



Carol Marinelli

THE SICILIAN'S
Surprise
LOVE-CHILD

MILLS & BOON
MODERN

CAROL MARINELLI

The Sicilian's Surprise Love-Child

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MARINELLI C.

The Sicilian's Surprise Love-Child / C. MARINELLI —
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His forbidden innocent... And the consequence of their surrender! Aurora Messina is everything cynical hotel tycoon Nico Caruso shouldn't want. Impetuous and far too innocent, she's trouble—and temptation!—personified. But even Nico's famous control isn't a match for their combustible chemistry... Then Nico discovers their encounter has left her pregnant! He's never wanted a family—he still bears the scars of his own childhood. But will Aurora's revelation give this proud Sicilian a reason to risk everything?

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His forbidden innocent...

And the consequence of their surrender!

Aurora Messina is everything cynical tycoon Nico Caruso shouldn't want. Impulsive and far too innocent, she's trouble...and temptation. Especially now that she's working at his new hotel. But Nico's infamous control isn't a match for their combustible chemistry, and it soon ignites in a sizzingly illicit encounter...

Then Aurora discovers she's pregnant! She knows Nico has never wanted a family—he still bears the scars of his own childhood. But will Aurora's revelation give this proud Sicilian a reason to risk everything?

CAROL MARINELLI recently filled in a form asking for her job title. Thrilled to be able to put down her answer, she put 'writer'. Then it asked what Carol did for relaxation, and she put down the truth—'writing'. The third question asked for her hobbies. Well, not wanting to look obsessed, she crossed her fingers and answered 'swimming'—but, given that the chlorine in the pool does terrible things to her highlights, I'm sure you can guess the real answer!

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The Sicilian's Surprise Love-Child
Carol Marinelli

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THE SICILIAN'S SURPRISE LOVE-CHILD

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For my great friend, Frances Housden.

Love you, Cuzzy.

C xxx

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CHAPTER ONE

‘AURORA WILL BE shadowing me today.’

Nico Caruso did not look up from his computer as Marianna, his PA, walked into his opulent Rome office. Instead he frowned.

‘Aurora Messina from the Sicilian hotel,’ Marianna elaborated, clearly assuming from Nico’s frown that Aurora’s was a name he did not know.

Oh, but he did.

Aurora Messina. Aged twenty-four—six years younger than him.

Aurora Eloise Messina, with her velvet brown eyes and thick dark hair that was not quite raven, though too dark to be called chestnut. Ah, yes... Aurora, with her olive skin that went pink in the sun.

‘Don’t you remember me, Nico?’

There was a tease in that familiar rasp to her throaty voice, and she brought with her the scent of home. The white crochet dress that she wore must have been hung out on the washing line, for it had caught not just the hot Sicilian sun but also the breeze from the ocean and the sweet scent of jasmine from her parents’ garden.

‘How rude of you to forget me,’ Aurora continued, ‘given that you have slept in my bed so many times.’

Marianna sucked in her breath at Aurora’s cheeky implication, but Nico didn’t miss a beat with his dry reply, ‘Ah, but never with *you* in it.’

‘True...’ Aurora conceded with a smile.

She had trained herself not to blush when Nico was near, but it was a struggle not to now. The stunning view of Rome panning out behind him went almost unnoticed and the lavish, expensive surroundings barely registered, for Nico, on this Monday morning, was proving more than enough for her senses to take in.

His thick black hair had been cut with skill and his strong jaw, with that slight dent in the centre, was so clean-shaven that she was actually anticipating the brief brush that would come when they shared a light cheek-to-cheek kiss.

Aurora came around the desk to greet him properly.

Of course she did.

After all, the two of them went way back.

But when Nico raised his hand to halt her approach, when his black eyes warned her not to come any closer, Aurora stepped back as if she’d been slapped.

She knew she was bolshie, and often came across as too forward, but after a lot of soul-searching as to how best to face him, she had decided to greet him as she would any old friend.

But Nico had halted her and that had hurt Aurora.

She tried not to let it show.

‘Take a seat,’ he told her, and then turned to his PA. ‘Marianna, let’s get started. We have a lot to get through.’

‘First, though...’ Aurora said. And instead of taking a seat, as instructed, she removed a large leather bag from her shoulder, took out a bottle of tomato sauce, and placed it on his immaculate, highly polished walnut desk. And then she took out another bottle.

‘Homemade *passata* from my mother,’ Aurora said, ‘and here is some *limoncello* from my father.’

Nico glanced over to Marianna, who was trying to keep the shock from her expression as Aurora turned his gleaming desk into a market stall. And then his black gaze returned to Aurora.

‘I don’t need these,’ Nico said, and gave a dismissive wave of his hand. ‘You can take them back with you.’

‘No!’

He had rejected her greeting. And now this!

Nico was not doing as he should. He was not saying that he missed the taste of that homemade sauce, and nor was he inviting her to join him in sharing the feast that the sauce would create.

He was not playing by the endless ingrained codes of home.

But then, she reminded herself, Nico never had.

For if that were the case then Aurora would be his wife.

Aurora Eloise Caruso.

As a teenager she had practised writing that name in her journals and saying it out loud. Now her cheeks flushed, just a little, as she tried to keep the note of anger from her voice. ‘You know very well that my family would never let me visit you without gifts.’

‘This is *work*—not a visit,’ Nico snapped. ‘You are here for five days to train for the opening of a new hotel; it is not a social occasion. Now, get these things off my desk.’

Nico knew he was being harsh, but he *had* to set the tone—and not just with Aurora.

The Silibri contingent had been in Rome for just eighteen hours and already he was fed up with the lot of them.

Francesca, who was to be Regional Manager, had brought, of all things, a salami, and left it for him at the reception desk. Did she assume that Nico could not get salami in Rome?

And Pino, who would be chief concierge at the new hotel, had somehow found his private number. Nico guessed he had got it from Aurora. He had given it to her once.

Once...

Nico refused to think of that time now.

The fact was, on their arrival yesterday evening Pino had called and asked Nico where they should go for dinner and what time he would be joining them!

Nico had rather sternly declined to do so.

The village of Silibri had come to Rome, and it seemed determined to bring him several slices of home.

Except Nico had been trying to run from home since he was sixteen.

Was it guilt or duty that always pulled him back?

He truly did not know.

‘Get these off my desk, Aurora,’ he repeated. It was a warning.

‘But I don’t want them.’ She shook her head. ‘I have shoes to buy, and I need the space in my suitcase.’ She fixed him with narrowed eyes. ‘Assuming I’m allowed to shop during non-work hours?’

He almost smiled at her sarcastic tone, but did not.

A smile.

A kiss.

When combined with Aurora, Nico knew full well the trouble they made...

So he met her glare with one of his own and hoped she’d hear the message in his veiled words. ‘When you’re not working, Aurora, I don’t care what you do.’

‘Good.’

‘For now...’ Nico flicked his hand at the desk. ‘...can we get rid of these and start work? We’re already running behind.’

‘I’ll take them.’

Marianna was rarely flustered as she was now. Aurora had that effect on people.

‘And I’ll get the swatches for the meeting...’

‘Swatches?’ Nico checked.

‘It’s decision day for the Silibri uniforms.’

‘What decision?’ Nico inhaled deeply and tried not to show his irritation. *Really?* Since when did he get involved in orders for uniforms?

'They don't like the green,' Marianna said.

'But it's the same as in all my hotels. I want continuity—'

Nico halted himself, deciding that he would save it for the meeting. He nodded to Marianna, who gathered the bottles and, with Nico's desk back to its usual order, headed out.

He was surprised when Aurora did not follow, and instead took a seat. 'I thought you were supposed to be shadowing Marianna?'

Aurora could hear the irritation beneath the silk of his low tone and she spoke hurriedly. 'I wanted a moment alone to apologise for being indiscreet. I was making a little joke about the times when you used to stay at our house.'

She grimaced then, because despite her best efforts that hadn't come out right. There really wasn't anything to make a joke about. Her father had used to find the young Nico asleep in the park after a beating from his father and had insisted he come and sleep at their home. Aurora would be moved to a made-up bed at the foot of her parents' and Nico would be given her room.

'Apology accepted,' Nico said, and got back to his spreadsheets.

He was still angry, though, Aurora knew, and she was cross with herself too, for she had been so determined to be serene when she saw him.

Nico did not make her feel serene.

'Anyway...' Aurora continued, and under the desk she gave his knee a playful little tap with her foot. 'We were never in bed together—you took my virginity on the couch!'

Her breath hitched as he caught her ankle with his hand and gripped it tight for a second. She wished—how she wished—that he would run that hand up her calf, but he scolded her instead.

'I didn't *take* it, Aurora. You very willingly gave it to me.' He pointedly removed her foot and released his grip. 'You *pleaded* with me, in fact.' He turned back to the computer. 'It's forgotten now.'

Liar.

For Nico, sex was necessary and frequent—if a touch emotionless. And it was always a smooth and controlled affair, taking place in his suite at the hotel, never at his home.

It did not compare to the panting, hot, sweaty coupling that had taken place with Aurora.

Nothing could ever compare.

'Forgotten?' Aurora checked.

'It happened just the once and it was a long time ago.'

'Four years, Nico.'

Yes, it had been four years since that night, and Nico had been paying for it ever since.

That one slip had cost him millions.

Tens of millions, in fact.

Though the cost of a new hotel had been preferable to another night under the Messina roof.

He did not glance up as she stood and walked to the window.

This was hell.

Nico was aware he had treated her terribly.

He should never have slept with her.

They had been supposed to marry. Of course they had never had a say in it, but as they'd grown up it had become a given. Her *nonna's* house had been left to her father, Bruno, and he had kept it for them to reside in after their wedding day.

Nico had been able to think of nothing worse. Stuck in that damned village, living opposite the in-laws and working all day on the vines.

Aurora had taken it well when he'd told her they would never marry. She had laughed and said something along the lines of *Thank God for that*.

It had been the sun that had made her eyes sparkle, Nico told himself. She had been sixteen then, and a skinny, slip of a girl. He hadn't seen her for a few years after that.

Oh, but when he had...

He glanced over to where she stood, looking out towards the Vatican City, and though he wanted to turn back to his computer screen he could not resist a double-take.

There was nothing, Nico thought, more beautiful than a beautiful Sicilian woman.

She was dark-eyed and dark-haired, with voluptuous curves that had never seen a gym let alone a scalpel or silicone. Beneath her full bust in the white crochet dress there was a thin strap of leather, tied in a bow. He could think of no other woman who might look so sexy in such a dress, but she certainly did. He wanted to pull on that bow...he wanted to bare her breasts and pull her onto his knee. To kiss that mouth and properly welcome her to Rome.

His eyes drifted down to her shoes, which were neutral. Her legs, though, were not—their olive skin was bare and her calves were toned. His gaze followed the line of her long limbs until it rested where he knew he would find dark silken curls; he knew, too, the grip of those thighs.

She was fire. And he must do all he could not to let it catch him. For what Nico craved in his life was order.

Aurora could feel his eyes on her and she liked the vague, unsettled feeling that tightened low in her stomach and brought a hot and heavy sensation between her legs.

She had seen him since that fateful night—of course she had. But since the morning after they had never been alone.

Now, for a few precious moments, they were.

Aurora had practised this moment in her head and in the mirror so many times, and had sworn to rein herself in. But what had she gone and done?

Teased and cajoled and tried to draw a reaction from this cold immutable man, who had ruined her for anyone else.

Yet she could not bring herself to regret losing her virginity to him. Aurora would never regret that.

She attempted a more bland conversation. 'I like Rome...'

'Good.'

'Though I *love* it in the early morning. I went exploring this morning...'

Nico looked back to his computer screen.

'I felt as if I had the city all to myself. Well, not quite...'

She thought of the cafés and markets opening, and the street cleaners she had encountered on her early-morning walk—the walk during which she had promised herself that when she saw Nico later she would be serene and controlled. Sophisticated. Like the slender beauties he dated, whom she read about while bile churned in her stomach.

'Tonight we're all going on a bus tour...' She halted, thinking how touristy and gauche she must sound to him. 'Are you excited about the Silibri opening?' she asked, because that seemed safe.

'I will be glad when it's done.'

Glad when he would be able to hand it over to his executive and the managers. When it would be up and running and no longer at this intense stage.

Right now, though, the tension was all in his office.

It was a relief when Marianna appeared and, with Aurora observing, they began to go through his schedule.

Nico was to meet with the Silibri hotel staff in fifteen minutes, and after that his day was back-to-back meetings with accountants, financiers and lawyers—and, no, Nico said, he would not be staying at the hotel that night.

'You have a breakfast meeting at seven and the helicopter is booked for nine...' Marianna frowned at this slight anomaly. 'Usually you stay here if you're flying out.'

'I'll be residing at home tonight,' Nico said. 'Now, can we check my Silibri schedule? I want to see my father's doctor as soon as I arrive.'

'You're going home...?' Aurora blinked. 'Why are you going home when we are all *here*'?

‘Again...’ Nico sighed. ‘You are here for staff training.’

He looked to Marianna and was grateful when she stepped in.

‘Signor Caruso and I run through his schedule each morning, Aurora. This is not a meeting, and nor is it a discussion; it is to ensure that everything is in order and that we are both clear on timings.’

‘Of course...’ Aurora attempted, but there were a million questions in her eyes about why he was leaving Rome so soon after they had arrived.

Nico answered none of them.

Instead, having gone through his impossibly busy week, they headed out of his office, with Nico holding the door for both the women.

‘After you,’ Nico said.

He wished his good manners were not quite so ingrained, and that he did not have to hold open the door, for the scent of her reached him again. The chemistry that flared between them was undeniable, and the want was still there.

Nico, though, was first to walk into the boardroom.

The Silibri contingent were there, waiting, and they greeted him warmly.

Too warmly.

‘Hey, Nico!’

And there were *more* gifts set out on the table.

Amongst other things, Francesca had brought homemade *biscotti* to go with the coffee being served. Only Vincenzo, his marketing manager, sat rigid, clearly taken back by the party-like atmosphere in the room.

He smoothed his auburn hair nervously and cast a slightly aghast look at Nico. Bizarrely, for the briefest of seconds, Nico wanted to tell Vincenzo to relax. Did he not know how things worked in Sicily? Did he not know that humour and conversation were an art form there, especially in Silibri?

Of course not. Vincenzo had been brought in from the Florence branch.

‘Let’s get started,’ Nico said.

It would hopefully be a quick meeting.

Aurora was to be assistant manager of marketing. It was not something she had studied for, but she knew the area well and loved taking photos—and she had ideas. Many of them.

Nico hadn’t actually got her the job; she did not need him to succeed.

Well, maybe a bit...

For without him there would be no hotel.

Vincenzo was speaking of the excitement locally, and said there were a few interviews nationally, for various tourism shows and breakfast television and the like.

‘I shall handle those,’ Vincenzo said.

‘You can take turns with Aurora,’ Nico interjected.

‘But I have had media training,’ Vincenzo pointed out. ‘Aurora can be a touch...forceful, and we want to extend a gentle invitation.’

‘Vincenzo,’ Nico said. ‘I wasn’t offering a suggestion, I was *telling* you to take turns with Aurora.’

He was not doing her any favours. Vincenzo was vain and self-serving—and, though he was brilliant at his job, it was as clear as day to Nico that Aurora, with her passion, her low throaty laugh, with her sheer love of Silibri, would be more enticing for potential guests.

‘Next,’ Nico said, and nodded to Francesca.

‘The fittings for the uniforms have been delayed.’

‘Then get them done,’ Nico said, even while knowing it wasn’t going to be as easy as that.

‘I have tried, but the staff have issues with the colour.’

‘And the fabric...’ It was the first time Aurora had spoken. ‘The wool is too heavy and the green makes us look like...’ She snapped her fingers. ‘That Englishman’s Merry Men.’

Nico had to think for a moment. But then he always had to think when Aurora was around—she brought him no peace.

He thought of the dark green uniforms that looked so elegant against the old Roman and sophisticated Florentine buildings, and worked well in both England and France, and then he joined the dots she had led him to with her mention of ‘the Englishman’s Merry Men’.

‘You mean Robin Hood?’

‘Who?’ Aurora frowned, and then she gave him a tiny smile to say of *course* she knew who he meant and was teasing him.

Their minds jostled, and she could see he was fighting not to return her smile. She was still looking at Nico’s full mouth, with a smile on her own, when Vincenzo cleared his throat and spoke up.

‘We think that Silibri should have a more casual feel.’

‘It’s a five-star hotel.’ Nico gave a shake of his head. ‘I do *not* want my staff looking casual.’

‘Of course not,’ Vincenzo agreed. ‘But there is a stunning French navy linen, and teamed with crisp white shirts...’

‘We would look like sailors,’ Aurora sulked.

Nico pressed the bridge of his nose between finger and thumb. What the hell had he been thinking? What had possessed him to venture into Silibri? He should have sold the land there and been done with it...

Yet as he sat there he recalled Aurora’s emphatic *no* when he had suggested that the night after

—
Damn, no matter how he tried to avoid it, all roads led to that night.

Nico forced himself back to the moment: What in God’s name was he doing, sitting here discussing fabric? It was *his* hotel and it had been four years in the making.

The trouble with the Silibri venture was that the staff considered it to be *their* hotel too. They were all *so* involved and took it all *so* personally.

‘What about the same green as the other hotels, but in linen?’ Francesca suggested.

Aurora shook her head.

‘That just takes us back to the Merry Men,’

‘So what do *you* suggest, Aurora?’ Nico threw down his pen in exasperation.

Of course she had an immediate answer. ‘Persian Orange.’

From her seemingly bottomless bag she produced several swatches of fabric and proceeded to pass them around. It was a linen blend that wouldn’t crease, she assured them, and with one look Nico knew she was right.

‘It is the colour of the temple ruins and the monastery just before sunset,’ Aurora said. ‘And you know how beautiful Silibri looks at that time of night. Mother Nature chose her colours wisely.’

‘It is a bold colour,’ Vincenzo objected. ‘A touch too bold, perhaps?’

‘I don’t agree that it is too bold; it is, in fact, quite plain,’ Aurora refuted, then cocked her head to the side.

Nico watched as her knowing eyes weighed up Vincenzo.

‘Are you worried that it might clash with your red hair?’

‘Of course not...’ Vincenzo was flustered and smoothed said red hair down.

‘Because,’ Aurora continued, ‘we could have bespoke shades on the same theme, with Persian Orange being the main one.’

‘Bespoke shades...?’ Vincenzo checked.

And Nico watched silently as his marketing manager warmed to his new assistant’s idea, and watched, too, Aurora’s small, self-satisfied smile as of course she got her way.

Heaven help Vincenzo, Nico thought, trying to manage her. Because Aurora could not be managed nor contained.

She was as Sicilian as Mount Etna, as volatile as the volcano it was famous for, and she could not be beguiled or easily charmed. She was perceptive and assiduous and...

And he refused to give in to her ways.

'I'll consider it,' Nico said.

'Consider it?' Aurora checked. 'But what is there to consider when it's perfect?'

'There is plenty to consider,' Nico snapped. 'Next.'

It had been scheduled as a thirty-minute meeting but in the end it took sixty-three—and of course it did not end there.

As Marianna disappeared for a quick restroom break, and Nico attempted to stalk off, Aurora caught up with him. 'I wonder if we could speak? I have an idea.'

'It has all been said in the meeting.'

'This isn't about the uniforms. I have another idea for the Silibri hotel.'

'Then speak with Vincenzo, your manager.'

'Why would I share my idea with *him*?'

'Because I don't generally deal with assistants.'

Aurora felt his cool, snobbish dismissal and told him so. 'It is spring, Nico, and the sun is shining—yet you are so cold that when I stand near you I shiver.'

'Then get a coat! Aurora, let me make something very clear—and this is a conversation that you can repeat to all your colleagues. You are here for a week of training to find out how *I* like things done and how *I* want my hotel to operate. You're *not* here for little chats and suggestions, and catch-ups and drinks. I did *not* build a hotel in Silibri to expand my social life.'

Nico wanted this conversation to be over.

'You are shadowing Marianna for the rest of the day?' he checked.

'Si?'

'Then what are you doing standing in mine?'

CHAPTER TWO

DAMN YOU, NICO!

How much clearer could he have made it that he did not want her near him? He could not have been more horrible had he tried.

As Nico stalked off Aurora wanted to be done with her feelings for him. To shed them. To discard them. To stamp her foot on them and kick them to the kerb. She was tired of them and bone-weary from this unrequited love.

‘Aurora.’ Marianna had found her. ‘We need to talk. Or rather, you need to listen.’

‘I already know what you’re going to say.’

But she was told anyway.

A little more decorum and a lot less sass, or she would be shadowing the bottle-washer for the rest of the week.

And while Aurora understood what was being said, she just did not know how to squeeze herself into the box demanded of her. Or how *not* to be herself when she was near Nico.

‘Hello, husband,’ she had used to greet him teasingly when, as a young girl, she had opened the door to him.

He would shake his head and roll his eyes at the precocious child who constantly fought for his smile and attention. ‘Your father says he wants some firewood chopped,’ Nico would respond.

Yet, as much as he’d dismiss her, she would still sit and watch him chop firewood, and her heart would bleed when he took off his top and she saw a new bruise or a gash on his back.

How could Geo do that to him?

How could anyone hate Nico so?

Then he would look over, and sometimes he would smile rather than scowl at his devoted audience. And her day would be made.

Nico hadn’t broken her heart when he had first left Silibri—after all, she had only been ten then—though for a while she had cried herself to sleep at night.

No, the heartbreak had occurred on one of his rare trips home, when Aurora had been sixteen.

Her heart had sung, just at knowing he was home, and then one afternoon he had spoken at length with her father behind closed doors. She had assumed they were drinking the grappa her father had saved for this very day.

And then Nico had come out and asked if she’d like to take a walk. She had quickly washed her face and hands and scrubbed her nails, so her hands would look pretty for the ring. And she had brushed her teeth for she had wanted to taste fresh for her first kiss.

They had walked down the hill and around the old monastery, but instead of heading to the ancient temple ruins, Aurora’s favourite place, Nico had suggested they take the steps down the cliff to the beach.

‘Our fathers are very old fashioned...’ Nico had said as they walked on the deserted sands.

‘Yes!’ Aurora had beamed, for she had known he had just been speaking with hers.

‘They try to make decisions for us.’

She’d felt the first prickle of warning that this conversation might not be going as she had long hoped. ‘They do,’ she had rather carefully agreed.

‘Aurora, I stopped allowing my father to dictate to me a long time ago.’

‘I know he is difficult. I know you hate him. But—’

‘Aurora,’ he broke in. ‘I can’t see myself ever marrying. I don’t want to have a family. I want freedom...’

It had been the worst moment of her life.

‘Aurora!’

Marianna's voice broke in on her painful reminiscence.

'Are you even listening to what I'm saying?'

'Of course,' Aurora said. She hadn't been listening, but she could guess very well what Marianna had said. 'Don't worry, I...' She gave a slow nod, took a deep breath and made a vow—not just to Marianna but also to herself. 'I will not embarrass myself again.'

Aurora was done with Nico Caruso.

For eight years she had loved him in secret.

A whole third of her life!

Well, no more.

It was time to snuff out the torch she carried.

She would be calm and distant and professional if she ever saw him again.

'I didn't mean you to take it like that...' Marianna gave her first kind smile. 'Nico is a wonderful boss, but he's no one's friend. Just remember that when you're working together.'

'I will.'

'Come on—the driver is waiting.'

'The driver?'

'So I can go and pack for Signor Caruso's trip. Oh, and I must organise his driver for the morning, now he's no longer staying at the hotel...'

Aurora just wanted the day to be over. She wanted to go back to her hotel room, throw herself on the bed and cry...and then emerge better and stronger and step into the future without him.

Instead, she had to step into his home.

It was beautiful, of course.

Nico lived in the Parioli district, and his residence was just a short drive from the hotel. It was elegant and tasteful and her heels rang out on the marble floors.

There was a huge gleaming kitchen, where Marianna deposited the *limoncello* and *passata* in rather empty cupboards. Then they went back to the main corridor, with its cathedral-high ceilings and a grand staircase which she climbed reluctantly—for surely Nico's bedroom was not the best place to attempt to get over him?

The master bedroom had French windows and a balcony and looked out to Villa Borghese Park. And, had it not been Nico's bedroom that she stood in, Aurora might have been tempted to step out onto the balcony and drink in the view. Instead she looked at the vast bed, dressed in white with dark cushions, and imagined Nico beneath the crisp linen.

His bedroom daunted and overwhelmed her, although Marianna was clearly very used to it and quickly pulled out a suit carrier and a case and started to select shirts and suits.

'Aurora, could you please sort out underwear?'

Joy!

It was agony—sheer agony—Once, a long time ago, she had slipped her hand inside similar black silk boxers and felt his velvet skin...

Oh, it killed her to be in his bedroom, and to remember how it had been between them, but she tried hard to keep her vow and focus on work.

'Should I pack these?' Aurora asked, holding up a pair of black lounge pants. To her surprise, Marianna laughed.

'No, I bought those just in case he has to go into hospital or something.'

'Oh...'

'You have to think of all eventualities if you're a PA.'

Except Aurora didn't want to be one. 'Marianna, why am I shadowing you today? I'm enjoying it, of course, but I thought I would stay with the marketing team.'

Marianna put the suit she was holding down on the bed before answering. 'Well, I don't always travel with Signor Caruso and, given that he'll presumably be spending some considerable time in

Silibri, I thought it might be prudent to train someone to assist me when he's there. I have someone in each of his hotels with whom I liaise. I spoke with Francesca and she suggested you.'

'I would be Nico's PA?'

'No. But I want someone in the Silibri hotel that I can liaise with directly regarding him.'

'Does Nico know about this?'

'No, it's just something Francesca and I have discussed. I would not trouble Signor Caruso unless I considered it viable...' She gave a thin smile, which told Aurora that she was already having her doubts as to her suitability for the role.

Aurora had doubts of her own.

Getting closer to Nico wasn't going to snuff out the torch. Instead it would fan the eternal flame that burned for him. So Aurora said the bravest thing she could. 'It is very nice of you to consider me—but, no.' Aurora shook her head. 'I don't think that role would be for me.'

Tonight, when she was back in the hotel, she would cry one final time over him, Aurora decided. There would be no bus tour.

She was a little tired of being with her friends. They saw each other every day and they were all so much older than she.

No, tonight she would recall with shame her own behaviour earlier with Nico and then she would weep into the pillow. And then...

Well, it was time she moved on—time she started dating.

Time to flirt.

To be twenty-four and single in Rome.

She might even download the dating app that Chi-Chi and Antonietta had told her about!

To hell with you, Nico Caruso, because I want to be with a man who wants me. I am finally out of your shadow.

And she was soon to be out of Marianna's.



'Where's Aurora?' Nico asked late in the day.

'Oh, she's with the marketing team,' Marianna said and then glanced at the time. 'Though they'll all be off on their bus tour now.'

Nico gave a small eye-roll, though not with any malice. It was more in amusement that Pino had called and invited him to join them.

Again he had declined.

'Do you know?' Marianna said. 'I have never met a more enthusiastic lot of people. With their energy and exuberance I'm sure the new hotel is going to be amazing.'

'If you like Persian Orange,' Nico said, and he pushed over the uniform order he had signed off on. Persian Orange! With bespoke tones of Butterscotch and Burnt Caramel for those who felt the shade might not suit their colouring.

Nico had a headache from looking at so much orange.

And he had another question. 'Why was Aurora shadowing you today? I thought her role was in marketing.'

'Correct,' Marianna agreed. 'But presumably you will be spending a lot of time in Silibri...?'

'Not once the hotel is up and running.'

'You are always between hotels. I have Teresa in Florence, Amelie in France... Francesca thought that Aurora might be suitable—'

'No.' Nico said it too fast, and with too much force, and he attempted a quick recovery. 'Look, I'm sure Aurora will be excellent in her marketing role, but I don't think she would work out as—'

'It's fine,' Marianna cut in. 'Aurora said the same.'

'She did?'

Why did that feel like a punch to his guts rather than spread relief? And why did the thought of working closely with Aurora unsettle him so?

Nico grabbed his jacket and took the elevator down to head for home.

He did not need to ponder further to know the answer: there was *way* too much history between them.

CHAPTER THREE

The night that neither can forget...

'YOU CAN TELL Nico that I'm not leaving my home.'

Just hearing Nico's father say his name had Aurora's heart both soaring and shattering anew.

It was a regular occurrence in Silibri. Nico Caruso's name was mentioned often.

'Since when did I have a direct line to your son, Geo?' Determined not to give herself away, Aurora responded light-heartedly as she plumped the old man's cushions behind him. 'I haven't spoken to Nico in ages.'

'He's sending his helicopter to take me to Rome.'

Aurora's cushion plumping was paused for a moment.

Geo got confused at times, and was also known to exaggerate, but even by Geo's standards this was too far-fetched to be believed.

'Who told you that?' Aurora asked as he rested back in his chair and she straightened up.

'The doctor did.'

'Oh? And is this the same doctor who told you that your drinking would kill you?' Aurora checked.

Geo gave a reluctant smile.

'The same doctor who said that you couldn't manage here alone and needed to be in a nursing home?' she continued. 'Because I thought you told me that that doctor could not be believed.'

'Perhaps,' Geo conceded, 'but he was telling the truth this time—Nico is sending a helicopter to fetch me.'

Wildfires had been ravaging the south coast of Sicily and steadily working their way towards their small village for more than a week. They had been told to get out—of course they had—but, like Geo, her father had refused.

She didn't doubt that Nico wanted his father away from the fires, but a private helicopter was way beyond a boy from Silibri—even a successful one!

Geo's lies were becoming more and more extreme. A few weeks ago, when Aurora had dropped off his shopping, he had told her that she had just missed seeing Maria. Maria, Geo's wife and Nico's mother, had died the year Aurora had been born—some twenty years ago.

Last week he had said that Nico owned three hotels across Europe. When Aurora had refused to believe him, Geo had corrected himself: Nico owned *four*!

'He stole from me!' Geo said now, and cursed. 'He took what was mine.'

'You tell tall tales, Geo,' Aurora said gently.

'Well, he can stick his nursing home in Rome. I hate him. Why would I want to live closer to him?'

Aurora knew that father and son did not get on. She knew it very well.

But, though she loathed Geo's treatment of Nico, she could not walk past the old man's house and not drop in. It was worth it if it made things a little easier on Nico to know that his father was being cared for.

'Now,' Aurora said. 'Is there anything else that you need me to do?'

'Take some money from my dresser and run down to the store.'

'I'm not getting you whisky, Geo,' Aurora told him.

'Why not? We're all going to die in these fires!'

Aurora beamed. 'Then you will meet your maker sober.'

'Take the money and get me my whisky.'

'Don't.'

The very deep voice caused Aurora's stomach to flip over, but even before she turned to face its direction she knew its source.

'Nico...' she said. 'You're here?'

'Yes.'

He wore suit trousers and a white shirt—which somehow, despite the ash floating in the air, looked fresh. His hair was black and clean, unlike hers, which felt heavy after a day spent sweeping leaves outside Geo's home and trying to get his house as safe as possible.

Oh, *why* couldn't he have arrived in a couple of hours, when she was all washed and dressed up for Antonietta's party?

But, really, what did it matter? Nico would never look at her in *that* way.

'How did you get here?' Aurora asked. 'The road from the airport is closed.'

'I came by helicopter,' Nico said.

'*Told* you,' Geo declared to Aurora, but then he addressed his son. 'I'm not going anywhere and you're not welcome here. Get out!'

Here we go, Aurora thought, and sure enough, within two minutes of Nico arriving, Geo was shouting and waving his stick at his son.

'Get out!' he raged.

'Pa...'

'Out!' Geo shouted. 'I want you gone. You bring nothing but trouble. You're not welcome in my home. You're a thief and a liar and you ruined me.'

It was Aurora who calmed things down. 'I'll take Nico outside and show him what has been done to prepare for the fire,' she suggested.

They stepped out of the small house, but there was no reprieve—Geo's words followed them out into the oppressive heat, where the air was smoky.

'He won't leave willingly,' she said.

'I know he won't,' Nico sighed.

He had his chopper waiting, and a care facility in Rome ready to receive Geo, but even as Nico had asked Marianna to put the arrangements in place he had known it was futile.

'You could carry him out,' Aurora suggested.

'I could,' Nico agreed, 'but then he would die on my shoulders just to spite me. What about you?'

'Me?'

'Yes, why are *you* staying, Aurora?'

'Because we have to protect the village.'

'And what can you do against the might of a wildfire?' Nico asked.

All five-foot-three of her. She was tiny—a stick.

Except she wasn't a stick any more.

They had avoided each other as much as possible since that awkward walk four years ago, and he had watched her blossom from a distance. The child he had rejected was now all woman. The cheeky, precocious brat who had hung on his every word was a forthright, assertive woman who, to Nico's cold surprise, completely turned him on.

Not that he showed it. For one thing had not changed. Nico did not want a family and he did not want the responsibility of another heart.

'Aurora, you can't do anything to stop the fire.'

'I can feed the firefighters,' Aurora responded. 'Anyway, Pa says the village is safe.'

'Aurora...' Nico kept his voice even, but fear licked at his throat at the thought of her staying here.

The village was not safe. Far from it. Nico had, after all, just viewed the fires from the sky, and heard the worrying comments from his pilot, who was ex-military. Bruno, Aurora's father, was probably regretting his foolish decision and just putting on a brave face.

‘Leave.’

‘No.’

He persisted. ‘Come with me now and get out.’

‘I already told you—no.’

‘I could insist...’ Nico said, and it angered him when she snorted.

Did she not get that the village was going to go up in smoke and that the fire would destroy all in its path?

‘I could just put you over my shoulder—the same way I am tempted to do with my father.’

‘And then what, Nico? What will you do with me in Rome?’

He gritted his teeth.

‘My father would not object,’ she said. ‘In fact, all the villagers would come out and cheer if you carried me off.’ She gave him a smile that did not quite meet her eyes. ‘But then you would surely return me, Nico, and that would *not* go down very well.’

No, Nico thought, it would not. ‘Don’t you *ever* think of leaving?’ he asked.

‘Why would I?’ Aurora shrugged. ‘*La famiglia* is everything to me. Give me good food and family and my day is complete. What more could I want?’

‘You should deepen your voice, Aurora,’ Nico said, ‘when you impersonate your father.’

‘But I wasn’t impersonating him.’

‘No? You’ve heard it so often you believe it to be your own thought.’

‘Why do you have to criticise?’

‘I’m not.’

‘Oh, but you are.’

Nico took a breath. Aurora was correct. He *was* criticising—and he had no right to. Especially when she did so much for his father.

He addressed that issue. ‘You still haven’t sent me your bank account details so that I can pay you for the time spent with my father.’

‘I don’t count it as work.’

No, she saw it as duty. Nico knew that.

Even though he had not married her, she had taken on the role of caring for his family.

‘Aurora...’

‘I don’t have time for this, Nico. I want to move the firewood away from your father’s home. I thought my brother had done it...’

‘Give me a moment,’ Nico said.

Walking away from the house, he took out his phone and made a call to his pilot.

He could get out.

Perhaps he even *should* get out.

As he and the pilot both agreed, it would be a waste of vital resources to have a pilot and helicopter sitting idle, just in case Geo changed his mind.

But Nico could not leave his father to his fate alone.

And neither could he leave Aurora behind.

He looked over to her, lifting logs, doing all she could to keep the old man safe.

‘Right,’ he said walking towards her. She was filthy from the effort and he watched the streaks of ash grow as she wiped her forehead. ‘Leave the firewood to me. What else needs to be done?’

‘Aren’t you leaving?’

‘No.’

Their conversation was interrupted with the arrival of Aurora’s father. ‘Nico!’

Bruno greeted him warmly, as he always did—and that consistently surprised Nico. The fact that he had refused to marry his daughter should have caused great offence, yet Bruno had confounded Nico’s expectations and still treated him as a future son-in-law.

'You will stay with us,' Bruno said.

'No, no...' Nico attempted, for he did *not* want to be under the same roof as Aurora.

Or rather, he wanted to be under the same roof *alone* with Aurora. He wanted to strip her off in the shower and soap those breasts that now had sweat dripping between them.

He was trying to hold a conversation with Bruno even as filthy visions of the man's daughter flashed in his mind. What was *wrong* with him?

'So you're too good for us now?' Bruno demanded.

They all spoke from the same script, Nico thought as he dragged his mind from Aurora's breasts. To refuse Bruno's hospitality would be an insult, and although in his professional life Nico did not care who he offended, he attempted to do things differently here.

Like it or not, while his father was alive, he still needed these people.

More, though, he wanted to do the right thing.

'You can have Aurora's bed.'

'No. Absolutely not!' Nico would not hear of it.

'She will be out tonight, at Antonietta's birthday party.'

'Aurora should be at home,' Nico said. 'With the threat to the village I thought the roads would be closed.'

'The main one is, but some are open between the villages, and the threat has been here for weeks,' Bruno said. 'Life goes on, and Antonietta's father is the fire chief. The firefighters are camping on his grounds so it is the safest place for her to be.'

Nico wasn't so sure of that—and it had nothing to do with the fire!

'I could be on lookout,' Nico said, but Bruno shook his head.

'It is Pino's turn tonight. I did it last night. You shall stay with us.'

'Well, thank you for your offer,' Nico said, 'but I shall stay only if I sleep on the sofa.'

'Up to you,' Bruno shrugged.

Before dinner Nico checked in on his father, who had drifted off into a drunken stupor. Aurora was already there, and rolling him onto his side, making sure Geo would not choke should he become unwell during the night.

'I told the store not to supply him with whisky,' Nico said to her.

'There is home delivery now,' Aurora shrugged. 'Even your father has worked out the Internet. And there's always Pino stopping by, or Francesca. You can't stop him.'

'I send money, but then I wonder...'

'If you didn't send it he would drink cheap wine instead,' Aurora pointed out. 'Come on, it's time to get back. Supper will soon be ready.'

'I need to speak with the doctor first.'

The news from the doctor was the same.

Geo needed to stop drinking and he needed a more comprehensive level of care—except there was no staff to provide it in Silibri.

'I have spoken to the agency,' Nico said to him. 'And I am looking to purchase the house across the street. That way—'

'You could purchase ten houses,' the doctor interrupted. 'No one wants to live here. The village is dying faster than your father.'

Why did Aurora choose to remain here?

Nico thought of long-ago evenings at the Messina dinner table. She would talk of her photography, and how she would pester the manager at the winery to change the labels on his wine. To rename, rebrand. She had passion and dreams—but they had been smothered by this village, like the smoke that blanketed the valley now.

'Come and sit down,' Bruno said as Nico walked into the Messina home. 'Good food and family and my day is complete. Come now, Aurora.'

But Aurora did not join them at the table.

‘No, Pa, there will be food at the party and I have to get ready.’

‘And will there be firemen at this party?’ Bruno checked. And though he spoke to Aurora, he looked over to Nico.

‘I think they are a little too busy fighting fires.’ Aurora smiled sweetly as she left the room.

Nico’s gut tightened.

‘Aurora has a thing for one of the firefighters,’ Bruno said, and rolled his eyes. ‘*Per favore, mangia, mangia*, Nico. Come on—eat.’

The pasta, though delectable, tasted like ash in Nico’s mouth.

Worse still, he could hear the pipes groan as Aurora turned on the shower...



It was bliss to have the hot day and all the grime slide off her skin and to feel the dirt and grease being stripped from her hair. This morning she had risen before six, and had worked every minute since, and yet though she ached, Aurora was not tired.

She looked down at her skin, brown as nutmeg, and saw her fleshy stomach and full breasts and all too solid legs.

She was too much.

Too much skin and bum and boobs.

Too much attitude.

Although as it had turned out for Nico she was not enough. Never enough for him.

How, Aurora pondered as the water drenched her, could Nico manage to turn her on even from the kitchen table?

Last week she had kissed a firefighter, and all she had felt was the tickle of his beard, and all she had tasted was the garlic on his breath, and all she had smelled was the smoke in his hair.

There was something so *clean* about Nico.

Even if his morals were filthy.

Oh, yes, she had heard the gossip about his many women!

But there was still something so clean about him—the tang of his scent and the neatness of his nails that made her shiver on the inside.

She stepped out of the shower and wrapped a towel around her body that was burning inside like the mountains that were aflame all around them.

She headed into her pink bedroom. It was too childish—she knew that—but then she should be gone by now.

Aurora thought now that she would either be the village spinster or perhaps she would marry one day.

But she would never know the bliss of Nico.

Never.

Ever.

And that made angry tears moisten her eyes.

Her nipples felt as if the surface skin had been roughened as she stuffed her breasts into her bra. And as she wrestled her dark hair into some semblance of style there was suddenly the snap of a chain, and her *collana*, the cross and chain she had worn for ever, fell to the floor.

It felt like a sign.

She felt dangerous and reckless and everything she should not be.

Oh, what was the point of being a good Italian girl when the perfect Italian boy didn’t want you?

And so she went to the special book on her shelf, out of which she had cut the middle and in which hid the forbidden Pill.

The Pointless Pill, she called it, for she could not imagine sex with anyone other than Nico.

Tonight she would drink wine and try kissing that firefighter again—and maybe this time when his hand went to her breasts she would not brush him off.

To hell with you, Nico Caruso. I shall get over you.

She put blusher on her cheeks and lengthened her lashes with mascara before sliding glossy pink onto her lips.

She dabbed perfume on her neck and wrists and then strapped on high heels. And she knew that she was not dressing for the fireman tonight, but for the one minute when she would pass Nico on her way out.

She wanted him to ache with regret.



Instead Nico ached with need when, mid-meal, Aurora teetered out in heels and a silver dress. Nico tried not to look up.

‘Go and change, Aurora,’ Bruno warned.

‘Why? I would just have to put my dress and shoes in a bag and change in the street,’ Aurora said cheekily. ‘Because I *am* wearing my silver dress tonight, whatever you say.’

Nico could not help but smile. Aurora did not hide, or lie, she just was who she was.

The taxi tooted. The one taxi that ferried people between villages.

He had to ignore the effect of her and the feeling, a lot like fear, that rose when he thought of her out on those fiery mountains tonight.

As she bent and kissed her father, her mother, her brother, he found he had to stop himself from running a tense hand down his jaw and neck as he awaited the torture to come.

Torture for them both.

If she did not extend to him the traditional farewell it would give rise to comments. Her omission would be noted and it would be awkward indeed.

He sat at the head of the table, and as she bent she put her hand on its surface to make as little contact with Nico as she could.

His cheek was cool when her lips brushed it. His scent she tried to obliterate by not breathing in. But because her brother leaned forward to ladle out more pasta she had to move quickly and put out a hand on Nico’s shoulder.

It was solid and warm.

One cheek to go.

Both were holding their breath.

Their desire was like the cattails and the bulrushes, waiting to be snapped open and for a million seeds to fly out and expand.

‘Be safe,’ he told her, in a voice that was somewhat gruff.

She gave the tiniest unreadable smile, and in it was a glint of danger as she straightened up.

‘I’m not your problem, Nico.’

She was, Nico knew, looking for trouble tonight.

Hell.

CHAPTER FOUR

Later on the night that neither can forget...

'WE SHOULD HAVE got out.'

Aurora turned and looked at Antonietta as the three friends sat on the hillside, watching the ominous glow.

'We'll make it,' Chi-Chi said. 'There is soon to be a storm.'

'And with storms come lightning,' Antonietta pointed out. 'I wish I had left. I wish I had taken off to...' She thought for a moment. 'Paris.'

'But you don't speak French,' Aurora said.

'I'm learning it,' Antonietta shrugged, and then was silent for another moment before continuing. 'Pa says we shall have a proper party after the fires. I'm getting engaged.'

Chi-Chi let out a squeal and jumped up in excitement.

'To Sylvester,' Antonietta added, and she looked to Aurora, who had to fight not to pull a face.

For Antonietta and Sylvester were second cousins, and Aurora was sure this was a match to keep money within the family rather than for love.

'Are you happy?' Aurora asked carefully.

Antonietta was silent for a very long time, and then she shrugged an odd response. '*C'est la vie!*'

Aurora didn't really know what that meant, but she could hear the weary resignation in her friend's voice and it troubled her.

'I hear your Nico is back,' Antonietta said.

'He is not *my* Nico,' Aurora said.

'No,' Chi-Chi agreed, and made a scoffing noise. 'You should forget about him,' she said. And then she nudged her as a fire truck turned into the hillside, bringing weary firefighters for a break, some food, and maybe a kiss...

But Antonietta caught Aurora's arm. 'If Nico is back, then what are you doing here?'

'He doesn't want me,' Aurora said.

But Antonietta, though only newly twenty-one, had an old head on her young shoulders.

'Go home,' Antonietta said. 'Fix what you can, while you still can. I heard my father speaking to his men about the direction of the fire...'

And hearing the solemn note in Antonietta's voice, and watching the weary firefighters approach, Aurora no longer wanted to be out in the valley tonight.



This... Nico thought as he sat at the table with Aurora's parents playing cards. *This would have been my life.*

Hard work out on the vines by day, and a tired body at night.

Except no amount of labour would be enough to tire his mind.

Yet, on the plus side, he would be sitting with Aurora in the now vacant house across the road, rather than looking at Bruno's hairy arms as he shuffled the cards.

Just because Nico did not want to be married to Aurora, and just because Nico did not want to stay, it did not mean there was not desire. It did not mean he did not care.

And he *loathed* the thought of her out there tonight.

'I'm going to check on my father,' Nico said.

He found Geo deeply asleep, and as he came out Nico felt the hot winds lick his face. He looked at the glowing mountains, and the approaching fire spreading towards them, and in the distance he could see lightning strikes.

They were sitting ducks, Nico thought as he went back into the Messina house.

‘Bruno, can I borrow your car and go and get Aurora? The fire is moving fast...’

But Aurora’s work-shy brother had just taken it, Bruno said. ‘And anyway, Aurora will not thank you if you interfere with her plans for tonight. I’ve told you she is in the safest place. They’re not going to let the chief firefighter’s house burn.’

Dio! Nico wanted to shout. *Do you really think the fire will give them a choice?*

‘If it gets much closer,’ Bruno continued, ‘Aurora knows to come home and we will head to the beach.’

He wanted to shake Bruno and ask, *Is it not better that we all die together?* But then, he did not want to worry her mother.

‘Grab a cushion from Aurora’s room,’ Bruno said, ‘You know where it is.’

Oh, he knew.

The scent of Aurora lingered in the air. He looked down and saw her gold cross on the floorboards. He picked it up and held it in his palm for a moment.

He caught sight of the book on her chest of drawers and he was intrigued, because he knew that poetry was not her thing. Even before he opened it Nico almost knew what he would see.

The little packet of pills, half of them gone, had been left for him to see, Nico was sure.

He replaced the book in her top drawer.

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