



Lela's Choice

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Category: Romance

Description: Missing in Malta—A Risk Worth Taking?

Lela Vella has been a dutiful daughter and aunt for the past decade. But her plan to wean her father and orphaned niece off their dependence on her is scuttled when her niece and boyfriend flee Sydney for Malta. Lela suspects her autocratic father of provoking the flight. Lela's desperate to reach the teenager before her father's ultimatums blow another generation apart.

Widowed, Australian international child-protection lawyer, Hamish McGregor accepts Giovanni Vella's request to remain in Malta after a conference to search for Vella's missing granddaughter. Hamish's formidable reputation is built on putting the needs of the child first. He doubled down on his work after the revenge murder of his pregnant wife by a client's husband, vowing never to get close enough to another woman for her to be a target.

Lela doesn't expect her father's henchman to beat her to Malta. Hamish doesn't expect the girl's doting aunt to see him as an enemy.

Reluctant partners, they navigate false leads and unexpected attraction. Can Lela balance her family's demands with her love for Hamish? Can Hamish accept living life is all about taking risks?

Total Pages (Source): 89

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Chapter One

Hamish MacGregor gave a silent whistle. The images he'd seen of Carmen Vella hadn't done her justice: professional websites, her niece's social feed—Carmen was often in the background. Good enough for recognition, although the unskilled snap-and-upload photography was exposed the moment Hamish spotted the flesh-and-blood woman through the customs gates at Luqa, Malta International Airport.

Her hair matched the Insta pics, thick and blue-black, while the gamin cut framed distinctive facial features. Her sculpted cheekbones were balanced by a softly rounded chin, a slightly too-wide mouth, and a straight nose. From close study, he knew her eyes were ebony, not black—the subtle browns and greens had held his attention longer than strictly necessary for identification purposes.

Every single image had missed the energy emanating in waves from the woman walking towards him. He'd want her passion on his side in a fight. Maybe that explained why her father had despatched her from Australia rather than come himself.

She was also gorgeous—impossible to ignore. Her purposeful stride emphasised the vitality contained in her compact body. Her skin tone was a warm olive, a reminder of her family's Mediterranean origins. She wore a loose tomato-red sweater and tailored, straight, dark trousers atop short leather boots, but the sense of lush curves had him sucking in a breath.

The air around her snapped with electricity.

Ms. Carmen Vella was making a dramatic entrance, if you equated drama with stealing one's breath. Her head lifted to scan her surroundings, and her rich, dark gaze collided with his.

Desire was immediate—the kind he hadn't experienced since he was an adolescent, when hormones regularly swamped more cerebral considerations. Any considerations, if I'm honest.

His reaction rocked him. Mindless lust was a relic of his adolescence, along with his drum kit. He valued women, loved his mother and sisters and respected the women who worked for him. It took more than an attractive package to trigger his libido.

Why Carmen Vella?

The kicker was the secrets clouding her eyes in those images he'd studied. They'd stuck in his mind. He understood defencelessness. His success as a domestic violence and child protection advocate depended on it. This woman wasn't defenceless, but the disconnect between the vulnerability in her eyes in the photos and the self-possession in every line of the elegant Ms. Vella tugged at him. She cleared the final exit, her journey from Sydney, Australia, to Valletta, Malta, complete.

"Carmen Vella?" He closed the last few metres between them.

Her head turned, her body stilled, her expression unreadable. "You work for my father?"

Question or accusation? He held his palms up in a gesture of goodwill. "I work for myself. I was in Malta on other business, but I've agreed to stay a few days longer to assist you and your family search for your niece."

"I haven't asked for your assistance." Her voice was deep and low, the soft cadence

at odds with the wariness he read in her stare. He hadn't expected suspicion.

"Your father ..." he started.

"I'm here independently of my father." She placed careful emphasis on each word.

"Carm—I mean, Ms. Vella."

"Only my father calls me Carmen."

"Miranda, we're blocking the exit." There was a time when saying Carmen instantly sparked the response Miranda—at least in his house, where his grandfather had been hooked on old movies. "Let's get out of everyone's way." He raised his voice enough to explain to a casual onlooker why he'd reached for her suitcase.

"Miranda!" She held tightly to her bag. Her scent, a little peppery, was proving a more reliable clue to the woman than the short bio he'd uncovered in his limited research. "Seriously? CarmenMiranda? A 1940s Hollywood star. What century are you from?"

"Give me an alternative."

"Who are you?" she demanded. He was close enough to be singed by the sparks flying off her.

"Hamish MacGregor. I'm an Australian lawyer, specialising in the illegal movement of minors across international borders." He extracted his passport from his jacket pocket and passed it to her. "As I said, I'm in Malta on other business and agreed to provide some assistance."

"To Papa?" She scanned his passport, a slight tremble in her hand.

“Aren’t you both pursuing the same objective?”

“I’m not sure of his objective.”

Hamish was also close enough to glimpse the weariness he’d missed at first glance. The turbulence in her beautiful eyes testified to an internal battle. He was impressed when self-control trumped tiredness and anxiety about her missing niece.

“Sorry, I wasn’t expecting Papa to contact me so soon.”

“But you were expecting contact.” Hamish’s instructions from Sydney had been explicit.

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“Giovanni Vella is my father. I love him. We share a big house with my niece and Papa’s sister. There’s always contact.” She dimpled through her exhaustion, her smile devastating in its charm. Her response was a succinct summary but not quite the truth. Giovanni Vella might be the devil or a saint for all the inflection in her voice, and Hamish was no clearer on whether she’d cooperate in his search. “Tell me what Papa’s asked you to do.”

“Apart from working with you?” he asked. A frown marred her smooth brow, giving Hamish a clue. “You really weren’t expecting me? Here? Now?”

“Not so soon. But here you are.”

“How about I buy you a coffee, talk about what we each expected?” Hamish binned all the assumptions he’d made so far.

She nodded.

He took charge of her suitcase and headed out of the stream of people towards a nearby café.

Thera-ta-tatof her heels hitting the marble tiles of the concourse close behind beat out a message clearer than Morse code, even before she spoke. “I’m agreeing to a conversation. That’s all.”

* * *

LELA FOLLOWED HIM, her reactions slowed more by the memory of the searing

heat in his jade green eyes when they'd first met hers than by jet lag. A heat fierce enough to spark flames. Relaxing shoulder and neck muscles bunched tight by his shocking scrutiny required conscious effort. She'd never experienced such raw need in a gaze, and the speed with which he'd dropped his ridiculously long lashes to hide his thoughts told her his reaction disturbed him as much as her.

She could almost believe she'd imagined it. An intensity at odds with the firm, dry touch of his hand when he'd taken charge of her luggage. She still hadn't explained her name—CarmenLelaVella—but she'd used Lela since she was eleven years old. Calling her Carmen made him her father's man. His joke about Carmen Miranda—an actress who'd died decades ago—made him sound more boomer than the mid-thirties he looked. Would he have the slightest clue how to relate to teenage runaways?

Sophie's run away.

Approximately two and a half days, fifty-seven hours ago—Lela had lost track of minutes—, her motherless niece had run from their home in Sydney to Malta. Without warning. Except Papa had checked Sophie's bank statement and discovered the flight. Papa was within his rights as Sophie's guardian, but how had he known to look on the very day Sophie disappeared? He'd checked on Sophie's boyfriend's whereabouts too.

Finding Hamish MacGregor waiting added to Lela's sense of being disconnected from reality.

She'd taken the first available flight out of Sydney. On the first leg of the journey, she'd focused on actions to keep the fear at bay, making lists of everything she needed to do. Then she'd used the brief stopover to call in favours and get the name of an agency that might help her in Malta.

With her plans made, the final leg had been filled with apologetic emails to her office

and fruitless what-ifs about why Sophie hadn't confided in her, why Sophie had run away with a boyfriend of a few months, leaving no explanation. Pregnant? Lela's heart simply stopped whenever her mind strayed in that direction.

Papa had said he'd hire investigators. Lela had asked him to wait, so she hadn't anticipated this booby trap.

Hamish MacGregor—Why does your name seem familiar?

She'd pleaded for forty-eight hours to manage her own search. A significant number considering Sophie had disappeared for forty-eight hours nearly six years ago. Papa's investigator then had had few scruples and zero understanding of the sensitivities of an eleven-year-old girl.

But like then, Papa wasn't giving her a moment alone in Malta. Why? Another question to add to her list.

Lela had one priority: find her niece and discover why she'd run.

Her father's emissary placed coffees and a few sachets of sugar on the table. "I thought you'd be gone." His presence was a brutal setback, but it didn't excuse her behaving like a bad-tempered shrew. While she mistrusted his intent, it didn't pay to alienate him. He might even be useful to her.

Just not tonight.

"I said I'd wait." Keeping her word was a non-negotiable legacy from her mother, earning her both friends and enemies. "Thank you." She picked up the cup and took a sip. A quick coffee, a few questions, then a blessed escape to her hotel. "That helps." Silence, a comfortable bed, with a few hours sleep, if she was lucky, and she'd face whatever MacGregor and Papa had to throw at her.

“How long have you been on the move?” He ripped the top of a sugar sachet open and upended it into his coffee.

“About thirty hours with stopovers. The deviation to Cyprus was a surprise.”

He considered her, slowly stirring his coffee, then apparently came to a decision. “Why don’t you let me take you to the hotel, and we can talk after you’ve had a few hours’ rest?” He had to be joking.

“I’m jet-lagged, not stupid. I know damn all about you. I don’t know exactly what you’re doing here, where your hotel is, and to be perfectly frank, now that the caffeine is helping me think a little more clearly, I don’t want to know.” She started to rise. “Thanks for the coffee.”

“I’ve told you my name. The work I do.”

“Illegal movement of minors across borders?”

“That’s one of my areas of expertise.” His composure added to her unease, making her pause in the act of reaching for her bag. “Google me, if you want details.”

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“I will.” Lela tried to disguise her anxiety with the sharp response. What did Papa tell you? What isn’t Papa telling me?

Dog-tired, she couldn’t recall the elusive memory hearing his name triggered. Giovanni Vella’s narrow-minded view of the proper role and place of women in his family coupled with his wealth and power were an unhealthy mix. Using his influence to get his way was commonplace. Unleashing a fancy lawyer before they had any facts hit a new low, tantamount to Papa declaring his intention to impose his will on her and Sophie.

“I’ve been employed to find Sophia Vella.”

“Sophie, her name is Sophie.” The name Lela’s sister, Mari, had listed on her daughter’s birth certificate. Damn Papa’s pig-headedness.

Hamish inclined his head, acknowledging the correction. “Why are you here?”

“Have you found her?” she asked, with the beginnings of relief. Maybe that’s why MacGregor was at the airport?

“Not yet. I accepted the job late this afternoon.”

“Then we’re starting from the same place.” She summoned a polite smile. She couldn’t afford to trust him until she understood why Sophie had taken off, along with Papa’s role in her departure. Last week Lela had refused to support Sophie’s wish to go to a house party with her boyfriend. It wasn’t their first disagreement about boundaries, and Sophie had seemed to accept Lela’s decision.

“I’ve worked in Malta before. I have extensive contacts who’ll find her quickly and without fuss.”

“What sort of contacts?” Lela had her own, but if he knew people who’d make the search easier, she’d be a fool to ignore them ... and him.

“An experienced investigator I’ve used in the past.” His implied leadership role was a forceful reminder he was her father’s creature.

“What’ she—I’m assuming your contact is a he—doing for you?”

“My investigator is a man, Ms. Vella.” He acknowledged her snap of frustration. “Although I don’t see the relevance of his gender. You’re welcome to join me tomorrow morning when I brief him.”

“I don’t have a problem with men, Mr. MacGregor. I’ve noticed a lot of them have a particular world view, approach problems in particular ways.” Sniping at Papa’s hired help was uncharted territory for Lela, empirical evidence that sleep deprivation muddled your reasoning.

“That sounds like an insult,” he quipped.

“I find a diversity of views delivers better results.” How did I allow myself to be drawn into this ridiculous conversation?

“Letting prejudice or ego overrule common sense won’t find your niece.”

Damn him for being right.

“You know nothing about me.”

“Same goes.” The challenge in his level voice slowed her down.

Papa favoured the quick hit of adrenalin that came from winning a fight, rather than taking the time to compromise. She’d vowed to be different, a vow lost in the jet stream, to be replaced by anxiety and exhaustion. Right now, a kindergartener stood a better chance of winning a debate with this enigmatic stranger than she did. Making decisions when her brain wasn’t functioning would only make matters worse.

“I’ll think about your offer to meet your investigator.” Just go away now.

“Your father has reserved a room for you at the Grand Excelsior Hotel for a week.”

Lela sank back onto the chair. Her last-minute search for hotels had thrown up the Grand Excelsior. Decadent luxury and 180-degree water views were beyond the budget of teenage runaways, so Lela hadn’t considered the hotel useful in her search for Sophie and her boyfriend. Now Papa had dealt it in.

Dealt them and MacGregor in.

“Your hotel?”

“I use it when I’m here,” he agreed.

Papa’s obsession with control would dictate that she be under the eye of his hatchet man. Or, another possibility popped into her head, and she knew she’d guessed right. Papa expected her to dutifully fall in with his plans, to accept his assessment of his granddaughter’s best interest and to help the lawyer.

Not this time.

There were no answers to be found in the preposterous shamrock green of

MacGregor's bland gaze. The colour alone bewitched, the intelligence and patience adding to his power. Men werenotsupposed to have green eyes, not unless they came from Iceland. And she was in a bad way when a trivial fact could pop into her mind, while she struggled to form whole sentences.

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“International lawyers and five-star hotels. He is pulling out all stops,” she said.

“It must be love.” He raised an eyebrow, seeking information.

“Or one definition of it.”

“A bribe so you’ll work with me?” He frowned as if considering the idea.

It wouldn’t pay to underestimate the hired help’s perceptiveness.

Hamish McGregor messed with her mind. His red-clay hair and few errant freckles were a touch too ordinary to merit the term handsome. His rock-hard determined jaw gave him a rugged look, and she’d guess persistence rather than stubbornness provided its strength. The kink in his nose suggested he’d been on the losing end of a fight at some point in his career, whereas his broad shoulders and easy carriage made the statement he could defend himself. Not cocky—self-assured—marking another change from Papa’s usual selection of goons.

“Why would Papa need to bribe me?” Lela pretended to be puzzled. Emotional blackmail was Papa’s preferred strategy.

His mouth curved into a warm smile, softening the angles of his face. His eyes crinkled with humour at her question, fascinating lines fanning out from the corners to distract her. Such unusual eyes, with impossibly long lashes, which he used more effectively than a geisha’s fan to signal advance and retreat, to tempt sense and sensibility.

His smile, those eyes, his sheer persistence were stuck on a loop in her head.

“Give me time,” he said, “and I’ll work that out. I’d like to make a move. Do you want a lift?”

“You’re like one of those all-terrain vehicles, relentlessly rolling over mountains and down ravines.” Lela picked up her cup, remembered it was empty, and set it down. “I need a minute to think.”

“While you’re a pushover,” he muttered, lifting his gaze to the roof. “Take all the time you need.”

MacGregor’s confidence that he’d get his way was a minor irritation. Papa’s reaction if she accepted his hospitality was the larger consideration. The money she’d save by staying at Papa’s expense, rather than her own, was enough to pay for a youth worker at the foundation she part-funded for a week. Papa knows how to target his incentives.

Bankrolling her was also a sign he’d pit his resources against Lela’s. No contest there; his resources were greater, and she didn’t need his offer to bankroll her to understand the risks. Accepting the offer of accommodation wasn’t surrender, although Papa might read it as that, giving her a short-term advantage. With Papa, you took any advantage on offer.

“Stalemate,” she murmured, more to herself than the man opposite. “I’ll accept your offer of a lift after all, Mr. MacGregor.”

How long would it take Papa, or his henchman, to figure out that accepting lavish accommodation was, at heart, her way of saying money wouldn’t influence her decisions or determine Sophie’s future?

* * *

“WHAT CHANGED YOUR MIND, Miranda?” Hamish muttered under his breath.

Grabbing the handle of her suitcase, he grinned at the name that had popped into his head when she’d rebuffed his overtures.

After directing her towards the car park, Hamish was content to follow his Miranda, a name he’d keep until she gave him an alternative. His grin widened recalling her reaction. The original actress held her place in the Hollywood pantheon because of her crazy headgear. But there were similarities between the Brazilian bombshell and the mysterious woman cutting a path ahead of him, not least the determination evident in her straight shoulders and the follow-me sway of a nicely curved butt.

Hamish had taken the chance she’d walk while his back was turned at the café. He’d glanced over his shoulder when he joined the coffee queue. She’d been sitting motionless, her face propped on one hand, shoulders slightly hunched forward. Even motionless, with her face the dead spit of the social media images, he’d known they and the pose were wrong. Her energy was like a slow throb, a bass rhythm that gave life meaning.

“I said I’d stay.” A simple truth. The answer and the look accompanying it, told him more about Ms.—Don’t-Call-Me-Carmen—Vella than the quick search he’d done on her. The lady’s word was her bond. Her smile had been wry when he’d offered to delay their conversation, but her heroic effort to push back fatigue had gained his sympathy, scuttling his intention to push for immediate explanations.

“Stalemate.” Crossing the terminal, the contradiction of her cat-that-got-the-cream expression and her last words gnawed at him. If the lady played chess, stalemate marked a draw, whereas her complacent smile had beamed a victory.

She was a mass of contradictions. Was the hotel room a bribe, and why would she need an inducement? He hadn’t missed the strain in her eyes when she’d asked if

he'd found her niece. Worried as hell, yet she'd procrastinated about accepting help from him. Calculation, wariness, her eyes reflecting light and dark in line with her thoughts so that by the time she'd agreed to accompany him, they'd reminded him of the colour of burnt toast.

Who'd have guessed burnt toast could be such an appealing colour?

“Stalemate.” She'd been speaking to herself more than to him. Hamish could work with a draw, a compromise between Giovanni Vella and his daughter, if it put Sophie—not Sophia—first.

Papa Vella had talked about punishment and retribution, and the evidence he'd laid before Hamish was compelling enough for him to take the job, even when commitments were backing up in Australia. Sophie was underage, in an unfamiliar country, and from the medical reports he'd seen, extremely vulnerable.

“It'll take about twenty minutes,” he said, hefting her suitcase into the boot of his rental car.

“I can just wait that long for a shower.” Her husky sigh rolled over him, triggering a needy thrum through his blood, while an unbidden image of her curvaceous body stretching under hot spray jets swam into his mind.

When the disembodied voice of his phone's satellite navigation system told him to go left, not right, he joined the traffic exiting the airport and knew real gratitude. The subtle perfume of his passenger gave substance to his fantasy, scrambling any sense of direction he might have had.

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“I’ve heard it’s easy to get lost in Malta,” she spoke over the traffic directions.

“Surprisingly easy. I gave myself a day on a previous visit when I turned it off and got lost repeatedly on back roads.”

“No sense of adventure tonight?”

“Meeting you will have to do.” He tried for a mocking tone and was afraid he’d just made a confession.

Joining the main highway for the fastest route into the old city centre, he forced his mind to concentrate on the heavy traffic and ignore the crawling need in his gut sparked by her throaty tones.

* * *

LELA SURRENDERED TO the dark comfort of the bucket seat. Briefly she closed her eyes, before gazing out the window, trying to get a sense of the island, a sense of a city steeped in history. Hot, parched, and that was a surprise to someone who came from one of the driest and hottest continents on earth.

“Have you been to Malta before?”

“Never.” Except for a few brief business trips to Asia, Lela hadn’t been out of Australia in nearly a decade.

“Even with the family connections?”

“My parents moved to Australia shortly after their marriage. We have no close family here.” It was easier to stare out the window; she really was too tired to think. The muddle of exhaustion was her best explanation for her reaction to the man beside her. Years spent controlling her impulses, training herself to think of consequences before action, yet one look at him had shaken her more than she would have believed possible.

Fatigue, an abnormal situation, bone-crushing worry ... and fatigue.

Hamish MacGregor was just a man.

She’d trained herself to deal with men.

A pity the confined space in the car enhanced the subtle scent of his aftershave, its spiciness tugging at her senses—its base note absurdly reassuring.

“How was the flight?”

“Long.”

“You must have moved to be here so fast.”

She gave him an A for perseverance. “The first available flight.”

He nodded. “A lot of time to think.”

“Is there a point to this conversation?” Lela made the mistake of meeting his gaze. Deep pools, deep enough to find your soul. Fatigue, she recited her mantra, blaming it for her uncharacteristic flight of fancy.

“People chasing runaways often focus on a single fear, the catalyst for the flight.

What's your theory?"

Are you digging for information or starting from a pre-determined position?

"What did Papa suggest?" Some decent sleep would help her navigate through the minefield Hamish was laying out for her. Instead, she was fumbling, stalling. She'd barely admitted the truth to herself and wouldn't share it with a stranger. Was Sophie pregnant? Lela couldn't imagine any other reason for her niece's flight. If she wasn't, what had spooked Sophie enough to run?

Whatever it was, Sophie didn't trust me enough to tell me.

"Duress." He captured her instant attention.

"Papa told you she was pressured into leaving Australia?" Lela recalled the last time she'd seen her niece. The morning after a dinner Lela had hosted at home for a few of Papa's business associates. Sophie had behaved like a spoilt child resentful at having to be present at the dinner, but Lela hadn't seen fear. "Did he speak to her? Fight with her?"

Hamish shrugged. "No comment."

"You don't know, do you?"

"I know I've agreed to find Sophie Vella, discover the circumstances of her journey, if she's afraid—"

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“She wasn’t afraid.” Can I say that with any certainty now? Last week Lela would have sworn Sophie’s running away days were over, that her niece would take the necessary steps to prevent pregnancy and disease.

“If she’s afraid,” he repeated with patient deliberation. “If Sophie has control over her own movements and is free to come and go at will. If necessary, to offer her my protection and a flight home.”

“Control over her movements?” Lela swivelled in her seatbelt, while he kept his focus steadily on the road ahead. “You’re making it sound like a kidnapping.”

“You’re sure it isn’t?”

“She believes she’s in love, followed her boyfriend home.” Lela opted for a part truth, but was powerless to stop the anxious speculation he’d triggered. Duress raised the stakes. Duress suggested a crime had been committed. Why did you plant that seed, Papa?

“An offer of protection and a flight home might be attractive now she’s had a few days to think.”

“Illalu,” she whispered her Mama’s gentle Malti curse—oh my god. “Papa doesn’t make offers, he issues ultimatums.” Fatigue—how else do I explain my blunt, unprecedented character assassination of Papa to a virtual stranger?

“We’re looking for a young woman, who either decided she had no alternative except to run away or was pressured. Time is of the essence. I’m not interested in family

squabbles between you and your father when a vulnerable young woman's well-being is at stake."

The disdain in his voice stunned her, stung her so she wanted to pour out the story of her father's treatment of Sophie's mother. Her family—Lela—carried deep emotional scars from Papa's decision to exile and ultimately abandon her older sister, Mari, more than eighteen years ago. Her beautiful sister had been sixteen when she became pregnant, seventeen when she died, leaving behind her six-month-old daughter. By comparison, Sophie was an innocent. Mari's options had been stolen from her. Lela wouldn't allow Sophie to be bullied or manipulated into a similar situation.

Not a story she usually shared.

MacGregor's disdain was a small price for the privacy she held so dear.

"Work with me," he urged. "I'm a stranger. You're the emotional hook she'll recognise, trust. She'll respond to you."

"I won't be used that way." And Sophie didn't trust me. Not when it mattered. "And just to clear up any potential misunderstanding ... Sophie didn't confide in me. I'm not sure my superior claim to her trust holds anymore." Sophie's distrust was a permanent ache, but it didn't change Lela's determination to put her niece's needs first.

"You won't even try to be a bridge between Sophie and your family, your father?"

Lela gasped, a semi-hysterical, half gurgle born of thirty agonising hours in a pressurised capsule crossing the earth when she'd been prey to nameless fears and helpless to act. Her fingers itched to smack her relentless prosecutor.

At ten years of age, wretchedly afraid and alone at her sister's deathbed, Lela had

been determined her niece wouldn't be exiled from the family as Mari had been. Without fully understanding, Lela had demanded her father take her and the baby home. The hospital social worker had stood behind her and made regular visits during those first few years, but the determination to fight had been Lela's.

Using instinct, she'd rebuilt her family, been the bridge, peacemaker, negotiator and loyal foot soldier. She'd rarely fought her father's edicts, had picked the issues where she wouldn't bend.

Nothing was more important to her than her family.

At twenty-eight, Lela had a clearer understanding of what was at stake, more power to influence the outcome, and knew the lines between right and wrong weren't always straight. Dragging Sophie home might not be the best way to hold Lela's family together.

No hired henchman could browbeat her, or prevent her from giving her niece space to choose her own future. Especially not an eccentric who christened her for an actor wearing a tutti-frutti hat and who was wearing a watch with a tiny crawling spider for a second hand.

"At the risk of repetition, MacGregor, you don't know me."

* * *

HAMISH LEFT THE CAR to valet parking and her luggage to one of the bellhops at the porticoed entrance to the hotel. Trailing her to reception, he arrived in time to hear the polished attendant's query.

"We have a booking for Carmen Vella."

“My name’s CarmenLelaVella.” His Miranda proffered a smile inviting girlish co-conspiracy. “Papa made the booking. I use Lela—he forgets.” She slid an open passport and some sort of official name tag across the desk. “I use Lela Vella.”

Hamish watched the receptionist check her documents, won over by the warmth of Lela’s smile and her confiding tone, before returning the document.

“Welcome to the Excelsior, Ms. Vella. Your room is ready.”

Why the hell couldn’t you just tell me you call yourself Lela?

Hamish had calculated that having her under the same roof for the night gave him an advantage. For a start, he’d know where to find her. Now, he wasn’t so sure.

He planned to find Sophie, with or without Lela Vella’s cooperation, but Lela’s wariness raised a whole slew of new questions about the case.

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She was right; Hamish didn't know her. His prodding about her role as go-between had infuriated her. Not enough to lose some of that self-control and blast him with the turbulent thoughts revealed by her white-knuckled grip on her seat. While she might love her father, she was having a hard time trusting him—and, by association, Hamish.

Hamish had expected her to say, "I'll do all I can to help you." Lela's speedy arrival and her genuine concern were evidence she loved her niece. She should have welcomed Hamish with open arms. After all, he'd built his reputation on lining up behind the interests of the child.

Carmen Lela Vella had become a puzzle he needed to solve to get her niece home.

Chapter Two

Lela exited the nondescript building housing the youth-at-risk charity. The director had been generous, giving Lela an hour of her time, allowing Lela to talk through her fears and second guesses. Lela had been reassured by the warmth and matter-of-fact competence she'd discovered there. The director's agreement to help find Sophie and her boyfriend, Peter, eased the tight bands of anxiety around Lela's chest, allowing her to breathe more easily. Her phone rang.

"Where are you?"

"Good morning to you, too," she replied. Mr. McGregor sounded pissed off. "Melita Street." She squinted up at the plaque on the wall, moving further away from the discreet sign marking the charity's entrance as she spoke.

“And the cross street?”

“Merchants Street.”

“You’re not far away. Stay there, and I’ll collect you in a few minutes.” His request had more demand than invitation in it.

“Hold on, MacGregor. How did you get my number?”

“Your father.” He gave the answer she expected, and she’d talk to Papa about giving out her number without checking with her—again. “I can see you,” he said.

Lela pivoted, then spotted the athletic figure approaching from the south. Checking over her shoulder, she made sure she had enough distance between herself and the charity’s entrance, so that Hamish wouldn’t connect her to the building.

He wore another suit with a pale blue shirt, the image of ultra-conservatism undone by his tie. Silk, she guessed, with an intricate geometric design in rainbow colours. Her merchant banker colleagues would interpret it as a subtle yet flagrant gesture of radicalism. Hamish’s new flourish was as unconventional as the spider watch fastened to his wrist. Maybe his fondness for old movies was the red herring?

She’d opted for informality, softening straight black trousers with a casual sky-blue jersey shirt. Her choice was designed to neither offend nor intimidate the staff of the charity she hoped would help her.

When he stopped beside her, her nostrils twitched. Damn, he was wearing the same scent. “Are you following me?”

“Looking for you. I didn’t think you’d be up this early.”

“No time to waste.” She glanced down to where he’d linked his arm with hers and was steering her in a southerly direction. “Where are you taking me?”

“We’re going to Upper Barakka Gardens, a popular tourist destination and the closest spot to sit and chat.”

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“I’ve already been, thanks.” She planted her feet.

“You were up early. What did you think of the saluting battery? They still fire the noonday gun as they have for centuries. The guns used to welcome dignitaries, but were also the official timekeeper.”

“Odd signage. ‘The noonday gun will be fired at midday today.’” She contemplated an elbow to his ribs.

“Makes you wonder what time they fire it on other days.” He flashed his beguiling grin—all generous mouth and self-deprecation, and she found herself falling into step beside him. “Are you a student of language?”

“It struck me as absurd.”

“Me, too. The Gardens are a neutral spot to sit and discuss what we’re doing next.” He refused to be ruffled.

“I don’t like being manoeuvred, MacGregor,” Lela muttered, irritated that his subtle cologne held its potency.

Six hours’ sleep had sharpened all Lela’s faculties. The time-zone fuzziness slowing her reaction time the evening before was gone. Jetlag still dogged her heels, and would probably knock her out later, but she’d made a good start on finding Sophie. The charity she’d just left dealt with youth in trouble and opened early. Lela had picked up the email confirming her appointment before she’d gone to bed and had relayed her thanks to her team in Sydney.

“I’ll bear that in mind. But for now ...” He gestured to a vacant bench.

Unfazed, he waited for her to sit before joining her. For a dozen heartbeats, Lela stared over the Grand Harbour and out to sea. With the sun glinting off the water and the cacophony of colours jostling for attention, Lela let herself sink into the moment and match more landmarks to the names she’d read on the complimentary map she’d found in her room.

“It’s stunning,” she blurted, the beauty spread out below them momentarily easing out the bumps in their uneasy relationship. “I don’t know what I expected, but this dazzles the eyes. The brightness of the colours is a sensory feast.”

* * *

LIKE YOU, Hamish thought. Images of her since he’d first met her danced through his mind. She’d been a bit rumpled and sexy stepping off the plane, haughty and dismissive when he’d accosted her, wary then decisive as she’d sifted his arguments, charming to the hotel staff, and deliciously grumpy when he’d escorted her to her room, as if disarmed by his simple courtesy. She reminded him of a hedgehog puffing its displeasure and rolling into a ball to repel invaders with its quills. Picturing those serious eyes from the original headshots, he decided the hedgehog analogy worked—a casual observer could easily interpret her natural defences as lethal attack.

How many people have you scared off, Lela?

“Yeah. It’s impossible to resist a new city or country. So many sights and sounds and places to discover; so many corners to turn and be delighted by.” He remembered she’d never been to Malta before and allowed himself to sit in the moment.

“You’re right.” She sighed. “But it’s not why I’m here.”

“I rang your room, thought you might join me for breakfast,” he said.

“I had an early coffee.”

“And have been sightseeing since?”

“Something like that.” She was hiding something and not very good at deception.

“Did you arrive in Valletta with no place to stay?” The question had puzzled Hamish during the early hours of the morning, when he’d replayed their conversation at the airport. If she’d planned an independent search, she’d have arranged for accommodation, maybe more.

“I had a booking at Kampnar City Living. I rang and cancelled after you walked me to my door.” She’d done her hedgehog thing at the reception desk—sotto voce—pointing out caustically that she should be safe crossing a lobby and ascending a few floors in an elevator in a five-star hotel with a porter.

“I didn’t think you had the energy left to see straight.” He’d liked seeing her ruffled, given her uncommon capacity to unsettle him.

She looked down her nose at him. “My reactions were more zombie-like than functioning human being.”

“You said it.” He grinned. “Yet you took the time to ring a lodge frequented more by backpackers than merchant bankers to explain you wouldn’t be arriving.”

“And your point?” She returned her gaze to the view, still wary of him.

“A nice gesture.”

“Don’t draw too many conclusions from one act of politeness, MacGregor. Plus, cancelling at that point meant I lost only one night’s accommodation costs.”

“I’m collecting impressions at this stage.” He was trying to make sense of her relationship with her father and the implications for his search. “Kampnar’s has a very different style to the Grand Excelsior.”

“It’s the kind of place to pick up news of Sophie.”

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“Have you spoken to your father?”

“I sent Papa a message saying we’d met and thanking him for booking the hotel.”

“No phone call? No inquiry about me?” he asked. “Just a polite acknowledgement of arrival.”

“Nothing wrong with politeness.”

“Unless you use it as a shield.” He tried a different approach. “Why did you accept his offer of accommodation?”

Her lips curved in amusement. “It came with free chauffeur service.”

“Hardly a consideration for a freewheeling financier making obscene amounts of money.” He was starting to enjoy the game, collecting clues to who she was in her monosyllables, half-answers, and deliberate attempts at deflection.

“Merchant banker, MacGregor, and I’m highly disciplined. First lesson in making money—parsimony allows you to keep it.” She was telling a bald-faced lie.

“Yet you flew first class.”

“The only ticket available at short notice.” She tucked some hair behind her ear, giving him a view of her strong profile.

“Pragmatic when you have to be.”

She swung back to face him. “How is this relevant to finding Sophie?”

“You’re relevant. I thought you were part of the solution. Now I’m wondering if you’re part of the problem. A merchant banker with your polished mix of graciousness and greed ...”

Her eyes flashed obsidian. “You’ve worked me out. Now can we move on?”

Incendiary is what you are. He studied her absolute stillness, marvelling anew at the self-control he’d first witnessed last night. Aside from the flashing eyes there’d been no reaction to his deliberate insult.

A very private person, his Miranda, adept at distraction. Her simmering sensuality was harder to ignore, especially as she seemed unaware of it. A dimple that fascinated, even when she didn’t smile. Not a Brazilian movie star, more like Shakespeare’s Miranda, beautiful and fearless.

“Another impression—you strongly disagree with your father about how to respond to your niece’s disappearance.”

“We’re exploring different theories.” She stared at the horizon. “It’s reasonable to make my own inquiries.”

“It’s reasonable to pool information if you’ve made inquiries.” His impression last night, once he’d tucked away the unexpected attraction, was of a passionate, decisive young woman, who’d dropped everything to search for her niece. Her job, if nothing else, told him she possessed a quick brain capable of weighing all the angles.

The wind caught her hair, tumbling it around her face. She caught it with one hand, pushing it back. “Will interrogating me help find Sophie?”

“I’m trying to understand the brief.”

“Last night you said there’s an investigator you use here in Malta.”

“Let’s finish with my impressions first. You live with your father, an aunt and your niece. No public ructions reported—one big happy family.”

“Family is important, especially in Maltese culture.” She made it a statement of fact.

“Agreed. Doesn’t family loyalty trump any petty theoretical dispute you have with your father?”

“My petty dispute is my business,” she said carefully.

“Not for long, if it interferes with my job. Is your father Sophie’s legal guardian?”

Still gazing out to sea, she let the silence lengthen. When her answer came, the wind snatched at it, tossing it high in the air as if it was worthless. “Yes.”

“What’s your role?”

“As Papa said, Sophie and I have always been close—sounding board, guide, mentor, confidant—until recently.”

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“Your father keeps his family close. Both your brothers and their wives work in the business.” He catalogued the facts he’d unearthed. “Not you?”

“I wanted to find my own way.”

And slip under the radar. Her presence, the little there was, on social media was professional, not social, except for her rare appearances in her niece’s feed. Little Miss Slip-Under-the-Radar intrigued him in a way the banker never could. His instincts insisted she was key to bringing Sophie home.

“Your skills would be an asset to Vella Enterprises.”

“A few moments ago you described me as greedy. Now I’m skilful.” She flashed her full-wattage smile at him, one that coaxed a response from him. “What do you want from me, MacGregor?”

“Your cooperation would make my job a whole lot easier.”

“What’s the name of your investigator?” Her smile lingered, but now her attention was focused on his answer.

“Martin Azzopardi.”

She recognised the name. Hamish wasn’t sure how he knew, but she’d heard the name before. Her father didn’t know it, and there wasn’t anything in the public domain broadcasting Marty’s special skills.

* * *

HAMISH BEAUREGARD MACGREGOR was suspect by association. However, Lela had done her research before she'd left the hotel this morning and chased down her elusive memory through the internet. The website listed his middle name—Beauregard. It meant respected or highly regarded. Had his parents planned his trajectory at his birth? MacGregor was a prominent player in international law, working to ensure that children couldn't be spirited across borders and hidden from family members after marriage and relationship breakups.

The director of the youth charity Lela had spoken to before meeting Hamish this morning had promised to send out word through their contacts on the street to see if anyone had news of an Australian girl travelling with a Maltese boyfriend.

“Peter Debrincat,” Lela had given Sophie's boyfriend's name.

The director's eyebrows had risen, and she'd hesitated. “Debrincat is a common surname, but one branch carries a lot of power in Malta.”

“Is Peter from that branch?”

“We'll check, but studying in Australia doesn't come cheaply. That kind of wealth can make things harder or easier. You might also want to hire a detective.”

“Is there anyone you'd recommend?”

“Martin Azzopardi. A good man, motivated by more than money. He's hard to get.”

Now MacGregor had him. A fact Lela couldn't ignore. Any more than she could ignore the patient way he waited for her answer. He was too smart, and had too good a reputation, not to do his own research.

“I’ll come, I’ll listen, but I’ll make no promises.”

“I’ve asked for cooperation, not promises,” he answered mildly.

“I don’t know what we’ll find.” She gave him the honest truth.

“We’ll find a vulnerable young woman.”

Lela couldn’t dispute his point, but her father had hired this man. Hauling a reluctant young woman back to Australia and dumping her on her grandfather’s doorstep could blow up in their faces. Lela had needed weeks to re-establish trust with Sophie after Papa’s last investigator had put his ego ahead of Sophie’s well-being. The unity of her family was too important for Lela to trust MacGregor yet. His history and employment of Azzopardi scored points in his favour, while perversely fuelling her hesitance. An honourable man would stick to the contract he’d made with her father.

“Finding is not understanding,” she stressed. “Finding may be the beginning, not the end.”

“You expect me to fall in line with however you want to handle this?”

Alongside his international work, his practice was a powerhouse in investigative child custody cases. She’d seen his name in a feature article a few months ago. He’d emphasised the importance of protecting children whose lives were torn apart by their parents’ anger or the desire for revenge. Lela had started her foundation to support vulnerable teenagers. She respected and understood his kind of passion.

It made no sense for someone with his expertise to be involved in a simple story of an almost-adult runaway.

“I don’t know how I’ll handle this yet. I don’t even know whatthisis.”

“But you’re open-minded?” He was still talking to her, listening to her. That was another positive on his side of the ledger.

“It helps in a crisis.”

“There’s a difference between a human and financial crisis.”

Was he teasing her?

“Financial crises involve real people, MacGregor, and your prejudices are showing again.”

AZZOPARDI’S AGENCY occupied an upper floor of an old stone building behind the Gardens. Within minutes they were in the outer office, a drab room with no view and a few tourist posters hanging on the walls. Old posters evoking a gentler, slower era—women in 1950s bathing costumes and men playing volleyball on the decks of cruise ships. An incongruous choice, Lela concluded, or else a clever distraction for harried clients.

Hamish gave their names to the receptionist, who made a discreet call, then rose to her feet and gestured for them to follow her into the next office.

“Hi, Hamish. Good to see you again.” A stocky man of medium height in a rumpled light-grey suit was rising from his chair as they entered. He bristled with energy and good humour. He must’ve been in his early forties—Lela sensed a quickness of mind and an alertness useful in his chosen profession. The twinkle in his eyes, when he murmured his welcome, included her and suggested he expected her critical evaluation.

The room was small, sparsely furnished, comfortable, but utilitarian, with two leather chairs angled in front of the big desk. In this age of computers, his desk was piled perilously high with manila folders. The tourist posters of the outer office were replaced by some family photos mixed with dramatic Caravaggio prints, a reminder of the volatile artist's time on the island. The eclectic mix suited the man and the mood.

"Marty. I didn't think I'd see you this trip, but something's come up. This is Lela Vella. She's looking for her niece. Lela, meet Martin Azzopardi—Marty. An old friend and the best investigator in Malta."

He'd used her preferred name, another sign he listened.

"Nice to meet you, Ms. Vella." The detective stretched out a hand. "Please have a seat. Coffee?"

"Not for me, thank you."

"Me neither," said Hamish.

Lela angled her chair to face both Marty and Hamish, the triangle establishing her separation from the debonair lawyer. The quick exchange of glances between the men confirmed they'd got the message. She was here, she'd answer questions, but she was reserving judgment.

"How can I help, Hamish?"

"Sophie Vella. She's a runaway, arrived in Valletta two days ago, on Tuesday."

Marty reached for his tablet. "Photos, personal details, social media listings, phone?"

“Photos on a few sites.” Hamish took a list from his jacket pocket and laid it on the table. “No postings on any sites since she left Australia, and she’s not answering the number I’ve been given. What about you, Lela?”

“I’ve got some personal photos on my phone. I could forward them if you need them.” She spoke to Marty. “I’ve had no answers to my messages. She didn’t have international calls on her phone plan, and doesn’t seem to have updated it, so I’m assuming she’s picked up a new SIM. I spoke to her closest girlfriend before I left. Her friend knew nothing. She was on the point of contacting me because Sophie is never silent for long. I checked again this morning—still no word to her friends at home.”

“Her grandfather said you had a family dinner a few nights before she left,” Hamish continued, “and Sophie was her usual self.”

“It was a business dinner, and Sophie wasn’t happy Papa demanded she be present. I saw her again the next morning. She complained about how boring it was and said she was going to classes. I had an evening meeting.” Lela scrunched up her nose. “She said all I ever do these days is have meetings.”

“Did you disagree about your absences? About anything?” asked Marty.

“She was being contrary. She resented work taking up my time. When I said I was available, she was too busy with friends. Sophie’s eighteen in two months”—Lela thought of the lavish celebration her father had planned in one of Sydney’s top restaurants—“so yes, we had minor disagreements. Like any adolescent, she was always pushing the boundaries. I can’t answer for Papa.”

“He didn’t mention any disagreements or fights,” Hamish said.

“Is she a confident young woman?”

“Very.” Lela responded to Marty’s quiet question. “Under normal circumstances.”

“What are abnormal circumstances?”

Lela liked Marty, liked his manner and his balancing role with Hamish. “She disappeared for forty-eight hours when she was twelve. We’d combed the streets and feared the worst. She was hiding in the attic. There’d been a few incidents at school, and she wanted to be homeschooled or change schools.”

“What happened?” Hamish asked.

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“A neighbour spotted the light in the attic and movement at the window. I’d just found her when the police stormed in on us.” She rolled her shoulders. “Or at least it felt like a raid to me.” Bright lights had flashed in their faces, guns had been drawn, and she and Sophie had clung to each other. “Papa gave the go-ahead—was afraid she was being held against her will.” His investigator had misused the information Lela had given him, had wanted the kudos of breaking the case.

“How’d you fix it?” Marty sat back in his chair.

“Ultimately it was a combination of hormones and high school colliding. None of her friends had moved to the same high school. She felt isolated from day one. Then she overheard some kids whispering and pointing and thought they were badmouthing her. She withdrew into herself, imagined slights where none existed, but it was a wake-up call. We got some professional support, spoke to the school, and it was resolved.”

“Is she planning to hide until she turns eighteen?” Marty looked from her to Hamish.

“Is she hiding, Lela?” Hamish pinned her with his gaze.

“I can’t answer that. I don’t know why she ran.” Admitting her failure broke her heart.

“Don’t know! What does your gut tell you?” Hamish jack-knifed to an upright position, impatience entering his voice for the first time since she’d met him. His unexpected outburst gave her a clearer picture of the man driven to find missing children.

“That we need facts to solve this,” she countered.

“And her emotional state? What about that? Who would she turn to if she was in trouble?”

Lela briefly closed her eyes to shut out the demand in his. “I’d have hoped she’d call me.”

“This is the first time she’s actually run away, and she led us to Malta,” Hamish concluded, while Lela remained silent, “bought the ticket using her debit card, then made a withdrawal from her account at Valletta airport. The ticket showed up on her statement, as did the cash transaction. Her grandfather accessed both, which she must have expected.”

“Papa has a very loose understanding of a person’s right to privacy.” Lela sighed. “And yes, Sophie knew Papa checked her account. We talked about it. I had a secret stash of cash at her age.”

“It’s legal, and understandable in this instance,” Hamish replied.

“Yet he didn’t do it for my brothers at the same age. Sophie used to rail against the inconsistency. Papa’s rule for daughters and granddaughters that didn’t apply to sons. And”—Lela revealed one of her father’s “coincidental” actions—“how did he know to check that day?”

“More importantly, she might be telling us she wants to be found.” Hamish considered her.

“Any other action on her accounts? Accommodation?” Marty intervened.

“Not that I’ve been told.” Hamish explained to Lela. “Malta is one of those countries

where you have to present a passport or identity card for accommodation. That should be an easy trace.”

“Any strangers, new people in her life who might be influencing her?” Marty’s fingers were poised above his tablet.

“She left Australia with a young man, who said he was a Maltese citizen, a student.” Hamish spoke first.

“You think that’s bogus?” Marty raised an eyebrow.

“Her grandfather questions the boy’s bona fides, thinks he might be running a scam, seducing her in an attempt to get her money. She’ll come into quite a sum when she turns eighteen.” Hamish leaned forward, resting his forearms on his thighs.

Lela couldn’t stay silent. “Papa’s wrong.”

“You can’t dismiss the possibility.” Marty seemed to consider the idea. “Giovanni Vella is known here. He still has extensive business interests. The granddaughter could be seen as an easy target. Still, it’s an elaborate scam. Why go to Australia for an heiress when Europe’s closer? Do you know the boy’s name?”

Hamish glanced at her. “According to my contacts, she came in with Peter Debrincat.”

Marty whistled. “It’s a common name here, so he might not be rich. One branch has a lot of old money in boats, tourist enterprises. Then again, he could have just purloined the name. Has there been a ransom call?”

“Peter’s not some sleazy conman.” Lela recalled the charity director’s hesitation at the name. On this she’d share all she knew.

“I’m operating on the facts I’ve been given, Lela. Is there something we should know, because now’s your chance to clear the air?” Hamish pushed himself upright in his chair.

“I met Peter; so did my father. Peter’s doing a semester of his university degree in Sydney. I’ve been imagining a number of outcomes, but a false name and extortion aren’t among them.”

“Why so sure about the name?” Hamish frowned.

“I’ve got a friend in admissions at the University. The character tests for Australian student visas are stringent. Peter jumped through numerous legal hoops before he even left Malta,” she explained. “I saw his passport.”

“Did you ask to see it?”

“He doesn’t have an Australian driver’s licence. You showed me your passport last night,” she retorted. “Peter’s a decent, responsible kid.”

“Not on current evidence,” Hamish bluntly contradicted her.

“After Peter called at the house, they invited me for lunch one day. Peter talked about his parents, his brothers. His lifestyle in Sydney wasn’t lavish, but he was living better than your average international student. Sophie wanted me to get to know him.”

“And she didn’t want her grandfather to know him better?” Hamish was more persistent than a female mosquito locked in a room with only one live body.

“She didn’t want Papa to forbid her seeing him.”

“Why would he do that?” Marty asked, mystified.

“Because Papa didn’t choose him”—Lela flung a hand in the air in an unconsciously Mediterranean gesture of dismissal—“because there’s some deep, dark history between the Vella and Debrincat families. Because even though she’s started university, Papa still thinks of her as a child. Because Peter’s a foreign student, and they’ve only known each other a few months. How would I know? Nothing reasonable,” she snapped, then lowered her voice. “They wanted me to put in a good word for Peter with Papa.”

“Has your father objected to other boyfriends?” Hamish looked at her curiously.

“This is Sophie’s first serious relationship.” Her niece had glowed with first love.

“The age of consent is sixteen in Australia, isn’t it?” Marty asked.

“It can vary, but yeah, in New South Wales it’s sixteen,” Hamish agreed.

“Unlike here, where it’s eighteen, and Peter could get into trouble if he’s caught having sex with an underage girl.” Marty made a note.

“I didn’t know that,” Lela whispered, positive seventeen-year-old Sophie and Peter had been lovers before they’d left Sydney.

“Peter will.” Hamish’s mouth set in a grim line.

“So will Papa.” Lela’s gut twisted as the broader implications of crossing borders hit her. Different laws, different values. “It doesn’t make sense to me. Their relationship was legal in Australia; they could have moved in together, married, done anything without seeking anyone’s permission if they’d waited a few weeks.”

“They can marry here at eighteen,” Marty said mildly.

“I don’t think marriage is their plan. I must find them, speak to them,” she insisted. This wasn’t making any sort of sense.

* * *

“IF MARRIAGE ISN’T THEIR plan, what is?” Hamish asked.

Lela swung her head to stare at him. “I don’t know.”

The distress in her eyes gave the lie to her earlier claim that facts were the key here. Whatever her gripe with her father, her concern for her niece was real. The emotions rolling off her had the force of a runaway locomotive—confusion, fear and a desperation she was trying to keep in check by insisting on a methodical, fact-driven approach.

“Would your father be thinking of marriage?” Given old man Vella’s opinion of the guy that was unlikely.

“She’s too young to be thinking of marriage.”

“Young people think of getting married all the time.” Hamish tested another idea. “While a true patriarch uses his female children to cement the dynasty’s future.”

“A bit out of touch in this day and age.” She wrinkled her nose defensively, leading him to conclude dynastic marriages weren’t unheard of in the Vella family.

“Marriage for money is never out of fashion for some people. Your brothers’ marriages align nicely with Vella business interests. Business partnerships have followed the church unions.”

“My brothers are married to wonderful, independent women they love.” She was as tart as a hibiscus flower and as stunning.

“That’s a bonus isn’t it, Marty?”

“The old guard can nudge their children in a particular direction.” Marty followed Hamish’s lead.

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“Why wouldn’t your father stitch up a deal with the Debrincat family if Peter’s from the successful branch of the family? Scion of wealthy Maltese family marries granddaughter of wealthy Maltese emigrant,” Hamish speculated. “Why wouldn’t marriage be on the cards from your father’s point of view?”

“Because he’d have me to deal with.” She was fierce as all hell. “They’re both far too young.”

“If she wants to marry the boy, would you object?” He still hadn’t identified her biggest fear.

“I’d encourage them to wait until she’s older.” Defensive, tart, fierce and barely holding on to her temper.

“If she’s pregnant?” Hamish prodded.

She flinched.

“That’s it, isn’t it?” Hamish watched the light leave her beautiful eyes. “You’re afraid she’s pregnant.” A pregnant Sophie added another complication to the mix.

“It’s crossed my mind.” She pushed her shoulders back.

“It scares you to death,” Hamish said, her distress a tangible presence in the small space. The reasons for opposing teenage marriage were real, but maturity, or being financially secure as a basis for starting a family didn’t always work out—he and his wife, Olivia, had waited and lost everything.

“Her mother was a single parent.”

Hamish was convinced Lela’s statement hid a bigger secret. Less than twenty-four hours, and he was convinced Lela Vella loved her niece, would love her niece’s unborn child. He still didn’t have all the puzzle pieces. “What counts is that the child is loved, wanted, and cared for.”

“Sophie’s always been loved and wanted.”

“If she’s pregnant and it’s accidental, there are options.” Hamish waited for her to choose one.

She visibly drew in on herself, her voice hoarse. “Sophie wouldn’t choose an abortion.” That made sense, given her mother must have made a similar choice.

“Would your father?” Hamish asked.

“I don’t know.” She closed her eyes. When she opened them, she’d come to some sort of decision. “I’ll support Sophie’s decision, but being pregnant is not a good enough reason by itself to get married.” She ground out the words, making him feel like an unreconstructed chauvinist, but revealing something else about herself. She was genuinely seeking to understand Sophie’s situation, not impose a ready-made solution onto it.

“Would your father agree?” Hamish was unable to imagine old man Vella being so open-minded. Was this the cause of the stand-off between Vella and his daughter?

“What do you think? You have Papa’s instructions,” she chided him.

“It’s your position we’re exploring now,” Hamish argued.

“We’re talking hypotheticals.”

“We are, but your father didn’t mention marriage. He didn’t tell me they were lovers, but his belief in a seduction scam presupposes they are. Like you, he must have considered pregnancy. He also didn’t give me the boy’s name.” Hamish didn’t like clients being selective with the facts. “That makes me wonder if there is some dispute between Peter’s branch of the Debrincats and the Vellas. What did you say, Lela—history between the families?”

“That was a generalisation.” She backpedalled, but generalisations usually had a core of truth. The line between justice and revenge was indistinguishable to some people. “I don’t know the name, had never heard it before I met Peter.”

“That’s why it’s called history.” Hamish grinned. “Marty, can you also have a look at past connections?”

Marty looked up from his notes. “There’s a good charity in Malta with offices on Melita, works with kids on the street—usually only looks for specific kids if they trust the person looking.”

“Maybe, if we run out of options.” Hamish studied Lela’s bent head. He’d found her on Melita Street. “They used their own names coming in. Let’s try tracing Debrincat first.”

“I don’t want a raid or anything that frightens them.” Her passionate plea told him she’d been scarred by the police bust all those years ago. “She’s a young woman, not a criminal.”

Lela’s preference for an informal search solidified Hamish’s hunch that she knew about the charity’s work.

“I never assume children or young people are criminals,” he replied.

Suspicion settled like a heavy cloud around them.

“We’ve got a confident young woman who’s travelling with someone who knows the islands well, giving him—them—the advantage. A sudden, unexplained decision, but they haven’t had a run-in with authorities, so probability says they’re safe and well.” Marty cut through the thick atmosphere to summarise. “No big deal until we add in family. We’ve got a grandfather and legal guardian who opposes the relationship. And you. Given she ran away, Sophie’s likely carrying a chip on her shoulder that Granddad, or you, don’t understand her. The tricky part is the underage sex, which is prosecutable in Malta.”

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“I’m not prepared to dismiss the possibility of undue influence, applied in Australia or here.” Hamish had accepted the job based in large part on Vella’s report of Sophie’s unstable mental state. “Until you arrived, Lela, she had no family, friends, no support network. And she doesn’t know you’re here.”

“She’ll know.”

“How?”

“Because I always have been.” She bit her lower lip, a telltale sign of anxiety. “I need to know she’s safe.”

“Lucky girl,” Hamish murmured. “Still, factor in an inheritance when she turns eighteen, and this is a young woman who needs to be found.”

“A point of clarification, MacGregor, Sophie doesn’t gain unfettered access to her inheritance at eighteen.”

A small but significant mistake on which to base a manhunt.

“What does she get?”

“It’s held in trust,” she explained. “Funds can be released for specified activities like study, but the bulk is locked up until she’s twenty-five.”

“Does she know that?” Hamish asked.

“She knows exactly what she’s entitled to and has been coached extensively to be on the lookout for fortune hunters. Papa reported a ticket and cash withdrawal from her account; no unexplained withdrawals—large or otherwise.”

“Your father suggested it was in play now.”

“I love Papa”—she shut her eyes to block who knew what memories—“but he can be selective with the facts.”

“You’re saying he hasn’t been straight with me?”

“I don’t know everything he’s said to you.” She turned to Marty. “Will you provide your information to me before sending it to my father, Mr. Azzopardi?”

Marty flicked a quick look in Hamish’s direction. Lela wasn’t desperate, she was being cautious. Until she spoke to Sophie, she was operating on one version of the truth. The men exchanged a look she couldn’t read.

“I can’t do that, Lela.” Marty spoke gently.

Lela nodded, clasping her hands tightly together. That went well.

“I can tell you that Hamish and I work together because we both want the same outcome. We try to make sure young people are safe.”

“Lela doesn’t buy that,” Hamish growled.

“Presenting yourself as my father’s man in Malta muddies the waters.”

“That’s some blind spot you’ve got.” Hamish looked like he wanted to say more, but sucked it back in front of his colleague. “Marty, when you find her—find one of

them—call me. We can come back in, talk about how to approach them.”

“Thank you.” Lela was grateful he hadn’t ordered her to leave.

“We’d like to find her fast,” Hamish finished.

“I always give you fast. That’s why you’re here.” Marty observed with a smile.

Chapter Three

Lela preceded MacGregor out of the office, emerging into the fantastically cobbled streets of Valletta. The temperature had risen since she'd left the hotel earlier this morning, another jolt to a system grappling with jetlag. She considered retreating to the hotel to continue her research in air-conditioned seclusion, to escape more of Hamish's probing questions.

"Let's walk, Miranda." He took off without waiting for an answer.

"Why do you keep calling me that?"

"Walking helps me think, and I'm guessing there's a lot going on in your head at the moment." He'd earned the right to challenge after her behaviour in Marty's office. He slid her a sideways glance. "Miranda reminds me of how illogically contrary you can be."

"I could go back to the hotel." She had reason for her caution.

"To brood?"

"I have work to do." Lela needed to reassess her options.

"A merchant banker never takes a break?"

"If you say so."

“Or to pursue your own line of inquiry. How did you know Marty’s name?”

“Someone mentioned it to me.” Asking for the investigator’s help was a gamble, not desperation, Lela told herself. Ok, I’m desperate. If the director of the youth agency was right, she needed Marty on her side.

“And you trust whoever this someone is, whereas you don’t trust me.”

“I don’t know you.” Her major, and maybe her only, gripe about him was the link to her father. Long experience had taught her Giovanni Vella’s people were not her friends.

“What would you have done if Marty had said yes?”

She halted.

He spun on his heel to face her. “Did you think that through? Or if he switched allegiance to you without hesitation, would you have doubted his integrity? What were you doing? Testing him or trying to give me the flick?”

“I didn’t plan it.” Lela threw a hand in the air, letting out a frustrated breath, which lifted the fringe on her forehead.

“I’m sure you didn’t. That’s the only reason I’m prepared to give you another chance.” He was infuriating.

“You’ll give me a chance!”

“You want access to Marty’s information, don’t you?”

Lela trusted the director of the youth charity to put out feelers through her network,

but she wanted any information Marty could find as well. “Yes.”

“Then walk with me. It’s time you answered a few questions.”

“Don’t push your luck, MacGregor.” But Lela was in his debt. He hadn’t cut her loose.

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Some part of her brain had registered they'd passed the Lower Barrakka Gardens a few minutes ago, and she could see they were about to change direction again, moving in a more north-easterly direction travelling around the peninsula. The fierce sunshine burnt the pavement, explaining why the horse-drawn carriages sheltered under custom-built horse awnings while resting between customers.

With her blouse sticking to her back, Lela wished she'd tucked a sunhat and glasses into the luggage she'd packed so hastily. Her packing had been as jumbled as her thoughts, her famed, cool decision-making lost in her urgent need to find her niece.

"Your father asked for help in tracing his granddaughter, a young woman he calls Sophia."

His starting point was unexpected, making Lela forget to guard her tongue. "He's always preferred it to Sophie, thinks it has more gravitas."

"Gravitas?" he repeated. "An unusual requirement for a young girl's name."

She skipped a few steps to keep up with him. "Parents usually choose names for a reason, especially for their firstborn. There's an excitement, a joy in giving your baby a name you think is beautiful. My sister said Sophie was the most beautiful name she'd ever heard." Mari had crooned the name to her baby, and Sophie had cooed and smiled back.

"This rule about parents choosing names they love doesn't apply to you?" he asked quietly.

“Touché,” she muttered, but at this point she owed him. “My sister also chose it because it means wise or wisdom, and she was damning Papa’s prejudice and anger at her pregnancy outside marriage.”

“Are you damning him for the same reason?” he asked.

The tally on his side of the ledger was adding up. Accepting Lela’s correction of Sophie’s name without question gave him huge bonus points. He’d met her last night; she’d challenged everything he said or offered, and he adapted with ease.

A man who listened.

Lela knew men did and could listen to women. The quality was often missing in her father, and the last investigator Papa hired had mimicked his natural biases.

“I’m using my mother’s name,” she said evasively.

“How does your mother feel about that?”

“She died eighteen months before my sister.”

Hamish paused, and Lela bumped into him. He reached out a hand to steady her. “Not as tough as you pretend to be, are you?”

“Tough enough to fight you.” Her chin lifted.

“Is Sophie’s father around?”

“No.”

“Could he have asked Sophie to fly to Malta?”

“Dean has no connection to Malta. Besides, he walked out before Sophie was born and has never tried to see her.” Despite all Lela’s efforts.

“To your knowledge.”

“My knowledge is the most reliable you’ll get.”

“Could your father have blocked contact?” He was sharing his thoughts with her, which helped her sort out her own. Was Hamish starting to question whether Giovanni Vella had given him all the information he needed on his quest?

“Sadly, Dean doesn’t have the balls to approach Papa. Dean would have come to me. The last time I tracked him down”—she’d thought he might be able to help after Sophie hid in the attic—“he was heading to Western Australia to make a fortune in the mining industry.”

“Your father is Sophie’s legal guardian, and she has lived under his roof since her mother died? Can we agree on those facts?”

“Yes to both questions.” Whatever I’m missing, it’s big. MacGregor was no lightweight. His reputation was built from his success in finding and returning missing children. And prosecuting those responsible for causing harm.

“I sense a but ...”

His perception was annoying.

“What has Papa asked you to do? Specifically?” She stretched out a hand to stop him.

* * *

PASSION LACED HER VOICE, an unbroken link between her, her sister and her niece. She was absolutely focused on finding Sophie. Hamish's instincts were right. Harnessing her dedication would make this easier for everyone involved. "I've answered that. Find Sophie, see if she needs help and get her home."

"I love my father, but he believes in punishment and retribution."

"I believe in punishment for crimes against children."

"That's not what this is. I'm missing something," she insisted. The deep sadness in her eyes scraped at him. The sadness, and he recognised it now, the determination to push through. "There's something Papa's planning that I'm missing."

"Ask him." Hamish was developing a list of questions for Vella himself.

But Vella's concern for an underage, young woman being taken advantage of by a travelling student was legitimate. Peter Debrincat had taken her out of Australia and left no forwarding address. Sophie had recently developed mental health issues. Giovanni Vella had confided that Lela refused to accept the diagnosis. He'd asked Hamish to keep the information confidential and only to use it as a last resort if it was necessary to bring Sophie home.

"You used the word crime. But in Azzopardi's office you claimed you didn't treat children as criminals."

“Peter’s not a child.”

“Illalu! Papa wants to prosecute Peter?”

“If Peter’s committed a crime, he should be prosecuted, but your father’s asked me to bring her home, not prosecute.” But it was something to think about later. Old man Vella tended to hellfire and damnation in his musings.

“Maybe it’s my fault she ran.”

“Did you fail in your supervision?”

“I didn’t monitor her every move.” Lela rolled her eyes. “She’s eight weeks from legally being an adult. I’ve tried to give her more independence each year, within the constraints of rules and responsibilities. I was aware of her movements; I know her friends; I’ve counselled her about the demon drink, about sex, sextortion, drugs, and wild, wild men.”

“Sounds pretty comprehensive.”

“I had a disagreement with her a few days earlier.” She released a long slow breath, a clue she’d reached another decision. “I told her she couldn’t go away with Peter for a weekend.” She stopped, resting her hands on her hips. “I thought she’d accepted my decision, but she brought it up on that last morning I saw her. She said she loved Peter.”

“And you disagreed.”

“They were moving too fast,” she said. “I suggested she bring him home more often.”

“She said you didn’t understand.”

“You’ve done this before.” A wry smile twisted her mouth.

Hamish hadn’t had a conversation with any woman about the intimate details of bringing up a child since Olivia’s death. When they’d discovered Olivia was pregnant, they’d spent hours daydreaming about their child’s future, what they’d do, what they’d say, what they’d share with their child—planning had been part of the magic. Until it ended. Hamish’s child would be four years old now. He and Olivia would never get a chance to deal with an adolescent. “Standard parenting from all I’ve heard. She probably engineered a fight to mess with your head.”

“I refused permission for a weekend in the mountains with Peter, so they ran away to another country!” She started walking again.

“That’s not exactly what I meant.” He caught up.

“I guessed they were lovers. I’d even given a remarkable amount of thought over the years on exactly how I’d handle this situation, including ensuring she had professionals to speak to about contraception and unplanned pregnancies. And I blew it.” She sucked in air. “I’m considered the revolutionary in our family, and I was preaching caution.”

“That’s why you’re worried she’s pregnant.”

She caught her bottom lip between her teeth. “A slap at me. I’m afraid my stubbornness, my insistence that she know who her mother is, may have given her a romanticised view of running away with a lover.”

“The past repeating itself?” Although old man Vella had been vague about how long Sophie had lived with him and Lela, Hamish had the impression it was a few years. Sophie wanting to recreate parts of her mother’s life was a possibility.

“I won’t let Papa issue ultimatums again.”

“The world’s a different place from when your sister had Sophie.” Hamish added the date Sophie’s mother died to the questions he had for Vella.

“Tell that to Papa.”

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“You’re going to have to tell me what it is between you two sometime.” He frowned. Time to put her on the spot. “Who did you meet this morning who gave you Azzopardi’s name?”

“Can I plead client confidentiality?” She scrunched up her nose before walking off.

“The only client who counts is Sophie.”

She glanced at him. “Papa supplied my date and time of arrival, although I didn’t share that information with him.”

“It wouldn’t have been hard to find out.” He fell into step beside her. “He could have checked with your office.”

“He probably did. But he could have handled it another way. Given me your details and the option to get in touch.”

“In his fear, his need to know, he rushed things.” Hamish wasn’t prepared to condemn Vella’s actions yet, but Hamish would contact his office and request more due diligence on the material Vella had supplied. Hamish’s reputation mattered to him.

“Rushing, I understand. I did it myself, but there’s more here.”

“You’re holding back as well. Didn’t you pay attention in Marty’s office?” He resumed walking up the hill, frustrated by the unanswered questions. “I don’t play games.”

* * *

LELA DIDN'T WANT TO fight him anymore. Tired of trying to second guess her father, desperate to know Sophie was safe, exhaustion caught her in a slow, rolling wave. She trudged behind him. Riding an emotional rollercoaster was her only excuse for her uncharacteristic sharing of confidences. Hamish Beauregard MacGregor was a stranger, but she was finding it increasingly hard to see him as an enemy. "Is the hotel far away? I'd like to take a few hours off."

"Around the bend and up the hill." He glanced back at her. "Did you get much sleep last night?"

"It doesn't feel like it now." She halted, groaning at the distance between their current spot and the hotel entrance. "Plus, I need to think, check more facts and make a few phone calls."

"Anyone I know?"

"Maybe.

Her contact at the Maltese charity had vouched for Martin Azzopardi, who'd in turn vouched for Hamish MacGregor. MacGregor had taken her father on trust, and who could blame him? If MacGregor had as much integrity as everyone claimed, then he'd make an independent assessment of the facts. He'd protect Sophie's interests, but Lela wasn't sure she had time to wait for him to work out Papa's end game.

Halfway up the hill, Hamish changed direction towards huge doors flung open at the back of the hotel. Conference attendees on a break spilled out of their exhibition hall. He tugged her through the crowd and bizarrely down one flight of stairs to the lobby.

"That saved us a long last climb," he said. "I'll meet you here at seven."

“That isn’t necessary.”

“You have to eat. I know a few good local restaurants. You’ll brood if you spend all your time alone.”

“If I nap now,” she replied tartly, “I might need to work later.”

“We’ve already had this conversation. Can’t take a break from merchant banking, even for a few days?”

“It’s legal.”

“I don’t doubt it’s legal. Is it moral?”

“Were you staying in this hotel before you accepted my father’s commission, MacGregor?”

“Yes.”

“You clearly don’t despise making money either. I abhor hypocrisy.”

He grinned. “And you, Miranda, are ferociously direct.”

“No need to hold back. Growing up I was called impolite and rude, but my favourites were unladylike and unwomanly. Now, I’m assertive.”

“I’m guessing the first lot came from your Maltese aunty and the second from some chauvinistic diehards in your workplace.” He shook his head. “You need to mix with a better crowd.”

SIX HOURS LATER, LELAsat in the lobby, letting herself be distracted by the passing parade of people. A group in stunning traditional Indian dress gathered a short distance from her, the women's saris in jewel colours: greens, crimsons and blues embroidered in gold. She glanced briefly down at her simple, summer sheath, a swirl of Monet-style greens and blues, pallid and shapeless in contrast to the vibrancy of the full-length saris. The women greeted one another and their dresses rippled and swirled. Were they attending an embassy or private social function?

“You’re looking far more relaxed.”

Turning towards his voice, she studied his casual burgundy jeans, black T-shirt and the lightweight cream sweater hooked around his shoulders. While his unconventional ties had provided a hint of the maverick within, stripped of his business suit he was somehow more male, more virile, more of a threat to her equilibrium. A whiff of his fresh aftershave and his slicked-back, damp locks told her he'd recently showered. Her nostrils quivered in response to the tangy scent. He'd be gorgeous naked. Rattled, Lela's mouth went dry. And, okay, following him up the hill, she had noticed he had a fine butt and ...

“Maybe I should amend that?” Had he noticed her stalled breath and wide eyes on him?

Lela swallowed, then ran her tongue over parched lips, flustered when his eyes followed the movement. “I had a nap, among other things.” Hastily, she rose to her feet.

“I like the dress,” he said.

“Colourless and without form.”

“In the interests of ongoing clear communication, let’s workshop this. I don’t think that answer is rude, undiplomatic or unladylike. You’re either not used to receiving compliments or embarrassed. A simple thank you works best.”

“Thank you, although my response was a classic case of dress envy.” She gestured towards the other group.

He studied them. “Saris in jewel colours and of that quality are mesmerising. Makes you think every woman should wear one.” He brought his gaze back to consider her. “Strong colours would suit you too, but I like the subtlety and elegant cut of this dress. And you have legs.”

“Basic anatomy, MacGregor.”

Grinning, he peered over her shoulder at the sofa where she’d been sitting. “Did you bring a jacket? It could get cooler later.”

“A shawl in my bag.” She waved a small bag at him.

“Let’s go. The restaurant’s in the old city. I hope you don’t mind another walk.”

“I’d enjoy it. I’m still working out the kinks from the flight.”

He slipped a hand under her elbow and guided her out the front door and towards the steps.

“I don’t need help finding my way.” But his touch, like his scent, was reassuring in

the nicest possible way.

“Another tip on communication. Accepting help isn’t always about needing it. It’s another one of those building blocks of relationships.”

Lela paused at the top of the first flight of stairs and turned to face him. His hand dropped to his side. “We’re still negotiating terms for working together.”

“See, a relationship.” Leaning closer, he sniffed discreetly at her hair. “Is that a wisp of chlorine underneath the Givenchy?”

“Did you see me in the pool?” And where did you pick up a knowledge of women’s perfumes?

“I confess, your honour. I was working on the balcony, and you caught my eye.”

“Further confirmation I have legs?” She tilted her head to one side.

“Guilty as charged. I still like the dress. Why do you prick up defensively when I comment on your appearance?”

“It’s irrelevant to what we’re doing.”

“True, but like accepting help, genuine compliments improve human interactions,” he said. “And because we know you like to understand cause and effect, my sister wears Amarige.”

“Shouldn’t we keep moving?” She peered around him, unaccountably pleased to have an explanation for the perfume. His sister, not a girlfriend. Not that his choice of lover—male or female—was any of her business, but her research hadn’t turned up an intimate partner. Not that I was looking. “It looks like a long way to the top.”

“Eighty-nine steps. There are some drawbacks to building a hotel into the side of a hill. Having trouble?”

She glanced towards the top. “Only with you, MacGregor. Flattery won’t gain my cooperation.”

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“That’s handy to know, if that had been my intention. At the risk of straying even further from our common purpose, you’re a beautiful woman.” His genuine admiration flurried her.

Lela started up the stairs, waiting until her breathing levelled before speaking. “Swimming’s relaxing; the rhythm of it allows my mind to wander.”

“Where did it wander this afternoon?” he asked as they reached the top of the stairs and headed up Great Siege Road towards the old walled city.

The move into safer conversational territory settled her. “I’ve gone over that last lunch I had with Peter and Sophie in my mind a million times. They didn’t tell me—Peter didn’t tell me—anything substantive.”

“Did it bother you at the time?”

“No, but now I’m wondering if it was deliberate. If they were already planning to come to Malta and didn’t want to give me too many clues.”

“A spur-of-the-moment decision works just as well,” he said without inflection. “Sophie found out she was pregnant, the boy panicked and suggested they run to Malta.”

“And if she’s not pregnant?” If anyone had asked her, even a few days ago, if Sophie would be careless about contraception, Lela would have instantly dismissed the idea.

“A perceived gripe with you or her grandfather. Punish either one or both of you for a

bit.”

“That makes her sound like a spoilt brat.”

“Is that a possibility?” He dug for secrets with the finesse of a trained spy.

“Not to this point. Maybe ...” she prevaricated. Sophie had been pushing boundaries since Lela had turned twenty-five and devoted most of her inheritance and more of her time to her foundation. “But no matter which way I spin it, she decided her only solution was flight. That’s a pretty desperate act.”

They’d reached the gates of the old city. Lela lifted her head to look at the high walls, enormous blocks of sandstone marking the entrance to Valletta. The fortress projected an awesome beauty.

“I accepted this commission thinking she might have been pressured into running away by the boyfriend.” Hamish glanced at her. “You’ve added pregnancy. Are there other options?”

“I was twenty before my father proposed a marriage for me.”

“That’s the basis for your assumption he didn’t suggest ...”

“An alliance is the term you’re looking for,” she said.

“A dynastic alliance for Sophie?”

“Sophie was seven when I was eighteen. My father needed me at home.” She’d known that without a word being spoken. Without her, Sophie would have been raised in a broken home.

“Sophie lived with you when she was seven?” He spun towards her.

“Sophie lived with us from the time Mari died.” A gorgeous baby, she’d had her grandfather, her grandaunt and her uncles enslaved within weeks.

He caught her arm. “How old were you when your sister died?”

“Ten.”

“And your father didn’t accept your sister’s pregnancy?”

“Papa’s very conservative.”

“When did your mother die?” Concern chased shock across his face, as he calculated the sequence and timing of the tragedies that had hit her family.

Lela opted to save him the effort. “My mother died twelve months before Sophie’s birth, and my sister died six months after.”

“I’m sorry.” His hand shot out to take hers in instinctive comfort. “So sorry. I’d assumed Sophie was orphaned recently.”

He gave Lela no time to refuse his warm handclasp. His sympathy and empathy were spontaneous, flowing over her to create the protective cocoon she’d wished for as a child. The speed of his reaction told her he’d experienced a tragic death. When his fingers remained intimately twined with hers, Lela’s curiosity stirred about who had died and what they’d meant to him. A mother and child? In his line of work, the death of an abused wife or child must be all too common.

A man who not only listened, but understood emotion.

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Looking at their linked hands and accepting his comfort reminded Lela of how rare and precious simple comfort had been in her life.

“How old was your sister when she became pregnant?”

“Sixteen.”

“Why didn’t you tell me? No, don’t answer that.” His frustration had a bite. “I’m your father’s man in Malta.”

“It doesn’t often come up in conversation.” She liked holding his hand.

“You prefer people to think you’re tough?” he growled.

“People draw conclusions regardless of the facts. My closest friends have been around long enough to know when Mari died and Sophie moved in.”

“Not a good enough reason for being reticent now.” He returned to the present and his allotted role. “I need more than the facts to find her. Emotions drive runaways as much as facts.”

“I don’t see you as a confidant.” Snatching back her hand, Lela tucked both behind her.

“I guessed that.” His voice was tinder dry. “And you’d reject my comfort. That’s a weakness, not a strength.”

“I can’t afford to be vulnerable.”

“Too late. You’ve got shadows in your eyes, you’re prickly as hell, and you’re single-minded about finding Sophie. That all tells me she’s important to you.”

He was offering her comfort anyway, and she welcomed it.

“I demanded custody of her. Crazy really, but I was afraid Papa might put her up for adoption. Of course, a ten-year-old’s claim has no legal standing. I didn’t work out until years later that he’d never have given her up.”

“Your father knows that without you she won’t listen to me. Or him.” He said the words slowly, finding the answer to a puzzle.

“That’s our dilemma, MacGregor.”

“Which we’re working on.” He angled his head to one side, his eyes twinkling conspiratorially.

“I haven’t ruled against you. Yet.”

“Let’s keep moving then.”

“And I’m no longer sure she’s listening to me. I can see why you’d think Papa might suggest an arranged marriage,” Lela picked up the thread of their earlier conversation. “A way to get her away from Peter. Although that raises another problem—why reject Peter as an option? But when I said no to an arranged marriage at twenty, Papa and I agreed no more arranged marriages for Vella women. That was my deal.”

“Would he stick to that?”

“Promises are sacred in our family.” After her niece had hidden in the attic, she’d given Lela a promise. That she’d tell her aunt where she was going, if she planned to disappear for a day. Discovering Sophie hadn’t left a message had equalled the grief of losing Mari.

“At this stage all we’ve got is speculation, with one exception. You’re suffering. Would Sophie understand that would be a consequence of her actions?”

Lela nodded.

* * *

“SHE’D EMPATHISE WITHthat?” Hamish had received another medical report from Vella’s office this afternoon claiming Sophie’s symptoms blurred her capacity to judge the impact of her actions on others.

“She’s a warm, loving young woman who doesn’t normally seek conflict.”

“Have you ever been separated from her for this long before?” Hamish pushed because empathy didn’t match the identikit Vella had provided for his granddaughter. Given Lela’s response, he’d get his office to check directly with the specialist.

“Once or twice, apart from the attic incident.”

He raised an inquiring eyebrow.

“School camps.”

“Doesn’t count. You knew she was supervised and safe.”

“Let’s be honest, young women across the world are breadwinners for their families at Sophie’s age. English is well understood in Malta. She can supervise herself.”

“You believe that?” Hamish turned a corner and stopped, drawing her with him to the side of the road.

“I have to believe that, or I’ll go crazy.”

“Why are you here? Why are you sticking to me like glue, when you could stay at the hotel or, like your father, have someone else do the work for you?” Hamish searched her eyes for an answer to the puzzle she posed. Her anxiety had been off the Richter scale at the thought of pregnancy, while she handled most other scenarios with practical good sense. Now, he understood, but could that fear have blinded her to everything else, to other changes in Sophie?

“Because I want to look into her eyes when I ask—‘Why this way? Why did you run away without leaving a word? Why have you kept quiet when you know we’re worried?’ And if she needs it, to offer my support,” she said, passion echoing in every syllable.

“You think your father’s quest is about control and punishment, driven by thwarted authority. You’re saying that’s the way he does business,” Hamish stated, finding her expression as unsatisfactory as it was in those first photos. “That’s why you’re

suspicious of my motives—Giovanni Vella’s proxy?”

“Your work history suggests you’re more than that.”

“And you’re waiting for me to prove it?”

“No.” She held her hands out in a sign of peace. “I’m doing what I came here to do.”

“So am I. The restaurant’s behind the Palace Armoury. If you don’t like it, there are plenty of others.”

THE INTIMATE RESTAURANT was welcoming and full, with people clustered around tiny tables that barely fitted their drinks and the fresh baskets of bread. A waitress at the bar waved a hand at Hamish and signalled for them to take a table squeezed against the front window. Then she manoeuvred her way through tables and bodies to reach them, handing out menus.

“What’s the local special tonight?” Hamish asked.

“Stuffat tal-fenek,” the waitress answered.

“I know that one.” Lela clapped in delight. “A rabbit stew, famous here in Malta. Slow cooked until the meat falls off the bone.”

“With a tomato, red wine and garlic sauce,” the waitress added.

“Let’s share one. Plus a vegetable dish and bread. Does that suit?” Hamish asked.

“Please.”

“Would you like wine, Miranda, or something else?”

“You can drop the Carmen Miranda comparison.” She looked wistful, as if she’d like to have a nickname.

“My granddad was a big fan of old movies. He would have seen anything she starred in. A very smart lady as well as a successful entertainer.”

“The Brazilian bombshell?”

“You did do your research. But you have to look beyond songs like Chica Chica Boom Chic—” he chided.

“You’re kidding!”

“—and understand she brought true Brazilian sound to Hollywood. Her artistic integrity was important for her, being true to her heritage. The name suits you.”

“Because I have integrity?”

“You do, but to be honest, it was a spontaneous reaction when you insisted on remaining nameless,” he answered. “Red or white?”

“Red, please. You heard my name at the Excelsior.”

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“Lela needs some explaining. Miranda suits you. Did you know Shakespeare created the name for his heroine in *The Tempest*?”

She shook her head.

“Do you object?”

“I’m still deciding.”

He ordered a local wine, Antonin, and some water. “Thank you.” He smiled at the waitress and then turned back to Lela. “Tell me the rest.”

* * *

“WHAT REST?” Shakespeare’s heroine, Miranda? Lela’s pulse raced.

“You told me you’d taken your mother’s name. Not why.” He held up a hand to silence her. “Is it to remind your father of your mother, to prod him in some way, because you think she’d have handled things differently if she’d lived? I’m guessing of course.”

“You’re very good at guessing.” Lela leaned back against the chair, sabotaged again by the way he paid attention. But she couldn’t allow Papa to take all the blame on this. “As you’re probably learning, there are a lot of common Maltese surnames, like Vella. Mama’s name was Lela Vella before she married Papa. I announced my name change after Mari died.”

“You were ten.”

The few people who'd heard this story were usually surprised and a little repelled. Lela sensed admiration rather than surprise in Hamish. “My personal rebellion. In less than two years, I'd lost my mother and sister, Sophie was a baby, and I was the sole female in my immediate family able to voice an opinion.

“My brothers were lost and confused, but using Papa as their role model and ready to swagger around the house pretending they weren't as scared and alone as I was. Maybe it was a bit easier for them,” she reflected. “They had each other.”

The waitress returned with the wine, offered it to Lela to sample. Lela swirled the glass, bent forward to absorb the “nose,” and nodded. The woman filled both glasses. Lela took a sip. “It's good.”

“Are you familiar with Maltese wines?” He held his glass up to the light.

“I've tried a few, not many.” He didn't push, just listened, making it easy for Lela to finish her explanation. “I wanted Papa to remember every time he looked at me that Mama would have fought his decision. She wouldn't have allowed him to abandon my sister.”

“I bet he has.”

“Not because of the name.” She fiddled with a fork. “And I was wrong. He's never really recovered from Mama and Mari's deaths. I didn't realise as a child how much I resembled both of them. He's so stiff-upper-lip and stubborn he won't talk about his feelings, and he lost the capacity to show physical affection when Mama died. Aunty arrived shortly after Sophie was born. Aunty isn't naturally affectionate either. If I had my time over, I wouldn't change my name, but by the time I worked that out everyone knew me as Lela.”

“Is he the only person who calls you Carmen?”

“Aunty does, but it throws me if someone in my wider world uses it. I don’t recognise myself in the name.”

Laughter from the next table distracted them. One of the customers and the waitress were having an animated exchange about the evening’s specials. The customer sounded like a regular who’d brought friends for a special night out. The waitress entertained them in a mixture of Malti, English and French.

“That’s another thing I regret,” Lela said, listening to the energetic bargaining at the next table. “That I never really learned Malti.”

“Does your father speak it?”

“Yes, especially to his sister. Sophie even has a few words, Nannu for grandfather and Zija Kbir for great aunt. When I was younger, I thought they wanted a secret language my brothers and I couldn’t penetrate.”

“Wasn’t that enough to spur you on?” he asked slyly.

“Am I so easy to read?”

“Another guess.” He smiled. But his perceptiveness came from listening to people. An insidiously attractive characteristic, especially when combined with his natural warmth.

“It was complicated. I wanted to know exactly what they were saying, but I feared it was a trap as well. Tying me to the old Malta, the old ways of absolute obedience to the male head of the family. I decided that if I learned Malti I was betraying my sister and giving up some of my independence. Stupid really. I’ve never fully realised that

before.”

The waitress arrived with the steaming rabbit dish and a vegetable dish called kapunata, a kind of ratatouille only with lots more capers. The bread was warm.

“Help yourself,” he said.

Lela served herself and passed dishes to Hamish. “Where on earth do we put the serving dishes?”

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“The window ledge behind you.” He pointed. “The rabbit’s delicious.”

For a few moments they ate in companionable silence. Lela hadn’t realised how hungry she was.

“What prompted you to become a merchant banker?” He topped up her wine.

Lela settled back against her chair. “Didn’t your research tell you?”

“I did basic research after I accepted the job, plus checked your niece’s social media site to help me recognise you at the airport.”

“That’s all?” she studied his face.

“While I waited at the airport I checked a few more sites, but you don’t have a presence. The professional sites offered limited info. Twenty-eight, merchant banker with one of the veterans of the financial industry—Western National—a few blocks from my Sydney office. You’re a private person.”

“What about after you met me?” Her audacity astonished her.

Indulging such curiosity was alien to Lela, or had been ruthlessly managed in Sydney where she’d stopped accepting dinner dates with men like Hamish. Virile, rugged men with masterful ways. Men with lips perfectly formed for kissing and eyes that sparkled with temptation. Men who walked away when they learned of her commitment to her family and Sophie.

His eyes rested on her mouth now. Are you, like me, imagining what it would be like to share a kiss?

“I have a whole lot of unanswered questions—about who you are, what makes you tick—but I want you to answer my questions. I want to look into your eyes when you answer me.” He tipped his glass in a silent toast to her.

“I don’t know what to say.” She faltered, feeling heat flooding her cheeks while he repeated her words about Sophie back to her.

Chapter Four

Lela glanced at her watch. Ninety minutes had slipped by. In the company of an attractive man—an attractive man who didn’t have an instant panic attack about her dysfunctional family—she’d forgotten where she was and why she was here. The waitress removed the plates and offered them dessert menus.

“I can recommend the Kannoli Tar-Irkotta. It’s similar to Sicilian cannoli.” Hamish glanced up from the menu.

“With a coffee,” Lela agreed. “Have you actually seen a Carmen Miranda movie?” She welcomed the freedom to tease.

“I told you, Granddad was the fan.” He grinned. “Although it was touch-and-go between her and Audrey Hepburn.”

“Her I do remember. I wanted just a smidgeon of her elegance. Aunty blamed body-contact sport for my lack of grace.”

“What did you play?”

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“Soccer. I wanted to keep up with my brothers.”

“Lots of grace in soccer. Look at Hayley Raso or Sam Kerr.”

Talking to him about neutral topics in a neutral location was a moment in time, a simple pleasure. Now, finishing the last of their wine and with a coffee coming, Lela studied him across the table.

“I bet you checked on me,” he teased. “But were your searches driven by necessity or interest?”

Interest was a very tame word for Lela’s reaction to him, but she wasn’t bold enough to tell any man he fascinated her. Beyond the stimulation to her mind, being the focus of his attention made her pulse race and her nerves skitter with anticipation.

“I did some checking,” she hesitated.

The waitress returned with their desserts and coffees.

“Thank you,” he murmured. “Don’t keep me in suspense. What did you find?”

The subtle scent of him had teased her senses during the meal, a spicy undertone to the aromas of the sumptuous feast. His deep drawl had rolled over her in a drugging wave, by turns raunchy then liquid honey. The warmth of his smile embraced her, the fine lines fanning out from the corners of his eyes hypnotising her with the life and laughter they represented.

“I recognised your name.”

“I’m flattered.”

“You’re a complex character.” Lela’s professional curiosity was natural and expected. Admitting to it wouldn’t tell him more about her than he already knew. Given how they’d been thrust together anyone would do some google snooping.

“So are you.” He smiled over his glass.

Complex was better than tough, which had been thrown at her more than once. Complex suggested an interest in understanding her, and his interest caused her to stumble emotionally. “You have a flourishing legal practice, plus you do pro bono work.”

“A lot of legal practices operate like that.”

“But a lot of them don’t also have foundation partners who devote a lot of their own time to comparative law, to the intricacies of international agreements on the rights of the child. Where does that come from?”

“My dad was your standard GP. A doctor in a suburban general practice. Mum worked in family services. Pro bono work was something he did—they both did. No big deal. You can give, so you do. And truth be told, there’s no major inconvenience to me.”

“You’re making it sound like it’s nothing.”

“It’s about being a member of society, being able to give something back.” Easy to see why people trusted Hamish MacGregor.

“That’s not the bit that’s complicated.” Her senses of smell, sound and sight were sharper and more attuned to Hamish than to any man she’d known.

“Mum became involved in a few cases where there’d been inter-country marriages. In one case, about twenty years ago, the marriage went wrong, and one partner decided to take the children back to their country and disappear.”

“I’ve seen stories of cases that made the press.” She paused. “I read one a few months ago. And yes, it was one of yours,” Lela added in response to his raised eyebrow.

“The devastation and loss for the parent left behind is crippling, whether or not they ever get to see their children again.”

“You’re working on stopping it.”

* * *

HAMISH SURE AS HELL welcomed her interest. “Mum sent me off to university, saying that if I could improve those laws, I’d be doing something useful.”

“Is your mum your biggest fan?” she teased.

“Parents tend to think their kids are brilliant.” He could have kicked himself when the light died out of her eyes. From what Hamish was learning, Giovanni Vella had been at odds with his daughter since she was a child. The old man clearly respected Lela’s tenacity, intelligence and resourcefulness, otherwise he wouldn’t have tried to link Hamish up with her. But there was a strong chance Vella had never told Lela she was loved. Unforgivable in Hamish’s book.

“Did you call in to Marty’s charity this morning before I met you?” he asked. She ignored him, concentrating on her glass, tipping it to watch the wine swirl gently in

the bottom of the crystal, so Hamish pushed harder. “Someone there told you about Marty. You’d lined them up to help you before I met you at the airport.”

“How’d you work that out?” She placed her glass on the table and leaned on her elbows.

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“Your reaction when Marty mentioned the agency specialises in working with kids in trouble.

“A colleague in Sydney recommended it.”

“What are they doing for you?” Hamish held his breath, waiting for her answer.

“Putting out the word through their contacts across the islands.” She abandoned her earlier wariness in a rush. “Letting Sophie know how I can be contacted.”

His immediate attraction to Lela had disturbed Hamish, not only because technically she was his employer’s daughter and covered by the same rules as his other clients, but because, since Olivia’s murder by the estranged husband of a client of Hamish’s, he’d refused to allow space in his life for romantic entanglement. Earning Lela’s trust was more exquisite than the first bite of the Kannoli, awakening senses frozen in time. “When were you going to tell me?”

“I’m not sure I was.” She was underestimating herself.

“And now?”

“How is now different?” She steeped her hands before her mouth. To silence herself?

“You know how. Batting your eyelashes might distract some of your colleagues, but it won’t mislead me into thinking you’re stupid.” The punch she packed was undeniable—woman plus warrior. Discovering he wasn’t immune was a shock to his ordered existence. “In simple terms—the charity you visited this morning vouched

for Marty and indirectly vouched for you. Just as Marty vouched for me. You want Marty's information, and I want whatever you get from the charity."

"You won't share if I don't?" She was a cool negotiator.

Who knew negotiating with Ms. Lela Vella, merchant banker, would be such a turn-on? Hamish toasted her with his glass.

"Are you calling my bluff, MacGregor?" Her eyes narrowed.

"Time to stop playing games. You know who I am, what I do. I've accepted your father's contract because Sophie is vulnerable, but that doesn't mean I follow orders blindly. I intend to find her."

"So do I."

"Then I'd say we're working together." He sat back in his seat.

"For the short term."

"That's good enough for now. By the way, my name is Hamish."

"I'm Lela." She stuck out a hand. "But I don't mind Miranda—on occasion." Her dimple was the invitation to be friends.

* * *

A FULL MOON HUNG LOW over Marsamxett Harbour. Its soft light surrounded them, settling like an invisible cloak across Lela's shoulders. They strolled down Great Siege Road towards the hotel. His arm occasionally brushed against hers, an escalating torment. Suspense and excitement, a tantalising taste of what could be if

they were two people who'd been introduced by a friend. Two people who had the freedom to explore each other. If she was a woman who knew how to tell a man she admired his work, liked him, and—to her surprise—was deliciously attracted to him.

Such wayward thoughts for a woman in Malta on a mission. Lela's total focus should be on finding Sophie. Just as every plan she'd made since Sophie joined the Vella household had factored in its impact on Sophie. Lela's current plan was to move into an apartment after Sophie's eighteenth birthday. Not far from home, but far enough, her promise to herself and Mari fulfilled. There'd been no chance to tell Sophie before her flight, that Lela had started to make plans for herself. Now the magic of the moonlit stroll with Hamish anticipated her independence and offered romance.

“Penny for your thoughts?”

“What is it about you, MacGregor, that has me telling you things I planned to keep to myself?”

“Can't you guess?”

In the half-light, Lela imagined his mouth relaxing into a grin, crinkles forming around his gorgeous eyes, his expression turning from serious listener to playful companion. “I'm assuming it's jet lag or some weird cultural dislocation, unless you're admitting you practise voodoo?” She refused to accept it had anything to do with his charm, or the fact that she hadn't been able to work out a way around it since he'd ambushed her at the airport.

“We've established some common interests.” He gave her a sideways look, a hint of mischief in the tilt of his head. “Then there's the mutual attraction.”

Drawing a deep breath, she found her nostrils filling with the soft perfume of the night and the faintest hint of his comforting essence, making her exhalation shaky.

“We barely know each other,” she protested.

“That’s irrelevant. Don’t tell me you didn’t take an instant dislike to that officious young woman who accosted us coming in the back entrance this afternoon, because I won’t believe you.”

“That’s different.”

“You mean it suits you to think it’s different. Mutual attraction can be ignored, acted on, or developed.”

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“How very rational of you.” His effect on Lela wasn’t rational; it was ... disturbing.

“You don’t like lawyers.” He paused at the top of the Grand Excelsior’s eighty-nine steps. “How very irrational of you.”

“That’s not what I said.” She came to a halt. How had they moved from mutual attraction to her opinion of lawyers? “I know quite a few lawyers.”

He remained silent.

“I appreciate that you ...” Lela corrected herself, “that lawyers generally have to develop a thick skin, a studied neutrality to show you have an open mind, so you can take on any case that’s presented to you.” If she’d blundered, she might as well finish. “I find it comes across as fake, a superficial veneer of interest, of pleasantness that’s required in your professional life and unfortunately seeps into personal encounters.”

“Don’t worry about my feelings.”

“We just finished agreeing I tell you things I shouldn’t.”

He took a step closer, while she took a step back into the shadows of the entrance gates, and found the stone pillar cool against her back.

“Tell me, Miranda”—his nickname for her emerged on a soft growl, sending tingles down her spine—“whether you think I have a slick, superficial persona that’s seeped into my personal encounters?”

“Hamish? MacGregor? Shouldn’t we start down the steps?”

“I like it here. In the night-dappled light.” He rested his hands at her waist, held them there while his eyes asked a wordless question. She raised her hands to his forearms. Satisfied with her answer, he simply gathered her in. As if she were a precious object he wanted to hold. “Malta has rules. It’s mandatory to kiss by moonlight,” he murmured, before dropping his head to find her mouth. His kiss—a gentle exploration laid siege to her soul.

She blamed the moonlight. She wrapped her arms around him, needing the solid feel of him when her body went into freefall. Heat pumped through her, scattering reason, so that in deepening the kiss he also soothed her, arousing and easing her rising need.

Defying logic.

I don’t want logic.

Her body trembled with pleasure. She craved the taste of him, man mixed with the sweetness of their after-dinner liqueur and pungent black coffee. Her senses filled with him, and she found flavour, more than taste. The heady concoction scrambled her brains, releasing inhibitions she’d relied on as unbreachable protection.

“I always follow the rules,” she murmured.

“No, you don’t.” Gently, he traced the line of her jaw, his touch intimate, springing a lock on her closely guarded heart. With her resistance melting away, she reached for him again, drawing him closer, until she was sandwiched between him and the pillar. Want, surrounded by need, while her blood bubbled and sparks shot through her. She surrendered to the thrill of the unknown.

When he released her mouth, she moaned her loss, rising on her toes to recapture his,

sliding her tongue over his lips—to tease, to tempt his plunder. His mouth opened, and he took them both under. Admiration and liking hadn't prepared Lela for this moment when every tendon in her body strained towards him.

“More please.” Lela welcomed his hands sliding over her shoulders, one binding her to him, while the other traced her breast, stroking, arousing. Floating, while simultaneously grounded in the moment, feather-light wonder and grinding need.

Yearning to touch skin she knew would be warm, she slid her hands under his shirt, gasping at the first touch of smooth, hard flesh. Her fingers trailed across his taut midriff. His indrawn breath satisfied a primitive need in her to arouse in return.

Why didn't my girlfriends tell me desire is so empowering?

Dazed—dazzled—she sank limply against him, relying on his strength to keep her upright, them both upright. Her limbs were heavy, at once languid and wanton.

“I want more too.” A husky plea against her ear, the bulge of his cock nestled between them.

Stunned, Lela drew back, her breathing shallow. His hands steadied her, and his gaze held hers for long moments. Neither of them moved, as if movement would snap the control he was exercising, the control she was seeking.

He took her hand to descend the final flights of stairs. “I think we can agree the attraction's mutual,” he said softly.

LELA WELCOMED THE SHAFTS of light slipping through the slit of not-quite-closed curtains. The dawn heralded a new day, permission to slide out of bed and do

something other than chase her thoughts as she had for the last few hours. Thoughts, dreams or fantasies, they sent licks of delight through her, energising her.

Confusing me.

A smile curved her lips when she caught sight of herself in the large mirror opposite the bed. Raising a hand to her mouth, she traced a finger over her lips, as Hamish had. The surge of heat through her mimicked the arousal he'd enticed from her. A woman desired. She did a little dance on the spot.

In his arms she'd stopped thinking, a weakness she rarely allowed herself. Sophie's well-being had been her focus for more years than she could remember.

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The freedom to be and feel without considering consequences was a shiny temptation. Hamish, with his perception and his integrity wrapped in a gorgeous package, was a shiny temptation. The enormity of knowing such a man desired her sizzled through her, creating a kaleidoscope of colours freeing her mind to soar.

When he'd looked at her, heat was a wildfire inside her. An all-engulfing, demanding fire that making love to him might quench or stoke higher. She'd welcome both.

The shocking revelation had her dropping back onto the side of the bed and scrambling to bring order to her jumbled head. She'd reached a truce with Hamish, an agreement to share information to find Sophie.

Sophie had to remain her primary goal.

* * *

THE HOPEFUL LIGHT OF dawn called to Hamish. By mid-morning the sun would be high, the sky a shattering blue, and the heat unforgiving. He stood on his balcony, undecided about a swim, when Lela emerged from a side door and crossed to the pool.

Her swimming costume was modest, but the memory of her abandoned and willing in his arms shot a bolt of lust to his loins. Long sleepless hours hadn't given him the answer to why he'd broken his own rules on not mixing business and pleasure.

Awakening a goddess? That was a stupid fancy.

Lela was like Shakespeare's Miranda, inexperienced in sexual games, innocent of kisses and where they might lead. Still, the spell she wove was dangerous. Or was he reading her all wrong? Sexually inexperienced but emotionally mature, hers was the passion of a woman who understood herself and her choices—not an innocent. She undermined his self-control and imperilled the vow he'd made after Olivia's death not to get close to another woman. Putting Lela in danger was untenable.

Hamish guessed Lela's reaction to him was new territory for her, just as his desire to abandon the contract he'd accepted—regardless of the rights or wrongs of the case—and throw his weight behind her was alien to him. Mouthing clichés about moonlight and kissing wasn't his usual style, but walking back to the hotel beside her, her scent had been more intoxicating than the wine he'd shared with her. Tantalising hints of what her skin would be like to touch tempted him when her arm had briefly brushed against his—pure silk.

Wanting to tell her, to show her she was beautiful was no excuse.

Now, watching her slip into the pool, he let out a small groan, envying the water caressing her skin, the small eddies embracing her with her first strokes. His reaction shook him to the core, leaving him needy, protective, and strangely invincible.

Giving in to the compulsion to join her, he reached the pool's edge in mere minutes. She'd pulled up at the other end, assessing him with those olive-dark eyes that held secrets he'd started to learn. Stripping off his shirt, he dived in, swimming beside her, matching her rhythm for twenty minutes.

"We need to talk about last night," he said.

Her arm splashed awkwardly, but she completed another lap before stopping. Apologising was the safest option—moonlit night, a little too much wine, then he'd steer them back to the professional plane he should have kept to. His personal, not

just his professional, ethical standards demanded he not act further on this attraction.

Her existence brought his ethics and desire into conflict.

Every sane, reasoned thought was wiped from his mind when Lela turned to him.

“I like the costume.” He’d braced his arms on either side of her, not touching her, but trying to establish a little privacy. She wrapped her hands around his forearms, her gentle touch sharpening his hunger for her. Hamish fought for the distance he’d told himself they needed to finish this job.

“Same one as yesterday. I bought it at the hotel shop. I didn’t think to bring one with me.” She spoke quickly. “I thought swimming would banish the last of my jet lag.”

“Did it?” He tried to summon the words he’d played over in his head in the hotel room. Kind words, step-back-from-the-precipice words.

“What happened last night was out of character for me,” she blurted.

“Don’t you share friendly kisses?” Hamish congratulated himself for not bobbling the word “friendly.”

“Rarely. And we shared more than a kiss.” She didn’t shy away from the truth. She had no artifice—she didn’t seek to evade, pretend or deceive in this most intimate conversation.

There was no room in his life for someone as crazy brave as her.

No room in my life for anyone. Not after Olivia.

Carefree happiness, the belief he could protect anyone he loved, had also been

casualties on the violent day Olivia had died.

“We shared a lovely meal, enjoyed each other’s company and ended the evening as consenting adults often do, with a chaste kiss.” Chaste—hell—I’m an idiot.

He’d intended to go slower last night, to sample her mouth the first time, because he liked the look of it, craved a taste of it, believed he was in control. Her sweetness leaked straight into a sugar addiction that blew his head off. He hadn’t been able to get enough of the taste of her. And the feel. She was lightning in his hands—bright, fast, dangerous—and his hands had raced everywhere, wanting to absorb her silky softness through his fingertips.

“It wasn’t chaste.” Each unconscious brush of her legs against his undermined his determination to push her away.

“Chaste compared to what I wanted to do to you,” he admitted defeat, “to what we wanted to do to each other.” Like any addict, he imagined what it would be like to kiss her again, to hold her delicious body against his own. He knew now she fitted perfectly, that her softness would mould against his hardness.

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Would she welcome his hands caressing her, binding her to him? Would she moan in pleasure when his mouth traced the line of her jaw, whispered behind her ear, became tangled in the wet tendrils of hair that clung to her neck?

“You don’t pull your punches, do you?” Her eyes opened wide, not with the shock Hamish expected, but with a more complex emotion. Regret?

“Neither do you. If the currency is to be brutal honesty, I want you in my bed.” He abandoned his good intentions. Her searing honesty caught him by the balls and squeezed his heart. He and Olivia hadn’t managed honesty at the end; he missed the intimacy that came with honesty.

“This is happening too fast.”

“How fast do you want to go?”

“I don’t know,” she stammered. “That’s not true.”

“I’m happy to go at your pace.” He brushed his lips across her damp forehead. The damndest thing was she embodied hope—for too long in short supply in his life. “But in case you haven’t noticed, you’re holding on to me, Miranda.”

* * *

LOWERING HER GAZE, Lela saw her hold on his arms was firm, that she’d angled herself into the V of his body created by his posture, legs apart to steady them both.

If a kiss was out of character, how did Lela describe her body's unconscious response to him? Desire shimmered through her, and she wallowed in the sensation of her body awakening. She let hunger roll through her like a wave, let herself lean against his wet, muscular male body. Hamish, a man who seemed to understand her choices.

"You make me impatient to experience." She lifted a hand to his chin, drawing his face towards hers to brush her lips across his mouth, once, twice, lighter than a butterfly before diving under his arm and surfacing a few feet away. "But I can't be sure if that's real or because I'm thrown off-balance by the bizarre situation we're in."

"Brutal honesty." He slicked back his wet hair, a frown creasing his forehead. "I don't ever mix business with pleasure. I came down here to apologise and put us back on a business footing."

Pulling herself onto the side of the pool, Lela sat facing him, her hair plastered against her head, suddenly self-conscious that her plain one-piece clung to every curve. "It's a principle I respect." She smiled. "And I admire the integrity behind your decision."

He groaned. "Do you know that dimple of yours is a killer?"

In a single action, she rose to her feet and collected her towel, wrapping it around herself to hide her thoughts as well as her body from him. "I don't need your apology, Hamish. I could have stepped away last night. But finding Sophie is the reason we're spending time together. We can't afford to forget that or let ourselves be distracted."

"We finish the job." His mouth twisted.

"Are you coming in?"

From the age of ten, Lela had understood the battle lines between her father and herself. After her mother's death, her father had seen things as black or white, and she could choose family cohesion or independent exile.

She'd walked the fine line with no major slips until her school graduation party. Lela had accepted a date from a boy in her class. She'd dressed up, he'd picked her up, they'd had a comparatively innocent night out, a few stolen kisses behind the school hall, a few fumbles, enough inexperienced stroking of her breasts to stir the woman in her and make her dream of greater intimacy. The boy had delivered her to her front doorstep, and, in case they were being watched, planted an innocent kiss on her cheek. They'd giggled and made tentative plans for a future meeting.

Lela had opened her front door to find her father, still dressed in his office clothes—a suit and tie, minus the jacket—ready to deal with the next problem in his day: her. Papa had accused her of betraying her family and snapped out a furious ultimatum. Either stop seeing the boy or leave his house that night.

Sophie was seven.

The father who'd bounced a young Carmen on his knee, who'd tickled her when he'd tucked her into bed remained consumed by grief at her mother's death. Despite Papa's treatment of her sister, she'd known he grieved deeply for Mari. But she'd seen fear on his face when he confronted her about kissing a boy. Fear he'd lose her, fear of what that would do to Sophie, to the whole family.

Because she loved him, she wouldn't challenge his dignity or right to make decisions in his own home. In those helpless moments of rage and loneliness—and there were many—she believed life would have been different if her mother had lived. That conviction sustained her.

"I might do a few more laps. Let's meet for breakfast and plan the day."

“Find Sophie?” Her niece was her first, second, and only priority.

“That’s the plan.” He plunged back into the pool.

Over the years, Lela had dated men, progressed far enough to bring them home to meet her family. They’d stopped calling or, the more honest ones, confessed they didn’t want to live a life bound by responsibilities she couldn’t abandon. The blunt subtext being they hadn’t cared enough about her to persist, a hint that no one could.

Hamish was right. She was attracted to him, but the moment wasn’t right. He still kept her father’s secrets. She still needed to know Sophie was safe.

Letting herself into her room, it hit her. Her response to Hamish was different to her dealings with other men. She’d known of Hamish for years, had admired his work and respected his commitment to vulnerable women and children. Hamish appealed to her head and her heart. For the first time in her life, she’d met a man who understood and shared her concern about Sophie.

No wonder Hamish made her body yearn.

Chapter Five

Hamish had chatted with the maître d' in charge of allocating breakfast tables in the dining room. He watched her now, wending her way through tables filled with people until she reached his table for two pressed against a window. He rose to his feet.

“Your guest, sir.” The woman melted into the background.

“You missed this yesterday.” Hamish gestured towards the view. “So, I bagged the best table today.”

“Did you have to fight off a hoard?” Lela slid onto the chair he held for her.

“Nuh.” He shrugged. “Just used my best negotiating skills. When I arrived, I said I was meeting someone and could wait for a table by the window.”

“What if I’d arrived sooner?” She rested her chin in her hand.

“I’d have moved to Plan B.”

“Plan B?”

“Accepted what was offered.”

“That’s very amenable of you. Couldn’t you throw a tantrum, strut backwards and forwards and demand the best in an overbearing and loud voice?” She snapped her fingers in the air as if to command attention.

“Is that what your father does?”

“Papa makes sure he’s known where he’s going, so the way is paved in advance.”

“Then it’s the merchant banking crowd who are rude and arrogant.” He pointed a finger at her in a gotcha gesture.

She shook her head, refusing to answer.

“I never did have a high opinion of them.”

“Tell me something I don’t know.” She looked around with interest. “What’s the deal?”

“A buffet. You’ll have to wait on yourself.”

“I like making my own choices.”

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“I’ve already worked that out,” Hamish said. She was an illicit sweet when he was on the strictest diet. Knowing family loyalty not self-indulgence was her guiding principle in making her choices was a big part of her appeal. “Tea or coffee, if they ask while you’re away?”

“Tea, thank you. Lady Grey if they have it. And some water.”

Before she reached the buffet, she’d hailed a stewardess, asked her a question, smiled, then touched the woman’s arm in thanks before moving to another section of the room. Hamish bet she didn’t ever shout or throw tantrums. With what he’d learned in a short time, he bet she’d given long and hard consideration to people, how she wanted to interact with them, how best to deflect their curiosity.

“Tea’s coming.” He glanced at her plate. “Just cereal and fresh fruit?”

“The fruit selection is irresistible.” While she ate, she asked questions about the names of the different buildings she could see from the window.

“Ready to discuss business?” Hamish asked.

“Let me order another pot of tea first.” She raised the teapot in one hand, pointed to it with the other. A waitress nodded.

Beautiful hands. Ambushed by her serious eyes, he hadn’t noticed those long, elegant fingers until he’d had them on him. Her nails were painted with a translucent sheen. Subtle, like her clothing. She could blend with any group, had deliberately chosen camouflage again today.

Lela Vella consciously duped onlookers. Not a chameleon; she didn't change who she was, just didn't reveal herself to casual observers.

"Have you heard from Marty?" She settled back in her chair with a fresh cup of the delicately flavoured tea.

"Not this morning." A different perfume teased Hamish's senses today, elusive but equally alluring, and he fought to resist its pull on his concentration. When she leaned forward to rest her chin on her cupped hand a second time, he drew a long steadying breath. With her simple act, he could believe there was no one in the world except him. "I updated your father," he continued, breaking out in a sweat. "He's concerned about his granddaughter."

"Papa loves her," she replied. "Do you intend to report all our conversations to him?"

Her ability to focus absolutely was mesmerising. If she'd been Hamish's banker, he'd have handed over every cent he had without a question. Oblivious of her power to distract, yet she used it effortlessly.

"I'll let him know when we locate her, if she's safe, and discuss next steps."

"He isn't interested in her safety." When Hamish raised a disbelieving eyebrow, she amended her statement. "He isn't only interested in her safety. I thought he'd mellowed in recent years, when my brothers and their wives started to have babies. Ultimately, Mari ran away. Maybe that's the trigger—an intolerable challenge to his authority."

"He doesn't like challenges to his authority?"

Raking her hand through her short hair to leave it tousled, and framing her face like a dark, bed-rumpled Botticelli angel, might delay the need for her to give Hamish an

answer, but it drained the blood from his head. His hands formed fists to keep them from pulling her into his arms.

“You’re speaking from experience?” he asked.

“I’ve never moved out of the house.”

“Did he ask you to?” Hamish bet he had.

“He’s issued ultimatums that I’ve accepted. But this time it’s different.”

“How?” He was developing his own theories.

“Neither Sophie nor I are children.”

“But she is vulnerable.” He guessed she’d made plans based on Sophie’s legal age of independence, but life was more complicated than that. “Isn’t that why we’re both here?”

She hesitated, but this morning proved she wouldn’t shy away from difficult questions if they were needed to get to the truth. The flash of hope she’d been unable to hide when Hamish had first said he was looking for her niece, like her decision to set aside their attraction, betrayed her. She’d sacrifice privacy, pride, and her own needs to find Sophie, making it odd that she wouldn’t confront the truth of Sophie’s mental state. Vella had said his daughter was wilfully blind.

“Yes,” she agreed.

Sophie’s vulnerability was the deciding factor in Hamish accepting the case.

“Then how could sharing information with your father compromise Sophie’s well-

being?” Hamish recalled the notes he’d received from Giovanni Vella, the pleas to find his granddaughter and make sure she was safe.

“I part fund a foundation in Sydney that works with young people on the streets, particularly young pregnant women.”

She was like those Russian Matryoshka dolls: you lifted the head off the first and discovered another hidden beneath.

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“Hence the cooperation of the charity here?” He sifted through impressions, snippets of information she’d let slip.

She nodded.

“Your merchant banking funds this foundation?” And Hamish had been accusing her of living the high life.

“Some. Mostly it’s my trust fund. It had the same rules as Sophie’s. I could use it for education from the age of eighteen. It became available when I turned twenty-five.”

“Does your father know about your foundation?”

“Papa’s an inquisitive man.” She dimpled playfully. “I imagine he’s made inquiries about where my money goes.”

“You’re telling me he spies on you!”

“Spying has such unpleasant connotations. Papa worries I’ll be targeted by scams, or conmen ...”

“Or charities for young pregnant women,” Hamish concluded. “Why do you tolerate his interference?”

“Compromise is essential in any relationship, if you want to make it work. I want to make my relationship with Papa work.” Growing up in her father’s house had delivered her a master class in negotiation. “But the foundation has taught me there

are many degrees of give and take.”

“What else has it taught you?”

“That not all relationships fizzle out as Mari and Dean’s did.”

“Have you ever been threatened because of your work there?” Hamish was on her father’s side about keeping her safe.

“Not directly. We don’t deal with custody matters, but I’ve seen the impact of coercive control on very young women.” She stared into the distance, her focus on something or someone else. “It’s akin to terrorism.”

Her word choice told him she understood on a visceral level.

“I don’t disagree. My Sydney office isn’t far from where that café siege took place a few years ago.”

“Innocent bystanders died that day.”

“On average one woman a week is killed by a partner in Australia.” He huffed out a breath. “But yeah, some of those café deaths were the result of friendly fire. I volunteered to be part of a consultation group afterwards.”

“To plan for another attack?”

She wasn’t blind to the risks, even with Australia’s gun laws.

“To put in place mechanisms that might save lives. Fortunately, there’s been nothing since.” He hesitated. “Your father didn’t tell me about your work with the foundation.” The facts Hamish hadn’t been given were starting to pile up.

“Papa and I are dancing around each other at this stage. And we’re both in the dark. I expect you to share every piece of information you find with Papa. I’d like to keep the information I uncover between us for now.”

“You won’t share what you find with him?” Old man Vella had asked Hamish not to share and had fed him half-truths.

“I’ll tell him she’s safe. I’ll tell him why she ran away—beyond that, I don’t have answers.”

“Let’s go back to the beginning. Your father painted a picture of Peter as a youthful Svengali, callously exploiting Sophie—basically a seduction and ransom scam.” Giovanni Vella wasn’t a fool, but Hamish was starting to wonder if the old man had taken him for one. Vella hadn’t admitted a concern about pregnancy in any of his correspondence. “Pregnancy makes it an even bigger deal.”

“I’m afraid he wants to destroy Peter.” She scrunched up her nose.

“If she’s pregnant I can understand his rage. On the most generous assessment that would make Peter Debrincat utterly irresponsible. There’s no need to get pregnant in this day and age.”

“Sophie’s not a cipher. If she’s pregnant, it’s a conscious decision,” she hit back. “People in love often think having a baby makes the perfect unit—creating family.”

Creating family. The words ambushed him. Hamish and Olivia had waited two years. She’d been pregnant when the abusive husband of one of Hamish’s clients had sought revenge, executing her and their unborn child. The killer had stalked Olivia, known she was pregnant. Pay attention, you idiot, but his mind had gone blank. “Yesterday you told me they were too young to marry.”

“Theyare, but if she’s pregnant, we need to deal with it.”

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“It makes more sense to grow up a bit, get a job first, make sure you can provide some financial and physical security.” Hamish was babbling about old dreams, and cursed himself for signalling something he had no intention of explaining. Child custody could be a deadly game, with violent male partners keen to punish their wives and children if they tried to flee. Except Olivia became the target, and his refusal to step away from a case had placed her in that diabolical position.

“Are those your plans?” She was scanning his face, clearly puzzled by his brutal intensity.

“Channelling the voice of reason and maturity.” For five years he’d lived with the consequences of not taking steps to mitigate the risk to his wife and unborn child, and he’d made a personal promise never to put another woman in the same position, never to get close enough to another woman for it to be a possibility.

He’d never discussed Olivia’s death and his vow with anyone, yet Lela tempted him to share those lost dreams with her. Lela would never use a confidence as a weapon. “I’m prepared to bet your father would expect you, if not me, to include youth agencies in the search.”

“Maybe Papa expected me to bow to force majeure and do what you said?”

“Yeah. Like that’s going to happen.” He forced a smile, while she continued to search his face for clues to his mood. But his jaw ached, and his face had settled into a Botox-induced rictus long before she released him from her scrutiny. “Would he think you helped her run away?”

“I doubt it, but Papa doesn’t trust me to follow his songbook. You were here waiting for me. A pre-emptive strike, conveniently located in the same hotel and able to monitor my every move.”

“Why would he suggest you help me if he doesn’t trust you?”

“In this mood, Papa would use anyone or anything in the search if he thought it would succeed.” She worried her father was prosecuting old battles, but Hamish needed more evidence.

Old man Vella had presented a convincing case for his concern and pursuit. Lela’s fathomless eyes, halo of hair, and seductive tones tugged at him, but he couldn’t dismiss the possibility she carried scars from the multiple tragedies she’d experienced in such swift succession. Can you see your niece’s situation clearly? “Could what happened to your sister be prejudicing you unfairly in Sophie’s case?”

“It’s a possibility you have to consider. It’s one of the reasons you and I have a truce, not a partnership,” she said.

“Do you always state the rules of engagement?”

“I try to.” And her irrepressible dimple peeped through, bewitching him. Lucky she’d called a halt this morning because his will had melted in the sun. “I hate it when Papa plays games.”

Hamish hated any gameplaying in relationships. And, to be honest, he’d shied away from thinking about Olivia’s flaws, the mistakes he’d made—she’d made—they’d made after her murder. Grief had smothered other emotions.

“Navigating my way through family conflict’s my bread and better.” Could he claim that? Olivia had ignored his request not to go out alone that day, seeing an

opportunity to wean him off his domestic violence caseload. Would Lela have listened to his warnings and taken basic precautions to protect herself and her baby? “You have to trust me on this.”

“Working on it.” She didn’t say things she didn’t believe.

Hamish checked his phone’s caller ID. “Marty. He might have something for us.” He walked a few metres away from the table to ensure he wouldn’t be overheard by other diners.

* * *

LELA GAZED OUT THE wall of windows. The swimming pool, empty just after dawn except for herself and Hamish, now bustled with activity. The floor-to-ceiling glass provided an uninterrupted view of the sun seekers below, those energetic, semi-dressed figures hustling for the best positions, claiming lounges and towels before they could be gazumped by later arrivals.

Envy, an emotion she rarely gave space to, shivered up her spine. Roasting herself in the furnace-like heat didn’t appeal, but she envied the holidaymakers’ untroubled existence. They could surrender to an open sky, cool water, achingly long days, filled with romance, discovery, but more enticingly—glorious irresponsibility.

Mari’s death did haunt her. If Lela hadn’t been so determined to fight her father, to keep the memories of her mother and sister alive, would life have been different? She’d started her foundation to turn the negative merry-go-round in her head into positive action. An organisation that picked up young people with nowhere to go and tried to provide some stability for them. Sophie was jealous of the time Lela gave to strangers.

Lela could admit that now. Pointless jealousy because Sophie wanted Lela hanging

around less and less, wanted more time out with her friends, but she'd wanted Lela at her beck. Was that Lela's fault too?

"First, second, and only priority." For now.

Could Sophie have become pregnant as payback?

Ironically, given her chaste lifestyle that Papa would waste a second blaming Lela for Sophie having a sexual relationship. All those years when she'd combed books on parenting and pop psychology in an effort to understand and make the right choices for her niece, she'd come to some stark conclusions. The draconian control exercised by Papa and Auntie was more likely to incite mutiny. But she'd never be able to convince them their rigidity was a classic trigger for disobedience.

"Marty has found Debrincat's aunt." Hamish tucked his phone back in his pocket. "She's prepared to talk to us."

"How did he describe us?"

"I told Marty to say Sophie's aunt would like to see her."

"You planning on remaining in the car?" Maybe that explained her unexpected response to him—the rhythm of their truce.

"She's an elderly Maltese woman. She'd expect a man to accompany you on such business," he deadpanned.

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“That’s the stereotype we’re trying to shake, macho man, not reinforce. Women can’t do anything without a man at their side.” No man had made Lela tremble inside, made her feel this overwhelming desire to reach out and touch him, take him. Last night and now—a yearning, which hit without warning. She needed to fight the slow roll of need turning her bones to water when she was near him.

“I’m aware women can do anything themselves. However, sometimes accepting help, accepting protection is not a weakness.” An undercurrent in his voice alerted Lela. Another conversation where the thread started with a darker story. He’d withdrawn in the same way when they’d digressed into the topic of babies making a family. Had he known a woman who’d insisted on doing something by herself, and it had gone horribly wrong?

“A learned response,” she apologised. “Fighting Papa’s views of how a good Maltese woman should behave has become a habit. Especially because I know he’s a few decades out of touch with how Maltese women behave.”

“From my experience, the gender balance here in Malta is more nuanced. You’re the one who emphasised the importance of family to Maltese people.” The urbane and always-in-control Hamish ran his hands through his neat hair, mussing it, and the improbable gesture disarmed her.

She resisted the urge to comfort him, as he’d comforted her last night, to finger-comb his dishevelled locks back into order for him. Instinct told her a casual touch wouldn’t ease the memory she’d sparked. But it could be enough to catapult them back to where they’d been in the pool this morning, when each of them had struggled to find a path between duty and desire.

“Mariella Debrincat is likely to respond to a solid front.” His phone buzzed again. “That’ll be Marty with an appointment for later today. I could go alone.”

“Now you’re being deliberately provocative.” Lela knew Mariella was a common Maltese name, still it forged a connection to know Sophie’s mother, Mari—short for Mariella—and Peter’s aunt shared the same first name.

“I said we were coming.”

“If I went alone, I could tell you what I discover.” She discovered she liked teasing him.

“Ditto.” He stood watching her, a grin twisting his mouth. “Mariella Debrincat is expecting a united front.”

“Worth a try.”

LELA SPOTTED HAMISH when she exited the hotel. He was checking his phone, leaning negligently against the rental car parked in the shade to one side of the entrance. A reminder his work in Sydney backed up while they searched for Sophie.

He looked up, as if he sensed her arrival, then pushed his long frame away from the car, and, for an instant, her heart stalled. He was gorgeous. Dressed in a classic grey suit, crafted by a master. Her gaze was once again drawn to his tie—Salvador Dali melting clocks, incorporating the stunning russets, blues and golds of the original masterpiece. The weather was hot enough to melt metal.

An elegant crusader for the rights of children.

“You dressed for the part,” he said, running an appraising eye over her navy suit and white blouse.

“Looks like we both had the same idea.” Lela waited until he’d settled in the driver’s seat before speaking. “Although your tie would incite a riot where I work.”

“I rest my case on the narrow-mindedness of bankers.”

“Bankers don’t wear watches like that either.”

“You like it?” He turned his wrist to check the face of his watch, where the spider continued its steady march with each second.

“Like the tie, it catches the eye.”

“Mothers are often reluctant to let small children out of their sight when they’re running for their lives. Everyone’s unsettled in that first interview.” He pressed the ignition. “A spider helps break the ice.”

“A nice touch.” It was a thinking-outside-the-square touch, reassuring Lela about how he’d deal with Sophie. Hamish said his interest in child custody had been triggered by his parents’ work. His commitment went beyond professional interest. She sensed it was both a vocation and a duty. Duty wasn’t always a happy place. “You’re an unlikely rebel.”

“I’m not a rebel.” His gaze shifted to hers, surprised.

“Your eye-catching ties and quirky watch don’t match the usual buttoned-down conservative.” They did add another endearing dimension to Hamish MacGregor.

“Your watch, while beautiful, is old-fashioned.”

“It was Mama’s.” She brushed a gentle finger across the face. “Then Mari’s.”

He squeezed her knee briefly in silent comfort. “Mrs. Debrincat lives beyond Paola.”
He made a left-hand turn.

“Sounds familiar.” She studied her surroundings for a few kilometres. “I expected to recognise a few landmarks from my trip from the airport, but I can’t identify a thing.”

“Paola is the closest town to the Hypogeum, possibly Malta’s most famous archaeological site, and that’s saying something. The country’s littered with ancient ruins.”

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“Have you been?” She stopped studying the countryside and looked at him.

“Not yet, but I did take the time to visit the museum in Valletta on my first trip here to see the Sleeping Lady.”

“Sleeping Lady?”

“You don’t know about the Sleeping Lady?” he asked with mock horror.

“Cut the crap, Hamish. I’m not here to tick off the ten top spots in Malta, and you know it.”

“Light conversation might ease any embarrassment from this morning’s swim.” His rich rhythmic rumble shivered down her spine.

“I’m not embarrassed. Overwhelmed, confused, fascinated, and we don’t have the energy for”—she waved a hand in a circular motion—“dallying when Sophie’s our focus.”

“I could find some.” He grinned. “Okay, let’s play tourist. The Sleeping Lady was found in the Hypogeum. It’s the only known prehistoric underground temple in the world and, since they’ve realised its significance, they control entry, letting in eighty heavily supervised people a day, about ten at a time. They don’t know much about her, except she’s got great curves and exudes mystery. Like you.”

“No mystery, just a woman with a purpose.” Although his compliment caused Lela’s heart to stutter. “I rang the director of the charity and told her my colleague was lucky

enough to know Martin Azzopardi, and he'd set us up with Mrs. Debrincat."

"Did she have anything?"

"A young couple on the Gozo ferry the day after Sophie and Peter would have arrived here. They had their own car. Gozo's the second island, isn't it?"

"Smaller, not as developed. A better place to hide?" he mused.

"If they really wanted to hide, it would have been easier in Australia."

"Hiding in plain sight? But Peter has that capacity here."

His logic was undeniable. If Peter's family was one of the most influential on the island, the couple could just disappear.

* * *

GIVEN HIS LINE OF WORK, Hamish had focused on potential kidnapping and illegal movement across borders. And the likelihood that while Sophie might not fully understand the consequences of what she was doing—even if she'd been a willing participant—that she might be treating it like a great adventure. That was preferable to her being terrified.

Lela had concentrated on her being with a doting boyfriend, possibly pregnant, and distrusting her family's support. There were flaws in her logic, given her earlier confidence in Peter, but her sister's history would make her more likely than most to consider worst-case scenarios for a teenage pregnancy.

"Are you worried Peter will abandon her?" A slew of new questions ricocheted through his mind.

She avoided the question. “The charity has an extensive information network, links with doctors, social service agencies and tourist dives, and can get a message out pretty quickly that a young girl is missing, and her family are concerned.”

“Your Plan A?”

She’d been staring out at the view, but turned to him. “Now it’s Plan B. Since they’re behaving like Hansel and Gretel and dropping breadcrumbs along the path. There’s every chance Peter’s aunt will supply the missing piece of the puzzle.”

“You didn’t have to tell me.”

“We agreed on a truce.” Simple reinforcement of the growing evidence of her straight dealing. Her words eased an ache in his bones, lodged there since Olivia’s decision to ignore his advice. Gameplaying destroyed relationships. Olivia’s had sabotaged her and Hamish’s. “Peter’s not another Dean,” she added.

When Lela agreed to cooperate, she gave her heart and mind to the task. Hamish’s physical attraction was easily explained—she was quite simply stunning. His emotional reaction was more dangerous than any attraction. He was shaken to his core with a longing he’d told himself he had no right to ever feel again while he continued to work in his chosen field.

Lela had arrived in Malta with a far greater chance of reaching places where people sought to hide than Hamish had. Her father could have left this exercise entirely up to her, if he knew his daughter.

He did know her!

Lela was right. Giovanni Vella didn’t trust her to be his emissary, to carry out his instructions to the letter. He, MacGregor, had been hired to ride shotgun on her. To

make sure that whoever found Sophie first, the old man's wishes triumphed. Hamish's suspicions of Papa Vella's motives were growing.

"I rang your father last night—told him we'd made contact with Peter's family. He repeated his instructions, stressed she was underage, his responsibility, and that he wanted her home."

"Did you expect something different?"

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“I asked him if he’d argued with Sophie, had some sort of disagreement to prompt her flight. He”—Hamish lifted a hand and let it fall—“prevaricated.” Hamish was adding to the mental ledger detailing where old man Vella and Lela differed in their stories. Testing each version for reliability, which one of them held proof of the truth.

“One of his skills.” She nodded solemnly.

“He still hasn’t admitted to meeting Peter, or corrected the record on Sophie’s access to her inheritance.” More telling, he wasn’t here. Lela had dropped everything to get here.

“Has Marty given you any more on the Debrincats?”

“This is the shipping side of the family. International business interests. This woman’s husband died a number of years ago. No children, and she’s very close to her nephew, Peter.”

“How did Marty explain you?”

“I’m a friend.”

She snorted.

“You’re still not sure if I’m running surveillance on you.”

“Are you?” She stuck her tongue firmly in her cheek.

“You know I’m not,” he said. It hit him with the joy of a fat drop of water on his tongue after a drought—she lacked guile. “Mistrust is fatal to a truce.”

“I respect our bargain, Hamish.”

“Given our current activity, that’s reassuring.” But Hamish didn’t doubt that if she gave her word, she kept it. Honesty was one of her most appealing qualities.

* * *

THE HOUSE APPEARED shabby and untended from the outside, but Lela was learning solid, golden stonewalls hid many secrets—hanging gardens, comfortable living areas, luxurious fittings, and ageless splendour. The Debrincat house was no exception. Admitted by a man in a dark suit, he invited them to follow him. Once inside, the thickness of the walls muted the noise of the busy street where they’d parked the car. Wealth demanded silence.

Crossing a sunny, sheltered courtyard, Lela followed the man into a room—Hamish on her heels—which might be a library. Two walls were lined with books, and a leather-tooled desk sat in the centre, with an upright chair behind it. Two leather couches were angled towards an ornate fireplace.

She accepted the offer of tea, before the man excused himself. Hamish crossed to a window, while Lela sat on the edge of one of the couches.

“I’m Mariella Debrincat, sorry to have kept you waiting.”

A tiny woman, barely reaching Lela’s shoulder, entered the room. Her appearance reinforced the impression, created by the surroundings, of generations of wealth. Rigorously coiffed hair, an elegant classic dark skirt and silk blouse, and wearing what was almost certainly a Mikimoto pearl necklace. Her English was unaccented,

her mahogany eyes brimming with a sharp intelligence, which put Lela on her guard, even as she rose to her feet. This woman didn't look like any traditional Maltese aunty Lela had met.

The woman smiled, with her hand outstretched. "You must be Lela."

"Yes, I am."

"The resemblance to your niece is quite pronounced."

"You've seen her then?" Relief flooded Lela. She'd clung to her gut feeling that Sophie was safe, but the words dissolved the small knot of fear sitting hard against her ribcage.

"They're both safe." The woman turned to Hamish with an appraising look. "Are you related as well?"

"Mrs. Debrincat, thank you for agreeing to see us." He stepped forward to shake the older woman's hand. "I apologise for any misunderstanding. I'm a friend of Lela's. I didn't think she should come alone. She's been worried."

"Not an agent of Giovanni Vella?" The woman released his hand.

"You must have checked who I am."

The woman considered them both for a few minutes, then, as if she'd seen something, she smiled a second time and invited them both to sit. The manservant returned with a tea tray. "Thank you, Luca. We can manage from here."

A few minutes were spent pouring tea and passing around cups.

“What do you want to know?” Peter’s aunt asked.

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“Are they staying with you?” Lela imagined Sophie pacing upstairs. Why wasn’t she here?

“They stayed the first night. Peter rang me from the taxi on the way from the airport.” Mariella Debrincat chose her words with care.

“You weren’t expecting him?” Hamish was polite.

“My nephew wasn’t due back from Australia for a few more weeks, but he said his friend urgently needed to get to Malta.”

“That doesn’t make sense.” Lela gripped her hands tightly together. Please, she offered a silent prayer, don’t let her be pregnant.

“They are very much in love. People don’t always make sensible decisions when they’re in love.” The older woman looked speculatively from Lela to Hamish again.

“Do you know where they are now?” Would this clever, cautious woman tell Lela?

“They’ve gone to stay with a cousin on Gozo.”

“Gozo.” Lela exchanged looks with Hamish. “Why have they gone there, Mrs. Debrincat?”

“It’s a good place to work and think for the summer. And they’re with family, so I know they’re safe.” The emphasis on the words family and safe puzzled Lela.

“Are Peter’s parents there?” she asked.

“They’re currently overseas. Peter’s mother is my sister.” She rolled a pearl through her fingers. “You could say that in her absence, I’m Peter’s guardian.”

“Except he’s of age.” Hamish re-entered the conversation. “It’s Sophie who’s underage.”

“I checked when they arrived,” answered Peter’s aunt.

“And what did you do about it?” he asked softly.

“Luca arranged to put a bed in my room, where Sophie spent the night.” The older woman refused to be ruffled.

“Isn’t that unusual, when you have so many rooms?” Hamish gestured to the size and luxury of the house. “And to share your bedroom with a stranger seems even more unusual?”

“I knew Sophie’s family would be concerned about her well-being,” she answered with equanimity. “I wanted to be in a position to reassure them should any questions arise.”

“Rather an elaborate precaution, Mrs. Debrincat.”

“Peter’s impulsiveness in bringing Sophie here is the action of youth and love. No one should be punished for that.”

“Perhaps the damage was already done before they arrived?” Hamish probed with rapier precision.

Lela drew in a sharp breath, aghast at his direct attack. The self-possessed old woman merely smiled at him, unfazed and unsurprised by the direction he'd taken.

"She's not expecting a child, if that's what you've been thinking." Mariella Debrincat sipped her tea.

Lela swallowed. Still, her question emerged as a croak. "Are you sure?"

"I asked her, then I separately asked Peter. He's never lied to me. They are young and hot-headed, but not fools." She looked from Lela to Hamish. "Would you like the address of my cousin in Gozo?"

Hamish glanced at her, and Lela nodded. "You're happy for us to see them?"

"There's no justification for burdening these children with ancient animosities," she replied.

"Thank you." He took the slip of paper.

Luca re-appeared. "You rang, madam."

"Please show our guests out."

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Lela rose to her feet. “What ‘ancient animosities’?” She licked her dry lips, willing the Debrincat matriarch to answer her intrusive demand.

“Your mother would have been proud that you took her name. You’re very like her, you know.”

“How do you know I took my mother’s name?” Lela whispered.

“She wrote to me after you were born, telling me about her beautiful Carmen. The strongest of all her babies, she believed.” She smiled at Lela’s surprise. “When Sophie told me her mother was dead and her aunt’s name was Lela, I asked questions.”

“You knew my mother?”

“She was my closest friend when we were children. She sent occasional letters until her death. I was devastated when she moved to Australia to marry your father.”

“My sister, Mariella, was named after you,” said Lela, feeling her way. “Mama loved Papa very much.”

“But she didn’t change him.” Bitterness entered the older woman’s voice. “A ruthless young man, interested in winning whatever the cost.”

“He was different when she was alive. Content, fun.” Lela knew exactly the kind of man he was, but grief had played its part in crippling him. “She was the only person he truly loved.”

“What about your brothers, Sophie, or you?”

“Boys are different.” Lela grimaced. “Little lords—and there’s that edge of self-congratulation in producing boys. He indulges Sophie too much. Perhaps we’ve all spoiled Sophie. Papa’s still a patriarch of the old style, so he also thinks he can control Sophie’s choices.”

“You understand love then, little Lela. And you must be a constant puzzle to him. What does he think of you?” Mariella Debrincat tilted her head to one side, a half-smile on her face.

“He respects me.” Lela had worked hard for his respect; she’d prefer to know he loved her.

“As he should. I tried to talk your mother out of marrying him.”

“Why are you telling me this?” Why didn’t Papa tell me this?

“Because he hated me for that, hated me for putting that pressure on your mother. When I discovered who Peter had brought home with him, I worried your father might try and hurt my Peter to punish me.” The older woman was shockingly right.

“I give you my word no harm will come to Peter for helping my niece.” Lela’s father still had the power to shame her. Lela would call him on this, but wouldn’t be disloyal here and now.

“I can see that, my dear.” She leaned forward to kiss Lela on both cheeks. “Very like your mother.”

After making their farewells, Hamish took Lela’s elbow to steer her out, his body shielding her from any onlookers in the house. “What’s distressed you?”

“She can see it too. He’s decided to punish Peter.” Illalu. “Papa would have recognised the Debrincat name. You told him we were coming here.”

“Yeah, he didn’t tell me he knew the family. Kept hammering the idea Debrincat was after his money.”

“Mariella Debrincat’s wealth dwarfs anything Sophie could bring.”

“The motives of lovers and the benefits of strategic alliances are probably a hot topic for the Debrincat dynasty as well.” Hamish looked over her head. “Meeting you has allayed her fears of blackmail.”

“Blackmail’s not what I’m frightened of.” She shivered. “If Mariella supported the relationship, it wouldn’t matter if Sophie came from wealth or not. Would the Maltese government really prosecute Peter for having a relationship with Sophie now? Wouldn’t they take into account that she’s eighteen in two months? That she’s an Australian citizen where the age of consent is sixteen?”

“Mrs. Debrincat wasn’t prepared to take any chances.”

The fact Hamish recognised the threat terrified her more.

“That was one night,” Lela wailed.

“Mariella Debrincat will testify that Sophie slept with her.”

“Mariella Debrincat’s not in Gozo.”

“I’d put money on that old woman having given explicit instructions for domestic arrangements in Gozo. Separate bedrooms, with the relatives as chaperone.”

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“You don’t have to share a bedroom to make love,” she dismissed his argument.

“Why, Miranda, is that what you’ve been teaching your niece?” Tugging on a strand of her hair, he pulled her head back to expose her throat, then drew a finger down to rest on the pulse hammering there, his eyes alight with humour.

Lela’s brain went into meltdown. Close to her, his jacket fell open, and the colours of his unconventional tie danced before her eyes. He flashed a stupid grin that made his freckles stand out more. Fewer than Lela had first assumed, itching to lift a hand to his face and count them. Her gaze dropped to his mouth, her knees started to buckle, and her vision to mist over remembering the taste of last night’s kiss, warm, intoxicating, virile man mixed with the richness of a sweet Botrytis wine. She moaned and leaned towards him.

“Steady. If you don’t stop looking at me as if you want to swallow me whole, Mariella Debrincat is going to have a whole lot more to think about. Might even ask Sophie who I am.”

“Then let go of me,” she ordered, stunned that his touch could make her forget where they were.

“Just making sure you can stand upright before I do,” he murmured.

Chapter Six

Walking the two blocks to the car, Hamish made a few decisions. “Back in the car, Lela.” He opened the passenger door. “Our next step needs a bit more planning.”

“Back to the hotel?”

“Not yet. I’ll drive while you ring Marty and fill him in.”

“We can find the cousins on Gozo ourselves, can’t we? I overheard a tourist in the hotel lobby talking about going to Gozo. It’s not far. We could go today.” She was babbling, planning action to cover the double hit to her poise—Mariella Debrincat’s revelations and her reaction to him.

“Better to think it through, consider consequences. What’s the bet Mrs. Debrincat is on the phone to Peter already. We know they’re safe. Marty can check if they’re where she says they are or have someone keep an eye on them to make sure they don’t take off again. We can go across tomorrow.”

“Mariella will warn them we’re coming, but won’t encourage them to run.” She made it a statement of fact. Composure restored. “She wants it ended one way or another.”

“I have to sweat blood to win your trust, while she just smiles.”

“You forget. Her link to me is through Mama, whereas your entrée to this search party is through Papa.”

“A man you say you love.”

Her dimple peeped out. “I love him, but never underestimate Papa’s determination when he’s set on a goal.”

Hamish listened to Lela’s end of the conversation with Marty. He applauded her brief summary of what they’d learned and listened to her arranging for Marty to send a text when he was able to confirm the information.

“Where are we going?” She glanced out the side window.

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“Down to the coast at Marsaxlokk Bay. It’s still a traditional fishing port, although according to the concierge, it’s had a few add-ons in recent years to satisfy the tourists.”

“We aren’t tourists.” But she smiled again, all sass and sunshine. Getting confirmation that Sophie was safe had made her lighter, and she was starting to reposition chess pieces in her head in response to Mariella Debrincat’s story. He couldn’t think of anyone other than his mother, who was so cool and focused in an emotional crisis.

“We need to eat as well as make plans. There’s no law that says we can’t do that in pleasant surroundings.”

Rounding the final hill, he knew the second she got her first glimpse of Marsaxlokk. Her involuntary cry of delight gave him a quiet buzz. “This is gorgeous, and you knew it. Thank you.”

He took her hand to amble along the esplanade, past the market stalls selling bric-a-brac, local sweets, small woodcarvings, sunglasses and sun hats. A mix of treats and essentials you suddenly realised you needed to cope with the blasting heat of the sun. When she tried on her third set of sunglasses, Hamish bought them for her.

“Thank you. The glare’s ferocious.”

They covered the full length of the esplanade in silence, stopping occasionally to eavesdrop on other tourists haggling over a meal or a boat ride, or to watch children paddling off the edge of the harbour wall. Hamish came to a halt, Lela beside him. He

watched some local fishermen gutting and cleaning the day's catch. The quiet walk had helped, given he figured both he and Lela had decisions to make after meeting Mariella Debrincat. Disdainful-looking cats surrounded one old fisherman, disinterested until his hand lifted and a scrap was thrown. Immediately the half dozen other felines abandoned nonchalance to vie for the tastiest piece of fish.

Hamish turned Lela back the way they'd come. "The deal is you select a fish and the kitchen cooks it on the spot." He pointed to a scattering of tables and chairs on the waterfront. Bright tablecloths with matching umbrellas identified each restaurant, while blackboard menus listed dishes of the day.

"Smells and looks delicious."

"The kitchens are over there." He waved towards shopfronts and refrigerated barrows, piled high with fresh seafood, across a busy road.

"You pick the fish," she said.

"Is this some kind of test"—he led her towards a laden barrow—"where you make some monumental character assessment about me based on whether I say, 'Of course I'll pick the fish,' or 'No, you pick the fish'?"

"My tests are more subtle." She tipped her sunglasses down. "You're more familiar with Malta and its fish."

Hamish made his choice. The waiter directed them to tables at the quayside with blue-and-white-checked cloths under navy umbrellas, following almost immediately with water and a bread basket.

"Life would have been different in our family if we'd had an aunt like Mariella Debrincat." She nibbled a corner of Maltese flatbread.

“In what way?”

“For a start, she’d have recognised Mari’s loneliness, how vulnerable she was to a boy on the make, and lectured her on birth control, probably supplied the pills.”

“Was the boy on the make?”

“To be perfectly honest, I don’t know at this distance. But I don’t think so. Dean was out of his depth with Papa, and they gave me different versions of the story. Dean didn’t stay around for Sophie’s birth, but he was a kid himself. Papa said Dean asked Mari for an abortion, and she threw him out. Dean says Papa convinced him to support an abortion, and then Papa disowned Mari when she refused.”

“So your father potentially used abortion as a wedge between your sister and Dean?” There was a lot not to like about old man Vella.

“Papa was shocked and devastated when Mari announced she was pregnant. It wasn’t long after Mama’s death. I’m not sure he was even sane about it; if he thought the threat of abandonment would make her bend to his will.” She fiddled with the sunglasses she’d set on the table, then shot him an up-and-under look. “He had plans for her. Stupid plans. She was stunning, all black curls and smiling eyes, with one dimple. When it peeked out you knew you’d do anything for her. ‘You have a responsibility when you’re part of a dynasty,’ Papa said.”

“What were her other responsibilities?” Hamish probed with care, unwilling to shake her out of this reflective mood, yet struck by how easily her description of her sister could have applied to herself.

“When Mama died, he expected Mari, as the oldest, to look after us all. She took on the cooking, the cleaning, the caring, but she needed something for herself. Along came Dean.”

“Did you like him?”

“I didn’t dislike him.” She sighed. “Ultimately he walked out on her, on them.”

“It’s hard to know what goes on between two people, a couple.” This isn’t about me. But learning that ten-year-old Lela had been prepared to put the well-being of her baby niece above all other considerations made him see Olivia’s attempt to bring him to heel in a different light. “What did you do?”

“After Papa issued his ultimatum and Mari left, my brothers and I were on our own for a while. No one in charge. I could do what I wanted before and after school. I gave her money.”

“Where does a child get real money?”

“After I emptied my brothers’ and my piggy banks, I stole money from Papa,” she said.

Not a hint of defiance or regret in her voice, just pride.

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“I knew Papa kept cash in the house. He’s old-fashioned, likes to have real money, not just cards in his wallet. I raided his private cache and slipped notes from his wallet most days until he noticed.” She took a sip of water.

“What happened?” Her resourcefulness fascinated Hamish.

“Papa summoned us, the boys and me. I don’t think it occurred to him I was the thief, but I couldn’t let my brothers take responsibility. I told him what I’d done. Paid for his obligations to Mari from his money.”

“How’d he react?”

“He couldn’t believe it at first. I was the youngest and a girl. He made me promise I wouldn’t give her any more money and told us his older sister was coming from Malta to look after us.”

“Did you keep your promise?”

“A promise is sacred in the Vella family. After that, I didn’t give her cash. I stole food from home and other things like towels, blankets, stuff for the kitchen.”

“Stole or borrowed?”

“I stole them. I knew Papa would forbid me giving them to her just as he’d forbidden me to give her money. In a corner of his mind, he mistakenly believed poverty would force her home. I hid what I was doing from him and my brothers. I was careful not to get caught.”

“That’s an inventive way around a promise. Did you steal from anyone else?”

She met his gaze directly, the vehemence leaving her voice. “Ah, Hamish, I do know right from wrong. To steal from a stranger would have been wrong. It was wrong to deceive Papa, but he gave me no choice.”

“Wasn’t your sister able to get social security benefits?” Twenty years ago there were already support services for young women.

“Yes, by the time Papa caught me, she had a small flat. Sophie was born, and Dean was long gone. Mari loved him, you know? Even after he left. She never really got over him.” Her voice wobbled.

“How did she die?”

“An opportunistic infection is the technical term. She wasn’t taking enough care of herself, focusing all her attention on Sophie.” Lela broke the bread into smaller pieces. “I didn’t know how sick she was until I stopped by one afternoon and found her collapsed. I hadn’t been able to get away for a few days because Auntie had arrived, and she was keeping a pretty close watch on me. I called an ambulance and went to the hospital with Mari and Sophie.

She huffed out a breath and, he hoped, some of her pain. “I told the doctors Papa was her next of kin. I assumed they’d called him, but he said later he didn’t get the message.”

“Were you on your own?”

“I had Sophie. And the nurses were really good. I’d taken Sophie’s change bag, but the nurses made sure we had food. One of them called a social worker. That scared me.”

“Did you think they’d take Sophie?” Hamish’s mother would adore Lela. And where the hell had that thought come from?

“I had no time to think because the social worker came to tell me Mari was dead,” she whispered, and her hand clenched on the table.

“Shit!” He covered her hand with his.

“I wasn’t whole anymore. When Mama died, we had each other. I hadn’t understood how much easier Mari made it. She remembered more stories about Mama, used many of the same expressions, just listening to Mari talk, being with her made me feel I still had part of Mama.

“I was sad and angry and disbelieving at the same time. The social worker offered to call Papa, but I said I’d do it myself. She stayed with me. I yelled at him; told him Mari was dead. Part of me secretly hoped that if he came, he could make it stop. Bring her back.” She blinked back tears. “I can’t remember it all. I called him horrible names, told him Mama would never forgive him, then demanded he come and get me and Sophie. If he wouldn’t take Sophie, I told him not to bother coming because I was staying with her. I don’t know where I thought I’d go. Shock.”

“Poor baby.” He turned her hand over, satisfied when she uncurled her fingers and threaded them with his.

Hamish tried to picture her at ten, all dark curls and tangled limbs, even then having a sense of justice and fairness. And her will to fight against unbeatable odds? Where had it come from? Her capacity to fight might have come from her father, he sounded like a ruthless bastard, but given Mariella Debrincat’s comments, Hamish guessed the determination to fight for those weaker than herself was her mother’s legacy.

“I didn’t feel like a baby. I was the woman in our family.” She studied their linked

fingers. “I couldn’t leave Sophie there.”

“He came.” Hamish’s values came from his parents and the home he’d grown up in, the ideas he’d been exposed to. His love, respect for and pride in his father was uncomplicated, unshadowed by actions he had to learn to forgive.

“Just as well,” she said wryly. “I had no idea what to do next, although the social worker stayed with me. Papa didn’t speak to me, but he came. I was cold by then, inside and out. Except for where I held Sophie. She was warm. Papa spoke to the doctors, to the social worker. Then I followed him to the car.”

“Did he show any regret?”

“Grief catches you in a maelstrom. It tosses you in the air, holds you between its teeth, shaking you until you’re helpless and afraid. It’s the same, yet different every time.”

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Her capacity to understand grief in herself and others was a revelation. Beyond understanding was acceptance without judgment. He'd never met anyone like her. She didn't passively surrender to destiny; she fought adversity with every breath in her.

Bitterness, that's what he realised. There was no bitterness in her.

The waiter arrived and several minutes passed while he served their meals and topped up their water glasses.

"Looks delicious." She gave a wan smile. "Once—Papa apologised to me once about Mari. It's another reason why I can't walk away."

They ate largely in silence, occasionally commenting on the food or passers-by.

"Did you look after Sophie?" Hamish asked, watching a waitress remove the plates.

"No. Besides," she said, raising still more questions about the Vella household, "my brothers were twelve and fourteen. They couldn't be expected to look after themselves, nor would Papa consider boys having a share in household duties. That's why Auntie came out from Malta."

"She's no Mariella Debrincat."

"She understands the role of women in a traditional family. Her father didn't believe in education beyond primary school. Family—rather"—she flung a hand in the air—"the men in the family know what's best."

“And she’s still breathing?” he asked, appreciating that Lela had been the glue in her family, the constant in Sophie’s life. She saw her niece as an individual, saw the changes as Sophie grew to womanhood.

“Now I sound like a horrible, ungrateful brat.” She frowned. “Aunty worked relentlessly to keep a clean house, to make sure we were all washed, brushed, fed and well looked after.”

“‘Relentlessly’ sounds bleak.” Emotional blackmail was equally raw—he’d never applied that term before to Olivia’s readiness to ignore police warnings and risk their unborn child, but Olivia had wanted to bend Hamish to her will. “Does your aunt love you?”

Concern for Lela drove the question, but it catapulted Hamish into an abyss he’d refused to explore. Did Olivia love me before she died? When the arguments about his work had increased? You could cope with a lot if love was the bedrock beneath your feet.

“In her way. Poor woman, she doesn’t understand me. Can’t understand why I have to fight.”

“Were you lonely?” He could admit now, he’d been lonely towards the end of his marriage.

* * *

“MORE OFTEN THAN I LIKE.” Lela would think about Hamish and loneliness later. “But I’m not a subject for pity. I have friends, a social circle outside my family. Good, loyal friends, both male and female, who grew up with me, who knew I was planning for Sophie’s future as well as my own.” Although quite a few men walked away when they learned Lela and her family were a package deal.

Lela let the silence lengthen, waiting for their coffees to arrive. She thought back to the conversation in Marty's office, her discovery that Sophie was considered underage in Malta, and her question outside the Debrincat home. "Would a Maltese court prosecute Peter? Hamish, did you hear what I said?"

"Sorry, my head was elsewhere." He brought his gaze back from the far horizon.

"Could Peter be prosecuted? What do you think?"

"Under ordinary circumstances, probably not, but if your father presents his medical evidence that Sophie has started showing symptoms of mental ill-health and is being taken advantage of, I'd be pushing for a conviction."

"That's an outrageous lie." Appalled, Lela pushed back from the table.

"Your father asked me to keep it to myself, unless absolutely necessary to bring Sophie home. He said you wouldn't accept the evidence."

"There is no evidence." She scowled.

"You're saying he falsified a medical report?" He searched her face, his voice carrying a hard edge.

"What did it say? When was it dated?" Panic rose along with her rage.

"That her behaviour has changed in recent months," he said. "She's talked of being spied on, followed, has had some unexplained emotional outbursts. Dated about a month ago."

"She didn't see a doctor, especially not a psychiatrist. I'd have known. I'd have been present," Lela muttered, indignation electrifying her. "She's a normal teenager,

pushing the boundaries to test her independence.”

“Are you sure?”

“Papa’s gone too far this time.” She dared him to repeat the claim. “Was there a diagnosis?”

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“More tests and monitoring are required,” he recited findings he’d clearly memorised.

“It’s a lie.”

“He’d question her mental health to get his own way?”

He was slow to anger, but Lela sensed it in him now.

“Papa has been known to bend rules. Have you spoken to the doctor yourself?”

“Giving false evidence in a court of law is a crime,” he snapped. “And yes, I’ve asked my office to make direct contact.”

“I’m sorry. I bet the report is carefully couched. Plenty of wriggle room for the doctor to say under cross-examination that adolescent rebellion is also a possibility.” Lela understood the pincer move her father had executed; a machination where Hamish’s integrity had been exploited, and hated her father in that moment. “Papa plays to win. That can involve being selective with the truth.”

“‘Never underestimate him,’ that’s what you said. How do you live with your father as a constant enemy?” He sounded baffled, but already she could see he was applying his mind to the puzzle.

“Because I refuse to see him as an enemy. I could hate him for inveigling you in his schemes. But I never forget that when I was a little girl, he was a happy, cuddly giant. Before our life changed forever. Having Sophie around has softened him—our home is not a place of permanent conflict.”

“‘Stalemate,’” he murmured, confirming he had heard her that first night. “That’s why you look for a draw. Total victory isn’t what you want.”

“Total victory won’t keep my family together.” Lela had known from the first she shouldn’t underestimate Hamish or his perception.

“He’s not content with a draw. Victory at any price.” He was frowning.

“I’ve paid the price until now. Friends argue I’ve given in too many times. This time the price is too high.”

“You guessed I hadn’t told you everything.”

“I didn’t think you understood the lengths Papa would go to get Sophie home on his terms.”

“Did he seriously think you and Sophie wouldn’t fight a claim of mental instability?” He grabbed the back of his neck. “He’s an idiot.”

“He’s desperate. Sophie’s always been his princess, and she adores him. He’d see this as a blimp on their relationship. I ruled out letting him choose her partner, but he’d want to approve him,” she explained. “Meeting Peter couldn’t have been foreseen, and given Papa’s history with Mariella, it must have infuriated him.”

“He thought he could use me to push for Peter to be prosecuted?” A quiet rage underlay the calm question.

“Papa gambled on it never getting to court.” Lela reached for his hand. Comfort was a poor apology for the position he’d been placed in. “You might have hesitated to take the case of a seventeen-year-old, unless you’d been convinced of her vulnerability.”

“I did hesitate, until that medical report. But you verified my assessment. Vulnerable, you said. Why did you reinforce my view?” His frustration at misjudging the situation was palpable. “Why?”

“Because, although she’s loved and has all the material comforts she might want or need, she has no mother, no father, no sibling.” Lela cursed herself for adding to Hamish’s dilemma. They’d been talking at cross purposes. “You’re always different. There’s a fragility, an insecurity, a distrust in the safety of life, even with all the care we’ve provided.”

“A sense of abandonment.” He nodded slowly, and his understanding made it easier for her to confess her tangled thoughts.

“Peter’s her first love, her first time to dream about being a woman, the possibility of creating life, establishing something of her own. Her very own. But maybe I’m wrong about that. I don’t want to presume or assume.”

“What do you want, Lela?”

“I don’t understand.” Was he asking about this moment, her life, her dreams?

* * *

HAMISH REPLAYED THE last few days in his head. Everything he’d learned about or seen of Lela demonstrated that she faced problems directly. If Sophie had health problems, Lela would face them and deal with them.

“I accepted the brief largely because of the medical assessment.” And he’d kept the secret to himself, until now. “But the pieces aren’t adding up. Mariella Debrincat is an intelligent, experienced woman determined to protect her family, and she didn’t mention anything odd about Sophie’s behaviour.” Logic indicated that Vella had lied

to him. Well, damn that!

“You’re still the person Sophie’s most likely to talk to. I’m prepared to do this your way, unless I find strong evidence to the contrary. And believe me, even with this, I’m going to look for it.”

She stared at him.

“What do you want?” Hamish asked.

“You mean more than our present information sharing?” Surprise, hope, elation chased each other across her face, and her luminescent joy reassured him about his decision.

“We find her. Look at what’s happening, talk to her and Peter before making any judgement about next steps?” he offered.

“Fifteen minutes on my own before you interview her.”

“Deal.” Giving Lela fifteen minutes with her niece would probably provide most of the answers they needed to solve this puzzle. Hamish would stake his reputation on it.

“You believe me?”

“Enough to graduate from conditional truce to partnership.” The attraction between them, a flame on low in all their encounters, might have taken them both unawares, but the foundation for this agreement was trust. He held out a hand. “Unless you’d prefer to spit on our hands or mix blood to seal the promise?”

“Deal.” She stretched out her own. Hamish could tumble her into his arms with a slight tug and knew she’d go willingly. A woman who didn’t appreciate her own beauty or her own strength, and who, if he was right, had denied herself the comfort of a lover’s touch in order to raise her niece, while keeping her father close.

The insight into her personality staggered him. An unbreakable core of strength that

sustained her family, and probably her friends and colleagues. She made no claims for herself. Not because she didn't want or need comfort, but because she'd stopped believing she could have her family and a lover.

She smiled, looking like he'd given her the Hope, Cullinan and Dresden Green diamonds all at once. The lurking shadows disappeared from her eyes, tempting him to offer to share more of the responsibilities she carried. Something shifted inside him. Her clasp was warm. The electrical pulse that flashed up his arm stunned him with its escalation of tension. He was off balance, dazed. She was radiant.

Crazy to let himself become this involved, but held in her smile, he had the craziest sensation he would always be safe and cherished.

* * *

LELA COULDN'T REMEMBER feeling this mixture of joy and relief before. Hamish's offer of a true partnership in their search for Sophie dissolved the bulk of her anxiety. On the journey back to the hotel, she let the sense of optimism settle in her bones. Loyalty to her family had kept her silent on so many occasions with her friends. Hamish was in this mess with her.

Having help in the battle of wits with her father was a rare, and surprisingly precious, experience. The wind had risen by the time they reached the hotel. Heaviness lingered in the sultry air. A storm loomed; the atmospheric tension created by Zeus standing with a thunderbolt in his hand ready to rent the sky.

"I'm surprised Marty hasn't rung back yet," Lela said when they exited the car.

"I turned my phone off over lunch." He slipped it from his pocket. "Marty sent a text. All good. They're working on one of the tourist boats, won't get in until mid-to-late afternoon tomorrow. We won't need an early start. Come to Sliema for supper," he

coaxed. “No point brooding alone?”

“Planning, maybe, not brooding. Thanks to Marty locating Mariella Debrincat, we know Sophie is safe, have an address for her, and a chance to have my questions answered. I’m grateful.”

“Your contacts saw Sophie on the Gozo ferry.” He shrugged. “You’d have found her yourself.”

“Thank you for the vote of confidence.”

“Come to Sliema with me?” He followed her into the elevator.

“How can you think about food after the lunch we just ate?” Teasing him was liberating.

“I’m a growing boy.”

“That might have been true at fourteen, now it’s called eating to excess.”

“They’ve got great tapas bars.” His smile was irresistible—request, encouragement, invitation to play all in one.

“That’s Spanish for nibbles, right?”

“Meet me in the lobby at eight. It’s a short trip by ferry from the bottom of the hill, a different vibe. Another side of Malta.”

“You’re fitting Malta’s key attractions around our search.” Lela appreciated his efforts to give her space to breathe, not just worry about her family.

“Sheer coincidence.” He lifted her hand and brushed a kiss across her knuckles.

“And is it skill or coincidence you’ve prised most of my family secrets out of me in a few days?”

“I’m recognised as a skilled interviewer.”

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“Did you say interrogator?” The banter delighted Lela, who rarely let down her guard with any man, much less flirted openly.

“I decided you were more like a hedgehog.”

“I don’t think I’ll like this comparison.”

He grinned. “Prickly and defensive.”

“I’m cautious.”

“That too. Come to Sliema? We can talk about Sophie.”

“We’ve spent enough time talking about Sophie today. She’s safe and well.” Lela knew that because Hamish had helped her find her niece.

“Come anyway.” He stepped out of the elevator at her floor, then rocked back on his heels, hands jammed in his pockets. Watching. Waiting.

“You’re worse than a dog with a bone!” Lela was a woman who’d kept her secrets. Until now. Was she spellbound? Like Shakespeare’s Miranda, held in thrall and freed by a prince. She’d checked the reference—Miranda had marvelled, “O brave new world, that has such people in’t.” The compulsion to go out with Hamish again tonight, spend more time learning about him was darkly dangerous. Playing hooky tonight hurt no one. They’d see Sophie tomorrow, and this strange adventure would be over. A strange time to realise she’d miss butting heads with him. “I’ll come.”

IN THE HOTEL ROOM, Lela showered the stickiness of the day away, donned the complimentary robe hanging on the bathroom door and sat at the desk with her computer. By prioritising tasks, she could deal with the most pressing work issues in a few hours.

When she next glanced at her watch, it was after seven. Her personal email account contained a few messages from friends, invitations for coming weeks and a terse one-liner from her father—What have you got?

Despite the big lie he'd told Hamish, she couldn't ignore him. Sometimes she wished she could, but the love and loyalty of her first ten years had shaped her. In a perverse way, Papa goaded her to go because he needed her to stay. And he was fretting.

Sophie loved him, was more like him than either of them could see, and would make her own decisions, whether he supported them or not.

“Papa. We have a strong lead on Sophie's whereabouts. I believe she's safe and will let you know when I find her.”

Hamish had probably sent his own message. She trusted the partnership they'd forged, trusted that he was a good man—a man who saw her, liked her, fancied her as much as she fancied him. He knew her secrets and her responsibilities and hadn't backed away. She gave herself permission to dream.

Hurrying now, she selected the blouse and trousers she'd worn on arrival in Valletta. And thanked modern plumbing for the speedy laundry service.

* * *

HAMISH SCANNED SIGNS as they strolled along the waterfront. Small bars and restaurants jostled for space, some with large decks perched on rocky outcrops to catch expansive sea views and more that were tiny holes in the wall. The streets were alive with tourists and touts, a jumble of colour and laughter. With its location in the Mediterranean, holidaymakers, retirees and people seeking a hiding place swarmed to Malta like iron filings to a magnet. He selected a nondescript door in a brick wall. “A friend told me about this place.”

People jumbled into booths, squashed around tables or, like them, chose a high bar along a side wall. Multiple languages were being spoken, often over the top of each other.

“I like it.” She surveyed the dimly lit cavern.

“It’s less formal than most of the offerings in Valletta. Paceville, down the road towards Gozo, is considered trendier, but I thought you’d prefer this. Champagne tonight. We’re on the brink of success.” Hamish signalled a waiter.

“You might jinx it.”

“Not possible. Marty has confirmed they’re there. No sign of another runner, and I emailed your father.”

“What did you tell him?”

“As little as necessary. She’s with the Debrincats. We have an address we’ll check together tomorrow. Did you contact him?”

“I said we had a lead, and I’d let him know when I find her.” She turned from him to scan the intimate bar and its customers with interest.

“Despite his machinations?” Hamish hadn’t doubted she’d inform her father Sophie was safe. Whatever their conflicts, whatever methods he used to get his way, part of the old man’s angst was genuine concern about Sophie’s well-being. The anxiety behind the old man’s pleas for urgency was sincere, and Lela’s attitude confirmed Hamish’s assessment.

“I love my father, Hamish.” A gift Giovanni Vella had traded on.

“You must, to still be in his house.” His mind was filled with questions about her choices. She saw life with a clarity he’d rarely encountered.

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“After I lost Mama and Mari, I couldn’t bear the thought of losing my brothers. Even at my lowest point, when I was furious at Papa. He’d issue edicts or impose authoritarian mandates without listening to my opinion. I fantasised about leaving but knew I’d die inside if I was separated from them—from Papa.

“It was harder after Sophie. She followed me like one of those ducks following flags on sticks in Balinese paddy fields, but she adored Papa as well. She didn’t recognise his barriers. Just climbed all over him and coaxed affection from him that he was unable or unwilling to show my brothers or me. I can’t walk away from any of them. I need them as much as they need me. You must understand. From what you’ve told me, you come from a close family.”

“My wife died.” Words Hamish hadn’t planned to say were pulled out of him. Unfair, after all the secrets she’d shared, not to tell her what haunted the core of him. Knowing, fearing she’d understand what many others couldn’t comprehend.

“Oh, Hamish.” She slipped her hand into his.

“Olivia was pregnant when she died.”

He heard the whimper, quickly swallowed as her grip tightened on his. “I’m so very sorry, Hamish.”

Hamish studied their joined hands. Insight slapped him hard. Her father’s rejection of her sister still haunted her, the threat he might also reject Lela. “If my child had lived, I wouldn’t have locked him or her out because of my grief about Olivia.”

“I know you wouldn’t.” She lifted their joined hands and pressed the back of his hand against her cheek.

“I’ll get us some drinks.” He crossed to the bar before he did something he’d regret: bundle her into his arms and race back to the hotel. When he’d been served, he returned to their table. She had her back to him, surveying the room. The trio in the corner pumped out jazz at a volume that allowed conversation, but created an intimate atmosphere of bohemian charm. “What will you say to Sophie?” he whispered against her ear.

She swung to face him. “I’ve got as far as hell in my mind.”

“And then?”

“It depends if she’s happy. On her reason for running. On what happens when these tight bands of fear clamped around my chest finally release.” She sighed.

“What’s your usual form of discipline?”

“Discipline!” She bobbed her drink. “She was a sunny-natured child, cooperative.”

“Didn’t inherit your temperament, then.” He grinned at her over his drink.

“Very funny.” She studied the bubbles rising to the surface in her glass. “She’s more like Mari. My sister was beautiful, inside and out. Gentle, caring. I can’t remember her ever giving my parents—Papa—a moment’s concern until Dean.”

“Did Sophie give you a moment’s trouble before Peter?”

“Not since that first year of high school, although in the last few years Sophie’s pushed to expand her boundaries,” she said slowly, staring over his shoulder. “I think

I mentioned she resented the time I gave to the foundation,” she corrected herself, “the time it took away from her.”

“Shades of your father.” He let the comparison sink in. “Whereas you’re intense, believe passionately in justice, and before you taught yourself that remarkable self-discipline, probably exploded like a firecracker.” What would it take for her to lose her temper?

“It still happens,” she admitted. “I’m not sure whether to be furious or pathetically grateful that she’s safe.”

“A little anger is in order. The picture I’m getting now is of a well-off young woman with lots of options and support who’s disappeared without a word.”

“Just as well, I’ve got my fifteen minutes first.” Her dimple peeped out.

“Have you considered she might want to stay?” Hamish got his answer when her head turned, a jerky staccato movement matching the shake in her hand holding the champagne. Liquid sloshed over the rim before she placed the flute carefully on the bench and grabbed a serviette to dry her fingers.

“She’s enrolled at university, her family, friends, everything she knows, and”—she sucked in air—“I’m snatching at reasons that might no longer be relevant.”

“Would you stay at home, if Sophie wasn’t there?” He asked the question, rather than offer false reassurance when she’d landed on a truth.

“I’ve rented an apartment. Planned to leave when Sophie turned eighteen.”

Leaving was a courageous decision when she’d just confessed she needed her family around her. “Why?”

“It’s time.” She rolled her shoulders. He had the sense of her releasing enormous tension. “I’ve tried to model good behaviour. Independence is the next step. For me, for her.”

“A halfway house for her?”

“You’re too smart for your own good. She’s been clashing more with Papa, with me, as she tests out adulthood. I figured I could model an orderly exit.”

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“But also provide time-out if the combatants needed it?” He was in awe of her capacity for self-reflection. “Prevent another schism in your family?”

She winced. “I left my run a bit late.”

“I’ve learned one party can’t make all the concessions. That’s not a lasting peace.” And which idiot had spouted that crap? He snagged a passing waiter carrying a tray of tiny stuffed mushrooms. “Try these, they’re renowned for their tapas here.”

Over the next three hours, the band grew louder, and the barriers between the crowd and the musicians blurred. Waiters continued to circle, taking drink orders and returning with plates of delicious mouthfuls—fish morsels, slivers of potato pancakes, slices of baguette piled high with meat or vegetable concoctions. Chits were added to a jar on their bench, and the mood became more festive and boisterous.

“Ready to go? Looks like people could be dancing on the tables soon.” Hamish gestured to some exuberant revellers nearby.

“I’m glad you talked me into coming.” She slid off her stool. “Let me pay for this.” She reached for the jar containing their food and drink chits.

“I could be charging your father.”

She shook her head. “You don’t charge your clients for your alcohol consumption or social activities.”

“You’ve let me pay for every other meal.” Her mind fascinated Hamish. “Did you

think I applied a liberal interpretation to your father's offer to pay your bills and added a margin for myself?"

Her gaze was steady. "For the short time before I worked out you're the Hamish Beauregard MacGregor."

"Beauregard was my grandfather. Beau in the family. I have no scruples about charging your father for anything you eat, drink or otherwise require." He still had an unanswered question. "Why are you letting him pay for you?"

"I'm sorry if I offended you."

"You puzzled me," Hamish said, slipping his jacket off the back of the stool and slinging it over his shoulder. "You took his money at the airport that first night."

"I figured if I accepted his"—she paused—"hospitality, I could fund a youth worker at my foundation for a week."

"I should have guessed." Hamish was beginning to understand the intricacies of each move and counter-move she made. All of them calculated to preserve a delicate balance. "Would he have worked that out?"

"It's my way of telling him money won't decide the outcome of this search."

"You should work for the UN. You negotiate like a pro." He rubbed his chin. "Let me pay for tonight. Consider it my contribution to your charity."

"My friends and I usually split the bill." Heat rose up her cheeks. "Don't imagine I hide in my bedroom and put every dollar I earn in the charity."

"That wouldn't model the behaviour you want Sophie to copy."

“Then let me get this.” She tried to pluck the jar from Hamish’s hand.

“I’m buying tonight, Miranda, because I asked for your company, and I’ve enjoyed it.”

“I wasn’t expecting you.” Her voice held uncertainty—she hadn’t expected someone to take her seriously. She was beautiful, inside and out.

“Me, or your father’s offer?” He was under no illusions. She’d have given him nothing if he’d been her father’s flunkey.

“I should have expected Papa’s offer. Would have, if my brain hadn’t been addled after the flight. Papa wanted me where you could keep an eye on me. You’re the surprise, Hamish.”

He registered her use of his name and absorbed the pleasure of it. “Your father wields money like a weapon.”

“He came from wealth, hence Sophie’s and my trust funds, but he was subjected to constant pressure to do better.” Her eyes didn’t smile.

“There you go again. Defending him. Yet he buys power.”

“He couldn’t buy you.”

Her compliment nourished the empty spaces inside him. Her trust was a unique gift because she understood the loss and sacrifices required to live your principles every day.

* * *

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LEAVING THE SLIEMAbar, Hamish walked at Lela's side to the ferry, sat at her side on the deck. Lela let warm night air envelop them, acting as a conduit for the prickles of awareness skating over her skin. The sparks flying between them were tangible.

The moon leered overhead, taunting them with a reminder of their first kiss. Still silent, they climbed the hill to the hotel. Slow torture. Side by side they walked, each careful not to get too close. Was he, like her, conscious that if they brushed against each other tonight it would trigger a firefight?

By the time they'd reached the hotel, Lela wanted to scream with the effort of keeping her hands off him.

"I'll see you to your door."

"No need," she croaked.

"There's need, all right, Miranda." His voice was husky with intent.

At the door, she fumbled with the security card. Placing his hand over hers, he took the card from her and flipped the lock. Her shallow, desperate breathing sounded like a whirlwind to her ears, while his steady hand had halted her trembling. His scent surrounded her—inviting, sustaining her in ways she hadn't imagined possible.

"Goodnight, Hamish."

He flashed that half-grin that undid her and stepped closer. "No hands. That's the best

I can promise.”

His mouth covered hers—honey, heaven. She sank into the taste and texture of him. her mind wiped blank. Lifting her hands to embrace him, she formed fists in the air, then let them slowly drop to her sides. No hands—as if that lessened the impact.

As the seconds stretched to minutes, as his tongue dipped into her mouth, sensation pulled at her belly, and her heart soared. Kisses on her chin, the tip of her nose, and her forehead were a playful torment. She followed his lead, and creating her own game, rubbed her cheek against his, planted kisses along the line of his jaw, arousing herself. Her blood raced, her body strained to get closer—pleasure and pain. When he took her mouth again, want and need drowned out reason.

“Goodnight, Lela.”

She stumbled through the door, leaning against it, her hands flat against the wood, while she tried to get her breath back. He hadn’t laid a finger on her, yet had turned her inside out.

Chapter Seven

The wind snatched at Lela’s clothes and hair where she sheltered on the front deck of the Gozo ferry. Fisting the fingers of one hand around the lapels of her jacket, she held the collar closed, intent on preventing stray gusts sneaking down the back of her neck and icing her spine. Her other hand wrapped around her midriff to anchor her jacket in place. Tendrils of hair whipped at her face, but she ignored the discomfort.

The exposed deck gave her the best view of Gozo as the ferry drew closer to its shores. Rugged, bare rocky outcrops, with no hint of the farmland she knew lay beyond. The flick of the wind and slap of the waves against the hull of the ship provided a soundtrack for her turbulent thoughts.

More turbulent today than yesterday. Then she hadn't known Hamish was a widower. Did your wife and child die during childbirth? He hadn't volunteered, and she'd been reluctant to push for confidences he wasn't ready to share. When he'd returned with their drinks last night, she'd followed his lead back to Sophie.

Today was also about Sophie.

“Why did you run?”

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Not pregnant. Then why? Lela had spent years trying to instill the values of self-respect and self-reflection in Sophie. Spent years trying to distill the essence of being sister, mother, aunt and grandmother so Sophie would miss none of them.

Lela had made mistakes. Who wouldn't? But Lela had hoped Sophie trusted her to give her niece a fair hearing and an honest answer. Harder to shift was the nagging conviction Papa might have floated the idea of an arranged marriage. At twenty, Lela had invoked her mother's name to repudiate a business marriage. Papa had promised her he'd never suggest it again. A promise, she'd believed, covered both her and Sophie.

Could she trust her memory now for the exact words Papa had used? His promise to her had been absolute, and he'd kept it. Did you leave yourself an escape clause, Papa, allowing you to propose such an arrangement for Sophie without breaking your word? Lela had been incandescent with rage at the time. The wily, old autocrat could have taken advantage of her less-than-rational state of mind.

"You wouldn't be so crazy, Papa, to lie to me about something so important." But the Debrincat name had spooked him, triggering old resentments. "I'll fight you." She'd walk the tightrope of independence and filial respect. Make the compromises needed to keep her family safe and close.

Whatever she found, this escapade had changed all their lives. Sophie's flight made it clear her choices would be her own. Lela and her father could either accept the changed family dynamics or face losing Sophie. Sophie's actions had also accelerated the moment when Lela could make choices, which put her wants and needs higher up the list of priorities.

She wanted Hamish to trust her enough to tell her about his wife's death. She imagined introducing him to her family. He lived in her hometown—inviting him to a meal, catching a movie or going on a picnic could be the beginning of something more.

No previous relationship had survived those tests.

Hope was a fragile yet indestructible green shoot in this messy endeavour.

Hamish is different.

She was different with him. In his arms she found another part of herself. Remembering the journey home the previous evening, her nipples tightened, and her eyes closed. Such sumptuous kisses—he'd shown her desire, shown her she'd laid down her defences against the passion he stirred. She wouldn't have stepped away if he'd put his hands on her.

Hamish draped his jacket over her shoulders and pulled her into the shelter of his arms. "Put this on before you freeze," he spoke against her ear.

Disoriented, still battling her disappointment that she hadn't reached out last night, new need and new heat pooled in her groin. Every muscle strained to turn into his body, to curl around him. Forcing her eyes open, she took a steadying breath and focused on the island ahead.

"Someone tried to call you." Something in his voice had her turning to search his face.

"What's happened?"

"You should be on deck. Approaching Gozo by ferry is a moment worth

remembering, when you forget about the crazy wind.” He grimaced. “Except I also got a call. You need to check who rang you.”

Lela followed him inside, sliding into a booth opposite him. When she read the text message, she was grateful for the warmth of his jacket. “The director of the charity wants me to ring her urgently.”

“Do you want a coffee?”

She stared at him blankly for a few moments. “I don’t need privacy, Hamish. Whatever she has to say we both need to know.” She pressed call back, her thoughts taking flight, while she waited for the woman to pick up. Had Sophie and Peter fled again? Were she and Hamish on a wild goose chase? “Lela Vella. You called.”

* * *

HAMISH COULDN’T PICK up much from the bits of conversation he overheard, but her questions were similar to those he’d asked Marty a few minutes earlier.

“When?”

“Did he give a name?”

“What did you tell him?” Ending the call, she turned to Hamish. “Did you already know?”

Hamish reached across the tabletop for her hand. Cold, shaking slightly but with rage or fear he couldn’t tell. He took her other hand, rubbing both between his own, coaxing warmth back into them. “Marty rang while you were on deck. I’d just hung up when your phone rang.”

“A man appeared at the charity claiming to represent me, saying I’d asked him to check for news.” She wasn’t panicking.

“What answer did they give?”

“The director guessed he was a fake. I’ve kept her up-to-date on our progress.” She’d acted to protect her sources and his. Evidence she considered the risks to others and looked after them. “But this man knew I’d been in touch. The director told him they were still looking. Hadn’t had any luck yet and asked for his contact details in case they learned anything.”

“Did he supply details?”

“Nothing traceable. A name and the number of a burner.” Her answer intrigued him.

“Where did you learn about burners?”

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“A lot of our kids in Sydney use them. They might be in trouble, but they’re street savvy.” She freed her hands and sat back. “They know how not to be traced. Did Marty know about my visit to the charity?”

“I told him, but the approach on my side was more indirect.” Hamish also kept his team informed. Lives could depend on it. “Luca—remember, Mariella Debrincat’s assistant?”

She nodded.

“He was approached at his local bar last night. A stranger offered him a drink, started chatting and slipped in a few questions about Peter’s whereabouts.” Hamish didn’t like the idea Vella had put a tail on him, on them, but Vella was the most likely suspect.

“Luca would be smarter than that.” She flicked off the sloppy approach with a hand gesture.

“You’re right. Luca told the guy Peter was studying in Australia and not due home for another month, then informed Mariella this morning. She rang Marty.”

“Someone followed us?”

“Someone followed you on that first morning, then followed both of us yesterday. Maybe your father doesn’t like the questions I’ve started to ask,” he mused, “and decided to hire someone else.”

“And do what?” She crossed her arms defensively. “Snatch Sophie? She’d scream blue murder if strangers tried to pick her up, and she’s surrounded by the Debrincat clan.”

“You know your father better than me. Could he have planned something like this?”

“It’s bizarre.”

“Would he have done it? She’s still a minor. If they have a copy of the medical report he sent me, they might be able to get her out of Malta before anyone has time to stop them.” Hamish outlined a worst-case scenario.

“Papa knows we’re seeing them today.”

“And might have worked out we may not do exactly what he wants.” Hamish let her process his theory. “I gave him the same outline you did.”

“We can’t see Sophie and Peter until this is sorted,” she announced.

“What do you want to do?”

She snatched up her phone and recited the message she was typing. “Papa, you’ve hired men to follow me and MacGregor. I won’t contact Sophie until I’m sure you’ve called them off. If I don’t have your word, I’ll make sure she stays hidden.”

“How will you be sure?” Hamish didn’t doubt her determination.

“If he gives me his word.”

“You’ll believe him? As simple as that?”

“You’re learning a lot about my dysfunctional family.” She pressed send. “Papa won’t tell me a direct lie. He won’t stop war-gaming to achieve his objective, but he’ll make a tactical retreat.”

“He knows she’s on Gozo,” Hamish theorised. “They could watch the ferry, offer a reward for news of her. They’d find her and fast.”

“Not as fast as us. We can give him certainty in a few hours.”

“You’re banking on his anxiety trumping his need to control?”

“Temporarily. When we had nothing, he could throw his weight around. But, like me, Papa needs to know she’s safe. I also suspect he won’t want to alienate you enough to make you quit.”

“I still might.” Hamish noticed the passengers heading down the stairs to the vehicle decks. “Time to get back in the car.”

“It’ll be warmer out of the wind.” She stood and handed him back his jacket. “If we park the car in a prominent parking place on the dock, and seem more interested in the sights than driving inland, it should reinforce my message.”

“DO YOU THINK HE’LL answer?” Hamish asked an hour later. “It’s the middle of the night in Sydney.” Tucked into the lee of the cliff in a patch of sunshine, they leaned against the car and watched another ferry unload.

“He’ll answer. We’ll give it another hour.”

“Then go back to Valletta?”

“We can decide then. Tell me more about how you got into this business.”

“It’s a long story.” One Hamish hadn’t shared with anyone since Olivia. Lela was putting on a good act, but he wasn’t fooled. She was going slowly insane thinking they’d leave Gozo without seeing Sophie.

“We appear to have all the time in the world.” She waved an arm to encompass the harbour stretched out in front of them.

“Don’t blame me if you’re bored by the time I’m finished.” Olivia had been, he realised now. She’d thought he’d fixated on an incident he should have got over. “Mum took me on an informal visit to a client when I was about twelve. I knew, because Mum and Dad had talked about it at the dinner table, that, let’s call her—Mrs. Brown—was a victim of domestic violence. DV to those in the business. I knew about DV, like I knew there were things discussed at our dinner table that didn’t leave the house. When we were small, Mum or Dad would hold a finger to their lips and recite ‘cone of silence,’ their mystic incantation to protect special knowledge. They stopped when I turned eight. My sisters and I knew anything connected with their work was confidential.”

When she adjusted her position against the car so she could watch him, Hamish commended himself—at least momentarily—on distracting her from her anxiety about Sophie.

“Not that Dad or Mum discussed their clients, but occasionally, as part of broader

conversations, examples were drawn. Driving to Mrs. Brown's house that afternoon, I knew the young mother had an apprehended violence order against her husband, that's an AVO."

"I know what an AVO is, Hamish."

Of course you do.

"Mrs. Brown was afraid her husband would steal the kids and hide them with his extended family in Malaysia. Mum wanted to check on them, drop off a casserole she'd made, make sure things were as normal as they could be. Mrs. Brown told Mum the AVO made her feel more secure.

"When we got to the house, Mum got me to take the kids outside. They knew her—a boy and a girl—but were less sure of me. Their 'outside' play area was a square piece of concrete in front of a garage.

"I spotted a basketball and a hoop half hanging off the side of the garage. I started dribbling the ball and dropped it in the hoop. Easy, since it was set at a height six-year-olds could manage, but they were impressed enough to relax."

"I'm impressed." She dimpled, but her interest was real, and his words came more easily.

"I persuaded the kids to toss the ball towards the hoop. I'd managed to coax a smile from the boy, when we heard shouting from inside the house. A man roared their names. They were terrified, running straight back inside, as if he'd tugged on an extended leash. I raced after them, catching them as they reached the living room door. Instinct I guess, but I grabbed their shirts to stop them moving past the door.

"Mum was calm. She held up her phone. 'If you don't leave now, I'll call the police.'"

“He was a big bastard—solidly muscled—and he loomed over her. ‘This is my house,’ he roared. ‘My wife, my kids. I tell them what to do. You two, we’re leaving.’

“He didn’t look at the kids, didn’t say their names, just stared at his wife, an ugly smile spreading across his face when she fell to her knees. ‘Not my babies.’”

Even at this distance, the vividness of the memory shook Hamish. Through his work, he’d resolved his rage at his own helplessness. The only way to erase the fear he’d witnessed was to work against it. Even now.

“Mum yelled at me, ‘Run, take them and run.’ She was already punching her speed dial number for the police when the man pivoted, swinging his arm. He backhanded her against the wall. She slid to the ground, still holding the damn phone.”

“You must have been terrified.” She’d edged closer still, half bent towards him, and he realised his voice had dropped. When she slipped her hand into his, he accepted the empathy he’d long yearned for.

“For a second, I froze, paralysed by fear and indecision, then I took a step towards Mum.” Hamish huffed out a breath. “Her eyes were fixed on me. ‘Run,’ she said. Something was wrong with her. Her mouth was twisted in pain, but she raised the phone and spoke. ‘Emergency,’ and recited the address.”

“Your mother sounds incredibly brave.”

Like you, he thought.

“I looked at the kids. I tried to pull them after me, but they were trembling and slow. I remember I screamed at them, ‘Come on.’

“We stumbled towards the back door, and I could hear the man behind us, gaining on

us as the kids slowed. They were crying too much to see properly. Then my feet were swept from under me, and I was sliding across the tiles towards the kitchen table. I don't know if he tripped me or hit me, but I collided with the table—hard.”

Lela didn't speak, but her grip on his hand tightened. She was reliving his nightmare with him.

“He scooped them up under his arms—like footballs—and he was on a full-field sprint—turning towards the front door. It was over in a flash. I didn't know what to do. I scrambled to my feet and went looking for Mum.

“At first all I could hear was Mrs. Brown screaming as she chased her husband out of the house, then a cry that sounded like he'd hit her. The kids' cries got louder then, and the man yelled at them to shut it. I was petrified, needed to check Mum was okay. She was slumped where she'd fallen against the wall, answering questions from the first responder. She broke off when she saw me. ‘Hamish, check the window. Get the car's plate number.’

“I was too numb to disobey. I went over to the window. He was bundling the kids in the back. ‘XG 426P.’” He shook his head in disbelief. “I can still remember that plate number!

“Mum repeated it. ‘We need an ambulance at the house,’ she said. ‘But catching that car with the kids is the first priority.’ Then she hung up and smiled at me. ‘Can you help me, darling, by bringing Mrs. Brown back into the house and making us both a cup of tea?’

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“It feels surreal whenever I remember it now. Back then I wanted to cry. I’d failed at everything. I’d been too slow to get the kids away, and I didn’t stop the man from hitting her, hitting any of them. I wanted to crawl into my mother’s lap and hold on, but she wanted me to go out to the street with that man and bring Mrs. Brown back inside. ‘He won’t stop you. He’s got what he came for.’ The engine roared as the car took off.”

He paused. “I told her I was scared.”

“She would have known that.” Lela gentled her hold, her fingers stroking his palm, even strokes easing the echoes of helplessness flowing through him.

“She called me her brave boy, said she understood I was scared. That he’d gone, and now Mrs. Brown needed our help.

“I remember asking, ‘What about you, Mum?’ and she told me she had broken ribs. The ambulance and paramedics would come soon.”

“You were brave too,” Lela murmured.

“Says a woman who faced tougher choices at ten years of age.” Hamish pressed a kiss to her temple. “I knew the car had left, but I was shit-scared when I went through the front door. A few houses away, Mrs. Brown lay crumpled on the grass verge beside the road. She was bawling her eyes out. I heard her in my dreams for years. A few people were looking out their windows, but no one came to help her. I knew that was wrong; they should have been helping.”

Lela pressed herself more closely against his side.

“She needed my help to walk back inside. Her body was a dead weight.” He wiped an eye with his free hand. He hated knowing Mrs. Brown and her kids would always have that memory. “I led her back into the living room. By this time, I could hear the sirens, police, ambulance. I tried to tell her we’d get the kids back, but I don’t think she heard a word I said. When she spotted Mum, she came alive enough to throw herself across the room and put her head in Mum’s lap.”

He rubbed a hand across his breastbone. “She was inconsolable. I remember thinking Mrs. Brown was as helpless as me, and like me, she wanted, maybe even expected, Mum would make it all better.”

“What happened?” Lela cared what happened to strangers more than twenty years ago.

“They caught up with the car on the way to the airport. The kids were traumatised, but safe, and with their father locked up, Mum did her magic with various government and voluntary agencies to spirit the family out of Sydney and to a town where they could start a new life. Mum had a few broken ribs, and for weeks, I didn’t leave her side. I was afraid if she went anywhere on her own someone might try to hurt her again.”

“Did she stop?”

“No. I don’t know what the conversations were behind closed doors, because there were closed doors for the first time in our house. Dad looked like he’d had the guts punched out of him when he arrived at the hospital.” Hamish must have looked the same after Olivia was attacked. His father had held him while he cried—both times.

“Was she hurt again?” Lela drew him back to the story.

“No, and she, they, argued that visiting Mrs. Brown’s house was a risk worth taking, because turning your back on her and her kids would reinforce the view that violence wins.”

“You must be very proud of her,” she said.

“Yeah, she’s a force of nature. My sisters and I were always safe and loved. I learned that’s not a given for every child, and it should be.”

“You do important work.” Her praise mattered. Understanding what drove him mattered more. He hadn’t known he’d craved her vindication.

He pushed himself off the car and turned to face her. “Did your father ever hit you?”

“Shouting, banging doors—and we had some of that before Mama died—but we all gathered for dinner and were expected to behave politely at the table,” she reassured him. “Whatever the resentments seething within. There was no physical violence in my family, Hamish. My father never raised a hand to me.”

“Emotional blackmail can be more devastating.”

“I made my own choices, Hamish.”

“I’m glad.” He squeezed her fingers. His choice had cost him his wife, his unborn child, and his belief he could protect anyone he loved.

“Did you learn to forgive yourself by doing pro bono work for women like Mrs. Brown?”

Her insight staggered him.

“I finally accepted there was nothing to forgive. Family consensus at the dinner table was that Mum and I did the best we could on the day.”

“Exorcised over chops and veggies,” she said lightly.

“I’m very partial to lamb chops. We talked about it a lot, about anger and fear and why some people choose to use children as bargaining chips or to punish a partner, as if the children are possessions, not actual human beings. Mum talked about spiriting children across borders and hiding them, and I knew that’s what those kids were afraid of, that’s what was on their faces when their father hauled them out of the kitchen.”

“Helping end the fear for others means ‘the big bastard’ didn’t win,” she said. Finding soul-deep rapport with a woman he’d known less than three days turned Hamish’s world upside down. “Did your wife work with you?” Her follow-up question cut the knees from under him.

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“Olivia studied law, although she specialised in commercial law. We met at university, mixed with the same crowd. She was fun to be with.” He stopped.

“But?”

“Olivia wanted me to give up my work defending abused women. She supported the international stuff—legislation, treaties—but didn’t want the messy details and spill over of people’s lives into our home, especially when she discovered she was pregnant.” Those arguments had been one of his most closely guarded secrets—until now.

“Did she understand it’s essential to who you are?” A courageous question, but he expected those from Lela by now.

“‘Circumstances change,’ she said. ‘I should change,’” he said.

“Can you tell me what happened to her?” A tentative question, but the time for half-truths was past.

“She was eight months pregnant when she was killed.”

“Killed?” She pressed a hand to her mouth, horror and a kind of bleak realisation flashing across her face.

“Five years ago, the husband of a woman I was representing in a custody dispute shot and killed my wife.”

“Dear heaven,” she whispered.

“Grief catches you in a maelstrom.” He’d lived that, and Lela was one of the few people he’d met who understood it. He glanced at their linked fingers, easing his white-knuckled grip. He’d been crushing her hand. “Sorry.”

He brushed his thumb across the top of her knuckles to soothe. “I don’t remember much immediately after she died, except the numbness, the indifference to everything. Bouts of activity to pretend my world hadn’t collapsed, then nights spent pacing the house, unable to sleep, to think. I didn’t know grief could be like that. For that first twelve months, I was going through the motions. My family made sure I ate. Work saved me from going insane.”

Lela’s phone rang.

“Take that,” he said.

She scanned the screen. “It’s Papa.” She answered the call, her eyes remaining fixed on him until he turned his back. He’d said enough. A hell of a time and place to meet someone who understood him so well—who was his perfect mate—who’d understand his vow.

“They’re leaving now,” she said. “On the return ferry to the mainland.”

He and Lela both turned to look at the ferry port. The ferry they’d watch unload had taken on new vehicles and passengers and now chugged out of port. Neither of them had noticed its preparation for departure or heard its departing whistle.

“Then we go now,” he declared.

* * *

LELA NODDED AND SLID into the passenger seat, torn between wanting to continue the conversation with Hamish and wanting to reach Sophie. He'd lost more than most in trying to defend vulnerable women and children. Sophie had always been safe in his care.

She was more familiar than she liked with the need to fill the empty spaces in your heart and head when you found yourself alone. She'd ultimately channelled her despair into her youth foundation. He'd continued to work with, and for, abused women and children. A vocation he'd committed to while still a child—turning a negative into a positive.

If your wife questioned your work, do you blame yourself for her death?

Surely not.

Questions, that it was unthinkable to ask, backed up in her head. Recalling his level voice, the tilt of his head, his unreadable eyes, and the sudden stillness of his body before Papa's call, her heart thumped against her breastbone. There was more to the story. And maybe he'd already revealed more than he intended.

Rounding the last curve in the road, the bay of Xlendi opened out before them. Tiny, by Australian standards, and picture perfect.

"Malta has exhausted all the superlatives I can muster. I don't think I've ever seen such perfection." Lela gestured to the beauty spread before them; the azure water dazzling in Malta's seemingly perpetual sunshine. A rocky cliff on the northern side, with a staircase just visible against the bare grey of the limestone cliff, suggested further coves could be found over the headland.

"Special, isn't it? But horrific in the season. Can you see a free car space?" His first words since they'd left the harbour.

Lela latched on to his innocuous remark as a way to navigate them back to the present. “You’ve been here before.”

“Once. I came across to Gozo and spent the day touring, skirting the coast, stopping at small towns, staring aimlessly out to sea, letting the heat haze bake the work tension out of me.”

“Hard work, negotiating international treaties?”

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“It can be gruelling.” He smiled. “You don’t do it alone, there’s usually shared purpose, but egos and national prestige can get in the way.”

“Satisfying?” She wanted to remind him of the value of his work. “Don’t answer that. Of course it’s satisfying, but you need the balance of regular casework as well.”

“Yeah.” He sounded grim.

The fire in the belly forged in the little boy continued, despite what had happened. A man who wore a spider watch to ease the horror of children needed the emotional connection of real people and real stories to face the evil he confronted every day. Easy to love such a man. Whoa, Lela.

“Is that a space?” He spun the car into the last empty spot. “A good omen.”

The engine died.

LELA FOLLOWED HIM DOWN a narrow passageway, emerging in the middle of a row of shops and restaurants overlooking the harbour. About one hundred metres across, the harbour was crammed with tiny bars and cafés. St. Patrick’s Hotel held the prime, central position.

“The Debrincats have the monopoly on boat licences here.” He steered her towards a small jetty, stopping at a sign nailed to a post advertising boat rides or hires, diving and snorkelling.

“A boat’s coming in,” Lela said.

He shielded his eyes, looking beyond the breakwater to a fishing smack heading their way. “Timing’s right. And that looks like Sophie on the front of the boat.”

Her niece waved at the other occupants before she half ran up the last few metres of the jetty to throw herself into Lela’s arms.

Lela’s world finally righted itself, her breath steadied, and her heart eased. Mariella Debrincat had insisted Sophie was safe, but seeing her made it real. For a few seconds, Lela held tight. Then she stepped back to hold her niece at arms-length.

“Hey, Lela.” Sophie flashed a tentative smile, part guilt, part embarrassment and pure defiance.

“The resemblance is striking,” Hamish murmured, squeezing Lela’s elbow. She turned to him. “Fifteen minutes. Starting now.”

“Where can we talk, Sophie?” Lela sensed rather than saw Hamish walk away, her entire focus on Sophie.

“In here.” Sophie turned and led her through the main entrance into the hotel. “Peter’s cousins own this place.” She signalled to a man at the bar and then crossed to a secluded table near a window.

“I planned to leave, Sophie.” Lela hadn’t planned a blunt confession as her opening, but it wouldn’t hurt to make Sophie realise she wasn’t the only player in this performance.

“Planned to leave what?”

“Move out when you turned eighteen. I’ve signed a lease on an apartment.” Lela loosely linked her fingers on the table.

“You didn’t tell me,” Sophie accused, sounding like a little girl refused entry to a game the older kids were playing.

“I haven’t had much chance to have any kind of conversation with you since you met Peter.” Lela had made herself available, and Sophie had stood her up more than once. “And most of our conversations have descended into brawls.”

“That’s because you wouldn’t listen to what I wanted.”

“I’ve always listened to what you wanted. I’ve taken you seriously, treated you with respect and answered you honestly. That doesn’t mean I’ve always agreed with what you want or allowed you to have it. That’s a responsibility adults have, trying to work out the right decision for your children.”

“I’m not your child,” Sophie flashed defiantly.

“No, you aren’t,” replied Lela.

But you are a child of my heart, and I’ve tried to keep my promise to your mother to make sure you grow up free and strong. At first because I loved her and then because I loved, love you.

“I’ll be eighteen in two months, legally independent.”

“I know.” When did Sophie start talking to me as if I’m an idiot? When did she stop being that adoring little girl who tailed me? “Why didn’t you wait until you were eighteen to leave Australia? And why didn’t you tell me or Papa you planned to go?”

“You would have stopped me.” Sophie’s logic was flawless—to her.

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“We just agreed that at eighteen you can do what you like.”

“I thought you’d side with Nannu, and I didn’t want a fight.”

Yet here we are fighting.

“Are you pregnant?” Lela was already sure the answer was no.

“No.” Sophie was scornful. “I got that message loud and clear. Neither of us want a child at this stage.”

“Then why did you leave?” The question Lela hadn’t been able to answer.

“I’m not going to marry Peter, you know.” Sophie seemed prepared to answer every question except the one Lela asked.

“I don’t know anything, Sophie.”

“Aren’t you shocked?” Sophie was finally sparing time for someone else’s thoughts.

“That you’re lovers? I knew that in Australia.”

“Peter said you knew, but I couldn’t see how you could when you’ve never had a boyfriend for more than a few weeks, much less a lover.” Oblivious to the casual cruelty of her words, Sophie’s stinging tone dismissed her aunt as irrelevant to any conversation about relationships, about Sophie’s life or future.

With the rational part of her brain, Lela recognised Sophie had made up a story to suit her version of events. Her niece's truculence was 95 percent uncertainty. Rational thought eluded Lela. The anxiety of the last few days had a stronger hold than she'd realised. To her dismay, she couldn't see past her own hurt, and it slowed her reaction time.

"I didn't think you'd get romantic love." Sophie shrugged.

"Why now?" Lela buried her pain and focused on the question she needed an answer to.

"Nannu asked to see me after the dinner party. You know what's he's like. He summons you to his office, offers you refreshments—he even uses that word—'Would you like some refreshments?' He relies on the antique furniture and antique secretary serving you stale cake and cold tea to intimidate you."

"Stale cake and cold tea don't keep him on the Business Rich List," Lela said in rebuke.

"He saves it for family." Sophie flashed the impish grin, which had won her numerous battles as a child. "Anyway, he announced his decision."

"What decision?" Lela swallowed her frustration.

"The dinner party was my introduction to my prospective husband, a man who offers a promising business partnership." Sophie imitated her grandfather's voice.

"He promised me he wouldn't." Oh, Papa. You created this mess.

"You didn't talk about it."

“Eight years ago!” Lela threw one hand in the air, when she wanted to stamp her foot and pace like a bull newly released into the ring. “When I refused to consider his ‘promising business partnership’ for myself.” Lela had never told Sophie, because it should never have impacted Sophie’s life. “I told him I wouldn’t tolerate an arranged marriage for myself or any future Vella woman.”

“He can’t have listened,” Sophie dismissed Lela’s intervention as old news. “I told him he and the idea were medieval. He steamrolled on. The clean-shaven, nerdy-looking fellow with granny glasses of all things—my perfect match.”

“He can’t have said that.” But Lela could picture Papa saying the words. “You thought I’d agreed? That’s why you didn’t tell me!”

Sophie had the grace to look embarrassed. “Peter said you’d never have agreed.”

“I might swap you for Peter. A sensible, level-headed young man.” Lela held on to her temper by sheer force of will.

“But you wouldn’t let me go away with him.”

“Waiting a bit longer for a dirty weekend with a young man you’ve only known a few months is a long way short of proposing marriage to the highest bidder,” Lela snapped. “Or can’t you see that?”

“You hosted Nannu’s dinner party. The coincidence confused me. I couldn’t take the risk,” Sophie excused herself.

“If you’d listened to Peter and spoken to me this entire fiasco could have been averted.”

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“It’s not a fiasco. It was my idea, then Peter said he’d come to keep an eye on me. Lots of kids at school take a gap year before university.”

“Lots of kids discuss that with their families and go with their full support.”

“You’d refuse that too.” Sophie folded her arms and slumped back in her chair.

“Why?”

“Because apart from your little foundation, I’m all you’ve got in your life.”

Lela closed her eyes, swallowed her anger, and prayed for an answer to come. Why did I ask for fifteen minutes on my own? What stupidity had made her think Sophie might want or need to talk to her first, that she could influence this confident, assertive—to be blunt—selfish young woman.

“I have friends, family, and while it is a ‘little’ foundation now, with work I can make it grow. Making a difference is important to me.”

“I’m not going home,” Sophie announced.

Hamish, more clear-sighted than Lela, had considered this possibility. His warning allowed her to remain composed while her body turned to ice. Sophie believes I’m cold, not composed. The betrayal was a body blow.

Before Hamish had planted that seed, it had never occurred to her Sophie wouldn’t return to Australia with her. A few days in Malta working out how and when she’d

see Peter again, but her gut insisted Sophie's home was in Sydney.

Stupid, stupid. Or had the shackles Lela had accepted for herself turned her into the selfish woman, clinging to her niece rather than setting her free? Sophie knew no doubt, her belief in her invincibility sparkled.

"I haven't decided how long. Maybe I'll take a few months. Peter and his family take on extra staff over summer to help with the business. I could learn to speak Malti properly."

"That will please Nannu." Lela heard the sarcasm in her response, and blamed herself for not seeing the full shape of the problem.

"I wouldn't be doing it to please Nannu."

"Papa knows Mariella Debrincat." Her niece needed all the facts to make any decision. "She was a friend of Mama's. Papa was spooked by Peter's name. He made a mistake, Sophie. Driven by desperation that he might lose you. He was wrong, but it can't cancel out a lifetime of loving you. He's devastated that you ran away."

"Only because I thwarted his will." Sophie pouted. "And you still plead his case, even though his treatment of you is unforgivable."

"There's nothing to forgive." Lela had failed if Sophie saw her as a victim.

"He's held you hostage to my mother's so-called mistake all these years. He's condemned you to a cold, lonely life. You've never had a proper relationship," Sophie cried. "I won't—I can't live like that, shackled, unloved, unlovable."

Lela pressed a hand to her belly. Sophie's verbal gut punch squeezed all the air out of her, making breathing difficult. The few men she'd allowed to get close had delivered

similar insults, but her niece's condemnation carried lethal power. Sophie was voicing Lela's deepest fear. That while she'd have immediate family, she'd never have someone of her own—unloved, unlovable, always alone.

* * *

“MAY I COME IN?” HAMISH had caught the last few sentences, but the devastation in Lela's eyes told him more. Rage flooded him at her niece's unthinking callousness. Lela had put her life on hold to ensure Sophie had the freedom to grow and challenge the world. Sophie didn't live in fear because Lela had refused to allow it.

“Who are you?” Sophie demanded.

“Hamish MacGregor. Your grandfather employed my company to find you.”

The girl looked from one to the other. “Then who found me?”

“We both did.” Lela met her niece's accusing gaze.

“And will Nannu be coming through the door next to drag me home?” Sophie rose to her feet, an unattractive half-sneer on her face. “Peter and I will run again.”

“Poor Peter,” Lela murmured.

“My turn, Lela. Why don't you go back out into the sunshine, and we'll join you after we've had a chat?”

Chapter Eight

Hamish found Lela at the end of the walkway that ran along the southern side of Xlendi harbour. Hunched into herself on a bench, she stared out to sea. He hadn't been sure how to find her, until an old woman sitting on a chair sipping coffee had gestured with her cane, and he'd spotted Lela's tomato red top and gleaming dark hair in the distance. The woman's face was deeply wrinkled, her eyes old and fathomless, but they missed nothing of human emotion.

"Thank you," he'd mouthed, lifting a hand in her direction.

Taking those last ten metres at a slow walk, Hamish observed Lela's motionless posture, composing and dismissing opening lines. Leaving her guessing about whether he'd caught the end of her conversation with Sophie would add to her torment. Best to confront it head-on. He dropped down beside her.

"They're heartless at that age."

She continued to stare straight in front of her, but tell-tale smudges on her cheeks revealed she'd been crying.

"Egotistical, confident they're right," he continued. "That's if they've been lucky enough to have comfortable lives with adults who've always supported them. You and I know that's not how it works for everyone."

She shifted in her seat to look at him rather than the turbulent sea beyond the safe harbour. "You're excusing her!"

“Never.” He took her hand, needing to reassure her through touch. “Just pointing out you achieved your goal. She’s confident and not afraid to tackle a new country and language. She still wants you to run interference with her grandfather. You’re right. She knew you’d come. Was relying on having you here.”

““Relying on?”” Her eyebrows rose. “How?”

“You—to take responsibility or blame, depending on how you see it.”

“Then I failed in her upbringing in a few serious ways.” Lela sounded defeated, which annoyed the hell out of him. She was silent for a few seconds. “She thinks I’m selfish.”

“Classic case of projection. If you’re selfish, she can absolve herself of responsibility. Did you get your answer on why they ran?”

“Papa told her one of the guests at that final dinner party was her prospective husband.”

“She figured you were in on the deal.”

“Is that a guess, or did you cross-examine her?” Even now, she was protective of her niece.

“She spent the first five minutes after you left justifying her behaviour. Then explaining the rules governing her inheritance. No court of law would deny her access to funds to continue her education in Malta. Poor orphan child wanting to get in touch with her heritage. She could attend a few classes at the university as well.” Hamish hadn’t bothered to tell her he was a lawyer.

“I can almost sympathise with Papa’s mental instability claim,” she said wryly.

“A touch of narcissism, but that’s not uncommon in privileged youth. Her upbringing means there’s a good chance she’ll grow out of it.”

“What do we do next?”

She was asking for his help, and her trust made him feel invincible.

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“Although your father has wasted my valuable time on a healthy, intelligent young woman who’s left home two months before the age of legal independence and has the resources to do it with a degree of comfort, I’m going to charge the agreed fee.”

She stared at him for a few seconds, brow wrinkled, then gave him her sweetest smile. “You’re going to be the bridge between Sophie and him.”

“I want Sophie to be the bridge between them, but I’ll hold myself in reserve.”

“You’re standing me down?”

“You’re due time off for good behaviour.” He was furious at Sophie, angry at the whole Vella family.

“You’re a good man.” She almost made him believe he was a good man.

“Given your experience of men, I won’t let myself get too big-headed over that compliment,” he teased because he sure as hell wanted to believe. He also ached to tell her she was one of the strongest women he’d ever met. He’d protect her with his life. Hell, MacGregor, this case is almost over.

“You shouldn’t listen to Sophie.” She leaned against his arm. “There are enough men, enough people and experiences in my life, for me to know what makes a good man.”

“To be brutal, the only danger Sophie’s in is becoming convinced that she can always have what she wants and treat other people with disrespect.”

“See, a good man. I wondered if you’d heard?”

“Enough to want to set her straight on a few things.”

“How very fatherly of you.”

He winced. “Why did you say there was nothing to forgive? Why do you accept what Sophie classifies as unreasonable?”

“I’m not a cipher,” she insisted. “I’m responsible for my own actions.”

“It’s human to blame, to accuse and, we both know your father hasn’t always made your life easy.”

“If you can’t live with your own decisions, you wither and die inside. Mama used to say if you agree to do something, do it graciously. If you can’t do that, walk away.”

She weighed actions and reactions in a way that confounded him, and could only have come from a strong sense of self.

Hamish searched her face. “You look happier than when I first sat down.”

“That’s on you.”

Her compliments drew him like a bee to honey. She’d landed in his life unannounced, challenging the conclusions he’d reached after Olivia’s murder. She was brave, honest, loyal and loving—an irresistible mix to a man starved of true intimacy for too long.

He tugged on her hand until she fell against his chest. Wrapping both arms around her, he rested his chin on her crown. When she shifted to look at him, he stroked a

hand down one side of her face to cup her jaw.

“Kiss me, Hamish.”

“My pleasure.” Dusting her face with soft kisses, he brushed one to her forehead, gave a nuzzle behind one ear, before settling on her mouth. The rush of heat beneath the contentment hit with a sucker punch. Hamish moved his lips over hers, building pressure until she opened her mouth and welcomed his intimate attention. He let his hands roam over her, urgent to possess. Her moans, her pleas encouraged him to demand more with his mouth and hands.

Hamish drew back, staring into her eyes. “You’re gorgeous.” Somehow, she’d climbed into his lap, and he’d tucked her into him. Seemingly oblivious to their surroundings, she burrowed her hands under his jumper, searching for bare flesh, tracing his ribs, the concave of his belly, possessing him.

“Someone’s coming,” he said urgently, aware of the thumping of his heart above the off-key whistling.

Her eyes lost their dreamy look. She finger-combed her hair into order, and Hamish cursed the young man strolling towards them. Peter was making a noise to announce his arrival.

“Have you met Peter?” she stammered, sliding off his lap.

“Briefly.”

“I suspect Sophie sent him as peacemaker.”

“She expects to be forgiven.” Hamish let his exasperation show.

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“That’s a no-brainer for me. Is she coming home with us?”

“Not anytime soon.”

“I’ll learn to deal with it.” She straightened her clothing. “I’d expected some warning. Not for Sophie to be at home one day and gone the next.”

“It’s another kind of grief.” He figured she’d had more than her share.

“Hi, Sophie sent me.” Peter stopped in front of them.

Hamish let Peter lead them back along the esplanade, past the cascading early blooming pink pigface, past one-room bars and restaurants, back towards St. Patrick’s Hotel. There were few people at the waterside tables, perhaps because the evening had turned unseasonably sultry.

Sophie waited for them. “I haven’t ordered yet. They have good local wines.”

“How do you know?” Lela asked.

“Don’t be stuffy. I’ve sampled a glass with Peter’s family, just like at home. My budget doesn’t run to expensive meals and alcohol. Especially since Nannu froze my account.”

“You don’t need money while you’re here,” Peter said.

Hamish exchanged a look with Lela. Another manoeuvre to pull the strings, another

piece of information the old man had left out of his briefing to Hamish.

“When did Papa freeze your account?” Lela asked.

“I managed one withdrawal at the airport.”

“I’ll leave you some.” Lela opened her handbag. “I withdrew more cash than I need.”

“I knew you would.” Sophie threw Peter a self-satisfied look.

“I wanted to tell you, Lela,” Peter rushed to explain.

“I made him promise not to,” Sophie interrupted, and in response to a questioning look from Hamish, added, “Lela would have asked me to wait, to think about it. And”—she paused dramatically—“I apologise now, but I thought she might have been on Nannu’s side.”

“Often speak without engaging your brain?” Hamish wasn’t going to encourage her poor-me performance.

“Nannu scares me.”

“Not that I’ve noticed,” Lela disagreed.

“Okay then, I’m not patient, like you, Lela. I’m like Mama. You can tell Nannu what you like. I’m not prepared to stay and navigate his rules. I want to find my own way, and I can’t do it in that house. I’m not you, Lela. I’m not as hard.”

Hurt flickered in Lela’s eyes, before she dropped her gaze to hide it. Damn Sophie for taking her aunt’s protection and love for granted.

“If you want to be an independent adult, Sophie, then you need to take responsibility for your actions,” Hamish interrupted. “You call him and tell him what your plans are.”

“Won’t Lela do that?”

“Your decision, your responsibility, especially as it’s no longer based on your original reason for leaving. Your grandfather deserves to hear it from you.” Hamish would insist on it.

“Peter said that.” Sophie glanced at Peter, who crossed his eyes at her. She stuck out her tongue. “I’ll think about it.”

“Time to grow up, Sophie.” Although her antics with Peter showed how very young she was. “It involves more than indulging your own desires. That is, if you care about consequences.”

“Now you sound like Lela.”

“That’s because she’s a very grown-up person who’s helped you get to the position of making your own decisions today. You owe her.” Someone needed to set Sophie straight. Hamish volunteered for the role.

“No, you don’t. That’s enough, Hamish. Why do I feel like I’m back at home refereeing between my brothers?”

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“You were very good at it.” Sophie sighed. “To be honest, I was expecting one of the nuns to ambush me.”

“What nuns?” Lela echoed Hamish’s confusion.

“They’re like an underground group, keeping a check on any unaccompanied young people who might move into the area. A bit like your foundation.”

“We haven’t spoken to them,” Lela said. “You were seen on the ferry to Gozo about the time we arranged an appointment with Peter’s aunt.”

“You said Nannu knows Mariella?” Sophie looked from her aunt to Hamish. “She said to call her Mariella.”

“She was a friend of Mama’s. Your mother was named after her.”

“Mr. Vella never said a word,” said Peter. “Neither didzija. What’s the deal?”

“Nannu had some sort of fight, didn’t he?” Sophie demanded. “I’m not stupid. For an astute businessman, he still manipulates his family as if old vendettas mean something. He thinks he can move us all around like chess pieces in some private game. For me, it stops now.”

“Papa knows we’re meeting you today.” Lela dropped that bombshell into the conversation. “He’s expecting a call.”

“You’re calling him today?” Sophie pushed back from the table.

“I promised.” Lela sipped her water.

“That’s a trap in our family. When you give your word, you have to keep it.” Sophie sat upright. “Except Nannu broke his promise to you, Lela.”

Hamish registered her father’s failure to honour his promise as another blow. He didn’t doubt she’d have it out with him, make her disillusion clear. Did old man Vella care? Did he deserve the loyalty she gave so freely?

“You gave me a promise to tell me where you are, where you’re going,” Lela said.

“I was a child then.” Sophie shrugged, not equating her behaviour with her grandfather’s. “I’m not promising anything now. I’m staying here for the summer, and I’ll think about my next steps.”

“I’ll tell him we’ve found you, and you’re safe,” Lela said. “That’s enough for one day.”

* * *

THE ARRIVAL OF PETER’S family ended private conversation. Lela liked the friendly couple in their forties on sight. Mariella Debrincat must have issued instructions to be explicit about the chaperoning arrangements to protect Sophie and Peter’s reputations if anyone came looking for the young couple. Separate bedrooms were mentioned so often, even Peter was rolling his eyes. Sophie giggled, a light-hearted sound, making Lela’s heart ache.

With shadows darkening the skies, Peter led them to a bustling restaurant nearby, the Stone Crab, which specialised in local seafood. Another link in the family business. Lela excused herself while the others settled at the table. Peter and Sophie were arguing over which dishes to order, while Lela found a quiet corner.

Opening her phone, she texted the message she'd been composing in her head for the last hour: "She's safe. I've spoken to her. She says she ran because you had a husband lined up for her. Not fair, Papa. I'll call tomorrow."

Hamish raised an inquiring eyebrow when she slid into the vacant chair beside him, and she passed the phone under the table. Scanning the screen, he closed it and passed it back, before resting his hand on her knee. More than comfort, he was on her side. Having a defender was a rare and lovely experience for Lela.

She appreciated how lovely an experience when she couldn't summon meaningless conversation at dinner, and Hamish covered for her. Asking about the boat business was an inspired choice of topic with this family.

The Debrincats described the routes to coves and inlets offering secluded swimming or diving; how trips would multiply in coming weeks and months as more visitors arrived for day trips or longer on the island. Sophie's help would be appreciated—when she learned a few more skills. More people were renting houses and staying for longer periods, tempted by the ruggedness and less-developed nature of this smaller island. The boat and crew-renting business for personally designed tours was taking off.

Waiters eventually removed the final plates from the table.

"You could stay, couldn't they, Peter? This early in the season there are still rooms available," Sophie volunteered, a hint of desperation in her voice.

"You're very welcome to," Peter agreed.

"The ferries run continuously, but we should make a move," Hamish said, with a "time to go" motion of his head.

“We’ve had some weather warnings,” Peter replied, his gaze on Sophie.
“Occasionally they close the crossing.”

“We’ll take a chance,” Lela said. Prolonging this departure wouldn’t make it any easier for her or Sophie.

“Deep down I didn’t really think you were on Nannu’s side.” Now that they were leaving her where she said she wanted to be, her niece clung to Lela. “I tried to convince myself because it gave me an excuse to run. I’ve wanted to run for a long time.”

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“I’m sorry you’ve been unhappy.” Lela had missed her niece’s sadness. And what kind of aunt does that make me?

“Not unhappy. Restless. Nannu has his work, the uncles have their families, and”—she looked uncomfortable—“you were more involved with your foundation. I was jealous. I’m sorry I said those terrible things earlier. I need to find my own way.” Sophie was very like her grandfather and would probably resent the comparison. “I knew you’d come. You told him you’d come, didn’t you?”

Lela hugged a weeping Sophie. “I told Papa I’d find you and—”

Sophie lifted her head from her aunt’s neck. “Take me back?”

“—find out why you disappeared without a word to anyone.”

“Nannu knew. He sent you as peacemaker. I want peace too.” Her niece squeezed her tightly. “Call me tomorrow?”

“Bet on it.” Lela turned to the cousin and his wife who were hosting Sophie. “It’s been lovely meeting you. Thank you for your hospitality to all of us and your kindness.”

“I’ll keep in touch,” Sophie cried as they drove away.

THE WIND PICKED UP when they summited the hill above the cove. Looking in the

side mirror, lights were switched on across the town, making Xlendi sparkle like a multi-faceted jewel. Lela imagined families settling in for the night, secure in their affection for each other, trouble-free. Then laughed at the fantasy she wove about other people's lives. Life was rarely perfect.

Swirling gusts buffeted the small sedan, requiring Hamish's strength to keep them moving in a straight line on the narrow access road. Without warning, dark clouds scudded overhead and jagged shots of lightning split the sky. When the first large drops hit the windscreen, Lela concentrated on counting them in her head, the growing tumult of the storm a perverse comfort, alleviating the confusion of loss, guilt and hurt that battered her as relentlessly as any storm.

"It's not the end, Miranda." His steady voice cut through the roar of the wind, reassuring in its certainty.

"I know that."

"You found her."

"Lost, found, lost again."

"That's overly melodramatic."

"That's what my heart says." She turned to face him. "But melodrama features regularly in Vella family interactions."

"Thanks for the warning." He flicked her a quick smile, then returned his focus to the road. "You can't force her to do what you want."

"I'll let her go, if that's what she decides." She stared at her hands. "Mama was about the same age when she followed Papa to Australia. It's not wrong to think it's too

soon, she's too young."

"No, it's not. But the best interests of the child always come first. We have that in common. Even if it's difficult, and for you, even if it means enormous personal sacrifice, the best interests of the child are paramount." He wrestled with the steering wheel.

"What would you have had me do?" she cried. "Browbeat her? Threaten her? Abandon her?"

"Now I'm learning to know you, you did exactly what I'd expect, now and when she was a baby."

She hadn't expected him, but she was so glad Hamish was here.

A low rumble of thunder followed seconds after the flash of lightning. The storm surrounded them, the intensity of the deluge making it impossible to see the road ahead. Driving became dangerous. He pulled into a cul-de-sac, the engine humming to keep the lights on, the thin metal of the car's body scant insulation from the tempest.

"We may have to catch a later ferry." He unclipped his seat belt and swivelled to face her.

"Is it bad enough to stop the ferries?" she asked.

"Can't answer that. Depends on the swell. Want to turn back?"

"I don't like Sophie's behaviour very much at the moment," Lela confessed.

"Because she thinks you're hard and unlovable."

Lela sensed his grin before she saw it backlit by feral lightning and underscored by the ferocity of the thunder.

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“You haven’t developed a tough enough skin if those insults upset you.”

“I needed to leave before I committed violence.” She sighed loudly. “And that’s more of the Vella melodrama.”

“Which bit pisses you off most? That she considered you were on the side of the devil, her suggestion you had no life without her, or her expectation you’d fix things with your father?” he asked conversationally.

“All of them.” None of her friends discussed raising adolescents with Lela. Her fault, skating over difficult conversations because they seemed disloyal or, in the early days, because her friends were interested in clothes and dating. Recently they were juggling work, marriage and babies. Being able to talk to Hamish, knowing he’d keep her secrets was an unanticipated gift.

“You counselled caution. Her grandfather treated her like a piece of property. Not much difference really.” He threw the provocative comment into the stuffy interior of the car.

“Now you’re pissing me off.”

“You should say that to your father or Sophie,” he said with quiet satisfaction.

“How do you know I haven’t?”

“A hunch. You have a marshmallow-soft centre you hide from most people, which your family exploits.” His compliments were equal parts acerbic and precious.

“I wouldn’t survive a day working with disengaged young people if I was a pushover.”

“I didn’t say you were a pushover. Loyal and loving to your family. Giving away most of your income is generous and reveals a passion for making a difference.”

“You haven’t seen me going without. Look at me.” She spread her hands. Colleagues and friends were more likely to challenge than congratulate her. “I don’t want for anything.”

“I am looking at you. Except now I’m seeing you.” His growling reply ricocheted through her body.

Her stomach did a long, slow somersault, dropping her off the edge of a cliff. Lela fell through endless space. Her nerves skittered, and her heart simply stopped beating. Still, she drowned in the endless green of his eyes. She admired his integrity, respected his decency, and had fallen for him spider web by outrageous tie by travelling companion degrees. His compliment cracked open the final barrier protecting her heart, narrowing her focus to the man sitting next to her. The storm isolated them from the world.

“Get a grip,” she murmured.

He laughed, leaning forward to kiss the tip of her nose. “Thanks for the invitation, but I’ll wait for somewhere more comfortable.”

“That’s not what I meant,” she stammered.

“I did.” He scanned the road ahead. “We might have enough visibility to get to Mgarr now. Let’s see if we can catch that ferry.”

Lela followed his gaze. The torrential downpour had lessened, the wicked wind that ripped at the car had dropped, and the road ahead was clear. She'd been oblivious to everything except him. Trapped by her own imagination, where Hamish played both maverick and magician. He was prepared to bend the rules if they interfered with a just outcome, and to her continuing astonishment he was able to make her forget everything except the light in his eyes, the wry twist to his lips, and the fresh, male scent of him. He offered safe harbour and sin in equal measure.

While he concentrated on the road ahead, her mind continued to wander. She imagined tracing her fingers over his face, intimately learning the contours of his forehead, cheeks and jaw.

Not enough.

Lela wanted to learn the contours of his body—broad shoulders, lean flanks, slim hips, and more. Having had her hands on him, she knew his skin was firm to the touch, lightly-haired, warm. Pressure built inside her to reach out, to help herself to what she craved—with her fingertips, with open palms, with her body sliding against his. The urge to stroke, to permanently imprint his long, muscled lines on her memory was overpowering. Naked, she needed to be naked to slide over him.

I want to rip your clothes off.

The boldness of her fantasy inflamed her.

Touch wouldn't be enough. All her senses sharpened. Taste, she wanted to savour the sensation of having her lips on him, her tongue, her mouth, of inhaling the erotic flavour of him as she aroused him. Surrendering to her imagination energised her. Only by gripping her hands together in her lap, and keeping her gaze firmly fixed straight ahead, could she stop herself from making that first move—in a moving car, in a storm! Her famed self-control was deserting her. Heat pooled between her thighs

and wonder and eagerness merged.

She wanted to make love to Hamish. Not because his kisses tasted of heaven, although they did. Not because he made her feel desirable, although when those clever hands traced her curves, she felt sexy, weak and wanton. But because she loved the honourable, understanding, luscious whole of him.

I've fallen for Hamish Beauregard MacGregor.

"Damn!" His expletive cut through her reverie, flicking her like a whip.

Her head snapped around to face him. Caught in the shocking discovery she was in love with him, she feared she'd spoken her thought aloud. "What's wrong?"

"Based on this traffic backup, it looks like they've cancelled at least one ferry."

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“What do we do now?” She tried to dispel the explicit images she’d conjured moments before.

“Options are to wait in the ferry terminal for the next available ferry or look for a hotel room. Peter’s right. This early in the season, getting a room shouldn’t be a problem.” He proposed a simple solution.

My decision to make.

A hotel. Her mind caught in a loop, continuously scrolling distracting images, while she fought to remind herself he was asking her opinion about a sensible next step, not propositioning her.

A moment in time. Her responsibilities discharged for now, no one waiting for her, looking for her, relying on her. Not carefree, but the closest she’d been to it in years. Maybe the bad weather was an omen?

The opportunity to take a few more hours with Hamish, to absorb the enormity of her feelings. She wasn’t a giddy teenager, but her acute awareness of him, and her love, was too new and precious to stay trapped by a downfall in a car in a ferry terminal.

“It’s been a long day. Let’s try a hotel.” A sensible answer reflecting a momentous decision for Lela.

He did a quick search on his phone. “The Grand looks like the best option. It’ll get us out of this traffic jam.”

The car park, ten minutes later, looked worryingly full.

“Wait here.” He made a dash from the car to the lobby.

Releasing a long slow breath, Lela’s stomach flip-flopped again as she followed him with her gaze, smiling when he paused on the doorstep to shake off the rain before entering the hotel.

When she’d dreamed of her mythical hero, of having him arrive one day in her life when she was free of responsibilities, her half-remembered dreams included a man who’d seduce both her body and her mind. Hamish’s sheer animal magnetism had her heart racing, even while she adored his commitment to his work. Common cause had brought them together. Sheer coincidence they’d found more. Their quest over, tonight they were free to write their own script.

“They’ve been rushed in the last fifteen minutes.” He dropped into the seat beside her. “There’s a five-hour shutdown. There’s one room left, a luxury king, which they claim has a bed the size of a football field. I’ve taken it, but we can let it go if you’re not comfortable.”

Dismay held her silent. The promise of a long, getting-to-know-you, romantic evening ending with an invitation for Hamish to join her in her room vanished before her eyes.

“How about I buy you a coffee in the lounge while we get some more information?”

Lela nodded, afraid her voice would betray her disappointment.

“You make a run for it first.”

She shook herself at the door like a shaggy dog, spraying water in all directions. He

did the same. Damp, but grinning by the time they were inside, Lela sensed a new tension replacing the awkwardness of the car, matching the steam rising off their clothes in the hothouse atmosphere of the hotel. Lela flashed a smile she knew was tentative, in recognition that entering the hotel had shifted the balance of events.

Crowds spilled from the bar into the lobby. People, like themselves, seeking shelter from the storm. The vibe was a mix of frustration, anger and resignation, with hands gesticulating and voices raised then lowered as questions were asked and answered.

“The queue of parked cars and trucks already in the terminal will likely fill the first few ferries.” Hamish returned from his own fact-finding mission. “Coffee or something stronger?”

“Probably both.”

“Quick.” He pointed. “That couple’s just moved.” He commandeered two chairs at the end of a bar and a harried waiter took their order. Fragments of conversation floated past them, further confirmation of Hamish’s assessment, if she’d needed any proof.

Her hesitation had nothing to do with logic. Logic demanded they stay the night. Camping in the ferry terminal or the car until crossings resumed wasn’t a real alternative. A luxury hotel room compared to at least six or more hours of discomfort. Pure temptation was being dangled in front of her, and a lifetime of boundaries urged caution.

“Anenormousbed,” he’d said.

A single room.

She loved him. Her heart skittered against her ribcage, and she admitted to herself she

wanted very much to make love with him.

He didn't know that. And she didn't know if his ignorance made her decision easier or harder to make. Possibility, probability, hope.

The waiter's arrival with coffees and a bottle of wine allowed a few more minutes where the decision might have gone either way. While the waiter filled their glasses, Hamish smiled, clearly guessing her dilemma and giving her the freedom to choose.

"What's worrying you." His thumb and forefinger brushed the frown from her forehead. "If it's absent nightclothes, I can offer you a spare T-shirt. My gym bag's in the boot of the car. Bathrobes come with the room."

"Big, fluffy white ones that cover you from head to toe?" She focused on the new image. Would he find terry-towelling alluring?

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“What do you want me to promise, Miranda?”

“Miranda—a Brazilian bombshell or Shakespeare’s heroine?” She didn’t know enough about the real or mythical character to judge who’d be Hamish’s chosen companion tonight.

“Both. Carmen Miranda was a trailblazer, whereas Shakespeare’s heroine was beautiful and admirable.” He watched her over his glass, his eyes full of mischief, and something more.

“You make me sound exceptional.” She held her breath, waiting for his next words, wanting to be caught in the spell he was weaving.

“You are.” His voice was gruff. “A beautiful, admirable warrior for your family.”

Seduced by the simplicity of his words, Lela gave herself permission to live in the moment. Regret, if it came at all, could come later. If she hadn’t trusted him, she wouldn’t have come to Gozo with him.

What am I asking him to promise?

Not to touch her because she was a twenty-eight-year-old virgin and counting? To make love to her? Or to let the night bring what may? Mama’s eyes had lit with love and laughter when she’d told her children of their father’s courtship. Love was worth a risk.

“Get your sports bag. I’ll collect the key.”

“Put the drinks on the tab. I’ll meet you at the lifts.”

Lela tested her reaction, while she waited for the concierge. A tingle of anticipation, a flutter of the unknown, the slippery dip thrill of abandoning responsibility. When she’d filched the first large note from her father’s wallet as a ten-year-old, she’d felt anxious, guilty, afraid of being caught, but buoyed by her sense of justice. The excitement, the adrenalin high from executing such a daring, yet perfect solution, had been unexpected by-products of her impulsive decision. That sensation paled compared to the exhilaration fizzing like champagne bubbles through her system now.

She wanted Hamish Beauregard MacGregor.

He stopped her entering the room with a hand on her arm. “I want you to promise something.”

“A bit late to stipulate conditions,” she murmured, although her heart sped up, already prepared to accept whatever he requested. Her point of no return had been passed in the lobby when she’d surrendered to instinct and intuition.

“Vella family business is left outside the door.”

“Promise.” She offered him a smile unclouded by doubt.

Chapter Nine

The last time Lela had shared a bathroom with a male had been before her second brother left home. The butterflies in her belly, the skittering pulse told her this was different, as did the awareness that on the other side of a flimsy wooden door was a man she respected, trusted, and who turned her insides to liquid heat with his crooked grin.

A new experience for her.

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Her stomach did a slow roll. The decadently long shower hadn't taken the edge off her nerves. She squeezed a few drops of the hotel's body lotion onto her palm. A quick sniff reassured her. Not too highly perfumed, so she rubbed the soft cream into her skin.

The sight of herself in an oversized and worn T-shirt labelled "simply the best"—an old Tina Turner song used along Australia's east coast as a football rallying cry, in the full-length bathroom mirror—reduced her to giggles. The thick terry-towelling robe blunted her hilarity. The woman in the mirror was now a shapeless blob. Finger-combing her hair into a semblance of order made her feel marginally more attractive. Applying the scent she carried in her purse boosted her confidence further.

"My heart's going pitty-pat." She rested her hand over the suddenly unreliable organ.

The wide-eyed woman in the mirror groaned at the cliché. Lela sank to the side of the bath, her legs refusing to hold her. She'd refused to make space for fantasy while she showered, forcing her imagination to shut down when it started to weave images of Hamish being dazzled by her. Bedazzled enough to lose his lawyerly control and ravish her. Her fantasies came tumbling back now, only this time she imagined ravishing him.

In the downstairs bar, when he'd told her she was beautiful, the warm glow of appreciation in his eyes had stalled her breath. He was gorgeous, inside and out, and she was stunned at how long that word, that want, had been in her subconscious, and she'd refused to give it room.

"Are you drowning in there?" Hamish, un-lover-like, rapped on the door.

“Coming,” she croaked, as if her voice was out of practice. Ready or not. Warning or promise, she didn’t know. With a final tug on her belt to make sure the knot would hold, she opened the door, staring fixedly away from the bed.

“You won’t find me in the closet.” His amusement snapped Lela’s attention back to the bed. He’d discarded his jacket and boots, propping himself against the bedhead, with all the pillows piled behind him. “The storm’s refusing to clear.” He pointed the remote at the huge screen on the wall facing the bed. “The weather channel seemed the place to start.”

“Um, right, good idea.”

“Nice robe.”

The folded back sleeves, the tight knot and the drape below her knees didn’t flatter. “There’s only one size.”

“Then it won’t cover as much of me as it does of you.” He swung his legs off the bed. “Which side of the bed do you want?”

Her gaze shot back to his, his eyes hunter green at this distance. A hot flush of heat rose up her neck, blessedly hidden by the robe’s thick collar. “I’ll take the other side.”

“Room service might call while I’m in the shower. I ordered toasted sandwiches and asked them to bring up the bottle of red wine we started.” He ran a finger down her nose on his way to the bathroom. “You were too upset to eat much at dinner. This is comfort food.”

Comfort took on a whole new meaning when he touched her. Featherlight and soul-deep, the flutter that started around her heart refused to settle. Replacing his mountain of pillows with two piles set at a distance from each other satisfied her immediate

need to prove she expected nothing, assumed nothing. She jumped at the knock on the door.

“Room service.”

“Thank you.” She signed the chit. “Mr. MacGregor’s in the shower.” The waiter’s gaze was neutral. She was an idiot to think he’d spent even a second speculating on her relationship to Hamish.

She set the tray on the table set against the large picture windows. Below their balcony and stretched out as far as there was light, electricity wires flapped in the wind, water dripping from them and the poles, which ringed the harbour. The terminal stood as a beacon in the middle, shrouded in the dark blanket of night, not a star visible, not a wisp of light breaking through the clouds. Wind whistled and beat against the balcony doors, while beyond them an eerie stillness hung over the scene.

Tiny people darted between cars and the terminal, gesticulating to communicate above the storm. This morning’s beautiful harbour scene had vanished. Being dry, warm and with the unmistakable odour of melting cheese tantalising her tastebuds was a welcome alternative to the chaos below.

“Perfect timing.” He emerged from the bathroom.

Lela couldn’t stifle her laugh, although she lifted a hand to her mouth to try and hold it in. “Nice robe,” she repeated his words.

“It does what it needs to.” He padded across to the table. When he settled on a chair, the robe slid off his knees.

“You have freckles on your knees.”

“It’s rude to draw attention to someone’s blemishes.” He flicked out a linen serviette and draped it over his bare knee. “Especially as we’re about to eat.”

“Are freckles a blemish?” She took the seat opposite, letting him lift the cover from the plate of sandwiches. “Mm, I’ve been salivating waiting for you.”

“Have you?” A sparkle in his eyes accompanied the teasing, mixing the formal with the crazy informality of sitting across from each other in bathrobes, with a huge bed behind them and uncharted territory ahead. At least for her. This couldn’t be the first time he’d found himself in a hotel with a woman. His wife had been dead five years. “Will you serve?”

I’m going to jump his bones, an expression she’d never considered in reference to herself. Impatience and lust were a heady cocktail.

While she divided the sandwiches between the plates, he poured two glasses of wine. They ate in silence, demolishing the food—the meal at the Stone Crab might never have been.

“Here’s to Malta.” He raised his glass in a toast.

“I can see the attraction for Sophie.”

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“Who?”

She rolled her eyes at his reminder Sophie was off-limits. “I’m attracted. When Mama was alive, Papa would tell us about the war, stories he’d learned from his father. The only country to be awarded the St. George Cross for bravery.”

“You sound wistful.”

“We talked about visiting as a family, but that stopped after Mama died.” She placed her glass on the table. “Maybe he couldn’t bear to come back without her?”

“Malta’s a lesson in survival. Stories of individual and collective courage. Endurance. Subjected to multiple attacks, multiple cruelties, yet the island hasn’t only survived, it’s thrived. Will you come back?”

As she was about to say she’d come back for Sophie, she caught the ironic look in his eye. Flirtation didn’t come naturally, and she was blundering through small talk with the finesse of a blushing teenager. “Probably.”

“And your father?”

“Doesn’t present-day Papa fall under the heading of Vella family business?” She twiddled with the stem of her glass. “What about you?”

“I’ll be back. The European treaties I work on are negotiated through Malta. Am I making you uncomfortable, Lela?”

“No.” She met his gaze.

“Do we agree on what’s happening?”

He was teasing her again, a dangerous game, one that could easily get out of hand.

“We’re waiting out the storm.” Except the storm raging inside her thundered with greater ferocity than the raindrops against the toughened glass doors separating them from the power of nature. Bubbles of excitement formed in the sluggish flow of anxiety through her veins, making her lightheaded. An intoxicating enchantment. Inhibitions, which had been her daily companions for more years than she cared to remember, disappeared under the gentle caress of Hamish’s emerald gaze.

“Which storm? The one stirred up by flirting, seducing, contemplating a night of sin,” he purred.

She took a gulp of her wine, then choked when it went down the wrong way.

“Don’t rush, Miranda. Take the time to savour.” Holding up his glass, he studied the rich colour of it, rolled it gently around the glass to aerate the wine and release the vapours, then tipped it forward to inhale the aroma. “Spicy, with a lot of complexity.”

No man had made her stutter or stumble. Feel this sense of exhilaration and trepidation simultaneously. Feel invincible in her skin, able to seduce him because she wanted to, yet tentative in case she misread his response—or fumbled—or hesitated—when she was naked under him.

Illalu, it astonished her to be thinking of being naked under him, on him, over him. And in that astonishment were the remnants of her fears, that here and now wasn’t real. Her reactions weren’t real but a consequence of the situation, where he’d appeared like a knight in shining armour understanding her concerns about Sophie

and her fears for her niece's future.

"We agreed we wouldn't talk about Sophie."

"I didn't."

He pressed a finger against her lips to silence her denial. "You were thinking of her."

"Only that unintentionally she introduced us."

"Remind me to thank her for that. If you've finished eating, we'll move this conversation somewhere more comfortable."

"More comfortable." Her voice hitched, and her heart hammered in her chest.

He pointed at the enormous bed, with its lush eiderdown and neat piles of pillows stacked about a metre apart.

"Of course." Lela rose from her chair, collected her wine and walked to the far side of the bed with a nonchalance she was proud of. Sitting on the edge, she swung her feet up onto the eiderdown. With the glass safely deposited on the bedside table, she rested back against her pillows, straightened the robe over her knees and smiled at him.

* * *

HAMISH WANTED TO SWALLOW her in one gulp. For the bravery she displayed in that lion-hearted action, her fugitive smile, half bravado, and half what-have-I-let-myself-in-for. He ached to hold her, to make love to her, but wouldn't—couldn't—abuse the advantage nature had given him tonight. Even her toes, with their entrancing deep-plum nail lacquer, looked innocent.

“Stack the pillows along your invisible line.” He approached the bed.

When her mouth opened and shut several times and those entrancing eyes narrowed, he suspected he’d taken the teasing too far.

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His Miranda might be sexually inexperienced, but she was smart, attracted to him, aware of the possibilities in agreeing to share this room and would kill him for making decisions for her. He'd learned enough of her past to know her decision-making included a dash of impulsiveness.

"Don't trust yourself," she purred, while gripping the lapels of her robe tightly in one hand.

"Enough." He rested his hands on his side of the bed, before advancing on hands and knees across the empty acres of space. He prowled towards her—his hands sinking into the thick softness of the eiderdown—letting her glimpse the savage lust surging through him, sure her swagger would evaporate when he called her bluff. She was adorable, and he'd promised himself in the lobby that if she agreed to stay, he wouldn't lay a finger on her. Didn't stop a bloke from taking precautions. "Nothing's going to happen between us. We're seeking refuge from a storm."

"Which storm?" She repeated his words, her hoarse whisper and the pink tongue running over her top lip tripping a switch in his brain, straining good intentions.

She held his gaze—a long sultry challenge while she eased her throat with a sip of wine. With the glass held as a shield between them, Hamish bore witness to the tremble in her fingers. Close enough to see her hold the wine for an infinitesimal moment in her mouth, before she swallowed hard, her eyes smoky now with provocation.

"You are daring me." Kneeling beside her, Hamish took the glass from her hand. Raising it to his lips, he ran his tongue around the rim, savouring her taste. "Lovely

flavour.”

A moan escaped her. Unconscious—he was sure—like the rapid rise and fall of her chest, the slight dilation of her nostrils, the flare in her eyes. A pagan fire. Hamish took his time replacing the glass on her bedside table, reaching forward, his left hand beside her right hip for balance, while his right stretched forward to set down the glass. Deliberately he brushed his arm across her belly, drawing encouragement when her fingers clutched the bedclothes, as if needing the fabric between her fingers or she’d grab him.

“I’ll just put it down for you,” he said.

* * *

LELA CURLED HER FINGERS more tightly into the eiderdown, wanting to wipe the smug expression off his face. Pleased with himself because he’d reduced her to a quivering mass with the lightest of touches, because he’d demonstrated his complete command of the situation. His primal purr rolled over her, creating a haze before her eyes, a mist of lust.

A smugly honourable man and his reasonableness ignited her passion. Scrambling to her knees, she made a private vow to shatter his self-control. She grabbed his head with both hands, pulled him towards her and kissed him. Hard—fast—then drew back to look at him, panting with the boldness of her action. Adrenalin roared through her with the power of knowingly dancing with danger.

“You’re playing with fire.”

“Burn, baby, burn,” she breathed, blowing cool air onto his heated face.

Something shifted in his eyes, the hunter returned, and his hands dropped to her hips

to drag her closer. This time he lunged, and the surprise of it, the wildness of it delighted her.

Threading her fingers through his too-long locks, she was free to revel in the thickness of his hair. His scent was fresh and clean, lemongrass with hints of pepper and something woody. The undercurrent of soap tantalised, a reminder of the real beneath the romance. Tremors skated through her, easing then rising in demand to the rhythms his fingers danced up her spine. His mouth softened and coaxed, and Lela yearned and yielded. The ragged sounds of her capitulation filled the room.

His hands were everywhere, stroking her through the heavy fabric of the robe, until she chafed at her limitations. Unbelting his robe, she nudged it off his shoulders, tugging until it fell discarded on the bed. A T-shirt as paper-thin as the one he'd lent her hugged his body.

"Wait," he groaned. "I didn't ..."

Her hands traced the worn cotton. Entwined in the flimsy fabric, the solid weight of his chest pulsed beneath her fingertips.

"You want me." The knowledge filled her with joy.

"Yeah." His chest rose and fell while he sucked in harsh breaths. "I wasn't sure you were ready for this." His hands circled her wrists, holding them still. "Wait. Be sure, Miranda?"

"I'm sure. I've dated, had an almost-lover when I was eighteen." She was afraid to breathe, afraid Hamish would change his mind. "School graduation party. A nice boy, fun to be with, gentle. He'd always been kind to me. That night we both knew there might be more, wanted more.

“Listen.” Lela read the hesitation on his face, and flattened her hands against his chest, needing to explain. “I was wearing a new dress. A magic night. Stolen kisses behind the school hall, a few fumbles. He wasn’t any more experienced than I. He touched my breasts, caressed and kissed them, made me understand what being a woman meant.”

“Lela, you don’t need to tell me this.” He held her away from him.

“Youhaveto understand. We talked about it on the way home. A polite kiss goodnight in case anyone was watching. Meet again. He knew a place.”

“You were being watched.” He guessed.

“Papa. He was furious. I’d closed the door, lent back against it, a stupid smile on my face, and Papa erupted. Accused me of betraying the family, gave me an ultimatum. I could say goodbye to the boyfriend or move out.”

“Your father was—is—unreasonable,” he said harshly.

“Sophie was seven. I couldn’t leave her. I promised myself I’d live by my father’s rules until Sophie was eighteen.”

“Her age doesn’t matter anymore.”

“He was afraid.” Lela curled her hands into fists. “I knew that. If I’d called him on that ultimatum, it could have destroyed our family. I wasn’t prepared to do that. Peter’s aunt said no one deserved to be punished for youth and love. I couldn’t punish him because he was struggling to find a way to deal with Mama’s death and Mari’s so soon afterwards. He still hasn’t let go of some of his confusion and anger.”

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“I’m sorry, this got out of hand.” He released her and started to inch away.

“That’s not what I’m trying to say.” Lela fumbled with the knot of her robe, struggling to untie it. She needed to look down, when she wanted to look at him, make sure he followed what she was telling him. The robe loosened, and she pulled it free, leaving a thin opening strip down the front.

“I’m not somenineteenth-century virgin. I know what it feels like to be wanted, to want. I can bring myself off. I’m not ashamed or frightened of our desire. I know what I’m asking you for. Make love to me, Hamish.”

* * *

THE CERTAINTY IN HERgaze pierced Hamish’s defences, scuttling the good intentions he’d tended like a newborn. His heart stalled at the roaring in his ears. She was offering a mating of equals. No past, no future, only now—an unparalleled gift. No games or tricks for his Miranda, just the generosity of spirit that was an integral part of her.

“Are you sure?” He was humbled by her honesty.

“Yes.” She was a dream he hadn’t dared to believe in.

Hamish lifted a hand to nudge her robe aside. Blood drained from his head to his groin, the caption “simply the best” making his mouth go dry.

His spare T-shirt skimmed her legs at mid-thigh. Gorgeous legs, the colour of a light

Australian honey, and he craved the sweet taste of them. The shirt followed her curves, hugging her shoulders, flowing like liquid gold over her bra-less breasts, the fabric catching at her raised nipples before it dropped to her hips. It clung, then swayed, changing direction as she moved.

Shameless craving blasted through his hard-won caution.

Reaching forward, he slid her robe off one shoulder.

“You’re beautiful. Brave and beautiful.”

“So are you,” she whispered.

He shook his head, lifting his other hand to push the robe off her other shoulder. It slid down to pool where she kneeled. “T-shirt looks better on you than me.”

Hamish skimmed a not-quite-steady hand down her throat and across one breast, smiling when the nipple puckered in response to his touch, leaning forward to suckle the tight nub through the cotton. She gasped, the breathless murmur echoing in his head, inviting both urgency and tenderness. His gut clenched. He’d give her both if it killed him.

“Lie down with me.” He’d allow himself this interlude because—admit it, I can’t refuse you—he wanted to love her even if they had no future.

Scooping up his discarded robe with one hand, he threw it off the bed. His shirt came next, a swift action to drag it over his head, letting it join the robe on the floor. Laying back against the pillows, he knew his dark briefs outlined every inch of his need. He stretched out a hand, catching her fingers, coaxing her down beside him.

“I’ve wanted you since you stepped off that plane.” Hamish drew her towards him,

savouring her moan of pleasure. She deserved lavish words of praise.

With soft kisses, he teased her, tormenting himself with her silken texture. Coaxing her mouth open with his tongue, he fed his need by mimicking lovemaking. His body strained with the effort of keeping the pace slow, while he waited for her to feel the lethargy that passion seduced, the languor of limbs stroked to the edge of reason, as well as the fire and heat.

“Tell me what you’d like.” He lifted his head to meet her dazed eyes, sure his were equally bedazzled, not sure if he could stop, but determined to give her a chance to change her mind. Her whimper of loss at even his small separation made him tremble in awe.

“You.” Her trust roared through him like a tornado through saplings, snapping his control.

Hamish stroked her through the tee, his movements increasingly urgent in response to her urging. He caressed her, with his hands, then his mouth, leaving damp patches where he suckled her breasts, before making his way lower. Trailing a line of kisses down her belly, he found where the cotton bunched at the apex of her thighs. Nudging the fabric aside with his mouth, he inhaled her scent. And kissed her there, where she was pure woman, hot and wet, waiting for him.

* * *

LELA EXPLODED IN Ablinding rush of sensation—like lightning ripping through her body, eclipsing the orgasms she gave herself. She let her head fall back and rocked against his mouth. His hands held her thighs steady while he loved her, absorbing the shocks and shudders rolling through her in waves. She cried out, rearing upright. He found her mouth with his, steadied her, and swallowed her whimpers of delight.

Heat, vulnerability, intimacy—a glorious symphony singing through her body.

He slid the shirt over her head before laying her back on the bed, caressing her belly, her breasts, arousing her again.

“My turn,” Lela breathed against his mouth. She gave an experimental wriggle, delighted by his groan when the movement insinuated her more deeply between his thighs. Testing his reaction, she undulated gently against him, a move heightening her excitement. He tightened his hold on her.

“Roll over,” she ordered against his ear, wrapping her arms around his chest. He rolled, his body slick with perspiration. Exulting in the power he gave her, she propped herself on his chest to ride him through the thin material separating them.

“Your wish is my command,” he gritted, the effort of control etched in his face.

Pushing herself back, she trailed her way down his body, replicating his actions by suckling first one nipple then the other, purposely slow, purposely provocative. Unbearably excited.

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His patient submission fuelled her eagerness. Curling her fingers in the top of his briefs, Lela rolled them down, unwrapping him like a gift. When his erection stood free, she stilled, brushing the smooth shaft with an inquiring finger, captivated by its primitive beauty.

“It won’t bite.”

“I might.”

“Be gentle with me.”

Bending forward, she repaid his attention to her, fascinated by the smooth skin and his body’s reaction to her exploratory tongue. When Lela took him into her mouth, slid her tongue along his shaft, he groaned. She did it again, then lifted her head. “Maybe I’ll stay here.”

“And maybe you won’t.” He gripped her arms, pulling her back to him. Fitting his mouth to hers, he lowered himself to her body. “You have a deliciously wicked streak.”

“Your fault. You let me be me.” Lela welcomed the heavy weight between her thighs, and the knowledge he would fill her. When he rolled off her and turned to his side of the bed, a protest formed on her lips.

“Need a moment,” he groaned, fumbling with the drawer in the bedside table. “Bought some condoms downstairs.”

“How very forward-thinking of you.”

“Not a plan.” He donned the rubber. “An impossible dream.”

His possession was gentle, allowing her to sink around him. An intimate invasion. He held her with his gaze—asking, coaxing, letting her know she was desired. Lela opened to him, taking him into her body as she had into her heart. Sensation spread in ever-increasing ripples, until she was weightless and floating.

Taking his weight on his hands, she sensed he’d held back, until this moment, until her body melted like chocolate around him. His rhythm changed. Slow, slick moves became more urgent, more possessive.

“You’re stunning.” He encouraged her with soft words.

“I love you, Hamish,” she whispered against his throat.

Then there was only heat and movement. She locked her ankles at his back, pushing for him to let go. Instead he took her higher. Untamed, wild, an act savage in its beauty and tenderness—release and an endless falling.

Slowly Lela became aware of the heavy weight slumped across her, of him sucking in air. He rolled over again, pulling her on top of him.

“How do you feel?” He pushed one hand into her hair, smiling drowsily into her eyes. He traced the length of her spine with his other hand, his touch telling her he needed to have his hands on her. Needed to keep the physical contact.

His slow massage started a low hum inside her.

“Wonderful.” Liberating to be able to touch him in turn, to tangle her fingers in his

thick hair, to rake it back from his face.

“I lost it towards the end—may have rushed you.” His hand strayed from her back to outline her breast, a finger rolling over the nipple, which tightened in response.

“Do I look rushed?”

“Rumpled, gorgeous, with an edge of smugness.” He dusted kisses across her bare shoulder.

“Then we make a pair.”

“Do I look like I could go another round?” He brought his head down until their lips were a breath apart.

“I thought you’d never ask.”

“SOPHIE WANTS YOU TO ring her.” Lela closed her phone.

We’re lovers. What a lovely way to start the day. Delight made her smile. A haze of sun glinted off the water as the ferry left the dock, the peaceful harbour giving the lie to the previous night’s storm. Theirs had been the last car on the late-morning ferry to the mainland. They’d also had to scramble into their clothes to ensure they met the compulsory check-out time.

“Let’s go back inside then.” He steered them towards a free table tucked in the corner of the ferry’s restaurant. “Sophie, Hamish here.” He listened for a while. “Tomorrow ... We’re at the Grand Excelsior ... I’ll tell her.”

Lela pressed a hand to her jittery stomach. Sophie was taking yet another step away from her.

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“Sophie says she checked on me, and they’ve talked.” He pocketed his phone.

“Who’s they?” Lela could guess the answer.

“Mariella, Peter.”

“She trusts the Debrincats more than me!” Sophie wasn’t just stepping away from Lela, she was bolting.

“She’s punishing you for being right, for insisting she take responsibility,” he said. “Although the Debrincats won’t treat her like a princess. They’ll expect her to work.”

“Why punish me?” Lela scowled at him. “You’re the one who told her to grow up and engage her brain before acting.”

“I have the value of novelty. And the Debrincats probably know about Marty’s work and reputation. I get the street cred for employing him.” He moved his chair closer and draped an arm around her shoulder. “You didn’t argue when I said I could be a bridge.”

“It’s time I passed the baton, at least where Sophie and Papa are concerned.” She snuggled under his arm, content to be comforted. “That doesn’t make it painless.”

“She and Peter will come to the hotel tomorrow. She’ll ring your father. So far, all she’s decided is that she’s staying here until she turns eighteen. But, she wants to feel that legal independence, see if it makes her feel different.”

“And your role?”

“To be witness if your father threatens her or Peter.” He kissed the top of her head.

“To point out she could disappear in Malta for the seven-and-a-bit weeks we’re talking about.”

“Mariella Debrincat would hide her?”

“That’s about it.” He took his arm away. “Are you going to call Sophie again?”

“Not yet.” Ridiculous to feel bereft without his embrace.

“Your father?”

“I’ll send Papa an email when we reach the hotel.”

Slipping his hand into hers, he tugged her to her feet. “Then back on deck. We must be passing Comino, the third island. You should see it.”

“Be tourists?”

“There’s nothing you can do now. Let it go for a while.” He stood behind her on the deck, his arms wrapped around her, his warmth and strength at her back—a lover’s embrace.

HE TURNED OFF THE NAVIGATIONsystem when they disembarked, leaving the sun and occasional road signs to guide them back to the hotel. Meandering along back roads, they talked little, although Lela rested her hand on his thigh from time to time, to draw his attention to some point of interest.

When roadworks forced them to halt for ten minutes, he pulled her into a clinch—a spontaneous embrace to match the carefree moment. Catcalls from the road workers reminded them to move on.

Mid-afternoon, Hamish turned the corner onto Great Siege Road and started the descent to the hotel. The calm sea and bright heat reflected off the yellow stone creating an impossible contrast to the previous night's wild weather.

“Have dinner with me?” He pulled up at the entrance.

“I'd love to.”

“My room at seven, room service. When will you let your father know?”

Lela rested the back of her hand against his cheek and rubbed gently. “Give me an hour.”

He glanced at his watch—she smiled again, seeing the spider move with the ticking over of each second. “An hour. Text me if you need longer. I'll contact him after you do.”

“That should be long enough. Then I might spend the rest of the afternoon working, or pretending to be a tourist.”

“Playing hooky. How wicked of you.”

“I feel wicked.”

“Hold that thought.” He drew her close for a lingering kiss.

The glow of remembered loving clung to Lela. Entering her room, she laughed quietly to herself. The room looked different; the world looked different. She walked onto the balcony and leaned against the railing. The bay glittered, the sky was a brilliant blue with light clouds scudding at higher altitudes, the sea a darker shade shimmering in sunlight.

For long minutes, she soaked up the beauty and peacefulness offered by the view. After calling Papa, she could surrender to the timeless charm of Malta and its languorous heat haze, spend her remaining time before meeting Hamish in the cool chill of the pool, or be pampered with a massage or beauty treatment, pummelled into suppleness with exotic creams, potions and unguents. She'd be soft on the outside and squishy on the inside from hours of indulgent hedonism.

Or she could shop for frivolous wisps of lingerie for Hamish to talk her out of tonight. Silk and lace. Tingles of remembered pleasure skittered down her spine. Perhaps she'd just lie on her bed and summon sensations from a night of Hamish's lovemaking when sleep had become a diminishing priority for both of them.

She'd told him she loved him.

The glorious freedom of being able to tell him. Pressing a hand against her heart, she imagined her fingers could pick up the vibrations love caused. He hadn't said he loved her, but he must. He'd initiated her into lovemaking with such tenderness,

touched her with exquisite passion, worshipped every inch of her body. Every action spoke of love. His every advance and retreat had been attuned to her needs. Inexperience couldn't blind her to that truth.

Tonight. She'd tell him again tonight. Floating on air, Lela hugged to herself the heady sensation of making love to the man she loved. She'd sweep him off his feet. The flimsy scraps of lingerie she'd spotted in the lobby boutique would contrast with her Monet green and blue sheath, the one dress she'd packed. Spinning in a circle, she let her head fall back, another laugh bubbling through her. He'd seen through her defensive shield and her uncertainties and let her be who she could be.

No man ever had. She'd been afraid no man ever would.

Afraid that it wasn't just her circumstances, her loyalty to her family, which had made previous boyfriends walk away. But that she was lacking, that the toughness she'd developed while still a child made the woman unlovable.

Hamish had laid that fear to rest.

Chapter Ten

With the doorbell still chiming, Hamish drew Lela into his room and into his arms. Pressing her against the solid wood of the door, he covered her face with kisses, ran his hands over the delicate fabric of her dress, catching fistfuls of it against her thighs as he sank into her.

"I thought you'd never get here." He lifted his mouth for a moment. "What took you so long? You look gorgeous."

Laughing, nervous, excited, Lela whispered against his lips. "You haven't looked at me yet."

He kissed her again—imprinting his mark on her—then drew back. “I’ve looked. You’re still beautiful. I didn’t plan to pounce the second you walked in the door.”

“I like your pouncing.”

“I’ve got glasses and some wine ready on the balcony.” He put an arm around her shoulders, guiding her across the room. “Best to move away from the bed.” He handed her a drink and raised it in a toast. “You’re looking at a free man.”

“You resigned?”

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“Let’s say my services are no longer required.”

“Papa sacked you! He sometimes has a problem distinguishing the message from the messenger.” Lela paced the small space, outrage on his behalf boiling over.

“Thanks for the support.” He grinned. “Did he sack you too?”

She spun back to him, her rage directed at her absent father. “Daughters can’t be sacked. Exiled, abandoned, abused for their irresponsibility, but not sacked.”

“Especially when they refuse to be.” He tilted his head to one side.

“What do you mean?”

“Isn’t that the secret of your success? You won’t be silenced, you won’t disappear, you show him what love looks like every day of your life.”

“He disrespected you,” Lela concluded.

“The honours were fairly evenly divided. He accused me of failing the brief. I told him he’d lied to me.”

“You’re sorry for Papa?”

“He’d spoken to you. The news flattened him.”

“Short of kidnapping her yourself and smuggling her out of the country, how does he

imagine you can change the outcome?” Lela understood her father’s shock and grief, but Hamish was blameless.

“I sent an itemised invoice, and I gave him my opinion she was safe, of sound mind, and by the time any case got to court, if he wanted to fight it, she’d be of legal age,” he paused. “And that I’d represent her in said court case.”

“And you think I’m direct.” She grinned. Where have you been all my life?

“My considered opinion—which I shared free of charge—is if he didn’t suck it up, he’d do incalculable damage to their long-term relationship. I also outlined the option of suing him. I rescheduled real cases for this.” Annoyance sharpened his tone. “Apart from wasting my time, lying about children is unforgivable. Children are taken advantage of every day because they don’t understand what’s happening to them.”

“That’s why you didn’t walk away when you discovered the first lie,” Lela said, appreciating his willingness to look beyond the personalities to the needs of the individual child. “You wouldn’t take the risk she wasn’t safe.”

“I needed to see for myself she was safe,” he agreed.

“He found your Achilles’ heel,” she murmured, stepping close to brush her cheek over his. “I’m sorry he didn’t recognise your integrity for the strength it is.”

“You’re not responsible for his actions.”

“We’ve taken you away from people who needed you more.” Although, if Lela was honest with herself, she needed him. His skill meant she’d found Sophie faster. His emotional support was helping her deal with Sophie’s rejection of her.

The doorbell rang, and he pressed a kiss to her forehead. “That’ll be room service. I hope you’re hungry.”

“ILOVE YOU, HAMISH.”

Nestled against his shoulder, his stillness, his infinitesimal withdrawal was a physical pain. Bathed in the glow of lovemaking, with her body still throbbing from his possession, Lela had felt invincible. She’d needed to share the words with him so he’d know how powerful he made her feel.

As his silence dragged on, she turned her attention to the painting on the opposite wall. It was decorated with a fragment of a Roman temple, and she learned the pattern in the ornate stone pillar, seeing how one twisting vine worked into another, grapes, flowers, small animals, meaningless decorations.

The coldness started on the inside, steadily spreading until she feared she wouldn’t be able to disguise her trembling from him, wouldn’t be glib enough to toss the uncontrollable shivering off as a reaction to his closeness.

Illalu, his scent clung to her, filling her nostrils, surrounding her in the bed, tormenting her. Lela needed to escape before she threw a Sophie-like tantrum. He’d made love to her as if his life depended on it, as if she was the most precious person in the universe. Was it all a lie, an illusion?

Certainty drained from her, and tears obscured her vision.

Each touch had shown her why she loved him—tender, passionate, committed. Every square inch of her body had been worshipped. For what? A casual pleasure? A quick fling?

“That was a mistake,” she whispered, rolling out of his embrace. For the first time, embarrassment at her nakedness washed over her. It wasn’t the bare flesh, but her confusion she wanted to hide.

“Lela.”

“Don’t touch me.” She shrugged off his reaching hand, scooped up the dress, which he’d peeled from her shoulders with deliberate eroticism earlier, from the floor. Blanking out the memory, she pulled it on, flimsy protection for her ragged emotions. Did I misread the signals?

“I said I loved you the first time. At Gozo. Why didn’t you stop me then?” Huddled into the armchair beside the bed, she curled her legs under her, closing her eyes briefly to compose herself, steady herself before the next blow.

He swung his feet to the side of the bed until he faced where she curled in the chair. “I let myself believe you said that because of the enormity of the moment. Everything was new for you, and you believed that’s what people say when they make love.” He wasn’t even pretending not to have heard.

“You bastard.”

“Maybe I deserve that,” he muttered, looking patient. Patient—she wanted to kick him where it hurt. “You’ve been on an emotional rollercoaster—anxious—relieved—angry—and aroused in the space of a few days. You’re not very experienced.”

“Are you saying I don’t know what I’m feeling?”

He dropped his hands between his knees and frowned at the floor. “We’re healthy adults attracted to each other. We had a chance to let go of inhibitions, no

consequences. Hell, I'm your first lover."

"A first fine careless rapture." She mocked his unoriginal excuses.

"It's too soon to say you're in love."

"Don't tell me what I feel." How could I have been so wrong? "Putting labels on my feelings won't change them."

"I shouldn't have taken advantage of you," he apologised stiffly.

"I see two consenting adults here. Don't patronise me. You're not an itch I decided to scratch. I have more respect for myself than that. And more respect for you."

Rising, he turned his back to grab his jeans and drag them up, before facing her again. "Sophie's flaunting her sexual relationship with Peter, unrepentant, immature, and prepared to throw spiteful words like unlovable at you like hand grenades. Don't pretend that didn't hurt, that didn't increase your vulnerability, your susceptibility to seduction."

"And you were the only convenient stud!" She exploded off the chair. "Don't kid yourself. I could have made love at eighteen or at any time since. I could walk downstairs now and probably have my choice of partner. Sex is always on offer."

"You're an incredibly desirable woman." He stuffed his hands in his pockets.

"Don't try and placate me either," she snarled over her shoulder as she paced her side of the room. "I was tempted to take a lover to prove I could trick Papa, to thumb my nose at his blindness. My personal protest against his ability to look at me and only see my sister."

“I’m sorry.”

“Apologise for your own crimes, not his. Honesty and integrity aren’t easy to replace.”

“If that’s to my account. I didn’t lie to you. I want you.” He stumbled to a halt. “What we’ve shared is like nothing I’ve ever experienced before. You’re breathtaking. I thought saying you loved me was part of the moment.”

“Unbelievable orgasm loosens virgin’s tongue. Naked woman babbles.” She planted fists on her hips to stop herself from waving them at him.

“I’m sorry.” He took a step towards her. “It happens.”

“Not to me.”

“Well, yeah, you don’t want to reopen the conversation where I point out your inexperience.”

She paused mid-stride and came to stand in front of him, meeting his gaze. “You want me to believe that’s what this is all about? You consciously and with deliberate forethought took advantage of me?”

“I care about you, Miranda. More than any woman I know.”

“Not Miranda.” Using his special name for her sharpened the betrayal. “I want the truth. You knew I wouldn’t make love to anyone on a whim.”

“Okay.” He sucked in a breath, raked a hand through his hair, leaving it mussed. More tired and more dispirited than Lela had ever seen him. “I believe you think you love me.” He held up a hand to stop her automatic protest. “That you wouldn’t make

love to anyone you don't care for. But when you kneeled opposite me in that bed last night—soft, generous, and so damn gorgeous—I allowed myself to take. I convinced myself you couldn't have fallen in love with me. Olivia ...”

“Because you still love your wife?” Old love would be impossible for her to fight.

“Because of the vow I made after she died,” he said carefully.

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“You vowed not to love anyone else?” A knife pierced Lela’s heart.

“I didn’t plan for any of this to happen.”

“You said she died five years ago,” Lela whispered, hearing her defeat in his dead voice, seeing it in his dull eyes. Those glorious green eyes—usually alight with speculation, lawyerly surmising, humour and life.

“The time doesn’t matter. I was turning twenty-eight. We joked that our child might be born on my birthday. The killer screamed at me from the dock. ‘See how you like it, to have some bastard steal your wife and child from you.’”

“He wasn’t sane.” Lela suspected she was repeating an argument he’d heard and rejected multiple times.

“What’s sane? Am I sane?” He started to pace. “I was responsible. If I hadn’t been involved in messy custody disputes, Olivia and our child wouldn’t have died.”

“You can’t believe you’re responsible.”

“Olivia believed I was responsible.” His pain hit with the force of a sucker punch.

Sorrow flooded Lela, urging her to reach out and hold on, to absorb some of the incredible hurt pouring from him, but he’d withdrawn into a dark pit where she was unwelcome. Hard on the heels of sorrow came renewed anger. He was prepared to shoulder the guilt his dead wife had been so keen to plant in his mind. What about Olivia’s responsibility?

“When did she say that?” Lela was a bitch to challenge his wife, but what hold did a woman dead for five years have on him?

“When the police issued a warning, Olivia asked me to drop my domestic violence caseload, said she felt threatened.”

“What did you do?”

“I accepted police protection. I upped security for Olivia, asked her to change her routines.” His hands fisted at his sides. “That day, she went out alone. I received her text when I came out of a meeting with my client. ‘Why should she be the one to change her routine?’”

Illalu. Olivia hadn’t followed the police advice. To frighten Hamish? To use the threat to convince him to give up his work? “Doing this work is who you are,” Lela repeated a simple truth.

“I need to be in touch with women, with their children, to know what they need. Violence against women and children is unforgivable. That’s where I’ve been heading since I was twelve years old. If I’d stopped, it would have been a betrayal of them. A violent man killed Olivia. If he hadn’t been stopped, he’d have killed again.” Hamish was revisiting old recriminations, and the result was torment and despair. “I’ve made peace with myself. After Olivia, I vowed not to put another woman at risk. I can’t do that again.”

Lela scrambled to find words to cut through old grief and new guilt.

“I thought you understood.” He hunched in on himself. “That I’d made it clear at the ferry dock, when I told you Olivia wanted me to change. That you’d understand my vow.”

Lela recalled the moment. He'd said all those things, but she hadn't joined the dots. She might have, but her father had called, and the moment had passed.

"Haven't you made your own deal with the devil?" He refused to back down, demanding she confront her choices. "You decided bargaining with your father every step of the way was better than not having him in your life."

"Damn you. Yes." For many years she'd been tormented by the idea she'd make a mistake, do something, which her father would regard as an unforgivable sin, which would prompt him to sever all contact between her, her brothers, and Sophie. "Promising Mari I'd look after Sophie meant giving her a family, a heritage."

"He can't keep you from Sophie. If nothing else, your trip here should have banished that bogeyman. Sophie's an adult now, like you. You can control how much you see each other, and Giovanni Vella can't do a damn thing about it." He'd changed direction, shed the mood of the moment before and stood staring at her with a half smile in his eyes.

He took a step towards her, ran his hands up and down her arms, seeking to rub warmth back into her, into what they'd shared. His bare chest was inches from her. Lela could lay her fingers against his heart and feel if it raced as fast as her own. "You can be free."

"Sophie's decision will change my life, but there's more than Sophie tying me to my family."

"Your family isn't going anywhere, but they've trapped you with obligations."

"I'm not a victim." She refused to be a victim.

"You're a prisoner."

“Now who’s projecting?” A storm raged inside her. “You’re both.”

“Stay with me here for a few more days.” His hands massaged her shoulders, slipped down to take her hands before raising them to his lips.

Lela trembled, and he read it as surrender, dropping her hands to sweep her into his arms, burying his face in her hair. He trailed kisses from behind her ear to the hammering pulse at the base of her throat. Matching heat rose in her, weakening her limbs, until force of will was her last defence, making her fight the urge to sag against him.

“Take what we have here—now.”

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“What do we have, MacGregor?” Lela pulled herself free and stepped back, holding up a hand to keep him at bay. Angry, aroused, torn in two as she’d never been before. Furious with how easy it would be to fall back into his arms, to sink into the welcoming bed, to take him deep inside her and live in the moment. Distraught at the dilemma he’d revealed and the solution he’d chosen. “You’re pretty free with your criticism of me putting my life on hold for my family. Now you’re asking me to put my life on hold for you.”

“Stay here with me for a few more days. Let me make love to you,” he repeated.

“A few days.” She struggled to control her anguish.

“We can go away together sometimes. I can’t promise more. I can’t take that risk again.”

“An affair until you jump at a shadow and decide we shouldn’t meet at all?”

“I’m trying to find a way to keep what we’ve found.” He was asking her for the impossible, and it seemed so unlike the man she loved.

“You can’t freeze the moment, take it out of hiding every now and again and breathe life into it. It’ll shrivel while it’s in the dark.” Looking into his eyes, Lela faced her deepest fear. Unlovable.

No man had ever put her first. Hamish wouldn’t be offering a secret affair if he loved her even a bit. The world didn’t matter to her—Hamish did.

“I could take precautions,” she whispered.

“If I acknowledge you publicly as my partner, you’ll be a potential target.”

“I won’t spend my life fighting shadows. I haven’t worked to keep my family together to deny myself the chance of making one.”

“I want to be with you again.” But he looked away.

“What do I tell my family? That I’m seeing someone, but we hide behind curtains and meet after dark? What do you tell your family?” she asked, reading the answer in his averted gaze. “Nothing, you tell your family nothing.”

“Don’t condemn my caution!”

“Caution is about taking steps to protect yourself and those you love. Your vow sounds like fear and guilt to me. Have you told your parents you’re responsible for Olivia’s death?” She doubted it.

“They’d disagree.”

“Waste their time on exorcism over chops and veggies.” She smiled without humour, at the memory of how his parents had soothed his childhood fears.

“Olivia’s death changed that. I might be able to turn my rage and fear into a weapon against those who attack me, it’s harder when they hunt the woman I love.”

“But we’re not talking about love, are we?” She pressed because the truth was preferable to false hope.

* * *

“ICARE ABOUT YOU.” I love you.

Her unwavering honesty and loyalty had slipped under Hamish’s guard. Her passion, her generosity, her sheer exuberance for living had caught him by the balls. He’d willingly lost himself in the wild taste and feel of her. The urge to take her had been irresistible, beating a tattoo in his blood until nothing else mattered except possession.

With her, he forgot the loneliness he’d carried too long, forgot the vows he’d made after Olivia died. More than that, wanting Lela beyond reason made those self-imposed shackles chafe at him, heavy beyond bearing. But the basis for that vow was unchanged. Telling Lela it would all be fine was a lie he couldn’t bring himself to speak.

Hamish closed his eyes, blocking out the challenge and the pleading he read in hers. Like the mighty warrior she was, she battled him, trying to shake his resolve. He wanted her more now than he had this morning, wanted her more with each passing moment, but couldn’t give in on this. Her safety was too precious to him. Asking her to agree to a secret affair was cowardly, but he wouldn’t admit he loved her. He’d messed up enough. If he had to wound her to save her, he would.

“The risk is always there.” He’d become too deeply entangled before he’d realised he would hurt her. If he acted with care now he might be able to salvage her pride.

“Would you deny yourself the possibility of love and a future because of one madman?” Her eyes reflected her turbulent emotions, dark amber as her tone shifted from anger to confusion.

“Isn’t that what you’ve done for eighteen years because of your father?”

“That’s cruel, but maybe you’re right. I’m not going to do it any longer. I’m going to find a man who loves me, who’s prepared to build a life with me.” Her voice

wobbled, and he cursed himself for making her cry. “You must know I couldn’t accept a furtive, hidden affair?”

“I did. I do. But it’s all I can offer. Selfishly, I want the possibility of seeing you occasionally.” He cursed his need, his greed in wanting to make love to her, to hold her even for a short time. He told himself a clean break would be better for her.

“I’m selfish too.” She pounded her chest. “I want you in bed beside me every night. I want you to share my dreams and my daily frustrations. I want you to be holding me if we decide to have a child.”

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The blow rocked him to his core. “If you’re pregnant,” he paused. Improbable but not impossible.

“If I’m pregnant?” she stormed. “What difference does that make?” She fought back and in ways he hadn’t expected. Her pride, her refusal to accept less than the truth, even if that hurt, had both tempted and excited him from their first meeting.

“I couldn’t leave you alone with a child.” He should never have touched her.

“I wouldn’t take you.”

The desolation on her face hollowed Hamish out. “You’re not making sense.”

“You have to choose me, Hamish. Me, with all the risks and uncertainties that entails,” she raged. “Later we might choose to have a family. A child is not a reason to marry or live together.”

“But your father?”

“To hell with Papa.” She turned her back on him.

“Lela, listen to yourself. One minute you won’t do anything that might upset your father, the next you’re talking about being a single parent, like your...” He tailed off at the ferocious look in her eyes.

“Sister. You were going to say like my sister. Mari took a risk on love. Taking risks for love is a sign of courage and joy, an affirmation of life. It’s a damn sight more

appealing than taking a risk for someone who says they care for you, and hey, the sex is great, so let's hook up when it's convenient." She was incandescent with fury. If she pointed a finger in his direction, he might spontaneously combust, and Hamish knew he deserved to burn in hell for not keeping his vow, for taking what he craved. Loving her had been like grabbing hold of sunshine.

"Hell." He jammed his hands in his pockets. Telling her the sex was incredible had been a mistake, fanning her rage. "At sixteen they had no idea what love was. We're completely off track here. I want you to promise to tell me if you're pregnant."

"I'm not pregnant." Her voice held a mix of resignation and despair.

"You'll tell me," Hamish insisted.

"Even in the midst of mindless lust, you took precautions. A responsible, careful, consider-all-the-consequences man. I won't be pregnant."

"Condoms aren't foolproof. I didn't consider all the consequences. If I had, I'd never have touched you. You make me want things I can't have. I don't want to hurt you, never wanted to hurt you." In the morning he might be grateful she'd refused an affair because she was right. Now, all he could see was he couldn't bear to let her go completely.

"Too late, MacGregor." She bent to pick up the scraps of lace. Her bra and pants had been kicked under the bed in their crazy, shameless dance to strip each other. She tucked them in the pocket of her dress. "An affair won't work."

"Why are you so sure of that?"

"Because loving you has shown me that while I'm not the narrow-minded conservative my aunt is, I do want a conventional relationship with you—contact

with the rest of my family and yours, introducing you to my friends, meeting yours. The dream of children.” Tumbled from their lovemaking, and struggling with his rejection, she fought his platitudes. She didn’t lack courage.

“You want everything.” Hell, now I’m blaming her. Good one, MacGregor.

“Having a love affair means just that to me. Loving, committing. Better than wanting nothing. You’ve built in the end of our relationship. I’m just fulfilling your expectations for us. Let me go now.”

* * *

LELA FORCED HERSELF to collect fruit and cereal from the breakfast buffet.

Last night she’d stumbled into her room and crept under the bedclothes. Rolling onto her side, she’d huddled in a ball. She’d screamed, and screamed again, uncaring whether the doona muffled her primal roar—raging about the death of Hamish’s wife and unborn child, about all the dreams he’d lost, and about those he wouldn’t allow himself. In the hours before dawn, she grieved her own loss.

What about me?

Taking a seat, she stared at the plates in front of her. Ilalu—I don’t want to eat.

So what are you doing with all this food?

Establish routines, fill the day with tasks that take you from one moment to the next. At ten, Lela had lucked out. The hospital social worker with her when Mari died had followed up. She’d counselled Lela, given her a sounding board in those first years and taught her the value of routine and normality for survival. Eat, drink, sleep, walk, talk and one day you won’t be doing those things as a zombie anymore. One day

you'll see the sky and be able to distinguish between the beauty and perfume of a rose and the dank odour of a musty cupboard. One day she'd laugh easily again.

Lela was sipping tea when Hamish arrived.

He slipped into the seat opposite hers. "Running away? Paying for a first-class seat. Isn't that a waste of money?"

"Emergencies call for extreme measures."

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“What’s the emergency?” he demanded.

She challenged him out of dry eyes. “My heart is breaking.”

“Don’t look at me like that.”

She gestured to empty tables nearby. “You can sit at another table.”

“I thought you’d understand that I can’t put anyone in that position.”

Now I’m “anyone” to you. “There’s no point in rehashing this.”

“You know I can’t leave today.” He glanced around and leaned closer. “Sophie and Peter will be here in a few hours. Can’t you bend a little?”

“Can’t.” She picked up her cup and was proud when her hand didn’t tremble. “At first, I had no options. Honestly, where could a ten-year-old have gone? Then I learned to compromise. Sophie was a little girl, my brothers and I were children. But I can’t compromise on this. It’s too big.”

“Stay.” He growled. “Sophie will expect you to be here today.”

“Not good enough. Have you changed your mind?” She tilted her head to study him. Thirty impossibly long seconds passed. “I thought not. I choose life, Hamish. I’m not prepared to settle for second best. I want a lover who’ll consider the possibility of loving me, who’ll be proud to be seen in public with me.”

“That’s unfair. I am proud to be seen in public with you.”

“In another city, another state, another country where your family and friends can’t see us. And you skipped the hard bit—opening yourself to the possibility of love.”

I love you. Like falling off a mountain, she’d been skirting close to the edge in those first few days, learning about him. The slow seduction of finding they shared the same values, had the same ethical approaches. Then she’d stumbled. It might have been his understanding about Sophie, his bone-deep commitment to people in trouble, or it could have been the taste of him. She’d tumbled over the edge quickly, flying without a parachute. Loving him was like falling, terrifying and exciting, like the third glass of champagne fizzing in her head, making her believe in miracles.

All that before they’d made love. His body had been a revelation, how her body had responded a personal sin. In the short time they’d had together, they’d seesawed from desperate lust and violent all-consuming need, to tenderness, to tending. He’d whispered sweet nothings, stroked and held her. A rollercoaster few days.

Loving. That’s what they’d done, even if he couldn’t say the word.

“We’ve just met. We barely know each other.”

“I disagree. I know you care deeply about your work, about your family. You persevered with getting me onside after I was rude to you at the airport. Not because it was me, but because my cooperation was necessary. You wear a spider watch and unconventional ties because you think about the impression a big man makes on a small child and their terrified mother. We have so many things in common. I look at you and see what might be. I yearn—body, heart, and mind.” She had no pride left, and maybe one day she’d regret exposing herself so totally.

“I explained.”

“You explained that a madman shot your pregnant wife. A man who beat up his own wife and children, and when you agreed to represent her, he decided to punish you.”

“He killed Olivia in cold blood,” he said through gritted teeth.

“What he did is unforgivable, and I am more sorry than I can say that you lost your family in such a way. Such meaningless phrases.” Consciously, she tried to steady her breathing and lower her voice. “I can barely comprehend what such a loss means. Are you going to let him control the rest of your life?”

“He’s not controlling my life. Damn it, I am. I’m still doing that work. I still deal with angry men. I won’t put a woman I care about in a position of danger again.”

“You say care about, I say love. You’ve never once said you love me. What do you really feel, Hamish? Don’t I deserve to know that?”

“I can’t allow myself to love. I can’t do that again.”

She forced a smile through the tears running down her cheeks. “I should apologise for this unedifying display. Do you have a tissue?” He passed one to her, and she wiped her eyes before pushing it into her pocket. “I’m not usually such a crybaby.”

“Let me drive you to the airport,” he begged.

“All arranged.” She took a final sip of her tea.

“What do you want me to tell Sophie?”

He’d stopped asking her to stay, and his acceptance of her decision hurt in a whole new way. No repeat of last night’s plea to be convenient lovers? Had his offer been another lie?

“That at the moment Papa and my brothers need me more.” A habit it was time she broke—letting her family rely on her. “I’m having trouble processing her decision.”

“She hasn’t made one yet,” he disagreed.

“She’s staying here until after her birthday. Do you have any idea how much planning has gone into her eighteenth birthday? How much they love her and will miss her?” She picked up her handbag.

“I’ll let you know what happens today. But regardless, there’s no way your father can hold you responsible for any of this.”

“Papa’s a law unto himself, but I’m used to that. Don’t worry about me. Angsting about me would defeat the purpose of sticking to your vow.” Lela was entitled to a little sarcasm.

“You need me to treat your father with respect.”

“You’d give him that power.” Lela watched the chasm opening between them. “And you’d give me nothing?”

“Anything less would diminish what you’ve tried to achieve in the last decade, and would threaten the truce we’re trying to negotiate to keep your family intact now.”

Damn you for understanding exactly what I’ve fought for.

“There’s no need. You aren’t asking me to choose between you and my family. You aren’t offering me a choice at all.”

“You’ll find someone else,” he said, the pain of his rejection slicing through Lela’s

heart with the ease of a knife.

“Faster than it’ll take you to find another table.”

“I didn’t say that to devalue what we shared.” He held out his hands, palms up, in a sign of peace.

“But it’s what you’ve achieved. Goodbye.”

“Notau revoir.” He waited. “Goodbye. That’s a tough call.”

“You’re not the first to call me tough.” Her voice wobbled. But Hamish had acquired the knack of being able to hurt her more than anyone she’d ever known. “I’m known for making the tough calls. Remember—assertive, unwomanly, unlovable.”

“You’re wrong. You’re strong, attractive and very lovable.”

“Except you don’t love me.” She managed another small smile. “And you forced this decision on me by saying we have no future even before we start.” She waited for him to say something. After endless seconds when her heart broke again, she said, “Let me go, Hamish.”

Chapter Eleven

Hamish knew to thesecond when her flight touched down in Sydney, imagined the taxi ride to the house, couldn’t imagine what sort of welcome she’d receive.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 7:12 pm

Giovanni Vella hadn't known she'd flown home. Thirty minutes after Hamish had told Sophie and seen the shock of disbelief on her face, he'd found himself telling the old man via video-link that Lela was on her way home alone.

Sophie had gripped Peter's hand while speaking to her grandfather. Her explanation hadn't differed much from her position the day before. She was safe, well, sure of her own mind, and would spend her eighteenth birthday in Malta. More permanent decisions would wait until after that.

If Hamish hadn't already worked out the central importance of Lela to her family, that stilted conversation via the internet would have made the point. Lela's absence had left them largely struck dumb, and he had little stomach to fill the gap. Especially as his sense of loss matched theirs.

"I'll send messages via social media, Nannu." Sophie made the concession Hamish had recommended. "And emails, just for you."

Vella said nothing. Hamish had never met him, but it seemed he'd aged in the ten minutes it had taken for the call.

"I love you, Nannu," Sophie whispered, blowing a kiss at the screen.

Hamish waited for the old man to respond, and after thirty long, silent seconds, acted. "We might wrap it up now."

"Inhobbok hafna, Sophia."

He'd give Lela two hours. Two hours to get home from the airport and talk to her father. Then he'd call.

SHE PICKED UP THE PHONE on Hamish's first ring.

"Hello, Hamish." She was calm, freezing him out.

"How's your father?"

"Shell-shocked is probably the best description. He kept repeating that she's staying there. Are you calling to say she's changed her mind?"

"She's here until her birthday. No commitments beyond that." He closed his eyes to better picture Lela. "Your absence shook her."

"Not enough to call me," she said flatly. "Papa mentioned emails?"

"She's promised to write to him. She told him she loved him."

"Thank you for that." She was gracious, and he hated the distance politeness and thousands of kilometres reinforced. "You said you'd be a bridge. That will help them."

"Sophie was crying when they finished. Vella told her he loved her in Malti."

"Papa doesn't say the words often enough."

Hamish hadn't given them to Lela at all, but he had to believe he'd made the right decision, otherwise he'd go crazy. "I'll see you both when I get back."

“That’s not a good idea. Talk to Papa, but you don’t need to talk to me,” she hesitated. “Do you think she’ll come home?”

“There’s a chance. She’s missing you both already, but no guarantees. She needs to make a point.” He’d almost forgotten the point he was trying to make. You’re safer without me. Right. Who cares that I’m no longer whole without you?

“I appreciate everything you’ve done and are still doing.”

“Miranda.” He gentled his voice.

“I’d better get back to Papa. Goodbye, Hamish.”

* * *

LELA WALKED BACK INTO the living room and a sudden silence. Her brothers had come home with Papa, and Auntie sat in her chair near the window tatting lace. Auntie was the only vaguely normal element in this room. A closer look showed her hands weren’t as steady as usual. Papa was veering between rage and despair, pretty close to her own state of mind. Her brothers exchanged a look, then turned to her. Their stares said, “Can’t you fix it?”

“Was that Sophia?” Papa demanded.

“We were positive you’d bring her home.” Joseph, her oldest brother, was asking a different question. Why didn’t you stay? What the hell’s going on?

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“That was MacGregor. Sophie’s determined to stay in Malta until after her birthday.”

“Who’s Macgregor?” Mirko threw himself onto the couch.

“Over to you, Papa.” Lela took the place at her younger brother’s side.

Her father scowled at her. “I hired him to bring Sophia home. He’s no longer in my employ.”

“Hamish MacGregor is an internationally acclaimed Australian lawyer specialising in the illegal movement of minors across international borders. He works for the Australian government on international treaties and has a private practice in Australia.” He was the most honourable and stubborn man Lela knew, and living in this household, stubbornness took some beating.

Joseph hissed out a breath.

“Hamish was undertaking treaty negotiations in Malta. Papa tricked him into looking for Sophie, thereby taking his time from cases more deserving of his attention.”

“How did Papa trick him?” Joseph leaned on the mantel above the fireplace.

Aunty hesitated, the bobbin of cotton held above the pins.

“I sent him a medical report. It said there was a possibility Sophia was having a mental breakdown,” Papa replied, holding her gaze. “Possibility, nothing definitive.”

“The definitive evidence came directly from you.” Lela gentled her voice. “You were desperate, but you allowed Hamish to believe a lie. He’d have shredded you if it had come to a court case, and I would have been cheering him on.”

Her allegiance to Hamish, and her use of his first name, caught Papa’s attention. No matter. Hamish would leave their lives as abruptly as he’d entered them. She’d miss him for the rest of her life.

“I don’t understand?” Joseph asked. “Was the kid a conman or not.”

“Peter Debrincat comes from one of the wealthier families in Malta. His aunt was a close friend of Mama’s. Close enough that Mariella was named after her.”

“I was afraid he’d steal her away,” Papa confessed, and his admission didn’t inspire triumph in Lela, just more regret, “convince her of the beauty of Malta, that she should research her family’s history.”

“What in holy hell did you think you were doing, Papa!” Mirko had an impressive range of expletives in several languages. Lela admired his self-restraint in Aunty’s presence.

“I still don’t get it,” Joseph added. “Why did she run?”

Lela let the silence lengthen. She wouldn’t have chosen this way to tell the story. She’d planned to invite her brothers’ wives over, to lean on their good sense, to weave the truth with smaller blessings. Her brothers’ children would have distracted Papa. He loved them—not as he loved Sophie—but they could always make him smile. Papa was watching her, and she lifted her chin in deliberate challenge. “Either you tell them, or I do.”

“I may have overplayed my hand,” Papa said slowly. The damndest thing—he didn’t

look diminished to her in this moment. He'd gathered them close when Mama died, cried with them, and she'd thought the solidity of their unit was an anchor that would always hold fast. "I suggested the son of a business associate was a suitable husband for her."

"For fuck's sake, she's a child." Mirko exploded off the couch. His daughters were four and five.

"Language please." Aunty made her reflex reply, and Lela stifled a giggle.

"You alone are responsible for this entire fiasco." Joseph finally sat down. "Maybe you're the one who's mentally unstable."

"Watch your mouth." Papa was offended by Joseph's judgement.

"She can't have imagined any of the rest of us would have agreed to an arranged marriage." Joseph was thinking out loud. "I'm assuming she didn't talk to you, Lela." Was he accusing her of failure?

"Why didn't she talk to you, Lela? How on earth did she think an arranged marriage could be forced?" Mirko took Joseph's old place beside the fireplace.

"Coincidentally, I'd refused to let her go away with Peter for a weekend a few days earlier"—Aunty gave a shocked gasp, but it was far too late to pretend Lela hadn't known Sophie and Peter were lovers—"then I unknowingly hosted the dinner party for her prospective husband. She equated my actions to Papa's in her head and—basically—decided we weren't respecting her right to make her own decisions."

"Was she looking for an out?" Joseph would be a good successor to Papa in the business.

“Yes.” Lela had thought long and hard about this. “She said we were all settled in our lives, knew where we were going. She wanted to find her own way.”

“Like Mama and you,” Mirko said, and Lela could have kissed him.

“What about her birthday?” Aunty asked, her lace-making set aside, a tear trickling down her cheek.

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Lela had thought about this too on the plane trip home. She hadn't spent all her time wondering about what-ifs, chastising herself for missing Hamish's signals, wanting him to love her enough to take another risk.

"What about a birthday party in Malta? We've talked for decades about going as a family. I'd say we'll never get a better chance."

"Accept her ultimatum." Papa jerked upright.

"Meet her halfway. Show we respect her choices, that we love her despite being devastated by her decision." Lela studied her brothers, could almost see their brains ticking over. They'd check with their wives, but they weren't opposed. "For you, Papa, it's a way to say you're sorry and show you mean it." Her challenge dropped into a charged silence.

Thirty seconds passed, then a minute. Lela wiggled to the front of the sofa. She hadn't really expected a fast response.

"It's a good idea." For Papa, a "good idea" was a concession speech.

* * *

KEEPING HAMISH WAITINGtwenty minutes for a scheduled meeting was a crude exercise in power, but Hamish had anticipated it. From the delayed acceptance of his request to meet Giovanni Vella, he knew the old man hadn't forgiven him for not hauling Sophie back to Australia. Nor for telling Vella his instructions weren't worth the paper they were written on. He'd failed the old man. And Vella had made him

wait three weeks for this interview.

“Mr. Vella will see you now.” The secretary’s smile hinted at apology.

A large, utilitarian office, with heavy, dark furniture. A recent paint job, new lights, drapes, and a recovering of the chesterfield couch brought it into the twenty-first century, but the old man had probably started his business life in Australia with that cedar desk and those chunky bookcases. Vella completed his conversation and slowly rose to his feet.

“You asked to see me, Mr. MacGregor?” The old man inclined his head, an autocrat granting a reluctant audience.

Vella had recovered from the shock he’d shown during the video call. His face had regained its colour, and he exuded more vigour, more king-of-the-castle body language today.

Lela shared her father’s semi-regal bearing. She’d held her head at just that angle on their last night together. Proud of who she was, refusing to accept his pathetic excuses. Skewering him with her clear-sightedness and unconditional love.

Hamish was comfortable with Vella’s antagonism; it reflected his discomfort with his own decisions. He’d exchanged a few emails with Mariella Debrincat and checked in on Sophie’s preferred social media sites. For the last four weeks, Sophie had kept her side of the bargain. She’d enrolled in a language course, worked on the tourist boats most days and sent her grandfather regular emails. If he was fair, the old man would admit she was healthy, happy and productive. Learning independence under the sheltering arm of the Debrincats.

“May I?” Hamish gestured to a seat facing the desk.

“Why have you come?” Vella sat down.

“I told Lela I would.” Hamish took the chair and faced him. And I’m letting you know she’s important to me. Make of that what you will.

“Yet you didn’t have the courtesy to tell me you’d decided to work against me,” Vella snapped.

“Until I met your granddaughter and talked to her, I hadn’t made a final decision. You had my report the next day.”

“It was a mistake hiring you.” Vella drummed his fingers on the desk.

“We can agree on that. Why did you? Why didn’t you let Lela handle it?”

“My daughter, Carmen”—Vella emphasised the name—“is supporting my granddaughter’s actions.”

“Instead of an arranged marriage to a stranger?” Hamish wouldn’t tolerate the old man’s hypocrisy, any more than he’d tolerate criticism of Lela.

“Dynastic alliances are commonplace in business.” Vella shrugged his indifference.

“I’ll take your word for it, but Lela wouldn’t have let you.”

“Carmen is a rebel.”

Hamish laughed for the first time in days. “She’s toed the line for eighteen years, lived by your rules, put her life on hold.” He could have added she was old-fashioned where it counted, made love to him because she loved him, but wouldn’t flaunt a secret affair in her father’s face, wouldn’t accept less than an honest relationship. She

hadn't responded to his texts, although a minor functionary at her office had thanked him on behalf of Western National for the bouquet of flowers he'd sent.

"Like my granddaughter, she's run away."

"I bet you knew about the apartment. She signed that contract long before you scared Sophie away." Hamish bet her father knew where most of her income went. The old man probably knew about the sheets and towels she'd stolen as a child. "I'd also be prepared to bet she eats at home two or three nights a week, even now. Lela will never willingly be separated from her family."

"It's not enough," Vella stated.

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“Lela excused your behaviour because of your grief in losing first your wife, then your older daughter. You’re wilfully blind if you can’t see Lela’s used every ounce of her love, compassion and intellect to keep your family together.” Someone needed to remind this old autocrat of Lela’s strengths, and Hamish seemed to have appointed himself as defender of her good name almost from the moment he’d met her. Praising her to her father was something he could do. “Eighteen bloody years and you want more.”

“She should be with me at home. They should both be with me.” The tremble in Vella’s voice surprised them both, while the sudden flash of emotion in his eyes reminded Hamish of Lela. The shape and colour were the same. The vulnerability he’d glimpsed in that fraction of a second was the key to why Lela loved him and refused to humiliate him.

Hamish gentled his response. “I know Sophie’s in contact with you, that you’re planning to go to Malta for her eighteenth birthday. Lela hasn’t turned her back on you. She couldn’t. You have your family today because she’s fighting for it.”

“That’s what you’ve really come to say.” Vella steeped his hands on his desk, his stare becoming assessing. What calculations was the old man making now?

“Yeah. She’s a miracle, Mr. Vella.” He rose to his feet and headed for the door, stopping when he reached it. “I also came to tell you I’m withdrawing my bill for services.”

“Why?” Vella inclined his head, focused on Hamish’s answer.

“Because it was a privilege and a joy to spend time with your daughter.” Message delivered.

Hamish saw Lela’s face everywhere, her fugitive smile, her serious concentration, and the passionate sparkle that lit the depths of her eyes. Frustrated arousal was a constant hum through his body, while an immobilising sense of loss made him lethargic, and for the first time in his life, disinterested in his work.

He couldn’t explain that. After Olivia’s death, he’d accepted any and every brief offered to him. The punishing fourteen and sixteen-hour days had kept him focused and sane, stopped him examining Olivia’s role in her own death. Doubting her had seemed disloyal until Lela made him confront the truth that not all women would have made Olivia’s choice, even if they were at war with him. Today he’d hinted to his partners that his current domestic violence case was likely his last. A condition he’d set for himself, if he was to have another chance with Lela.

“I don’t see the connection. We had a business arrangement.”

“Do you love your daughter, Mr. Vella?”

“That’s none of your business.” Vella stood erect.

“Lela thinks it’s conditional on her doing what you say, being who you want. That if she transgresses in any way, you’ll cut her off like you did her sister.” She also thought I was interested in the sex, not the substance of her. He was working on how to apologise for that lie.

“I’m sorry my older daughter died as she did, and that I didn’t do more to prevent it.” Regret stiffened Vella’s voice. “I was shocked and angry when she allowed that young man to trick her, to shame us.”

“Comfort her, is how Lela sees it. Grieving for her mother, loaded with responsibility for her younger siblings, she wanted someone to hold her.” Hamish wanted Lela to hold him, lovelorn idiot that he was.

“Carmen has a generous spirit, like her mother.”

“Did you take advantage of her mother as well?” Hamish was learning more than he expected from prodding the old man. Maybe the shock of living in a house without his daughter and granddaughter had forced some self-reflection.

“You know nothing.” Vella’s fist clenched.

“Have you told Lela how you feel?”

“You can’t know what it’s like to lose the love of your life.” Vella was playing the sympathy card rather than answering the question.

“The husband of one of my clients killed my pregnant wife.” And Hamish knew with blinding certainty—he’d loved Olivia, but she wasn’t the love of his life. Lela was. After less than a week together and three weeks apart, he had no doubt. And she was right—he’d been too caught in past guilt to see what she offered. Lela was first, last and always a protector. In Malta she’d taken care to protect her sources. Unlike Olivia she’d never weaponise a child, much less risk a child’s life.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t know.” Vella waved a hand in the air, letting his ignorance excuse his arrogance. “Carmen is stubborn.” Hamish lifted an eyebrow, and the old man hurried on. “A fighter. She misses her mother and sister. Losing them was hard for her.”

“Didn’t stop you trading on her loyalty, her readiness to forgive.”

“A father’s right!” The old Tatar admitted it, but claimed it as his due.

Hamish was contemplating committing a similar sin—trading on her readiness to forgive. The temptation to beg for a few hours of her time was a tiger clawing at his gut.

“I try not to repeat mistakes. I will never agree with her completely, but I’d cut off my right hand rather than lose her.” If Vella told her more often, something positive might be salvaged from the mess Hamish had created.

“Tell her, not me.” He closed the door behind him.

He had a hide lecturing her father, when he’d let her believe he didn’t love her. Love her! She sang in his blood. He could still smell her, still feel her in his arms when he closed his eyes to sleep at night. Not being able to see her, to touch her was a physical pain.

The fear he could knowingly put her in danger burned stronger.

Along with his current brief had come a warning that the client’s husband had more than once threatened violence to anyone who tried to keep him from his wife and kids. The wife and kids were in hiding, living each day in fear of their lives.

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If Giovanni Vella was paying attention—and he wasn't a stupid man—he'd have worked out that Hamish was in love with Lela, and that he'd never separate her from her family.

When Hamish had sorted this case, he'd go to her, beg her for another chance.

A WEEK LATER, HAMISH stood at the windows of his fifth-floor building. The outlook provided a clear view of the central plaza below. The busyness and activity of people going about their daily tasks—of flower vendors spruiking their wares, of sunseekers on benches in those pockets of the plaza still attracting the sun's attention—usually distracted him, emptied his mind of tedious detail and allowed his subconscious to solve intractable problems.

Today something was different. Shielded from noise, a silent movie played out in front of him. Police and tactical response vehicles moved in from all directions. His office had had no warning of a drill. Another terrorist siege? Intent on answers, he turned to his desk.

“Hamish.” His second-in-command popped his head around the door. “We've had an early alert from the cops. They said to prepare the building for a lockdown.”

“What's up? I've spotted the response squad.”

“Trouble a block up. Tipoff is a domestic gone wrong.”

“Why the heavy response?”

“Someone spotted an assault weapon and a backpack that could be rigged with explosives. They’ve taken hostages at West Nat. Isn’t that where the Vella daughter works?”

No!

The word roared through Hamish in instant denial. His brain, processing facts with robot-like precision, moved faster than his body, still sitting in his chair. Standard business hours, Lela would be working, would be inside the building, possibly facing a thug with a gun.

She didn’t know he loved her. He had a plan—a stupid, stupid plan to tell her when the time was right—for him.

“Are you okay, Hamish?”

He met the concerned gaze of his colleague. “Take care of everyone here. I have to go.”

“The police have already closed the block.”

“I have to go.” Hamish snagged his jacket off the back of the door, shoved his phone in his pocket and headed out. “Lifts still open?” he threw over his shoulder.

“When I came in they were.”

Hamish pressed the button for the garage. If any move had been made to lock down this building, an exit would be easier from there. He didn’t want to fight anyone, but he had to be as physically close to her as he could get. Remembering phones on silent

could be used in a lockdown, he took the risk and texted her.

“Lela, please let me know you’re okay.”

The tension in the air was palpable when he slipped out of the garage and into the crowd. An inexorable push of people away from the plaza in front of West Nat. Ambulances and fire engines now ringed the plaza. Media vans were parked further away. The choreography of dealing with a hostage crisis played out according to the pre-arranged plan—sealing the buildings closest to the plaza and evacuating people from open space and nearby buildings to a safe distance.

Where are you? Alone? Afraid? Damn it, she was just as likely to be standing in front of another woman or child to protect them.

Police were at the back of the crowd, calmly shepherding the horde away from the crisis. The hum of excited, anxious and confused voices carried rising fear, while the police carried out their orders with inexorable efficiency, professional and unshakeable.

Adrenalin pumped through him, his eyes darting everywhere at once, looking for an opportunity to get closer. West Nat was cordoned off, but he could get closer. Close enough to see who went in and came out of the building.

The crowd surrounded him, and the police were mere metres away. He ducked back inside the garage and dropped down behind a car.

The spider crawled slowly around his watch face. Three minutes and no word. He willed Lela to respond, but wouldn’t chance another message. The thought of never seeing her again, never hearing—No!

Studying the crowd and the cops, he worked out a plan. The cops were sweeping the

area in waves, picking up stragglers or those, like himself, who were reluctant to leave. Their reasons might be as good or better than his, but when he spotted a guy gesticulating wildly and swinging punches at the cops, he took his chance. Slipping out behind them, he ran the fifty yards to his regular café on the corner of the plaza. Bent double, he leaned into the door. Locked.

He signalled wildly at the man peeping under a drawn window shade to the right of the door, eyes rolling with fear.

“Man, we’re not allowed to take any more customers.” The barista, who served him daily, squeezed the door open a crack.

Hamish gripped the side of the door, forced it open further and pushed through, letting it slam behind him. “Not here for coffee,” he grunted.

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“The cops will go ballistic.” The young man locked the door and propped a chair under the handle.

“Don’t tell them.” Hamish scanned the room quickly, recognised a number of regulars, now crouched under tables and benches, white-faced and unnerved by his forcible entrance.

“My girlfriend’s in there.” He held out his hands to show they were empty.

His terse confession rippled around the room, creating a visible wave of relief. A few regulars nodded. The barista had dropped down below the level of the window again. Hamish crossed to the window on the other side of the door, sliding down the wall, with his back against it, knees drawn up while he tried to catch his breath. His heart hammered against his ribcage; sweat rolled down his back.

Ten minutes and no answer.

Ten minutes and his own helplessness terrified him. As did the realisation he could lose her to a random act of violence. That he’d arrogantly assumed being with him was the biggest risk to her safety.

An incoming message. He sucked in a breath.

“What do you know?” It took him a second to realise it was Lela’s father, another to register Lela hadn’t been able to get a message to anyone.

“No news. I’m in a café on the edge of the plaza, as close as I can get.”

“Thank you,” Vella texted. “Keep me informed.”

“Will do.” Hamish stared at his phone after he pressed send. Vella expected me to be searching for Lela.

Rolling to his knees, he lifted the edge of the thick curtaining. The building, one of those steel and glass creations testifying to the power of humankind, was in his direct line of sight. The plaza, jammed with shoppers and office workers on meal breaks on a normal day, stood eerily empty. Hamish remembered the last city lockdown, when lives had been lost.

“Lela, you must be okay.” He scanned the building for signs of activity. “Please, be okay,” he muttered the mantra to himself.

“There’s movement,” whispered the barista to the room. “Someone’s coming out. A guy. He’s putting down the gun and putting up his hands.”

Police and ambulance staff entered the building, but no one exited. Thirty minutes later, a cop knocked on the door of the café and gave the all-clear.

Thirty minutes when his brain played with scenarios of where Lela might be, what had happened to her. In each one he was helpless. By pushing her away from him, he had no legitimate claim to be the first to see her. He made his way towards the building—barricades blocked his path. The heavily armed police stationed at one-metre intervals were turning everyone away.

“My girlfriend’s in there.” He’d framed arguments to get him through, but doubted he’d get past security.

“Only immediate family of the hostages are allowed in at this stage, sir. We’re still checking to make sure all staff are accounted for. Thankfully, no injuries.”

“Can people inside ring family, friends?”

“They’re free to call whoever they want. But we won’t be allowing anyone into the building for a few hours.”

“No injuries. Immediate family of hostages can go in. Everyone is free to use phones.” Hamish pressed send, and waited for Vella’s response. Please God, if Lela was safe, she’d have let her family know first.

“No word yet,” came the terse reply.

Frustrated by his powerlessness and wanting action, Hamish jammed his hands in his pockets and paced back to his office. Pointless to wait in the square. He trusted Vella to let him know she was safe. Media crews were now swarming the site and sending live feeds to news outlets. He could pick those up in his office, plus, he’d be able to get back in minutes if Lela called.

Why would she call him after the way he’d treated her?

At his desk, he trawled through all the news sites. All agreed it was incredible no one had been hurt. With no reply to his text, Hamish left a voicemail. “Lela, please talk to me. I need to know you’re safe.”

Slumped in his chair, staring into space, he accepted the simple truth he should have known all along. Staying clear of her didn’t guarantee her safety. It guaranteed he had no right to defend or protect her when she needed him; no right to tell her he loved her, would always love her. Why did I wait?

“Hamish.”

“Lela.” He tipped over his chair in his rush to reach her, was halfway across the room

before she held up a hand.

“How?” he asked.

Her pink tongue glided across dry lips, moistening them, revealing what her honesty was costing her. Standing in the open doorway, her arms folded across her chest, she looked uncharacteristically fragile. Her posture was defensive, a warning to stand clear. Her courage in coming here after the lies Hamish had told her humbled him.

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“The security guard escorted me. I showed him my West Nat pass card and said you’d been trying to reach me. He seemed to understand, said you were still here and brought me up.”

“I must remember to thank him. Why?”

“I know how important it is to see someone when you’ve been worried about them.”

“Terrified is a better word.” Hamish took another step closer.

“Terrified then,” she hesitated. “I’m sorry you had to go through that. I accidentally left my phone behind when I went to a meeting on another floor.”

“You look tired. Great, but tired.” Hamish breathed her in.

Her deftly applied makeup couldn’t disguise the smudges below her eyes from someone studying her as intently as Hamish was. A little thinner perhaps, and swallowed by that coat.

She shrugged. “Work’s been busy.”

“Let me take your coat.”

“I won’t be here that long.”

“Long enough to take off the coat.” He stepped around her to slip it from her shoulders, throwing it in the direction of the sofa without looking. A dress, figure-

hugging jersey in a forest green. His throat ached remembering how he'd teased another green dress off her on their last night together.

"My office must have let you know I was safe." Her attention was focused on the opposite wall.

"A bloke called." She was here in the room with Hamish. Close enough to inhale her, the scent she'd worn the first night they'd made love. Being here had to count for something. "I thought you'd be home with your family."

"I video-linked to Papa, and the brothers and Aunty, let them see I was in one piece." She'd never have settled for a video-link when Sophie went missing. She knew seeing wasn't enough, would never be enough.

"Thank you for coming." He allowed himself to hope she'd listen to him. "Seeing you isn't enough." He stood at her shoulder. "I need to touch you too, Miranda. To know you're real as well as safe."

"I'm not sure that's a good idea, Hamish."

When Hamish didn't step back, she took a deep breath, swung around to face him and stepped back herself. Then offered a hand.

"A handshake?" He looked at it, saw the tremble before her fingers formed a fist.

"It's the best I can do," she whispered.

Hamish stretched out his hand, took hers, thinking he could willingly drown in her beautiful eyes, cursing himself for the tears trembling on her lashes. Before they could spill over, he tugged her forward, tipping her into his arms to bind her to him. It was enough for the moment to hold her close, not sure who was comforting whom,

aware of his galloping pulse and her unsteady breaths. He held her for long moments, not trusting himself to move.

“Let me go.” She pulled back.

“I’d rather not.” He rested his cheek against her temple.

“I only came because ...” She’d donned a reserve more impenetrable than chainmail.

He’d backed her further into the room, away from the door. “I know. Talk to me.” The first stirring of panic rippled through him.

“About what?”

“Anything.” Listening to her voice delighted Hamish.

“Why didn’t you go home?”

I don’t have a home without you. Sentimental claptrap and not what she needed to hear from him. “I thought you’d call, or send a message. I planned to come and see you, wherever you were,” he said.

“You visited Papa.”

“He told you.” Was that a good thing?

“Why?”

“I said I’d meet him in person.” He shrugged. “A compulsion I didn’t fully understand at the time.”

“And now?”

He nodded.

* * *

LELA TURNED AND WALKED towards the chair he’d been sitting in when she’d arrived. Automatically picking it up, she leaned on it for support, while she slowly gathered her composure. This morning had reminded her of the precariousness of life. Being in his arms reminded her of all the reasons she loved him, all the reasons she’d missed him. There hadn’t been a moment in the few weeks since she’d said goodbye when her head hadn’t been filled with him, when her body hadn’t ached at his absence. She was ready to accept his terms—any terms.

I’m afraid I’m too late, that your silence since the one phone call when you returned to Sydney means you’re no longer interested.

Checking on her well-being was a Hamish sort of thing to do. Patting her down to assure himself she was safe was pure Hamish.

“Papa invited me to lunch with him at Bennelong, a rare honour.” Unimportant chitchat, but she was sharing a room with Hamish—working her way towards a

declaration.

The tension in his beautiful, deep voice in the short voicemail message had given her the courage to make his office her first stop. He hadn't noticed her arrival, allowing her to study him from the doorway for endless seconds, while she'd summoned her meet-the-client poise. Hunched into his chair, he'd looked deep in thought. With thoughts that brought no peace. His jacket was flung on the leather sofa at the side of the room, along with his discarded tie. The one he'd worn at breakfast in Malta, when she'd begun to realise he was a non-conformist—when she'd been intrigued—when she'd begun the headlong fall into love.

Even if he'd lost interest, she'd apologise for her quick judgement in Malta and tell him something she should never have forgotten—cherish the moments you have with those you love because they're gone in a heartbeat.

“Even taking the time to lunch is out of character for Papa.” Then recalled she'd described her reaction to Hamish's first kiss as out of character. Everything reminded her of Hamish. “Anyway, he said you'd made him see a few things differently. He told me he's proud of me.”

“That's a start.” The acerbic tone alerted Lela.

“Did you coach him?”

“Just reminded him life's short.” He pushed his hands into his trouser pockets. “But Sophie's flight and your move out of the house made it easier to make the case.”

“Papa explained he can't call me Lela. It reminds him too much of Mama. In part because Mama chose the name Carmen. Mama said it tied her to her mother and grandmother.” Lela treasured the discovery. “Papa accepts that everyone except him calls me Lela. He's organised to go to Malta for Sophie's eighteenth birthday. He's

taking my brothers and their families with him.”

“She invited me last week.”

“Oh.” What was Sophie playing at?

“That’s what I said, then she offered a lure, said you were going. I was planning when I might see you, talk to you, apologise.” He took a step closer. “I told her I needed to sort a few things first.” He didn’t need to add, do the work I love. His strength was also his weakness. In seeking to protect those he might love from harm, he locked everyone out.

Lela cursed the unfairness of life. “You said no.” She was no longer certain of her conviction in Malta that he loved her, that they’d made love together. She’d come anyway.

“I said I had to sort a few things first. Today changed my timeline. Let’s talk about now.”

“Okay.” She sucked in a steady breath. “I can talk about now.” About a no-strings affair.

“I love you,” he said.

Lela closed her eyes. Exquisite agony. “I carry too much baggage to be easy to love. Papa, Sophie, the tough woman I’ve become as a result.” The baggage had grown heavier with his rejection.

“You had me from the moment you walked through the customs gate at the airport.”

“You said that was lust, remember?”

“I want you.” And the intensity of his words made Lela tremble. “Every moment I spent with you, I fell harder, deeper.” He raised a hand, then dropped it to his side. “What bastard told you that you’re difficult to love? Who, besides Sophie, was cruel enough and stupid enough to say you were unlovable?”

“I’d give yourself a tick for that one.” Her stomach clenched. Believing, then losing again, would kill her.

“Fair call, but I wasn’t the first?”

“You were the only one who mattered.” Lela hadn’t planned to make that confession. She’d planned to be sophisticated, blasé—wasn’t that the right tone when you were suggesting an affair? “You left me alone.” Her voice cracked in anguish. “I felt unlovable.”

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“I abandoned you as effectively as your father abandoned your sister, as those idiots before me abandoned you.”

“You said you cared for me.” She pressed a fist to her heart. “Care, not love.” But the words she’d been desperate to hear were smashing chips off her defences like a chisel splitting marble.

“In my arrogance, I believed I was keeping you safe.”

“Isn’t that what today’s about?” She took a step towards him, close enough to be ambushed by his scent and the memories it stirred. “I’m safe. I wasn’t in danger. There’s no need to lie.”

“It’s not a lie.”

“You don’t have to say you love me because you thought I was in danger.” She was afraid to believe.

“Remember when I accused you of confusing sex with love.” He edged closer, his hands hanging loosely at his sides. “You effectively called bullshit. Well, I know the difference too.”

“You’ve had a shock.” Shock upended you. She’d made peace with his offer of affectionate passion—the only offer he’d made. “You’ve had days to contact me. Why say the words now?”

“I was questioning my decision from the second you walked out of my hotel room. I

walked back into a difficult domestic violence case. I've already told my partners this is my last custody case. I was waiting for the preliminary hearing to confirm the accused will be held in custody until the actual hearing before I contacted you."

"Hamish, no." The words echoed in her head, a sacrifice Lela could never accept. Forgetting herself, she closed the distance between them to grip his forearms. "It's who you are."

"It's not all I want to be." His gorgeous green gaze was steady and sombre. "Why did you come?"

"I came to tell you I'm safe." And to ask if your offer of an affair is still open.

"You called your family. You came to see me in person. Why?"

"I was safe today—on another floor, in a locked secure room, but the hostages were my colleagues. The woman he came to find was my PA. She's only worked for me a few weeks. I barely know her, but I know she has small kids. It's not the same—my experience can never match what you went through with Olivia—but I understand better why you've decided you can't do that again. I accept your offer of an affair. You don't need to give up your work. I don't want you to stop being who you are."

"Compromising again, Lela? I can't ask you to do that."

"It's my choice." She waited for the blow.

"That offer's no longer available." He had changed his mind.

"I understand." No, I don't. She started backing away.

"I loved you in Malta. Couldn't bear to think of someone hurting you to get to me.

That's why I walked away. I thought telling you then would make walking away harder.

"But I couldn't leave you. Giving up my domestic violence work is my compromise with my fear. Seeing your father was clearing hurdles, part of my apology to you. He and I circled each other, but before we finished, we'd established I wouldn't come between him and his daughter. Equally I won't tolerate him coming between us."

"Papa didn't tell me that," she cried, stamping a foot at him.

"We didn't spell it out in so many words."

"You and I don't have a relationship."

"He knows I respect you, admire you, want you to be safe."

Tears stung the backs of her eyes, but Lela wouldn't cry now. She'd shed too many tears. "Machismo bonding, two arrogant men deciding my future without me. I make my own choices!"

"He can't let you go any more than I can. He admitted he's traded on your soft heart."

"I'm not here to talk about Papa." Hope she was afraid to feel, was pushing through her despair.

"I love you. I'm less without you." His slow smile curved his mouth. "I knew I loved you in Malta. That with you I could have everything. But I couldn't bear losing everything."

"Today, when I thought you were in danger, I knew I'd forfeited any right to be there. I wouldn't have been allowed in for the family briefings. I wouldn't be the person

they'd call if you needed help. That drove me crazy. I was stupidly arrogant thinking I could control events. I can't protect you from life. I can share it with you, live it with you. Please marry me?"

Lela swiped at the tears spilling onto her cheeks.

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He slipped his arms around her, pulling her close to drop light kisses on her hair. “I had to stop you when you said you loved me in Malta. I couldn’t let myself listen because I knew it would break my resolve. God, holding you again is like winning every case I’ve ever fought,” he whispered.

Lela sagged against him.

“I’ve missed you. You smell so good, so warm. Your perfume haunts me. It wakes me in the night from dreams where I’m struggling to reach your side. I’m asking for another chance.”

Lela let her head fall back, raising a hand to his cheek.

“I’m sorry I hurt you.” He lifted his hands to her face, brushing the tears away with his thumbs. “We’ll argue, we’ll both compromise, we’ll live and love together. Please say something—anything.”

Looking deep into his eyes, Lela started to believe. “You mean it.”

“What can I do to make you believe?” He pressed her head into his shoulder, holding her close, combing his fingers through her hair.

Lela closed her eyes, listening to the steady beat of his heart in the lengthening silence, and found courage enough to risk again. She leaned back against his arm. “I won’t accept you if you give up the work you’re meant to do.”

“Won’t marry me if you’re pregnant, won’t marry me if I give up my work.” His grin

dawned slowly. “Having you fight me on this is like coming home.”

“Marry? You’re sure?”

“Please, choose me.” Deep, steady, filled with passion, his voice held a promise she couldn’t refuse. “I love you. Tell me you still love me.”

Lela pressed her lips to his. “I love you, Hamish. I don’t know how to stop.”

“My Plan A was to sort my current case, tell you what I’d done and convince you to give me another chance.”

“Plan A?”

“Today gazumped it. But I had a backup plan.”

“We could start with an affair?” Lela smiled. “I could take you home now?”

“Yes, please, but it’s not enough. I want you in my life. I need you in my life. Marry me?” He rested his forehead against hers. “You’re braver than me, Miranda. I knew that when you walked away in Valletta. There’s only you.”

“I won’t let you give up your work.”

“I’m prepared to negotiate boundaries.”

“Come to Malta with me?” She tested his resolve.

“Sophie said your father’s hired a villa for the whole family.” He sounded dismayed, but willing.

“Papa’s still part of the package.”

“Sold.”

“What about your vow?” She nestled closer.

“It was easy to keep until you. I’ve made a new vow.”

Lela linked her hands around his neck and drew his head down to hers. “Love me, Hamish.”

“That’s the vow,” he growled, swinging her in a circle.