

A SWEET ROMANTIC COMEDY

MY SECRET CELEBRITY



KRISTINE W. JOY

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Edited by Caitlin Lengerich.

*To the dreamers, the travelers, and the hopeless romantics. But especially to
the ones who have always wanted to eat their way through Italy...*

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CHAPTER ONE

Larisa

“Did he just ask us if we want pasta? Because I could *really* go for some spaghetti and meatballs right now!”

“Shhh, Emmy ... no,” I whisper. “He’s just welcoming us to the Mare Verde Hotel, that’s all,” I say, suddenly grateful for the very limited Italian I learned on the nine-hour plane ride over.

The man who greeted us in Italian is wearing a spotless, very bright, red uniform. He smiles widely and appears to chuckle under his breath before continuing in English. “Good afternoon, ladies, and welcome to the Mare Verde Hotel. My name is Enzo and I’ll be your personal butler for the duration of your stay. Please allow me to escort you to your rooms whenever you’re ready.”

Enzo gives a little bow to me and my two best friends—Emmy and Josephine—before settling himself a few steps further away to wait for us. I try my best to act casually and fit into this *extremely* expensive environment.

“Wow, talk about the royal treatment,” Emmy gasps. “So, *this* is what it’s like to be the wife of a billionaire, Jo?”

“I don’t know yet. The wedding isn’t for another month.” Jo shrugs. “But when I *actually* become Jacob’s wife, I’ll let you know.” She winks. “Until then, let’s celebrate and enjoy our time on the Amalfi Coast, shall we, ladies?”

“Your wish is our command. You’re the bride, after all, and as your bridesmaids, we’re obligated to do everything you say!” I laugh.

“Yes, and I’m sure that three weeks on a luxury vacation at the most exclusive hotel in Italy is truly an effort on your part,” Jo jokes.

We keep up the banter as we look around the large and impressive private courtyard of the Mare Verde Hotel, which is even more luxurious than I imagined. It’s a vision of paradise with its lush green lawns and vibrant flowers. There’s not even a car in sight, which makes it feel especially exclusive.

“It feels like we’re in our own little world out here,” I say.

“Because we basically are!” Jo replies. “Jacob said this hotel is invitation only. It attracts billionaires, millionaires, politicians, and high-level business people, since it’s not open to the public.”

I reach into my bag and pull out my camera, quickly snapping away at anything that catches my eye—a pot containing a bouquet of bright pink roses; a stone bench overlooking the courtyard; an old statue set off in the corner.

It’s been a dream of mine, for as long as I can remember, to photograph Italy.

The thought of getting lost in the winding Italian streets with nothing but my camera and a sense of adventure makes my heart flutter with excitement. Since the moment Jo told us she wanted to have her bachelorette party in Italy, I’ve been researching and preparing for this trip. The list of things I want to do, see, and photograph is nearly endless. And I’m determined to enjoy every moment of this once-in-a-lifetime bachelorette trip with my best friends.

“Look, there’s a fountain over there,” Emmy points out, her voice filled with excitement as she hurries over to it.

We follow her, taking turns posing for pictures beside the beautiful Venetian-style sculpture. The bubbling water adds an extra romantic touch.

“Shall we allow Enzo to show us to our rooms?” Jo asks.

“I’d love nothing more.” Emmy beams.

A sleek, black limousine pulls me from my thoughts as it comes to a slow

halt just a stone's throw away from me. Its darkened, tinted windows reflect the Italian midday sun, giving no clues about who might be inside.

"There are no other cars in this private courtyard. How come *this* person is allowed in?" Emmy scoffs.

"Hmm ... I'm assuming it must be someone important—or someone very rich. One thing I've learned over the course of my relationship with Jacob is that high-profile people don't usually like to walk, or park, on the street like regular people." Jo shrugs.

"What about the rules?" Emmy asks, naively.

Both Jo and I turn to Emmy and laugh.

As I turn my attention back to the limousine, I see another butler in a spotless red uniform rushing to open the back door. Then, slowly and deliberately, as if he knows that he's being watched, a tall and imposing Italian man emerges from the backseat.

And I am *stunned* by what I see.

This man looks as if the golden light of the sun itself, and the salt of the Mediterranean Sea has been rubbed into his skin. His shiny, dark hair, perfectly and yet casually arranged in poised waves, looks as if he's done nothing but bathe in olive oil since the day he was born. Such handsome features, such a perfectly chiseled face. He looks like every photographer's dream model—but better—somehow.

I've never seen a more handsome man. At least not in real life...

The impossibly confident, yet charming way in which he carries himself, paired with his Mediterranean allure, is so strong that I feel I *have* to capture it on film.

"Wow ... who is *he*?" Emmy asks as I raise my camera and start taking some candid photos of the stranger.

"I have no idea who he is, but I bet he's someone important," Jo replies.

"Well, yeah. But isn't *everyone* here important?"

"Are *we* important?" Jo laughs.

"I suppose not, but your future hubby is," Emmy retorts.

"Which, I suppose means—"

"*Hey! Ma che stai facendo, ai???!*" Suddenly, the peace of the hotel's private courtyard is interrupted as the mysterious man starts to yell in rapid Italian. "*Perche mi stai fotografando???!*"

The mystery man is obviously angry ... and his anger appears to be directed at *me*.

I freeze with the camera still firmly placed against my face and just stare at him, startled by his reaction. Behind me, my friends are equally shocked.

“*Tu! Sto parlando con te! Sei sorda?*” He waves his arms in my direction in a very theatrical way.

His voice is so loud that I feel stunned to my core.

Then, he turns to several people from his entourage and addresses them. “*Cos’è questa? Mi hai detto che questo è un hotel privato! Che nessuno mi disturbera qui!*”

I have absolutely *no* idea what’s happening or what he’s yelling about, but several people from the hotel’s management have now emerged into the courtyard and are speaking to him, trying to calm him down.

“It was a really bad idea to not learn any Italian,” Jo whispers as we all watch the heated interaction between the man and the hotel employees.

“Even if you *had* learned Italian, do you think you could have understood whatever ... this is?” I ask, gesturing toward the angry man. “I don’t know about you, but I was focused on learning how to say hello, goodbye, and pass the pasta...” My voice trails off as I begin to feel deeply unsettled by the trouble I seem to have caused.

Maybe I can try to fix this.

I break away from my friends and approach the Italian man and his group. “I’m sorry ... Sir? I feel like I’ve offended you by taking pictures. But I promise, I didn’t mean any harm by it. I was only—”

“American!” he interjects, turning to me with a very haughty expression on his face. “You’re American? Wow! That’s even worse!” he says in perfect English, with a pronounced Italian accent.

“Excuse me?”

“I was told that I would have *complete* privacy at this hotel. And yet, here you are! An American, taking *my* picture! I’ve barely gotten out of my car and here you are!”

“Sir, I think there’s been a misunderstanding. I definitely don’t want to disturb your privacy. Look, I saw you and I just wanted to—”

“I don’t care what you wanted! Get out of here!” he snaps. “Take pictures of trees, of ... of ... what do you call them in English? Oh yes, squirrels! Why do you have to take *my* picture?” he continues yelling at me.

I turn around and look at my friends, who are just as baffled as I am.

“Look, I really think this is just a huge misunderstanding, and I’d really appreciate it if you could stop yelling at me.”

He does stop, but only for a moment.

“You know, you have some nerve. Why did you come here?” He continues his rant, looking at me from head to toe.

“I’m sorry? What do you mean—*why* did I come here? It’s a free country!” I reply, starting to feel indignant.

“Why did you come. To. *This*. Hotel?” he spells it out for me as if *I’m* the one who doesn’t speak English. “And why are you taking my picture?”

“Are you joking right now? Is this *your* hotel, or something? I’ve been trying to tell you why I was taking your picture, but you wouldn’t let me get a word in. Look, you had just gotten out of the ... the limousine or whatever, and I thought that ... umm ... the car looked nice,” I lie. “Anyway. It had *nothing* to do with *you*! But you refuse to understand that and, instead, you keep yelling at me!”

What started as an apology has now turned into a full-blown argument. My friends, as well as the hotel’s staff, step in.

“Signore Gianluca, please ... this young lady meant no harm, sir,” I hear one of the employees mention him by name for the first time.

“Yeah. Calm down,” Jo interjects. “Sure, she was wrong to take your picture without asking for permission first, especially since this is a private resort. I’ll give you that. But you don’t have to fly off the handle like that.”

“Of course,” the hotel employee agrees. “And, if you want, Signore Gianluca, we can ask that she kindly delete the photos.”

He grunts something in Italian and then slams the limousine door, ending the conversation. Then, without saying another word, he walks away, his entourage following closely behind.

I watch—still trying to process everything that just happened—and notice, as he’s about to enter the hotel, he puts on his sunglasses and runs a hand through his perfect hair.

“What just happened?” Emmy asks, shaking her head.

“I have no idea. I mean ... I guess he was right. I shouldn’t have taken his photo without asking for permission. I really don’t know what came over me. But still ... I’ve *never* had someone go off like that and yell at me before. Did any of you even understand the things that he was saying to me in Italian?” I ask.

“Not a single word...”

“No.”

“Who do you think he is?” Emmy asks as we finally make our way inside

the hotel.

“If I had to guess, I’d say he’s probably some kind of businessman or magnate of some sort. Based on his reaction when he saw you taking his photo, it’s obvious he doesn’t want people to know he’s here,” Jo offers.

“Or he’s having an affair,” Emmy says as we follow Enzo to the elevator that takes us to our private suites.

“What?” Jo and I say in unison.

“Yeah! Think about it, guys. Some super handsome, hunky Italian guy at a luxury resort, all alone. Maybe he’s here to see his mistress and he didn’t want his picture taken!”

“You have a wild imagination, Em.” Jo chuckles.

“Maybe he’s a spy working for the government! And he’s here to investigate some kind of secrets!” Emmy continues.

“Yeah, I’m sure that’s *exactly* what he’s doing,” Jo says sarcastically. “What do you think, Larisa?” she asks.

“I have no idea, but I’ll tell you this. Regardless of who that guy is, that kind of behavior doesn’t fly with me.”

CHAPTER TWO

Gianluca

“Are you alright, Gianluca?” my personal assistant asks me as we step inside the hotel suite.

“I’m fine, Cara. Who *was* that woman, anyway? And why was she taking my photo? You assured me that I’d have complete privacy at this hotel. That’s all I want.”

“And you have it, I promise.” She smiles and I can see just how tired she is, which makes me ease up a little, but I still don’t feel any better about the whole situation.

“How is it possible that someone was taking photos of me as soon as I set foot outside the limousine? You know how much I’ve been trying to avoid all this—press and publicity and ... paparazzi. They’ve been hunting me down ever since I broke up with Elena. And here they are, once again!”

“Please don’t get yourself worked up again. It’s not good for your skin.”

“My skin? That’s all you people ever seem to care about—the way I look and nothing else. I’m not allowed to express any kind of emotion unless it’s on screen and in front of a camera.”

I crash onto a nearby sofa and watch as the people from my crew and the hotel staff bring in all my luggage.

“Be careful with that suitcase. It has all his scripts!” Cara chastises one of the hotel employees. Then she turns to me. “Gianluca, you *will* read through these scripts, won’t you?”

“Are you being serious? I’ve been working like crazy this past year. I filmed three movies. Back-to-back. Isn’t working while you’re on holiday supposed to be bad for your skin?” I sigh.

She stares at me, blankly.

“Not to mention, that whole thing with Elena and how *awful* she was,” I add.

“Yes, I understand. But you broke up with Elena, and now everything is *fine*,” she replies, trying to brush the whole thing under the rug, just like she always does.

Cara hasn’t admitted it out loud, but I’m convinced she doesn’t want to pick a side because she and Elena became friends over the course of our relationship—it’s girl code, or something.

“So ... I’m just supposed to forget about it, then? Act like nothing happened?”

“You’re very good at acting. You’re one of the best actors in the industry.” She smiles.

I get up from the couch and take off my sports coat, relieved to finally be in the privacy of my hotel room. It’s incredibly hot in the afternoon sun, in July, but I *had* to wear it, so it feels good to finally throw it on the floor and let myself get comfortable.

“Don’t do that!” I immediately hear Cara’s voice from behind me. “Prada paid you a lot of money to wear their clothes in public—you know that,” she snaps, bending over to pick up the sports coat.

“I’m not in public right now, am I?” I rebuff before stepping out onto the terrace to try to get away from her.

I just need a moment of peace.

I take a deep breath and look around. My private suite has a gorgeous view of the Amalfi hills. In the near distance, I can see the Mediterranean Sea—a calm and cool green—sparkling wildly in the sun.

“Gianluca, you haven’t answered me about the scripts,” Cara carries on the conversation even though I’ve made it more than clear that I’d like to be left alone now.

Unfortunately for me, she has other plans.

“What scripts?” I play dumb.

She joins me on the terrace, not giving me a moment of peace or an ounce of personal space.

Story of my life.

“I brought along an entire stack of new scripts. Carlo sent them over last week and he wants you to read them all as soon as possible and choose a few movies that you’re interested in.”

I run my fingers through my hair, more out of frustration than anything else, and try to keep my cool.

“Cara, I appreciate that you’re trying to ensure work gets done. However, I’m on vacation—a vacation I *desperately* need. As you know, I did three movies last year. I need some kind of break. And Carlo is *my* manager—he knows that better than anyone else. I came here so I could simply ... I don’t know ... sleep, eat, go to the beach, to the spa. Why can’t I just do that?”

“You can. You can do anything you want. You’re the star!” she repeats the same lines that she’s been telling me for years. “But, in the meantime, while you go to the beach and to the spa, you can also read some scripts. Is that so difficult?” I watch her as she goes back inside and deposits a large stack of scripts on the coffee table. “There! Whenever you feel like it. Take your time!”

The illusion of choice. The illusion of freedom.

I turn around and focus on the view of the hills sprawling in front of me. The air is crisp and fragrant, and smells of salt and the sea.

“Gianluca...”

I groan.

This woman simply won’t quit.

She joins me once more on the terrace and, in a rare moment of transparency, begins explaining the situation to me. “You’re in a very good place right now, career-wise. You’re the most famous actor in all of Italy and you’re on your way to becoming one of the most well-known actors in the world ... but only if we play our cards right. Gianluca, you actually have a chance to transition from Italy to Hollywood—to star in *American* movies—and maybe win an Oscar; a Golden Globe. But you have to apply yourself. Now is not the time to back down. You’ve got to put in the work. Isn’t that what you want?”

Honestly, I have no answer to that question. But I do know that I could

never tell her what really lies within my heart. Because that's not at all what she wants to hear.

Instead, I smile and nod.

"I'll read the scripts. You can call Carlo and tell him to stop worrying. I'll be sure to choose a few movies that interest me by the end of my retreat here on the Amalfi Coast. And as soon as I do, he can contact the casting directors for auditions and whatnot."

"Perfect! Oh, that's going to make Carlo so happy!"

She leaves the terrace to search for her purse and her phone, no doubt to call my manager immediately. In her wake, her words replay in my mind.

"Carlo will be so happy."

Carlo, but not me.

"Sir, we're all finished with your luggage. Everything is properly stored and ready to go. Is there anything else we can do for you at the moment?" the bellhop asks as he approaches me.

"No, thank you so much. I really appreciate it."

The bellhop smiles as I tuck a one hundred euro note in his hand.

"Wait, one more thing. Earlier, when I came in, there was a woman in the private courtyard. She was taking some photos of me as I got out of the limousine. Who is that woman? Is she a paparazzo or a journalist?"

"No, sir, I don't think she is. The lady is American, she's here with some friends on vacation."

"Is that so? Then why was she taking pictures of me as soon as I got out of the car? Who does that?"

"I'm not sure, sir."

"Look, I think this woman might be an American journalist—here to write some kind of article or exposé on me."

The bellhop looks at me with a blank expression on his face. "Sir? What do you mean?"

"I think she was sent here by a publication ... maybe Vogue ... or, I don't know ... maybe some kind of gossip magazine or website. Or some sort of social media account? She obviously knows who I am. She probably knows about my breakup with Elena and now she wants to find out the 'dirt.'" I use the traditional air quotes around the word "dirt" because, in reality, there is no dirt to dig up. The breakup between Elena and I was very straightforward. "Whoever she is, I just can't believe she already found me. These so-called journalists make me so mad! Why can't they just leave us alone?"

“I don’t know, sir,” the bellhop says, but it’s obvious he has no idea how to help.

“Anyway. I was told that my retreat at this hotel would be completely private and safe—that I wouldn’t have to hide my identity. I was told I could relax here. Surely you can understand why I’m concerned that there’s an American journalist on the hunt for ‘dirt’ about me and my awful ex.”

“Would you like to switch rooms, sir?” the man asks.

“Switch rooms? No ... What ... what would that achieve?”

“The Mare Verde Hotel provides suites and luxury accommodation for special guests who want privacy and—” He starts reciting the hotel’s booklet text, which he’s obviously memorized.

“That ... will be all,” I politely interject, just wanting to be alone. “Thank you.”

Everyone except my assistant makes their way out of my hotel room. It’s finally (almost) quiet and peaceful.

“What did Carlo say?” I ask her.

“He’s happy that we’ll be having some new projects soon. And he hopes you take care of yourself and relax while you’re here.”

“I will. Oh, and Cara, can you please find out more about that woman from earlier?”

“What about her?”

“I really think that she might be an American journalist. Can you please find out who she is?”

“Mmm ... sure, I guess. But I have to say, I think you’re reading a little too much into the whole thing. This hotel does background checks on their guests. You know that. They don’t allow anyone in unless they’re ... well ... connected and have a very good reason to stay here. This is not a hotel for regular people—it’s for business people, billionaires, politicians, and other celebrities, just like you.”

“I know that. But she could be working undercover.”

Cara starts laughing at just how ridiculous my idea sounds.

“Why are you laughing? It’s possible! Regardless, I need you to find out whatever you can about her.”

“If she was working undercover, she wouldn’t have exposed herself to you so openly. At most, she’s a fan. Despite the fact that cameras aren’t exactly welcome here, she probably couldn’t help herself. But ... maybe there’s another reason...” her voice trails off.

I lean in, extremely curious about what Cara has to say.

“What? What other reason could there be?”

“Well ... you haven’t stopped talking about her since we arrived. Perhaps the reason you want me to find out more about her is not just because you think she’s an American journalist here to spy on you and write an exposé. Perhaps it’s because you think she’s ... attractive.” She grins.

“Ridiculous! Attractive? I didn’t even *see* her that well!”

“You’ve been obsessing over her every minute since we came—making up theories in your head and concocting scenarios. Sure, maybe she’s undercover. Or, maybe you just can’t stop thinking about her.”

I shake my head. “That’s just ... Look, all I’m worried about is my privacy. Why is that so hard for you to believe?”

“Fine. You’re worried about your privacy. But, may I remind you that you came here to swim, eat, go to the gym, and read some scripts? Even if she is an undercover journalist, what could she possibly write about? What brand of soap you use?” she says wisely.

“That’s not the point...”

She looks around for her purse before shoving her sunglasses and two cell phones inside. She points once more to the stack of scripts on the hotel coffee table. “Please don’t forget about the scripts. You don’t have to start right away. Just ... don’t forget.”

“How could I possibly forget? You’re going to remind me every single day of this vacation.”

“Well, that’s my job. And try to get some rest, okay? Otherwise, your face will look all puffy.”

“Thanks,” I say, my voice laced with sarcasm.

“Come on, don’t be like that. What if your undercover American journalist takes a photo of you *not* looking like the most gorgeous Italian actor that you are?” she teases me as she heads towards the door to leave my room.

“Yeah, that’s very funny. But you’ll see I’m right. There’s something about this woman. I can’t quite put my finger on it, but there’s *something* about her. And I’m going to get to the bottom of this.”

“Gianluca, is there really something about this woman? Or do you wish there was something about her so that you have an excuse to discover it?”

CHAPTER THREE

Larisa

“I swear, that was the best sleep I’ve gotten in months,” Jo says as she stretches lavishly in her seat, cracking her knuckles softly.

The warm daylight seeps into the cozy cafe as the aroma of freshly baked croissants fills the room. Jo is feeling refreshed, while I struggle to hide my fatigue from our exhausting flight.

“The wedding has been taking my last ounce of strength, energy, and, honestly, sanity,” she confesses.

“But what about the wedding planner? Isn’t he taking care of everything?” I ask as we wait for the waiter to arrive.

“Yes, of course, but I’m still responsible for choosing and approving everything. Not to mention, this wedding has turned into a much more *serious* affair than I originally thought.”

“How so?”

“Well, we recently tallied up the RSVPs, and it turns out, there will be close to four hundred people in attendance.”

“Four hundred?!” Emmy gasps. “Meanwhile, I barely know four people...”

she jokes.

“A lot of them are Jacob’s business partners or potential business partners. You know, other millionaires and billionaires that he wants to do business with.”

“Oh, so this is an opportunity for him to network, then,” I reply.

“Absolutely.”

“And how do you feel about that?” Emmy asks her.

“Well, in the beginning, I was a little taken aback. I never imagined I’d have a wedding of this scale, but Jacob explained that it would be rude not to invite them—they’d see it as an insult. So, I’ve gotten used to the idea. And I can’t wait to marry him—he’s the love of my life. It’s just that, now, I feel like I have to pay attention to every single detail and make sure that the wedding is picture-perfect. Not just for us, but for every celebrity, billionaire, millionaire, businessperson, magnate, and oligarch that will attend.”

“Wow ... the underbelly of marrying a billionaire. That’s fascinating.” Emmy smiles.

“It’s a whole different world. But I think wedding planning in general is stressful...”

“You’re right. That’s all the more reason to enjoy this vacation!” I exclaim.

“Absolutely. Thank you so much, girls, for coming. You have no idea how much this means to me,” Jo says.

“Of course! Thank you for bringing us to Italy,” both Emmy and I agree.

Jo smiles. “Don’t thank me. This was all Jacob’s doing.”

“He really is the MVP, isn’t he? I just can’t believe you bumped into that perfect specimen of a man on a sidewalk.” Emmy laughs.

“I wish I could meet my soulmate on the sidewalk.” I sigh.

“Hey, you never know. Maybe you’ll meet an Italian man who will sweep you off your feet.” Jo wiggles her eyebrows. “A lot can happen in three weeks.”

“Well, if the men around here are anything like that guy from yesterday, I don’t want one.” I laugh.

“Maybe don’t snap their picture before getting their name next time. You might have better luck,” Emmy jokes.

I roll my eyes. “Yeah, yeah. Lesson learned.”

“Well, girls, we’ve got three whole weeks to spend here on the Amalfi Coast. What do you want to do? Do you have anything specific in mind?” Jo asks.

Boy, do I ever.

“I don’t know about you, but I did some research back home and found about a million things I want to try,” I reply eagerly. “Let’s see, there’s yoga on the Amalfi hills. I desperately want to go to the hotel’s spa. Oh, and Pompeii, of course! There’s also this amazing little town called Vietri sul Mare that I just can’t wait to photograph. It’ll be an incredible addition to my portfolio. I’d love to take some scuba diving lessons on the Island of Capri—I talked to one of the hotel staff members last night and he told me that they offer private lessons for some guests who are interested—and I definitely am. I’d really like to take a boat trip to the Blue Grotto and...” I stop talking and look at my friends who are now giggling as if I’m a comedian on a rant. “What? Why are you two laughing at me?”

Jo looks at me with an amused expression. “Larisa, do you think we’ll have enough time to do all that?” She chuckles.

“Hey, I’m just excited. We’ve got three weeks here, right?” I shrug.

“Yeah, but we also need to factor in some downtime for relaxing and enjoying the views,” Emmy chimes in.

“We can enjoy the views while scuba diving.” I smirk. “What did *you* ladies have in mind, then?”

“I, for one, want to sleep in, have breakfast on the balcony, read a book or two by the pool, lounge around at the beach, and maybe take a stroll at sunset,” Jo replies.

“And *my* only plan is to eat my weight in pasta, pizza, and gelato,” Emmy adds with a grin. We all burst out laughing at her comment.

“Okay, well I’ve dreamed of coming here since I was a little girl, and I want to make the most of it. I’m not just going to lounge around all day. We can do that at home.”

“There’s nothing wrong with wanting to explore. But don’t you want to relax, too? Spend some time on the beach? This hotel offers private beaches. You can even sunbathe in the nude for the perfect tan. You deserve some time off, Larisa...” Jo says as she tries to flag down the waiter.

“But this *is* me taking time off. I also want to enjoy the time I spend here. And take some photos of these incredible places.”

“Good morning, ladies. What can I get you?” the waiter asks as he finally approaches our table.

“I’ll have the frittata with a side of fresh strawberries and a lesson in chilling out for my friend here,” Jo jokes.

But the waiter seems very confused.

“An order of ... chilling out? I’m not sure we have that on the menu, signora. Can I get you something else?”

“She’s joking,” I interject. “She has a problem with the fact that I don’t want to waste three weeks getting crispy on the beach while reading mystery novels and watching endless reruns of *Under the Tuscan Sun*. I’ll have the fresh cornetti alle mandorle and an espresso, per piacere. Grazie!”

“Molto bene, signorina.”

“Hey, *Under the Tuscan Sun* is the perfect movie to watch on this vacation!” Emmy injects. “It’s about Italy. It’s about a woman on vacation in Italy!”

“That’s exactly the point, Emmy. Why waste my time sitting on the beach watching a movie when I can just ... live that movie?”

The waiter smirks, and I just know that he’s been eavesdropping on our conversation this entire time. He turns around and assures us that he’ll be back with our order in no time.

“I suppose you’re right...” Jo finally agrees with me. “But, as fun as all that sounds, wedding planning has made me so tired. I kind of want to just sleep, eat, and relax for a while.”

“I’m with you, Jo! I don’t necessarily feel tired, but I also don’t want to wander up and down these hills in the hot sun,” Emmy agrees.

“That’s totally fine. You two can unwind on the beach while I do all my activities and take photos for my portfolio. Then, once you’re feeling rested, you can join me. Maybe you girls can come with me to yoga or something.”

“That sounds like a plan to me!” Jo agrees.

“So, tell us, Larisa, are you gonna find a hot Italian man to accompany you on all these adventures of yours?” Emmy grins.

“Come on, you guys. You know I’m not like that.”

“Why not? You’re on vacation in one of the most romantic places on the planet. What’s stopping you?” Jo asks.

“You both know better than anyone that I don’t date casually. And let’s just say I *did* meet someone here—in this gorgeous, romantic place—there’s no way it would work. I’m only interested in finding a *real* relationship with someone I can trust, someone I can build a life with. What are the chances I’d find a man like that here? In three weeks, no less?”

The girls look at each other and exchange meaningful glances.

“What? What’s all that about?” I ask.

“We’d just hate to see you close yourself off and miss out on the adventure of a lifetime.” Emmy shrugs.

“You guys ... I think you’ve watched *Under the Tuscan Sun* one too many times. You really think that I’m going to waltz off and find a handsome Italian man who sweeps me off my feet? And then what? I’ll live the best love story of my life? Don’t be ridiculous.”

“Why not? Crazier things have happened.” Jo winks. “As long as you keep an open mind.”

“And an open heart!” Emmy adds.

“Sure...” I reply, my voice dripping with sarcasm. “And I bet that man is right around the corner waiting for me.”



“Alright girls, I’m going to go lie down in my room for a while, maybe take a nap,” Jo says and heads for her room.

“What? Already? It’s eleven in the morning. We just woke up two hours ago and barely finished breakfast!” I protest.

I watch in dismay as she heads down the hallway, nonetheless. “I’m sorry friend. But I really do plan on relaxing during this vacation. I want to be as rested and refreshed as possible when I go back to Boston.”

She disappears into her room without waiting for another word.

“What about you, Emmy? Anything planned for today?” I ask.

“I think I’d like to venture down to the beach. I need to find my bathing suit first, but I definitely want to start working on my tan. I want to be glowing when I return to Boston. Wanna come with me?”

“Hmm ... that does sound pretty nice, but I think I’m going to take a walk around and see exactly what this place has to offer. I might even take my camera and get some shots if I can. The light right now is gorgeous, and I want to take advantage of it.”

“Whatever floats your boat, hon,” she says before disappearing into her room, a little further down the corridor.

I make my way to my room to freshen up. After only a few minutes, I emerge from my hotel suite with my camera, a pair of sunglasses, and a straw hat that I’m hoping will protect me from getting too sunburned.

I walk over to the little passenger elevator at the end of my hallway. It’s much smaller than the main elevator, but Enzo suggested we use it if we want

to exit closer to the courtyard, which is where I'm headed.

The elevator takes a little while to arrive, so I adjust the camera around my neck and put on some lip balm.

Ding.

As the elevator doors finally open on my floor, my heart almost stops.

It's ... him.

The Italian man who made such a fuss about me taking his photo yesterday is standing in front of me. His massive frame almost takes up the entire space of the elevator and, for a moment, I hesitate, not knowing whether I should get in.

He reaches a hand out and keeps the doors open. "Are you getting in or ... what? You can wait for the next one if not."

His dismissive demeanor is a dead giveaway that—just like me—he hasn't forgotten about our little spat yesterday in the private courtyard. But I'm not going to give him the satisfaction of knowing his presence is getting under my skin.

Whatever this guy's problem is, I refuse to let him ruin my vacation with his sour mood.

"Yes, I'm getting in. Is there any room?" I push back.

He looks at me as if he doesn't understand the question. Still, he moves to the side and waves toward the empty space in the elevator—his gestures are large and theatrical as if he loves to perform. "Please ... how much room do you need?" he says emphatically.

I have to force myself not to roll my eyes at him before stepping inside the, much too small, elevator. I watch as the doors appear to close in slow motion. The atmosphere in this tiny elevator is tense—it feels like the air itself has turned into molasses.

I'm squeezed in so close to the mystery man that I can't help but smell his cologne. It's certainly expensive, no doubt about that. An intriguing mixture of orange blossom, vanilla, and ... tobacco? It makes my mouth water.

He clears his throat as if he wants to say something but no actual words come out.

I look up at him expectantly.

Up close, his tanned skin is so smooth, it almost looks unreal. I've never seen a man with such incredible skin before. His green eyes have golden flecks that radiate light and there's a small cluster of freckles on his nose that just makes me...

“Can I help you?” he asks briskly, pulling me out of my daydream.

That’s when I realize I’ve been staring at him.

“Huh? What? No ... I was ... What? No. Can you help me...”

I swallow and feel my hands shaking a little.

“Why don’t you take a picture? It’ll last longer. Isn’t that what you Americans say?” he quips, clearly referencing the incident that happened yesterday.

“Okay, look! Listen here, buddy. I have no idea who you think you are. But this is just ... I understand that I crossed a line by not asking your permission to take your picture, but I apologized *several* times. What more do you want me to do?”

“Really? Is that so? You have no idea who I am? Is that why you were taking pictures of me just as I was getting out of my car? What a lucky coincidence, American Jane! Unbelievable!”

“What? What are you even talking about?! Oh, wow ... you have a huge case of main character syndrome, you know that? Are you *really* under the impression that I traveled all the way from Boston, and paid all this money—well, not me, my best friend, but that’s not the point—just to take your picture? Wow! How self-centered are you?”

He looks down at me with a cold stare in his green-gold eyes.

“I’m not self-centered. I’m observant.”

“Observant? Buddy, you are not even ... you’re not even in the same *building* as the word observant! You’re very clearly mistaken...”

The elevator doors finally open and I depart, feeling haughty and all fired up.

“And you know what else? You’re just...” I turn around to face him so I can continue my rant. He grins at me and waves ironically as the elevator doors close and cut me off.

He did not...

I push the elevator button feverishly, probably ten times in a row. But nothing happens, of course. The elevator does not, magically, return so that I can speak my piece to this Italian man that irks me.

As I stand in front of the elevator, befuddled, I begin to realize just how foolish this row is. So, I shake it off, put on my straw hat, and head outside.

The sun and the perfect blue Italian sky immediately calm me down.

All that’s left now are his green-gold eyes that swim hauntingly in my mind and the smell of his cologne that, somehow, seems to linger on my skin.

CHAPTER FOUR

Gianluca

Finally ... a moment of peace.

Cara agreed I could have a few hours to myself, so long as I promised not to leave the resort. She doesn't seem to realize that I have *no* desire to leave the privacy of this hotel. Especially considering that my breakup with Elena—including the ridiculous lies and speculation—was on the front page of the tabloids for weeks on end. I simply want some peace and quiet ... and to feel like a normal human being for once, rather than a circus animal on display for the world's enjoyment.

I step into the shaded courtyard of the resort's cafe. The soft murmur of conversation and the clinking of glasses create a soothing ambiance that instantly eases my frazzled nerves. A gentle breeze rustles through the vibrant bougainvillea vines that adorn the perimeter, releasing their sweet fragrance into the air.

The waiter approaches, a young man with slicked-back hair and a warm smile. His name tag says "Marco."

"Good day, sir. What can I get you?"

“I’ll have a double espresso and a cornetto, please,” I say, taking a seat at one of the wrought-iron tables.

“Coming right up,” Marco replies, scribbling down my order and disappearing into the café.

As Marco bustles off, I take a moment to reflect on my encounters with the American woman, replaying that moment in the elevator—her fiery eyes challenging me, her voice dripping with sarcasm. It’s unusual for someone to stand up to me like that, to not be intimidated by my presence. I’ve grown used to people being in awe of me, and treating me with deference simply because of my wealth and status.

But not her.

No, she had the audacity to call me self-centered and even accused me of having “main character syndrome.”

The nerve.

Lost in my thoughts, I almost miss Marco returning with my espresso and a freshly baked cornetto. He places them delicately in front of me, then lingers for a moment.

“Is there anything else I can get for you, sir?” he asks, his voice polite but tinged with curiosity.

I look up at him, catching a glimpse of my own reflection in his eyes. “No, thank you, Marco. Just some time alone.”

He nods understandingly and retreats back to the café’s entrance.

The aroma of the coffee fills the air, instantly awakening my senses. I take a sip, savoring the rich flavor as it dances on my tongue, momentarily distracting me from my thoughts.

I lean back in my chair, feeling the coolness of the wrought iron against my skin as I take in my surroundings.

The courtyard is filled with an eclectic mix of guests, each engrossed in their own conversations or lost in the pages of a book.

There’s an elderly couple sitting nearby, their hands intertwined as they share stories and laughter. A group of friends, their voices filled with youthful exuberance, clink glasses in celebration. My eyes drift to a family seated at a table across from me. The parents, tired but content, watch their children as they chase each other through the courtyard, their laughter echoing in the air. It’s a scene so simple, yet filled with a profound sense of joy and love that tugs at my heartstrings.

I want that.

I long for a life filled with genuine connections and simple moments of happiness.

While I'm grateful for the opportunities I've had in my life, I can't help but feel tired of the superficiality that comes with my fame and fortune.

I want something real, something meaningful.

But as much as I desire it, it's starting to feel like an unattainable dream.

It's hard to imagine I'll ever find someone who sees beyond my career and truly knows me for who I am.

I shake my head and try to focus on the things I *do* have.

Like ... this rare moment of solitude.

It's a strange yet comforting feeling to be sitting amongst a crowd of people but not have to be in hiding. Nobody seems to care that I'm here, and for once, I'm not the center of attention.

The weight of fame and expectations slowly lifts off my shoulders.

But only for a moment.

I catch sight of an obnoxious straw hat in my peripheral vision.

It's *her*.

She's taking pictures, and, once again, her camera is pointed at *me*.

My irritation flares up again as I look at the American girl.

The audacity of this woman.

Is she deliberately trying to invade my privacy?

Everything in me wants to yell at her. But instead, I take a deep breath, reminding myself that reacting impulsively in front of all these people will only draw more attention to myself—which is the exact *opposite* of what I want.

I must handle this situation calmly and diplomatically.

I motion for Marco to come over, keeping my gaze fixed on the woman.

“Marco, could you please ask that woman to put her camera away? She seems to be taking pictures of me without my consent,” I say quietly, trying not to attract further attention.

Marco nods, understanding the gravity of the situation.

He approaches American Jane, his voice firm but polite as he addresses her. From where I'm sitting, I can see him gesturing toward me. Her face turns red as she hastily lowers her camera with a mixture of defiance and embarrassment.

I lock eyes with her, determined to make her understand the gravity of invading someone's privacy. She may be feisty, but I won't back down. Not

when it comes to protecting my own personal space.

Marco returns to his position at the cafe entrance, subtly keeping a watchful eye on the situation. I take the final sip of my espresso, trying to regain my composure.

As I observe her from across the courtyard, I can see the conflict in her eyes. She hesitates for a moment, then picks up her bag and begins to walk toward me, her hat flopping with each determined step.

It's almost ... cute.

In an ... annoying ... sort of way.

My heart rate quickens as she approaches. I brace myself for another confrontation, ready to defend my boundaries.

But rather than confront her again, I suddenly have a brilliant idea.

I think it's time to take a different approach.

With a mischievous gleam in my eyes, I hold up my phone ... and begin taking pictures of *her*.

Caught off guard, she freezes mid-stride, her eyes widening in surprise.

I snap a few candid shots, capturing her bewildered expression before lowering my phone.

A smirk tugs at the corners of my lips as I watch her process what just happened.

"What are you doing?" she stammers.

"Returning the favor," I reply smoothly, before leaning back in my chair and studying her with amusement.

Her cheeks flush a deep shade of pink and I can't help but chuckle.

"Tell me, American Jane, how does it feel to be on the other side of the camera lens?"

She crosses her arms over her chest and narrows her eyes at me, clearly unamused by my playful retaliation. "My name is *not* 'American Jane.' It's Larisa," she snaps. "And for the record, I was *not* taking your picture! I didn't even see you sitting there!"

"Oh, so you were just invading other people's privacy, then?" I challenge, my voice laced with sarcasm. "Or were you just trying to capture the essence of this ... how do you say ... mmm ... picturesque courtyard?" I add, gesturing around us.

She scoffs. "I was simply documenting the atmosphere, not invading anyone's privacy. I didn't even see you."

"Documenting the atmosphere, huh? Is that what they call it these days?"

Well, it seems we have *two* photographers in the courtyard now.” I smirk.

She opens her mouth to respond, but the words don’t come out. Instead, she simply stares at me, her expression caught between defiance and curiosity.

I tilt my head slightly as I observe her reaction.

The tension between us is palpable, a silent battle of wills that hangs in the air like a charged electric current.

I can’t help but feel a strange sense of exhilaration.

Finally, she breaks the silence. “You know, the world doesn’t revolve around *you* ... *sin—signore*.” She huffs, her breath escaping in an exasperated sigh, as she takes a step back from me.

I lean forward, closing the distance between us. “And yet, you seem to be quite fixated on me, Larisa.”

Her eyes widen—I can nearly see the wheels turning in her head as she grapples with her conflicting emotions.

“I—I’m not fixated on you,” she stammers, her voice betraying her attempt at composure. “And I wasn’t taking your picture. Now delete those photos of me, immediately.”

“Oh, I’m afraid I can’t just *delete* the photos.” I raise an eyebrow, my lips curling into a playful smile. “You see, I have a certain ... fondness for capturing authentic moments, and that expression on your face was quite captivating.”

Her cheeks flush as she glares at me. “You’re enjoying this, aren’t you? Making a mockery of me.”

I lean back in my chair, the smirk still lingering on my lips. “Mockery? No, dear. I find our banter quite entertaining,” I reply. “Besides, you didn’t seem to mind taking pictures without consent until the shoe was on the other foot.”

She crosses her arms over her chest, her eyes narrowing. “Two wrongs don’t make a right.”

“And yet, here we are.”

My words hang in the air, the atmosphere thick with tension.

Larisa’s eyes flicker with a mix of frustration and resignation, her lips purse into a thin line. It seems she has reached her breaking point.

“Look, I don’t have time for this.” She sighs. “I have better things to do than engage in this ridiculous back-and-forth with you.”

I watch as she turns on her heel and starts walking away, feeling satisfied that I finally got one over on the paparazzi.

These people need to understand how it feels to be under a constant microscope...

But as she walks away, I can't help but notice the way her auburn hair cascades down her shoulders in silky waves, the curve of her hips accentuated by the perfectly tailored dress she's wearing.

Despite the animosity that exists between us, there's something about her that draws me in.

Too bad she's only here to try to damage my reputation...

CHAPTER FIVE

Gianluca

“What did you find out about that woman, Cara?”

“What woman?” my assistant asks absent-mindedly as she goes through a long list of emails on my behalf.

“That woman we met when we arrived—the one who took photos of me. I ran into her on the elevator this morning ... and she was staring at me, and then again—”

“Everyone stares at you, Gianluca,” she interjects. “You’re the most famous man in Italy. Well ... except for the Pope.”

“I’m more famous than the Pope...”

She laughs and stretches a little. “I guess you’re right. Hey, wouldn’t it be great if you played the Pope in a movie?”

“Hmm ... I suppose. But you know they don’t really cast Italian actors in those roles. They’re usually American actors who can barely do a proper Italian accent.”

“Yeah, I know. I think we all saw that in the *House of Gucci* movie. Anyway, it would still be great,” Cara says, not taking her eyes off the

emails.

“So, about the woman...” I return to our previous conversation.

“You can rest assured that she’s not an American journalist writing an exposé on you...”

“How do you know?”

“Because I asked the receptionist about her. Which, I must say, did not come easy. They don’t give out personal information about guests, but they made a one-time exception given the circumstances that took place in the courtyard,” Cara says.

“And what did they say?”

“They said her name is ... hold on a second.” She checks the notes on her phone. “Larisa Thompson. Larisa, what a beautiful name. Anyway, she’s from America. Boston, to be more precise. And she’s here with two other women, Emma or Emmy—or something—and Jo. They’re here on a three-week holiday. One of them is getting married and the other two are bridesmaids. That’s everything I know!”

As I’m sitting on the couch, I lean forward, trying to see into my assistant’s notes.

“Which one of them is getting married?”

“Not your mystery woman. It’s one of the others. Don’t worry, Larisa is just a bridesmaid.”

I relax back into the couch. “That’s not what I meant. And I wasn’t worried. It was a simple question.”

“Oh, I know.” She grins. “But even if Larisa was the bride, when has a woman being married ever stopped her from falling in love with you?”

“Cara, sometimes I wonder if you say these things to me because you really believe them or because you’re paid to do so.”

She looks at me with a serious face. “Well, considering you were voted the most handsome man in the country last year, it seems like a natural conclusion. And given that I’ve worked alongside you for years, I can safely say, you’re *always* the center of attention. You have that ... *je ne sais quoi* that makes an entire room stare at you when you walk in. So, why would you think I’m lying?”

I watch her speak and wait for her to finish.

“What happens when all of this is gone?” I ask. “When it’s just ... me?”

She takes a few moments to think about my question.

“Then you won’t have to read all these scripts anymore,” she jokes,

obviously avoiding the answer.

“I see.” I don’t want to put pressure on her, so I change the subject. “So, this mystery woman is not a journalist, after all?”

“No, she’s just a bridesmaid on some sort of wedding getaway.”

“Hmm. I don’t buy it. Since when does *this* hotel allow random brides and her bridesmaids in? This still seems suspicious to me,” I say.

“I knew you would ask that, so I did some research of my own. Turns out the bride is marrying a billionaire.”

“Still, that doesn’t exclude the possibility that Larisa’s a journalist—a well-connected one.”

Cara throws her hands in the air in exasperation. “Gianluca, why don’t you just ask her out, already? Honestly. If you really want to find out more about her, that’d be the best way to do it. If she’s a journalist, you’ll know by the way she behaves and the types of questions she asks you—considering you’ve been dealing with journalists since you were a child, it should be pretty obvious. But if she’s not, you can *finally* put this matter to rest, once and for all. You really need to stop playing Sherlock Holmes on your holiday and get started on those scripts!”

“That might be the best idea you’ve had since we got here.” I grin.

“That’s why you pay me...”

“Hah! I knew it!” I point a finger at her comically and she bursts out laughing.

“Okay, this is too much fun and I still have about a million emails to go through. Everyone wants you. Photoshoots, interviews, commercials, movies, TV series ... and I’ve got to answer all these emails.”

“Yes, you truly have the harder job,” I mock.

She smirks, taking her laptop before heading back to her room—leaving me alone with my thoughts.

That’s when I remember the revenge photos I took of the American girl in the courtyard.

Amused with myself, I quickly reach for my phone and open the gallery, scrolling through the candid images I captured earlier.

I can’t help but chuckle as I look at Larisa’s surprised expression in each photo. It was all in good fun, of course. I have no intention of using the photos for anything other than a little harmless teasing.

But, as I continue scrolling, I find myself studying each image, taking note of the way her hair falls effortlessly around her face, and the glimpse of

vulnerability in Larisa's icy blue eyes.

It's a look that tells a story, a story that intrigues me more than I care to admit.

But one photo in particular stops me dead in my tracks.

It's a close-up of Larisa.

There's a ... softness to her features I hadn't noticed before.

I zoom in, mesmerized by the freckles that dot her nearly translucent cheeks. The way her lips curve into a subtle smile makes my heart flutter.

I find myself drawn to the photo, unable to tear my gaze away. It's as if her eyes are speaking to me, beckoning me closer, urging me to unravel the mystery behind them.

Suddenly, asking her out doesn't seem like such a bad idea after all.

But I'm jolted back to reality when I remember that she's most likely a journalist, here to dig up a story on me.

I can't let myself be fooled by her innocent smile and captivating eyes.

I've dealt with enough reporters in my career to know their tricks and manipulations.

I toss my phone aside, deciding to focus on my scripts instead.

Now is as good a time as ever.

I reach for the pile of scripts and select one at random.

Little Women

The Remake – All Male Version

Hardly believing this is a real project and half laughing to myself, I open the script and start reading.

The story of Jo, Amy, Beth, and Meg, the famous four March sisters. This remake will replace the female protagonists with male characters, renamed Jean (French actor), Andrew (British actor), Bob (American actor), and Mario (Italian actor).

"They couldn't come up with any more stereotypical names..." I mutter to myself.

The character of the mother, Marmee March is replaced by a father, played by Danny DeVito.

The love interest, Laurie, will be played by Pete Davidson.

Scene 1

Interior. Danny DeVito is cooking dinner. Mario and Bob enter.

I continue reading and amuse myself. My phone vibrates and I reach for it without checking who it is, still absorbed in this nonsensical script.

“Ciao, amore, it’s me!”

“What? Oh, Elena ... How many times have I asked you not to call me that?”

“Not to call you what, amore?”

I can immediately feel myself getting a headache and am tempted to hang up on her. “What do you want, Elena? Unless there’s something seriously wrong or you’re in danger or something, there’s no need for you to call me. There’s no reason for us to talk.”

“Amore, why are you being so mean?”

“I’m not being mean. We’re broken up. We’ve been broken up for a while now. And when I left, I specifically told you that I didn’t want you in my life anymore. But you don’t seem to be able to respect that boundary.”

“Amore, listen, I want to see you. I think we need to talk. We’ve been apart for far too long...”

“We’re not apart. We broke up months ago. There’s a difference. The fact that you can’t accept that, frankly, has nothing to do with me.”

“No, no ... wait. Please talk to me. I miss you so much, Gianluca!” She continues talking in a fake, high-pitched, childish voice that irritates the heck out of me. “Oh, and I love you like I’ve never loved anyone else! You know that!”

“No, I don’t know that.”

“But Gianluca...” she continues to whine. “We’re so good together. How can you possibly say no to us? We were ... a power couple! We were it! We were incredible! Everyone talked about us—the news, the magazines, social media. We were the couple everyone idolized! They wanted to be us! Don’t you miss that?”

This conversation is making me sick to my stomach.

As I listen to her, it becomes obvious that what she truly misses is not *me* but rather, she misses being seen in a relationship with me—because of my fame.

“No, we were not ... it. You cheated on me, remember? With my co-star, Fabio. On the set of the movie! How can you possibly say that we were such an incredible couple? It’s clear that all you care about is being with a famous man. Whether it was me or him—I don’t even think it mattered to you.”

She gasps. “That’s not true!” I can hear through the phone that she’s now forcing herself to cry.

“Please, stop. I went to acting school for years. I know when someone is

pretending. Your tears are not convincing. And, frankly, neither was Fabio...”

I throw in this last jab at Fabio admittedly because I still feel a little resentment toward him. But I’m entirely aware that Fabio owes me nothing.

He’s not the one who cheated on me.

Elena is.

“Fabio was ... a mistake. Gianluca, please, it’ll never happen again, I promise you! Please take me back. I’ve changed, you’ll see! We can be together, get married, have babies! Isn’t that what you want? You’ve always wanted a family. And we can do that!”

I can’t contain my laughter, knowing very well that none of what she’s saying is true.

“I’d have an easier time believing that aliens landed in the middle of Rome and are putting on a free show at the Coliseum. There’s no way I’ll ever trust you could be faithful to me again. Please don’t call me anymore.”

“No, no! Wait! You and I are meant to be together! Can’t you see how perfect we are for each other? Don’t be like this. Who are you going to find that’s better than me?”

“Someone who truly loves me for who I am. Not someone who sees me as their ticket to fame. Or money or notoriety. I want to be with someone who’s interested in me as a *person*, not someone who seeks validation from strangers on the internet like you do.”

“I’m an Instagram model! I have a career!” She raises her voice into the telephone.

“And I applaud you for it. But you can’t use me to sustain it. That’s not what I’m here for. You made a mess of our relationship. You had an affair with another actor, most likely because you hoped that would attract attention to you and your ... Instagram career. You know, somehow, that hurt more than the cheating itself.”

“What are you even talking about? I was thinking about you the whole time! I was—”

“Stop. You did it because all you care about is yourself. You didn’t care about me, my feelings, my life, my career, or the damage you were doing. Do you have any idea how hard my team worked to cover all this up? And how reluctant I am now when anyone comes near me? That’s all because of you and your vanity. And now you want to get back together? Absolutely not. That’s the best joke I heard today, and I was just reading a male version of *Little Women* when you called.”

“Gianluca, please ... I have to see you. One last time? For old times’ sake?” she begs. “That’s it, I’m coming to your house to—”

“No,” I interject. “I’m not even home, Elena. Please, just leave me alone. It’s time to move on.”

She pauses for a few moments. “I just hope ... good luck with your career, Gianluca.”

The phone disconnects and she’s gone.

I know, of course, that this type of thing happens. Maybe even more so when you lead the type of life I do.

Regardless, the conversation I just had with Elena leaves a bad taste in my mouth.

CHAPTER SIX

Larisa

“Where’s Emmy? We’re going to be late for yoga class,” I say to Jo as we both look around the courtyard. “There she is. What the heck is she wearing?”

Emmy is strolling casually along the path toward us sporting a neon green leotard with pink animal print. Her outfit is so bright in the blinding, midday Italian sun that it’s making my eyes water.

“Wow, that’s a ... look.” Jo grins and checks Emmy out from head to toe. “Where are you heading in this leotard, Em? The eighties?”

“Very funny, Jo. I got it from the hotel’s shop. The lady who works there said it looked great on me. Well ... I *think* that’s what she said. She was speaking Italian ... but she made a huge ‘OK’ sign with her hands, so...”

“So, you took her word for it?” Jo continues to tease Emmy.

“Stop ... she looks great. Well, she looks ... fine,” I interject before I can stop myself. “Come on girls, the yoga class starts in about half an hour and we still have all these stairs to climb.”

We set out and up the marked trail, marveling at the incredible vistas

opening everywhere in front of us. We enjoy the views of terrace after terrace. The terracotta roofs shine brightly in the Mediterranean sun and its cypress trees stand completely still in the hot blaze. At the bottom of this stupendous hill, the sea itself stirs a little, creating small waves of pure emerald.

“Why are there so many stairs?” Emmy complains after a while.

“Because it’s the coast? We’re literally on the side of a mountain right now,” I try to explain but I’m not sure she wants an explanation. Perhaps she’s just venting.

“I didn’t realize I was so out of shape. By the time we get to the yoga class, I’m going to be completely wiped out,” Jo adds.

“No, you’ve got this. Come on, we’re nearly there,” I encourage her.

We climb a few more stairs and stop for a bit to enjoy the view of the terraced gardens that adorn the Amalfi coastline. Soon enough, a sign announces that we’ve reached our destination, and it’s truly an incredible sight.

Perched up high on a ridge among what looks like hundreds of lemon trees, the yoga class looks over the Mediterranean Sea.

“This is stunning!” I exclaim, feeling like I’ve reached paradise.

My friends are already collapsed on the grass, pouring water on their faces and fanning themselves with English-to-Italian guides.

A tall and extremely tan Italian woman warmly welcomes us to class. She tries her best to speak English, but the result is an adorable mixture of both languages. “Buongiorno, every person, and welcome to yoga class!”

I manage to coax Emmy and Jo from off the ground and we make our way to three open mats along the middle row.

We’re surrounded by men and women that I vaguely recognize from the hotel. They’re all minding their own business—paying us absolutely no attention.

“My name is Daria and I ... be teaching ... how to be doing the yoga. Si?”

No answer.

The hot sun is bearing down on us and we’re all eager to start at this point.

“Mmm ... va bene. Allora ... Let us begin ... The first position is the Tadasana or the Mountain Pose. Because we are on a mountain. Si?”

She waits for someone to react to her little joke but, once again, people just ignore it.

“Wow, tough crowd,” Jo whispers next to me.

“So, put the arms, your arms up in the sky and...”

“What did I miss?” a familiar voice catches my attention.

I turn sharply to my left and see that my nemesis—the annoying Italian man who seems determined to ruin my vacation—has placed his yoga mat next to mine.

He’s wearing a fitted black T-shirt and form-fitting yoga pants, which accentuate his muscular physique. His dark hair is neatly slicked back, revealing his chiseled jawline and bright green eyes.

He’s nearly unrecognizable dressed down in yoga gear, but his aura of smugness is unmistakable. It’s as if he’s deliberately trying to disrupt my peace and serenity.

My insides start to churn and my palms become clammy.

“What are *you* doing here?” I say to him through gritted teeth.

“I’m here for the yoga class.” He smirks. “Wow ... you’re not very perceptive, are you?” He stretches himself to his full height as he does the yoga pose indicated by the teacher. I can see his black T-shirt rising slightly and exposing his toned abs.

Next to him, I get a little frustrated, but try to do the exercise nonetheless.

“So, you just happened to take the same yoga class as me?” I whisper.

“It’s the only yoga class the hotel provides. This may be an exclusive hotel, American Jane, but it’s not *that* exclusive. These classes are not just meant for you,” he replies, keeping his eyes on the teacher.

I grunt and grind my teeth in frustration.

“What’s wrong?” Jo asks me.

“It’s ... him!” I mouth to her.

“Huh?”

“*Him!*”

“Him? Him who?”

“Him! The guy who yelled at me in the courtyard ... and took my picture,” I try my best to mouth these words to her so he doesn’t hear me.

“Okay, I did *not* understand a single word you just said. Do you need some water or something? And who is that guy?” Jo asks as we move to the next pose.

“Oh, my goodness!” I groan in frustration and wipe my forehead. The hot sun is right above us now and I feel like I’m baking.

“What are you guys talking about? And who’s that guy next to you, Larisa? He’s hot!” Emmy breaks into the conversation, making me cringe.

“Thank you!” I hear him say from my left.

He’s grinning now but still not looking at us as he casually continues the yoga exercises.

“He’s that—guy—we met on the first day who was upset that I was taking his photo! Who then proceeded to take *my* photo,” I reply.

“My name is Gianluca,” he says, clearly hearing every word we’re saying.

I feel like I’m in one of those dreams—where you’re standing in front of the class completely naked, and you have to tell the teacher that the dog ate your homework. All while your crush is staring at you considering if he should still ask you out after this display.

“Look, I...”

“Silence, ladies!” the yoga teacher chimes in. “Yoga is a time for ... how do you say in English? Oh ... It’s a time for ... You know. Just ... silence!”

“That means you have to be silent too, Gianluca!” I throw at him in a whisper.

He doesn’t even look at me.

“Now let’s move on to the pose called Bitilasana or the ... umm ... how do you say in English? Mucca?”

“You know? I still don’t get why you had to come today. I seem to be bumping into you everywhere I go lately,” I tell Gianluca.

“Cow,” he says.

“Um ... *what* did you just call me?!” I immediately fire back.

“I wasn’t talking to you, American Jane. I’m talking to the yoga teacher. The pose is called the Cow. Mucca means cow. She doesn’t speak English very well. I’m trying to help her out.”

“Oh, well ... that’s ... very nice of you, then...”

We continue doing a few more poses but it’s more than obvious that neither I nor my friends are any good at this.

Gianluca, on the other hand, is perfection itself. His long and lean body seems to twist and contort as if he’s a fish in clear water, not a man doing yoga on a little mat in the suffocating heat of July.

Next to me, Emmy trips and lands on her knees. I’m convinced that Gianluca is about to turn and make a sarcastic comment but am surprised to see that he pretends not to have noticed her little faux pas—even though he definitely did.

“Alright, signore and signori, it’s time for the Warrior Pose!” the yoga teacher announces.

“Oh, no, not the Warrior Pose,” Jo complains next to me. “I swear my knees are going to give! Santa Mozzarella, help me!”

I try to settle into the pose myself but, as I do so, I can see out of the corner of my eye that Gianluca is taking his T-shirt off.

His athletic and toned body immediately attracts attention and a few of the other women turn their heads to look at him.

Gianluca pays no attention and continues with his exercises as if this is something that happens to him on the daily.

“Oh, my goodness ... he looks incredible,” Emmy whispers. “I mean ... who has a body like that? Do you remember that statue we saw of The David? That was nothing compared to this guy. He’s just...”

“Shhh! He can hear you!” I try to shush her, feeling supremely embarrassed, even though I entirely agree with her.

The golden sun of the Amalfi coast radiates off of Gianluca’s body, highlighting every toned muscle and curve of his physique. There’s a small trail of dark hair that leads from his chest down to his waistline, further adding to his allure. The glistening sweat on his skin makes him look unreal, like a statue come to life. He’s like nothing I’ve ever seen before and, to my sadness, probably like nothing I’ll ever see again.

“No, he can’t hear me. I’m whispering!”

“Yes, I can.”

I turn around to see Gianluca grinning in that special way only very handsome men do when they know they’re being adored by women.

“I am so sorry ... Really. She’s had too much ... umm ... water. You know ... the sun and dehydration and ... these lemon trees. They go right to your head!” I rant.

“That’s alright. I don’t mind.” He smiles at me.

“Great, then,” I reply and try to follow more of the poses indicated by the teacher.

“Do you agree?” he asks, taking me completely by surprise.

“Excuse me?”

“Do you agree with your friend there?”

“Wow ... just when I thought that maybe, just maybe you could be a nice guy under that annoying exterior, you ask me that?” I reply feeling indignant but also taken aback by his brazen and self-assured tone.

“I haven’t done anything wrong. I’m just asking if you feel the same way,” he replies simply.

“You’re asking if I think that you’re the hottest guy around?” I start laughing. “My goodness ... the nerve of some people. Tell me, is this the way *all* Italian men act? Or just you?”

“Is this the way all American women act? Or just you?” he retorts, still grinning.

I can tell that he’s openly flirting with me, but I simply don’t understand it.

“What’s that supposed to mean? How am I acting?”

“Shhhhh!!!” an older woman in the front row turns around and shushes us.

“Sorry...” I say.

Next to me, Emmy and Jo huff and puff, until Jo gently grabs my elbow.

“Larisa, I think Emmy and I are done with this yoga class.”

“What?”

“Honey, it’s like a million degrees out here, and these poses are too difficult. We’re hungry and thirsty. We’d like to go back to the hotel.”

“Oh, alright. I’ll meet you back there, then,” I reply.

“Signore and signori, let’s get ready for the final pose of the day!” the yoga teacher announces. “It is named the Down Dog! No, that’s not right. Downward Begging Dog. No ... anyway, follow my lead, please!”

She puts her palms on the yoga mat and lifts her backside into the air, creating a sort of V-shape with her body.

I follow her lead, but struggle with the yoga position. My hands are slipping on the yoga mat and my legs have started to shake because of the effort. Not to mention, I’m feeling self-conscious now that my entire midsection is up in the air—especially considering that (probably) the most handsome man in the world is a few inches away from me.

One of my legs finally gives and I can feel myself slipping.

But, instead of falling on my face, a strong hand snakes around my waist and pulls me up.

Gianluca steadies my entire body and holds me into position from behind for a few seconds. I can feel his hand on my belly and, strangely, that makes me shake even more. His other hand travels along my spine all the way to my neck which he places in the correct position. I can feel my pulse quickening and my heart racing.

For a moment, wild thoughts run through my head and I almost forget where I am.

“Are you alright?” he asks, with genuine concern on his face.

“I’m fine, don’t worry ... but thank you,” I answer as I finally get up.

The lesson is over and we're free to go.

I quickly pack up my things and head for the stairs. But I realize, now, that my friends are gone, which means I have to make the journey back alone.

As I reach the trail, I hear a familiar voice call out.

“Do you mind if I join you?”

CHAPTER SEVEN

Gianluca

I put my T-shirt back on and run to catch up with Larisa as she heads down the trail toward the hotel.

This could be my chance to finally find out if she's a journalist or not, and what she plans on doing with the photos she took of me on the first day of my retreat.

"Ummm ... do I have a choice? There's only one trail back..." she says and I can tell that she's blushing a little.

She's feisty, this one.

I chuckle softly and match my pace to hers. "Well, I suppose you could wander off into the lemon grove and get lost," I suggest. "But I wouldn't recommend it."

Her cheeks flush even more at my remark, and I can't help but find it endearing.

"I think I'll stick to the trail," she replies with a hint of amusement. "Besides, I wouldn't want to miss out on the company of the hottest guy in Amalfi." Her voice is now dripping with sarcasm.

I raise an eyebrow, impressed by her ability to match my teasing banter. “Is that so? How fortunate for you.”

“You’re insufferable.” She rolls her eyes playfully and continues walking. I fall in step beside her, enjoying the comfortable silence that settles between us.

The Amalfi coast stretches out before us, the vibrant colors of the cliffside villages contrasting against the deep blue of the sea.

As we go further along the trail, Larisa starts to slow down, her steps becoming more labored. Her face glistens with sweat, and her cheeks are flushed from exertion.

I reach into my backpack and pull out a bottle of water.

“Here,” I say, offering it to her, “you look like you could use this.”

“I’m fine.” She huffs.

I raise an eyebrow, unconvinced by her response. “Are you sure about that? You seem a bit worn out from the yoga class.”

“Pfft. Hardly. I’m just not used to this heat,” she retorts. “But thanks for your concern.”

“Whatever you say.” I shrug, taking a long sip of water before offering it to her again. “You know, it’s not a sign of weakness to accept help when you need it.”

She glances at the bottle of water and then back at me, contemplating for a moment before finally giving in and accepting it.

She takes a long gulp, and the cool liquid seems to revive her as she sighs in relief.

“Okay, maybe I needed that more than I wanted to admit,” she says sheepishly. “This sun is really beating down hard. The lemon trees were a great idea for a yoga class, but even so, I have to say, the heat is simply sucking the life out of me. I don’t know how you can live like this.”

“It was fine for me.” I shrug.

“You really know how to rub it in, don’t you?” She scoffs. “Though, I guess that makes sense ... since you’re ... Italian. I’ve noticed that the locals don’t seem to be nearly as bothered by the heat as the tourists are. We’re all fanning ourselves, always asking for more ice, turning on the air conditioners. While you seem to be just ... fine.”

“I guess it’s because we were born and raised in this Mediterranean weather. We have a higher tolerance for it.”

“So ... if you weren’t bothered by it then why did you take off your T-shirt

during the yoga class?” she asks me.

We take a few more steps down the path as I gather my thoughts. “To work on my tan a little.”

She doesn’t seem convinced by my answer.

I can see her looking at me from the corner of her eye. “Ahem, sure...”

“What? You don’t believe me, American—”

“Why do you keep calling me that?” she bursts out.

“Because ... that’s what you are, isn’t it? And also, because I love the look on your face every time I say it.”

She stops in the middle of a set of stairs and looks at me.

“What’s that supposed to mean? I don’t make a face!”

“Oh, yes you do! Believe me, you do!”

“What kind of face?”

“I don’t know. You get a little frustrated and your cheeks puff out. It’s very cute,” I reply, walking ahead of her now.

“Ah, so you’re teasing me?” she asks.

“Bingo! Is that what you say in English? Or is that just in the movies?”

She rolls her eyes at me comically and I notice just how beautiful she is, despite the fact that she’s not wearing any makeup. Her gorgeous red hair, which she tied in a high ponytail for the yoga class, is now in disarray and her creamy skin is flushed and glowing. The Italian sun has caused a myriad of new freckles to appear on her skin and she looks like she was drawn from someone’s imagination.

“Why are you asking me? You’re apparently the expert on Americans,” she says sarcastically. “And how is your English so good? Did you study it in college or something?”

“Umm ... yes. I did,” I reply a little uncertain as to why she’s asking me this question. As an international actor, I’m required to speak English as well as possible, even if I still retain my Italian accent.

“Cool,” she says simply, stopping to drink some more water.

“What do you do for a living, Larisa?”

“I’m a freelance photographer.”

There it is.

“A freelance photographer? For magazines? Or websites?”

“It depends, I guess. I do projects for ... anyone who needs it, really. I do weddings, baby showers, gender reveals, and sometimes photoshoots with models for magazines. But also traveling and art. Those are my favorites—

and what I want to focus on. My ultimate goal is to publish my own photography book,” she explains. “I try to capture the moment when inspiration strikes. But ... anyway, that’s why I was taking your photo on that first day. I tried to explain it to you but you just ... ranted in Italian and then disappeared inside the hotel.”

“But what about celebrities?” I ask.

Larisa stops and looks at me confused.

“I don’t follow. What about celebrities?”

“Celebrity photos. Like paparazzi. Isn’t that what you do as well?”

“No, no. I don’t dabble in that. It’s a really dirty business and, to be honest, I hate it. I actually know a few people in the business who do it. If you manage to get some good shots of celebrity this or celebrity that, it pays very well. But that’s the whole problem,” she explains.

We sit down on one of the ancient stone steps and catch our breath. Beneath us, the lavish green of the Mediterranean Sea sprawls as far as the eye can see. Over our heads, the mountains reach for the sky.

“What do you mean?”

“Well, because private photos of celebrities pay so well, a lot of paparazzi create stupid situations so that they can get the shots. Like ... one time a photographer fell in front of a celebrity’s car and pretended that he ran him over just to create chaos and then photographed it. That kind of stuff. I hate it. I don’t want to do that. I’m not interested in that.”

I watch her face as she explains all this and realize that, perhaps, my assistant and the hotel staff were right. Larisa is definitely not a journalist and ... it appears she’s not interested in selling photos of me, either.

“I’m very glad to hear that, Larisa. I mean, I’m glad that you’re not willing to participate in this culture of vultures and hyenas who refuse to understand that celebrities are normal people who deserve respect.”

“Wow, you’re passionate about this topic,” she says. “I wouldn’t have guessed that someone like you would care so much about trivial things like ... celebrities.”

Trivial?

I stare at her in disbelief. And then, a sudden thought strikes me.

Is it possible she has no idea who I am?

“Yes, I am ... I just mean, everyone deserves respect, no matter who they are and what they do. It’s a huge problem in modern society that we no longer seem to understand this,” I reply.

She smiles warmly at me and nods.

“You’re so right.”

“Larisa ... do you know anything about Italian cinema?” I try to tiptoe my way around the topic.

“I mean, as a photographer, I do think cinematography is super fascinating. But, that’s about it. I’m not much of a movie buff. Of course, I’ve seen the most famous movies out there. You know, *Titanic*, the superhero ones, umm ... the one where he was dead all along, Disney princess movies when I was a little girl. But I don’t really keep up with Hollywood. My friends make fun of me because I can never keep up with pop culture. And the only celebrities I know are Leonardo DiCaprio ... and Will Smith, of course. Also, that new guy with a name that absolutely no one can pronounce—Timothy Chardonnay?”

“Timothee Chalamet,” I correct her gently as thoughts race through my head.

“Yeah, him. Anyway, that’s about it. Why do you ask?” She adds.

“Oh, I was just curious about what you like to do in your free time. Other than photography, obviously,” I reply.

“Mmm...” she thinks for a few seconds as we descend the last of the stairs and the hotel comes into view. “Do you like movies, Gianluca?” She’s smiling and now I’m totally convinced that she has absolutely no clue who I am.

“As much as the next guy,” I reply, trying to keep it casual.

We slip through one of the back entrances into the private courtyard where we first met a few days ago. It’s silent and empty, everyone’s probably taking their afternoon nap at this hour.

“Well, I guess I should be heading up to my room. That yoga class plus all the stairs have really done a number on me.”

“You should take a cold shower,” I advise her.

“I will. Hey, how do you stay in such good shape? And what’s the secret to your amazing skin?” she asks as she walks away.

“Lots of water and sleep.” I smile.

Also, a few thousand dollars’ worth of skincare that my manager gets me from Korea.

“Italian men...” she replies. “You really are something else, aren’t you?”

“Larisa ... see you around?”

“I suppose since we’re both stuck at the same resort, I won’t be able to

completely avoid you.” She smirks.

“So long as you keep your camera out of my face,” I quip.

“Don’t get in the way of my camera lens,” she retorts, before turning around.

“Bye, American Jane!” I call out, watching her red hair disappear through the glass doors.

But only a moment later, Larisa reappears as if she just remembered something. “Hey, Gianluca, I forgot to ask you something. That was so rude of me.”

“What is it?”

“What do you do for a living?” she asks.

“Me? Uh ... I’m a ... businessman,” I answer the first thing that comes to mind, even though I don’t have a single clue what being a businessman entails.

“That makes sense. Half the men in this hotel are businessmen and the other half are politicians,” she replies. “Okay. Well, have a good day!”

I take the elevator to my own suite, replaying the conversation in my mind.

Meeting Larisa is proving to be a much more fascinating experience than I anticipated.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Larisa

“I don’t understand. Where’s the spaghetti and meatballs?” Emmy asks.

“It’s your turn. I cannot have this conversation with her again,” Jo says to me, before hiding behind her menu.

“Emmy, spaghetti and meatballs is not an Italian dish. It’s American. They don’t serve it here.”

We’re visiting the quaint Italian town of Sorrento today. Emmy has been on a mission to find spaghetti and meatballs since we arrived in Italy, and so far, her search has been futile.

“I feel so duped...” She sighs. “If not spaghetti and meatballs, what exactly am I supposed to post on Instagram?”

“Nobody cares about food pictures. How about we just have a nice lunch, talk, and enjoy our time together?” I reply.

“Ugghh ... you sound like my mom. Also, for the record, Larisa, people *love* food pictures. There are entire social media accounts dedicated to food photos. You’re a photographer, you should know that.”

“I prefer to take pictures of people, nature, and art. Not my lunch.” I shrug.

“Well, maybe you’d have more followers if you did,” she jokes while continuing to scan her menu as if the spaghetti and meatballs dish might magically appear.

“How many times do I have to tell you, I don’t care about social media? I only use Instagram for my photography business because it’s expected. It’s basically just a portfolio for my work. I don’t care about followers.”

“And that’s totally fine. But don’t bash my food pictures.” Emmy smirks.

“Okay, well you’re going to have to find something to photograph that’s not spaghetti and meatballs. Jo, what about you? What are you having?” I change the subject.

“Hmm ... I’m torn. I really want the carbonara pasta, but I also want to fit into my wedding dress. Oh, did I tell you guys that Alessandro Michele is designing my wedding gown?”

“That’s incredible!” Emmy claps her hands enthusiastically. “There really are so many perks to marrying a billionaire.”

“Who’s Alessandro Michele?” I ask.

“The former creative director for Gucci,” Emmy squeals.

“Wow, that’s awesome, Jo,” I add, before turning my attention back to the menu. I don’t have a clue about fashion or pop culture, but I don’t want to rain on Jo’s parade.

I peruse the menu, trying to choose something that is both healthy and delicious. But as I consider the zucchini pasta, I get distracted by a heated conversation at one of the surrounding tables.

A group of women dressed in fancy clothing are having a passionate discussion in high-pitched Italian. They are waving a newspaper around and pointing to an article that seems to have struck a nerve. I strain my ears to catch snippets of their conversation, out of sheer curiosity. But I can only make out a word or two here and there.

“Can either of you understand what those ladies are talking about?” I ask my friends.

“Wow, Larisa Thompson, look at you engaging in gossip,” Jo taunts me.

“Come on, aren’t you a little curious what they’re all worked up over? Maybe there’s something happening here in Italy that we should be aware of.”

“Actually, come to think of it, I did overhear some of the maids in a similarly heated discussion this morning. They were holding up some sort of Italian gossip magazine. I couldn’t understand it, obviously, all of it being in

Italian, but curiosity got the best of me, so I asked one of the maids to give me the scoop,” Emmy says.

“So? What is it then?”

“Ah, nothing important. Just some local gossip that they all read in the morning paper, apparently,” she replies lazily. “It seems that some actor was spotted with a mystery woman on some kind of date. The photo was blurry, so everyone has been up in arms trying to figure out who she was.”

I shake my head in disapproval. “Don’t people have better things to do?”

“And here I thought that we were obsessed with celebrity culture,” Jo replies.

“I know, right? Well ... here comes the waiter.”

We each order a plate of pasta and a pizza for the table that we plan on sharing.

Our drinks arrive in tall, colorful glasses that are already dripping with condensation as the ice starts to melt in the heat of the terrace. I savor the tangy sweetness of the limoncello as it quenches my thirst.

When the food arrives, the plates of pasta and pizza are a feast for the eyes, each dish adorned with fresh herbs and colorful vegetables. I take a bite of the pizza and the crispy crust gives way to a gooey, melted cheese and the tangy tomato sauce bursts with the sweetness of ripe tomatoes. It’s a perfect blend of textures and flavors and I can’t help but appreciate the artistry that goes into creating such a simple, yet exquisite, dish.

As I continue to indulge in my pizza, I notice a subtle change in the atmosphere at our table.

Something is going on with my two friends.

It’s almost as if there’s an unspoken dialogue between them.

I take another bite of pizza and finally ask. “What’s up with you two? You look like Santa’s elves conspiring to put coal inside every child’s Christmas present as a joke.”

“We’re waiting.”

“Waiting? Waiting for what?”

“Come on! Tell us! Tell us!” Jo says.

Both my friends are looking at me with pleading, puppy eyes.

“Okay, do your drinks have more alcohol in them than mine? Because ... I have no clue what’s happening.”

“Larisa. Tell us what happened between you and the hunky Italian guy yesterday, at the yoga class. When we left, his hands were all over your

body!” Jo exclaims.

“Wait—that’s what this is all about? Guys ... nothing happened.”

“Stop! Don’t do that! Don’t play all coy and shy with us. How can you say that nothing happened? The most handsome man on planet Earth had his hands all over you while half naked!” Emmy replies.

“Okay. But I think that you’re forgetting a few things. Such as the fact that we were surrounded by a group of people taking a yoga class. Or the fact that I don’t even *know* him. And let’s not forget that we got off on a *very* wrong foot when he went off on me in a full-blown Italian rant the day we got here. Not to mention—he taunts me every chance he gets!”

My friends look at each other, trying to process what I’m saying, before looking back at me.

“So, what happened? Did you two make out or what?” Emmy asks, completely ignoring what I just said.

“What? No! I mean ... we hiked back together but, you guys ... did you not hear what I just said? I don’t know this man. And, honestly ... he’s arrogant and pompous and acts as if he’s the center of the world for reasons I can’t understand. He really thinks that everyone is always paying him the utmost attention and he’s conceited and ... and—”

“Charming and funny and ... so incredibly handsome!” Emmy finishes my sentence for me.

“That’s not ... the point,” I reply.

“Maybe that should be the point,” Jo says as she reaches for a slice of pizza. The warm cheese stretches to infinity as she struggles to take a bite.

“What do you mean?”

“Larisa, look. I know that you and this man got off on the wrong foot. But maybe that was all just a misunderstanding,” Jo explains. “From what I saw during the yoga class, he seems to be a charming guy. Why don’t you give him a chance?”

“Give him a chance? A chance to do what, Jo?” I sigh and put my fork down.

My limoncello cocktail has gotten warm now, but it still tastes like heaven.

“To go on a date! You deserve to go out and have a little fun for a change. He seems like the perfect person for you to spend some time with here in paradise!” Jo replies.

“The perfect person? Are you two forgetting how obnoxious this guy is? Besides ... I could have an adventure with literally anyone here. The

doorman, the waiter, the guy who sells sunglasses to tourists in the town square. Why are you both so set on Gianluca?" I huff.

"Because unlike the doorman and the guy selling sunglasses, Gianluca looks like he walked straight out of a movie. He could be part of the wondrous adventures you have in Italy before you return to your boring life in Boston." Emmy wiggles her eyebrows.

"My life is boring? Gee, thanks—"

"That's not what I meant," Emmy interjects. "I just mean, you can be a little uptight sometimes. I think you should loosen up and have a little fun—maybe this is the start of the kind of adventure you'll dream about for the rest of your life! Something to think about when you're lonely or sad ... you know—an escape."

I finish my cocktail while listening to her and set down the empty glass.

"Guys, I really appreciate what you're trying to do. I understand your point of view. And maybe I *can* be a little uptight sometimes." I shrug. "I'm also fully aware that having an adventure in Italy is a great, escapist, romantic dream. But it's just ... not *my* dream."

My friends look at me as if I've just told them that I'd like to go live alone in the jungle for a year.

"Look, what I mean is that ... as amazing as it all sounds—I simply don't want it."

"Then what do you want?" Emmy asks me.

"A meaningful relationship. Not some 'adventure.' I don't want some short-term fling, I want security, reliability, trust ... I want to be with someone that I can build a life with, not someone who will forget about me as soon as I get on the plane back to Boston. That's why I've been single for so long. I'm waiting to find a genuine connection."

"I understand. It's just that ... we both saw a connection between you and Gianluca. It was like ... you fit together somehow," Emmy says.

"Yeah." Jo nods. "We were watching you two at yoga, and it looked like you've always been together ... even though, obviously, you've only interacted a few times. Weird ... how that can happen," Jo continues.

"I guess..." I reply, their observations still lingering in my mind.

"So, then, that's it? You're not going to see him again?" Emmy asks.

"Well, considering we're both staying at the same hotel, I'll most likely see him. Especially since it appears we like to do the same activities," I reply.

"Ah, so you have things in common." Jo nods.

I shrug, refusing to make eye contact as I suddenly remember how good Gianluca looked with his shirt off at yoga...

“What does he do for a living?” Emmy signals the waiter for more drinks.

“He told me he’s a businessman.”

“Here, in Italy?” Jo asks.

“I don’t know exactly. I didn’t ask. But I suppose so. Why?”

“He’s really handsome for a businessman, isn’t he?” Emmy adds.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” I interject.

“Nothing ... I just thought, based on his looks alone, he might be a model or an influencer or something...” Emmy replies.

“The hotel we’re staying at is not really meant for models and influencers,” Jo explains as she finishes her plate of pasta and leans back into her chair. “The hotel is like the Chateau Marmont, right? You can’t stay there unless you have the right connections. So, it makes sense that he’s a businessman of some kind. Though, I see Emmy’s point.”

“On what?” I ask.

“He’s clearly an important person. But, he doesn’t look like your average businessman, either...”

“Coming from the girl who’s marrying a Henry Cavill-look-alike businessman.” I laugh.

Jo holds up her hands in surrender. “Hey, I’m not saying it’s not possible. But most businessmen look like—well, businessmen.” She giggles. “Maybe he *is* an undercover CIA agent after all.”

“Guys, come on. You’re freaking me out. You’ve had way too much limoncello and the sun is right on top of us. Let’s go ... take a nap or something. And enough of these conspiracy theories, okay?”

“As you wish...”

We retrieve our purses and head out of the restaurant.

“But, you know, maybe there *is* something about him that doesn’t sit quite right,” Emmy adds.

“Guys ... please ... Look, half an hour ago, you were encouraging me to have some kind of Italian adventure with him. And now you think that there’s some kind of conspiracy theory around him? Really?! Get it together.”

“Fine, you’re right. Let’s go sit on the beach and eat some gelato!”

I follow my friends as we make our way back to the hotel and onto the private beach it offers. Immediately, a waiter appears with cocktails, gelato, and sparkling water.

“Okay, I could definitely get used to this,” I say as I settle in, looking out at the sea.

Emmy looks at me with a mischievous grin. “This could be your daily reality if you gave Gianluca a chance.”

CHAPTER NINE

Gianluca

“Alright, I talked to the driver of the boat and the instructor on the island. They assured me the scuba lessons are private—like everything else around here. There will be other people there but—”

“Other people? How’s that private, then?” I ask patiently, even though I feel that, sometimes, my assistant doesn’t understand just how much I value solitude.

“Well, it’s ... closed off to the public,” Cara explains. “The only other people taking scuba lessons will be fellow guests of the hotel. But I promise they won’t bother you, Gianluca. I looked at the list and it’s a few politicians who are most likely there to discuss some kind of secret deal on government funds. They won’t have eyes for an actor like you. There were a couple of other businessmen from China with their wives. They most likely won’t know who you are. Not in a bad way,” she hurries to add, not wanting to hurt what she obviously perceives as my fragile celebrity ego.

I don’t have such a thing.

Even though she doesn’t believe me.

“Great. Then I can do my scuba diving lessons in peace. Remind me again why I’m doing this?” I ask as I climb onto the boat. It rocks back and forth as the small waves crashing against the hotel’s private beach move it slightly.

“For your next movie? Remember?” She sighs.

“But I haven’t even accepted that role yet, Cara. And the script only mentioned one scene in a swimming pool—I’m just supposed to dive in to retrieve a watch. Are scuba diving lessons really necessary for that?”

“Gianluca, they’re still doing the auditions. And it’s James Cameron we’re talking about here. What if it comes down to you and ... Tom Holland? How’s it going to look when he dives down to the bottom of the pool like a seal while you have no clue what you’re doing? Who do you think James Cameron is going to cast?”

“I suppose you’re right...” I frown.

“Don’t make that face. You’re going to get wrinkles.”

I turn around and signal the captain to set off.

The moment she starts treating me like a child is the moment I leave.

Or I fire her, right here on the spot.

As the boat moves away from the shore, I call out to my assistant, “Is Tom Holland really in line for this role as well?”

“I have no clue! Just do the scuba diving lessons!” she calls back.

“When I return, I’m finding a new assistant, Cara!”

She laughs but she has no clue that I half mean it.

The sail toward the island of Capri is far more enjoyable than I could have possibly anticipated. It reminds me of the years when I was a little boy and my parents would take me on vacation to the seaside.

Back then, we lived in a small house in Campania and every summer I would get a few days by the sea, in the Gulf of Naples, not far from where I am now.

“What would it take for you to sail this boat out on the Tyrrhenian Sea?” I ask the captain, my voice loud above the din of the waves.

“I’m going to Capri, boss! Nowhere else!”

Nowhere else.

I look across the familiar sea and reminisce fondly over my amazing—albeit short—childhood. I was, as they say, “discovered” by an agent when I was only eleven and my life took a completely different turn.

I was forced to grow up fast.

Now, here I am, on my way to learn how to scuba dive, trying to beat Tom

Holland for a part in a movie. A man who, no doubt, has a story similar to mine, just in a different part of the world.

As the boat docks on the island of Capri, I take a look around.

The setting is exactly as Cara described it to me. The Chinese businessmen are with their wives, and the Italian politicians are lost in conversation. I don't think they have any intention of leaving this boat.

As I step onto the dock and head toward the beach, no one even casts a glance my way.

"Wow, are you following me?" a voice calls out from behind me.

I turn around sharply to see a familiar, and very beautiful, face. "Larisa? What are you doing here?"

"Umm ... I guess the same thing as you? Scuba diving lessons, right?"

"Yes. I just didn't expect to see you here, that's all," I reply.

"What's that supposed to mean?" Larisa cocks her head to the side, a mischievous glint in her eyes.

"I—I didn't know you were interested in scuba diving."

"There are a lot of things you don't know about me, Gianluca. You're much too busy being the center of attention to notice anything else." Larisa's voice is filled with a hint of playfulness, and I can't help but be drawn to her magnetic energy.

"Well, it seems we have more in common than I realized," I say, matching her tone.

"I'm not so sure about all that." She starts walking in front of me.

She's wearing a black and gold swimsuit that fits her perfectly. Once again, her red hair is pinned to the top of her head, with a few strands falling down and caressing her shoulders. Her glowing skin is starting to catch a brush of color from so much sun exposure, giving her blue eyes an intense glimmer.

I'm mesmerized.

She looks like an angel.

She turns around and catches me staring. "Come on, are you going to do this or what?" She laughs.

We make our way off the dock and onto the shore where the instructor—a man in his fifties who talks far too quietly for anyone to hear him over the wind and waves—begins his lesson.

"I can't hear a word this man is saying," Larisa whispers.

"Neither can I..."

After several minutes of both Larisa and I trying to catch his instructions,

we fail and make jokes to each other instead.

“So ... put the mouthpiece in your mouth and ... make bubbles? Is that what he said?” she asks.

“Yes, absolutely. When you’re done with the bubbles, high-five all the fish,” I joke.

Larisa laughs and it might be the cutest sound I’ve ever heard.

“And see if you can find Nemo!” she bursts out.

“Per favore, no, fermate!” I beg her to stop as I no longer can control my laughter.

“Why stop now? I can’t hear a word this man is saying, so...”

“So, we’re just going to make up our own rules for scuba diving?” I ask.

She jerks her head up to listen to the instructor. “There, see? The three rules are: float, kick, and breathe! Or, at least, that’s what I *think* he said. I suppose he could have also said goat, stick, and teeth.”

“Yeah, there are lots of goats at the bottom of the sea,” I quip and she laughs again.

And that’s when it hits me that—for maybe the first time in my adult life—I’m able to interact with a woman who’s not interested in my fame or my status.

She doesn’t even know who I am.

And there’s a part of me that wants to spend more time with her...

But for this to happen, I’d have to keep lying to her.

How am I going to keep up this lie? What will happen if she finds out?

My thoughts are interrupted as we’re instructed to gather our equipment and make our way into the water.

I quickly strip off my t-shirt, feeling the warm air against my skin.

Larisa’s eyes seem to linger on me, though she tries to hide it with nonchalant glances.

“Like what you see?” I ask her.

She rolls her eyes and turns away so I can’t see her blushing. “Where’d you get *that* line from, Gianluca? The movies?”

“Maybe...” I grin. “Is there something wrong with it?”

“It’s not wrong. It’s just ... cheesy.” She smirks.

“Ah, really? Wow ... I had no idea that you’re such an expert in flirting, Larisa. Tell me, what should I have said, then? Or, better yet. What do *you* say when you’re flirting with a guy?”

She stares at me, clearly taken aback by how direct I’m being.

“What seems to be the problem?” I continue. “You were the one who was staring at me a minute ago when I was taking off *my* clothes.”

She goes even redder in the face and I can tell she’s trying to find her words. “I wasn’t ... staring...” she manages to mumble.

“Ah, no, of course not,” I reply. “You were leering.”

She sets off along the water line to grab a mask and some fins without saying another word.

“Oh, come on, I was only joking! Larisa, you must know I was joking...”

She throws a mask and a pair of fins at me with quite a bit of force. There’s clearly some meaning behind that gesture and I’m supposed to get it.

“Why do you enjoy teasing me so much? Provoking me ... playing with me?” she asks as she starts to put the scuba diving gear on.

I walk over to her and extend my arm so that she has something firm to hold on to for stability. At first, she’s surprised by my gesture, but then accepts it.

“I already told you why. I love your reactions when I do it. You get so ... what’s the word? Umm ... Peeved? Ah, yes. I read this word once in a scr—in a book.”

She gives me a long glance.

“What book?”

“I can’t remember the title. Anyway, it’s just banter,” I reply.

She puts on her fins and looks up at me expectantly.

I reach my hand out to her and offer a word. “Tregua?”

Much to my surprise, she takes my hand and shakes it, sending a jolt of electricity through my body. Her touch is warm and soft, and I find myself holding onto her hand for a moment longer than necessary.

Time seems to slow down, the world around us fading into the background.

“You ready?” she asks, breaking the spell.

I snap out of my daze and nod, trying to regain my composure. “Yeah, let’s do this.”

I put on my tank and regulator, and head out into the water, following the teacher, alongside a couple other people. He provides instructions again, and this time we can actually hear him.

The water is cool and fresh, salty and sweet, all at the same time and feels divine after being in the hot sun.

I look over at Larisa. Her skin is wet and glossy and her face is completely flushed.

I've seen the most beautiful women in the world with my own eyes—the ones that every man dreams of: actresses, singers, models, and influencers. So how is it possible that this woman, swimming next to me right now, in the cool waters of the Island of Capri, is more beautiful than all of them?

I remain still for a moment as an intense desire washes over me.

“How did you know what that meant? That word ... *tregua*,” I ask her.

“I didn't,” she answers simply.

“Then why did you shake my hand on it?”

She turns and looks at me, the sun behind her, illuminating her fiery hair, like a halo around her beauty.

“Because I trust you.”

She disappears into the waters for the first scuba diving lesson, leaving me on my own.

Somehow, her words send an arrow through my heart.

Because she doesn't know the truth.

I dive into the waves, determined to find Larisa. The water is murky today, too cloudy to see very far. But I don't let that stop me, I've always loved a good challenge.

The sun filters through the water, casting an otherworldly glow on everything around me as I swim deeper, searching for any sign of her fiery hair or graceful movements.

But even with all the beauty surrounding me, my mind keeps wandering back to Larisa. I can't help but want to learn more about her. *Who is she? Where did she come from?*

I finally spot her ahead of me. She's swimming effortlessly among the rocks, her red hair flowing freely behind her now.

How did she learn to swim like that?

She turns suddenly and sees me, giving me a playful smile before darting off again.

That's when it hits me—Larisa is like a mermaid of the ancient world, calling me, enticing me to an adventure like none other.

I follow after her eagerly, excited for whatever lies ahead.

Together, we explore underwater caves and swim among schools of colorful fish. And with every passing minute, I feel myself getting more and more captivated by Larisa.

But eventually, the captain signals that it's time to make our way back to shore.

I can't help but feel disappointed that our time together is coming to an end.

But then, Larisa turns to me with a mischievous glint in her eyes. "Race you back?" she challenges.

"You're on!" I reply, my heart pounding with anticipation.

We both kick our fins, propelling ourselves forward with powerful strokes, as the water rushes past us. The adrenaline fuels my every movement, a surge of excitement building within me.

Larisa is a few meters ahead of me, her graceful form slicing through the water effortlessly. I push myself to swim faster, determined to catch up to her. The waves crash against me, but I'm driven by an indescribable force, urging me forward.

With a final burst of strength, I surge forward and reach the shore just moments after Larisa.

We both collapse onto the sand, breathless and exhilarated from our impromptu race.

"Dang, American Jane. I didn't know you had that in you." I laugh.

"I was the swim team captain back in high school," she replies with a grin. "Guess some things never change."

I chuckle, brushing the sand off my arms. "Well, you certainly haven't lost your touch. That was an impressive race."

As we take off our scuba gear, the instructor calls out for our attention. "Thank you for participating in today's lesson, signore and signori! For anyone who wishes to remain a while longer on the Island of Capri, we've organized a select dinner right by the water. We hope you enjoy!"

"What do you say, Larisa? Shall we dine while the waves crash at our feet?"

"I'd love to." She grins and we make our way to the tables. "Hey, what does that word mean, anyway?"

"Which one?"

"Tregua?" she asks as we take a seat at one of the tables.

"Truce."

CHAPTER TEN

Larisa

“Whatever I thought was going to happen when I left Boston, it *definitely* wasn’t this.”

The sun is setting behind the ridges and I feel as if I’m in a dream. Spending the day with Gianluca, exploring the waters surrounding the Island of Capri, was surprisingly fun.

“And what is ... this?” Gianluca asks me with his cheeky, charming grin.

“Well, look around.” I gesture. “We’re currently in our beach clothes, having what looks like an extremely fancy dinner on the Island of Capri. This feels like a fantasy—not real life. It feels like we’re in a movie.”

He stares at me for a moment and then clears his throat. “But this *is* real life. Why are you so surprised? Is it because of the island? Or Italy in general? Or ... is it because you’re here with me?” He winks.

I roll my eyes, playfully. “If anything, being here with you, of all people, is the surreal part...”

“Me, of all people?” Gianluca’s green and gold eyes grow wide.

“Has anyone ever told you that you have an expressive face? Because you

pretty much wear your emotions all over it, you know that? And your gestures too—it's as if you're on stage or something."

He leans back in his chair and looks to the side for a moment. "I don't know about all that, but we were talking about *you*, Larisa. So, why do you feel like that ... about being here with me? Of all people?" he parrots my words back to me.

"I didn't mean it in a bad way," I reply. "I only meant that ... Well, I find it a little funny, actually. I only met you about a week ago—and it wasn't the *best* first impression, I'll tell you that much. Yet, here we are, like the oldest of friends, having dinner together on the Island of Capri."

"Even enemies can enjoy good food." He grins.

"Where do you come up with these lines? I swear, sometimes..." I smile as the waiter approaches and deposits a series of plates on our table.

"Signora, signore, buona sera. Here's some artichoke bruschetta, pistachio focaccia, pane, burro e alice, and, of course, tarrali pugliesi that I suggest you dip in the baked ricotta with honey and thyme. Enjoy!"

"Oh, my goodness, this is such a feast! So much food just for the two of us!" I remark as I take in the incredible array of colors, textures, and smells.

Gianluca gives me a peculiar look and then laughs.

"What is it? Why are you laughing?"

"Amore, this is just the antipasto!" He continues laughing.

"Huh? What's *that* supposed to mean?"

"Antipasto means 'before the meals.' The food we have before the meal," he explains.

"Are you trying to tell me that these are just the ... appetizers?"

"Eh, there you go! Va bene! Appetizers!" he repeats in a pronounced Italian accent.

"So, there's ... more?"

"Tesoro, darling, why don't we eat?"

He takes one of the tarrale—a little handmade pretzel type of snack—and dips it into the creamy ricotta. A layer of buttery goodness topped with glassy honey comes off.

Then, without warning, he holds it up to my lips.

I freeze for a moment, my lips lightly brushing against the warm ricotta and honey. Gianluca's eyes hold mine, a mischievous glint dancing within them.

The air between us crackles with an electric energy, and I can't help but

feel a rush of anticipation as I slowly part my lips and take a bite of the tarrale.

I savor the rich, sweet flavors on my tongue as Gianluca watches my reaction intently, a small smile playing on his lips.

I raise an eyebrow at him, my mouth still full. “Is this some kind of Italian tradition? Feeding each other appetizers?”

He chuckles, a low and melodic sound that warms my heart. “No, bella. It’s not a tradition per se, but it’s a way for me to share the experience with you. To see your reactions, to witness the joy in your eyes as you taste the flavors of Italy.”

His words make me blush, and I avert my gaze towards the breathtaking view of the sun dipping below the horizon. The sea shimmers with golden hues, mirroring the warmth spreading through my chest.

“Here, try this.” He holds up a delicate piece of bruschetta topped with artichokes and drizzled with olive oil.

I open my mouth once more, inviting him in, but this time, I feel not only the bite of food but his fingers as well. “Mmm ... that tastes so good...”

“Me or the food?” he asks, snickering.

“Wow ... seriously? Gianluca, where did *that* come from?” I ask him.

“What do you mean?”

“Why the sudden change? I mean, you’re really turning on the charm.”

“So you admit that I’m charming?” He smirks.

“I didn’t say that.”

“But you’re implying it,” he teases, leaning back in his chair.

I can’t help but laugh at his persistence. “Fine, maybe you have a little bit of charm.” I relent. “But that doesn’t mean I’m falling for it.”

“Ah, the challenge is on then,” he says, his eyes twinkling mischievously.

The waiter approaches and clears our plates to make room for the main dishes.

I do my best to compose myself as we receive another bounty of plates that barely fit on the table.

“Signora, signore, here is Mazara del Vallo red prawn in a white wine sauce, authentic spaghetti carbonara alla Roma with Alba white truffle, Ossobuco with pesto polenta, and Fiorentina Steak. Enjoy!” The waiter retreats, leaving us to marvel at this Italian feast.

“Wow ... this is just ... I don’t even know where to start.”

“Why don’t you try the red prawn first? It’s delicate and simple. We can

work our way from there to more complicated flavors,” Gianluca says before offering me a bite of the sweet and tender sea delicacy.

“So, did you and your family eat these types of dishes growing up? Are these truly traditional or are they just for tourists? Come on, you can tell me. I’ll keep the secret!”

He laughs and reaches for some white wine. “They are ... somewhat traditional, I suppose. They’re Italian, for sure. But they’re not a dish most Italians eat on a daily basis. Who can afford white truffles and red prawns?”

“Oh, I see. So, you didn’t eat this growing up?”

He hesitates for a moment as if it’s difficult for him to decide, even though it’s such a simple question. “Umm ... not at first. I guess that as I got older, I was ... well, we were able to afford fancier food.”

“Ah, because of the business?” I ask.

“I suppose. But enough about me. What about you? Why don’t you tell me what it’s like growing up in America? Is it really like it’s portrayed in the movies?”

“No, not really. I mean, sure, some things are accurate. But a lot of it is exaggerated. I think Hollywood has made simple, day-to-day living seem much more exciting than it actually is. For example, I’ve heard that some tourists think that going to Walmart is *such* an incredible experience. It’s just a supermarket...”

“Because they saw it in the movies?” he asks.

“For sure. Or on social media. There seems to be so much hype around these things.”

“You’re not a fan of social media, then?” Gianluca asks me as he cuts the steak into smaller pieces for us to enjoy while we talk.

“No, it’s not my thing. I get that it’s necessary—definitely for people like me. Since I’m a freelance photographer, I had to make an online portfolio so people could see my work—that’s how I’m hired. But, other than that, I don’t like the idea of putting your personal life out there on display. I just don’t see the point.”

He stops and stares at me.

“Is that really what you believe?” he asks me.

“Mmhmm.”

“I’ve never met anyone like you. I have to say, it’s so refreshing to see. I feel like, these days, everyone is so obsessed with ... themselves, basically. And that’s coming from me,” he jokes.

“I don’t get it. What does that mean?”

“Nothing, nothing. Umm ... I just meant that you’re right. Social media has made everyone *far* too obsessed with their looks and, evidently, with fame—which is exactly why I have a problem with it,” he says.

“Fame?”

“No. Not the concept of fame itself. But rather, the fact that people today seem to be chasing fame for the sake of fame. Do you know what I mean? Not because they have something to say or a message to put out in the world. A piece of art or, like you, a photograph—which is also art. They just want to be famous for ... existing.”

I watch him speak and see the fire and passion in his face. “You’re really passionate about these things, Gianluca.”

“Well, it bugs me, as you say. Plus, they have no idea,” he continues after he takes a small bite of carbonara.

“No idea about what?”

“Fame! They have no idea what it’s actually like. Everyone thinks it’s a lavish, rose-colored life and that all you do all day is wear designer clothes and go to parties with supermodels. In reality, the clothes are horrible—they make you wear them because you’re under contract. And the supermodels usually turn out to be the ugliest people on the inside that you’ve ever met.”

I stop with my fork in midair and watch him ramble on and on. “Gianluca ... is everything okay? I mean, I love that you’re so passionate about this but...”

He looks at me as if he’s just woken up from a trance. “Yes, yes. I guess I just ... I feel so comfortable with you that I poured my heart out. You know what, though? You mentioned that you have a photography album on social media. Why don’t you show it to me?”

“Right now?”

“Why not? Do you have something better to do?” he smiles.

I reach for my phone and access my Instagram account. “This is my professional profile. I have a personal one as well but ... I don’t really use it. So, here’s my portfolio.”

Gianluca takes the phone and starts to swipe, lingering on the photos that he likes best. “These are incredible. You’re so talented. These photos should be in a gallery. Or, like you said, published in a book.”

“Thanks so much!”

“I mean it ... the way you see the world is simply fascinating. You know, I

always think of photographers as people who ... well, take my—take photos. But you are something different. This is art. You have such a special way of seeing the world. And capturing it.”

“Wow, you’re going to make me blush,” I confess, hearing Gianluca’s compliments.

He smirks playfully, before continuing to scroll through my photos. He swipes until he reaches a portrait of my parents. “Tell me about this photo...”

“Oh, these are my parents, Jack and Diane. I took this picture of them last year as the first snow was falling over Boston. I happened to be back home having dinner with them when it happened. Of course, I had my camera—since I take it everywhere—and I just had to capture this moment because it was so romantic.”

“Are they romantic people? Your parents?”

“Absolutely. And on this particular day, my father saw on the news that it was going to snow. He watched for it like a hawk through the window and as soon as the first snowflakes started to fall, he immediately took my mom out to the park across the street from my childhood home. He said that he wanted to kiss her in the first snow of the year.”

“That sounds ... perfect. Your father sounds like an amazing husband to your mom.” Gianluca smiles. “And, I guess, a wonderful father to you?”

“Absolutely! They are and have always been my heroes. Not only were they both incredible parents ... but their relationship with each other is, honestly, the best. The way they love one another is nothing short of magic. It’s as if they were truly meant to be together and—ever since they were young—they’ve wanted nothing more than to spend as much time together as possible.”

Gianluca listens intently, his eyes fixed on the photo of my parents. There’s a hint of longing in his expression, as if he’s yearning for the kind of love they share.

“I wish I could experience something like that,” he whispers, almost to himself.

“Me too,” I agree with him. “That’s what I want as well—in life and in love. I really hope to find someone who can love me like my dad loves my mom. Someone who truly wants to spend their life with me. I’ve witnessed my parents all this time and I’ve seen just how happy they make each other. I’d love to experience that kind of happiness.”

He pushes the phone toward me and sighs. “Don’t we all?”

I can sense the hint of sadness in Gianluca's demeanor. I offer him a smile, but he seems lost in thought.

After a brief pause, curiosity gets the best of me. "What kind of relationship do you want, Gianluca?"

He looks into my eyes. "It's not really about what kind of relationship I want. For me ... it's about what I can *have*. Or, better yet, what I *can't* have." His face has become sadder than I've ever seen it.

"What could you possibly *not* have? A rich, successful, and ... handsome man like yourself?" I ask.

"Oh, so you *do* think I'm handsome?" He smirks.

"I knew you were gonna say that." I squint. "C'mon, be serious. What can't you have?!"

"You'd be surprised, Larisa."

"Please." I gesture toward him. "Enlighten me. And while you're at it, tell me, what business are you in anyway? Food? Fashion? Tech?"

Before he can elaborate, the waiter appears with dessert. "Signora, signore, here is our specialty tiramisu and a few cannoli on the side for you to enjoy. Buon appetito!"

"Thank you," Gianluca says politely as the waiter sets down the dessert on the table.

He then reaches out and grabs one of the cannoli. "Here, taste this..."

I oblige, opening my mouth as he delicately places the cannoli between my lips. The sweet cream filling melts on my tongue, the flaky pastry crumbling with each bite. His fingers brush against my lips again and, this time, he becomes even bolder, caressing my cheek in a surprisingly loving and tender gesture. A part of me wants to swat his hand away, but another part of me is secretly enjoying it.

I close my eyes for a moment, savoring the taste of the cannoli and the gentle touch of his hand against my face. It's not just the food that leaves me breathless.

"Wow, this is amazing," I say, trying to focus on the food rather than his touch.

"Cannoli is one of my favorite desserts," he says, his hand still lingering on my cheek.

When I finally open my eyes, I find him staring at me with an intensity that sends a shiver down my spine. "You're so beautiful ... Do you know that? How can you be so beautiful?"

“Stop it,” I say, trying to hide the smile that threatens to break free. “You’re just saying that because you want me to fall for your Italian charm.”

He chuckles and shakes his head, his hand still lingering on my cheek. “I’m just stating the obvious. You have this radiance about you, a natural beauty that shines from within.”

I feel my heart skip a beat at his words, and my cheeks grow hot.

No man has ever looked at me quite like that before—with such adoration and sincerity.

“You’re making me blush,” I say in a near whisper.

“I can see that.” He smiles. “But I love it. It suits you. Has any man made you blush before?”

His direct question catches me off guard. “I ... Well, I don’t really know. Not like this, I suppose...”

He leans in across the table and gets as close as possible to me.

I can see every single golden fleck in his magnificent green eyes and every single freckle on his perfect skin.

He is the definition of beauty.

“Do you like it, Larisa?”

My hands are slightly shaking and my stomach has dropped.

All I can do is nod.

If there ever was a man who knows how to play the game of love, he’s sitting in front of me right now.

I swallow heavily and stare into his eyes, transfixed and completely lost.

“Who are you? What are you doing to me?” I whisper.

“I could ask the same thing to you.”

We look at each other across the table for a few moments, the only sounds coming from the waves that nearly touch our bare feet as they crash into the sand.

Gianluca has me wanting more.

So much more.

Perhaps my friends were right. Perhaps there is some type of unexplainable *connection* between us, after all.

“Last call for Amalfi!” the tour guide calls for the guests to come back to the boat.

The magic of Capri is over.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Gianluca

I linger in bed for a few moments and think about *her*.

The way the wind blew through her long and silky red hair, her freckled skin, her blue eyes that lit up as she talked about her passion ... The way she looked in that black and gold swimsuit—absolute perfection—as she got lost in the waves before me.

But beyond that, I'm amazed by the way she sees the world through her camera lens. The way she talks about the people she loves. The way she seems to savor every moment. The way she rambles when she's nervous. The way she challenges me...

I should have reached out and pulled her close...

Knock. Knock.

"Gianluca! Are you up? Carlo just called me and wants to know where you are with the scripts!"

I groan and turn around in bed, facing away from the door. Still, my assistant continues to knock.

"Gianluca? Are you up?"

“No.”

“Very funny. Can I come in?”

“No.”

“Is that also a joke or can I actually come in?”

“Cara, please go away!”

“Gianluca, I spoke to Carlo and he said that—”

“I don’t care what Carlo said! It’s eight o’clock in the morning, I want to rest.”

Even though there’s silence for the next few moments, I know that she’s still on the other side of the door, waiting for the best moment to restart the assault.

“Gianluca...”

“Santa Madonna ... proteggimi dal male, protect me from evil...” I groan and finally get up from bed.

“I can hear you.”

“I wasn’t whispering, Cara. Please ... you know this isn’t much of a retreat if you don’t give me a single moment of peace. There should be a rule against waking me up before nine.” I step into the living room and open the door for her.

“It is a retreat. A very luxurious and expensive retreat that the studio is paying for, by the way,” she bites back.

“Ah, right. And I’m sure they’ll never let me forget it.”

“It’s not about that, Gianluca,” she says, stepping into my room. “And all you have to do while you relax and have fun is read a few scripts and answer some questions. Is that really so hard?”

“Please stop talking to me like I’m a child,” I reply, feeling a wave of resentment rise inside me.

“I wasn’t...”

“Cara, I’ve been in this business since I was eleven years old. I get it. This is how the game works. They pay for all this stuff, and I wear some silly designer clothes to advertise them. Done deal. No harm, no foul. I understand the game, I play the game. But please don’t patronize me. Don’t treat me like I’m a petulant child when I ask for some space to relax a little after filming three movies back-to-back.”

She takes a few steps back and clutches the iPad to her chest.

I shake my head, reminding myself to be careful with my words. A single email from her to a gossip website and I can easily be accused of practically

anything. Shouting at her, mistreating her...

“Anyway, what can I do for you, Cara?”

“Carlo called me and asked if you read any of the scripts,” she answers coldly.

“Yes. I read the remake of *Little Women* and another one with no title attached to it about a guy who hunts a werewolf in the forest.”

“What did you think about them?”

“They were both ludicrous...” I reply and pour myself some coffee. I sit on the couch in front of her and watch as she goes through her iPad.

“Yes, well, that doesn’t matter, does it?”

“It matters to me.”

Cara gives me another cold stare and continues. “What Carlo wants to know is if you’re *interested* in any of them.”

“Not yet. I’ll keep reading them and if something comes up, I’ll let you know.”

“Fantastic. I’ll be on the edge of my seat,” Cara says emphatically as she gets up to leave my room.

“Tell Carlo that I did the scuba diving lessons.”

“I will.”

Just as she’s about to leave, I stop her. “Cara, wait!”

“Yes?”

“Can you do something for me, please?”

Based on the expression on her face, I can see that she’s waiting for an apology from me. But I really don’t think there’s a need for one.

I pay her a lot of money, the least she can do is treat me like an adult.

And allow me to relax, for once.

“What do you want me to do?” she asks.

“Please find a photography album about the Island of Capri and send it to Larisa Thompson, today, to her room. This morning if you can. Also, please have the hotel’s florist prepare a large bouquet of pink roses to go along with it. Make sure they’re the sweet-smelling kind. Oh, and please come back to my room with it first, I want to add a note.”

“Is she your new ... woman?”

“Please, don’t talk about her like that.” My tone comes out more coldly than I intended.

“Fine. I’ll be back in an hour or so. You can prepare the note in the meantime if you want.” With that, and without saying goodbye, she leaves.

Personal assistants have an incredibly weird way of bossing you around when it's really you that should be bossing *them* around.

Cara is no different.

I wait for the hour to pass and drink another espresso. The caffeine courses through my veins and gives me a boost to start working through these scripts.

I pick a random one from the pack that has a "Top-Secret" mark on it. That can only mean one thing in the world of cinema. This is a Marvel movie.

Even though there are no indications, no title, or anything else that might link it to the legendary production company, the script is clearly meant for a new superhero movie.

I take my time with it and, even though I'm reluctant at first, I quickly get sucked into the intricate world and compelling story.

"Can I come in?"

"Huh? What? Has it already been an hour?"

"It's actually been two and a half hours. The hotel florist didn't have the pink roses you wanted so they had to ship some from the other side of Positano. What have you been doing?" Cara asks me.

"Believe it or not ... I've actually been reading some of these scripts. And one of them has me hooked."

"Is that so? Oh, please don't tell me that it's some independent, art house movie that will take two weeks to shoot in an apartment. No one except for your mom and your cousin—who has a crush on you—will want to watch *that*."

"Wow, that was actually pretty funny, Cara. Good job. I didn't peg you to have such a sense of humor." I chuckle.

She shoots me a dirty look and pushes a pen in my hand. "Write the note for your woman."

"She's not my—Stop calling her that, will you?"

I scribble on the creamy card, trying not to make any spelling mistakes in English.

Dear Larisa,

I enjoyed the time we spent together on Capri.

Thank you for sharing the wonderful stories about your parents with me. I admire your passion for photography. Learning such details about you was truly inspiring.

This is a photography album of Capri itself that, of course, will never match your talent and exquisite touch.

I hope it will remind you forever of the day we spent together.

Yours,

Gianluca

“Done. Please make sure that this reaches Larisa immediately.”

“Mhm. Aren’t you going to give her an autograph, too?” Cara asks sarcastically.

I choose to ignore her comment. “Please go and deliver this. Thank you.”

She exits my room once more, leaving me in the company of the script for the superhero movie.

It’s a thrilling tale in which I would be playing the villain, a half-human-half-robot who wants love but is only capable of revenge. He confronts Spider-Man in a battle that promises to look explosive on screen.

Cara returns with an answer from Larisa almost minutes later. “Looks like the American girl is super eager to date an Italian celebrity.”

“She doesn’t know ... never mind. What did she say?” I ask.

“She wrote a note for you on another card and gave it to me. I don’t get it, Gianluca. Why haven’t you given her your phone number? What’s with all this card business and writing notes to each other?”

“Umm ... I just ... this is more romantic,” I quickly find an excuse.

I turn the card over and read Larisa’s message.

Dear Gianluca,

Thank you so much for the roses and the album! This was such a sweet gesture on your part. What more could I possibly ask for?

I know ... Would you like to come with me on the day trip to Pompeii tomorrow?

Please, say yes!

Yours,

Larisa

I freeze with the card in my hand, not knowing what to do.

How can I possibly leave the resort and go to such a crowded place like Pompeii?

In the vast sea of tourists that floods the ancient site every summer, probably half of them will recognize me.

And yet, my desire to spend time with Larisa trumps everything.

“Cara?”

“Yes?”

“I want to go to Pompeii tomorrow.”

“Stai scherzando, you’re kidding me!”

CHAPTER TWELVE

Larisa

Knock. Knock.

“Larisa? Are you in here? We’re planning to head down to the beach and were wondering if you wanted to join,” Jo asks through the hotel room door.

After I welcome them in, Emmy and Jo look around surprised at the mountain of pink roses that now fills my room.

“What in the ... what’s all this?” Emmy’s eyes are wide as saucers.

“What?” I ask nonchalantly.

“What do you mean, what? Are we not looking at the same thing? Wait, is this from the Italian guy? Gianluca? Is he behind all this?” Emmy asks.

“He might be.” I grin and drag one of my suitcases to the bedroom. “Come on, you have to help me pick out something to wear.”

“Hold on, hold on. What’s happening here?” Jo interjects. “A few days ago, when we had lunch, you were absolutely sure that you didn’t want to date him. And now he’s filled your room with pink roses and you’re choosing outfits? So, you *are* dating him after all?”

“Yeah, and where were *we* during all this?” Emmy says.

“You two were probably drinking limoncello on the beach and taking endless naps. But anyway, Gianluca and I are not dating. We happened to take the same scuba diving lesson and—”

“Oh, you *just so happened* to take the same scuba diving lesson, did you?” Jo laughs, putting air quotes around this sentence as if she doesn’t believe me.

“Actually, yes,” I reply, brightly. “I had no idea that he would be on the Island of Capri. How could I have known? I was really interested in the scuba diving lessons and, of course, I wanted to see the island itself. I was hoping to take some underwater photos, but the water was a bit too murky. In any case, Gianluca was there as well. As it turns out, we *do* have much more in common than I originally thought.”

“Alright. So, you went scuba diving with the hunky Italian man in skimpy bathing suits. While we were napping on the beach. A little jealous, not going to lie.” Emmy chuckles. “And *then* what happened?”

“Nothing, you guys!” I react, knowing very well where they’re going with all this. “We had dinner on the beach and—”

“You had *dinner* on the beach and then he sent you a truck filled with pink roses?” Jo interjects. “And you call that *nothing*? Hon, what does he have to do? Fly a plane with a giant sign attached to it saying: ‘*Larisa, I like you*’?”

“Alright, alright ... maybe you’re right.” I shrug. “He also ... sent me a photography book of the Island of Capri.”

“Aww, wow! That’s super thoughtful!” Emmy exclaims.

“Yeah, it really was.” I can’t help but smile as I reflect on our evening together there. “He showed a whole new side of himself in Capri. I think you two were right about us. There *is* a connection.”

“I *knew* it! So, are you going to see him again?” Emmy wiggles her eyebrows.

“Yes, actually. I invited him to go to Pompeii with me today,” I reply before disappearing into the bedroom.

Behind me, I can hear my friends gasping in surprise.

“You asked him on a date?” Jo asks.

“I—I guess I did.”

“Larisa, that’s awesome! But ... I’m a little confused. I mean, what happened to the whole, ‘*I’m looking for a serious relationship? Someone I can build a life with*’?” Jo asks.

“I still want that. Nothing has changed. But, as you both encouraged me to

do, I'm keeping an open mind. And after spending more time with Gianluca, I realized that he is, in fact, a wonderful man. So, who knows? He might be the man I could build my life with..."

Emmy and Jo look at each other again as if they know something I don't.

"What? What is it now?" I huff.

"Larisa ... you *do* realize that Gianluca lives here and that you live in Boston, right?" Jo asks.

"Yes, of course. What does that have to do with anything?"

"Well ... it's just that ... if you two *did* get into a committed relationship, things might be difficult," Jo says.

"Guys, I don't get it. A few days ago, during lunch, you told me to go for it. What happened? Why have you changed your mind?" I ask.

"Honey, we haven't changed our minds," Jo answers and Emmy nods along. "A few days ago, we encouraged you to go on a date or two with a handsome Italian man, to let loose a little and get you out of your usual routine. To have a little summer adventure you can look back on one day..."

"Yeah, we weren't expecting you to fall in love with a stranger!" Emmy adds.

"Who said I'm falling in love with him?" I protest.

"Okay, okay. However, you *did* just say you're seriously considering building a life with Gianluca. But ... do you even *know* him? I mean ... what's his last name?" Jo asks.

"It's ... I haven't asked him yet!" I reply, suddenly feeling a little silly. "Guys, look, if this is your argument for me not dating Gianluca, it's a flimsy one at best. So, I haven't asked him his last name yet. Big deal. Is that what actually matters?"

"That was not the point," Jo says.

"Then what was the point?" I ask, starting to feel frustrated by the conversation.

"It's just that ... well, this might not end the way you think it will." Jo explains. "We thought it would be fun for you to have a little adventure—knowing very well that we've got to leave at some point and go back to Boston. But we never expected that this would turn into you wanting a *relationship* with a man who might not want to go to America or ... is just..."

"Just what?"

"We don't want to see you get your heart broken, that's all," Emmy interjects.

“But it was totally okay to go off on some adventure with him when he was a complete stranger? How’s *that* for logic? I’m actually getting to know him, and *now* you’re worried? Why? Because this could turn out to be the kind of relationship I’ve been longing for my whole life and not some silly Diane Lane, *Under the Tuscan Sun* fling that we could gossip about over brunch? Guys...”

They remain silent and watch me as I try to dig some clothes out of my suitcases.

“Larisa, we didn’t mean to upset you,” Jo finally says.

“I’m not upset. I just don’t understand where you’re coming from with all this.”

“We truly want the best for you and never wanted to push you into anything,” Emmy says.

“Yeah, and we’re happy that you found Gianluca. But ... we still think you should be careful,” Jo adds.

“Yeah ... well, anyway, right now, I have to get ready. We’re going to Pompeii and I have absolutely nothing to wear.”

“Why don’t you come into my room and try some of my dresses?” Jo suggests. “I have some designer ones that would look amazing on you.”

“Yeah! And I’d love to do your makeup,” Emmy adds.

We head out the door and I can’t help but replay our conversation in my head.

I know that my friends want what’s best for me but they have a weird way of showing it.

Why wouldn’t Gianluca be the man I think he is?

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Gianluca

“Just for the record, I think this is a *very* bad idea,” Cara says as she helps me choose a particularly large baseball cap.

I don’t want to admit it to her, because that would ruin my plans, but, secretly, I think that this might not be the best idea I’ve ever had either.

“Hand me that black one. Do you think this is too much? What if I wear a scarf too?”

“You could ... but you’re going to *boil* in this weather. Also ... with a scarf, people might think that you’re trying to steal their purses.”

“Yeah. Forget the scarf. So, just a baseball cap and sunglasses, then.”

“That should do it, I suppose,” Cara admits. “And try to stay as low profile as possible—don’t interact with anyone, don’t speak too loudly or people may recognize your voice, don’t do any big gestures, and don’t go to any shops. If you need anything, like water or tickets, ask her to do it, okay?”

“That’s not very gentlemanly of me, though.”

“I know. But you *have* to. All it takes is for one of those shop girls to recognize you or take a photo. If that happens, we won’t be able to get you

out of that tourist trap unless we call the fire department,” Cara replies.

I know that she’s right, but I try to hold my ground. “Come on, it can’t be that bad...”

“Really? Have you already forgotten what happened in Mexico? Or have you intentionally blocked it out?” she asks.

I step away and change my T-shirt into a plain, black one.

“I don’t know...”

“Gianluca, when we were in Mexico, promoting *The Whisper of the Wind*, you got food poisoning from one of the local restaurants. As if that wasn’t bad enough, we couldn’t get your personal doctor on location and we had to take you to the local hospital. Remember?”

“Hmm...”

“Surely you didn’t forget how your army of fans found out and surrounded the hospital, waiting for you to come out. And when we finally did, they stopped traffic, circled the car, broke the windows, and tried to get to you.”

“Oh, yeah, I thought that was a dream I had.”

“Don’t be so flippant,” she replies. “The worst part is, I still have no clue how they were able to find out in a matter of minutes where you were. In a foreign country, no less!”

“That was the worst part? How about the fact that they almost flipped the car over?”

“Ah, so you *do* remember!” she exclaims.

“Cara ... that’s not going to happen today.”

“How do you know?”

“Because I’m going to be careful. Look, I have a black T-shirt on, big sunglasses, and a baseball cap. You can barely even tell it’s me!”

“If you say so ... anyway, I’m going to send two bodyguards to keep an eye on you, just in case.”

“Do you have to do that, Cara?”

“It’s Carlo’s orders. He says it’s for your safety, and I agree. Don’t worry, they won’t disturb your date. They’ll be dressed in casual clothes, just like you. They’ll only step in if ... you know...”

“The crowd tries to tear me to pieces,” I reply a little more grimly than I intended.

“Well...”

“And just think ... there are people out there who *actually* want to be celebrities,” I joke. “Look at me. I can’t even take a date out without military

preparations.”

“Stop complaining. You’re rich, gorgeous, and talented. This is a small price to pay.”

“That’s what I keep telling myself.”



“Hello, there! I almost didn’t recognize you under that disguise!” Larisa jokes as she walks toward me in the hotel’s private courtyard.

“Really? Umm ... I just ... want to protect myself from the sun. I think I got a little sunburnt the other day when we were on the Island of Capri so now, I have to do this.”

“I thought that you Italians can handle the Mediterranean sun no problem. What happened?” She laughs, poking at my large baseball cap.

“Mmm ... sure, but we’re not invincible, after all.”

Goodness, I hate lying to her. But ... if I were to tell her the truth, she may not look at me the same ... or... give me a real chance.

“Well, you know best. I have plenty of sunscreen, so don’t worry. I got you covered!” She points to her bag.

“Dolce and Gabbana. I like your style, Larisa.”

“Wow, you know your bags, Gianluca. Is that part of your business or do all Italian men know Italian fashion brands?” she asks me.

“No, no. Dolce and Gabbana is, obviously, very famous here.”

“Well, thank you. My best friend, Jo, got it for me.”

“It’s very nice. I love your dress too, by the way.”

She’s wearing a yellow sundress with small straps that look amazing against her red hair and increasingly tanned skin. The thin straps keep falling enticingly off her shoulders, exposing her bare skin and making me crave her.

“Thanks. I don’t exactly know what brand this is, though...”

“It doesn’t matter. You look ... incredible in it.”

She blushes a little, but I can tell that she’s getting more and more comfortable with my compliments.

“Shall we go, then? Who else is coming? Do you know?” she asks as we climb into the car provided by the hotel.

“From the hotel, you mean? I honestly don’t know. Considering we’re the only ones here—nobody, I guess. I’m not sure who else is interested in things like this,” I reply, knowing full well Cara most likely bribed the hotel staff to

ensure we'd have private transportation.

"Are you?" Larisa asks me playfully. "Or did you just accept my invitation because ... you wanted to see me again?"

"Of course, I wanted to see you again. Here, there, anywhere..."

She brushes her naked leg against mine and I feel a little lightheaded. The day has barely started ... and I know I need to keep a clear head in order to avoid being recognized. But with Larisa next to me, it's going to be harder than ever to keep a level head.

She takes my breath away.

The driver sets off on the hour-long journey toward Pompeii and, as expected, we're the only ones he's transporting.

"So, have you been to Pompeii before?" Larisa asks me.

"I went once on a class trip. I think I was in the second grade. They took us there to show us the destruction of the volcano and what it left behind."

"Wow ... did it have a big impact on you as a little boy?"

"Honestly, all I remember is that one of my friends tripped on one of those big boulders, fell, and chipped a tooth. We called him 'sdentato' for the rest of the year—toothless..."

She laughs and places her hand on my arm, casually but firmly. "That's so mean! That poor boy!"

"What's mean is that we had to ride all the way to Pompeii in an old bus from the fifties that smelled like cow dung and mold. I think there was an owl living in it. The bus driver used to threaten us that if we didn't settle down, the owl would tell the principal what we did!"

She bursts out giggling like a schoolgirl herself.

"Oh, my goodness! And you believed him? That a possibly non-existent owl could talk and tell on you to the principal?"

"We were in second grade, Larisa," I reply. "We weren't exactly scientists."

"I can just imagine you as a little boy, riding in that old bus to Pompeii, frightened by a big, mean owl..."

"Are you making fun of me?" I ask.

"Absolutely!" she laughs.

"Oh, Santa Madonna ... Madre mia ... Look what I have to put up with," I pretend to complain but she knows I don't mean it.

The car glides along the scenic route towards Pompeii, the sun casting a warm glow on Larisa's face.

“Tell me more about your childhood. What were you like?” she asks.

I lean back in my seat, reminiscing about my childhood as memories flood my mind. “Well,” I begin, a nostalgic smile forming on my lips, “I was always a bit of a troublemaker. Growing up in a small town, my friends and I were constantly getting into mischief.”

Her eyes light up with curiosity as she leans closer, her hand still resting on my arm. “Oh, tell me more. What kind of mischief?”

I chuckle, tracing circles on her hand with my thumb. “One time, we decided to play a prank on our history teacher. We hid all the chalk in the classroom and replaced it with brightly colored ones we made ourselves. The teacher’s hands had a blue hue for weeks.”

“Oh no!” Her laughter fills the car, filling me with a sense of joy that only her presence can bring. “That’s so mischievous! What did your parents say?”

“My parents were not too pleased with me, to say the least,” I reply with a sheepish grin. “They couldn’t understand why I would waste my time on such pranks instead of focusing on my studies.”

She nods. “Surely they just wanted the best for you as parents often do. But I think a little mischief now and then is what makes childhood memorable.”

“Oh absolutely. Those moments of mischief were some of the best memories of my childhood. We were just kids having fun, trying to make the most of our days in that small town,” I say, my voice filled with a mix of nostalgia and fondness. “Life was so much simpler back then.”

Larisa looks at me intently, her eyes sparkling with curiosity. “Are you still close with your parents?”

I take a deep breath, feeling a pang of sadness wash over me. “No, unfortunately not. My parents passed away in a car crash when I was in my early twenties. It was a difficult time for me, but I’ve learned to cherish the memories we shared together.”

Her expression softens, her hand squeezing mine gently. “I’m so sorry to hear that, Gianluca. Losing loved ones is never easy.”

Her words bring a sense of comfort, a reminder that I’m not alone in my pain. “It’s been a long time since then, and I’ve come to terms with their loss. But I do miss them, especially during significant moments in my life.”

Larisa’s eyes reflect understanding, and she leans in closer, her voice barely above a whisper. “I lost my grandmother a few years ago and it was heart wrenching. I can’t imagine how difficult it must have been for you to lose both parents. It’s admirable that you were able to overcome such a

tragedy and become the successful, kind-hearted man that you are today.”

Her words touch something deep within me, stirring emotions that I’ve kept hidden for so long.

It’s as if she has this uncanny ability to see past the facade I present to the world and glimpse the vulnerable parts of me.

“Thank you,” I say softly, feeling a lump forming in my throat. “Your words mean more to me than you’ll ever know.”

She smiles warmly, her fingers lacing with mine as the car continues its journey towards Pompeii. The touch of her hand sends an electric current through my body.

And for the first time in nearly two decades ... I feel like a normal person.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Larisa

The loss of his parents weighs heavy on my heart. I can sense the pain behind his smile, the strength it took for him to overcome such tragedy.

He embodies resilience and compassion, and it only deepens my admiration for him.

There are so many more layers to Gianluca than I originally thought.

I can't help but lean closer to him, wanting to be near him, to feel his presence.

"So, what were you like as a kid?" he asks me. "What was it like growing up in Boston?"

The gentle hum of the car's engine creates a soothing backdrop to our conversation.

"Growing up in Boston was quite the adventure," I begin, gazing into the distance as I recall the memories. "The bustling streets, the vibrant neighborhoods, and the rich history that surrounded me—it all shaped who I am today. For as long as I can remember, I was always filled with a sense of curiosity, eager to explore every nook and cranny of the city. I took a

photography class in high school and fell in love with capturing the essence of Boston through my lens. Every weekend, I would wander the streets, documenting the hidden gems and the moments that made the city come alive.”

Gianluca listens intently, his eyes fixed on me, his expression filled with genuine interest.

“There’s just something magical about capturing a moment in time, freezing it forever in an image,” I add.

“Ah, so that explains why you were taking photos in the courtyard at the hotel,” he says, finally putting the pieces of the puzzle together.

I laugh. “Yes, I wanted to capture the beauty of the courtyard and its intricate architecture. Photography has always been my way of expressing myself, of capturing the essence of a place or a person.”

“And what’s my essence?” he asks.

“Hmm, let me think,” I muse, playfully tapping my finger against my chin. “Your essence is ... a combination of strength and vulnerability. There’s a certain depth in your eyes that tells a story, a story filled with determination and resilience. But beneath that strong exterior, there’s also a gentleness, an empathy that shines through. It’s as if you carry the weight of the world on your shoulders, yet you still have room in your heart to care for others.”

Gianluca’s gaze softens as he takes in my words, a hint of vulnerability shining through. “I never realized how much you could discern just from a photograph.”

I smile. “Photography is a window into the soul. It captures the moments that words fail to express. And in your case, it’s evident that there’s so much more to you than meets the eye.”

“I feel the same way about you,” he says, his voice filled with sincerity. “There’s a depth to you that I’m drawn to, a sense of adventure and curiosity that makes me want to know more.”

A blush creeps up my cheeks at his words. “What would you like to know?”

“Tell me more about your family. Do you have any siblings?”

“I’m an only child.”

“Oh, me too!” he says.

“But I come from a big family—my mom has eight siblings—so Sunday dinners were always filled with laughter, lively conversations, and, of course, an abundance of delicious food. My cousins and I have always been close.

Three cousins in particular are like sisters to me. They live in a beach town not too far from Boston called Bluegrass Bay, so we would get together a lot.”

“Tell me more,” he urges.

“Well,” I continue, “growing up, my closest cousins would stay the night every other weekend. We had this ongoing competition to see who could come up with the most daring and creative pranks.” A mischievous grin creeps onto my face as I recall my childhood antics.

“Ah, so I wasn’t the only mischievous one out of the two of us.” He winks.

“It’s true.” I laugh. “One time, we decided to pull a prank on my unsuspecting neighbors. We gathered all the garden gnomes from their front yard and arranged them on their front porch. The next morning, the neighbors woke up to a spectacle of gnomes engaged in various hilarious activities: fishing in a birdbath, sunbathing on miniature lawn chairs. We even created a gnome-sized barbecue complete with tiny hot dogs. It was quite the sight!”

His laughter echoes through the car. “That’s brilliant! I can only imagine their surprise.”

“Oh, they were completely baffled. We watched from behind the curtains as they examined their magically transformed front porch. It was like a scene out of a comedy film. We were so proud of ourselves. We laughed about it for weeks.”

“Your family sounds incredible,” he says. “I can only imagine the laughter and love that filled your home.”

I nod, a warm smile spreading across my face. “We had our fair share of chaos and arguments too, but there was always this underlying sense of unity and support. We knew that no matter what happened, we had each other’s backs.”

Gianluca’s face drops, his eyes filled with a mix of longing and sadness.

After a minute of silence, curiosity gets the best of me. “What were your parents like?” I ask him.

He takes a deep breath, and I can see the weight of his emotions settling heavily on his shoulders. “My parents ... they were incredible people,” he says, his voice filled with both fondness and sorrow. “They were always there for me, supporting me in everything I pursued. My mother, Rosina, had this radiant smile that could light up the darkest room. She was fiercely protective of her family and had this nurturing nature that made everyone feel loved and cared for. And my father, Eduardo, was the epitome of strength

and resilience. He taught me many valuable lessons about determination and hard work.”

I can see the hint of a tear forming in his eyes. I reach out to gently squeeze his hand.

“Gianluca,” I say softly, “it’s okay to feel sadness and miss them. Your parents sound like incredible people, and their memory will always be with you.”

“They were taken from me too soon,” he whispers. “And ... if I’m honest, sometimes, the grief can be all-consuming. No matter how much time passes, it’s always ... there. And with my job ... I very rarely get downtime. I practically live on the road, traveling from one place to another. It’s been a way for me to escape the pain, to keep myself busy so I don’t have to confront the void they left behind. But I really just want to make them proud.”

I squeeze his hand tighter, offering him a small semblance of comfort. “I have no doubt that they would be proud of the person you’ve become. You carry their legacy within you and the strength and resilience they instilled in you shines through.”

“I just wish they were here to witness it all,” he says, his voice barely above a whisper.

I lean closer to him. “Wherever they are, I’m sure they’re looking down on you, cheering you on every step of the way.”

“You’re right. Thank you, Larisa.” He smiles. “And thanks for listening.”

“You don’t have to thank me, Gianluca. It’s what friends do.”

“Oh, so we’re officially friends now?” He wiggles his eyebrows.

I can’t help but chuckle at his playful tone, relieved to see a glimmer of the lighthearted Gianluca I’ve come to know.

“Frenemies,” I reply with a grin.

He feigns offense, placing a hand dramatically over his heart. “Frenemies? That’s a harsh title, American Jane. I thought we were past such formalities.”

I laugh, the sound filling the car and bringing a lightness to the heavy air. “Alright, fine. Friends it is then. But quit calling me Jane.”

His smile widens, and for a moment, it feels as if the weight of his grief has lifted just a little. “Okay, American.”

We continue our journey, the streets passing by in a blur. The conversation flows effortlessly between us, as we continue to swap stories about our families and our childhoods. Each word weaves another thread in the fabric

of our connection.

“You know, Larisa,” he begins, his voice carrying a tinge of hesitation. “I never expected to meet someone like you on this trip. The connection we’ve formed—it’s unlike anything I’ve experienced before.”

My heart quickens at his confession, my emotions swirling in a cyclone of excitement and anticipation.

“I feel the same way,” I admit softly, a shy smile playing on my lips. “There’s something undeniably special about it.”

He reaches over and gently places his hand on top of mine.

A rush of warmth floods my body. It’s a feeling I can’t quite put into words.

“There’s something undeniably special about you.” Gianluca smiles before leaning closer, closing the already minimal distance between us. “And I’m hoping we can be more than just friends...”

My heart is pounding in my chest as he reaches out and begins tracing my jawline with his fingertips. A wave of pleasure shoots through me at his touch.

“I—I’d like that,” I whisper, my voice barely audible as I meet his gaze.

The air crackles with anticipation, as if the universe itself is waiting for our next move.

He tilts my head up toward his as our faces inch closer.

I part my lips instinctually, and I can feel his warm breath against my skin.

Time seems to stand still as we hover just inches apart, our eyes locked, communicating a yearning that words cannot fully express. The world outside the car fades into a blur of insignificance.

And then, finally, our lips meet in a tender but passionate kiss.

He tastes like cinnamon and the warmth of summer, a flavor that lingers on my tongue and exhilarates my senses. Our lips move together in perfect harmony, igniting the fire that’s been simmering within us both.

The kiss deepens, our bodies leaning towards each other as if drawn together by an invisible force.

I feel his hands sliding up the back of my neck, his fingers tangling in my hair, while my own hands find their way to his muscular back, tracing the sculpted lines and contours of his muscles while pulling him impossibly closer.

All other thoughts fade away as we lose ourselves in the moment, the car becoming our own little universe in which nothing else exists except for the

raw passion we share.

We explore each other's mouths with fervor and hunger, our tongues dancing in a desperate symphony.

Our kisses become more urgent, the desire between us growing with each passing second. I can feel the heat radiating off of Gianluca's body. He gently sucks my bottom lip into his mouth, drawing a soft moan from deep within me. The kiss becomes an intoxicating blend of need and longing, as if we've been starved for this connection our whole lives.

The driver clears his throat awkwardly as the car slows to a stop.

We reluctantly break apart, gasping for air as we realize that we're not alone. I blush profusely, my eyes meeting Gianluca's with a mix of embarrassment and desire.

"Um ... sorry about that," the driver stammers. "We've arrived at your destination, Pompeii."

I can feel the heat rising in my cheeks as I fumble to compose myself, embarrassed by our lack of restraint. "No need to apologize," I blurt out. "We appreciate your driving skills and excellent timing."

The driver gives us an awkward smile, clearly relieved that we're taking it lightly, before he opens the car door and steps aside, gesturing for us to exit.

"Enjoy your visit to Pompeii," he says politely, closing the door behind us.

As we step out of the car and onto the ancient streets of Pompeii, I take a moment to collect myself, while our passionate kiss still lingers on my lips, fueling a fire within me that refuses to be extinguished.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Gianluca

That kiss was even better than I could have imagined.

The taste of Larisa's lips, the way her body melted against mine ... it was indescribable. But even more than that, I felt something pure and genuine with Larisa—a connection that transcends the superficial.

I never expected to feel so comfortable opening up to someone. But she makes it easy for me to let my guard down.

She sees me for who I am, and even accepts my flaws.

That's something I've never experienced before.

Everything in me wants to explore our connection further, but now that we've arrived in Pompeii, with a sea of tourists surrounding the archeological site, I've got to stay focused on the task at hand—blending in and *not* being recognized.

I take a deep breath and make sure to pull my baseball cap as low as possible and keep my sunglasses on.

Some of the tourists are wandering aimlessly from side to side, others are pushing, while even more ask for directions in an attempt at Italian that no

one can comprehend.

I notice Larisa looks a little overwhelmed when faced with the crowd so I take her hand.

“Don’t worry. I’ve been here before, remember?” I smile.

“Yeah, when you were eight.”

“So? Come on. We can do this together!”

She grins and, hand in hand, we head inside. I’m just as happy to be holding her hand—happy that I have her by my side to navigate this crowd of people.

Larisa has no way of knowing, but in my day-to-day life, I have to do this by myself. All alone, facing millions of people.

But now, she’s here.

As expected, the archaeological park proves difficult to move through. There seems to be thousands of tourists, all scrambling to and from the same fixed points. Ancient villas, temples, and, of course, the preserved remains of the people who perished because of the eruption.

“Do you think we’ll actually get to see something?” Larisa asks me loudly over the chatter of the crowd.

“We can try...” I respond, even though I’m worried that heading directly into the crowd will surely get me recognized.

“Come on, let’s go this way!” She decides to take the lead and I allow her.

We turn into one of the ancient streets that takes us to a villa. Astonishingly enough, it’s so well preserved that we can walk inside and make our way through its inner garden among the columns.

“Isn’t this incredible? This house is over two thousand years old!” Larisa says and starts to take photos.

She takes her time and finds the best angles possible while I get more and more worried that someone might, at any point, find out who I am.

A pair of elderly ladies start circling me, eyeing me very suspiciously for a few seconds. I pull my baseball hat even lower and take Larisa away. “Come on! Let’s find the ... you know ... the ... thing!”

“Huh? What are you talking about? Where are you taking me?” She laughs and, luckily for me, she thinks that this is a game.

I hold her tightly until we exit the ancient house and find a little corner where we can rest. Still in my arms and holding her camera, she struggles to understand.

“What was that all about, Gianluca? I was taking photos. Why did we have

to rush away?”

“Because ... I just felt like we spent enough time there. And it’s such a touristy place, anyway. Why don’t we try to find one of the temples?”

“Umm ... alright, I guess ... You know, you’re acting kind of weird right now.”

“Am I?” I reply as we head out through the crowd once more. I relax a little as I notice that everyone over here seems to be too busy taking selfies or videos of the monuments themselves to notice me.

We finally arrive at The Temple of Apollo, but it is entirely surrounded by people and there’s hardly any chance she can take decent photos.

Larisa looks up at me, a hint of disappointment in her eyes and I immediately want to do something to make her feel better. Before I can stop myself, I suggest, “Why don’t we bypass the crowd and climb up to the top of that hill over there? You might get some beautiful shots from up there.”

Her eyes light up with excitement. “That’s a great idea!”

We make our way through the crowd, maneuvering between groups of tourists and amateur photographers.

I do my best to keep my head down and avoid being recognized.

As we climb up the narrow staircase that leads to the viewpoint, I can’t help but feel a mixture of anticipation and anxiety. It’s a risk, being exposed in such an open space, but seeing Larisa’s smile makes it all worth it.

Finally reaching the top, we step onto the platform overlooking the Temple of Apollo. The view is breathtaking—the ancient ruins contrasted against a backdrop of blue skies and rolling hills. Larisa takes out her camera, her fingers dancing over the settings, ready to capture the moment.

I glance around, my heart racing as I sense eyes on me. But amidst the sea of faces, nobody seems to recognize me. It’s a relief, but I know we can’t stay here for long.

With a deep breath, I try to focus on the beautiful scene in front of us and wrap my arm around Larisa’s waist, pulling her close. She leans into me, her head resting on my shoulder as we watch the world go by.

“Do you ever get in front of the camera, Larisa?” I ask, breaking the silence that had enveloped us.

“Only if I can control what’s behind me,” she replies, pointing her camera at the breathtaking view of the ancient ruins and snapping a few photos.

“Can I take your picture?” I ask her.

She pauses, her fingers still poised over the camera, tilting her head

slightly, considering the question. “Sure, but why?”

I smile as she hands me her camera. “I want to freeze this moment in time, and ... capture your essence.”

“Smooth.” She laughs, taking a few steps back.

I carefully frame the shot, positioning Larisa so that the Temple of Apollo is in the background, and her smile is the focus. The soft light filters through the clouds, casting a warm glow on her face. I zoom in, admiring the way her hair dances in the gentle breeze, the way the sun caresses her cheekbones, the way her icy blue eyes sparkle with excitement.

“You’re beautiful, Larisa,” I say, before pressing the shutter button. The camera clicks, capturing the soft shade of pink that tinged her cheeks at my compliment. “Perfect.”

She laughs softly and hugs me tightly. “Thank you,” she whispers.

I return the hug, feeling the warmth of her body against mine, suddenly overcome with gratitude.

Standing here, suspended above the ancient ruins, I’m reminded that sometimes, amidst the chaos of our lives, we find beauty in the simplest of moments.

I’m so grateful to be here right now with a woman who likes me for ... me.

I turn the camera back to her, and she takes a look at the shot. A smile spreads across her face. “You did a great job. I’m glad you’re here with me right now,” she says.

I nod, my voice slightly hoarse. “Me too.”

We continue to enjoy the view in a comfortable silence for a few moments, each lost in our own thoughts.

“Well, should we head back down the hill? I’m kind of hungry,” Larisa suggests.

“Sure, let’s head back,” I reply, my eyes following her as she walks down the hill. “How about we grab a cup of coffee and a snack? We can find a place that’s not so crowded and sit down a little,” I add.

“That sounds great! But ... are we going to find coffee here?”

“It’s Italy, you can find coffee everywhere.”

As we make our way toward the café, I suddenly remember what Cara told me—that I should ask Larisa to buy the things we need, to avoid being recognized.

Back at the hotel room, when we spoke of this in theory, I agreed. But now, looking at Larisa, I understand that there is absolutely no excuse I can make

that she would possibly believe as to why I, the Italian speaker, am sending *her* inside to buy the coffee.

I brace myself and go in.

As expected, as soon as my turn comes, the girl behind the counter starts looking at me in a funny way. “You know ... you look a lot like that guy...”

“No, I don’t really. Can I, please, have two espressos, two bottles of water, and two cornetti? Thanks a lot!”

“Sure! But you do look like that guy! The actor! What’s his name? The famous one?”

“I don’t know. I don’t watch movies...”

She turns around to prepare my coffees and all I want is for this to be over. I can imagine the entire crowd recognizing me and descending on me like hyenas. The girl behind the counter finally hands me my order and says, “Are you related to him? That guy...”

“Thank you and have a good day!” I speed outside to where Larisa is waiting near the entrance.

She smiles broadly as she accepts the coffee and cornetto. “Wow, the girl behind the counter sure was chatty.”

“Are you jealous?” I ask her.

“Mmm, no ... not at all...”

“I can tell you’re lying, Larisa.” I grin.

“Well, what did she say?”

“Nothing ... she thought I ... look like someone she went to high school with,” I reply, feeling supremely uncomfortable with the lie I just told.

“What a line! She was definitely hitting on you! You know that, right? ‘You look like someone I went to high school with...’ Such a cheesy line, too. I wish I had gone in to get the coffee and snacks now.”

“Honestly, me too.”

We find a wooden bench that puts a little distance between us and the crowd, which continues its never-ending march through the ruins. It’s not much, but it’s enough to make me feel better.

“Mmm this tastes incredible!” she exclaims in pure pleasure. “Thanks so much for buying my coffee, Gianluca. That’s so sweet of you!”

“It’s really nothing. I just wanted you to enjoy this little break,” I reply.

She reaches out and takes off my sunglasses.

“Do you know that you have the most beautiful eyes ... in the world?” she says.

“I could tell you the same thing, Larisa.”

“Thank you. But your eyes are like none I’ve ever seen. I’m fascinated by the golden flecks. Would you let me photograph you? I’m asking for permission this time.” She grins.

“You can do anything you want ... would you let me kiss you again?” I ask.

“You can do anything you want...”

I lean in and brush my lips against hers. The soft sensation is extraordinary and makes me crave more. I sink in, feeling her tongue press against mine, playfully and enticingly. Like enjoying the sweetest dessert, we taste each other, long and intricate, savoring every movement, every touch, and every sound. Her hands clasp around my neck and I can feel her getting closer to me. I try my hardest to focus, to stay present in the moment, and remember where and who I am.

After what feels like a lifetime, we break away and I look around, curious to see what’s happening. The tourists are minding their own business or, rather, Pompeii’s business. A man dressed in a weird pair of shorts and a Hawaiian shirt is taking photos close to us. But not of us ... I think.

“Hmm ... we came here to marvel at the ruins and we ended up—”

“Marveling at each other,” I finish her sentence. “How about we head back to the hotel, take a long swim in the pool to cool off, order a big meal, and then watch a documentary about Pompeii on the terrace? We can’t see anything here, anyway,” I say, putting my sunglasses back on.

“That sounds perfect!” she exclaims and we link hands once more, trying to make our way through the crowd.

Just when we’re about to reach Porta Marina and head to our car, a woman points toward me, even though I can’t hear what she’s saying over the noise of the crowd.

“Gianluca, do you know her?” Larisa asks me casually.

“Aaa ... I think she was inside the cafe earlier. I must have cut in line in front of her or something. Anyway, here’s the car. Are you ready to go?”

She believed me.

But how long can I keep this up?

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Larisa

“It’s just so crazy to think that these people were just going about their day-to-day lives and then were just ... gone without warning,” I say to Gianluca, the haunting images of the ash-covered bodies frozen in time in Pompeii still fresh in my mind.

We just finished watching the documentary on Pompeii, and the weight of history hangs heavy in the air as we sit on the terrace outside my hotel room.

The night air is cool and refreshing. The gentle breeze carries with it a faint scent of salt from the nearby ocean.

“Yes,” he replies, leaning back in his chair. “It’s amazing how life can change in an instant, whether it’s due to a volcanic eruption or something else entirely.” He glances at me, his gaze lingering for a moment.

“You know, as we were walking through the ruins earlier, I couldn’t help but feel a profound sense of connection with these people from 2,000 years ago.” I pause, looking out at the moonlit night over the water. “I’ve always been fascinated by history, and being here, standing on the same ground they once stood on, it’s almost like our stories are intertwined. Their lives, their

fears, their dreams—they were just like us, living and loving and hoping for a better future.” I sigh, lost in thought. “I’ve often thought of history as something separate from me, something that happened to other people in different times. But being here, I can’t help but feel like I’m a part of it, too.”

Gianluca takes a sip of limoncello, the moonlight glinting off the glass as it reflects in his eyes. “It’s an interesting perspective. To see history as something that’s happening now and to ourselves, rather than something that happened to others, long ago. It’s a powerful reminder about the fleeting nature of time.”

“Exactly,” I say, nodding in agreement. “And it also makes me appreciate the present moment even more. It makes me want to ... seize the day, and continue to pursue everything I’ve set out to do. While also cherishing every moment and not taking anything for granted, simply because we never know how much time we have left...”

“I couldn’t agree more. And I must say, I’ve really enjoyed spending the day with you today. I can’t tell you how long it’s been since I’ve acted like a tourist in my own country.”

“I’m glad I could be a part of that,” I say with a warm smile. “Speaking of seizing the day, what’s on your bucket list?”

He gives me a confused look. “Bucket list? What do you mean?”

“You know ... what do you want to do before you kick the bucket?”

“I’m not sure I understand what you mean. Why would I want to ... kick a bucket? Or make a list of *things* to do before kicking it, exactly. That sounds painful and unpleasant.”

I chuckle. “No, no, it’s just a metaphor for dying. A bucket list is a list of things you want to do, accomplish, or experience before you ... you know ... kick the metaphorical bucket.”

“Oh, I see what you mean, I guess,” he says, looking thoughtful.

“Have you ever thought about what you’d like to do or experience before that happens?” I ask.

“I’ve never really thought about it, to be honest.”

“Really? Not even one thing?”

He shakes his head. “No, not really. I’ve always been so focused on my career and what I need to do next that I never took the time to think about what I truly wanted for myself.”

I can’t help but feel a twinge of sadness for him. Here is this successful, handsome man, but he doesn’t have any personal goals or dreams outside of

work.

“Well, maybe it’s time for you to make a bucket list then,” I suggest.

He looks thoughtful for a moment before turning back to me. “Okay ... I’ll give it a try. But what about you? What’s on your bucket list?”

I pause, thinking about my own answer. “Well, there are definitely some travel destinations on it. Like seeing the Northern Lights or going on an African safari.”

“That sounds amazing,” he says enthusiastically.

“But more than that,” I continue, “I want to make sure that whatever I do in life brings me happiness and fulfillment. Whether it’s in my career or personal life. And I’d really like to become a mom.”

He nods in understanding and squeezes my hand gently. “I think you’d be an amazing mother. Just from the little bit that I’ve seen, it’s clear you’re so caring and compassionate. You’d definitely be a great mom.”

“Thank you.” I smile at him. “That means a lot to hear you say that. It’s something I’ve always dreamed of, and I hope one day it becomes a reality.”

“I want that too.” He pauses for a moment, looking into my eyes with a sincerity that takes my breath away. “To be a parent, I mean. I want to build a life with someone I love, and to have a family of my own.”

My heart swells with warmth at his words.

I’m starting to realize just how much I’ve come to care for Gianluca.

Our connection has grown deeper than I ever expected.

“Sounds like you’ve got the start of your bucket list, then.” I wiggle my eyebrows.

He chuckles. “I guess I do. We’ll add starting a family to my so-called ‘kicking the bucket list.’”

“No, no, it’s just a bucket list.” I laugh. “Not a *kicking* the bucket list—”

“I thought you said dying is like kicking a bucket...”

“I did say that, but the list is ... just ... nevermind.” I shake my head, unable to contain my giggles. “It doesn’t matter. Okay, so you want to start a family, then.”

He smirks. “Yes. I’d just really love to have a daughter.”

“A daughter? Really? For some reason I did *not* expect that. I expected you to want three boys or something.” I laugh. “I get it though. I want a daughter too, of course.” I smirk.

“I mean, don’t get me wrong, I’d love to have a son too.” He grins. “It’s just that, raising a daughter, watching her grow into a confident and capable

woman, just seems like a beautiful experience. I want to show her that she can achieve anything she sets her mind to, and I want to be the kind of father who supports her dreams, no matter what they may be. I want to experience that special father-daughter bond I've heard so much about. I want to experience dance recitals, father-daughter dates, and all the wonderful things that come with raising a daughter. And ... as silly as it might sound, I want to get the opportunity to walk her down the aisle at her wedding one day."

I nod slowly, taking all of this in. There's something undeniably sweet about the idea of Gianluca being a father. "You'd make a wonderful father," I tell him sincerely.

"Thank you." He leans over and takes my hand in his, intertwining his fingers with mine.

We sit in comfortable silence for a few minutes, watching the stars slowly emerge in the night sky, enjoying the warm breeze blowing across our skin and the tranquility of the terrace. Gently, he traces my finger with his thumb, hypnotizing me with his touch. I let out a breathy sigh and close my eyes, lost in the magic of the moment.

"Do you see those stars right there?" he says softly, breaking the spell.

I open my eyes and follow the line of his gaze. "Yes, what about them?"

"If you look closely, they kind of form a constellation shaped like a heart."

I squint my eyes, trying to make out the shape he sees. And there it is—an intricate arrangement of stars forming a nearly perfect heart in the sky.

It's like the universe itself is conspiring to bring us together.

"It's beautiful," I whisper.

He turns toward me, his eyes filled with an intensity that makes my heart skip a beat. "Do you know what they say about stars?"

"What do they say?" I ask, captivated by his words.

"They say that when you wish upon a star, your dreams come true." He leans in toward me, his lips just a breath away from mine. "Do you want to make a wish on that heart-shaped constellation, Larisa?"

My heart races as I consider his question.

There's something undeniable about the way he looks at me, and I find myself wanting nothing more than to be as close to him as possible.

"Yes," I reply, my voice barely above a whisper. "I do."

He gently places his hand on my cheek, his thumb brushing against my lips as he brings his face closer to mine. I can feel the warmth of his breath on my skin, and I'm filled with a sense of anticipation.

Finally, our lips meet. The kiss is gentle at first, a delicate exploration of each other's lips. But as the seconds pass, the intensity builds, our mouths moving in perfect sync, as if we've been doing this for years.

He traces the outline of my jaw with his fingertips, sending shivers down my spine, as I part my lips for him. Gianluca deepens the kiss, his tongue dancing with mine. I moan into his mouth, surrendering completely to the passion we share.

He tastes like lemon drops and honey, a sweet and tangy combination that lingers on my tongue. His lips explore every inch of mine with steady, deliberate movements.

Time seems to stand still as we lose ourselves in the moment. He pulls me closer, so that our bodies are now pressed together, our hearts beating in perfect harmony. It feels like everything I've ever dreamed of, every wish upon a star, is coming true right now.

This connection, our undeniable chemistry, is something I never expected to find.

I move my hands to his broad shoulders, gripping tightly as I'm overcome with a surge of emotion. He responds by running his hands through my hair, cradling the back of my head as he kisses me passionately. My heart is pounding in my chest, my body tingling with desire.

For what seems like an eternity, we continue to kiss, lost in the magic of the moment, the soft breeze, and the stars above.

Eventually, Gianluca pulls away, gazing into my eyes, an unspoken word hanging between us.

"Goodnight Larisa..." he whispers, his voice low and husky.

"Goodnight, Gianluca..." I reply, my voice just as low.

He stands tall, the dim light from the room casting shadows across his face, making his chiseled jawline and piercing gaze even more striking. He smiles at me before walking gracefully towards the door, his dark hair tousled from our passionate embrace.

The soft click of my hotel room door closing behind Gianluca leaves behind a sense of longing and the sound of my own racing heart.

I can't help but feel overwhelmed with excitement and possibility.

This feels like the beginning of something beautiful.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Larisa

A bright sun the color of sweet lemonade streaks through the open windows of my hotel bedroom. I can smell the salt and brine of the Mediterranean from my bed. As soon as my eyes are half open, I reach for my phone and find a series of text messages from Gianluca.

Gianluca: *I had an incredible time with you.*

Gianluca: *Honestly, I can't stop smiling.*

Gianluca: *You're probably asleep so ... good night, amore.*

Gianluca: *Or if you see this in the morning...*

Gianluca: *Good morning!*

I read his messages again and again, like love letters, feeling butterflies spread inside me. I send him a quick reply, unable to contain my excitement.

Me: *I woke up with a smile on my face...*

Me: *All thanks to you.*

I stretch my limbs under the cozy sheets, still basking in the afterglow of yesterday's kisses before noticing that it's almost twelve.

I spring out of bed, hoping that I can still find my friends having some type of late breakfast, somewhere in the hotel.

"Hey, you guys ... I'm so sorry for not coming down sooner! I guess I just ... slept in this morning," I begin when I finally find them on a terrace overlooking a glorious hill covered in olive trees.

Wearing bright bathing suits and oversized hats, Jo and Emmy look like they're about to shoot a scene in a movie from the fifties.

"That's alright. We're glad you could join us at all. Do you want some coffee?" Jo smiles.

"Sure. You know, you guys look like you should be on the cover of Vogue. Maybe I can take some photos of you one of these days. Those tans are really coming in," I reply, enjoying the aromatic taste of the strong, Italian coffee.

The little, white espresso cup feels dainty in my hands. I'm so used to the large, plastic cups we have at home but it's definitely something I'm getting accustomed to.

"You really think so? Because I do want to look my best for the wedding," Jo replies.

"Yes, you're glowing and obviously well rested. Maybe we can have a little photo shoot on the beach," I suggest.

"Oh, that would be so great. And it would give you a chance to spend more time with us." Emmy winks at me.

"I know, I know ... I'm sorry I've been gone so much ... but this vacation has turned out to be so great. Much better than I could have hoped for." I

can't help but grin. "What have you two been up to?"

"We've been having the time of our lives. Swimming in the pool, relaxing on the beach, drinking limoncello, and working on our tans. We even got caught up on our Italian gossip this morning," Emmy explains. "Hey, remember that article everyone was up in arms about the other day ... about that Italian actor? Turns out the woman he's dating is from another country. Which is why they've been so mad. The bartender at the beach was translating for us. It's so juicy!"

"What do you mean ... juicy?" I ask, even though I have no real interest in this type of thing. I merely want to entertain my friends and keep up with what they've been doing.

"Well, it seems like they've been seen out and about. But nobody has been able to get decent pictures of them. The last images that were published in the newspapers were of them surrounded by a mass of people. I think they visited some kind of museum or something, I don't know..."

"So? I don't understand. What's wrong with that?" I ask.

"Nothing. But the mystery just keeps getting bigger and bigger. Apparently now the *entire* country wants to find out who this woman is," Emmy says.

I help myself to a large and scrumptious looking maritozzo off the serving tray. As soon as I take a bite, the fresh cream and subtle taste of lavender and lemon zest coat my mouth and send me straight into paradise.

"Wow, this is so good. Where did the Italians learn to cook like this?"

"I know, right? I wonder if I can convince Jacob to hire an Italian chef." Jo grins.

"That would be amazing. Okay so ... let me get this straight, because I'm having a hard time following all this celebrity stuff. You're saying an actor who is famous over here, in Italy, is having some sort of fling with a woman who is not ... Italian? And people are obsessed with this because ... why, exactly?"

"Because this guy is the most desired man in Italy! I suppose that they're all upset he's not dating locally. She's not part of the culture..." Jo explains.

"Yeah. Apparently he used to be in a relationship with a famous woman until a few months ago. They were Italy's golden couple. A bit like Beyonce and Jay-Z, Bennifer, that type of thing. When they broke up, people were very disappointed, even though no one actually knows what happened between them or why they broke up. And now he's dating this other woman," Emmy explains as I continue to eat my sweet breakfast. "So there's all sorts

of rumors about it.”

“Mhm. People want him to get back together with his ex, not this mystery woman,” Jo adds.

I take the last bite and try my hardest not to lick the plate. “What’s Bennifer?”

My friends look at me like I’m an alien who just landed on planet Earth.

“That’s not the point. The point is...” Emmy begins again.

“The point is that it’s all gossip, you guys,” I reply. “Really. And it all seems kind of toxic if you ask me. Parasocial relationships and all that. I mean, I understand that people loved this actor person and his ex as a couple but ... people need to pay attention to their own lives more.”

“Speaking of our own lives,” Jo says, “how’s yours going, then?” She grins.

“If you want to ask me about Gianluca, just ... ask,” I reply, laughing. “There’s no need for this beating around the bush.”

“Fine. How was your date at Pompeii?” Jo asks.

“Actually, it was really great. We were finally able to open up to each other. We actually ended up kissing in the car on the way ... and then again, right there, among the ruins. It was so ... romantic.”

“Wow, that sounds amazing, Larisa. I’m really happy for you.” She squeezes my hand. “You know ... when we first arrived, if you had asked me how things would progress between you and this Italian man, I *never* would’ve guessed *this*. You went from yelling at each other in the courtyard to having a super romantic date at Pompeii ... complete with an epic kiss,” Jo says.

“And if you asked me, I would have never guessed that you’d end up marrying a billionaire single dad. And yet, here we are, at a private hotel in Italy, on a bachelorette getaway, a few weeks before your wedding,” I reply.

“Life is funny that way, isn’t it?”

“Maybe for you two, it is. I still have to go to my job and live my boring, normal life,” Emmy replies, pouting. “Alone.”

“Oh, come on, don’t say that. Em, I have a feeling that great things are in store for you. Just wait and see!” Jo tries to comfort her.

“I agree. Come on, Emmy, don’t be upset...” I add.

“It just sucks to be alone,” she says.

“I mean ... you don’t *have* to be alone. You could always cash in on your marriage pact with Evan,” I say, wiggling my eyebrows.

“The marriage pact we made when we were teenagers?” She huffs. “No way! How many times do I have to tell you two that I don’t see Evan like that?”

“Well, you’re blind, Emmy. And you two would seriously be perfect together...”

“I have to agree. Evan is the sweetest! And he’s a doctor! What’s not to love about that?” Jo asks.

“Okay, c’mon girls, enough about me. We were talking about Larisa and her Italian hunk!” Emmy dodges the subject. “Have you given any thought to what you two will do after we leave? Or ... have you talked to him about it?” she asks me.

“Um ... not exactly. But I guess I just—”

“Do you think he’ll come to Boston?” Jo adds.

“I mean ... maybe? I don’t see why not...” my voice trails off as I begin to realize the difficulty of this whole situation.

“Didn’t you say Gianluca is a businessman? I mean, based on the fact that he’s staying at this exclusive hotel, I’m guessing that he has to be a rich and important businessman. So, is it going to be easy for him to move to Boston?” Emmy asks.

“I haven’t actually thought about that,” I reply, suddenly feeling uncomfortable with the conversation.

“Maybe you can move to Italy, then...” Emmy adds.

“Guys, look. I think you’re taking things a little too far, don’t you? Gianluca and I have only known each other for about two weeks. Isn’t it a bit early to start thinking about moving across continents?”

“Perhaps you’re right...” My friends seem to be agreeing with me.

“Yeah. Look, I do like Gianluca. I like him a lot, actually. He’s very different from any man I’ve met before. And, honestly, I think he likes me back—maybe just as much. But ... that doesn’t mean that our relationship has to go the speed of light. Right?”

“Totally. We were just wondering if you’ve talked to him about any of this, that’s all,” Emmy says, shrugging her shoulders.

I understand what my friends are saying and as much as I don’t like to admit it, they’re probably right. This is a conversation that I will have to open at some point with Gianluca before we leave Italy.

“Anyway ... I really don’t want to rush into anything.”

“Has he mentioned anything about the future?” Jo asks.

“What do you mean?”

“Has Gianluca suggested he wants more than just ... you know, a holiday thing?”

“Not exactly. But his behavior has shown me that he likes having me around,” I reply.

A silence follows as my words still linger in the air.

Somehow, I feel foolish for having said that, even though I know perfectly well that it’s true.

After a while, our conversation resumes its natural course.

“Look at those women over there, at that table. They’re *still* talking about it,” Emmy says.

“Talking about what?” I ask.

“That actor and his ... foreign girlfriend.”

I try not to roll my eyes because I know just how invested my friends are in this Italian piece of gossip. But, frankly, it’s the last thing on my mind right now.

“Can you understand what they’re saying?” Jo asks.

“No. But they’ve got that same paper in their hands ... and the bartender said everyone’s upset that the pictures in the newspapers and online were so bad.”

Even though I’m not invested in the gossip, as a photographer myself, I feel compelled to say something. “That’s so stupid. Even if the photos had been better, even if they were the best photos imaginable. Then what? What would they have done? It’s not as if they could have recognized this woman! Or as if they run in the same circles!”

“Yeah, I guess they’re just curious.”

“They’re bored, is what they are,” I reply. “Come on, let’s go. The sun is getting very strong and I haven’t put on any sunscreen.”

We get up and make our way back inside the hotel and its cool, marble halls. Before we go through the glass doors, we pass the table of bored ladies who’ve been discussing the actor and his affair all this time in rapid and unintelligible Italian.

Even though I can’t understand what they’re saying, I can tell just by their tone of voice that they’re gossiping. I catch a few words here and there that make no sense to me whatsoever.

A moment later, I stop dead in my tracks and stare at them from behind the glass doors.

“Larisa? What’s wrong?” Jo asks me.

“Nothing, no ... I just ... I thought I heard one of them say ... No, that’s silly. I think I spent too much time in the sun. Maybe I need a nap or something.”

I run a hand across my face and walk off in the direction of the elevators.

Did I really hear what I thought I did?

Surely not. It’s just a very common name here, in Italy.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Gianluca

“So, how was your day at Pompeii with the American woman?” Cara asks as she sits on the couch opposite of me.

Behind me, my personal stylist is almost done with my haircut and she watches him intently, even though I don’t exactly understand why.

“Her name is Larisa. And it was fine. No one recognized me. The rest of the crowds seemed to mind their own business. They were more interested in the ruins than us.”

“Oh, so now it’s ‘us,’ is it?” she asks me in a very acidic tone.

“Cara, what’s the matter? You seem to be annoyed over everything I do and say these days. I don’t really appreciate the attitude.” I cut right to the chase.

Her face hardens and she stares directly at me now.

“Carlo appreciates it, so...”

“You don’t work for Carlo. You work for me. And so does he. You’re *my* personal assistant, you’re supposed to be on *my* side. Or at least ... be nice to me.” I smirk.

She rolls her eyes only a little, enough to make a point. “You know, I could say the same thing to you,” she snaps.

“What do you mean?”

“That you’ve ... changed lately. That *you* have an attitude.”

“Cara, I’m just tired. I worked a lot this past year, which is why I’m on this retreat to begin with—to rest. Not to mention my breakup with Elena was really ugly, and draining. I’m sorry if I haven’t been up for conversation lately, but I really don’t think that your role as an assistant is to judge my attitude. I’ve always tried to treat you with kindness and respect.”

She nods but I can see that she doesn’t like what she’s hearing.

Behind me, the stylist has finally finished and I can get up. He packs up his kit and hurries to leave the room, no doubt, not wanting to be a part of what he perceives to be an argument between a celebrity and his personal assistant.

Cara sees him out and then returns to me. “Anyway,” she begins, “I was asking you about your ... date with the American woman in Pompeii. Is this a serious thing between you and her? Should I get an NDA for her to sign? Does she know how any of this works?”

I pour myself a glass of coconut water while I ponder Cara’s questions.

Clearly, Larisa has no clue who I am.

As a result, it would be difficult to ask her to do *any* of these things.

“No ... not yet. We will ... get there, in time,” I say casually, starting to realize the weight of my secret.

“Gianluca, you’ve already been out in public with her. And you seem to be spending a lot of time together. You know that she’ll need to receive proper training before anything else happens between you two. Or before you share any personal information with her. We can’t have her running off to the media or writing a book about you or ... doing TikToks and exposing you or whatever it is that they do these days!”

“Larisa is not going to do any of these things,” I reply, getting a little impatient.

“How do you know?”

“Because I *know* her...”

“You know that American actor—Ben? Something? The one from *Gone Girl*. He sent a video to a woman he met on a celebrity dating app. And then she posted it on the internet to try to get famous off him,” Cara says.

“Cara, please ... enough of these ... anecdotes. Stop trying to scare me. Larisa is not that type. Actually, she’s not interested in fame or money or

clout. That's why I like her so much."

"I'm not trying to scare you. I'm just being realistic and—"

"Really? Because it seems like you're being hateful—assuming the worst about Larisa because you ... like Elena so much. I haven't forgotten that you and Elena were practically best friends. And maybe you still are. Is that why your attitude toward me has changed so much in the last few months? Are you secretly on Elena's side?"

She stands up, gathers up her two phones, iPad, and a series of folders and papers she brought with her. "Elena just made a mistake and you were not able to forgive her," Cara says.

"She *cheated* on me with one of my co-stars on the set of my movie while I was filming a scene. That's not making a mistake, that's being the *worst* girlfriend in the history of girlfriends," I reply coldly.

"Fine, then." She turns around to leave my room. "I booked the spa appointment for you and your new ... girlfriend. And I sent that luxury robe to her room along with some flowers, just like you wanted. So head on over whenever you're ready."

"Thank you. Was there anything in the newspapers about me?" I ask casually.

She gives me a long glance.

"No."



Excited to see Larisa again, I make my way to the hotel's spa. Hidden deep in the basement of the resort, far away from the heat and the harsh sunshine, the spa provides a wonderful and cool oasis.

I see Larisa appear from behind a corner and grin from ear to ear at the sight.

"Hey! Am I late? I hope not. I know that we're not allowed to bring our phones in here so I wasn't sure of the time."

"I don't care..." I reply, wrapping my arms around her. She lifts herself up on the tips of her toes and plants a soft kiss on my lips. The touch of her mouth against mine sends a wave of warmth through my body, erasing any lingering tension from the conversation with Cara.

I lift her up in my arms, and she wraps her legs around my waist in response. We continue to kiss, our lips hungry for each other, and I taste hints

of coconut water on her tongue. Our bodies are pressed together in an embrace that feels like home as we linger in the deserted hallway for what feels like minutes on end.

I then kiss her forehead and her temples, before trailing gentle kisses along the curve of her jawline. Larisa giggles softly, her laughter like music to my ears before I capture her lips again, savoring the sweet sensation of her kisses.

“Mmm ... how come you’re such a good kisser?” she asks, her voice almost a purr now.

“It’s one of my many talents,” I joke.

“Many talents? Is that so? And what are your other talents, may I ask?” She jumps down and takes my hand as we make our way inside the spa.

“Well ... you know, I can actually cook fairly well. Courtesy of my mother and my nonna, of course.”

“Oh, I’d love to try your cooking!” she replies brightly. “What else?”

“I think I’m pretty charming too.” I wink.

She laughs and agrees with me as we approach the main desk.

A woman in a white coat greets us. “Hello and welcome to the Mare Verde Spa. Thank you for booking the couples’ day of rest and relaxation! Would you like to start with the Romeo and Juliet Experience of the Senses?”

“What do you think, Larisa?” I ask her.

“I have no idea what that is, but it sounds great!” She grins.

We’re led into a small and low room with terracotta walls and two massage tables in the middle that have been dressed in red linen. Rose petals have been sprinkled everywhere and red candles spread a subtle, flowery scent. We accept frosty glasses of champagne as we are left to get comfortable.

Larisa gives me a knowing look and a bit of a shy smile.

“What’s wrong, amore?” I ask her.

“Mmm ... nothing. It’s just that ... we’re supposed to take off our robes, right?”

I chuckle at her question, finding her shyness endearing. “Yes, that’s typically how it works,” I reply with a playful grin. “But only if you’re comfortable with it.”

She hesitates for a moment, her cheeks flushing a soft shade of pink.

“Don’t worry, I’ll turn around,” I add.

Her blush deepens at my words. “Okay, but promise you won’t peek,” she says teasingly.

I raise my hands in surrender, giving her a lopsided smile. “Promise,” I say, holding out my pinky. “No peeking.”

She wraps her pinky around mine and we shake on it.

Turning around, I lean against my massage table, giving Larisa the privacy she needs. The sound of rustling fabric fills the air as she undresses and makes herself comfortable on her massage table.

“Okay, your turn,” she says.

I turn back around, slowly untying the knot of my robe.

The sight of Larisa lying on her massage table, covered only by a thin white sheet is a sight to behold. Her long hair spills over the edge of the table, and her eyes sparkle with nerves and excitement. The candlelight dances across her flawless skin, highlighting her curves in all the right places.

Her breath hitches as I approach, the heat of our bodies almost tangible in the air. I climb onto the massage table beside her, our bodies now inches apart. “You look stunning,” I whisper.

“Thank you,” she replies shyly. “You don’t look so bad yourself.”

As we lay on our respective tables, side by side, the massage therapists enter the room. “Buongiorno signore, signora. Thank you for choosing the Romeo and Juliet Experience of the Senses. If you are ready, we will begin with a chocolate body scrub for the signora and a wine body exfoliation for the signore. After that, we can continue with a creamy and, of course, organic olive oil mask for the body for the couple, all ended by a full body ultra relaxing massage.”

“That sounds ... heavenly,” Larisa approves and I give them the signal to begin.

We rest there, close to each other, getting slathered in chocolate and wine, enjoying this unique experience, sipping our champagne.

“You smell unbelievable,” I tell Larisa as I watch them lather her gorgeous body in chocolate.

“Thanks ... you look absolutely divine,” she compliments me right back, smiling.

“Yeah, but I smell like wine.”

“What’s wrong with smelling like wine?” She laughs.

“Well, it’s not exactly chocolate, is it?”

“Do you like chocolate, Gianluca?”

“I like it when you’re covered in it,” I reply, reaching out my hand and taking a bit of chocolate off her arm to taste it.

“You’re not supposed to do that!” She giggles.

“Why not? By the way ... you taste ... fantastic.”

She blushes and takes my hand. We rest on the massage tables, hand in hand, waiting to be packed in olive oil as the next treatment that will then lead into our massage. She’s playing with my fingers, something that I find endearing and sweet.

“Are you having a good time?” I ask her.

“You know ... every time I’m with you, no matter what we’re doing, seems to be the best time I’ve ever had,” she confesses. “How do you do that?”

“I ... haven’t actually *done* anything. I think the champagne is getting to your head,” I joke.

“Gianluca, I’d really like to keep seeing you after this holiday is over. What do you think?”

“Of course,” I reply. “Larisa, you’re so special. The time we’ve spent together has only made me want you to be an even bigger part of my life. I’d love nothing more than to ... be in a relationship with you and be able to see you all the time.”

In the back of my mind, I know that I need to tell her the truth about who I am.

But right now, covered in olive oil and waiting for a massage is not the time to do it.

There will be other, better occasions for that conversation.

She smiles and leans in to kiss me, interrupting my thoughts.

“Larisa ... I can’t believe you’re real...”

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Larisa

Is he the man I've been waiting for my entire life?

Yesterday at the Mare Verde Spa with Gianluca, indulging in luxurious treatments and basking in each other's company the entire day, was an absolute dream come true.

From the moment we arrived, it felt like we were the only two people in the world. Every touch, every whisper was filled with an undeniable connection, a magnetic pull that drew us closer.

Gianluca has become such an important part of my life in such a short amount of time. It feels as though we've known each other for years, rather than just a couple weeks. Hearing him say he can see a future with me melted away all my doubts and fears.

Knock. Knock.

"Come in!" I yell out.

Gianluca walks into my hotel room, looking as gorgeous as ever.

"Good morning, handsome! I'm so happy you're here!"

He bends down and kisses me. "Good morning, amore. I brought you some

coffee. How did you sleep?”

“After that massage? Like a baby. Do you have that saying in Italian? To sleep like a baby? You know ... I should really start to learn some Italian, shouldn't I? It's such a beautiful language.”

“You're beautiful,” he says and kisses me again. “Larisa, can we talk about something for a moment?”

“Umm ... sure,” I reply, gesturing toward the couch. “But only for a moment. I have a very big day planned for us!”

“A big day for us? What do you mean?”

“I wanna go to Vietri sul Mare. You know, the town with the ceramics? And I thought you might like to come with me. I read all about it before we came here and I'm dying to photograph it. Just think about all the amazing shots I'm going to add to my portfolio. And, possibly, to my book! Goodness, I just have so many ideas! I want to go to the Museum of Ceramics and to the Solimene Ceramics Factory. Am I pronouncing that right? And there's also this little beach ... Spiaggia della ... uh... wait—”

“Larisa, I'm not so sure that's a good idea. Vietri sul Mare is ... I mean ... it's probably swarming with tourists and I don't know if you'll be able to take any decent photos. Just like in Pompeii, remember?” Gianluca says.

“I suppose you might be right, but I'd still like to give it a try.”

“But what if we go all the way there and you aren't able to take any photos?” he asks.

“Then we'll just sit on the beach, eat ice cream, and make out.” I smirk.

He gives me an odd look that I can't quite read. “I don't know ... Vietri sul Mare is far away and—”

“It's not far away,” I interject. “It's here, on the Amalfi Coast.”

“Yes, I know. But by the time we get there, you're going to lose all the light ... for your photos, you know what I mean?” he says, running a hand through his hair in a very anxious way.

“Why don't you let *me* worry about that? I'm the photographer, after all.”

“Yes, but—”

“Gianluca, what is this all about? I thought this could be a really fun, romantic activity for us to do together today, but if you don't want to come, then ... just say so.”

“I do want to come. You have no idea just how much I want to come. But —”

“But what?”

His face is now contorted as if there's a battle going on inside him, one to which I have no access. "Nothing. Let's go."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes, I'll meet you in the courtyard in a half an hour," he says before heading off to his own suite.

A half an hour later, we meet in the courtyard of the hotel, ready to go. Gianluca's outfit is identical to the one he had on when we visited Pompeii together, down to the large baseball hat and huge, dark sunglasses.

"Wow. You really don't want to be seen with me, do you?" I joke.

He gives me a scared look. "What? No! What are you talking about?"

"Calm down, I was only joking!" I laugh.

I try to lighten the mood during the car ride by telling him about my life in Boston and all the traveling I've been doing as a freelance photographer.

But I can see that Gianluca is only half listening, always looking out the window as if he's expecting someone to be following us.

"You know, you're in a weird mood today," I blurt out.

"No ... I'm just ... tired," he says.

"Tired from your vacation?" I smirk.

"I ... didn't sleep very well. How much longer until we get there?"

"Actually, we're here. Let's stop here so that I can get some shots of this spot."

We exit the car and set out on foot toward Marina di Vietri. Gianluca glances nervously around as we cross the main square of the little town but relaxes a little when we get lost in the maze of narrow, cobbled streets.

Soon enough, we reach the spot that made the town famous. A vibrantly blue building with a pink roof and decorated with tons of ceramic plates and flowers overflows your senses as soon as you set eyes on it. To its right, the Madonna and her saintly baby look after the house and, perhaps, the entire town.

"Isn't this ... breathtaking?" I ask as I start taking dozens of pictures.

"It's beautiful..."

"Take off your sunglasses! Can you even see it?" I laugh.

"I can see well enough, thank you."

A small group of people make their way along the street toward us, stopping by the blue building to take photos and selfies.

Gianluca darts away toward the creamy, yellow houses in the background and becomes very interested in the pieces of pottery they have to offer.

“Hey, where are you going?” I call out.

“Nowhere. I’m just looking...”

I walk over to where he’s standing and put my camera away before reaching up to him and caressing his handsome face. “Are you sure you’re alright? You’ve been acting weird all morning. You know you can tell me anything, right?”

He links his arms around my waist and kisses the tip of my nose. “I’m fine. Don’t worry about me. Have you gotten all the pictures you wanted?”

“Yes. Let’s go to the Solimene Ceramics Factory next!”

He nods but doesn’t say anything else, leaving me with the faint impression that he’s not completely onboard with this idea, but wants to please me.

Is it me?

Or is he afraid of crowds?

I’m trying really hard not to get in my head about why he’s acting so strange this afternoon. We had an amazing day yesterday, there’s no reason it could be about me ... right?

Whatever it is, he’ll tell me in due time, I’m sure.

I ... hope.

Slowly, in the stifling heat that seems to radiate from the ground, we make our way through the tiny streets. Pieces of ceramics and tile are everywhere, including on the ground, making it a unique walk, filled with treasures at every corner.

I stop and take photos of nearly everything I see.

“Why are all these streets so tiny? Were people smaller in the past? Were they...” I look up from my camera and realize I’m alone now. “Gianluca? Where are you?”

I look over and see him surrounded by a group of people across the street. They’re talking in rapid and very animated Italian, accompanied by brazen hand gestures.

I approach them and try to make some sense of the conversation but it’s impossible. Not only do I *not* know the language but they’re talking so fast, that even if I did it would be futile.

“Ma tu sei l’attore famoso! So chi sei!”

“Non sono chi pensi che io sia! Per favore, lasciami in pace!” Gianluca tells them as he tries to break away.

“Tu sei il mio attore preferito! Ma certo! Fammi un autografo!” a woman pleads with him, which I find very strange.

“Ti sto dicendo che non sono lui! Lasciami in pace!”

“Fatti un selfie con me, Gianluca!”

I’m laser focused on trying to translate what they’re saying. *Selfie*. Did that woman just say something about a selfie? Or is there an Italian word that sounds like selfie ...

She knows his name?

He finally manages to extricate himself from their midst and grabs me by the elbow. We march along one of the little streets, creating as much distance from the crowd as we can.

Behind us, I can hear a lady calling out, *“E la tua ragazza?”*

“Gianluca, who were those people? What did they want from you?” I ask when we stop to catch our breaths.

Beads of sweat have formed on his brow but still he refuses to take off his baseball hat and sunglasses. Even so, I can see that he looks harassed and anxious.

“Nobody. Just some ... tourists asking for directions.”

“Tourists asking for directions? They didn’t really look like tourists to me. And they were kind of aggressive.”

“Well, I don’t know what to tell you. They wanted directions to ... the beach. When I told them that I’m not from here and I don’t know how to get to the beach, they got angry. That’s all,” he replies and looks over his shoulder, as if he’s expecting someone to jump out of the bushes at him.

“Gianluca, I don’t want to seem pushy or anything like that but I have the feeling that ... there’s something ... I don’t know ... off...”

“There isn’t.”

“If they were just tourists asking for directions, how come they called you by your name?”

He speeds ahead as if he’s trying to get away from this conversation.

But I know that’s not the solution.

Whatever it is, we need to talk about it.

“I tried telling you this morning that it’s not a good idea to come here. This place is swarming with tourists. And they’re all ... full of caffeine and gelato. They’ve clearly been in the sun for too long. We should’ve just stayed at the hotel. I’m sorry, Larisa. I just ... don’t like this kind of stuff...”

“Yeah, I noticed back at Pompeii that you seem to have a problem with crowds. I don’t really understand why but ... it is what it is. Perhaps you’re right. I shouldn’t have pushed you to come here. I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay. It was my choice. I knew that this type of thing could happen and still wanted to come. I just wanted to spend the day with you doing the things you love the most,” he says, finally regaining his composure.

I reach up and kiss him, feeling grateful that he was willing to face his fear of crowds to be here with me. “Hey, how about we get something to eat and then head back to the hotel?” I suggest.

“That sounds like a great plan. Thanks!”

We head to the nearest restaurant and find a table at the back. Even so, there’s a spectacular view of the sea that’s simply breathtaking.

“So, are you actually going to take off your sunglasses or ... are you planning on sleeping with them tonight?”

He smirks but still doesn’t remove them. “Why don’t we just order something?”

“What do you recommend?”

“Hmm ... let’s have some prelibatezze. I’m thinking gamberi al forno, perhaps a few oysters with lemon, and some calamari with butter and parsley. And then, for the main course, how about some ... caponata? How does that sound?” he says after consulting the menu.

“I did not understand a single word of what you just said, so I’m entirely in your hands!” I laugh.

The meal, however, is utterly delicious. The generous platters of appetizers are brought to the table almost immediately and the smell of the seafood overwhelms all my senses.

Starving, I dip into the rich buttery sauce of the calamari with warm ciabatta bread and gorge on the sweet shrimp. Almost full, I cannot refuse a heaping portion of the caponata, which turns out to be a scrumptious dish of fried eggplants in golden olive oil with crunchy pine nuts and the best agrodolce sauce I’ve ever tasted.

“Mmm ... this is just ... heaven! I cannot believe this food is real!”

He watches me eat with a happy face. “I’m so glad you’re enjoying yourself, amore.”

“I am. But what about you? Are you going to tell me where your issue with crowds comes from? Or is it going to remain a mystery?” I ask Gianluca.

“Larisa ... there are some things that you don’t understand about me.”

“I know. That’s why I asked.” I smile.

Finally, as the sun goes down across the Mediterranean Sea, Gianluca takes off his sunglasses. His face looks worn and his eyes have a worried

expression.

“You look tired,” I manage to say, even though I fear there might be more behind all this.

He looks into the distance, and I can tell there’s something on his mind.

There’s something that he’s been struggling with all this time.

But I can’t quite put my finger on it.

“Excuse me, would you be interested in dessert?” the waiter asks, holding a tray filled with delectable treats.

Gianluca opens his mouth to dismiss the man, but something stops him. Instead, he glances at me, a pleading look in his eyes as if silently asking for a momentary distraction from the weight of whatever he’s been holding back.

I smile at him, understanding his unspoken plea, before turning to the waiter. “Why not?”

CHAPTER TWENTY

Gianluca

I walk into my hotel room and find Cara waiting for me, a stack of newspapers in her lap.

“Anything interesting in there?” I ask.

“No,” she answers, putting her iPad on top of the stack. “How was Vietri sul Mare?”

“It was ... alright. But a small crowd of people recognized me and wanted an autograph and some pictures.”

“Ah ... did you manage to leave quickly? Are you alright?” she asks.

“Yes, I’m fine. Don’t tell Carlo, though.”

“Of course.”

There’s an awkward moment in which we remain in the same positions, her on the couch and me in the middle of the room, staring at each other. I’m waiting for her to speak but it doesn’t seem like she has any intention of doing so.

“So, what’s up, Cara?”

“What do you mean?”

“Um ... is there a reason you’re in my hotel room right now? Is there something you’d like to tell me?”

“I—I was just waiting for you to ask how the date went. That’s all.”

“Oh. Well, you could have texted me. Or called me. Or waited for me in the hallway. I don’t see any reason why you should be in my room. Do you?”

“I’m here in case you need something,” she says but still doesn’t get up and off the couch.

“I don’t need anything at the moment. Thank you, Cara. You’re free to go.”

She lingers for a moment longer and then gets up, taking the newspapers with her.

“Actually, you *can* do something for me. Since you seem so eager to ... work,” I tell her.

“Yes?”

“I’d like to take Larisa out for a special dinner tomorrow. At the Gardens of Ravello. Can you, please, rent it for me? For tomorrow evening.”

“The entire place? You want me to reserve the entire place just for you? Tomorrow? That might be difficult on such a short notice,” she says.

“I know. But tell them it’s for me—and that I need privacy. It’s okay, they’ll understand. The chef there knows me personally.”

“Alright, then. If that’s what you want,” she replies. “Hey, Gianluca?”

“Yes?”

“Do you remember that conversation we had the other day?”

“What conversation?”

“About your new girlfriend. And how she should really sign an NDA. That hasn’t changed, you know. The sooner you get her to do that, the better. And we need to make sure that she understands what she’s getting herself into. You know what I’m talking about—the marketing campaigns, the fake relationships between you and other actresses, the publicity stunts...”

I listen to Cara speak and a chill runs down my spine at her words.

I’ve been putting off this conversation with Larisa because ... well, for the first time in my adult life, I’ve felt ... normal. I’ve finally been able to be my truest self with someone. I haven’t been consumed with wondering if she’s only interested in me because of my status.

But now that so much time has passed, I fear that she might be upset over the fact that I haven’t been completely honest with her.

There’s absolutely no telling how she will react when she learns about all this. About my life.

“You know what? Maybe tomorrow, at the Gardens of Ravello, I can finally open up this conversation with her. What do you think?” I ask my assistant.

“Like I said, the sooner, the better. We just need to know that we can trust this woman, that’s all.” She clutches the newspapers to her chest and stares at me.

“We can trust Larisa, don’t worry about that.”

I just hope that Larisa will still be able to trust me after I tell her who I really am.

“Fine. You’re the celebrity...” Cara replies.

“Don’t call me that.”

“How are you doing on those scripts?” she asks me. “Have you read any more of them or has your new girlfriend been taking up all of your time?”

“As a matter of fact, I managed to read almost all of them. Believe it or not, I’ve been feeling a lot more inspired since I met Larisa. I don’t know what it is. She just has a zest for life that makes me feel so ... creative.”

“Imagine that...”

“Yeah. And not only did I read all the scripts, I even chose a few—the superhero movie, a remake of *Alien*—”

“Oh, no ... They’re remaking *Alien*?” she interjects.

“Yeah, I know. But what can you do? It’s either this or ... umm ... other remakes.”

“What other scripts did you choose?”

“A biopic of Leonardo da Vinci and a movie about Giacomo Casanova.”

“You would be really great in that! The Casanova movie, I mean, not the da Vinci biopic, sorry.” She grins.

“That’s alright, don’t worry. I feel the same way, but I thought I’d give it a shot anyway. I know I’m too young but ... who knows?” I reply as I stack the scripts in her arms.

“Look at this! The Rock is also being considered for the Casanova movie!” she exclaims.

“But he’s not Italian,” I reply.

“Neither is Jared Leto. That didn’t stop him from turning *House of Gucci* into an episode of Mario and Luigi,” Cara says.

“You might be right on that one. Ask Carlo to make sure that I get into the audition before The Rock—have him use his connections, okay?”

“You bet. Okay, I’ll go call Carlo and then I’ll set up your date for

tomorrow night. Message me what you want to wear and I'll have it ready for you."

"Thanks, Cara."

She finally leaves my room and I have a few moments to myself.

Between the movie auditions and the weird turn that my relationship with Larisa has taken, my retreat on the Amalfi Coast does not feel like a vacation at all anymore.

I step out onto the terrace and picture the evening we'll be spending together tomorrow. And the news that I have to share with her.

I just hope it's not too late.

CHAPTER TWENTY-one

Larisa

“Welcome to the most memorable place on the Amalfi Coast!”

Gianluca takes my hand and guides me across the open terrace of the Ravello Gardens. A long line of white and weathered statues greets me. I’ve seen this place so many times in photos, it almost feels like déjà vu being here in person.

“I don’t ... know what to say. This is...” I struggle for words.

He takes me forward to a small balcony of black, wrought iron that opens directly onto the infinity of the sea.

“This is the Terrazza dell’Infinito,” Gianluca tells me.

“The Terrace of Infinity.”

“Exactly. Do you know that Gore Vidal once said that this is the most beautiful view in the entire world?”

“I can see why. This is simply too beautiful to be put into words,” I reply, still trying to catch my breath.

“On a clear day, the blue sky and the blue sea become one and you simply can’t tell them apart anymore. There, look into the distance. What do you

see?” he asks me.

“Nothing ... I can’t see anything but the sea.”

“Exactly. That’s why it’s called the Terrace of Infinity. From this point where we’re standing right now, it looks as though the Mediterranean Sea goes on forever—that you could sail its waters and never return.”

“That’s such a beautiful fantasy,” I reply as Gianluca moves behind me and takes me into his arms. I can feel his lips on my neck, kissing me gently.

“But, don’t look down, amore,” he warns me.

Despite his words, I take my chances and glance down from the iron balcony. The view makes me gasp. A gigantic drop makes it seem as if we’re on top of the world.

“Oh ... It’s making me dizzy...”

“Don’t worry. I’ve got you.” He smiles and closes his arms tighter around me. “We’re more than a thousand feet above the sea. Above Amalfi itself. Look at the houses!”

Indeed, the beautiful houses with their orange and terracotta roofs now look like toys or pins on a Monopoly board far below us. I turn around and kiss Gianluca, enjoying the taste of his lips, his smell, the comfort of his arms.

“I’m so happy I found you ... how did I get to be so lucky?”

“Amore, I should be the one saying that. I came on this retreat just to ... get some peace and quiet. And instead, I found you—the most wonderful person I’ve ever met. Life is so weird sometimes,” he replies.

“Wonderfully weird, though.”

He holds me tight as we enjoy this moment that I know—for many years to come—will be so dear to us.

“Shall we have dinner?” he asks.

“I can’t wait!”

We descend a few steps and make our way toward the Rose Garden, or Terrazza delle Rose, as Gianluca explains to me. The place is simply stunning. I can see that a table has been placed in the garden for us, among the countless rows of roses that are in bloom and spreading their magical aroma.

“I rented the entire place just for us,” he says. “I wanted to have some privacy.”

“You were able to rent this whole place on such a short notice? That’s impressive, Gianluca. You know, one of these days, you’re going to have to

tell me exactly what it is that you do. And how you can afford something like this,” I try to joke but I’m being quite serious.

“It’s not actually about what you can afford. It’s more about the people you know,” he says. “I’ve come to learn that over the years.”

“Really? So, money doesn’t matter, then? Is it true what they say? That money can’t buy happiness?”

“Maybe for some people. What I meant to say is that connections are what get you through the door. Not money necessarily. It can help. But in the end, it’s who you know that matters most.”

“Hmm ... that sounds like a scene from *The Godfather*. Should I be worried?”

He laughs and signals for our private waiter to approach.

“We’ll see.”

“Good evening, sir. What can I get for you?”

“Let’s start with a bottle of champagne, please. And some caviar. Thank you.”

“Of course, sir. Right away.” The man gives a small bow and walks away.

“Do you like caviar?” Gianluca asks me.

“I’ve had the supermarket kind. But I’m assuming that this one is...”

“Not that.” He laughs. “I think you’re going to like it, Larisa. You know, I really like you in this dress.”

“Thank you. You look great too. As usual.”

He gives me a small and kind smile, as if he is used to these types of compliments. Given the fact that he’s such a handsome man, he probably is.

“Can I ask you something, Gianluca?”

“Of course.”

“How come you’re single?”

“What do you mean?” His eyes show genuine surprise upon hearing my question.

“Well ... it’s no secret, I guess, that you’re an *incredibly* handsome man. And I’m not saying this because I’m biased, I’m sure that other people must have told you this before. Right? Other women must’ve noticed it as well?”

Instead of answering, he gives a small nod of the head, in an elegant and gracious manner.

“Not only that but you’re smart, kind, successful ... so why are you single? I mean, you came all *alone* to a retreat on the Amalfi Coast. Can I ask why?”

“Sure you can, Larisa. The reason is much simpler than you think. And the

only reason I haven't said anything about it until now is because I wasn't sure you'd want to know about it. The reason I came alone on my retreat is because I've been working very hard lately ... but also because ... I'm recently single. I broke up with my ex-girlfriend a few months ago. It wasn't pleasant."

A rush of jealousy courses through me as I hear him say those words.

Obviously, he's had other women in his life—I never imagined a scenario in which he didn't—but hearing him say it out loud makes me uncomfortable.

"Oh ... I'm ... sorry to hear that," I reply.

He grins and gives me a knowing look.

"I don't think you mean that," he jokes.

"Well ... I mean, I'm sorry that you had to go through a bad experience. But I'm very glad that ... it worked out well for me," I reply.

"For us."

He reaches across the table and takes my hand, casually and warmly, as if we've been a couple for years.

"You know ... I love this about you ... so much," I say.

"Love what?"

"This. How you manage to make the distance between us just ... disappear. You have a way of making me feel as if we've never been apart. As if we've always known each other. You just have such an easy way about you, Gianluca. It makes me feel safe and cherished."

"I'm very glad you feel that way." He smiles and raises my fingers elegantly toward his lips. He kisses every single one of them and I watch, butterflies flying madly in my stomach.

"Hmm ... you were telling me your story?" I ask again, trying to regain my composure.

Gianluca lets go of my hand and reaches for the champagne bottle this time. It's a very old bottle, with a golden paper label that seems to have disintegrated with time. A sign of quality and brand, no doubt. He pours the amber liquid into two tall flutes and hands me one.

"Yes. It's not necessarily something that I enjoy talking about. But, at the same time, I don't want you to feel like ... I'm hiding something," he adds and, just for a moment, his handsome face becomes dark. "I want to be honest and open with you, Larisa, even if it means digging up all this dirt."

"I appreciate that so much..."

"My ex-girlfriend's name was Elena. We met at a party where she was

introduced to me by a ... common friend, more or less. Elena is an Instagram model.”

Gianluca adds this little detail into the conversation very nonchalantly as he sips his champagne, and I’m positive that for him, dating models is a daily business.

But it makes my insides churn.

I’m starting to learn more and more about the reality in which Gianluca lives and my feelings toward it are mixed.

“An Instagram model? Oh, that’s ... interesting.”

“Why?” he asks, taking me by surprise.

“Umm ... no reason. I suppose that makes sense. Please, go on with the story.”

“Yes, so, we dated for a year or so. Things were ... not bad but not great either. I was always traveling for work,” he says and clears his throat. “She wasn’t happy about that.”

“Why didn’t she come with you when you were traveling?”

“She did. Sometimes. When it was possible. Most of the time, I needed to concentrate, or the circumstances were just not favorable. But, in reality, that’s exactly what led to our breakup.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, as it turns out, Elena cheated on me with ... a colleague of mine. While we were working on the same project. What’s even worse, I think she did it, not because she was genuinely interested in that man, but because she thought it would help her career as an Instagram model.”

“No way!” I exclaim before I can catch myself but Gianluca simply smiles.

“Way! Is that what you Americans say?” he jokes.

“In movies mostly ... but Gianluca, what she did was horrible. I’m so sorry that happened to you. How can anyone be so selfish? So self-involved?”

“I think that’s what took me by surprise, as well. Like I said, our relationship wasn’t ever ... an excellent one. In other words, I knew she wasn’t, how you say, the one. I knew we weren’t going to get married, have children, or meet each other’s families, and so on. But she was pleasant enough. At least in the beginning.”

“May I ask why you stayed with her for so long? If you knew she wasn’t the one?”

“I ask myself that same question all the time. I think it’s a combination of reasons. A lot of people really loved us together, looked up to us even. I think

I ... didn't want to let them down. I met her after being in a really dark place, with the loss of my parents and all, and I think I enjoyed the companionship. Even though I didn't see a long-term future with her, I admittedly enjoyed her company. So ... it did really hurt me and surprise me that she would do something like this."

"Cheat on you for internet clout?" I ask as I drink my own champagne.

"Exactly. It gave me a new sense of just how low people can go. And how they can cash in on any opportunity to take advantage of you," he explains.

"Hmmm ... is that why you were on your guard that first day we met? When you saw me taking pictures of you?" I ask.

"Yes. At least in part. The experience I had with Elena taught me a valuable lesson. And I'm happy you brought that up because we never had a chance to talk about that day. I'm sorry about the way I behaved."

"It's understandable. At least, I understand it now," I reply.

"Still ... it shouldn't be an excuse," he says. "I'm so sorry for the way I treated you—yelling at you like I did. You didn't deserve any of it. It was simply a misunderstanding."

"Well, maybe you can do something to make up for it." I grin and flirt with him.

"Really, and what would that be?" He catches on and caresses my cheek. "I'll do anything."

"I have a few things in mind that you could do..."

He pulls his chair closer to mine and, half a second later, we are diving deeply into each other. Gianluca's lips find mine, and we share a kiss that ignites fireworks within me.

I respond eagerly, my fingers entwined in his hair, pulling him closer. His big hands travel across the open back of my dress, caressing my skin, leaving a trail of electric sensations in his wake.

I pull him as close as I can until I can feel his heartbeat against me. As the passion between us intensifies, I can't help but feel a sense of vulnerability. Gianluca's words about his past relationship linger in the back of my mind, reminding me of the potential dangers that come with getting involved with someone like him.

But in this moment, all rational thoughts escape me as desire takes over.

My fingers twist and twirl in his luscious hair and I deposit a trail of kisses all along his chiseled jaw. Gianluca's touch is gentle yet possessive, his hands now exploring my face as if trying to memorize it.

“How are you real?” I manage to moan, not able to believe just how incredibly handsome he is.

Out of the corner of his eye, Gianluca sees the waiter approaching. With a groan of frustration, we disentangle from each other’s arms and try to act as naturally as possible.

The man deposits a plate of caviar on the table, followed by a small mountain of shaved ice covered in the biggest oysters I have ever seen. The food is accompanied by a frosty bottle of vodka which, much like the champagne bottle, also has a faded and worn-out label.

“This looks so good! I’ve never had caviar and vodka before,” I say and try to get my hair back into place.

Gianluca takes the small mother-of-pearl spoon and heaps some caviar onto it for me. He also pours me a measure of crystal-clear vodka into a tiny but extremely fancy looking glass. It looks like water but I know it will feel like fire.

“Caviar first,” he explains, “always on a mother-of-pearl spoon. Otherwise, it would be a waste. You will taste the ocean, the brine, the salt, and all its depths. Let it coat your tongue and imagine yourself surrounded by the cold water of the deep sea. And then, this hundred-year-old vodka. Sweet, aromatic, with notes of coriander and lime. A perfect pairing, amore. Just like us!”

“You know, with each moment that passes, I’m more and more convinced that I’m the luckiest girl in the world,” I reply and accept the heaping spoon of caviar.

The taste and effect are exactly as Gianluca described them. Followed by the vodka which hits my brain like fireworks. I wince and, with only one eye open, I can see him laughing and reaching out to caress my face as he usually does.

“Mmm ... that was such an intense experience!”

“More intense than what we did before?” he asks me in a low voice.

“Nothing is more intense than you...”

He kisses me again and, if possible, his lips make my head swirl more than the vodka.

In the rose garden of Ravello, more than a thousand feet above the Mediterranean Sea, I realize that I’m surrendering my heart to the most charming and wonderful man I’ve ever met.

“Gianluca, tell me something...”

“Anything, amore.”

“Is all of this real? What’s happening right now? I feel so immensely happy. Here, with you ... us ... it’s unlike any other relationship that I’ve ever had. Is it real? Or is it just a dream that will end soon? Am I going to wake up and realize it was all the fantasy of an American tourist on holiday in Italy?”

To my surprise, there’s no answer from Gianluca.

My questions are not literal, of course. They are, more or less, the type of talk that lovers share. Sweet nothings. As a result, I expected him to say the same sweet nothings back to me.

And yet, he remains silent.

I put down the caviar spoon and look at him. “Gianluca? What’s the matter? You have such a weird look on your face all of a sudden. Is everything alright?”

“Larisa, do you remember the other day when I told you that we have to talk about something?”

“Vaguely...” I answer, not knowing where this conversation is going.

“Before we went to Vietri sul Mare, I wanted to talk to you. But then we got caught up. And then after that incident with the ... tourists, all evening, I was trying to find a way to bring it up, because there’s something we need to talk about. Something that’s very important to me.”

“I remember now. Gianluca, you’re making me a little nervous. What’s going on?”

“I think it’s time for us to have that conversation,” he replies and I watch as he drinks a shot of vodka as if to prepare himself.

My hands become clammy and, all of a sudden, I feel as if there’s not enough air, despite being outside. The vast sea and the immensity of the evening sky surrounding us from all sides, feels as if it’s closing in.

“Oh no, I knew it...” I manage to mutter. “I knew this was all too good to be true. Gianluca ... you’re married, aren’t you? There’s an Italian wife somewhere, isn’t there? Some rich, fancy lady dressed in fur coats and leopard print shoes that’s anxiously waiting for you to come home right now. All the while you’re here ... with me. Oh, no...”

“What? Larisa, no. What are you talking about?” He looks at me as if I’ve gone crazy.

“I knew there had to be something!”

“I’m not married. I just told you the story about my ex-girlfriend, Elena and how we broke up because she cheated on me. How could I possibly be

married at the same time?” he asks.

“I don’t know! I don’t know how Italian men work!”

“Larisa ... stop. This is serious. I’m not married. I promise you. This conversation is about something else. Will you listen to me?”

I look into his eyes and try to find a way to read his mind or, possibly his soul. But, as usual, his face is perfectly poised. It’s an unreadable mask.

“Alright, then. Tell me. What is it?”

He takes a deep breath, as if to prepare himself before speaking. I wait with bated breath to see what turn our relationship is about to take.

It feels like the whole world has stopped moving.

The whole world except for the waiter.

He approaches our table and clears his throat.

“Signore Ferraro? A man named Carlo Caldone is on the phone for you. He says that you haven’t been answering your own phone and that this is urgent. You need to contact him right away. This is about your work, sir.”

“What? Right now?” Gianluca replies.

“I’m afraid so, sir.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Gianluca

“Amore, I’m so sorry. But I absolutely need to get on this conference call,” I try to explain things to Larisa as best as I can.

“That’s fine. I understand your work is important, but that’s not what I have an issue with. Gianluca, the conversation we were about to have at dinner seemed to be significant. And now ... here we are, back at the hotel, nothing having been resolved,” she tells me in a calm but clearly worried way.

“I know, amore, I know. Please, believe me, this is not what I had in mind for tonight. The conference call just came out of nowhere. And if I can, I’ll come to your room later tonight to talk. Hopefully my conference call won’t last too long.”

“That’s fine. We can just talk in the morning...” she says.

“Amore, you’re tired. Why don’t you go take a bath or watch a movie with your friends?” I say and kiss her forehead.

“How can I do that, when I know that we were about to have such a pivotal conversation and now ... can you, at least, tell me if it’s something bad?”

Should I be worried?"

"Larisa, there's nothing to be worried about. I promise you. I'm not married, I don't have children that you don't know of, an extra limb, weird tattoos, or a pet goat in my garage. My feelings for you haven't changed, if anything, they're stronger than ever. This conversation was simply about ... something that I need you to know, that's all."

"Mmm ... alright, then. I guess it can wait until morning. Maybe I will go take a bath and then see what Jo and Emmy are up to," she says.

"Please tell them I said hi!"

She kisses me and walks toward the elevator.

"Good luck on your conference call," Larisa says before disappearing inside.

Not a moment later, Cara comes down the hallway from her own room. "Finally, you're here! Carlo has been driving me insane with phone calls!"

"I know. He called me thirty-seven times while I was at dinner with Larisa," I reply.

"And you didn't answer a single one of those calls."

"Yes, and then he called the restaurant. How did he know I was there, by the way?" I ask Cara.

"I told him, of course."

"Great ... so, what is this all about?"

We walk into the living room of my hotel room and I turn on all the lights as Cara gets everything ready for the conference call.

"The superhero movie," she announces and sets the script as well as some other papers in front of me.

"What about it?"

"You got it, Gianluca! The part is yours! The casting director called Carlo just this evening and told him! This is it! We're going to Hollywood!"

A rush of excitement courses through me.

This will be, without a doubt, the biggest movie I've ever made in my career.

I suddenly feel as if I'm standing at the edge of a cliff, ready to take a dive. It's almost impossible to put into words.

"Madonna mia! You're joking! I got the part? In the Marvel movie? I'm so happy!"

Cara claps her hands and takes a bow in front of me. "You got the part! Just imagine your name up there! On that gigantic screen. Gianluca Ferraro!"

she screams and gestures largely across the room.

“That’s insane. I have to call Larisa and...” I say before I realize that it’s not possible.

A shadow of sadness and regret passes over me as the thought that I cannot share this news with Larisa dawns on me. There’s nothing I want more than to call her right now. To run straight to Larisa’s arms and celebrate with her.

But it’s not possible.

Because she doesn’t even know who I am.

What good are all these massive achievements if, in the end, I’m alone in a hotel room with an assistant who doesn’t even like me?

“Gianluca? Is everything alright? Come on, we still have to do the conference call,” I hear Cara’s voice calling me back to reality and back to this happy event.

“Yes, yes, of course.”

“So, it’s going to be you, Carlo from Rome, and the directors and casting director in Los Angeles. I’m going to be right here if you need me. Okay?”

“Yeah, sure. Thanks...”

“Alright, here we go!”

She presses a few more keys on the laptop and the conference starts. Two middle-aged men with graying hair, both wearing glasses, show up on screen. Dressed in casual, white T-shirts, they look like a pair of dads who just wandered in from getting the groceries at the supermarket. And yet, I know that they are two of the most important and powerful men in Hollywood.

Carlo makes the introductions in a cheerful voice. He’s obviously ecstatic about this opportunity.

“Hello, Gianluca! Hi, gentlemen! Hello, Sarah! Gianluca, these are, as you well know, Anthony and Joe, the directors of the movie. And this is Sarah, the casting director.”

“Oh, so you’re the one responsible for actually getting me the part?” I joke, addressing the woman.

She blushes awkwardly and tucks a strand of hair behind her ear.

“Hello, Gianluca, how are you? Am I pronouncing your name right?” Anthony asks me.

“It’s perfect, Anthony. Thanks so much for considering me for your movie. This is an incredible opportunity for me!”

“Don’t mention it, man. When we saw your profile and all the work you’ve done so far in Italy and Europe, we were both like, this is our guy. He’s the

villain. He's the next Joker, the next Loki. That's our Oscar performance right there."

"No pressure, I guess!" I continue to joke.

"What pressure? Gianluca is so incredibly talented. If you want an Oscar performance, that's exactly what he'll deliver," Carlo, my manager chimes in.

"That's what we like to hear. We need these movies to kick it up a notch, right, Gianluca? Because we have a lot of competition. Warner Bros put out *Dune* and Chalamet did a great job there, DC put out *Joker* and Joaquin Phoenix got an Oscar for that ... So, we need to do the same thing, right?"

"So, you need me to compete with Chalamet and Joaquin Phoenix?" I ask, feeling a trickle of cold sweat running down my back.

I keep my composure and smile as usual, not wanting them to know how nervous I suddenly feel.

"Yeah, but that's no problem for you, right? You're young, handsome, Italian, exotic."

I clear my throat. "Of course. Yes."

"Great," one of the men continues, "so, we'll get you in the gym, have you work out for about half a year, bulk you up, you know, the usual. Maybe do a little tweaking here and there in case you need a little filler, some wrinkles corrected and what not, and then we can start the shoot in about a year."

"That sounds like a plan," I reply, though I haven't quite processed everything they just said.

"Speaking of which, Gianluca, before we begin this process. We're going to need you to fix your issues," one of the directors tells me.

"I'm sorry?"

"Your ... issues. It's not really that big of a deal, and we do have quite a while before the movie comes out. It'll be about nine months before we start filming, then it will take about two months for the actual shoot, and then about a year and a half for the post-production. So, we're looking at about two and a half years before this comes out. You have time to fix it."

"Umm ... I'm not following, Anthony. What exactly do I need to fix?" I ask, getting more and more confused by the second.

"All of this ... gossip that's been going on around you. All the negative press. I mean, people really don't like it, man. We don't need your relationship drama getting in the way of the marketing campaign for the movie. So, you know, just break up with her man. It's fine. There are plenty of women out there. You'll meet as many as you want here, in Los Angeles."

He laughs.

“Again, I’m not sure I understand what you’re talking about, Anthony. What are people not liking? And what gossip? And break up with who?”

I look to my manager, Carlo, who is making some desperate signs toward me to stop talking.

“Your American girlfriend, Gianluca,” one of the directors says.

“What?”

“Yeah, man. Your whole country seems to be mad at you. They *hate* the woman you’re with, and they’ve been very vocal about it on TikTok. All it takes is one viral video, and that drama can spread right across the pond. We don’t need your relationship with some silly girl that everyone seems to hate overshadowing our marketing campaign for the movie. Just get rid of her, man. You’ll be better off single anyway. The ladies like to think they have a chance.”

I remain there, rooted to the spot, staring at the screen and at their faces, completely shocked. A million thoughts are running through my head.

“How ... how do you know about all this?” is what I manage to ask. “How do you know about her?”

“What do you mean, how do we know about her? It’s all over the newspapers and the internet, man. You’re trending—it’s all that social media can talk about. And look, don’t get us wrong. We love free publicity and controversy as much as the next guy. What they did with *Don’t Worry Darling* was brilliant. Having the actors dating each other and then fight and ‘expose’ each other—that was perfect. A lot of money came out of that. But this is a little much. Do you catch my drift?”

“No, in fact I don’t catch your drift. What do you mean when—”

“Gentlemen, Gianluca has definitely understood your message. He and I will look into the matter and I can promise you that, one way or another, it will be resolved. We’ll make sure there’s no interference with the movie or the marketing campaigns.” Carlo steps in and takes the reins of the conference call.

“That’s exactly what we like to hear. You have a good manager there, Gianluca. Keep him close!” Anthony says.

The call ends and I’m left speechless, still staring at the dark screen of the laptop. Opposite me, Cara watches intently, not saying anything.

I get up, pour myself a measure of whiskey, and collect my thoughts before I address her. “Cara ... would you like to explain what I just heard?”

“I don’t know. What did you just hear?”

“I’m not in the mood for your games.” I try to remain calm. “It seems that the directors of the new movie know everything about me and Larisa. Not only that, but they found out about our relationship from the newspapers, the internet, and social media. How is that possible?”

“How should I know?”

“I’m on a private retreat on the Amalfi Coast, at one of the most private, exclusive hotels in the world. And so is Larisa, obviously. How is it possible that the *whole* country has found out about us?” I ask her again, the whiskey glass now trembling in my hand as I can feel myself getting angrier and angrier.

“Yes. And then you went to Pompeii with her. And to scuba diving lessons. And to Vietri sul Mare. And to yoga classes ... on top of a hill no less. And to the Gardens of Ravello on a date—this evening if I’m not mistaken,” she says sarcastically. “Obviously people saw you with her. You told me yourself that people recognized you in Vietri sul Mare and asked for autographs and selfies. And now you have the audacity to ask me how it’s possible that the whole internet is filled with pictures of you and your girlfriend? Come on...” She gets up from the couch and starts gathering the scripts and other papers from the coffee table.

“I see. But why didn’t you tell me?”

“What?” she asks, not looking me in the face.

“Why didn’t you tell me about all this? You or Carlo. Obviously, you knew. I saw you with a whole stack of newspapers just the other day. I actually asked you if there was anything about me in there. And you looked me in the eye and lied to me. Why?”

“Because ... I wanted to protect you. Like you said, you worked so hard and then your breakup with Elena was so horrible ... I just didn’t want to disturb your peace by giving you this bad news. Plus, both Carlo and I really thought that this would blow over by now.”

“Did you?”

“Yes. And it probably will. You know how these things go. People will get tired of this story, eventually. As soon as another celebrity gets in a relationship or a politician makes some kind of mistake that gets everyone’s attention, they’ll be onto the next thing. We don’t have to address it.”

“So, you planned to never tell me about this?” I ask her.

“No. Carlo and I agreed that it would be best to let you finish your retreat

in peace and *then* let you know the news. That's all. There's no conspiracy theory against you." She rolls her eyes.

I drain my whiskey glass and pour myself some more.

"What are they saying about Larisa? Why do they hate her?"

"They don't hate her. Umm ... they just don't like her that much."

"Why?"

"Because, as you know, the public really liked you with Elena. Plus, Larisa is American and ... they have something against foreign women, I suppose. They've also been kind of ... making fun of her."

"What? What are you talking about, Cara?"

"In the beginning, the photos of the two of you were blurry and very non-descriptive. I suppose that whoever was taking these photos was doing so from a distance. But the more time you spent with her and the more the two of you went on dates, better photos appeared all over the place. I guess that was the fans."

"I don't understand. Why are they making fun of her?"

"There have been some jokes about the fact that she's a red head. And the fact that she's ... not very tan, I guess. They're also saying that she's too skinny, you know, that she doesn't look like the typical Italian woman."

"That's insane. Why would she look like an Italian woman? She's American. Her grandparents are Irish!"

"I know ... but that's the kind of things they're posting online. You know how hateful the internet can be."

I sit down on the leather couch and try to collect my thoughts.

"Cara, this is ... bad."

"Come on, Gianluca. You heard what the directors said. It's going to be three years before the movie comes out. You have plenty of time to sort this out. Don't turn this into a drama."

"That's not what I mean. Cara, I haven't told Larisa who I am."

The news seems to strike her like a thunderbolt.

She actually stops dead in the middle of the room and stares at me with wide eyes, trying to comprehend what I've just told her.

"You haven't ... what do you mean? You haven't told her your name or..."

"I haven't told her anything. She knows my name but she thinks that I'm an Italian businessman here on a retreat. Larisa has no clue that I'm a famous actor or that she's currently in all the Italian newspapers. Or that they are being mean to her."

As I say these words, my head starts spinning.

“That’s insane. How is that even possible? Does this woman live under a rock? How could she possibly not know who you are?”

“She’s American. I’m not that known over there like I am here. Plus, she doesn’t like social media so how could she know me?”

“Okay, fine. But she didn’t Google you after you met? You said that you told her your name. Come on, this is ridiculous. All it takes is five seconds. The moment you type in Gianluca Ferraro, you get about a million photos of you and another million articles about your movies, your career, your entire life ... how could she not have done that?”

“Why would she? I didn’t Google her. She showed me her portfolio on Instagram once and that was pretty much it. I trust her. And, I suppose, she trusts me...”

“Well, that was a mistake, wasn’t it?” Cara says.

I look at her and feel desperation grip me.

“I’m sorry. That’s not what I meant. I just—”

“I was going to tell Larisa this evening all about it,” I interject. “During our date at the Gardens of Ravello. And I was really hoping that she would understand why I did it.”

“Why did you do it? Can I ask?”

“Because I finally found someone who liked me ... for me. Not because I’m famous or because they can get something out of me. Like Elena.”

She rolls her eyes at me but I ignore it and continue.

“I enjoyed spending time with Larisa like a regular person, having a normal relationship. I hoped that she would understand. But now, not only do I have to tell her the truth about who I am ... I have to tell her how, since the day we met, there’s been a smear campaign against her in the press.”

“That definitely makes your job harder,” she replies.

“We agreed to talk tomorrow morning and sort everything out,” I say.

“It’s going to be a long night, Gianluca.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Larisa

“Do you think she’s awake yet?”

“Even if she’s not, we should probably wake her up. This is really important.”

“Do you have the coffee and cornettos? Larisa loves those.”

“Yes, I do. They smell really good.”

“Larisa? Can we come in? We have breakfast for you ... Are you still sleeping?”

I hear footsteps in the living room and smile, still under the bedsheets. It’s nice to be awoken like this, in the middle of this Mediterranean paradise, the warm sun coming through the silk curtains and bathing everything in a soft, yellow light.

“I’m still in the bedroom! Come in, though...” I call lazily from the bed.

Jo and Emmy make their way through the door on their tiptoes, even though I’m clearly awake. Their faces are very tanned and I feel as if I haven’t seen them in a million years.

“You guys! You look so good! This European weather and sun are really

doing miracles for you! Come on, sit on the bed with me and let's have some coffee."

I reach out for one of the typical, small coffee cups and sip a little. It's strong, bitter, and yet surprisingly creamy.

"I have no idea how they do it over here, but this coffee tastes incredible. It's the one thing I'm going to miss most when we go back to America. Well, the coffee and Gianluca, of course. You know, he and I have spent so much time together, and yet, I *still* haven't had the chance to ask him what we're going to do once this retreat is over. Anyway, I'll talk to him about it today."

"Yeah ... about that..." Emmy runs a hand through her hair. She's holding a stack of newspapers and magazines closely to her chest.

"Are you guys going to the beach this morning? What are all those magazines for? Oh, gosh, do they still do those articles where they pretend to give you advice about men but instead just tell you to get a bikini wax?"

"Umm ... Larisa, I think there's something we need to talk about," Emmy says.

"What's up with everyone? That is *exactly* what Gianluca told me last night. And he freaked me out, by the way ... before he got interrupted by the work thing. He said we needed to talk about something. And now here you are, saying the exact same thing. I feel like, all of the sudden, I'm at a United Nations Conference."

"Larisa, before we talk, we just need you to know that we're here for you, okay? And we love you so much, honey. And that ... we're going to get through this. Together. Like always. The three of us. We're strong, right?"

I put my coffee cup on the bed right next to me and stare at Emmy.

"Okay, you're freaking me out—which is exactly what Gianluca did to me last night. Guys, I don't want to be rude or anything like that, but you're all acting so weird. I'm starting to think that I'm on an episode of *The X-Files*. What is going on? What do you mean we're going to get through this? Get through what?"

Emmy clears her throat and takes my hand as if she's about to deliver horrible news. "Honey, Gianluca is a famous actor. His name is Gianluca Ferraro, like he told you ... but he's not a businessman. He's a very famous actor. An international celebrity. Think ... Leonardo DiCaprio."

"Umm ... guys, look. If this is your idea of a joke ... or if you're trying to pull some kind of prank on me because you're bored with just sitting on the beach all day ... this is not funny. I mean, I'm okay with pranks, but this

particular one is *not* funny. I don't even think I get it."

"Larisa, we're not joking. Just try to process what we're telling you. Gianluca has been lying to you. He's a very famous actor and it appears that he most likely just wanted to have a good time while he was here, at the hotel."

I get out of bed and start pacing the room. The little coffee cup spills and forms an ugly, brown spot on the white sheets.

"Stop it! This is not funny! Gianluca wouldn't do something like this! Plus ... plus, it doesn't even make sense! Wouldn't I recognize him if he was a famous actor?"

"Not exactly. Do you know of any Italian actors?" Jo asks me.

"I ... I ... Look, I really don't know what you're trying to say with all this..."

"Honey, it's okay. We understand that this is a very unique situation and that you are probably having a hard time processing it. But it doesn't change the fact that it's true," Emmy replies calmly.

"Okay, then. So, how come you two know him if I don't? How is it that you two know anything about famous Italian actors?" I ask, putting air quotes around the last words, not wanting to believe them myself.

Emmy and Jo look at each other. Finally, Emmy lowers the newspapers and magazines that she's been holding tightly against her chest.

"We were in Positano yesterday. We went to do some shopping and Jo saw a magazine at one of the newsstands. Of course, we don't speak Italian, but..."

"But what?" I ask, feeling like the ground itself is shaking beneath my feet.

"But we don't have to. You're on the cover, Larisa."

Emmy turns one of the magazines around and, sure enough, there I am, on the glossy cover. It's a picture of me during the scuba diving lesson, dressed in nothing but a bathing suit, wet, and extremely unflattering. Next to me, Gianluca looks like a Greek god, tanned and sculpted.

"How ... where ... I don't understand..." is all I manage to say.

"We know, honey. We were shocked to see this as well. Mostly because the Mare Verde is such a private and exclusive hotel—nothing like this is supposed to happen. We have no clue how the paparazzi were able to get ahold of these pictures and publish them, no less," Emmy says.

"Yes. In fact, I talked to Jacob about this last night," Jo adds. "He told me that if you want, you have every right to sue the hotel. This shouldn't have

happened. Your privacy is supposed to be guaranteed here. And yet, somehow, private pictures of you and Gianluca were leaked to the media.”

My head is spinning now.

Only ten minutes ago, I woke up enjoying a great morning in bed as the Italian sunshine poured through my window. Everything was fine in my world. Now, here I am, on the cover of a magazine, in my underwear, having a very serious conversation with my friends about suing the hotel.

“Guys, this is ... I don’t feel so...”

“Okay, okay. Why don’t you take a couple deep breaths with me?” Emmy says.

Jo rushes over and brings me a glass of cold water.

“Here you go. Drink this. It’ll clear your head a bit.”

I do as she says. But my feelings of confusion, desperation, and betrayal are here to stay.

“I don’t understand ... how is this possible? How could I be dating a famous actor and not know it? I trusted him...”

“I’m so sorry, Larisa. I should have Googled him for you or something,” Jo says.

“I Googled him this morning ... everything comes up. Here, I can show you,” Emmy says and starts scrolling through her phone.

Hundreds of photos of Gianluca appear on the screen. On the red carpet, dressed in various costumes and playing different roles in his movies, accepting awards, holding hands with other women.

“Enough ... I don’t want to see this anymore. I just ... I don’t get it. Why wouldn’t he have told me any of this? It’s so bizarre that he hid this from me.”

“I agree. This was an incredibly foolish thing for him to do. I mean, what did he think was going to happen when you finally found out? That you were just ... not going to care? That you’d just ... be happy?”

“Unless...” I say as a sudden realization hits me.

“Unless what?”

“He never planned on telling me at all. Maybe this was all just some kind of meaningless fling he wanted to have while he was here, at the hotel. A little fun. Maybe he was hoping that by coming to this exclusive place, he’d be able to keep it all under wraps. And when it was over, he’d just disappear. If I did find out, if I looked him up, for example, it would be too late, anyway. How could I possibly get in touch with him again? Wow ... I just

can't believe that was his plan all along..."

"Perhaps..." Jo says.

"The only thing that doesn't make sense about all this is his behavior. The way he acted and the things he told me were so ... I mean, he really made me feel like he was falling in love with me. He made me truly believe we were starting a relationship that would continue after this vacation," I explain as my friends listen intently.

"Yes, but did you actually have that conversation with him?" Jo asks.

"Did he ever bring it up to you? Did he ever explicitly say he'd like to continue seeing you after this holiday in Amalfi?" Emmy adds.

"I ... don't really know. I'm so confused right now. I mean, I thought he did. But now I'm not so sure. I feel like everything that happened between me and him is just one, giant blur. That I ... maybe ... misinterpreted everything he did and said."

"No, please, Larisa. That's the last thing you should do. Don't blame yourself! You didn't misinterpret and you didn't misunderstand. If he misled you, then it's all on him!" Jo tells me with her usual fire.

"I guess..."

A few seconds of silence fall between us and I feel a gigantic headache settle in. The news I just received seems to be too much for me even on a physical level, let alone emotionally.

"Umm ... Larisa?"

"Yes..."

"There's something else you need to know," Emmy says cautiously.

"Oh, please ... don't tell me. Is he actually married as well? I had this conversation with him last night and he swore to me up and down that he's not. But, of course, I don't believe anything he said anymore. So, is he?"

"No, he was telling the truth about that. But..."

"What?"

She shows me some more of the magazines and newspapers. "It seems that the Italian press and social media ... are against you."

"What are you talking about?"

"Well? Do you remember those women that kept gossiping over lunch about a famous actor and a woman he's dating? And how she's so ... awful?"

It was me they were referring to.

It's almost as if a giant boulder has just descended on my head at the realization.

How much more of this can there be?

“Emmy ... please, please tell me this is just a bad joke. That I’m still in bed, sleeping and that this is some sort of nightmare.”

She doesn’t answer.

Instead, she pushes the magazines and newspapers toward me.

“Oh, no ... so, not only did I just find out that the man I was falling for is a famous actor who has been lying to me. And that pictures of me and him have been leaked to the press. But that the press also hates me and has been publishing bad things about me?”

“Pretty much. We don’t know exactly what they’ve been saying because we don’t speak Italian, but...”

“Well, let’s find out, shall we?” I say and pull one of the magazines toward me.

“No, Larisa! I don’t think that’s a good idea!” Jo says and tries to stop me but my anger has taken over my common sense.

I grab my phone and take a picture of one of the articles. It only takes a few seconds for the translation to appear on screen and even less for tears to stream down my cheeks.

“Ah. The scarecrow from America who is out to get our beloved Gianluca,” I read aloud.

“Larisa...”

“Save Gianluca from the American gold digger,” I continue.

“Please, stop doing this to yourself,” Emmy begs, but I am too far down the rabbit hole now.

“Gianluca’s new girlfriend looks like a mop with red hair compared to his ex, the superb Elena Montese.”

“Larisa, enough! They just want to sell magazines. They’ll say anything to get people to click on their stupid posts! They don’t mean it. It’s just publicity to all of them. They don’t even know you!” Jo insists.

“Gianluca Ferraro and his new American girlfriend visit Pompeii and make out among the ruins. Fans are enraged as the American woman convinces our hero to disrespect the monuments.”

More and more tears are streaming down my face but there’s nothing I can do to stop them. The press has not only published photos of me and Gianluca, they’ve also managed to completely twist everything that happened between us.

“Gianluca Ferraro and his new girlfriend visit Vietri sul Mare. In a rush to

get back to his girlfriend, the actor is mean to his fans. People are angry and demand that the American woman leave the actor alone.”

“Larisa, please, stop.”

“That’s not what happened! I didn’t even know what was going on. He told me that they were random people who were asking for directions! Why are they doing this?”

“That’s just how these things work, honey,” Emmy says. “They can’t just report the news ... because that would be boring. An actor and his girlfriend go on a date and they kiss. That’s normal—it’s boring. No one would buy the magazines and no one would click on this ‘news.’ They need an angle. They need a hero and a villain—like in every story. Unfortunately, they chose to make you the villain ... and it seems like the people agree, but only because they’re fans of Gianluca.”

“But why is Gianluca allowing all this to happen? He must’ve seen these magazines, right? The newspapers and the social media stuff. Why didn’t he ... ah, because he doesn’t care about me. About us. About anything. To him, this is probably just publicity,” I realize.

All publicity is good publicity, apparently.

My heart hurts as I try to process these thoughts.

I’m shocked that someone could be this cold-hearted.

“Larisa, we’re so sorry,” Jo says, squeezing my hand. “Honestly, we never thought that something like this could happen. Just like you, we thought that Gianluca was a nice guy who genuinely cared about you. I mean, yes, Emmy and I had our reservations about how a relationship between you and him could work long distance, but only because we want the best for you. We never once imagined something like this happening.”

I drop my phone and the magazines directly on the floor before walking out onto the terrace, barefoot and still wearing my pajamas.

The handmade ceramic tiles are already warm, as the Mediterranean sun has been blazing on them the entire morning. With a pang, I realize that they remind me of the day I spent in Vietri sul Mare with Gianluca, photographing ceramics.

“Guys, I want to go home.”

My friends join me out on the terrace.

“Are you sure? Don’t you want to stay behind a little longer and talk to him? Confront him about all this? It would only be what he deserves,” Emmy says.

“Yes. I’m sure. I mean, I know we still have a few days left of our vacation—and I don’t want to spoil your bachelorette getaway, Jo. I’m not trying to ruin it for you or anything like that. I just—”

“Want to go home,” Jo interjects, finishing my sentence. “I get it. Don’t worry, honey. I completely understand. Your mental health is way more important than us spending a few more days on the beach. Plus, I really miss Jacob,” she says and smiles.

“Thank you so much for understanding...”

“Of course. Always. I’m just so sorry that this happened.”

“Me too. You know what I hate the most? I already know that whenever I think back on these days or remember these beautiful places ... whenever someone mentions Italy or I see photos of Italy, I’ll forever be reminded of what happened here.”

“How about pasta?” Emmy jokes, trying to lighten the mood.

“Even pasta...”

“Larisa, are you absolutely sure you don’t want to stay for one more day to at least try to find out why he did this to you?” Jo asks me.

“What for? What do you think he could possibly say?”

“Maybe he can give you an explanation for what he did. Or, at least, some closure. And then you can feel better about this whole thing.”

“No ... there’s no point. Honestly, I just want to get away from here as soon as possible. If I do talk to Gianluca, he’s just going to lie to me again. Or invent some excuse to try to get me to forgive him. I wonder how many other women he has done this to...” my voice trails off and my stomach drops at the thought. “Besides, all of Italy hates me, apparently.”

“I’m so sorry, friend.” Emmy hugs me.

“Alright, then. I’ll go down to reception and ask them to get the private plane sorted out for us. I’ll make sure we get out of here by this afternoon,” Jo says.

“That sounds great. Thank you so much, Jo.”

“Of course. What are you going to do until then?” she asks me.

“I was supposed to spend the day with Gianluca. We were meant to talk ... but ... I think I’m going to write him a letter, instead. I’d like to tell him how I really feel. I don’t know if he’s going to read it. In fact, I don’t know if he even cares. But there are some things I need to get off my chest. I just don’t want to do it face-to-face.”

“We’ll be here if you need anything at all.” My friends assure me before

leaving for their own rooms to pack and prepare to leave for Boston.

All of a sudden, it seems, the sun has set on this glorious and golden vacation on the Amalfi Coast.

How foolish was I to think that I had truly found my love here?

Too foolish, perhaps.

I sit down at the desk in the hotel living room and choose a creamy sheet of paper. Such a delicate support for all that I'm feeling at this moment.

If only I could do this with photographs instead of words.

But he needs to know how I feel.

He needs to know what he's done.

Dear Gianluca,

Amore.

Wait, that's your line.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Gianluca

“Gianluca, Carlo wants you to...”

“No. I can’t do anything else. Cara, I’ve been in meetings and calls all day long. This movie is not coming out for three years and it’s already taking up all my time.”

“You know very well how this works. You’ve been doing this since you were a child. There are a lot of things to handle in the preliminary stage of the project,” she says before handing me a new stack of papers that I’m expected to go through.

“But I need to go talk to Larisa. I promised her yesterday ... can’t this wait a little longer?”

“Can’t *Larisa* wait? You still have a few days left of your holiday here—there’s plenty of time to talk to her. Let’s finish our work and you can see her later this evening. This Marvel movie is incredibly important, you know that.”

I pace around the hotel room, trying to figure out what to do.

Cara looks at me with a raised eyebrow like she can’t believe that I’m even

considering this. “Gianluca, she hasn’t even answered your messages yet.”

“Yes, it’s weird. Maybe I should go to her room right now.”

“That’s not what I meant. She’s probably down on the beach with her friends. Or having a late lunch. Better yet, she probably hasn’t answered you because she’s getting a facial at the spa with her friends. You know they don’t allow phones in there. I think you’re taking this *far* too seriously.”

“I’m taking this too seriously? Cara, I haven’t told her who I am. Larisa has no clue that I’m an actor. Nor does she know that our relationship has been exposed in the media—or that they’ve been publishing such negative things about her. She deserves to know this. And I want her to hear it from me. Her feelings are on the line. How can you say that I’m taking this too seriously?” I ask incredulously.

“Because you are.” She rolls her eyes at me. “Think about it for a second. What woman *wouldn’t* love to discover that her boyfriend is a famous and rich actor? That, all of a sudden, she can move to Hollywood and go to parties with Beyonce and Brad Pitt? Really, now ... you’re being dramatic—creating these silly problems in your head.”

“Larisa is not like other women. She doesn’t care about these things. Which is why I liked her so much in the first place. I’m worried that I might’ve hurt her by keeping all this a secret from her. And that is the last thing I want to do.”

She sighs and gives me an exhausted look. “I really don’t understand where your obsession with this woman comes from. You’ve met thousands of the most beautiful women in the world and yet, here you are, pacing around the room like a lion in a cage, worrying about some random, lackluster girl from who knows where in America.”

“Stop it. Don’t talk about Larisa like that. I’ve had enough of this with the newspapers and social media—I won’t tolerate it from you, Cara.”

She glares at me and then changes the subject. “I wish you could worry about the Marvel movie as much as you worry about this woman. Why don’t you—”

“No, thanks,” I cut her off before she finds something else for me to do. “I’m going to Larisa’s room right now. You can tell Carlo to wait. I’ll finish everything else tomorrow or ... I’ll see. This is way more important. Larisa is more important to me.”

Without waiting for an answer or a reaction from Cara, I storm out of my hotel room and head toward the elevator.

My heart is racing, so I take a few deep breaths to try to calm myself down because I don't want to face Larisa like this.

She and I are about to have a crucial conversation.

Probably the most important one of all.

I need to have a clear head.

Only a few minutes later, I reach her floor and head toward Larisa's room. I knock gently on the door and wait for her to open it.

"Si? Come posso aiutare il signore?"

"Oh ... I'm here to see Larisa. Is she in her room?"

The maid looks at me with wide eyes, not understanding what I mean.

"Larisa? My name is Antonia," she says.

"No, no. I'm looking for Larisa, the lady who is staying in this room. Can you get her for me? Or do you know where she is?"

"Ah, you mean the lady with the red hair?" the maid says.

"Yes, yes! Has she gone down to the beach or something?"

"La signora se ne ando," she says to me in a very matter-of-fact way. So much so that I have trouble comprehending what she means.

"She left? What do you mean she left? Where did she go? To the beach? To the hotel's restaurant? To the spa?" I ask, getting more and more frustrated by the minute.

The maid adjusts her uniform and gives me a blank stare.

"America."

"No, no. I know that she's from America. But where did she just go? In the hotel? To eat or to..."

"America!" the maid repeats herself, this time much louder as if I'm a child or I don't speak Italian.

"Look, miss, are you trying to tell me that the woman who was staying in this room—Larisa Thompson—checked out? She's not here anymore?"

A cold shiver runs across my skin as things start to come together in my head.

"Si, si! La signora ha fatto il check out! Oggi, alcune ore fa."

"A few hours ago? Why did nobody tell me?" I ask, even though my question is beyond reason.

The maid stares at me again, not knowing what to say.

She simply shrugs and then points at the empty hotel room she's been vacuuming.

I take a few steps back, as if to distance myself not only physically but also

mentally and emotionally.

My mind understands what happened but my heart refuses to accept it.

There's only one thing that could have occurred.

Larisa found out. Everything.

She must know who I am. She must've seen the newspapers and magazines.

I run to the elevator and make my way to the reception desk, hoping I can find out more information from the man in uniform.

"Hello! I need to know ... Can you tell me ... Umm ... do you know..." I start but realize that I'm in such a state of distress that I can't even make up my mind as to what questions I should be asking.

"Hello, Mr. Ferraro. How can I be of assistance today?" the man in uniform says.

"Larisa Thompson. The American lady who was here with her friends. Did she leave? Did she check out?"

"Mr. Ferraro, with all due respect, sir, I cannot give out this type of information about our guests."

I feel as if the ground is about to open and swallow me whole.

The entire world seems to be against me now ... but I need to keep my composure.

"Yes, of course. But perhaps you can make an exception. For me?" I straighten myself to my full height and remind the man behind the reception desk who I am.

He hesitates for a moment but then leans in and whispers. "Very well, sir. Miss Thompson has, indeed, checked out along with her two friends, earlier today."

"I see. Have they given any clue as to where they might be heading? Back to America? Or will they be continuing their holiday?"

"Mr. Ferraro, I really cannot give out this information, please..."

"Well ... did I mention this is my favorite private retreat? One that I recommend to every single one of my friends in Hollywood. But I don't have to. If you're not willing to cooperate with me. Why would I?" I tell him coldly.

He contemplates for a moment before tapping a few keys on the computer. "Miss Thompson and her friends requested a private plane be arranged for them. We did that, of course. The plane is on the way to Boston as we speak."

My head grows dizzy and light as I continue to process what's happening.

Her vacation wasn't supposed to end for another few days ... and given that she's headed home early, has ignored my calls, and left without saying goodbye ... I'm certain now that Larisa knows the truth about me.

There's no other logical reason as to why she would have done this.

Still, I do my best to keep my calm demeanor. "I see. Did the lady leave anything ... for me?"

"Not that I know of, sir. But she did seem to be very distraught when she left the hotel."

My heart sinks at his words.

I hold tightly to the reception desk like a drowning man holds on to a piece of driftwood in the middle of the ocean. "Very well. Thank you so much for your help."

"My pleasure, sir."

I turn around and head for the elevators once more, trying my hardest to reach them before my knees give out.

The mess I created hangs heavily on my shoulders.

But just as I'm about to reach the comfort and privacy of the elevator, I hear a voice call from behind me.

"Signore Ferraro! Wait!"

The maid that was in Larisa's room just a few minutes ago catches up with me, panting as she runs.

"Yes? What is it?"

"Signore Ferraro, I forgot to tell you ... The American lady ... The one with the red hair. She left this for you!"

She pushes a sealed envelope in my hand, smiles, and walks away.

On its smooth and silky surface, there is a single word, written in dark ink.

Amore.

I rush back to my room.

Thankfully, Cara is not here, so I have a few moments of privacy with Larisa's letter.

I head out to the terrace that overlooks the Mediterranean Sea and rest against the stone ledge. The sun beats down on me as I almost tear through the envelope to find the pages written in Larisa's own handwriting.

Dear Gianluca,

Amore.

Wait, that's your line.

I believe that you're used to this. You're used to lines, possibly because you're an actor, possibly because you've been using lines on me from the moment we met. And what lines they were! I believed them all.

Gianluca, I found out the truth about you today. At first, I was shocked and almost refused to believe it. I thought that, perhaps, my friends were playing some sort of joke on me. However, the more I thought about it, the more I realized just how much sense it all made.

How you almost refused to go to Vietri sul Mare that day with me and tried to talk me out of it. The disguises, random people coming up to you in public, and, of course, the way we met. How upset you became when you thought I was taking your picture.

You must have imagined I was a crazy fan...

I imagined a lot of things as well, but not this. Never this.

You're probably wondering why I didn't stay behind to talk about all this. Or why I didn't confront you, cry about it, scream at you, make a big fuss, have a huge argument ... I'm sure that's what you expected.

What would be the point? When a building crashes and turns to dust right in front of your eyes, what's the point in screaming at the pile of broken stones on the ground? And what else is there to talk about? Except more lies and betrayal.

I could have stayed to ask you one single thing. Why? This will be the question that will forever haunt my mind. Why, Gianluca? You could have any woman in the world. Why did you choose me to drag into this little game? Perhaps it was fun for you. Perhaps you were bored and decided to try something exciting. The rich and famous actor pretends to be a regular guy while he's on holiday. And the naïve American girl believes everything.

Such a fun game, isn't it?

Whatever your reasons might have been, I'm sure that all of this has meant nothing to you. The moment you return to your glamorous life, you will forget about me in an instant as you will forget about everything that happened during these three weeks in Amalfi. I will become nothing but a moment, a fun game in the spectacular life of the great actor Gianluca Ferraro.

I wish I could say the same about you. I wish I could make it all go away just as easily. When my plane lands and I'm back home, in Boston, I pray that my time with you becomes nothing but an anecdote. A fun story that I tell my friends.

But it won't. Do you know why?

Because you broke my heart.

If you don't remember anything of our time together, if time erases all, if you don't even recall my face again, remember this:

You broke my heart.

Amore.

I want to read the entire letter again, but I can't bring myself to do it.

In a way, she's right. Even though I'm sorry that Larisa left without talking to me, I understand that the conversation would have been an extremely difficult one.

Back in my room, I reach for my phone and call her.

There is one, short ring, and then an unbreakable silence. The call ends on its own.

Confused, I try again, but get the same result, no matter how many times I do it. I text her.

Me: *Can you, please, answer the phone?*

Me: *I really need to talk to you.*

Me: *I've been trying to call you about ten times now but...*

Me: *Larisa, I got your letter and you don't understand what happened.*

Me: *Please!*

Me: *There are so many things we need to talk about.*

I press send after the final message and wait.
The answer comes almost immediately as I stare intently at the screen.

Message has not been delivered.

Message has not been delivered.

Message has not been delivered.

Again and again, for each line of the text that I write to her.
It finally dawns on me that she blocked me.
I begin calling her again, even though I know it's futile.
My heart, not wanting to face the facts or to accept the reality of what is happening, keeps pushing me to dial and redial.
In the end, I get a few automated messages as a result of my incessant calling.

The customer you're trying to reach is unavailable.

The messages repeat absurdly on my screen almost like a punishment.
Perhaps there's another way I can get through to her.
I call Cara to my room and she arrives almost immediately, looking as sour as ever.
"Cara, I need you to do something for me. Please, find Larisa's email address. Personal or professional. Both if you can."
"Alright..." She rolls her eyes at me. "But is there any specific reason?"
I turn to her, completely put off by her attitude and tired of her questions.
"Cara, is that any of your business? I asked you to do something as my personal assistant. Should you be questioning me right now? Rolling your eyes? Giving me cold stares? Please, get me her email address."
She leaves the room as I open Instagram and try to find Larisa's photography portfolio. As expected, all I can find is a message, announcing to me that the page is no longer available.

Larisa has blocked me on social media as well.

I call my manager to have him working on the same task. “Carlo? Hey, it’s me. Listen, can you do me a favor?”

“Sure, Gianluca. You name it!”

“I want to get in touch with Larisa Thompson.”

“The woman from the newspapers?” he asks and I can already hear his hesitation through the phone.

“Yes. She left the hotel today and went back to Boston. But I can’t reach her. Can you, please, get her email address for me? Use your connections. She’s a freelance photographer so I’m sure that someone in the industry knows how to get to her.”

“Gianluca, listen, I don’t think that this is such a good idea,” Carlo begins.

“What are you talking about?”

“You heard what the directors of the movie said. You need to sort out this mess that has been created around your relationship with Larisa.”

“That’s exactly what I’m trying to do, Carlo! But I need to get in touch with her somehow!”

“No, Gianluca, I think that maybe it’s best if you just leave her alone. This whole scandal will die down at some point. And, by the time the movie comes out, everyone will have forgotten about it.”

I feel a surge of anger course through me now. My fingers clasp around the phone so tightly that I can actually feel my knuckles hurting.

“Carlo, I want you to listen to me because I’m only going to say this once. I’m getting really tired of you and Cara—your attitude, your questions, and your ill will toward me. Do you hear me? I’m done with both of you. In case you’ve forgotten, you work for me, not the other way around. As a result, if you don’t do what I tell you, that’s fine. I can find another manager who will. And who will be more than happy to work with me on the Marvel movie.”

There’s silence on the other end of the phone.

I know that Carlo is collecting his thoughts.

“Gianluca, my boy!” he finally says, sounding much more chipper than before. “When did I say that I don’t want to do this? No, no! You’re misinterpreting my words! I only meant that ... Yes, anyway! So, you need an email? You know what? I’m going to do something even better for you. I’ll find out her home address in Boston as well. You know, in case you ever want to go and visit this young lady!”

“Thank you, Carlo.”

“Of course. Anything you want. You’re the star! Also, I want you to know that I’m working on cleaning up the whole mess in the newspapers. There won’t be any more pictures or articles.”

“That’s great. Thank you, Carlo.”

“Absolutely! What am I here for? Yes, I saw Elen—I mean ... I spoke to ... someone yesterday about it and...”

“Hold on a second. You saw Elena yesterday? What does she have to do with all this?” I ask, very surprised to hear my ex-girlfriend’s name come up in this conversation.

Carlo takes another pause and I can hear him breathing heavily.

“Now, Gianluca, please, don’t be upset.” he continues. “I was going to tell you. Well, I was thinking of telling you...”

“What?”

“I found out that it was Elena who leaked the pictures of you and Larisa to the press.”

“Elena? She was behind all this? But how?”

“Yes. It seems that you told her you were away from home. She apparently called you?”

“She did. But I didn’t tell her where I was. And even if I did, she wouldn’t have access to this hotel unless she was specifically invited.”

“That’s true. But it was enough that you told her you were away,” Carlo explains, and suddenly things are starting to make more sense. “I guess she was able to track you down somehow and then had someone follow you around and take those pictures. I was wondering how the photos could have been leaked to the public since the hotel itself is so private. I guess this is how.”

“Yes ... this is how...”

“She obviously had someone working from the inside,” Carlo continues. “Maybe a guest staying at the hotel who kept an eye on you and Larisa the whole time? I mean, how else could anyone have known where you were at all times, all your dates...”

I lean against a wall and try to collect my thoughts as I listen to Carlo speak.

“Do you know who it could’ve been?” he asks.

“Yes, I think I do.”

A moment later, the conversation is over.

I put the phone down and wait for Cara to come back.

“Gianluca, I wasn’t able to find Larisa’s email address, but I’ll keep trying. Maybe ... wait—why are you looking at me like that?”

“Cara, you’re fired.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Larisa

“You look amazing, Larisa! This golden dress goes perfectly with your red hair.”

“Thank you.”

“And you got such a beautiful tan in Italy—oh, I’m so sorry, I shouldn’t have said that.”

“Jo, it’s fine. I’m not forbidding people to say the word ‘Italy’ around me. And, thank you ... I think this dress looks great as well,” I reply, looking at myself in the grand mirror of the stylist’s dressing room.

Jo’s personal stylist opened his boutique just for us today so that we can do the final fitting of our bridesmaids’ dresses.

“Oh, I’m so happy! You and Emmy look absolutely stunning!” She hugs me as Emmy appears from her own changing room.

“These dresses do look incredible. Jo, thanks so much for not putting us in something ... you know ... that bridesmaids *usually* wear.” Emmy laughs.

“I’d never dream of doing that. I want you both to look and feel your best! What about these shoes, Larisa?” Jo approaches me holding a pair of black

pumps that have a gold bow at the back.

“Hmm. Oh, yeah. Sure. They look great.”

“Honey, why don’t we talk for a little bit?” she says, pulling me to the side.

Jo and I make our way to a lavish, beige leather couch and sit next to each other.

She takes my hand, lovingly. “Larisa, you haven’t really been the same since we came back from Italy. Not that you should be—that’s not what I’m trying to say. What happened between you and Gianluca ... and the way you were depicted in the newspapers ... it’s all very difficult to recover from. But I just wanted to check in with you and see how you’re feeling?”

“I don’t care about social media and I don’t care about the Italian newspapers!” I fight back and I mean it. “They’re just some stupid gossip columns that no one has even heard of here, in America. I mean, sure, at first I was afraid that what they wrote about me might damage my career. But none of it even made it across the ocean. So...”

“But you’re still upset?”

“Not about social media! That’s just a bunch of people who have nothing better to do all day than to watch the private lives of celebrities. Or, at least, what they *think* are the private lives of celebrities. Because now I know for sure that most of that stuff is made up. What they wrote about me and Gianluca wasn’t even true. They just ... spiced it all up.”

“So, what’s going on?” she asks me. “What’s been on your mind?”

“I’m just disappointed.” I sigh. “I trusted him, Jo. I thought that ... he was kind and genuine. I actually thought to myself, what a great man. How lucky I am to have met him! And, instead, he treated me like a ... fun activity that you do when you’re bored on holiday.”

“I’m so sorry, friend. I wish there was something I could say to make you feel better. It’s just unfortunate that you never got to hear his side of the story,” she says.

I scoff and manage a weak smile. “Really? But what else is there? What else would be the reason for keeping all this from me?”

“Hmm ... I don’t know, Larisa. But I can see that what happened in Italy meant a lot to you. And that it’s still on your mind. I can see that you’re visibly hurting. So ... I just want you to know that I’m here for you. And if this is all too much, and you don’t want to be in the wedding anymore, that’s fine. I don’t want to pressure you to ... party and pretend to be having a good time when, in reality, your heart is broken.”

I grasp her hand tightly and feel warm and comforted by her words.

“Jo, you are the best friend anyone could have asked for. Thank you so much ... for being so incredibly selfless and not pushing me. But I *do* want to do this. I want to be here for you and Jacob. And celebrate with you. You’re my best friend. There’s no way I’m going to miss your wedding.”

“Aww, well, I’m glad to hear that!”

“But I’m *really* going to miss you when you’re on your honeymoon,” I tell her as we get up to resume the fitting session.

“Emmy will be here, though, and we can have a chat on Zoom every day.” She laughs.



The big day arrives faster than we could have anticipated.

Before I know it, I’m once again wearing the gold dress and fancy black pumps that we picked out as our bridesmaids’ attire and entering the magnificent Stoney Hall, an old and illustrious church that Jo and Jacob have chosen for their wedding ceremony.

Emmy catches up with me and tries to adjust her hair as she goes. “Can you believe it?”

“What? The church? Yes, they’ve existed for thousands of years,” I reply sarcastically.

“Oh, you ... No, this! All of this! I never in my life thought that I’d be attending a billionaire’s wedding. Did you?”

“Emmy, you’re not attending the wedding, you’re Jo’s bridesmaid.” I laugh. “But other than that, yes. I have to agree that I don’t think I’ll ever witness something like this in my life again. I mean ... are those actual diamonds on the flower ribbons?”

“I think so, yes,” she says as we approach one of the wooden pews. They’re decorated with yellow orchids that have been wrapped in pink ribbons. On the ribbons themselves, small diamonds sparkle in the morning light.

“This is incredible! And have you seen the band?” Emmy says.

“Yes, but it’s not a band. It’s a choir that they brought from ... ummm ...”

“From where?”

“Italy,” I reply, feeling my throat constrict a little.

“Oh, I’m sorry, Larisa. This must be so difficult for you. Are you alright?”

“I’m fine, don’t worry,” I lie as we make our way back out of the church and into the courtyard. The August sun shines brightly, promising a beautiful wedding day for Jo and Jacob.

“Have you heard from him at all?” Emmy asks.

“No, I haven’t. But then again, I blocked him on everything. So ... even if he has tried to contact me, how could I know?”

“I suppose you’re right,” Emmy replies while struggling to fix her hair, which seems not to want to cooperate, no matter how hard she tries.

“I did read online that he was cast in the new Marvel movie.”

“Really? Wow ... that’s big news. For him, I mean,” Emmy replies.

“Mhm. Soon enough, he’ll forget all about me.” I sigh.

“Are you sure about that?”

I turn around so fast that my dress has a hard time keeping up with me, forcing me to adjust it myself by pulling the bottom part in place.

All the while, Emmy is gasping like she’s watching a soap opera. Which is more than fitting, since the man standing in front of us right now is, in fact, an actor.

In the brilliant August sun, Gianluca looks very much like an international celebrity—as if every space he occupies is his own red carpet.

I guess it’s true what they say. Some people were truly born to be a star.

Gianluca is definitely one of those people.

“What ... are you doing here? No, no. How did you get here? How did you know where I am?” I ask him.

“Your best friend is getting married today,” he says smiling.

“So? What does *that* have to do with anything?”

“She’s marrying a billionaire. The details of the wedding are all over the news. It wasn’t that difficult,” he continues.

“I guess ... but that still doesn’t mean that you should’ve come. Did you just decide to crash my best friend’s wedding, then?” I lash out, realizing just how mad I am at him.

In a twist of events, for a moment, we revert to the same type of relationship we used to have when we first met.

Perhaps it is fate playing a joke on us, perhaps it was always meant to be like this.

Next to me, Emmy clears her throat and decides to give us some space. “Umm ... why don’t I go and ... yeah. You know. I have a thing. With the thing. See you later, then!” she mumbles before walking away. Though, she

keeps turning her head in our direction, horribly curious to know what's happening between me and Gianluca.

I'm one hundred percent certain she's going straight to Jo to tell her about this development.

"Larisa, I didn't come to crash your best friend's wedding. I wouldn't dream of doing that. I am very well aware that I wasn't invited. But ... this is the only way I could see and talk to you. After you left Italy, I tried so hard to reach you. As you well know, you blocked me on your phone, your Instagram account, your email ... and I actually managed to find your home address..."

"What? Gianluca, that's just..."

"I know, I know." He raises both his hands in surrender. "I was desperate to come and see you. To talk to you. But then I realized that just showing up at your door might make you even madder."

"So, you showed up at my best friend's wedding instead?"

"What other way was there to see you?"

"What do you even want, anyway?" I scowl.

"To talk to you, that's all. Maybe if you have a minute right now? Or after the wedding. That's alright. I'll wait as long as it takes."

"I—I mean, I guess we can talk now. The ceremony isn't for another hour. Although, I'm not sure I'm *interested* in hearing what you have to say."

He smiles a little and we make our way to the back of the church.

It's silent and peaceful here, among the trees and hedges. On a little wooden bench, Gianluca begins to tell me what he feels.

"Larisa, I think there's been a misunderstanding about what happened between us—"

"There is no misunderstanding. You lied to me about who you are," I interrupt him.

"No, I just ... never told you."

"Oh, wow! You've got some nerve. Do you know that? What is it about you? Is it like ... an Italian thing? Did you fly all the way to Boston thinking that you'd be able to wiggle your way out of this situation with a ... technicality?" I start to laugh.

"That's not what I meant. Larisa, in the beginning, when we met, I thought that you were a journalist and that you came from America to write some type of article or exposé on my breakup with Elena. And that's why you were taking my picture on that first day."

“Yeah, sure. Because everything revolves around you, Mr. Celebrity.”

“Okay, I deserve that.” He smiles. “But it’s true. Soon enough, I discovered that you were, truly, just on vacation. I also discovered something *much* more interesting.”

“That not everyone on planet Earth knows some rinky-dink Italian movie star? And that you needed a dose of a reality check?”

“I deserve that too.” He grins and I start to loosen up a little as the connection between us turns to banter and playfulness. “I discovered that you didn’t know who I am. And that was...”

“Your worst nightmare.”

“It was something I have hardly experienced before,” he says.

“You’ve got to be joking! Do you have any idea what you sound like right now?” I laugh.

“There are things that I haven’t been able to tell you while we were together. One of them is the fact that I’ve been an actor since I was a child. It’s not usual for me to meet people who don’t know me or want something from me. Almost all the people around me want to use me or make money off of me. When I met you, it was ... a breath of fresh air. It was an incredible opportunity to be myself and to spend time with someone who, perhaps, might be interested in ... just me.”

I ponder his words for a few moments. “Well ... I never thought about it like that.”

“The reason why I never told you who I am is not because I wanted to deceive you or play games with you. But because you ... liked me for me, Larisa. And that was almost like a drug to me. You’re the first person that ever saw me as a human being, as a man, as someone you could talk to, laugh with, play with, and, maybe, build your future with. Not as a cash machine, a face on a screen, or a body that can advertise clothes and watches. I fell into this ... dream of being loved for who I am as a person ... not because I was in a bunch of movies.”

“Gianluca ... why didn’t you tell me all this? Back then. Why did you think I wouldn’t feel the same way about you, even if I knew who you are? That makes no difference to me. To me, you are still *you*. I don’t want you because you star in movies or because you’re famous. I want you because of the way you are. Because of how I feel when we’re together.”

“You want me? Still?”

“Doesn’t everyone?” I ask, half-joking.

“Not like this. Not like you.”

As we sit on the little wooden bench, I reach out and take his hand. He looks at me, his eyes wide in surprise as if he didn't expect me to react this way or to accept him once again.

“So, you came all the way to Boston to tell me this?” I ask.

“I would have gone all the way to the moon just to tell you hello,” he replies.

“In English or Italian?”

He laughs and I can see the stress and worry on his face melt away as he understands that there's still a chance.

A chance for us and our happiness.

“Larisa, I'm so sorry I lied to you about my profession. But everything else I told you was true. I need you to know this. I'm so sorry that you had to find out my true identity from the newspapers. I never wanted any of this to happen. I hope you believe me when I say it. I wanted to tell you so many times. The evening we spent in Vietri sul Mare and other times as well. But it never came to be. Before I had a chance to tell you myself, you found out.”

“Why did you let them publish all those things about us?”

“I didn't know ... I never look at magazines or read things about myself online. If you only knew the things people have said about me over the years. I stay far away from the media. My assistant knew, of course, but as it turns out, *she* was the one leaking everything to the press.”

“What? You're joking.”

“No. I fired her on the spot,” he says.

“So, I guess you're a victim just as much as I am,” I reply.

“I should've protected you. And I thought I was. Please know how sorry I am...” he says.

“I believe you. And I forgive you. I just wish things would've been different.”

“Me too. But they can be different from now on. As long as we're together,” he says.

“I'm so glad you came here.”

“Me too, amore.” He leans in and caresses my face. Even though it hasn't been that long, it feels as though I've missed his touch for a thousand years.

I stare into his green eyes, memorizing each and every golden flake.

His eyes feel like home.

“I must say, the time we spent apart made me realize that I don't want to

spend another day away from you. I'll do whatever it takes to make this work. Because I love you, Larisa."

"I love you too, Gianluca."

"Can I kiss you?" he whispers.

"Please..."

The silence of the garden and the August morning takes over as our lips meet once more, this time after having spoken the truth.

Perhaps that's why this kiss feels sweeter, longer, and deeper.

I part my lips for him as he deepens the kiss, his hands cradling my face. His touch is gentle yet filled with a fiery passion. It's as if every word left unsaid during our time apart is now being conveyed as he enjoys the contours of my lips.

We begin to melt into one another, our bodies pressing closer with every heartbeat as we explore each other's souls through the language of our lips.

Our tongues intertwine, sending shivers from the top of my head to the tips of my toes. He tastes like peppermint and summer sunshine, a perfect blend of cool and warmth.

A soft breeze rustles the leaves overhead, adding a touch of magic to the air. The sun peeks through the branches, casting dappled light upon us.

It feels like nature itself is celebrating our reunion.

His hands explore the contours of my neck, my back, my waist and I lose myself in the sensations, the electricity that courses through my veins.

Every touch, every caress feels like a promise, a vow of forever.

As Gianluca's hands hold me tight, I realize that there's no other place I want to be. There's a connection between us that pushes us forward.

"So, this is what it's like to kiss a celebrity." I smile after we break away.

"Do you like it?"

"Oh, are you flirting with me?"

"Maybe." He grins.

"You flirt with fans, then?" I tease him.

"I had no idea that you're my fan," he teases me back.

"How could I not be a fan of such a good kisser?"

"Have you actually seen any of my movies?"

We walk hand in hand inside the church and wait for the wedding to start.

The bells start to ring high above us, resonating against the old stone walls. The perfect chime to mark the end of a memorable story and the beginning of my lifetime of love.

EPILOGUE

Gianluca

Nine Months Later

“Do you think you can stop me, Spider-Man?”

“I’ll do anything it takes. I’ll die if I have to.”

“Then I will be more than happy to grant you this wish.”

“Cut! Let’s reset! Larisa, can you, please, go and take a look at the set? I feel like we need more lighting on the far left. I don’t like the angle over there.”

“Sure thing, Anthony!”

She walks across the set and approaches me smiling.

“How did I do?”

“You were fantastic, as usual.” She grins and kisses me, even though I

have about two tons of heavy stage makeup on.

“Better than Tom Holland?”

“He’s doing fine but nothing compared to you, darling. You know that.” She kisses me again.

“You really are my biggest fan, aren’t you?”

“Hey, I just work here.” She shrugs. “And, as the assistant to the director of photography for this movie, I can only be objective. You were ... fantastic. Amazing. Wonderful. Incredible!”

Larisa’s arms clasp around my neck as we sink into another kiss. “Gianluca, people are watching...” She’s suddenly reminded of the fact that we’re on set, but she still grins in pleasure.

“Yes. That’s what happens when you’re a celebrity and you’re dating the most beautiful woman in the world. Goodness, I love it when you blush...” I caress her exquisite face with the tips of my fingers, careful not to get any of the stage makeup on her.

“Alright, this is far too much fun. I have to go and check the set like Anthony asked me,” she says.

“I’m going to go over my lines one more time.”

We kiss again and I watch her walk away.

My new personal assistant, June, approaches me with a warm smile. “Are you ready to go over the scene one more time?” she asks, handing me the script.

“Sure. Will you do it with me, June?”

“Absolutely!”

We head to my trailer a little off the set and I settle into a slightly uncomfortable chair as June hands me a bottle of coconut water.

“There. I put a paper straw in so you don’t ruin your stage makeup.” She smiles.

“Thanks so much, June. You’re the best.”

“I’m just doing my job! Speaking of which, I talked to Anthony earlier today.”

“Yeah? What did he have to say?”

“He wants to start campaigning for you to get nominated for an Oscar. He’s not so sure about Tom Holland, but he thinks that you have a very good chance. We can talk to Carlo later as well. If you keep up the good work, you can easily be the next Joaquin Phoenix or Heath Ledger and win an Academy Award as the greatest villain of the decade,” she hypes me up.

I smile and sip my coconut water. “I don’t know ... that’s a huge accomplishment, June. Can you imagine me actually winning an Oscar? Up there with all the greats?”

“You *are* one of the greats, Gianluca!”

“Thanks, June. Did Anthony say anything else?”

“Yes. He said he’s very impressed with Larisa and wants to keep her on his team for the next Marvel movies.”

“Oh, yeah?”

“Definitely. Anthony is more than grateful to you for bringing Larisa onboard. She’s a wonderful assistant to the director of photography and, honestly, he owes you one.” She laughs.

“Larisa is pretty incredible, isn’t she? I know she’s loving it as well. She enjoys working on the movie set so much. Funnily enough, I think she enjoys it more than I do,” I explain, grabbing my script.

“Why wouldn’t she? She’s great at this and ... you guys get the chance to spend time together.”

“I can’t even begin to tell you how much I love that,” I reply before grabbing a neon yellow marker off the table in my dressing room.

I highlight some of my lines to help me remember them better—an old actor’s trick.

“Mmm ... Gianluca?” June starts up the conversation again, a little shakily.

“Yes? What is it?”

“It’s just that ... well, I was on Instagram today and...”

“What?”

“I saw that Elena has a new account.”

“Does she? That’s interesting. Is she even allowed to do that? With the lawsuit and all?”

“I’m not exactly sure, which is why I thought that I should mention it to you. I’m going to discuss it with Carlo and our lawyer as well. Last year, when you sued her and Cara for leaking private photos of you to the media, she was banned from Instagram. At least, while the trial is pending. I don’t really know how she’s suddenly able to have a new account.”

“Is she still doing the whole Instagram model influencer thing?” I ask.

“No, no. She switched to health stuff. From what I saw, she’s giving advice to women about crystals, energy, and how to drink moss powder. That kind of thing. Maybe that’s why she was able to go back to social media. Because she chose to leave the celebrity arena,” June explains.

“Alright, well thanks for the heads up. But I don’t want to talk about Elena anymore. It puts me in a foul mood and I still have an entire day of filming ahead of me.”

“You’re right.” She pulls out her iPad and old-fashioned agenda and thumbs through it. “Let’s see. Alright. The Met Gala. Everything is ready or, at least, almost ready. Anna Wintour has approved both your outfit and Larisa’s. Which is more than I can say for the Kardashians,” June adds in a gossipy whisper, even though we’re all alone in my trailer.

I start to laugh at how much she’s enjoying the backstage of celebrity life and indulge her for a moment.

“What does that mean?”

“Well, the word among personal assistants is that one of the Kardashian sisters wanted to wear a dress that she designed herself ... but apparently it looked more like a tablecloth than anything else. Anna Wintour said absolutely not which led to a bit of a ... disagreement, let’s say. Anyway, you and Larisa are in the clear.”

“That’s good to hear.”

“Are you excited about the Met Gala?” June asks me.

“I’ve been invited before. To tell you the truth, it’s a party like any other. But I’m happy that, this year, Larisa is going with me. It will make the whole experience far more enjoyable.”

June looks at me with a chuckle in her expression.

“Boy, you really love her, don’t you?”

“More than I could ever put into words.”

“Alright, back to reality now.” She laughs. “We still have to go over your lines!”

“Hold on. How about that ... other thing? Our little secret, June. How are we doing on that?” I ask and smile.

“Our little secret?” She grins. “It’s going *amazingly* well, and it’s right on track! Don’t worry about a thing. I have it all planned out to the last detail.”

“Good. I’m so happy to hear that! Do you know how excited it makes me just thinking about it?”

“Oh, I can imagine.” June laughs.

“I can’t wait to see Larisa’s face! That’s all I can think about!”



Hello and welcome to E! News! I am your host, Bayelle Sotomayor, here with the latest and freshest gossip from the Met Gala red carpet. I have the tea y'all and it's piping hot! Who is dating who? Who is going to dress according to tonight's theme and who's just going to show up? And what will Rihanna be wearing? The hottest questions on everyone's lips, and I have the answer to all of them!

Get ready with me to watch your favorite celebrities walk down this iconic red carpet as we embrace this Met Gala's theme: Art – What Is it Good For?

Do you have the answer? I surely don't. But maybe our dear celebrities do. Oh, I see Megan Thee Stallion coming down the red carpet. Here we go! It looks like she's the first to arrive. Doesn't she know that...

I turn off my phone and look out the limousine window. Next to me, Larisa is smoothing out the massive bottom half of her dress which is taking up most of the space in the car.

Following the instructions of my stylist, Larisa and I have decided to wear costumes based on a famous painting by a classic Italian painter. *The Temptress* by Pio Ricci has Larisa wearing a stunning silk pink dress that goes incredibly well with her red hair and creamy skin. I, on the other hand, am wearing a formal suit based on the blue satin costume in the painting.

Even though I'm a little uncomfortable, I've been told over and over again for the past few weeks that my costume is a work of art made by John Galliano himself.

I look over at Larisa and notice just how resplendent she looks in the pink dress.

"Why did you turn that off? I want to know what's going on..." she says absent-mindedly.

"Amore, we're going to the Met Gala right now. You'll know in just a matter of minutes," I reply, taking her hand.

"Yeah, that's right. Silly me ... I guess it's just difficult to wrap my head around all this, you know?" she tells me.

"What do you mean?"

"Well, a year ago I was just ... me. Larisa Thompson from Boston. Freelance photographer. And now, I'm sitting in the backseat of a limousine, going to the Met Gala, no less, with my boyfriend—one of the most famous actors in the world. It's ... surreal."

"Is surreal good or bad? My English doesn't go that far," I reply.

"It's ... neither. I feel like I've fallen into some kind of dream, a fantasy of

some sort. That I'm Cinderella and you're Prince Charming."

"Does that make you happy, amore?" I ask, not sure where she's going with this.

"It does! Absolutely! I feel like my life—our life—is an intense and wonderful adventure. Every day there's something new to explore and discover. And, honestly, I can't wait to wake up and see what it is!" she confesses.

"I'm so glad to hear that, my love," I reply before kissing her.

Her fingers are wrapped around mine and I can feel that she's nervous.

"Darling. I can feel you trembling. What is it?"

"I think I just need to get used to all this," she confesses.

"Larisa, we have a lifetime to figure everything out. And, do you know what the best part is? That we get to do it all together. Listen to me, whatever comes our way, we can definitely face it, simply because we're together. That's the real adventure if you ask me."

She leans in and tilts her head up until her soft lips find mine.

There's no need for words on her part, her kiss says it all.

I reach out and cup her beautiful face with my hands. Strands of her gorgeous red hair frame her face and I tuck them neatly behind her ear as we continue to enjoy each other.

The car makes its way through the streets of New York, that concrete jungle which, proverbially, never sleeps. And after about twenty minutes, the limousine driver announces that we've arrived at our destination.

Larisa grabs my hand even tighter as if we're about to jump off a plane together ... and I can't help but smile.

"Oh, Gianluca ... how did I let you talk me into this? This is just ... how will I be able to do this? The red carpet ... the biggest celebrities in the world ... the hundreds of photographers..."

"Amore, breathe. You look incredible and, honestly, this is just a party. Trust me, you'll see..."

She nods but I can see that she's still a little shaky.

I help her out of the car and onto the pavement, waiting eagerly for her reaction.

As if on cue, she addresses me. "Ummm ... what's ... happening? Where are we? Oh, no. Did we get the address wrong? Did we get the day wrong? Is it not the first day of May today? Did we get the city wrong? Are we not in New York?" she starts rambling in a panic as she looks around wildly.

I laugh and take her hand.

“We didn’t get anything wrong, amore. Everything is exactly the way it’s supposed to be. Come, I have a surprise for you.”

The people on the sidewalk outside the Empire State Building pass us in a hurry and give us long and strange glances.

We are, after all, wearing our Met Gala costumes.

Not wanting to linger, I take Larisa’s hand and we make our way inside the Empire State Building itself.

“Gianluca ... What’s happening? Is this the Empire State Building?”

“Yes.”

“Why are we here? Did the Met Gala change locations at the last moment? But why? And where is everyone else? Brad Pitt and...”

“I was hoping that we could do this without Brad Pitt,” I joke, trying to diffuse her anxiety a little as we walk inside the elevator.

“What? What do you mean? And where are we going?”

“Oh, just to the roof...” I say casually.

“The roof? We’re going to the roof of the Empire State Building? Right now? What for?”

“I thought we could admire the view for a while. You know, the New York skyline and all,” I joke.

The elevator doors open up and Larisa gasps, just like I thought she would.

“I ... don’t understand ... what’s happening?”

The entire roof has been decorated and made to look like a familiar scene from the Amalfi coast. All around us, the setting and mood have been arranged with small but very real olive and lemon trees in ceramic pots that sway lightly in the evening May wind.

The dark and waxy green leaves spread an intoxicating aroma and I watch as Larisa closes her eyes for a second and breathes in deeply. “Oh ... that smell ... the lemon orchard ... oh ... the yoga lesson! The yoga lesson!” she explodes and clasps her hands together in happiness.

“Exactly.” I grin, thrilled that my surprise is working precisely the way I planned it.

I take her hand and help her navigate through the beautiful scenery. We walk among the trees and Larisa discovers with another squeal of delight an exact replica of the blue house that she loved to photograph in Vietri sul Mare.

“It’s the house! It’s ... perfect! I can’t believe what I’m seeing! It’s the

Amalfi Coast, right here at my fingertips! It's our holiday and the beginning of our relationship all rolled into one, perfect scene."

"That's right. And you haven't even seen everything," I reply, taking her forward, still holding hands.

"There's more?" she asks, her eyes now wide in astonishment.

"Absolutely!"

A few steps away sits a mini version of the Gardens of Ravello. Larisa stands stunned for a moment.

"Do you ... like it?" I ask tentatively.

As if entranced, she walks forward, letting go of my hand.

The row of ancient marble statues is the same as the one we saw in Italy during our romantic date. Only this time, it's not overlooking the Mediterranean Sea. At more than one thousand feet, it stands as a silent guardian overtop the busy and bustling city of New York.

Larisa turns to me. "I don't know what to say ... Gianluca. This is, without a doubt, the most beautiful and special thing that anyone has done for me in my entire life. I don't even know if ... anything will ever come close to this..." she whispers as she continues to look around, stunned by what she's seeing—the most cherished memories from the start of our relationship, all in one place, in the clouds above New York.

"This is just the beginning, trust me when I tell you."

She looks at me quizzically and covers her mouth with her hands when she sees me getting down on one knee.

I pull out a small, black box covered in velvet from my coat pocket and open it in front of her. The oval emerald, in all its blueish green grandeur, is surrounded by twelve round diamonds that seem to be on fire in the evening light. Two white pearls crown the masterful piece of jewelry that I now extend toward Larisa, my heart beating so hard that I can almost hear it.

"Larisa, you're the love of my life. And I've been around the world, I've met the most famous people one can meet, I've done ... everything. But nothing, and I mean nothing, has made me anywhere close to as happy as you have. They call me the man who has it all. Fame, money, a career ... but none of that matters. All I want is you. My heart wants *you* and nothing else."

I can see that tears have started to come down on her beautiful face as she struggles to keep her composure.

"I'm here on one knee, in front of you, because I want you to be my wife. And I could sit here and promise you fame, riches, a lavish life filled with

things that most people in this world cannot even dream of ... but I won't. Because I know none of that matters to you. And all of that pales in comparison to the life I imagine for us, as husband and wife. What I will promise you is that I will love you. Adore you, cherish, and respect you. I want nothing more than to spend the rest of my life making you happy. Because your joy is my joy. You're the most important thing in my life and please ... please ... if you let me, I will try to prove this to you until my last breath."

Streams of tears have now flooded Larisa's face.

The sun is almost set, painting the entire scene in a splendid orange glow.

Down below, the noise of the city seems to have faded, just for us.

"Will you do me the immense honor of being my wife?" I ask.

She stoops down to her knees and joins me, a river of happy tears still pouring down her face. I try to wipe them away but she refuses to let me.

"Yes! Yes! From the bottom of my heart, yes!"

Only a second later, her arms are around my neck and we're kissing, kissing like we've never kissed before, all the passion in us now unleashed. It's like a deluge, like a dam has broken, our hearts are now one and our lips want to seal the pact.

When we finally manage to break away, I remove the ring from its velvet box and slip it on her finger.

"Gianluca ... this ring is incredible..." she whispers and watches as the last rays of light catch in the powerful grip of the emerald and its adjoining diamonds.

"Do you like it?"

"Like it? I've never seen anything more beautiful. Except for you, of course." She grins and kisses me again.

"Oh, I thought you forgot about me," I joke.

We straighten up and she looks around at the beautiful scenery once more.

"Do we still have to go to the Met Gala?" she asks.

"I thought you were excited about it?"

"I am. But I'm even more excited about this. About you, about us!"

"Tell you what. Let's go to the Met Gala, because I *do* have to show up and promote the movie. But let's come back here after it's over and have a party of our own," I flirt with her as we head back to the elevators.

"Gianluca, are you ... hitting on me?"

"What? I'm sorry, of course not. I'm engaged. Plus, you're American,

so...” I watch her giggle.

“Engaged. Oh, wow ... we’re *engaged*. I’m engaged to an Italian man. Does this mean that I’m going to have to learn Italian now?” she asks.

“You don’t have to do anything, amore. But it might be nice, in case you’re interested. Plus, the children might be less confused,” I reply as we get back into the limousine and head toward the Met Gala.

“The children? What children?” she says.

“Our children.”

“We have children?”

“No, but we will,” I reply.

“Is that so?” She laughs.

“Absolutely. A boy, a girl and ... maybe twins.”

“Four children??” she reacts, her eyes going wide, but I’m just teasing her.

“Yeah, absolutely. And their names will be Mario, Luigi, Pepperoni, and Pasta. And they’ll go to a convent school in Italy.”

She catches on that I’m joking and rolls her eyes at me in a sweet and comical way.

“You know, we don’t have any children yet, but you’re already getting the hang of dad jokes,” she replies.

“There’s no harm in being prepared. So, when do we get started?” I grin.

She laughs and reaches out to kiss me.

The limousine snakes through the busy streets, carrying us not only to the Met Gala, but to our future, it seems.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Kristine W. Joy is an Amazon Bestselling Author who loves creating sweet

and swoony stories full of sizzling chemistry and laugh-out-loud banter. She prefers her coffee iced and her kisses hot. When she's not dreaming up romance novels or writing from a cozy coffee shop in Northern California, she is spending time with her hubby and toddler. Becoming a published author was a lifelong dream. Becoming a momma was the inspiration to make it a reality.