

KIMANI™ ROMANCE

# Tuscan Heat

THE BOUDREAUX FAMILY

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DEBORAH  
FLETCHER  
MELLO

**Deborah Fletcher Mello**

## **Tuscan Heat**

Серия «Mills & Boon Kimani»

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### **Аннотация**

In the name of loveA coveted teaching invitation gives Donovan Boudreaux the chance to leave his New Orleans comfort zone and meet his secret email pen pal—world-renowned author Gianna Martelli. But when he arrives at the Martelli wine chateau in Tuscany, he discovers he's been deceived. His misgivings dwindle as Gianna introduces him to the hidden pleasures of Italy—and a passion that takes both Donovan and the reclusive writer by surprise.Gianna loves her simple life on her family's legendary vineyards. Until her matchmaking twin initiates a clandestine correspondence. Determined to make amends, Gianna soon realizes that she and the charming professor share a bond that can't be found in books. A friendship soon flames into an intense affair they know can't last forever. And now a vindictive rival could destroy Donovan's reputation, career and any hope of a future with Gianna...

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In the name of love

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He laughed heartily. "Gianna Martelli has a little bit of a jealous streak," he teased.

"I do not!"

"Yes, you do." He reached for her hand, entwining her fingers between his own. His touch was electric, the current between them combustible. "And I kind of like it," he said, his voice dropping to a loud whisper. "But if I'm honest," he continued after another brief pause, "I'm really hoping that you and I are seeing each other. Or getting close to that point."

The hint of a smile danced across her face. His touch was

heated, fire coursed through her palm, up the length of her arm and exploded with a vengeance through her body. A tingle ran down her spine and back up, the sensations a shiver away from orgasmic.

She suddenly pulled her hand from his, color heating her cheeks. Turning her body around, she lay back against him, resting her head in his lap. She pulled a grape from the bunch in her hands and slid it into her mouth.

Dear Reader,

The Stallion-Boudreaux clan continue to thrill me! I love these two families, and telling their stories has been so fulfilling.

Tuscan Heat brings us back to the Boudreaux side of the family alliance. Donovan Boudreaux takes us to one of my favorite places in the whole wide world! Everything about Italy screams romance and love, and Donovan finds it in the most unlikely manner.

As I've said many times before, there could be no Boudreaux story without that foundation of family, friends and faith. Like his siblings, Donovan is very much his own man. He's a tad conservative and maybe even a little introverted. Gianna Martelli and her big, bold personality are a formidable challenge. She's fire to his ice, and together they will melt your heart! I so hope you enjoy their journey as they find love.

Thank you so much for your continued support. I am humbled by all the love you keep showing me, my characters and our stories. I know that none of this would be possible without you.

Until the next time, please take care and may God's blessings be with you always.

With much love,

Deborah Fletcher Mello

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Tuscan Heat

Deborah Fletcher Mello



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DEBORAH FLETCHER MELLO has been writing since forever and can't imagine herself doing anything else. Her first romance novel, *Take Me to Heart*, earned her a 2004 Romance Slam Jam nomination for Best New Author. In 2005 she received Book of the Year and Favorite Heroine nominations for her novel *The Right Side of Love*, and in 2009 she won an RT Reviewer's Choice Award for her ninth novel, *Tame a Wild Stallion*. With each new book Deborah continues to create unique storylines and memorable characters.

Born and raised in Connecticut, Deborah now considers home

to be wherever the moment moves her.

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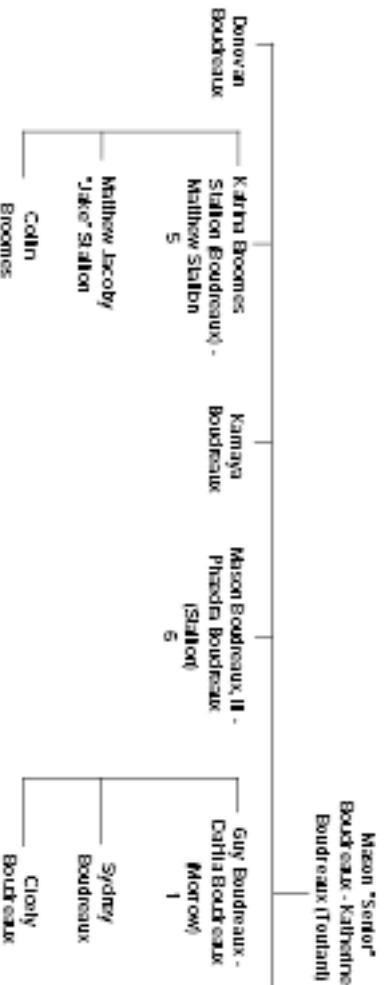
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To my Muse

for keeping me dreaming.

You make my heart sing!

## THE BOUDREAUX FAMILY TREE



### BOUDREAUX FAMILY SERIES

1. Passionate Premiere
2. Truly Yours
3. Heart's Affair
4. Twelve Days of Pleasure
5. Seduced By A Station (The Station Series)
6. Forever A Station (The Station Series)

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## Chapter 1

She and her sister were identical twins, and most people were never able to tell the two women apart. But Gianna Martelli had taken a pair of scissors to her sibling Carina's dark locks, cutting the young woman's waist-length tresses to pixie short. Carina's natural curls were suddenly less abundant as she stood in the center of the room, her head waving slowly from side to side to show off her new hairdo to their family.

"Wow!" Graham Porter exclaimed, his dark eyes shifting back and forth between the two women. "Wow!"

"What's that mean?" Carina questioned, her eyebrows lifted as she tossed her husband a look. "Why do you keep saying wow like that?" A wave of panic flashed across her face. "You don't like it!"

He met the look his wife was giving him, holding his hands up defensively. "No... I mean yes... I do! It's just unexpected," he said, turning to his father-in-law for assistance. "What do you think, Franco?"

Franco Martelli grinned. "It's lovely, daughter. But it's a definite change. And like Graham said, it's unexpected! I think what your husband is trying to say is that you've surprised us, is all."

"I told you to trust me," Gianna said as Carina smiled, pulling her hands through the new short length of her hair. "It really does look great!"

"Are you going to cut yours, too?" Franco asked, turning in

his seat to stare at Gianna.

The young woman shrugged. "I was thinking about it, but Carina doesn't want me to."

"I want us to look different," Carina said. "Just for a little while. No one will mix us up now."

Gianna rolled her eyes skyward, tossing the extensive length of her own dark waves over her shoulder. "It's been forever since anyone last got us confused."

"Last week at the market, Mrs. Falco thought I was you."

"Mrs. Falco is half-blind," Gianna said with an eye roll. "She gets papà and Graham mixed up!"

Graham chuckled as he rose to his feet, moving to his wife's side. He leaned down to kiss her cheek. "It's a very flattering style on you, sweetheart. I really like it," he said softly. "You look beautiful!" He trailed a finger across Carina's cheek, and she smiled brightly as he leaned in to kiss her lips.

Gianna threw the two a look, the faintest hint of jealousy furrowing her brow. She blew a low sigh. "You two need to get a room," she quipped. She rose from her seat and moved toward the door. "I'll be in my office. Some of us have work to do."

"Speaking of," Carina said, "I sorted your mail and typed up your notes. And your agent called. She needs to speak with you about the changes in your next contract."

"I don't have a next contract. I told you to tell her I'm not interested in what they're offering."

"I did, which is why she wants to speak with you."

Gianna nodded. "I'll call her," she said, trying to ignore the gentle caresses passing between her sister and brother-in-law. The couple's very public displays of affection were often distracting and unsettling, the love the two shared enviable. Gianna couldn't help but wish that she had what they had. With one last wave of her hand she turned and disappeared from the room.

Behind the closed door of her office, Gianna ran her fingers through her own thick tresses, pulling the wealth of her hair up into a high bun. She found herself wishing that she'd cut her own hair first, motivated by the effort it took to maintain the lengthy locks. That, and she found herself in want of a change. One that might bring a man into her life with a slow hand that glided like silk across her bare skin. She blew a low sigh as she turned to stare out the window to the landscape outside.

The sun was shining brightly, and she had full view of the family's vineyards. Their family home was situated in the Ombrone Valley, one of the most beautiful stretches of countryside in Italy. She stared out to the Chianti vines, the cornfields and the lengthy rows of cypress trees. In the distance the expanse of chestnut forests reached up to kiss the bright blue sky. The view paid homage to unparalleled art, the land a masterpiece of blessings. For a brief moment Gianna sat staring at the beauty, lost in her thoughts as the morning's bright rays peeked through the window to kiss the round of her high cheekbones.

She blew one last sigh as she spun around in her leather executive's chair toward her computer. Powering up the device, she waited for the unit to engage then typed in her password. Minutes later she stared at a blank screen, unable to decide in what direction she planned to take her next story. Writer's block had suddenly crept in with a vengeance. When nothing came, she swung her chair around to stare back outside.

\* \* \*

Donovan Boudreaux found the pomp and circumstance of the Catholic ceremony somewhat sobering. He was standing at the altar of Saint Patrick's Church in New Orleans holding his niece, Cecily Boudreaux, in his arms. The infant was being christened, she and her twin brother, Sydney, both receiving the sacrament of spiritual cleansing and rebirth. Light shimmered through the stained glass that enclosed the building's front turret.

He fought the urge to yawn as Father Charles Dussouy made the sign of the cross in front of one baby and then the other. He stared down into the infant's sweet face as the priest announced her Christian name, sprinkled holy water over the child's head and welcomed her into the congregation. She never once opened her eyes, barely shifting her small body when the water saturated her curls. Her brother, on the other hand, screamed at the top of his small lungs.

Donovan grinned as he and his brother Kendrick exchanged a look. Kendrick was rocking young Sydney vigorously, trying his very best to calm the baby down. But Sydney wasn't having any of

it, no ounce of consolation from his uncle and godfather bringing him any comfort. It wasn't until the matriarch of the family, Katherine Boudreaux, lifted her grandchild from her son's arms did the little guy finally settle down as she snuggled him against her chest. There was something about their mother's touch that put them all at ease, and as each of her children watched, it made them all smile.

The private ceremony was over almost as quickly as it had begun. After the priest wished them well and disappeared from the sanctuary, the family stood in a protective circle around the twins, who'd been returned to their parents' arms.

Mason "Senior" Boudreaux, the family patriarch, cleared his throat, swiping at a tear that lingered in the corners of his dark eyes. "Your mama and I are glad that all you kids could make it home to celebrate these babies," he said, his tone low. The man's gaze swept around the circle.

The eldest Boudreaux child patted his namesake's broad shoulder. "Where else would we be, Senior? You know once you and Mama give the command we follow orders!" Mason Boudreaux III said.

His siblings laughed, their heads nodding in agreement. Donovan leaned to kiss his mother's cheek, his arms wrapped around her shoulders as he hugged her close. His own eyes roved from one face to the other. There was no escaping the Boudreaux lineage. Their distinctive features hinted of an African-Asian ancestry, with their slight angular eyes, thin noses, high cheek

lines and full, pouty lips. Side by side they were a kaleidoscope of colorations that ranged from burnt umber to milk chocolate.

His brother Mason, who could have passed for his twin, stood at his side. The low lines of their closely cropped haircuts complemented their distinctive facial features. Mason's wife, Phaedra, clutched his elbow on his other side. Then there was his very pregnant sister, Maitlyn, and her husband, Zakaria Sayed. Maitlyn was the second child and oldest girl in the Boudreaux family. Standing beside them was his sister Katrina, who was a year younger than Donovan, with her husband, Matthew Stallion, and their two sons, Collin and Jacoby, or Baby Jake, as he was affectionately called. On his right side stood his younger brother Darryl, and Darryl's wife, Camryn, who held their newborn baby, Alexa Michelle, in her arms. The twins, Kendrick and Kamaya were next, Kamaya linked arm in arm with their baby sister, Tarah, and Kendrick's wife, Vanessa. His brother Guy, and Guy's wife, Dahlia, the twins' parents, closed their family circle. In that moment, the love between them all billowed like the sweetest breeze all around.

"Can we please go eat now?" Tarah suddenly whined. "This lovefest has made me hungry."

Katherine shook her head. "I declare, child! You are always hungry."

"I would really like to know how you stay so thin!" Kamaya exclaimed, her head waving.

"Good genes," Tarah said with a soft giggle.

Maitlyn rolled her eyes, slapping a hand against her hips. “We have those same genes, so I don’t think that’s it,” she said with a warm chuckle.

They all headed in the direction of the exit and home. Minutes later the joy and laughter continued at the Boudreaux family’s Broadway Street house. The food was abundant, plates overflowing as the family all caught up, conversation sweeping from one room to the other.

“I like the name Rose. Rose Lynne Sayed,” Maitlyn was saying, her hand gliding in a tight circle across her abdomen. “Although Zak is still insisting we’re having a boy!” she said, leaning in to whisper with her sisters. “He even told the technician that did the ultrasound that she didn’t know what she was talking about.”

Kamaya laughed. “At least it’s not twins!”

“I wouldn’t mind having twins,” Tarah said. “A boy and a girl. You get it all done in one shot. Dahlia never has to be pregnant again. How perfect is that? You, on the other hand, might have to do it again to get a boy. Maybe even twice.”

“If I had thought that way after Kendrick and Kamaya were born, you wouldn’t be here,” their mother interjected as she joined in the conversation. She took the seat beside Tarah, giving her daughter’s ponytail a playful tug.

Kamaya laughed. “I know!”

Katherine turned her attention to Donovan, who was leaning against the home’s brick fireplace, a glass of red wine in his hand.

“So, Donovan, what’s going on with you? What’s the big news you wanted to share?”

“Yeah, Don Juan! Are you engaged? Pregnant? What?” Tarah said teasingly.

“You have to date first,” Kamaya said with a deep chuckle. “Are you finally dating, big brother?”

Donovan shook his head, amused by his sisters’ teasing. “Don’t call me Don Juan,” he said, cutting an eye at Tarah.

“What’s going on?” Kendrick asked, moving into the room. “Who’s calling who names?”

“Tarah,” Mason said, sauntering in on his brother’s heels. “You don’t even need to ask.”

Tarah threw her brother a look. “Why do you assume I did something? How come it can’t be Maitlyn or Kamaya who’s doing something?”

“Because it’s always you,” her brothers all answered in unison. The women laughed, Maitlyn and Kamaya nodding their heads in agreement.

Tarah rolled her eyes skyward, her arms crossing over her chest. Her lips were pushed out in a full pout as she tossed her body back against the sofa cushions.

Katherine smiled. “Y’all stop now. Donovan was just about to tell us his news.”

The family all turned in Donovan’s direction, eyeing him curiously. He shook his head, the attention suddenly unnerving. His brow furrowed.

“Well?” Katherine prodded. “What is it, baby?”

“I’m moving to Italy,” he pronounced, his gaze sweeping around the room. “I leave at the end of the semester. I’ve been invited by the University of Siena in Tuscany, Italy, to come teach there. I’ll be a visiting professor for one year teaching the structure of associative algebras relative to their radicals.”

Tarah jumped up excitedly. “Hot dog! I get to visit Italy! Yes, yes, yes!” she exclaimed as she rushed to Donovan’s side. She threw her arms around her big brother’s shoulders.

“I didn’t hear anyone in the room say anything about you going to Italy,” their mother noted. “Sit your tail down, Tarah, and give your brother some space.”

Tarah tossed her hands up as she moved back to her seat, plopping her body back down against the sofa.

Everyone in the room laughed.

Donovan laughed with them. “I hope that once I get settled, you’ll all come visit me at some point,” he said.

“You couldn’t find a college in Texas or Florida or someplace closer? You’re a mathematician, after all. Everyone needs a good numbers man,” Katherine said, her bright smile dropping into a deep frown.

He shook his head, meeting his mother’s gaze. His smile was consoling. “This is a great opportunity that I can’t pass up. It’s a definite résumé builder.”

Congratulations rang warmly through the room as his siblings moved to shake his hand and give him hugs.

His mother moved to his side, her hands clasping his shoulders. There were tears in her eyes. “Why must all of you move so far away? Italy is halfway around the world, for heaven’s sake!”

Senior joined them, wrapping his own arms around his wife’s shoulders. “Leave that boy be. Your son’s almost forty years old! Cut them apron strings already, woman!” The man’s smile filled his dark face as he kissed her cheek.

She rolled her eyes, fighting the smile that pulled at her own lips and the tears that burned hot behind her eyelids. “He’s only thirty-seven. He’s nowhere near close to forty yet. And I’ll cut the apron strings when I darn well please, Senior Boudreaux!”

Donovan smiled, the pad of his thumb swiping at a tear that had rolled down his mother’s cheek. “It’s not like I won’t come back, Mama. I’m not planning to be there forever. And I hope you’ll definitely come visit me.”

Tarah suddenly waved her hands for attention. “Can I live in your apartment while you’re gone?”

\* \* \*

Senior eased his body into the queen-size bed beside his wife. Katherine sat upright against the pillows, her electronic reader open on her lap, her reading glasses perched low on her nose. She cut her eye at her husband as he snuggled his body close against hers. He leaned up on one elbow, his head resting against an open palm as he stared at her.

“What?”

“What do you mean what?”

“I mean, why are you staring at me?”

“I’m staring,” he said softly, his hand trailing a heated line across her leg, “because you’re so beautiful.”

Katherine shifted her glasses from her face, resting them easily in her lap. She met the look the man was giving her. “What do you want, Senior Boudreaux?”

“Why do I have to want something, woman?”

“Because when you start tossing out compliments, you’re up to something. So what is it?”

Senior rolled his eyes skyward as he dropped onto his side, then moved onto his back. He pulled one arm up over his head as the other clutched the covers around his body.

“I tell you how beautiful you are all the time. That doesn’t mean I want something.”

Katherine pulled her glasses back against her face. She threw one last gaze in his direction. “Mmm-hmm!” she muttered under her breath.

Senior laughed. “Okay, so maybe I want something,” he said as he rolled back toward her.

“You’re working my nerves right now, Senior,” she quipped, a smile pulling at her thin lips. “You see me reading. You know I don’t like to be interrupted when I’m in the middle of a good book!”

Senior shrugged his shoulders. “I was thinking that we probably need to update our wills,” he said, ignoring her

comment.

She pulled at her eyeglasses a second time, closing the cover on her electronic device. “What brought that up?”

“Our babies. With all of our new grandbabies we need to make sure they’re going to be taken care of. We don’t have much, but I want to make sure they each get a little something from us when the time comes.”

Katherine nodded. “Do you remember when it was just Collin? Back then I used to think he was going to be the only grandbaby we would ever have!”

Senior laughed. “And you spoiled him like it, too!”

The matriarch nodded. “Katrina was going through so much back then, raising Collin by herself after his daddy died.”

Senior fell into his thoughts, thinking about the army helicopter pilot who’d married his daughter and fathered his eldest grandson. He’d been a good man, and his untimely death during the Gulf War had been devastating. Both he and Katherine had been thrilled when Katrina had found love a second time with Matthew Stallion. Matthew loved their daughter immensely and had stepped in to parent Collin without a moment’s hesitation. The couple had been blessed again when their second son, Matthew Jacoby Stallion Junior, had been born. Everyone in the family called the youngster Jake. Only his beloved grandmother called him Jacoby.

Senior tossed his wife an endearing smile. “Katrina’s happy, and them boys is doing good. She and Matthew are doing a fine

job raising Collin and Jake.”

“My sweet little Jacoby is a handful. But he’s got a great big brother!”

“Collin takes after his granddaddy,” Senior said with a chuckle.

Katherine laughed with him. “That’s not a bad thing! Not a bad thing at all!” She trailed a warm finger against the side of her husband’s face.

“Now we’ve got the twins, and little Alexa, and Maitlyn will be having her little munchkin soon. Before you know it, Tarah will be married and having babies. I just think we need to make sure we’re prepared.”

“It used to drive me crazy worrying about our kids getting married and having families of their own. I wanted them all to know the kind of love you and I have, but your sons were determined to do things their own way.”

“And look at them now. I think my sons are doing a fine job. You were worrying for nothing.”

She smiled. “I guess I was,” she said as she thought about her children and the people who’d come to share their lives. Her eldest son, Mason, had married Matthew Stallion’s sister, Phaedra. Mason wanted children, but Phaedra wasn’t ready to rush into the responsibility. She imagined it would be another year, maybe even two before the young woman would be ready. Katherine had told her son that waiting wasn’t a bad thing. It would happen when God was ready for it to happen.

Then there was Maitlyn. Her oldest daughter had been heartbroken over the demise of her first marriage despite both her parents having warned her that her ex had been no good for her. Meeting her brother's best friend, Zak Sayed, had shown Maitlyn how a woman was supposed to be treated. And now Maitlyn and Zak were expecting their first child.

With Guy and Dahlia settling in nicely with their twins, and Darryl and his wife, Camryn, loving on their new baby, only three of their children had yet to find happiness in a committed relationship. Donovan was the only son still an eligible bachelor. Their daughter Kamaya's happily-ever-after was right in front of her face, but she was the only one who couldn't see it, and their youngest, Tarah, was still looking for Mr. Right, although Tarah was often quick to settle for Mr. Right Now. Katherine blew out a low sigh.

She suddenly felt her husband eyeing her intently, and she met his stare. "I think you're worrying for nothing," she said. "Every one of our kids is doing well, and their babies will want for absolutely nothing."

Senior reached his arms around his wife's waist and hugged her close. "Maybe, but I'd rather be safe than sorry."

She nodded, gently caressing his shoulders as she hugged him back. "We've done good with our children, Senior Boudreaux," she whispered softly. "We've done really good, old man! It's time you and I both stop worrying."

"So, does that mean you're happy about Donovan going to

Italy?”

“I like having my children close to home, you know that, Senior. I will never be happy about Donovan going so far away, but I’m happy that he’s been blessed with this opportunity.”

He gave her a quick squeeze. “Donovan needs a change of scenery. This trip will be good for him. He’s been focused on school and work and nothing else for too long now.”

Katherine blew a soft sigh. “Maybe, but I’m still gonna miss my baby!”

Senior laughed heartily. “Your babies are grown!” he said as he reached to swipe a tear from her eye.

She leaned her cheek into the palm of his hand. “They will always be my babies!”

Senior reached up to kiss her mouth, allowing his lips to linger against hers for a good long while. Katherine broke the connection, suddenly laughing as she turned off her reader and rested it against the nightstand. She reached to turn off the light that decorated the tabletop.

Her husband eyed the wide grin across her face. “What’s so funny?”

“I think we should make a baby!” she said, still giggling as she nestled herself beneath him.

Senior laughed with her. “You’re hoping for a miracle, aren’t you?”

“Not really. I just thought we could have a whole lot of fun practicing,” she answered as she slid her lips back to his.

## Chapter 2

Donovan moved from his kitchen into his family room, hanging up the telephone he carried in his hand. He'd been on a conference call with Maitlyn and his brothers, acquiring help for his impending trip. His Lafayette Street loft had been his single greatest investment, and he needed to ensure that someone in the family stayed on top of things while he was gone, lest Tarah turn his home into a sorority party house.

Making sure the doors were locked and the security system engaged, he headed to his office. He sat down in the leather executive's chair, pulling it up to the large oak desk as he turned on his computer. As he waited for it to power on, Donovan folded his hands in his lap, dropping into deep thought.

Donovan was the third child and the second son in the family of nine. With a doctorate in mathematics, he was a tenured professor at Tulane University. The most conservative of all his siblings, he was an intellectual challenge to most. His staid demeanor made his sister Katrina, a district court judge, and his brother Mason, a billionaire entrepreneur and business executive, look wild in comparison. His younger siblings frequently professed that he defied all logic with them having careers in the arts and him having no artistic inclinations whatsoever. Even his brother Kendrick, who had often kept much of his life a deep, dark secret until meeting Vanessa, was more outspoken and outgoing than Donovan tended to be.

But Donovan had secrets, too, the likes of which would make

his whole family sit up and take notice. His very conservative, very organized lifestyle had always been an open book, and now he was keeping details close to the vest. His interest in Italy was just the tip of the cache of secrets he'd been keeping from his family. A full grin pulled wide across his face.

He focused on the lengthy list of email messages that filled his inbox folder. He was searching for one in particular, and when he found the familiar email address his smile widened.

For months now he'd been pen pals with a woman who lived in Italy. A woman he had yet to meet or speak to in person. He only knew her from the award-winning books she was renowned for, her promotional photo gracing the back cover of each. But he'd become obsessed with the email messages from her that came daily, the engaging exchanges brightening his otherwise dull existence. And now he was being afforded an opportunity to visit Italy and meet her in person. Never much of a risk taker, Donovan rarely found himself out of his comfort zone. He could only begin to imagine what his siblings would have to say if any of them were to find out.

He didn't have to imagine what his parents would say. He could already hear their admonishments and concerns, both asking questions he didn't necessarily have answers for. He had never heard of any online relationship turning out well. For all any of them knew, he could have just as easily been chatting with Bubba in the state penitentiary. He no more knew who was on the other end of that computer than she did. He only knew what

he was being told, and any of it could have been a bold-faced lie. The anonymity of the internet made embellishing and stretching the truth an easy thing to do. But something about the eloquence of her words had Donovan trusting that he did indeed have a connection with the illustrious author.

He read the message that had come hours earlier.

I live a charmed life. I get to live in a beautiful villa in the Tuscan Maremma, eat pasta prepared by an amazing Italian chef and travel to charming cities whenever I want. What's not to love? I imagine that finally meeting you will be the icing on some very sweet, sweet cake! So, please, come. I can't wait to show you everything exquisite about Italy.

A shiver of excitement surged up Donovan's spine. He reached for the four-hundred-page mystery novel that rested on the corner of the desk. *Mayhem and Madness* by Gianna Martelli had landed on the New York Times bestseller list three weeks earlier and didn't seem to be going anyplace anytime soon. He flipped the book in his hand to stare at the photograph on the back jacket.

Gianna Martelli was a stunning beauty, and he imagined that the professionally shot black-and-white image didn't begin to do her justice. Her dark eyes were focused on the camera, and he felt as if she were staring directly at him. The look she was giving was searing, her gaze intense. But there was something about her expression that gave him pause, made him wish he could reach through the pages to draw her into his arms and hold her tight. He sighed.

Two books ago he'd reached out to email her, wanting to offer his opinion of her current novel at the time. He'd been excited to share his opinions about her characters, the protagonist a math professor at a historically black college. He'd been eager to tell her where she'd gotten it wrong and what had been wholeheartedly right. He had only half expected a polite but scripted response. Instead, he'd gotten an intriguingly worded reply that had challenged his sensibilities. Curiosity had gotten the best of him and he'd written back, receiving another reply that had him suddenly wanting more. Before he knew it, they were exchanging lengthy emails and a delightful friendship was born.

He typed a quick message back.

You've convinced me and now I'm counting the days. I can't wait to see that sunset you are always bragging about.

After adding his travel details, he pushed the send button. Moving from his office to his bedroom, he pulled an oversize suitcase from a closet shelf and began to pack.

\* \* \*

Rushing into the large kitchen, Carina looked from her husband to her father and back. Both men paused, concern washing over their expressions.

"What's wrong?" Graham questioned.

"Are you okay?" Franco asked, resting the knife in his hand on the butcher-block counter.

She shook her head vehemently. "Gianna's going to kill me!"  
The two men cut eyes at each other.

“What did you do, Carina?” Franco asked, eyeing his daughter with a narrowed gaze.

She raised both hands. “It’s really not that bad, but Gianna isn’t going to like it!” she exclaimed.

“What isn’t she going to like?” Graham asked.

Carina crossed the room to stare out a window. She moved from one to the other, and then to the door, to ensure that her twin was nowhere near.

Franco shook his head. “Gianna went into town for me. She’s not here.”

“He’s coming to Italy,” Carina blurted. “He’ll be here next week.”

“Who’s coming to Italy?”

“Donovan Boudreaux, the math professor from the United States.”

Both men seemed confused, tossing each other another look.

Carina sighed. “The man she’s been communicating with, except she doesn’t know she’s been communicating with him because I’ve been sending the messages.”

Both men snapped in unison. “You’ve been doing what?”

The young woman nodded. “I’ve been pretending to be Gianna. He’s been writing to her, and I’ve been answering.”

“Carina, why would you do something like that?” Graham snapped.

“Because I knew she wouldn’t, and I think they would make a really great couple. He’s just as nerdy as she is.”

“But he hasn’t been building a relationship with your sister, Carina—he’s been building one with you,” Franco said, crossing his arms over his chest.

Carina shook her head. “That’s not true. Every word I sent, she wrote. I copied them out of her journals.”

“You read your sister’s journals?” Her father’s look was disapproving.

“I’ve been reading her journals since we were twelve. Besides, I am her personal assistant. I’m supposed to answer her mail.”

“I don’t think that’s what your sister intended, daughter.” Franco shook his head from side to side. He went back to chopping the bulb of garlic that rested on the wooden chopping board. “Gianna is going to kill you!”

Graham laughed. “She is definitely going to kill you,” he said.

Carina rolled her eyes at her husband. “Thanks for the support.”

“So, what do you know about this guy?” Graham asked. “How do you know he’s not a psycho?”

“He teaches at Tulane University in New Orleans. He comes from a big family, and he reads the same boring stuff Gianna reads.”

“So he is a psycho!”

“He’s very sweet and a bit of a romantic. He’s exactly what Gianna needs.”

“So, tell me,” Graham said, turning to stare at his wife, a wooden spoon waving in his hand, “exactly when were you going

to tell Gianna about this guy?”

“I hadn’t figured that out. I thought I had a little more time until he decided to come to Italy to meet me... I mean her.”

Graham continued to eyeball her. “I’m having some issues with this,” he said. “You’ve been having a relationship with another man for weeks...”

“Months actually,” Carina interrupted, her tone casual.

Graham paused, his eyebrows raised. “Months?”

His wife nodded as she gave him a quick shrug. “I was building a friendship between them. That takes time. And I was going to tell her. I think.”

He shook his head. “You’ve been building this relationship for months now, but I’m supposed to believe that you did it for your sister, when you didn’t even know if you were going to tell her?”

“You’re making it sound worse than it is!”

“It sounds the way it sounds, Carina, and it’s not kosher! It’s not kosher at all!”

Her father moved from the tomato sauce he’d put on the stove toward the door. “I’ll let you two have a minute,” he said. “Watch my pot while I’m gone, please.”

Carina blew out a soft sigh. She locked gazes with her husband, noting the disappointment and confusion that gleamed from his eyes. She didn’t have the words to explain how she’d rationalized what she’d done. All she knew was that in the beginning, it had made all the sense in the world to her. And that even in that moment she knew beyond any doubt that she’d done

the right thing.

Since the publication of Gianna's first book, Carina had stepped in to do those things Gianna neglected to do for herself. From managing her fan page to answering reader questions, Carina had been her sister's personal assistant and marketing guru, maintaining her Twitter, Facebook and Instagram accounts. When Donovan's first email message had come, there had been something in the tone of his words that had caught her attention. His comments had been thoughtful and provoking, his words laden with emotion. She instinctively knew he was exactly what her best friend in the whole wide world needed.

Her response had been all Gianna, the wisecracking, tongue-in-cheek retorts her sister was known for. As their emails had gotten lengthier, she'd pulled lines and paragraphs from Gianna's personal writings to respond, wanting him to know her twin the way she knew her, in her sister's own words. And it had worked because now he wanted to meet the woman he'd befriended. Admittedly, Carina hadn't thought her plan through to the end. She'd imagined that once she'd vetted the man, she could have told Gianna and passed on the reins. Despite hoping that her twin would be happy to step in and take over, Carina knew that happy was probably going to be the last thing Gianna would feel about the situation.

She felt her husband still staring at her, and she lifted her eyes back to his. "Donovan likes Gianna. Everything he knows, he

knows about Gianna. He doesn't know me or anything about me! And when she finds out and gets to know him, she's going to like him, too. I'd bet my last dollar on it. I just wanted her to be as happy as you and I are, and you know she wouldn't have done anything like this on her own."

Graham shook his head from side to side. "So when do you plan to tell Gianna?"

"Tell Gianna what?" Gianna asked as she moved into the room. She looked from one to the other. "What's going on?"

Carina moved too quickly to her husband's side, leaning against him for support. The two exchanged a quick look, a wave of nervous energy palpable around them.

Moving to the counter, Gianna dropped her bags against the wooden top. Her eyes were still locked on her sister and brother-in-law. The bubbling pot on the stove interrupted the moment as tomato sauce suddenly spewed over the sides and down to the stove top.

"Oh, hell!" Carina exclaimed, moving to lower the heat on their father's meal.

Gianna watched with one hand on her hip as she waited for the duo to clean the mess. When the last dishrag had been rinsed, the pot back on simmer, she asked a second time, "So what is it that you have to tell me?"

Mumbling, Graham leaned over to kiss his wife's cheek, then moved toward the door. Without another word, he disappeared through the entrance, leaving the two women alone. Gianna

moved to stand in front of her sister, her arms crossed over her chest.

“What’s going on, Sissy?”

“Why don’t we sit down? Did you find everything you needed at the market?”

Gianna shook her head, her index finger waving in front of her sister’s face. “Oh, no, you don’t! You are not changing the subject, and don’t you move until you answer my question!”

Carina took a deep breath and then another. “I found you a boyfriend,” she said, and then she spewed out the story, not bothering to take another inhale of air until the last word had spilled past her lips.

\* \* \*

“Open the door, Gianna,” Franco commanded. “You can’t hide in there forever.”

“I’m not hiding!” Gianna yelled back. “I just don’t want to talk to anyone.”

“Now, daughter! And don’t make me say it again.”

Gianna sighed deeply as she moved onto her feet toward her office door. She undid the lock and pulled it open just enough to peer out into the hallway. Standing on the other side, her father gave her that look, his mouth pursed tightly, his eyes narrowed. Sighing again, she stepped aside to let the man enter.

Franco moved to the upholstered sofa and sat down, turning his gaze to stare at his daughter. Neither spoke, Gianna still pouting in anger. As she sat down beside him, she couldn’t help

but marvel at her father. His calm demeanor was soothing, and his dashing good looks made her smile.

The older she and her sister got, the more Gianna thought they were starting to look like their beloved father. His complexion was warm, his loose curls more silver than black. They had his nose and jawline, but neither had inherited his chilling blue eyes. He swore that both his girls resembled their mother, but Gianna didn't necessarily agree, thinking they were a nice mesh of the two. She suddenly thought about her mother.

The beautiful black woman from New York City had been the love of her father's life. A chance meeting while Angela Wilson had been an exchange student in Tuscany had solidified their future. Franco had always believed that they would have grown old together, but his beloved Angela had suffered a brain aneurysm when the twins were twelve years old. The loss had been devastating. Franco had thrown himself into running his family winery and loving his children. He still mourned the loss.

As long as Gianna could remember, she and her sister's antics had been enough to keep him on his toes, and keep his head gray. And despite their love for one another, they spent more time angry with each other than not angry, with Gianna, the elder by ten minutes, always pouting because of something Carina had done.

"So when do you plan to speak to your sister?" her father asked.

Gianna rolled her eyes skyward. "Never! I cannot believe she

would do this to me.”

“It was a little extreme, but her heart was in the right place.”

“This man is coming to visit, and he thinks there’s something between us and there isn’t. I don’t know anything about him.”

Her father nodded. “I imagine he’s going to be disappointed.”

“And his disappointment falls on me. She used my name. That’s unforgiveable.”

“Everything is forgivable.”

“Not this.”

Franco chuckled softly. “Even this. You just need to figure out how to make it right.”

“Why do I need to make it right? I didn’t do anything!”

“That may be true, but just like you pointed out, your sister used your name and now a man who doesn’t deserve it is going to be disappointed.”

Gianna screamed as she shook two fists in the air. “Aargh! I swear I could kill her!” She began to rant in her native Italian.

Franco chuckled softly. “That’s an option,” he said with a nod, “but I’m sure you can come up with something more creative. Something that will make everybody happy.” He tapped a warm palm against her knee.

Gianna shook her head as her father stood back on his feet.

“Carina loves you, Gianna. And you love her. What she did, she did out of love. Don’t you forget that, mia cara.” He leaned down to kiss her cheek.

She nodded slowly, meeting his gaze. “Va bene, papà,” she

said, her expression unmoved.

As the patriarch made his way out of the room, Gianna rose to lock the door behind him. She wasn't yet ready to face her twin, and she knew it would only take a quick minute for Carina to come busting her way inside if she found an opportunity.

She moved back to her desk and the oversize manila folder that rested on its surface. After her admission Carina had given it to Gianna, insisting she read the contents. Gianna still hadn't bothered to break the cover to see just how deep Carina's deception ran.

There was a soft knock at the office door. Carina called her name but Gianna ignored her sister, still staring at the stack of documents. Despite her anger she was intrigued, the curiosity pulling at her. Of all the stunts her sister had pulled over the years, this one had to be her most devious by far. And she was scared to death, fearful that there might be something she liked hidden in those pages that would draw her into her twin sister's madness.

\* \* \*

Outside Gianna's window, a plethora of bright stars and a full moon illuminated the dark sky. She'd been reading for hours, the home on the other side of the office door having gone quiet for the night. Carina had tried more than once to get her attention until she'd finally given up, her tear-filled tone apologizing again and again for what she'd done.

Gianna picked up the very first message from the man named

Donovan, rereading the words she'd already read a few dozen times.

Dear Ms. Martelli,

My name is Donovan Boudreaux. I'm a math professor at Tulane University in New Orleans, Louisiana. I have been a fan of yours since your first book, *Bruised and Battered*. Despite my previous intentions to write and tell you how much I've enjoyed your writing, I've always stopped myself, feeling that you probably would not want to be inundated with more fan mail. But I was so enthralled with your last story, and the character Dr. Hanover, that I could not let the opportunity to tell you what I think pass by. Your artistry is rare and your words are epic. I was captivated from the first sentence to the last. However, I'm curious to know if you intentionally wanted your readers to empathize with the protagonist despite his being so unlikable. Your disdain for this man was obvious, but as I found myself rooting for him I had to question your intent and wondered if the reflection of him as a man mirrored my own projections. Or are they reflections you masterfully and purposely elicited from us? I'd love to discuss him in further detail. I do hope you'll respond.

Yours truly,

Donovan Boudreaux

Carina's response had been brilliant, her sister pulling excerpts from two news interviews she'd done and quoting one of her favorite proverbs.

Mr. Boudreaux,

Thank you for your kind words. Your support of my work is appreciated, and I found your question interesting. I think what you deemed disdain was anything but. Dr. Hanover was one of my favorite characters to write, and I'm pleased that the dynamics of his personality did not get lost in the details of the mystery. Dr. Hanover's character was drawn to invoke a whirlwind of emotion from the reader, that connection both thought-provoking and substantive. To quote one of my favorite Scriptures: "As iron sharpens iron, so one person sharpens another." Proverbs 27:17. Dr. Hanover served his purpose if you were rooting for him, his advice and wisdom intended to sharpen yours. Thank you for reaching out and please do keep in touch.

Happy reading,

Gianna

And Donovan had kept in touch, continuing to write. His brief paragraphs had expanded to lengthier messages, and Carina had kept up nicely, pulling her responses right from Gianna's private writings. Gianna was surprised by how her twin had pieced the responses together, some of the replies so spot-on that she would never have believed Carina had anything at all to do with them if she hadn't known better. It was almost as if her twin had been stowed away in her head, privy to her thoughts and possessing an understanding of her worldview. It was a cosmic connection like no other, and Gianna didn't know if she could have done the same so successfully.

She pulled one of his last messages from the folder, the

literary connection having evolved into something she couldn't even begin to define.

Dearest Gianna,

I marvel at how you're able to articulate what I'm feeling, when I can't even find the words. You are correct. I would be disappointed if I'm not selected for this teaching fellowship. But I'm a man, and my disappointment should not be telling. There are some issues I should not be sensitive about, and because I'm a man that sensitivity should definitely not show. If it does, it would be seen as a sign of weakness. What woman would want a weak man?

Gianna marveled, too. Her sister's crafted reply had been award-worthy.

Donovan, Donovan, Donovan!

Every woman wants a man who owns his feelings! Sensitivity can never be seen as weakness if it walks hand in hand with honesty. Owning our emotions is empowering. Of course you'll be disappointed! You worked hard to qualify for the opportunity. You want it! You are deserving of it! So claim it and think of the day you land in Italy, when you can stand beneath the brightest blue sky and watch the sunset that I watch daily. No woman should want a man who would do any less than that!

And now this stranger, who was connected with Gianna in a way that she found outrageously absurd, was on his way to the Italian coast, expecting that she would be as excited to see him as he was to see her. It was crazy and overwhelming, and despite

every ounce of reservation she was feeling, she was intrigued and curious in the same breath.

### Chapter 3

Donovan stood with his brother Kendrick, the two men waiting in the flight hangar for the preflight maintenance check on their brother Mason's private plane to be completed. Membership having its privileges surely applied as Donovan eyed the luxury aircraft, one of a dozen planes that Mason had at his disposal. The opportunity to fly private planes had been a gift, the gesture humbling, and Donovan couldn't begin to know how he'd ever be able to repay the favor.

"I promise, baby! I will call you the minute I land," Kendrick was saying while rolling his eyes. He exchanged a look with his brother as he continued his conversation. "Vanessa! It's only three days. I'll be back before you know it. I promise!"

There was a pause, Vanessa's raised voice echoing out of the receiver in Kendrick's hand. The man blew a heavy sigh. "I swear, honey! This is not a covert mission. I am not disappearing underground on any assignment. I ride a desk now, remember?"

Donovan smiled. Kendrick settling down with his new wife had come with a host of challenges for his younger brother. The couple had met when the FBI agent had been assigned to Vanessa's protective detail, whisking her away to one of the world's most romantic honeymoon spots to protect their cover. Despite Kendrick's assurances that his secret agent days were over, Vanessa remained unconvinced, crippled by anxiety every

time he disappeared from town.

Kendrick shook his head as he disconnected. “She’s going to kill me.”

Donovan laughed. “You tagging along with me isn’t what she thinks it is, is it?”

Kendrick shook his head. “I have some work to take care of once we drop you off and send Mason’s plane back his way. I’ll be meeting up with my unit in Florence and going on to Greece. I just didn’t give Vanessa all the details of this little venture. I just told her you were scared and wanted me to check things out for you.”

“Why would I be scared?”

His brother shrugged. “Your sisters have her convinced that you’re a little soft. I just rolled with it.”

Donovan’s eyes widened as he stared his brother down.

“What?” Kendrick asked, tossing him a look. “Even you know the girls think you’re a little easy. They’re always afraid someone’s going to take advantage of you because you’re so trusting.”

Donovan shook his head.

Kendrick chuckled. “Hey, it’s no big deal. It gives me an excuse to go do what I need to do.”

“Do I even want to ask?” Donovan said.

“Nope! Because if I tell you I’ll have to shoot you, and we don’t want to ruin your trip.” Kendrick laughed as he changed the subject. “So, are you excited?”

“I’m nervous. Not scared,” he emphasized, “but nervous.”

“About teaching? That’s your thing, bro! Why would you be nervous?”

Donovan met his brother’s curious stare. “I just...well...” he stammered, his eyes skating back and forth as he tried to choose his words carefully. “There’s someone...a woman... She...”

Kendrick eyed him with a raised brow. “Okay, spill it. What aren’t you telling me?”

There was a moment of pause before Donovan answered, lost in his thoughts about Gianna as he reflected on what he knew about the woman.

From her bio, he’d discovered that she held two advanced degrees in science and mathematics. From their communications, he knew that she abhorred traditional intellectual attitudes. So much so that she’d been initially reluctant to communicate with him when she discovered he was a professor.

From reading her novels, he knew that she was proficient at spinning a good thriller and murder mystery. Gianna had a talent for creating male protagonists who appealed to male readers. Despite her literary accolades, she was famously reclusive and purposely avoided the public eye, preferring to spend her time at her family’s Tuscan estate working in their winery.

From their exchanges, he took her to be something of a free spirit who practiced yoga religiously, followed an organic diet and was a self-professed nudist. She was passionate about the

family's Tuscan estate and winery, and had once stated that she would readily give up her pursuit of the next great novel to work the vineyards.

He took a deep breath. "I have a friend there, and I'm nervous about meeting her," he said finally. "We've only communicated by email."

Kendrick grinned, his smile full and bright. "A friend? When did you get a friend? Who's a girl? In Italy?" he questioned, crossing his arms over his chest.

Donovan felt his own grin spread full and wide across his face. "We've been acquainted for a while now."

"And she's Italian?"

Donovan nodded.

"Is she in education, too?"

"She's a writer. Her name is Gianna."

Kendrick paused for a moment. "Gianna Martelli? The author of *Mayhem and Madness*?"

"You know her?"

"I know her writing. Vanessa bought me a copy of her book to read. It's really good."

"She's extremely talented," Donovan stated.

"She's also quite the looker, if I remember correctly," Kendrick noted with a nod.

Donovan shrugged. "She's all right," he said, trying to keep his tone in check.

Kendrick gave him a swift punch to his upper arm. "Look at

you, big brother! I think you're actually blushing! Wait until I tell the family!"

Donovan laughed, lifting his hands up as if in surrender. "You wouldn't. You cannot tell the girls! I would never live it down." He mocked his sisters, imitating Tarah's shrill tone. "Don Juan has a girlfriend? Don Juan is actually speaking to a woman? Let's give Don Juan some advice!"

Kendrick laughed heartily. "You're right. I can't do that to you!"

"Thank you!" He changed the subject. "So have you and Vanessa decided on a honeymoon spot yet?"

As the two men continued their conversation, the flight attendant gestured for their attention. "Gentlemen, we're ready for you to board now," the woman said politely. She gave them both a smile, her gaze shifting between them.

Donovan reached for his carry-on bag and led the way. Minutes later the two men sat comfortably, secured in the plush leather seats as the plane taxied down the runway. He relished the camaraderie he shared with his siblings. He could laugh easily with his brothers, and since it wasn't often that the two were able to spend time together, he was grateful that Kendrick was taking the trip with him, whatever the other man's reasons.

Donovan also didn't mind the teasing from any of his family. He knew that no matter what, he had their support, and the tight bond they all shared was unconditional. But as he thought about Gianna and what might be waiting for him when they finally

landed, he was only willing to share so much about the exquisite woman and what he felt about their unique situation. As he stared out the window, watching as the plane lifted easily into the cloud-filled sky, Donovan took a deep breath and then another, hoping that the fear he felt in his heart didn't show on his face.

\* \* \*

Sophie Mugabe and Alessandra Donati stood at the arrival gate of Pisa International Airport waiting for the American professor to gather his luggage and exit the travel center. Both were excited as they stood with handmade signs, Donovan's name printed in bold black letters across both sides.

Sophie was Donovan's host and the department chair at the University of Siena. She'd been following him since they'd first met three years earlier at the International Conference on Mathematics and Statistics. That year the conference had been held in London, and Donovan had been presenting the theories he'd published in his book, *The Deconstruction of Associative Algebras of Prime Characteristic*.

Sophie had been enamored from day one, her enthusiasm for the professor and his work almost compulsive. Her regular emails had been just shy of stalking, but he'd been exceptionally kind in his responses. The prospect of getting to know him personally through the next year had her excited in a way she would have never imagined. She was fighting to contain the emotion bubbling through her midsection, desperate to maintain her decorum in front of her student.

Alessandra Donati stood with indifference, her gaze sweeping around the airport lobby. Since the girl's freshman year, Professor Mugabe had mistaken her proficiency with mathematics for interest, singling her out for attention that Alessandra had neither needed nor wanted. But the perks of being the teacher's pet outweighed the disadvantages. So despite wanting to be in Venice with her friends who'd driven up for the day, she'd agreed to come with her mentor to welcome some visiting professor from the United States. She sighed heavily as she looked down at the thin gold watch on her wrist.

"He's landed," Sophie said, excitement ringing in her tone. "It should not be too much longer now."

Alessandra forced a smile onto her face. She was about to comment when she caught sight of the college professor, the man eyeing them both curiously. The distinguished black man smiled sweetly, and the gesture took her breath away. Tall, dark and handsome to the nth degree, he actually had her heartbeat fluttering. She threw her teacher a quick look, not missing the other woman's glazed stare. Her professor was likewise moved.

"He's quite handsome, isn't he?" Sophie muttered as she waved excitedly.

Alessandra chuckled beneath her breath. "Oh, yes, he is!" she exclaimed.

"Professor Mugabe! What a surprise!" Donovan said, moving to their side. He leaned in to give his benefactor a warm embrace.

"Dr. Boudreaux, welcome to Italy! I could not let you arrive

and not be here personally to welcome you. I hope that your trip was pleasant?”

Donovan nodded. “The flight was great. My brother flew with me, and it gave us an opportunity to catch up.”

Sophie tossed a look over his shoulder, her eyes skating back and forth. “Your brother is with you?”

Donovan smiled again. “He’s actually headed on to Greece as soon as they refuel his plane.”

Alessandra cleared her throat, stepping forward for attention. Her eyes swept from one to the other, settling on the beautiful black man.

Sophie tapped her hand to her forehead. “Forgive me. Where are my manners! Dr. Boudreaux, allow me to introduce you to one of our prized students. This is Alessandra Donati. Alessandra is a senior mathematics major. She’s quite gifted and looking forward to being in your class this semester.”

Alessandra smiled, her gaze narrowing ever so slightly. “Dr. Boudreaux, it’s very nice to meet you,” she said as she tossed the length of her blond hair over her shoulder. She extended a manicured hand in his direction as she batted her false eyelashes.

“The pleasure is mine, Ms. Donati,” he said, shaking her hand.

“I was very excited to hear that you would be coming to the university. Your paper on Lie algebras was quite engaging.”

Donovan laughed. “It really wasn’t, but I appreciate you saying so.”

The young woman’s smile was bright, the glint in her eye even

brighter.

Sophie interrupted the moment. “I thought we’d get you settled into your cottage, then take you by the school and out for your first meal here in Italy. Unless you have other plans?”

Donovan took a deep breath. “I’d actually love to visit the school, but I’m having dinner with friends. I apologize, I didn’t know...”

She shook her head swiftly, interrupting his comment. “Oh, please, no apology necessary. I just thought I’d make the offer.”

“You have friends here in Tuscany?” Alessandra asked.

Donovan smiled. “Yes, Gianna Martelli and the Martelli family. They have a vineyard in the heart of the Tuscan Maremma, not far from the province of Grosseto.”

Both women shrugged indifferently. “Martelli is a very common name here in Italy,” Sophie said, disappointment shimmering in her tone.

Donovan nodded. “Perhaps we can have breakfast in the morning and you can show me around? I’m very excited to see the campus and get acquainted with the faculty.”

The older woman grinned. “Definitely! That is definitely doable.”

\* \* \*

Gianna was as nervous as her sister, the two women scurrying about trying to ensure everything was perfect before Donovan Boudreaux arrived for dinner. Freshly cut flowers decorated the home, resting atop the tables and counters. All the windows had

been opened, and a warm breeze blew like a whisper through the space. A roasted chicken scented the air, and handmade pasta waited on the wooden countertop to be dropped into lightly salted water.

Franco and Graham exchanged a look as both women came to an abrupt halt, eyeing each other from across the room. A silent conversation passed between them, something unique that only they understood. The brevity of it could have filled a thimble, but in that brief moment there was something magnanimous that happened between them.

Gianna sighed softly, and as if she'd caught the warm breath, Carina folded her hand into a tight fist, pulling it to the spot between her breasts. Both women smiled, and then just as abruptly resumed their frantic fussing about.

Franco broke the silence. "Have you spoken to this man, Gianna?" he asked curiously.

She paused to meet her father's stare. "I sent him a text message. His flight should have landed by now, and once he gets settled he's going to find his way here."

"Did you want me to go get him?" Graham asked.

"No!" both women answered in unison.

"It's just a ride!" Graham replied, bristling slightly.

"You would tell him. I know you," Carina said.

Gianna nodded in agreement. "It has to come from us. From Carina."

"Why from me?" her sister asked, turning to stare at Gianna.

“Because this is all your fault. You’re the one who allowed this lie to snowball.”

“You could have told him already,” Carina said. “You’ve been emailing back and forth for the last two weeks. So you’ve been playing in that snow, too!”

“I could have,” Gianna said matter-of-factly. “But then he might not have come.” She cut an eye in Carina’s direction.

Her sister laughed. “I knew you would like him!”

“I find him interesting. So, yes, I’m curious.”

Carina jumped up and down excitedly. “You really like him!” she exclaimed.

Franco laughed as he rose from his seat, peering out the front window. “That’s a good thing because your new friend just pulled up outside!”

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