

*Damn him.*

And damn me for not being stronger.

I walk to the bed and belly flop on it. Turning onto my back, I stare at the ceiling.

Wait a second.

Did Tiero say he'll see me tomorrow? We've made no plans. And given tomorrow...no, actually today is Monday, I assume he'll have to work.

Does he want to take me out to dinner again?

Undoubtedly, he wants another opportunity to seduce me.

How long can I hold up my walls before he decimates them?

Sticking to my principles is proving harder by the day.

Come what may, I'm determined to have dinner with Rhia and Zoe tomorrow night—and only with them. I'm here on a

girls' trip. No man should ever intrude on our time together, even one as skilled a kisser as Gualtiero De Marco.

My lips tingle at the memory of what happened. They're still swollen from our kisses. It's like his lips are imprinted on mine, his breath still caressing my skin.

*Argh*, I groan in frustration.

The fire is still burning, the hunger needs to be fed. I need relief—urgently.

I'll have to take matters into my own hands. Stripping off my clothes, I head into the bathroom and turn on the shower. I step into the cool spray, letting the water run over my overheated flesh. My hands glide over my well-primed body, my fingers and thoughts of Tiero taking over until the fiery blaze is put out. But despite my best efforts, the embers are still smoldering.



The next morning I don't get out of bed until eleven o'clock, the need for sleep more pressing than our next itinerary item.

Of course, the moment I wake up, memories of Tiero's hot lips on mine invade my mind.

*Argh!* It's like he's imprinted himself in my head already.

I'm surprised Rhia hasn't jumped on my bed yet to quiz me over last night.

When I finally venture into her room, I find out why. She hasn't returned from her night out. Further explorations of Mount Etna will have to wait. Suits me. A slow day is exactly what I need.

I spot Zoe on her terrace, stretched out on the lounge with large sunglasses covering her eyes.

"Hey, Zo. Mind if I join you?"

"Not at all. Though, I'm too tired to talk," she says, yawning.

"Same here." I put up the umbrella to avoid the full sun and recline on the other lounge. "You went out last night?" I ask.

"Hmm." Is all the answer I get.

I wonder if she had another wild night with Mateo and Romeo. She does have that certain glow about her. So much for not having sex for a while. I knew she'd never last. I'll find out more later.

We're quiet for some time, dozing as the light breeze cools our heated skins. Zoe really must be exhausted. She hasn't even asked me where her sister is, which is most unlike her. Two full nights of sexcapades will do that to a girl.

"Let's order breakfast," Zoe eventually suggests. "I need food."

"Great idea. I'll have an omelet. Can you check if they can make it with capsicum, parsnip, and kale?"

“Who has parsnips in their omelet?” she murmurs under her breath.

I admit, parsnip in an omelet is unusual, but my dad and I always loved it, and it’s my way of remembering him.

“It’s your turn to order,” Zoe mumbles. Neither one of us wants to get up.

I don’t even open my eyes to respond. “Not true. I called room service in Palermo.”

“Bugger.” Zoe yawns loudly. “Let’s play rock, paper, scissors. Best of three,” she proposes, lazily rolling onto her side to face me.

“Fine,” I grumble. She’s clearly forgotten I always win this game, and after only two rounds, I do... with a bright smirk on my face.

Zoe moans but gets up and slowly heads inside. She walks carefully and only seems to take deliberate steps.

“Don’t forget my licorice tea,” I call after her.

I hear Zoe inside, placing our order. Joyful sounds drift in from all around, but when I glance over to the other balconies on either side of us, they’re all empty. There’s no sign of life—no towels hanging over chairs or umbrellas open. It’s strange because the balconies above and below seem to have plenty of activity.

When Zoe returns, I ask, “Have you noticed that we seem to be the only ones on this floor?”



Surprised, she has a look around. “Hmm,” she says sleepily while gingerly laying back down and shutting her eyes. “Maybe they’re doing some renovations?”

“In peak tourist season? That would be stupid.”

“Does it matter?” she asks, yawning some more.

“I guess not. At least, it’s nice and quiet,” I say, following her example. Closing my eyes, we doze until there’s a knock.

“Food is here. I ordered, you get the door,” Zoe mumbles, still half asleep.



We eat in silence until halfway through breakfast, when an exuberant Rhia appears in the balcony doorway.

“I want to get married,” she announces without a hello.

That gets Zoe’s attention. She spits out the juice she was drinking. “What?! Are you crazy?” she nearly yells.

“That’s wonderful,” I say at the same time. “What brought on this change?”

She sits down next to me, excitement radiating off her.

“Well, I can’t imagine being with anyone else ever again. I want to spend the rest of my life with Lex, and I want the rest of the world to know he’s mine and mine alone. I want that gleaming ring on his finger that announces to all the bitches out there this man is taken.”

“Good night, then?” I jest.

“The best,” she dreamily replies.

“Oh my God. You can’t be serious, Rhia. Why would you want to chain yourself to one man for the rest of your life? Sure, everything is fine now. But you might want to dump his ass in a month or two.”

Rhia rolls her eyes at her sister. She doesn’t understand what it’s like to be head over heels in love, but I’m convinced her time will come. Sooner or later, we’ll witness her metamorphosis from a hoe into a devoted girlfriend, maybe even wife. I just hope I get married before her.

“Are you going to propose? Not sure Lex would have that idea on his own. You’ve both been adamant that you don’t need that piece of paper,” I say.

“You know, I might. Remember how elaborately Lex told me he loved me for the first time?”

“How could anyone forget? That has to be one of the most romantic and swoony things anyone has ever done.”

“You two are disgusting,” Zoe mumbles under her breath. We both ignore her.

“Well, I’m going to orchestrate something mind-blowing. Something that will knock him off his feet, and then I’ll sweep him up. We need to brainstorm. Too bad we just had our anniversary. It would have been the perfect date.”

“Except that you weren’t in the same place.”

“Actually, we were.”

“What?” Zoe and I ask in unison.

“Yep.” Rhia beams at us. “It was the best surprise ever.”

“Where is he?” Zoe wonders, looking around to see if he’s hiding somewhere.

“He had to fly back this morning. But he broke the rules just so he could be with me on our anniversary.”

“Awww,” I coo. “He really is the sweetest. I hope he doesn’t get in trouble.”

“If he does, I made it worth his while. Besides, I don’t think he cares too much about his job anymore. He’s leaving in a few months anyway, remember?”

“True. Tell me more. I want details,” I say as Rhia takes a sip of tea from my cup.

“Ugh. Licorice tea, really, El?” I shrug my shoulders. It’s not my fault she doesn’t like it.

“Here, have my orange juice,” Zoe says, handing her the glass. “And then spill. I want details too. But leave out the gooey bits and get to the spicy ones.”

Rhia’s smile grows impossibly large, every part of her beaming with happiness. “Well, the car came to pick me up and dropped me off at a fancy hotel where a concierge was waiting for me and lead me into a suite. Holy cow, you should have seen the view. It was amaaaaazing.

“Anyway, when I get to the bedroom it was filled with flowers... roses and tulips everywhere. He must have spent a fortune. There was a note on the pillow that said, *‘Sorry I can’t be with you. But I want you to be pampered. Enjoy your massage.’*”

“Next thing I know, there’s a knock on the door, and this girl with a massage table stands there. She tells me to leave my bra and things on and then hands me a blindfold.”

“Oh, kinky.” Zoe lights up as she sits at the edge of her lounge while my mouth hangs open.

“Right? I wasn’t quite sure what to think or what crazy plan Lex had hedged. But I’m trusting my man and decide to go with the flow. Anyway, she massages all my exposed parts... my shoulders, arms, and legs, and I’m really starting to relax. But then, she strays...”

“What do you mean?” I ask, now on the edge of my seat too.

“Well, she stroking up my inner thighs and over my exposed butt cheeks because I was only wearing a thong. And I’m beginning to wonder what kind of massage this is.”

“Oh, this is so cool.” Zoe is rubbing her hands together, looking excited.

“I wasn’t quite on board with that, but then I smelled something.”

Zoe and I both stare at her with eyebrows raised.

“Bergamot.”

“Huh?” Zoe frowns while I smile.

“Lex,” I fill in.

“Yes, Lex,” Rhia sighs. “He slipped in unnoticed and swapped places with the girl. Well, I’m sure you can guess what happened next and for the rest of the night,” she says happily.

“I can imagine, but I want the graphic details,” Zoe insists.

“Not gonna happen, sis. This is your future brother-in-law we’re talking about. I don’t want you to look at him with R-rated movies running in your head.”

“Spoilsport,” she grumbles. But the next moment, a grin as big as a Cheshire Cat nearly splits her face. “Well, let me tell you two pure souls about my adventures.”

“I’m not sure I’ll ever be ready for that,” I mumble.

“I take it you and your Italian boy toys got together again last night? What happened to you taking a break from sex?” Rhia asks, making her sister huff.

“I can’t let opportunities like this go to waste. And besides, Romeo and Mateo are thirty... boy toys suggest they’re younger than me,” Zoe replies.

“Technicalities... and they are your boy toys,” Rhia insists. “All men are toys to you. You want nothing else from them.”

“True”, she admits happily, without reservation.

“So... what did you guys do?”

“Naughty things. I thought the other night was intense with them, but they raised the bar even higher. Turns out they’re both into bondage. Now that’s something I haven’t played with much. But by golly, was it good! And their stamina... I seriously thought I was going to pass out from all the pleasure.”

Zoe lowers her sunglasses on her nose and peeks over the rim, staring me down. I feel like a bug under a microscope.

Eventually, Zoe speaks again with great seriousness. “Ella, hun, I hope for your sake you get to see Tiero’s dick!”

*What the heck?*

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## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

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### ELLA

I raise an eyebrow at her, saying nothing.

“The looks run in the family, right? So I’d say there’s a good chance that relates to other areas too,” Zoe says sheepishly. “Oh my good lord, girls. Mateo has *the* most perfect cock, and you know I’m qualified to say that.”

She licks her lips, remembering. “It’s long and thick and with the perfect curvature. I couldn’t get enough of it. Romeo’s was great too, but nothing compared to Signor De Marco’s. Seriously, Ella. You have to get down and dirty with Gualtiero,” she insists.

“Oh, Zoe,” I laugh. “I feel like the virgin Mary next to you.”

“That’s because you are,” she replies dryly, laying back down.

I follow her example and stare up into the light blue sky. Rhia disappears briefly and drags another lounge onto the terrace, making herself comfortable.

I study them both as they relax in the sun. Sometimes I envy their easy-going nature when it comes to sex. Neither of them is afraid to try new things as long as it feels good.

What would it be like to be with two guys? The thought makes me shudder.

I find it hard to get comfortable with one, let alone two. Mateo sounds like he's dynamite in bed. If Tiero is anything like his brother... I'm not sure if I should be excited or scared.

*What am I thinking?*

There won't be any sex with Tiero.

*Then why is your pussy throbbing at the thought of him?*  
The devilish voice on my shoulder asks.

*Oh, buzz off.*

Zoe's phone rings in her room, disrupting the peace, and she gets up to answer it. Watching her, I see her face light up when she realizes who it is. Throwing herself onto the bed, she winces. In her excitement, she forgot she's stiff and sore.

"Oh my god," Rhia suddenly shrieks, sitting up straight. "I haven't grilled you yet about your night. Spill the beans, El. I want a progress report."

*Ah, finally.*

I was beginning to worry. It's not like Rhia to forget her post-date interrogation.

"Well, compared to your night, there really isn't much to tell. We had a lovely dinner. He took me to an Irish pub," I tell



her with a raised eyebrow, and she bursts out into laughter.

“Really, an Irish pub,” she repeats.

“Yep, he thought I might need a reminder of home.”

“That’s cute. But I want the juicy details. Did he make a move?”

I remain silent. If I tell her, she’ll get carried away one way or another, and I’m too worn-out to be lectured about not sleeping with him.

“Ella! Spill!” She throws a cushion at me but misses spectacularly. She must be tired. Her aim is usually spot-on.

“I don’t think he seduced you. You don’t look satisfied. And given what we’ve just heard, a De Marco won’t be a lousy lover.”

I roll my eyes at her. After all, it’s one of my favorite things to do.

“Something happened though, or you would have denied it by now,” she continues.

“He kissed you,” Rhia declares, and my face turns red on cue.

“I knew it,” she exclaims triumphantly. “And by the way you’re blushing it was hot and steamy.”

She looks thrilled with herself. “God, I’m good. Without you even saying a single word, I get the entire story.”

I close my eyes and shut her out. Another pillow flies my way, and this time doesn’t miss. “Hey,” I protest.

“Seriously, Ella, spill,” she demands.

“Okay. Okay. You are correct. We kissed... and it was amazing.” I say, scrunching up my nose slightly.

“Then why don’t you look happier?”

I let out a long puff of air. “He scares me... No, that’s not true. My reaction to him scares me.” I twist my fingers in my lap as I remember what it’s like to be in his arms.

“What do you mean?” Rhia asks, looking puzzled.

“Whenever he touches me, it’s like I go up in flames. And when he kissed me... I lost all sense of myself, of everything around me... I’ve never had that. I’m not sure what to do with it.”

“You’re overthinking it, El. You and Tiero have such a strong current buzzing between you, it probably can be seen from space. Kissing him is meant to be like that.”

I remain quiet. I’m not sure what to say.

“You owe it to yourself to explore this further. Yes, it might never result in more than a fling, but down the track, you’ll regret it if you don’t give him a chance.”

Rhia looks so earnest. And I can see where she’s coming from... sort of.

“Let’s assume this is a fling. How do I not get my heart entangled? Before Lex, how did you do it?”

She regards me closely, and I can almost see the wheels in her brain turn.

“Here’s the thing,” Rhia begins carefully. “I’m well aware I’m pushing you to have more fun. You’re not into casual sex and that’s cool, but you’re twenty-six and entering the flowery fields of your sexual prime,” she winks, smirking. “But you live like a nun and tend an austere garden.”

“Rhia, my garden isn’t austere. I enjoy my flowers,” I interrupt her.

“Yes, you do, and it’s important to enjoy your body by yourself. But human touch, other than from your massage therapist, is vital. Don’t starve yourself of it. You can’t tell me you don’t want more than your own hand or a dildo in your pussy. Don’t you crave feeling the warmth of a body pressed against yours? Hands and lips exploring your body? A hard dick filling you just right?”

I remain silent as the images she’s painting take over my mind.

It’s Tiero’s hands I see, stroking my body... Tiero’s lips taking my mouth and gliding over every inch of my skin... Tiero’s cock entering me, stretching me, filling me up.

My pussy clenches in response, my muscles squeezing the void. I let out a frustrated sigh, pressing my legs together to quench my building arousal.

“Your face gives you away,” Rhia continues, unperturbed. “El, you didn’t come to this earth to deny your desires. You came here to give them life. Don’t feel guilty for wanting Tiero just because it won’t lead to a committed relationship. I’m not trying to change your personality here, but how far

have your insecurities gotten you? Just go into this with your eyes open and go home with no regrets.

“You’re here to enjoy yourself, live to the fullest... remember it’s what inspired this trip in the first place. You desire that man. It’s written all over you. Let go of your inhibitions for once and enjoy him.”

I let Rhia’s words sink in and mingle with my own. For a while, we say nothing and just soak up the sun.

“I hear what you’re saying,” I finally speak. “And you’re right. When I’m with Tiero, all I want to do is climb him like a tree... And I’m sure sex with him would be amazing. My position on one-night stands isn’t all that’s holding me back, though.

“I don’t know how to best describe it, Rhi. My reactions to him are really unsettling. He looks at me, and I melt. I get a whiff of his aftershave, and my pheromones go into overdrive. And when he touches even the smallest part of me, electricity zings through me. But it’s not even about my physical response to him.

“It’s this weird connection to him—it scares me. He’s touched a part of me I didn’t realize existed. It probably sounds crazy, but it’s like I’ve known him forever, yet he’s a complete stranger to me... And I know what you’re going to say about past lives... yada yada yada... so don’t,” I pause to gather my thoughts while Rhia remains silent, giving me space to formulate what’s going on in my head.

“Something in my gut tells me to stay away. I’m well aware it could just be fear... it probably is. But here is the thing. If I sleep with him, I’ll automatically lower my defenses and let him penetrate me, literally and figuratively. And he’ll embed himself even more than he already has in only three days. This vacation will come to an end. That’s as unavoidable as the sun setting this afternoon. The last thing I need is a tangled up, broken heart, and a mind obsessed with a man I can’t have.”

Rhia has no comeback for that. She nods in acknowledgment, letting me know she’s heard me. We lean back in our chairs, the atmosphere more solemn than before.

That changes when Zoe bounces back onto the terrace, spinning, and singing.

Rhia frowns at her. “What’s up with you?”

“Romeo just invited me to go to Tuscany with him and Mateo for a few days. They’ve got business there and want me to come along,” she tells us happily.

“So you’re leaving then?” Rhia asks, a little annoyed, peeking over the rim of her sunglasses at her sister.

“Damn straight I am. I won’t say no to these hunks. I want to see what else they have in store for me.” She rubs her hands gleefully and does another pirouette on the spot.

“So much for coming on a trip with us,” Rhia mumbles.

“Oh, sis. You know me. I like to be spontaneous.” She gives her sister an exaggerated kiss on the cheek and dances back inside, pulling out her suitcase.

“Wow. She’s not wasting any time, is she?” I say, watching her.

Rhia growls in her direction, shaking her head. “No. She isn’t. Why did she want to come with us in the first place?”

“I think the lure of Italian men might have had something to do with it,” I say, smirking. “Hey sweets, cheer up. It’s not like we’ve seen much of Zoe, anyway. I know you wanted to bond with her, and she’ll get there eventually, but she’s just not there yet. She needs to do some maturing first.”

“That she does,” Rhia agrees. “Ah well, it’s back to just you and me. Can’t say I mind that.”

I smile at her. I like that thought very much.

“Let’s have dinner tonight, just the two of us,” I suggest.

It’s the perfect excuse to take a break from Tiero. Things are getting too intense, and I might not be able to resist him if I spent any more time with him.



It’s early afternoon, and Zoe excitedly jumped into a car with Romeo an hour ago, waving goodbye and telling us we’d see her when she got home... eventually.

Rhia and I drag our tired bums out of our rooms to do at least a little exploring today. We can’t justify doing absolutely nothing for an entire day—it goes against our nature.

We're walking down the corridor to the elevators when a door a few rooms down opens, and a geeky-looking guy steps out. He doesn't look like your typical tourist, but I guess they come in all shapes and sizes. He gives us a polite nod as we pass and heads in the opposite direction.

"See, there are guests on this floor," Rhia remarks as we step into the elevator.

As we reach to the parking lot and get into our little red Fiat Panda, Rhia's phone starts to ring in her bag. She checks the caller ID, wrinkling her forehead.

"Shoot, it's the office. I told them to ring me *only* if there's an emergency," she says, looking a little concerned.

"Go ahead. Answer it," I urge her. I've been impressed that her phone hasn't rung once for an entire week. She has capable staff, but they rely heavily on Rhia's direction. She listens intently, her face going from concerned to astonished to beaming and then back to concerned.

"Oh my god, that's one hell of an opportunity. When do they want to have the proposal by?... Next Monday?! That's impossible... Email me all the details right away," I hear her say before she hangs up.

"What's happening? You look excited and scared all at the same time."

"You're not wrong. Oh my God, Ella... oh my fucking god." She squeals and does her weird little happy dance. It's

the second time I'm seeing it today. This clearly runs in the family.

"I need to sit down. Let's get a drink." She touches her chest and pats it as if to calm her heart.

So we lock up the car again and head back inside and aim for the hotel bar. Once seated, I turn to my best friend expectantly.

"What's going on?"

"That was Tim calling," Rhia begins.

Tim is her right-hand man and is handling the business while she's away.

"Do you remember the boutique hotel chain I've been trying to win as a client since I started my company?"

I shake my head, no. "They're all over Europe specializing in unique properties, no run-of-the-mill type stuff with them. They review their PR team regularly to keep the ideas as fresh and unique as they are and invite tenders every so often. We've never made it onto their tender list... But guess what?"

She gulps down her drink in one go and then fans herself in excitement. "They just rang and want us to tender for their next PR campaign... Oh my God, oh my God, oh my God... Ella, this is huge. This could be the breakthrough I've been waiting for. If we win this, it will catapult us on the international stage, and the sky is the limit from there."

"That's amazing!" I'm as excited as she is. No one deserves it more than Rhia. She puts so much love, sweat, and



dedication into her campaigns, and I just knew it would pay off big time before too long.

We order another round of drinks. “We need to celebrate,” I declare.

“We have to do it now. Once Tim forwards me the tender documents, I need to study them and prepare a strategy. We only have a week to come up with something mind-blowing. Sorry sweets, but I can’t do dinner tonight.”

I swallow my disappointment. I don’t want to go out on my own. But staying in my room reading a book sounds like a horrible plan when you’re on vacation.

“Don’t worry about me. This is important, and you need to get started. I understand.” And I really do, even though I don’t like how this will affect everything.

“You’re the best. Why don’t you ring Tiero and go out with him tonight?” Rhia suggests.

“Hmm,” I say, non-committedly. Good thing I haven’t told her about him wanting to see me again, or she would ring him herself.

Our drinks arrive, and we clink glasses. “Congratulations on making the tender list!” I say as we take a sip of the cool, sweet liquid. “What made them change their mind and include you?”

“Who cares why! It’s only important that we’re one of the three companies invited. I’ll blow their minds. That account is mine!” she declares confidently.

Her phone pings, and she checks it quickly. “Here we go,” she squeals, rubbing her hands together.

She really loves what she does, and even though owning her own company has come with lots of challenges, she is thriving, and so is her company. I’m immensely proud of her.

Rhia gets up and heads to the stairs. I follow her. “I’ll spend the afternoon by the pool and read,” I say more to myself as Rhia is off in her own world, focused on reading the document Tim sent.

I change into my blue bikini, grab my book and phone, and head to the pool, where I make myself comfortable on a chaise under an umbrella. I begin to read, but my eyelids quickly grow heavy, and I fall asleep.

A pinging sound wakes me up, and I see my phone vibrate on the little table next to me. I stare at it for a moment.

Even without looking at it, I know who it is. I’m surprised it’s taken him so long. I hesitate, butterflies fluttering in my stomach. Taking a deep breath, I take the phone and swipe open the message.

*Tiero: Princess, I’ll pick you up for dinner at seven. Can’t wait to see you.*

I shake my head, amused. Why is it this man never asks?

Ah, that’s right... it’s the ruling nature of his name. He commands, and people follow.

It irks me a little that he thinks he can decide my movements. Yet, there's something sexy about his domineering way, and I can't deny my body melts a little more every time I'm with him.

Part of me had hoped he would ring—I long to hear the low timbre of his voice. The space I wanted to put between us seems like too much now. Rhia, being busy, gives me the perfect excuse to renege on my conviction to stay away from him.

To be honest without the distraction of sightseeing today, he's all I can think about, and it has made me horny as hell. That magnetic pull between us is strong, even when we aren't together.

The fire he ignited when I first laid eyes on him has gained momentum and burns brighter than ever. I feel hot all over and it's not from the sun. My tummy does involuntary somersaults.

I need to cool off.

I get up and dive into the water, swimming to the edge on the side of the cliff and staring out into the blueness of the sea. When I've found my inner calm again, I get out and lay back on my chaise. After twenty minutes I finally reply—don't want to come across as too eager.

*Me: Okay. See you then.*

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## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

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### ELLA

**I**t's almost seven o'clock, and I'm getting ready to go out.

Rhia has been holed up in her room and hasn't surfaced all afternoon. One week is not long to pull this off, and she's understandably freaking out. But she works best under pressure, and I know she'll be brilliant. If she makes the top two, she'll be traveling to London the following week to present her proposal to the board of directors—no pressure!

Feeling restless after my text exchange with Tiero, I wasn't able to enjoy the slow day I had craved. I lounged by the pool, dozed on and off, and tried to read the mafia romance I picked up weeks ago in preparation for this trip—after all, Sicily is home to the mafia. I couldn't get into the book though, my thoughts continuously swirling towards Mr. Tall, Dark, and Handsome.

Nervous anticipation has been building for hours. My stomach is in knots. At this rate, I'm not sure I can eat anything.

“Are you ready yet?” Rhia calls from her room. “Let me see you.”

I walk over and do a little twirl in front of her. I’m wearing a shirt and skirt combo tonight rather than a dress.

The dark moss green sleeveless wrap shirt complements my fair skin tone and exposes the swell of my breasts tantalizingly. The matching tight-fitting light gray skirt with moss green and dark brown stripes is three-quarter length and hugs my figure. Of course, Rhia had the right high heels in her arsenal which seem to make my legs stretch for miles.

“Oh, you’re such a prick tease,” Rhia says happily. “He won’t know what hit him.”

“I can’t believe you’re ditching me for work,” I mock her.

“I’m sorry, sweets. I promise I’ll take you to the fanciest restaurant in Dublin with the first paycheck from this job.”

Punctual as always, Tiero knocks on the door at seven o’clock sharp. I grimace at Rhia before I head into my room to open the door.

My breath catches in my throat. He’s dressed in a dark gray suit, tailored perfectly to his body. It hugs his shoulders and hips and makes my fingers itch to touch him.

His eyes take me in hungrily, and he licks his lips. “Wow. I didn’t think it was possible for you to look any more ravishing... you’re stunning, princess.” He leans in and kisses my forehead.

*What? That’s it?*

Then his aftershave hits my nose, and all I want to do is nuzzle in closer.

*Jeez, why does he have to smell so good?!*

When he pulls away, the desire in Tiero's eyes is blazing, and my cheeks heat under his scrutiny. He holds out his hand to me, and as I take it, he pulls me closer and plants a tender kiss on my lips.

*Ahhh, that's more like it.*

Sadly, he doesn't linger and almost immediately steps back.

"Are you ready to experience Sicily's finest dining experience?" Tiero asks beaming at me with a panty melting smile.

*Oh my.*

Perhaps I should take a spare pair of panties with me. The ones I'm wearing are already damp.

Still holding my hand, Tiero leads me to the elevator where Santino and another guard are waiting.

"Hello, Santino. It's nice to see you again," I say in greeting. For a millisecond, he looks surprised by my acknowledgment.

"Likewise, Miss O'Neil," he replies with a smile that surprises me. It's the first time I've seen Santino do anything other than scowl.

I turn to the other guard with a smile and introduce myself. He blushes, and I try to stifle my glee at his reaction. He

introduces himself as Mauro. Big and muscly like the others, he's only young, maybe in his mid-twenties.

Tiero smiles down at me as if amused. He probably never had a date greet his staff. But if my parents and my job have taught me anything, it's to acknowledge everyone, no matter who they are. No person is more or less special than another. It's a lesson that has stuck with me.

We enter the confined space of the elevator, and I feel tiny, surrounded by so much testosterone. We make the ride to the lobby in silence. Tiero's thumb brushes over the back of my hand in a steady rhythm—it wakes up the swarm of butterflies.

Will this ever change?

Today, there are three cars parked in front of the hotel. The usual two black SUVs are flanking a black Ferrari.

*Oh my God!*

And it's not just any kind of Ferrari—it's their latest and fastest and aptly named *812 Superfast*. It's the most sexy car I've ever seen. I want to jump for joy.

“Are we driving in this?” I ask, beaming at Tiero while pointing at the car.

His smile is just as bright. “We sure are. Do you approve?”

*Do I approve? Is he serious?*

I throw my arms around his neck and pepper his face with kisses. “This is amazing. I love it.”

He walks me to the passenger side and opens the door. I slip into the car and onto the super-soft leather seat that seems to mold itself around my body. The interior is as luxurious as I imagined. I'm in awe of the craftsmanship. What a sleek machine. I want to drive this baby.

Tiero joins me moments later, looking even hotter behind the wheel of this beast. Recklessly, I want to climb onto his lap and kiss the living bejesus out of him. But instead, I rein in my desire and grin at him widely. "Can I drive?" I ask. "Please say yes, pleeeeeease say yes," I plead playfully.

He smiles at me brightly. "Sure. How about on the way back?"

I nod excitedly.

Holy shit! I'm going to drive the fastest Ferrari money can buy. Dreams do come true. I'm so giddy I could pee my pants, as Rhia would say.

Tiero starts the car. The engine roars to life and then purrs like a big, happy cat. The two SUVs, one in front and the other behind, both start their engines too, and our little procession is on its merry way.

"Wow, I can't believe you own one of these. I've never driven in a V12 before." I gush, my excitement hard to contain. "Even a Formula One car only has eight cylinders."

"After what you told me the other day, I knew you'd appreciate it."

"Oh my gosh, you have no idea! I'm so excited."



“Did your grandfather teach you about car mechanics?”

“Yes, he did. I know the basics. If a car breaks down, there’s a good chance I get it going again,” I say, somewhat proudly. My skills have come in handy many times over the years. Especially on road trips with Rhia.

We fall into easy conversation, and time flies. I’m clueless where we are, having paid no attention. Tiero slows down the car as we drive through large iron gates, up a long driveway, and come to a stop in front of a majestic-looking villa.

A valet opens my door and helps me out. Tiero tosses him the keys as he takes my elbow to guide me up the few steps to the front door. We’re flanked immediately by four security guards, who scan the area diligently. I look at Tiero questioningly, but he just nods.

The maître D welcomes us and leads us to a corridor to one side of the entrance, gesturing to an elevator. Santino and Mauro join us while the other two station themselves by the door.

I only catch a brief glance of the restaurant. It appears elegant and exclusive. I wonder why we aren’t dining in there given it looks so inviting. Gentle piano music plays in the background, but the elevator doors close, and the sound dies. Tiero smiles down at me. I smile back, then raise an eyebrow as if to ask, *‘What’s next? Where are we going?’*

He chuckles and replies to my unspoken question. “Patience, my princess. You’ll see soon enough.”

The elevator dings, and Santino and Mauro leave first and sweep the area. We wait a moment and, at Santino's nod, step out onto a large rooftop.

It's lit up by hundreds of candles, giving the space a warm and intimate flair. Blinking rapidly, I'm trying to take everything in.

*Wow!*

My mouth falls open, but no words come out. I've never seen so many candles in one place. It transforms the area into something truly magical.

A lone table for two sits in the middle, surrounded by flowering trees, potted in large barrels. Fairy lights illuminate the flowers—it's like an enchanted garden.

A string duet to one side fills the air with sweet, harmonious tunes. A partition is blocking their view of our table. He's thought of everything to ensure our privacy.

Nerves rumble in my stomach.

"I'm lost for words. It's amazing." I say in awe. "How come there aren't more people up here dining? This has to be much nicer than the dining room downstairs."

"You're right. Normally it's packed. Dining under the stars is popular. But I wanted you all to myself," he says, placing a tender kiss on my forehead.

"You reserved the whole rooftop for us?"

He nods as he pulls out my chair to seat me. I'm flabbergasted. This isn't a cheap establishment. It must have cost him a small fortune. The thought makes me uncomfortable. Nobody has ever gone to such lengths to impress me.

"I don't know what to say," I whisper as Tiero takes his seat next to me. "You know you don't have to do this."

He takes my hand and places a gentle kiss on top. My stomach somersaults, and my pulse quickens. "You are a very special woman, and I want to give you the best."

My throat is suddenly parched, and I reach for my water glass nervously. It's becoming clearer by the second that Tiero is here to seduce.

How long can I resist this onslaught of charm?

My defenses are crumbling. What will be left of them by the end of the night?

*Let loose and enjoy life.* Rhia's words echo to mind.

Maybe I should give this a go. Tiero wants me. That much is clear. It must be the little devil's voice talking because just as I finish the thought, the little saint's voice sitting on my other shoulder is piping up. *No, stay strong. Casual sex only leads to heartbreak.*

*Shut up, both of you.*

Santino and Mauro leave the rooftop, having finished their surveillance, just as a server appears with our champagne. Liquid courage... perfect.

We clink glasses and I eagerly take a sip. I'm such a lightweight with alcohol. The effects hit me straight away and my body relaxes. I wholeheartedly welcome it.

Tiero watches me, amusement written all over his handsome face. I draw in a deep breath through my nose. Smiling at him, I whisper on the exhale, "Why are you looking at me like this?"

"Why do I make you so nervous, princess?" he asks, going straight for the kill.

*How am I supposed to answer that?!*

Because you're the hottest man I've ever met? Because you exude power and intimidate the hell out of me? Because there seems to be much more lurking beneath the surface than what you let me see? Because I don't understand why you're interested in me?

There's a myriad of questions in my mind.

*What do I say?*

I search my brain for an intelligent answer. Resting my hands in my lap, I twist my fingers anxiously. He notices and reaches over and pulls one hand on top of the table. Never letting go, he caresses it with this thumb, my eyes following the movement. My heart is beating out of my chest, and I'm sure he can see it.

*God, I'm blowing this.*

"Angel, look at me," Tiero says, his voice gentle. My eyes slowly lift to his. There's only warmth and tenderness. "Tell

me,” he says, his voice low and his eyes sincere.

I twist the fabric of my skirt with the hand on my lap. My chest is tight, and my breathing shallow.

“I’ve never met anyone like you. You intimidate me. The way you make me feel is nothing I’ve experienced before. It’s unsettling, and I don’t know how to be around you,” I fire off quietly.

“How do I make you feel?”

“You fry my brain and set my body on fire.” I whisper dryly.

“How do you know it’s not the same for me?”

“Because you are always calm and collected. Nothing seems to rattle you... not even when a car tries to run you over.”

“You know, ducks appear calm on the surface, but their feet kick frantically under the water.”

That makes me laugh. “I could never think of you as a duck. You do your middle name justice... you’re definitely more lion than duck.”

He laughs with me, and it disperses the tension. He lifts my hand and kisses it tenderly, just as the door to the rooftop opens and a couple of servers step out carrying dishes. My skin tingles where he touched it, and I take a deep breath to calm my racing heart.

“I hope you don’t mind, but I ordered the chef’s specials for us when I made the reservation. It’s a selection of his best

dishes... I have no idea what he's got in store for us, but he never disappoints. And don't worry, I told them you don't like eggplants." He kisses my hand once more before letting it go when the servers place the first course in front of us.

The food is delicious, and five courses later, my stomach is happy and full. After the little ice-breaking laugh, conversation flows easily.

Tiero is a fabulous conversationalist. As he demonstrated on our first night out, he's a history buff, especially on Italian history, and enlightens me on the finer details of the fall of Troy and Pompeii. I'm fascinated and ask many questions, and he answers every one of them expertly. I mentally add these places to my travel list, my curiosity raised to a point where I have to see them for myself.

As the servers clear the last dish, Tiero talks to them in Italian, and they nod their heads before disappearing through the door.

The two musicians have been playing softly in the background the entire time. Tiero stands and offers me his hand.

"Dance with me, princess?" he asks, but in true Gualtiero fashion, it's more of a command than a request. I don't mind though. I want to feel his arms around me again.

The alcohol has loosened me up not to be so self-conscious. I put my hand in his, and he caresses it with his thumb. And the wretched goosebumps... they're back.

He leads me a few steps away from the table and snakes his arm around my waist, pulling me close to his body. Only a few inches separate us, and his heat penetrates my skin.

Fire ignites in my veins like a raging inferno, and I swallow hard as my gaze rises to meet his, my heart racing in my chest like a Ferrari engine.

Tiero begins to sway to the rhythm of the music. In my heels, the top of my head reaches below his nose, and he breathes me in before placing a kiss on my hair. Resting my head on his shoulder, I listen to his heartbeat—it's racing just like mine.

It comforts me to know I'm not alone in this, that he's just as affected by my presence. I slide my hand over his heart and connect with its wild beat. Like drums in the jungle, it awakens something raw and primal inside me.

I lift my head off his body and stare up at him. His eyes are devouring me, his pupils nearly black and blazing with want. A want that is growing stronger inside me with every passing second, too.

Tiero lowers his head and kisses me, his lips soft on mine.

*Finally!*

I've been waiting for this all night.

He stops dancing, and his hand glides to my face, holding it in place as he deepens our connection.

And one seductive kiss at a time, he strips away the armor I put up to protect myself. My breath catches, and I can't help

the little moan escaping my throat.

“I want to know what sounds you make when I’m buried deep inside you.” His voice lowers to a rough growl, and it does things to me... like throw caution to the wind.

*Good god, he talks dirty.*

It turns me on like nothing else.

The panties I am wearing are soaked. I really should have brought a second pair.

Looking around, I worry he wants to take me right here and now. I wouldn’t allow that, would I? I’m not so sure anymore.

Tiero chuckles. “Not tonight, princess, but soon.” His voice is full of desire. “Very soon.”

I’m not sure if this is a threat or a promise—probably both. Am I ready for it? For him?

A shudder ripples through my body when I feel his hard length pressed against my abdomen.

His hand wanders under my shirt, stroking my skin as he pushes my bra out of the way. Goosebumps pepper my skin at his touch. It feels so good.

It’s been so long since a man has touched me. And until now, it’s never been a man who ignites wildfires within me that rage out of control within seconds.

He cups my breast in his hand as fingers roll my nipple lightly between his thumb and forefinger before pinching it. A shock of pleasure travels straight to my core. It clenches



helplessly against nothing, the void inside me screaming to be filled. My clit is throbbing, and he hasn't even touched it yet.

"I'm so hard for you. It hurts," he whispers in my ear while sucking on it, biting it gently, causing the goosebumps to spread all over my body. His mouth descends on mine, his tongue seeking entrance. I open for him, melting under his delicious onslaught. He rubs his rock-hard cock into my abdomen.

Jeez, he wasn't kidding.

Where is Dr. Agosti now? I'm sure this will bruise.

His lips never leave mine as his fingers travel slowly downward.

Inching up my skirt until it's gathered around my waist, he cups my sex in his large hand and then trails a finger down one side and up the other, then oh so lightly circles my clit over the fabric of my thong. The feathery contact blazes across my nerve endings, sending them into spasms. He continues his slow attack as I writhe and arch against him.

I want more... I need more.

He walks us backward until I hit the hard edge of the table. With a brush of his arm, he clears it, the vase and flowers crashing to the floor. Neither of us cares.

He lifts me onto the surface, standing in between my open legs. His hands go to my face while he kisses me with a ferocious appetite. We devour each other, the pent-up tension consuming us.

I forget everything, my senses overtaken by the passion Tiero unleashed.

We're out in the open on a rooftop restaurant, where two people are playing string instruments behind a screen only a few feet away... and it doesn't even register.

Tiero's hands curl under my knees, pulling me closer until there is no space left between our heaving chests. Then they travel up my bare legs, my skin humming where he stroked it. Our kisses turn more and more into more.

I'm losing my fucking mind here.

I rip my mouth away from his to suck in ragged breaths, my lungs completely emptied of oxygen.

Struggling for air, too, it doesn't stop Tiero from latching onto my neck, running his tongue and open-mouthed kisses all along its tender spots.

One hand reaches the seam of my thong, and he brushes his thumb over the soaked fabric, massaging my clit in maddening slow circles.

With a determined tug, he rips it off me and lets it fall to the ground. Then his fingers are at my opening. He slides one deep inside, and I jerk against him, the sudden invasion making me cry out.

I cling to the front of his shirt, scrunching it up into a ball in my fist while I hold on for dear life.

"Tiero," I moan.

A second finger joins the first in the tight confines of my pussy.

“Fuck, princess. My name on your lips is the goddamn sexiest thing I’ve ever heard,” he rasps against my heated skin, all the while slowly pumping in and out of me, brushing my G-spot every time. I grow embarrassingly wet, my body melting under his touch as my hips rise off the table in a desperate attempt to get closer.

“You’re so fucking tight... Perfetto...,” he says, his voice gone gravelly. “You’re so wet for me... I want more... give me more, princess. Fuck, you turn me on so much!”

Holy hell, I turn him on?

I’m the one who’s embarrassed by the level of my arousal, my moist inner thighs showing the evidence of what this man does to me.

“I can’t wait to taste you, to feast on that sweet little pussy of yours, run my tongue along it and lap up all your sweet nectar.”

He needs to stop speaking, or I’ll come on the spot. God, help me, I’m so hot for this man.

My release is building under his ministrations, and I squirm against him, losing all coherent thought. All I can do is let the rioting sensations in my body take over. I try to stay quiet, I really do. I don’t want anyone to hear, but I lose the battle to contain my moans.

His fingers work in and out of me, moving faster with each thrust. “What do you want, princess?” Tiero whispers in my ear, his voice low and guttural. His eyes are glued to my face, fixated on watching me come undone.

I can’t answer, too lost in the moment. Swollen, desperate, and near the edge. I just want to crash over. He slows his movements, his eyes burning into me. I close mine, not wanting to lose the momentum, and groan in protest.

“Please, Tiero,” I plead.

“Look at me,” he commands roughly. I reluctantly do. “Tell me what you want,” he repeats, his tone low.

“I... I want to come,” I whimper, all embarrassment for having to say it out loud pushed from my mind.

His breathing grows heavier. He’s turned on too. It’s not just me who’s trying to hold on to sanity.

“Good girl,” he rasps and starts pumping my pussy again, adding a third finger, his thumb now circling my clit with precise pressure. I’m so full and ready to explode... just a little more.

I’m rapidly approaching boiling point. Tiero thrusts his fingers deeper, rotating them inside. He’s pushing me higher and higher until the sound of my wet arousal and our heavy breathing is the only thing filling my ears.

I want to reach the stars, and yet, I want to prolong this for as long as possible. I’m so, so close. Tingles bubble up my legs and tremors shake my body. I can’t hold on any longer.

“Come for me, princess. Now. Give it all to me,” Tiero growls.

The demand sends shock waves through me. A firestorm that sparks in my stomach travels throughout my entire body and I let go, Tiero’s name on my lips in a deep guttural bliss-soaked groan.

My toes curl in my shoes, and my body jerks as wave after wave of pleasure courses through my veins. The aftershocks go on and on, and I tremble as Tiero continues lightly stroking me, drawing out the spine-tingling sensations.

I feel utterly boneless.

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## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

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### GUALTIERO

I hold Ella's trembling body in my arms. Our breathing is labored. I'm ready to explode, my cock hard as steel. If I don't take her soon, my sanity is on the line.

The temptation to have her right now is too much.

With her being semi-naked, her scent invading my senses... it's like waving a red flag to a bull. All I want to do is unzip my pants and slide into her wet heat, and get lost in her.

She's on an orgasm high and unlikely to protest, but this isn't how I envision our first time together.

She's the woman I'm going to marry, and the mother of my future children. I don't want her to regret it the moment it's over. I want it to be a memory she'll cherish forever—that *we* will cherish forever.

I pull away from her, and it's harder than anything I've done in a long time. The scent of her arousal lingers in the air. The taste of her sweet lips is still on my tongue.

My appetite is wetted to have more of her... to have all of her.

*Patience*, I remind myself, *patience*.

I need her to trust me, and she won't if I take her like an animal in a public place with the threat of discovery at any moment. Not that anybody would dare walk in on us, but Ella doesn't know that.

She slides off the table, her skirt falling back into place. I bend down to pick up her panties and stuff them in my pocket. They'll come in handy later.

I watch her as she adjusts her bra, then her top. God, I can't wait to get her naked. My fingers itch to touch her again.

She's embarrassed, unable to look at me, and fidgeting with her clothing. I reach for and draw her closer. My hands go to her face, lifting it to mine and kissing her slowly. The way she melts into my arms fuels the raging inferno inside me.

I can't get enough of her.

Reluctantly, I break away from my sweet angel and smile at her. She beams back at me, and I wish I could take her home with me tonight.

But I can't. After I drop her off, we'll pay a visit to Molinaro. One of his guys leaked his whereabouts, and it's high time I had a chat with the weasel—one he is unlikely to walk away from.

I take Ella's hand and guide her to the elevator. When we get to the waiting cars, I toss her the keys. Her eyes light up

like a Christmas tree.

“You’re really letting me drive your car?” She jumps in excitement.

“I let you drive more than just my car,” I tease her, and she blushes on cue.

God, I love putting this color on her cheeks.

I hold the door open for her, and she slides in. She starts the car the second my ass lands in the seat. She revs the engine a few times with an infectious laugh. In front, Santino’s SUV pulls out, and Ella follows, getting the hang of the gears and clutch. When she does, she’s like a pro who’s driven nothing else.

She’s eager to floor it. She taps the steering wheel impatiently.

“Can I overtake them?”

The hopeful expression on her face makes me laugh out loud. “Do you know what you’re doing?”

“I can hold my own.”

“Then go for it,” I tell her, curious to see what speed she’ll hit.

Without needing another invitation, she pushes down on the accelerator, swerves out to the other lane, and without trouble overtakes Santino. I wave to him as she flies past.

With little effort, she puts distance between us and the other cars. They follow hot on our tails. Not surprisingly, my phone



rings seconds later, Santino swearing on the other end.

“Si calmi! Chill out,” I tell him. “Non è un problema.” After a short while, she’s cornering better than I do, anticipating her apexes to perfection. The smile on her face is huge, and sheer excitement beams off her. It pleases me more than I thought possible.

“It’s too heavy in the front,” Ella says with a slight frown on her face.

“I’ve had this car fitted with long-range tanks. We’re on the front reserve tank,” I explain.

“Why do you need long-range tanks?”

“I don’t like putting fuel in it,” I smirk. Of course, that’s not the reason, but Ella doesn’t need to know that. I’ll shield her from my business as long as possible.

“Haha. As if you would fuel up yourself.”

“True.” I laugh. “I have people for it.”

“Is there a way to lighten the front?”

“There is. I can pump fuel between tanks.”

Ella smiles. “Good. Do that.”

*Who is this woman?*

The blushing girl has disappeared, replaced by a badass goddess. She surprises me at every turn. There’s a depth to her I didn’t expect, and I can’t wait to discover more.

“I think we should let Santino catch up now, or he might have a heart attack,” I say.

She doesn't respond right away, but pushes down on the accelerator one last time before begrudgingly slowing down.

"That was so good!" She looks alive with rosy cheeks and bright eyes that rival the stars. "This baby flies like the wind."

Santino catches up to us and overtakes our Ferrari, glaring at Ella as he does.

She laughs. "Oops, I think I'm in trouble," she says with a mischievous glance at me.

"Good thing I'm the only one allowed to put you over my knee." I wink at her and enjoy the blush coloring her face.

Looks like my little innocent Ella is back. I can't wait to show her all the fun I have in store for us.

Her innocence and my experience are like a match made in heaven. She's like a blank page, and the thought of molding her into my sex goddess is making me instantly hard.

*Patience*, I remind myself for the hundredth time tonight.

We pull up at her hotel, and she kills the engine, handing me back the keys.

"Thank you. This is, without a doubt, the best car I've ever driven," she beams.

I might just buy one for her for her birthday.

"My pleasure, princess." I take her hand and kiss the top of it. Her skin is incredibly soft, and the urge to tear off her clothes to discover just how soft is burning me up alive. Reluctantly, I let go of her and get out of the car.

I'm about to take her hand to guide her inside, but she turns to me with a timid smile. "No need to walk me up to my room. Thank you for a... memorable night." She leans in to kiss my cheek.

She wants to put distance between us, and unfortunately, I will have to let her—for now.

I need to take care of the threat that could derail everything and put her in danger. If Molinaro knew how important Ella had become to me in only four short days, he would stop at nothing to hunt her down.

"Prego. Let me know if Rhia is working tomorrow. I'll take you out on my boat, and we can explore the islands around here."

"That sounds lovely. Thank you, Tiero."

Good, she's not trying to get out of it and run from me... not that she could. I gather her into my arms, planting a chaste kiss on her lips. "Sweet dreams, princess."

"Buonanotte," she calls over her shoulder as she climbs the stairs and disappears into the hotel.

Santino walks over with a glare on his face. I laugh. "Lighten up."

With a heavy sigh, I shift into business mode. "Tutto pronto?" All set, I ask.

He nods and informs me that more of our men are already on the way to Molinaro's Sicilian villa.

It's rare he stays there, preferring to run all aspects of his business from his heavily guarded residence in Rome. Not that his house here is any less secure, but the intel we collected over the past six months revealed a few weaknesses we're able to exploit.

I suspected he was on the island after the car incident last week, but it was confirmed when we captured one of his soldiers this morning. With a little help from Santino, he spilled the beans.

This war between our families will end tonight.

I throw the keys to the Ferrari to a soldier who'll take it home and get into the SUV. When we arrive at our meeting point close to Molinaro's mansion, there's a flurry of activity.

Not what I expected.

My men had instructions to wait for my command. Annoyed, I exit the car as Marcelo, one of my capos, approaches.

"We were attacked as soon as arrived. We took most of them out, but there might still be some in the house. Molinaro isn't here. I found out he left three hours ago. Someone tipped him off. Lorenzo and Alfio got hit, but should be okay. They're on the way to the doctor," he says, bringing me up to speed.

Heat flushes through my body, and it's not the kind Ella inspired. Anger, hot as Mount Etna's lava, is boiling up in me.

"Cazzo bastardo," I spit out through gritted teeth.

That fucking bastard. What a coward, running away like a little girl.

“Find out from whoever is still alive where he’s gone and then burn everything down. Leave no witnesses and nothing standing.”

Santino and I get back into the cars, leaving Marcelo to carry out my orders. I’m fuming, no closer to a resolution. My body is tense, and I itch to hit something. Maybe I should have stayed back and let out my frustrations on one of Molinaro’s goons.

He knew we were coming for him.

*Fuck!*

“Santino, find whoever tipped Molinaro off and bring him to me. It’s time to remind all of our guys what happens if they betray me.”

I can’t afford a mole in my midst, especially not now, with Ella in the picture. If indeed I have a spy in my camp, Molinaro will know how much time I’ve spent with her and how besotted I am.

I need to find a way to keep her by my side. Only then will I be able to relax.

I call Alonso to check in on my angel. He assures me all is well at the hotel, and that she’s safely tucked away in her room.

“Get extra guys to watch all entries and exits and have somebody stationed in the lobby. Remove anybody

suspicious,” I instruct. The sooner I can move her in with me, the better.

Next I dial Mateo’s number. He answers on the first ring.

“Molinaro wasn’t there,” I say without greeting.

“What the fuck? Was the bastard lying this morning? Too bad you killed him already.”

“No. Someone tipped Molinaro off.”

“What?!”

“We’ve got a fucking mole,” I seethe.

The other end of the line erupts in swearing.

“Have you made any leeway in Tuscany?” I ask.

“The shipment has arrived safely. But everybody is tight-lipped. Something is off.”

“Then make them talk.”

“Don’t worry. I will.”

“How come you answered your phone right away? I thought you’d be balls-deep in the little redhead.”

“I was waiting for your call.”

“Rather than fucking? You’re bored already?”

“You know me. I like variety. Romeo has plenty of fun with her though,” he says, chuckling, before turning more serious. “With Molinaro loose, you’ll need to double security around Ella.”

Mateo's comment brings the first genuine smile to my face since dropping her off at her hotel. I told him about her the day I met her... told him I found my One.

He didn't question it.

Mateo grinned and pulled out the celebratory whiskey, the one we keep for special occasions, and poured us both a glass, toasting to Mrs. Ella De Marco.

"Already done," I tell him.

"Good." I love he's looking out for her already. She's family now.

"How was your date?" he asks.

"Fucking memorable. She's something else... a total surprise package."

I tell him about Santino blowing a gasket, having to chase us when she took off in the Ferrari. Mateo chuckles. "You'll have fun keeping her in line."

*Oh, I will.*

The convoy of cars pulls up at my house, and I get out and head into my study. I need to focus on my next steps with Molinaro, need to come up with a new plan to draw him out.

But my thoughts keep drifting to Ella. The feel of her body in my hands, her moans, and whimpers... so enticing.

I'm rock hard all over again.

And the way she let go when she climaxed—utter perfection.

I need a release!

I reach into my pocket and pull out Ella's panties, bringing them to my nose and inhaling her intoxicating scent.

Tomorrow, I vow to myself. Tomorrow I'll have her and end this torture I put myself through.



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## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

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### ELLA

“Hey, sweets. How is it going? Are you making progress?” I ask as I enter Rhia’s room the following morning.

It’s early... well, it’s nine o’clock, but that’s early when you’re on vacation. Rhia is sitting at her make-shift desk furiously typing into her computer. She looks up briefly as I sit down on her lounge and holds up her pointer finger.

“Just give me a sec,” she says, distracted.

I pick up the room service menu to check out the breakfast options. It turns out the kitchen doesn’t stock parsnip, and an omelet without it is not my cup of tea. Hmm, the pancakes sound good.

I place an order for both of us, and not long after, Rhia and I are enjoying a scrumptious breakfast with stunning views of the azure blue waters.

As expected, Rhia quizzed me about last night’s dinner as soon as we sat down to eat. She’s learned over the years she

gets most information out of me when I'm happily occupied munching. I tell her all of it, and her eyes are ablaze with excitement. What happened at the restaurant is right up her alley.

"Holy cow. That's hot," she gushes. "My nickname for Tiero will be Goldfinger from now on... or Goldfingers." We burst out laughing at the image.

"Yeah, let's not. I don't want a picture of an overweight, ginger-haired villain in my head the next time Tiero gets creative."

In true Rhia fashion, she ignores my comment and keeps swooning. "Aren't dirty talkers just the best?"

Who could argue with that? It sure turned me on to the point of no return.

"It felt weird, though, being the only ones on that rooftop when the restaurant downstairs was full to the brim."

"You weren't alone," she points out. "The musicians were behind the screen."

"Good point. I hope they enjoyed the concert." I cringe, blushing at the memories all over again.

"Who cares? You won't ever see them again."

I know Rhia is right, but I have trouble shrugging it off like her.

"Have you heard from Lex?" I ask, guiding the conversation back to her as I spear a juicy-looking strawberry onto my fork.

“Yeah. He got back okay, but it’s been radio silence since.”

She suddenly turns serious and scrunches up her face. “Ella, I think I have to go home early. I can’t get this proposal ready on time from here. I need to be in my office, where I have all the resources at hand. I’m so sorry to do this to you.”

My face falls. I knew in my gut this was coming, but it does nothing to lessen the disappointment. We’ve been looking forward to this vacation for so long and to cut it short sucks big time.

But this is a mega opportunity for Rhia to launch her business to the next level, one she has to take and succeed.

“I understand. When are we leaving?”

“Oh my God, Ella, you’re the sweetest, but let’s get one thing clear. You don’t need to come home with me. It’s bad enough I have to cut this trip short.

“I want you to stay and enjoy the next five days. I feel bad for abandoning you like this, and I’m doubly glad now you’ve met Tiero. I’m sure he’ll take good care of you,” she says with a self-satisfied smile, obviously content she kept pushing me in his direction.

It hadn’t even occurred to me to stay here by myself. But of course, she’s right. It’s not like I’ve never travelled on my own, and five days really isn’t that long.

“When are you leaving?” I ask, sadness filling me.

“I’ve booked a flight for tomorrow morning.”

I nod dejectedly. I was so enjoying our time together.

“Are you going to enjoy your last day on the island with me, or do you need to continue working your little butt off?”

“Unfortunately, the latter... There’s so much to do and so little time. I need every hour I can get. I predict there’ll be little sleep until this proposal is sent,” she sighs, but is still buzzing with excitement.

“Okay. Though let’s enjoy one last dinner together... no boys allowed, just us.”

“Agreed,” she smiles as she gets up, kisses the top of my head and goes back inside to slave away on her computer.

My phone pings with an incoming message. Jeez, this man has a sixth sense of knowing when I’m being ditched by my friend.

*Tiero: Am I picking you up for a day of fun on my boat?*

I can’t help the smile spreading across my face as tingling anticipation races through me.

I’m under no illusion of what I would agree to by accepting his invitation. It means a bed and privacy... alone time we’ve not had so far. It’s obvious where it would lead.

Do I want to go there?

Embark on some casual fun, knowing full well my heart is on the line?

Then I recall Tiero's lips on me and the way his fingers pumped in and out of me... the way my orgasm nullified any rationale.

Am I ready for more?

My body screams '*Hell yes*'!

Laying in bed last night, there wasn't much else occupying my mind. I'm so pent up with lust and desire for the man I seemingly don't care anymore that this will never be more than a tryst, and that part of my heart will remain here with him.

*Think before you act!* I scold myself.

Remember Oma's wise words, '*Act in haste, repent in leisure.*'

I need to calm my libido down and think things through.

*Okay, rational thoughts...*

Values... which ones are still important to me?

I decide to ask Google's algorithm to enlighten me more on the subject. Not surprisingly, a long list of entries opens up, and I randomly click on an article.

*'... Values are the things we care about most. They guide us like the railway tracks guide a train and keep us heading in the right direction...'*

Until this point, I've never questioned the direction I was taking with men and relationships. I wonder now if it's because I've never met anyone to challenge my views.

I date stable, predictable men and stay far away from the playboy type. While Tiero first gave off that vibe, I've since come to realize there's more depth to him than I first thought.

Sure, he wants to get into my pants, and last night, he had ample opportunities to seduce me, and I could tell he wanted to. But he has reined in his desire to give me space and time to want this as much as he does.

So he doesn't really fit either category. Is it any wonder I find myself thrown in the deep end, unsure of what to do?

Where do I stand emotionally and mentally with the breed of man I'm currently facing?

I take a deep, steadying breath—it takes me out of my immediate lust fog and helps me to focus on the bigger picture.

Where do I want my train to take me?

*'... We sense the logic of values in our head but then must commit them to action through our hands, and lastly we feel the sense of them in our heart...'*

At the word 'hands', my mind jumps to memories of last night without warning... Tiero's strong hands caressing my body. The desire I just reined in swirls to life again.

My head tells me I don't do casual sex. But my heart sings at the thought of Tiero's body covering mine.

What do I value? What's important to me?

I tap my lower lip as I think.

In general, top on my list would be compassion and helping others, respect for people, the environment... life itself, really. And then there's courage... though often I'm sorely lacking in it—maybe that's why I value it so much?

In terms of relationships, what would make my top three?

Hmm, I contemplate for a moment, thinking back to Don and Marco, and what I learned from my relationships with them after they were over. The answer is easy. Loyalty, faithfulness and integrity are what's essential to me.

But what I have with Tiero isn't a relationship. It's not like we're dating. It's a holiday fling that will end in a few days. So, I really can't judge it by that standard.

I read on, '*... Values mean nothing unless we consistently act on them and hold them in our hearts. The task is to look for opportunities to celebrate actions that align to these values and also to ensure that in everything we do, we aspire to live them...'*

But my head and heart are not in agreement.

My head insists no, while my heart screams yes.

Isn't the saying '*Follow your heart*'? I want to... because I really really want this man.

I want to experience everything he has to offer, even if it's only short-lived or maybe because of it. I think Rhia has a point. I'll regret it if I don't.

And well, one of my values is courage. Perhaps it's the courage to follow my heart.

Why stick to a no-casual-sex rule when all I want is to have sex with him?

As long as I go into this with my eyes wide open and no expectations that go beyond this holiday, I should be okay. Right?

Decision made, I reply to Tiero's text message.

*Me: I'm all yours for the day. But I have to be back in time for dinner with Rhia.*



An hour later, Tiero and I walk hand in hand through the marina towards his boat.

He's the most casually dressed since I've met him. And oh my, does it suit him.

He looks sinful in his navy board shorts that hug his fine ass and show off his tanned, muscular legs. His cream-colored shirt gives enough of a hint of his muscle lying underneath to make my mouth water. I can't wait to see it in the flesh.

But this will have to wait. Like always, we're not alone.

Thankfully, only Santino is following us close by, and I can spot another guard stationed at the end of the dock.

My stomach is in knots with the anticipation of what's coming. If his greeting when he picked me up is anything to go by, this is going to be one hot and steamy day.



As soon as I opened the door, he took one look at me in my navy-blue sundress, stepped inside, and had me pushed up against the wall, devouring my mouth in one long and boiling hot hello kiss. My knees went weak, and we both were breathless by the time he let go of me.

The car ride to the marina also did nothing to calm my swirling emotions. He placed a hand on my thigh, gently stroking up and down, igniting my nerve endings in the process.

I had the urge to repay the favor, but that seemed way too forward. So I settled for letting my fingers trace circles over his wrist. If my touch had a similar effect on him, he didn't show... so maybe not.

I stop in my tracks when we get closer to what I assume is Tiero's boat.

"That's yours?" I ask, my mouth falling open.

Tiero looks at me with a smirk. "She's a beauty, isn't she?"

He looks back at his boat with pride written all over his face. "I knew she was right for me when I first looked at her. Originally, I had my sight set on a different boat, larger and faster, but something drew me to this one," Tiero says, his voice gone soft.

He had wanted something bigger and faster?

In my books, the boat before me is enormous—definitely the biggest I've seen. Then again, I haven't seen that many. But it's by far the biggest one in this marina.

I know little about boats or yachts, but I figure if they have several stories, it's expensive. If you count the hull space, which has many little windows, there are three stories. Then my gaze lands on the name prominently displayed between the upper and second decks.

And I freeze.

My jaw goes slack, and I blink a few times before I look at Tiero, a million questions running through my mind. His steady gaze is focused on me, waiting for my reaction.

*Thump, thump, thump*, goes my heart.

I don't speak. I don't know what to say.

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## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

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**I**t's not often I find myself lost for words. But it's happening right now.

I stare at the boat, my mind trying to make sense of what I'm seeing. After a long moment, I turn to Tiero, who has been carefully watching me.

He finally breaks the silence. "I bought this boat a few years ago when I first took over from my father. Going out to sea helps me relax and think clearer."

"So you didn't name this boat just yesterday?" I say, only half-joking. Surely he wouldn't go that far with his wooing?

He laughs, "No, angel. It had this name when I bought it."

*Wow! What are the chances?*

I keep staring up at Tiero's boat and the bold letters spelling out ELLA.

Is this a sign from the universe telling me to go for it?

With a thumping heart, I walk onboard, holding onto the rail.

A three-person crew greets us. “Ella, this is Giuseppe, our skipper, Mario, our cook, and Rocco, the deckhand and steward,” he introduces them.

*Our skipper and our cook?* I guess he means ours for the duration of this trip.

Turning to them, Tiero says, “I want total privacy. I’ll call you if we need anything.”

*Total privacy.*

I know what that’s code for, and the damn blush creeps up my cheeks again.

The crew nod their understanding and head inside while Tiero leads me to the staircase to the upper deck.

I’m overwhelmed by this display of wealth. I knew he had money—obviously... the Ferrari, the fancy restaurants, the constant security around him.

Why does his boat throw me into a spin?

As we reach the top of the stairs, I stop to take in the cozy space. Day lounges with large, comfy-looking pillows are arranged in a U-shape.

*Wow, this is so nice.*

The coffee table catches my attention. A three-pronged spear is inlaid under a heavy glass top. Laughing, I say, “Knowing you, I suppose this is Poseidon’s actual trident?”

“The god of the sea would ever part with his power weapon, but it’s a great replica. By the way, in Italy, we call him Neptune.”

“I know, I know.” I raise my arms in surrender. “My mistake.”

Tiero kisses the top of my head. “Good girl,” he teases.

“This is a Trident yacht, and the table came with it,” he explains. “I’m told it’s a one-off because this boat was the first one of its kind.”

It’s sweet how proud he is to own this unique piece of furniture. I smile to myself... boys and their toys.

“When I was a kid, I had this recurring dream where Neptune rose out of the water, his trident in hand, walking towards me,” Tiero says.

“Oh, was that a nightmare? In most pictures I’ve seen, Neptune looks menacing.”

“No, he didn’t look scary in my dream. Maybe that’s why I love being out at sea. Try not to laugh, but this table was one of the reasons I bought this boat.”

“So the name wasn’t the deciding factor?” I tease.

“It would have been if I had known about you.”

Oh, what a charmer. I’m sure it works on all women.

As I stand by the rail, the engine roars to life. Two people are untying the thick ropes and throwing them on deck, where Rocco stores them away neatly.

Tiero sidles up next to me, watching his crew work. He nods to the security guard on the dock, who gives him a thumbs up. What was that all about, I wonder?

“Where are we heading?” I ask with a wide grin as we both watch the boat glide out from where it’s anchored, slowly making its way onto the open sea.

“If we had more time, and you didn’t need to be back for dinner, I would have taken you to the Aeolian Islands. They are of volcanic origin. Given how much you liked Mount Etna, I thought you might enjoy seeing Stromboli as well, but we can do that another time.”

I wish we could, but I’m well aware our time together is running out.

Perhaps I should plan a trip to the volcano on my own in the next few days. Surely Tiero will have to work and won’t have time to play tour guide.

After spending time on Mount Etna, I want to see Stromboli... but only from a distance. It’s one of the most active volcanoes on the planet and has erupted almost continuously for the last two-thousand years. That’s totally mind-boggling. I make a mental note to research tours later tonight.

We’re unencumbered by other boats now, and the skipper speeds up. The vast blueness of the sea stretches before us, sunlight shimmering on the surface like gold. It’s truly magical.

“You’ve told me what we would have done if we had no time restrictions. But what’s the actual plan?”

A grin spreads over his handsome face, and his eyes gleam with mischief. “I thought we might spend the day relaxing out on the water.”

Hmm, relaxing with no destination in mind... I bite down on my lip to stifle my smile.

Tiero comes up behind me, putting his hands on either side of mine on the railing, caging me in with his body. My stomach flutters.

The musky scent of his aftershave mixes with the salty sea air, making an intoxicating blend. We stay like this for a long while, neither one of us speaking.

Tiero places a soft kiss on top of my head. Warmth floods through me at this intimate gesture.

“Have a seat, princess. Make yourself comfortable. I’ll get us a drink.”

He disappears into the interior of the boat, and I realize that I’m yet to have a tour of this magnificent vessel.

When he returns, he’s carrying two glasses of wine. I swallow hard at the sight of him.

He lost his shirt somewhere along the way, and it’s the first time I’ve seen him like this.

I can’t tear my eyes off his chiseled chest. I knew he’d be ripped from the few touches I sneaked, but I’m unprepared for

seeing it in the flesh.

*Holy, holy shit!*

This man's body is hot! And apparently all mine for the taking.

My eyes travel down his torso, and my mouth goes as dry as the desert.

"Princess," Tiero says, handing me my glass as his mouth curves into a smirk so predatory my legs go weak.

"Th... thank you." I stutter like an idiot who's never seen a bare chest before.

Well, truth be told, I've never seen one so amazing... hard and defined. My fingers itch to touch.

The proximity of his body is wreaking havoc on me, and my body heats as if it's been in the sun for hours. Tiero smiles knowingly.

He steps closer.

"I like the way you're looking at me, cuore mio," he says, his voice deepening.

Cuore... from the little Italian I know, I'm pretty sure it means heart. He's calling me my heart.

My insides melt. I wish this really meant something.

I bring the glass of wine to my lips, avoiding his penetrating stare, and take a hasty sip.

I taste nothing.



The tingling in my chest spreads through my entire body. Taking a deep breath, I force myself to lift my gaze... and meet blazing fire in his eyes.

The magnetic pull always swirling between us is stronger than ever, making me forget everything.

With my ex-boyfriends, I could never get my mind to shut up. Truth be told, I've never lost my head over anyone, but I have a distinct feeling today will be the day.

Tiero takes the wine glass from my hand and sets it aside on a nearby table along with his own.

He turns to me with a slow, sexy smile, and my mind goes blank.

Closing the distance between us, Tiero pulls me against his naked chest, and I'm ready to go up in flames.

*Fuck!*

And he hasn't even touched me yet.

My sensitive, erect nipples push uncomfortably against my bikini top under my dress. But they're not the only thing that's erect. Tiero's rock-hard cock presses into my abdomen and strokes the already burning flames of my arousal further.

More bruising for Dr. Agosti to take care of. The thought makes me giggle.

“Why are you laughing, cuore mio?”

I look away, embarrassed. “It's nothing. I... I just laugh sometimes when I'm nervous.”

His hands move to my face, caressing my cheeks with gentle strokes.

*God, that feels nice.*

I bite my lip to stifle the moan threatening to escape. His eyes zone in on the teeth puncturing my lip, and he rubs the indent with his thumb after I release it with a shaky breath.

“Don’t be nervous,” he whispers as he lowers his head to take my lips in a slow, sensual kiss. I melt into his embrace, needing so much more.

All too soon, he pulls back, his eyes glassy and almost black.

He makes sure he has my full attention before saying in a low, husky voice, “You know this is going to happen today, don’t you?”

*Holy hell!*

At his words, the muscles low in my belly clench.

How is this man turning me on with a single question?

I nod.

There is no need to ask what he’s referring to... I know what’s about to happen.

Despite my original reservations, after last night, I want it.

I crave it.

Tiero gifts me with a pantie-melting smile. He lowers his head, his lips touching mine for a kiss that leaves me gasping for more.

His eyes sear me with their force. I close mine and let myself fall into the beauty and hunger of his lips as they pepper kisses along the length of my neck.

“I need you, angel.” The urgency in this voice matches the rampant desire between my legs.

He presses his chest into me, and I bury my face in his warm skin, trying desperately to draw in calming breaths. It backfires gloriously. I’m now drowning in his delicious scent. It only stokes the wildfire burning inside me.

He lifts my chin again, forcing me to look up into the storm of his lust-filled eyes. But there’s something else there... a tenderness that’s unexpected. My breathing quickens in response, and he kisses my forehead lovingly, then peppers gentle kisses down my nose until his lips meet mine.

“I’ve been waiting so long for this moment. I’m going to make you feel so good,” he rasps.

And I have no doubt he will.

Ready to enjoy this time with him, I let myself go, handing over the reins.

Tiero doesn’t hesitate and takes all I have to offer. He devours my mouth, and like a perfect dance partner, his tongue glides and strokes while mine follows, melting into his.

My restraints dissolve, and I let my hands do the talking.

I stroke his broad back, loving how his muscles ripple under my fingertips. When I reach his firm behind, I slide one hand into his shorts.

*Oh, yes!*

He's gone commando.

I can't resist and squeeze his shapely flesh. A shiver runs through him. It makes me insanely happy that I have this effect on him too. I grin against his lips.

"You are breathtaking, princess," Tiero whispers as he nibbles on my ear. "I can't wait to worship this gorgeous body of yours, to have you underneath me, to make you fall apart in my arms."

*Yes. PLEASE! Now.*

My soul is screaming for his touch. I want more, more, more.

And he delivers, kissing me with such passion, I fear my legs will give out.

While his lips seal mine, he unzips my dress with sure fingers and pushes it off my shoulders while I fumble with the ties of his board shorts.

Tiero's hands roam my body and travel to my soaked bikini bottoms. My breath goes ragged as he unties them and throws them overboard into the water.

Jeez, why does this brute act turn me on so much?

His kisses grow more feverish, and my body is turning into a hungry mass of molten lava rolling down the hillside of Mount Etna, scorching rhyme and reason in its path.

Why did I resist this for so long?

I can't remember.

At this moment, I can't remember anything.

Tiero sucks hard on a sensitive spot on my neck, and I groan loudly, goosebumps peppering my body with lightning speed.

Finally, my shaking fingers loosen the strings that stand between me and Tiero's glorious nakedness.

The shorts slide down his legs, and I skim a hand over his hips to his taut behind, pulling him closer. My other grips his erection, squeezing it.

*Fuuuccckkk, he's big.*

A low rumble escapes Tiero's throat, echoing through me.

He drags his fingers lightly down the straps of my bikini top, pausing between my breasts before letting his fingers wander to my back, undoing the ties. When the scrap of fabric falls away, Tiero bends to trace the line of my breasts with his tongue while rubbing a hardened nipple with his thumb. I gasp when he takes the other nipple between his teeth, biting down before lapping at it to take the sting away.

My hands find their way into his hair and pull his mouth into me. He sucks so hard I go blind with pleasure.

"Tiero," I groan, not sure if it's in protest or if I'm begging for more.

I push away from him and sink to my knees. I want to taste him and see his glorious cock up close. But he stops me and pulls me back up.

“Not now, princess,” he rasps. “We have plenty of time for this later. I need to be inside you. I need to feel you on my cock.”

In one graceful motion, he grabs me by the back of my bare thighs and lifts me onto his hips. I wrap my legs around his waist so he can carry me across the deck to a table, where he lays me down gently, his chest heaving with his labored breaths.

We’re out in the open. Anybody could see us, but I’m so overtaken by lust and desire, I don’t care about any consequences.

I’m naked before him for the first time, and he takes a step back to take me in fully.

Watching him stare at me with so much longing is the most erotic thing I’ve ever seen. The image burns itself into my memory, and I’m certain I’ll remember this moment when I’m ninety-nine.

He studies me, his scrutinizing eyes ever so slowly tracing over every inch. And judging by the expression on his face, he likes what he sees. To my surprise, I don’t feel shy. Under his fiery gaze, I feel sexy and alive.

Emboldened, I let my legs fall open and run my hand from my breast slowly to my pussy. His eyes are riveted to the path my fingers take and lock onto my glistening sex. He licks his lips as he steps closer and sinks to his knees.

All air leaves my lungs when he leans in. His tongue darts out, tasting me, teasing me with painfully slow, languish strokes that ignite bliss throughout my body. I jerk beneath him, and his hands go to my hips to hold me still.

“Fuck... You taste heavenly,” he growls, his eyes fixed on me. They’re not letting me go, and it’s so intense I have to close mine to escape their force.

Tiny whimpers fall from my lips as I mindlessly squirm on the table. His tongue is relentless, never letting up. My legs drape over his shoulders of their own accord, and my hands find their way into his dark hair and tug, pulling him closer.

My body is on fire, and I’m not in control of it anymore. Each pass of his tongue is electrifying me more, injecting my body with ever-growing pleasure. I buck and moan, teetering on the edge... only a little more.

I’m heading straight for the peak when he suddenly stops.

“Nooooo,” I wail, my eyes flying open. I look down at him over my heaving chest. Hooded eyes so full of desire stare back at me. I want to come, and he left me dangling right on the cusp. My eyes plead with his.

“I need to be inside you, princess. Today, you’ll come for the first time on my cock. I will indulge more in your sweet nectar later. Right now, I need to feel your pussy squeeze me tight.”

He rises to his feet, and leaning over, kisses me ferociously. His dick is at my entrance, rubbing slowly up and down my

slit. Frustrated, I release a deep moan—the anticipation is killing me. The butterflies in my stomach speed up, and my heart spins like the whirling dervishes in complete trance.

Finally, Tiero pushes in, and the heat of his cock in my pussy is beyond exquisite.

*Fuck, that feels so good!*

Then I freeze.

“Condom, Tiero... We need a condom.”

Panicking, I push him away from my body.

“Merda!” he swears, then disappears inside and moments later walks back out, sheathing himself.

“Now, where were we?” he asks, his eyes hungry.

I lean up on my arms to watch him as he positions himself between my legs again. Tremors speed through me as his erection presses against my center. He moves to kiss me. It’s hard and demanding, making it clear who’s setting the pace.

He slides two fingers inside me and the pleasure peak that died moments earlier roars back to life. I fall back onto the table as my body bows sharply.

We groan in unison.

I’m lost for words. It’s not a problem Tiero faces.

“God, princess. You’re soaked and so goddamn tight. I’m going to fuck you so deep. You won’t be able to walk off this boat.”



He jams his fingers as far as they go, strumming my clit with his thumb while whispering dirty nothings against my lips. I only moan louder.

“I’ll bury my cock deep inside you until you scream my name... until you milk me so dry there’s not a drop of cum left.”

Nobody has ever talked to me like this. Nobody has ever taken so much command. My arousal is at an all-time high, and I writhe in need underneath him.

He removes his fingers and spreads my legs wider. Watching me, he thrusts in deep, burying himself to the hilt in one breath-stealing stroke.

*Holy fuck!*

Tiero throws his head back and roars. The sounds coming from him are like that of a lion triumphing over everyone else.

A sharp moan escapes me as his thick cock stretches me. It burns, my body throbbing around his invasion. It’s been so long since I had sex and never with someone so well endowed. My back arches off the table, and I see stars as my body tries to accommodate him.

“That’s it, princess. Take it all. Take all of me,” Tiero thunders.

I’ve never been so full. He doesn’t give me time to adjust and sets a punishing rhythm, slamming into me over and over again.

“Spread your legs,” he bellows, and my legs obey as if having a mind of their own, opening further to allow him complete access to my body.

He’s taking me with so much abandon, all my past encounters seem trivial by comparison.

Tiero’s teeth sink into the side of my neck as he manically drives in and out of me.

This is primal... as if he’s marking his territory.

“Cazzo! You feel amazing!” He breathes out as he speeds up and fucks me harder, holding my hips tight to prevent me from sliding off the table.

I take all of him. What other choice is there?

I’m unable to utter a single word, my mind shutting down conscious processing.

All I can do is feel.

There’s only Tiero. His thick cock rubbing all the right places inside me, his feverish hands on my skin, his groans and moans reverberating in my ears and through my entire body.

I gasp with every thrust, pushed closer and closer to the edge of no return. My cries grow louder, and so do Tiero’s grunts. They’re spurring me on. I’m discovering how much I love a vocal man.

*What a turn-on.*

He's rough and wild now, like a man reaching his breaking point.

"Come on my cock," he demands. "Let me have it. Give it to me... NOW," he roars.

Tiero pinches my clit, and I come on command. I scream my release onto the open sea, and I'm sure it's heard miles away.

My walls contract almost violently, squeezing Tiero's cock as he pulses inside me. He thunders my name as he follows me into the abyss with one last deep, hard thrust.

Shockwaves of pleasure shoot through me, overwhelming sensations that leave me breathless.

*Holy shit!*

I've never come so hard.

'I've never...' seems to be the theme of today, I muse as I catch my breath.

My body lays limp on top of the table, every inch of my skin pulsing with euphoria. Completely dazed, I couldn't move a muscle if I tried.

We're both sticky with sweat, panting and trying to draw in much needed air.

He leans over to kiss me again, softer this time, the urgency gone. It's slow and deep and thorough.

After what seems like a lifetime, he pulls back, holding my face in his hands, penetrating my eyes.

“You are mine now,” he declares with a tone of finality.

A tremor shakes my body as his eyes pierce me, driving home his point.

My mind is still mush—I can’t think.

It’s just a figure of speech, right?

Before unease can take hold, Tiero caresses my cheeks, his expression softening. “That, princess, was an excellent appetizer. Now let’s get to the main course,” he says, smiling against my lips. “I’m still hungry.”

“Oh hell, what beast have I unleashed?” I ask, only half-joking.

“One who will feast on you for the rest of time,” he replies while lifting me into his arms and carrying me to his cabin.

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## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

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### ELLA

In what feels like an eternity later, I lay on Tiero's chest in the ship's master bedroom, or, as Tiero enlightens me, the stateroom. It certainly is stately.

A king-size bed dominates the room, and the dark wooden furnishings accentuate the warm and elegant atmosphere. There's a sofa placed by the open window leading out to a balcony. Azure blue water stretches before us as far as the eye can see. I understand now why Tiero finds it relaxing.

We haven't left this cabin since entering it late this morning. We've been at it for hours, and I've lost count of how many times he's made me come.

Tiero feasted on my pussy and worshipped my body. His tongue, lips and fingers working magic, making today an unforgettable experience. I'm so glad I've given into my base instincts and done something I never would have at home.

My core is still throbbing insistently, wanting more. How can this be after hours of indulging in everything Tiero?! But I

really, really do... I want more.

More of Tiero, and more of the pleasure he so skillfully gives.

When hunger of a different kind strikes, Tiero gets off the bed to get us some food.

He faces away from me when he pulls on his shorts, and I get my first proper glance at the tattoo that's completely covering his back. I had seen parts of it, but never all of it.

My jaw drops open in awe.

How many times does this man make me speechless?

A majestic looking lion runs towards me with his mane pushed back by the wind, mouth half-open showing a sharp canine tooth.

It's incredibly lifelike... and frightening. This isn't a tame pussy cat. This lion is wild and ferocious... the king of the jungle.

Tiero's tanned skin color is perfectly woven into the design. What stands out most, though, are the beast's steel-blue eyes penetrating anyone who dares to look. A shudder passes through me.

*Wow! Just wow.*

I've never seen anything like it. It's a work of art.

The lion is ready to pounce, determined and fierce... and it suits Tiero to a tee.

I'm lost for words even after Tiero stepped out of the room, staring at the spot where he was just standing. Needing to shake my head to come back to the here and now, I snuggle into his pillow, taking in the scent that's so him.

Hmm, I've died and gone to Italian Sex God heaven. What a great place to be.

Despite my rumbling tummy, my eyelids grow heavy. But before I have a chance for a siesta, Tiero returns with a tray of finger food, which he places on the bed. I sit up as he feeds me a strawberry before eating one himself.

“Your tattoo... it's breathtaking. How long did it take?”

“It took the artist several days. The hardest part was finding the right motif.”

“It fits you perfectly.”

“I'm glad you like it, cuore mio. I want you looking at me.”

I blush. You'd think after the hours we just spent together, this annoying habit would stop.

Moving behind him, I hold on to his back as I kneel on the bed. He feeds me more fruit over his shoulder, and I let my fingers trace the intricate design of the lion as I eat.

It truly is spectacular.

I bend down to follow the outline with my lips and tongue. Tiero's breathing speeds up, and a thrill runs through me at his reaction to me.

Despite my earlier tiredness, sleep is the furthest thing from my mind. Tiero turns and pushes me onto my back, pinning me beneath him. I love the weight of him on top of me. He's so much bigger. Beneath him, I feel caged, yet also secure and protected. It's an incredible dichotomy, and I revel in it.

After thoroughly devouring my mouth, Tiero slowly kisses a path down my body, all the way to my toes.

His touch is as electrifying as when we started these fun games hours ago. My skin tingles in the wake of his lips, and my breathing grows shallow. He's kissing his way up my legs, holding me by my calves, when a naughty gleam spreads over his face.

Oh boy, what's going on in this wicked head of his?

He caresses the inside of my knees and slowly licks his way up my inner thighs, nibbling occasionally. It has me writhing so much he grips my hips to hold me still.

My hands grab his hair, tugging, trying to guide him where I need him most, but he's not to be persuaded. He laps at my labia, kisses my mound, but purposefully neglects the little nub screaming for attention.

"Tiero...", I wail. "Pleeease."

I sense his evil grin against my skin. But still, he denies me.

Fine, I take matters into my own hands. I lift my right hand from his hair and bring it to my aching clit.

"No," Tiero growls, pushing my hand off and pinning it to the bed. "This is my pussy. And I give it pleasure how I see



fit.”

Oh dear God, bossy Gualtiero is a major turn-on.

I can't help the smile spreading across my face as I stare up at the ceiling, surrendering to his ministrations.

When he has worked me up into a frenzy of need, he runs his tongue along my seam until, finally, he reaches my clit and circles it with precision. A deep, guttural moan of relief leaves my throat, and the bastard chuckles, the vibrations sending delicious chills through my body. I gyrate my pussy into his face, groaning loudly with pleasure.

Tiero gently pulls my clit between his teeth before delving his tongue deep inside of me.

*Fuck, this is soooo good.*

Can I pack him in my suitcase and take him home with me?

Before I can finish the thought, his hands reach up to my breasts, lightly massaging them and playing with my nipples, squeezing them with just enough pressure to short-circuit my rational mind.

It doesn't take long for me to scrunch up the sheets between my fingers in an attempt to hold on just a little longer.

“Tiero, please. I want you inside me when I come,” I beg.

“You take what I give you, princess. I'm not ready to fill you with my cock. You'll come on my face first. I want to lap up every drop.”

That's it for me. When he starts talking dirty, it's all over.

My arousal skyrockets.

Overwhelmed by the sensations in my body, it's a losing battle. I try to close my legs as the firestorm in my body becomes too much to bear. But I only trap Tiero's head between my thighs, which makes him double his efforts.

*I can't hold on.*

My voice is hoarse from screaming all day, and I only manage a low moan as I come. My voice might be subdued, but the orgasm sure isn't.

The blazing inferno is swallowing me up, whooshing through my body like an explosive fireball. Tremors rake my spent body as I pant for air, and fireworks erupt behind my closed eyelids.

*Holy shit, that was intense.*

And apparently, we're not finished.

Through hooded lids, I vaguely register Tiero rolling on a condom. Without hesitation, he slowly pushes into me while I'm still on my orgasm high.

He assumes a steady rhythm, and I wrap my legs around his waist, loving having him so deep. He moves unhurriedly, his lips on my neck, then peppering my face with kisses.

It feels different from the other times we've been together today. More intimate, more like making love than fucking.

I'm lost in Tiero's hazel-brown eyes. And to my surprise, I realize I want to be lost in them. He's giving me more than just

his body...

The way he stares into my eyes, unblinking and with an unfamiliar oneness... it's like our souls are merging.

Everything is merging.

I don't know where I begin, and he ends.

Our breathing is turning heavy. Moans and gasps fill the air, signaling our impending release. And through it all, his eyes remain on mine, and mine on his.

"Come with me, angel," Tiero forces out through gritted teeth, struggling to breathe, only hanging on by a thread.

He moves within me, gyrating his hips and touching new places. Indescribable pleasure shoots through me, and I sail over the edge with his name on my lips.

With my pussy strangling his cock, he lets loose, pushing as deep as he can go. He shudders, unloading his seed into the condom with a low rumble of his throat and tightening of his abdomen.

He kisses me tenderly, his weight on his elbow as not to crush me. His tongue searches out mine, beginning a tentative dance that feels like a promise.

A promise for what, I'm not sure.

Our chests heave as I run my hands slowly up and down his broad back, enjoying the warmth of his skin under my fingers.

Still connected with him in the most intimate way, I feel a closeness like I never have. His forehead rests on mine as we

share the same breath... and seemingly so much more.

*Holy shit, I'm so far gone!*

My heart constricts, and it's hard to breathe.

The moment is broken when Tiero carefully slides out of me, takes off the condom, and tosses it away. He rolls onto his back, taking me along so I'm nestled snugly against his chest.

He kisses my forehead tenderly while tightening his arms, pulling me even closer... and just like that, I'm back in the mind-numbing sphere that Tiero so easily engulfs me in.

For the first time I can remember, I feel complete and whole... and fully satisfied.

The energies swirling between us have morphed into something new. There's an unusual peace inside me. It emerged from out of nowhere, and I don't quite know what to do with it.

I look up at him, and our eyes meet. And I know he feels it too... this undeniable connection between our hearts and souls.

Not wanting to analyze my feelings right now, I lay my head down on his chest, listening to the steady beat of his heart. Tiero's fingers caress my back slowly until they stop. His breathing evens out, letting me know he's drifted off to sleep.

*Wow, this was wholly unexpected.*

I knew we'd have sex before too long, and he'd fuck me to within an inch of my life... hard, fast, and demanding. He just emanates that kind of power.

But never in a million years did I expect him to make love to me. Yet that's what we just did. It was sweet, tender, and intimate.

My heart is full and happy beyond measure.

With a blissful sigh, I close my eyes and follow Tiero into dreamland.

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## CHAPTER NINETEEN

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### GUALTIERO

I wake up slowly and am a little disorientated until the gentle rocking of the boat reminds me of where I am and brings back all the delicious memories of this day.

Ella is snuggled up in my arms.

I smile. This feels so right.

Cuddling isn't my thing. Once I'm done with a girl, I leave or send her on her way.

I never linger or stick around.

I also never have slow sex. I like to fuck and fuck hard.

But Ella brings out a different side of me—one I didn't know existed. It's gentler, more caring. A side of me wanting to hold and caress her.

Don't get me wrong, I want to be inside her... pretty much all the time. From the moment we met, I've been jerking off to fantasies of her multiple times a day. She's been driving me crazy. Taking things slowly for her sake has nearly been

killing me. She has no idea how hard it's been not to take what's mine.

And she's mine. She has been from the moment I laid eyes on her.

And now I've finally claimed her.

She surpassed all my expectations.

How can somebody who looks so innocent have so much passion?

When I first entered her, I thought I had died and gone to heaven.

And the expression on her face... I swear I've never seen anything more beautiful.

But I was wrong. She took my breath away when she shattered in my arms. It's a moment that's now ingrained in my psyche.

I've rarely had sex like this... so all-consuming, intense, and earth-shattering. I want to take her bare, with no barriers between us. I've never fucked without a condom, and I can't wait to have this first with her.

Ella has crushed my carefully constructed world, and now I can't imagine my life without her. To think I didn't even know her a week ago, and now all I want is to take care of her and see her happy.

I study her sleeping form. Her chest rises and falls rhythmically, and she looks so peaceful, a small smile gracing

her lips. She's stunning, and she's all mine.

Despite all the problems I'm facing with Molinaro, I feel sated and content... and it's all because of her.

She's my shining goddess, my *dea splendente*.

She brightens my world like no other woman ever has. No girl ever mattered to me before. I've enjoyed them for a while and then moved on to the next.

If a guy tried to get too close to a girl I was fucking, I would set him straight. Not because I was jealous, but because in my position I can't let disrespect slide.

With Ella, the idea of her with another guy makes me see red, and a new, possessive streak rears up. No other man will ever get close to her again, let alone touch her. I won't allow it.

I play with Ella's soft, blonde hair and bring it to my nose, inhaling deeply. It reminds me of sunshine and summer days by the sea.

For the first time in a long time, or perhaps even ever, I'm completely relaxed and happy. I hope she will always have this effect on me.

The deep sense of knowing I found HER pervades me again, bringing me peace. Papà was right. This thing with Ella feels entirely different. It goes beyond lust, beyond infatuation.

Despite the short time I've known her, I love her... truly, deeply love her.



Ella will be my wife and mother of my children. Wow, I'm actually looking forward to the future.

If our earlier activity is anything to go by, putting babies in her belly will be a hell of a lot of fun. I want to get started right away.

The sooner I get her pregnant, the better. The next generation of the De Marco family needs to be secured.

A son... the thought makes me smile. I want to hold him in my arms, teach him all I know.

Fuck, I can't wait to be a father!

I want a whole brood with her, at least six. Of course, they'll be mainly boys because De Marco men have never failed to produce heirs. But I wouldn't mind a daughter or two, especially if they look like my angel.

If I had my way, I'd find Father Joseph and get married today. But if the past week has taught me anything, it's that I can't rush her, or she'll get skittish and try to run away.

I've never had to work so hard to take a woman to bed, but the wait has been more than worth it.

Women usually fall at my feet, and the ones who don't are quickly won over by my charm. But the goddess in my arms kept resisting despite her attraction to me.

She stuck to her guns, insisting that vacation flings are not for her. It's one of the many things I love about her. Little does she know this isn't a casual tryst. It never was. This is as serious as it gets.

Security around her will need to be tight. I frown at the thought, studying my sleeping angel. She can no longer go anywhere on her own.

How will I break this to her? I suspect she'll fight me on it, but this is non-negotiable.

For the time being, my men will have to remain hidden. I ponder which of them will be best suited for the job. She's my treasure, and I will guard her as such.

Everything will need to be in place by the time news breaks in my circles. There can't be any slip-ups.

My enemies likely know already about her. We've been out in public twice, and I was affectionate with her. Rumors will be circulating, putting us even more under the microscope.

People of my rank and line of work don't show emotion, be it fear, concern, or desire. It shows a vulnerability that will be used against me, putting everything at risk. I've never been so foolish, but with Ella... it feels unnatural not to touch her. The need to stake my claim, to let everyone know she's mine, is overpowering.

For the moment, it might just be speculation, but once I move her into my house, the news will spread like wildfire. And they will celebrate. At last, they'll have found a weakness in me.

I'll double my efforts to show she's the *only* weakness I have and that I'm still the ice-cold and ruthless bastard they know.

I loathe that Ella is going to turn into a target for their games in order to get to me. And there'll be plenty who'll try—Niccolo Molinaro most of all.

I must locate him and take care of him. He's too much of a loose cannon. So far, he's been lucky in avoiding us. He's tripled his security, making it near impossible to get close, but I'll find a way. It all comes down to the right bait.

While to observers, Ella may seem to make me weaker, internally, I feel stronger with her in my life. It sounds like a cliché, but I truly believe with Ella by my side, I can face anything and come out the winner.

I have a few days left to make her fall deeper for me... because she is falling in love with me. The way she looks at me, and the way I affect her whenever we're close, give her away.

And this last time, when I was buried deep inside her... our worlds merged profoundly. A delightful shiver runs through me at the memory.

With her friends gone, spending time with her will be a lot easier. I can't wait to have her all to myself.

And once I've given her what's inside the little blue box hidden in my bedside table, I'll be a step closer to ensuring she stays mine.

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## CHAPTER TWENTY

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### ELLA

I'm splayed over Tiero's body, sated and sleepy.

Despite our siesta, I'm still tired. Not a surprise, given the day's activities. I haven't worked out that hard in years.

Tiero's hand gently caresses up and down my back. I lift my head off his warm chest and peek out to sea.

"What time is it? It looks like the sun is setting." The sky is turning beautiful shades of reds and pinks. "We need to head back, or I'll miss dinner with Rhia."

"What if I don't want to let you go?" Tiero asks as he rolls on top of me, pinning me beneath him.

I laugh. "You have no say in it." Pecking him on his big, kissable lips, I add, "You'll just have to learn to share me... at least for tonight," I tease.

"Princess, I never share." He peppers kisses down the side of my neck, and for the umpteenth time today, my arousal is fired off. I need to get out of bed, or this is starting all over again.

Smiling up at him, I say, “You had me all day. And you made good on your promise... I won’t be able to walk off this boat. You’ll have to carry me.”

With a sigh, Tiero picks up the phone and talks in Italian. I assume he’s speaking with our skipper, instructing him to return to shore. He slides off the bed and disappears into the ensuite bathroom. I marvel at his sculpted ass as he walks off, showcasing all of his glorious body... I’ve died and gone to Italian hunk heaven.

The shower turns on, and moments later, Tiero surfaces again and picks me up. “Your wish is my command,” he winks.

God, I hope he doesn’t want more sex. I have serious doubts my body could handle more. I’m sore in places I never knew existed.

Tiero carefully lowers me when we’re under the large raindrop showerhead and begins to wash my hair. He caresses my scalp in a tender massage, and I rest my head against his chest.

This feels so nice.

I close my eyes, relishing his touch and the warm water softly hitting my body, cocooning us in this moment in time.

Then he washes my body, removing any evidence of our time together. The thought makes me sad. Then again, I’m sure he’ll make me dirty again before too long.

After he's finished with me, he soaps himself up with lightning speed, then steps out of the shower to retrieve soft bathrobes. Before I know what's happening, he scoops me up again, and I giggle like a schoolgirl as he carries me back to bed, placing a loving kiss on my forehead. I'm back to where I started... just a lot cleaner.

"I've got something for you," Tiero whispers, eyes shining bright.

I cock my head to the side and regard him with curiosity. He opens a drawer in his bedside table and takes out a little, square velvet box.

My heart stops... literally.

My jaw drops, and I'm sure my eyeballs are bulging out from their sockets.

*Oh my God, this can't be...*

I stare at the box in Tiero's hand, dumbfounded. He laughs out loud, enjoying my discomfort.

"The expression of horror on your face is comical, princess," he says, amused. "This isn't what you're fearing... though I admit the box has a certain similarity."

I let out an audible slow breath, my head still spinning. Tiero sits down next to me and offers me the dark blue box. I take it with shaking hands.

Do I really want to know what's inside?

With trembling fingers, I open the lid. A pair of stunning blue sapphire ear studs are embedded on a velvet cushion, sparkling in the light. They're gorgeous, and they match my eye color. Yet again, he's managed to leave me speechless.

I raise my gaze from the box in my hands to Tiero's eyes. He's been watching me with a tender smile.

"I thought of you when I saw these. Will you wear them for me... always? And think of me?"

My heart melts.

*God, this man is beautiful!*

"Always, always, or always while I'm in Sicily?"

"Always, always," Tiero says, eyes sparkling.

All I can do is nod. I swallow the lump in my throat. Tears threaten to break loose. Who would have thought Tiero was hiding a sentimental side?

But why is he buying me expensive gifts? We've had sex. He no longer needs to woo me. What does it all mean?

"Will you put them on for me?" he asks, smiling lovingly at me.

Again, I nod. My hands are still shaking, but I manage to fasten the buds in my ears.

Tiero's eyes shine even brighter. He looks really happy, and I realize I'd do near damn anything to see him like this again.

"Thank you," I say, laying my hand over my heart.

“You’re so beautiful, cuore mio,” Tiero rasps, stroking my face lightly with his fingers before sealing my lips with his.



We’re in the Ferrari on our way back to the hotel. And guess who is driving?

Yes, excited me.

The grin on my face gives away how much I’m enjoying this. I even behave today and don’t lose the security cars.

When Tiero handed me the keys, Santino gave me a stern warning look that would make a grown man wither, but I found it hilarious. Let’s just say he wasn’t impressed when I laughed at him.

Nothing can kill my good mood. I had the best day ever... relaxing on the open sea, as Tiero would call it.

I’m the most relaxed I’ve been in a long while... endless orgasms will do that to a girl.

Tonight, there won’t be any tossing and turning. I’m bound to sleep like a log after that marathon sex session.

It’s close to eight o’clock, and the sun has set. One day I need to drive this car in the daytime and really stretch it. As I pull into the hotel’s driveway, I reluctantly turn off the engine. I don’t want to get out of this beast of a machine, it’s so much fun to drive.



“Thank you for letting me drive your baby again.” I beam my biggest smile at him. “And thank you for an amazing day out on the water.”

I lean over and kiss him softly before I drop the keys into his hands. “Oh, and thank you for the gorgeous earrings. You’re spoiling me.”

“You deserve to be spoilt, princess.” Tiero pulls me close for another kiss, this one decidedly steamier.

His hands come up to cradle my face as he devours my mouth, and we get lost in each other... again.

Time ceases to exist, just like it always does when he’s this near. We kiss, and we kiss, and we kiss. I could do this all night.

The ping of a phone reminds me that there is an outside world. I need to go, or Rhia and I will never make it to dinner. Begrudgingly, I pull away.

“I better go in. Rhia will wonder where I am,” I say, out of breath.

We get out of the car and are immediately flanked by Santino and another guard.

Have they been watching us the entire time? God, I hope not. That’s rather embarrassing.

How does Tiero cope with having eyes on him all the time?

As Tiero leads me into the hotel, his hand rests possessively on my lower back, claiming me for the entire world to see.

“Are you sure I can’t sway you to come to my house after you finish dinner?” Tiero asks as we enter the elevator.

Ever since we left the yacht, he’s been trying to convince me to see him again later tonight.

I smile at him. “Nope... nothing you can do. It’s my last night with my best friend, and I’m spending it with her. Besides, you made good on your promise of me not being able to walk. I need recovery time.” I bat my eyelashes at him, and Tiero grins at me, looking very pleased with himself.

It’s true, though. When I woke up from our nap, I could hardly move. My poor pussy feels sore and overused. I like it. It’s a wonderful reminder of what we shared for the past few hours.

“Plus, I’m taking Rhia to the airport in the morning,” I say as we leave the elevator and walk down the corridor to my room. “So, I need to be here. We can meet tomorrow afternoon if you like.”

“Okay, fine.” Tiero relents. “But I will send a car for you two in the morning. That way, you don’t have to worry about driving on the wrong side of the road, even though it’s the right side,” he adds with a wink. “And then my driver can bring you to my office afterward, and we’ll have lunch.”

“You’re so thoughtful. Thank you.”

We reach my door, and I kiss him goodnight. But it’s not enough for him. He pulls me closer and deepens the kiss.

“I’ll miss you, princess. I want to be buried in your hot, little pussy again as soon as possible,” Tiero rasps into my ear.

Goosebumps run down my body, and the fire in my core is lit again.

*Haven’t I had enough for one day?*

“You’re insatiable,” I whisper back.

“Only with you, cuore mio... only with you.”

I’m not sure I believe him. He still strikes me as a player... a very generous one, but a player nevertheless.

Despite my best efforts, I feel myself growing more and more attached to him. All this lavish attention is sweeping me off my feet.

I need to put some boundaries in place... and quickly.

After one last lingering kiss, I open the door to my room and disappear inside, falling against it with a huge grin as soon as it closes behind me.

*Wowsers, what a day!*



Rhia is where I left her this morning, sitting at her desk, reading through documents on her laptop. She glances up when she hears the door.

“Is it dinnertime already?” She seems surprised, clearly lost in her work. Nothing else exists for Rhia when she gets in the

zone, and she becomes unstoppable.

“Have you been sitting in front of this thing all day?”

“Yep, and it’s going well,” she says, her focus going back to her screen. “Let me save this, and then I’m all yours.”

“Cool... I’ll just change into something else. Where do you want to go tonight?”

I wait for her response while I study her. She looks ruffled, her hair tied up in a messy bun, and her lower lip is puffy from biting it too much. She does that when she concentrates too hard.

“You probably never thought you’d hear me say this, but how about we stay in and have dinner on the terrace with our amazing view? It’s the last time I get to see it, and I want to make the most of it.”

“Works for me.” I smile at her. “I’ll change into something comfy then.”

I’m glad Rhia wants to stay in tonight. The thought of getting dressed up is too tiring to contemplate.

I go to my room and change into my sleeping shorts and singlet. When I get back to Rhia, she’s already on the phone, ordering what sounds like a wide selection of foods. I raise an eyebrow at her. “You’re hungry by any chance? How many people are you planning on feeding?”

“Just us. I’m starving. I haven’t eaten all day.” No surprise there.

“Tsk, tsk, tsk. I leave you alone for a few hours, and you stop looking after yourself. Are you sure I can send you home alone?”

“Ha, ha, you’re hilarious.” She scowls at me.

We take a seat on the balcony, quiet for a moment, enjoying the sound of the waves crashing below and the sparkling stars above. The moon is illuminating the surface of the water, making it shimmer like molten silver in the half-light. Contentment settles over me, and I smile, if only to myself.

“Are you really going to make me ask?” Rhia breaks the silence.

“Ask what?” I pretend I have no idea what she’s talking about. I bite my lip to stop myself from smirking from one ear to the other. She gives me a stern look and raises an eyebrow, waiting.

“Fine. What do you want to know?”

Rhia rolls her eyes. “Everything... of course.”

“Well... we kissed.”

“Is that all?!” Rhia looks disappointed.

“Don’t knock it. The man can kiss. I completely lose my head.”

Rhia smirks. “You lost your head with Eero, too. Does he kiss better than him? He was your benchmark, right?”

Aww... Eero. Now he was the epitome of a nice guy. And he could kiss! If only I hadn’t been in a relationship with

Marco... fireworks could have gone off.

“Yeah, Eero set the bar high, but Gualtiero De Marco easily smashed it.”

“Then don’t hold out on me, El. I had a long day. You’ve got the glow that tells me a lot more than just kissing happened. I want details.” Rhia stomps her foot, and I’m reminded of when she used to throw temper tantrums as a teenager.

“Hmm, let me think...” Tapping my finger against my lips, I gaze at the sky as if contemplating. I’m really enjoying having her at my mercy.

“Arggggh, Ella! If you don’t spill right this minute, I’ll tickle you till you can’t breathe,” she threatens.

“Okay, okay.” I raise my arms up in surrender and grin at her.

“In the history of my entire sex life, I’ve never had so many orgasms in one day. I’m sore everywhere, and I don’t think I can walk straight,” I tell her, laughing, which makes my sore bits more noticeable.

“However, that won’t stop me from doing it all over again tomorrow.” I beam at her, and she chuckles.

“I knew you had it in you. You just needed the right guy to do it with. Did I not tell you this Italian stud would deliver?!” She’s bouncing in her chair in excitement, looking very pleased with herself. “Come on, give me the juicy details.”

Before I can tell her anything, there's a knock on the door. "Must be Dr. Agosti. The bruising to my inner thigh is much worse this time," I say cheekily.

"Very funny," Rhia sticks out her tongue at me. "This will be our food. About time... I'm starving." Rhia jumps up and lets in two servers, who push a trolley each to the balcony.

"How much food did you order?" I ask, astonished.

"Lots," she smirks. "I told you I'm hungry, and I'm sure you must be too, after exercising all afternoon." She blows me a sassy kiss when I roll my eyes at her.

Then there's another knock, and a new server walks in with an ice bucket and a bottle of champagne.

"We didn't order that," Rhia says.

"Compliments of Signor De Marco," he replies.

*Aww.* That's so sweet of him.

But how did he know we were eating in? Perhaps he instructed the hotel to leave the champagne in our room, whether or not we were here?

The servers leave, and Rhia lets out a whistle when she reads the label.

"Wow. It's the really good stuff. You must have delivered the goods," she teases and then adds, "He's very thoughtful, isn't he?"

"That he is. He's been spoiling me." I point to the earrings he gave me earlier.

They're truly gorgeous, understated but sophisticated... exactly how I like my jewelry, and I'm certain the quality is peerless, too.

"Wow, Ella, they're beautiful. The color is amazing. Did he give them to you before or after the deed?"

"After... I tell you what, though, I was about to have a heart attack when he pulled out a little square velvet box... my brain totally misfired."

We both laugh so hard at the thought of Tiero proposing we need to cradle our stomachs.

"Give him a few more days," Rhia says through tears. "By the end of the week, he just might."

"Don't even joke about that. I'm fighting a losing battle not to get attached here."

We fill our plates with pasta and seafood salads but hardly make a dent in the abundance of what Rhia ordered. Munching away, I fill Rhia in on the details, and we swoon together about the hotness that is Gualtiero De Marco.

"You know, casual sex is healthy," Rhia says without blinking. Given her wild past, of course she'd tell me this.

"Maybe for someone like your sister. She seems to get antsy if she goes a few days without it. For me, not so much. It's the emotional side I'm struggling with and getting attached. How do I turn this off?"

I lean forward, eager to hear her wisdom. She's been there, after all. Before Lex, casual fun was all Rhia was interested in.



And now she wants to get married. I never thought I'd see the day.

“You do it like you do everything.” She raises her glass to her lips and takes a long sip. “You gather all the facts, consider your expectations and likely outcomes, so there won't be any surprises.

“Now, I have been saying all along this could be the beginning of a great love story, and I stick with that. There's something special going on. I feel it in my bones. And if it's meant to be, it will be.

“But just in case it isn't, here are the facts. You're on vacation. Gualtiero lives in Sicily, and you'll be returning to Dublin by the end of the week.”

*Shit.* For some reason, that reminder cuts deep, and I feel part of my heart breaking already.

“No matter what, El, make the most of it. Experience five days of Sicilian perfection with no regrets,” Rhia continues. “Let loose, be wild... nobody will ever know. As for the likely outcome, if you two can't work it out, then you both return to your normal lives, having made memories you'll revel in for a lifetime.”

Is there really more here? Could there be a future for Gualtiero and me?

I shouldn't be thinking past this trip. What would be the point? Why hope for something that's not likely to happen? It can only lead to disappointment.

The fact remains that I really don't know the man. We live very different lives that don't seem compatible.

A holiday fling, I can see, but hoping for more is foolish.

It could never work... even if we had feelings for each other. And at least for my part, that's already a given.

Heartbreak is inevitably on the horizon, but it won't stop me from enjoying the man while I can. Given today's shenanigans, the rest of the week promises to be an adventure. I wonder what other things Tiero has in his arsenal of tricks.

"Go for it, El," Rhia encourages, chewing on her lower lip. "If this turns out to be just sex, so be it. Fuck him out of your system, and then go home and add this trip to your memoirs."

I ponder her words as I go to sleep that night. Just sex... Well, it was that when he took me hard and fast the first time. That last time on the boat, though? We made love. It was raw and intimate and hit the nerve connected right to my heart. And I know that if I continue down this path, I'll get hurt.

*Run. Now!*

But I'm already in too deep. How would I explain to him that I don't want to see him anymore?

Maybe I should just fly home with Rhia?

No, that would suck. It's my first proper vacation in two years, and I won't let a hunk of a man intent to capture my heart steal it away from me. I just have to build stronger walls for protection.

As I hug Rhia goodbye, I resolve to truly live it up for the rest of my time here. If I have to spend the next few days without my best friend, I might as well do the things I wouldn't have done had she stayed... namely, one Gualtiero Leandro De Marco.



We're on the way back from the airport, and Tiero's black SUV is bumping along the busy streets of Palermo. A middle-aged man called Fabio is driving. Apparently, he's Tiero's regular driver, though I've not seen him on the job before.

The passenger seat is taken by a muscly guy who introduced himself as Alonso. He looks very Italian with his tanned olive complexion, dark eyes, and black short-cropped hair. I assume he's one of Tiero's bodyguards, though I'm not sure why he's with me and not Tiero.

From the backseat, I watch the scenery change from city life to the quiet green countryside.

I'm sad Rhia had to cut our trip short. After Zoe left, I looked forward to our time together. But, clearly, it wasn't meant to be. At least we had a bit more than a week together. That's better than nothing, right?

And I can't fault her for flying home. This is an amazing opportunity for her. If she wins this account, it will set her up to expand her business, and she's been working so hard for that.

While Rhia's leaving is unfortunate, now that Tiero is in the picture, I have to admit, being here alone makes it a lot easier to spend time with him without feeling guilty for neglecting my best friend. In that sense, the timing couldn't be better.

Lost in thought, time flies by, and the hour-long trip to Catania is over before I know it.

We arrive at Tiero's office building, and Fabio drives through enormous gates with two guards on each side.

Everything around Tiero is always well guarded. I guess whenever I'm with him, I couldn't be safer.

Fabio drops me off in the courtyard near the front door. As I slide out of the car, I take in the De Marco Headquarters. It's probably the most unusual office building I've come across. It's an old-style Catanian Palazzi, which I suspect is centuries old.

The stone building is in a large U-shape, two stories high, with columns and arches along the front on each level. Potted trees and plants are scattered all along the courtyard, making it look more like a home than a place to conduct business.

As I walk up the few low steps to the entrance, I gaze up the expanse of the building and notice a tower soaring above the roof level in the right-hand corner. It reminds me of the fairy tale *Rapunzel*, and I'm expecting a girl with mile-long blonde hair to appear at any moment and let down her mane to allow her lover to climb up.

The walls are a cream color with a tint of pink... the entire set-up looks warm and inviting. It's a stark contrast to what I imagine Tiero's business dealings are like. To say I'm surprised is an understatement.

I pictured something modern and edgy, even a bit overpowering for his headquarters. Something that intimidates and sets people's expectations to never mess with the man. Then again, maybe he wants to lull them into a false sense of security so he can pounce on them with an element of surprise.

I'm totally overthinking this.

Alonso appears by my side and gestures to the open front door. Actually, front door is another understatement.

What I step through is more like a medieval fortification. It's huge and heavy with enormous bolts and locks.

Butterflies are dancing happily in my stomach as I walk into the foyer. I'm excited to see Tiero again.

As I look around, I gasp, my mouth falling open. This isn't what I expected, judging from the exterior of the building. It's like another world inside. The twenty-first century is most definitely present here.

The entrance area is a large, open space with high ceilings. Walls must have been removed to create this space. It's white and crisp and definitely not homey. There's an elevator in the right-hand corner, which I assume goes up all the way to the top of the tower. To the left is a regal-looking staircase.

Corridors run off to either side, well-lit by the windows that are evenly spaced throughout.

At the reception desk, a pretty brunette in her thirties smiles at me. “Miss O’Neil?”

“Yes. Buongiorno.” I smile back as I make my way towards her.

“Signor De Marco is expecting you. Marcelo will take you up.”

She points to a big, burly man standing close by, who has been observing our interaction closely. His head is shaven, and a tattoo peeks out at his neck. He looks menacing. I guess nobody gets past him easily.

Marcelo nods at me in acknowledgment and gestures towards an elevator I hadn’t noticed before. I thank the receptionist and make my way over to him. Up close, he looks even bigger and fiercer than anyone I’ve ever met. No smiles to be found anywhere—I doubt he even knows how.

Alonso disappears down a corridor as Mr. Stoneface and I wait by the elevator door. When it arrives, an elderly gentleman steps out. He briefly scans the length of me, and the hairs on my neck stand at attention.

Who’s that? And why is he giving me the creeps?

I step aside to let him pass, and with a curt nod in my direction and an “Arrivederci” to Marcelo, he takes off and disappears out the front doors.

Mr. Stoneface follows me into the elevator and presses the button for the second floor. We would have been faster using the stairs. In fact, I wish we had taken them because, in such a small space, I feel a little intimidated by my big escort.

Marcelo... I wonder what his name means. I quickly pull out my phone and google it. Even before any results show, I know it has something to do with Mars, the god of war.

As the results show, I bite my lip to stifle my giggle. Marcelo means ‘little warrior’.

He’s the exact opposite of little. The warrior part is unquestionable, at least as far as his outside is concerned. He might be a total teddy bear inside.

*Yeah, right.*

The thought makes me laugh again—internally, of course, because I sure as hell don’t want him to ask what’s so funny.

The elevator dings, and we step out. Marcelo leads the way through a corridor with evenly spaced windows and glass doors to one side, leading to a balcony that stretches the length of the building. Spacious offices are on the other side, some of them big enough to have several partitioned workstations in them. People are focused and busy at work and pay Mr. Stoneface and me no attention.

At the end of the corridor sits a desk which, I presume, houses Tiero’s secretary. She’s a well-dressed middle-aged woman with a friendly smile.

Santino is standing by a door, and Marcelo joins him. They must work out together and follow the same diet. They're both huge. Though Santino might have a few pounds on Marcelo.

"Buongiorno," I say in greeting.

"Buongiorno Miss O'Neil. I'm Maria, Signor De Marco's personal assistant. He's expecting you. Just go in." She points at the door Santino is guarding.

Nerves dance in my stomach. I'm so excited to see him again.

I wonder what he's got in store for me today.



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## CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

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### ELLA

“Thank you, Maria,” I say as I walk towards the large double door. Santino knocks and opens it for me without waiting for a reply.

Tiero’s men seem to be everywhere. Does he really need them? Is it because of the car incident that flung our paths together last week, or has it always been like this?

All thoughts flee my mind the moment I step into Tiero’s office. I stop to take in the man and his surroundings. His office is enormous, befitting for his status as CEO, and has a masculine, powerful air to it.

Tiero gets up from his chair and walks towards me, a predatory glint in his eyes. The butterflies in my stomach flutter as if on a sugar high, and heat rises in my cheeks.

He looks simply edible.

He isn’t wearing a suit jacket, and the arms of his dress shirt are rolled up, revealing his muscular, tanned forearms.

*Yum!*

Who knew that the mere sight of forearms could be such a turn-on?

“Close the door, princess,” he says in a low, commanding voice.

I turn around to do just that when his hands move up from my arms to my shoulders, and he nuzzles my neck from behind. Goosebumps erupt all over my body at his touch. My heart constricts in my chest, and a deep ache begins to pulse inside me.

“I’ve missed you,” he whispers in my ear before sucking on it, and I can’t help the shudder traveling through my body.

“Tiero,” I whisper back, my voice hoarse.

My arm comes up, threading around his muscular neck and into his lush, soft hair.

I turn my face towards him, and our lips meet. His mouth locks against mine, his kiss hard and insistent.

He thrusts his tongue past my lips. It dances with mine. His is clearly ready to lead, command, and take, and mine willing to yield, submit, and give.

His hands travel down my body. One is holding me around my waist, pressing me tightly against his front. The other is fondling my breasts sensually over my dress.

His hardness presses firmly against my lower back, and my need for his body grows. Arousal ignites my core, and my panties dampen more and more with every passing second.

He breaks the kiss suddenly and turns me around to face him. As his hands snake underneath my dress, he attacks my neck with his wet tongue and lips.

Holy shit, the man is horny... but so am I.

Tiero's hands travel over my covered pussy and up to my stomach, pushing my dress up to my waist before he lifts it over my head and drops it to the floor.

He grabs my hair and descends on my lips again. He angles my head to deepen the kiss as he walks me backward, still devouring my mouth.

My head spins, and I'm glad my back hits the wall, helping me stay upright. Tiero cages me in with his powerful body, his mouth never leaving mine.

With an impatient tug, he tears my panties off my body. This cave dweller act is such a turn-on, a fresh wave of moisture floods my core. He lifts me off the ground, and my legs automatically wrap around his waist. I'm now only held up by the wall and his body weight leaning against me.

His hands let go of my body, and I can feel him fumble with the belt of his trousers. I hear a zipper lowering, and his shaft springs free, the hardness pushing into my belly.

"Condom," I manage to get out through maddening kisses. He swears in Italian, but quickly puts his hand in his trouser pocket to retrieve a foil pack. He leans slightly away and rolls it on.

It takes a few seconds, but it's not enough of a reprieve to slow down my racing heart and breathing. I watch, fascinated, as his nimble fingers cover his beautiful cock in record time.

Before I know it, he's back at my entrance, looking at me with so much heat, I might come from just the look in his eyes.

With an unfamiliar urgency, I lean forward to capture his lips. He responds in kind, kissing me with a ferocity that takes my breath away. His hands roam over me, touching, caressing, fondling, stroking. I lose track of where they are, completely lost to the overwhelming sensations.

He enters me in one hard thrust, and we both moan in unison.

"Fuuucckk!" he growls. "Princess, you feel incredible on my cock," he says, his voice hoarse as he starts a pounding rhythm. I can't say anything, too overwhelmed by what his body does to mine.

I'm so wet, the squelching sounds of my arousal hang in the air every time Tiero easily slides in and out of me. Every hard thrust jars my entire body, filling me with sweet, aching pressure.

My senses are flooded with him. The masculine smell of him, the heat emanating from his body, his sounds, and moans escaping him. They all add up, driving me completely out of my mind.

I hold on to him for dear life, moaning his name over and over again.

Tiero slows down his tempo but thrusts deeper and deeper, rotating his hips and hitting new spots within me. My eyes roll back in my head, the pleasure too much and yet not enough.

My mouth hangs open, trying to draw in air as I groan and writhe against him. He lifts his head from my neck and kisses me ferociously before dropping it right back where it was, sucking and licking the delicate skin, marking me as his.

I close my eyes and wrap my arms tighter around his neck, moaning as he pushes deeper. His breath is hot against my throat, his groans vibrating in my body. He grips my hair again and tugs hard, forcing my head back.

“Look at me,” he commands, growling. My eyes lift to his. His pupils are dilated, black with passion.

My core tightens around him, and curses I don't understand leave his sinful mouth. My internal muscles start to spasm uncontrollably. An explosion of shudders rains through my entire body. With one last hard thrust into me, I fall apart.

I bite his shoulder to prevent myself from screaming, digging my hands into his strong biceps. I cum so hard my vision goes dark and then comes back with black speckles flooding my sight.

Tiero is right at my heels, moaning my name loudly as his orgasm consumes him. Shaking violently, he empties himself.

My body is still humming minutes later with the ecstasy he has unleashed.

Caught up in post-coital bliss, I'm panting and rest my head on his broad shoulder.

We stand like this for a while... me pushed against the wall with my legs wrapped around Tiero's waist, and him leaning his body into mine, still connected in the most intimate way.

"Wow, what was that?" I whisper in wonder.

"That, princess, was quickie perfection." We laugh together, and then he kisses me tenderly, almost reverently.

"I can't argue with that," I reply quietly.

Unwinding my legs from Tiero's waist, I lower them carefully to the ground. But my muscles are quivering so much I fear they might give out.

I hold on to Tiero's arms and blush in embarrassment as I admit, "I don't think I can stand yet. I came so hard my legs are like mush."

He picks me up immediately, a self-satisfied grin on his face, and carries me across his office to a comfy looking leather lounge, where he sinks down with me in his lap. I stare at his beautiful face, his eyes sparkling with mischief.

"You look smug," I say, smiling up at him.

"What can I say? I enjoy making you weak in the knees."

I sigh happily and snuggle closer into his chest. He's stroking my back tenderly and kisses the top of my head before resting his chin on it.

Contentment fills me. I'm so sated. This was wholly unexpected.

"Is sex always like this for you? So mind-blowing?" I ask and silently add, 'with such intensity, such raw passion and such lust you fear you'll burn up inside if you don't have it?'

I know for sure it's not like this for me. Never has been. I'm so excited to have experienced this. But for him? Given Tiero's temperament, I assume this is nothing special.

He doesn't answer right away. Is he thinking about all the other girls who came before me? All the models and beautiful women who graced his arm and bed? Insecurity creeps in, and I don't like it. I regret having asked.

He keeps stroking my arms. Maybe he's dozing and didn't hear my question. I'm praying he didn't! But no such luck. His voice sounds deliberate when he finally speaks.

"I usually have good sex, but never like this. What we have is special, angel. I've never felt a connection like ours before. I'm so fucking drawn to you. I think of you all day, and it's driving me crazy. This never happens."

My stomach flutters. I smile into his chest, my heart giddy, knowing that I'm not just another girl in a long line up of conquests... that I mean something to him, and that he won't forget our time together when this is over, and I go home at the end of the week. That part puts a dampener on my mood.

How can I possibly go back to normal life after an experience like this?!

But now isn't the time to think about it. I can do that when I land back in the land of reality on Sunday afternoon.

I *will* enjoy my time with Tiero without thinking about the end. That's what Opposite Ella would do.

Suddenly, a thought hits me.

My entire body tenses, and I pull away from his body to look at Tiero. His expression turns to concern at my abrupt movement.

"Please tell me your office is soundproof. We were so loud, and there are at least three people right outside your door." I remember in horror.

There was nothing subtle or quiet about the way we came together. My cheeks stain red at the thought of Tiero's secretary and bodyguards overhearing our tryst.

Shit. I don't think I can walk out that door and look any of them in the eye ever again.

Tiero laughs. "No need to worry, princess. No sounds escape these walls," he placates me, gently stroking a strand of hair out of my face and tucking it behind my ear before soundly and thoroughly kissing me again.

"You can welcome me like this again any time." I smile against his lips.

"Be careful what you wish for, I might just do that." He tightens his hold on me, and I feel safe and content. Cocooned in his warmth, I wish we could stay like this forever.



He moves so he can rest his forehead against mine, looking deeply into my eyes. “What are you doing to me, angel? It’s only been a few days, and I’m totally addicted to you and this delectable body of yours,” he admits. “I can’t get enough of you. I just had you, and already I want you again.” His growing erection against my buttocks is proof of his words, and the desire is mutual.

My stomach chooses this moment to growl loudly.

“Sounds like I need to feed you before I take you again. No wonder your legs couldn’t hold you up,” he says jokingly.

I get off his lap gingerly and retrieve my dress from the floor, pulling it on while Tiero zip up his pants and unrolls his shirt sleeves. He points to his private bathroom, and I head in to freshen up and make sure nobody can see I just got fucked to within an inch of my life.

Fat chance of that.

I study myself in the mirror. My cheeks are rosy, my lips swollen, and I have the glow only a satisfying orgasm leaves behind.

Oh well, not much I can do about that.

*Channel Opposite Ella*, I tell myself. She’d be proud of that tryst. And what a tryst it was... absolutely amazing.

If only my panties weren’t ruined. The thought of going commando out into the world doesn’t sit right. Next time, I’ll bring a spare pair in my purse.

As I re-enter the room, Tiero stands behind his mahogany desk, putting on his suit jacket. My eyes are drawn to the piece of furniture. It looks a little out of place. Everything in Tiero's office looks old-style-new except for the impressive desk with its telltale signs of long service, making it look more like an antique.

Tiero follows my gaze and smirks. "Do you want me to bend you over this desk, princess? I'm more than happy to have you again."

I laugh, "You're funny... I need lunch first." Running my fingers along the smooth surface, I say, "Tell me about this desk. It seems special."

Tiero cocks his head to one side and regards me. "You're very in tune."

Then his gaze returns to the furniture in front of him. "This desk is special. It's been in my family for four generations. Every head of the family has sat at it to run our business. I plan to pass it to my son one day." He sounds proud of his legacy, proud of his family.

"I'm sure you will." And I mean it.

A picture of Tiero in the future pops into my mind, of him sitting with a mini version of himself on his lap, showing him things and teaching him how to be the next leader of his pack.

The thought of being defiled on this surface suddenly seems unthinkable. "Having sex on this desk seems like blasphemy now."

Tiero walks around the desk and takes my hand, pulling me towards him. “I’m certain you wouldn’t be the first woman on this desk. I dare say it has seen some action in its time. None of my forefathers were saints before they got married.”

If the desk could talk, what stories would it tell? Then sudden jealousy hits me. How many women has Tiero bent over this desk and taken from behind?

“Have you...?” The words die on my lips, and Tiero doesn’t say another word, just looks at me with an intensity that makes me forget how to breathe. All I can do is stare back, my heart galloping in my chest like a wayward mare.

His hands come up to my face, and he strokes my cheek. I’m sure he can feel my racing pulse against his palm. His eyes linger on mine, and it’s as if he’s trying to read something in them. What, I’m not sure. He lowers his head, and his lips take mine in a slow, sensual kiss we both get lost in.

My stomach grumbles again, and with a last peck on my lips, he pulls away and guides me to the door with his hand resting on my lower back. Something above the doorframe catches my attention. There, in bold black writing, it reads ‘*Omne Trium Perfectum*’.

“What does that mean?” I point to the writing.

“It’s Latin and means ‘*every set of three is complete*’. My father had it put up there to remember all of his children. He wanted it above the door because the desk faces it, and it’s in his direct line of sight.”

“That’s beautiful.” I stare at it for a moment, my dad’s words coming to mind to always remember the power of three.

“It’s incredibly thoughtful of your dad to include his daughter and remember her in this way. He loved you all very much,” I whisper, truly touched by the gesture. It seems like the De Marco men have a sentimental side beneath the untouchable exterior.

“He did. His family was the most important thing to him.”

As we leave Tiero’s office, I avoid looking at Maria. She couldn’t have missed what just went on in this office, given how long it has taken for us to re-emerge to go out for lunch.

Santino walks ahead to call the elevator, so it’s there when we reach it. As we walk down the corridor, people scurry out of our way and into their offices or cubicles, eyeing me curiously and Gualtiero with caution. He doesn’t spare a glance at any of them, but marches forward with purpose. It makes me wonder what sort of boss he is. At the sight of him, his employees hurry along, looking efficient and a little scared.

Marcelo is gone, but Alonso is here now and falls in step behind us. When we reach the elevator, we all step inside. Even though the elevator is spacious, I feel like a fairy surrounded by giants.

The SUV is already waiting for us as we leave the building, the back door open and ready to slide in. The car speeds off, followed by another car with more security, and our little procession soon arrives at a quaint-looking restaurant.

As the car comes to a stop, Tiero's phone rings. He looks at the caller ID, and his eyes turn stone cold, the underlying fury and animosity palpable. It sends shivers through me. Thank goodness, I'm not at the receiving end of that anger.

I can't help but wonder who is? What's turning Tiero from hot to cold within milliseconds?

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## CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

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### ELLA

**W**e're finishing dessert when Tiero's phone rings again. He ignores it, not even looking at it.

Our lunch date has been wonderful. Conversation is so easy with him—it flows as if we were long-lost friends. Tiero held my hand, stroking and caressing it with his skillful fingers, and we played footsies under the table where no one could see. I feel like a giddy teenager again, crushing on a boy.

The butterflies are there whenever I look at him. But the moment he touches me, they disappear like a rabbit in a magician's hat, replaced by a current of high voltage electricity coursing through my veins. It erases anything in its way, leaving only lustful hunger in its wake.

It's hard to believe he gave me an earth-shattering orgasm only an hour ago. Already, I'm primed and ready for round two.

What is this man doing to me? I've never felt so wanton in my life.

My feet find his calf again, and I slip my toes under his trousers and rub slowly up and down. It ignites a fire in Tiero's eyes, and it's clear he's on board with my thinking.

Just when I'm about to suggest heading to the bathroom together, something I've never done before, his phone rings again. After a glance at the caller ID, Tiero's eyes turn to stone. The warmth and comfort I saw in them only seconds ago is gone.

He answers the call, speaking curtly in Italian. I'm taken aback by his tone. I've never heard his voice so icy. It sends shivers down my spine.

He seems like a completely different person. Everything about him has changed—his demeanor is stiff, the tension in his body is obvious, and his voice is as frosty as a blizzard. Even the color of his eyes has darkened, making him appear more dangerous.

I stare at him in shock.

Remembering my presence, he glances at me and gets up, heading to the back of the restaurant to continue his conversation out of earshot.

Can he just use any backroom in any establishment he visits? Once again, I wonder who exactly Gualtiero De Marco is.

He returns soon after, looking more like himself again. "I'm sorry, princess, but I need to take care of a few things."

"That's okay. Can Fabio take me back to my hotel?"

Though his face remains unreadable, his energy changes, and I can tell he doesn't like my request.

“Why don't you stay in Catania? Maria will book you in for a nice pampering afternoon at the spa. And then later tonight, I have a surprise for you,” he says, making eye contact with Santino across the room, nodding at him to let him know to prepare for our departure.

Wanting to lighten his mood, I give him an overly bright smile. “A surprise? Do tell. You have my full attention,” I say in a playful tone.

He returns my smile, but it doesn't reach his eyes. “Nice try, princess. You'll find out after your massage,” he says, kissing the tip of my nose.

A massage sounds heavenly, but I don't want to sponge off Tiero. He has been so generous, and it doesn't seem right to keep taking from him. I know he can afford it, but this isn't why I'm attracted to him.

“No. Thank you, Tiero. It's very kind of you, but I already had plans to explore Syracuse this afternoon. I just need to get back to the hotel to collect my rental car. I'll meet you back at your office later when you finish work.”

Tiero looks astonished by my refusal of a pampering session. Hell, I'm surprised myself—I love a good massage. When was the last time I had one? I can't even remember.

Disapproval is written all over his handsome face.

*Too bad.*



My mind is made up. No sponging off vacation flings!

“You’ll lose too much time traveling back and forth,” he objects. “If you want to go to Syracuse, Alonzo will drive you. He can be your tour guide and then bring you back,” Tiero decrees.

I grimace at the idea. “I don’t mind driving back and forth,” I assure him. “I don’t want to be an imposition.”

“You aren’t. I don’t like the idea of you driving around on your own.”

Why on earth not? I normally drive everywhere on my own. I might get lost occasionally because I’m a terrible navigator, but that’s half the fun. I’ve discovered some wonderful places because I took the wrong turn.

“Thank you, Tiero,” I say politely, “but I don’t want to spend the afternoon with your guards.” That doesn’t sound like fun at all.

Tiero is looking at his watch. He’s getting impatient, but that’s hardly my fault. He’s the one dragging this out by wanting things done his way.

“It makes little sense for you to drive all the way to Taormina.” He sighs, frustrated, “Take one of my cars. That’s the easiest solution.” With that, he rises and pulls my chair out for me. Looks like that’s the end of the discussion.

We ride back to Tiero’s office in silence. He seems preoccupied with whatever happened during that phone call. When we arrive in the courtyard and the car stops, he doesn’t

let me get out. Instead, he pulls me into his lap, takes my face into his hands, and kisses me tenderly.

“Please let Fabio drive you to Syracuse in this car.”

I think it’s meant to be a question, but really it’s more like a polite command.

“I would feel much better knowing you’re safe on the road. Italian drivers can be unpredictable,” Tiero continues when I don’t reply straight away.

I’m not sure if that’s true or if he’s telling me this to make me agree. So far, Rhia and I have been the crazy drivers... not that I’m admitting that to him.

His eyes bore into mine, so sincere. How can I refuse him when he’s so caring? I caress his face with my fingers, and he leans into my touch.

I kiss him and whisper against his full lips, “Okay, fine. If it makes you feel better.”

He smiles and looks happy for the first time in the past twenty minutes.

My heart melts.

Jeez, if it’s that easy to improve his day, then who am I to deny him?

“Fabio, take Ella to Syracuse and wherever else she wants to go,” Tiero instructs his driver, who nods his agreement. He kisses my nose and eases me off his lap. With a last squeeze of my hand, he exits the car.

To my surprise, Alonso slides in the front seat a moment later, and the car takes off.

Hmm, why is Alonso here?

Should I ask him?

Perhaps he's got business in Syracuse, and it makes sense for him to ride along. Surely, he's not here to follow me around... or is he? He's a security guard, after all.

I tap my fingers against my legs as my mind overanalyzes the situation. My eyebrows draw together, and I bite my lip, debating if I should say something.

I really wish I had Rhia's forwardness sometimes. But I remain silent and decide to speak up should Alonso attempt to accompany me. I made it clear I didn't want that, didn't I?

We travel in silence. I'm uncomfortable not knowing what's going on. Taking a deep breath to steady my nerves, I take out my phone and google Syracuse to jog my memory of what's there.

Ah, it looks so beautiful. Scrolling through the pictures helps me relax, and I'm getting excited about this afternoon's exploration.

"Fabio, could you please take me to the Neapolis Archaeological Park first?" I ask.

With a nod, he sets the navigation in the car to my requested destination, and half an hour later, we arrive on site.

“Will you wait here, or would you like me to call you when I’m ready to move on?” I ask as I slide across the seat to get out of the car.

“I’ll wait,” Fabio says indifferently.

As I leave the car, Alonso gets out too and looks ready to join me.

No, that won’t do.

Gathering my courage, I speak up. “Alonso, it’s not necessary for you to come with me. I’m okay on my own.”

For a moment, he looks bewildered and a little confused.

“Actually, I’ve never been here as an adult. I hope you don’t mind, but I want to have a look around. I won’t disturb you. Once we reach the amphitheater, I’ll take a different path.”

*Shoot.*

I can hardly say no to that, even though I don’t like the idea of having him around.

I nod and turn to walk off. “Miss O’Neil,” Alonso calls after me, and I peer at him expectantly. “Please take my phone number.” He hands me a business card. “Just text me when you’re ready to leave, so I won’t hold you up, waiting for me.”

*Aww, that’s thoughtful of him.*

I smile at him as I put his card in my purse.

When we reach the amphitheater, I sit down on one of the ancient steps and let the energy of the place sink into my

bones. If these stones could talk, I muse, what stories would they tell?

True to his word, Alonso has walked on and is admiring the view from the opposite side of the arena before disappearing out of sight.

I breathe a sigh of relief.

Even though he didn't gaze my way, I felt watched.

I pull out my phone, take a snapshot and send it to Rhia.

Me: Wish you were here with me.

A response pops up almost immediately.

*Rhia: Damn. I really wanted to see Syracuse. Now, I probably never will.*

*Me: You landed okay?*

*Rhia: Yep. Just in a taxi to the office. Send me some more pics, so I can live vicariously through you while I work my butt off. Can't believe I was in Sicily mere hours ago... seems like a lifetime already.*

*Me: I know! I miss you.*

*Rhia: Ditto.*

I move on to the Greek theater that used to hold up to twenty thousand people. Imagine this place filled with people in tunics and sandals, enjoying the performances on the stage down below. What a spectacle that would have been.

I run into Alonso again at the Altar of Heiron II. He smiles at me as he explains, “Ara di Lerone, also known as Great Altar of Syracuse... it’s the largest altar known from antiquity. It dates back to the third century BC. It was dedicated to Zeus and used for animal sacrifices.”

I screw up my nose in distaste as I gaze along the length of it. “How long is it? It looks enormous,” I say in awe.

“It’s nearly two-hundred meters long.”

“That’s about two-hundred-and-twenty yards?” I ask as I touch the stones in reverence.

“Maybe. I’m not great at converting measurements.”

“Why the need for such a huge altar?” I wonder aloud.

“They held festivals here and sacrificed over four-hundred bulls each time.” My eyes nearly bulge out of their sockets, and my stomach turns at the thought of how much blood would have flowed from these tables. I retract my hand on instinct.

“Oh... that’s just awful.” My hand goes to my heart, tapping my chest as I think of the poor animals.

“It was common practice back then.”

“How come you know so much about this place? Are you a history buff, too?”

I think of Tiero and Mateo and how much they know about the history of this island and Italy in general. Do all Italians have a love for the history of their country?

Alonso laughs and looks approachable for the first time. “My entire family is passionate about history. I grew up with all the stories.”

“Are you from a big family?”

“Yes, my family is very traditional. I’m one of five. I’ve got three sisters and a brother.”

“And where are you in the pecking order?”

He chuckles. “I’m right in the middle.”

“You’re lucky to have a big family. I don’t have any siblings, and since my parents passed away, it’s just me.”

We walk along the rocky path in silence. My thoughts automatically return to my parents. They had been to Sicily long before I was born. Did they come to Syracuse and wander the same path as I am now?

But this isn’t the moment to get sentimental. I don’t want to be sad today. I shake my head as if this simple movement had the power to push away the thoughts—time to think about something else.

I glance over at the man walking next to me with strong, confident strides. He’s scanning the perimeters, ever alert to

his environment.

“How come you’ve never been back here before now?” I ask.

He hesitates for a moment. “To be honest, even though I drive past often, I never thought to stop.”

That makes sense, I never stop at historic sites around my home either.

“Where to next?” I ask. Alonso is turning out to be a valuable and knowledgeable tour guide. I might as well make the most of it.

“Orecchio di Dionisio,” he says, and I stare at him blankly. “The Ear of Dionysius. It’s an old limestone quarry over twenty meters high. Its name comes from the entrance shape, which looks like the inside of a giant ear. Legend has it that Denys, the tyrant of Syracuse, went there to listen to the conversations of his prisoners.”

When we reach it, I take in the impressive walls. Alonso calls out, “Buongiorno,” and it echoes loudly on and on and on. I can see why it’s not a good idea to divulge secrets in this space.

I take a few more pictures for Rhia while Alonso leaves the quarry to take a phone call, obviously not keen for me to eavesdrop.

As if I could understand an Italian conversation.

As we get back to the parking lot, Fabio is deep in conversation with another tall, burly looking guy. Do any



regular men ever work for Gualtiero?

“Is it a prerequisite to be colossal and muscly to work for Tiero?” I ask, shaking my head, but Alonso just smirks and doesn’t answer. As we approach, the man claps Fabio on the shoulder, gets into the car parked next to ours, and drives off.

“Where to next, Miss O’Neil?” Fabio asks.

“Please call me Ella. Miss O’Neil makes me feel like an old school governess.”

He grins but says, “I can’t. The boss would have my balls if I got too friendly with you.”

I look at him in surprise. “Surely, using someone’s first name isn’t getting too friendly.”

“Signor De Marco would disagree. And I want to keep my job.”

“Fair enough.” Jeez. Tiero didn’t strike me as that formal, but he clearly has his preferences.

“Where to, Miss O’Neil?” Fabio asks again.

“Ortigia Island please. According to my guidebook, it’s pedestrians only. That should make it easy to get to all the sights.”

“Would you like me to be your tour guide?” Alonso asks.

“Thank you for the offer, but I’ll be fine.” I’ve got my trusted Lonely Planet guide with me—it’s come in handy many times, and I’m sure it won’t let me down this time either.

The idea of strolling the streets with Alonso just seems weird. Sure, he seems nice, but spending hours with a guy I don't know is not my idea of fun.

He opens the backdoor for me to slide in. "As you wish."

Alonso doesn't appear happy, though, his face stern. I get the impression he's here to guard me. From what, though? Is Gualtiero worried someone is going to run me over? That's ridiculous, right?

"Alonso, are you guarding me? Am I in some sort of danger?" I ask, feeling uneasy.

"Of course not, Miss O'Neil," he's quick to reassure.

"Meaning I'm not in danger, or you're not guarding me?"

Shifting in his seat, Alonso is quiet for a moment, clearly trying to think of an appropriate answer.

"Signor De Marco wants your stay to be easy and enjoyable."

That doesn't answer my question, but I resist pointing it out.

"So, there's no danger?" I ask again.

"No. No danger." Sweat is beading on Alonso's forehead, but his voice is steady. Something isn't right.

"Good, then I'd rather go on my own," I say, determined.

Fabio and Alonso share a look but say nothing. We drive in silence through the busy streets of Syracuse. Once we cross the bridge connecting Ortigia to the city, I'm surprised by how calm it is. There are few cars around, and even the tourists

seem to have gone elsewhere today, with only a few people in the streets.

Fabio pulls over, and Alonso points to a path along a wall towering over the sea, which leads to the heart of the island. It looks enchanting and a little stuck in time—I can't wait to get in amongst it.

“Call me when you're ready to leave,” Fabio says, handing me his card. I nod and slide out of the car, inhaling the salty breeze caressing my face.

As I stroll along the quaint streets, I pass several souvenir shops, and my thoughts automatically turn to Rhia. She would love this.

I wonder how she's getting on. I'm tempted to ring her, but she never answers her phone during the day when she's on a deadline.

My eyes are drawn to the shop selling vintage goods. Rhia has a collection of old-fashioned hairpins, and with her birthday coming up, I'm under a little time pressure to find one with a dragonfly for her. All my searches have come up with nothing so far, but perhaps I'll get lucky today.

With great enthusiasm, I cross the road and enter the shop. They seem to have everything vintage here. There's even a section just for pins—lapel pins, brooches, hairpins, hat pins, tie pins, stick pins, sash pins, collar pins. The mind boggles with how many types of pins there are.

Sadly, none of their hairpins are right for Rhia, but just before I turn to leave, my gaze falls onto something else.

*Wow, this is crazy.*

I bite my lip to stifle the excitement that wants to consume me. I didn't find a present for Rhia, but the perfect gift for Tiero has just fallen into my lap. There was a reason this shop was calling to me!

With a wide grin, I make my purchase. I can't wait to give it to him. He's been so generous, and now he'll have something to remember me by, too. Hopefully, he'll like it as much as I do.

I spent the rest of the afternoon visiting the Greek ruins, the Temple of Apollo, and the beautiful Syracuse cathedral.

I love sitting in the quiet and ethereal space of cathedrals. They bring a deep calm that seems to permeate my every cell.

Letting the stillness and faint aroma of old tapestries and frankincense seep into my bones is my kind of meditation. When I close my eyes in these serene spaces, it's as if time comes to a halt, and all the cares of the world float away. Sometimes when I open my eyes again, the sense of timelessness is so overwhelming I have to think about what century I am in... because really I could be in any era, back or forth.

Back home in Dublin, I visit Christchurch Cathedral every week. The thousand-year-old building with its gothic architecture has a very special place in my heart. After my

parents' deaths, it was my place of refuge, a sanctuary to hide away in. It helped me to center myself and find hope.

Above all, though, I love how small I feel in the large space. It puts things into perspective for me every single time. I wouldn't call myself religious, but I appreciate the glorious buildings that were created over the centuries in the worship of God.

As I sit in the quiet Syracuse Cathedral, I can't seem to settle into the meditative state I usually so easily slip into. I'm on edge for no apparent reason.

With a sense of unease, I look around. There are only a handful of people walking around, admiring paintings and statues.

Nothing seems out of the ordinary. Yet, the longer I stay, the more the hairs on my neck stand to attention.

I scout for the closest exit and spot a side door off to my left. A sudden chill travels through my body, and I cross my arms tightly over my chest. I get up slowly, and with long strides, I head towards the door.

Thank God it's not locked, and I step out into the fresh air with a sigh of relief.

Just being out in the open relieves my tension. I gaze behind me at the door, half expecting a stalker to rush out hot on my heels. But nothing. The door remains firmly shut.

Am I becoming paranoid after my conversation with Alonso?

I take a deep breath to rid myself of my absurd thoughts.

The sky has turned a pinkish color, and I only realize now how much time has passed. I walk back to the seaside and sit on the wall in an open area, just to be on the safe side.

I text Fabio and let him know I'm ready to leave.

*Please come quickly*, I pray. I don't want to be alone anymore.

The eerie sense that someone is watching me is lingering, and it makes my stomach turn.

I keep telling myself it's Alonso, but my gut tells me otherwise. Alonso doesn't give me the creeps, and I'm most definitely creeped out.

But who is watching me?

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## CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

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### ELLA

The moment I spot Alonso, I sigh with relief. I jump off the wall and walk towards him, and he guides me to where the SUV is parked.

The drive back to Tiero's office seems to take no time, or perhaps it's because I'm lost in thoughts.

All this security around Tiero is making me paranoid. The perceived danger this afternoon is probably all in my head.

Why would anybody watch me? I'm no one important.

*Argh.* I can't let this spoil my vacation.

Tiero is waiting when the car pulls up and slides into the seat next to me. His eyes sparkle as he takes my hand and kisses it tenderly. Just the sight of him has me smile like a goof.

My friends, the butterflies, come to life again, or maybe they're more like my foes. My pulse speeds up as I slide closer and snuggle into him, breathing in the scent that's so

unmistakably Tiero. He always smells so damn good. I wish I could bottle it and take it home with me.

It's only been a few hours since I've seen him, but I've still missed him.

*Damn, I'm becoming way too attached.*

His arm comes around me, and he kisses the top of my head. For the first time this afternoon, I feel safe, and my body relaxes.

“Where are we going?” I ask, not recognizing where we are, which isn't all that unusual.

I have no navigational sense. My dad was great at it. He could look at the sky and know what direction to take. Sadly, I didn't inherit his talent.

Give me a map to read, and it's almost guaranteed we'll never get to our destination.

On the trip, when Rhia met Lex, I couldn't even program the satellite navigation properly. It was an honest mistake, but we ended up missing the wedding we traveled to Scotland for.

But if it hadn't been for my abysmal sense of direction, my best friend wouldn't have found her happily ever after. So perhaps it was destined to be. That's what I tell her whenever she complains about me sending us on unexpected routes.

I'm pulled out of my daydream when my previous question answers itself. To my surprise, the car comes to a stop at the marina.



“We’re going back to your boat?”

“We are. And we have a destination this time,” Tiero says with a wink.

“Oh, and what is that destination?”

“My island.”

The man has an island?!

*What the heck?*

“You’ve got an island?” I repeat in disbelief. What world have I stumbled into?

When Tiero says nothing, I lift an eyebrow and cock my head to the side, looking at him expectantly. He smiles and leans over to kiss my lips.

“I do. And we’ll spend the next few days there.”

My eyes open wider in surprise.

*What?*

“Umm, did you just say a few days?”

He laughs at the dumbfounded expression on my face. “Yes, princess. Your hearing is spot on.”

Am I ready to spend twenty-four-seven with him? And for more than a day?

My mind screams ‘No’, but my body has different ideas. It instantly heats, shouting ‘Yes Yes Yes’.

But I shouldn’t be ruled by my libido!

Besides, I only have three full days left, and there are things I want to tick off my itinerary before my flight home on Sunday. I wish he'd run this by me first. He's kidnapping the rest of my trip without even consulting me.

"I have plans for the next few days, you know?"

The one thing I've noticed about the powerhouse that's Gualtiero De Marco is that he decides for everyone and expects no opposition.

Do people always do what he wants? It would appear that way, and it bugs me.

"Do you really want to keep them?" he asks as I turn to him to say something about him steamrolling me.

He looks excited, and I don't have the heart to disappoint him. And then there's my body's reaction to seeing him happy. His wide grin and sparkling eyes have me melt into a puddle.

Tiero takes my hand and squeezes it enthusiastically, running his long fingers up and down its length, making my body tingle. It's been only a few hours since I got to touch him, and I want more..

"But what about your work?"

"If anything important comes up, I'll handle it from the island."

I throw in one last protest. "But I don't have a change of clothes with me."

Tiero laughs and bends over to whisper into my ear, “You won’t need any clothes. I intend to keep you naked the entire time.”

Oh God, why is the thought of us running around without a stitch of clothing turning me on so much? My cheeks color and I shake my head to rid myself of the image of a naked Tiero.

“Not going to happen,” I whisper back.

“Spoilsport.” Tiero winks, pecking my lips for a quick kiss. “Then you’ll be pleased to know that I have some of your things from your hotel.”

“What? Someone went through my stuff?” I stutter in utter disbelief.

“Relax, princess. They didn’t go through your stuff. They just packed a few obvious things.”

Oh my God, I can’t believe my ears. It’s thoughtful and disturbing at the same time. I’m not sure which one to settle for, though I’m leaning towards the latter. And how the hell did he get into my room?

I look at Tiero unimpressed, but he laughs it off and kisses me passionately. After a minute or two of his fiery assault, my mind goes blank... as usual.

If I had the mental capacity right now, I’d roll my eyes at myself.

It’s pathetic.

I remember one important item from my room. “Did they pack my birth control pills?”

I’ve always been paranoid about falling pregnant, especially without being in a committed relationship.

So far, on my insistence, Tiero and I have been using condoms, and I have no intention of changing that, but I’d rather be doubly sure.

“Of course, princess.” Tiero smiles at me, kissing my forehead tenderly, before adding, “We’re not quite ready for a bambino yet.”

*Wait... what?*

We’re not quite ready yet?

Is Tiero seeing a future for us?

My heart leaps at the thought. No, let’s not get ahead of ourselves. He’s probably just said it to be sweet.

He gets out of the car, and I watch him as he walks around to open my door.

Well, I guess I’ll be spending the next few days on his private island.

With a heavy sigh, I resign myself to my fate.

*Nah, just kidding!*

I’m fricking excited.

Screw playing tourist. I can always come back another time. But how often will I have an entire island to myself with a multi-orgasmic Italian god?

I picture a set of old-fashioned scales. On one side there's the tranquility and exclusivity of beaches, the azure blue sea, a cooling breeze... and a hunk of a man all to myself. On the other side of the scales are beautiful monuments... and hordes of people, sweat, and heat... and exploring alone.

*Yeah, tough choice!*

As I get out of the car, Tiero takes my hand, bringing my fingers to his mouth to kiss.

God, he's so swoony.

Beaming up at him, we make our way to where ELLA is anchored.

I will embrace this unforeseen turn of events. '*A new adventure awaits,*' I hear Rhia's voice in my head. This would be right up her alley, and she'd be cheering me on.

Heck, she would hire a whole cheerleading squad to mark the occasion. This is so unlike me.

"It will take a few hours to get to the island. We'll sleep on the boat tonight and have breakfast there," Tiero tells me as we walk hand in hand to the boat.

I still can't believe it has my name. What a freaky coincidence! Though Oma would tell me that there is no such thing.

We follow Santino and Alonso on board, who immediately go to sweep the boat for threats. Surely, this is excessive. It's not like this boat is ever unattended. There were two goons

keeping watch by the marina entrance. But I guess it's better to be safe than sorry.

The same crew greets us before retreating to their duties. Even though this is only my second time on ELLA, it feels like I've done this many times, and there's a certain comfort in that.

Enjoying the familiarity, I take off my shoes and climb the stairs to the second deck with Tiero's hand resting on my lower back. With a smile, I hold on to the railing as the boat slowly maneuvers out onto the open sea.

*This is the life.*

The cool evening breeze caresses my skin, and I turn my face upwards, grinning at the sky where the stars appear one by one.

Tiero's hands snake around my waist as he pulls me into him. Without shoes, my head fits perfectly underneath his chin. We're silent for a few minutes, just enjoying the comfort of each other's company.

A noise behind us startles me, and we both turn to see Rocco balancing a heavy tray. He puts it down on the table and, with a nod in our direction, disappears again.

Tiero lets go of me and moves towards the table. I hadn't noticed the bottle of champagne chilling in the ice bucket, but suddenly I feel parched. As if reading my mind, he opens it and pours us each a glass.

He looks so handsome in the moonlight, and the few well-placed candles along the deck make everything look ten times more romantic. My knees go weak just looking at him.

He passes me a glass, and we clink. “To an unforgettable time together.”

He takes a sip, his eyes never leaving mine. Before I met Tiero, I’ve never experienced such intense eye contact with anyone. With him, it’s almost becoming natural. It’s like a burning need to stay connected in this way.

“Are you hungry, princess?” he asks with a soft smile.

“Starving,” I say, just as my stomach rumbles loudly.

Tiero takes my elbow to guide me to the table and pulls out my chair like the perfect gentleman. The wonderful aroma of basil and tomato hits my nose as soon as he lifts the lids off the plates. There’s a variety of dishes ranging from pizza to pasta and an enticing seafood salad. I take a little of everything.

Pulling out my phone, I snap a few pictures of the scrumptious food with the boat’s railing and the sea in the background. They look fantastic—Rhia will be jealous. I’m about to send them to her when Tiero snatches the phone from my hands.

“Hey,” I say, startled. “Give it back.”

What is he doing?

“Sorry, princess. Your phone is traceable, and few people know where my island is. I want it to keep it that way.”

“Oh, okay,” I mumble, a little confused.

I suppose it makes sense, but isn't this overkill?

“You can turn it off completely until we get back on Saturday or give it to Santino, who can make it untraceable.”

I can't be without my phone for that long, so I nod in agreement. Santino appears a few minutes later and takes my phone away.

“At the end of our trip, can Santino put everything back to normal?” I frown.

I'm not sure I like any of this.

“Of course, princess.”

Pacified for the moment, I dig into the food. It's delicious. I didn't realize how hungry I was until I started eating.

With all the pasta and pizza I've consumed on this vacation, I'm sure I'll be ten pounds heavier by the time I get back home. Good thing I'll be burning off some of these calories later on. The thought makes me chuckle, and Tiero raises a curious eyebrow.

“How do Italian women stay so slim with all the carbs they're eating?”

“They have a lot of sex,” Tiero deadpans. “You see, that's why older women are rounder... less sex, more pounds,” he winks.

Is he serious?



I suppose it would make sense, but I'm not sure if he's pulling my leg.

“Well, given all the carbs I'm devouring, I better have a lot of sex tonight,” I reply sheepishly.

Tiero chews his food, grinning. “I can help you with that.”

“I bet you can,” I say with an equally big grin.

We eat in comfortable silence for a while. Then something that has bugged me since our date at the Irish pub pops into my head.

Our upbringings couldn't be more different, and I want to understand his more.

“Tell me about your childhood,” I say in between bites. “What was it like growing up in your family?”

The question seems to surprise him, and he chews thoughtfully before speaking.

“Where to begin?” he muses.

“When's your birthday?” I interrupt.

“My birthday? It's August ninth.”

“Is this why your middle name is Leandro? Because your star sign is Leo?”

Tiero chuckles. “No, that's a coincidence. My middle name was always going to be Leandro... after my great-great-grandfather. He started the De Marco businesses. Every first-born son is gifted with this middle name in honor of his achievements.”

“That’s a lovely tradition. Good thing his name didn’t mean little duck or pretty dove or something like that.”

Tiero throws his head back, laughing, “Yes, it’s a very good thing.”

“And what was he like, Leandro De Marco? Did your nona tell you stories about him?”

“Well, it’s said that he was ruthless in business, but with his family, he was tender and caring. He and my great-great-grandmother had eight children... only two boys in amongst them, the oldest and the youngest. He was very protective of the girls, and they could only marry if their suitor proved themselves worthy.”

“Worthy in what way?”

“I’m not sure as I wasn’t there,” Tiero jokes. “But I imagine if I was my great-great-grandfather, and I had six daughters, I’d look at the financial status to ensure he could take care of her and her offspring. He would have had to be a good catholic and be loyal to the family. Actually, thinking about it... not much has changed.”

“Then let’s hope you don’t have daughters... I’d feel sorry for them. You’d put their poor boyfriends through the wringer.”

“I most certainly would... and enjoy every minute... only the best for my children.”

“Have you seen the movie *Meet the Parents*?”

“No, I haven’t,” Tiero replies.

“You’d like it,” I laugh. “What would happen if you don’t have a son? Would the business go to Mateo’s son if he had one?”

“That won’t happen. Every first-born child has always been a boy. I’m confident this will continue.”

“No pressure then,” I joke.

We finish our meal and move to the lounges. My back to his chest, I sit engulfed in his arms. His hands stroke gently up and down my skin, leaving tingling nerve endings in their wake.

“How come you don’t have more siblings? I thought you said big families are traditional. What happened after your sister was stillborn?”

Tiero doesn’t answer right away, and I turn my head to look at him.

“My sister’s name would have been Stella. She stopped moving a few weeks before mamma was due to give birth, and there was nothing the doctors could do. My mother was devastated, so was my father. They induced her, and she had to give birth to a dead baby.”

I clutch my chest. “I can’t even begin to imagine how distressing this must have been.” I reach for Tiero’s hand and squeeze it in sympathy.

“It was horrible. I was only eight, but I remember the sadness... all the laughter was gone. After my mother gave birth, she was very weak. She contracted an infection that

ravaged her body. She passed away two weeks after Stella. My father was heartbroken.” Tiero’s voice is solemn, his face serious.

Part of me is sorry I asked—I don’t want him to relive sad memories. The other part is glad he’s telling me something so personal. I want to get to know all of him.

“After mamma’s death, papa was never the same. He never remarried. He said he could only love so fully once. My mother was his One and Only. He poured all his energy into the business and grew it exponentially.”

“I’m so sorry you lost your mom.” I rub his arm comfortingly. I can tell that even after all this time, it’s still a hard subject for him to discuss. “Who looked after you when your father was working?”

“Nona. And we also had a nanny, Rosabella, who we adored. She was very good to us.”

“Is she still alive... Rosabella?”

“No, she passed away a few years ago. But she lived with us until then. She was part of our family.”

“So what was young Gualtiero like?” I ask as I playfully elbow him in the ribs, trying to recapture a lighter mood.

“Naughty. Very, very naughty. Me and my best friend Enzo got into all sorts of trouble... and Mateo trotted along too, always wanting to be part of the action.

“Enzo lived in a cottage on our estate, and we went to school together. We were thick as thieves. Rosabella would

pack us a basket of food after school, and we would take it to the treehouse we built. It was magnificent. Two stories high, with a rope ladder to climb up. We came up with our own security system to alarm us if other kids were trying to steal our treasures.”

“That sounds like fun,” I smile, wishing I could see a picture of young Tiero. “What did your security system look like?”

“It was really quite primitive, but we were mighty proud of our efforts. We tied empty cans together and attached them to the ladder so they would make noise when someone tried to climb up. We also set perimeter alarms by tying fishing line between trees and connecting them to bells in our treehouse.”

“Jeez... you took this quite seriously.”

Tiero laughs, “Of course. I had to protect what was mine... It’s in my blood.”

“And how often did you get ambushed by other kids?”

“Not often... particularly not after dealing with the few that tried.”

“What did you do to them?” I ask, my curiosity raised.

Tiero smirks, and he looks so boyish. “We beat them up, of course. At one point, Enzo and I dug a hole and covered it with sticks and leaves... a trap like you see in the movies... and we put a snake in it.”

I turn to him in horror, eyes wide. “You didn’t!”

He chuckles. “Sure did... but don’t worry, it wasn’t poisonous. You should have seen Romario Stronzo’s face. He shit his pants and ran screaming to his father once we pulled him out. I was grounded for a week and got a few lashes, but it was worth it. He never came near us again.”

“I don’t blame him,” I laugh. “How old were you?” I ask as Tiero goes back to gently stroking up and down my arm, and I snuggle deeper into him.

“Eight or nine, I guess.”

“And you beat kids up when you were that young?” I ask incredulously, which makes him chuckle even harder into the top of my head.

“Princess, it’s a boy’s world... we don’t like to be molly-coddled like girls.”

I roll my eyes. “Girls like it rough sometimes too,” I say innocently until his wide smirk makes me realize the innuendo I just offered.

Rolling my eyes at him again, I smack his arm and set him straight.

“Get your mind out of the gutter, Signor De Marco. I’m talking about eight-year-old girls here. Until puberty hit, Rhia was quite the tomboy. She could climb trees with the best of the boys, and she was a daredevil on her horse, galloping way too fast and jumping over every obstacle in her way no matter how high... I felt sick just watching her sometimes.” I smile, remembering Rhia’s fiery locks blown horizontally in the wind

when she rode her horse like armies of monsters were after her. I could never keep up, nor did I want to.

“And you, princess? Were you a daredevil too?” Tiero interrupts my trip down memory lane.

“Me? No, I’ve always been a bit risk-averse. The thought of falling and hurting myself was always enough for me to stay on the lower branches while Rhia would climb all the way to the top. The branches were getting too thin to hold her weight, but she never fell once. I’m sure if I had attempted it, I would have come crashing down.”

“I can’t picture you climbing trees and riding horses. You appear too dainty for that.”

“Dainty?! I take offense to that,” I mock, turning to him, placing my hands on my hips and trying to give him my sternest look. I don’t pull it off, and Tiero laughs out loud, pulling on my hands to bring me back against his body and kissing me playfully.

“So what happened when puberty hit?” Tiero asks.

“Well, that was interesting... Rhia did a one-eighty and turned from a tomboy into a girly girl. She refused to wear shorts or pants or even sneakers and begged her mother to buy her dresses and heels. I have to admit it was much more my speed. But no matter what phase of life we were in, we were always inseparable.”

“Like Enzo and I,” Tiero says wistfully, his mood turning somber once more as he stares off into the distance. I wonder

what he's remembering.

“Where is Enzo now?” I ask in a soft voice, not wanting to startle him when he's so deep in thought.

“Enzo was killed when he was fifteen... I was there...” His words drift off, and when I look at him, I see pain—pain that stems from guilt and shame.

My heart goes out to him, and I clasp his hands in mine.

“Oh Tiero, I'm so sorry. What happened?”

He shrugs his shoulders and lets out a long breath. “It's a long story. Remember when I told you that my father took me along to his business meetings when I turned twelve, so I could learn how to deal with people and situations?”

I nod, my mind going back to the night he took me to the Irish pub. It surprised me to learn that Tiero's father had taken his son out of his childhood environment and thrown him into the world of adults so early on.

“My father was a great man. I admired him and the way he would command a room and get exactly what he wanted. He had a certain way of speaking that was calm yet forceful. He struck fear into his opponents. The power he wielded was palpable, and I wanted a taste of that power.”

He gets up to pour us another drink. While he fills my glass with more champagne, he goes for something stronger, Scotch, if I had to guess.

“I was still a child at heart and like all children, I would reenact what I had seen. When Enzo and I met at the treehouse,



we roleplayed business meetings. Sometimes I was the boss, at other times it was Enzo, and I practiced being an opponent who had a backbone.

“By the time Enzo and I hit our teenage years, we were an intimidating team and ran wild. When we were fifteen, we started going to my dad’s clubs and indulged in alcohol and girls... mostly alcohol, though,” Tiero is quick to say when he sees my horrified face.

He was fifteen when he lost his virginity? Jeez, I was nineteen and thought I was still too young.

How could he go to clubs as a fifteen-year-old? Where was his father? Where was Rosabella? If his mother had still been alive, would she have allowed him to go off the rails like this?

I don’t voice my thoughts, though. Who am I to judge what happened in his past? Tiero is opening up to me, and I’m thrilled he’s letting me see a side of him I’m certain few people get to witness... ever.

Tiero puts down his glass and walks to the railing, staring out over the calm sea.

“A few of the staff tried to stop us, but we practiced our intimidation tactics... and were quite successful. They were afraid of us and the consequences if they didn’t serve us or raised concerns with my father... so they let us do whatever we wanted. This went on for some time. We got cocky, feeling invincible.”

Tiero takes a deep, pained breath and closes his eyes, a haunted expression darkening his face. I sit quietly, watching him, an unusual sadness flowing through me at seeing him so distraught.

“We got in with the wrong crowd. One night, we partied with some young guys who were only a few years older than us. They were passing coke around, and we took some.” I cringe at the thought of a teenage Tiero frying his mind with drugs.

“Turns out they had stolen the coke. As we left the club, the drug dealer and his thugs were waiting for them. Enzo was high as a kite and thought he was unstoppable. He got into a fight with one of them. The guy pulled out a knife and stabbed Enzo several times. He crumbled to the ground, bleeding uncontrollably. The guy had hit a major artery. Enzo died in my arms... I still see him sometimes... the light leaving his eyes, his chest ceasing to move. It was the worst day of my life. It was the first death I witnessed. I was never the same afterward.”

There's only silence as I let Tiero's story sink in. The horror of what he has gone through tugging on my heart. I open my mouth to speak but can't find words. Instead, I walk over to where Tiero is standing, his back turned to me, and I thread my arms around his waist and rest my face against his broad back, holding him the best I can.

I close my eyes to push the images of blood and death out of my mind.

What a burden to carry for a young man.

I turn Tiero towards me and cup his beautiful face, pulling him down to me for a slow, gentle kiss. I want him to forget the pains of his youth and erase the memories that still haunt him.

*Yep... I'm officially a goner.*

My need to comfort him takes over, and I want... no, need to see him happy again.

Of course, empathy is normal under these circumstances, but the urgency to make it all better for Tiero is overwhelming. It tells me my heart is already lost to him.

*Shit! I knew I couldn't pull off casual.*

His lips are soft against mine, and we both get lost in the kiss. He pulls me flush against his body, his touch and kisses becoming more urgent.

Feverishly, Tiero's hands sneak underneath my dress, caressing the skin of my thighs and, inch by inch, getting closer to where I long to be touched the most.

A deep ache begins to grow inside me, and my need for his body is unstoppable. He lifts me and carries me back to the lounge, sitting down so I'm straddling him.

Greedily, I grind my sex against his hard erection. We both moan as our tongues duel.

As my hands run over his gorgeous muscular chest, I feel his rapid heartbeat beneath my fingertips. I grin against his

lips, loving the effect I have on him.

Then suddenly...

*BANG.*

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## CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

---

### ELLA

**W**hat was that?

It sounded like a firecracker piercing the air.

In a flash, Tiero's powerful arms swing me through the air until I land on the floor, shielded by the lounge we sat on. Covering me with his body, he listens intently, his eyes scanning everything around us. Shouts sound from the lower deck.

What the hell is happening?

I'm about to ask what's going on, but his hand covers my mouth gently while the pointer finger of his other hand makes a 'Shh' motion for me to be quiet.

My heart is beating out of my chest.

Are we under attack?

God, I knew getting involved with him would put me in danger.

Somebody tried to fricking kill him before. What if this someone is having another go?

I try hard not to hyperventilate, but it's a losing battle.

The shouting is dying down, and Tiero sits up, ever vigilant to what's happening around us. Shooting forward like a launched arrow, he pulls me into the interior and into a bedroom.

“Stay here,” he orders. “I'm going to find out what happened.”

Too shocked to have an intelligent reply, I nod as he walks towards the door.

Glancing back at me, he instructs, “Lock the door behind me, and let no one in other than Santino or me.”

I feel light-headed, as if all blood has drained from my body. When Tiero sees my ashen face, he rushes to me and envelops me in a tight hug.

“Everything is okay, angel. It's probably just a kitchen incident. Staying in here is merely a precaution.”

I nod again, and he reluctantly lets me go. “I'll be right back. Lock the door.”

He doesn't have to tell me twice. As soon as the door closes, I turn the lock and double-check it a few times.

The minutes tick by, and sweat is gathering on my forehead as I pace the room.

Where is Tiero?

Why the hell is he taking so long?

I hold my stomach. It's churning.

Shit, I'm going to be sick.

Blowing out a series of short breaths, I try hard to regain control of my frayed emotions.

What was that bang?

It sounded like a firecracker, but that's unlikely.

Maybe a flare went off? But why would it?

My mind refuses to acknowledge the other possibility...

A gunshot?

Maybe.

If it was, who was it aimed at? And is that person still alive?

My body trembles as I contemplate what might have happened. I shake out my hands as I pace, wanting to throw off the anxiety coursing through my body.

Tiero's innate reaction was to protect me, to cover me with his body, and to only let me up when he thought it was safe.

He didn't care for himself.

He cared for me.

The weight of this gesture is slowly sinking in.

*Wow!*

Would he have done this for anyone?

My mind races... I'm probably overthinking this.

His lightning-fast reaction raises questions I don't want to ask. Yet my mind throws them at me anyway.

If I had been with any other person, we probably would have been frozen, unsure of what to do. But Tiero knew exactly what to do. There was no hesitation.

He took cover, his senses immediately on high alert. What does that suggest?

He's done this before. I'm sure of it.

Is he's expecting attacks at any given moment?

*Oh God, what have I gotten myself into?*

There's commotion in front of the door, and I hold my breath. A light rapping on the door and Tiero's voice pull me out of my stupor, and I undo the lock with trembling hands.

Tiero enters and immediately hugs me. My arms wind themselves around his waist, and I hold on tight.

"It's all good, angel." He's cradling me tightly against his body, one hand in my hair, holding my head against his chest.

"There's nothing to worry about. It was a minor gas explosion in the kitchen," he explains while he rubs my back soothingly and peppers kisses on top of my head. For the first time since the bang, I breathe out properly, my body relaxing.

In Tiero's arms, I feel safe.

"Was anybody injured?" I ask, my voice still shaky.

Tiero pauses before replying, "Everybody is fine."

"Is it safe now?"



“Yes, we isolated the problem,” he assures me.

I pull back and look up at him. He smiles at me, but it doesn't reach his eyes.

A heaviness hangs in the air. Something is troubling him. His demeanor is off, and this alone worries me.

As if reading my mind, he bends to take my lips with his, catching them in a searing kiss.

I pull away and out of his hold before we get carried away, because we will if we continue this. With eyebrows raised, he watches me as I make my way back to the lounge to pick up my bag.

“What are you doing, princess?”

Rummaging in my Bermuda triangle of a bag, I find the little black box I bought for him this afternoon and turn it a few times in my hands before pulling it out.

Now is as good a time as any to give it to him. It might lighten his mood and make him smile for real. What were the chances of finding something so perfect for him?

When I turn back to him, Tiero eyes me curiously, an intrigued smile on his handsome face.

“I've got something for you.”

I'm so excited about this. I hope he likes it as much as I do.

“What is it?” he asks, the sparkle returning to his eyes.

“A present,” I say self-satisfied, holding out the little square box to him.

Surprised, he takes it. “Don’t worry, it’s not an engagement ring,” I tease.

Tiero opens the lid, and his eyes widen.

“I saw this in a shop this afternoon, and it roared ‘buy me, buy me’. So I did.” I beam up at him, the upset of the kitchen incident forgotten for the moment. “Now you have something to remember me by as well.”

“Wow. This is magnificent,” Tiero says, his eyes searching mine.

He pulls out the tiepin from the black velvet cushion and holds it up to the light. The lion head that’s so like his tattoo stares back at him—it’s just a hell of a lot smaller.

“I couldn’t believe my luck. The tiny sapphires for his eyes blew me away... just like the lion on your back.”

He nods, still looking at it in awe. “I will treasure this forever.”

Bending down, he kisses me gently. “Thank you, angel.”

Then he shows me just how grateful he is. He scoops me up into his arms and carries me like a bride into the master suite, where we spend the remainder of the night in the most satisfying of ways.



I wake to gentle rocking, and it takes me a minute to remember where I am. Sunlight is streaming through the

balcony doors, and I stretch my limbs with a content smile on my face.

*What a night.*

There wasn't much sleeping. I got the impression Tiero was determined to make me forget what happened last evening, and he fully succeeded.

God, this man has a wicked tongue, skillful hands, and even more adept fingers. This insatiable hunger for me is not something I've experienced... ever. And I'm all too happy to let him have his fill of me.

Talking about my sex god, where is he?

I look around the room and spot him on the lounge on the balcony, reading a book. He looks so peaceful, and I take my time drinking him in. He's only wearing a pair of swim shorts, and his tanned, muscular chest is gleaming in the sun. My fingers itch to touch him again and run my hands all over his well-defined muscles.

My ever-present desire for him awakens and pools between my thighs. I'm still swollen from last night's activities, but it doesn't stop me from lusting after him. Before I follow through, though, and let myself indulge, I need to use the loo.

I get out of bed and walk naked into the bathroom. You'd never tell I'm on a boat. This room is easily as big as mine at home. Rhia and I once went on a mini cruise, and the bathroom was more like a broom closet. You could hardly

turn, and I felt sorry for people who suffer from claustrophobia. Not a problem here.

As I wash my hands and face, the door opens, and Tiero enters. My eyes meet his in the mirror, and everything inside me lights up.

“Good morning, princess,” he says huskily as he steps closer to me.

Not wasting any time with small talk, he trails tiny kisses along the side of my neck, and I tip it to one side to give him better access.

“Buongiorno,” I reply on a shaky breath.

His hands sneak around to my front and travel up from my stomach to my breasts. His rock-hard erection presses against my butt—he’s ready to conquer again.

*God, I need him... right about now!*

As I turn my head to tell him, he takes my lips, cutting off any words. There’s an urgency in his touch that sends shivers through my body. After last night, his hunger should well and truly be sated, but it’s like a bottomless pit.

As he kneads and squeezes my breasts, his tongue demands entrance into my mouth. And when I acquiesce, he takes no prisoners, taking charge with fervor.

What’s driving him this morning?

All I can do is surrender to his onslaught. And I do it willingly.

Without taking his lips off mine, he drops his hands for a moment to pull his swim shorts down. He takes out a condom from the bathroom cabinet, sheathing himself in no time.

Finally, letting go of my imprisoned mouth, he pushes down on my back until my elbows rest on the countertop. Without further ado, he lines himself up and, in one ruthless thrust, buries himself to the hilt with a guttural roar.

I let out a small scream at the sudden invasion, his girth stretching me to the max. The burning sensation is deliciously wicked, and I close my eyes to absorb it. When I open them again, his dark eyes are glued to me in the mirror, taking in all my reactions.

His intensity is dialed up a few notches this morning. I didn't think that was possible.

He doesn't say a word, his only communication is through his eyes, and holy shit, is he telling a story there. One of lust, passion, and debauchery. And my eyes are eager listeners.

My body bathes his cock in a rush of cream, making it easy for him to withdraw and slam back into me... over and over. Unable to hold my head up any longer, it drops onto my arms, and I close my eyes, basking in all the sensations firing off in my body.

But Tiero is having none of that. He fists my hair and pulls my head up so that I'm forced to watch him in the mirror.

He's so fucking hot.

His muscles release and contract in an even rhythm that's hypnotic to observe. I love watching him come undone. His eyes are glazed over, and the passion on his face steals my breath.

Tiero's raw power is unleashed as he fucks me hard. I never thought I would enjoy being taken with such abandon, but I really, really do, despite the hard edges of the vanity pushing into my abdomen with every brutal thrust. I'm sure I'll see the bruises by tomorrow, but what a fabulous reminder that will be.

Right now, though, I don't care. I want all of him, all of what he has to give me.

Our moans grow louder as the wet sounds of our coupling fill the room. The air reeks of sex and unbridled lust. A light sheen of sweat covers both of our bodies, and we're panting with the effort to draw in more air.

Abruptly, Tiero yanks me upright by my hair, and I let out a startled yelp as he wraps his hand possessively around my throat, hammering into me faster. I'm completely at his mercy, unable to move even an inch.

He truly owns me.

With his hot breath on my neck, and his moans caressing my ear, my climax is approaching like a runaway freight train. His free hand travels up my body until he reaches my breast.

"I need you to come for me now, princess... Fucking NOW," he roars.

And when he squeezes my nipple with force, I do.

I couldn't hold it off if I tried.

With a long wailing scream, I come and keep coming. Tiero follows right behind, moaning my name, his last two thrusts the most desperate yet.

I feel his heat exploding even through the condom as my walls milk him dry.

*Aaahhhhh... Holy shit, what was that?!*

At last, he releases his hold on my throat, and I slump forward, chest heaving, trying to draw in precious air. My legs are like jelly, and I'm glad for the vanity holding me up. Tiero leans over, kissing along my spine as he too catches his breath.

His tenderness is in such stark contrast to the possessiveness he just showed. I don't know what to think or feel. This is all foreign to me.

Tiero just takes over everything, and the feeling that I'm completely in over my head prevails.

Our eyes meet in the mirror. "Now it's a good morning." Tiero grins at me.

*I'm so screwed.*

Literally and figuratively.



Breakfast is scrumptious. As if by magic, an omelet with kale and parsnip appears in front of me. Mario, the cook, serves us.

Where is Rocco? He's always waited on us. I throw a questioning look at Tiero, but he keeps sipping his coffee, unperturbed.

He said no one got injured in yesterday's blast. Perhaps Rocco has different morning duties?

We eat in comfortable silence on deck, and I enjoy the warm rays of the sun on my skin.

The boat is now anchored in a small bay. Stretched out before us is Tiero's island, and he's visibly proud of his private getaway as he observes it from his seat by the railing.

I look over to the morsel of land nestled in the vast blue bosom of the sea. There isn't another stretch of land in sight—seclusion is the word.

“The island is shaped like a moon crescent,” Tiero explains. “We anchored in the crescent's belly where the boat is protected from the weather.”

“Is the boat staying here?”

“No, they'll go out to sea and return for us on Saturday. They'll be close by should we need to leave earlier.”

“Are you telling me we'll be on this island without your security team?” I ask, hopeful of being completely alone with him.



“I wish... Santino and Alonso will stay there. But don’t worry, we won’t see them. Their huts are on the opposite side. They’re under strict orders not to disturb us.”

“How big is this island of yours?” I ask as I let my eyes wander over the sandy beach with a backdrop of green, leafy trees. A large section of it has been cleared, and a large hut-style house with an enormous swimming pool glistening in the sun is snuggled into the landscape.

“Not very big... you can walk around it in two hours.”

“That’s bigger than mine,” I tease as I follow Tiero down to the lower deck.

Three jet skies are awaiting us. Tiero mounts one and holds out his hand for me to climb behind him. I wrap my arms tightly around his waist.

I’ve never been on one of these before. How exciting!

Santino and Alonso climb on the others and immediately race towards the shore. I watch Giuseppe, the skipper, and Mario as they lug our bags and other supplies into a smaller vessel. I assume one of them will take everything to the island and set it up for us.

The roar of the engine brings my attention back to Tiero as we fly over the water. My heart is racing at the same speed.

We head straight towards the island, but before we reach it, Tiero makes a sharp right, and we glide alongside the shoreline.

“Let me show you my island. Let’s go around,” Tiero yells over the noise of the jet ski.

He slows a little so I can take in the views. There are a lot of beaches and a lot more trees.

Before too long, we’re on the opposite side of the island, and through the trees, I can make out a few huts spread evenly along. This must be where the others are staying.

A few minutes later, we’re back to where we started, and this time Tiero drives up onto the sand. I hop off. My feet hit the water—it’s refreshingly cool. The heat of the day is in full force and has me sweating. I can’t wait to dive in to cool off.

“I assume there’s going to be enough food and water for a few days?” The thought of being stranded here without provisions suddenly strikes me.

Tiero laughs. “Of course, princess. I had the kitchen fully stocked. We could stay here for weeks if we wanted to and not run out. And if anything is missing, we can have it flown in. There’s a heliport on the island.”

Of course, there’s a spot for a helicopter to land. How silly of me to think otherwise.

I guess he needs it in case something important comes up, and he hasn’t got hours to travel back.

We walk up a wide path towards his dwelling.

Still on the beach and off to one side sits a cabana-style hut in the same design as the main house. Under its roof is a large, comfy-looking daybed with mosquito nets hanging from all

four corners. Despite being tied together with azure blue ribbons, the fabric dances playfully in the breeze. An array of cushions, all in hues of blue, is scattered across the head of the bed, and I just want to throw myself on it.

*Could this be any more perfect?*

A bed by the sea on a private beach on a secluded private island is what my vacation dreams are made of from now on.

I want to squeal with delight but settle for bouncing on the spot instead.

This is the perfect little getaway.

I can understand why Tiero loves coming here.

I pull out my phone and have Tiero pose for me halfway to the house. Rhia will be so jealous when she sees this.

The house is the ideal size, though it's a lot smaller than I expected. Given his personality, I pictured Tiero with something grand and impressive.

The main house is idyllic for this spot. It has a thatched roof made of thick layers of reeds. It reminds me of a tropical island, sunshine, and vacation time.

With childlike giddiness, I rush past Tiero and jog up a few shallow steps into a courtyard with the enormous swimming pool I could see from the boat. Another cabana is to my right, with another large daybed and a couple of low tables on either side.

A hot tub is on the opposite side of the deck. I can't wait to test it out tonight. It will be magical to sit in there under the millions of stars that must be visible with no other lights around. This time I do squeal and clap my hands together.

I check my watch to see how many hours before nightfall... damn, more than half a day still to go. Never mind, I'm sure there's still plenty more to explore.

I feel like a kid in a candy store, uncertain what to choose first.

My attention flies to Tiero, who opens a large set of bi-fold glass doors, and I step into the light-filled, airy space. High ceilings with dark, exposed timber beams are the first thing I notice. Warm timber floorboards connect all parts of this open-plan hut that mimics the island itself... in a sort of crescent shape.

To the left is a kitchen with granite countertops and state-of-the-art appliances. Two fruit baskets sit on the breakfast bar, laden with bananas, pineapples, mangoes, apples, and citrus fruits. It's a season-free offering of nature's abundance.

A four-seater lounge graces the middle of the room with three large armchairs facing it. A timber coffee table sits nestled in the center.

The absence of a television strikes me. Instead, floor-to-ceiling shelves filled to the brim with books fill the walls.

This is so cool.

As if on autopilot, I walk over and let my fingers glide along the spines. There are some thrillers, but most titles are about Italian and European history and mythology. I guess that explains a lot. Some of these books show signs of being read often and are clearly loved.

*What a place!*

I'm falling more and more in love with it. And to my worry, its owner is also burrowing into my heart.

Beside the bookshelves is a door that opens to a large bedroom. Taking center stage is a king-size four-poster bed with see-through white muslin fabric hanging all around it. Another door leads to the adjacent bathroom.

And that's the extent of Tiero's getaway home.

"It only has one bedroom," I say. "This isn't a place where you party."

Tiero chuckles. "This is my place to recharge. Other than Mateo, nobody else comes here."

"You don't bring girls here?" I ask, surprised.

He contemplates me, his eyes softening. "No, never. You're the first."

I'm not sure what to say.

My heart swells, and the butterflies in my stomach have a field day.

Tiero steps closer and draws me into his arms. His eyes penetrate mine as if trying to tell me something profound and

deep. And I melt—melt into his embrace, melt into his gaze until I don't know anymore where he ends and I begin.

“Let's test out the bed,” Tiero whispers huskily as he walks me backwards until the back of my knees hits the mattress. “If I recall correctly, it's extremely comfortable.”

I smirk against his lips as he pushes me down and covers my body with his, kissing me deeply and carrying me off into a world where only he exists.

Can life get any better?

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## CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

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### ELLA

The sun shines on the surface of the water, making it sparkle like an ocean of diamonds.

The sea is flat and calm—perfect for paddle boarding. It takes me a while to find my balance, but once I do, there's no stopping me. I'm even trying a few yoga poses on my board but fail spectacularly, falling into the water accompanied by Tiero's laughter.

After that strenuous exercise, we're stretched out on the daybed by the beach, basking in the late afternoon sun. The sound of gentle waves lapping onto the shore and birds singing in the trees fills the air.

I sigh contentedly, putting down the book I snatched from Tiero's library as I stare at the glimmering vastness before me.

I glance at Tiero. How did I get so lucky to end up on this island with him?

What the hell does he see in me?

If only I had the guts to ask. But he's so engrossed in his book, looking relaxed and peaceful, I'm not willing to ruffle any feathers and potentially listen to something I'd rather not hear.

I roll onto my stomach and steeple my chin on my hands.

"What are you reading?"

"The latest John Grisham thriller," he replies without taking his eyes off the page.

"You're way too relaxed to be reading a thriller."

Tiero smirks. "What should I look like?"

"Tense, chewing on your nails, face scrunched up in anticipation..."

"Is that what you look like when you read a thriller?"

He puts down his book and moves closer to me. I snuggle into his warm body and let my fingers play with his nipples.

"I don't read thrillers. My poor little heart couldn't stand the death, blood, and guts. Remember. I'm risk-averse," I joke, even though it's the truth.

"I prefer sweet and innocent... relatively speaking... I do like hot and steamy scenes in my sweet and innocent books."

Tiero shakes his head, eyes sparkling. "Tell me about your first hot and steamy time that robbed you of your innocence."

He wants to know how I lost my virginity? Really?

"Oh," I flush red at the memory of my first time. "Well, it certainly wasn't hot and steamy, more like awkward and



uncomfortable.”

Don wasn't very experienced or adventurous enough to have tried out much. I was only the second girl he slept with, and his previous girlfriend probably left him because the sex was mediocre.

When we first got together, he really wasn't a great lover. But even back then, it wasn't all about the sex for me. We shared a connection, and that was more important. Though it was nothing compared to what's going on between Tiero and me.

The sex got better over time as Don and I learned about each other's bodies and what brought us pleasure. But that first time, he was so excited, foreplay was more like fore-groping, and the total experience was over before I knew it.

“Don, my first boyfriend, tried to make it something special. We went away for the weekend and stayed at a nice cottage by the sea with a fireplace and a hot tub. So full marks for ambiance, but the rest... well, it's not something you write books about.”

It had hurt... a lot, and I was glad when it was over.

The best part of the experience was the cuddling afterward. It was more intimate and memorable than the act itself, and I felt a closeness to Don I hadn't expected after the disappointment of my first time.

The man who's holding me now couldn't be more different. “I wish you could have been my first. I'm sure with you it

would have been amazing.”

Tiero’s face turns serious as he pushes me onto my back and lays his body over mine.

“I wish I had been your first, too. I hate the idea of other men touching you, of their dicks having been inside you. I want to be the only one.”

He kisses me possessively as if staking his ownership of me now.

If I had time to think about his words, I’m sure I’d be shocked about his claim on me, but my mind is too wrapped up in the sensations he awakes with just his lips.

He breaks away when we both are breathless, his fingers caressing my face with such tenderness I forget that I desperately need to draw in air.

“What about you, Signor De Marco? Who took your innocence?” I whisper against his skin, my voice gone hoarse.

“A girl named Gia. She was working in one of my dad’s clubs. She was nineteen and experienced. Thank God for that, because I really was terrible.”

“How old were you?” Given what he told me of his wild youth, he must have been young.

“It happened the day after my fifteenth birthday. It was her present to me. We slept together for a few weeks, and I learned a lot about pleasuring a woman from her. She was an excellent teacher.”

I smile as I imagine a young Gualtiero learning the fine art of sex. “Were you a good student?”

He thinks back for a moment. “I was definitely keen to learn. One of the first things she taught me was how to delay blowing my load,” he chuckles. “I lasted all of ten seconds the first time. So afterward, she made me go down on her and taught me what to do with my tongue and mouth.”

“Well, those lessons paid off,” I mutter, blushing at the memories of how good Tiero is with his tongue in my pussy. He grins cockily at me.

“What happened with Gia after all your lessons?” I wonder if they stayed in touch. After all, your first lover is special.

“She moved away, and I never heard from her again.” Tiero shrugs his shoulders, seeming uninterested as to his first lover’s fate.

“Oh... were you sad about it? Was that why things ended between you two?”

“No, they ended well before that. It was fun and games with her, nothing serious.”

“You said you’ve never had a girlfriend. Why have you never been in a serious relationship?”

“I’ve never met a woman who could hold my interest long enough, or who I had a soul connection with,” Tiero says thoughtfully, while stroking my hair. “I feel a connection with you, Ella,” he says quietly.

My heart soars. I want to cry with happiness.

I'm not alone in this. He feels it too!

A lump forms in my throat—I can't speak.

I bury my face in his chest, breathing in his scent while Tiero tightens his arms around me, pulling me closer until there is no space left between us. We lay like this for endless minutes until Tiero breaks the silence.

“What about you, princess? Have you been in a serious relationship?”

“I only do serious relationships. Our vacation fling is my first casual encounter.”

Tiero acts so fast, for a second, I'm not sure what's happening.

Suddenly, he's maneuvering both of us, so I'm sitting in his lap. He takes my face into his hands, his eyes boring into me. They're determined and passionate.

“Let me be clear about something, angel. This isn't a fling for me. I'm well aware we've only known each other for a few days, but this thing between us goes deeper for me. And I think it does for you as well.”

I'm pretty sure my heart stops on hearing these words.

This isn't a fling for him?

Is Rhia right? Could this be the beginning of a great love story?

*No. No way.*

This can never be more than a vacation romance.

“Tiero,” I whisper, my voice choked by the lump in my throat. “I’d love for this to be more than a fling. What I feel for you... The way my whole body reacts to you...” I don’t know how to finish this sentence. I drop my eyes, needing to break this searing contact with him.

All these feelings could just be from the constant orgasm high we’ve both been on. I’m far removed from the reality of my normal life. Doesn’t everything look more wonderful when you’re on vacation?

“You live here, and I’m going back to Dublin in a few days. This can never be more,” I whisper, not having the courage to look him in the eyes.

Never in a million years would I have imagined myself saying words like these.

*Argh! This is awful!*

Never again shall I venture down the path of casual relationships. I’m not cut out for this.

Tiero doesn’t reply, but pulls me tight against his body again. I tuck my head under his chin and listen to the steady beat of his heart.

Thankfully, he drops the subject and carries on with our previous conversation. “So tell me then. How many guys have you been with before me?”

I’m glad Tiero can’t see my cheeks flushing pink. Compared to his experience, I might as well be a virgin.

“Before you, I’ve only ever been with two guys. Donald was the one who got my V-card. We were together for two years.”

“You lasted two years with a guy who couldn’t satisfy you?” Tiero sounds horrified.

“It wasn’t all that bad. First times are usually not that great... and it got better,” I justify.

“Besides, when you think you’re in love, you’re willing to make concessions.”

Above me, Tiero is shaking his head.

“And I didn’t know better. Sure, I had heard Rhia’s tales, but she’s very different from me, and I figured she was made for it, and I wasn’t.”

“Oh princess, you’re definitely made for it,” Tiero says, not hesitating a second. “I’m addicted to you.”

His comment makes me insanely happy.

I know now that the off-the-chart chemistry between us is what makes all the difference. Neither Don nor Marco ever brought out this side of me.

“I’m sorry you had such a lousy first experience,” Tiero says. “You deserve to be worshipped and made to come in every way possible.”

And hasn’t Tiero achieved that goal at every given opportunity? He’s made me come so many times I’ve lost count.

“Tell me, princess. Did this prick of a first boyfriend ever make you come?”

Gosh, he’s insistent. This little interrogation reminds me too much of Rhia’s efforts when she wants to get to the bottom of things. Why is discussing my previous sex life making me feel so uncomfortable?

“No,” I admit. “I’ve never orgasmed with him. All my orgasms came from my own hands.” After a moment, I add, “It’s a good thing I didn’t know back then what I was missing out on.”

“You wasted your life with that guy.”

“Two years isn’t that long. And we still had fun,” I protest. “Relationships aren’t all about sex. Donald was a good guy. He was loyal and dependable.”

Tiero rolls his eyes at me. I can see now why Rhia finds it so annoying when I do it to her.

“Boring... especially when you’re that young,” he counters.

My face goes sour. I don’t like being judged. He, who’s never been in a committed relationship in his life! And he’s fricking thirty-two! He knows nothing about what Donald and I had.

In hindsight, I realize it wasn’t really love, and more like filling a need to be with someone who made me feel secure and supported. It’s what I needed at the time, and I won’t let some Italian playboy walk all over my life choices.

Tiero notices the change in my body language. “I’m sorry, princess. I didn’t mean to upset you. It just saddens me that such a beautiful, intelligent, and warm-hearted woman like you settled for someone who wasn’t good enough for you... even if this was years ago.”

And with that, the tension drains from my body, and I melt again.

“How old were you when this Donald guy took your most precious gift?” Tiero asks, embers of jealousy burning in his voice.

He’s jealous? Of a man who no longer features in my life?

“A lot older than you... I had just turned nineteen.”

“How did you keep your virginity for that long?” Tiero asks in disbelief. “You’re stunning... you would have had men fawning all over you.”

I like that he thinks that.

“I’ve always been picky, and Donald was the first guy who stirred something inside me. He was handsome, highly intelligent, and had an air of confidence about him I found attractive. I was eighteen when I met him. He was two years older than me and studying at Dublin University. We talked endlessly before anything ever happened. Rhia had been sexually active for years by that stage and was at me the whole time to stop procrastinating and get on with it. With her in my ear, I reached a point where I just wanted it over and done with.”



Not much has changed, has it? Rhia is still on my back to have more fun between the sheets. Well, I'm catching up now in spectacular fashion.

Tiero frowns, clearly not pleased with my explanations. "What happened with this Donald guy?"

"Despite our average sex life, we were quite close, but all that changed when my parents died in that car crash about a year and a half into our relationship. He tried to be there for me, but I wasn't in a space to accept his help. I became a bit of a hermit, and our relationship suffered. When he finished uni, he went to America to work for a company his family was associated with. I was furious with him, but in hindsight, it was for the best. Our relationship was on the way out anyway."

"I know how hard it is to lose your parents. I'm sorry you had to suffer through this." He holds me tighter, memories of losing loved ones haunting us both.

"What about boyfriend number two?" Tiero asks. "Tell me about him."

"Well, I met Marco a year after Donald and I broke up. He was a great distraction from the pain I was still going through from having lost my parents. Marco was adventurous and fun. He made me smile again. He worked for his family's business. Two years after we started dating, they opened a new subsidiary in London and appointed Marco to run it. He wanted me to move with him, but I wanted to stay in Dublin, and that was that."

I leave out the part where he cheated on me and how I found out. I couldn't be with him after that, no matter how much he tried to convince me to take him back.

“And was he able to please you?”

I laugh. “Is sex the only thing on your mind, Signor De Marco?”

“Can you blame me? Just look at yourself in this bikini.”

I kiss him then, erasing the memories of my failed relationships, making sure Tiero is the one who's at the forefront of my mind.

But he pulls back, staring at me. “Well, did he? Please you, I mean?”

“Yeah, we had a good sex life.” I leave it at that. Tiero really doesn't need to know more.

From the looks of it, he didn't like my answer. So, I tell him the truth. “You, Signor De Marco, are topping everything and everyone. You please me like no man ever has.”

The truth of what I just said hits me.

How will anyone ever compare to him?

Have I set myself up for a lifetime of disappointment?

*No!*

I can't think like that. Tiero just set the bar high, but that doesn't mean there aren't others who can reach it.

Clearly pleased with my words this time, Tiero descends on my lips.

God, I love making out with this man.

His kisses are all-consuming. I forget the world around me. They heat my blood and turn my insides into molten lava.

After a while, Tiero lets go of me and swings his legs over the side of the bed.

“I’m going for a swim. You want to come?”

“Yes, I most certainly do,” I reply sheepishly.

He rolls his eyes at me, but can’t hide his grin. “Right, let me try again.”

He pauses for a second, thinking while I look at him expectantly. “I’m going for a swim. Do you want to come with me?” But before I can answer with an equally big grin on my face, he holds up his hand to stop me. “No, no, no... spiacente. That wasn’t much better.”

He taps his index finger along his sinful lips. “Aha,” he finally says. “Beautiful Ella, I’m going for a swim. Would you like to travel with me into the depths of the sea?” He looks pleased with himself as I burst out laughing.

“Travel into the depths of the sea?! That’s the best you can come up with?!”

“Ah, there’s that word again... come,” he exclaims, pleased and somewhat triumphantly.

It’s me rolling my eyes this time as he pulls me off the daybed. “Yes, sir. I would love to travel with you into the

depths of the sea... where you can make me come.” I wink cheekily at him. “Just bring a condom, Signor De Marco.”

He scoops me up in one swift motion and wades into the cool turquoise waters of the Mediterranean, where he fulfills my request... in his typical, spectacular fashion.



Sunlight is peaking through the curtains, promising a fabulous day ahead.

Smiling, I try to stretch, but warm arms are encircling my waist, and hold me in place. The sound of even breathing on my back tells me Tiero is still fast asleep.

I turn carefully in his arms, not wanting to wake him, and am greeted with the most beautiful sight... the perfect male specimen.

God, I'm a lucky girl.

A girl who's sore but satisfied.

That hot tub... I knew I would love it.

Tiero and I spent hours in it last night. It was magical. The Milky Way was so clear—I've never seen so many stars in my life. No less than nine shooting stars scurried through the sky, and I made a wish for each one of them... wishing that my time with Tiero would never end, that we'd always be so happy.

One can dream, right?

After our conversation on the beach, he hasn't mentioned wanting more again, and I'm grateful for that.

I can't see how more would be possible.

I don't want to move from Dublin—my whole life is perfectly set up there.

How could I give it up for a man I don't even know and who intimidates me most of the time?

And I can't imagine Tiero wanting to move away from this sunny place. He couldn't anyway, given his responsibilities to his family business.

And a long-distance relationship? That won't work either. Not with Tiero's sexual appetite. He wouldn't last a month.

Plus, what would the point be if moving in together was never on the cards?

No, as heartbreaking as it will be, we're both better off to enjoy this time together and then go our separate ways.

I mustn't get any more attached than I already am!

But it's hard. Really hard.

Especially when it's so wonderful to wake up in the arms of a man who rocks your world.

*Yes, it's too late for me.*

His hook is firmly lodged and the line taught... how will I not sink when this vacation is over?

Next to me, Tiero stirs, but his eyes remain closed. I let my gaze wash over him. The lower half of his body is covered by

a sheet, and if I'm not mistaken, something is denting it.

*Ah, right.*

I've forgotten the other reason why waking up next to a man is so good... the one thing he has to make the start of any day glorious.

A goofy grin spreads across my face as I inch closer, letting my hands glide over his taut abdomen. A pair of warm, hazel-brown eyes slowly open, matching my happy expression.

We stare at each other, and that electric current that's always there when our eyes connect crackles to life. Tenderness shines in his, and I feel so close to him.

Why does he have to live here? Why couldn't I have met him in Ireland, and we could make a go of this?

This will really hurt when the time comes to say goodbye.

*But now is not that time!*

As if drawn in by a magnet, my body moves closer to his, and the heat of his skin seeps into me. It spreads through me like a wildfire, and my pulse picks up pace.

How does this man have such an effect on me in mere seconds?

Tiero's hand gently caresses my naked back, his hard cock pushing against my thigh. Desire, hot and rampant, ignites deep within me.

"Good morning," I breathe huskily.

Instead of answering, his hand glides along the side of my face and into my hair. A move that's so simple but unleashes something in me... a ferocious hunger in my belly that demands to be fed.

He pulls me even closer and kisses me deeply. The kiss turns fiery immediately, explosive passion running from his lips into mine.

After the night we just had, how can I still not be sated?

Tiero rolls me off him and moves on top of me, not once losing the connection between our lips. His hands unerringly roam over my body, supercharging my need for him. My body arches into his, eliminating any gaps... I need to be closer.

My hands wander over the smooth skin of his back. I love his rippling muscles under my fingertips. Tiero's cock pushes hard into my abdomen. The fierce hunger I felt moments ago escalates, and I growl against his lips.

*Here we go again... here we go again.*

Will I ever get enough of this man?

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## CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

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### ELLA

“Tell me something about you that nobody knows,” Tiero asks with a soft smile as we face each other on his large, four-poster bed.

We’ve been chatting for hours in between passionate bursts of lovemaking that leave us energized yet spent at the same time. I love that dichotomy.

Trays of food are all around us. We nibble on fruit, bread, cheese, and delicious biscuits whenever we need to refuel.

“Nobody?” I clarify.

Tiero nods.

“Hmm, that’s a tough one. I usually tell Rhia everything.” I tap my finger against my chin, thinking.

“There has to be something you’ve kept from her,” he says, nudging me.

Red flushes my cheeks... oh my God, does he know?

But how?



Can he read my mind? No, he's just guessing.

There's one thing I kept from Rhia... only because she would have gotten carried away, and Connor and I had agreed we wouldn't tell a soul—ever.

So, I'm not going to admit to Tiero or anyone that I once nearly slept with Rhia's brother when we were both a little drunk.

We kissed and got naked, but it was a mistake, and I stopped everything at the last minute, which was more than awkward. I just don't feel that way about him, but in a moment of weakness and loneliness, I gave in to his advances.

We talked it out a week later and are good friends again. But had I told Rhia, I would have never heard the end of it.

After Marco and I broke up, she pushed for Connor and me to get together, and in a lot of ways, it would have been perfect. Connor is one of the best people I know—genuine, funny, super caring, and not to forget hot as hell, but I could never see him as more than my best friend's older brother.

“You're blushing, princess. Tell me,” Tiero orders, putting his finger under my chin to lift my face to his.

*Think, Ella. Think.*

Then another memory resurfaces. “I've cheated,” I blurt out.

Tiero looks at me, and his eyes widen with surprise. “On your boyfriend?”

“God, no!” I’m quick to respond. “Though I was tempted once... on a Scotland trip. It was just before Marco and I officially parted ways,” I add. Why I don’t know. It’s not something I’m proud of.

“I cheated in a geography test at school in year seven... and I’ve never told a soul. I was so ashamed.”

“Ella, Ella, Ella, I didn’t think you had it in you,” Tiero chuckles. “How did you cheat?”

“It was quite elaborate.” I smile as I think back. “In hindsight, I should have spent the time studying. It took me much longer to create my deception. And then I felt awful afterward.”

“Maybe, maybe not. Let’s hear it,” Tiero encourages, wanting to hear the story now.

“Well, first, I’d like to say I’d normally never cheat, but geography really isn’t my strong suit, and I was petrified to fail... Perhaps that’s why I can’t navigate,” I say more to myself as the realization hits.

“Anyway, in my mind, this test was super important. Rhia and I had just started secondary school, and the pecking order was being established, and my arch enemy at the time was in my geography class. Portia O’Brian... God, I loathed that girl! She was so pretentious and thought herself better than anybody else. Even thinking of her now makes me want to punch her pretty, always overly made-up face!”

That makes Tiero laugh. It's not often I have violent bursts, but even now, my fingers clench into fists.

"I had considered sewing a cheat sheet into my skirt, but then I would have needed to look down, which could have given me away. So I sewed an extra layer of fabric onto my pencil case, and I could secretly detach a corner or two and peek inside. I even stitched my cheat sheet into it so it wouldn't blow away if there were a gust of wind from an open window."

Tiero shakes his head. "Wow, you really thought this through. I love it. Tell me more."

Delighted with his enthusiasm for my ploy, I go on. "I chose blue paper for the cheat sheet, similar in color to my pencil case, which had been a birthday present from Rhia that year. She had handmade it and written all over the fabric. So when my secret flap was lowered, the cheat sheet wasn't even that obvious. I was quite proud of myself for how it turned out. During the test, though, I was sweating, and my heart was pounding. I totally expected to get caught."

"And did you?"

"No, I got away with it and aced the test." I giggle, remembering. "I felt so guilty for cheating, though. I didn't tell anyone. Not even Rhia. Even though she would have cheered me on."

"Fascinating. And totally surprising."

I chuckle. “Yeah, I have some badass in me... don’t underestimate me,” I declare with mock conviction.

“Noted,” he replies, tickling me lightly. “Now, tell me about that one time you were tempted to cheat on your loser boyfriend.”

“Ah, but that’s not a secret. Rhia knows about it.”

“And let me guess, she cheered you on?”

“Hmm, I see you’re getting the picture. Of course, she did. Doesn’t mean I acted on it, though.”

“So, who was the guy?”

“Why do you want to know? If I asked you about every woman you took to bed or were tempted by, I’d say we’d still be here tomorrow... that’s if you can remember them all,” I tease him, though I’m certain it’s the truth.

Not surprisingly, he ignores my last comment. “I want to know all about you, cuore mio. Everything there is.”

He looks so earnest, and it touches my heart—so I relent.

“As I said before, it was on the Scotland trip Rhia and I went on two years ago. It’s where she met her boyfriend. I entered a speed stacking competition, and my main competitor was this hot Scandinavian guy who looked a lot like a Viking.”

“Speed stacking?”

“Yeah. Have you never seen it?”

“I have. I just can’t picture you doing it.”

“I’m actually brilliant at it. I won that tournament.”

“You did?” Tiero looks impressed.

“Yes. And I won a Highland calf as a prize. Well, Knox was a calf back then, now not anymore. He’s got the sweetest temperament. Rhia’s parents have a large property, and he stays there. I visit him every chance I get.”

“You’ve got a Highland bull as a pet?” Tiero asks in disbelief.

“I do.” I grin at him. “See? I’m unique in so many ways.”

“I figured that out the moment I met you.” Tiero leans in for a kiss, and I close my eyes and let myself get lost.

I could do this for hours... well, actually I have, but I can’t seem to get enough.

Tiero growls against my lips. “Woman, you distract me so easily. You were telling me a story.”

“Huh?” My brain has turned to mush... and all he did was kiss me.

*Unbelievable.*

“Viking?” he jogs my memory.

“Oh, that’s right. Hmm, Eero was his name. He was runner-up.”

Let’s leave it at that. Given Tiero’s jealous tendencies, he doesn’t need to hear the rest. But he clearly wants to.

“And how did Eero tempt you?” he probes.

“Well,” I stall, contemplating what to tell him... not that much happened, but still. “We flirted throughout the

tournament and then celebrated my win afterward. He was fun to talk to, and we hit it off.

“When Rhia disappeared with Lex, he was a proper gentleman... walked me back to my hotel and everything,” I say the last bit probably a little too fast.

I left out the part where Eero kissed me in a darkened corner of the pub, which later continued at every darkened street corner on the way to the hotel.

My body heats, remembering. That man could kiss... not as well as Tiero, but at the time, he made the top of my kissing chart. Eero pushed for more, but that was one occasion my period saved me from doing something stupid.

Tiero doesn't need to know any of this, though. A furious blush colors my face, and Tiero doesn't miss it.

“Define everything,” he pushes, eyeing me closely.

I swallow hard, uncomfortable under his scrutiny. “Umm, as I said, he walked me home, kissed me goodnight... on the cheek,” I quickly add, “and walked away. I saw him again the next morning when he delivered Knox, but then Marco turned up unexpectedly, and that was that. I felt guilty as hell about having another man on my mind when I had a boyfriend.”

Over the past two years, I wondered a few times what it would have been like to be with Eero. The way he made my body burn, and how hard I made him...

“What aren't you telling me, princess?” Tiero interrupts my reminiscing.

*Bloody hell! I'm too easy to read.*

“Nothing,” I reply, batting my eyelashes to be cute. Time to shine the spotlight on him. “What about you? What’s something nobody knows about you?”

Tiero regards me for a moment, deciding whether he’ll let me off the hook, and then says, “I’ve never loved a woman. Other than my mother when I was little.”

“Hmm, that doesn’t count.”

He raises his eyebrows at me.

“I assumed that given you never had a girlfriend. Try again.”

He smiles at me, his eyes lighting up with something that looks a hell of a lot like affection and... love?

But that can’t be it. The man just admitted he’s never loved a woman... though he used past tense. And he said he felt a connection with me...

No, I’m reading too much into this.

“Surely, there were girls you felt something for?”

“Lust, yes. But once that’s sated...” he lets the rest of the sentence fade into nothing... just like the women in his life.

“Do you give all of your conquests earrings to remember you by?” I ask, immediately wishing I hadn’t.

He breaks out into a face-splitting grin. “Are you jealous, princess?”

“Of course not,” I huff.

*I so am.*

Tiero tackles me. “I like it,” he says, kissing me. “But you have nothing to worry about, princess. You’re the only one I’ve ever felt this connection with, the only one I’ve ever given a gift to... other than my cock, of course. That really is a gift in its own right, don’t you think?” Tiero teases.

“Oh,” I didn’t expect that answer.

He’s never bought a present for a woman? I’m stunned into silence, ignoring his brash last comment.

“Why me?” I whisper.

“You, angel, are special,” he says, his eyes penetrating me deeply while his fingers play with a lock of my hair. “You stir things in me I’ve not known before.”

As the meaning of his words sinks in, my heart begins to race and my insides quiver.

All talking ceases as he pulls me closer, and his lips find mine.

Round six for today...



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## CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

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### GUALTIERO

**E**lla is sleeping next to me, so peaceful and serene. She's my goddess, my dea splendente.

Is it strange that two weeks ago, I didn't know she existed, and now I can't imagine a life without her?

I push a strand of her golden hair from her face, admiring the smoothness of her skin. Under the light of the stars and moon, she truly looks like an angel.

She is by far the most beautiful woman I've ever laid eyes on.

And she is all mine.

Fuck, I'm a lucky bastard.

She insisted on sleeping under the stars. As all daybeds are under a gazebo roof, she made me drag the mattress and cushions onto the sand.

Surrounded by the best of what nature offers, I lay on my back, completely content, staring up into the sky.

I haven't done this since I was a kid. I'm astonished how happy it makes me, and it's all on Ella's account.

She's good for me.

The Milky Way is so clear. It reminds me of how very small I am in the big scheme of things. Up there, in space, my problem don't matter... so why are they important here?

The soft sound of waves rolling onto the shore is soothing. It's only interrupted by the occasional screeching of a nocturnal animal from the small forest in the middle of our island.

*Our island?*

When did I begin to think of things as ours?

It's peculiar but also not surprising. All my planning is with her in mind now.

How can she believe this is a mere fling? She feels our connection as much as I do. Of that, I'm sure.

The smell of the salty air fills my lungs, but it's the scent that's so undeniably Ella that fills my every cell. Sleep is an impossibility when she's near. Food no longer satisfies me. I hunger only for her.

Ella's rhythmic breathing close to my ear brings a peace I never want to let go of. I pull her tighter to me, and she snuggles closer, a smile on her beautiful face.

She's safe here with me. I wish we could stay forever, isolated from the rest of the world. Maybe we should, but how

can I run the business from here? It wouldn't work.

My mind drifts back to two days ago. I had to get her away from Sicily. Molinaro's henchmen were spotted in Syracuse the afternoon she was there. I can't have her out in the open by herself anymore. Alonso and Oriana kept watch, but having to stay hidden makes their job harder.

The thought of her alone in the countryside, traveling to every tourist destination in Sicily without proper protection, had me break out in a sweat.

I had to bring her here.

This island is equipped with the best security and surveillance money can buy, and nobody can get here unnoticed... unless, of course, they have help from the inside.

I growl at the thought. It makes Ella stir, and I kiss the top of her head to settle her again.

To be betrayed on my own fucking yacht by someone I had picked off the street and given a home and a life to is so fucking disappointing.

Rocco's loyalty should have been guaranteed, but greed got the better of him. Santino had caught Rocco injecting poison into the dessert he was preparing to serve Ella and me.

When confronted, my once valuable deckhand pulled a gun and shot. But Santino isn't my head of security for nothing. Much more experienced than the novice, he had him restrained lightning-fast and had finished questioning him by the time I got downstairs.

Molinaro.

Of course, it was fucking Molinaro behind the attack. I want to wring his fat, stubby neck... and I will.

The bastard bribed Rocco, offering him so much money he couldn't refuse. Didn't Rocco realize he would never walk away alive? That he would die either by Molinaro's hand or mine?

The fact Molinaro has infiltrated my circle is more than troubling. Who else is doing his bidding? We know there's another rat in our midst. But who? Rocco wouldn't have been it. He was too insignificant and had no access to information.

Right now, I'm not sure who I can trust. Santino has started the long process of vetting everyone in my organization. If there's even the slightest suspicion, the person will be dealt with, and examples will be made. No one fucks with me!

Ella's frightened eyes and trembling body are something I'll never forget. For that alone, Rocco deserved to go overboard. No one lives who crosses me.

I should be in Sicily or Rome and deal with Molinaro, but I can't leave Ella right now, and a few days away from my problems will help sharpen my focus.

Mateo has returned from Tuscany early and is doing what he can to locate our enemy. I'm flying to Rome early Sunday morning to meet with some other people who've had it with Molinaro. Together, we're better equipped to flush this weasel out and dispatch of him.

Until then, I'll enjoy my angel.

We talked for hours in between my taking her. I've never had that and doubt it would have been meaningful with anybody else.

Ella, though? I want to know everything about her. All her thoughts. All her dreams and ambitions.

And the sex? It's like she was made for me. And me alone. I'm surprised she's still walking. I'm not always gentle, but she loves it, her body responding to mine perfectly.

Listening to her talk about her ex-boyfriends was hard. I knew the basics from Santino, but hearing it from her... all I wanted to do was hunt them down and make them pay for hurting her.

This raging jealousy is so new. The thought of anyone having touched her before me drives me crazy. I want to cut off their balls. How did they not realize what a treasure they had in their hands?

Donald Ryan and Marco Gommery were fools.

Their lives will soon become a lot more difficult, especially Ryan's.

How could he leave an angel like mine after her parents just died? Selfish prick.

Apparently, he's married now... to the heiress of the company his parents sent him to work for. How convenient.

The bastard got engaged only four months after leaving Ella. It's clear in my mind he cheated on her, and that will never do. They live in America, but that won't be a problem—I've got plenty of contacts there.

And Mr. Gommery? I'll enjoy his downfall. He won't know what hit him... literally.

Of course, Ella will never be the wiser. She hasn't got a revengeful bone in her delectable body. She's beautiful in every way, inside and out.

I don't deserve her.

But I can't let her go. I've been waiting for her all my life.

My gaze travels down her naked form. Her perfect cream skin is glowing under the moonlight, beckoning me to touch. My cock aches in an almost desperate need to have her again, to feel her hot pussy take me in deep.

I'm burning up with the urge to feel her raw, with nothing in between us, her slick velvety walls embracing me. I let my hand travel the length of her body, over the dips and valleys of her breasts and hips... so soft, so alluring.

She sighs in her sleep and arches closer to me, calling to me on a primal level. Every muscle and tendon in my body is ready to explode. I need to take her again. But I rein in the urge... for now, I let her rest.

I want to stay here with her forever and have her all to myself.

But our days on the island are numbered, and I have to decide how to handle what has to come next.

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## CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

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### ELLA

**W**e've just finished a scrumptious breakfast by the pool when Tiero's phone rings. It's a ringtone I haven't heard before, and his eyes immediately shoot to the display.

His gaze hardens, and his eyes glaze over with ice like the water in an alpine lake when winter hits. He grabs his phone and walks inside without a word. Silence descends until Tiero's shouting echoes from the living room. Then it's deadly quiet again.

What's going on?

Tiero emerges again, barking instructions in Italian into the phone. My brows furrow as I watch him. His body is rigid, his muscles tense. A desert storm engulfs him. He rubs the back of his neck before he drops his hand to his side, clenching it into a fist.

His voice is like steel, and I feel sorry for whoever is on the receiving end of Tiero's wrath.

He looks downright frightening.



His face is set in hard lines, his jaw ticking. It's hard to believe he's the gentle person I woke up with this morning. I stay still to avoid drawing his attention.

What happened? Why is he so worked up?

When he's finished his tirade, he slams the phone down on the table and disappears inside.

For a brief moment, I'm unsure what to do, but decide to follow him. When I reach the bedroom, Tiero is pulling on clothes. The veins are standing out on his corded neck. I've never seen him so upset.

I watch him quietly, hesitant to speak. Obviously, something bad has happened, and I want to know what's going on. Are we leaving? Should I pack?

"Tiero," I say carefully, looking at him with questioning eyes.

He visibly tries to rein in his temper. "I have to leave for a few hours. The helicopter will pick me up soon. You will stay here. Alonso will remain on the island. Call him if you need anything. I'll be back later."

His voice is lacking its usual warmth and warns me not to argue with him. I'm only too happy to comply. I certainly don't want to upset him further.

This isn't how I imagined this day to unfold. It's the second last day of my vacation, but if Tiero is in such a foul mood, it's probably for the best not to spend it with him. I have no idea how to deal with an angry Italian.

I leave the bedroom, grabbing the book I've been reading from the nightstand. With tightness in my chest, I try to make myself comfortable on the daybed near the pool. I can hear Tiero on the phone again inside.

Thoughts are racing through my mind. What could have happened to provoke such an explosion in him?

Did someone die?

The car incident when we met comes to mind. Was someone run over? God, I hope Mateo is all right.

Moments later, Santino and Alonso arrive on quad bikes. They look as tense as Tiero, and unease fills me as I watch them warily. My stomach churns, the breakfast I just enjoyed laying heavily in my gut. They nod in my direction as they make their way inside.

In the distance, the sound of an approaching helicopter chops through the air. It gets louder by the second.

Tiero steps out onto the terrace and walks over. He presses a kiss on the top of my head.

"Stay here and close to Alonso," he instructs. As if I had anywhere else to go, I'm on an island with no means to get away.

"Tiero, what happened? You're scaring me," I whisper.

"There's nothing to worry about, princess," he tries to reassure me but fails.

“Wouldn’t it be better if I came with you and went back to my hotel? So you can focus on whatever it is you have to do?”

“No. Do as you’re told,” he says curtly, brooking no opposition.

I blink a few times and swallow the lump in my throat.

Wow, he’s never spoken to me this way, and I’m taken aback.

Needless to say, I hate it. Taking a deep breath, I remind myself he’s under a lot of pressure and try to let it go.

Tiero straightens and walks off the deck without looking back, his ever-present shadow Santino following. They mount the quad bikes and soon disappear from view, heading to the heliport in the middle of the island.

What was that all about?

A short while later, the sound of the helicopter taking off fills the air. It flies overhead and into the sunshine. If only it could brighten up Tiero’s day.

I watch the helicopter as it becomes smaller and smaller and then disappears over the glittering sea.

I let out a long breath. Wow, that was intense.

Alonso walks out of the house, and I notice for the first time that he’s dressed casually in a t-shirt and board shorts. So far, I’ve only seen him in suits, and it’s kind of weird seeing him like this.

“Alonso, do you know what’s going on?” I try my luck with him to find out more.

“I’m sorry, Miss O’Neil, I’m not able to discuss this,” he replies firmly. Of course, he isn’t—I guess I’ll remain in the dark then.

“What if Tiero is delayed? We’re meant to leave tomorrow.”

It has been on my mind since Tiero told me to stay put here. I have to leave by tomorrow afternoon, or I will never get back in time for my plane on Sunday.

“I assure you, Miss O’Neil, all is well. Signor De Marco will be back later today, and everything will go ahead as planned.”

Easy for him to say. I doubt he can guarantee me anything. But I have no other option but to wait and see.

“Would you like me to stay here with you?” he asks.

The thought of having Alonso here for company feels weird. I don’t need a babysitter, and I assume I’m safe here by myself.

Alonso seems to pick up on my last thought. “It’s completely safe here. No one can come to this island unnoticed.” Is he a mind reader?

“Well, in that case, I’ll call you if I need anything. Grazie, Alonso.”

He nods. “I will be at the heliport house. I can be here within minutes should you need me.” With that, he disappears

down the path.

The roar of another quad bike announces his departure. Where do they keep all these vehicles?

It's quiet now that I'm all alone. Is this what Robinson Crusoe felt like on his deserted island?

*Gosh, I'm being ridiculous.*

This is nothing like the poor guy from the book. Unlike him, I have a fabulous shelter, a kitchen stocked with food, and another person on the island. I'm not alone.

Still, it does little to help my unease.

Right, I need a distraction. I lay back on the bed and pick up my book and immerse myself in someone else's world. It takes my mind off things... at least for a time.



After making myself a sandwich for lunch, I head down to the beach for a swim and a paddle. The water temperature is wonderfully refreshing, and I let myself float in the crystal clear sea, enjoying the peace and quiet.

I decide to explore the bay a little further and get back onto the paddleboard. No waves break here, making balancing a breeze. Though that changes the closer I get to the bay opening. Still, it's a brilliant day, and the water is calm.

As I reach the open sea, I hear yelling behind me. Looking over my shoulder, I spot Alonso waving and shouting things I

can't understand.

What's up with him?

Trying to maneuver around so I can see what Alonso wants, a wave tips the board, and I lose balance. Arms flailing, I fall off. Hitting the water hard, I go under. Flummoxed, I forget to close my mouth and swallow an excessive amount of seawater. It makes my sinuses burn from the salt.

Having never been able to open my eyes underwater, I squeeze them shut and frantically feel around for my board to hold on to something. I can't find it.

Panic sets in, and I kick wildly to break the surface. When I finally do, I gasp for air. I'm treading water when another wave takes me under again, disorientating me even more.

A moment later, muscular arms wrap around my waist, pulling me to the surface.

Alonso.

Thank God he's here!

Actually, he's the reason I fell in the first place.

He drags me to the paddleboard and helps me put my arms up on it as I take in gulps of air.

"You okay?" he shouts over the ringing in my ears.

I only manage to nod. That's when I realize I'm topless.

*Shit!*

I don't need Alonso to see my boobs. Good thing we're still in the water.

But what the hell happened to my bikini top? I must have lost it when I hit the water.

“Why did you shout at me? What’s wrong?”

“There’s a yacht too close to the island, and you’re out in the open. I don’t know their intentions. I want you back at shore.”

“You should have come out on the jet ski instead of yelling at me,” I say, annoyed. Looking around, there’s no sign of anybody other than Alonso and me. “And where is this yacht?”

“It’s moved on now. Come, let’s get you to shore.”

Alonso hasn’t noticed my predicament and is dragging me to the jet ski. He hoists himself onto it and offers me his hand to pull me up.

“I can’t,” I tell him, and he looks at me, puzzled. “I lost my top,” I explain.

“Oh,” Alonso says, looking anywhere but me.

I laugh to myself. That’s so cute. The big burly man is flustered by my semi-nudity.

I’m sure if he could, he’d offer me his shirt, but he’s not wearing one. Wearing only board shorts, his naked, wet chest glistens in the sun.

Hmm, he’s really well built. While I have no desire for the man, I appreciate a good chest.

Looking straight ahead, he holds out his arm for me. “Let me help you up. I won’t look.”

I hesitate. “Can you see my top anywhere?”

He scans the water around us but shakes his head. “Sorry, I think it’s gone.”

Reaching out his hand again, I take it this time. What other choice do I have? I certainly don’t want to swim back to shore.

With a sigh, I let him pull me up. Trying not to sit too close to him, I debate what to hold on to. Alonso starts the engine, and the jet ski launches forward before I decide, and I’m promptly flung backward and hit the water again.

Laughing this time, I come up for air, hearing Alonso swear.

“Shall we try again?” I call to him, still giggling, and we go through the same procedure again.

“Hold on to me,” he instructs, and reluctantly, I place my hands on his hips. I’m not sure why, but it feels inappropriate, and I’m certain Tiero wouldn’t like my hands on another man... even under these circumstances.

When we get back to shore, we sit for a moment, contemplating how best to proceed.

“My towel is over at the daybed. How about I’ll fetch it, and you just don’t look?”

“Okay,” Alonso agrees curtly, struggling for composure. I wonder if he’s picturing Tiero’s reaction to seeing his woman



half-naked. Ah well, at most, he'll get a glimpse of my naked back. I can live with that.

Once my towel is wrapped securely around me, I give Alonso the all clear. His jump off the jet ski is followed by a loud, pained curse.

Blood colors the water. Will this attract sharks? Better not go swimming again today.

“What happened?” I ask, rushing to his side as he hobbles out onto the sand.

“I cut my foot.”

Come on, what else can go wrong today? No, scratch that. That's an awful question to ask, and I don't need the universe to show me.

“Let's get you to the house. There has to be a first aid kit there.” I wrap my arm around him for support, praying the towel will not come undone. Together, we stagger up the path until we reach the house. I sit him down on a lounge and rush inside to locate what I need to clean and bandage his wound.

Alonso hisses as I clean the cut. Blood is still streaming from it, and I try hard not to show how queasy it makes me feel.

“Can we not mention any of this to the boss?” Alonso asks carefully, making me smile.

“Works for me. I don't think Tiero needs to know you saw my boobs,” I tease.

“I didn’t see anything,” he replies too quickly, making me laugh out loud.

“You need to rest your foot for a while,” I tell him. “Do you want to play cards?”

He’s surprised at my suggestion, but nods. Unable to find playing cards anywhere, I return with a stack of plastic cups I found in the kitchen.

“I couldn’t find any cards, but I found these.” I lift the cups to show him, but he stares at me blankly.

“Speed stacking. I’m going to teach you.”

For the next hour, I show Alonso the predetermined sequences, making pyramids and taking them down at high speed. He’s an eager student, and we have a few laughs. I see a lighter side to the normally serious man, and it suits him so much better.

After a while, he excuses himself, saying he needed to return to the security feeds, and I pick up my novel. Now, where was I?



The rest of the day passes without further incidents. While I’m enjoying this downtime, thoughts of Tiero are never far away. I wonder what he’s doing and if he’s calmed down.

What could have possibly made him so angry?

Did a business deal go sour? Would that be enough for Tiero to lose his cool like that? Actually, he didn't really lose it. Despite his anger, he was composed. He just looked ready to let heads roll to fix whatever went wrong.

I spend the next few hours on the daybed by the beach and finally finish the mafia romance I first started on the plane to Sicily.

Why is it that the women in these books always roll over for the criminals they encounter? None of them want anything to do with that kind of lifestyle to begin with, but as soon as they fall in love, they seem to be okay with all the crime surrounding them.

Don't people have a backbone?

Those scenarios seem so unrealistic.

And while the possessive streak of these powerful men, where the girl is his and his alone, is freaking hot on paper, in real life, it would quickly get old being treated like a possession.

I pull out a cold bottle of water from the cooler box and take a thirsty sip when I hear the blades of a helicopter chopping through the air. I look to the sky and, sure enough, in the midst of the vibrant reds and oranges of the setting sun, a dot appears and rapidly grows larger.

Tiero has been gone for most of the day, and to be honest, I've enjoyed the time on my own. My lady parts needed a

break to recuperate from all the pounding... not that I'm complaining.

I decide to wait for Tiero here rather than meet him at the heliport. I wouldn't know how to get there anyway.

God, I hope everything is all right, and everyone is okay.

A quarter of an hour later, a familiar heat spreads through my body. It's always there whenever Tiero is near. He appears moments later, walking towards me, losing all his clothes along the way.

*Well, hello there!*

Someone is horny.

As he comes closer, he strokes himself, and it's an incredible sight to behold. I lick my lips in anticipation and rise to my knees, ready to devour his length as sparks ignite between my legs.

When Tiero reaches me, he bends down to kiss me, ferocious need oozing from him. Our tongues duel, and our teeth mesh.

My blood boils as his hands find my breasts and knead them almost to the point of pain. Under his onslaught, my nipples grow tight and my breasts heavy. As arousal pumps through me, I grow wetter by the second.

I inhale his intoxicating cologne and absorb the heat radiating from his powerful body.

I want him inside me right about NOW.

Grabbing his cock, I stroke it firmly. To my delight, it throbs even harder in my hand. Tiero pulls back, takes my face into his hands, and gazes into my eyes with great sincerity.

“I want to feel you bare, princess, with nothing in between us,” he growls.

I freeze, dropping my eyes.

*Wow, I didn't see that coming.*

I know most men don't like condoms, but Tiero seemed okay thus far.

He cups my chin and lifts it until my eyes have no choice but to meet his again. He looks at me expectantly. I want to say something, but no words leave my mouth.

How can I tell him I don't want to go bare without killing the moment?

I need this last barrier between us.

It would be too intimate otherwise. This sort of thing is reserved for the man I'm in a deeply committed relationship with.

“I know you're on the pill, and I'm clean. Not once have I had unprotected sex. I want all of you, Ella.”

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## CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

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### ELLA

**T**iero's eyes bore into me.  
He wants all of me.

I hear my heart hammering in my chest.

*I can't give him that.*

Not if I don't want to lose myself completely.

He lowers his head to take my lips again, this time more gently. "Say you agree, cuore mio." His tone is seductive, and my heart screams *YES*.

Why is he so tempting? It's been such a long time since I've felt a man so intimately. And to have Tiero that way...

*What am I thinking?!*

No!

I'm leaving in less than two days and most likely will never see him again. The thought makes tears well up, but I blink them away. My heart is going to break when the time comes to

say goodbye. I don't need to make it worse by removing the last barrier I've kept in place.

Tiero pulls back and studies me. He can read the indecisiveness in my eyes. "What's going on in that beautiful head of yours?"

I swallow hard. God, I hate disappointing him.

"I'm sorry, Tiero, but I'm not comfortable with that," I say quietly. "I'm paranoid about falling pregnant, especially given I'm going home in a couple of days. I wouldn't be able to enjoy us. What-ifs would run through my mind the whole time."

The discontent in Tiero's eyes is like a slap in the face, but he recovers quickly and, with a nod, says, "I understand. It's okay."

But the mood has taken an unmistakable nosedive.

"I'm really sorry, Tiero."

I lean forward and pepper his face with soft kisses. He takes a deep breath and exhales slowly. His shoulders drop as he relaxes his body. Responding to my kisses, he takes my lips again with renewed intensity.

Without warning, he grabs me by the waist and turns me around so that I'm positioned in front of him on all fours. He pulls off my bikini bottoms, reaches under the mattress, and I hear the crinkle of a foil pack.

Seconds later, Tiero grabs my hips and slams into me without warning, releasing a loud groan. He hasn't warmed me

up like he normally would with his skilled fingers or mouth.

My breath catches in my throat at the sudden intrusion. I wasn't prepared for this.

Despite being wet, my internal walls burn with the stretch of his cock, and I'm not sure which side of the fine line between pleasure and pain I'm walking on.

He lets out another long moan, and the frustration in it is unmistakable. He doesn't give me time to adjust before pulling out and slamming back into me.

I cry out. Fuck, he's so deep.

This is going to be an angry fuck... and I'm okay with that.

My mouth hangs open, but I still can't draw in a single breath. I'm too overcome with all the sensations in my body.

I cry out each time he smashes into me. It's like he's trying to drill into my very soul.

"Fuck, fuck, fuck," Tiero roars behind me.

His thrusts are hard but slow, and his fingers are digging painfully into my flesh. I'm sure I'll have bruises tomorrow, but hey, at least it's something to remind me of this virile lion of a man when I'm back home. It might make the transition easier, or maybe it will make it worse to see physical memories of him. But the marks will fade, just like the inevitable heartbreak... I hope.

I'm glad I stuck to my guns and kept that last physical barrier between us.



As if sensing that my thoughts have wandered, he pulls out of me and slaps my ass painfully hard.

*Ouch!*

It does the trick, though, and brings me back to the present.

“Here, with me,” he demands before surging back in and setting a punishing pace, thrusting harder.

This isn’t about my pleasure. This is Tiero taking from me what he wants.

“Fuck, you take my cock so well. You’re made for me, princess,” he moans as he uses me like a human fuck-doll.

I wouldn’t have thought I’d like being used like this, but as the seagulls are my witness, I love it. There’s an abandonment of all rhyme and reason, a freedom to just be.

I fall onto my elbow, not able to hold myself up any longer. It changes the angle, and Tiero’s thrusts reach even deeper. I whimper and moan as pleasure takes over. I’m going to have a heart attack if he continues like this. My pulse and breathing can’t keep up with his onslaught.

Tiero’s thighs are slapping against me, the sound heightening my arousal.

A few more thrusts and I reach the point of no return, my climax overtaking me like Tiero’s Ferrari going from zero to a hundred in two point nine seconds.

“Yes, fuck. Come on my cock, princess.” And I do, screaming his name.

Tiero pulls me up by my hair and clamps his large hand possessively around my throat, holding me close to his body as he pounds into me forcefully.

“You are mine, Ella. All mine,” Tiero bellows while I still contract around his cock.

One, two, three more savage thrusts, and he follows me into the abyss. His cock jerks inside me as he unleashes his seed into the condom with a deep, rumbling groan.

Covered in perspiration, our chests heave to draw in much-needed oxygen. We collapse onto the daybed, our heavy breathing filling the air. He pulls me closer to his body, spooning me from behind.

*Oh my fucking god. That was extreme!*

My first real angry fuck... and there's a lot to be said for it. The intensity was off the charts.

I hate disappointing him, but my decision feels right, and I'll stick with it. Doing things to please others only leads to resentment.

Tiero and I aren't in an actual relationship. All this can ever be is a holiday fling, no matter how close we might be.

My future is on the line, and I won't jeopardize it. What I told him earlier is true. I'm paranoid about falling pregnant. I have no intentions of being a single mum. It's one of my worst nightmares.

I doubt Tiero will bring up this subject again. He saw my resolve, and no man wants to be rejected twice. I really hope

he fucked the disappointment out of his system. But even if he hasn't, I won't let it spoil what little time we have left together.

The warm summer breeze gently blows over my skin as the last rays of the sun settle on the water, bathing the sky in deep hues of orange and red.

Contentment fills me.

In my wildest dreams, I couldn't have imagined myself in the arms of an Adonis on his private island, having the hottest sex of my life and being treated like a queen and like a harlot at the same time.

A girl could get used to this.

But she better not, I remind myself. The return to reality will be harsh enough.

Why, oh why, did I not guard my heart better?

Pain grips me when I think of leaving on Sunday, and tears well up in my eyes.

*Don't go there. Don't go there.* I chant to myself.

Realization hits.

*Oh no.*

I've truly fallen in love with Tiero.

How could I not?

He's swept me off my feet. With his charm and charisma, he's hard to resist.

And I have to leave him in less than two days.

I blink away the tears, but it's no use. They softly run down my cheek.

At least I'll have cute puppies to cheer me up when I return home. They never fail to bring a smile to my face with their playful innocence.

And eventually, I will get over him, right?

I close my eyes in pain. What if I don't?

The day we met floats into my mind. It felt like our souls merged. What if he's my soulmate?

*Oh God, I can't go there.*

It's too much to think about.

So, I quieten my inner rumblings and focus on Tiero's strong arms holding me tight. I love being nestled against his muscular chest. It makes me feel protected and cared for.

Needing him even closer, I wiggle my bum into him, and his cock hardens again.

Desire immediately pools between my legs. Jeez, you wouldn't think I just had a mega orgasm.

I turn in his arms, and he rises onto his elbows, looking down at me with fire in his eyes.

"Why is it I can't get enough of you?" he whispers. "I've had you many times, but I only want you more. I've only just taken you, and I already need to be inside you again. What are you doing to me?"

“It’s the same for me,” I whisper back and reach up to caress his beautiful face, pulling him down to me to let my lips do all the talking.

Then we make love—raw, passionate love that lets our hearts speak the words that don’t pass our lips.



After the intense moment on the beach, Tiero’s mood has returned to normal, and we spend the evening in the hot tub.

Two small floating tables hold our dinner and drinks. In between stolen kisses, we play a few rounds of backgammon, which, to my surprise, I win.

I’m all too happy to console Tiero. Letting my hands slide down his sleek, wet body is as much of a treat for myself as it is for him.

When I reach his cock, it jerks to life at my touch. Never taking my eyes off his, I stroke him lovingly, my thumb playing with his mushroom top, caressing the sensitive spot beneath the rim.

Tiero’s breathing is becoming labored. His eyes glaze over, but he doesn’t close them. The energy flowing between us is electric. I love the effect I have on this man, how, when he lets me, he becomes putty in my hands.

Up and down my hands move, and at last, he throws his head back in ecstasy and rises to standing, water dripping off

his delectable body. Without hesitation, I take him into my mouth and suck him as if my life depended on it.

Tiero gathers the hair from my face, wanting an unobstructed view of his length disappearing into my eager mouth. I find a rhythm that has him moan, and soon he can't hold back any longer and begins to thrust rapidly in and out.

His face contorts with the strain to hold back just a little longer, but he loses the fight. Tiero grabs my head and holds me still as he erupts down my throat with a strangled groan. His savory taste explodes on my tongue, and I clean him up with long strokes before letting go of him with a tender kiss to the tip of his beautiful cock.

“Princess, if this is how you comfort me when I lose a game, I never want to win again,” Tiero says, voice still husky.

I smile up at him, pleased with myself as he slides back into the water.

“I have a present for you,” he says softly, still enjoying the after-effects of his climax.

My brows furrow as I look at him. “You've given me so much already, Tiero. I don't need another present.”

“I want to give this to you.” He leans over the edge of the hot tub and rummages through a bag. “I saw it when I was out earlier, and it screamed your name.”

“Oh? There are things other than you screaming my name?”

“Princess, I don't scream your name.” Tiero pretends to be affronted.

“True, you moan it... loudly. And it’s music to my ears.”  
And it really is.

There’s no better sound than Tiero in passion when he lets go. I should make a recording, so I can listen to it when I play with myself.

Tiero doesn’t reply, but smirks, his eyes gleaming with mirth. He hands me a square, flat box the size of a drink coaster.

Thank goodness, it’s not another ring-sized box. I take it and open it gingerly. My eyes are immediately drawn to a beautiful sapphire pendant. It is gorgeous.

Though simplistic in its design, there’s nothing modest about it. Set in white gold, an array of small perfectly clear sapphires form the shape of a star. A halo of tiny round diamonds finishes the edging, creating a mirror-like shine. An elegant, thin, white gold necklace holds the pendant. I gape at it, speechless, my hands shivering.

“Do you like it?” Tiero asks, his breath teasing my neck.

“I love it. It’s stunning.”

“Not nearly as stunning as you.” Tiero takes the necklace from its box and puts it around my neck.

Fastening it, he says, “It matches your earrings. But I admit it’s probably a bit fancy to wear every day, so I got you another one.”

He turns to get something else out of the bag. Smiling, he hands me another velvety box.

Words escape me. Nobody has ever spoiled me so much.

With trembling hands, I take it from him and open it.

*Oh my God, it's official...* Gualtiero De Marco is the most wonderful man on the planet.

“I wanted you to have something you can wear every day and think of me,” Tiero whispers into my ear, placing a gentle kiss on my neck.

I'm staring at the necklace in my hands. It's a smooth silver chain with three slightly larger chain-links in the middle, each having an intricate charm pendant attached. I take it out of the box to admire it more closely.

It's gorgeous and undoubtedly will become my favorite piece of jewelry.

“The angel is there because you were my guardian angel the day we met,” Tiero explains as my finger glides over the highly detailed figure. What craftsmanship. Even the feathers in the angel's wings are beautifully outlined, despite the small size.

“The heart pendant in the middle was the hardest to pick. Do you have any idea how many types of heart charms there are? I chose that one because the entire heart is made from one sapphire, and the blue matches your eyes... and your earrings. But more importantly, I picked a heart because you've touched mine so deeply, cuore mio.”

Cuore mio, my heart... He's been calling me that for a while. And now he's making it part of his goodbye gift... can



this man be any more swoony?

“And the crown... well, you are my princess... and always will be.”

He stares into my eyes as he delivers these words... so sincere... so loving? My heart leaps and races away. I hear the beat in my ears.

Tiero has put so much thought into this, and I don't think I've ever received a more meaningful gift. He clearly considered each part of this necklace. I'm so touched, so lost for words, unshed tears glistening in my eyes.

I try to open the clasp, but seem to need an engineering degree to work it. It's not your standard necklace closure, but something rather complicated. Why would anybody create something so impractical?

“Here, let me,” Tiero offers, and takes the necklace from my hands to put it around my neck.

It sits lower than the sapphire necklace and can be worn with pretty much anything. Though it looks expensive, it's not over the top. That's a good thing because I want to wear it every day. A giddy grin threatens to split my face.

Leaving him is going to be even harder now.

Water sloshes between our bodies as I turn around to face him. I kiss him deeply.

“Thank you,” I whisper against his lips.

Then Tiero does what he's so good at... he takes over and shows me with his body how much I mean to him.



It's just after five in the morning on Saturday, when I wake up because I'm a little cold. As I reach over to Tiero's side of the bed, it's empty. Where could he be at this hour?

I sit up and look around. There's no sign of him anywhere.

Swinging my legs over the side of the bed, I grab Tiero's shirt off the floor and lift it to my nose, inhaling deeply. It smells like him.

*God, I will miss him.*

I resolve to steal his shirt, take it home, and never wash it. It will be a reminder of the best time of my life, of the man who raised the bar incredibly high for any other... a reminder of Opposite Ella.

Maybe Opposite Ella is here to stay. I want her to—I like her.

Sadness takes over at the thought that this is our last full day together. In a few hours, we will leave this paradise, and before I know it, I'll be sitting on a plane returning to my normal life.

A life without an Italian god making me succumb to his advances multiple times a day and spoiling me rotten in between.

I guess all good things come to an end.

In my search for Tiero, I check the house first, but all is quiet and untouched. The colors of pre-dawn tint the sky in soft hues, slowly pushing the darkness away. The moon is still visible above, mixing its light with that of the rays of the soon-to-rise sun. And the stars? They are fading from sight, taking the last of the magic they cast on us last night with them.

I spot Tiero's silhouette sitting on the beach and make my way to him. The sand is cool under my feet, and the gentle breaking of the waves is all there is to hear.

Even though I make no sound, Tiero seems aware of my presence, turning around and watching me approach. An air of melancholy swirls around him like a vortex and grows in me the closer I get.

Tiero pulls me down to sit in between his legs on the sand. Wrapping his arms around me, I snuggle my back against his chest. We sit in silence, watching the glittering waves roll peacefully to shore.

With his chin resting on top of my head and encircled in his powerful arms, I feel safe and content.

We sit like this for a long time and watch as the sun rises like a giant red balloon out of the sea, transforming the sky from the silvery black of the night to deep violet.

"I don't want you to leave," Tiero whispers into my ear, finally breaking the silence. "Stay a while longer here with me."



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## CHAPTER THIRTY

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### ELLA

**S**tay a few more days?

My heart leaps at his suggestion, and my stomach somersaults.

*Welcome back, butterflies.*

I do want to stay and spend more time with him.

I want that so very much.

But as I sit here on this beach in Tiero's arms, I know this would only delay the inevitable.

If I stay longer, I will only grow more attached to this man who's rocked my world. It will get even harder to leave him behind.

If, after only one week together, it feels like my heart is going to be ripped out, what would it be like after two or three weeks?

No. This has to end.

I'd rather have the pain of goodbye now than wait and make it ten times worse.

“I really wish I could stay and spend more time, Tiero. But I have to return to my life in Ireland. I'm expected back at work on Monday morning. New puppies are arriving. They need all hands on deck.”

I'm so glad about the new arrivals. The playfulness of the puppies is bound to cheer me up. Nobody can remain sad with such cute creatures around. The timing couldn't be better.

“Besides, what would I do here if I stayed? You have an empire to run, and I'd only be in your way.”

Tiero says nothing, and I can tell he doesn't like my answer.

I look off into the horizon, where the sun rises higher and higher. I'm glad I got to share this serene moment with him. The morning sky is a pale blue now with no cloud in sight. I shift in Tiero's arms to gaze at him in the soft light.

*My God, he's so fricking beautiful.*

Our eyes lock, and our heads move closer together until our lips touch.

The kiss is unhurried.

We take our time caressing one another. I part my lips, and Tiero's tongue enters and slow-dances with mine. He draws me closer to his warm body, and I sink deeper and deeper into him, into this kiss, into this moment.

Tiero stands, breaking our connection, and scoops me up into his arms. He carries me to the daybed on the terrace, where he lowers me gently. We discovered early on that making love on the sand isn't as romantic as movies or romance novels make out. Sand in certain areas is a real pleasure killer.

Tiero strips me of his shirt and pushes me gently down so I'm lying on my back. Completely naked before him, he takes a moment to drink me in. He devours me with his eyes, and I relish being so completely desired.

Stripping off his shorts, he comes to rest on top of me. Resuming our kisses where we left off, he nestles between my legs, his hard cock grinding into my heat.

Shockwaves of electricity ripple through my body as Tiero wedges his thighs against mine, opening me up more to him.

I love his body against mine. His weight pushes me into the mattress, limiting my movements and putting him in charge once more.

I groan into his mouth when his hands travel to my breasts to play with my nipples, rolling them in between his fingers. He slightly pinches and twists them, sending desire straight to my pussy.

Holding my gaze, he bites down, watching closely for my reaction. Finding my limit, I reach for his cock and squeeze it hard in retaliation. He groans against my sensitive flesh and releases it with a pop.

Pushing his hips against my hand and thrusting into my grip, he latches onto my other nipple, his eyes challenging me.

Biting my lip, I force my body not to react. It's so hard not to squirm as Tiero's hand ventures from my breast further south.

*God, I'm so wet and ready for him.*

His fingers skim along my folds, his thumb skirting over my sensitive clit, rubbing it slowly. It's driving me out of my mind.

And yes, I squirm... mission accomplished.

Sensations of pure pleasure run through my body, and my back arches, exposing my throat. He doesn't waste time and latches onto the soft skin, peppering kisses followed by long licks of his fiery tongue up the side of my neck.

He slides one finger and then another deep inside me, all the while kissing me hungrily.

His lips and teeth trace my jawline as his fingers pump relentlessly in and out of me. The tingling heat in my sex gathers momentum, the peak undeniable in my sight.

I stare into his eyes as my body stiffens and my pussy clenches around him. I breathe out his name on a groan.

He undeniably is the master of my body.

Tiero's cock is still in my hand, and I stroke him purposefully, feeling his throbbing veins. He pulls out a



condom from underneath a cushion and rolls it on. The next second, he pushes into me.

Our foreheads touching, we seek each other's eyes as we make love.

Tiero's strokes are measured, slow, and deep. Still, his breathing is rapidly growing labored, his guttural grunts music to my ears.

I revel in all of his sounds. I revel in the way he fills me. And I revel in his soft skin beneath my fingertips and the way he gets lost in me.

I'm doing this to him.

I hold on to his back as I climb closer and closer to another abyss. Tiero swivels his hips with every in-stroke, hitting the perfect spots deep inside of me.

As the sensations in my body spin out of control, holding his gaze is becoming increasingly difficult. My eyes want to close, but I force them open, not wanting to sever this connection with Tiero.

He reaches for my face, cradling it in his hands, kissing me with so much passion my toes curl. Tingling heat is spreading out from deep within my core until the explosion can no longer be contained.

I cry out with the intensity of my orgasm, clawing Tiero's back to pull him closer to me.

Our foreheads are still pressed together as he lets go, too. With a low, rumbling moan and my name on his lips, he finds

his own release.

*This is perfection.*

Surrounded by the peace and stillness of the early morning, we lay together, entangled and sated, matching the glow of the sun with our own.

*Rapture. This is it.*

It's different from what I experienced in Agrigento.

It's more like what I expected it to be like... the feeling of intense pleasure and joy, basking in post-coital bliss in the arms of my lover.

This is what heaven must feel like. I never want it to end.

Tiero remains inside of me while our breathing slowly returns to normal. His gaze on me is tender and loving. It almost moves me to tears, but I hold them back. Now is not the time to cry.

My heart is so full, ready to burst with all the feelings I'm holding inside.

"That was incredible," I whisper.

"Yes," he whispers back. "We are made for each other."

Yes, my heart agrees.

But we have no future.

Heartache is waiting around the corner.



I'm packing up the few belongings I've got with me. Tiero is down by the beach, making a phone call.

The hint of melancholy dissolved this morning with the rising sun... and Tiero's rising erection. Are men really that straightforward?

Tiero's yacht arrived an hour ago and is anchored in the bay. It's the irrefutable reminder that our time on this magical island is coming to a close.

I walk out onto the deck and sit down on the daybed, hugging my legs as I stare into space.

Tightness envelops my chest, and I have the undeniable urge to eat an entire block of dark chocolate... or a pint of ice cream.

Taking a deep breath in and letting it out slowly, I try to decide what to do next.

*Come on, Ella, just get on with it.*

But get on with what?

I should ring Rhia to make sure she won't forget to pick me up from the airport tomorrow. Digging my phone from my bag, I dial her number.

Shit, I should have checked the time before ringing her. Rhia usually sleeps in on Saturdays, but to my surprise, she answers right away, sounding chirpy and alert.

“Thank goodness you’re up. I wasn’t sure if you’d still be asleep.”

“I wish I was. No sleep for me at the moment. I’m putting the finishing touches on my presentation for Monday.”

It’s so good to hear her voice. I didn’t realize how much I had missed talking to her. Sure, we’ve been texting back and forth, but nothing beats a proper conversation. I let out a long breath, and the tension I’ve been holding slowly drains away.

“How is it coming along?” I’m certain Rhia is on target, she always is.

“Great. I’m going to blow them out of the water on Monday. They won’t know what hit them.”

“I have no doubt. You’re a force to be reckoned with.”

“How is life on the private island?” Rhia asks. “I still can’t believe he’s got a fricking island. You’re a lucky bitch.”

“That I am. But we’re packing up now. The boat is back, and we’ll return to Sicily this afternoon. You’re still picking me up tomorrow, right?”

“Sure am. I can’t wait to have you back. By that stage, I’ll have this presentation finished, and we can go out to dinner.”

“Sounds good. You might have to bring a wheelchair, though. I’m not sure I’ll be able to walk.”

Rhia laughs a full belly laugh. “Oh, El. I’m so happy to hear that. It’s about time you knew what that’s like. Tell me more.”

I bet she's bouncing on the spot with excitement—it's in her voice.

“God, Rhia. Where do I even start? I'm ruined for any other man... at least when it comes to sex,” I say jokingly, but then realize how true the statement is.

“The man is insatiable! I've never had so much sex or so many orgasms in my life. And he isn't sweet or gentle... well, at bedtime he is, but during the day it's hard, fast, and furious.”

She claps her hands. “At last! I'm so happy you're finally with someone who knows how to use his equipment! Promise me you'll make the most of it while you can. A guy like that is rare to find here.”

I'm quiet for a moment, and Rhia senses my unease. “How are you feeling, El? Will you be okay leaving Tiero behind?”

“I don't know,” I sigh. “I'm conflicted. He asked me to stay longer, but I said no. It's only delaying the inevitable, and what's the point in that?”

“You've fallen in love with him, haven't you?” Rhia asks.

“I don't think I've ever stood a chance not to. You know me. I always get attached way too quickly. But is it really love? Or more like infatuation? Or perhaps it's just a crush? I mean, how could I not develop a crush on the man? He treats me like a princess... he calls me princess, for God's sake. He showers me with gifts and attention...”

... he brings me to his island no woman has ever set foot on and tells me I'm his first in many ways.

*No. No. No.*

This can't be more. It just can't.

It's a crush. That's it. I can live with that.

How could it be love? Not after only a week. I don't really know Tiero. He's only shown me his charming side the entire time... well, mostly. But there is so much more to him—I can sense it.

Twice now I've seen him turn cold and angry. He scared me, and I wasn't even at the receiving end of his wrath. And he offered no explanation. Why would he? Maybe if we were properly dating, he'd enlighten me. But he doesn't tell me anything. Clearly, I'm just a girl he's fucking... yeah, that makes more sense.

But it hurt to think of myself as only a fling.

Rhia has been talking, but I've been zoned out completely with my own thoughts.

"... and who knows when you'll meet someone like him again. You guys have so much chemistry. Perhaps you should stay a little longer and explore where this relationship could go."

"Chemistry wears off eventually," I say. Because it's true, it always does. "We're on a hormone high, helped by the fact there's an expiry date on this... this... whatever this is. Is it

any wonder everything is so intense? It's natural wanting to prolong it, isn't it?"

"Perhaps. But what if there's something real there, and you're throwing it all away by going home? What if he's your One?"

And here I thought Rhia was the more realistic one of the two of us.

"Remember the dating guru we followed for a while? What was his name... Timothy someone?" I ask.

"Timothy Wood," Rhia chimes in.

"Wood?! Was that really his name?" It sounds made up, but it's memorable, something you'd want in that industry.

"Yep, and you had a crush on him." Rhia is quick to remind me.

Well, that was easy to do. Timothy Wood was... is really hot. Though, I would never admit to it.

"Did not," I deny. "Anyway, moving right along. Remember what he said about the One?" I ask, but don't wait for her answer. "He said, there isn't just one person who's meant for you, but thousands of people who you could be extremely happy with. And ultimately, that's what you want, to be over the moon happy. And when people talk about the One, they're talking about a person with the qualities they were looking for, and who wants to be in a serious relationship."

"While that sounds reasonable, I still believe Lex was meant for me and only me. But besides that, how does what you just

said disqualify Tiero from running for the top spot?” Rhia asks.

“I don’t know if Tiero has the qualities that are important to me or if he even wants to have a serious relationship. He’s never had a girlfriend before.”

“He’s obviously waiting for the right person to come along. And why couldn’t that be you?” God, she really doesn’t want to let this go. “What are you afraid of?” She asks, exasperated.

“We live in two very different worlds. Worlds that I don’t think are compatible.”

There’s a moment’s silence, and I bet she’s rolling her eyes.

“Just so you know, I’m rolling my eyes at you,” she tells me, annoyed.

Ha, I knew it!

“Rhia, I’m coming home tomorrow. Will it be hard to go back to my reality after this amazing trip? Absolutely! Will I be heartbroken? Most certainly. After all, I met an amazing man with whom I had the time of my life and who made me feel things I don’t want to analyze. But the truth is, I can’t see a future with Tiero. And before you ask, yes, I’ve dreamed up many scenarios in my head where we did, but it’s just not realistic.”

Rhia sighs dramatically, “I hear you, El. I’ll make sure I have your favorite choc-mint ice cream ready and waiting for you.”



And that's why I love her. Well, one of the many reasons. Even if we disagree, she'll be there for me and support me with whatever I decide. I can count on my best friend to help me pick up the pieces of my shattered heart and mend them back together. Let's just hope it won't take me two years this time.

We chat for a little while longer before I end the call and go to the beach. Tiero is still on the phone, and I sit down on the warm sand and look out over the azure blue sea.

*What a trip!*

It has surpassed anything I could have ever imagined.

While I had a fabulous time with the girls before Tiero entered the picture, there's no doubt in my mind that he's the sole reason this vacation turned into a spectacular one. One I'll never ever forget.

"What are you afraid of?" Rhia had asked.

What am I afraid of? Why did I get so defensive when she encouraged me to stay longer?

I frown at myself... I don't understand.

It's undeniable. I have strong feelings for Tiero. For heaven's sake, I felt the earth shift and our souls connect... so why am I not jumping at this opportunity to explore this?! I'm sure I could get more days off work if I tried.

On our first night on the island, I've wished upon a star for our time not to end, and then he asks me to stay... yet I run in the opposite direction.

*What's wrong with me?*

I want to stay. I want to see what this thing between us could be. So why am I not saying yes?

Am I afraid of getting hurt again? Is it because I have a deeper connection with Tiero than I have had with any other man, and I'm scared shitless? Because if this doesn't work out, my heart will be irreparably damaged.

Rubbing the back of my neck, I look up at the sky, wanting to yell at the universe. What the hell is it that's holding me back? Someone explain it to me... please!

I close my eyes and let out a frustrated breath.

Is it because I'm so risk-averse? Because I sense this is a high-stakes game? Well, it is.

*Fuck, fuck, fuck.*

My mind is spinning, and my stomach churns. There are too many questions and no answers. I roll my shoulders to ease the tension.

It's probably a combination of all those things. Or maybe it's my subconscious, or my gut, telling me we're not right for each other. But why would that be? We've grown closer over the last few days. He's told me things no one else knows... I'm sure of it. Yet I still know next to nothing about him.

What I said to Rhia holds true as well. We're from two very different worlds, but that's not an insurmountable obstacle.

Am I afraid I'll fall completely under his spell? Since I've met him, he's pretty much orchestrated my movements. He rarely asks. He just decides and expects everyone to follow. And they do.

He's so dominant, especially in the bedroom. But I love that. It allows me to just be in the moment, and I don't have to wonder what to do next or if I'm doing it right. It's liberating.

But then his powerful nature is intimidating, too. If I'm being honest with myself, I fear he'd steamroll me and expect me to surrender my entire life to him.

*Then what is it?*

Argh! I'm driving myself crazy. My thoughts are all over the place. How am I meant to make sense of this?

"Hey princess," Tiero greets me with a kiss to the top of my head. I jump, startled.

Too lost in my head with all the questions bombarding my brain, I didn't notice him walk up. "You appear deep in thought."

Still staring out at sea, I deflect, "It's like paradise here... so peaceful. I can see why you like to retreat to this place."

"Yes, it's beautiful here," he says, staring at me. "But this," he points at the sea and the island behind him, "is nothing compared to your beauty. You, Ella Rose O'Neil, are my paradise."

*Swoon!*

I smile at him, trying to say something clever back, but my mind has gone blank. It's still befuddled from my earlier deliberations, and then, of course, Tiero hits me with all his charm. That would leave anybody's brain scrambled, right?

He pulls me up and envelops me in his tanned, muscular arms. I breathe in his scent, musk with a hint of sea breeze.

"I don't want you to leave," he whispers into the air. "I have to go to Roma early tomorrow morning... come with me, Ella," he implores.

I stay silent for a moment, letting his plea sink into my heart.

He doesn't want this to end either. My doubts are forgotten as my heart soars... but it's short-lived as the reality of our situations comes crashing back, and my heart breaks a little for both of us.

"I can't, Tiero," I choke out, sadness already darkening the moment. "We both knew this would have to end."

Tiero says nothing. I can tell he wants to argue.

"Please, Tiero, let's not spoil our last day together by being sad."

Am I trying to convince him or myself? He studies me intensely, then nods his head and goes back to holding me.

"I have an idea that can help us forget any sadness," he says, smiling at me as he bends low to pick me up, throwing me over his shoulder.

I can't help but laugh as I dangle over his body, trying to steady myself by holding onto his broad back.

"Tiero, let me down," I protest.

"I will, princess," he replies, smacking my bum playfully. "When we get to the bedroom."

"You've got a one-track mind, Signor De Marco."

"I sure do," he agrees with me. "But so do you, Miss O'Neil, so do you."

Well, I can't argue with that. Since Tiero has entered my life, I have turned into a bona fide sex maniac. Good thing I'm leaving tomorrow. I couldn't sustain this forever.

When we get to the bedroom, he throws me onto the bed, and I bounce a few times. Tiero then quenches his insatiable thirst for me, and we don't emerge until a honking from the yacht tells us it's time to go.

I take one last look at the place where I spent some of the happiest hours of my life. With a heavy sigh, I jump onto the jet ski, holding on tight to Tiero as he revs the engine a few times.

As we leave this sanctuary, a single tear escapes and slowly tracks down my cheek.

Goodbye to this island, goodbye to this vacation, and goodbye to the happiness found in Tiero's arms.

One last night is all we have left.

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## CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

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### ELLA

The car ride to my hotel is made in complete silence. Night has fallen, and we had a wonderful last dinner on my namesake yacht.

We've spent the hours it took to return to Sicily cuddled up together, dozing. We're both tired, but don't want to waste what precious little time we have left together.

We made love once, and it was soulful. I clung to him the entire time, only too aware that our time is running out like the last grains of sand in an hourglass.

My throat constricts.

After tonight, I might never see him again.

Unshed tears brim in my eyes, and I'm struggling to swallow down my emotions as I snuggle deeper into the warmth of Tiero's embrace.

His arm is tightly wrapped around my waist, holding me close to his body as I watch the dimly lit scenery shoot by

outside. I'm cocooned in his strength and care, but come morning I'll leave it all behind.

Despite my best efforts, a big fat tear rolls down my cheek, and I let it. When my plane takes off tomorrow, I'm leaving a piece of my heart and a big, bright, unmanifested possibility here with him.

When we arrive at my hotel, it seems like eons since I've been here. I feel like a different person is returning. Only a few days have passed, but it might as well have been a decade.

We take the elevator up to my floor, Santino and Alonso shadowing us. Once we step out, they remain there.

Always the gentleman, Tiero carries my bag and opens the door for me, and we step inside. If I thought his stare was intense before, it's belittled by what I see in his eyes now.

No words enter my mind. Shiver upon shiver runs through my body, and my hands start to tremble.

We just stand there looking at each other as an eternity ticks by. He has not uttered a word since the door closed behind us, his gaze unwavering like a laser beam pressing on my soul.

*This is insanity.*

But I can't look away, held prisoner by whatever is going on.

Both our chests are heaving as if we had run for miles, but we haven't moved a muscle.

Butterflies are churning butter in my abdomen as the unmistakable rise of my arousal dampens the thin layer of lace between my legs.

At last, Tiero moves closer, his eyes glued to mine. He reaches out a hand, and I take it.

With a gentle tug, he pulls me against his chest.

He reaches for the hem of my dress and lifts it over my head. He undoes my bra and lets it drop to the floor. Next are my panties. He tears the seam on both sides and throws the scrap of fabric to the side.

That would be pair number six he's ruined, but I don't care. The caveman act turning me on once again.

Still, no words are spoken.

His eyes are trained on mine, and I'm mesmerized.

I step closer to him and untuck the shirt from his pants, releasing each button through its hole until I lose patience, and in one swift move, tear his shirt open, buttons flying everywhere.

A smile glows on my face. I've always wanted to do that, and it was far more satisfying than I imagined.

I undo his pants and push them over his hips. Tiero steps out of them before brushing them aside with his foot.

He engulfs me in his arms and slowly descends on my mouth. The kiss starts like a whisper, a soft breath in the air, but quickly develops into more when his tongue impatiently



strokes along my lips, demanding entrance. As if of its own accord, my mouth opens and grants him entry.

Our kiss turns desperate then. I'm being devoured, and I give as good as I get.

Tiero picks me up like a bride and carries me to the bed, his lips never leaving mine. He lays me down on my back and immediately covers me with his body.

My breathing becomes ragged. There isn't enough air in this room. Our bodies are covered in perspiration, and we've only just begun.

Tiero lifts his body off mine, eyes still glued to me, and reaches into the nightstand to retrieve a condom from a box Zoe left.

*How did he know those were there?*

I have no time to contemplate it, too enthralled with watching him sheathe himself.

Then I'm pinned underneath him, and he plunges in deep in one determined stroke.

We both moan in unison, clinging to each other.

Our foreheads touching, I stare into the depths of his soul.

With our chests heaving, Tiero stays still to let me adjust to his length. My body has somewhat adapted to his size, but still, every single time the delicious burn of first entry takes my breath away.

We still haven't spoken, but the kind of communication we're having is more powerful than anything we could create with words.

He takes my hands in his and squeezes them lovingly before he lifts them above my head and clasps them in one of his.

He pumps into me slow and oh so deep.

His long, measured thrusts drive me out of my mind. Pinned firmly beneath him, all I have the freedom to do is thrash my head from side to side like a wild animal. With each hard thrust, the bed hits the wall with force. It's the only sound I can hear.

Tiero's hot breath tickles my neck as he moves in and out of me, and the need to feel his skin beneath my fingertips grows exponentially.

"Please let go of my hands," I pant. "I want to touch you."

But he ignores me, instead kissing me deeply before resting his forehead against mine, never missing a thrust.

"Tiero, please," I breathe out, pleading.

I'm not sure what exactly I'm asking for. For him to let go of my hands? To speed up and give me the orgasm my body is primed for?

Still, his hold on me is unrelenting, and damn if it doesn't turn me on even more.

Out of the blue, an orgasm erupts in my core like a volcanic explosion on Mount Etna. I groan as my body shudders and

spasms. Tiero seems to have waited for just that.

With his free hand, he lifts my legs over his shoulders, and I have even less freedom to move than before.

Then he really lets me have it.

He's as wild and untamed as the beast tattooed on his back. His hips work at piston pace, and all I can do is lay there and take all he has to give me.

Just as a second orgasm hits my body like a lightning strike, he lets go, too. He roars like a lion and comes almost violently deep inside me.

He holds still, eyes closed as if frozen in time.

When his eyes reopen, they're like lasers. He towers over me, and I couldn't look away if I tried, the magnetism between us activated in full force.

Finally, he releases my hands, lowers my trembling legs, and drapes his body gently over mine. Holding my face in his hands, he kisses me with a gentleness that wasn't possible seconds ago. And I melt—melt against his body and into his lips.

*This man!*

How will I ever get over him?

We stay like this, glued together, just kissing.

Then Tiero is growing hard again. How is that even possible? He just blew a huge load.

This is going to be a long, long night.



I'm woken from deep sleep by soft kisses along my jaw, and Tiero's long fingers stroking my cheek.

*Noooo. No more sex!*

Wow, I'm surprising myself with that thought. It's never entered my mind before. But I don't think my body can take any more.

My eyes refuse to open, too heavy to even move an inch.

"Angel," Tiero's deep timbre somehow penetrates the fog in my head.

Seeking his warmth, I rub my cheek against his hands. With a sleepy smile, I force my eyes to open. They might as well be weighed down by sandbags.

Tiero is sitting on the edge of the bed, already fully dressed.

"What time is it?" I croak, noting it's still dark outside.

His other hand finds mine, and he squeezes it tenderly. "It's just past four o'clock. I have to go. My plane to Roma is leaving in half an hour."

He leans down and kisses me with such reverence. It's quite the opposite of the demanding, forceful kisses he showered me with all night.

*Hmm, this is nice.*

I try to get out of bed, but wince when I move. My body does not want to co-operate.

Holy shit, I'm sore.

Rhia might really need a wheelchair to pick me up.

Before I can get too much further, Tiero stops me. "No, princess, stay in bed. Get more rest."

I smile at him, thankful for not having to move. Rest sounds good.

I let my head fall back onto my pillow, and Tiero tucks the sheet around me. With a quiet moan, I snuggle back into the covers. My eyes fall shut, and I'm already half-asleep again.

My brain is still offline. It doesn't register this is goodbye, the dark pull of slumber too strong to resist.

Tiero kisses my forehead and whispers, "Go back to sleep. A presto, angelo mio."

With one last lingering kiss on my lips, his hand slides out of mine, and somewhere in the distance, I hear a door shut.

Turning onto my side, I hug his pillow... it smells like him.

Hmm, I love his scent.

With a contented sigh, I drift off.



It's almost ten o'clock, and I'm ready to head to the airport. The front desk ordered a cab for me, and it should be here any

moment.

I haven't heard from Tiero, nor did I expect to.

He told me the next few days in Rome would be busy, and he wouldn't be able to talk to me.

Yeah, right, as if sending a message takes more than a few seconds.

I bet it was his way of letting me know that whatever was between us is now over. After I refused to stay longer, he's making a clean break.

I should be grateful... but I'm not.

Far from it.

I want to cry.

I hated waking up alone, so used to having his strong arms holding me against his body. It's crazy how quickly I got used to it. And how will I go to sleep at night not having him with me? I don't even want to think about it.

*I'm so fucked!*

After Tiero left, I slept like a rock, shattered after our sex marathon.

God knows when I'll ever have sex like this again, and I wanted to make the most of it. So did he. Hence, we kept going past the point of exhaustion.

I have no idea how many times I came. I lost count after the fourth orgasm, but my throat is raw from all the moaning and

screaming. The other hotel guests got one hell of a concert last night. I'm surprised no one knocked on our door to shut us up.

When I tried to get out of bed this morning, my body was so stiff I could hardly move. I stood under the hot shower stream for half an hour to get some movement back, wishing the entire time for a deep bathtub to soak in. But that will have to wait till I get home.

Do I have any wine in the fridge? And, more importantly, ice cream?

I can't remember. Best to get some more on the way home from the airport, just to be on the safe side. I'll drown and eat away my sorrows with Rhia tonight.

Why did I let Tiero slip out this morning without a proper goodbye?

I'm furious with myself, but I was half-comatose when he left. He's half to blame for that, of course, but now I'll never get a second chance to tell him how much this past week meant to me.

Scanning my room, I gather all my things and put them next to the door. My gaze falls onto the lilies he sent me almost a week ago. They hang limp and dying on their stalks.

*Just like me.*

When I received those flowers, I could have never imagined the days that followed. Or how much Tiero would get under my skin.

He's stirred feelings I've not experienced before.

The moment I laid eyes on him, I was overcome with lust for the man. And it only grew from there. It will be unrivaled for some time, maybe for the rest of my life.

The connection we shared was the biggest surprise of all. Right from the beginning, he felt so familiar.

He rocked my world the day I met him. And every day I spent with him since he's buried himself that much deeper into my soul.

I'm in love with Tiero.

There. I've admitted it to myself.

Could I have really fallen in love with him that quickly, though?

I guess Rhia fell in love with Lex just as fast... so it is possible. And look where they are now. They made it work.

*Shit.*

What if this really was it for me, and I blew it?

Then again, there's a good chance all these emotions are just from the constant orgasm-high of the last week.

Perhaps I'm only seeing what I want to see? Wanting there to be more to make me feel better about having a holiday fling—it's possible, right?

Time will tell what my true feelings for him are. And returning to my normal life will help sort it all out.

A tear rolls down my cheek, and I wipe it away angrily.

*No crying, Ella!*



I need to get out of here. Where is that damn taxi?

I walk onto the terrace while I wait for the call from reception, my thoughts drifting to Tiero once more.

I want to hear his voice or read a message that says he's thinking of me, too. Phone in hand, I hover over the keyboard.

*Me: Thank you for a wonderful time this last week. Sorry I couldn't stay awake this morning to say goodbye properly. I will always remember you.*

I want to add, *'I miss you already. You're all I can think about. I've fallen in love with you.'*

But of course, I don't.

While it's true, it's also pathetic and needy. This was a vacation fling. I remind myself of that for the hundredth time today.

I knew it. He knew it. Everybody knew it.

I'll be fine once I land in Dublin and get engrossed in my own life again, and not some fantasy life where I'm the queen of a private island, for God's sake.

Still, my finger hovers over the send button.

*Don't do it!*

If he wanted to be in touch, he'd be in touch.

He was relentless in his pursuit of me, so his silence speaks volumes.

I bite my lip as I stare at my message—my heart and my mind at odds.

A noise on Rhia's balcony makes me look up. A raven has landed on the tiles beside a dove that's perched on a sun lounger.

I study them. What an odd combination.

Two birds from different worlds... just like Tiero and I.

They could never work together.

As if realizing this too, the dove quickly steps away. It startles the raven, and it flies off.

*Fucking brilliant.*

I let out a dejected sigh, on the brink of tears once more.

Thanks, universe, but I didn't need the reminder.

With a heavy heart, I delete what I've typed and put my phone in my pocket.

Maybe I should delete his number? No, that would be premature.

There's still no call from the front desk. Perhaps it's best to wait downstairs. Too many memories of last night confront me in this room.

Before I turn to leave, I inhale the fresh sea air one last time and admire the view.

Wow, what an amazing time I had here. Sicily turned out to be a complete surprise package.

I move through the room, making sure I haven't forgotten anything. My eyes tear up again when I see the dead flowers, and I grab a tissue from my purse to wipe my nose.

Good thing I'm traveling alone. I'm in no mood for company.

I stare into space as I take the elevator to the lobby. With just me inside, it's rather spacious, and I hate to admit it, but I kind of miss having three testosterone-laden men surrounding me.

When I get to the lobby, I can see a man in a driver's uniform waiting by the door, and I make my way to him. Why didn't they ring me?

"Miss O'Neil?" he asks in a heavily accented voice. I nod, and he takes my suitcase and bag and leads the way.

Instead of a taxi, a tinted town car is parked by the curb. Hmm, perhaps the hotel has an arrangement with a car service?

The driver deposits my luggage in the boot and opens the back-seat door. I slide in, and the door closes behind me.

To my surprise and utter shock, someone is already sitting there.

A well-dressed, older gentleman with a serious expression faces me.

"Who are you?" I stammer.

An immediate sinking feeling hits my stomach, and my entire body goes cold.

Something is seriously wrong.

I need to get out of this car... NOW.

I turn to open the door, but even before my hand touches the handle, a hand comes around my waist, pulling me away. I let out a scream, but nobody on the outside seems to notice.

The driver starts the car, and within seconds, we pull out into the street.

I struggle to break free, but the man's grip on me is firm.

Full body tremors seize every part of me.

Primal screams fill the space in the car... my screams. They sound foreign to my ears, the panic making my voice unrecognizable.

*I have to get away!*

Adrenalin pumps through my body. Amidst my ear-splitting screaming, I gasp for air.

I can't breathe.

My pulse is racing, and the sound of my heartbeat thrashes in my ears.

I lash out, but he restrains my arms easily—he's so much stronger than me. He pulls out a cloth and holds it over my mouth and nose.

*NO!!!*

I don't want to breathe in the vile scent, but I'm hyperventilating. My hands and feet begin to tingle as if stabbed by hundreds of needles. Then they go numb.

*Oh my God, oh my God, oh my God.*

What should I do?

Panic, raw and primal, is consuming me.

My head is shrouded in a dark haze. I feel dizzy.

Black spots cloud my vision. I'm going to be sick.

*This can't be happening!*

Someone is talking to me in Italian... it sounds soothing...  
but it fades in and out...

It's the last thing I remember.

Then my world is swallowed up by darkness.

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## AFTERWORD

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Ella's story will continue in Nights At Sea – Book Two of the Triple Flame Trilogy.

Pre-order it here <https://mybook.to/nightsatsea>

Want a sneak peek of Chapter One? Subscribe to my [newsletter](#), and see how the story continues.



Enjoyed Sicilian Sunset?

Please take a minute and leave a review on [Amazon](#) and [Goodreads](#).

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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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I'm only getting started with this trilogy... there's so much more to come, and I am soooo excited about it. Ella's story is what put me on my writing journey nearly two years ago.

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I love you all so very much!!!

To my mum and dad, who believed that I could do this all along—thank you.

Thank you to my awesome beta reader team who's been cheering me on, especially the Crazy Lady, Yvette, Gigi, and

BJ Alphas. So grateful!

A big thank you to my PA, Sherri, the bloggers and reviewers who share news about my books and who helped me spread the word. I couldn't do this without you.

And to TL Swan and all the wonderful authors in the Cygnet Inkers—thank you. You're such an inspiration and always ready to help, advise, and support—it's invaluable and I'm so happy to be part of this awesome group with such an amazing mentor.

And last but not least, a big thank you to you, the readers. Thank you for taking a chance on a newbie author. The wonderful messages you're sending my way touch my heart.

You are the reason I'm writing these stories. I want to bring joy to the world, let love and life win, and leave you with a smile on your face.



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## THE ESCAPE SERIES

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Each book in *The Escape Series* is set in a different, beautiful location around the world.

Let's escape together.

### **Highland Escapade**

Catch up on how Rhia and Lex met, and their steamy journey through the Scottish Highlands.

[Highland Escapade](#) is Book 1 in the Escape Series, and will make you laugh and swoon.

#### **Blurb:**

Being swept off my feet wasn't on the itinerary for this trip. Yet in the blink of an eye, I find myself cradled in the strong arms of a hot as hell stranger.

My best friend Ella and I are on our way to a wedding... but we don't make it. Don't ask why, you'd only roll your eyes – I know I do.

We set out on a Highland adventure instead and get more than we bargained for... including one mysterious Scot who always appears just in the nick of time to save my butt.

He's temptation personified, with a voice that has me melting on the spot.

I want him, I want him, I want him... but he keeps disappearing despite our mutual attraction. Maybe that's a blessing and not a curse, for no man has ever made me lose my head the way Alexander Dougal does, and I don't like feeling so out of control.

Our flirting develops into a battle of wills over who will cave first, and at the end of this trip I'm left with the looming question...

What will happen after this holiday tryst is over?



### **The Triple Flame Trilogy**

Well, you're holding Book One in your hands. Ella's exciting Mediterranean adventure is only beginning and will continue in Nights At Sea.

I've got lots more in store for her – it's epic.

Each book will be released about six weeks apart so you won't have to wait too long to see where Ella's journey is taking her next.



### **Eero's Story**

Even though Eero had only a little role in Highland Escapade, I've fallen in love with the swoony Scandinavian, and he just has to have his own book.

His is a second-chance love story that sees him return home to Norway for Christmas.

Add his story to your [Goodreads](#) TBR today, and stay tuned for more details.



More books are planned in this series, taking us on trips around the globe. I can't wait to share these sexy stories with you.

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## KEEP UP TO DATE

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