

# **Taylor Made**

**By Kate Athens**

All rights reserved

**Pen It! Publications**

**© 2016**

ISBN #: 978-1540746627

ISBN #: 1540746623

Edited by: Pen It! Publications, LLC

Cover Design by: Dawn Dominique

Author Photo by: Vaughn Harper

First Edition © 2016

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED: No part of this book may be reproduced, stored, or transmitted, in any form, without the express and prior permission in writing of the Pen It! Publications, LLC. Book may not be circulated in any form of binding or cover other than that in which it is currently published.

This book is licensed for your personal enjoyment only. All rights are reserved. Pen It! Publications, LLC does not grant you rights to resell or distribute this book without prior written consent of both Pen It! Publications, LLC and the copyright owner of this book. This book must not be copied, transferred, sold or distributed in any way.

Disclaimer: This book may contain adult language, graphic content and some situations that readers may find unacceptable. Neither Pen It! Publications, LLC, or our authors will be responsible for repercussions to anyone who utilizes the subject of this book for illegal, immoral or unethical use.

This book is a work of fiction, unless otherwise stated. All characters, places, business, etc. are a work of fiction submitted to Pen It! Publications, LLC by the author. Any resemblance to those living or dead, is purely coincidental.

The author is responsible for approval of any and all edits and are the final responsibility of the author.

All inquiries regarding the content included in this book should be directed to Pen It! Publications.

Pen It! Publications, LLC

[penitpublications@yahoo.com](mailto:penitpublications@yahoo.com)  
[www.BuyMeBooksNow.com](http://www.BuyMeBooksNow.com)  
[www.PenItPublications.com](http://www.PenItPublications.com)

## Acknowledgements

I'd like to thank my husband for the many years of putting up with my writing venture, when the floors weren't swept and things weren't spic 'n span.

Everyone needs a sister and best friend that believes in the things you believe in and listens to countless tales of imaginary characters. I am currently doing the same for her writing venture.

A special thanks to Duane for 'believing' and 'encouraging' me when the earth was fighting me on the very issue of becoming a writer, and for his countless hours of listening to the imaginary characters of Black Eagle and Indigo Sky, Sir Michael and Lady Daphne, and for reading Courtiers and pushing the book. Maybe we will see Courtiers in print one day. Let's keep Indigo Sky under wraps for right now. There is enough writing on the plate.

A big thank you to everyone in the local writing group for their friendship. Thank you to Floyd and Pauline for reading Taylor Made and believing as I do. Floyd your camaraderie is amazing as well as your imagination and writing talents. Pauline, if it were not for your call to the publisher we wouldn't be here. You really did make my dreams come true. Hush, smile and accept the compliment. We see you in print too.

And a huge thanks to Debi and Pen It! Publications for giving me this opportunity to start a career. And so, with the assistance from Pen It! Publications we are off to the races... Tune in tomorrow for more books from Kate Athens.

## PROLOGUE

When fashion merchandiser Heather Taylor travels to Italy, she stumbles upon the Holy Grail of the clothing world – and Luigi Cassini, a gentleman nineteen years her senior. Heather ends up with a whole lot more than she’s bargained for. The man, fatherly yet very Italian has a fire sparked within his soul, a fire he thought long dead. He pursues Heather, wins her affection and they marry upon his yacht.

Returning home, Luigi’s playboy son, Rausi, begins a relentless flirtation with his new stepmother. Heather makes attempt to stop him but enjoys his attention as well. One night Rausi pushes his father and Heather too far, which causes the equivalent of a Greek tragedy to unfold.

# 1

Heather shrieked, while scrambling after white sheets of paper that fluttered high and low; pages picked up by a sudden gust of wind off the Bay of Naples.

Pandemonium flew in an open café, as patrons reached for the wayward pages.

*"Grazie, grazie,"* she said in a panic as strangers approached, returning her work to a round table, shaded by a red umbrella. Her inability to comprehend the Italian language and being in Sorrento, Italy caused an excruciating case of nerves, on top of this indignation.

*"Grazie,"* she repeated as another stranger stepped forward, returning another portion of her life. The height of the man caused her to look up. His hand offered a slightly crumpled sheet of paper.

"American?"

"Yes, I mean *si*," she stammered from the sight of an attractive older gentleman. He stood closely, although not improper. He smiled and with the softest blue-gray eyes, fatherly, yet very Italian.

"One must be aware of sea breezes that snake along the *viale*."

"A little too late to learn this tidbit of information, but in the future I will certainly take notice of unpredictable sea breezes along the avenue," she grinned.

His grin exceeded hers as he silently nodded good day. He then strolled to a café table near the entrance to the establishment door. There he lowered his tall frame gracefully to the chair. A newspaper in his hand, unopened, was placed on the table. His right elbow went to the paper. He then

ordered to the waitress, with a flip of the fingers, “*Caffe’  
nero.*”

Heather’s laptop made a sound. She turned her attention to it.

**Heather** *Good morning.* She said to her sister, Hope, the manager of their mother’s boutique.

**Hope** *Buongiorno.*

**Heather** *I can’t wait to tell you. I found it!*

**Hope** *Found what?*

**Heather** *The Holy Grail! The perfect white blouse to stock mother’s boutique.*

**Hope** *Where?*

**Heather** *Here in Sorrento, Italy, right around the corner at the local tailor’s shop. It has the placket down the front and pearl buttons on French cuffs.*

**Hope** *Egyptian cotton and two percent stretch?*

**Heather** *Don’t worry about textiles right now. I’ll arrange for all the details to be put in writing and then I’ll let you know more.*

**Hope** *Good. So how is the weather?*

**Heather** *Absolutely beautiful. It’s sunny. The steep countryside is simply amazing. I wish you were here to enjoy it with me. You should see the sailboats and yachts tied up in the harbor.*

**Hope** *Do you see boats right now?*

**Heather** *Yes. They are fantastic and so is the view. You would not believe how blue the sky is and how turquoise the Mediterranean Sea is. They just mesh together in this dreamy state of profusion and color. Like a good tie-dye shirt.*

**Hope** *Sounds wonderful. I sure do need a vacation.*

**Heather** *You do. You should have come with me.*

**Hope** *Well, with mom in retirement, one of us needs to stay here and mind the store.*

**Heather True.**

A male voice resounded from two tables away. His tone was moderate in a soothing baritone. He seemed to be speaking to her. “Business is booming?” For an Italian his English translated steady and precise, but still, with the undercurrent of a thick accent.

**Heather** *Hang on, this guy.*

**Hope** *What guy? What are you talking about?*

Heather looked across the tables to see the same gentleman that had returned a portion of her life. *Hmm*, she thought *silver-gray suit, cashmere blend, crisp white shirt and pink tie – nice*. The man was not bad looking either. His build was tall and trim and his hair was black, heavily peppered with white at the temples. His face was clean-shaven with sharply chiseled features. But those soft clear eyes and the soothing tone of his voice, made up for sharpness of his masculine features, along with the strong presence he emitted.

She shot him a swift glance, “Yes, business is very good today. Thank you.”

He nodded with a pleasant grin that only deepened the rugged line in his cheeks.

**Hope** *WHAT GUY?*

**Heather** *This guy that is trying to start a conversation with me, he’s wearing a pink tie, must be confident in his masculinity.*

**Hope** *Is he flirting with you?”*

**Heather** *No, but he has been observing me ever since he sat down. He looks wealthy.*

**Hope** *How wealthy?*

**Heather** *Hope, you are a trip. I don’t know, maybe*

*wealthy enough to own one of those yachts tied up in the harbor.*

**Hope** *Well, are you talking to him now?*

**Heather** *No.*

**Hope** *Then what is wrong with you? You've never been shy before, especially when I talk you into modeling in the spring and fall fashion shows. You are a natural. People love my bubbly, little sister. Why don't you talk to him?*

**Heather** *It's because I don't speak the language. Sigh.*

**Hope** *I told you before you left the country that you should have learned Italian, stupid. How careless can a person be?*

**Heather** *Oh be quiet.*

**Hope** *Well then, what are you wearing?*

Heather chuckled aloud.

**Heather** *That sounds rather ominous. I am wearing the black slacks, black boots, white shirt, obviously not perfect, and the blue paisley wrap.*

**Hope** *Good, the blue softens the auburn in your hair. Fabulous, now go and talk to him.*

Heather bit back a grin and closed the laptop. Her sister's greatest fault lay in her ruthless attempts at matchmaking. Hope remained happily married with exuberant teenagers warming her home while Heather suffered from the breakup of her marriage. The divorce, four years ago, was emotionally devastating, but the freedom she gained was liberating.

"More coffee?" the waitress asked.

"No, anymore and I might not be able to fall asleep tonight, but *grazie*."

Heather tucked the computer into its case and prepared to leave. In the process her sight abruptly met with the gentleman's soft gaze. Throwing all caution to the wind



she labeled him as harmless.

“Sir,” she inquired. “Do you know the tailor around the corner?”

His intelligent eyes lit up. “Si.”

“Do you know how reputable he might be?”

“Franco Bruscolotti is a reputable tailor. I have purchased suits from him before. Why do you ask?”

Yelling across two tables did not settle well with Heather, neither did she have the inclination to get overly friendly with this stranger.

“Umm, I am a fashion merchandiser for an exclusive boutique in Atlanta, Georgia, the United States. Mr. Bruscolotti has the quality we are looking for. My problem is just this, I would like to arrange a contract with him, however my Italian is simply horrid. Do you know where I might find an interpreter?”

“Your name?” he said rising from his chair.

Heather jumped to attention nearly toppling the briefcase again. She swiftly caught the handle before it fell to the ground. “Heather Taylor.”

“Come,” he said slowly. “I will take you to Franco Bruscolotti.”

His outstretched hand marked the way. There was no hesitation as she quickly grabbed the briefcase and the laptop and stepped forward. *Sweet heaven above*, she thought. *This seemed to be working out better than anyone could have imagined.*

“I might ask for your name too.”

“Luigi Cassini.”

She led as they exited the café terrace and began walking along a narrow cobblestone street.

Attraction to this man struck oddly. She had never been one to warm quickly toward strangers, professionally or privately, but he wore an inviting confident charm that quickly

drew her in.

Wearing three-inch heels she stood nearly five foot ten however, she still had to look up. "Forgive my boldness, but how tall are you?"

"Six foot three inches by American standards."

"Oh my, you are tall, especially in a country where the majority is less than six foot."

"I suppose this is fortunate or perhaps a curse, when not all portals take height into consideration."

In that brief connection she studied his features. Short hair framed his lightly tanned face. He wore a healthy radiance. Tiny wrinkles shown faintly around his eyes. There was a slight dimpling of the cheeks that had become permanently etched, but other than that he was a picture of health. The man was distinctively handsome.

"Mr. Cassini, forgive me if I'm imposing on your day."

"You are not."

"This is very kind of you to take time out of your busy schedule." Struggling along cobblestones and carrying two cases she continued, "I'm sure you've had a long week as well."

"I have recently left work for the day. It is no inconvenience. May I carry something for you?"

"No thanks, I've got it."

They rounded the corner of the block.

"May I ask what you do?" she asked full of spunk and with a slight Georgian drawl. "Or are my questions too personal?"

"Insurance." A noisy truck barreled past along the narrow avenue, leaving putrid diesel fumes in its wake. "My business is insurance. I cover most of the village as well as high-end insurance. I am also on the board of directors for a shipping company in *Napoli*."

"How interesting."

She noticed how he grinned faintly in a tender unassuming way.

The door to the tailor's establishment stood open. Heather entered first as Luigi stepped aside. Inside, the foyer opened into an airy shop, antique, but refreshingly neat and tidy. Bolts of fabric in every shade of the rainbow lined the walls while counters filled the mid-section.

"*Buongiorno, Signor Cassini,*" a man welcomed grandly with opened arms.

"*Buongiorno, Signor Bruscolotti.*"

"It is good to see you," the proprietor continued in their native language. "It has been a long time. How may I help you?"

"When have you last brushed up on your English?" Luigi countered in English. *Signorina* Taylor is American and wishes to do business."

"Ahh, I will do my best. And how may I help the *Signorina* Taylor?"

"The sample of the white blouse in the window. I am interested in it."

"*Si, si.*"

"I specifically like the placket and French cuffs with pearl buttons."

"Ahh, *si*, and this is for you?"

"Umm, no, I need several ordered from the generalized size chart. To stock a small boutique in America."

"Oh." His eyes lit up with surprise. "Well, then let's see..." he continued chattering as he went to a countertop and grabbed a notepad.

Within less than a half hour their contract came together. Their proficient translator's assistance was well received and Heather could not have been more thrilled. It opened another world of opportunities for the clothing store back home. Once the new merchandize arrived in Atlanta her

sister Hope would be just as thrilled.

With paperwork finalized, her signature scrawled on a tablet, and a handshake to seal the deal. It was complete.

"I believe my assistance is no longer needed," *Signor* Cassini said. "It has been a pleasure, *Signorina* Taylor. If you need a translator again ask for Cassini, most everyone knows."

The man disappeared to the street as quickly as he had materialized. Such an enigmatic gentleman she thought. Turning to *Signor* Bruscolotti she asked, "Do you know him well?"

"Ahh, *si*. Several know him for his, umm, how you say – his generosity, his philanthropic. He is a wealthy man that lives on the hill overlooking the bay. At night sometimes, we see much *illuminazione*, many lights – a festivity if you will. You know?"

## 2

Heather stepped out into the starry night after having dinner in a restaurant better known for their lunch menu. She walked along a well-lit avenue catching the many flavors of Sorrento. Taxis and tourists noisily clamored to and fro. Music and laughter rang out further down the block. Vacationers caused her to stop as they spilled into the street from an open pub.

Not being able to speak the language was difficult enough. Nonetheless, she had to smile. The cultural diversion was invigorating.

Studying cultures, their way of life, and imagining centuries of basic survival that brought humanity to this modern existence fascinated Heather. It left the American daily focus less than narrow-minded while taking simple freedoms for granted. Traveling to Europe opened a new window to view the very evolution of mankind. The village of Sorrento seemed so primitive, humble, with Catholic ethics and family values embedded in their thread of life. It enriched her soul.

Heather continued to the dock and leaned against the sturdy railing. There she soaked in the view of boats bobbing in the bay while listening to the tide's gentle surge. To her left lights flickered down from the hillside. Their reflection sparkled like diamonds in the water. To her right the volcano Mt. Vesuvius shadowed dark against the night sky.

The beauty of the evening caused a sense of entrancement and she pulled the paisley scarf tighter around her shoulders. The water's surge was hypnotizing in a soothing sort of way, and her guard came down.

*"Signorina Taylor?"*

That soft baritone voice called out from behind. She jumped from the unexpectedness and turned.

He wore casual jeans and a thin jacket over a light blue shirt. She wore the same clothes from earlier in the afternoon.

*"Signor Cassini."*

*"You are on the dock by yourself? Forgive me. It is Signorina, correct?"*

*"Yes. It's too early to retire so I thought I would take a walk instead."*

*"Ahh, I see."* He moved to the right, toward the pier, while still facing her. *"For me, it is business as usual. Always more work."* Luigi hesitated. *"Are you waiting for someone?"*

*"No."*

*"If you have no plans at the moment would you care to walk with me?"*

Her heart jumped. The man, the invitation, the attractive accent caught her by surprise. Accepting the invitation would be far too forward. Propriety pressed her to decline, but curiosity caused her to take the plunge.

*"Where are you going?"*

*"To my yacht. There are important documents onboard that I will need for tomorrow. Your company would be most welcome."*

*"Well,"* she contemplated, on one hand Luigi Cassini was a stranger, but on the other hand he seemed a harmless gentleman. *"Sure, why not."* Her evening promised nothing better.

*"Good, it is this way."* He offered with an open palm. She stepped forward as Luigi accompanied in that subdued stroll without complaint. *"May I be so bold as to ask why a lovely woman such as yourself is not married?"*

*"Oh, you cut to the chase mercilessly!"*

*"Forgive me. It seemed the most obvious question to*

ask.”

“I was, at one time.”

“Ahh, no need to explain any more. Many of us are together in the same way.”

“You too?”

“Yes.” There was a hint of jest in his voice. “It has been twelve or possibly thirteen years, I don’t count. What would be the reason? But the woman, she is still a thorn in my side.”

“I’m sorry to hear that.”

He said with a quick wave of the hand, “No need to be concerned. She collected enough compensation to live comfortably for the rest of her life. That is, if she does not overindulge at the spa.”

Heather had to laugh. Luigi laughed too. His laugh came from deep in his lungs, reverberating.

“Did your separation come easily?”

“For the most part, yes,” she answered with her southern drawl slipping out. “We didn’t make a large fuss. The split was inevitable. We were wrong for each other from the get-go. My career takes me all over the country and he kick started his life elsewhere.”

“Good separations are easy on the heart and on the bank account, but uncommon to hear. Most divorces say – can become contemptible. It is only the lawyers that win.”

They walked past many vessels along the pier until reaching the last one.

“Here, please stand to the side for a moment and I will lower the ramp.”

“This is your yacht?”

It was more like a ship, not that she had much to compare with besides a pontoon on a lake, and a cruise ship many years ago.

“I am half owner. *The Valor* is a working vessel. Sometimes she is rented to reputable guests that wish to

travel a few weeks, a few months.” She watched how he climbed aboard with ease, opened the gate and physically set the sturdy ramp. “Be careful and I will hand you up.”

Once onboard they walked along a narrow deck. “A little further,” Luigi said directing her toward the stern. “This door.” Heather stopped and waited as he unlocked a side entry. When the lights came on, her senses suddenly reeled. It was another world. The sparkling image of glamour. Heather felt as though she had stepped into an Art Deco lounge of rich jewel tones.

“This is the formal salon. The main sitting room,” he announced as they entered.

The room sparkled with high gloss finishes and plenty of plush seating. Two twinkling chandeliers hung from separate ends of the ceiling. Ornate mirrors lined the walls and polished brass fixtures glistened from end to end.

“Can I get you something to drink?” Luigi asked while approaching the bar. “A nightcap perhaps?”

“Are you having something?”

“I believe so. What for you, umm, I imagine amaretto.” She noted the lines of his cheeks deepen. “Something tells me you like the taste of sweet.”

Grabbing the back of a barstool Heather draped the blue paisley scarf over the edge before sitting. “Does it show?”

He turned, but his expression changed. His sight fell to the white blouse. She knew the male expression well and considered it nothing less than flirtation.

“I refer to disposition over physicality as to the preference of sweet.”

*Smooth talker.*

“Amaretto is fine.”

“Neat or with ice?”

“Over ice.”

She fidgeted as he made drinks and took in the room.



“Do you ever have parties, balls, dances in here?”

“It has been done before.”

“I’m sure they’re very glamorous.”

“It depends on the meaning of glamorous, as to the attendees or manner of costume?”

“All of the above.”

He set her drink on the counter. “I’m glad you approve. As to movie stars onboard – there have been none to my knowledge, however there has been a political dignitary or two in the past.”

“So you’re not able to enjoy the ship very often I presume?”

She regretted the question as quickly as she said it. The statement appeared to cause him duress.

“Not anymore. Perhaps once a year if I am fortunate.”

“Oh.” Perhaps the sudden change held reference to his ex-wife. Or his career. She would not ask.

Spilt vodka caused him to wash his hands. After drying on a towel, he went to a wooden panel in the wall. Heather quietly watched as he opened a safe and picked up a letter sized manila envelope from inside. He tucked the envelope in his jacket’s inner pocket and closed the safe with a minimum of fuss. She disengaged as he returned to the counter.

“I have an idea. Bring your drink and follow me. We will take them up to the bow.”

Luigi came from around the bar. He picked up her blue scarf and carefully placed it around her shoulders. In the closeness, the proximity, she felt something more as his hands rested for a moment on her shoulders. His touch was firm, but gentle. His presence was very masculine. It caused her to flush. Or was it the two sips of Amaretto?

“Remember what I said about sea breezes.”

“Snaking along the *viale*? How can I forget?”

She chuckled while gazing into soft blue-gray eyes. His

sight seemed to be glued to hers before she shied.

Luigi escorted her through the ship. They passed an elegant dining room with a long cherry wood table that could easily seat ten people. Continuing through a carpeted corridor they passed the darkened galley and went through a thick sea faring door. Once outdoors Luigi turned on the lights to illuminate a teakwood deck. The deck appeared capable of holding several lounge chairs or sunbathers on a warm Mediterranean day.

Heather felt privy to an opulence never expected. However her eye was drawn to the land.

“So what do you think of the view?” Luigi said slouching against the top railing with ease at though he had done it a thousand times before.

“It’s breathtaking. I never could have imagined something so beautiful.”

She moved forward with caution, not knowing how deep the water might be. She touched the railing as the gentle tidal surge continued its monotonous song against the hull.

“I agree. I love this place. Do you travel often?”

“Not abroad as much as I’d like. I work in the states mostly, but I have been to Paris, London and Milan for business. Paris is also striking after dark.”

“It is.”

She seemed unconvinced with his statement. He swirled the vodka in the glass before taking a drink.

“Have you been to the United States?”

“Several times, but for business mostly. I have conducted several meetings in the major shipping ports – New York, Miami, but I must say Italy has them all beat.”

“Why Luigi,” her voice rose in a taunting manner. “I think you are biased.”

His gaze deepened and she could have sworn he looked into her soul. There was something connecting them.

She had no doubt. His personality was appealing besides the attractiveness, the tan on his face, the square hairline, and the sharp slant of his cheek.

He turned to lean on the railing again with a subtle and audible sigh. Ice rattled in his glass as he swirled the vodka.

"My son," Luigi said with a flip of the hand toward the land. "He parties." The statement could not have been more casual than if read from a newspaper headline.

"Where?"

"There," he pointed. "To my right. On the hill. It is the brightest light."

"That's your house?" She could not tell, but the structure appeared to be large. Trees made it difficult to see. It appeared to be a white stucco structure buttressed to the side of the hill. Lining the length of the property, it was unmistakable, the typical vase shaped balustrade, completely Italianate. Its stone railing bordered the treacherous rock cliff overlooking the sea.

"As soon as I leave the house he texts his friends. They all come running. Speeding dangerously along the curves without a care in the world."

"And so you leave often?"

The question seemed strange. She wished she could have taken it back, but it was too late. Luigi bowed his head and looked sadly into the nearly empty glass.

"No, not often."

"How old is your son, a teenager, still in college?"

"No," Luigi replied with the sound of angst. "He is thirty-one."

"Thirty-one? Oh, I'm sorry, your description sounded as though he were younger."

"Mentally he is. I am afraid I have not done well raising the boy." Luigi downed the remainder of his drink with one gulp. "What age would you consider young?"

“Well, I’m thirty-nine, not considered young.”

Luigi’s voice softened in defeat. “My dear, you are in the prime of your life. Don’t fool yourself, now is the time to enjoy all that life has to offer.” The remaining ice from the vodka glass got roughly tossed overboard and into the sea. Pulling away from the railing his hand nudged her arm toward the sea faring door, “Let me take you back to the dock. Better yet I will see you safely back to your hotel.”

\*\*\*

For some odd reason *Signor* Cassini stayed on Heather’s mind all night and into the next day. Sadness seemed tinged in the man’s controlled voice. And his thick accent – it stimulated somewhere deep in the pit of her belly. She found the man to be mysteriously powerful yet vulnerable too.

Mediterranean men, she had been warned in college were the worst. Their flirtatiousness and sexuality were nearly perverse. One hour in the presence of an Italian man and a girl’s reputation might be tarnished forever. She laughed to herself at the antics of college women and their childish thoughts.

But Luigi, his character seemed more – like that of an innocent. *An innocent what* her rational mind kicked in. He had more than likely experienced a fantastic life due to his career and position. More than she could ever imagine. Obviously his wealth bought a standard of living most could only dream of. He could buy friendships – purchase the company of women at that rate of exchange.

Obviously, he was a man of substance and could be dangerous. Beyond belief, but gut instinct also told her he was just a lonely man.

Caught up in the dream she recalled his masculine

chiseled features. *I wonder what those large hands might feel like on...*

Two taxicabs honked along the curb waking her from the fevered dream.

"I've got to get in touch with Hope."

Heather found a quiet spot in the busy piazza to open her laptop. Instant messenger popped on. She waited as town's people brushed past her.

**Hope** *Hey!*

**Heather** *About time. Where have you been?*

**Hope** *Busy with customers. What's new?*

**Heather** *Got the twelve white blouses ordered from the tailor. You're gonna love them. Next order we can tweak the color and pattern and order more. Oh, and I found a cobbler too?*

**Hope** *Apple or peach?*

**Heather** *Oh gosh. A shoe cobbler dummy. You know, the kind that makes shoes from your foot measurements?*

**Hope** *No need to explain, just giving a hard time. Gee. Cool, so now we can provide custom made shoes for the store?*

**Heather** *Maybe, but I don't know how high tech this guy is. His service seems pretty slow and it might be only something we can use personally, not so much for the store.*

**Hope** *That's fine. I trust your judgment. Hey, whatever happened to that guy yesterday?*

**Heather** *Oh, that guy. Well, let's just say I have talked to him more than once. Hope, you and I need to have a talk on the phone.*

**Hope** *Heather, what's going on?*

**Heather** *I will give you a call in a couple hours. Okay?*

**Hope** *Heather, don't shut.*

The laptop closed.

### 3

“*Signorina* Taylor,” the hotel clerk said extending his hand with a note. A red and green logo emblazoned across the top. “This message was left at the front desk with your name on it.”

“Did you see the person who left it?”

“No, *Signorina*, my shift has only begun. I am sorry.”

The letter read ‘Meet me at the *ristorante* where we met in the open courtyard. 5 o’clock, for dinner – *Signor* Cassini’.

She jogged across the bustling street in dress and high heels to greet him.

He kissed her hand before saying, “It is good to see you again. Thank you for meeting me for dinner. May I add that you look quite lovely this evening?”

“Thank you, and so do you.”

“But, not as lovely as you.”

“Well, we are going to have to stop meeting like this,” she teased while reaching to touch his charcoal-gray suit coat. Pinstripes only made the man appear taller.

“Perhaps, then, we should make it official and avoid any prerequisites.” He held the door. “After you.”

*Hmm, what did he mean by that?* Did he thoroughly understand the English language? Or perhaps it was just the cultural divide.

They entered the building. It was a building that had stood for centuries, similar to other colorful buildings in the area. They were randomly painted in shades of a brilliant sunset. Colors of orange, yellow and salmon pink, scattered about in neighborhoods – in the village of Sorrento.

*“Per voi il Signor Cassini.”* The waitress escorted them to a table.

*“Sì, grazie.”* Luigi held the chair for Heather while inquiring, “So how was your day?”

“Oh, the day turned out to be quite good. I found a shoe cobbler to add to the list.”

“Ah, that would be *Signor Rizzo*.”

“I gather you know him too?”

“As was mentioned before I have insured half the village.” He took the next chair at the square wooden table.

It intrigued her – that he knew so many people in the area. *Signor Bruscolotti* spoke ‘several know him for his generosity’. Even the hostess spoke his name.

“Is this your favorite restaurant?” Heather asked.

“One of a few in Sorrento. This establishment is better known for their classic Old World cuisine. However a short drive along the bay is another favorite of mine, better known for their fresh seafood.” He stalled for a moment. “Perhaps I should have let you decide the restaurant.”

“Oh, no, this is fine. I’m having a wonderful vacation sampling all the restaurants I can visit into a short few days.”

He picked up the wine list and held it. “You won’t be disappointed. I assure you. Do you enjoy wine?”

“Yes. Riesling is very nice, but my preference is toward rich reds, pinot noir or merlot from Napa Valley.”

“I notice you have very good taste in many things *Signorina Taylor*. Curiously I wish to learn more. You know this Napa Valley?”

“Yes. It’s a very beautiful place with a fine Italian flare.”

“Well, please don’t make mistake. Italian flare is not the same as Italy herself. Surely, you have come to the conclusion yourself.”

He flashed that deep grin leaving her senses tumbling, along with that baritone thrum in his voice. She held their

gaze for several seconds before shyly turning away.

The old building was interesting with its oak beams exposed. They were hand-hewn and thick, and appeared able to shoulder up the second floor for another five hundred years.

The jingling bell on the establishment's door harkened more customers.

Heather saw a young couple enter and stand just inside the door. They were both strikingly gorgeous and polished by a particular scale of society. The young man stood tall, well-toned and carrying his worth to aplomb. His complexion was dark with black hair styled sharply up at the forehead, completely Italian and remarkably handsome. He wore a five o'clock shadow, and dressed all in black. His silver belt buckle and the whites of his eyes stood out as contrast.

The young woman, slender, wore a glittery gold club dress and tall stilettos. Her youthful skin glistened from glittery highlighter dusted on her exposed shoulders and arms. Lush blonde hair framed a dangerously attractive face, overly covered with make-up and gloss.

Whispering near Heather's ear Luigi spoke, "My son and his girlfriend. I am sorry. Would you mind if they sat with us. I had no indication they would be here."

Heather stuttered. Luigi did not notice. He casually motioned with an inward flip of the fingers for the couple to join them.

Next to the table, Luigi's son muttered something in their native tongue. Heather, lost to the dialect, felt the tone rather rude.

"I could also say the same," Luigi replied. "I did not know you would be here. Sit, join us," Heather imagined Luigi spoke English for her benefit. Just as he had done with the tailor. "Heather, this is my son, Rausi. Rausi, *Signorina* Heather Taylor, from America."



Her nerves, breath, all caught at once as the attractive man lightly took her hand in greeting. His lips intimately brushed across the tops of her fingers in one quick motion. Sparkling gray eyes lined with long dark lashes penetrated somewhere in her gut. Then memory screamed as American college women warned against carnal Mediterranean men. What danger resided within their cold souls that could make a mere girl sense danger...She fought the fear.

"My girlfriend Ava," he politely introduced with immaculate English, and a baritone voice similar to his father. The subtle accent tucked beneath.

"Nice to meet you."

Ava said nothing and in fact retreated stone cold sober, turning her back to the table.

Luigi touched Heather's forearm. "Ava does not speak English well. She has not been to university."

"Oh, I see."

He returned his focus to Rausi. To Heather's shock, the three immediately became engulfed in a quick-tempered Italian banter. Each one speaking at once. The waves of Ava's hair bounced as her lower lip turned upside into a frown. Her high-pitched voice sang out in shrieking defensive. The men spoke with hands in the air. Rausi's pained features were readable with a dozen animated expressions at once. Through their heated exchange Luigi appeared to maintain composure.

"If you expect to take her to America then I suggest she take lessons," Luigi said defusing their impassioned banter. "French will only get you to France. Sit down. By the way, did you get the car serviced?"

Ava lowered onto the chair across from Heather. Her lower lip covered with hot pink gloss stuck out in a pout.

"Of course."

"This morning like I asked?"

Rausi sat with a youthful smirk full of attitude. Not

missing a beat he replied, “They took care of it this afternoon.”

“The appointment was for late morning. Allowing you to sleep in. Appointments are made out of consideration to another person’s time.”

As Rausi grabbed a green cloth napkin Heather noticed a bejeweled watch gleaming from under his white cuff, a cuff secured with a cushion-cut diamond link.

Shaking out the fold he replied, “They drove the Ferrari in the garage after lunch – without a problem.” He grinned knowing his father had already turned away. He then cocked his head to the side and looked deeply into Heather’s eyes before sizing her up with one long devouring glance.

“So, this is a date?”

“No,” she snapped. “We are strictly business.”

“Ah, and what kind of business may I ask, mathematical or prone?” he crooned unfettered and leering for a response.

Her senses lurched, unaccustomed to such rudeness.

The waitress returned appropriately destroying any chance at retaliation – that is if she could have mustered the right words to put him in his place. This Mediterranean man was the epitome of vulgarity. The offense made her uncomfortable.

Heather quickly reached for a glass of water and took a healthy swig to wash away the burning of her cheeks. Rausi moved the same, picking up his glass and deliberately matched her movements. The cunning act only caused more intimidation.

“We will have two bottles of the house wine,” Luigi ordered. “Chilled if you will.”

“Si.”

The blonde in the meantime leaned toward her boyfriend and softly demanded. They spoke intimately for a

few moments before Rausi said to his father, "Ava is uncomfortable. She wants to sit at another table."

"I understand. But first, Ava," Luigi said garnering her attention. He spoke soothing words in Italian to which Ava then smiled. Luigi nodded in return as she and Rausi rose from the table to leave.

To Heather he said, "I am sorry for the inconvenience."

"No need to apologize. I think their intention was to be alone all along."

Reaching across the table Luigi took her hand into his and squeezed, "Perhaps this is my intention as well."

Heather smiled before adding, "They do make a striking couple. I have come across many personalities throughout my travels. Sometimes the exchange does not always translate well be it cultural or vernacular. However, body language and human nature are usually common ground. If I may add though, your son's personality is spirited and somewhat intense. And in the looks department I do see a resemblance."

Sadness crept over Luigi's expression. "Sometimes I see none at all." His hand retreated from the table.

"Things are difficult?"

"My difficulties are not why we are here. We are here to share the evening."

The waitress interrupted with bottles of wine.

"One goes to my son," Luigi instructed before continuing. "I will say this only once and then we change the subject. Ava is twenty-two. My son is thirty-one. He pushes her, tells her what to do, runs her life to excess. Responsibility to correct their relationship is not mine, but if I were to guess – their relationship is not built on love. She may take years to learn this. My son?" He gave a shrug of the shoulders with the palms of his hands facing up. "His future scares me."

Heather's heart went out to the man. Her mouth

opened to speak, but nothing came out.

"I've said too much. I have troubled you with my burdens. Please forgive me."

"No. I am interested. I want to know these things. I also want to learn everything about you too."

"Me? There is nothing. But you. There is much for me to learn."

\*\*\*

"We'll take the car. The harbor is four streets from here."

Luigi drove to a parking lot located near the pier. The sign at the gate read 'Restricted Area, Owners Only' and required an electronic pass to gain entry. Once inside Luigi parked the black Aston Martin. He exited and went around to her door as a gentleman.

Heather stood and froze as the passenger car door closed from behind. She had grown accustomed to the fact that Luigi did not move fast. The moment seemed ripe as he hovered closely and something drew her near to him. His fingers delicately caressed her chin, raising her face to his. His soft gaze lured her along with his strong masculinity. A beaconing force drew their lips together, slowly, gently, a mutual meeting. Her head tilted back, only a few inches. She had grown comfortable and trusting within his company, and so with the second kiss she reciprocated. The potency of their attraction only increased.

Her expectancy of his kiss was that it would be subtle and polite, almost to the point of being hesitant or vague, but experience proved something altogether new and exciting. She felt the man within, the vibrant capable man that knew the essence of a woman, knew how to stir her emotions to do his bidding. Luigi stood firm with broad shoulders, muscle

mass still strong. His experienced lips ever so slightly glided over her perfectly formed mouth, sending intimate signals through her system.

He touched her face, her arms and her shoulders. To infringe upon more would give the wrong impression of which he did not want to do. Three times he kissed her mouth. With the third kiss she lightly purred and he knew then that he stood within her graces.

To the ship's middle deck Luigi handed Heather along the ramp before ascending the sturdy access himself. Lights of the hillside flickered and she paused long enough to search for the white villa.

"Will Rausi and Ava party at the house tonight? I don't see any lights."

"No. Ava is dressed for the club. I expect they will go dancing until morning."

"This is only Thursday. Don't they have careers?"

Luigi plodded along the narrow deck. He quietly opened the door to the salon and turned on the lights. Heather sensed his silence as perhaps a cultural gap unexpectedly stumbled upon or simply none of her business.

As the lights came on he replied, "No, they don't."

Heather had never come this close to excess in wealth and had only read of affluent tabloid existences. But folded in the midst of glitz and glamour, it was obvious that pain and regret existed too. There had to be a lesson of fragile human nature wedged in between, a lesson of God-given rights stacked against fighting for a cause.

Then why did she wish to be swept up in the arms of glamour while weakening against better judgment of her own time-honored traditions?

## 4

The sofa in the salon proved comfortable as Heather lounged and admired the lights of Sorrento through the window.

“Would you like something to drink, amaretto or something different?”

“No thank you. The wine was plenty this evening. I usually don’t drink that much.”

“Are you saying you are a bit tipsy?”

“Maybe a little.”

He rounded the corner of the bar.

“Then I take full responsibility as it was I that kept pouring. I can imagine not many Americans are brought up on the *vino*.”

“I could have easily said stop at any time, but I didn’t. And dinner was delicious, thank you. And dessert. Sharing it was totally charming. How did you know I have a weakness for triple chocolate cake?”

“An educated guess.”

“Or perhaps it’s just a woman’s thing to savor desserts.”

He cleared his throat with a slight cough. She had noticed his persistent tickle and considered it most likely allergies.

He responded, “Some men enjoy chocolate too. I for one don’t mind indulging in desserts once in a while, especially while sharing it with a beautiful woman.”

She blushed from the compliment and from the excess of wine.

Telltale ice rattled in a short vodka glass when he came around the sofa to sit beside her. One arm found its way to the back of the sofa as he leaned forward setting the glass on a coffee table.

“Heather, I’m going to be as straight forward as possible. Surely you have noticed that I am attracted to you.”

Sobriety flashed as quickly as lightening in the night sky. Her blush failed to cease.

He continued, “I am nineteen years older than you, not considered young by any means. But last night. After going home, well, I could not get you out of my mind. When you told me your age – I felt old. You are so young, so vibrant. Full of vitality. In the community there are some that consider me youthful for my age.” He flustered. “Even local women of society have put me on this ridiculous list along with my son. They refer to us as, umm, eligible bachelors.”

Heather smiled. “Luigi, are you saying that you’re a hottie?”

“What is hottie?”

“In America it is another word for sexy.”

Tightly closing his eyes he frantically shook his head in negate, “No, no.”

“It’s alright. It’s fine that they label you with such flattery.”

“Please, it is wicked and degrading when certain women fawn.”

“Well, now you know how women feel when faced with the same unwanted attention.” Turning slightly and facing him squarely she admitted, “Last night I thought about you too.”

“How so?” His eyes lit up with hope.

“You’re an exceedingly handsome man, intriguing and compassionate.”

A warm hand gently came up to cup her face.

“Those are similar qualities that I find in you. You are a sophisticated woman and gorgeous, and I like being with you. I want more,” he whispered while moving closer, “much more.”

Heather found herself unable to resist the forbidden fruit, the forbidden nature of their age difference, their cultural divide. It all enticed and enhanced a budding desire. Their kiss reflected the urgency, the exploration of something new and exciting.

Reclined against the back of the sofa the full length of their torsos came into contact. Luigi soaked in the flavor of Heather, with his mouth, with his hands. Her suit jacket slipped from her shoulders, from one arm and then the other exposing a silky chemise and bare arms.

“You excite me,” he said. “I have not felt this way in a very long time.”

She gazed into his gray pupils and watched as they clouded over from a craving.

“Me too, and it scares me.”

He nodded subtly, “I agree. We need to proceed slowly, but how do I resist, when you make me feel so alive?”

His gentle fingers traced the oval shape of her face, starting at the forehead. She felt the warmth and pulsating energy from his fingertips. She felt his driving force and try though she may she could not fight it.

“I know there is very little stopping either one of us from diving into this,” she said. “Neither one of us is tied to a spouse. However if there is one drawback it’s that I’m American. You’re not, or vice versa. One of us is out of our country. We can’t rush into anything because, well, it’s no use. And then this turns out to be a one night stand and I’m not a fan of indiscriminate sex.”

“Nor am I,” he added quickly, “Heather, I did not bring you here expecting sex.”



"Yeah, yeah," she jested pertly. "You only want me for my mind."

He smiled and replied, "Something like that."

He gathered her up in his arms. She felt the raw power and energy of the man and it thrilled her. Not only was he a gentleman, but he could fulfill her romantic dreams as well. His massaging hands did wondrous things to her body, his large hands that together could cover her back. When they slid down to her waist, she balked.

"We mustn't."

"Don't worry; I'm not going to touch you. I'm only caressing, providing pleasure."

"Isn't that what the wolf said too little red riding hood?"

He chuckled at the same instant his right hand squarely covered her left thigh. "Ahh, but the wolf didn't get this far."

"I think he just did. Luigi, we need to take this slow."

"Don't panic, I'm not offering myself to you." A hand brushed back her hair that had fallen forward in their tussle. "I like the color of your hair, the shiny chestnut with a hint of fire. In your eyes I see rich mahogany with flecks of gold." He resigned. "Forgive me. I am being too forward. Here, rest against me and I will hold you."

She gave in to the simple pleasure of lying leisurely in Luigi's arms as his insistent pressure slowed.

"Tell me everything," he said. "I want to learn all there is to know about your life."

"I'm boring."

"No, no, no. Tell me, have you always lived in America? Do you have brothers and sisters?"

"Yes, we have always lived in the suburbs of Atlanta. We're your typical large Methodist family. I have two older brothers and one older sister. I'm the baby of the family. What about you?"

"I have one younger brother."

"Are you close?"

"Enough as brothers are. He lives in Florence with his lovely wife. They have two boys and five grandchildren. He is proprietor of a company that renovates ancient buildings. We are also business partners of a few franchises. So what is your favorite color?"

"It depends on the season I suppose. I like all shades."

"Quite the diplomat," he smiled and then groaned in frustration. "I can't keep my hands off of you."

"Then don't," she purred.

## 5

Mid-afternoon, the day sweltered under a hot sun as the air conditioner blew on high. The engine of the Aston Martin revved when the light changed, and they surged into traffic.

“Only a fool would let a woman that can’t speak the language wander the inner streets of *Napoli*! For Christ’s sake didn’t someone warn you about criminals?”

“Well, I can’t remember. You know, I might have read something in the fine print of the brochure.”

He swore loudly in Italian with her name attached. He then swerved into four-lane traffic cutting off a driver. They honked. He raised a hand.

“Relax Luigi, it was only a joke. Of course I know about criminal activity in Naples, *Napoli*, whatever you call it. It is a serious matter. Besides, I was only browsing the shopping district.”

“Criminals are everywhere. You don’t speak Italian. How do I get through to your brain?”

“You’re yelling at me again.”

Luigi’s habit of speaking with his hands unnerved Heather, especially while driving.

“You are exceedingly lucky I was in town when you called my cell phone. How can you let yourself get lost in a dangerous city?”

“Alright, the careless episode is over. I’m alive. I’ve been rescued by a knight in a shiny black car. I’m indebted – no, make that thankful to be inhaling the breath of life.” He got quiet. She heard a sigh, a very deep sigh. “You’re still mad?”

"I'm getting over it. But tell me this, can you see my point of view?"

"Yes, I can see your point of view."

The car easily took to the fast lane.

"Here in *Napoli* there is something we call mafia, ruthless criminals that pickpocket and steal from tourists, and that's not to mention the gigolos."

"Gigolos," she replied with a rise of an eyebrow, not seriously concerned.

"Male whores on street corners."

"Wasn't that a problem like thirty years ago or something? Sounds like something from an old movie – one before my time."

"Technical terminology may be different, but the concept is still the same. One can only wonder how you made it through the whole of Europe without a guide."

She chuckled at his over protectiveness. It bordered on fatherly. "I have contacts, Luigi. There are people in Europe I can call in case of an emergency. Besides, you care more about me than you're willing to admit."

He continued his rant to her chagrin.

"Imagine Ava walking the streets of Miami alone."

"Oh, no. She would never survive the gangs, the pimps, drugs slipped into drinks. Tourists are warned about certain areas."

"Okay, so now do you understand what I am saying?"

"I am not some twenty-two year old gorgeous blonde that's naïve and never been to college."

Their glance met. His expression softened.

"No, you are not, Nevertheless you are an adult and expected to behave like an adult. With common sense."

She studied Luigi. He had fathering down to an art. Perhaps he had raised his son better than he gave himself credit.

“And why weren’t you at work?”

“Because I had to be in court this morning. It was a civil case. Not long. It was very minor.”

“Oh.”

“As a board member for a shipping company here in *Napoli* I am in town often.”

“Sorry to put you on the spot.”

“You didn’t.”

The south lane of the highway snaked across the countryside bordering Mt. Vesuvius. It also provided wide vistas of the Bay of Naples. Heather watched as they passed the many ruins of Pompeii. Leaning her head against the headrest, she basked in the panoramic views. She also felt the lingering heat from his outburst as well as caught the aroma of his spicy cologne. The delectable scent she could now recall from memory.

Luigi reached over to take her hand into his, “Can we call a truce?”

She rolled her head against the headrest, “I thought we already had.”

“We have.” He gingerly brought her hand to his mouth where he pressed the flesh to his lips.

It was all so fast, this sense of fate creping in. It was as though they had known each other longer, much longer. Luigi gently guided her, nudged her in their newly forming alliance and she adored him for it.

Near Sorrento, they traveled an ancient road, bordered by stone walls, a path cut deeply into the terrain however paved over by modernization.

He turned off the main road and eased through an electronic gate. They went over a low speed bump as she watched in the side mirror, the heavy metal gate close automatically.

The private drive felt like a quarter of a mile under a

canopy of mature trees before the grounds opened to a manicured lawn. The car continued around a cascading fountain while the two-storied white stucco villa came into view.

“So this is your home?”

“Yes, the front facade is original, built by my grandfather. The building has been added onto twice since that time.”

“It is beautiful.”

She couldn’t stop studying it.

The second story featured a wrought iron porch railing that stretched the length of the building. Planter boxes hung from the railing, lush and overflowing with colorful floribunda.

Black shutters with iron fittings flanked tall windows and French doors. She imagined briny sea breezes blowing through those opened windows, bellowing through white sheers. Reminiscent of era gone by, when leisure was considered a way of life.

The car pulled up to one of four garage stalls. A red Ferrari Italia parked outside as well. Its condition was clean and polished.

“Rausi will be leaving soon.”

“On a date with Ava?”

“Who knows,” he said turning off the ignition.

They exited the car.

Heather continued marveling. They walked along a terra cotta pathway before entering a covered corridor. Stucco walls and exposed brick, all painted white, brightened the confining space. Large black sconces hung as sentinels on either side of a thick timbered door. Luigi held it open as Heather entered.

She stepped into the foyer. Venetian plastered walls in shades of a warm sunset welcomed her.

The continued on to the main living space.

Twenty-foot ceilings drew her eye to the left, to the second story. A balcony stretched the length and the long room. The railing was hand-hewn and lacquered in a dark stain as was the stair railing.

“Make yourself comfortable. One moment please.

*Posta.* Err, mail.”

“Sure. Take your time.”

Luigi immersed himself in envelopes from a console table.

Heather continued taking in her surroundings. To the right, the fireplace was rustic and stone. To the far wall were two sets of French doors. The view through the doors was of a blue swimming pool. Past the pool were the vase-shaped balustrades she had seen from the yacht. Past the balustrades was the Mediterranean Sea with the sun setting low on the horizon.

Suddenly there was a thumping sound resonating from down a hall.

Rausi came from around a corner, stomping in a quest to slip on his boots. He tossed a red leather bag on the coffee table. The Ferrari emblem blazoned on the flap.

“Where are you going?” Luigi asked.

“Not sure. Paolo mentioned *Napoli*.”

Near Luigi’s cheek, Heather said quietly, “Huh, he can, but I can’t?”

“There is no comparison.”

She loved how he rolled his consonants.

He remained engulfed in the mail.

“Ahh,” Rausi announced. “Look what we have here, Miss Business Only. Good to see you again. Business on Friday night outside the office, huh, sounds kinky. Did you bring garters and lace to entice my father?”

“Rausi,” Luigi warned. “Don’t begin that infernal rant.”

“What rant? It was only a question.”

Rausi leaned against the arm of an overstuffed chair and jerked the leg of his jeans over one boot and then the other. Heather noticed how his form-fitting shirt revealed every well-toned ripple and dangerous abs. The man radiated confidence, which only aroused her curiosity.

His expression softened as he stood up. He stood tall like his father, but a couple inches shorter. "So, you are from the United States?"

"Yes."

"Where?"

"From Atlanta, Georgia."

"Never been there," he said detaching.

She began to relax.

"It's like any other American city, large and full of highways."

"I bet. So your career is clothing?"

"Yes, I'm a fashion merchandiser for a clothing boutique in the city."

He looked her up and down provocatively.

Heather noticed several readable expressions all at once, some exceedingly vulgar. She took a step to Luigi for protection.

"You seem the type that wears clothes to her advantage. Put together just right." He stepped forward, his gaze continuing to devour.

"How am I supposed to take that, as a compliment or consider the statement just rude?"

He gloated, then laughed before saying, "Take it any way you want. I only speak the truth. Fragile femininity is appealing when the woman is beautiful."

"I'm not fragile."

"No? Then only beautiful? What are you afraid of?"

"I'm not afraid of anything. What do you do for a living?"



He suddenly shut down. Completely. For that, she was thankful. He retrieved the leather bag, catching the strap and placing it over a shoulder.

“What I do for a living? You want to know? I chase women.” He approached with an inappropriate swagger. “Shall I give you a running start?”

“Rausi! *Basta*. Enough,” Luigi growled. The rest of the mail slapped down on the table. “Not all women are uncouth, especially American women. I am sick to death of this rant. Every day it wears on my nerves. I want it to stop. Now.”

Heather noticed how the son ignored his father again.

“Pity,” Rausi said quietly, stepping within inches of her ear. “Not all American women are as pretty as you.”

She shivered as his fingers lightly caressed down her arm, to her hand, where he took it and held it for a moment. The pale gray of his pupils seemed to bore into her. She noted the smoothness of his dark olive complexion, the fullness of his lips, and the radiating heat of his skin mingling with her blush.

Her sense of discomfort seemed to intoxicate and enliven him more. She felt his touch as a jumbled network of pulsating energy, the moment robbing her of rational thinking. Her awareness was only of the rise and fall of his chest. There was a sharply drawn intake of breath as though he purposely caught her scent.

Bringing her hand up to his lips he ever so lightly kissed her fingers, leaving a hint of moisture from his breath, “*Arrivederci la bella signora.*”

All in that split second she felt the intense pressure of his willpower, a power capable of waking the dead!

He let go of her hand and left through the same door she had entered.

Heather then wrapped herself around Luigi’s right arm, clinging. “He scares me. Is he capable of behaving as an

adult?"

"He can, but he gets no satisfaction. It is a way of controlling his surroundings I suppose. And me. I am afraid the condition grew worse after his mother moved out. That's been several years ago. I can't seem to change him."

"I'm sorry."

"No, no, no, don't be concerned. It does not matter. We have the whole evening to ourselves," he said before clearing his throat with a light cough. "Let me show you the villa."

He proceeded to give the tour. Heather followed one-step behind, marveling at the classic Old World European furnishings, statuary, hanging tapestries and paintings. Her upbringing had been middle-class American through and through. She was a Georgian peach raised in the suburbs of Atlanta, in the classic American South. And certainly not accustomed to such wealth and formality.

Seeing the house made her wonder about Luigi's ex-wife. This had been her domain, her husband and her family. Her presence was still prevalent in the many details.

Walking and listening to Luigi speak Heather tried not to feel detached. Had Mrs. Cassini been in love with her husband? Did she make this house their home? Did she nurture her family? Was she a member of society?

Useless questions Heather knew. She would never be privy to the truth.

And what of Luigi and Rausi? They presented themselves like night and day. The father was always calm and reserved, gently nudging others to follow his lead. While the son appeared impulsive, brash and intimidating. Similarity in appearance proved that they were indeed father and son. They were both tall, dashing, with the same slant of the cheek and square hairline. Heather did see one difference though. Rausi's masculine face was not as rugged. His jaw was less

elongated, but more square. Nonetheless, both men were handsome in their own right.

Heather generalized their personalities. Luigi crafted his mind into a well-oiled machine – mathematical and logical. And there again, similarities between father and son were as night and day. Rausi seemed to thrive on instincts, emotions, and flirtatiousness that he mastered to do his lustful bidding.

Luigi coughed then cleared his throat.

“This way,” he said leading her toward the far set of double French doors. “This is my personal office or study as I refer to it.”

Heather entered a room that seemed small in comparison to the others. It was located to the left of the fireplace facing the terrace and the sea. Its walls were paneled in a warm walnut, extending up to the tall ceiling, while deep red curtains hung over one lonely window. Sunlight filtered through off-white sheers illuminating a space that would have otherwise been dark. A brass telescope was also positioned near the opened sheers. She wondered if perhaps he used it for watching ships in the day or stars at night.

The intimate space belonged to a man’s world. A large antique desk faced the door. It was mahogany and heavy and behind it were floor to ceiling...Facing the door was large antique desk; mahogany and heavy. Behind it were floor to ceiling bookcases filled with books. Near the top several dusty editions screamed of a different era, the turn of the twentieth, when a man’s domain was sacred ground, a place where he could retire and contemplate his contribution to society. Or study his existence as a whole.

Confirmation of masculinity lay in a large round ashtray at the forefront of the desk. A humidor box situated beside it. Through beveled glass in the lid she could see cigars lining the tray.

“It’s quite beautiful,” she said running a finger across

the inlay and beveled glass.

"A dear friend gave it to me as a gift. He had sailed *The Valor* to Cuba several years ago and purchased the humidor while there."

"Do you smoke cigars?"

"On occasion," he coughed again. "Along with a fine wine or liqueur. They seem to go hand in hand."

"Oh," she stated quietly, amazed with the finery. "I wouldn't know."

His cough worsened before losing a battle in trying to hide the ailment.

"Do you have allergies?"

"No," he shook his head and patted his chest. "It is only a minor inconvenience."

"How minor?"

"It is nothing, really nothing. My doctor says there is a small growth in my throat, nothing to cause alarm, but it does cause this pressure."

"A growth," she replied startled with the revelation.

"Oh, Luigi, I hope it is nothing serious?"

"Oh, no, no," he waved off the unrest. "It is nothing serious. It is a growth. This means that in the future they will surgically remove it. Please, don't be concerned. I am actually doing quite well."

"I have noticed that you clear your throat occasionally. Is there any pain?"

"No, I feel no pain. I assure you it is very minor, just an irritation now and again."

"Have you been to a doctor lately?"

"Of course," he smiled at her thoughtfulness. He had not had the pleasure of someone fussing over him in so long. It felt nice. "Believe me. I am flattered with such attention. But, enough about me."

## 6

Constellations of Roman mythology twinkled in the night sky as colorful mood lighting shimmered at the bottom of the swimming pool.

Heather floated peacefully along the surface, soaking in distant lights on Sorrento's hillside. An aroma wafted in on the gentle breeze, citrus, from the lemon grove on the other side of the hill.

She felt languid. It was though the Goddess Venus hovered, ready to administer and sprinkle her concoction for love.

Water displaced in the pool from the shark otherwise known as Luigi. His body came into contact with hers. At the strategic point of impact wanderlust arms caused her to lose balance and falter. They sunk to the depths. Embraced, the full length of their bodies raked together. And just as quickly, they broke through to the surface again.

"How you ever talked me into skinny dipping at midnight I'll never know," she giggled while wiping water from her face.

"I have a way with words."

"Yes you do. A wonderful way with words."

Their wet lips meshed together as they floated at the surface. They continued tumbling, limbs coming together at many angles. The curve of her neck seemed to provide him with the perfect area to nuzzle. She held tightly to the solid barrel of his chest as they struggled to stay afloat.

"I can't get enough," he said.

Desire pulsed through her core for Luigi. It was astounding the way he could arouse her senses. Each movement seemed to cross a new boundary. His mastered

adeptness left her longing and inflamed.

Slowly, in their tumbling play, he moved her to the shallow end of the pool. Kissing her into the corner.

"I'm amazed," she said.

"With what?"

"With you. How you have not let another woman into your life. It's amazing."

"Actually it does not cross my mind. I have had acquaintances, but nothing serious. My son and I do well for ourselves, alone in this house."

"No thoughts of wanting more from a woman?"

"Does this mean you are offering?"

"That's not what I meant."

"I know what you mean and the answer is no. I don't count on expectations however my biggest thought lies within my grasp. Heather," he said carefully brushing wet strands of hair from her face. "You are very beautiful. I can't help myself. I want to make love to you."

She regretted not knowing the language when he murmured an addendum in Italian. No matter, the tone of his voice blended with the ambience along with the gentle sound of the water's surge.

"I'm weakening as well."

"Come with me. I have a better idea."

They stepped out of the pool.

He grabbed two beach towels. The first one he wrapped around her. She let him give a quick rubdown before wrapping it around her body. He then did the same to himself with the second towel.

Seconds later, he took Heather's hand and led her to the far corner of the house, toward the right and to a triangular shaped courtyard. The courtyard was secluded from the pool by a wall of stacked stone. Red bougainvillea cascaded lushly over the wall.

In the center of the courtyard was a small round table with two chairs. She would have loved seeing it in the daylight, perhaps enjoying morning coffee while watching the sunrise.

Stopping near the round table he said, "Would I be too forward in asking that you spend the night with me?"

"No," she purred. "You would not be too forward in asking me, and yes, I would like spending the night with you."

Overcome in their ardor he backed her toward the table's edge. Her buttocks encountered the cool metal. Caught up in the embrace her hands rested on his shoulders and a thigh rose to caress his leg.

"Do you ever have coffee here in the mornings?"

"No, never." They moved in delirious abandon.

"Perhaps I should, perhaps you would join me?"

"Can you see the sea from here in the daylight?"

"Yes," he said preoccupied with tracing her face.

"Then yes, I would join you."

His lips were mad for her. In one swift instant he took her hand again, leading her toward an entry.

"This is so secluded. It's charming and unique."

"It is for security purposes."

"Security?" She balked.

"Si. This corner is constructed into the side of the hill, an impenetrable fortress. As a board member for the shipping company my family must be protected."

She felt his hesitation in not wanting to reveal too much.

"Protected from what?"

"Heather, it is not for you to worry about. You are completely safe in my home. Piracy in the shipping business is a very real problem and therefore I take precautions. We have never used the alarm, but nonetheless it is available."

"Heaven forbid you would have to ever pull the alarm," she said pertly.

“Hush. No worries. We are enjoying the evening.”

He led her to narrow French doors, dark green in color, and flanked by black shutters. They stood open. Dim lighting escaped into the courtyard.

She crossed the threshold.

Inside, the essence of the man revealed. The furniture was black and contemporary. Under her feet was the softest wool carpeting, off white in shade. In front of her was a king sized bed angled to face the French doors. Matching end tables framed either side of the bed. A sleek dark comforter turned down exposing creamy white sheets. They were edged with a contrasting shade.

Their towels fell to the floor in a heap before he gently laid Heather on the bed, her head resting on a pillow. He then climbed in beside her.

“Such an amazing woman,” he said, his voice enamored in the moment.

She felt his hand run the length of her thigh. His heartbeat raced against her beating heart. “It’s never felt this perfect.”

Heather hummed while running kisses along his neck and over a shoulder. “I agree. There’s something magical.”

“There is. The Roman gods in heaven are singing and dancing tonight.”

“And drinking wine too?”

“Always,” he breathed against her skin.

He took his time. Basking in the glory. He wanted her completely receptive when the moment came. Fingers combed through her hair. Passionately he pulled her mouth to his.

Caught up in rapture she thought to herself. Luigi was mysterious in some ways, especially in his knowledge of worldly things, and of women and of how to treat them. All that mixed with his heritage, his accent – the sexy sound of his



voice thrilled her. Never had she come across a man so perfectly matched to her desires, and never would she find a man such as this again.

They made love, their bodies blended together in repetitive ecstasy that lasted well into the night. They could not stop, did not want the night to end.

Toward morning, she woke, only for a short time, as enchantment from the faint dawn's light lent a heavenly glow through the opened French doors. A sweet and citrusy fragrance blew in from the hillside. There was an olive grove in close proximity as well. In addition, the scent of the briny sea wafted across the threshold adding to the dazzling cocktail.

In the early morning light, a foghorn sounded in the distance. By 6 a.m. church bells from a chapel in the village chimed the hour. Heather, caught up in a dream, rolled over into the warmth of Luigi's body.

## 7

Ham sizzled in a skillet on the stove burner.

"I can't keep my hands off of you."

"I know," she replied bumping him with a hip to move aside. "But, the eggs might burn. Hand me that spatula."

Sunlight streamed from the bank of windows across the galley kitchen. The light bounced off pale maple cabinetry and gleamed along shiny dark marble countertops. The long and narrow room was fit for a culinary chef. An island, with four bar stools accessible from either side, separated the kitchen from the wall of windows.

Heather reached for a spatula as Luigi reached around the men's pajama top she wore. He wore the bottoms. "Oh, it's difficult when you do that," she giggled. "And what did you say you wanted to drink."

"Orange juice."

"Well then grab two glasses from the cabinet."

"Why bother, when I'd rather drink you."

"Stop," she giggled under an insistent hand. His other hand reached for a glass. "Hey, what does –" she struggled with her Italian. "*Voglio che tu sia mia* mean?"

"Why?"

"Because I heard you say it a couple of times last night. What does it mean?"

"It means I want you."

"Hmm," she glared at him, reading his smug expression. His reply had been too curt. "Are you sure there isn't more to that?"

"That is the meaning in full."

"Are you sure? It sure sounded like something more."

“That is all that it means. Why? What more did you want to hear?”

The garage door to the house suddenly closed. They abruptly glared at each other in fear, terror on her face and amusement on his.

Boots clicked on a tiled floor.

“Luigi!” Heather whispered harshly, fearing they would be caught in a less than appropriate manner.

“Shh. Don’t worry.”

Rausi sauntered into the living area. “*Accidenti*, what do I smell?”

She saw him walking their direction, toward the kitchen. His appearance was disheveled from a hard night of partying. He had changed shirts too, into a nondescript gray t-shirt. There were dark circles puffed under his eyes and his short hair stuck out at odd angles.

Heather turned into Luigi feeling vulnerable wearing only a pajama shirt.

Rausi seemed unconcerned with circumstances and grimaced while walking past his father. There was an unspoken, awkward moment between father and son.

“Business is not what it used to be,” Rausi said grabbing a piece of ham from the plate. He stuck the whole thing in his mouth. He then grabbed a cup and poured coffee into it.

“So, you are now only getting home?” Luigi asked.

“Si.” He spoke with his mouth full.

“Did you go to *Napoli*?”

“Si.”

“With Paolo?”

“And Mathieu. It looks like someone never left the house last night.”

“I ask few questions and expect the same.”

“Evidently.” He returned the coffee pot to its base.

“And a calculator and keypad is not involved.” He sauntered past his father once more and gave a sharp glance. “Damn.” He tossed his disheveled head from side to side before walking off.

Vulnerable. She felt vulnerable under Rausi’s piercing stare.

“Do think he’s going to be all right?”

“Yes.” Luigi replied, grinning. “He will survive. He has never seen me in the house with any other woman besides his mother.”

“Do you think he’s traumatized?”

“No. Besides, why would I care if he’s traumatized? I am rather flattered to be caught. It favors my ego.”

Returning to the ham and eggs she replied, “There is absolutely nothing wrong with your ego. In fact I kind of like it.”

## 8

By late afternoon reality reared its ugly head. Heather sat in the passenger seat of the black car as Luigi drove her back to the hotel. She fought back tears, but refused to let him see. She just couldn't. It would be devastating to let him know her weakness. Her vacation in Italy was ending. She would check out of the hotel in the morning and catch a flight back to America.

They sat in the car at the hotel's entrance.

"Heather, this is difficult for both of us. I do not appreciate the sentiment either. It hurts my heart." His hand rested against her headrest. "*Per favore*. One favor for me."

"What is that?"

She felt afraid to look up from the floor, afraid of emotions that ran deep.

He tucked a finger under her chin to pull her attention to face the obvious. "Go pack your bags and let me check you out of the hotel."

"I don't leave until morning."

"I know. Listen. Pack everything. I will check you out of the room tonight. Then come back and get in the car. I have a guest room upstairs. It is comfortable with a private balcony overlooking the orchard grove."

"But Luigi, I can't."

"You can." He caressed a thumb over her tired cheek. "Neither one of us settles for indiscriminate sex, we need to further discuss what happened last night. We are not parting without discussing what it means. Come home with me."

"Luigi, if I miss my flight tomorrow it means I put my life and career on hold. I have never been that irresponsible."

It's, it's – just not right.”

“I understand, believe me, I am also considering your ethics. Please know I will not let you down. Whatever we decide – whatever you decide will be the final word. Will you at least give me a fighting chance?”

The warmth of his fingers caressed her cheek.

“Alright, I'll put everything on hold tonight so we can talk.”

“Good. Now let's go in and check you out of the hotel.”

She packed her belongings a frantic rush, stuffing and squishing clothes at random. Down the elevator, she struggled with one large suitcase, the laptop, a small briefcase and a carry-on bag.

At the car, he lifted the heavy suitcase into the trunk.

“Where is the hotel receipt?” she inquired.

“It is taken care of.”

“Luigi, give it to me.”

He heaved the carry-on into the trunk.

“It's supposed to go on my credit card. I want it, now.”

He held the car door for her, wordlessly. He walked around to the driver's seat and started the ignition.

“Luigi, stop avoiding the obvious. The receipt. Where is it?”

His smugness did nothing to alleviate her duress.

“Don't be overly concerned. I feel responsible.”

“Hey, you can't take on the responsibility of my hotel bill. The boutique covers part of the cost. My sister Hope is going to wonder what I've done.”

“Let's just say due to my request to put your life on hold I feel obligated to pay the bill. It is only a minor thing.”

“Luigi,” she fumed. “You can't buy me!”

“I would never purchase a woman's affections. I also hope you would not stoop to the level of being purchased.”

*Oh, wealthy Italian men!* Heather, flustered with

Taylor Made

aggravation, and jerked to face forward in the seat. He twisted his words quite well.

9

They trudged through the garage, through the inner hall and to the base of the rustic staircase. Luigi heaved the suitcase and carry-on while Heather carried the rest of her possessions. Their argument ceased and calm prevailed.

“Are you sure this is no inconvenience?”

“None at all. You are a guest in my home.”

“This really is going overboard. I mean, really, this is too much.”

“Tomorrow we can talk more, but first let’s see that the room is in order. The housekeeper will be here in the morning.”

They walked a quarter of the way up the stairs.

Sprawled out in a recliner, cell phone pressed to his ear, Rausi appeared relaxed in Bermuda shorts and white t-shirt. He cursed at the interesting sight on the staircase.

He then responded to the person on the other end of the phone. “*Vaffanculo*. No, not you. Hang on, this ought to be good.” In a tone much louder he said, “Setting up office? There is a convenient bed in the office for intimate liaisons.”

Caving under the pressure Heather flattened her back against the wall, the bags nearly fell from her hands, “I’m sorry, Luigi, this isn’t going to work. I don’t like him and I’m simply afraid of him.”

“Rausi.”

“What? What did I do?” He then said into the phone, “No, Papa is sending me a warning... Sweet Hephaestion?... Take that back... Because it’s not true... Paolo, go to hell.”

“Put your hand over the phone.” Luigi growled, “Now.” Rausi propped the cell on his chest, hands free. “Treat your



friends with disrespect, but not mine. Heather is a guest in my home. Change your behavior or I will have the swimming pool ripped out of the ground and thrown over the balustrade and into the sea.”

“That would be a criminal offense and you don’t want to pay the fine. Besides, the village would talk about that crazy lunatic living on the hill. He makes no sense at all.” Rausi then eased his tone mocking her slow Georgian drawl, “Enjoy your stay in our *casa*, Heather Taylor from America.”

She did not believe his transformation, not one bit. She ignored him and stormed up the stairs.

## 10

“What?!”

“You heard me.”

“No I didn’t. You’re out of your mind,” Hope yelled into the phone.

“Please, don’t be so upset.”

“Oh, I’m not upset. You’re the one out of your mind. You’ve only known this guy for a few days.”

“Two weeks,” Heather corrected.

“Oh, excuse me. Two weeks, yes, that’s more like it. You decide to marry this guy after knowing him for two whole weeks. What was I thinking? Forgive my slip in judgment. No. I won’t allow you to throw your life away after two weeks of – of lustful indulgence.”

“There’s not much you can do about it. We’re going to be onboard his ship for our honeymoon very soon.”

“I just can’t believe this. Where are your brains?” Hope screamed into the phone. “Sweetie, listen to me. You are idealizing the man. He is not some saint that women can carelessly hand themselves over to. His desires are selfish. You are being taken advantage of by a slick foreigner with a pretty accent and lots of money to lure any unsuspecting woman into his seedy lair. He sees an attractive American woman, naïve to his underworld tactics and thinks he can easily take advantage of your feminine nature.”

“I want you here for the wedding.”

“If I go to Italy it will be to knock some sense into your stubborn head and drag your butt back home. Kicking and screaming, I don’t care!”

There was a loud crash from Hope’s end of the line.

“Hope, calm down. Please, you have to understand,

we're in love."

"In lust, sweetie, it's called in lust."

"If you could only see us together, we have things in common. Our personalities blend. He's rational and understanding. Luigi is fascinating and finds me that way too."

"This is the most absurd thing I've heard in my entire life. And I presume you've moved in with him?"

"Yes, I love him and he loves me. Why can't you just see things my way and let me be happy?"

"Heather," Hope lowered her octave to a cool cadence. "Here's the voice of reason, you've always been more needy, a clingy child, and being the baby of the family, well, you're used to getting attention and lots of it. This guy is older and somehow it's bringing out your clingy, needy, daddy issues."

Heather's voice weakened, but still fought, "Well, being older you're bossy, overly aggressive, thick headed and not prone to love at first sight."

There was a deep sigh from Hope's end. "I guess there is no way I'm going to change your mind."

"No, I'm not going to be swayed – by anyone. Are you coming to Italy to support me or not?"

Hope swore, loudly, before saying, "A ticket on short notice will cost me an arm and a leg." The sound of angst came in the form of a muffled scream. "Let me see what I can find."

Heather quickly offered, "I'll pay for your ticket. Since you will be matron of honor, I can at least do this much."

"Oh, I forgot your fiancé is loaded."

"Don't make it sound like a dirty word."

"I'm not. Give me some time to think. It's killing me, Heather, it's just killing me."

## 11

Heather managed to avoid Rausi the first few days while living in the house. Quickly she realized he was rarely home. After a few days she gained a level of comfort. However Rausi began showing up to share dinner in the evening, curious of the woman living under his roof. Heather believed Luigi's promise that he would keep his son under control. And when Rausi actually made attempts at getting to know the real woman, Heather began to relax. But, then his crude nature flared again. She ignored it for the most part and looked to Luigi to intervene.

"So, is your sister as hot as you are," Rausi needed for a reaction.

"She's older than me, and married with kids so don't get any wild ideas."

"You mean like two sisters working me over real good in bed? Damn, it's a promise?" His stance opened exposing his vulnerabilities. "Say it's so. Tell me it's a promise."

"Shut up."

"What's the matter? You know you want to. Don't shy away, *donna mia*. I'll show you a good time."

"Do you realize that when I'm your step-mother I will have the ability to put you in your place?"

Rausi rushed to her where he warmly gathered her in his arms. He pressed his blue shirt and tie against her frilly beige dress, taking advantage of the warmth and curvature of her soft bosom. "And how is that? With plenty of sweetness? You will be the sexiest *matrigna* a man could ever have."

"I hear Italian mothers have deadly accurate throwing arms. I've been practicing with a baseball." She punched him

squarely in the arm. Hard.

“*Accidenti*,” he bellowed, shoving her away as poisonous venom. Heather tumbled backward from the brutality. Rausi then turned toward his father. “She fights me more and more. What is this? Such a mean woman. How am I to adore *matrigna* when she hits me?”

Luigi rose slowly from the hearth of the fireplace. Kindling took hold and a small fire sizzled.

“It’s inevitable. The two of you have been arguing for days.” Luigi tossed a long match into the ashes box. “Edmundo and John will be here soon, but before they arrive we need to talk about the business. Your attendance at the office three days out of the week is not enough. I want you there every day of the week and for a full eight hours. There will be no leaving early. Grandfather’s lifeblood will be in your hands. When Heather and I are onboard the yacht you will be responsible for the house and the insurance company. I want your word that it will be done.”

“Don’t beg father, it is nauseating to hear.”

“I am hardly begging. Be serious. I am stating this for the sake of our financial security. In the event something might happen I want to be confident that you are in control.”

Rausi’s typical smugness melted. Heather was unaccustomed to seeing both men serious, and particularly over the insurance company. Luigi never spoke about the details of his career.

“Set your friends aside or I will be forced to give delegation of power to Raphael. There are certain amenities you might lose forever should my brother take charge. Your cousins might fare better in the wake.”

“You would give *Zio* Raphael everything, huh? You would deny me my inheritance?”

“Raphael is responsible. However, I have enough faith in you that you can be responsible as well. Can you promise

me this much?"

"*Si*. To keep my car."

"*Dio Mio*," his voice rose with hands to the heavens. "It is about the things grandfather did to make our life easier. He poured his life into this family, into this house and the business. It is your legacy, your life-blood you must hold onto – as sacred as Mother Mary is to the Holy Church."

"I know. I know. Stop yelling. I'll do it. You have my word."

"Good. Sunday evening we will prepare for Monday morning. We will talk more, alone, tomorrow. This is important. I need to know you are by my side to work hard."

Rausi scowled. Heather felt the anger aimed at her.

"What?" she said in defense.

"You signed a matrimonial agreement?"

"Yeah, it's called a pre-nup in America. What, you are worried that I'm after the money? Well, I'm not, so get over yourself."

To his father he said, "What if I need to get in the safe?"

"You know how to get in the safe. Everything is accessible with the right pass codes."

## 12

The doorbell rang as dinner guests began arriving. Heather's heart palpitated nervously.

"*Buonasera*, Gloria, *buonasera* John," Luigi greeted warmly. "Let me introduce my bride-to-be, Heather Taylor from America. Heather, come here."

She walked under the bridge of the upstairs balcony and to the front door. It was the old part of the house.

"*Buonasera*," she said shyly before suddenly being squashed in the center of two bear hugs. The top of Gloria's brown and gray curls came to Heather's eye level. Balding John was not much taller.

"John and Gloria Whistlethorpe are originally from England," Luigi continued introductions. "They have been in Italy longer than I can remember."

Heather caught her bearings as they released their hold.

"Thirty-five years, darling," Gloria said running her polished nails down Luigi's arm. "Our children went to school together. Remember," she explained with a throaty voice revealing her age, older than Luigi. "I've been in real estate for as long. One day I'm going to yank this house right out from under Luigi and sell it so I can retire."

"Over my dead body," he replied dryly. "No one touches the *casa* my grandfather built, nor the land my grandparent's farmed. I was raised here and so will my grandchildren. Should I be so fortunate."

The woman warmly patted his arm and grinned, extending the jest. Suddenly she called out, rolling her consonant in perfect Italian. "Rausi, you are the picture of

health.”

The peaceful Cassini home flared to a low roar. John Whistlethorpe stepped aside making room for the next couple following in on their heels.

“*Ciao*, Edmundo.”

“Luigi, *ciao amico mio*.” The bass of Edmundo’s deep voice jumped into the fray, “And this is the young *signora*?”

“*Si*, Heather Taylor.”

“*Dolce Erica*,” he complimented. “That you are, Sweet Heather.”

“Thank you. I am very flattered.”

“And that you should be.”

“Heather has had the privilege of being aboard the yacht,” Luigi added. “Edmundo is the senior owner of *The Valor*.”

“Oh, I see.”

“Have you done much sailing?” Edmundo inquired.

“I’m afraid not.”

“You will then, very soon. It will be a most wonderful voyage. We will see that you have a pleasant time.”

Heather analyzed the man. He stood nearly same height as her. He was stocky with thick shoulders covered in a light gray suit coat. His thinning white hair fell no longer than his voluminous ears. His features, mouth and nose were thickly oversized making his presence a bit intimidating.

Nonetheless, his long glance to Luigi revealed the depth of their friendship, one that covered much living.

“*Buonasera Carlotta*,” Luigi said softly to Edmundo’s wife.

Luigi kissed the woman’s hand with a simple gesture that meant nothing more than many years of friendship.

The woman’s expression was one of refinement, subdued, at Luigi’s greeting. Her suit dress, elegantly cut and richly hued, hinted at her status as the wife of a wealthy



merchant. She was clearly of Mediterranean heritage with classic medium olive skin tone and black hair, obviously dyed.

Carlotta stepped further into the foyer. Her jewels glittered under the lightening. Heather felt detached from the woman and also felt a chill as they weakly shook hands.

Heather knew this evening was going to be miserable and she prayed these people would not hate her for being a younger woman nabbing Luigi. It was like Hope had all but said – nabbing ‘a sugar daddy’. But, Luigi was not some superficial provider. Heather loved him. And he loved her. Their love was real. And if Carlotta thought anything less, then she was wrong. Dead wrong.

The guests settled in the Cassini household as cocktails poured in an alcove between the kitchen and dining room. Luigi nursed his usual vodka on ice. He seemed to drink more on social occasions, and in the evenings too, always wine with dinner, or a vodka chaser. Heather did not consider him to be alcoholic but nonetheless she could not miss his penchant for drinking.

“Excuse me,” she said quietly to her husband-to-be. “I’m going to check on the caterers.”

“Of course. Don’t be long.”

She escaped to the kitchen more for fresh air than anything else. She felt more at ease with the caterers; strangers, than with the growing party, and caught her breath.

From the front of the house shouts rose as the women came to life. Their cooing voices echoed all the way into the kitchen. Heather cautiously peeked around the corner.

“Darling!”

One more guest arrived. A woman. The very individual she and Luigi had discussed at great length whether to invite or not – Rausi’s mother, Luigi’s ex-wife Alexia.

‘The meeting is inevitable,’ Luigi pressured as they discussed the details of their engagement, ‘one day you will

meet her.'

'But, at our engagement party,' Heather countered.  
'Please, no.'

'What better way to meet my ex-wife, you have me, she does not.'

'This is ridiculous. I don't want her ruining our special occasion. I am the bride, the new woman of the house. She will hate me.'

'Alexia and I share a son. He is my heir which binds us together. You on the other hand will become my wife, my right hand. Heather, you have my heart. It is for the best. She cannot tear us apart and should she attempt to disrupt our occasion I will tell her to leave. You have my word.'

His word had been generally good. So far. Luigi had lost any feeling for his ex-wife years ago. She had left him for another man which in turn had left Luigi a broken man. That is until he gathered enough strength to become whole again. Even though Alexia denied her husband faithfulness in marriage, Luigi explained, her love of finer things did not cease. And if anything the situation grew worse as she grappled to confiscate any amount of the Cassini fortune she could get her hands on. She was materialistic at best, and at worse was downright contrary over the matter. In her youth Alexia had mental strength and fortitude. In later years her strength had become as cold as steel. But today, few persons paid her eccentrics any mind and accepted her for who she was.

Peering from the kitchen Heather's heart sank. She felt tears forming under the surface of forced composure. Maybe her feelings had been correct all along. The other women seemed to love Alexia. Which only meant they would hate the new bride.

Their voices rang out through the house.

"Rausi, where is Ava?"

"She isn't feeling well."

"Oh! The company is not exciting enough for her?"

"Ah, probably not."

"Well, then it is her loss. I would love her as a daughter-in-law. But, obviously not tonight."

*Oh, great. Alexia could detect fear in people, and could be vindictive too.* Heather quieted a heart palpitation with her hand to her chest.

Heather saw Luigi come looking for her.

"Come," he said wrapping an arm around her waist.

"The caterers have everything under control. I will hold you close. Everyone will see that we are together." He kissed her forehead. She smelled the alcohol on his breath. "I promise this evening will turn out to be everything we want it to be. Everyone will toast our future together."

"You promise not to let me become the sacrificial lamb?"

"Of course not," he chuckled. "Why would you say that? There is nothing to be afraid of. Our guests are here to honor our engagement." He took her hand, "Come."

They returned to the old section of the house and to their guests.

Heather's gauzy beige dress paled to a plunging red neckline that revealed a hefty, yet sagging bosom. Alexia stood an inch or two shorter, a little plump with black hair overly dyed and unnatural looking. Her large brown eyes were thickly surrounded with heavy black eyeliner. Cleopatra could not have worn it any better. The heavy make-up only accentuated aging circles under Alexia's dark eyes.

So, Heather thought, the apple did not fall far from the tree. She now knew where Rausi got that piercing stare and sharp tongue. Those traits did not come from his father, but from the Cleopatra wannabe. Through Alexia's abundant shortcomings one could not deny she was appealing for a

woman her age.

“Why Luigi, she is simply divine,” Alexia said approaching Heather and cooing with the smoothness and subtle edge of a well-honed temptress. “American women have such an air of – of softness. Next to English women they can be so – so regally defined.”

A light nudge prodded Heather in the back.

“It is nice to finally meet Rausi’s mother.”

“Yes,” Alexia said gravitating toward theatrics and waving her wiggly arms unnecessarily. “Let’s leave it at that and avoid the fact that I was ever married to Luigi during his active years.”

From across the room Rausi’s expression changed, as he bit his lip. It accentuated his dimples in the most attractive way. His mother had eagerly played her trump card.

“Certainly, and I’m looking forward to loving him during the carefree prosperous years.” *Then gold digger it was.* She would bear the horrendous scar for life!

Why Heather felt the need to assess Rausi’s reaction she did not know. She watched as he raised his gaze toward the heavens, shook his head in disbelief, then looked down into his glass. He downed the remainder and headed back to the bar.

Luigi whispered to Heather, “I have a glass of wine set aside for you. Shall we toast our engagement?”

She smiled at his thoughtfulness and at his support.

“Everyone.” Luigi turned to his guests and announced, “A toast to our engagement and to my beautiful wife-to-be.”

Edmundo moved from out of the shadows. “And to my good friend Luigi and the lovely Heather, may you have a long and happy life together.” He raised his glass.

The salute resounded as crystal chimed. “*Un centinaio di anni.*” A hundred years. Gloria’s hefty English voice rang out above all others. Heather, however, noticed Alexia decline the

toast and in fact turned away. When the Cleopatra wannabe returned focus, her dark eyes landed accusingly at Heather, angry and brooding.

Dinner commenced with the host positioned respectively at the head of the table. Rausi was seated to his left and then Alexia and John Whistlethorp. Heather sat at the far end of the table between John and Gloria. Luigi felt it best that John and Gloria sit near Heather for their neutrality.

The peacekeeping tactic worked as Gloria engaged in constant prattle with the bride-to-be, keeping the dear girl's mind off a challenging evening.

The placement put Alexia facing Rausi and Luigi, and her longtime friend Carlotta.

Heather watched Alexia. Not trusting her one bit.

After dessert and several liquors, Gloria noticed meaningful glances between the happy couple and whispered, "See how he adores you. Don't for one minute doubt his love. I see happiness and a bright, bright future ahead."

"You can see it?"

"Oh, yes, I have known Luigi for – heavens, so many years now. The man has never been happier. Look at him now. See how he smiles."

"I think he wonders what you and I are talking about."

"Good. Keep him wondering. Men love a good chase. Although he has already caught you. John and I are thrilled to see Luigi getting on with his life. You know, finding someone to share the future. Togetherness, it warms the heart."

"Thank you, Gloria," Heather said leaning in. "Your encouragement is invaluable, especially on a night such as tonight."

"You are welcome," Gloria replied leaning in as well. "I am only saying this from what I see. I am also looking forward to spending our vacation together. How much of the Mediterranean have you seen?"

“None.”

Gloria suddenly flared up in her seat, “None? Oh, well, we will have a wonderful cruise. You will see the world as never before.”

After dinner and with an easement in conversations, the men retired to the large living space. Rausi kicked back in a lounge chair with one eye on the television, a ballgame, and one ear on voices of commerce. Heather sat back and listened.

“So, what do you think,” Edmundo said, “Am I right or am I wrong to expand the reach of export?”

“If you want to grow the company,” John offered, “then by all means take on new ports, but, do you have enough ships to cover the demand?”

“More ships, more expense, as well as insurance.” Luigi looked to Edmundo.

“Not necessarily...”

Their speech reeked of governmental controls over a fluctuating market. Heather learned that John was a banking financier. Even he considered advancing one’s career their primary focus. And with good reason, it filled their bank accounts.

“Rausi,” Edmundo said, his deep baritone rolled off his tongue. “I hear you’re going back to work on Monday.”

He jerked to attention. Obviously feeling no pain. “That’s the rumor.”

“Good. It makes me proud to hear this. One day soon you will take over the insurance company so your Papa can retire.”

Rausi moved as though suddenly awake, “I hope you are not thinking about retiring next year.”

“Not next year or the following year, no. We expect your efforts to be honest from now on. Working two or three days a week is not enough. Edmundo and I both remember

what happened last year.”

“I was busy.”

“What does that mean? I *was* busy?” Edmundo roared, “The boy has no common sense. Why doesn’t he have common sense, huh? Let him come to work for me. I will force this laziness from between his ears.”

Alexia’s and Carlotta’s whispers excluded all others as they sat in wing chairs near the French doors. The two women made Heather nervous in their exclusion.

Gloria came to sit beside Heather. She comforted, “They have been friends for many years, really good friends. The divorce tore them apart in some ways, but their friendship never completely fell apart.” Placing a hand over Heather’s, “Don’t let them make you feel any different. What they have together is of no meaning to you, and what you have with Luigi, well, they should say nothing hurtful. They may talk of pains and of slights that the divorce caused, but that is no reason to take on the pain of another. You move forward with this marriage, the wedding plans. This is your special day, not theirs.”

“I don’t know what I would’ve done without your wisdom this evening. Thank you for being here.”

Gloria smiled warmly and replied, “It is my pleasure.”

## 13

Shirring started from under her right arm and draped to her left hip. A cluster of crystal rhinestones glistened at the hip while an excess of shirring continued onto the floor. There it puddled.

"This is the one," Carlotta nodded, agreeing to the strapless white satin wedding gown. "It looks beautiful of you."

"I think so too. I love the mermaid style. Thank you Carlotta for being here with me."

"It is no problem. I am pleased that Luigi asked me to join you today."

Carlotta grinned in her most unassuming way, devoid of emotion.

Heather's discomfort in the presence of Carlotta had not completely faded. The discomfort had something to do with Alexia's influence. Heather knew it had to be for sure. What exactly was that influence?

"I'm sure Luigi and me rushing into marriage is difficult for some people to understand."

"Don't," she said with a blink and a subtle shake of the head. "There is no need to apologize."

"But, your relationship to Luigi's first wife..."

"My relationship to Alexia is all together separate. Yes, we were family in the early years, but things change. It is not wise to blame anyone you know, for – for misdirection. It is not my place to do so or Edmundo. I support Alexia as a dear friend, and I support Luigi as family."

Carlotta seemed to search for the right words, "You see my husband and your husband-to-be are as brothers. They



protect one another. They must. Why? Because there are people out there that would destroy their companies, their lives, the careers they have made. Realize the more political influence a man owns the stronger his opponents are." Her tone softened, "and if I may be so bold as to give one piece of advice, it is this; quietly stay by his side and let no one corrupt his good name."

"I understand, but where does this caution come from? Do they have enemies?"

"How can I describe a lifetime of history, or their fathers? For now be aware they are very powerful men and where there is – shall we say position of power then there is danger. There are always those that wish to gain or take away prestige from them. This is Italy; the history of Italy is everywhere."

Looking to the hem of the gown Heather fought a building detachment from Carlotta, Edmundo *and* Luigi. She felt suddenly very far from home. "Is Edmundo concerned with my marrying Luigi?"

"No, he has said nothing. Why do you ask?"

"Then Alexia, she thinks I should not marry Luigi."

Reaching for the short train to the gown Carlotta gently straightened it. "Alexia has her opinions. It goes without mention. She is the ex-wife. She is also aware of business opponents and the certain lengths men will go to in defeating our husbands. Of course she is concerned for Luigi, for his safety and for his happiness. You are new to our country as well as to Luigi."

The whole conversation irritated Heather.

"She thinks I can't protect Luigi?"

"You can and you will. No, that is not entirely why Alexia is troubled."

"Alexia is troubled? Then what is it? Please, I need to know, if for no other reason than to know where I stand in the

middle of this triangle.”

Carlotta’s discomfort showed in her posture.

“It is the money.”

“Oh. Well, that is none of Alexia’s business. She divorced him.”

“*Si*. I have said too much. It is their son Rausi that will inherit everything. And if Alexia is still living she expects Rausi to take care of her. To say anymore is inappropriate on my part. We must not jeopardize our future. *Io a ti*. Me and you. My husband and your husband-to-be are very close. We will be as family and must protect one another.”

“Ha. So Alexia thinks by my marrying Luigi I will eat up a chunk of the funds.” Adrenalin rose to fighting level. “I have every right to marry Luigi and take a honeymoon. And if we chose to travel to the United States to see my family then we have every right to do that too.”

“Granted, you do own that right.” Carlotta softened a bit. “Just between us, Luigi has enough money to keep everyone happy.”

Heather noticed how Carlotta, for the first time, pursed her lips ever so slightly into a small grin. It caused her harsh features and wrinkles to soften, and the chilliness of her disposition to warm a degree or two.

“So, do you want a veil to go with this gown?”

“I don’t know. Maybe I’ll just put my hair up.”

“Perhaps a tiara then?”

“Maybe something understated like a rhinestone clip.”

“Well, if you wear your hair up I do think you should at least wear long earrings for the occasion. I noticed some very nice ones over here in the jewelry section.”

## 14

The day blasted off with the intensity of a five-alarm fire. Preparations for the wedding had come together at a fevered pitch. Nonetheless, Luigi had his troops under control.

“Rausi,” he yelled across the house. “The luggage is in the Land Rover. Take Heather and Hope to the ship and unload all that is to go onboard. I will wait for John and Gloria to pick me up.”

“Where is my tuxedo?”

“In the Land Rover. What did I just say?”

Calmly Rausi walked down the hallway and then stopped beside his father. With the back of his hand he brushed lint from the shoulder of his father’s jacket while chiding, “What’s the matter? What is with this irritability? Getting married today or something?”

“When are you going to grow up and find a house of your own?”

“Why bother? I like this one. It suits my needs.” He snatched up the keys and gave them a toss in the air before walking away.

“Well, it doesn’t suit mine. This will be Heather’s home. I want her to be happy. Find somewhere else to live.”

“Ciao!”

Since Hope’s arrival, Rausi reveled in his glory pouring on added charm in addition to the grating banter. He flourished under their scorching attention. Loving every razor sharp jab inflicted.

Heather sat back in the passenger seat of the Land Rover as Rausi maneuvered along Sorrento’s curving hillside. It made her nervous how he drove with only one hand on the

steering wheel, particularly on the tight curves. She turned off the radio to avoid any more distraction.

"Are you really going to work in the Cassini office while we're gone?"

His eyes came off the road for a split second to glare at her. "You doubt me?"

"I've never known you to be serious about much of anything."

"Never is a bad word?"

"Seriously, can you do the job?"

"Aye. What to do? American woman can be so naïve."

"Don't insult me."

"Yeah, Rausi," Hope piped up from the back seat.

"Don't insult us. You might get the shock of your life."

"Hey, Heather insulted me first. Of course I can work. I have worked for Papa many times before."

"Well, what do you do? Sit there?"

"Si, I sit there. All. Day. Long. What? You doubt me?"

"What about parties, are you still going to have friends over when we're gone?"

"Sure, why not? *La vita dolce*. I will live the good life with loose women at night and count Papa's money during the day. I will live up to my reputation. You'll see."

The pair in the front seat glanced at each other. He smirked. Heather glared back shaking her head.

"You're being a smartass."

"Who says?"

From the backseat Hope leaned forward again. "Rausi, have you heard in America women categorize the French, Italian and Middle Eastern men?"

A dark eyebrow rose. "They do? How so?"

"We see them as flirtatious and dangerous and they are to be avoided at all costs."

"Oh, yeah," Heather added. "The camel jockeys are the

worst. Their penetrating stare is scary. It's like they're looking right through a girl."

"Seriously? A camel jockey? What the hell do you mean by camel jockey?"

"The Middle Easterners, they have this arrogant look like women are nothing more than slaves to be owned and bred like animals."

Heather noticed his pause and a dimple form through the wooly growth on his cheek, right before he answered, "Well, women are supposed to be owned and bred aren't they?"

Interior of the Land Rover exploded in a vacuum of fiery estrogen before he could take back the careless remark.

"Condescending chauvinistic pig!"

The top-heavy vehicle jerked across the double yellow line as both women swatted him. Heather screamed over the loss of control of the vehicle. Rausi swore as Hope's colorful words rolled off her tongue. A Fiat barreled around the curve. It honked before running off the road to the soft shoulder.

He quickly straightened the wheel, swerving back into their lane, and regained control.

"*Signora's* it's only a joke! I'm teasing," he shouted. "This damned thing steers like *merda* compared to the Ferrari."

"For Christ's sake Rausi, when are you going to freaking grow up?"

He shot Heather another arrogant glance, "Such a *bella* when you're mad, the blush on your face is sexy as hell. Don't hit me again. Papa will kill us if we have a wreck and die."

"Hope, see what I have to put up with?"

## 15

The women sequestered at the bow of the ship in their stateroom.

“This is where you’re spending your honeymoon?” Hope said while turning one complete circle.

“I guess so. Wow, it’s so bright, the lighting, the mirrored ceiling. I love the light maple paneling and the granite shelves. Check out this king sized bed and the white comforter.”

“Look at the closet space,” Hope said poking her nose inside several paneled doors. There are houses that don’t even have this much space.”

“Under the porthole, is that a vanity or a desk? Hope, look at this bathroom.”

“Can I come with you? I’ll just stow away somewhere out of sight. You’ll never know I’m even here.”

“Oh, I wish you could. We would have so much fun. Next time for sure.”

“Well, okay, enough of that. We better get you into this dress and fix your hair.”

A half hour later, there was a knock on the door.

Hope opened it and came face to face with a short woman with curly brown and gray hair.

“A sight for me weary eyes,” Gloria exclaimed with a hand held to her chest as her accent slipped out. “I swear I’ve never seen a more beautiful bride. The others haven’t nary an idea of what they’re about to behold. Such a beautiful bride in her sparkling tiara.”

“Carlotta convinced me wear it. To match the occasion. Oh, and the chandelier earrings too. Well, I guess since you arrived that means Luigi made it to the ship in one piece.”

“Oh yes, yes, we can’t forget the groom. The men are with the captain as we speak, confirming charts and destinations I suppose. I will say Luigi seems very calm for today.”

“Good, he’s doing better than me. Gloria, this is my sister, Hope. We’re from Georgia, the southern part of the United States.”

“It’s very nice to meet you.”

“Whew, that’s one less thing to worry about,” Heather commented. “Luigi getting here safe and sound. We, on the other hand, almost didn’t make it at all. The Land Rover nearly ran off the road.”

“It did? Why? What happened?”

“Rausi was badgering like an idiot again. How can he be so stupid?”

“Ahh,” Gloria said, settling in. “Things would go smoother if you didn’t take him so seriously. For the most part it is all an act.”

“How can stupidity be an act? There are those that have their wits and those that do not. He does not.”

“Ah, but he does.” Gloria found the vanity’s chair and sat down. “He is not quite the fool he has many believing. There is an intelligent interior hidden inside. He has a bachelor’s degree in both business administration and business accounting. He is about as sharp as his father. Perhaps by applying himself one day he might make great strides in the insurance company. You know, prove his worth and please Luigi.”

“You are kidding, right, a bachelor’s degree in business accounting?”

“It is true.”

“Well, then why doesn’t he use it?”

“I suppose it was his parents’ divorce that sent him down the road of self-destruction. Rausi had made great

strides academically. He also played soccer in college. He won many awards for his achievements while his parents supported him by being there, attending most of his games. It was when Alexia and Luigi had their falling out that things went downhill,” Gloria sighed. “Everyone close to the family felt their loss. It should not have happened. But, it did. Poor Rausi suffered just as much. I don’t want to say they spoiled him with love, but he was doted on quite heavily. From both parents. And so, when Alexia and Luigi parted ways Rausi went wild and turned into this lazy playboy. Of course, his age had a little to do with that at the time. Being in his twenties, he was ready to experiment with life. Today I suppose being careless is a way of acting out, still trying to gain attention.”

“Then why doesn’t Luigi do something to change the situation?”

Gloria shook her head, “I suppose Luigi suffers from guilt and failure. To make up for the loss Luigi never tells the boy no and therefore lets him get by with this ridiculous behavior.”

“That’s allowing him to get by with murder. Rausi is an adult now.”

“What more is there to say? If Luigi can’t stop the self-destruction of his son, then what else can be done?”

“Wow, he has a double bachelor’s degree in accounting and business of all things. I would have never suspected it.”

“Try ignoring his antics, the showing off. When you react, it only stirs the flame. It rewards his bad behavior.”

Hope removed the plastic protection from her satiny gown just as Heather turned to Gloria, “Did you see the flowers in the salon?”

“Yes, I did. What a sight to behold. We will enjoy fragrant lilies and roses for the rest of the week.”



## 16

Pachelbel's Canon played over unseen speakers, when Hope preceded her sister into the ship's salon. Heather watched as Hope stepped carefully in a pale satin gown while holding a small bouquet of flowers. They had both suffered a case of nerves before heading to the salon.

This had to be the smallest wedding they had ever seen, but the richest – on a yacht off the Amalfi Coast of Italy, floating in the Mediterranean Sea, and surrounded by wealthy moguls.

Gloria and Carlotta were decked out in finery while the men stood in pressed Italian suits. Luigi and Rausi stood at the forefront in matching black tuxedos. The captain, in regalia, sported his uniform, and stood facing the participants with Bible in hand.

The guests murmured in approval as Heather walked down the makeshift isle. She felt as exotic as Aphrodite in her mermaid styled wedding gown. And also with her chestnut hair pinned up at the sides and falling in soft tendrils.

She saw Luigi's stare – as well as Rausi's. Their glares made her self-conscious.

She counted the guests. Sure enough the new couple had arrived. Luigi had warned her to expect them. The woman, relatively tall, brunette, dressed awfully casual for a wedding and wore little makeup. Heather judged her as middle aged, pretty in her own right, but with the look of a librarian, understated. The stout gentleman; average in height, tanned, but not of Mediterranean heritage, could have been from any walk of life wearing glasses and sporting a goatee heavily peppered with gray, and a stadium jacket over

wrinkled khakis.

Carlotta stood next to them. Heather could have sworn Carlotta smiled. Perhaps it was her way of showing approval of their union. The gesture revealed acceptance. Heather realized she was now one of them.

And Rausi. He no longer looked like the fool he portrayed. As handsome as any male model and formally dressed as a man of status, he presented himself every bit the owner of two bachelor degrees. Her tinted glasses came off. She saw him less as a threat and more for who he was – his father's son. This was to become her family.

And Hope, dear Hope to the left, one look was enough to cause a flood of emotion. Hope gave a slight nod of encouragement to hurry up and get up here.

Luigi. She had learned his many expressions, but the soft one that he bore was a look of pure loving adoration.

At the makeshift altar, he took her clammy hands into his and gently rubbed his thumbs over the back of her knuckles, the gesture meant to calm, but his nerves showed as well.

During their vows, they heard only enough to follow the captain's prompts.

And when asked for the rings, Rausi produced both the bride's and the groom's. She had begged him for something understated. She gushed in surprise at the ring, a little more than understated.

The modest, yet beautiful American Georgia peach became Mrs. Luigi Cassini and their guests eagerly applauded in approval.

"Geoffrey and Audrey Broussard," Luigi introduced to Heather.

Audrey took Heather's hand and shook, firmly, and so did Geoffrey.

"Excuse us for the way we're dressed," Geoffrey

blurted in earnest. "Our flight from Egypt was delayed. You see Audrey has been working day and night on a new find and I'm afraid we've had to rush to get here."

"Oh," Heather replied, startled with the revelation. "Well, we are happy that you made it in time. And may I ask what do you do?"

"Archeology," the woman began, "it's been a passion of mine since childhood. I am afraid my father, an Egyptian scholar, has always been involved in odd ventures. I was introduced to ancient and Biblical history at an early age. Our vacations were never like normal families. Ours usually consisted of working an excavation site in some remote region of the globe. There is nothing more rewarding than uncovering antiquities that have not seen sunlight in a thousand or more years. It is such a joy. And so, Geoffrey and I have been living quite crudely in a tent near the Valley of the Kings for weeks now." She took a breath, feeling giddy and fearing herself rambling. "We are definitely looking forward to relaxing on this ship for the next couple of weeks. What a wonderful wedding. Very much the lovely bride, wouldn't you agree sweetheart?"

"Yes. *Signor* Cassini has chosen well."

Audrey gushed, "I can't wait to see you unwrap the wedding present we've brought. It's from Egypt. Rare antiquities can be so priceless. We had to be very careful in getting it out of the country."

"Be careful, dear," the man gasped, "We don't know if *Signora* Cassini might be a customs agent."

Heather chuckled at the eccentric nature.

"I'm a fashion merchandiser. Your secret is totally safe with us. We will be excited to open your gift after the meal. It was not necessary, but extremely thoughtful of you." She turned toward her husband and smiled. "Luigi and I are just happy you are here to share our day."

Celebratory toasts rang out before everyone moved to the mirrored dining room. Carlotta pranced, pleased to have obtained a world-renowned chef to prepare the onboard meal.

By late afternoon, Heather and Luigi dug into their wedding gifts. Heather dove into the Broussard's present last. It was tremendously heavy and wrapped in nondescript brown packing paper. She asked for Luigi's help in lifting it before she tore into the paper.

Peeking inside she gasped before pulling the item out of the box. Using both hands she extracted a small gold statue in the shape of a leopard.

"Oh my, Luigi, look. It's beautiful."

"The statue is from the fifth dynasty and is solid gold," Audrey stated proudly. "The leopard is known for its symbol of power and protection. As you can see it's crafted with turquoise and coral around its neck in the form of a leash. The implication is that this particular leopard would have been a beloved pet of the deceased king."

"It's amazing," Heather cooed. "Thank you so much Audrey, we will cherish this gift forever."

Leaning against the edge of the bar Edmundo grumbled, "Geoffrey, how can you bring contraband aboard this ship? It is forbidden, *cattivo presagio*. Pray to God in heaven." He quickly crossed himself. "Pray hard that we will have a safe journey."

"This present is given as a symbol of protection not as a bad omen by any means. Please refrain from any old superstitions."

"You stole it from a grave," Edmundo growled. "It had been placed in that tomb four thousand years ago to protect the deceased. The creator gave it to his king, not to us. I'm sure his spirit will come looking for that – that token." He flung his arms in turmoil as his voice rumbled, "Pray hard that

we have a smooth journey.”

“Ahh, I swear Edmundo. Had we’d known it would send you into a fit of insanity Audrey and I would have presented this gift to Heather and Luigi in private.”

Rausi strutted up to Edmundo and placed an arm around his shoulder. “Well, *Zio*, with the price of gold right now and if the statue were melted what price do you think it would bring? And that is realizing the melting process would burn the hell out of any evil spirit.” Someone laughed. The chuckle was female. Rausi flashed a gleaming smile. “See, so you have no fifth dynasty ghost wreaking havoc over your cruise. Huh, so what’s the problem? Calm down before you have a heart attack.”

“No,” Audrey cried. “Priceless antiquities are never to be destroyed. Oh, no. This is not meant to be melted or sold. Promise me no one will melt this precious statue.”

Luigi lent a reassuring hand in her direction, “No harm will come to the statue. Rest assured it will not be melted.”

“You laugh now,” Edmundo poked Rausi in the chest with a thick finger. “Men have mysteriously died excavating the Valley of the Kings.” Rausi dramatically reeled backward, grabbing his chest and faking pain as Edmundo continued, “Fate is not to be tempted. Bad things happen when the gods are crossed.”

“Edmundo,” Geoffrey groaned. “You are referring to things that happened over a century ago. What more than likely killed those men were poisonous gases rather than spiritual energy. Methods of excavation are different now. We have much safer ways to dig than ever before.”

“I respect this ship. You brought contraband onboard my ship. It is a bad omen. End of conversation.”

“With all due respect the statue is a gift not to be taken out of context.”

“We shall see.”

The captain entered the salon announcing a fifteen-minute warning for those disembarking.

"Move aside," Rausi said elbowing between his father, Edmundo and Hope. "I get to kiss the bride."

As in deep tradition, he kissed both her cheeks. She felt his warm pulsating energy. He pulled away only far enough that they were eye to eye. He grinned. She smiled back. It was then that he leaned forward until his mouth delicately covered her lips for one quick moment. He then retreated. His brilliant gray eyes held more blue in them today she noticed. He intrigued her. Not sexually, but in curiosity of what was in his mind, heart and soul.

"Be safe. Come home soon," he whispered, his accent thick.

"We will, and you behave."

"I intend to." His eyes danced.

She saw a flicker of intelligent within his mind. He was so handsome. Along with that strong pulse just under the surface of his skin. She was sure women everywhere found him simply irresistible.

"Oh really?"

"Don't doubt me. Have faith. You don't know what I am capable of."

"Well, then prove yourself," she whispered back.

He gave a low guttural sound. "Oh, I will. Mark my word. Don't challenge me. Most never win."

"I'm not challenging you. I'm only stating fact," she said, returning a phrase he had used.

His eyes danced with fire. When he didn't respond, she knew she had won the battle of words. She had also grown accustomed to his gaze, which had fallen to her lips again. She knew the curve of his cheek covered with dense black stubble that gave him the aura of a baby faced pirate. She could now detect the scent of his cologne, spicy, alluring, and knew Ava

would most likely live in the house with him while they were away.

Hope nudged in between them pulling her sister apart.

"What are you doing?" she whispered, adamantly.

"Huh? Saying goodbye."

"That's not what I mean. Your new husband is standing right here."

"Yeah, so?"

"You are flirting with him."

"Huh? Rausi? No."

"Little sister, I'm telling you, that's not the way I see it."

Luigi interrupted, "It's time to go. The ship will be sailing shortly. Hope, we will walk you and Rausi to the ramp."

Temperaments cooled at the ramp. Heather and Hope locked together in a tight embrace.

"I love you."

"I love you, too. Be sure to keep in touch. I'm going to be concerned every day you're at sea."

"Don't worry, we'll be fine. I'll try to phone home in a couple days."

"You better. It's a great big ocean out there. Be careful."

"It's not an ocean it's a sea."

"Oh gee, whatever. Just be careful."

"We will. Have a safe flight home. Oh, and enjoy the ride in the Ferrari."

"Ha! If only Rausi and I can get along long enough to make it safely to the airport."

"He is to be held accountable. He will be a gentleman."

Something told Heather that Rausi was ready to change. Things would be different from now on.

Heather froze at the railing, unwilling to let go. She waved toward the parking lot, to her sister one last time as

the ship's engines roared to life. Hope waved back. Dock personnel released the ropes. The engines engaged the propellers and the ship moved. She watched as Hope and Rausi walked to the Land Rover.

Luigi took her arm. "It's time, come, let's go inside."



## 17

She was carried across the threshold to the forward stateroom where, alone at last, he placed her on the king sized bed.

"No, don't, not in this dress, I can't move. I'll never get up again," she flustered, rolling from side to side, stuck in the mermaid gown.

"There is no need for you to get up." He positioned on top, silencing her with a single kiss, his hands gently cupped the side of her face. "I want to look at you. I want to remember this moment forever, with your hair gathered into the crown of a princess. I want to remember the love in your eyes. I want to remember my kiss left on your lips." He gently pressed his lips to hers and let a finger caress where his mouth had been. "I want to make you happy, always."

"Oh, Luigi, you do, I love you."

"I love you too. *Il mio amore.*"

"This feels like a fairytale that I don't want to wake up from. You know, where reality is always on the other side waiting to rear itself."

"I will keep the fairytale alive for you. Every day will be special as long as we're together."

She sighed. He relaxed as well.

"I believe you. I can't believe we did it. We really did it. I will be Mrs. Luigi Cassini for the rest of our lives."

She held the ring up to the light to see it sparkle.

"Do you like it?"

"I love it. It's beautiful. It signifies your love for me and the bond we have made."

"It is true. Forever."

The thought, the promise made her go weak. No other man could bring honesty to a level as Luigi did. He would do anything to make their lives blissful and complete.

She tugged at his tuxedo jacket. Luigi slipped the jacket from his arms and began unfastening his cuff links. She noticed the cufflinks were exceptionally beautiful, diamond and onyx set in heavy gold.

“Here let me,” she said holding her hands up.

“I can’t wait to make love to my wife. These past few days have been torture while you have slept in the guest room. Do you know how many nights I almost went upstairs to have my way with you?”

She smiled, “Do you how many nights I would have let you?”

Fumbling with the gown he grumbled, “How do we get this dress off?”

“Very carefully. Help me stand first.”

He helped her to rise, but before she could direct him to the zipper his mouth covered hers in an ardent kiss. His surging blood accelerated.

“This dress, remove it now.”

“Go easy, here, on the back, the zipper.” His hands went to work. “This is so much better than making out in the kitchen every morning. I bet we shocked him a time or two.”

“It is no more revolting than what my son and his *amici* have done to me. They have no inhibitions. What they do by the pool abolishes decency. But tonight, I want nothing more than to think of my new bride.”

And in wedded bliss they consummated their marriage. It was their day. They belonged to each other, now and forever, and honestly in the eyes of God.

## 18

The yacht docked at the Port of Hercules, Monaco, in the quiet of the night.

By noon the party of eight took lunch on dry land in a bright and airy restaurant overlooking the bay.

"I have enjoyed excellent service before, but this is going overboard," Heather commented to Luigi as they were seated in the restaurant. "Pardon the pun. Not that anyone wishes to fall overboard." Luigi looked to the ground and grinned as Heather continued whispering, "Do they know we came in from a ship? Is it because of Edmundo?"

He whispered back, "Shh, *sì*. The reservations were called in from the ship. The restaurant arranged for the shuttle to pick us up. It is a courtesy."

"Oh."

"It is nothing for you to worry about. As a passenger on *The Valor* you are well taken care of – by Edmundo and myself."

*Indeed, wealthy Italian men.* She began reveling in their company and the pampering attention to every detail.

By mid-afternoon, the lovebirds landed in the lobby of the Hotel de Paris to begin their honeymoon – alone. The others continued to other accommodations.

"Do you want to return to the casino?" He asked as they strolled arm in arm along a sidewalk in the evening air.

"Not really. Do you?"

"No. Lady Luck has me up a fair amount. Why bother? Who says gambling and women don't mix?"

"I will say you are on a roll, sweetheart."

"My only thrill comes in watching admirers gaze at my

beautiful wife. And this dress,” he said referencing her blue sequined gown and the newly purchased jewels. “It glitters like these diamonds around your throat.”

Her hand went to her chest and over the hefty necklace, recently purchased, with matching earrings. “Luigi, I love them, but it’s still difficult knowing they cost as much as a house in the Atlanta suburbs. My family could never comprehend the extravagance.”

“The cost is not for you to worry about. I can afford more diamonds should we wish to indulge. A price should never be put on love.”

“We are having the best honeymoon anyone could ever have. Don’t you agree? It’s not like the past two weeks.”

“What?” He stopped. “You tire of the starch businessman whose nose is always in the newspaper?”

“No, I like him too. But, this carefree side of you is sexier.”

“Should we hurry back to the room? I’ll open the complimentary bottle of champagne and loosen your inhibitions. Didn’t you mention something about lingerie?”

“I know your weakness for garters and silk stockings.”

“It is true. Ah, but wait, I have another idea.”

“What?”

“You slip on the lingerie and model it for me,” he said softly. “Show me all the positions we are going to become entangled in tonight.”

“I’ll tease you with no mercy. You’ll be begging for my attention.”

“Excuse me? Who will beg?”

“You.”

He stopped to delicately place a warm hand on her cheek, “No, my dear, it will be you who will be begging.”

“How can you be so sure?”

“Obviously, it is a woman’s nature to entice and a

man's duty to provide."

"Hmm. Alright, that's a rather fancy way of putting it. So where will you be while I'm busy enticing?"

They began walking again.

"Reclining on the lounge chair."

"What if I decide to join you on the lounge instead of posing on the bed?"

"I'm sure the moment will dictate what we do."

They dodged traffic while crossing the street.

"We'll have music?"

"Of course. Whatever you want."

"You do realize champagne goes to my head quite quickly."

"That is the whole idea – to toss out every last shard of inhibition. I want my wife to enjoy herself."

"Luigi?"

"Yes?"

"I was wondering. Have you ever thought about having another child?"

When he quieted and moved apart, she felt suddenly alone. Pedestrians seemed to choke them as reality hit. They had been having so much fun that life rearing its sobriety startled him.

He led her off the busy sidewalk and gazed at her, seemingly to read more past the question itself. "Honestly, no. I never thought of more children."

"Oh."

"Clearly this is a topic you have given some consideration to. Yes?"

"Yeah."

"What is this American 'yeah'?" he said pertly. "Is it something you say to make the horse go faster? No, excuse me that would be 'yaw'?"

"You tell me," she replied in jest. "Haven't you kept up

with your spaghetti westerns lately?”

“No. And I have no intention to do so.”

Heather cowered, gun shy of the topic now.

“Just because I don’t have an opinion on a child does not mean that you don’t. You have been thinking about this for some time?”

“Yes.”

He sighed before adding, “Parenting is a long journey. What you expect out of a child does not always happen. Take Rausi for example. I love my son with all my heart – for the most part he is a good man – but he turned out different from what his mother and I wished for. Why didn’t you have a child years ago with your first husband?”

She didn’t particularly want to look back and especially at a moment like this. “Circumstances were never right and now, well, at the age of thirty-nine I feel my biological clock ticking.”

“I see. And now that we are married circumstances have changed in your favor.”

“Would you consider having a child?”

He paused long and hard before tackling the question. “I am almost sixty. In twenty years I will be nearly eighty. Most of my peers are referring to their grandchildren at this stage of life. It was ten years ago that I supported Rausi in his athletic achievements, but to see myself with a child attending university when I am near the age of eighty –”

“I’m sorry to have brought up the topic.”

“Let me finish. It is not impossible however the idea is not a practical one for me.”

“Of course not,” she said turning away, regretting the conversation in the first place.

“Heather, although it is not practical it doesn’t mean we cannot have one. My position as a father would be, well, challenged due to my age.”

“I’m sorry.”

“What I am trying to say is this,” he reached to regain her attention. “To put everything into perspective – this quest is about you. You would like to have a baby.”

“Yes.”

“Okay, I’m not going to be selfish in not considering your wishes. For us to become parents is not completely out of the question. We will keep the lines of communication open. As of right now we have rushed into each other and into marriage. Perhaps next summer we will evaluate the status of our union and talk more. My biggest concern at this point is having Rausi in the house. I don’t know what his reaction to a brother or sister would be, especially when he is of the age to start a family of his own. The dynamics of our home are definitely askew.”

“I understand,” she said no longer in the mood for this night.

“I love you. I want you to be happy.”

## 19

Three days out to sea, Heather stood beside Luigi as he shaved, leaning against the countertop.

"You missed a spot," she teased.

"Where?"

"Right here," she took a finger, wiped a dab of shaving cream on her index finger and touched the tip of his nose.

"My nose doesn't need shaved, but you on the other hand, my dear —"

"Oh, no, no, no."

She saw it coming and made a hasty retreat toward the door. He put the razor down in a rush, grabbing her hand. Their barely clad bodies crashed together by the force of his pull. He swiftly smeared shaving cream over one eyebrow.

"Don't," she shrieked. "If that razor comes near me I'll be forced to retaliate. Someone might get hurt. Luigi, I'm warning you."

"Warn all you want. Two can play at this game."

Her right hand grappled for the countertop. She managed to escape, but in doing so, also bumped Luigi's toiletry case. The contents spilled across the countertop, including a pill bottle that noisily rolled toward the sink. It was a tinted container half full.

"What's this," she said grabbing the bottle.

"A prescription." He went back to shaving. "From my doctor."

The Italian label was difficult to read.

"What are they for? Does it have something to do with the growth on your throat?"

"Not specifically, no. It relaxes me and helps me to sleep."



“Why do you need help sleeping?”

“For stress,” he said rinsing the razor in a stream of water.

“I didn’t know you had a problem with stress. You never mentioned it before.” The very thought that he needed to take pills to relax worried her. Some days he drank heavily, both wine and vodka. Within hours of one another and if he took medication on top of the alcohol – the concoction was a lethal mix. “Am I not your stress reducer now?”

“Yes, you are. There is no need to be troubled. I have not touched them since before the wedding. I don’t expect to need them any time soon.”

He returned the spilled contents including the pill bottle back into the case, out of sight, and zipped it shut.

## 20

Turquoise waters swelled as far as the eye could see. The sun in the heat of day glistened off gently rolling waves.

Heather stretched, as a lazy cat, on a sunning lounge in her new Brazilian bikini. When she saw the black bathing suit in the store with the gold trim, she knew she just had to have it. Audrey, full of energy and not prone to relaxing, sunned on the forward deck too as the Mediterranean breeze washed over the teakwood deck. Carlotta and Gloria, in brightly colored sundresses sat under an awning, specifically rolled out for the day.

“Audrey, Heather, come and eat,” Gloria encouraged. “Such thin little waifs. Any minute there could be a strong breeze that might blow either one of you over the railing.”

Heather had learned to ignore their generation gap, but heard the extra set of footsteps as afternoon tea was brought to the deck.

Julius, as always, moved quietly with efficiency. He was professional and sharp, and also a deck hand for docking and embarking. He was bright and ever observant. Too observant. Heather had no way of covering herself, but knew he would gawk if given half a chance. His simple curiosity of her had shown one too many times. Luigi had noticed as well.

“Thank you, Julius,” Gloria said. “Well, girls, we have cucumber sandwiches and a tray of biscuits. Don’t let it go to waste. Come and join us.”

Neither one moved. Heather reveled in the warmth of the sun beating down. Lanky Audrey, sporting a floral one piece, slathered on another round of sun block over her arms and legs.

“Lunch wasn’t that long ago,” Audrey replied. “I could

use a large glass of iced tea about now.”

“Me too,” Heather added.

Gloria turned toward Julius, “Two iced teas for the skinny minis. I suppose force feeding them is out of the question.”

Julius retreated.

Several minutes passed without his return.

“Where is he?” Gloria questioned unaccustomed to bad service. “What did he have to do, sail to China for tea leaves?”

“Hired help,” Carlotta replied. “You know how they can be. Some will make you wait just because they can.”

Minutes later Luigi sauntered to the deck with two iced teas in hand and approached the sunbathers.

“Audrey, here, it’s cold.”

“Thank you, but you didn’t have to go out of your way.”

“It was no trouble.” Turning toward his wife, “And yours, my dear.”

She removed her sunglasses and smiled up at him. He set the glass on the deck before leaning forward for a quick kiss on the lips.

“What better service than to have my handsome husband deliver my drink, but I think you ruined Julius’s day.”

“That is the whole idea. I think he has seen quite enough of my wife for one day.” His hand brushed across her cheek. Oil from the sunscreen coated his hand. “Don’t stay out too long. The sun’s rays are harsh out at sea.”

“I know.”

“Okay, I am on my way back to the observation deck.”

“*Ti amo.*”

He grinned. Her skill of the Italian language progressed, but more, her love warmed his heart. “*Ti amo.*”

As soon as Luigi left one woman spoke to the other,

“Ah, to be newly married and in love.”

“I can’t remember that far back.”

“Nor can I. Pass the cream please.”

## 21

With dinner out of the way the men edged up to the bar while their wives moved to comfortable seating in the salon. Heather kicked off her sandals and curled up on a sofa.

Audrey gave another faint moan while touching an ice pack to one of her sunburned ears. Audrey's audible discomfort drew sympathy from most everyone, except from Gloria whom had warned her of the consequences from too much time in the sun.

"Cuba is not so bad." As usual, Edmundo's deep voice filled the room "The populous is starved for commerce as you well know. Their beaches are decent and ripe for the tourism should they allow it."

"And your trip to Cuba," Geoffrey inquired. "Was it for business or for pleasure?"

"Both. The Caribbean waters are fantastic. Central America is worth exploring, and starved for commerce as well in certain regions. I would recommend it. However Cuba is a hard sell for what we consider basic staples. They are guarded. I could interest no one in our wine or olive oil."

Geoffrey taunted, still perturbed over the leopard statue, "And what comes out of Cuba?"

"I said nothing about export."

"But, you were shopping. Cargo ships must stay loaded both ways if you are to make a profit."

"Of course," Edmundo replied, tired of Geoffrey's insinuations. "It is never a bad thing to take on new trade. My company encourages it."

"Even if the country is communist? Surely they don't follow the same rules as the rest of the world. Shall we say strictness evokes a certain lack of rules?"

“Here, here, what do you insinuate? I deliver products that consumers want.”

“Yet in some cases death and destruction follow in its wake.”

Even Gloria’s quiet John felt the jab unreasonable. “Gentlemen, let’s be fair. The episode you refer to in the Indian Ocean was an accident. Accidents in the ocean are unpredictable and frightening to say the least. It hurts business and it hurts companies. Not to say the loss of life is catastrophic.”

Defending his honor Edmundo roared, “I am not the one who brought contraband aboard this ship. Don’t accuse me of piracy or of breaking the law until you can prove me wrong. Better yet, there will be *no* proving me wrong because I am not a smuggler. I am an honest businessman.”

Luigi jumped into the fray. “We are in mixed company. Might we hold our opinions until tomorrow and continue this discussion on the observation deck?”

Temperature of the room changed along with the mood.

Carlotta, quite comfortable, stirred in her chair. “There is no need to protect anyone in this room,” she said recalling the day she had warned Heather to uphold her husband at all costs. “We are not as sheltered as the men might think. It is obvious that certain opinions hold sway no matter as to the content.”

Heather shot the woman a horrified glance that she would dare overreach proprieties standards. Carlotta returned with a subtle wink.

“I agree,” Luigi said. “However this ridiculous conversation is going nowhere. Geoffrey and Edmundo need to come to terms over the statue and stop attacking one another’s moral code of honor.”

“I could not agree more,” Carlotta said before turning

to her husband. "Darling, this is a vacation. Our guests should be enjoying their voyage. Trust is a delicate balance and I trust everyone in this room."

"Has anyone stopped to look at the radar lately?" Edmundo inquired. "There is a strong storm coming across the Atlantic."

John piped up, "I believe it's a remnant of low pressure off the Americas."

"Exactly. A bad omen," Edmundo stressed while heading for the door.

"We will be forced to tie up at Barcelona and weather the storm in the city."

Geoffrey had had enough, "Audrey, come, you're not feeling well. Let's retire."

Luigi stood too, extending his hand to Heather. She picked up her sandals from the floor before heading down the hall.

Safely away from the salon she asked, "Has Edmundo ever smuggled?"

"I'm sure he has. It is not always a crime. There are too many rules and regulations in the shipping industry the way it is. He should not be blamed completely for some choices. The cigars in my humidor box at home were smuggled. As long as he is not caught I hold no reservations against hiding some things on ships."

"Then you know what's been smuggled?"

"I know a lot of things about the industry, but they are not for you to fret over."

## 22

"You're home!" Rausi greeted as they stepped in the door.

Heather dropped two large handbags on the coffee table before plopping on the sofa. However, so did Rausi, right beside her.

"Tell me everything. Where did you go? What did you see?"

Heather watched as Luigi sauntered through the house searching for anything out of place. The simple signs of Ava's presence were there. Empty wine bottles and remnants of takeout food on the kitchen counter. A pair of Ava's sandals lay tossed by the patio door and a blouse lay strewn on the floor, but there was no Ava.

"When was the last time the housekeeper was here?"

"Yesterday, she wanted the day off. So I let her."

"You're alone?"

"Ava went home this morning. Good thing that you called yesterday. Nice to see you too. So, how was the trip?"

"Fantastic, everything it should be."

"That's good to hear. And now everyone is home safe and sound," Rausi said crowding her space. "So, tell me, where did you go?"

"All over really, I don't remember each and every port, but we spent a couple days in Monte Carlo, and then Nice and Marseille. We actually got stuck several days in Barcelona waiting for a storm to pass before heading onto Portugal. Of course Edmundo blamed the leopard statue, *il contraband*," she accentuated in perfect intonation of the man's accent.

"Such superstition. Why go to extremes?"



“So what do you think of the Spanish coastal cities?”

“They were the most colorful and the people too. We took several tours, and of course the restaurants were out of this world.”

“When you’re with Papa and Edmundo everything is always the best. Surely you know.”

“Oh yeah, I saw it firsthand. The marinas cater to the larger ships. It’s unbelievable how they snap to attention and come running.”

“Your *naïveté* is shedding. So how was the nightlife, wild and out of control?”

Luigi continued his search through the house looking for telltale signs of anything out of place. He exited his office. Heather glanced to her husband, cognitive of his possessiveness, and hoped all was well within his sacred domain.

“We really didn’t notice much nightlife beyond Monte Carlo.”

Rausi squeezed her, “Next vacation I take you some place special, maybe Ibiza where we can have some crazy fun and dance in a disco full of floating soap bubbles.”

“Oh you think so?”

Luigi stood in front of them, waiting.

“Yeah,” Rausi replied.

“Shh,” she giggled, “your father doesn’t like the word ‘yeah’. We had a bit of controversy over my American slang.”

Grinning from ear to ear Rausi looked up to his father and said loudly, “Oh, yeah?”

“From controversy to conspiracy, affirmation of the word is precisely, yes. Help me bring in the luggage. There seems to be more than originally left the house.”

Pleased with having them home Rausi hopped up taking the order well.

\*\*\*

Monday morning in the Cassini office Rausi sat at his desk while talking on the phone.

"No. What I am asking for are the pros and cons of going forward with this merger. From a legal standpoint of the buyout, tell me, what precautions do we take in protecting our company's assets?" There was a pause. "*Si*, I'll hold."

He watched as his father entered the office, but before he spoke, the voice on the other end of the phone interrupted.

"Okay, send the report to the Cassini office with my name on it. By the end of the day. *Si. Grazie.*" He hung up. "Is it me or is everyone else incompetent?"

"Who is to say?"

"What sort of answer is that? Two weeks of vacation and you come home lazy from sailing the sea. What kind of example does that make? Work seems to be the furthest thing from your mind. You know, I'm not sure who you are."

"I have earned the right."

"Obviously. So, now that you're back, there are no surprises lying on your desk? No emergencies commanding your immediate attention?"

"None. That is just it. I am proud of you."

"Ahh," he scoffed while rising from the chair. "The Ferrari will need replaced soon. Maybe I'll want to replace it with a *Pagani Huayra*."

"The *Pagani Huayra* has a waiting list of over a year. It makes no sense. I suggest you lower your expectations." He then gazed at his grown son, remembering the boy within, "I came to your office for one reason. I want to say I am pleased with your progress. These past weeks have been very good."

"Ahh. Whatever. You left me with no other choice. *Zio* Raphael would steal my inheritance and Edmundo has a way

of insisting above all else. He would rather have me strung up over a water well by my thumbs in a piazza if I did not come to work.”

“Don’t be so egotistical. What I see is real initiative on your part. I am proud of that initiative.” In the grand Italian way he kissed his son’s cheeks. Then holding his head with both hands, looking him square in the eye, “You will continue to make me proud, *si?*”

“Of course, Papa,” he answered, feeling the threat of responsibility looming over the horizon.

“Good. I have faith in you. We throw our passion in the Cassini name, into grandfather’s strong reputation, but there is more work to do. Much more. We have only brushed the surface.”

## 23

The television blared with a soccer telecast. Luigi had his nose planted in the business section of the newspaper, the markets never far from his mind. Heather ignored the ever-present paper and casually slouched into his side.

“Okay, that guy there, he is one of the best soccer players in all of Italy,” Rausi explained to her from his favorite recliner. “They will score this time. Watch. You’ll see.”

Luigi glanced over the paper as the announcer’s voice gained in momentum, the excitement level rose as did the cheering fans.

“I thought of something. Be right back,” Heather said retracting from Luigi’s side. “I’m going for the last crème puff.”

Luigi lifted his arm allowing her to leave. Volume of the television roared to life as their team fought for goal. Rausi perched on the edge of his seat. Having been in their shoes many times before he knew their intensity and adrenalin surged.

Barefoot, Heather walked into the kitchen.

“Hey, you are missing the most important part,” Rausi yelled. He turned to his father. “What did she say?”

“She wants the last *sfogliatella*.”

Hesitation was brief. He looked at the play on the television before shouting, “No!” In one split second he jumped out of the chair and ran half way across the floor with the speed of a soccer player on defense.

Heather stood at the counter picking up the last crème puff. She held it as Rausi grabbed her from behind with unnecessary force. She shrieked in the attack. Even Luigi glanced over the newspaper at their commotion.

"Give it to me," he demanded squeezing her midsection and grappling for her hands.

"No, it's mine," she said stuffing a bite into her mouth.

"You'll get fat and Papa will throw you to the dogs."

She stuffed another bite and chewed rapidly. His grappling limited her range of movement, but she managed to respond. "You should have been thrown to the dogs long ago for bad behavior. Bad dog!"

"Give me a bite. You already ate two and I only had one. It's not fair. I am bigger than you."

He squeezed her right wrist.

"Let go," she muttered with a mouthful.

"Not until you give me a bite." He wrestled and manipulated, but she held her own. "Don't make me hurt you."

"You're hurting me now, brute. Let go."

The last bite went into her mouth before she went weak. Finished with the battle and the crème puff she threw her hands into the air for reprieve.

He backed off.

Heather felt the orange flavored crème filling and crumbs all over her fingers and mouth.

"Too bad, you're too slow," she mumbled in her newfound Italian accent while reaching for a drinking glass.

She noticed a strange look form on Rausi's face. He shook his head in negate as though the battle was far from over. He leaned closer. She backed up, further until her back suddenly jarred against the black granite of the island.

"What do you want?"

"What do you think I want?"

"Retaliation is useless now. Bad dog."

Her hands were a mess. She brought one finger to her mouth preparing to lick the crumbs from her fingers. Rausi quickly grabbed the hand. He took one finger in his mouth and

licked it. Heather felt the force of his tongue, and repulsed in shock – at the audacity.

She felt how his tongue leisurely rounded the finger, intimately and improper. The wolf-like eyes bore into her as he went from one finger to the next in the same titillating manner. She gazed helplessly, flabbergasted while his stance proved more than proper. His hips pressed into hers. Fire rose from her belly as his tongue made use of each finger. He pressed into her with the vulgarity he had used in the beginning, that cultural divide that American men did not express.

He knew exactly what he did and felt the heat rise from her skin.

“Hold your mouth like this,” he said with a hand holding her chin, “open slightly.” He proceeded to lick her lips, one side and the other. She felt the stubble of his coarse black beard.

It was wrong, so wrong. Rausi’s masculinity, his Italian heritage, his aggressive ardor, was more than she could process. He was kissing her in front of his father. Why didn’t Luigi speak up? Heather tried shoving him away, but he would not stop. Rausi held a captivating power greater than hers, leaving her defenseless.

Pressed against the countertop Rausi proceeded to pull on her upper lip, sucking in the flavor. Heather weakened to his drive. Her left hand held the counter. Luigi could see. Caught in the web of a strange emotion her right hand went to Rausi’s arm.

Remnants of the pastry melted in their heat. Persistent in the act, he took her lower lip and sucked it into his mouth. Chest-to-chest, heartbeat-to-heartbeat, Heather was left with no other choice. She kissed him back. The gesture surprised him. He faltered from a carnal reaction, a reaction he could not act upon. His drive that had been so indestructible came

to a rapid halt as he retreated.

“Go,” he said angrily, the playful sparkle in his eyes gone. “Go back to your husband.”

“You play too rough,” she replied smacking him on the arm.

Heather freed herself and at the sink washed her hands and mouth. She dried with a kitchen towel and returned to the couch. In the same instant Rausi stormed through the house, down the hall and slammed a distant door.

“All that because he couldn’t have the last crème puff,” she said carelessly, returning to Luigi’s side.

Luigi stiffened at her touch, bracing his back against the couch.

“He got burned by his own match.”

“What? I didn’t encourage that madness.”

Heather created distance.

“Nor did you say no. His ego is singed.”

“*His* ego is singed? What about my feelings. He cornered me.”

“You let him.”

Stunned at the audacity she flustered and snapped, “I sure as heck didn’t *let* him. He is bigger than me and twice as strong. I can’t fight him off when he bulldozes me.” Luigi grimaced not understanding the word bulldoze. “*Spinge!* He pushes me.”

The newspaper straightened with a shake of the hand as Luigi detached. “I state facts as I see them.”

She could have easily stayed in the argument to demand her point be heard. Luigi never told Rausi no. Gloria even said as much. Rausi held little respect, when it came to crossing her personal space. He took what he wanted, when he wanted all because Papa allowed it. How could she say no to Rausi and make him believe sanctity of its meaning, when the man respected few boundaries?

## 24

On Friday Heather saw Luigi off for *Napoli* as usual. Rausi, on the other hand was nowhere to be seen. He had perhaps gotten a late start and grabbed a cup of coffee along the way to work. Friday's were his responsibility to manage the insurance office in Sorrento, which he faithfully had been doing for weeks. How or when he left, was no matter to Heather. All she cared about was owning the morning.

She took off for her run along the winding country road, admiring Sorrento's rocky coastline and the view of the bay that bordered the Cassini property. Luigi's grandparents had farmed the land, raising chickens and sheep as a living, and sold their harvest at market. Remnants of the old outbuildings remained on the high side of the hill. There were grapevines running wild, unattended, and an old orchard in disarray. It was large with an assortment of citrus, pears and olives.

Luigi explained to her that his grandparents made the best of hard times. Sections of Italy were not wealthy before the war, or even after. The farm had been productive and served the community well. It put food on the table for several living in the village during those early years.

By mid-morning, the swimming pool called to her. The pool boy had finished early and was long gone, and the matronly housekeeper busied herself inside the house. The coast was clear for catching the sun's rays.

Reclined on a floating lounge Heather closed her eyes while soaking up the warmth of the sun, the heat beat down on her tanned skin. That is until the radio suddenly came on. And then the whistler started his tune.



"What are you doing home!" she sharply accused while covering her bare breasts with an arm.

"Papa is with Edmundo in *Napoli* today. My head hurts from numbers. I am taking the day off from work."

"Not with me you don't. Turn right around and leave."

He didn't even toe-test the water first, but dove, head first, straight from the ledge. The displacement caused her floating lounge to rock violently, even as he broke through to the surface. There he gave a quick toss of the head, flinging water everywhere.

"Do you need help?"

"Help? From you? No."

He swam to her and grabbed the side of her chair.

"How can you be so sure?"

"I am."

"Completely sure?"

"What are you talking about?"

She noticed his dark wet lashes clumped together.

"In covering your breasts, I am willing to help although it does make for odd tan lines. Nonetheless I am willing to assist a lady in need."

"I'm not in need. Just go away," she said splashing him in the face.

He splashed back while retreating.

"Aye, American women. So uptight about their bodies. In Europe we have topless beaches. The piazzas are filled with fountains and statues displaying goddesses in their glorious state of nudity. Even in our home, there are paintings and statues of Roman gods and goddesses displaying their true nature. Fornication is a gift. Everyone does it. You've seen the depictions in Pompeii. It is called sex. Don't hide yourself. I have seen plenty of topless women. Nudity only reveals the woman that you truly are."

"My God, you are so obsessed."

"With what?"

"Women and sex."

At the shallow end he declared, "I am a man of many talents. I have other interests too."

"Oh really, such as?"

"Money. *Soldi*," he said rubbing his fingers together, signing in Italian.

"Oh, heaven forbid I should forget the very thing that makes you spoiled rotten."

"Careful, spoiled, *donna mia*, you forget I hold degrees. My passport is stamped more than yours." He stood at the shallow end. His deep tan glistened with water droplets.

"It's easy to forget the things that are not always obvious."

"You are a wicked woman capable of severing a man's heart with your tongue. You hurt my feelings."

"Sorry, I didn't realize you had feelings."

Ignoring her remark he dove and swam laps.

That inner voice told Heather that Rausi was most likely harmless today. And in so thinking she reluctantly let her guard down, as well as her hands. His swimming laps continued. She couldn't help but notice how his arms straightened with each stroke. His toned shoulders and back muscles rippled with movement. He swam perfectly. *And why not* she thought, he was perfect at most anything he set his mind to. He dressed perfectly handsome. Rausi was the epitome of perfection in his perfect little universe. *Spoiled rotten brat*, she thought.

From one end of the pool and back to the other he swam for exercise. And in those swim briefs. *Oh*, how they were brief and, *oh*, how embarrassing it was too look at him. They revealed too much and he held no modesty.

Well, his exhibitionist nature was not hers. *He could just keep it.*

He stopped swimming after several laps, and then fidgeted while checking maintenance of the pool. He looked in the skimmer twice.

Her hackles eventually rose with his wandering eye and she eased off the chair into the deep end and went under. The cool water was soothing relief. She swam to the shallow end of the pool and broke through to the surface. Her hand caught the railing just as she began stepping out of the pool, up the wide steps to the stone paving.

“Where are you going?”

“To a lounge chair to finish sunning my back.”

“You can’t go yet.”

“I can go anywhere I want. You don’t own me.”

“And so we refer to jockey’s again. I suppose camel or otherwise. Does it include prancing horses?”

She ignored the brat and his reference to the Ferrari’s symbol.

She knew he would be watching and analyzing her every step. She quietly bore the inevitable, grabbed a fluffy white towel, placed it on a patio chair and eased to the chair belly first.

Far away in the village, a clock chimed the quarter hour. *Good* she thought. Forty-five more minutes and then she would go inside.

The sound of the bells echoed in her head as they did most days. On occasion, they played classic religious songs she had heard in her youth, and she would sing along.

The strong Catholic faith radiated, not only from Sorrento, but from all over Italy. Far from being Catholic, she still enjoyed the passionate nature and culture of the people just the same.

An aggravating grating sound came as Rausi pulled a lounge chair over the flagstones and alongside her chair.

“Now what do you want?”

“We don’t want to be alone.”

“Oh, believe me. I am well aware I’m not alone.”

“Such attitude.”

“Such attitude?” She felt his hands grab her ankles.

“Rausi! What are you doing?”

“We can’t let you get sunburned.”

Suddenly oily suntan lotion was slimed over both calf muscles. His hands rose to her thighs.

“Hey, that’s far enough. I’m not going to burn and I don’t need that stuff.”

Leaning close to her ear he said softly, “You know what I like best about you, Heather?”

“No, please, don’t tell me. I don’t want to know.”

His hands abruptly dug into her buttocks, “This right here.” He smacked her on the rump with enough force she nearly jumped.

“Rausi!”

“I’m just being honest.”

“You’re just being a doggone pest. Stop it and just go away. Lay down on your own chair like a good lap dog.”

He did not quit. He professionally massaged up her back, to the point Heather could not argue much more. The massage caused her to relax. She straightened her neck for him to reach her shoulders, and sighed.

“See what happens when you stop fighting the moment. I’m not going to hurt you. I never would. When I played soccer, my muscles would cramp from running so much. Some knots were so painful I thought they would burst. You’re a runner too. See how good this feels.”

“I swim to relax after a run.”

“Don’t deny this feels good because I know better.”

His hands did wondrous things in calming her. He leaned closer deepening the percussions up her back. She groaned at the release of tension – until the palms of his

hands widened to her sides to explore the fleshy roundness. In the process of leaning forward his thighs encountered hers.

"Stop right there big boy." She pointed, "To your chair."

"But, you owe me."

"I don't owe you one darned thing."

"You do."

"What in all of heaven and earth could I possibly owe you?"

"It's your turn to rub lotion on my back."

"Fat chance, buddy, you're as dark as an Egyptian the way it is. You've had a lot longer to get a base tan than I have."

"My skin burns too," he said feigning victim to her condemnation.

"You've got a base tan. Shorten your sunbathing time or rub lotion on your own skin."

He drug his feet to the lounge chair and reclined on his belly, positioning to observe her. "You are so beautiful."

She flopped her head the other direction.

"Hey, don't turn away. Look at me."

She turned and spouted off, "All you're good for is pushing and bantering, evoking and pressuring. What do you want from me?"

He reached out gently taking her hand into his palm and gloated, "You kissed me."

"So, I was backed against the countertop. Your mouth was all over mine."

"No, no," he shook his head. "I only tasted *sfogliatella*."

"That's ridiculous. Bottom line. You were kissing me." She tried jerking her hand away. He tightened the hold.

"Uh uh, wrong."

"Let go of me. I don't like this game."

"It is no game," he pulled on her arm. "Don't fight me. I won't hurt you." Her eyes widened as he pulled her hand to his mouth. Ever so slowly he brought the palm to his mouth, placed his lips over the flesh between the thumb and the wrist – and kissed it. His mouth covered the portion of her hand, tasting, sucking in the flesh.

She only saw the wolf cornering his prey. When his tongue flickered against her skin, she felt the entrapment. He taunted and teased no different from sucking sticky *sfogliatella* from her fingers.

"Let go of my hand."

"You're intrigued, curious?"

"Maybe."

"Do you want to find out?"

The question, especially coming from him, scared her. "I just want to lie in the sun." Jerking her hand away she spewed, "You're badgering me like a lovelorn schoolboy."

"Why do I feel you're not being honest with yourself?"

*The audacity.*

"For Pete's sake Rausi, what will it take to shut you up?"

"What will it take? I'm surprised that you ask." His array of expressions changed to the enigmatic one of seriousness. "One kiss."

"Argh," she groaned loudly. "You won't let it go. Would you promise to leave me alone?"

"Yes."

"And you won't go back on that promise?"

Calmly, maturely for once, he replied, "I won't go back on the promise."

"Well, I'm not moving from this chair."

"You don't have to." He sat up, dragged his chair closer, metal screeching across the stones. He situated back down, belly first. "Your eyes are beautiful, flecks of amber in

the light brown. I love how you look at me with uncertainty. Cautious, but curious.” He ran his fingers through her hair. “Brunettes are feisty and smart. In the sun I see strands of hair that shine like gold. You are *bella* in every sense of the word, made to be put on a pedestal for all to see.”

“Hurry up.”

“No, I want to take my time.”

Her cheek rested on the towel. “I bet you torment Ava like there’s no tomorrow.”

“Who? This moment is about us. I want to begin where we left off.”

“We didn’t leave off from anywhere.”

“Shh, yes we did.”

“And where is that?”

“Like this,” he said leaning over. Rausi’s shoulder nudged her to her side. His mouth found hers. Ever so softly he let his lips trace over hers without actually kissing, caressing until the nerve endings tingled. “Here, open.”

“Rausi...”

She weakened. The scent of Rausi, hot-blooded and vibrant mixed with pool chlorine, affected the animalistic core of her very being – somewhere deep inside – she connected with him. The connection was odd. Dangerous. She did find him intriguing, but to wonder more about the depth of his passion was wildly dangerous. She was married and in no way did she want to encourage Rausi, but his badgering wore thin.

“Like before.”

He wrapped an arm around her torso. His solid, radiating body hovered over hers, when their lips met. His tongue licked and invaded. She balked at his overwhelming eagerness to consume her soul.

“Relax.”

He leaned in further and placed his mouth over hers again, deepening the kiss. His bare chest came into contact

with hers. The electric surge was instantaneous. It made her nervous just like the first moment their eyes had met. The sensation of his chest against hers made her nipples harden. He took advantage of the moment and shifted his body to feel the caress of her skin.

Pressing her lips into his and holding onto his arm for balance, she felt the force of his energy, felt what he had to offer, and knew the intense level of passion he could provide.

Although he had her pinned, she needed to fight harder before he overstepped the last threshold of propriety. With her free hand she reached up and fisted a handful of his hair, and pulled. The wild act only seemed to entice him more.

He pressed into her. They were an inferno, overheated as a furnace on a hot summer day.

Although the pit of her belly responded to the act – fear of getting caught was paramount. They were barely clad. He had urged her into a less than appropriate position that could easily be misread, bare chest to bare chest. His legs were willing to entangle hers. If they were caught a scandal would run like wildfire among Luigi's friends and the repercussions would be horrendous.

"Rausi," she whispered, pushing him away. "That's enough."

His lips traced the curve of her face while his hot breath caused her insides to rumble like the heavens preparing for a storm. The tingling scratch of his whiskers irritated her skin.

"What do you feel?"

"Nothing."

"Liar."

"I gave you one kiss. Now leave me alone."

"Evil temptress," he accused with a guttural growl while sliding off her body. He eased onto his lounge chair, belly first onto the towel where he gyrated his hips, applying



sensation to his engorged manhood. “If we were anywhere else, a secluded beach, I would have my way with you and you would never be the same.”

“Whatever.”

From in the kitchen the housekeeper shook her silver head of hair.

“Rausi is nothing but a bad apple. People in town know to lock their daughters away from Rausi and Paolo. Those two boys are wicked. They play too rough with the emotions of women. And what of the new *Signora* Cassini – to marry the father and kiss the son?”

The housekeeper crossed herself and went back to mopping.

“Madonna Mia full of grace, pray for the sinners now and forever!”

## 25

"Papa, what are your plans tonight?"

He eyed his son while understanding more of the inquiry than was needed. "The arts commission is having their annual charity event. Heather and I will have dinner in town before attending the fundraiser. Why do you ask?"

"No reason. Paolo and I are going into town."

"You want the house for entertaining, no?"

"We always come here. It's private. No one interrupts us."

"Not tonight. No. Find another place to entertain your friends, but not here. I don't want Heather exposed to your debauchery."

"Fine," Rausi said and walked off.

They dined at their favorite seafood restaurant before heading to the fundraiser.

Luigi drove the narrow back streets as dusk darkened the heavens. "There is not a parking space to be found."

"What about there," she pointed to an open spot.

"No. That is for emergencies only," he growled.

"Remember, we have driven past it twice now."

"Well, we could park by the dock and walk back up the hill."

"I refuse to spend a half an hour walking," he snapped, annoyed. "And you, my dear, are not dressed for walking."

"Well, what else can we do?"

"I am finished driving in circles. We are going home."

"Luigi, please. Members of the committee have requested your presence both formally and personally, and on more than one occasion. It seems they are bound and

determined to have you here.”

“They want my contribution.”

“They want your presence too,” she protested.

“It cannot be helped. More parking should be available if they want my attendance this year, besides, my only reason for being here is to show off my beautiful wife.”

Reaching over to caress the side of his face she gushed, “Oh, sweetheart.”

“We are newlyweds. What do they need us for?”

“Exactly.”

“They will receive this year’s check in the mail and then next year I will get the chance to show off my lovely wife for everyone to see.”

“Luigi, you continue to warm my heart every day.”

Taking her hand he kissed the back of her fingers, “Have I told you lately how lucky I am to have you?”

“Not today, but I think you got it in right under the wire. What is it? Nearly ten o’clock?”

They drove out of town and into the curving countryside. However, back home and in the driveway sat the Ferrari, a yellow Lamborghini, an older Alfa Romeo and a small blue Fiat.

“For Christ’s sake I can’t even get in my own damn garage!”

“Sweetheart, it’s not the end of the world. Park behind Rausi’s car. The others can still get out. If he wants to leave later on then he can move your car to the garage.”

“I don’t want them here. Earlier Rausi asked me what we were doing. I knew he wanted the house to entertain his friends.”

The Aston Martin cornered tightly behind the red car, blocking it in.

“The patio doors are closed,” she said. “We’ll draw the drapes tightly and stay in our room. Let them party. They will

never know we are even at home.”

“I suppose, but I still don’t like the fact that they are here.”

“They only drink don’t they? There are no drugs?”

“No, no, Rausi doesn’t touch drugs. As an athlete he was never interested in them.”

“Good. Then let them drink while they’re at the house. At least they’re not driving around getting in trouble.”

“I still don’t like it.”

Hiding behind the thick drapes of their room proved easier said than done. Energetic music blared through the outdoor speakers. Laughter rang out regularly along with an occasional feminine shriek. The carefree language of revelers flared in both English and Italian.

Heather heard splashing through the French doors, as the swimming pool crowded. Luigi groaned and restlessly tossed and turned in bed. Gradually the volume of the music increased vibrating the bedroom’s French doors.

“No more,” Luigi said in anguish, throwing the covers from the bed. “Do you want to see them scatter?”

“Luigi, you wouldn’t!”

“Watch me.”

“They’re only having fun,” she said reaching for him. “Be gentle.”

“Why? They have no consideration for our needs.”

“That’s because they don’t know we’re at home. For heaven’s sakes don’t make a scene.”

He got up and tugged on a pair of shorts. She reached for her robe to put over a camisole and panties. “Should I get dressed?”

“At this moment you are wearing more than they are.”

She tied the belt in a bow as Luigi pulled apart the drapes and opened the French doors. Music filtered in at a high decibel with the doors open. Bright lights illuminated the

area causing their eyes to take a moment to adjust.

The red bougainvillea covering the stone wall shielded Heather's view of the pool, but not Luigi's. He was the first to see Paolo in the shallow end with his back to the ledge. Paolo moved rhythmically. The young woman on his lap suddenly reacted to being caught by the homeowner. It caused Paolo to whirl around only to see Luigi's angry face. The young woman swam off as Paolo quickly gained his senses.

Luigi pulled Heather to his right, blocking her view.

"Papa," Rausi exclaimed out of surprise, seeing only his father. He kicked something into the pool.

Paolo frantically searched for a towel as the woman searched for her thong.

"Angelina, are you looking for this," Rausi said kneeling to the swimming pool edge, and picking up a red thong from the pavers.

The dark haired woman with well-rounded curves enunciated in Italian, "Toss it to me!"

"Oh no, you come and get it. Here, from my hand."

She swam to the edge of the pool and demanded.

"Give it to me!"

He leaned over to meet her. "For one wet kiss and it's yours." Eagerly her moist lips met his for a passionately deep, but brief moment. "Mmm, Angelina, your kisses drive me wild with desire." She smiled. "As does your beaming smile. Tell me I'm next for the forbidden fruit."

"Rausi," his father hollered above the noise. "The music, do something about the volume."

Returning to a standing position he replied, "I didn't know you were home. The music is too loud?"

"Sì, it is rattling the windows and doors. Turn it down."

Suddenly he noticed from behind Papa, "Hey, Heather. Come swim with us. How long have you been home," he asked while setting his sights on the American prize, and hastening

his way to her.

“We have been home for a while. We were unable to make it to the fundraiser. Parking was nonexistent.”

“Too bad. Paolo, Mathieu, come meet Heather.”

Heather held onto Luigi for dear life as two attractive Italian, and barely clad, young men came forward.

Barefoot Mathieu, in a European swimming brief, staggered with a freshly opened bottle of beer. Paolo, out of the pool, moved hesitantly with a towel slung low around his hips.

That strange nagging voice in Heather’s head – the one heralding every college girl’s warning about Italian men had long ago subsided. She came to realize most Italian men were gentle family men faithful to God, the church and the Pope. But, the faint inkling of old superstitions resurrected as Rausi, Paolo and Mathieu lined up – barefoot and shirtless, to examine the foreigner. They were darkly tanned, handsome athletic men, Paolo and Rausi, the same age and Mathieu a few years younger. They each held that wild womanizing look in their dark eyes.

Heather pleadingly searched Luigi’s face to avoid their meaty glare. She knew bait about to be thrown to the sharks would never see demise coming.

“Come, Heather, go swimming with us,” Rausi stepped closer and urged.

“No.”

Ava along with the voluptuous dark haired beauty, Angelina, stepped out of the pool wearing nothing but thongs. A third girl followed shyly from behind. She jogged on tiptoes toward the safety of Mathieu.

Melting into Luigi’s arm Heather felt old. *Oh God, to be twenty-two again with firm round breasts perked high and a thin waif of a body.* Heather wished she had not come outside.

Rausi approached with a drunken swagger and tugged

on her arm. "Go swimming with us. Come on. Let's go. We'll take good care of you."

"I said no."

"Look, Paolo," Rausi whirled around, shouting to his best friend. "Tell me. Isn't she the prettiest American girl you've ever seen, huh?"

Paolo's devouring expression was obscene.

"Luigi, tell him to stop," Heather pleaded. "Please."

Rausi continued, persistently tugging on her arm.

Heather fought the insistent tug.

"That's enough," Luigi said. "Heather doesn't want to go in the pool tonight." Luigi held a hand to his son's shoulder, holding him at bay.

"Sure she does. Don't be shy. We'll have a good time."

Rausi suddenly reached out, gripping Heather's waist, firmly, and pried her from her husband. Heather panicked in the brazen move and yelped as their tussle immediately turned physical.

"Rausi!" Heather screamed.

"Put her down," Luigi yelled and scrambled for her release. "Let go this instant. Heather does not deserve such indignation."

Heather knew he heard his father's voice, but ignored it. Rausi's hands were too busy wrestling to hold on to her squirming torso as she fought with all her might. His hands grabbed her breasts, her hips, her thighs, all the while forcing her toward the pool. She knew he would throw her in and then jump in behind her.

Paolo, from the sidelines, roared with laughter at the sight.

The silky bow of her robe fell open as she kicked Rausi's direction, but it was no use. Rausi's fingers dug into her flesh. She screeched and flailed her arms. Finally her feet touched the ground as Ava came forward, yelling in Italian

too.

Luigi, Ava and Heather all yelled at Rausi as Paolo continued roaring as a banshee. Rausi struggled to pick her up, refusing to relinquish the prize and intent on throwing her in the pool.

Heather saw her predicament as insanity – only because Luigi could not gain control over his son. But, she would. Heather partially freed herself when Rausi leaned over her back. She squirmed, swinging her shoulders from side to side. He could only grapple at her torso. With an elbow in the air, Heather swung hard and broke free.

*“Cazzo!”*

Rausi reeled backward with a hand to his eye.

“What happened?” Paolo asked, foolishly cackling as a child.

Rausi stormed to Mathieu and snatched the cold bottle of beer out of his hand, and eased it to his right eye. “She fucking nailed me in the eye!”

“You deserved it you worthless idiot,” Heather yelled, grabbing the ends of the robe and pulling them back together.

“We were only having fun.”

“That’s not fun. It’s abuse,” she screeched. “I said I didn’t want to go in the pool and I meant it. We came out here to get you to turn the damn music down so we can sleep.”

Ava stepped forward from behind the boys. Her sweet voice carried high-pitched yet accusing toward the older woman.

Sensing danger Heather remained as far away as possible from Paolo and Mathieu. She turned and yelled back, “How can you stay with this idiot? He doesn’t care about you. He’s only using you for one thing. Don’t be so blind. My God, you have a whole lifetime ahead of you. Why don’t you make use of it somewhere else?”

“Heather,” Luigi said gathering her into the safety of



his embrace. "She doesn't understand what you're saying. Don't make things any worse than they already are. We will go back in the house. Rausi, are you going to be alright?"

"Hell, no, it's going to be black for a week."

"Serves you right for being so *stupid*," Heather spewed.

Swaying with one eye closed, he pointed the bottle her direction. "Go to hell, Heather."

"You're on a one way track to beat everyone else down that freaking road."

Luigi pried her from the heated banter and escorted her back to the house.

Alone in their bed Heather continued to spit fire, tossing, turning, unable to rest.

"Calm down," Luigi soothed.

"I can't. I'm so mad I can't see straight."

"Let's not reiterate. It is not worth the effort. Look at the situation this way. He loves you as his stepmother. He wanted to show you off to his friends. That's all."

"I didn't want to go swimming. The girl's don't want me near their boyfriend's either. They want all their attention and if I jumped in the water then I would have been stealing their limelight."

"True."

"See, I know the aspects of the situation, but Rausi – insisting I join them is unrealistic and inappropriate."

Running a hand over her hair, he kissed where his hand stroked and said, "My son is loving. He is energetic and he means well."

"I felt as though I were being attacked."

"He's drunk. They all are. Maybe tomorrow we will get an apology. But for now, calm down. No harm is done."

"Except for his eye which I don't for one minute regret blackening," she snarled.

“Okay, okay, enough.”

\*\*\*

Early afternoon Heather muddled about the kitchen fixing a cup of tea. Luigi secluded in his office, weary of the night before and with strong desire to be left alone.

Rausi slept till late morning before scuffling into the kitchen, hung-over, barefoot and wearing baggy shorts.

She watched as he reached for the pot of coffee that had been sitting for hours. He said nothing and seemed to be purposely ignoring her presence.

“So, do you hate me?” she asked not particularly caring, and not expecting that he actually would hate her.

He growled with an accent thicker than usual, “No, I don’t hate you. But, I’m mad as hell.”

When he looked up, she could see the black eye. It looked horrid. The other eye, bloodshot with a dark circle didn’t look much better. The beard grew scruffier and his hair had not seen a comb since yesterday.

“Put some ice on the eye. It will make the swelling down.”

He ignored the statement.

“Did Ava make you feel better last night?”

“Christ!” he blew up, jerking his shoulders, nearly spilling coffee everywhere. “No, Ava didn’t make me feel better last night. She accused me of trying to steal you from Papa and, and —” His whole body shook from frustration. “Paolo was fuel to the fire. He taunted her with the idea even more. She never stopped screaming at us.”

“I’m sorry.”

“No you’re not. You’re not sorry for one damned thing. Ava and the girls left us soon afterwards.”

“Really, I am sorry. The whole evening turned out

badly.”

“I don’t need anybody’s opinion right now. I don’t need you, and I don’t need Paolo or Ava. Just stay away from me.”

He stormed out of the kitchen and toward his room.

“Be sure and put some ice on that eye,” she hollered after him.

“Mind your own business!”

She shivered at the strength of his voice.

## 26

“Who is he talking to?” Heather said to Luigi a week after the incident.

“How should I know? Moreover, why should I care?”

She stared as Rausi paced the patio outside the French doors, his cell phone plastered to his ear and animated in the exchange.

“Something must be going on. He’s not been the same all week.”

“No he hasn’t. He has been in the office every day. His progress in the company is coming along. That is my only concern,” Luigi said, searching high and low for a suitable dinner wine. She heard the dull clang of unopened wine bottles as he scavenged the wine cooler. “Let’s skip the *Montevervine* and try an aged *Taurasi* tonight. I think you will enjoy this one. It’s another red wine.”

“Low on tannins?”

“Umm, not so much, no, we will taste it first. Tell me what you think of the aroma.”

“Okay. So is Rausi actually pulling his weight at work?”

“Very much so,” he answered reaching for a hand towel and the cork opener. “More than ever, and so outside influences must not get in the way. That infernal, antagonizing banter has to stop. I have heard more discontent lately than I can tolerate.”

Luigi’s warning was not to be taken lightly. Heather only wanted to please him and make their house a happy home.

When the phone call ended, Rausi stepped in the house. Atmosphere of the room changed.

Heather, in tuned to his many emotions, sensed his sadness. "What's wrong?"

"Paolo is hurting. He wrecked the Lamborghini on his way home last Friday night. The car can't be fixed."

"Oh, how awful."

Luigi said nothing.

"He went to the hospital in an ambulance. His injuries are bad. Paolo said he broke his left arm, ankle and foot. There's a gash across his forehead and he's battered and bruised. He says he can barely move."

Luigi said dryly, "I don't want the same thing to happen you. Use your head. Taking a chance with the car is not worth risking your life. I value my son too much."

"I'm not going anywhere soon."

"Why is that?"

"Ava and I are no more. We broke up."

Heather would have shown remorse, but felt it was not her place, not with Luigi's recent warning of their banter. She looked to her husband who showed no signs of acknowledging his son's grief.

The room quieted in an uncomfortable manner as the conversation died. Luigi proceeded to open the bottle of wine, and the cork gently loosened with a pop.

Perhaps it was the sensitive subject or perhaps it was due to the air thickening. Heather shot a glance to the curio cabinet, the one with the gold leopard statue. It vibrated. A ghostly hum sounded across the room. And then the ground literally began to shake under her feet. Glass and precious ancient artifacts rattled from within the curio. Luigi and Rausi also felt the vibration eerily increase.

"What's happening?" she yelled grappling for the nearest sturdy object. "Is it Mt. Vesuvius? Maybe the volcano is getting ready to erupt."

The ground continued shaking as glass and ceramics

made a tinkling sound in the vicinity of the fireplace. The fireplace irons and pokers rattled against their iron encasement and then fell on the stone hearth with a loud crash. A ceramic lamp vibrated across a table, spun, and then smashed into a dozen pieces on the tiled floor.

Luigi dashed to the open door, looking toward the distant landscape. Rausi rushed not far behind. "I'm sure this is only a small earthquake," Luigi said. "They are not unheard of in this region. See. It is already quieting now."

The vibration gradually diminished to a low rumble and then dissipated, but not her nerves. Her body shook from a gutless fear, from God's wrath over simple, humble human beings. She stared at the curio and its contents, unable to get over the fact that it seemed to be the center of the commotion.

"Luigi, do you remember how loud music shook the French doors?"

*"Sì."*

"This evening the patio doors and windows were not rattling. The shaking was confined to the vicinity of the curio cabinet."

"What does that have to do with an earthquake?"

The idea seemed rather silly, but feasible. "The gold panther is locked behind the glass."

"Oh," he abruptly flung his hands up to the heavens. "You and Edmundo and your ridiculous superstitions. Retaliation from the gods above would receive more merit than that damned statue. Rest assured the commotion was only a mild earthquake." He poured a healthy glass of wine, took in the aroma and then took a healthy swig. "This is good. Here, taste it." He poured a second glass.

Rausi, his shoulders slumped, moved as a lost soul to the patio.

"I feel bad for him. He seems lost."

“Paolo’s accident happened because he was drunk. What more is there to say? During his years at university I imaged great things for him. But, now? Nothing. Paolo will not take my son down to street level too.”

“You know, I feel a certain responsibility. Since you and I have gotten married my presence has caused things to happen.”

“You’re wrong,” the deep thrum of his voice vibrated stronger than usual, “My son is finally growing up. Change is for the best. His friends are nothing more than worthless leeches hindering progress.”

“Don’t you think you’re being rather harsh? I don’t particularly see them as leeching off of him. They are his friends.”

“My son is working beside me, making great strides to take over the family business one day. As long as there is progress I have no complaints.”

“Of course, sweetheart, we are all aware of your sense of duty. He is hurting right now. Can’t you see it? Aren’t you afraid he’s under too much pressure from—” she cut her words off.

Luigi’s expression was one of agitation, reigning in another rant for the sake of peace.

Through the window, they could see Rausi watching the sunset. It was not unusual. He had been enamored with watching the boats come in since childhood.

“If you think it will do any good. Then go. Talk to him.”

“Do you mind?”

“If mothering eases your worry then, no, I don’t mind. See if you can raise his spirit. But first, tell me what you think of this wine?”

She took the glass, took a whiff of the aroma and then took a sip. “Mmm, full bodied. We’re definitely going to need cheese with dinner.”

She smiled and it appeared to appease his soul.

“Too much tannin?”

“A little bit, but I’d still like to study the flavor.”

“Good.”

He took a couple more drinks.

Stepping to the patio, she saw the remainder of a beautiful sunset. Orange and salmon-pink evening clouds thickened over the sea’s horizon, as though waving the loss of a lover sent to sea.

Rausi sprawled out on a lounge chair, quiet and lost in his thoughts.

“Are you going to survive?” Heather asked, approaching his left side.

“Yeah.”

She chuckled, “Don’t let your father hear you say that word.”

“Yeah, well, I learned it from you. He can deal with it.”

Nearing his side she asked, “Does the eye still hurt.”

“No.”

She stood next to his chair and let the palm of her hand brush against his temple and forehead. His head was warm, nearly feverish. He leaned into her hand, seemingly relishing the touch.

“It only hurt for a couple of days.”

“I’m sorry.”

“No, don’t be. I should say the same.”

A few seconds ticked by. His torso and shoulders gravitated toward her waist.

“I feel responsible,” Heather began. “There are a lot of things that have happened since I met and married your father. Maybe you wouldn’t be in this situation if it hadn’t been for me.”

“Maybe.” His hand found the hem of her shorts. Placing a hand to her hip Rausi held her close to his shoulder.



"You didn't cause Paolo's accident. He was careless and drove to fast. However, you were right about Ava and me. We used each other. She was convenient. I gave her a good time and bought her attention. But, that night everything changed."

Heather's hand went to his shoulder to steady her position. "The evening seemed fine until your father and I came out. We only wanted the music turned down. I'm sorry we ruined the party."

She listened to his deep sigh, noticed his energy rise along with swift movement in repositioning a foot.

"What are you thinking?" she asked.

"Nothing."

"That's quite a large nothing."

"Don't worry about it. Maybe my judgment was not the best that night."

"I really feel responsible for some of your problems."

"How so?"

"Well, since the wedding you've had to go back to work which leaves little opportunity to be with Ava, Paolo and Mathieu."

"We had plenty of opportunities to get away, however —" His hand roamed up over the fleshy curvature of her backside to her hip. "You are part of the problem." He pulled on her body, forcing her to bend at the waist.

"What?" she resisted. Her hair fell forward as he pulled.

"Come here."

"No."

"Do you care about me?"

"Of course. You know I do."

"Ava and Paolo are partially right. They see clearly."

"What do they see?"

"I am not trying to steal you away from my father. I'm not that *stupid* as you told everyone that night. But, Heather, I

do have one weakness.”

She fell victim to his fortitude. Bending over, inches from his face, Heather could feel his hot breath, his radiating energy.

*“Baciami.”*

His left hand caressed the softness of an inner thigh, as he desired her mouth.

“No. Your father can see everything we do and I’m sure he’s watching us now.”

“He knows how I want you. He sees it when we are together. Tell me that you want me too.”

“Rausi, you’re pressing into dangerous territory.”

He chuckled, “Mentally or physically?” He pressed deeper. She squirmed to get away. “Tell me you want me.”

“I don’t want you,” she stressed as his fingers found their way under her shorts.

*“Sei un bugiardo, liar. I see it in your face when we talk. You kissed me before why won’t you do it now?”*

“Because.” The hand encroached further as she squirmed to fight him off. “Quit it or I’ll blacken your other eye.”

*“Straordinaria donna! I love how you fight me. One kiss, baciami.”*

Neither one heard the patio door, but they heard Luigi’s voice in the evening air. “That’s enough, both of you. Heather. Get back in the house.”

They both jumped at the implication of being caught. Heather’s heart pounded with a rising fear of repercussions due to Luigi’s severe tone. It scared her.

“This isn’t over,” Rausi whispered before theatrically releasing her hand, pretending to push her away. She reeled before catching her balance.

“It never began,” she whispered in panic. “I am married to your father for heaven’s sake.”

She moved away from the chair, slowly returning to her husband.

“Luigi, please.”

His expression was not to be tested.

“I don’t want to hear feminine wailing. I know what I know. Go in the house.”

She reluctantly retreated, tears forming in her eyes. Oh God, what had she done?

Rausi now wished he held a drink in his hand. The old man prepared to give a speech of hierarchy, legend and failure. The things great men are made of as though rock solid souls are born from strewn pebbles of the ground.

“Stop forcing yourself on Heather. She is upset. She doesn’t know how to handle your passionate nature.”

“I think she does. Heather appreciates the ardent ways of Italian men. Very much at this point. Wouldn’t you agree? I have your raging bloodline, you know.” He paused before adding, “Unless it skips a generation. Ah, yes, raging fortitude must skip a generation from grandfather to grandson. My father has always been *passive* to a fault.”

“You have not one quarter the character my father had or his hardworking ethics. My father was born when men respected one another. When they held honor above all else. If he were alive today he would feel nothing but shame and be repulsed by his grandson.”

“Heather is playing games with me,” he replied with a shrug. “She wants me. You know it as much as I do.”

“How can you say such a thing?”

Rausi smirked, reached for his crotch and adjusted. “Heather is in her prime, full of vitality. She wants a man that can satisfy her.”

Rausi, even with his left hand, blocked his father’s hand that swung to slap his head.

“Ah, father,” he said, guarded and ready to block

again. "Let me ask one question. What walks on four feet in the morning, two in the afternoon and three at night?"

"I am in no mood for games. You know it as well as I do. It is the Sphinx riddle in Oedipus. I do not have to tell you the answer. As an infant, man crawls on all fours. As an adult, he walks on two legs. In old age he relies on a walking stick."

"So where is your walking stick old man?"

Luigi kicked the chair causing Rausi to scramble to his feet, ready to fight. The chair violently toppled in their tussle, screeching on flagstones as it slid.

"What's gotten into you? You are not yourself. Do you see me as King Laius and yourself as Oedipus?"

"Hardly," Rausi sneered, feeling the prickly heat of his father's anger.

"Listen to the voice of reason. I was twenty-six when I married your mother and she was a mere twenty years old. We had a child when I was younger than you are now. I also had a steady income to support my family. Wisdom should never be mistaken as compliance or wasted on an impertinent rogue. When and if you manage to reach my age, only then tell me what knowledge lies within your thick scull."

Rausi ducked out of the way of his father's charge.

Within a safe distance and both hands in the air Rausi clapped. Slowly. "*Brava, Papa, brava.* Hierarchy, rest in peace."

"Put your hands down," his father roared and lunged. Rausi's quick defenses blocked the assault. "You want King Laius' widowed queen for yourself?"

"I would never marry a widow. My high standards could not withstand the degradation."

"Then you wish me dead?"

"No," Rausi growled and hissed. "Of course not."

Rausi was not so quick this time as his father caught him by the arm. His threat compounded with fingers digging

into the flesh, “Get out of *my* house.”

Rausi glanced into his father’s angry eyes and found not an ounce of passivity. “Get away from me,” he said pushing off. “I’m going to my room.”

## 27

Heather caressed lotion under the thin strap of a camisole top and down her arms as fragrant breezes blew in through the French doors. She loved the smell of the citrus trees and Italian herbs as well as the fresh salty air from the sea.

A small lamp illuminated her bedside table where she returned the bottle of lotion.

"I made a call today," Luigi said, his head resting on his pillow and facing away from her.

"To whom?"

"To my doctor. The news is not good. We have decided to go through with the surgery soon."

"Oh, Luigi."

She sunk under the sheet snuggling into his back.

"It needs to be done. This lack of energy is draining me. I am left unable to give undivided attention at work or at home."

"I'm sorry about this evening."

"I don't blame you completely. You don't understand how to handle my son's passionate nature."

"I'm trying to be a good wife and love your family too."

"I know. I know." He turned partially to face her.

"Adjusting to a new culture is not always easy. We both understand that. It has not been that long. You are still new to our customs." He took a heavy breath. "Anyway, the surgery will be scheduled soon."

"I am worried. Well, with not knowing what to expect."

"No need to be. My doctor is very competent. You will meet him. There is no reason to worry. I will be in good hands."

"I'll stay by your side during the whole surgery."

"Well," he patted her hip, "in the waiting room, yes."

"That's what I mean. I will be the first thing you see when you wake up. I'll see that your recovery goes smoothly."

"Of course, I have no doubt you will take good care of me, but my greatest fear is for my family."

"We love you."

"I know. Sometimes I can only deal with so much. Including the report from the doctor. He is concerned. Control seems to be slipping from my hands more and more these days."

She squirreled her way into Luigi, pressing her body into his.

"Not tonight."

"I just want to cuddle."

"Maybe tomorrow."

Heather's squirming insisted.

"Not tonight. I am sorry. I am failing miserably as a new husband, but I need to rest."

"You have been working a lot of overtime lately. Maybe you should take some time off. You're under too much pressure the way it is."

"No. My company is in the middle of a takeover. The merger is too important for me to stop now. This is a critical time."

"Must it always be about business?"

"It is not always about business. Right now, it is about surgery. Turn the light out, please."

"You are worried aren't you?"

"A little. Yes. Please turn the light out."

She returned to her side of the bed and gazed out the doors toward the night sky. It was difficult to see much past the lush bougainvillea, but she could see the sky and the twinkling of ancient Roman stars.

While gazing out the door she suddenly saw something move. The shadow was the size of a man. It fell across the bougainvillea making her blood run cold. Heather was well aware of the need for security due to Luigi's powerful status, but at that moment she regretted the doors were left open.

"Luigi," she whispered. She reached to shake him while pulling the sheet across her legs at the same time. "Luigi, someone is outside the doors."

He rose to his side to see. The shadow jerked once then disappeared.

"Is someone there?" Luigi said.

"Could it be someone from the shipyards?" she whispered.

He didn't answer but reached for the back of his nightstand. In a flurry of uncertainty, she heard a small metallic click and wooden drawer scrap open.

"Who's there?" Luigi called out with his hand on an object she could not see. Silence reigned. "Show yourself."

A beer bottle slowly rounded the door before the hand that held it revealed himself.

"If a pirate wanted you dead it would be over by now," Rausi said. "And with grandfather's old Luger. Hmm. Does it still fire? Don't tell Heather. She might be curious to know how many American men died in the war or were wounded by that firearm. She might jump off the cliff and swim back to America yet tonight."

"What are you doing out there?" Luigi said in angst as his hand relaxed and let go of the gun. It fell back to the drawer. "How much have you had to drink?"

"I'm still coherent."

"Then what are you doing?"

He said nothing while only looking at her.

"Make him leave," Heather snapped.

"Answer me. Why were you hiding behind the door?"



"I want to see what she looks like, what she sounds like."

"My God, Luigi, if he's not plastered drunk then he's out of his freaking mind. Do something about him once and for all. Please."

"Such as?"

"Kick him out of the room. Hell, kick him out of the house."

"Father would never kick me out of the house," Rausi smirked and stepped forward. "He's too *passive*."

"Then threaten to write him out of the will," Heather begged while clinging to Luigi's arm. "Threaten to dry up his funds. If that doesn't make him leave I don't know what will."

"Do you think cutting me out of the will actually scares me, Heather? Well, it doesn't. Don't assume you'll collect much of anything, *donna mia*. Remember, you signed a matrimonial regime to forfeit any claim. I would make sure you received nothing. Do you hear me? Nothing. And I, as we all know, am the one legal heir to inherit it *all*."

"I won't be abandoned," she demanded with a fist hitting the mattress. "Raphael will come in and take control over your allowance. He knows how lazy you are."

"*Basta*," Luigi yelled. "I am not dead however I am tired, very tired. Fight this out among yourselves." He slid from the bed and stood while grabbing his robe. He pulled it over his shoulders before slamming the secret drawer to the nightstand.

"What," Heather shrieked, throwing herself to edge of the bed, reaching for him. "Luigi, what are you doing?"

"Letting the two of you fight over my will, as if I were already dead. I am only having surgery. I am in fact quite well and very much alive. And now I'm going someplace quiet to sleep."

He walked toward the bathroom.

“Luigi, don’t you love me anymore?”

“Of course I love you.”

“Then why are you punishing me?”

“I’m not punishing anyone. If anything I’m giving you both what you want – each other.” She started to speak, but he halted her words. “I want no feminine wailing. If Rausi needs to stop making advances then stop him yourself. But after what I witnessed on the patio this evening –”

“Luigi if you leave me alone with him you will divorce me tomorrow.”

“I won’t divorce you. Get this infatuation out of your system. Both of you. Tomorrow, Heather, you are bound directly to me and only me.”

“Gloria told me you never tell Rausi no. Why won’t you tell him now?”

“Do it yourself. I’m done. *Basta*,” he said signing the word ‘enough’, closed fingers flying open as his hands moved apart. He then went into the bathroom to the medicine cabinet.

Rausi eased the beer bottle to the floor. His moment was ripe as he slithered across the foot of the bed.

“No,” she said adamantly yet softly while clutching the sheet to her chest. She did not want to scream anymore. “Go away. Leave.” She felt Rausi’s radiating energy, read the deviate danger in his eyes.

“Shh,” he said with a finger to his lips. “Stay right here. Roll over on your belly. I’m not going to hurt you.”

She whispered, “You’re out of your mind. Someone needs to lock you away in an insane asylum. This is crazy. Get out.”

“No,” on his hands and knees he crawled up the bed.

“Your father is still over there.”

“He gave us permission.”

“I’ll throw you out myself.”

Tossing the sheet aside she rose to her knees ready to fight. At the sight of broad shoulders towering over her, and his devilish grin, she changed her mind. He would have enjoyed the wrestling match and she would only lose. They were face to face. She hated the fire that flared in his over confident soul.

“Shh,” he motioned with a twirl of the hand to turn over.

The request seemed innocent enough. Luigi had not left them completely. He stood in the bathroom. There was still time. If only he were man enough he could still toss Rausi out to the patio, on his rear, off the property and into the street.

The sound of running water came from the bathroom as a glass was filled. Lying on her stomach she could see what he was doing. Luigi took two pills – the muscle relaxers. He had never taken two doses before and the sight caused her concern. Luigi had to be hurting more than he let on.

Still wearing the t-shirt and shorts from earlier in the day Rausi laid down beside her, reclining on his side, elbow on the pillow with his head in his hand.

“I want the truth,” he said softly.

“What truth?” She smelled beer on his breath.

“In the kitchen. You kissed me.”

“It was a mistake.”

“No.”

They both heard the door to the hallway open and close again as Luigi left the room.

She felt like a pawn tossed between two warring factors in a game of deadly chess. Maybe she had bitten off more than she could chew, when it came to Cassini men. Both men were confident in making their own decisions and one highly sexed. Maybe Hope had been right all along. This was a mistake, a mortal liability.

## 28

The wolf glared at her.

“Be honest. You are curious. You have thought of me.”

“As sinful as it sounds, yes, of course I have thought about you inappropriately. You’re attractive, spoiled to the core and you have everything a man could ever want.”

“I don’t have everything,” he said with a subtle shake of the head. “Not by far. But, you wonder what it would be like to lay beside me?”

“I’ve felt your body on more than one occasion. We’re side by side now.”

She became increasingly aware of their proximity. He felt the running charge and nudged closer.

“And you want more?”

“He would hate us tomorrow.”

“No he won’t. I promise you this much. He and I may argue and throw insults, but my father loves me. He loves you too.”

“But, why?”

“Huh? Why does he love you?”

“No. Why me?”

Rausi reached to her hair and tucked a strand behind her ear. “Why do you think? Can’t you feel the pull? I felt it the moment I laid eyes on you sitting with my father in the restaurant. You felt the pull too. I saw it on your face.”

“The look on my face was fear. The same fear I feel right now.”

“Absurd. Your tactics lack precision. Try another tactic or play the devils trump.”

“Sorry. The devils trump is the card you play every day.

It's worn out."

"Then play the queen of diamonds," he said glowering and close enough to kiss her. Instead, he backed up, hopped to knees, tore the t-shirt from over his head and tossed it to the floor.

"Rausi, I'm too scared. No."

"Don't be afraid."

He leaned forward and brushed her silky chestnut hair to the side.

"Face down again."

"Why?"

"Shoulder massage. Face down."

She straightened up, face down. His fingers delicately massaged the back of her neck, strong, yet gentle. She felt his radiating heat against her skin and moved to accommodate.

"You are so beautiful," he whispered. "I want to touch every part of your body."

"We can't."

"Shh, don't think about anything. Relax. Let everything go."

Rausi the snake ran his lips down one arm. The citrusy aroma of her lotion lingered in the air. She was sure he infused it in his brain.

His mouth licked and kissed back up the arm, across her shoulders and down the other arm.

He massaged her skin, her arms until they slowly unfolded, like the petals of a rosebud in bloom. He stretched forward until his chest came in contact with her back. His skin pulsed against hers as his mouth gently bit into his tasty treat.

She felt his solid, muscular body as he made calculated inroads behind one ear. His whiskers tickled and she wiggled under the prickly hair. Rausi then adjusted his hips. She felt the cargo shorts meet her backside, felt the zipper bulged.

Then reality struck.

"That's it. Massage is over," she said fighting to be released.

"Roll over," he commanded.

"Why?"

"Because I said so. Roll over."

When she balked, they wrestled. He grabbed her around the waist and physically rolled her onto her back. Air escaped her lungs in a gasp.

"What are you going to do now?"

"Finish the massage."

"And then leave like a good pool boy? That's it. No tip for rotten pool boys. They're worthless and they think way too highly of themselves."

"Don't argue. It defeats the purpose. Now lay still."

Her expression held a wallop of fight. He roughly pulled her ankles, making her body straight. Besides the view, the cleft of her apex attracted him. She frowned as he repositioned one of his legs between hers.

"Close your eyes."

"I want you to leave."

"No you don't. You love tormenting me. You are a mean woman for all the wrong reasons. A dominatrix. You would crack a whip over my head and demand that I kneel to the ground to please you. I am not a dog. Now close your eyes. I'll show you how to appreciate me."

"You're a *hound*," she insulted him with the perfect German intonation, but without the grunt.

He raised one eyebrow. "Don't tempt me to get rough because I can. You deserve to be loved. Not dominated. Now close your eyes."

She obeyed only because she couldn't stand looking at his gloating facial expressions.

His hands deftly went to work, caressing her soft belly.

The flutter it caused took her by surprise. He gave no mercy and she weakened to his gentle manipulation.

Her nipples hardened causing peaks to form under the camisole. The sight interested him and his hands roamed under the camisole, kneading the softness and pinching the peaks.

“Rausi,” she murmured. “Please.”

“Please, what? You want me to finish?”

Their sight connected. Their mouths within inches of a kiss. Their breath hot and heavy.

“Are you done fighting me?” A few seconds passed as he waited for an answer that never came. “I’ve no other choice but to take that as a yes.”

Their encounter in the kitchen, the encounter by the pool – the episodes had awakened her curiosity of Rausi. She could not deny that she had fantasized about him. His physical attractiveness, the undivided attention he gave. Even through moments of curiosity, she felt his feelings bordered on love for her, unlike Ava or Angelina whom he had used for entertainment purposes. His affection for her was more dangerous than either one of them could control. This building awareness of sexuality only heightened their dangerous liaison to the point of no return.

He kissed, fondled and explored her body as she responded to his mastered skills.

“An angel,” he whispered. “*Un angelo, vedere il bagliore*. What is this power you hold over me?”

She mumbled, languid, “I have no power when you take advantage of me.”

“You are Venus, Cytherea, Aphrodite wrapped into one. Feel our hearts beating the same note. You pull me to you, Heather. Tell me I’m not crazy.”

“You’re insane.”

“No. I don’t believe it. You make me this way. How do

you do this?"

His kiss smelled of beer. He was mildly drunk, drunk with desire more than the beer. Their mouths moved together, lips gliding over the voluptuousness of the other. Rausi's kisses built. They were powerful, formed by his overzealous zest for life. His kisses waned, and built again before trailing off in a tender emotion.

He had been the one to pull away in the kitchen. Beside the pool, Heather insisted they stop. But now – neither one wanted to stop. Tonight they would finish what they had started.

"I dreamt that one day we would be together."

Her firm round bottom filled out the lace panties perfectly, but he wanted them gone. Making haste, he snatched them from her sinuous legs, and tossed them to the ground before running a finger along her silky slit.

"You've been holding out on me. You're wet."

"Maybe."

He slid a finger inside. She gasped at the sudden violation.

"I want you Heather. I have waited so long for this day. I have suffered greatly. You won't regret our passion."

With each thrust, her ability to think diminished. Her traitorous body deceived as she gave in and cocooned him, drawing him near.

"Are you sure?"

"I have dreamt of this moment. My love is like nothing you've ever experienced before."

He was serious. He was a man more arrogant than should be allowed. But, it was that egotism that excited her. She enveloped his hard torso. His smooth dark toned skin fascinated her, the beauty of it, as well as his face. Those beautiful eyes surrounded by dark lashes that always, always bore into her. The scratch of those black whiskers irritated her



delicate skin, but his hungry mouth enticed her.

“You think so?”

Her hips came off the bed to meet his fingers that darted in and out.

“I know so.”

He moved away, straightened up to his haunches and unsnapped the cargo shorts. The zipper came down.

“How many times do you come?”

“Three or four times on average.”

“I’ll make you come fifteen times,” he said in an accent thick and heavy with lust.

“I don’t know about that, maybe ten at best.”

“Fifteen,” he promised. His cool eyes darkened as gray stone. He tugged off his shorts and tossed them aside.

Heather glared at Rausi’s engorged cock standing to attention.

“The weakness in your eyes makes me change my mind. Tonight twenty. *Venti*.” He shoved her knees into the air and lowered his head between her thighs. “Don’t forget to count.”

She reveled in his egotism while her fingers combed through his hair. How one man could have everything – including whatever he stole, deprived a simpler breed of man. He pleased and pleased in remarkable ways and at a leisurely pace.

One hour later, she begged, panting and winded in their repeated rapture. The last copulation had taken her breath away. “When are you going to finish?”

“What’s the count?”

“Thirteen.”

“We’re not done. I only come when I want to.”

“Oh,” she rolled her eyes as they switched positions for the umpteenth time.

“On your back, your head over the side of the bed,” he

barked out the oddest positions. He stood at the side of the bed. "Use your fingers to pleasure yourself."

Another hour later Heather begged again, strain sounding in her voice, "I'm tired."

"No, we're not going to quit." His hands held her legs. "You are sweating though."

"I feel like I've worked out in the gym."

"Get on your knees."

At last he took control from behind. She braced. Still, he would not finish. Her tone was of frustration. "Rausi."

"What's the count?"

"Nineteen."

The rocking bed seemed to have a mind of its own. They were acrobatic circus tumblers and professional athletes sprawled across the bed.

"Touch yourself."

"I'm tired. I can't anymore."

"Do it!"

She obeyed. The moment intensified. Emotionally, physically, mentally they were as one. He knew her sounds intimately, felt the sensations she gave. *Venti*. He let the sensation build until it shot down his spine and captured his soul. He reared back allowing the godly pleasure to surge. Mt. Vesuvius blew in a volatile explosion as Pompeii lay destroyed. Within minutes he fell to the bed, spent.

## 29

She could have sworn she heard him snore. Carefully Heather slid from the bed. He didn't move. She went into the bathroom, her legs wobbly. She grabbed a fresh towel and turned on the spray to the shower. The temperature of the water quickly warmed. Even the warm stream had a cooling effect against the overheated flame of her skin. Her heart still pounded from their energetic workout. She was mad, angry, confused – satisfied. Her legs would not stop shaking. The hour was near midnight which only added to the confusion. Heather rubbed her eyes. Soon, soon, she would find Luigi. Two pills were too many to take along with his heavy consumption of alcohol earlier in the evening.

She nearly jumped to the ceiling as hands slid around her waist.

"I didn't mean to scare you."

"I thought you were asleep."

Stealing half of the water's spray he replied, "I was."

"We need to find your father."

"Don't worry, wherever he is he's out cold."

"We've got to find him. He's going to be mad," she said rushing to finish the shower.

"Don't panic. Slow down," he said crowding her.

Their flame continued to blaze as their wet bodies came in contact. The exotic craving, not even a memory yet.

"Let go of me once and for all. We're done."

"We are anything but done," he said reaching for the body wash.

"It has to be." Heather quickly rinsed off as he lathered up. "This can never happen again."

Rausi, frowning, grabbed her arm with a soap-covered hand, "Heather, don't fool yourself. I will have you again."

"Whatever."

"This attitude," he snapped. "I'm sick of it. I am a changed man. See what you have done to me." He caressed soapsuds around her midsection. "*Il mio amore.*"

"Oh, please, get a reality check."

"My love for you is real." He placed a hand on her belly, "Maybe you will give another Cassini heir one day?"

"That's it." She fought to break away. "No. I am protected. If you want an heir then marry Ava. This conversation is over."

The genuine hurt shown on his face and he released her arm.

"Ava and I are no more. She is gone."

"I'm terrified your father has drugged himself to near death," Heather said continuing to rush. "I need to find him."

"He is fine, don't worry. At his age he has immunity in his system."

She stepped out of the shower. Grabbing the fluffy, white towel and began drying off, her body first and then the hair. "I couldn't live if he hated me."

"He won't hate you."

"How can you be so sure?"

Rausi stepped out of the shower, grabbed a towel and wrapped it around his waist. Heather had a sudden realization. It was perverse.

"My God, you've done this before?"

"Done what?"

"You and your father – shared a woman."

"No! Absolutely not! Heather, this longing I feel for you is real. To the outside world – they would say it is not healthy, but what I feel is in my heart," his hands cupped her face, "It is true love, *amore*. Can you not understand?"

She broke free, grabbed a robe that hung on the back of the door and slipped it on. "Please, I can't cope with declarations of love anymore. I don't want to see you anywhere near me or your father tomorrow. Stay away from us. Do you understand?" In an instant she flew from the bathroom, through the bedroom door and out into the hall.

The house was dark in the silent night. The cool tiles under her bare feet were a welcomed distraction to the confusion in her head. Near the family room she saw faint light coming from a lamp that had been left on. She searched for Luigi, but he was nowhere to be seen. She expected to find him curled up on one of the couches, but he wasn't there.

Heather ran from room to room in a panic, guilt overtaking her mind. She flipped the light switch to the patio. Nothing. He was nowhere to be found.

Rausi sauntered through the living room toward his side of the house.

"I can't find him," she cried.

"That's because you're not thinking clearly. Upstairs. Try the guest room."

Heather flew up the stairs, two at a time, to the second story. Sure enough the guest room door had been tightly closed. Carefully, quietly, she opened the door. Luigi, tucked under the sheet, snored in sound slumber. She approached and fell to her knees at the side of the bed, touching his shoulder. He stirred.

"Luigi," she said softly in the dark silence. "Do you still love me?"

The pills had taken effect. His mouth was dry, almost too dry to speak, "*Si*." His mind barely functioned. So much so that he spoke his native language. He had been such a gentleman and nearly always, thoughtfully, spoke English in her presence.

"You don't hate me?"

“Lay down. *Sonno.*”

He wanted her to lie down and sleep. Maybe she had survived the horrible ordeal. Tomorrow things would return to normal.

He returned to slumber before she tucked under the sheet next to him. It was for the best that his awareness of a dysfunctional house was minimal. Her heart still pounded from the commotion and anxiety. Lying in the quiet cool of the night, she could only feel Rausi’s touch and hear his commanding voice in her head.

The night went slowly due to guilt and turbulence. Sleep did not come until early morning.

Luigi, however, overslept by two hours. She would not wake him though, thinking it best to allow the drowsy effects of the pills to run their course. She listened to his soft snore for the longest time, felt his beating pulse and wondered if he dreamt. The surgery would be soon. Perhaps fear of the unknown crept into his mind.

By 8:30 Heather cautiously stepped out of the bed to face the morning.

Coffee needed to be made, a semblance of normalcy. They would all need plenty of coffee to start this horrid day.

Heather tiptoed to the kitchen. She went to the coffee pot, but it was full, hot, and recently made. Rausi had beaten her to the kitchen. However, he was nowhere to be seen.

She reached in the overhead cabinet. Coffee mugs clanged together as a case of nerves left her frazzled. Her body and actions were no longer her own. She wanted to remain quiet as a mouse. The threat made to Rausi last night was real. He had to stay away.

Her hand shook while pouring coffee. Weakening against all hope she just wanted to fade into the woodwork. Disappear. Die. The residual effects of Rausi’s touch and the sound of his taunting voice were ever present, ringing

continuously through her head. She was not completely angry with him. Secretly, Rausi had provided a thrill that rivaled the mythological gods in heaven. Temptation for more of the thrill would prove extremely dangerous – to both of them. It could never happen again.

She plotted the morning hours. Before Luigi woke, the evidence needed to be thrown in the washing machine. But first, curiosity rose to an alarming degree – the garage. She had to know. She ran through the hall, opened the door to the garage and peeked. The Ferrari was gone. A small portion of her emotion deflated at the sight of the empty stall.

## 30

It was not until mid-morning, that Luigi came downstairs.

"I didn't want to wake you. How are you feeling this morning?"

"Very tired."

She noted how his speech was impaired and his fortitude lacked the usual grace.

"You're not going to work are you?" she inquired, pouring coffee in his cup. "I don't think that you need to be driving today."

"No. I will phone my secretary and handle business from home."

"Good, I think it's best to avoid driving or anything strenuous until the effect of the pills wears off completely." She hesitated. They both sensed the draining tension. "Luigi?"

"No. I don't want to talk about it."

"But –"

"I said no. I am angry over wanting to sleep and instead was forced to listen to my wife and son behave like teenagers. I am insulted that you would both fight over my will – and to my face, as if I were dead. What happened later in the room – I don't want to know." He pointed, "But mark my word, it will never happen again. And I never want to catch the two of you cavorting behind my back ever again.

*Comprendere?"*

"Please. Don't you see? It's him, all him. He pressures me, relentlessly."

"I am going to talk to my son. It is not all his fault. You entice him. I want the enticement to stop."



Luigi took his coffee and walked away. Leaving Heather reprimanded as a child with her hand slapped.

He sequestered, door open, in his home office. Before noon Heather entered with a second cup of coffee and set it on the desk. Luigi spoke into the phone, "I want this business addressed today. Fax the report along with the forms. I will sign them and return the fax. Be sure they go into the mail this afternoon. Also, is my son in the office?" He paused as the secretary made the affirmation. "No, I don't want to speak with him. We will be in touch this afternoon. Goodbye."

He hung up the phone.

"Are you going to be hungry for lunch?" Heather asked needing to be close to Luigi. Inquiring about lunch provided an excuse to talk to him, to be near him, searching his emotion and fearing his anger. It was a penitence she needed to pay.

"I'm not hungry."

"Whenever you're ready just let me know."

She turned to leave, her head down.

"Heather," Luigi said, instinctively shoving his chair from the desk. "Come here," his arms opened for her. She came around the edge of the desk and fell helplessly into his embrace, burying her face in his neck as the tears flowed. He stroked her hair causing the physical touch to instantly repair a portion of the divide. "The world is not ending. Okay?" She buried her head deeper into his neck as he cradled her. "Don't let it happen again."

"It won't."

"Okay, so no more tears now. I have more work to do."

## 31

The ferry came in from Capri on time as Rausi blindly watched the vessel from his office window. He sat in the stillness of his office on the top floor, mindless of the outside world. He nearly nodded off again. Last night he had slept maybe three or four hours at the very least. Her scent, her touch, her voice, everything about the woman replayed in his mind as though she were still beside him. Heather had sated his drive in their energetic tryst, but left in its place something more powerful, more precious and desirable. Something he could not own, nor buy.

And although his drive had quieted, for now, his head hurt from lack of rest, but worse yet his heart felt ripped open. A feeling he had never felt before and didn't particularly care for.

He desperately wanted to pick up the phone. To call. To talk to her. To hear her voice. The thought was tempting, very tempting. But, he agreed, any contact between them would be dangerous right now. The budding temptation lethal.

Earlier that morning he had the sense to pack an overnight bag. He rushed by lamp light in his room, snatching a second suit from the closet along with a shirt and tie, and stuffed them in the red leather bag. He could not go home. No. Not tonight. It was for the best. They had to avoid each other. She wanted it this way.

The office phone rang several times. He jumped with each ring, but it was never Heather or Papa. Only business.

Lucinda, the secretary, kept him busy, but the work seemed trivial compared to his scrambled thoughts. And why

didn't Papa call him if for no other reason than to discuss the company or the all-consuming merger? That thought bothered him the most.

By afternoon self-doubts mushroomed into agony. What if Papa was angry? What if Papa was mad that he had forced himself into their room, and forced himself on Heather? The unknown grew. And what if Papa's usual calm demeanor flared to something besides passive? Rausi felt sucker punched. Only once before had he felt real fear – in the Alps – while skiing downhill at a high rate of speed. He had misjudged a drop and went over a cliff larger than expected. The terrorizing freefall lodged in his throat while hovering several feet above the ground. He landed hard, lost control and rolled to a stop. Safe, but shaken up and bruised, with a torn tendon.

Today was different. He felt there was a very good chance he might lose his home *and* his father, which was precious as life itself, and the loss, a cruel fall from grace.

After work, he left the building and retreated to the tourist end of town, blending in with vacationers. The company of strangers provided a safe haven since few would know his name, except for one bartender near the pier. They had gone to school together. Other than that, almost no one knew the tall dark stranger with sadness in his eyes. He was just another unfamiliar face walking the cobbled streets.

Rausi checked into the room of a small hotel off the beaten path, locking himself away from society. It was for the best. This uncertainty over his future left him edgy. Heather had been right in telling him that his emotions bordered on obsession, bordered on insanity. He felt nearly on the edge of losing his mind now.

Lying on the bed he cursed and threw the television remote across the room. He then rolled over and sulked with what he could not have – Heather in his arms.

## 32

Refreshed the next day with a bright and shining morning, Luigi stepped into the Cassini building at his usual hour. Cheerful and professional as always, he walked the long corridors greeting his employees along the way. They in return welcomed him back, wishing him well from yesterday's presumed illness. Lucinda had informed one or two employees that *Signor* Cassini had not felt well. And that the younger *Signor* Cassini had been so saddened and preoccupied with his father's illness that he could barely focus. Gossip spread like wildfire throughout the building.

"Please, thank you for your concern. It was nothing. I am quite well as you can see," Luigi said consoling his employees.

Several minutes later, Rausi's office door slammed so hard the windows shook. Rausi jumped, turned, and was stunned by his father's expression. He had not seen the old man this mad in years.

Luigi stood there with his suit coat comfortably open, one hand on his hip and the other hand in the air. "Two words," he said composed yet fuming. "No more."

It made sense for the most part. Rausi rubbed the growing stubble on his cheek having not shaved in days and the beard itched. "Okay, can you elaborate?"

"I have been pushed as far as I am capable of tolerating. Today you will respect my privacy, my wife's privacy and this flirtation with Heather stops – right now."

"Okay," he said with a shrug of the shoulders. "Can I go home tonight?"

"I won't stop you from living in the house. I don't understand why you won't find a place of your own."

"I'll start looking tomorrow." Startled, Rausi barely recognize his own voice. The words were foreign and sounded as displaced as he felt.

How could he pull himself away from the only place he had ever known as home? It was after his parents' divorce that he had stayed in the house for his father's sake. But, Papa no longer needed him.

"I don't care what you do," Luigi said. "Just know one thing – there will be no more pressuring, intimidating or arguing with Heather. Give her respect. As long as I am alive the house belongs to her." The vacant look on his son's face was pleasing to Luigi. "I am insulted that you would argue over my will. Have I denied my son anything? No. I spared nothing for your education. One day you will inherit the house and the company. That is if you can hold onto it. God forbid you let the Cassini name crumble to the ground," he growled. "The accounts, everything will be yours. Everything. Except for one thing. My wife. Do you understand?"

He continued over Rausi's blank stare, "Your focus belongs in one place and one place only – this growing merger that we've discussed. It continues to come together. The only chance for our company to absorb their clientele list lies with both our heads clear and working together. I want you supervising the financial end and I will continue preparing their officers. They have weak-minded managers, angry and ready to snap under the pressure, but they still hold information we need. If those men do not concede in a matter of days they will be replaced nearer the acquisition. If you stay focused I will see to it that you fill the highest position. The whole of the division will be under your supervision. Okay?"

Rausi had no doubt that his Papa loved him. If he took responsibility for his future, this very day, it would remain secure. There would be no more threat of Zio Raphael taking control of the money, or replacing his position in the family.

## 33

The coffee table sat buried under several thick folders. Luigi, still wearing his suit, sat in the center of the couch while Rausi tottered on the edge of his favorite recliner. He remained in shirt and tie as well, however minus the jacket and with sleeves rolled up. They immersed themselves in details of the merger.

"I won't be there the day the companies merge," Luigi said. "So it falls in your lap. Believe me; I would have postponed the surgery if I could. The merger has been scheduled and the surgery can't be postponed."

"Don't worry, Papa, I saw this day coming."

"Good. Now we have covered legalities and responsibility. Here is the latest financial report of their current worth," he reached across the table. "It includes the projected stock value after the merger and applied growth percentage under our code. The same quarterly report should have been sent to your office. If you don't have it yet it should be there soon."

"I haven't seen it, no."

Heather hovered nearby, listening. She had not heard or seen Rausi since that day. He had only recently returned to the house, but they managed to avoid each other. At night, he sequestered in his room. Each morning, he escaped early.

This sudden sight of him thrilled Heather although the emotion mingled with shame and guilt. Luigi was her beloved husband of whom she would uphold always and forever. But still, Rausi's touch lived in her heart – so much so the guilt hurt.

"Are you worried Papa?"

“Over the surgery? No, honestly I am not. You have proven yourself. I trust your ability to handle the company.”

“That’s not what I meant, but I’m glad you’re taking the surgery in stride.”

Heather walked around to the back of the couch and declared, “He is more worried about our reaction to his hospital stay than he is concerned about his own welfare.”

Rausi ignored her presence completely and buried his nose further in the paperwork. She found the sudden change in demeanor quite odd.

“It is true. I am more concerned about my family’s reaction than I am about myself,” Luigi said, patting her hand that had found its way to his shoulder. “In a month or two we will forget we ever had a disruption.”

She leaned over to hug her husband. Shiny chestnut hair fell into her face and his. “How about we put something on the grill tonight? Aren’t you the master griller?”

“I am, but not tonight. This is very important.”

“Alright,” Heather replied backing from the couch. “Rausi, it’s good to see that you’re home.”

He still gave no sign of her presence. She felt the chill and didn’t much care for it.

Although Rausi did not look directly at her he could recite exactly what she wore – baggy unattractive slacks, a nondescript shirt and a thick sweater that hid her figure. Assuming her outfit had something to do with his presence he scoffed. *Who wore the guise of stupidity now?* Didn’t she realize he had memorized every detail of her naked body, every subtle nuance of her passionate nature? Heather could not hide her glorious figure behind frumpy unattractive clothes. He knew her intimately.

## 34

Pasta came to a boil on the stove while sporting news blared on the television. The monotonous drone of the Italian sports announcer, day in and day out, got on her nerves.

“Rausi, if you’re not going to watch that television then turn it off!”

One evening they had run into each other at the garage door. It produced a semblance of civility when Rausi was forced to acknowledge her presence. Cause and effect meant that they could resume sharing an evening meal, as a family, albeit strained and quiet.

Tonight, dinner sat in limbo while they waited for Luigi as he had not gotten home yet. This project, the merger, consumed both men. It was all Luigi talked about and worked overtime on, too much. The man was exhausted, and two days before his scheduled surgery.

There came a knock from the side entrance. Heather waited assuming Rausi would answer it.

The knock abruptly turned into vigorous pounding.

“Rausi, someone is at the door!”

The pounding vibrated a priceless medieval painting hanging on the wall.

“Stop it. Oh crap.” Pasta boiled over. “Rausi, get the damn door!”

Maybe he had locked himself out of the house. That didn’t make sense. The patio doors stood wide open. He could have easily gone around the garage and gained entry. Heather turned off the stove and went to the door.

“I’m coming. I’m coming. Stop beating the door down.”

She opened it. A young man stood there, a stranger.



He was moderately tall, athletic, perhaps in his early twenties, yet he began speaking in Italian faster than she could decipher. She caught the words 'Rausi', 'Mathieu' and 'brother', but not much else.

"You're Mathieu's brother?"

"Si."

"What's going on," Rausi asked making his presence known. "Who's yelling?"

The stranger's composure suddenly slumped at the sight of Rausi. He continued speaking in Italian, "Mathieu sent me. You have to come."

"Where? What for?"

"There's been an incident. Near the house. You must come. It's the Aston Martin."

"Papa? Is he hurt?"

"We don't know," he continued in Italian. "The police are arriving. Come quick."

Heather and Rausi looked at each other afraid to draw any conclusions.

Not quite understanding their words, Heather asked, "Why did you ask if your father is hurt?"

"Papa wrecked the car."

"So what is this man saying?"

"All he is saying is that he probably sideswiped the wall and blew a tire or two. Let's go."

"Let me make sure the stove is turned off."

"Hurry."

She took off running in flimsy flip-flops.

Placing an arm around Mathieu's younger brother Rausi whispered, "What do you know?"

"The car is half way down the ravine. No one can tell yet. He missed the turn and went through the stone wall."

"Christ." His guts went sour. "Don't say anything else. I don't want her to hear." *Keys, he needed the keys.* "Heather,

hurry up.”

They went to the garage and rushed to the car. The Ferrari sped through the gate before the small Fiat could catch up.

Sinking into the seat Heather rambled, “Do you think he’s hurt? I mean wrecks happen on the curves of Sorrento. It’s no big deal. Even Paolo’s wreck could have been much worse. Modern safety devices give cars and their drivers a better chance. Aston Martins are built solid. He’ll be alright don’t you think?”

“I hope so, Heather, really I do. Don’t jump to conclusions until we learn something solid.” He shifted gears and sped down a short straightaway.

A long line of traffic backed up tightly around a curve. After work traffic. Red flashing lights from emergency vehicles pulsed through the trees and off the crumbling face of the hill, while long shadows of the late afternoon lent an uncertainty to the scene.

Rausi saw Mathieu at the side of the road and drove up fast causing him to sidle out of the way.

Once stopped, Rausi hopped out of the vehicle in haste, his sneakers crunched over gravel and broken stone.

“Have you seen him? How is he?”

“An emergency crew is down there right now. No one has sent news to us yet. We don’t know anything.”

“Well, why not? I have to get down there.”

Rausi scanned the area in assessment.

“I don’t think that is going to happen. No one is allowed near the busted wall. We’re all waiting to hear.”

“I’m going down there.”

“Then I’m going with you,” Heather said bounding forward.

“No. Stay here. Mathieu, watch her.”

“Hey, you can’t get rid of me that easy. I’m going too.”

“No. I said stay here.”

Mathieu reached to Heather, “*Signora*, please, be careful, your sandals. The broken rock is very dangerous.”

She jerked her arm away, remembering him from that awful night by the pool. Annoyed with circumstances, she paced in flip-flops as Rausi went to the emergency crew.

“Halt!” An officer at the edge of the road stopped him.

“My father is down there,” he answered in his native tongue. “I have to go to him.”

“No one is going down the hill. An emergency crew is working as fast as possible. We know that traffic is backed up. People are frustrated and they want to get home too. Just bear with us and stay out of the way.”

“But, that’s my father down there. I have to see him.”

“No one is going down the hill except emergency personnel. Please step back from the road.”

“Listen, you don’t understand. My name is Rausi Cassini. My father would want me by his side. I can talk to him, calm his fears. You know, have you seen him? What is his condition?”

“We have not gotten word. Now stand back or you will be forced to leave the area.”

He stepped back, angry, warned, although not totally convinced.

The retaining wall lay busted. For a car to have blasted through that barrier it had to have been going fast. The gutless feeling in Rausi’s stomach did not stop. He knew his father hurt from whatever his condition might be. Silent terror consumed him as he paced the scene. He noted the weathered mortar. It must have weakened from years and neglect. Overgrown weeds grew between the foundation and pavement causing separation.

He glanced at the officers. Their backs were turned.

In the blink of an eye he jumped. He went over the

wall, diving down, feet first. His white sneakers scuffed over loose ground and the skin on his hands tore from jagged rocks and prickly shrubs. He barely noticed the pain through spiraling fear. And then the tail end of the car came into view. He could see the license plate and the brake lights, roughly making out their shape through the damage. He could not make out the front end clearly. Splattered dirt and debris covered what had been an immaculately clean automobile. Father would never let his car look this way. The car sported ghastly scrapes and dents in the framework making him feel sick. This was not the same vehicle that parked in the garage night after night. Tires dug into the ground, up to the wheel wells. It was difficult to tell if they had gone flat or were buried into the mire.

He came to an abrupt stop, whirling to one side, grappling at a sapling tree.

The emergency personnel, in light gray coveralls, worked on either side of the dark heap. The driver's door lay on the ground beside the car, pried off at the hinges. Before Rausi could reach the wreck a tarp unfolded and whipped in their hands. It was given a toss over the hood of the vehicle.

"No!" Rausi bellowed.

The workers turned to look at the commotion.

"Who are you? No one is allowed down here."

"That's my Papa."

One medic quickly stopped him with an outstretched hand to the chest. "You shouldn't be here."

"I want to see him."

"No, you don't." A stout man forcefully pushed him back. "I am sorry. He's gone."

"No, he's not," Rausi said nearly hyperventilating. "No. Papa! I'm here." Heat rose in his head, behind the eyes as his voice choked. "No, it's not true. Papa, answer me. Tell them it's not true. Talk to me."

"Please," the stout man said. "We need to get you to the top of the hill. Can you climb? We'll go now."

"No. Let me see him. I want to talk to him."

"But –"

The medic had been interrupted from drawing the tarp completely over the open door. It revealed enough that Rausi could see. He stared at his father's arm dangling lifelessly. The sleeve of the black suit and crisp white cuff hung loosely to his side. Rausi waited for the arm to move but it did not, only deathly silence. Dark hair tufted from the back of the pale hand and knuckles, the familiar hand of his father.

*Papa, move, Rausi mentally encouraged tell them you want to get out of here. Tell them you want to go home, tell them... tell them that you are still alive. Papa!*

The hand did not move.

Silence of the gully was an oppressive fog in the surreal nightmare. The only sound came from someone turning their foot on crumbling stone.

"Give me that," Rausi quickly ordered.

"What?"

Pointing to the limp hand Rausi said, "His wedding ring."

The medic balked.

"It's not my place to move anything. The police will package his personal effects. The family will receive them later."

"No, give it to me now."

"But *signor*, it is not my position to do so."

"This man's wife is waiting at the top of the hill, waiting to hear news that her husband is alive. How do I tell her that he is gone?" Tears choked him. "That ring belongs to her."

Both men tottered in a standoff on a precipitous slope.

The medic gave in and went to retrieve it. He gently

tugged on a lifeless finger, removing the ring, and then returning to place it in Rausi's palm. The simple exchange was too much. Rausi rolled the ring in his palm, feeling the texture, remembering how happy his father was the day he married Heather. Rausi fought the emotional battle of his life. Tears choked his every breath. The blood drained from his head. He lost the battle knowing his father would not be coming home tonight, or ever again, and collapsed.

Tears streamed down Rausi's face as the medic helped him climb the incline, slipping over dry gravel, straining to reach the top.

Out of the ravine, Rausi felt as though he had conquered the abyss of the underworld only to be thrown into the pit of hell.

Heather ran to him, reached his side and fearfully mothered him. Her expression was pained with unanswered questions while her hand touched his cheek and tears. He hadn't the strength to explain to her.

"What happened," she begged.

He could only shake his head.

"Tell me. I need to know."

He mustered strength.

"Papa's gone."

"No. You're lying," she said breaking away. "No, no, Luigi, where is he? I want to see him. Take me to him."

"I saw him Heather. He is not coming back."

"I don't believe you. What kind of mean trick are you playing this time?"

"It's true. The car – he's gone."

He could only hold her steady, look deeply into her eyes and force her to see the truth. She slowly wavered under his glare as they broke down together. They spiraled into the dark chasm until his arms were no longer strong enough to hold her.

Confusion and chaos hung thick around them as the sound of a diesel engine increased. The tow truck backed to the ravine.

An officer approached them, offering, "We can have someone drive you home."

"No. I have my car, I can drive," Rausi mumbled.

"Are you sure?"

"Yes."

"Then please," he said loudly over the deafening alarm of the wrecker. "We need to clear the area. There will be someone in contact with the family soon. Once we have the report we will know more."

Rausi had Mathieu's assistance in supporting Heather to the passenger side of the car. There, Mathieu reached out, wordlessly, and hugged Rausi in support. Rausi nodded back in a daze.

They saw that Heather got in the passenger seat and then Mathieu left.

In the driver's seat Rausi turned the key to the engine. It started with a roar. He then backed to a clearing in the road and turned the vehicle around.

"Do you think he suffered?" she whispered.

"No. The airbags deflated."

"Do you think he knew what happened?"

"It was quick. He could not see past the airbags." Rausi struggled to contain his emotions. "He never knew. Besides, God wouldn't let him suffer, not Papa."

"He knows this road. He grew up in this area. He wouldn't let this happen, especially not during daylight hours."

"It could have been anything, an animal or another car blocking the road. We may never know."

## 35

The refrigerator door closed. Dinner went into storage containers untouched.

Rausi came out of the den finished with the responsibility of making phone calls.

"I called Edmundo, mother and Raphael. Edmundo will get back with me tomorrow. There is much to go over."

"That's nice. I'm sure as soon as your father gets back from his business trip he'll want to see Edmundo."

Rausi froze. The horror of this day wore badly enough on his physical system without this. Her denial.

"Heather," he said softly, concerned. "What did we do this evening?"

"I fix dinner and you know, then what?" she said, her Italian accent slipping out. "Nobody eats and what happens? I end up putting it all away."

"Heather, you're in shock. Papa is gone."

"Right, he's gone on an unexpected business trip. He should be back tomorrow. You know this whole business of a merger, or a takeover, or whatever in the world it is. It's really infringing on our lives. I can't wait until it's done and over. I'm tired of it. Just tired of it."

He hung his head and reached in a pocket he pulled out the ring. He grabbed her hand and poked it firmly in the palm.

"Here. Now do you remember?"

"Where did you get this," she snapped, accusing.

"Where do you think? From the crash. Your husband. He's gone. He died."

She said nothing, rolling the ring around one finger,



cherishing it, deriving any small sensation she could from Luigi. It was true. Luigi was gone. As much as Heather fought reality – she knew.

“Did you see him?”

“Si.”

Rausi searched her brown eyes. Wishing to know what thoughts might be in her head.

“Did he feel any pain?”

“No. He never knew what happened.”

“Did you see any blood?”

There was slight pause. “No,” he lied before looking away, wondering if the tragic memory would ever fade. He tried not remembering until his body shook with silent sobs. He went to the couch. She followed, sitting beside him – before curling into a fetal position. He held her as they both mourned for what seemed like hours. Passage of time slipped into oblivion.

When dusk descended she shifted, her voice hoarse.

“How can we go on?”

“We’ll find a way.”

“And if we don’t?”

“We will.”

The sun fell over the horizon and the house darkened. She whispered, “I miss his voice.”

“I miss it too,” Rausi choked. “I miss his frustration with me. He thought I didn’t listen, but I did. I heard every word he ever said.”

“Your father made sure we never lacked for anything. He did everything for us and he did it out of love.”

“Oh,” Rausi looked toward the ceiling. This was hard.

“Yes, he did.” Wiping his eyes with a sleeve he stretched his long legs under the coffee table. “I don’t think I can sleep tonight, but we need to rest. Try to clear your head.”

“I can’t.”

"I can't either."

"Rausi, I'm so lost without him. I don't think I'm going to make it."

They mourned for an eternity. By midnight he felt Heather jerk as though half asleep. He stirred.

"Get up," he pushed. She moved groggily, pulling tousled hair from her face. "We need to sleep."

He took her hand and led her down a long corridor. To the other side of the house, to an area she was not accustomed to, to his room. The room was similar to the far side of the house with a shape more elongated than wide. French doors along a narrow wall provided access to the patio. The modern blue and white space appeared organized and clean as though the housekeeper had swept through during the day.

He stripped the bedspread with one broad motion. It fell to a bench at the end of the bed. Next, the top sheet stripped down to the bench. He laid Heather at the far pillow where she curled up facing the wall, and facing a pair of snow ski's that hung on a rack in the corner. He did not touch her, but quietly reclined in the spooning position.

"Do you think we're being punished for what we've done?"

He knew the accident had nothing to do with their passionate encounter. As for punishment, no, he did not think it, but obviously, Heather held some issue.

"Maybe."

An hour later he pulled the sheet over their fully clothed bodies. By morning, she was gone.

## 36

The cell phone woke him up. He rolled over, groaned and answered it in a foggy haze.

“Hello?”

“Hello, this is Detective Esposito from the Sorrento Police Department. With whom am I speaking?”

“Rausi Cassini.”

“We have a detailed account from the accident and would like to meet with *Signora* Cassini and the family this afternoon if possible. Perhaps 1 pm. Would this be a convenient time to meet?”

“Yes, we’re anxious to learn the findings.”

“Very good.”

He hung up the phone, walked to the other end of the house and knocked lightly on Heather’s bedroom door. There was no answer so he pushed the door open.

“Heather?”

She curled up on the bed wrapped tightly in Luigi’s white robe. She faced the other direction.

“Heather, the police will be here this afternoon. They want to speak with us. They have news about the accident.”

“I don’t want to see anyone.”

“They understand this is a difficult time. I’m sure their meeting will be brief.” He glanced around. Everything appeared in order. He took a step backward and glanced into the bathroom. Thick moisture and heady fragrance still clung in the air, the scent of Heather’s skin. She had taken a shower. The clothes she had worn yesterday lay carelessly strewn across the floor along with a damp towel. His eye traveled up to the bathroom countertop. His father’s razor, a toothbrush and the wedding ring had been organized on a crisp white

hand towel. It pained him to know she had placed them there in his memory.

“When you are up to it, we can put Papa’s personal things away so you don’t have to look at them every day.”

“Go away. I don’t want you here.”

He quietly left the room.

\*\*\*

“Heather, I’m sorry. Come home,” Hope pleaded on the phone.

“I can’t,” she whispered still curled up on the bed, the phone tucked under her head.

“Why? Luigi is gone. What is keeping you tied to that place?”

“I have to take care of things.”

“What’s to take care of? The housekeeper does all the work. Get real. The only reason you want to stay in Italy is because you’re spoiled by all the benefits. I’m sure they’ll offer you a parting allowance to live on. Just come on home and get away from Sorrento – Italy, whatever. It seemed like a bad idea from the start. I still think the old man lured you into his lair and took advantage of what you had to offer.”

“It was never like that.”

“Care to back that up with proof?”

“Why are you being so cruel to me? It was more about love than you will ever know. Hope, don’t hurt me any more than I’m already hurting. I called you for support.”

“Well, what are you going to do then?”

What could she do? Heather broke down in tears unable to speak.

“Where’s Rausi? How is he holding up?”

“He’s somewhere in the house,” she sniffled. “He’s hurting too.”

"Heather, I hate to bring this up, and now really isn't the time, but I'm not out there to have a legitimate conversation whenever we need to talk. The day of the wedding I saw something that concerned me. It was completely out of place. What is your relationship to Luigi's son?"

"I'm his stepmother, his father's wife."

"He doesn't see you as a mother figure. He's a grown man you know, and doesn't need a mother. His actions scared me. When I was out there, he had that camel jockey look of ownership over you."

"Rausi is harmless. He's just spoiled beyond comprehension and overly confident. And he's so damn good-looking he flaunts those good looks at any suspecting female that will fall for his charm."

"Have you fallen for his charm?"

"Hope. Please."

"At the wedding he kissed you. I mean, my God, Heather, right in front of his father. Even I could see smoldering intimacy between the two of you the whole time I was out there. What do you think the guests saw? What could Luigi have been thinking watching the two of you suck face?"

"Hope, stop it. I am hurting right now. I love Luigi more than anyone knows. Only he knows."

"Heather, don't stay in Sorrento because of Rausi. If you do you'll be looking at more trouble than it's worth."

"I'm staying here because it's my home."

"Alright. I can see I'm not going to talk you out of it, but here's one warning. If you stay, you best be very careful. Somebody's going to get hurt even more and I'm afraid it's going to be you. Heather, cut your losses while you still can. Come home."

## 37

The doorbell rang. Rausi went to the formal entry, to the old section of the house and opened the door. Two detectives stepped forward.

"My name is Detective Esposito," the elder of the pair said. "And this is Detective Amoretti. Is *Signora* Cassini at home?"

"Yes, I'm sorry, but *signora* is not up to having visitors today, certainly you can understand. I am *Signor* Cassini's son. I can deliver the findings to her personally."

"I'm afraid our information is significant to the case. We must speak with the *signora* directly. If you can inform her that we are here, we will wait. This will not take long. Please, her grief is to be expected however we must speak with her in person."

The standoff was an aggravation to say the least. Why they insisted on speaking to the wife instead of a blood relative he did not know. Heather's obstinate mood only made matters worse.

"Come into the foyer and I will get her."

The two men stepped inside while Rausi stormed off.

He tapped on her bedroom door before entering.

Inside he found she had barely moved from hours ago.

"Heather, get up. The *polizia* is here. They insist on seeing you and they won't talk to me."

"I told you to leave me alone."

"Not this time, *donna mia*, come on," he said pulling on her arm. "Hurry up and get dressed. They are waiting in the front foyer. They have news about the accident and I want to know. Now."

"I'm not going."

“Damn it, don’t fight me on this! Stop being so stubborn.” He went to her closet, frantically searching through racks of clothes, messing up the organized structure. Finally he pulled out a navy blue pullover and threw it on the bed. “Here, it’s not black, but it will do. Now stand up and get dressed. Where are your shorts?”

“Get out,” she screamed while pointing at the door.

“Will you get dressed?”

“Yes.”

“Then hurry up. I am waiting right outside this door. If you’re not out in two minutes I am coming back in.”

He gave her five uninterrupted minutes.

When she walked into the foyer, she was every bit the black widow in black dress slacks, a kitten heel and a long sleeved black sweater. She also wore a pair of lightly tinted sunglasses to cover her tear-stained eyes. Her hair had been wet when she went to bed and it spiked on the left side, unflattering.

“*Signora* Cassini,” the elder officer said with a slight bow. “You have our deepest sympathies from the loss of your husband. Thank you for meeting with us. We have some detailed information that we would like to share, however we regret that it comes with misgivings. The report of your husband’s accident has come back from forensics. We are sorry to inform you that our findings have detected more than only a mishap. We are afraid foul play is also involved.”

Both she and Rausi exclaimed simultaneously.

“What does this mean? What are you saying?”

“The tests reveal that only recently the brakes on the car were tampered with. An investigation is currently under way to find out more. And so if we could speak to the both of you – separately, we would like to ask a few questions to learn more about the late *Signor* Cassini and his particular habits.”

“Like I said *Signora* Cassini is not up for discussing

anything. She is grieving the loss of her husband and not feeling well today.”

“We are attempting to build a timeline to see who the elder *Signor* Cassini talked with yesterday, or the day before, even as long as a week ago. These are just a few of the questions we want to ask. Do you have a few moments to give?”

Rausi turned toward Heather. She looked tired. About as tired as he felt. “Can you talk to them?” She nodded affirmatively. He moved closely to kiss her forehead. “Okay. I am sure this won’t take long. Do your best. If you need me I will not be far.”

Detective Amoretti, a short round man, motioned toward *Signora* Cassini. She led him into the formal living room, a quiet parlor that was rarely used. Its decor was dark and heavy and permeated with the essence of Grandmother Cassini.

Detective Esposito, a slender man with a rugged face and a serious expression, inquired of the current head of household, “Is there somewhere we can talk privately?”

“In my office.”

Once inside the room Rausi sat casually behind what had been his grandfather’s desk and his father’s. He took ownership of the domain, his heritage, without flinching or missing a beat. Detective Esposito sat across from him, face to face.

“Just a few questions,” the officer began. “Do you know of anyone who might wish to harm your father?”

“No.”

“Think hard. Has he argued with anyone recently, the *signora* for instance?”

“No.” Rausi leaned back in the chair, “That’s absurd, my father and his wife did not even yell at one another. Heather would never hurt my father much less anyone else.”



“Okay, then you. You and your father had a recent falling out or an argument?”

“No. Now listen here,” he leaned forward again, elbows on the desk. “My father was the most honorable man you would ever want to meet. Everyone, even his employees, loved him. He gave attention freely to family and charitably toward the community. He is flawless in honorability. Ask anyone in the village. They all care about him. My father has no enemies.”

“I’m sorry to say, but it seems he had one enemy and that someone tampered with the brakes of his car. Someone wished your father dead. I am only doing my job. There is a murderer out there, somewhere. Aren’t you curious to find out who did this treacherous deed?”

“Of course,” he snapped at the prod.

“Then let’s continue. We are not accusing anyone just yet, only searching. Now your father had a business partner, *Signor* Marinacci, am I right?”

“Yes, Edmundo, he is like family to me, *zio*. He is like an uncle.”

“Would this man wish any harm against your father?”

“No,” he stressed with increasing irritability. “They were raised as brothers. My grandfather and *Signor* Marinacci’s father were in the war together. When the war ended, they made the best of difficult situations. Our country was left devastated. Our people were poor. These men worked to support their growing families. Edmundo and my father grew up like brothers. He would never hurt him. He loved him as I do.”

“Please answer carefully. Would he not wish to steal your father’s wealth, underhandedly, to take more than his share?”

“To insinuate the very thought is preposterous,” Rausi spewed, shoving away from the desk. “Our conversation is

over.”

“Almost. Now think hard. Are there any other business partners? Or at work, did you work in the same building with him?”

“Si.”

“Who did your father speak with over the past few days? Could something have happened in the business?”

“I don’t see my father everyday nor am I aware of his meetings.”

Rausi thought of the merger, but said nothing. Their managers are weak-minded individuals Papa had said. He wondered if Papa had done something to anger or threaten one of those men.

“Perhaps this is something you need to find out for your own piece of mind. Speak with his employees. Maybe one person witnessed something peculiar only recently. Where was the car parked every day? Are there cameras nearby? All it takes is one piece of information and we might be able to build a case. Believe me, I am here to help. Now if you can help me find the answers we will solve this crime.”

Their meeting was over and the two officers stood near their car, calculating what they had just heard.

“What do you think? Do you believe everything the *signora* said?” Detective Esposito inquired – the clicking of his mind almost audible.

“I believe she is a grieving widow. The *signora* does not fit the role of a perpetrator in the crime. *Signora* Cassini is American. She does not understand what is going on beyond the fact that her husband is gone. What about the son?”

“He is holding his emotions close to his heart. He is painting the picture of perfection for the wife and the business partner as expected. What do you think of the pair together?”

“What do you mean?”

"He is protecting her, is he not?"

"Why shouldn't he?"

"Let me approach this differently. Okay, if a husband and wife never argue, ahh, say they get along perfectly as the Cassini's seem to have done. They have a good marriage, *si?*"

"*Si.*"

"You heard the son yell at his stepmother before she came to the front door."

"She stood her ground. She yelled back."

"If they are a grieving family and if there was little fighting in the household, why fight now – and over getting dressed – and in the signora's private chamber?"

"Some families are different. These people are wealthy. They behave differently than say your family or mine. There are no small children in the house to protect from adult behaviors."

"Don't you find it strange that the son would inappropriately push his stepmother in her private chamber and over what clothing to wear?"

"What are you getting at?"

"The son also took his stepmother into an embrace and kissed her forehead. Is that not considered intimate?"

Detective Amoretti countered, "Again, some families are more affectionate. True this pair seems very close, perhaps due to their grieving circumstance. *Signora* is very upset as a wife in mourning would be. The son seems upset too. If you are looking for probability that the wife murdered her husband – I don't think it for one minute. Now, on the other hand, if you are assuming that the son may have had something to do with his father's death we will follow through on your assumptions. Do you think he murdered his father?"

"Not particularly. But, there is a tight bond between this pair. The son is an adult still living under his father's roof, which is odd in itself. The *signora* married a man old enough

to be her father, but is closer in age to the son. Together they could have set in motion a chain of events.”

“Then we will search for clues.”

## 38

Rausi watched their car leave. Once the driveway was clear, he whirled from the window – and roared in an ungodly rage that made Heather shudder with fear.

He charged through the house to what had been his father's bedroom and began tearing into drawers.

Heather followed. Seeing the carnage she shrieked, "What are you doing? Stop it! Just stop it!"

Rausi strong-armed the nightstand. An electric cord ripped from the wall before the table lamp crashed to the floor sending glass shards flying.

"I'm looking for something," he growled.

"For what?"

The secret compartment in the back of the nightstand popped open. Rausi reached inside and pulled out the Luger.

"My God, why did he need a gun?"

He checked the chamber. It was loaded. "You won't need this. I'm taking it with me." He grabbed the spare clip as well.

"That's your father's gun. Put it back. What do you need a gun for?"

"I don't *need* a gun. I own two semiautomatics and carry one in the car for protection."

"Why are you taking this gun? Are you planning on shooting someone?"

"Not today."

In the bottom of the draw sat a silver key. It was the item he searched for. Snatching the small key in his fist Rausi turned toward the far wall. He dove across the bed, landed feet first on the floor and began tearing into his father's wardrobe, ripping clothes from a top shelf and carelessly

flinging them to the floor.

"You're making a mess out of the closet. Get out!" she screamed at him.

There, crammed in the back corner he found the medium sized metal box. He tossed it on the bed where it bounced once. Sure enough, the key unlocked the lid and it flew open. Six bundles of cash fell out, each one thousand Euros, neatly stacked and still bound in their wrappers. A small piece of paper, torn from a legal pad was also in the box. It held an array of handwritten numbers neatly scribed in a line. He grabbed the paper and stormed out of the room.

Astounded with the amount of cash lying on the bed Heather roughly stuffed the Euros back into the metal box before returning it to the top of the closet. The clothes would have to wait. She needed to know what Rausi was doing and ran after him.

Slamming of furniture continued in the office in his explosive hunt.

"Please tell me what is going on. Why are you so mad?"

"I need his passwords," he answered, right before a large safe door swung open with a groan. Ten more stacks of Euros could be seen neatly pressed against the sidewall. More than had been in the metal box. But again, it was a yellow sheet of paper torn from a legal pad that Rausi grabbed. He then plopped in the leather chair, whirled around and turned on the desktop computer.

"What do you think you're going to find?"

"I have no idea. Maybe if we are lucky we will find a link to the murderer, a threat, blackmail, anything."

"Do you know who did this," she asked softly, afraid of what he might say.

"No, that's just it. I don't know." He maneuvered through computer sites typing in passwords. "Christ! All he

ever did was study the markets. His email is filled with this stuff. I don't see anything. There is nothing that stands out in his private inbox."

He suddenly flung a notepad across the desk out of frustration. It fell on the floor next to Heather's chair. She hedged a split second before bending to retrieve it.

"Don't touch it," he growled. "I'll pick it up myself."

"Rausi, please, please talk to me. Tell me why you are so mad. Did the police say something to upset you? Do they know who did this?"

In the blink of an eye he reached for the phone at the edge of the desk and hit the first button on speed dial. The person on the opposite end answered immediately. Devoid of formality Rausi said, "I need help."

"I know. They were here too."

"They were? What for?"

"The same reason. Searching for answers," the gravely old voice remained calm and steady. Rausi heard the gloat in the old man's voice. *Predictable* he thought.

"And what did you tell them?"

"Nothing, I know nothing."

"Edmundo, be honest. Do you know who killed my father?"

"I wish I did. Justice would have already been served by my men, quite crudely I might add. So how much did you tell the police?"

"What's to tell? I don't have answers to give either."

Edmundo took a heavy breath before asking, "How is Heather doing?"

"She's here with me. Heather thinks I've gone completely mad." He glanced at the pistol and clip setting on the desk. "Last night was not easy – for either one of us."

"I'm sure it was the worst night for us all." Edmundo sighed heavily. "I loved him dearly. The rest of my days will

not be the same. I miss him so much now.”

Rausi rolled the chair away from Heather as flood of emotion hit again. “What are we going to do? Who are we up against? I’m not going to pretend I’m not scared because I’m scared as hell.”

“Be calm. As soon as the detectives left my home this morning, precautions were made. I took some liberties – for you and Heather as well as for Carlotta and me. Now don’t be afraid. Wait a minute. Hold on.” A couple minutes of silence followed before Edmundo returned to the line. “Okay, now turn toward the window, soon you will see two men behind the house, don’t panic, they are my men there to defend the estate.”

Glaring out the window Rausi waited.

“What are you looking at?” she asked.

“Nothing.”

Within a matter of seconds he saw two men appear from behind the garage. They dressed in dark clothing and wore bulletproof vests. They stepped down from the patio onto the grassy terrace leading to the cliff. Holsters strapped to their shoulders. One had an automatic rifle strapped to his back. Obviously they were snipers, Rausi knew, skilled in the art of killing. Their backs remained to the house as they searched the incline to the village and the sea.

“Okay, I see them.”

Curiously Heather quickly hopped from her seat and started toward the window. “What do you see?”

Rausi jumped out of the chair, but the phone cord stopped him from going over the desk. He roared, “Heather, sit down! Now!”

Edmundo’s deep voice rose to life on the other end of the line, “Don’t be so hard on her. Gentlemen don’t yell at women with that tone. Calmly inform Heather that I have sent two guards to protect the house. Is that so hard to do? *Nostro*



*Padre nei cieli.*" God in heaven.

The old man continued ranting as Rausi motioned for her to sit. Heather's frown revealed the pain and hurt from his outburst.

"It is only protective measures to insure your continuing safety," Edmundo continued. "Until we find out who did this monstrous deed we cannot take chances. Now go through the house, lock all the windows and doors. Close the drapes and shutters in every room upstairs, everything in the front of the house. Downstairs keep the lights low in the evening and stay away from the windows. If they come in from the sea let's pray they don't have firepower to reach the hillside. I will see what I can do in protecting the house from a nautical standpoint. Okay? Is this too much to ask? Can you do this for me?"

"I will do it now."

"Good. That's my boy."

Rausi hung up the phone, stood from the chair and went around the desk. "I'm sorry. I am sorry. I am only trying to protect you, me, and the house. Come here," he positioned far from the window, but looking toward it. "See those men," he put an arm around her waist. "They are here to guard us. There will be no sunbathing, no swimming in the pool, no jogging outside the house or showing your face until they are gone. Do you understand?"

The tightening threat almost set her off balance.

"Who are they?"

"Edmundo's guards."

"Why do we need guards?"

"Against the underworld. This is just the way things are."

"Well, why do we need to go to such drastic measures?"

She really could not see. Security was such an

unspoken thing, taken for granted, such as the locked gate over the driveway. Even as a child Rausi never asked whom those men were, but undoubtedly knew the meaning of hovering guards on special occasions, men with holstered guns.

“Well, it’s like this. After World War II some men made their fortunes, like my grandfather.” Rausi told the story as he had heard it a million times before. “While some men chose criminal paths. It remained a problem for decades. In the 60’s and 70’s certain problems even escalated. The battle has lessened over the past twenty years or so. Pirates remain in the shipping industry, thieves that are not above stealing containers right off the docks. There are those that would topple an industry if they could find one weakness – like my father, or Edmundo, or you or me.”

“Pirates? Like in the movies?”

He paused. “I’d laugh if it didn’t hurt so much. Pirates are high tech now. We have to be careful. I’m going to lock up the house now. Neither one of us can leave or go into Sorrento. If we need anything – food, groceries – they will have to be delivered by people that we know personally.”

“What about making arrangements, you know, for burial?”

“They are going to have to make a house call or we use a driver.”

“Isn’t this kind of going overboard?”

“I’m not taking any chances.” He felt weary. “When it’s over, I’ll get a mechanic to go over the vehicles.”

“Do you really think someone is out to get us too?”

“I don’t know, Heather,” he answered while locking the office window and yanking the dark red velvet drapes closed. “I just don’t know. When it’s all over, if you want to leave I wouldn’t blame you for wanting to escape this madness.”

“Have you stayed with your father because you were afraid to go out on your own – afraid of pirates?”

“I *stayed* because it was necessary. I stayed because my father *needed* me.”

“And you needed him, needed him so much that you shrugged off every responsibility and lived the life of leisure at his expense.”

“My shallow nature shows so easily?” he replied with resentment and turned to the door.

“Yes, it shows. I don’t see it right now. You were scared out of your mind just a while ago.”

“I am still scared. My father was murdered yesterday and the murderer is still out there somewhere, lurking.”

## 39

Early the next morning Rausi climbed into the back of a large car, a car owned by Edmundo. The interior was dark due to heavily tinted windows and the day was overcast. No matter. His mood was dark as the driver delivered him to the Cassini building.

Within ten minutes of arriving at the company he called a meeting to order. Every office worker packed into a large conference room. Standing room only.

*Signor* Cassini solemnly stood at the forefront.

“As most everyone has heard by now my father has passed away in a car accident.”

The room exploded with sounds of sorrow.

“I will be standing in as corporate leader and business will carry on as usual,” he remained in control for as long as possible. “There is no reason to fear for your jobs. They are secure and will remain secure well into the future. We know the company is strong and by working together it will stay strong. Many of you are also aware the company is going through a corporate merger, absorbing a company in *Napoli*. My father and I have been working very hard to get the transition to this point and under my direction, the merger will continue to move forward until its completion. There is room for growth now at Cassini Insurance and room for certain individuals to take a larger role in the company. I will arrange for another meeting and get with you shortly.”

Sure, Rausi realized, the takeover would go on as planned, but actual legalities of his inheriting the insurance company would take weeks if not months. Once the will was read only then would family lawyers see to it that Rausi

received his inheritance – and the presidential position to the company.

He could not help but gaze at familiar pictures on the wall – photos of his father and grandfather, along with other corporate leaders in the business. Rausi felt he would rather have Papa by his side rather than own the money or the power. What did titles and authority matter without his father's comforting voice telling him everything would be okay? He needed that voice. He needed it now.

Someone coughed and he came back down to earth.

"I welcome any assistance as we move forward. If there is anything I can do to help my employees let me know. We will get through this. We will make the transition. No matter what happens. No matter what the future holds. We will move forward. Are there any questions?" No one spoke. "Then thank you for your time."

Most everyone in the building fell into a state of grief. But through that grief, they gave Rausi their utmost devotion. The company would remain firmly intact with the current *Signor* Cassini sailing at the windless helm. Sadly – favorable trade winds were dead.

Sequestered in his office he felt numb. Tears were nonexistent. He had no more to give, but neither did he have the energy to concentrate on much of anything.

There was a knock on the partially opened door.

"Come in."

Lucinda came into Rausi's office holding the information he had requested.

The woman, nearly the same age as Luigi, had been with the company for many years. She knew her job well. Lucinda, a grandmotherly figure with short gray hair, was adept at making wise decisions, complimenting her position soundly.

"In the past few weeks," Lucinda began, her voice

professional and steady, "*Signor* Cassini's contacts have been routine. Nothing stands out in peculiar. We are being contested by other insurance companies, but within acceptability of the law. They fight us, but the fight is not volatile and they have no direct link to your father's office."

"I see. Anything else?"

"For this week, he had four visitors. Here are their names," the secretary handed over a sheet of paper with names and dates and the hour of their meeting.

Carlotta's name was on the list.

"Did you see *Signora* Marinacci or speak with her?"

"*Si*, she was gracious as always and delivered a quarterly check. I believe she and your father had lunch."

"*Signor* Giordano?"

"The current president of the company we are merging with."

"And did you hear their conversation?"

"No, it is always behind closed doors. *Signor* Giordano is frowning more often with their meetings. The merger is hard on him. I understand he is not happy that his company is selling."

"I want Giovanni from our resources department to acquire the personal files of their top managers and report to me."

Rausi had recently become aware which managers were on the chopping block and for what reasons. He would study the situation again and deal with them accordingly, but later.

"And Paolo was here?"

"*Si*, *Signor* Orsolini. He is still using crutches and wears a cast on his arm. A family member drove him and waited outside the office. The man seemed quite miserable, encumbered by his restrictions."

"Do you know what they discussed?"

"No, they spoke inside your father's office."

"Do you have *Signor* Orsolini's file?"

"He is not a client of ours."

"Yes he is."

"No, *signor*, he is not."

"He used to be," Rausi said, tired of this verbal dance.

"Get me his file, current or not. I want to see it."

By midmorning Rausi felt his troubles would never end. Paolo stopped paying his premiums over a year ago. He held no insurance at the time of his accident.

He closed his office door before picking up the phone.

Yelling into the telephone the veins in Rausi's forehead throbbed, "What the hell, Paolo, what the hell were you thinking?"

"You owe me."

"No." Thinking as his father, as the president of a large company, he countered, "Paolo, the Lamborghini. Your hospital bill. What were you thinking?"

"I paid the insurance. I paid it. You owe me the car."

"By God, prove that you paid it." Rausi searched frantically through the computer's database, searching for record of a check or credit card. "Christ, by all means prove me wrong. I have no record past a year ago. Three months – even six months ago, maybe I could have worked something out. Over a year of not paying? Why is there no recent activity under your name? I can't even fund the hospital bill."

"That's what your father told me too. He wouldn't help me. My life's blood lays in ruin."

"That's right – you were in the office and spoke with him. Did you hear about his accident?"

"I heard."

"And did you know the police are calling it a murder? Someone killed my father."

"No, I hadn't heard. I don't hear much of anything, or

from anybody these days. I can't get out of the house or even find entertainment. Angelina is gone. I'm sorry someone killed him, but serves the old man right for turning me away. Rausi, you won't turn me away. Will you? We're friends. Just a portion of the hospital bill, that's all I'm asking for."

"Fuck you, Paolo! My father did not deserve to die. The night the Lamborghini got totaled is the night you screwed up. This is your own doing. Maybe you know who murdered my father. Maybe it was you!"

"It was *not* me! I didn't do it. I can barely get out of the house. I'm confined in these horrible casts. How could I manage to kill anyone? Huh?"

"Then you hired someone."

"You're a liar. I have nothing. No money to hire anybody with."

Both men flared, impassioned and heated. Rausi had walked a thin line in his personal life on numerous occasions, but nothing compared to foolishly compromising his inheritance. It was a fool's game to do so. He would never endanger his grandfather's name. In the middle of arrogance and conceit he would never squander the Cassini fortune. Many thoughts ran rampant. The deepest one hurt the most.

"Your father will bail you out of the hospital bill. Hell, he even purchased the Lamborghini in the first place. You are far from broke. Stay away from me, Paolo. I never want to see you again." And with that he slammed the phone down.

Sickening sensations crept up Rausi's spine. Paolo disrespected his father's name. He wanted to be elsewhere, anywhere but stuck in the office when reality hit hard.

The secretary lightly knocked on the door before entering.

"*Signor* Cassini, we need an answer on what to do with this soon, if you could look over the form and advice me." One glance and she questioned, "Are you okay?"



"Yeah," he lied.

"Excuse me?"

"*Si!*" Rausi faltered while flinging a hand over his eyes. *Damn American slang* – it poured over at work too. He loved Heather's voice, as she taught him useless American slang.

"Is there anything I can do?"

"No. Forgive me. This day is more than any man should have to face."

"Of course, the coming weeks will be an adjustment. I will see that you are disturbed as little as possible."

"No, please, this is your job. Don't stop progress on my account. We will continue working. Your position is invaluable to me. More than ever." He wondered about bonuses. Lucinda was critical to the company and would be for some time.

"What do I need to see? Give it to me. There is one thing you can do. Get Detective Esposito from the Sorrento Police Department on the phone for me."

"Detective Esposito?"

"*Si*. I'll be anxiously waiting to talk with him."

She left the room and made the call. Late morning passed slowly. Noon was a blur. By early afternoon, Detective Esposito sat in Rausi's office.

"What makes you think Paolo Orsolini could have murdered your father," the detective eagerly began.

"I don't go on hunches often, but something wasn't right."

"What do you mean by something was not right? Is there evidence, a detail we might find?"

"That's just it, there is nothing tangible, but he does have motive to hurt my father. He was careless by not paying the insurance premiums. Christ, you don't spend that much on a car and not pay insurance. Paolo knows better."

"If he arranged for someone to tamper with the car how might he go about doing this?" With paper and pen in

hand Detective Esposito knew the answer, but needed to hear Rausi's theory.

"Hundreds of ways." An elbow rested on the desktop, his right hand supported his aching head. "Anyone off the street can be hired. The car sat safely in the parking garage all day with security cameras on it. It is difficult to say how or when they got to the car. This is why I need you to find out."

"Did you argue with your friend while on the phone?"

"We get loud and argue all the time, it's not unusual, but yes, we were louder than normal. He is upset and making unreasonable demands for insurance money."

"Do you plan on giving him the insurance money?"

"Oh, no. Hell, no."

"And how did he perceive your disposition on the phone?"

"Paolo knows I'm mad because he didn't pay the premiums. I even accused him of killing my father."

Detective Esposito's rugged expression lit up. "And how did he react to that accusation?"

"Of course he denied any wrongdoing. He said he was sorry to hear about the accident – but then he said something else."

"What did he say?"

"He said maybe my old man deserved what he got because he wouldn't give him the insurance money either."

The wheels were turning now. "What was Paolo's relationship to your father?"

"They got along. There was no animosity. You see, Paolo and I were best friends in college. We played soccer together. My parents were as proud of him as they were for me and his parents supported us too." Slowly leaning back in the seat he swiveled slightly to the left, away from the detective. "Don't you see? I have lost my father and my best friend. The pain is horrible."

“I am sorry for your loss. Rest assured however this is very good information. We will see what we can find.” As Detective Esposito prepared to leave, another thought hit him. “One more thing, would you be willing to help us force a statement from *Signor* Orsolini should the opportunity present itself? This may be the only way to get him to talk.”  
“Of course, anything.”

## 40

He sat in the home office more as a refuge rather than actually concentrating on work. The door remained open and he heard scuffling on tile floors.

“Heather.” The scuffling stopped. “Come in here.”

“Is everything okay?”

“No. Today was awful.”

“Mine too.”

She crossed the threshold, moving toward a chair.

“I’m sure it was. I had a disturbing conversation with someone this afternoon.”

“Oh? With who?”

“Paolo.” The name sounded dirty to him now.

“Ahh, Paolo, how is he? What did he say? Is he still in pain?”

“His injuries are the furthest thing from my mind. In fact I don’t even care if he is in pain.”

“What’s the matter? That’s not like you to not care. He’s your best friend.”

“Paolo may have done something to cause the accident.”

“That doesn’t even make sense. How could Paolo have caused it?”

“He may have done something. Illegal.”

“Not Paolo. He would never do anything like that. Would he?”

“When we spoke on the phone, I heard something in his voice. It wasn’t typical. He panicked during our conversation. He was out of his head and said something careless. He disgraced father and me.”

"I don't understand. Why would he do such a thing?"

"He wants money, money that doesn't belong to him. Paolo is desperate right now. He has nothing to pay his hospital bills or collateral to replace the car. I don't feel sorry for him. Not after saying that my father deserved to die."

"That's horrible. Why would he turn on your father? Luigi would never hurt anyone."

"No, Papa would never harm anyone, not unless it was to protect you or me."

The phone rang. Rausi scowled wishing to be left alone.

"*Ciao.*"

"*Signor Cassini?*"

"*Si.*"

"This is Detective Esposito. May I have another moment of your time?"

"Of course, do you have news?"

"We might have an interesting lead. I need to ask a few more questions as to the elder *Signor Cassini's* habits."

"Of course, you can ask me anything."

Quietly Rausi put the receiver on speakerphone so that Heather could also hear the conversation.

The detective began, "Did your father always go straight home after work?"

"Sometimes. Yes and no."

"Can you elaborate further?"

"Most days he went to the newsstand to get his newspaper or an occasional financial magazine."

"Did he go that day?"

Heather shook her head in affirmation. "He would have gone to the newsstand after work," she said softly.

The detective heard her voice. "*Signora Cassini?*"

Rausi answered. "Yes, *signora* is in here with me. You are on speakerphone."

"I see. Okay, and the day of *Signor* Cassini's death there were some suspicious happenings in town."

"Suspicious? As to what?"

"We have a witness that saw a man surveying a black Aston Martin parked behind the newsstand that day."

"Oh," Heather gasped at the mere association.

"This person says they are accustomed to seeing the car at that vicinity most days. *Signor* Cassini, they know of him and know he is there to get his paper. They say a strange man acted oddly searching his surroundings and at one point knelt to the ground on both sides of the car."

"Was it Paolo?" Rausi swiftly asked.

"No, this man had full use of his extremities. He was dressed in dark greasy work clothes."

"So someone really did tamper with the brakes?"

"It seems to be so."

"Who did this?" Rausi shouted.

"Did your father know anyone at the repair shop on *Primo Viale*?"

"No, we only use the reputable dealerships where our cars come from."

"Do you or did your father know of anyone who works in this particular repair shop?"

"No."

"Did you know Paolo Orsolini was in the repair shop and spoke to someone that day?"

"No!" He shouted and slammed his fist on the desk. "Paolo said he went straight home. He lied to me. I knew he was hiding something."

"Paolo Orsolini did not go straight home from the Cassini building. We have proof that he stopped at the repair shop. There is a video from across the *viale*. He walked, though with the aid of crutches, to the rear of the building."

## 41

“Darling,” Alexia expressed while fussing over her son. “My tears are very real. I loved your father with all my heart.”

“That’s not what you said five years ago. You hated him with every fiber of your being.”

She scoffed with a toss of her head, “Ah, I was in a different frame of mind trying to find a decent condo with a view of the sea. Your father had me in a state of duress.”

“Christ, mother, you should have been an actress. Don’t try fooling me now. I am sick to death of manipulates.”

Heather, on the other side of the room, turned away from their antics while reaching for Gloria’s arm and said, “I can’t take that woman right now. Do you see how she sneers at me? For God’s sake, this is *my* husband’s funeral. This is no place to make a scene.”

“Very true, very true, we’ll try our best to ignore her.”

“She looks like something out of a Gothic novel. My God, who wears a heavy veil like that in this day and age? And that’s way too much cleavage for propriety’s standards especially at a funeral and while wearing all black.”

The older woman shoved Heather in the other direction, “Ignore her; just ignore her. They tell me this room over here is quite nice for meditation. We are all grieving today. It is stressful enough for everyone. It is a day that should have never happened. And, it seems like only yesterday we were gathered on the ship together.”

Gloria dabbed a tear with a damp hanky. “We were happy. He was so happy.”

Gloria led Heather through the dark and narrow corridor, through an ancient building fraught with funeral goers. The lighting was adequate enough with exposed knob

and tube wiring strung out and layered with dust. The walls were Venetian plastered in a faded powder blue, uneven, cracked and peeling.

A side door opened and closed with more visitors giving their final respects. Mathieu and his parents quietly slipped in the door. Heather glanced up recognizing him.

“*Signora* Cassini, my deepest sympathies,” he said subdued and respectful. She softened thinking that perhaps the night by the pool misrepresented his personality. It was Paolo and Rausi that had acted up that night. Not so much Mathieu. “I am very sorry. The last day we saw each other was not easy.”

“Thank you Mathieu.” She held out her hand. He was hesitant in lightly shaking her hand. “Rausi will be glad to see you.”

“These are my parents.”

Mathieu made the introductions.

Heather shook their hands. “It’s very nice to meet you. Thank you for being here and for supporting Rausi. He will be happy to speak with you.”

After introductions were made, Gloria continued herding Heather to the prayer alcove. To a room where the walls were a dark warm shade and the wooden floor supported two winged chairs covered in worn red velvet. A thick white candle burned in a *prie dieu* near a simple shrine of the Blessed Virgin Mary. Catholic sentiment oozed from every nook and cranny of the old chapel Heather thought. She found the primitive environment charming in its antiquity. And foreign as she had been raised Southern Baptist. Luigi had been born and raised Roman Catholic. However, he and his son had not practiced their faith in many years.

Voices rose from the viewing room. Suddenly there was a wail that strove to contest archaic sainthood.

Heather grimaced and shook her head. Gloria gripped



and pulled her hand forcing her to swallow any shameful remark.

“Did you hear Edmundo?” Heather whispered.

“I believe he has arrived.”

“Good Lord, I swear Alexia’s wail rivals any squealing hog.”

Gloria quickly pulled back and gulped for air, astounded with the audacity. She retreated while saying, “Callous Americans. Honestly! Hold your tongue. I will send Edmundo in here to see you when he is finished mourning with Rausi and Alexia.”

Only then did Heather remember that calling an Italian the equivalent of a pig was disgraceful at its worst. Or at its best. She let the comment stand.

The prayer alcove proved to be too claustrophobic. Heather got up and paced the halls. She recognized several faces and felt they recognized her too. There were the owners of their two favorite restaurants. Everyone stopped and gave their condolences, offering only good things to say about Luigi’s life. They loved him and treated Heather as though she were family, and welcomed her back to their establishments anytime soon.

“We’ll take care of you. We’ll make a celebration and fix something special just for you,” they offered with glad tidings.

The town was amazing. No one was a stranger toward her even though she still felt like a tourist at times. Everyone was so loving, accepting, and genuinely caring. It made her anxiety of the day lessen.

A woman, older and elegantly attired, approached.

“I am Yolanda, treasurer of the Community Arts Committee,” she said taking Heather’s hand into her soft palm.

The woman continued to speak quite intimately of

Luigi. She seemed to know several personal details of his life and business, and let her words slip freely. Heather felt certain that this woman might have been one to place Luigi on the list of eligible bachelors. Worse yet, maybe she had even dated Luigi. Heather did not want to know, did not ask, and quickly escaped.

The inevitable – Edmundo and Carlotta found her wandering the marbled corridors. There were no words, only tears as Edmundo grabbed her tightly into an embrace. Heather lost her last thread of composure. Carlotta fit in beside them with a caressing hand on Heather's back.

"This is the worst day of my life," Edmundo blubbered. "I miss him so much."

"I do too."

"In some ways Luigi was my rock. He stood firmly where I failed. I relied on his logic and reasoning and I am so afraid that I took him for granted. He was my brother, but I did not do enough." Edmundo cried, "I loved him so much."

"Don't beat yourself up. He never felt that you took him for granted, never. He loved you too. I know he did."

"Si." Edmundo straightened his suit coat, and then blew his thick nose into an oversized handkerchief. "Gloria tells me it is not easy for you in the room near Luigi."

"Alexia –" She stopped before using the word 'hog'. "Alexia is in the center of attention. She is making a scene. I feel unwelcomed standing next to my husband. It's not right."

"No, no, you belong in the room. Come, come," he pulled on her arm. "Raphael is here."

"Luigi's brother?"

"Si. The two of you have not met yet."

"What will Alexia do if I speak to him?"

Edmundo glanced to his wife.

Carlotta's expression changed. "Don't worry. I will distract her. Go. Go meet Raphael."

It seemed half the town drifted through the chapel to pay their final respects. Always, someone had a good wish or two to pass along to the family, their remembrances with only the fondest gratitude.

*Signor* Bruscolotti, the tailor, stopped Heather at the entrance to the viewing room.

"*Signora* Cassini, my deepest regards. It was only yesterday that you came into my shop. You and *signor* had met that day?"

"Yes, we had met that day," she smiled, sadly.

"Then perhaps I played matchmaker," he smiled in return, yet reserved.

"Perhaps a little, yes."

"It is good to see you again. I am sorry for your loss. There is no better man than *Signor* Cassini. A real hero. Come in the shop and see me again." Exuberantly he patted her hand. "I'll make a beautiful creation just for you. You'll see. It will complement the beautiful *signora* perfectly."

"That's extremely kind of you. Thank you."

"Just for you." He bowed as she walked away.

Edmundo hastened her along to Rausi and a stranger that stood next to the casket. The stranger's back was toward her. Heather could not see. He stood about the same height as Rausi. Raphael was not as tall as his older brother had been. A woman, average in size and not blessed with height stood beside them. Her complexion was dark and her short black hair was peppered with silver streaks. Heather saw the woman's profile, which included a large sloping nose. Very Greek.

"*Zio* Raphael," Rausi said. "This is Heather."

The man slowly turned. She saw sadness in his eyes – gray eyes. This was certainly Luigi's brother. The resemblance was unmistakable although Raphael carried more weight. The similar rugged face could not be mistaken, but the added

weight softened his square jowls. Raphael had the same squared hairline as Luigi and Rausi and as much silver in the temples as Luigi had had. Although many similarities could be pointed out, Heather felt Luigi was the more attractive of the pair and more polished in his appearance. Raphael's wealth was obvious in several fine details, but years of hard work had rounded his shoulders and aged his hands.

"It is nice to meet you, Heather. I deeply regret meeting on this day. Our introduction should have happened long ago. Please know that my brother spoke of you often. I have only heard good things."

"You talked to him often?"

"*Si*, on the phone. Did he not tell you? He should have."

"I wasn't aware of this, no."

Heather noted how the voice was similar to Luigi's – the deep baritone thrum. His intonation of words spaced the same as Luigi's, slow and considerate of foreign linguistics. Heather struggled fighting off the mesmerizing effect.

"Well, when my brother and I spoke, we were enmeshed in the companies and finances. One would imagine our conversations to be rather boring." Raphael grinned faintly, aware that anyone who knew Luigi knew his penchant for numbers. "May I introduce my wife, Teresa?"

Heather took Teresa's extended hand and lightly shook.

"It is very nice to meet you Heather."

"And you as well, Teresa."

"Again, as Raphael said it is awful we have to meet on this day."

"I agree." Curious of her brother-in-law Heather asked, "Were you and Luigi close?"

"Close, as in familiar? *Si*, as brothers we are close. Of course my family is in Florence and we were unable to visit as

often as we should have.”

Someone turned toward several noisy children playing in the benches. Raphael gestured to the nearest bench, Teresa on the end, Raphael in the middle, and Heather at his side. They could see Rausi a few feet away, practically chest to chest with Edmundo and whispering. Heather didn’t think any more of their muted conversation as she was preoccupied with the sound of Raphael’s voice.

“When our boys were younger, still in school,” Raphael continued, nodding toward two small families in the row behind them. Heather noticed two men with their wives and five squirming young children. The adults acknowledged her with a nod or faint smile. “My brother’s family and my family used to vacation once or twice a year together. Marco, Dino and Rausi are similar in age and have always gotten along well. Did you know Luigi was an excellent skier?”

“No, I didn’t know.”

“We traveled to the Alps, took skiing trips with the boys many times. We went in the beginning of the season, when the snow was fresh and then again at Christmas.”

Heather felt an arm prop up around her shoulders as Rausi came to sit on the bench. His warm breath blew on her cheek. She inhaled his energetic cologne and felt safe with his closeness.

Raphael continued, “Rausi, he is a show off. On skis or on a snowboard he fears nothing.”

“Except for large drop-offs. I had my share of lying flat on my back, staring up at the sky. It hurt. Not to mention a torn Achilles tendon.”

“Ah, but still you had no fear, it was a challenge. There is no mountain you would not try.”

“I wouldn’t say that. I respect some hills. I am not a professional.”

Heather bit back a grin. Raphael had the same ability

to harness Rausi's ego as Luigi had done.

"We enjoyed those family vacations. Do you ski?"

"No, in Georgia I never had the opportunity to try."

Rausi nudged her, "We'll go skiing someday. I'll take you to the Alps. We'll have fun."

Heather inquired of Teresa, "Did you ski with them?"

"Sometimes, but not often, Alexia and I made sure to have a roaring fire in the fireplace with plenty of hot chocolate and food ready for when they came back to the chalet. All boys, you know, they make quite an army."

"I can imagine. Raphael, it is so nice to meet you. These stories are just what I needed to hear today."

"I have plenty more. We will share them another day. In the future, I promise, we will not be such strangers."

She couldn't help but watch him talk. His mannerisms, the voice, the tired eyes were all so much like Luigi's. It was as though she had been given a pill to calm her anxiety.

"Forgive me if I stare. You look so much like your brother. He was taken from me so suddenly. It's like having a small portion of Luigi back again."

Her words seemed to make him uncomfortable. Raphael blinked nervously and looked toward the floor.

Teresa smiled, understanding the sentiment, "Yes, they do resemble one another. Their father was a large man, a hard worker, very smart too. And their mother grew up in a big family. They were farm people. She was a humble woman, and a good cook. I wish you could have met her. You would have liked her, and I'm sure she would have liked you too."

A thought suddenly struck Heather. Luigi received his humble nature from his gentle mother. What a loving mother she must have been. And Rausi got his theatrics from Alexia. Heather thought *hmm, what did Luigi ever see in Alexia besides raven black hair, teased high to give the impression of volume, along with big breasts?*

## 42

The main entry opened and closed as Mathieu came inside. He stood visibly shaken for a moment. Rausi caught him scanning the chapel and motioned for his attention. Quietly they moved to a corner out of earshot from the mourners.

“Mathieu, what is it?”

“You don’t want to hear what I have to say.”

“Yes I do. Tell me.”

“I don’t want to cause any more stress to this day than...”

“We never keep secrets,” he said backhanding Mathieu in the chest.

“Paolo is outside. He’s irrational. The guards won’t let him cross the parking lot.”

“Huh? Paolo is outside?”

“Si.”

He cursed under his breath feeling suddenly sick. The devil resided in their midst.

“Okay,” he said pulling his defenses together, calmly and in a matter of moments. “No one else is to know. Your job is to make sure the guards keep him under control. I will come out when no one is looking and deal with Paolo myself.”

Mathieu took his orders like a soldier and quietly slipped away. No one seemed to notice as Rausi scanned the crowded room. He spotted John Whistlethorp and sauntered to the man as though nothing were the matter.

“Can I see you a minute?”

The two men went to the edge of the room.

“How are you holding up, Rausi?”

“As well as can be expected. I need to ask a favor

though. Can you do something?"

"Sure, anything."

"I need for you to call the police right now. Don't let anyone hear. No one is to know. No one. Detective Esposito, tell him we have a disturbance outside."

"This doesn't have anything to do with —"

Staring squarely into John's face he stressed the words, "Esposito, now hurry."

"Rausi, you're not involved —"

Overly calm, Rausi seemed to float away as he backed toward the vestibule. "Don't let anyone hear the call."

John quickly searched a coat pocket for his cell phone.

Heather jogged around a corner and grabbed Rausi's sleeve in the vestibule.

"What's going on?"

"Nothing," he lied easily with a pleasant expression and clear eye contact. "I was just talking to John and Gloria. They want us to join them for dinner by the end of the week. Perhaps you could discuss the details with Gloria. Find out what time we should be there."

"Do you want to go?"

"I think it would be a good idea for us to leave the house this weekend, to be with friends."

"Alright, I'll talk with Gloria. Are you sure nothing else is going on?"

"There is nothing going on. Now go," he said with ample reassurance and shoving her in the direction of Gloria. "Talk to her."

Heather tossed him a dirty look. He knew she was suspicious, but threw her off track long enough to deal with the real problem.

The parking lot was relatively quiet. There was not a cloud in the sky and the sea breeze blew gently.

He strode behind several vehicles, loose gravel



crunching under his polished black leather shoes. The parking lot ended at a long strip of grass. The lawn bordered a tall line of cypress, woody in scent, while the temperature dropped ten degrees in the shade.

He saw Mathieu standing on the lawn near five guards. They wore dark suits and two did not hide the fact that their suit coats sheltered holsters. The guards surrounded Paolo, who leaned on his crutches for support.

Rausi saw how Mathieu fidgeted nervously knowing the severity of the situation. Hotheaded tempers were about to blow.

“I thought I told you to stay away from me Paolo.”

“That’s no way to talk to your best friend.”

“You’re not my best friend. Not anymore.”

“Sure we are. See, tell these men how we went to college together, how we played on the same soccer team. We were star athletes in our day. Hell, they probably even know our names. We were famous.”

“I don’t play soccer anymore. Why live in the past?” Turning at the waist he said, “Mathieu, are you staying or leaving?”

“Staying. I was there that day. My loyalties stay right here.”

“Okay.”

Rausi moved closer to Paolo, steady in his pace, calculated and threatening.

“How long did you stay in town the day my father died?”

“I went straight home.”

“That’s not what I heard.”

Rausi, knowing everything about Paolo, as if he were his brother, noticed how he shifted uncomfortably with the crutch posts under his arms. Paolo, never out of composure, suffered a nervous twitch.

Rausi smirked.

"I did. I went home."

"No, that's a lie. Eternal hell and damnation to any *piasano* that thinks he get by with it. Why are you lying to me? Why bother covering the truth? What about the newsstand?"

"What newsstand?"

"The one my father went to nearly every day after work to pick up his newspaper. Someone followed his car that day. The police are conducting an interrogation in the neighborhood, and someone told them he spotted a man examining the car in a parking lot. Did you know they can identify the man that tampered with the brakes? Aren't you curious in knowing who this man might be?"

"Sure, this is good news, right?" Paolo said shifting away. "I mean they'll find the culprit soon."

"So who did you talk to after leaving my father's office? Possibly this same man?"

"No one, I went home."

"Wrong answer Paolo." Rausi moved forward while unbuttoning his suit coat. "Who did you talk to?"

"No one, I swear."

Rausi continued cornering as Paolo searched for an outlet.

"The police have recently learned you were at the repair shop on the same avenue as the newsstand. Someone remembered your name, why can't you remember theirs, huh?"

"I had business to take care of, no big deal. The Lamborghini lies in ruins in the parking lot."

"I thought you said you went straight home Paolo. See, you cover your tracks like the groveling *piasano* that you are. Who did you talk to?"

Rausi instantly kicked one crutch out from under Paolo's arm. Paolo tottered painfully from the unexpected

exertion. He slipped and fell helplessly into the grip of a guard.

“No one. I didn’t talk to anyone.”

“You are lying to me!”

“No, I’m not!”

Paolo put the other arm out to defend his broken body. Right before Rausi grabbed a handful of shirt collar.

“One last chance or we finish you right here, who did you hire to kill my father?”

“Your father owed me money. I deserve to be paid. The Cassini fortune is worth hundreds of millions. Just one quarter million will get me out of debt. You owe me that much.”

“I owe you nothing. You disrespected my father and you disrespect me in front of these witnesses. Who did you hire to kill him?”

Mathieu, who had disappeared while no one watched, came hopping around the corner of a car beating his hand on the hood. “The police are here. Do something quick or hide him.”

Paolo, cornered as an animal, endeavored to free himself, but the guard held firm. Without the use of his arms Paolo reared back his head before defiantly spitting on Rausi’s suit coat. “I’m not going to jail. I didn’t do anything.”

“Yes, you did. You killed my father!”

Paolo saw it coming. He felt the energy and smelled the tainted surge of adrenalin in the air. His one free arm could not block Rausi’s rushing assault as a fist connected to his face. Pain shot through his jaw, his mouth, and taste of blood oozed over his tongue.

Rausi, caught up in the moment, continued pounding Paolo until the body slumped. Anger, resentment and the cavernous sense of loss boiled into a full-fledged need for revenge.

At the sound of sirens the guards quickly snapped into

the fray physically wrenching the pair apart.

“You had my father killed,” Rausi yelled with his arms restrained behind his back. “How could you?”

Paolo spit blood from his mouth before saying, “He owed me money.”

“Rot in hell, Paolo! Rot in hell! God, how I hate you,” Rausi cried with tears streaming down his angry face. “He didn’t deserve to die.”

## 43

Edmundo stormed out of the building at the sound of commotion. His guards instinctively stepped back, slipping off into oblivion. However always on alert. Stocky Edmundo, in a blaze of emotion, gathered up the broken Cassini heir, offering his broad shoulder for support. He shouldered Rausi's shuddering sobs, holding him as if he were his own son.

"This is justice," Edmundo muttered. "Righteousness will be served. Spending a lifetime behind bars is more suffering than one minute of death. Believe me. You know it as much as I do."

Paolo, bleeding at the mouth and nose, handcuffs behind his back, was lowered into the back of a police car.

"It hurts Edmundo. I can hardly bear the pain."

"I feel the droning ache every hour of every day. Luigi was a pillar of strength to us all."

"But, he was *my* father."

"*Si*, he is, and will always be. There is no changing that fact."

They pulled apart, straightening themselves, their suits, their ties.

"There is nothing right about this day. We are going to finish it. We have to, for your father's sake. Together, we will survive this awful tragedy. He would agree. He would say the same for us, that we gather ourselves and go on. Okay?" Rausi nodded in approval. "We are men. Let us be strong for the others. You will become a pillar of strength too. To everyone. And me. I will see to it. Agreed?"

From the center of a gathering crowd, Alexia stepped lively, shoving curious onlookers aside in her quest to get to

her bright and shining son. In the promenade, the cumbersome black veil clouded her vision. She ripped it from her hat in one broad stroke. From there it cascaded to the ground like a wilting feather. The hem of her skirt fluttered as her wide hips beat out a tempo to the charge. Within reach of Rausi, her arms outstretched to retrieve her child, to protect him with all the comfort a mother could give.

“Mother, no. Don’t. Not here. I am okay.”

“Your hand, look at it, it’s bleeding.”

He looked. Blood oozed from fleshly torn knuckles.

“Really, it’s nothing. I feel nothing.”

“That is numbness from shock. From the ordeal. We’ll go inside now and wash the blood off. Come,” she said putting an arm around him. “Inside is more private. We can talk.”

He looked to the distance, distracted. “In a minute.”

“Why? We’ll go in now. I insist.”

She grappled for his arm as he defiantly brushed her off.

“I said no.”

“Rausi!” She warned, suddenly seeing the person distracting him.

Near the chapel’s entrance, Heather stood quietly on the top step, beautiful as Aphrodite, but dressed all in black. The breeze from the bay blew strands of chestnut hair into her eyes causing her to reach up to her face. She tucked the strand around her ear.

Their sight connected the same moment. She stepped down from the entrance. Mourners, spectators to the commotion, blocked his way, but he pushed through the crowd to get to her. She did the same. Hastening their steps and closing in on the distance, they came around the perimeter.

Rausi, the moment he could reach her, grabbed Heather and pulled her to his chest. “It’s over,” he said

burying his face into her hair.

"I know."

"The guards will go away and we can leave the house whenever we want."

"I'm glad."

"There's only one thing, Heather," he said breaking apart to look into her eyes.

"What?"

"Don't leave me. I cannot bear the thought of being alone in that house. Please, say you won't leave."

"I'm not going anywhere."

"Promise me that you will always be here. Tomorrow. The next day. The next week. If you leave I swear I will hunt you down like an animal," he said with the threat quite clear, his voice still unsteady from the fight. "Promise me."

"I promise. It's my home too."

"It is," he said embracing her and making a scene for all to see.

## 44

The weather forecast predicted gale force winds off the Bay of Naples. A *nord-ovest vento* the weather channel had said. A north-west wind.

They battened down the hatches in preparation. The lounge chairs went into the pool house. Potted plants, wind chimes, and doormats were stored away. Rausi wrestled, alone, with the swimming pool cover, clamping it into place. He also closed and latched antique black shutters over windows and glass doors in preservation of the old house.

It had only been a few weeks since the funeral and mood of the house remained bleak. The impending storm only brought more sobriety. Heather was yet to experience a seafaring gale crash into the land. Rausi – always had the company of his father during the squall.

He lay in bed alone in his room late in the evening as rain rolled in from the sea. The electricity had gone dead an hour earlier, leaving him in total silence, rehashing the error of his ways. He regretted wasting the past years, behaving irresponsible and shrugging off responsibility. Especially when calling his old man passive. Papa was the strongest man he ever knew, and the most honorable. There was never passivity about him.

Rausi ceased beating himself up before inflicting irreparable damage. He promised himself instead of suffering regrets he would spend the rest of his life proving his worth. He would work diligently and see that the Cassini insurance company survived.

High winds slammed in from the bay rattling shutters and challenging nerves.



When the rain began, it pummeled the house like marbles, sheeting in sideways, threatening the eaves with decapitation.

BANG! A loud clap of thunder struck. He jumped and cursed as the hair on his arms and back of his neck stood on end. The rolling thunder echoed across the land for several seconds before dissipating.

As a child growing up along the shoreline he was familiar with an occasional tempest blowing in from the sea, but this one rattled his nerves more than usual, perhaps because his nerves were already rattled.

Welfare of the house was his responsibility. He also found himself tethered to the company. Accountability fell squarely on his shoulders. For better or for worse. He was married to the company just as Papa had been.

Lightning and thunder roared as though the gods in heaven shook their fists in anger at mere mortals. Brilliant flashes of light flickered on the walls and seeped through gaps of the shutters.

As much as he wanted to relax, it proved impossible during the peak of the storm.

A faint noise roused him from bed. In consideration of the unknown, he wore shorts and t-shirt, prepared for a quick excavation if winds tore the house apart.

He got out of bed to search for the noise and shuffled down the hall, feeling his way through the dark passage. In the family room, he waited for a flash of lightning. There it was. In the quick moment of brilliant light he assessed the room. Everything seemed to be in place.

He thought of Heather at the other end of the house and wondered, but, no. There was no reason to disturb her. That room was a fortress buttressed against the stone cliff. Besides, she grieved alone. He did the same.

The disturbing noise came again. This time it was

louder. He analyzed the scraping sound before realizing it came from between the patio doors and the office. A shrub beat the side of the house. The landscaping was taking a beating and would be a disaster by morning.

He turned to go back to his room. He took a step – only to ram his big toe into a large chunk of marble, the life-sized statue of Venus at the base of the stairs.

*“Cazzo!”*

He cursed at the pain. Cursed at the electricity for being out and grabbed the newel post for balance. He felt the toe. It was just stubbed. He would live.

And then another sound came from – where? It was faint and low. He turned a full circle and listened. It was a hum and not from the wind. It was human. *Who in the hell?* He listened closely and heard a female voice from up the stairs. *Who was she talking to and how did they get in?*

He darted up the stairs two steps at a time, winching as the toe throbbed. If a burglar had broken into the house he would have to fight. There was no time for weakness, or for retrieving a gun. The element of surprise was his only weapon.

The door to the guest room was partially opened. He could faintly see Heather sprawled on a messed up quilt.

Another BANG of thunder hit. Sharp lightning flashed from the heavens sending shadows bursting across the walls, as well as on the doorway. Heather screamed in terror at the sight in the doorway.

Rausi burst through the door, scanning the room and seeing there was no one besides the two of them.

He flew to her side. “Hey, it’s only me. Calm down.”

She sidled across the quilt to avoid him, but his quick reaction caught her arm.

“It’s okay. It’s only a storm.”

“But, he’s out there.”

“Who is out there?”

“Your father!”

Rausi’s blood ran cold.

“Hey. Listen to me.” His hand slid down her arm until he held her hand. He wound his fingers through hers and knelt beside the bed. “Father is not out in the storm. His ashes are in the urn resting in the curio cabinet. You know it as much as I do. Now think. Why are you up here?”

“I don’t know.”

“How can you not know? Don’t you remember walking the stairs?”

“I’m embarrassed.”

“Embarrassed? Why?”

“I needed to get away from that room. I wanted to be somewhere else.”

“Too many memories?” He saw a subtle nod. “Your room and the cellar are the safest places to be in a storm. It’s dangerous up here. Can’t you hear the wind threatening to rip the roof off?”

“I don’t care.”

Through flashes of lightning, he could see her expression. She was in no state to be alone.

“Move over.”

“Huh?”

“I said move over, I’m coming in.”

He noted how she evaded touching him. She had nothing to fear this night. He had no intension of abusing her affections.

“Better?”

Her leg suddenly encountered his. He took advantage of the situation, caressing back, only to proof he was trustworthy.

“I’m concerned about these lapses in judgment.”

“Don’t worry about me.”

“Maybe we should get, you know, professional help, a

doctor to figure out what all this means.”

“No, I don’t want to talk to anyone.”

“Why not? It is nothing to be ashamed of.”

“I’ll get over this on my own. We’re both still in shock. I know you struggle at work. You’re on the phone all day or in meetings. I know what you’re going through. It’s not only about taking over the insurance company, but everything else too. I understand there’s more to everything than meets the eye.”

“I can take care of myself. However my responsibility is also in seeing that your needs are met too.”

“It doesn’t have to be.”

“It does. Heather, we should be spending evenings, weekends doing things together. I’m sorry I haven’t been available.”

“You’re not my babysitter.”

He paused. There was a hint of a smile in his words, “*Grazie Dio*. I would rather do the babysitter.”

“Quit.”

She needed to be distracted. His tactic worked. Perhaps too much alone time created these lapses in judgment. If they just continued talking...

“I admit sometimes I forget he’s gone.”

“Really?”

“Uh huh. With a hundred situations going on at the office, I think of a question to ask him. I turn my chair; get ready to stand and remember he’s gone. It makes my heart hurt. I know the loneliness you feel.”

“It hurts all the time.”

He paused before saying, “We dwell on sadness too much. Change of topic. You know this used to be my room when I was a child?”

“Yes, and when your father was a child it was his room first. The next bedroom over belonged to Raphael.”

"Uh huh. This was my room before my parents added the room you have now. I was about eight or nine when they built on to the house. Did you know I had a nanny that lived with us? That is until I started school."

"Don't make me laugh." She shifted to look at his face. "You had a nanny?"

"What's so funny about that?" Rausi leaned back against the pillow. She fell against the crook of his arm before propping up on his chest. He continued, "Lots of families have nannies. It takes the pressure off busy parents."

"It allows parents to be irresponsible. They miss out on the most important milestones of their child's life, the early years."

"Okay, we agree to disagree. I'm trying to tell you about my nanny."

"Sorry, go on."

"She was a plain woman, a simple woman that wore the clothes of a peasant, homemade with stained aprons. But, I loved her. I loved her like she was my own mother. And I believe the woman loved me too, as if I were her child. Then one morning I woke up and she was gone, sent away, and they never told me why. I suffered for months, missing her."

"Because you started school?"

His voice became a whisper.

"It's not fair when people you love suddenly disappear. It has happened far too many times. Everyone I love eventually leaves. Now both my mother and my father."

"Oh, Rausi, I am sorry."

He gave her a squeeze. "That's why I don't want you to go."

"And what did I say? I'm not going anywhere so stop worrying. You know, Alexia, your mother, she's not completely gone. She wants to be part of your life. I watched her the day of the funeral. She's a doting mother. Why do you blame her

so much?"

He shrugged. "I suppose it's because of how badly she hurt Papa. Being home with him, I watched his pain. When he learned there was another man in her life, well, it broke his heart. It left him devastated. My father was my hero and heroes are not supposed to suffer pain."

"So you blame your mother?"

"Of course."

"Is this why you stayed with him all these years?"

"You're very perceptive."

"You didn't want him to be lonely?"

"Correct."

"I hate to say this, but I don't believe you. You just admitted that you don't want to be alone, now you're making him out to be the martyr. You're the one that's afraid."

"Again, we agree to disagree. I am alone every day at work. Every decision belongs to me."

"Oh come on, you have advisors, fund managers and corporate leaders." He shrugged as she continued, "I also don't think it's particularly right to blame your parents for leaving. There were things going on in your mother's life. You were already out of school by the time she moved out of the house. Their problems had nothing to do with you personally."

"I am an adult. I know these things."

"Good."

His tactic of distraction worked. "So are we even now?"

"Even, for what?"

"Don't worry about it. Are you feeling better?"

She shrugged her shoulders.

Turning toward the window Rausi saw the lightning lessening. Even the winds seemed to change direction. "We're on the backside of the storm now."

"Good, I'm getting sleepy."

“Me too.” He didn’t move to rise and she didn’t move either. Thinking aloud his mind was a thousand miles away when he rambled, “I’ve got meetings scheduled through the next two weeks and I want to be home at the end of this quarter – to monitor progress. But, after that.”

“What are you talking about?”

He slumped deeper into the bed, pulling the sheet up. “I’ve been thinking.”

“About what?”

“Well, isn’t the end of November an American holiday?”

“Yes, Thanksgiving. It’s when families get together and stuff themselves with too much food.”

“If you want I can arrange a trip to Atlanta for your holiday.”

“Seriously?” her voice rose.

“Sure, I’ll make arrangements with Edmundo to use the company jet. We’ll fly direct.”

“Wow. Home to see my family for Thanksgiving?”

“A change of scenery would be good for both of us.”

While in mourning he would not pursue a relationship with Heather, but in the meantime, subtle nuances would open the way. He never considered himself a hunter – however, challenge to outwit the fox intrigued him. Spending time with Heather’s family would cheer her up while making him the man by her side.

## 45

“Kevin!” Heather hollered to her brother as he stood beside a blue minivan.

She and Rausi, pulling luggage to the curb, had just exited Atlanta’s Hartsfield International Airport.

“It’s good to see you Heather. It’s been way too long.”

“It’s good to see you too.”

Kevin, dressed in a blue dress shirt and tan khaki’s, was just as she remembered, but with a little more white in his auburn hair. He wasn’t nearly as tall as Rausi, but had a build that was similar.

“I’m Kevin Taylor,” he said, extending a hand to Rausi. “Heather’s oldest brother. You must be Luigi’s son.”

They gave a firm handshake.

“Rausi Cassini. I am pleased to meet you.”

“Well, we’re happy to finally have you two on this side of globe,” he said cheerfully and moved to put their luggage in the back of the van. “So how was your flight?”

“Fine,” Heather replied. “I’m just so excited to be back home. I can’t wait to see everyone, and mom and dad.”

“I bet. They’re excited to see you too. They probably didn’t sleep much last night due to the high level of anxiety. Things are pretty crazy around here knowing you’re coming home. Here, let me help with the luggage. We’ll put it in the back.” The hatch automatically lifted. Several pieces of luggage were heaved inside.

“You’re alone?” Heather asked propping sunglasses to the top of her head.

“I just took off work. Jean is waiting at home for us.”

“How is Jean? I can’t wait to see her.”



"She's fine, the kids and grandkids keep her pretty busy these days. She's down to working part-time as a bank teller and the rest of her time helping out with the kids."

"Three grandkids?"

"No, four, Allison just had her first. Last month was sort of a blur."

"Oh. I forgot."

"Sis, you need to get home more often. I'm telling ya, you're missing out on the bulk of the action around here."

They got in the car, Rausi in the front passenger seat.

"Listen," Kevin said, "dad mentioned something about finding a spare vehicle for you to get around in, but he doesn't want to give up his truck."

"I believe we just drove past the rentals," Rausi said. "I insist on making my own arrangements for a car. Perhaps we can backtrack tonight on the way to the hotel."

"Are you sure?"

"Positive."

From the back seat her fingers ran through his thick hair, "Sorry, but the car rentals won't have any Italia's, Alfa Romeo's or Fiats. You're going to have to let me do the driving."

Subtly his head moved against the soothing sensation her fingertips provided. "We'll see about that."

"You're not going to win on this matter. You're on my turf now big boy."

"Like I said, we will see."

Kevin had overheard talk of the Cassini fortune on occasion, but didn't pay much attention to the gossip.

"So, Rausi, what do you do for a living?"

"I oversee several companies."

"Overseeing as in a managerial position?" Kevin glanced while driving.

"No. I own them."

“Oh.”

“Basically our main corporation is high-end insurance. We insure the local trucking and shipping industries on one tier, yachts, sports cars and the like on the second tier and local businesses on the main level. My uncle and I franchise a series of reconstructive companies across Italy and I own stock in Naples’s import/export.”

“I see. I suppose that keeps you hopping.”

Feeling the need to save both men Heather announced, “Since taking over the insurance company, we were happy to learn that this financial quarter was good. Earlier we feared the worst. You know, Rausi worried about stepping into his father’s shoes.”

“Jean and I were sorry to hear about Luigi’s passing. We were looking forward to meeting him one day.”

“He was a very good man, the essence of a true gentleman.”

“Well, Rausi, I can speak for the whole family, we are pleased you can join us for Thanksgiving – and for bringing Heather back home to us.”

## 46

“Surprise!”

As soon as the front door to the house opened most of the family bombarded them.

“Daddy!”

She flew into his arms.

“Heather. It’s been too long.”

“And mom.” They hugged too.

“We’ve been worried sick.”

“I know. Mom, dad, this is Luigi’s son, Rausi.”

Extending his hand, he smiled warmly and enunciated his words carefully, “It is my pleasure to finally meet Heather’s parents.”

“Well, we’re glad you’re here. Hope has done her best in keeping us informed by way of Heather’s wedding photos. Pictures just aren’t the same as being there. We wished we could’ve gone and felt bad not to be able to make it.”

From out of the shadows, a woman’s voice slowly built. “Rausi?”

“Hope?”

He kissed her hand.

“Are we on our best behavior today?”

“Of course, I have no room for error. I am on foreign territory. But you, on the other hand, promise to play nice?”

“Who’s playing,” she said mischievously. “Come here, I want to introduce you to someone. First, that’s my husband Clint.” A man, plump and round-faced, grinned and nodded. “And the hostess of the house, this is our sister-in-law, Jean. Jean is like our other sister, the one that’s laid back and keeps all the drama to a minimum.”

An elegant woman, petite with good bone structure

and a short confident hairstyle stepped forward. "I have heard a lot about you."

Rausi took her hand and gently brushed his lips over her fingers before replying, "Don't believe anything they say. If the information came from Hope then I'm afraid she has greatly misled you."

"The news is all good. I'm glad you can join us. We appreciate having Heather come home to us."

As the homecoming died down the men retired to a large living room. Rausi noted it was adequate for a large family. However, the house seemed small, confining with low ceilings. Heather's father, Kevin and Rausi took the time to learn more about one another.

Jason Taylor, the second son, waited until it was his turn. When the time was ripe, he took the podium.

"Well I own the largest bait and tackle shop this side of West Point Lake. There's nothing more satisfying than fishing in the early morning light. Ya gitcha a strong cup of coffee to warm your belly in the dawn of a new day and have a six-pack of cold beer ready by late afternoon." Not sure what is in question here. If it is simple of course I approve.

The room got quiet. Rausi blinked a few times before answering, "I see."

"My boy started playing football this year. Tackle position. You ever play football?"

"Umm, yes and no. Football in Italy is referred to as soccer in America."

"Isn't that a sissy's game?"

"Jase," Kevin warned quietly and subtly shook his head.

"Italy takes the sport of soccer quite seriously," Rausi defended. "Actually, it is popular around the world. American fans are just catching on. When I played soccer a few years back, I was in the best shape of my life."

“What about fishing? Ever do any fishing,” Jason said while rocking in a lounge chair and snacking on chips and soda.

“I can’t say that I have. I much prefer staying active with water sports.”

“You need to try it once, come on down to the lake and we’ll fix ya up with some tackle. You like eating bass?”

Rausi swiftly calculated the American standard of peasant.

“My preference actually tends toward seafood. Do you enjoy deep sea fishing?”

“Heck yeah, who doesn’t, it just costs too much to rent the boat. And then there’s all that rocking on the waves. It’s kinda hard to keep your balance.”

“See that photo on the wall?”

“Which one?”

“The day your sister was married in the Bay of Naples. Do you see the ship we are pictured on?”

“Yeah, that’s a nice one. Must have cost a bundle.”

“Come to Italy and I’ll arrange for your family to fish off the back of that ship. It has stabilizers to counterbalance the rocking motion.”

“You know the guy that rents it out?”

“Quite well. I own half of it. My uncle owns the other half.”

The bag of chips fell to the floor. “Really?”

“Really.”

“What’s a boat like that run a fella?”

“As in cost to purchase it? About thirty million euro.”

“What are we talking about in American dollars?”

“In American, that is nearly forty million dollars. But then, a captain has to be hired and a crew is needed to run the ship. Calculate yearly maintenance along with insurance and you get a clearer picture. However, while at sea there are fuel

and docking fees to be taken into consideration.”

Jason seemed to be turning a different shade of fleshy pink.

Eyeing the women in the kitchen Rausi said, “Excuse me.” He left.

Jason turned to his older brother and remarked, “That foreigner sure is a strange one.”

“So are you Einstein. Brush the crumbs off your shirt.”

The women chattered away, happily, unbeknownst to his presence. Rausi slipped an arm around Hope and another around Heather.

“My two favorite women.”

“For a Wednesday,” Hope needled. “What’s the flavor for Thursday?”

“The flavor for Thursday is turkey,” mom replied dryly.

Rausi saw a family resemblance between mother and daughters. Heather had her mother’s appearance and grace although Heather’s facial features must have taken after the Taylor side.

Nonetheless, mom was a youthful 75 years young. She kept her shoulders back and wore a flattering pastel blue jogging suit. Her iridescent blue eye shadow matched the suit while flattering her stylishly coiffed white hair.

“So, Rausi, do they have big turkey dinners in Italy?”

Letting go of the feisty pair he answered, “No, I’m afraid not. We don’t have access to turkey like America’s do.”

“Then what do you people eat over there besides pizza and pasta?”

He grinned at the casual inquiry, “Seafood is plentiful. You will find most restaurants cater to the catch of the day. We also have access to fresh market vegetables. Heather is a good cook. She’s become accustomed to our culture.”

“Mom, I hate to say this, but when he says market he doesn’t mean a grocery store. It is literally an open farmers

market in the middle of the village. And it's true, we eat lots of fresh vegetables, and heavy on the *vino* at dinnertime. There's even an orchard next to the house with citrus and olive trees, and apples and pears." She gave him a smile.

"Well, it's making me hungry," mom said. She slowly got up and finished putting the dressing into the oven, pre-cooking it for tomorrow.

"What's this I hear about someone almost wrecking a Land Rover?" Jean asked while quietly sitting back.

"Oh, Hope has been telling terrible stories," Rausi stated, thick on the accent and ready to torment. "So ruthless these women are. They are mean hearted. They both hit me while I only drive."

"We're mean?" Hope nearly shouted. "It's because of that crap you were saying. It was derogatory."

"But, you don't hit the driver."

"Women aren't slaves!"

"I never said they were. I was only joking," he said, turning to mom, playing up the Italian with wide hand gestures, opening up his vulnerabilities as well as his stance. "Mamma, they started it. All day long they taunt and tease a defenseless man. Huh? What's a man to do and look at them now, starting up with the banter? It breaks my heart."

Mom smiled hugely, "Heather, no one told me how handsome Rausi is."

When Hope groaned, Rausi grinned. He went to mom, kissed her hand and then hugged her, gently, cheek to cheek.

"See, Mamma, she likes me."

"Oh, crap," Hope said.

"This isn't good," Heather added.

"Yeah we're doomed. Told you so, Jean, he's nothing but trouble."

"Today Mamma," Rausi continued with a wink.

"Tomorrow I win Papa over."

Hope turned to her sister.

“Why do you think he acts this way? Is it because he’s an only child?”

“Partly, I think he’s just a natural born showoff. He knows how to get under people’s skin and manipulate them.”

“Think back to when he annoyed Edmundo over the gold statue. He had a captive audience at his disposal and played it up thoroughly.”

“Aw, come on,” Rausi broke in. “Which one of you laughed? I heard laughter. The joke was funny.”

“It wasn’t me,” Heather said eradicating herself from the line of fire.

“Hope? You laugh at my jokes?”

“Pat yourself on the back this time buddy. You’re not always cute or funny.”

“Maybe not, but Mamma thinks so.”



## 47

By late afternoon Heather and Rausi stopped at the car rental.

"It's too bad all they have left in the sports class is a Corvette," Heather said. "I suggest we go with it."

"I have never even seen a Corvette."

"It's an American muscle car."

"I know what it is I have just never seen one."

"Well, it sits low to the ground. Count yourself lucky."

They checked in with a prearranged reservation and took the elevator to the top floor. He turned the door handle and opened the door. She instantly whirled around.

"You did this on purpose."

"Maybe."

"I wanted two double beds, not one king," she said flinging a carry-on toward his gut. He dodged.

"I'll sleep in the chair. Deal with it."

"No. I want my own room. March back down to the desk..."

"Too late," he stated, shoving her into the room.

She had no other choice but to make the best of a rotten situation. They dropped their luggage and began to unpack.

Moments later Heather snapped, "Give me your extra hangers."

"Get over it. We'll each stay on our own sides of the room."

"I asked for your hangers not another smart ass comment."

"Why are you like this? One minute you are agreeable,

the next, you blow up like an inferno.”

“I don’t know. I’m grumpy. I’m tired of traveling and I want to be alone.”

“Well, go take a shower. Pretend I don’t exist.”

“Is that another smart ass comment?”

“Get off my case.”

She turned on a heel, grabbed a small bag and disappeared into the bathroom.

Alone at last she gazed at her tired reflection in the mirror and lathered on makeup remover.

Deep down inside she wasn’t completely mad at him. They were far from Italy, far from the sorrow of a funeral, and far from everything that reminded her of the past few months. Being alone with Rausi she didn’t completely trust her feelings. She cared about him. His health. His happiness.

She rinsed the suds from her face. *Hell*, she thought. She had felt the gentleness of his hands one too many times and knew how he could overtake her mind, body and soul. Did she fear him? Or want him?

A half hour later, wearing a t-shirt and sleeping shorts she exited the steamy room.

“It’s all yours.”

He wordlessly disappeared behind the door.

Heather sunk into the bed, into soft sheets and a white comforter. She turned the television on.

*Ahh, relief.* American television with an American way of enunciating words. She flipped through the local channels.

Twenty minutes later, he came out of the bathroom with a towel wrapped around his waist, slung low on the hips.

“I forgot my shorts. I didn’t do it on purpose so don’t accuse me of trying to win your affections.”

He grabbed a pair of shorts from a suitcase, threw the towel aside, pulled on the shorts and then dove into the bed – facing her, his elbow on the bed, his head in his hand. It was

his stare that quickly unnerved her.

"I did not count on something."

His voice was so solemn it startled her.

"What?"

"How being home with your family would affect you."

"So?"

He resituated. They were inches apart. She saw a dark, muscular wolf that had lost his bite.

"When we pack our clothes and go to the airport.

When I go home, what are you going to do?"

"I'm going back to Italy too."

"Why?"

"Because I want to."

"That's no reason. I want to know *why*."

"Because it's my home."

"But, you're happy here. I saw someone today I barely knew. It was you."

"Stop badgering me."

She inched away.

"I am serious. Why do you want to go back to Sorrento where you're full of lapses in judgment and sick with depression? Your husband's ashes sit on a shelf because he deserted you right after a honeymoon fit for European royalty. What kind of a home is that? Huh?"

"Don't."

She rolled over.

"Don't turn away. Now is not the time. Explain what you mean?"

She returned her focus.

"Haven't I made myself perfectly clear? I left Atlanta without ever looking back." She had a painful thought, and gasped. "If you do anything to try and take Sorrento or the house away from me I will fight you on every level."

"Settle down. I'm not going to take anything away, but

realize it's technically *my* house. Not yours. I am only asking why you want to go back. Why are so attached to *my* house?"

"Stop hounding me for answers."

"Heather, be honest for once."

She stopped fighting and snuggled into him.

"Heather," he groaned, his arms gathering her into their familiar embrace.

She felt his pulsating energy as though it was hardwired and about to electrocute her.

"Come on," he pressured. "Tell me why. Make me understand what is in your head."

"It's because I love Sorrento. I love the house. I can't leave."

"And the lifestyle?"

"The lifestyle helps. I have grown accustomed to certain comforts. So now you're going to accuse me of acting like a selfish playboy?"

He retreated, hurt, and far enough to read her expression.

"Don't insult me. It's my God given right to spend it, throw it away or buy women if I want."

"You're rude," she said and kicked for freedom, but he held tightly. She rolled on her back as Rausi continued his hold, pinning her to the bed.

"I didn't buy you, Heather," he said, inches from her face. She looked at his lips and the trimmed beard. Trimmed was much better than the wooly growth it could become. "Nor am I a playboy anymore if you haven't noticed. Just answer the question truthfully. Why?"

"We are still in mourning. I can't say it out loud. I'll be struck dead for sinful thoughts."

"Pretend," he said with intensity. "For one damned minute pretend we are not in mourning and tell me."

When she spoke, her voice was barely audible,

“Because I can’t leave you.”

Rausi’s stare was pure intellect. It was as though he could reach into her soul and pull out her very thoughts. His power was stronger than she had ever known anyone to ever possess.

“You’re eyes tell me that you tell the truth. You’ll stay with me?”

Her body relaxed. He eased as well.

“You begged me to stay when they took Paolo away.”

She instantly regretted saying the name, but Rausi did not flinch.

“What I want and what I say is useless. Unless you are completely honest, Heather, with yourself and with me. I can’t reach a conclusion alone.”

“You know.”

“That’s just it. I don’t know.”

“Please,” her head thrashed from side to side against the pillow. “Take me for who I am, allow me to move slowly. It’s not been that long. I can’t pretend.”

He let go and slid to a more comfortable position. However, the current between them continued to flow. It was inevitable, this night, especially how her leg draped over his, how her body arched to meet his. He moved to cover her as their lips met.

“I’ve dreamt of this. I’ve gone mad night after night wanting what I can’t have.”

“Why waste time dreaming the impossible?”

“Little fool.” He propped up again. “I committed one of the most horrible sins known to mankind. It is told in countless tales of Roman mythology. The ending is always tragic. I fell in love with my father’s wife. The morning I walked out of the house I left everything behind. My home, my heritage and the one woman I loved. I had nothing, least of all enough self-esteem to justify my very existence.”

"I'm sorry."

"Sorry is not what I heard that night. I only heard 'go away' and 'get out of my sight'."

"Rausi, I was scared. Really scared. I had just as much to lose."

"No, you didn't have as much to lose. My inheritance? No. I had to do whatever he said. My life was worthless. I was at my father's disposal. He could shove me over the cliff if he wished to do so and I had no recourse to fight him on the matter."

"For God's sake, your birthright was never in jeopardy. Not like the state of my marriage."

She tried escaping the weight of his body, but he held firm.

"That night what did you feel?"

"My emotions were shattered. I was pushed into a corner by two men that didn't give a damn about *my* feelings."

"That's not true. He told you to kick me out of the room, but you didn't. What did you feel?"

"I was mad."

"At me?"

"At both of you and myself."

"You said that before. What did you feel? In here," he said touching his heart. "Anger was not all consuming. The next day, what did you think?"

"The next morning, when I saw that your car was gone I..," she paused having never admitted the feeling aloud. "I had hoped all day long the phone would ring so I could hear the sound of your voice. I recalled the sensation of our lovemaking all through the night and into the next day."

"And if I had called home then what? Heather, I tottered on the brink of becoming a madman. I would have rushed home for more of your body. Would you have kissed

me?"

He waited patiently.

Softly, slowly, she answered, "Yes."

"With passion?"

"Yes."

She could not believe her own words. If Luigi were still alive she knew within her very being she would not have answered that way, and Rausi would have never pressured her again either. Their fool's game would have been over.

"And now?"

"I want you again."

"Heather," he murmured soft as an exhale.

"Can this be right?"

"There is nothing standing in our way anymore."

He oddly detached.

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing."

"Who's lying now? What's wrong?"

"I have forced you before. I am not forcing anymore."

"No. You're not."

"I have not considered your wishes."

"Why bring it up now? Do you feel guilty?" She had learned to read his many expressions. He did feel regret. "Yes, Rausi, I have suffered. You did hurt me."

"What happened was —"

"What happened is over," she offered.

"It was never my intention to —"

"I know. Let it go."

They were cautious into the night, not wanting to inflict any more emotional damage. She set the pace for slow lovemaking and Rausi followed by giving unconditionally. She adored that he no longer had to prove his masculine abilities or apply his mastered skills, and gave from his heart filled with goodness.

They made love for an eternity, slowly, satisfying,  
repairing their broken souls, free from the stigma of sin and  
forgetful of the obligation to mourn.



## 48

He gave the keys a toss in the air and caught them with one hand.

“See, I told you so. I can drive anywhere in the world.”

“Yeah, big deal.” They walked along the sidewalk to an older brick ranch house. “We weren’t on interstate 75. I still have my doubts about your abilities.”

He shouldered in with a nudge. “We are going there this afternoon just to prove a point.”

“Oh, no we’re not.”

“Oh, yes we are.”

“Nope, we’re going to be here all afternoon. I win.” Practically nose to nose she rubbed it in. “End of conversation.”

“Don’t count on it.”

“Sorry, big boy, I’m counting as we speak, in English.”

“I always get my way. Always.”

“Prepare for that record to be broken.”

“*Donna mia*, keep fighting me and see what happens.”

“Rausi, I can take you down anytime I want.”

“You say that after last night?”

She was cornered against the door when he signed the obscene gesture, ready to kiss her.

The door flew open.

“It’s about time,” Hope snapped. Her fiery red hair seemed aflame next to a deep red sweater.

“Is food on the table already? I didn’t think we were that late.”

“Nooo, not yet,” Hope replied pulling her sister into the house. “I’m just teasing. Oh wow, where did you get this outfit?” She tugged at the collar of the tweed bolero jacket

then tugged at the hip of the matching slacks. She then went searching for designer tags, nearly toppling Heather.

"Let go for crying out loud."

"Where did you get it?"

"In *Napoli*, I mean Naples."

"I want to know the name of the designer. Do you think we can find their studio online? I mean really, I want to know."

"Probably."

"Find out how to get in touch with them. *Pronto*."

Hope stole the jacket, slipping it off Heather's shoulders.

"Okay, okay. I'll get more Italian designers lined up for the shop. Gee, are you happy to see me or what?"

Hope examined the craftsmanship as Heather stood wearing a perfect white blouse, unbuttoned far enough to reveal ample cleavage. Heather had twirled into Rausi's side as the jacket came off. His one arm held her as he supplied a look of approval down the exposed shirt.

"Not now," she whispered to him.

His lips went to her temple as he whispered in return, "Did you say something?"

"You heard me."

He brushed his lips across her temple with a hum.

"Hope, give me the jacket. I'm cold. We'll find out the maker. In the meantime I'll be on the lookout for fresh designers. Good grief, you're a spastic case."

"Excellent. I am glad to see you. And you, Rausi, to give you a compliment would only be redundant. You always look sharp. Good to see you too."

He flashed his charming smile and kissed the back of her hand.

The house brimmed over with adults, grandchildren, spouses and great-grandchildren causing the acoustics to be

loud. Women and children's voices rose above all others and father and Kevin knew when to stand out of the way. The old workhorses. Rausi joined them at the edge of the room.

Jean held her new granddaughter.

"Who is this?" Heather asked.

"It's Allison's first."

"Oh, Allison, I remember when you were this size. It doesn't seem that long ago. Your dad wasn't much older than you are now. Gosh, how time flies. Can I hold her?"

Jean gently handed her granddaughter over. Heather cooed over the tiny bundle wrapped in the softest of pink blankets, examining tiny fingers and ears and sandy-brown hair, baby fine.

"Aunt Heather, this is just what you need. You're a natural."

Jean intervened, "Maybe someday."

"It's okay. Luigi and I had talked about possibly this summer, but it's all right. I'm not so young anymore."

"Thirty-nine is still young. Don't give up on dreams."

"Why does that number create so much pressure?"

"It's only a number. Don't let it bother you."

Holding the baby only intensified emotions – some quite complicated. It aroused a hopeless yearning, causing life to seem so cruel. Life was short and happiness was not always so easily found.

"We're ready to eat. Dad," mom called through the house. "Move the kids to the table. Kevin, do the honors." She pointed to the heavy platter. "Heather, take the chair next to dad. Rausi, here, sit next to Heather."

Everyone gathered at the table, adults at the formal table and others to outlying arrangements. Father respectfully led the family in grace before they all dug in. Hands shifted bowls of food to the right, silverware clanged and a tear or two resounded from a mad little one that didn't get their way.

“Daddy, do you think that you and mom could ever visit us in Italy?”

“Well, we’ve discussed it before. At our age traveling isn’t easy. We move too slowly for those long corridors and crowds of people. Of course we wanted to be at the wedding, but it just wasn’t feasible.”

“What if Hope and Clint came with you?”

“Well, we are retired now. I know it’s disappointing. I wish we could.”

Heather glanced to Rausi and said, “It doesn’t have to be complicated. Could we help?”

She saw Rausi’s mathematical mind begin its calculations and felt he could not deny her wishes. They exchanged a quick glance. Rausi’s expression was serious and he blinked in analyzing.

“*Signor* Taylor, if I made arrangements for travel aboard a private jet would you consider the trip? A personal driver would pick you and your wife up from the airport and deliver you directly to our home in Sorrento. There would be no worries about foreign terminals or public transportation.”

“Daddy,” Heather gushed. “That’s a brilliant offer. We have three guest rooms upstairs. A forth one is a catchall room right now, but I can clean it out. And if any grandkids came too we have two couches in the family room and one in the formal living room.”

“Honey, I don’t believe Rausi is making allowances for our whole crew at once. Let your mother and me talk it over first. It is a very generous offer.”

“Will you think about it, seriously?”

“We’ll talk it over soon. Just not today. Let’s make sure we are all on the same page first.”

“It would be no trouble,” Rausi reassured. “Heather and I would be happy to have you visit our home.”

“Maybe when the weather warms up.”

“Then by the summer, daddy, oh please, say you’ll think about it seriously.”

“We’ll think about it. Let’s just get through today.”

As the first course was consumed mom offered second helpings.

“Rausi, can I get you anything else?”

“Oh, no, thank you. This is plenty. It’s all very good. I’m not accustomed to American cuisine however the noodles are very good.”

The bowl was handed to him.

“Mom’s homemade noodles are the best. It’s kind of like American pasta,” Heather laughed. “You know, mom, I bet he’d like homemade dumplings too. Good ole southern comfort food.”

“Which ones? For breakfast or for dinner?”

“Oh, mom’s cherry dumplings are to die for.”

## 49

By mid-afternoon the women gathered in the kitchen. Pots and pans clanged as the last dry towel was pulled from a drawer.

Hope and Heather leaned against the kitchen counter.

"Why don't you stay home with us, for good," Jean pressured.

"I can't."

"Why not? Gee, aren't we your family anymore?"

"Of course you're still my family. Italy is growing on me. I love it over there. It feels like home. Just getting in the car and driving around is second nature to me."

Hope elbowed her, "It's because of him. It's that stupid infatuation. No one is hiding a thing from me. I can see it clearly."

"You don't understand. Rausi's afraid of not having anyone to lean on. He's never been alone in his life."

"Oh good grief, he's a grown man. He can surely take care of himself. Hire another maid and a cook. That's all a man needs anyway."

"If you had only been there the day of the horrible accident and saw what we went through. Hope – I can't – I can't talk about it yet. On the phone I told you it wasn't an accident. The police were involved. It was Rausi's best friend that had Luigi murdered." The women went silent, listening. "Someday I'll explain everything. But, not today. Italy is not like here." She couldn't tell them about pirates and bodyguards, guns and indiscretion.

"I'm sorry, Heather," Jean said. "You've gone through an awful lot lately. You didn't deserve that kind of trauma. At

least come home and visit us more often. We're always here to give support."

"I will."

Football buzzed on the television screen while children played on the floor.

Rausi confiscated one of the recliners. He sprawled back, preparing for a nap.

One little boy played on the floor making car noises. His toys, a plastic case full of cars and a vinyl mat with the image of a city, covered the floor near the recliner.

Running out of room on the small mat the boy drove a car up the recliner and over the arm of the chair.

"Do you know what kind of car that is?" Rausi asked.

"Nope."

"It's a Diablo."

"A what?"

"A Lamborghini Diablo."

"How do you know?"

"I've seen a few before. And that red one on the floor looks like a California."

Not quite understanding the man's strange accent the little boy said, "You talk funny. California isn't a car."

From the couch Kevin's oldest son, the child's father answered, "He's right, Seth, it's a Ferrari California."

Gazing over the array of cars Rausi added, "And I think I see a blue Maserati over there, next to an American Corvette."

"Do you play cars?"

"How do you mean play cars?"

"Here," the boy handed Rausi the Diablo. "You take this one." He went back to the floor while rambling something incoherent in his make-believe world.

Heather came into the living room and leaned over his head, "Making a new friend?" Her hair fell forward.

He smiled, looked up and stretched both arms up to pull her to him.

“I think so. Why do I feel drugged?”

“That’s from eating a big meal full of carbs and from tryptophan in the turkey.”

“Not from this morning?” he whispered quietly.

“No,” she said smiling back, wishing he would be quiet and keep their secret just that, a secret.

He gazed deeply into her eyes and mouthed the word, “*Baciarmi.*”

She patted his whiskery cheek, took his hands and removed herself from his grasp.

\*\*\*

Goodbyes were simply horrible. Mom, dad and Hope saw that Rausi and Heather made it to the airport.

Heather was teary eyed as they stood at the curb. “Bye mom, bye daddy, now promise you’ll come and visit us soon.”

“We will strongly consider it.”

“Please do,” Rausi encouraged. “Give us a couple weeks’ notice and I’ll arrange everything. We will see that you have a safe trip and a great vacation.”

Mom hugged him and said, “Take care now and don’t let the mean girls pick on you.”

Hope hugged last. “Take care of my little sister. If you hurt her, buddy, you’ll have me to answer to. Got it?”

“I have no doubt. Seriously, Hope, don’t worry. Your interests are the same as mine. I won’t let anything happen to your sister.”



## 50

Credits rolled across the television screen to a strong techno beat as the movie ended. Heather rested against Rausi on the sofa as his fingers moved slowly in a gentle massage on her scalp. Suddenly he pulled away and glanced to her spiked hair. The dishevelment was humorous. He chuckled as she wiped away a tear.

“Why so sad? The movie had a good ending.”

“Yeah.”

He gave a gentle squeeze. “What’s wrong? You miss romance?”

“I miss him.”

Rausi was correct in predicting her emotional spike in Georgia. At home her mood spiraled.

Over Christmas he had managed to lift her spirits with a trip to the Alps. They exchanged gifts. He presented her with a white ski parka lined with faux fur, matching ski pants and snow boots. She refused to ski on the slopes however they did go snowmobiling. And Rausi – he enjoyed time on the slopes, refreshing the cobwebs from his mind, as well as getting a much needed workout. It was a welcomed escape from the insurance company for a week.

Heather didn’t argue when he dragged the mattress out of the bedroom and put it in front of the fireplace in their private chalet. The chalet was beautiful with a spacious cathedral ceiling and exposed wooden beams. The stone fireplace was tall and the hearth was large enough to walk into. The crackling embers kept them warm through the snowy night.

They talked and drank until the wee hours of the morning. He was gentle with her emotions and only let sex

happen when the moment was right. Only when she was receptive, rolled into his arms and kissed him first.

New Year's Eve, they were guests in Edmundo and Carlotta's home along with John and Gloria. Throughout the visit there remained an undercurrent of mourning. However, everyone did their best to ring in the New Year with grand hopes for a bright future.

Back home in Sorrento, Heather fell under the spell of grieving widow while Rausi became a workaholic, a changed man.

"If it were the other way around Papa would not have stopped living completely."

"I think he would have."

"Well, maybe to a degree, because he was old, but you're young and full of life."

"I don't feel like it."

"Then do something. It's been over six months. Get over this incessant sadness. Even I don't dwell on things or work every weekend. I have been to clubs – with Mathieu. I admit we saw Paolo's ex-girlfriend, Angelina."

"Really?"

Heather sat up creating distance.

"Uh huh. She and I danced." He refused to let go when she tried squirming out of his grasp. "I won't hide the truth. If any woman can light a fire in a man's soul it is Angelina. That is as far as we went. She reminds me too much of the past. Anyway, I don't care if I never see her again."

"Why not? I'm sure she would give you anything you want. Remember, I have seen Angelina. She has a body that doesn't stop."

"Yes, she does. But, so do you. Perhaps the number *twenty* comes to mind?" She frowned and grinned in the same instance. "Don't you see? The playboy in me is dead. I don't want party girls that use me for sex or want me to spend

money on them. A Cassini is worth more, much more.”

“You are worth more.”

“And so are you. Today is the day to come out of the mausoleum and become whole again. Do you still run?”

“Sometimes.”

He shook his head. “That is not enough. Exercise. Take care of yourself. Think about doing things. Get out of this house. Can you do that much? For me?”

She gave a halfhearted nod.

“I am serious, very serious.”

“Rausi?”

“Hmm?”

“I blame myself.”

“For?” He shrugged. “What?”

“Everything.”

“What is everything?”

“For Paolo’s accident and Luigi’s too.”

“Oh, no, no, no,” he grimaced at the atrocity of the thought. “You had nothing, *nothing*, to do with either accident. Do you understand me? Where is this coming from? Why would you think such a thing?”

“If I had not gone outside with your father the night of the party maybe none of this would have happened. Don’t you see? It’s my fault that Paolo wrecked the car that night.”

“Heather. You didn’t even know Paolo before that night. He drank too much. He should not have been driving.”

“You don’t get it. When you and I fought, it upset Ava. I don’t know how much Paolo had to drink but —”

“He drank a lot. He always did.”

“When the girls left the party, I’m sure the three of you, Mathieu too, drank even more. If I had not gone outside then the girls would not have gotten mad or left early. It’s my fault. Don’t you see?”

“Paolo’s drinking had nothing to do with you. There

were things on his mind. He did things during the day that Angelina knew nothing about. That night was fate for him. It had *nothing*,” Rausi gently cupped her face with his hands, “nothing, to do with you. Okay? So get this stupidity out of your head.”

“If I hadn’t chased the girls away, he might not have gone home when he did.”

“No. I said no. You did not make Paolo do anything. Okay? He is a man. He can do as he pleases. The two of you never even spoke that night.”

Heather sat quietly for several seconds. Rausi dropped his hands.

“If you say so.”

“I say so.” He looked to the curio cabinet, to the burial urn. “And there is something else I have been thinking about lately. If we are to move forward – Papa’s ashes – I would not want my ashes sitting there, wasting – waiting for nothing, but an empty eternity. To me that is hell in itself. I think we should let him be part of the earth. You know, go back to where we came.”

“No! I won’t let him go,” she said fighting him on the matter. “You can’t. I won’t let you scatter his ashes. I won’t!”

“Now listen to me. He would not want his remains sitting on a shelf that no one sees. I would not want my remains sitting there, mingling with the dust. By releasing those ashes to the earth, think about it, your spirit might be set free too. These self-defeating doubts might also stop.”

“I can’t let go of his ashes. Please, I can’t let go.”

“Heather, he is gone. That’s it. He is never coming back. You are not going to get better until you banish these fears. I will make arrangements. We will have Edmundo and Carlotta join us and set him free. Okay?” He moved to search her expression. “Okay?” She nodded reluctantly. “Good.”

He leaned to kiss her cheeks, slowly, gathering her

broken mind and willing his energy into her saddened soul. The simple act seemed to calm her tantrum. When he kissed her mouth, he took advantage of the carnal act for his own selfish needs. The softness of her chest against his stirred the flame and his hands roamed to her back. Their contact evolved. It built from his craving and her need to be consoled. Heather responded only so far before letting the emotion fall. Rausi then retreated, in defeat.

“Come out of the mausoleum,” he reiterated. “Imagine for one moment, if you could do anything in the world what would it be, cruise on the boat again?”

“No, too many memories.”

“Return to Monte Carlo? I’ll take you. We’ll have fun.”

“No, I don’t want to go back there either.”

“How about shopping for more clothes?”

“I have a closet full of clothes and no place to wear them, along with jewelry too. Your father spent a fortune on me.”

“Ahh, American women, aye,” he said sitting up on the sofa. “And all you wear are athletic attire in the winter and jogging attire in the summer. Did my father ever tell you what the Cassini fortune is worth?”

“No. I don’t want to know. It’s none of my business. Luigi took care of me out of love. Love is all I wanted.”

“Money can raise your spirits,” Rausi moved to stand. “You’re still a Cassini. Someday I’ll make arrangements for us to get away. But, only when this sadness is gone.”

He got up and walked toward the hallway.

“Rausi?”

He stopped, “What?”

“Does money bring you happiness?”

“Not right now, no. I’m not *paralyzed* by the walls of a tomb either.”

## 51

The doorbell rang. She ran halfway across the house. The stretch invigorated her soul among other things, her thoughts. Heather had taken his advice and begun running again. She felt re-energized. Alive.

The doorbell rang again. She skidded to a halt one second before Rausi had a chance to open it. But, with one look at her, he lost all train of thought.

“Wow, *bambino*.”

“Open the door. It’s Edmundo and Carlotta. Put your eyeballs back in their sockets you overgrown jock.” She physically bumped him out of the way with a hip before opening the door.

“Ciao Edmundo, *ciao* Carlotta,” she warmly kissed their cheeks and they returned the gesture. “Come in, come in.”

However, the startled expressions on their faces and the glare at her appearance –. She looked down to the bright red top with white Capri’s and strappy heels. She then looked to the somber attire Edmundo and Carlotta wore.

Carlotta gasped, “Have you been shopping?”

“No, Rausi picked this out for me to wear. We’re trying to change the gray mood of the house and gain a more positive outlook. I’m sorry if it shocks you. Maybe this is too much. Should I go change? Forgive me if it’s inappropriate.”

Carlotta stammered at first, “Dear, if this – this is what you choose to wear don’t let me judge. Is everything alright, I mean are you doing well?”

“Oh, yesterday I had a wonderful day at the spa,” she said flashing the bright red manicure and pedicure. “And I’ve taken up running again. I’m feeling so much better than, well,

you know, than before.”

“We are making strides too,” Edmundo said, albeit with a heart still heavy. “I’m happy to be in contact with Rausi nearly every day and hope we can work together in the near future.” He turned to Rausi. “You must come and join my board of directors and be part of my company.”

“Edmundo, you pressure me on the phone every other day. I told you any added responsibility is too much for me to consider right now, much less the reputation.”

“Ahhh, reputations are for children. Power is – shall we say liberating. Don’t fool yourself Rausi.”

“I’m well aware of the condition. Give me a few more weeks to think about it before committing any more of my time. Zio Raphael is pulling more weight than before and helping whenever he can.”

“Of course, but realize I won’t take no for an answer. When you are ready, you come let me know.”

“Fair enough. Here, let’s go to the kitchen. For this day I have chosen a special wine. I think father would be pleased knowing his family enjoyed this particular one. And also, Edmundo, I have a present for you.” Rausi picked up a small box set near the backsplash. “These were his favorite cufflinks, the square diamond and onyx set he received from you as a gift many years ago. I would like for you to have them back and wear them in his honor.”

“Oh, yes,” Edmundo replied with welling emotion. “I remember them well. He wore these often and I will do the same. Thank you, the gesture is most overwhelming. It means the world to me to have something he held in such fondness. They are very beautiful.”

“I agree.”

Heather and Rausi worked in tandem in the kitchen. He filled wine glasses as she placed a tray of hors d’oeuvres on the bar. They eventually took their drinks in hand and

prepared to toast the occasion.

“To a special day,” Rausi said lifting his drink. “To the memory of my father, may his days in heaven be productive and observant of those of us still on earth. May he guide us and continue teaching us, and may we meet again, on the other side of the balustrade, on the right side, in eternity.”

The stemware clanged together in salute.

A horrifying feeling silently crawled under Carlotta’s skin as she observed the pair mulling about in the kitchen. Something was terribly wrong although she could not put her finger on it. Something odd was growing in this household, something turbulent and demented. If Luigi were alive this situation would not have had fuel to form.

Carlotta tried desperately not to notice the bright red top while holding her suspicions as eloquently as she could.

At last Rausi did the honors. He walked to the curio cabinet and unlocked it, retrieving the burial urn containing his father’s ashes. Carlotta noted the gold leopard statue and wondered if Edmundo did the same.

The small party stepped outside to a grassy terrace overlooking the bay. Rausi ceremoniously held the urn. Carlotta froze in fear, before abruptly breaking her silence.

“Dear, come with me, just for a moment,” she said to her husband.

“Can I help with anything,” Heather offered. “Here, let me refill your glass.”

“No, no. The wine and hors d’oeuvres are wonderful. I need to speak with Edmundo privately for a moment. I’m sorry for the disruption. We will only be a few minutes.”

The woman darted toward the patio doors, her heels sticking in the grass before clicking on the pavers.

“Are you sure I can’t help with anything?” Heather called from behind. “Is everything okay?”

“Oh, no, dear, everything is fine. Edmundo. Please.”



He reluctantly followed her into the house, and sensing her anxiety he closed the doors behind them.

“What’s wrong?”

Nearly hyperventilating with a hand to her heaving bosom she said, “Don’t you see it?”

“See what?”

“I can’t exactly say. But first – the way they are dressed is completely inappropriate for today. The image is more befitting for a nightclub.”

“They are young. I will agree red for a widow is irresponsible, but I won’t criticize. Heather is a good woman.”

“Darling, there is more,” Carlotta gushed. “Did you notice how they look at each other?”

“In what way?”

“Well, he gazes at her with that irresponsible look and she returns the look lovingly, deeply into his eyes as she did with Luigi on their honeymoon. Edmundo, I am terrified there is more happening here than we know.”

“They are family. They live under the same roof and are accustomed to one another.”

“Oh, no. Oh, no, no, no. Those glances they exchange, they are more than any stepmother to stepson. They know intimacy with each other,” she suddenly covered her mouth from spewing the transgression.

“Carlotta, that is preposterous.”

“Imagine for one moment. Don’t you see how they stand next to each other, how their bodies brush past the other? They touch one another often. His hand is all over her back, her arms. Also, there was one moment when she stood before him with both hands on his chest while staring into his eyes. She did the same with Luigi – when she was madly in love with him. But Edmundo – I feel ill, physically sick.” She exclaimed, “What if they are sleeping in the same bed at night!”

“Calm down, relax and take a deep breath. We don’t know if this is true. And to make dangerous assumptions would only be embarrassing, to everyone, if the accusations are untrue.”

“And if I am right? And if the assumption is correct?”

“What? That they are sleeping in the same bed at night?”

“Si.”

He grimaced and shook his head before saying, “Okay, if it were true then it is highly bold on Heather’s part to become entangled with the son so soon after Luigi’s death. I might – and I am only saying I might go back to Alexia’s initial assumption that Heather is after the money. As you convinced me early on I don’t believe that to be so. Heather is a modest woman.”

He took a breath, “Now Rausi, he loves women. He is a hot-blooded Italian boy. His bad reputation is no secret, from here to Rome if the stories are true. I am sure he has pushed the threshold of decency with Heather. On the ship, after the wedding, everyone could see how he took longer than should be allowed to kiss the bride. But, to sleep with the grieving widow of his father, well, it borders on incest and is indecent at best.”

“So you see what I mean?”

“Dear, we have no solid proof. I suggest we make the best of the situation and join them. Heather is still the grieving widow –”

“Wearing red.”

“– wearing red. And Rausi is handling the Cassini business while resuming the role his grandfather began. We should be proud. We loved Luigi too. Today is for respecting his memory.”

“When Alexia finds out what’s going on, she is going to explode.”

Edmundo's brows knitted together in sternness. He pointed a warning finger and said, "And the information *will not* come from your mouth. Everything is pure speculation at this point. Gossip only fuels the fire that returns to burn its perpetrator."

They stood at the stone balustrade, just past the swimming pool, as far toward the sea as one could safely venture. The rocky cliff, worn from trade winds and time, angled straight down at a dizzying height. Cassini's had cherished their view of the sea for over a hundred years. It had all begun with a deep Catholic faith and the love of two young people – Grandfather and Grandmother Cassini. It was only befitting that Luigi's ashes be spread over the land and sea his family loved.

Edmundo held the women, one under each arm as Rausi opened the urn. A heavenly downdraft whipped from Sorrento's hillside sending ashes flying toward the sea. The moment held praise to Luigi's life, a loving and caring tribute to one man so special.

\*\*\*

"Carlotta seemed terribly upset today. She could barely focus," Heather said.

"I noticed it too. It must be the day. My heart pounded as well seeing my father's ashes sweep over the cliff. One day I will want the same for mine. Carlotta was just overwhelmed with today. We all were."

"Of course and Edmundo is an emotional man. I'm glad the cufflinks went over well and that he has them as a reminder."

"Me too."

Reaching into a pocket Rausi pulled out a folded sheet of paper.

“What’s that?”

“A bank account number. Edmundo gave me fifteen million euro for fathers half of the yacht. I told Edmundo to keep it, but he insisted.”

“What are you going to do with fifteen million euro?”

He shrugged, “I suppose give a portion to the village of Sorrento or to the hospital and invest the remainder.” A thought suddenly hit him, “You didn’t want to keep the yacht? I’m sorry if you wanted it. Perhaps Edmundo would reconsider and take the money back.”

“No, I don’t know what to do with a ship. Like I said it holds too many memories. Those are memories I’ll cherish forever, but I don’t want to be reminded of sailing the Mediterranean at every turn.”

“I’m proud of your progress, and it’s only been since we talked the other night.”

“Well, it makes sense to start taking care of myself again. I feel pretty darned good right now.”

“Yeah, *bambino*, and that red shirt looks so hot I want to burn my palms on your flame,” he said running his hands down her torso.

“Not so fast big boy.” She squirreled out of reach.

“Oh, come on. One touch,” he said with a thrust from his hips as he began to play. “Burn me with your fire. Make me melt.”

“You couldn’t handle the flame,” she replied with a giggle that he hadn’t heard in some time.

She took off skipping down the hall.

“Try me, one touch. Don’t you want to see a grown man lose all control? Make me your love slave.”

“No!”

He took to the chase and tackled her. He exhaled hot breath against her ear, letting his hands radiate around her midsection as his crotch thrust toward her belly.

“Every part of me is yours.”

She squirmed and escaped again, laughing as he groaned.

“Good, can your hands fix dinner tonight? I want *spaghetti alle vongole* and *pastiera* for dessert.”

“Aye,” he said with arms reaching toward her. “I am wounded. I give you all my love and you leave me a broken man. I am broken hearted.”

“You don’t look so broken hearted to me.”

She sprinted down the hall as Rausi fell to his knees with his hands in the air. “I am, see? Completely scorned.”

“Those black slacks are going to need washed for sure after rolling on those dirty floor tiles.”

“*Bambino*, don’t leave me groveling on the floor like a school boy wanting...”

The door to her bedroom slammed shut. She locked it.

## 52

Rausi didn't pretend to know half of what his father knew in predicting financial trends. He hired competent advisors to manage Cassini capital.

Franco, a friend to the family, was one of several financial advisors. Rausi had spoken to him earlier in the day as they tossed around investment ideas. Another thought came to him in the shower.

He stepped out of the shower, towel dried and pulled on board shorts. The damp towel was then draped across his shoulders as he headed toward the home office.

Barely past the family room fireplace, had he come to an abrupt stop. Heather stood in his way. Whipping the towel from his shoulders he snapped the end against her backside, precise and quick.

"Oww!"

"You're in my way." She wore a sundress with high heels, her hair and makeup done. It put him on high alert. "Where have you been?"

"I've been in town, to the spa, purchasing things. Oh, and the Land Rover is making a noise."

"What kind of noise?"

"I'm not sure. There's a thumping sound from behind the dashboard. It's not really in the engine. The sound is more below the steering wheel. The thud bangs around for a while and then sometimes it just goes away."

"I'll take care of it tomorrow. What do you want to drive in the meantime? Scaglietti, Maserati or what? We should have gotten a car for you long ago. Why haven't we gotten a car for you to drive?"

"The Land Rover has served its purpose just fine. How else was I to learn to drive Sorrento's awful curves? But, if you're serious," she smiled eagerly.

"I am serious."

"I'd like an Audi."

"Audi it is. No trouble. I will leave work early tomorrow and we will go buy one. You are still in my way." He backed off full of spunk and energy and snapped the towel again.

"Ouch! Dammit, that hurt."

"Tell me, what are you going to do about it, huh?"

Rausi taunted knowing how it frustrated her to no end. She neared. He looked to her mouth, luscious and shining with pink gloss, as she put both hands against his chest and shoved. Hard. He grinned and puffed out his chest, rubbing taut abs.

"You want this? You're going to have to earn it."

She gave an audible scoff although he noticed feminine weakness. The desirable kind as her sight scanned his naked chest.

"Earn what? I swear, arrogant men."

"My body goes freely to no one. It has to be earned."

"Well, so does mine."

With pending matters, he leaned toward the office. "Don't fool yourself. *Lo sono Italiano!* I could take you any time I want."

"*Italiano* equals super inflated ego, overgrown jock. Get over yourself."

"Damn right, now leave me alone. I've got calls to make." The feisty mood continued as he snapped the towel once more.

"Stop it!"

"Mmm, look at that ass bounce."

"That's indecent."

She gave a loud sound of angst – right before he disappeared behind the office door. It slammed shut.

Heather walked out to the patio and pondered what to do with the evening. The exterior house lights were off, but the colorful LED lights at the bottom of the swimming pool were on. She thought *a swim would do wonders about now* and kicked off her heels.

The springtime air still cooled quickly in the evenings. However, the heating element in the pool had clicked on about an hour ago. She wiggled a toe in the water. The temperature was perfect. The wiggling toe stirred the harsh scent of chlorine that hung in the air, while LED lighting danced in the ripples.

All alone temptation took over. She slipped out of the sundress. It fell to the ground. Then the panties. She used the hand railing for support and walked down the steps into the depths for a short swim.

Submerged up to her neck, the cobwebs began to wash away.

The loss of Luigi became easier with each passing day. Even the memorial tribute in town had been a thoughtful gesture given by the town's people. Their loving support was more than she or Rausi could have ever imagined.

So many nights she and Luigi had looked to the heavens, to the stars twinkling in the night sky, and pondered Roman gods and goddesses and the creation of civilization. The thoughts were humbling. It made their love so much stronger.

Loving him had been such a small portion of her life, not even a complete year, yet it had been such a life altering change. Heather could not leave this house. The house needed her. Her presence had put such a thumbprint on the Cassini household. She even felt the spirits of Luigi's mother and father, and knew, deep in her heart, they approved of her presence as well.



“Sure, Franco,” Rausi said into the phone, deep in analytical thought and swiveling his chair from side to side. “I want to transfer those funds while the stock is low and keep lose ends to a minimum. Put that in the global annuity. Watch for turbulence in the market. Should that happen we might want to do something different.” The chair swiveled toward the window. He suddenly stopped, lost all train of thought. “Umm, Franco, I have a mild emergency. I need to go.”

“An emergency?”

“Nothing major, but it does need tended too. I’ll get back with you in a day or so after I decide on the fund manager.”

“Okay, keep in touch. *Ciao.*”

“*Ciao.*”

He hung up the phone and sat, staring out the window, as seconds ticked away. He saw her walk into the water and watched as she swam the length of the pool.

A chill hung in the office with his body still damp and minus a shirt. He knew the water’s temperature would be warm about now. But, was she ready? He couldn’t tell, but the moment felt right. Extremely right.

He went out to the patio and stopped long enough to adjust the music, and increased the volume. The song on the radio happened to be ‘On an Evening in Roma’. *Perfect* he thought to himself.

Heather whirled around and said in alarm, “What are you doing?”

He said nothing. He stood for a second at the side of the pool and then shoved off the board shorts. They fell to the

ground. He didn't bother with a toe test of the temperature first. He covered his vitals and jumped in. Three seconds later he came up with a whip of the head, flinging water in all directions.

"I'm sorry," she said, scooting away. "I thought you would be on the phone for a while."

"No."

"I just wanted to take a quick dip before retiring. I'll leave you alone if you want to swim."

He said nothing, but encroached on her space as she went to the shallow end.

"I didn't think you would see me out here."

"The curtains are partially open. Do you think I am going to let you have all the fun without me?"

"It's not been that long. We're still in mourning."

"It has been seven months. That's long enough to put life on hold."

"Well, most people mourn for a year, sometimes longer."

He lunged for her hand and caught it. "Don't go."

"What do you want?"

"Come here."

He gave her no other choice and lessened the space between them. He gently cupped her face in his hands, looking deeply into her eyes for the longest time. Her look of puzzlement only increased his endearment.

"Do you know what I want?" he said softly.

"You've made it perfectly clear."

"No, not that, well, yes," he stammered, not in the mood for pettiness. "I want more. What I want is for you to stay beside me forever."

"Umm, I don't know how to respond to that."

"Say only the truth. Look at me when you speak. I want to feel your words. I want to see it in your eyes and feel

it in your touch.”

“Rausi, sometimes I feel our cultural divide. It’s confusing. Your passion is more than I can handle.”

“No, your passion is strong too. Rise to the occasion and don’t back down. Talk to me.”

He waited patiently for her answer.

“Well, you and I faced insurmountable challenges from the beginning. Yes, there was more between us from the very start than I wanted to admit or could even comprehend. In all honesty I still don’t understand why it all happened. Things got confusing after you barged in the room that night. And then after the passing of your father we both changed. We grew closer these past few months, but without promising anymore.”

“Because I let us grow in this way. I gave you all the freedom in the world as long as you stayed in this house, as long as you were close to me every day.”

“I sort of gathered that. These past few months I watched you grow into the man your father always wanted you to be.”

He frowned.

“I feel it,” she said quickly.

“Do you?”

“Yes, I feel your love.”

He read her eyes. She told the truth.

“You know. Do you remember? I made a promise once.”

“What promise?”

“You don’t remember?”

His chest pressed against hers. There was a spark, a certain energetic charge when they touched.

“No.”

“That I would have you again one day. That promise came true in Atlanta and again in the Alps. It’s inevitable when

two people are in love.”

“What would people say if we started an affair?”

“Technically it is not an affair. We are both free to see whomever we choose. No one needs to know what we do. Edmundo accepts you and Carlotta, and Gloria and John do as well. You are one of us now. What we do in this house is no one’s business, but our own. We both have vitality. I can provide a loving home if that is your desire. I love you, Heather, more than I have ever loved any other woman. Honestly, our attraction happened the first moment we met, in the restaurant. I saw it in your eyes. You felt it too didn’t you?”

“I don’t know.”

“Tell me. Don’t lie,” he said gently cupping her throat. “I saw the blush on your face. Tell me you felt something between us.”

“Yes, it’s true. The moment you walked in the door I couldn’t take my eyes off of you.”

“I saw your stare, the nervousness on your face.”

“That’s because you scared me.”

“No, it was the attraction. You were afraid of the extent your heart could grow for me. It was an emotion that grew into love.”

“I do love you.”

“I know you do.”

“I’ve never known any man before with sheer and utter confidence, and handsome as well.”

“Superficial.” He placed her hand over his heart. “It’s what is in here.”

“Yeah, but I still feel guilty for what we did. Part of me wants to love you freely, but I don’t know how to move forward. How do I get past this fear?”

“We have paid dearly. We both paid a heavy penalty. Just let it go. It is spring, a time for new beginnings.”

His lips found hers. Slowly at first. Rausi's kisses were like the ebb and flow of a tide – rushing in and then slowly falling apart only to rush in again, overpowering, overtaking. He conquered with the grand gesture of Caesar's promenading army.

“You can't tell a soul.”

“No one will ever know. It is only us, alone. The night is beautiful.”

Their fervor rose to an enticing pinnacle as guilt fell apart, diminishing with the fading sunset.

“Heather, it's been too long since we made love. I want you every night.”

“Why didn't you say something?”

“Because you weren't ready. But, you're ready now. Do you want me?”

“Yes,” she breathed.

“How much?”

“This much,” she answered reaching for him.

He groaned at the touch. The sensation tore through his body, the wanton need that he had not experienced in too long. He repositioned their bodies and copulated. They both gasped. It had been an eternity since they had felt glorious passion. Their rhythm sloshed the sides of the pool.

“Mmm, yes, oh yes,” she murmured, enraptured in sensations. “Rausi,” he responded and water splashed with more fervor. “Oh, God no! We can't. We have to stop.”

“Why? What's wrong?”

“I haven't kept up with birth control. I'm so sorry.”

His shoulders dropped as she backed away. Frustrated, he cursed and slapped the surface. It made a popping sound.

“I'm sorry!”

His emotion went from frustration to one of making swift decisions. He whisked her up in his arms in swift motion and stormed out of the pool. At the towel cabinet he stopped.

“Lean over and grab two towels.”

“Why?” she said. “What do you plan on doing?”

“*Dio in cielo*. Just grab two friggin’ towels.”

She grabbed the towels before he carried her to a sunbathing lounge. Heather was placed to her feet. The evening chill settled in the air making the chair cold. He spread one towel over the length of the cushion, and draped the other over his shoulders.

“Lay down,” he ordered. She did.

He leaned over her, got on top, one foot on the ground and kissed her passionately. His fingers found the mark and she bucked up to meet them.

Fighting desires seemed futile. They merged again with warm yearning.

“Do you have condoms?”

“I don’t want a condom.”

Her fingers dug into his flesh. “You’re going to have to pull out then.”

“No, it feels too good. Are you fertile?”

“Yes, for heaven’s sake.”

“All the more reason not to pull out, you’re not getting any younger.”

“Damn you, Rausi,” she said smacking him on the arm. “You’re no better than a chauvinistic camel jockey.”

Their rhythm broke. He chuckled before gradually stopping. He sat up and smiled. She sat up too as they glared at each other, hungry for more.

“Well, by far I don’t own you, Heather. You are a woman of the world.”

“You’re trying to breed me like I’m an object to be owned.”

The lingering chill encroached as they both shivered in the cool evening air. “Here, get close. I’ll keep you warm.” He wrapped the beach towels around their shoulders and pulled

her tightly to his chest. Speaking softly near her ear, “I want an heir – badly. There is no other woman for me. I love only you, Heather.”

“I’m trying Rausi, truly I am. But, I’m scared. What will people think? What will they say about us? And if I’m pregnant?”

He took her face in his hands. “They will say what a beautiful woman that Cassini woman is. She lives high on the hill in a big stunning casa old man Cassini built for his bride many years ago. What a lucky woman she is. What a lucky man the current *Signor* Cassini is for loving her. Perhaps she will give him a son one day.”

“Perhaps give him a son to shock his Papa with laziness and promiscuous behavior on the patio.”

He sighed, calmly, finally at peace. “I could be so lucky.”

She viewed this change in him as amazing. He was serious about becoming a responsible adult. She knew in her heart Rausi would never let his children get by with all the crap he had done.

Suddenly another thought struck, “Oh, and not necessarily a son, it could be a daughter.”

“Oh?”

The idea of a daughter had never crossed his mind. They had not had a female Cassini in the family in over 80 years.

“Yeah, I don’t make the decision,” she teased. “It’s the male biological factor that decides whether it is a son or a daughter. Could you imagine raising a girl?” Heather rubbed her cold nose over his. “She would have wild pool parties with boyfriends over to the house.”

“Oh, no.”

Heather laughed as Rausi unraveled.

“If I have a daughter she will not kiss a boy until after

college.”

“You’re so biased. You wouldn’t want her to behave like Ava or Angelina?”

“No, I would want her to behave like you, beautiful with brains.”

“Think about it. Really, think about it. A child brought into this home deserves both a father and a mother, two people that love each other and are willing to raise their child.”

“Uh huh,” he spoke preoccupied brushing back strands of wet hair from her face.

“Creating and raising a child isn’t a game. It is a serious matter. There are emotional and financial considerations.”

“We’ve got that covered. You’re emotional and I have financial considerations.”

“Why do I still feel like you’re not really listening to me? I’m eight years older.”

“Seven and a half. Everyone knows beautiful women age like fine wine.”

“When I’m sixty, you’ll only be fifty-two and that’s a big difference. My life will slow down while you’re still vibrant.”

“We’ll cross that bridge when we get there. I love being with you, looking at you, listening when you speak. I listen to every word you say even though you think I’m not paying attention. I have learned so many American things. Heather,” he pleaded. “I would be lost if you left me. I want you by my side, forever. Don’t you know I’ve left you alone these past months?”

“I know.”

“I’ve not touched you purposely, not forced myself into your room. We each needed time to mourn, to adjust to a new way of life. My greatest fear was waking up one morning to find you had packed your things and gone home to



America. I have a packed bag that sits in the front of my closet. I needed to be ready to move as fast as possible, chase you down and bring you back here where you belong.”

“Oh, really,” she said smiling from ear to ear.

“American men have nothing over me,” he puffed out his chest.

“You think so?”

“I know so.”

“Well, for the most part your arrogance wins hands down, but there are a few that can give you a run for your money.”

“Then I buy them out.” Seriousness prevailed, “I admit Mathieu and I have been to the clubs, but I found no girl worthy of my affections. I could only think of you at home alone. I wanted to be here too.”

“Does Mathieu know about –?”

“No,” he said firmly. “Mathieu thinks my indifference is because of Papa. Mathieu doesn’t know about that night. I have told no one. So now I am saying there is no other woman I want to be with. Mathieu can attest there is no one else.”

She touched his face. The wooly growth of his cheek felt coarse. His wolf-like eyes had softened greatly over the past several months, aged to a fine degree with the typical dark circles from an olive complexion. Subtle, but permanent creases also formed near the eyes. He had been forced to mature so fast as of lately.

They had supported each other all along. And blamed Rausi for the fact she didn’t want to leave this house, this home. She couldn’t leave – not knowing what direction his life might have taken without her. He could have fallen into a deep depression or worse, a real gold digger could have taken him for everything, including his sanity. Alexia had nearly sent Luigi down that lonesome road.

Heather loved both Cassini men, as though she had

been placed in Sorrento by a higher authority to grace their lives, and they in turn gave her eternal love.

“We’re going to Rome for the weekend,” Rausi said.

“We’ll forget our troubles. If you want to make a child we will do so in the ancient city. If not,” he smiled mischievously. “I’m taking you to Vienna the following weekend. Without a doubt you’ll be convinced to have my child by then. Imagine bringing life back to this house.”

“A funny thing,” she said remembering standing near a fountain in Monte Carlo. “Last summer I made a decision to try and get pregnant about now.”

“Oh, really?”

“But, not tonight, let’s go slow. Think things through some more.”

She wondered if she wasn’t pregnant already. They had played Russian roulette. Been far too eager.

“Fair enough, it’s only getting colder out here. Let’s go back in the house. And – I have a box full of condoms. I suggest we make use of them.”

“That is *so un-romantic*.”

“What? You want romance? *Sono un Italiano*, dammit, what more do you want?” He hopped up, swiftly bent over and heaved Heather up in his arms. “I’ll give you romance, slow and sensual. All night long.”

## 54

“Here’s the travel bag,” he said dropping a red leather carry-on on her bed. It held shirts and ties, and his travel kit. He draped a black suit coat over his right shoulder. “The bag fits behind the seat in the car. There’s plenty of space for your evening gowns.”

A small pile of clothes and a toiletry case lay at the end of her bed.

“Where are they?”

“I don’t have them anymore.”

The sudden look of surprise on his face matched her greatest fear.

“What’s that supposed to mean? Where did they go?”

“I sort of sent them to Atlanta and Hope kind of sold them.”

He shifted on a hip, “You did what?”

“Seeing the gowns hang in the closet was painful. Do you know what it’s like having the carpet ripped out from under your feet?”

“Another American slang, huh?”

“I knew I’d never wear them again so I boxed them up and sent them to Atlanta. Hope was able to sell the gowns as secondhand because women out there wouldn’t pay the original cost.”

“You didn’t.”

She nodded.

“And the wedding gown?”

“That got sold too.”

“You enterprising little —” he growled in frustration. “The whole Cassini fortune under your nose and — were you

compensated?”

“No, I gave it to the store.”

He gave the sound of angst before diving into the closet. “Shoes, dammit, where are your shoes? Don’t tell me you got rid of the diamonds and emeralds that father gave you! Heather, I will strangle you with my own two hands if —”

“Settle down. I kept the jewelry and the heels. One necklace set is in the make-up bag.”

“Grab the shoes and let’s go. Hurry up. We have shopping to do in Rome. You planned this all along didn’t you? I know how conniving women are.”

“Honestly, no, I didn’t,” her heart palpitated at the thought of shopping in Rome – the Cassini way.

She shoved the items in the bag and they headed for the hall.

“Right. Typical woman. You’re only after my money.”

She stopped and tugged at his belt buckle, “That’s not true.”

“Do I need to take care of business right here? I’ll pull you to the floor. Mark my word, Heather, I’m angry. Don’t tempt me right now.”

“Nope,” she gave a quick kiss on the mouth. “It’s eight o’clock in the morning and you can’t have me until at least – say midnight tonight. Hmm, that’s sixteen hours.” She chirped confidently, “You can’t touch me until then.”

Reeling her in with a forceful jerk, the gym bag fell to the floor. He had her whisked into a moment of frenzied passion that left her reeling. His free hand roamed over the dress slacks. He hit his mark as Heather’s passions flared and she began to squirm. He then stopped. The point made.

“Don’t tell me what I can or cannot do,” he said setting her free. He grabbed the items from the floor and headed for the garage.

“So what, I can make you very uncomfortable all the

way to Rome.”

“What works for the cock also works for the hen, precious. Don’t start something you can’t handle.”

\*\*\*

Rome. The *Via Condotti*. Heather felt a rush of endorphins like she had not felt in ages. Sure, it had a lot to do with Rausi. She loved him more than she felt she had a right to admit to, but besides her feelings for Rausi – this rush – well, there were designer shops, the top names of the world, dotting the avenue. She walked the narrow sidewalk hand in hand with Rausi.

A certain designer house caught her eye and they entered.

At the nearest rack she flipped through designer gowns with abandon. One after another, her hand moved quickly. She knew her likes and dislikes, there was no hesitation as she tossed another contender to the maybe-pile.

“I’m not completely mad at you for getting rid of the gowns,” he stated while perched on a chair and observing.

“I guess I should have been more considerate of your reaction and asked for your permission first.”

“No. It’s understandable why you got rid of them. I don’t mind making new memories. Our memories.”

She stopped.

“Really?”

“Si. Don’t move. The red one.”

Her hand hovered over a glittery red cocktail dress, knee length with a plunging neckline.

“You like this one?”

“I want to see you in it. Try it on.”

“What about the blue one with the silver edged halter?”

“Try that one on too.”

She grabbed two more gowns before diving into the dressing room. He waited, sitting just outside the dressing room door.

Each time she modeled outside the curtain she found him leaning over with his elbows on his legs and his head in his hands. And each time he perked up enough to give an opinion. She adored his admiring gaze, but wondered about his stress. *Was it Rome? Or her? Or was it something altogether unforeseen?* He had not been himself all day.

By late afternoon they settled into the St. Regis Grand Hotel. Again Rausi was quiet. He pulled on the black suit coat and roughly straightened the shirt cuffs.

“Are you preoccupied with work?”

“No. Why do you ask?”

“You seem distracted.”

“I didn’t sleep well last night. That’s all.”

His forced expression didn’t cut it for her. He was hiding something.

“Do you feel pressure for what we’re doing?”

“Who knows? Maybe.”

“We don’t have to go through with it.”

“No, Heather, it’s not about making an heir.”

“Well, then what is it?”

“Nothing, it is nothing.”

“Then has it something to do with your father?”

“No. I am a bit tired that’s all. By the way, I have never seen you look so beautiful, as you do tonight.”

Lights twinkled in the cascading water of *la Fontana di Trevi* while a faint spray misted the air.

Heather nervously held her breath with eyes straight ahead. The glittering red dress was garnering too much attention from a gathering crowd of spectators. She was ever cognizant of the chandelier earrings with matching necklace, a large pear shaped diamond resting at her cleavage. She clung to Rausi's arm as men and women alike gawked. Even a sharp dressed gigolo, suspiciously hanging around a corner, kept an eye on them.

She carefully descended the steps to the fountain while on his arm and stated, "You can take the sunglasses off now. The sun has gone down."

"I'm watching men stare at the mother of my future child. What do you think of the fountain?" The sunglasses moved to the top of his head.

"It's larger than I imagined. It's spectacular."

She continued holding onto his arm and could have sworn she felt him shiver. There was a slight chill in the evening air, but his black suit coat would have kept him warm. As much energy as Rausi radiated he could not have been cold. His mental processes were calculating some unknown equation. She could tell.

He took her arm, releasing her and created distance. She noted an element of fear, something uncharacteristic in his eyes when he dropped to one knee. That same fear suddenly streaked through her gut with lightning speed. *No!*

Kneeling to the ground he opened a small box. The diamond ring was – *huge* – square in shape, cushion cut and

would cover the width of her finger.

“Heather, will you be mine for eternity?”

She was stunned and far too shocked to speak.

Her reality was that these past several months she had been living a double life. The life Edmundo, Carlotta, Hope and Alexia expected of her. The life of a demure and faithful widow that had convinced them all it was never about the money and it was not. She also lived another life supporting her dead husband’s son. A secret life. How could she say yes to Rausi, when the opinions of others held so much influence?

“Heather, will you marry me?”

“I’m too scared to answer.”

“What’s holding you back?”

“Carlotta – your mother –”

He quickly hopped up to his feet and put both hands on her upper arms. “Remember what we talked about. What we do is no one’s business. Okay? I understand your fear. Yes, my mother may have plenty to say about what we do, but realize she wants what is best for me. And Heather, you are best for me. Forever. I love you with all my heart. I want to marry you. I want us to create the next generation together.”

“This is all too soon.”

“No, it’s not. If we make a child this weekend we want the baby to have the Cassini name.”

“I am a Cassini.”

“That’s not what I mean.” His voice softened, “We don’t want an illegitimate child.”

He was right. She hadn’t thought this far ahead.

He stepped back, pulled the ring from the box and stated, “For me, please. While we are in Rome wear this ring. It stays on your finger. When we get home, before you take it off we talk first. Whatever we do we keep the lines of communication open. Okay?”

She nodded.



The engagement ring slid onto her finger, perfectly. Evidently he had done his homework and knew the right size.

As Rausi leaned in to seal their engagement applause rang out from all sides of the piazza. Evidently the tourists had observed their romantic display. She shied from the unwelcomed attention.

“I do want to marry you, Rausi. Someday.”

“That is all the answer I need for now.”

He reached into a coat pocket, extracted three coins, and turned his back to the fountain. He tossed them over a shoulder. She heard three splashes.

“What’s that for?”

“Good luck.” ... and a wish for marriage.

## 56

The nightclub crammed full of attractive men and women dancing *la dolce vita*. Any woman could have been another Angelina or Ava, smiling and using their body as a weapon of seduction. Any other man could have been a younger Rausi or Mathieu responding to the dance of seduction.

“We seem to draw attention wherever we go.”

The deafening techno beat pounded through her throat as she danced.

“I haven’t noticed.”

Heather shimmied among a throng of dancers to the quick beat as laser lights flashed, blinding to the eye. She turned just in time to see a multitude of expressions on Rausi’s face. Pain, excitement, delight with her squirming feminine body. His hand went to his belt buckle where he unconsciously readjusted.

She leaned over and yelled over the loud music, “You are so subtle.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” he answered loudly, drawing her into more of a rumba.

“I have to say I’m amazed with your dancing abilities.”

“I’m amazed at how sexy you look tonight.”

She threw her head back and laughed, enamored with his attention.

“Did you know you’re attracting women’s attention like a magnet? I suspect you’ve been afflicted with this ailment most of your life.”

“I don’t notice anything, but you. You are my total focus.”

Those brilliant gray eyes retained steely passionate fire, intelligent and intense. She no longer feared his strong Italian heritage, but now adored his animalistic gaze, and knew his soul upheld her faithfully.

She suddenly felt the need to drape her arms over his shoulders. She understood the true essence of Rausi. The emotion warmed her through and through.

"I love you and how you make me feel," she said combing her fingers through his hair.

"*Mio amore*," he murmured.

"How is it Italian men are able to love so strongly?"

"We are true men, proud, we know our women. We know how to love them."

"You're walking on dangerous ground with that statement. I wouldn't explain this to a man that lacked your fiery nature."

"Why? I educate them. I write a book on how to love women. Excuse me, how to love *one* woman."

She laughed. He was serious. Love to him was putting a woman on a pedestal in all her glory in order to admire her endlessly. She knew he loved and adored her with every fiber of his being.

How they got to the edge of the dance floor and slow danced when everyone else shimmied to the carnal beat of attraction, she did not know. The strobe light harshly blinded the eye as one long song blended into the next.

Rausi suddenly took her hand and led her to a darkened corner of the nightclub. She allowed him to pull her between his legs as he leaned against a pillar. There he gathered her up and kissed her passionately, his hands playing with the hem of her dress, and squeezing her rounded bottom.

She wondered if strangers watched as they made a scene.

"Taylor is a French name," he said with fingers caressing everywhere they landed. "You're a French tart that likes to tease."

Giddy from the effects of wine and Rausi she answered, "I don't think I'm very good at teasing."

"You know how to get under my skin and you do it well. What are your thoughts on marrying me now?"

"Devoting the rest of our lives to each other? I think it's the right thing to do."

"I think so too, especially if we make a future heir."

"Do you realize the changes we'll be making, to the house, much less to our lives?"

"I'm ready. Us alone in that big house. With a baby. Tomorrow will not be the same. We will put the past behind us. Tomorrow we'll make *our* history." He took her hand. "Let's catch a taxi back to the hotel. We don't want to be here anymore."

"Okay."

Their passion flamed in the backseat of the taxi, they then rushed through St. Regis Hotel, down the hall and toward their suite. He fumbled with the card to open the door while cursing like an Italian dockworker.

"Calm down," she said before her hand reached to caress his driving force again.

"Heather," he warned, then groaned and returned to cursing while fumbling with the card.

Once inside, he slammed the door and turned the locks. She kicked off her heels. His jacket flew to the floor.

"Here, give me your wrists," she demanded and went to work on the cufflinks. They easily came off and then she quickly turned around.

"Here, unzip my dress. Can you unhook the necklace?"

"No. You looked like a princess all night. I want a princess in my bed – with her necklace, earrings, and diamond

engagement ring.”

“Dripping in diamonds, huh?”

The pun was too late to correct.

“French tart,” he accused, pulling the dress from her shoulders.

“Yet, oh, so sweet!”

The red dress fell to the floor.

“That’s yet to be determined.”

“Oh, I think you determined that factor before.”

“We have? Then I want more.”

“Oh, you know you have.”

“Who could ever forget? I recall every touch. Every taste. Every nuance of your body. I know it intimately.”

Off came his tie, the shirt. The pit of her belly contracted in yearning as he backed her toward the bed. His belt was quickly unbuckled and his slacks slid to his ankles.

“Shove the blankets off,” he ordered.

She took her order with the zeal of a French maid about to be pleased. The rest of their clothes flew to the floor.

“So are you going to have me count to twenty?” she said scooting over bright white sheets.

“No.”

She loved that he was no longer the reckless, carefree Rausi. She trusted him due to his growing maturity.

“What are you going to do?”

His actions, his hands were swift in answering that question as he positioned between her legs. She purred under the touch of a finger that slid inside her moistness and instantly found the magic spot.

“I’m going to keep you on edge until I’m ready.”

He didn’t lie. Rausi pushed the limits on adventure, but lying was never part of the plan. She bucked under the pressure of a fast running orgasm. Minutes later they merged.

He varied the speed, keeping her begging for more. A half hour into their escapade he propped four pillows against the headboard and sat up in a slouching position. "Ride me."

She felt his undeterred gaze that worshipped her body in the dimly lit room and climbed onboard.

When her breathing increased, he thrust once deeply, and held it. She shuddered. The result achieved.

He stopped. The sudden disengagement threw her off center.

"What are you doing?"

"Watching my beautiful princess squirm, *baciami*."

She leaned over, kissed him and ground her pelvis into him.

"Want more?"

"Uh huh."

He obliged, using the strength of his whole body he thrust hard a few times, deeply and stopped. She shuddered in his arms. He hummed in reward from the rippling effects of her blown orgasm.

"How long are you going to keep this up?"

"Full of puns tonight?" he said reveling in their lovemaking. "You know how long I can keep it up. Until I'm ready to come. How long can you stand it?"

"Longer than you think."

"Oh yeah?" He loved bringing her to climax over and over again. Her shuddering responses rippled through his body as well. Again he whispered in the heat of passion, "How long?"

She felt too winded to bother with a response.

The temperature of the room simmered and the sheets burned, moist from perspiration of two naked bodies caught up in rapture.

"Lie on your back."

He helped her to reposition and took over, pounding

out a tempo. She knew he needed a sensual and slower pace to peak, and also knew the pounding would force her into orgasm quickly. When she could take no more, she warned him.

“Rausi.”

He instantly slowed the pace.

“Then come for me.”

She came undone. The fluttering butterflies shattered into a hundred tiny pieces as her contractions pulsed wildly around him. He took his pleasure with long, conscious strokes against her wild pulsations, quickly building his combustion. When he could no longer hold it, he exploded. Heather braced against his weight, waiting for the tension to subside. And then they both fell to the bed, drained.

Moments later his hand reached to her belly.

“How long does it take before it’s a baby?”

“I think it takes a few hours.”

“Not for me. My boys are fast swimmers.”

“You think so?”

“I know so.”

“Time will tell,” she said before they both fell asleep.

In the night they stirred from a spooning position.

“Do you think it’s a baby yet?”

“Uh huh,” she murmured. “He says Papa be quiet I’m trying to sleep.”

Suddenly wide awake, Rausi leaned up. “He?”

“Or maybe she.”

“Hmm. You’re going to make a good Mamma, a good looking Mamma.”

“In America it’s called a hot Mommy.”

“Then you’re going to be a hot Mommy. The one that I love.”

In the morning, the rich smell of chocolate cake filled the air. She ate one large slice while the cake was still warm. At noon she ate chips with a sandwich, yogurt and another large slice of cake. An hour later she had a third slice. She glanced to the cake again. It seemed to glow in the center of the countertop with the luster of gold bullion.

The phone rang, once, twice. She went to the phone. *Oh, crap*, caller ID revealed it was Hope. Reluctantly she answered it.

"Hey, I haven't heard a peep out of you in months. What's up little sis? How's it going? Is everything all right?"

"I'm fine and you?"

"I'm as good as can be expected. Hey, women are asking if you have any more of those gowns. They went crazy over them."

"Umm, I have a couple more in the closet, but Rausi says they are to stay in the closet. He didn't take the news very well."

"He didn't? He got mad?"

"Let's just say he wasn't too happy."

"I'm sorry if you regret getting rid of them. Oh, gosh, maybe we shouldn't have sold them. It didn't cause a fight did it?"

"No, I don't regret getting rid of those particular gowns. They held too many memories. I couldn't ever wear them again."

"Well, I understand. So, how are you doing? What have you been up too? I miss our talks."

"Oh, not much," she rubbed her pregnant belly while eyeing the chocolate cake disguised as gold bullion.



“Not much is going on halfway around the world, gee, can you elaborate? What’s been going on since you got back from Rome?”

She grabbed a fork and took a bite straight from the cake platter. “Well, we have painters here. I’m remodeling the bedroom.”

“Oh, really?”

“Yes, everything is being changed from the ceiling to the floor, even the light fixtures.”

She regretted not being able to tell Hope that Rausi’s room would become the nursery, and that Rausi would be moving into the refurbished master suite.

“Furniture and curtains on order right now. We’ll put a large rug over the old tiles instead of having carpet. The bathroom walls and cabinets are getting painted too, but we’re not touching the marble countertop.”

“We’re as in we?”

“Sorry, slip of the tongue.” She nervously took another bite of cake.

“Sounds like a complete overhaul.”

“It will eventually be my own personal space.”

“Anything else new? Do you still run?”

“Sometimes,” she said with her mouth full. “I still work out and go to the spa once a week.”

“Sounds like the life of leisure.”

“I’m sorry. I probably sound tired.”

“You do. You sound completely out of it.”

“I didn’t sleep very well last night.”

“Oh? Why?”

“No particular reason. Don’t they say as a person gets older they have more trouble sleeping?”

“Yes, but you’ve not reached the elderly status yet.”

“Oh, well, whatever.”

“Heather, for God’s sake. What is wrong? You sound

spaced out. You haven't started partaking of the *vino* in the afternoon?"

"No. Of course not. I don't drink at all these days. Now Luigi, he could hold his liquor. Between the vodka and wine, he drank quite a bit, but I don't think he was actually an alcoholic."

"So you still think about him?"

"Sometimes, but things are better since last winter. Rausi and I are doing fine."

"What is Rausi up to these days?"

"He is doing very well, very happy. He pulled the Cassini enterprise through during the rough transition – and that merger too. He is also working with Edmundo on the board of directors for the shipping business, whatever that means. I still wonder if Edmundo smuggles illegal stuff. You know. They act so covert sometimes I wonder what they are really up to."

"Probably just being guys. They've got to be real he-men."

"Probably," Heather smiled. Rausi was all man.

"So, do you still want mom and dad to visit Italy this summer?"

A case of nerves hit as she searched for an excuse.

"Well, not this summer."

"Why not?"

"Umm, it really wouldn't work out."

"Why," Hope pressured. "What is going on over there?"

"Nothing." *Think fast; make an excuse, any excuse.*

"Hey, Hope, can I call you back. The housekeeper is getting ready to leave. I thought she already left. I need to talk to her about washing the windows. I'll give you a call later and we'll talk some more."

"Sure."

There was a moment of dejection in her voice.

"Love you, bye," Heather said quickly before hanging up the phone.

Well. That didn't go well – at all. Gold bullion – she took another bite.

That evening Rausi took the news of the phone call as a bad excuse. He frowned. "So, you lied to your sister?"

"I just didn't tell her the truth."

"Not telling the truth is lying. You need to call Hope back and explain everything. She's going to find out sooner or later."

"No! You won't tell her will you?"

"Of course I am. We both are, right now, and on speakerphone. Get your butt into the office."

"No."

He grabbed her arm and she drew back with dead weight.

"It's the right thing to do. Confess. They are all going to find out one day. You may be able to hide your belly for months, but we're not going to be able to hide a baby."

"Sure we can. Just watch me."

"That's ridiculous. Heather, it's time to be held accountable."

He drug her into the office and tapped speed dial.

"Hello?"

"Hope."

"*Caio* Rausi, how are you? I just talked to Heather this afternoon. Good to hear your voice. Is everything alright?"

"We have no worries. But, we do have something to say. I'm afraid Heather wasn't truthful this afternoon."

"Oh, blame me," she said slumping in her chair.

"Here, I'm going to use speakerphone so we can all talk."

"Heather, I knew something was wrong this afternoon.

What weren't you telling me?"

She scowled at Rausi and shook her head in negation. He fiercely pointed to the phone.

"Your sister is behaving irresponsibly. She is keeping a secret of which I am about to reveal."

"Don't you dare," Heather threatened.

"What is it," Hope yelled into the phone.

"Heather and I are expecting a baby."

Dead silence filled the air for a minute. "Okay," Hope said hesitantly. "Would someone like to elaborate?"

"Heather and I are married and she is six months pregnant."

Another minute of silence ensued. "Okay. Heather, did he coerce you in any way or threaten you into marrying him?"

"No."

"Ah, at last, she speaks."

"Be happy for me Hope or you will never see your niece or nephew."

"Is this what you wanted? I mean you wanted to get pregnant?"

"Yes, don't you remember our conversations last summer? My biological clock is ticking. I want this more than anything."

"Well, as long as the pregnancy is agreed upon then I'm not blaming anyone."

"See, I told you so," Rausi grinned. "We both want this baby. I need an heir and Heather and I are in love."

"Well, then I'm happy. Congratulations. Although, Heather, I am hurt. Very hurt. Why can't you confide in me anymore?"

"Because all you ever do is beg me to come home. This is my home. And, I'm embarrassed."

"Embarrassed? Why?"

"Because no one knows."

"No one knows what?"

"You are the only person that knows we are expecting. I'm embarrassed that Rausi and I got married when we were supposed to be grieving."

"Heather, old fashioned standards no longer apply in today's society. As long as you are happy then no one else's opinion should even matter. You had a hard year, the emotional upheavals...my God. The move to Europe in itself wasn't easy."

"What about jumping from one hot frying pan into another?"

"You said it. I didn't. Honestly that's about the extent of it. You're well aware that having a baby is a major life changing experience. Please, Heather, I care. Listen, if you want to talk, call me. I'm here. When my kids were little, I remember the emotional roller coasters. It's not easy. You need to surround yourself with as much calm as possible."

"The only reason you're not badgering me is because Rausi is on speaker phone too."

"That's not fair. I'm not badgering you because I'm worried now."

"Hope, your sister is healthy," he chimed in. "We have an excellent doctor, however; I do think it is a good idea to stay in contact with her. She needs someone to talk to besides me. I don't always have the answers."

"I definitely will be in contact."

"We'll take the baby to the states as soon as he or she can travel. I promise."

"I would like that, very much, and mom and dad would be grateful too. So do you know what sex the baby is?"

"Not yet. The nursery will be painted lemon, lime, tangerine and buttery cream."

"Sounds delicious. It's funny the colors are flavors instead of shades."

“We’ll have a live-in nanny for the first few years.”

Heather heard the pause in her sister’s voice. No one in the family had had the luxury of a nanny.

“I suppose having someone to help with diaper changes and feeding is an advantage. Of course I raised mine without any help.”

“Mom and grandma were there to help you. I’m starting a family alone and over the age of thirty-nine. Besides, Rausi’s job is stressful. He needs his sleep.”

“Hey, it’s your decision. I’m not saying anything one way or the other.”

“Hope,” Heather hesitated with her words, rose from the chair and went to him. “I love Rausi very much. I have for a long time. Even when you asked if there was something going on between us, I couldn’t admit it. We were grieving, but I loved him then.”

Rausi swiveled his desk chair in order to accommodate her sitting on his lap.

“I figured as much. My instincts are pretty good.”

“Can you sense how happy we are?” Heather said as her husband eased his arms around her growing middle. “We are very content. We’re looking forward to the baby and having a long future together.”

“Yes, Heather, I sense that you are both quite content. Let’s just keep it like this for a while, huh. And, Heather, don’t be afraid to come to me. I won’t make judgment on anything. Just as long as Rausi treats you right.”

“Oh, he does. He spoils me to no end.” She squirmed as he nuzzled his mouth into her neck.

“I bet he does. Rausi?”

“Hmm?”

“Treat her right or I’ll come out there and straighten out your wagon myself. You know I can do it too.”

“Uh huh.”

“Are you listening to me?”

“Uh huh.”

“Stop it, that tickles,” Heather complained. “He hears everything you say. I think. He probably doesn’t know what you mean by wagon.”

“If you could see this belly,” he said. “She’s getting bigger by the day. And these pudgy cheeks,” he said caressing a finger over her face.

“Oh send me a picture, please. How much weight have you gained?”

“I’m not sure, but I managed to save one piece of chocolate cake for Rausi tonight. I just baked it this morning.”

## 58

Nine months after their trip to Rome, Alessandro Luigi Cassini was born in the middle of the night.

Heather gazed as the nurse put him into his Papa's arms for the first time. Silent tears of joy and remorse ran down Rausi's cheeks.

"You'll be a good Papa," Heather murmured.

"It's hard to say."

"See how content he is in your arms. You will make a fine Papa."

"I don't know. I'll never be like him – my father. He was the best."

"Sure you will."

"I miss his presence. More than ever now."

The love in Rausi's expression said all the things he could not say aloud.

"I know. It is bittersweet."

"Very. I don't want to think about it. Alessandro has a whole life ahead of him. Little Zandro. He has a whole world of opportunities that lie ahead. Opportunities that I let slip by."

"No you didn't. It just took a while. We're back on track now. Alessandro is a tribute to his grandfather – and to you. The Cassini name will live on."

"Uh huh."

"I think he must take after you. I don't remember either of my brothers or sister looking like that – from their baby pictures."

"Possibly. I don't know. I don't even know if there are pictures of me in the house."

"Sure there are. Probably in the catchall room. We'll find them. We'll look when we get home."



Edmundo growled in an uproar when he could not find Rausi. Over twenty-four hours he fitfully called the house and cell phone. Finally, midmorning a call came through to his office.

“*Ciao*, Edmundo!”

“It’s about time. Where have you been? I have been worried out of my mind thinking something horrible has happened. You have not been home. The house is dark and no one has been inside. One car is even missing.”

“You had someone check the house?”

“Yes. And why not? Don’t be so surprised at the lengths I will go for what is important. Where have you been?”

“I’m on my way to *Napoli*. I will be there in less than a half hour. I will explain everything.”

“What’s to explain? Where were you? I don’t want to hear some long drawn out story. Get to the point.”

“I’ll be there shortly.”

The cell phone shut off.

“Rausi!” he yelled into the phone, but it was too late. “That boy,” he mumbled. “I thought he had grown up.”

Edmundo noticed twenty-two minutes on the clock by the time Rausi strolled into his office.

“What is all this,” Edmundo said, his accent deepening. “I call everywhere and get nothing. You won’t return my calls. I have been worried out of my mind. What is going on?”

“Everything is fine, but there are some things we need to discuss.”

“I don’t know anymore. I thought you had gained some sense. I thought you could be held accountable for your actions, but now I just don’t know anymore.”

"Stop rambling, *zio*, and let me speak. I have good news, but the news doesn't come easily. Papa has been gone for over a year now. We can come out of mourning. For me, I have been out of mourning for quite some time."

"*Dio mio*, what are you saying? Spit it out."

Edmundo saw Rausi hold his left hand up and then noticed the wedding ring.

"I've been married for eight and half months."

"What?! There was no wedding. You did not invite me to a wedding."

"We had a simple ceremony. I am in fact and honestly married."

"Who is the lucky girl? Do I know her?"

Edmundo scowled when Rausi stalled.

"It is Heather."

"What? No, not Heather."

"Yes."

"What are you doing to the poor girl? What have you done?"

"We are in love. We have never been happier."

"Why isn't this world the same anymore?"

"The good news gets better, but the shock gets worse. Are you prepared?"

"Do you realize my heart is not what it used to be? Carlotta is worried since my bout in the hospital. The doctor says I need to remain calm. I live with too much stress. I am not what I used to be."

"Edmundo, the reason you could not reach me yesterday is because I was at the hospital. My cell phone was turned off for good reason. Heather and I have a son – Alessandro Luigi."

"No." Edmundo felt his blood run cold. He flushed and reached for a pitcher of water at the corner of his desk.

"*Zio*, are you alright?"

Rausi rushed to pour the water into a glass for Edmundo.

"But, why? Why do you keep secrets from me? Am I not like your own blood? I take care of you."

"Heather feels guilty. She thinks she has betrayed my father by loving me. And, for the most part she did not want visitors during her pregnancy."

"Because you pushed her into something she was not ready for!"

"I probably did, but she went along with it. Why? Because she loves me."

"She was a grieving widow. Tell me you did not take advantage of her affections while in mourning."

"I didn't. We are in love. I'm sorry we had to keep this secret, but now that we have Alessandro – I want to tell the world."

"I need to see Heather right away. I need to know she is safe and that you haven't abused her good nature."

"I haven't hurt her. But, another thing – she's afraid of Carlotta, and my mother. She's afraid of what they might say."

"Carlotta, no, she has tact, but Alexia, you know your own mother. It is best to keep your women under control. Alexia can become a major liability if she is not quickly tamed. Your father was a strong man, but even Luigi could not manage her disposition. But you, Rausi, can take control." Edmundo slipped back in his chair. "Hmm, a son?"

"Yes."

"I only have daughters. They are good daughters, but they move away. I gain sons by marriage, but it is not the same." A new rage suddenly sent him reeling. "I want to see Heather. Now."

"She's still in the maternity ward. She and the baby will not go home until tomorrow. Wait until tomorrow."

"No, we go now."

“I just drove here.”

“I don’t care if you rode a bicycle while standing on your head and spitting lime seeds. I want to see her now!”

Edmundo stood. Rausi followed.

“Please, give her space to recover. Wait until we get home. I’m begging you, Edmundo.”

“No, we are going now. This is why we have drivers.” He yelled instructions through the open office door. “We’re taking my car.”

“Let’s wait a day or two. At least let her get her strength back. She doesn’t want company right now. You know. It’s not easy.”

He poked Rausi in the chest with a fat stubby finger, “You know better than to contradict me. Now do as I say. You’ve done enough damage, and now I need to fix it.”

Heather rested comfortably. With her eyes closed, she listened to the quiet hum of the nurses' station. People came and went all morning. Another voice asked for a specific room. The voice was familiar. Footsteps then tapped along the tiled floor, heavy footsteps. Heather suddenly knew, and then smelled the familiar heady perfume of a black haired harlot.

Her nightmare peaked. The day of reckoning entered the room.

"Heather, are you awake?"

She faked sleep.

"Heather," The woman gently touched her arm.

"I'm awake. What do you want?"

"Still hostile are we?"

Heather reached for the nurses' button, but Alexia stopped her hand.

"Don't, please."

"What do you want?"

A well-manicured fingernail arrogantly went to Alexia's chin. "Well, isn't it quite obvious? How long did you think you could keep my grandchild a secret from me?"

"For the rest of your life?"

"I don't understand your bitterness, this blatant hatred. You stole my husband in the first place, and yet you blame me for our inability to get along."

"He was your ex-husband. You and I had no reason to form a friendship, an alliance or anything else for that matter."

"And so now you steal my son and hide my grandchild from me. You want the entire Cassini fortune don't you? By

having a baby you think the money is within reach, right? An heir to seal the deal. Didn't anyone offer you money to go away? Back to America from where you came?"

"I stole nothing, Alexia. You are the one being a materialistic bitch. You can't stand for one minute that the men love me more than you."

Alexia laughed, quite amused, "Oh, Luigi and I had a special relationship even after the divorce."

"That's not the way he described it. You called him a workaholic and found another man to support your whims. Luigi sent you packing when he found out about the affair. You destroyed him. And then poor Rausi – he suffered just as much. He may have suffered the breakup the most."

She arrogantly sniffled. "Maybe so, but I bore Rausi. No one can take that bond away from me. We are as close as family can be – mother and child."

"And I bore your grandchild. Don't think anyone can ever come between me and my husband or my baby."

"My dear, gloat all you want. You win for now. I don't have the final word and you own the next generation. But, don't put on airs. My bloodline runs through your child as well. I will not be put out to pasture from your catty remarks."

"I'm not the one being hateful. I just had a baby and I want to be alone."

Alexia startled as a tall shadow blocked the hall's bright light.

"Mother?"

"Oh, Rausi," she flew into a fit of theatrics. "What horrible thing have you done? How long did you think you could keep this secret from me?"

"How did you find out?" he asked stepping into the room.

"The town talks. People know things. I just learned about my grandson this morning and rushed here to see him."

Another large figure blocked the light and crossed the doorway.

“Edmundo?”

The room quickly crowded.

“Out, out, out,” Heather nearly cried. “I want everyone out, except for my husband.”

“Shh, I know,” he said rushing to her side. “This is too much. Edmundo is concerned. I told him we are married.”

“Ohhhh...” Alexia wailed at the news.

Undaunted by his mother, Rausi continued, “Edmundo insisted we come immediately. He’s afraid I’ve taken advantage of you.”

“It seems everyone is upset, including me, when all I want is quiet.”

“Heather,” Edmundo stepped forward as though his feet were weighted to the floor. “I am sorry to come in unannounced, but I feel a certain responsibility to the family. Just, please, answer one question. Did Rausi force you into doing something you did not want to do?”

“No.”

“You wanted marriage again – so soon?”

“Yes, I’m in love with Rausi. Has some crime been committed?”

“No,” he said carefully. “If you are in love with Rausi then it is not a crime.” He stepped closer. “The day Carlotta and I were at the house. The day we scattered –” He crossed himself. “– Luigi’s ashes. Was something going on then, a relationship?”

“No, nothing was going on between us then, but we knew deep in our hearts we couldn’t be apart. The situation may seem like we’ve rushed into marriage, but we haven’t.”

Edmundo’s initial anxiety calmed, but the new inquiry was unspeakable. If it were true then it went all the way back to the day of the wedding, onboard the ship, and the

inappropriate kiss between step-mother and step-son. Edmundo would have to let this new uncertainty die. The past was no more. "*Va bene*," he nodded, "Okay. I see no harm is done."

A nurse came into the room with the baby.

"Alessandro wants his Mamma."

"May I see him," Alexia cooed. "Oh, Rausi, he looks just like you. I remember. Can I hold him?"

The nurse stopped for a moment to allow Alexia to view the child. Rausi went to his mother. He placed an arm across her rounded shoulders and kissed her temple. "You think we look alike?"

"Oh, yes, at this age, yes. Let me hold him."

"In a little while. Can you and Edmundo wait in the waiting room? I will come and get you when we're ready."

Alexia, on her way out, reached out to touch her grandson, to feel the warmth and energy of the small little bundle. He fussed due to hunger, but the tender moment warmed Alexia immensely.

With Edmundo and Alexia gone Heather said to the nurse, "I'm too upset to take care of him."

"Here, just hold him. He wants to be near Mamma."

She took Alessandro in her arms and held him near as nature swiftly took over. Heather wrapped a blanket around him as well as herself and he quieted instantly.

Rausi rested inches from them. He caressed his son's fine black hair; his hand nearly covered the whole of Alessandro's head and shoulders. "I couldn't be more proud and frightened at the same moment."

"What do we do next?"

"That's simple. You regain your strength and we take Alessandro home."

"It's unbelievable how they both showed up on the same day."



“For better or for worse they are our family. They are concerned. That’s why they are here. Believe it or not they care.”

“They’re like hawks, descending, picking every last morsel of our lives.”

“More American slang, huh?” He gave a lopsided grin. “Stop fighting the inevitable and accept them for who they are. You are in a position to gain everything. The Cassini fortune is in your favor. Just allow them to be part of our lives.”

“It’s not the fortune I’m worried about. It’s the back biting.”

“Why? You have everything. You have me.”

Heather couldn’t argue. She certainly held position as Rausi’s wife and as the mother of his heir.

A thought suddenly came to her – Alexia held this position when married to Luigi. She had taken their marriage for granted and let love wither away. Heather was stronger than that. Nothing would wither under her watch, absolutely nothing.

## 61

"Where is Carlotta?" Alexia asked while taking a seat in the waiting room.

"At home. She does not even know I am here in Sorrento."

He took the seat next to hers, slowly lowering his tired frame with a groan.

"What do you make of them?" Alexia asked.

"What do you mean?"

"Well, they seem to have hurried into this relationship. Heather married Luigi rather quickly too. Isn't it strange how she holds little regard to sanctity?"

"Yes and no," he answered cautiously. "I trusted Luigi's judgment completely. He loved Heather and I saw no exception. Luigi was not young and every man is entitled to companionship." He leaned toward Alexia's chair with his elbow on the armrest. He tread carefully with his words, "When a man reaches a certain age and enjoys the company of a younger woman. I hold no reproach if both parties are in agreement."

"Edmundo, no, if I may be so bold, do you think – how shall I say this?"

"Just say it."

"Paolo, bless his soul, did something unspeakable. It was the work of the devil, dark and full of hatred. I have no idea what could have possessed him to turn into this evil monster. I loved that child too. Today, I should hate him, but I don't. The sadness I feel is sorrow for his family, and for the state of mind he fell in to. My question is this. Do you – for one minute – think that Heather might have influenced Paolo

to harm Luigi so that she could get her hands on Rausi?"

Edmundo groaned, sat back and took a deep breath.

"My instincts say no. Paolo's downfall came entirely due to the insurance money. But, you do raise a good question."

"Do you think Heather hired Paolo to do something bad?"

They were completely alone in the waiting room. For this, he was thankful.

"No, I do not think Heather had any communication with Paolo whatsoever. I don't want to be the bearer of bad news, but now seems to be the time. Carlotta visited Luigi earlier that day, before Paolo's visit. They had lunch together."

"Oh?"

"Luigi confided in Carlotta. He revealed something. Something not repeated to Heather, not to Rausi and not even to you or me."

"What is it?"

"Luigi's doctor had informed him earlier in the morning that the test proved to be more serious than they thought. He had throat cancer, and it was spreading."

"No!" A fearful hand flew up to her mouth. It slid slowly down her neck to cover a diamond solitaire that she wore, a present Luigi had given her many years ago. "Why didn't he tell me, his wife? Why couldn't he confide such news to me? I would have been beside him."

"You were not his wife anymore, Heather was. He did not give this news to his son, or even to me. It makes me angry as well. Am I not his confidant? Did we not share everything?"

"Why would he keep such a secret?"

"Who knows? Probably to protect those he loved. He was under immense pressure with the business and the takeover at the time. I continually gave him advice on the

merger. Preliminaries were taking every minute of every day. He had problems at home too. I felt that something worried him, but he said nothing.”

“Problems at home? What kind of problems? Was it something to do with Rausi and Heather?”

“Alexia, listen, I do believe there were signs while Luigi was still living. The day of the wedding Rausi had his sights on Heather even then. She enjoyed his attention. You know your son. He has always been hot-blooded Italian boy.”

“I know all too well. We warned him, both Luigi and me, that women would try to trap him, to get their hands on his inheritance.”

“*Si, si*. However, another thing – no other woman had lived in the house since you. Rausi had no other woman around since his mother. So tell me what hot-blooded Italian boy would turn away from an attractive woman living under the same roof? There is room for flirtation every day. Whether she wore provocative clothing or they swam in the pool together. There is fuel for passion. Rausi had access to a *bella donna*, on a daily basis. Understand what I mean?”

“*Si*.”

Tapping the arm of the chair while deep in thought Edmundo continued, “And Luigi, I am positive he would have been aware of Rausi’s flirtation with Heather. Now how much of a fuss Heather made over the boy in front of her husband I cannot assume. If she loved Luigi as much as she appeared to, I would say she made very little fuss over your son. Then behind Luigi’s back if they carried on...I don’t know.”

“Do you think they’ve been up to no good since last summer?”

“I’m going to give Heather more credit. No. What transpired between the pair was slow to materialize. Luigi would have seen their growing relationship. As to his reaction – we may never know. I think the right thing today is not to

concern ourselves with the past. Luigi is not here to be hurt by their impulsiveness. I truly believe they are in love. Why don't we simply support them? You have a new grandson. It is our duty to help raise the boy."

Doubts fell to the wayside. By then they were called back to the room.

Leaning on the bed next to Heather, Rausi tugged on the tight confining shirt. He knew a diet was in order to counteract this weight gain. Any more strain on the shirt and the buttons would pop.

Alexia cooed with the baby in her arms, studying his little hands and feet, and sharing the view with Edmundo.

"Alessandro the Great is a perfect name for the grandson of Luigi," Edmundo said.

"Alessandro has your cheeks, Rausi, and your forehead and hairline. Just like your father. However his complexion is not quite as olive."

"And he has blue eyes," Rausi added.

"Beautiful blue eyes," Alexia cooed while gently rocking her new grandson.

## 62

The flight from Atlanta to Naples went off without a hitch. However, highways leading out of the Naples were busy during rush hour. Hope was thankful mom, dad, and her husband, Clint, were chauffeured. It gave them a chance to study the views and ruins of Pompeii.

Outside of Sorrento Hope recalled the quaintness of the countryside from her last visit. It was just as she remembered, the twisting, winding roads. And the charming Cassini home, the Old World European elegance, however this time there was a sense of serenity and balance.

Hope held Alessandro for the second time that day, captivated with her nephew.

“Is he always this good?”

“Pretty much, unless he’s hungry or needs a change.”

“He’s so little. And beautiful. And is quick with a smile, just like his daddy.”

A hand towel, thrown over her shoulder, protected her shirt while burping the baby. Heather wiped the kitchen countertop for the last time since putting dishes away, while Mom gazed out the window toward the patio.

“Come and look at this,” mom said.

Hope and Heather glanced out the window to see the men sitting on the patio. Clint sat on the right, daddy sat in the middle and Rausi on the other side. They each held a cigar in hand and a stiff drink on their armrest while facing the sunset.

“I wonder what they’re talking about.”

“Oh, who knows? I’m sure we’ll hear about it later.”

The sight pleased Heather immensely. Luigi had rarely stopped working long enough to enjoy the simple pleasures

that life had to offer. He also rarely spent quality time with his son since the college years. But, this was daddy and Rausi, her two favorite men, enjoying the simple pleasures of life.

"That's not unusual to find him sitting out there. He meditates out there in the evening and watches the sunset, or watches the fishing boats come in. It's very relaxing. Do you think daddy is having a good time?"

"What's not to enjoy," Hope snapped while readjusting the towel and the baby.

"Huh?"

"This place is like a resort."

"Yes, yes," mother intervened, "we are being pampered like royalty. Seafood every night. That's not something we're used to. And fresh squeezed lemonade from your own orchard in the afternoon. Not to mention handmade soaps and lemon shampoo."

"What? We shop at an open farmer's market. That's just how we live."

"See mom, Heather's been gone for over a year now. She forgets what it's like to be an American."

"Gone? But, I'm right here."

"You've forgotten what living in Georgia is like."

"No I haven't. All I asked was if daddy was having a good time."

"Of course he's having a wonderful time. He's done nothing but smile these past couple of days. Partly because we know you're safe now, and, very busy," she patted the baby. "We're happy to be here, to visit with you and be part of our grandson's life."

Holding a secret, Heather thought now was as good a time as ever to make the announcement. "I guess now is as good a time to say it – I'm pregnant again."

Hope jerked to attention. Mom straightened her shoulders.

“So soon,” Mom said. “I guess at your age it’s best to get it over with.”

“Mom!” Heather and Hope looked at each other.

“What? What’s wrong with being honest?”

Hope chided her sister, “You’re really going to have your hands full now.”

“You think?”

“Yeah. Two. You’re in for it now.”

\*\*\*

A year after Alessandro was born Isabella Kiara Cassini came into the world. Her father beamed and cradled his daughter in his arms. When the nurse came to take her – Rausi refused to let go. The first daughter in the Cassini family in over eighty years moved and stretched in her father’s arms. Heather beamed with pride at the beautiful little girl with the black hair. She also knew Isabella would challenge her father for better or for worse. The thought pleased Heather to no end. Rausi would silently pay for the playboy years – every day – for the rest of his life.



## 63

### Three years later

"The nanny needs to go," Rausi said. "I don't want Zandro and Izzy to suffer any more than I did when I lost mine."

"You're being terribly unfair. I know the nanny has been a contentious subject since before Zandro was born. But, she helps me. Don't you hear a word I say? Yes, and, how do you think the kids will feel when she disappears? They will suffer the same loss that you felt at five years old. The kids are so young. We love the nanny."

"We discussed this before. She can babysit some days, but living in the house, no, it has to stop."

"Why are you being so cruel, to both the kids and to me? Don't you know how much work she does around here? She feeds them, does laundry and keeps their room in order. We can't live without her."

"We have a housekeeper for that. The time is now. She needs to go. She will be sent away with good references."

"I don't think it's any of your business deciding one way or the other. She doesn't help you, she helps me."

"No. The nanny needs to go."

"Deal with it yourself then," she said tossing a handful of laundry at his feet and walking away mad.

The next day Rausi came home from work late. He quietly slipped in the side door with his arms full. In his arms the furry, brown creature stirred.

"Papa! What is it? Can we keep it?" four-year-old Alessandro inquired.

“Don’t scare it. Be nice.”

Rausi set the brown puppy to the floor and watched as it shivered in fear.

Alessandro and Isabella flew to the floor quickly making friends, stroking short curly fur. Within moments the puppy began wagging its tail, albeit shyly.

“What’s this?” Heather asked with an accusing glare.

“I think they’ll forget the nanny if they haven’t already. Here are her documents. Her legal name is Coco Chanel. She’s a chocolate cocker spaniel. The breeder says she shouldn’t get very big.”

“Oh, how cute. Little Miss Coco Chanel.”

“We’ll make a bed for the dog in the kid’s room and no more nanny.”

“I’ll admit its genius.”

“Of course it is. I thought of it.”

“It doesn’t help with the laundry or clean their room. Or babysit when I want to leave the house,” she said walking away. “Oh, and it’s your responsibility to feed the dog, take care of it and haul it to vet for grooming.” Heather knew exactly where the responsibility would fall. More work – for the housekeeper.

\*\*\*

“Alessandro,” Grandma Taylor said with excitement.

“Do you remember me? We spoke on the phone yesterday.”

“Si,” he said quietly.

“The kids speak English as much as they speak Italian, and they alternate back and forth easy enough. But, in America,” Mamma corrected, “we say yes. Can you do that? For grandma?”

“Yes,” the little dark hair boy answered with a coy grin and tongue in cheek.

"That was a good idea, mom, talking to them on the phone. I think Alessandro has a better understanding of why we're here," Heather turned toward her father giving a hug. "Daddy."

"It's so good to see you. We're glad that you're home."

The rich smell of chocolate chip cookies filtered through the living room.

Grandma leaned toward her grandson, "Do you like cookies?" He shook his head, as a wide grin formed across his cheeks, and then allowed grandma to lead him toward the kitchen.

Rausi came through the door carrying his daughter. Hope and Jean both noticed Isabella come into view at the same moment. Isabella wore tiny white sneakers, designer blue jeans with a blue shirt edged in pink ruffles. She carried a small stuffed animal, a brown puppy.

"Oh, look," Hope cooed. "Hellloo, Isabella. Here, let me straighten the barrette in your hair. Such shiny black hair. Rausi, she has your shape of face. Oh, don't be shy." Her bright blue eyes focused on Hope as she shyly leaned into her father, wrapping her arms around his neck.

"Do you want down?" Rausi asked.

"No," she shook her head in negation.

"Then can I hold you?" Auntie Hope urged. "Please?"

"This is Mamma's *sorella*, Mamma's sister."

"Rausi, you've put on weight."

"Have I?"

"You look different. And you shaved the prickly gruff off too. About time."

"That's been four years ago."

"Well, I haven't seen you in forever."

"I know. Things have been busy lately."

"I bet," she answered with a chuckle. "Gosh, Isabella looks like you. Look at those blue eyes."

"She's studying you. Maybe she sees the resemblance to her mother."

"Maybe. Hand her over. I want to hold her."

Isabella went into Hope's arms. "She is such a baby doll. Simply beautiful."

Jean hounded in cooing over the little girl.

"Don't be fooled," Heather commented. "Isabella's world is never in disarray for very long. Papa sees to it." She then whispered, "Spoiled."

"As it should be," Hope replied giving Rausi a wink.

Daddy piped up as mom set food and drinks on the kitchen countertop. "We want to catch up on all the latest news. Now what's this I hear about kickball?"

"Oh, you mean soccer? Alessandro thinks he might like to play soccer one day," Heather replied.

"Oh he does? That's wonderful."

"We shouldn't be surprised. The sports channel is on the television half the time. The only other thing, Isabella likes playing soccer too."

"Does she try to keep up with her older brother?"

"All the time. She's good at kickball. During the day we take the new puppy outside and play in the front lawn where they have plenty of space to run."

"Where is Chanel?" Alessandro suddenly asked, worried.

"Remember Chanel had to stay with Mathieu and Javier. Rausi's friend Mathieu and his wife have a son Alessandro's age. Javier is a few months younger, but the boys play together quite often. We felt the new puppy would be in good hands with them while we're gone."

## 64

### A year later

“Zandro, stop yelling at the television,” Mamma warned, in no uncertain terms.

“But, I’m winning.”

“Stop saying those bad words.”

He ignored her and continued flipping and turning the video controller as a madman, hell-bent on winning. He yelled alternately in English and Italian as Chanel sat patiently by his side.

Rausi came home from work that evening and dropped his coat and briefcase on a table. Noticing Isabella sitting on the sofa and pouting he asked, “What’s wrong with her?”

“Isabella is mad.”

“What for?”

“She’s mad because she’s not a boy.”

“Oh. I’m afraid to ask. Is it the anatomy issue again?”

“No, that was two years ago. Remember, we separated bath time after the fiasco.”

“Izzy, come tell Papa what’s wrong,” he sat down pulling his pride and joy to his side. He lovingly straightened a portion of her hair, the portion a barrette missed.

“Zandro has more fun. He has friends.”

Rausi looked at his son and caught wind of the bad language.

“Look at him. What kind of fun is that? Alessandro, watch your month!”

The boy seemed to squirm and yell louder with Papa’s attention.

Squeezing Isabella, “What? You want to yell at the

television too? What fun is that?"

"No."

"Girls are supposed to be pretty. You don't want to be a boy. What's wrong with the big doll house we bought? Don't you play with it?"

She frantically shook her head.

"Why not? Girls like playing with dolls."

Heather sat with them, squeezing Isabella in between them. "Wrong answer Papa. It isn't fair the neighborhood has more boys and no girls Isabella's age to play with. We've got to create balance."

"I sense a lecture coming on."

"Girls can play sports too. They can also be great ball players. Papa just needs to play ball with us more often. Like this weekend. And girls can go to school and make good grades and grow up to be anything they want to be. We work with numbers every day. You can grow up, go to college and learn business accounting. Shh, Izzy, don't tell Papa and Zandro, but sometimes girls are smarter."

"Are we starting a battle of the sexes?"

"If so you're outnumbered with the dog. Little Miss Coco Chanel makes three to two odds."

"Don't bet anything you can't afford losing. Prepare for defeat."

"Bring it on."

Suddenly Alessandro let out a string of bad words.

"Alessandro!" Rausi threw a pillow that hit him upside the shoulders, practically toppling the boy.

"Don't! I'm winning!"

"Stop yelling!" He returned his focus to his daughter. "See Izzy, why do you want to be like that? When you grow up, boys will come around and want to talk with a pretty girl. They will be all silly. They will talk silly and want to hold your hand."

“And want to have pool parties.”

To Heather – Rausi’s screwed up expression was priceless.

“No,” he answered sternly.

“Who’s winning now? What, Alessandro can have friends over to play in the pool, but Isabella can’t? Not fair Papa.”

“Papa?” Isabella stood up on the couch cushion, eyeball to eyeball, and asked, “Were you ever silly?”

“Never.” He tickled her as she squealed with laughter. She tossed her head as silky dark tresses fell forward into her face and his. Papa then carefully pulled a few strands from her tiny lashes. “Well, maybe a little.”

“Maybe a lot,” Mamma added.

“Oh, you’re going to get it later.”

“Promises, promises. Rough day at work? You seem kind of tired.”

He reached over with one hand in an instant and messed up her hair.

“That’s all right,” she said tossing long bangs from her face. “You’re just jealous because girls are winning.”

Standing on the couch, in all seriousness, Isabella asked, “Papa what did you do silly?”

“This ought to be good,” Mamma said under her breath.

“Hush,” he told her. “Well, for one thing I did something you and Alessandro will never do.”

“What?”

“Play ball in the house or on the patio.”

“Why?”

“Why? Because I say so.”

“And what did *you* do?” Mama asked.

“You know the broken tiles in the kitchen under the big window?”

“You didn’t.”

“Yep, I was playing outside. I watched as the ball got closer and closer to the house. I must have been around ten years old so I don’t remember if I hit a soccer ball off my head or with a fist. But anyway, it moved in slow motion. I thought *nooooo*. And sure enough it went through the window. It was loud and glass flew everywhere. Horrifying.” Pointing to his son, “You hear the sound he makes? You thought my Papa; your grandfather was a quiet man? *No*, that is the sound a Roman warrior makes – to scare the enemy. I heard my name yelled from the top of his lungs. Outside he came with the ball palmed in his hand. Like this,” Rausi displayed his hand, fingers apart, slightly bent, “He gave that ball a kick down the side of the hill, toward the sea, and we never saw it again. So to this day we don’t play ball in or near the house or I will yell like a Roman warrior.”

“How effective. Okay, you win points for this round of the battle – and for a charming story.”

“I’ll win more points later,” he said quietly. “*Molti* points, maybe twenty. *Venti*.” He saw she nearly flushed. It was the younger Rausi she viewed, the one full of lustful indulgence before they married and had children. “Why so quiet? It gives me the impression I’ve won.” He gently patted her cheek knowing he had succeeded in this round.

“Change the subject.”

“Okay, back to Isabella, what do you want to do?”

“I want finger paints.”

“No, not tonight, not the finger paints,” Mamma said. “They’re messy. I need to feed this crew. How about regular watercolors? I’ll put a canvas cloth on the table first.”

“Okay.”

“Alright, there’s one problem solved.”

Heather and Rausi stood up at the same time while Isabella went to gather water paints. He reached for Heather



and kissed her cheek.

"I love stories about your childhood. I want to hear more."

"I've plenty more to tell."

From the floor, another string of bad words came out at a low roar.

"Rausi, can you do something about him? Murder and kill are inappropriate words coming from the mouth of a five year old. He doesn't understand."

Quick as a flash, diving in with both hands Papa picked up his son, effectively startling the boy.

"No, no, no, no, no!" Alessandro screamed, still holding the controller, "Papa! No! I had the high score."

"I don't care. Let go of the controller."

"Nooooo."

"Give it to me," he said grabbling against his wiggling son. He managed to pry the device out of the boy's hands.

"Promise me you'll stop yelling those words at the television."

"No."

"Yes."

Chanel, wagging her tail, calmly waddled over and sat down.

"Good girl," Rausi said. "Now, Zandro, promise me you'll never say murder and kill again. We don't say those words in this house."

"I promise."

"Do you know what the penalty is for lying?"

"No?" He stretched out the word with vague hesitation.

"Penalty is that I take the video games away for a week and lock them in the safe in my office. So have we reached a gentleman's agreement?"

"I guess."

"Okay, no more yelling bad words. Now put the game

away for tonight.”

Rausi hugged him and kissed both his cheeks grandly in the Italian way.

Mamma started dinner and Papa went to change out of his suit. Quietly Isabella sat at the table creating a grand masterpiece with her favorite colors. They flowed perfectly across the paper. Brilliant reds and vivid blues blended into a trench of deep royal purple. Alessandro sauntered over to investigate. Without thinking he stuck his finger in the center of the beautiful painting, screwing his finger into the paper.

Isabella screamed and then cried. “No, no, no, Zandro! *Papaaaaa!*”

Chanel galloped across the tiled floor, her nails tapping out a tempo. Paint water flew into the air and splattered across the table. By the time Heather turned to look at the chaos, Chanel was licking muddied water, as it dripped from the table’s edge, her tongue, turning purple. Isabella’s screams continued as Alessandro tormented relentlessly.

“Rausi!”

In the twilight of the early morning, Rausi had taken the emergency call as he lay still in bed. The dock supervisor spoke erratically into the phone, panicked. Shots had been fired and dockworkers were injured. The workers had thieves trapped in the warehouse with no way out. One guard dog lay shot and bleeding while the other dogs were held at bay. The dock supervisor felt the standoff was dangerous beyond the point of return and chose to make the call.

Rausi shot out of bed and rushed into the bathroom. He closed the door so Heather could not hear. "Don't call the *polizia* yet. I am sending backup to clean up the mess. I'm on my way. Hold them any way you have too. You know what to do. Give them a lesson they soon won't forget."

An hour later, the black car with tinted windows came to a full stop. A bodyguard hopped out of the front seat and opened the rear door. Rausi stepped out in a dark topcoat, tailored and crisp. Underneath he wore a dark suit and on his feet were black Italian loafers.

"It looks like they only have four trailers backed up to the warehouse," the bodyguard said. "Maybe they didn't get away with any crates."

"Today, *si*, but what about yesterday?"

The guard shrugged.

The sound of sirens pierced the air. They could be heard on the interstate. Getting closer. They seemed to be heading toward the port.

"Who called the *polizia*? We haven't secured the area yet."

"I don't know."

"Find out!"

"Boss, we have to get you out of here."

"I need to know the damage first. My men are trapped in there and so are the drivers. You know the enormity."

"We don't have time to find out. We have to get you out of here."

"I want to look in the trailers."

Hired dockworkers began exiting the building. Under the supervisor's arm was a supported worker that had been shot, the man's pant leg stained a dark moist shade.

"*Signor Cassini*," the bodyguard warned. "Only one more minute, the sirens are getting closer. We have to go. Hurry."

He knew necessity in staying out of the limelight. When his father held this same position, Luigi rarely stepped foot on the docks. Least of all when trouble was brewing.

In a last minute fit of insanity Rausi took off sprinting toward the loading docking. "Bring the car to me. I want to look inside the trailers."

The guard hopped to the chase while yelling to the driver, "Get the car over here! *Presto!*"

Up the concrete steps Rausi charged two at a time. Closer to his men he could see their dishevelment, their strain from the fight. "Guido, what did they get away with? How many containers were emptied?"

"Several containers were tampered with." He labored from supporting the injured man. "There's no list on what they have gotten away with."

"So they drove away with loaded trailers?"

"*Si*. Yesterday."

Rausi grimaced. And then forward in motion he continued sprinting. "How many trailers have loaded and gone in the past two days?"

"A few. We know most of the companies. These came

in last night with forged papers. We regained control of the yard entrance this morning. No one has come or gone since midnight."

Rausi's overcoat flapped in the run, his shoes tapped out a rhythm on the rough concrete surface. He made a quick dash down the line looking into the open trailers. They were filled to the brim, every last one of them. The thieves had gotten greedy in the last minute.

He continued his sprint toward the open warehouse door, needing to know how many containers sat ready to be loaded.

"You know the penalty for stealing," Rausi said to his workers. "They deserve every bone in their hands broken."

"We couldn't get a hold of them."

It was too late. The police sped in through the opened chain link gate.

Rausi's bodyguard panicked and shoved him aside. "We've got to get out of here. Come with me. We'll walk calmly down to the pier. I'll call for a speedboat to pick us up. No one will ever know you were here."

Patrol cars roared to a stop all around. They took to position, guns drawn. One officer yelled orders to surrender.

"Forget it. It's too late. I'll take care of everything."

"*Per favore*," he grabbed the arm of his boss, "*Signor* Cassini, think twice, *Signor* Marinacci demands you keep a low profile."

"I can handle him."

"It's not him I am hired to guard, *signor*. It's your anonymity I'm concerned about."

Rausi descended the concrete steps.

"I'm *Signor* Rausi Cassini, manager of these piers," he called out with hands in air. He noticed his driver face down on the ground beside the car, still running. "You have my driver in handcuffs. Release him."

“Stop right there.”

Rausi did as he was told and shoved his arms higher bunching the shoulders of his topcoat even more. An officer charged forward with gun drawn. Rausi was frisked. They found no gun.

Several minutes later, control was gained over the area by the authorities. The warehouse was searched and emptied. The thieves apprehended, brought out, and the wounded were tended to.

Rausi straightened his coat once the authorities confirmed him to be the corporate manager.

Ambulances arrived to the scene simultaneously with the local news as the dock became a whirlwind of activity. During the commotion, Rausi was forced to give a short briefing to the insistent media. Cameras aimed at his face. The newscaster badgered him for details, but he managed to dodge prying questions and kept the interview short.

“Rausi!” red-faced, Edmundo yelled, held in restraint by an office worker. A secretary fanned him while the other pushed the stout man firmly into his chair. Edmundo took another drink of ice water. “I’ve just taken my heart medication. I can’t have another pill for hours. One day I am going to die. You are pushing me toward that day.”

“Don’t worry Edmundo I’ve taken care of everything.”

“You haven’t taken care of shit!”

“Calm down.”

“Calm down? You have just put your life in jeopardy. You have put your family’s life in jeopardy. Your children’s lives are in danger! Do you understand? Your face is all over the media now. The scourge of the earth knows who you are. How many times have I said stay off the docks, huh? Men with high profiles have no business strutting around like its Easter Sunday morning, when there is a gun battle going on.” He crossed himself and then poured water on a handkerchief, applying the cooling sensation to his forehead. “I don’t feel well. Rausi, can you not see the carnage?”

“I see it.”

“Then let your men do the work. Once they gain control only then will they give us answers. Don’t go to the docks looking for trouble. They have the ability, the weapons, and resources. They know what they’re doing.”

“Okay. It was wrong of me.”

“Stealing happens all the time, things get taken or lost. This is why we have insurance.”

“Edmundo, I *am* the insurance. It’s my money. Anything that is stolen comes out of my company.”

“*Si, si* and this is why you are heavily invested.”

“I don’t like losing – at anything.”

“Neither do I. Can’t you understand? Your privacy...*Dio un cielo*. Your face is on the local news. Oh, Luigi,” he cried with his hands to the heavens. “He managed the division without ever going to the docks. We thought this scourge of the earth had taken his life. The pain we suffered. You have to get home before Heather sees the destruction. They know who you are. Before long they will know where you live. Your children. Your wife. You have to protect them. Rausi, go. Just go.”

Edmundo reached into a drawer and pulled out a large file and slapped it on the desk.

“No, wait. Come back. There is more. This has been in a drawer for weeks. Maybe today is the day it should be known.”

“What is it?”

“Everything,” Edmundo said flushed. “It is everything I own. It is the shipping business, several small investments and their past yearly performances. Everything, except for my house, my cars, personal investments, The Valor and my daughter’s inheritances.” He put his hand on top of the stack. “Rausi, it’s yours, all yours, but for one price.”

“No Edmundo, you can’t do this.”

“I can and I will, but for one price.”

“I’m sure I cannot afford that price nor am I worthy of it.”

“You are and you can. In the future keep your face out of the media and protect your wife and your children with your very life. I don’t know. The damage is done. Perhaps the enemy will soon forget your face. They know your name now. Keep your guards close, always. Every day for the rest of your life as I do.”

“Edmundo. I’m not prepared for this. When did Cassini



and Marinacci blood become one? I'm not half the man my father was and not nearly man enough to step in your shoes."

"You can do this. Take it home," Edmundo rose from his chair. "Read through it. In two weeks we will talk more. I will not let you down. I promise."

## 67

He drove home, sweating as though a fever had taken hold. Off came the topcoat and the suit coat, the tie as well.

It had all happened within the morning hours. He had managed to avoid being arrested. His identity as a mover and shaker in the shipping industry was now in the hands of the public. The slip in releasing his identity marked him as someone to topple by the shipping underworld. In the midst of turmoil he had been given the opportunity to become one of the region's most influential businessmen, a corporate giant able to affect the stock market and wealth of the country.

He had no other choice but to accept Edmundo's offer. He had to take it, for the sake of the Cassini name. Somewhere lurking in the future, heaven forbid, the day Edmundo would no longer be around...He knew it would be as saddening as the day he had lost his father. Edmundo and his father were – were two great men – men that had made his existence a better place.

The late model Ferrari hummed down the curved drive, the gates automatically closed from behind. He had come and gone on this driveway a million times. He knew every crack in the pavement, knew how many trees canopied the drive, but today the drive seemed different. The tree branches appeared to hang lower, the shade more prevalent.

An early model Alfa Romeo sat near the garage doors, a white convertible. Mother's.

He groaned, "Not today."

"How will I ever get to know my grandchildren if you don't invite me over?" Alexia announced loudly after sneaking into the house.

“Alexia,” Heather shrieked, “How did you get in here?”

“I have my ways.”

She gained ground walking into the great room and pawed her perfectly manicured nails over Isabella’s silky dark locks, “Oh, look at this precious face. Such a beautiful child. Don’t run away. I am your *nonna*. Come back.”

“Alexia, answer me, how did you get into this house?”

“Oh, don’t get yourself in a panic. I slipped through the gate when the housekeeper left.” She eyed a braver grandchild, “Alessandro. My. Look how you’ve grown. Heather, I know my rights and I demand to have access to my grandchildren. Two or three times a year and only by chance is not enough.”

“Whatever. Alessandro, do you remember Papa’s Mamma? This is *nonna* Alexia.”

The little boy shrugged his shoulders.

“Oh, he is the spitting image of his Papa.”

“Pretty much so, and in temperament too.”

“And...?” Alexia suddenly went blank.

“Isabella Kiara.”

Alexia melted at the face of a cherub. “So beautiful. I don’t remember when the Cassini’s had a girl in the family.”

“Mamma, please,” Alessandro begged, “one video game. I won’t yell. Please, just one.”

“*Va bene*, but only one game and only for a half hour, after that it wears on your nerves and mine.” Heather turned the television on. “Pick out one game and don’t make it War of the Infidel World. Why we bought that junk for a five year old I’ll never know.”

Alessandro rummaged through a box of games while the noon news came on.

“Isabella, *nonna* wants to see the new dollhouse. Can you show her? *Nonna* thinks it is quite special.”

“Oh, yes, Isabella. I would love to see the new

dollhouse.”

The kids suddenly stopped and looked at the television. Alexia heard Rausi’s voice and Heather stopped too.

“What is he talking about?”

“Thieves got in the warehouse,” Alexia explained.

“They broke in during the night and unloaded shipping containers. It seems they hauled away imported products in trucks.”

“Rausi was there during the fighting? Oh my God!”

“The news reporter says the gunfire was contained to the warehouse.”

“Mamma, I want this game.”

“Zandro, not now.”

“Heather, see. He is fine. He’s in one piece and gave the interview. He is okay. A little hyper, but he’s okay. Don’t worry.”

They heard the entry to the garage open and close. Rausi entered the room appearing tired and drained.

“How could you?” Heather snapped. “I thought the pier and warehouses were off limits. Edmundo says...”

“I know what Edmundo says, believe me. I’ve been lectured once today and don’t want to hear anymore.”

“Rausi,” Alexia said in disbelief. “I barely recognize you. You put on weight. What, you gain four sizes?”

“Two sizes mother, please, don’t start with the theatrics. Whatever happened to *ciao*?”

“You look more like your father every day. I can’t get over this change.”

“It’s because of too much stress.”

“Well, too much stress is not good. I suggest you stop. You know? And who knows what food you are eating. It is not healthy.”

“Don’t lecture.”

He dropped the overcoat and suit coat on the coffee table.

"Papa, Mamma won't let me play a game now. She said she would."

"Here, give me that thing," She said grabbing the device, then turning it on. "Entertain yourself. Isabella, show *nonna* the dollhouse. Rausi, I want to talk to you. Alone."

On impulse they headed for the home office. Rausi dragged his weary feet with a thick package in hand. She closed the door from behind, as he dropped the folder on the desk with thud.

"What were you thinking about walking into gunfire? Are you trying to get – Oh God, I can't even imagine—"

"Heather. Don't say another word. I didn't."

"I couldn't go on if I lost you too."

"Yes, you could, for the sake of the children."

"Edmundo says the warehouses are the most dangerous places to be for even warehouse workers too."

"He just finished lecturing me. Let it go. I'm home and I'm tired."

"Well, look at you. Was it worth it? Going into that horrible place?"

"I had my reasons. The loss of revenue might be high. I'm worried, very worried, but that's not everything."

"What's not everything?"

"It's unreal. I can't fathom the enormity yet."

"Can't fathom what?"

"Oh," he groaned. He went to his chair and fell into it. "This," he said with fingers tapping the folder once.

"What is it?"

"It's three years of financial reports for the shipping business. There are a few other companies included, wealthy businesses like our lumberyards."

"So?"

He laughed sarcastically, "So? That's it? No more questions?" He twisted his chair toward the window, "I need a vacation."

"You need a vacation. What about me? I'm frazzled. I can't think anymore. I'm raising two young children without a nanny and have a husband that walks into gun battles."

"I didn't walk into a gun battle. It was brief and confined to the warehouse."

His chair swiveled as she paced.

"And then to make matters worse your mother shows up unannounced demanding her *grandmotherly* rights. Rausi, I am tired too. I can't handle everything."

She started to cry.

"Oh, no, no, no, we don't want tears. Come here. Sit on my lap." She sat down and he began rocking the chair back and forth. "It's not that bad."

"It sure seems like it."

"Okay, we should get a babysitter through the week."

"But, Hope says –"

"I don't care what Hope says. She isn't here. We can hire a babysitter. Besides, we need a vacation, just the two of us. Alone."

"Ha. Like that would ever happen."

"Sure it can."

"How?"

"You know, my mother wants to get to know them. We will let her babysit."

"Yeah, right. She couldn't handle those two. They would drive her mad."

The rocking stopped. He tilted his head to look deeply into her eyes. "Do you really care?"

"No."

"Well, there we have it. She raised me. She can feed them, wipe their faces and send them to bed at night." The

rocking of the chair resumed. "Can you imagine my mother back in this house? She regretted leaving it from the first day she walked out."

"Everybody loves this house."

"It is a good house. A good home. In two weeks we'll take a vacation. My mother can babysit for a week or two. We'll go to the Alps. We'll walk hand in hand during the day, dance in the evening and make passionate *amore* at night."

"You're overly confident."

"Uh huh. So get used to the idea."

"Why?"

"Because we deserve it." The chair stopped. He patted his chest, "I'm getting fat. I need exercise. For two weeks I am taking care of myself. You go to the spa again. Get a massage, do all those things they do."

"What's going on?"

"Changes, my dear, changes."

"You got scared out of your freaking mind today. Didn't you?"

"Sort of, but not how you think."

"Then how? What happened today?"

"Have you tried on that glittery red dress lately, the one we bought in Rome?"

"Oh, heavens, no. I've gained weight too. My body is shot if you haven't noticed. I need a boob job."

He checked her breasts with the palms of his hand, lifting. "No, they seem fine to me."

"Oh, yes, they need lifted."

"Then make an appointment, anything you want. Nothing is too good for my beautiful wife. We both used to be runners. Start running again. Get in shape and I'll do the same."

"What is going on?"

"In two weeks many things will be different."

“Good or bad?”

“I don’t know how good, but definitely not bad,” he grinned out of sheer and utter torment.

“Just tell me for crying out loud. What happened to you today?”

“This stack of paper, its Edmundo’s shipping business.”

“So?”

“He is handing the bulk of it over to me.”

“What? How?”

“Soon we start proceedings for what I imagine is his retirement and for me to take over the shipping company.”

“Oh. Is this what you want? How can you control what you own and what he owns?”

“With managers, lots of managers.”

“It will be too much work for you to handle.”

“No, it won’t. I make complicated legal and financial decisions every day. I have competent people that know their jobs. They do their work and I make sure they do it right. Edmundo will teach me what he knows. I can learn.” He stopped and tapped his fingers on the desk. “You know, together Papa and Edmundo were good at manipulating import/export markets. They had, well, a certain aptitude when it came to handling things. Papa had the financial know how. That’s why his nose was always stuck in the papers. And Edmundo knows how and when to move the goods when the market is ready.”

“Do you think you can do the same thing?”

“We’re about to find out. The idea of power seems rather thrilling.”

“Rausi?”

“Hmm?”

“Do you think your father groomed you to take over the insurance company?”

“Of course he tried. He sent me to college and



encouraged me to take interest in the company.”

“So do you plan on preparing Alessandro to take over both businesses when he grows up?”

“Alessandro’s future is too far away to know. Who knows what his aptitude is or if he will even be interested.”

“You need to play ball with Zandro more often. Spend time with him.”

“We will. This weekend. I promise.”

She nudged the desk with her leg to start the chair swiveling again. “You know, two things are different in this household since you were a child. One, Alessandro has me to answer to. Second, he has a sister he will eventually have to look out for. And furthermore, what’s wrong in thinking Isabella could take over the insurance company? She is very good with numbers. We work with them every day.”

“You’re a good Mamma. If Isabella wants to run the company she can. We will see. They have twelve years of school to get through first before thinking of university.” He paused. “You know. I am thinking. My mother. She has always wanted to get back in this house.”

“Rausi. You wouldn’t.”

“We have issues with security now. I failed today and for that I am very sorry. I put my family at risk. We are going to have hired guards beside us for a very long time. This may be difficult at first, but you will have a personal guard every time you leave this house.”

“What about when I run?”

“Running on the country road is too dangerous now. If you run you take a guard along. They will be living here and watching out for our family.” Rausi continued, “But, if mother moved back into this house —”

“Why do we need a bodyguard? Who would be fool enough to break in the house with her around?”

“Be nice.”

"I am. I'm being realistic."

"No you're not. She can have the nursery and the kids can go upstairs."

"And then, when Zandro becomes a teenager he sneaks out on the balcony and climbs down in the night to be with his friends. And when Izzy has her first crush, she has boys climbing up the trellis to sneak into her room. I don't like it, not one bit. And if you buy them sports cars I'm hiding the keys."

"You have no faith."

"Oh, I have faith all right, but they have your raging bloodline," she said patting his smooth cheek.

"Come, get up. Let's go tell *nonna* her dreams have come true. She can move back in the house and be with her grandchildren."

"No. You go tell her. I'm staying right here."

"We'll tell her together," he said tugging on her hand.

Alexia rejoiced with the news, softening greatly with tears of joy, making grandmotherly promises of being there for the children, and mother-in-law promises of staying out of the way.

"But, Heather, let me tell you how I make Rausi's favorite tomato sauce over homemade raviolis. And fresh lemon cake for dessert. From lemons in the garden, you know. I'll show you. You'll see."

And so with a housekeeper, a cook and a built-in babysitter, and married to the most handsome man in Southern Italy to give her attractive babies – she had it all – Taylor-made.



Author Kate Athens lives in a small Midwestern town with her husband of over twenty-five years, and their menagerie of pets. Kate has been writing since 2003. She writes

contemporary romance and historical epic adventures.

When she is not writing, Kate enjoys flower and vegetable gardening, European history, Pinot Noir and exotic cars.

She encourages you to follow her on Instagram.