

MARCELLA

SICILIAN NOSTRA

BYPAULSMITH.CO.UK

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CHAPTER ONE

SICILIAN BLOOD

SANGUE SICILIANU

The Savoy was unashamedly luxurious, a palace of excess beyond the reach of most. It was one of his favourite London hotels, close to Covent Garden where he wandered the artisan stalls and boutique shops.

He had no entourage with him tonight. Ordinarily he would take his suite overlooking the Thames, but not this time. From the embankment below, the traffic murmured into the evening air.

Alfredo, one of London's finest Sicilian chefs, ran the kitchen with quiet authority. His arancini and pasta alla Norma were legendary. Normally Vincenzo ordered both just as Susan arrived.

Tonight, no one would be eating.

He dressed casually, though his taste for fine clothes showed in every detail. Sand coloured, hand tailored trousers, a navy Armani sweater, taupe Gucci loafers. His hair was short, thick, his frame lean

and athletic. He carried himself with the natural poise of a man born to command.

The faint spice of Azzaro Pour Homme lingered on his skin, warm, masculine, unmistakable.

His favourite table was waiting, as was the decanted bottle of Nero d'Avola from his own vineyard in Avola, Sicily. The Savoy kept two crates in their cellar, marked exclusively for Mr Donetti.

But he wasn't here for wine. He was here for her. Tonight, he would tell her. Vincenzo Donetti was to be married in seven days.

He felt sick. He loved her, and she loved him. But she would never belong in his world.

Susan's shift ended at 18:00. She was anxious, though excitement tugged faintly beneath it. She showered and changed into a simple floral dress from Zara, the cotton cool against her skin. Vincenzo often brought her Gucci dresses in their signature gift boxes, silk and extravagant, but tonight she chose one of her own.

Makeup was light. She didn't need more. Natural beauty, flawless skin, eyes that turned heads without effort.

A knock at the door.

She stepped into the Rolls Royce Ghost courtesy car The Savoy had sent. She hated the pretentiousness, the pomp, the overpriced drinks. They always met here. Same bar, same time. Only the clothes changed.

The commissioner opened the grand doors.

'Good evening, madam.'

She nodded, distracted.

'Bella, bella!' Vincenzo beamed as Susan walked towards him. She tried to smile but it faltered. He noticed.

She hugged him hard. The half smile, the lingering hold, it told him everything. She caught the faint trace of his aftershave as she pressed

her face against his neck. The warmth of his skin was already woven into her memory.

He tilted his head.

‘That’s some welcome.’ Then, softly, ‘Come on. Let’s walk.’

The night was warm, clear, almost countryside like. She squeezed his hand. His grip felt looser. Or maybe her imagination.

An empty bench ahead. He gestured.

‘Please sit?’

She nodded.

‘You sounded different last night.’

She loved his accent, that Sicilian lilt polished with flawless English. He wondered if she already knew.

‘As ever, Susan, you look beautiful. Bella. But we need to talk.’

His voice hardened.

She shot back quickly.

‘Funny. I’ve got something too. Who’s first?’

He drew a breath.

‘I’ve been engaged since before we met. Seven months. It was never supposed to get this far. I never meant to fall in love, but I did. I’m sorry.’

Her eyes blazed.

‘What... what did you just say?’ She stared at him, as if hearing wrong.

‘Seven months? You’ve been engaged this whole time? So what am I, Vincenzo? The affair? A pastime while you wait for your wedding day?’

Her breath came hard, sharp.

‘All the calls, the visits, every time you told me you loved me, was that all just a performance? Lies. All of it. Just fucking lies.’

Her hand cracked across his cheek. The sound rang out sharp and clean, the sting burning hot on his skin. It startled them both.

He touched his face, half stunned.

‘Wow. I didn’t see that coming. But I guess I deserved it. I do love you. I meant every word. But it was supposed to be casual. I’m sorry.’

Something snapped inside her.

‘Casual? Never meant to get this far? You’re an arsehole, Vincenzo. Just a fucking arsehole.’

The tears came. Not hers. His. His vision blurred, the salt sharp on his lips.

He had never seen her like this. Her fury. Her strength. And he realised letting her go would be harder than he imagined. But there was no choice.

Her thoughts spiralled. Was she really just a fling? A side affair that ran too long? Arsehole, she kept thinking. Over and over.

‘Tears? Why are you crying? You’re the one dumping me. I assume your lovely fiancée has no idea I exist. Well? Does she?’

He stayed silent.

‘When’s the big day?’

‘Next Saturday. A week from now.’

He dipped his head in shame. That made it worse.

‘What? Are you serious? How long has this been arranged? Why only now? Why let it get this far? I love you.’

Her voice broke. She sobbed. A hard, devastating clarity crashed in.

He hadn’t heard her news.

‘Susan, I want to explain. I do love you. Everything we shared was real.’

She noticed, he was already speaking in the past tense.

‘I come from a Sicilian family. Three hundred years of blood. The eldest son must carry the name, keep the bloodline pure. That means

I can never marry, never have children with anyone who isn't Sicilian. I'm sorry.'

She laughed bitterly.

'So I'm not pure enough for your precious blood? What an asshole. I'm lucky to be out now.'

Silence hung. Heavy. Suffocating. The warm night air suddenly felt cold.

Vincenzo knew he'd said what he came to say. He deserved every word she had thrown at him.

Then he remembered, her news.

'Susan, you had something to tell me?'

She rose. He made to stand but she pressed a hand to his shoulder.

'Don't. Please. You're a liar. A cheating asshole. And someone I don't ever want to see again.'

She turned, walking fast.

Her head spun. He had always told her he was an investor, with interests across property, manufacturing, finance. Global. Like a younger Warren Buffett. Polished, plausible, impossible to pin down. She'd believed him. Wanted to believe him. But his words tonight, bloodline, purity, three hundred years, they didn't belong to the world of boardrooms and balance sheets. They belonged to something older, darker, rooted in Sicily.

And now, walking away, she hated herself for not pressing harder. For letting him charm her into silence whenever the questions rose.

'Susan, please. It doesn't have to end like this.'

She didn't look back. Tears streamed as she forced her pace quicker, fighting the sobs.

'Susan, you wanted to tell me something. What was it? Susan?'

She didn't stop.

Vincenzo would never know he was going to be a father.

‘A non fucking Sicilian murky blood baby,’ she growled, her voice raw, metallic in the still night air.

CHAPTER TWO

MARBELLA TEARS

LACRIMI DI MARBELLA

He watched Susan walk away and ached to follow, to explain everything, how much he loved her, the tangled legacy of his family, the business, the impossible weight of duty.

But he knew he could not. The family came first. That had been his choice the day he turned sixteen.

He had never known real love until Susan. Then everything changed. And changed again the moment he told her the truth.

She reacted exactly as she should.

I lied, I betrayed, and now she is gone. I traded her for duty, a trade no man with a soul should ever make.

He sat for some time by the embankment wall, watching the black river drift beneath the lights. The water shifted and coiled, dark as oil, carrying the weight of a city that never stopped.

He let the silence press in until it grew heavy, then he stood.

Not ready to face anyone, he walked slowly, deliberately, along the Thames, following the curve of the water. The night air held a strange warmth, and the footpath was nearly empty.

Half a mile from where she had left him, he reached 10 Trinity Square. From the street it looked like any other high end residence, but the rooftop was already secured. A black helicopter waited, silent, blades still. No markings. No fuss. Just efficiency.

He boarded alone. The door shut behind him with a quiet finality. London fell away beneath him.

By the time the helicopter touched down at RAF Northolt, the Donetti G650 was already prepped. Its engines glowed beneath the apron lights. Two pilots waited in silence. Ground staff kept their distance.

The Rolls Royce logo on the engines shimmered like a warning. This jet was not for ordinary men.

The Gulfstream G650 was built for people like him, fast, silent, able to cross oceans without interruption.

Inside, the cabin reflected his taste. Dark Sicilian walnut ran in sleek lines along the walls, its richness offset by polished chrome. Obsidian detailing threaded through surfaces in fine veins, catching the light like volcanic glass.

Along one wall stood a walk in humidior, its climate tuned with precision. Opposite, a crystal cabinet held a private whisky collection, a Dalmore 62, a Macallan Red 78, and a Glenfiddich 50 Year.

At the rear, his private quarters carried more than a bed. The space was both sanctuary and meeting room, a place where doors closed on the outside world but decisions still carried weight. A low table of Sicilian walnut, veined with obsidian, stood between two chairs opposite the bed. In its centre, inlaid with precision, was the Trinacria, the three legged motif surrounding a face. It looked ancient, drawn

from the island's history, a reminder of home carried high above the earth.

Tonight, though, none of it mattered.

Vincenzo boarded without speaking. As one of the crew approached, he waved her away.

'No disturbances. No food. I'll get my own drinks.'

Turning to the captain, he added,

'Change of plan. We're going to Marbella.'

The door to his private quarters closed behind him with a gentle thud.

In the air, he finally made the call to Sophia.

'The wedding has to be postponed,' he said. 'Political complications. That's all I can say for now. Please, pause everything.'

'But everything's in place,' she replied.

'I know. I'm sorry. I wish I could say more.'

Something in his voice must have convinced her. She did not press.

'I won't be back as planned,' he added. 'There's a stop I have to make. I'll call you tomorrow. You deserve better. But you know what this life demands.'

When the call ended, he knew he had made two women cry in one day, and the only thing he felt was tired.

He called Stefano.

'I'm diverting to Marbella. The wedding can wait. I'll speak to my Father tomorrow. Do we have any friendly yachts in Puerto Banús?'

'Not sure,' Stefano said.

'If we do, make preparations please. If not, try to organise one. Either way, I'll need something.'

'Understood. Give me an hour,' Stefano replied.

As the G650 smoothly landed, he noticed five matching black Range Rovers lined up on the tarmac. Security. The usual. Smart suits, dark sunglasses, and silence.

A poised woman stepped forward. She wore confidence like perfume, subtle, expensive, unmistakable.

‘Salve, Signor Donetti, mi chiamo Lucia. Sarò responsabile della sua sicurezza e di tutto ciò di cui potrà avere bisogno durante il suo soggiorno in Spagna. Il suo yacht la aspetta ed è a pochi minuti di auto da Puerto Banús.’

‘English,’ Vincenzo replied. ‘The language of the world.’

She switched seamlessly.

‘Hello Mr Donetti. My name is Lucia. I’ll oversee your security and assist with anything you require during your stay. Your yacht is ready, a short drive to Puerto Banús.’

He smiled.

‘I understood the first time.’ He offered a ghost of a smile.

The convoy rolled out. Vincenzo sat in the third car, bracketed by protection. Lucia rode in the front passenger seat, calm and composed.

No one spoke during the forty minute journey.

At the marina, the barrier lifted before them. The last two vehicles stayed behind, blocking entry.

Lucia turned.

‘Lady Moura is moored up. Nasser Al Rashid is away, but he has agreed you may use the entire yacht. The crew are briefed. You’ll be undisturbed or fully supported, your choice. I’ll remain onboard, as will your team.’

‘I haven’t seen him in years,’ Vincenzo said. ‘But I’ve stayed aboard before. Makes things easier.’

‘I’ll handle the thank you call,’ she replied.

‘Good. Please do.’

Lady Moura, 344 feet of floating decadence, awaited them. Gold etched nameplate. Private beach. Wave pool. Helicopter. Every indulgence imagined.

He remembered the yacht’s symbolism, just not what it meant.

Lucia boarded first, greeted the captain, disappeared briefly, then returned.

‘Shall we?’ she said, holding the door open.

Vincenzo nodded and followed her aboard. His security team spread out across the dock, watching, waiting.

Lucia led the way.

‘I know this yacht well,’ she said. ‘I’ve asked the captain to prepare your suite. I’ll give you a tour if you like.’

‘Thank you. I’m not hungry. I plan to go straight to bed. Join me for breakfast at 7:30?’

She nodded and guided him below deck.

Vincenzo’s suite, an entire floor, was usually off limits, even to him. A sanctuary reserved for Nasser’s family. Six other levels spanned pools, gyms, entertainment, bakeries, chefs, crew. A sailing palace.

He had only stayed here once, years ago, helping his Father close a sensitive deal.

He closed the suite door behind him. Silence.

He stepped out onto the balcony and lowered himself into a chair that faced the dark water.

The port lights shimmered. Boats rocked gently.

His breath caught. He buried his head in his hands. Bit his lip.

The tears came anyway.

CHAPTER THREE

LADY MOURA

SIGNURA MOURA

As he woke, showered and dressed, Vincenzo felt better than the day before. Sleep had dulled the ache but not erased it. He was looking forward to breakfast with Lucia.

He left his suite and stepped into the glass elevator. The lift rose through the decks of the Lady Moura, sunlight spilling across the glass walls until it opened onto the top floor.

Lucia was already there, waiting at the table. She stood as he approached, her dark hair falling loose against the pale silk of her blouse. The open collar caught the light on her skin, a single gold chain resting at her throat. There was precision in her poise, understated yet exact, and he found himself watching her as he closed the distance.

‘Good morning.’

‘Good morning to you Mr Donetti.’

‘Please call me Vincenzo.’

She corrected herself.

‘Good morning Vincenzo.’

They both smiled as one of the crew pulled out a chair opposite her.

When he sat, she noticed his calmness first, steady and disarming. Then her eyes caught the open collar of his shirt, the crisp cotton rolled neatly at his forearms, the easy fit of his chinos and soft loafers. The watch at his wrist caught the light, elegant and deliberate. Rumours had always followed Vincenzo, about his looks and his presence, but now she realised the stories had not done him justice.

‘I like having breakfast here, overlooking the ocean,’ Vincenzo said, gesturing to the endless view.

‘Yes, it is rather nice,’ she replied, still wondering why she was having breakfast with Vincenzo Donetti.

There was no menu but everything was available. They both ordered fruit to start. Vincenzo followed with grilled crispy bacon and American pancakes with maple syrup, and English Breakfast tea. Lucia chose light cakes and coffee.

‘Now Lucia, are you part of my organisation or some other?’ he asked.

Lucia felt more than a little dejected, having worked her way up in his family business for the last seven years, but she replied politely.

‘I head up your operations in all European countries except Italy and Sicily.’

Vincenzo laughed.

‘Yes of course you do. I was teasing. I know very well who you are, and it’s no coincidence that it’s you hosting me on this visit. You attended Cambridge University and studied Economics, first class honours, yes?’

She nodded.

‘Tell me your story Lucia, please.’

She paused, just long enough to gather her thoughts.

‘My father, Marco Vella, was an Italian civil engineer working across the Mediterranean, and my mother, Elena Camilleri, was Maltese, a

lecturer in modern languages. They were both killed in a car crash while on safari in Tanzania. I was two years old. My biological parents were close friends of Franco and Lucy.'

Vincenzo leaned forward.

'And Franco took you in?'

'Yes. He and Lucy had no children of their own. They adopted me and raised me in York, northern England. I still visit, though not often. They would rather I had followed them into academia.'

'Academia. What is it they teach?'

'He's a professor of mathematics at York University.'

Vincenzo nodded.

'And Lucy, does she teach?'

'Yes, languages. Italian, Spanish, Greek and Latin. Her full name is Lucietta, she's Maltese. That's where she and my mum met. They grew up together.'

'Do you sometimes wish you had stayed in academia?'

'No, not for a moment. Occasionally I thought I'd chosen the wrong path in finance, at first it was boring. But on the big stage, it's fascinating.'

'Fascinating,' he replied, raising one eyebrow. 'I've never heard it explained that way. Please, continue.'

Lucia inclined her head.

'After Cambridge I went into corporate finance in London. By twenty five I was already a senior director in one of the top three accountancy firms. That is where your people first noticed me. Seven years ago I joined your businesses, and I have been here ever since.'

'Yes. You were recruited seven years ago by our then head of talent. That was at my request, and your progress has been carefully monitored since. Do you know the true fabric of our business, Lucia?

You've worked only on certain divisions across Europe. Do you understand what I'm saying?'

She kept her expression even, though her mind flicked back to that one conversation with his Father a year ago, Carlito himself, calling on her to resolve a UK union dispute. A project buried and never spoken of since. She couldn't be sure if Vincenzo knew, and she had no intention of asking.

'Yes. I understand the business beyond the surface. That said, most of what reaches me are the mumblings of people who assume too much. I assume nothing. But I'm not stupid. Many of our assets are funded with unsustainable levels of cash. That cannot be hidden from someone like me.'

He leaned back slightly, studying her, letting the silence stretch.

'Mumblings, you say. Unsustainable levels of cash. Where do you believe this cash comes from?'

She pondered. He was testing her, her loyalty, her knowledge. She was sure of it.

'Cash leaves traces. However deep it runs, it always surfaces somewhere. I don't need to know its origin to see how it moves. My concern is making sure it flows cleanly through our portfolios.'

'The cash business, Lucia. It is the spine of everything my Father built. It pays for acquisitions no bank would touch. It buys silence. Loyalty. Fear. Banks, politicians, generals, police chiefs, judges, all of them have their price, and we pay it. Do you understand what that means?'

She paused, weighing every word.

'I do understand. The cash business is the soil. Without it, nothing else in our garden could grow.'

'This is not a career ladder, Lucia. It is a life.' He let the last word hang.

She gave a small nod.

‘That’s why I’ve never treated it as a ladder. I know where loyalty belongs. I also know that loyalty isn’t blind.’

His eyes narrowed, amused by her phrasing, but he pressed further.

‘What about your ambitions? Would you step up? Would you involve yourself in all of the family business?’

She hesitated, not to think, but to weigh the risk of each word.

‘It’s not what I expected you to ask. I didn’t imagine you’d even notice me at this level.’

‘Is that the best answer you’ve got?’ His voice was flat.

She met his gaze.

‘No. My answer is yes. Of course yes. I am ambitious. But I am not careless. And I’m only half Sicilian.’

Taking a slow sip of his tea, his voice calm but firm, he said,

‘I’d like you to join my personal team. That means global responsibility wherever I direct you. You will report only to me. You’ll hold instant authority in any area I set before you. The strict understanding is this: what we discuss stays between us. You may speak frankly and ask whatever you wish.’

He stopped speaking.

Her pulse surged. She wanted to leap from her seat, laugh, kiss him, but she held steady.

‘You honour me, Vincenzo. Thank you. I’d be delighted to join your team.’

She wondered if she was replacing someone but knew better than to ask.

‘May I ask when you would wish me to start?’

‘You’ve already started, Lucia. The second you said yes. Of course, you will be instrumental in appointing and handing over to your successor, but we both know who that will be.’

He raised his eyebrows.

‘You will accompany me back to Sicily where you will be introduced to my Father and brother. There is a villa waiting, with everything you will ever need. You will be paid one million euros each year, with bonuses two or three times that number in shares across our portfolio. You will have full use of the Gulfstream G650, helicopters, and a fleet of cars at your disposal. A personal driver, a dedicated security team, and staff will attend to anything else you require. Whatever you need, wherever you are, it will be provided. May I assume this is satisfactory?’

She nodded, stunned.

‘Okay then, so we start right now. I need some advice.’

She nodded again.

Vincenzo explained that he was to be married but had postponed the wedding because the timing wasn’t right. He told her about Susan, what he’d done, how sorry he was, and that his heart really wasn’t in the wedding he’d postponed.

Halfway through, his voice faltered, just for a moment. A crack of feeling slipped through before he straightened, his tone steady once more.

‘She can never understand unless I explain. If I explain, then I place her in danger,’ Vincenzo said.

‘If you do speak to her again, perhaps there’s a way to say what you need without putting her in danger. Your Father’s wishes and so on.’

Vincenzo smiled.

‘And do you have any suggestions as to how I might melt the ice so that she may consider speaking to me?’

‘Well, two choices. If you know where she lives, you can turn up at her house or work and take it from there. Or send flowers every day until she relents.’

Vincenzo smiled.

‘I like the flower idea, very much.’

‘Consider it sorted,’ she replied.

The remainder of the day, Vincenzo explained in intricate detail all facets of the company and some of the less savoury things that sometimes happened.

‘Dinner at six?’ Vincenzo asked.

‘Shall I make arrangements, or would you prefer onboard?’ she asked.

‘You choose,’ he said.

‘Onboard will be fine,’ she replied.

He gave a small nod, the kind that carried more weight than words.

As he rose, she realised for the first time why people spoke of him the way they did. The words she had just spoken seemed ordinary enough, yet she knew she had crossed a line she could never step back from.

CHAPTER FOUR

SICILIAN TAPAS

CICCHETTI SICILIANI

Vincenzo showered, a splash of aftershave, then dressed in a relaxed white linen suit, complemented with an open neck black shirt and Gucci toe post sandals. He ran a hand through his hair, not to style it but to break the precision, just enough to suggest effortless ease. Then he was ready for dinner.

He was waiting for her to arrive, and she did so at 18:05 precisely. Walking towards him in a little black dress, Chanel, he thought, her athletic figure carried it perfectly. A discreet string of white pearls at her neck, black and white contrast shoes, and a matching clutch bag completed her look. The pearls caught the low amber light, flashing briefly as she moved. He could see her Maltese and Sicilian blood in her olive complexion, the minimal makeup, the neutral gloss across her lips. The faint salt tang of the sea drifted in with her, mixing with the trace of his aftershave that reached her as she drew near.

Her bright green eyes set off her olive skin and shoulder length dark brown hair. She was attractive, intelligent, and ambitious.

Vincenzo stood.

‘Bella Lucia.’

She smiled as he offered her a chair.

‘You look very nice also,’ she replied.

‘Water?’ he asked.

‘Yes, please.’

‘I’ve heard of Acqua di Cristallo, but never seen it anywhere. Is it nice, can you tell the difference?’ she asked.

‘No. It’s water, and only people stupid enough to pay champagne prices for water drink it.’

He held his face for a moment, then laughed. Lucia followed with a small laugh of her own.

Vincenzo surprised her with his next words, less a question than a dilemma.

‘This morning I asked you about Susan. Let us continue that conversation. Your thoughts, please.’

Lucia hesitated.

‘Well, I can imagine you’re a little...’

He cut in.

‘So this is not an area you feel comfortable discussing with me?’

‘It’s not that. You just caught me off guard a little. I was expecting a strategic business question or my thoughts on expansion. But if I can speak frankly, Susan will be hurting, there’s no doubt. Perhaps there was a gentler way to explain our ways. Does she know anything about your business?’

‘No,’ came his instant reply.

‘Do you love her?’

‘Yes.’ The answer came quickly.

‘But I can never be with a woman who is not Sicilian. I cannot marry her. I could never have children with her. So it could never be anything more than casual. That is all it was ever meant to be.’

Lucia chose her next words carefully.

‘Is the Sicilian thing ever flexible?’

Vincenzo held her gaze.

‘These are my Father’s wishes. It is also part of our unofficial hierarchy. A nonsense in my opinion, but still, his wishes.’

He stopped short of explaining what his Father had once told him on his sixteenth birthday.

‘In the future, will the business pass to you, your brother, or both? And if it is you, how would you feel about changing the rules?’

Vincenzo smiled.

‘Perhaps I should have spoken to you before I spoke to Susan.’

They both smiled.

‘While my Father is still with us, I will not change the rules. I will uphold what is expected of me.’

She nodded. It was clear this was not up for debate.

‘What do you want from her?’ she asked.

‘Good question. I don’t know. She can never be mine and probably would never want to after what I said. But even if she could forgive me, my position hasn’t changed. I suppose I just want her understanding. And maybe forgiveness.’

Lucia considered this.

‘I’m not sure she’ll ever understand until she knows who you are and what the business does. As for forgiveness, once she understands, even if she disagrees, she may accept it, move on, and perhaps forgive you.’

‘Mmm. She can never know what we do. She’s not that kind...’ He caught himself, stopping short of saying more, before it sounded as though he was placing her above other women.

Lucia knew the missing word, woman, but smiled anyway.

‘Shall we have something stronger?’ Vincenzo asked.

‘That would be nice.’

He offered a small explanation of why they should avoid champagne and have Prosecco instead. She nodded in agreement.

The chief sommelier offered no menu but suggested they start with some bubbles. Lucia waited, curious to see if he knew not to suggest champagne. He did not. After a short list of the finest labels in the world, Vincenzo spoke.

‘I’d like you to choose, Lucia, whatever you wish.’

‘In that case, we’d like some of your finest prosecco. What do you have, please?’

The sommelier replied,

‘Oh, yes of course. In that case I’d recommend Col Vetoraz Valdobbiadene Extra Brut Cuvée 5, noted for its fine bubbles. It has notes of candied orange peel and raisin bread.’

They looked at each other. Then Vincenzo spoke.

‘Candied orange peel, interesting.’

Lucia wondered what was coming next, as did the sommelier.

‘Do you have any 1959 Dom Pérignon on board?’

‘Indeed we do, Mr Donetti. Excellent choice, but I’m afraid they are reserved for—’

The captain appeared and cut him short.

‘Yes of course, Mr Donetti. Exceptional choice.’

The sommelier bowed his head and withdrew. When he returned, he carried the bottle as though it were a Ming vase, his hands steady, his pace deliberate. Every movement spoke of care.

Only then did the cork pop with a gentle sigh, the faint hiss of escaping bubbles marking his silence.

He introduced himself. Vincenzo was respectful and even laughed lightly with him before the captain returned to the helm.

‘Now, what shall we have to eat?’ Vincenzo asked.

‘I’m not really in the mood for a huge dinner. I wonder if they could do some Sicilian tapas, if that suits you?’

‘Excellent idea. I love tapas, grazing food rather than a formal dinner sometimes. And this is surely one of those times.’

He smiled, noticing the fading sunlight catching her hair.

After the captain’s intervention, the sommelier understood. Mr Donetti was a very important man, and if he wanted fifty thousand euro champagne, or anything else, then he would have it.

Five minutes later he was pouring, for the second time in his career, the very rare 1959 Dom Pérignon for Lucia and Mr Donetti. The fizz rose in fine, persistent streams, releasing a honeyed citrus aroma, deep and rich, that curled from the glass like time itself.

Vincenzo doubted the man had ever tasted it. He gestured for him to sit down.

‘Please, have a glass with us. Tell us about life on this rather fantastic yacht.’

‘Oh my, I couldn’t. The captain would not approve.’

Vincenzo signalled for another glass and chair. When they arrived, he stood, placed a hand on the sommelier’s shoulder and pressed him gently to sit.

‘Well, in that case, Mr Donetti’

‘Please call me Vincenzo,’ he interrupted, then asked his name.

‘Louis,’ came the reply.

‘This is only the second bottle of this champagne I’ve ever poured. Of course, it’s not within my budget and I’ve never tasted it. This is a special moment for me. Thank you so much.’

Vincenzo raised his glass.

‘1959.’

Three glasses touched.

Louis drank, savouring every second, then spoke of his love for the collection of fine wines and champagnes. It was the only reason he worked there, to be near one of the finest private collections in the world. His job was to know and care for every bottle.

He stood, thanked Vincenzo, nodded at Lucia, and retreated with his empty glass and chair, leaving them in peace.

Lucia spoke softly.

‘How very kind of you, Vincenzo. Not that I know much about rare champagnes, but from Louis’s response, and the fact he’s only poured two bottles, I’m guessing it’s special.’

Vincenzo smiled.

‘The rarity and cost are not why I ordered it. I ordered it for the occasion. Thank you for accepting my offer. I have a very good feeling about this.’

She smiled, still wondering what it had cost.

‘I knew Louis was unlikely to have ever tasted it. And whenever I order something of that vintage, provided the sommelier is one I like, I always ask them to sit and share a glass. No big deal to me, a very big deal to them.’

Thirty minutes later, three waiters and the head chef presented ten plates.

The chef inclined his head and began.

‘Bruschetta al Pomodoro, toasted bread rubbed with garlic, topped with fresh Sicilian tomatoes, basil, and a drizzle of Frantoia Barbera extra virgin olive oil.

‘Arancini, rice with saffron, filled with mozzarella and slow cooked ragu, then fried to a golden finish.

‘Caprese Skewers, mozzarella, cherry tomatoes, and basil, dressed with Frantoia Barbera olive oil.’

The smell of garlic and basil rose warmly, cut with the sharp tang of tomato. Lucia instinctively leaned forward before catching herself.

‘Thank you, chef. We can take it from here. And thank you for sourcing Sicilian produce.’

The chef nodded and withdrew.

Lucia was again impressed by Vincenzo’s manners. He was indeed a gentleman, at least in what she had seen.

The evening flowed with no talk of business. Only small things, memories, parents, holidays, skiing. Lucia was captivated. Vincenzo was nothing short of an enigma, and she found herself flirting. He seemed to like it. Soon they had both turned their chairs to face one another.

As dinner ended, Vincenzo stood.

‘It’s time for bed.’

Then, with a flicker of mischief:

‘For me. Tomorrow afternoon, I’ll return to Sicily. But there’s no rush, we can have breakfast if you wish, I’d like to explain one or two things about my Father and brother Alberto.’

‘Yes, that sounds nice.’

‘Okay then, breakfast, then perhaps a walk on the beach. It feels like forever since I’ve done that.’

‘Okay then, breakfast and maybe beach it is.’

Lucia rose as Vincenzo motioned for her to walk in front.

‘This is me,’ she said.

Vincenzo nodded.

‘Yes. Well, thank you for a lovely evening, Lucia. I’ve very much enjoyed it.’

He took her hand, kissed it lightly, then looked deep into her eyes. A faint wisp of his aftershave clung there, enough to make her breath catch.

‘Buona notte.’

She nearly melted.

‘Good night, Vincenzo. I too have had a lovely evening.’

She lingered a moment before her door. Vincenzo did not look back.

He both smiled and frowned as he walked back to his suite. His evening with Lucia had been a success.

If only she was Susan, he thought.

CHAPTER FIVE

POWER TRADE

CUMMERCIU DI ENERGIA

Vincenzo had offered no resistance when his Father suggested that he should date Sophia.

‘She is single and very beautiful,’ his Father commented.

‘Yes. She is beautiful indeed,’ Vincenzo replied, knowing full well that his Father meant for him to marry Sophia for political leverage and, of course, to produce pure Sicilian babies.

‘That’s it then, we understand each other, yes?’ Carlito stated rhetorically. Vincenzo simply nodded.

‘Will you call Bassimo tomorrow or would you like me to?’ his Father enquired.

‘I shall call and arrange to see him face to face. We can take it from there.’

As Vincenzo arrived at Bassimo’s villa, he had already decided that he would be clear from the outset and gauge how quickly he could proceed from their initial conversation.

Bassimo opened the door, welcomed him in, and moved through the villa to a terrace at the rear.

Bassimo had encouraged Sophia to dress appropriately, in something eye catching, and to ensure she was passing through the villa at the time Vincenzo was either arriving or leaving.

She did.

Sophia's father, the Governor, was the most senior politician in Sicily. He had earned his place at the top table over many years of schmoozing with the real Sicilian power people. Don Carlito had cajoled and positioned his old friend Bassimo, and he had happily taken the bait, as well as millions in campaign funds. Governor Bassimo knew he would be called upon whenever needed. He accepted that. Don Carlito pulled the strings, but he was still in power.

'So, Bassimo, you know why I'm here. I'd like to get to know your daughter Sophia a little better and would like your permission to, well, to take her on a date.'

Bassimo smiled.

'It's an honour, and I'm sure that Sophia will be delighted.'

'I'd like to be clear about my intentions, Bassimo. If our date goes well and both Sophia and I are a match, then I'll be asking for your permission to marry her.'

Bassimo smiled again. Having considered this possibility and long wished for the moment to come, he replied,

'Yes, of course, of course. I'm sure you'll make each other very happy.'

'It's settled then. I'd like to take her out this Saturday.'

They both stood and shook hands.

Bassimo knew that having Vincenzo Donetti marry his daughter would secure his own, as well as his family's, position as one of Sicily's prominent families. He would be the father in law to one of the most powerful men in the world.

As both men started to walk off the terrace through the house, Sophia appeared.

‘Bella,’ her father said, before encouraging her to be introduced to Vincenzo.

‘Sophia, I’d like you to meet Vincenzo Donetti.’

Sophia appeared in a striking blue and white floral day dress, the fabric cut to flatter every line. Her makeup was heavier than it needed to be, lips glossed, eyes sharply defined. Even her jewellery, modest at first glance, was chosen to catch the light. Her hair fell over one shoulder in what she intended as a casual gesture, but the finish was too polished to be natural.

She was beautiful, yes, but in a way that looked curated. Flashy. Preened. Too perfect.

Sophia was known for her ambition as much as her elegance, a social climber who never missed a chance to impress. She knew exactly who Vincenzo was, and the ten year age gap between them. It bothered her not. He was handsome, powerful, and insanely rich. A catch any woman would want.

She smiled as her father introduced them both and held out her hand. Vincenzo gently lifted it, bowed his head slightly, and softly kissed it.

Up close, the effect was even clearer. Her perfume clung heavy, as though she had spilled the bottle on her skin. Too much. Like the makeup, the jewellery, the carefully fallen hair, everything just a little overdone.

He lifted his head and smiled anyway.

‘Bella.’

She returned his smile but said nothing.

Her father, sensing the awkwardness, acted as chief negotiator, bridging the gaps in conversation. After several of his injected exchanges, Vincenzo eventually got around to asking her on a date.

‘Sophia, would you do me the huge honour of accompanying me for dinner this Saturday?’

Then silence.

To Sophia, it sounded like a formal invitation rather than anything remotely romantic. Her father nudged her shoe with his.

‘Oh yes, that would be nice,’ she responded.

She smiled faintly. Inside, she knew what had just happened. She might be game for it, but her father had still traded her like currency.

‘How lovely,’ her father added quickly, sensing that Vincenzo wanted to leave and unsure how Sophia really felt about the emotionless invitation.

‘So Saturday it is. Is there a time you’re thinking, Vincenzo?’

He was not. In truth, he would have preferred to defy his Father altogether than carry on with the charade. Still.

‘Oh, I just need to check one or two things I have planned. Would it be okay if I confirmed in a day or two?’

Before Sophia could answer, Bassimo spoke for her.

‘Yes, that will be just fine.’

Sophia shot him a glance, then quickly turned back to Vincenzo.

‘Exciting,’ she declared.

Vincenzo offered his hand to Bassimo, who quickly and firmly took it.

Vincenzo smiled, turned, and walked towards the door, with Bassimo rushing to get ahead and open it.

Tapping Vincenzo on the shoulder, he added,

‘She’s a little shy. You’re the first real date she’ll have ever been on.’

Trying his best to reassure Vincenzo of his daughter’s innocence.

‘Ciao,’ came the final word from Vincenzo.

He stepped out into the Sicilian sun, expression unreadable. The deal was done, the path set. Yet as he walked away, one thought cut through the charade.

Susan. Always Susan.

CHAPTER SIX

FATHER & SON

PATRI E FIGGIU

‘I would like to thank you, Lucia, for organising my impromptu stopover. So, this is what happens next.’

He explained that she would need to hand over the reins of her current responsibilities, then asked how long that might take.

‘Perfect. Then you will join me in Sicily in three weeks. I look forward to introducing you to the family.’

She smiled, opened his car door, and watched him climb the steps onto his G650.

She felt a little strange. Sad, almost, seeing him go. He was charismatic. She had heard the stories about his looks and his charm, and knew other women could be easily ensnared. Still, he was going to be, at some point in the future, the head of a global empire worth billions. And while he had charm, she also knew he could access his dark side whenever required.

As he climbed the steps, he did not turn around. No fond farewell. He just made for his favourite seat and sat down.

‘English Breakfast tea, please,’ he said to one of the hostesses.

She nodded and immediately returned to the mini galley.

In the air, he thought about Susan, and what Lucia had said.

I can change the rules. I can marry who I want. This Sicilian thing is stupid. Out of date. It needs changing.

His thoughts raced ahead. But reality caught up quickly. His Father's wishes had to be obeyed.

He knew he did not want to marry Sophia. Power play or not, he did not care for her. All this nonsense about angel numbers, 222, hand delivered invites, and the rest of it.

'Stupid woman,' he muttered aloud.

The timing was poor. The hostess was just behind him with his tea and heard the words.

'Oh, I am sorry,' she said, quickly turning back.

'No no, not you. I was thinking aloud,' he replied, offering a reassuring smile.

'Oh, thank you,' she said, placing the tea on his table. She didn't stop for a chat, and quickly retreated to the galley.

Vincenzo hatched his plan to delay the wedding. Indefinitely, if possible. If not, then for as long as he could.

Soon, he was home and greeted his Father, who held out his arms to embrace him.

'Ciao, Vincenzo. Ciao, caro.'

Vincenzo returned the gesture. He had missed him. The trauma of telling Susan, the seemingly impromptu diversion to Marbella, the wedding postponement. His Father noticed a stronger than usual embrace.

'So, Vincenzo. Has everything been sorted? Susan? Lucia?'

'Yes, Father. But there is something you should know.'

His Father raised his formidable eyebrows.

'The wedding postponement.'

‘Yes. I guess your old friend Bassimo called?’

‘Indeed he did. Care to explain?’

Vincenzo sat and composed himself. He explained to his Father that Sophia was *bella ma vuota* — beautiful but empty, a bimbo. A social climber. And while he knew she could provide pure blood children, he could see no happiness in this marriage. None.

‘Happiness is a long game, son.’

Vincenzo raised an eyebrow. ‘Really.’

‘Listen. I understand, I really do. But I have to say, I am doing this exclusively for you, not for me. I do not intend to retain the pure Sicilian blood obsession, Father. If not in my lifetime, then in that of my pure Sicilian babies.’

‘So you will still go through with this, then. Is that what you are saying?’

‘That’s what you’re hearing. For sure. But yes. On your command and wishes, I will carry on with this charade. But I will need more time. Six to eight months. Not now. And this is one hundred percent not negotiable.’

His Father sensed a win and did not intend to push his son further, other than to say,

‘Knowing Sophia, she will need another 222 days.’

Vincenzo smiled, looked at his Father, and both laughed together.

‘By my calculations, you have at least another seven months, son.’

More laughs followed.

‘Whisky,’ his Father said, already walking toward the off limits collection. ‘Remind me, son. Which of these is your favourite?’

‘To be honest, Father, I cannot remember what they are. Can you remind me while I choose a Cuban? Are you having one?’

‘Good idea. Yes, it is indeed Cuban time.’

‘So... 1946 Macallan. Very rare. Quite smoky, peaty, and apparently notes of oak barrels. Dalmore, their one hundred and eightieth anniversary, finished in champagne casks. Very smooth. Finally, and my personal favourite, Glenfiddich 50 Year. They only release fifty bottles each year and it is a scrap to get more than ten. Which one?’

‘Nineteen forty six Macallan for me, please.’

He walked back over with two Cohiba Behike BHK 56s.

‘Perfect,’ his Father said.

‘Happiness can come in all sorts of ways. This is just one of them.’

‘What, a glass of whisky and a cigar?’ came the quick, half joked response.

‘Fifty thousand a bottle and a grand a smoke. I’d call that special.’

Vincenzo nodded. He knew full well the cost of both. Frankly, he would swap it all to be back at the Savoy enjoying an evening with Susan.

As they got down to business, Carlito explained his plans to step back. He wanted nothing more than to legitimise the business. To get rid of the messy stuff. Narcotics. Casinos.

They both knew that was not possible. Cash was sometimes king, and it had allowed the family business to expand into legitimate enterprise simply because of their instant and continuing liquidity. Still, it remained an ambition. The responsibility would be handed to Vincenzo.

They sat back in two of the six circled wingback armchairs. In the centre, a low round table created an informal meeting space. One wall featured a side view wine rack with around four hundred bottles of their own wines. The minimalist but traditional Sicilian furniture ensured the room remained semi authentic to its roots. A silent ventilation system ensured the smoke did not linger or collect. It simply dispersed as if they were outside.

It was Carlito's favourite room. His War Room, as he often called it. And it was no secret he loved classical music. Vincenzo had treated his Father on his sixtieth birthday to a rather special record player.

Not that Vincenzo knew anything about hifi, music systems or whatever. He had simply instructed someone to get the best there was. Even he was a little surprised when the final bill arrived at just short of a million euros.

His man explained,

'Well Mr Donetti, the turntable was a Derneville VPM 2010, powered up by a Dan D'Agostino.'

'Please stop,' Vincenzo interrupted, politely but firmly. 'I am sure it is all very good. Thank you.'

The Manor House was, for all intents and purposes, the Donetti family's head office. Each of them had their own rooms. This one was Carlito's.

It was commonly believed that the Donetti men and their partners lived there. They did not. In truth, none of them did. The Manor House was a ruse, nothing more.

Each Donetti had private underground access to their real residences. Vincenzo's was the furthest away, reached by a monorail that also doubled as an emergency escape route. Rumours about such passages swirled constantly, yet were always laced with counter rumours, a deliberate smoke screen to blur fact and fiction. What mattered most was that The Manor House offered excellent cover should an attack ever come.

Carlito spoke.

'The business, well at least ceremoniously, will be handed to you on the day of your wedding. Now postponed for at least 222 days.' He raised one eyebrow. 'Officially, I step back today. But I must firstly

‘speak to your brother. As we both know, his ambition sometimes outpaces his brain.’

Carlito twizzled his gold and black onyx ring. Emblazoned in the middle was the Trinacria. This ring never came off. But Carlito knew, as did Vincenzo, it would be handed to him on the day of his wedding.

Vincenzo nodded, in no rush to bring forward any potential confrontation with his brother.

Both men drew on their cigars and exhaled simultaneously, then immediately sipped their whisky.

‘Indeed, this is a true pleasure in life,’ Vincenzo said as he slipped back in his chair.

His smile lingered, but his thoughts had already moved on.

His brother would need handling. Not loudly, not rashly. With the caution one gives a blade pressed to the skin.

CHAPTER SEVEN

LUCIA

Vincenzo sent his Gulfstream G650 to collect Lucia. It was quicker, more efficient, and above all else, a little show of power, his, and perhaps hers, to the people she was leaving behind.

As she boarded, she smiled at the greeting flight attendant.

‘Good morning, Miss Lucia.’

‘Oh please, it’s just Lucia,’ she said with a smile.

One of the attendants showed her to her seat and offered refreshments or some light food, explaining that they had fresh Sicilian tapas.

Lucia smiled. Her dinner with Vincenzo on the yacht had also been Sicilian tapas.

‘He’s purposely done that,’ she thought.

‘Well, for now, do you have any champagne? Actually, on second thoughts, do you have fresh orange juice? Not the packet stuff?’

She remembered she’d be meeting the whole Donetti team. She didn’t want to smell of alcohol.

‘Yes, freshly squeezed this morning. Ice?’

‘Yes please. Perhaps I’ll have some tapas in a while. Is the flight about two hours?’

‘A little longer. 2:25 to 2:45, depending on conditions. But we have a clear sky, low wind, so closer to 2:25. Bathrooms are just there. TV controls are in the armrest, sockets for charging and laptop power are here. I’m just over there if you need anything, or you can press the buzzer.’

Lucia nodded.

‘Thanks.’

No announcements. No delays. They taxied straight to the runway and were airborne within minutes. Her orange juice arrived two minutes later.

She sat back, looking down on Marbella and the last seven years she’d spent climbing the ladder. Why would Vincenzo send a private jet and have tapas from that night on the yacht? Coincidence?

She sat back again. His private jet. Identical tapas. What was he up to?

She let herself imagine walking beside him, his hand on her back, smiling politely to guests. She caught herself.

Of course, she’d been the one sending the flowers, not as a romantic rival, but as his facilitator. No card. No message. Not yet. Just a steady stream, waiting for Susan to accept one. Then maybe the next. Then perhaps one with a note. He hadn’t asked her opinion since dinner aboard Lady Moura. She had made her view clear. He was still very much in love with Susan, and now he was getting married.

‘It’s a charm offensive. A test, maybe. Or just Vincenzo being, Vincenzo,’ she thought, scrunching her nose at the idea.

Her tapas arrived.

After landing, she wasn’t sure if tipping was expected, but guessed private jets, or any jets, didn’t work like that.

A man met her at the bottom of the steps and opened the door to a black Range Rover.

‘Good morning, Miss Lucia. It’s just a short drive to the helipad. Thereafter, you’ll be at The Manor House in about an hour.’

She gave a polite nod but said nothing.

The drive wound past terraced olive groves and quiet stone outbuildings, before the low thump of rotor blades signalled her next ascent.

She had never flown in such a luxurious helicopter. The captain asked her to put on the headset. Once she did, the roar vanished.

‘I’m Mr Donetti’s personal pilot,’ he said. Then paused, no need to mention he was one of three.

‘We’ll be landing directly at The Manor House.’

He said nothing more. That suited her perfectly.

‘We’re about five minutes out. We’ve just entered the Donetti estate. If you look to your left, that’s Caterina village. Most of the villas are there. Yours is further out, larger plot near.’

He stopped himself. Saying too much is never wise.

‘Nice to have you here, Miss Lucia. Have a good day.’

The steps unfolded as the rotors slowed.

‘Ciao, welcome Lucia!’ Vincenzo called over the noise.

She walked over, held out her hand. He took it, then pulled her into a half hug.

‘Hello, Vincenzo. Nice to see you again. An impressive estate, from what I could gather on the fly in.’

He motioned for her to follow him through the rear of The Manor House. Small talk, yes, but not one word about the tapas.

‘Father, Alberto, this is Lucia. As you know, she’s now part of the senior team and reports directly to me. She’ll be helping streamline operations across most of our businesses worldwide. If there’s an opportunity, Lucia will be involved. If there’s a problem, Lucia will be involved.’

Alberto piped up.

‘Just nothing to do with security, sweet cheeks.’

He didn’t realise it was a demeaning phrase. His Father did, and shot him a disapproving look.

Carlito spoke.

‘Vincenzo speaks very highly of you. You’ve come a long way. Are you ready to join the rest of the business?’

He gave nothing away that they had already spoken. Not met, perhaps, but talked.

‘Mr Donetti—’

‘Stop, stop,’ Carlito interrupted. ‘We’re all on first name terms here. It’s Carlito, today and every day.’

‘Oh. Well then, Carlito, Vincenzo, and Alberto, I’m fiercely loyal, very capable, and yes, I want to be involved in all of the business. Except security, that is,’ she said, returning Alberto’s smile.

Unusually, he returned it. He wasn’t sure if it was a dig or submission. Perhaps both.

They each took a seat in one of six wingback chairs. The Sicilian walnut table gleamed between them. Carlito stood and offered his sons a whisky.

‘Are you a whisky drinker, Lucia? Would you like to try?’

‘I am indeed, but only neat, with one rock. I don’t like the taste to dilute too much.’

Vincenzo raised his eyebrows and glanced at his Father.

‘Very well,’ Carlito replied, slightly surprised. He explained what was in the three decanters.

Alberto stood.

‘Cigars?’

Carlito and Vincenzo both nodded.

‘Hoya Monterrey, please,’ Vincenzo said.

‘A mild one, brother,’ Alberto replied.

All eyes turned to Lucia.

‘Care for a cigar?’ Alberto asked, then chuckled.

‘I prefer something a little fuller. Do you happen to have any Cohiba Behike Fifty Twos?’ She smiled and raised one eyebrow.

‘Well indeed we do. Excellent choice,’ Carlito replied.

Vincenzo and Alberto exchanged a glance, surprised. She’d disarmed Alberto with his own game. He wasn’t upset. He was impressed. She had edge. Balls, even.

Carlito continued.

‘So, Lucia, you report to Vincenzo. He answers to me. Simple enough?’

She nodded.

‘I assumed so.’

‘Alberto runs family and cash business security. He reports only to me. Then there’s Stefano, he’s out of the country right now. He oversees security for everything else. Questions?’

‘No. Clear enough. What about the other division heads, the cash businesses and such?’

Carlito replied.

‘You already know the European side. The global commodity traders report to Vincenzo. He’ll bring you in when there’s a mission. As for the cash businesses, those stay in this room between the three of us, until otherwise agreed. I’m sure you understand.’

‘Absolutely.’

They leaned back, sipped whisky, and drew on their cigars.

‘Tell me about yourself, Lucia,’ Carlito said.

She shared a little. Only daughter. Parents gone. Her education. The headhunting that brought her to this room.

‘And if you knew then what you know now, would you still choose this path?’

She didn’t hesitate.

‘I suppose we all have choices. An ordinary life for an ordinary person, or a life that’s exciting, on the edge, where risk is offset by reward, power, and influence. So no. The only thing I’d change is how long it took to get here.’

She let out a soft, inviting laugh.

‘Couldn’t have said it better myself,’ Alberto replied.

This was some woman, he thought. Whisky drinking, cigar smoking, super brains, knockout figure, all wrapped in a casually tailored power suit. Wow.

‘I agree,’ said Vincenzo. ‘But not all of it is glamorous. Sometimes brute force and will is what gets it done.’

He’d almost stepped into Alberto’s role, grounding her. He’d also noticed his brother had taken a shine to her.

He felt it, the flicker of resentment. Not jealousy exactly. Something colder.

Lucia asked about the estate. How old was it? Did they still make wine? Did they take part in production?

Vincenzo answered.

‘The estate is about five hundred years old. The village you flew over is new, but designed to look original. Father named it Caterina, after our mother. She passed many years ago. The wine is still made. There are shops, a small trattoria, and an enoteca, a wine bar.’

‘And the villas, do all the senior team live on the estate?’

Carlito interjected.

‘No, and yes. Only global roles are in the village. The nicer the villa, you know.’

He let her fill in the blanks.

‘And the no part?’

‘Oh yes. Each country has a head, very senior. Those are not here, but are as senior as some positions we have here.’ He took a slow sip of whisky.

Lucia nodded, filing the information away with a small smile.

Vincenzo spoke.

‘So, Lucia, do you have any further questions, or would you like me to show you around a little?’

He stood.

‘Unless anyone has further questions, I’ll show Lucia around.’

Carlito glanced at Alberto and made a closed mouth gesture, as if to say, strange. Alberto mirrored it back.

Noticing, Vincenzo re offered.

‘Ordinarily, Stefano would walk you round and make introductions. But since he’s not here, I’ll take you to your villa. Show you the protocols.’

She stood, finished her whisky, and thanked Carlito.

‘That’s the smoothest whisky I’ve ever had,’ she said, raising the empty glass.

She copied Vincenzo and placed her quarter smoked cigar in an individual ashtray.

‘Also very nice,’ she added, holding Alberto’s eye just a second longer than needed.

Or at least, that’s what he thought.

Both Carlito and Alberto rose as she left the room.

She didn’t look back. But she knew they were watching.