

# Broken Sandglass



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Joseph Roelands

**\*\*WARNING\*\***

Dear reader,

This novel was originally written in Dutch as *Gebroken Zandloper*.

It was never intended to be published in English.

However, after the author was asked for a translation,  
he translated it himself.

This translation has not been professionally edited.

Please enjoy the story, and forgive any typos or awkward phrasing.

J.R.

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# 1 'when in Rome ...'

Friday, May 1<sup>st</sup>

Rumbling noises from the busy Roman traffic below drift through the open balcony doors of my suite on the fourth floor. Sitting on the edge of my bed, I kick off my shoes and rub my sore feet. I walk into the luxuriously decorated bathroom and turn on the tap to fill the double-sized bathtub. The marble floor tiles feel pleasantly cool.

Back in the room, I continue undressing. It takes effort to peel my sweaty legs out of my tight jeans. I won't be needing those for a while in these temperatures. Just as I unbutton my bra, I glance outside through the fluttering curtains. On the other side of the narrow alley, two construction workers stand on a rooftop. Tools in hand, they stare in my direction, motionless.

To my surprise, I don't feel the urge to step out of sight or even close the curtains. Fully aware that they're watching, and almost feeling their gaze on my pale skin, I reveal more of myself. My bra slides down my stretched arms onto the bed.

Slowly, I turn around and make sure they have a clear view of my breasts. The thought excites me, which is strange. I've never had any exhibitionist tendencies before. Wearing only my panties, I stroll toward the curtains. Right before I close them, I look straight at the men and give them a cheeky wink. The thick, heavy fabric slides between us, and only then do I feel my cheeks flush, a reaction I'd expected much earlier.

As I lower myself into a lovely foaming bath, a few moments later, I see my blushing red cheeks in the mirror. What was I thinking? It felt like I wasn't myself for a moment. All in all, it has been a very strange week already. I close my eyes and try to relax.

Thinking of the past days. My grandfather had summoned me. Well past the age of eighty, he doesn't get involved much anymore in the management of the shipping company. But every now and then, he likes to try and influence my daddy through me.

This time it was not about work at all. He had a personal favour to ask.

He has made arrangements for me to be off work for the next three months, as he wanted me to travel on his behalf. He was quite secretive about it, but I know him well enough not to ask any further.

In blind faith, I therefore travelled to Rome this morning. On Monday, I have an appointment with a certain Professor Berini.

So, first, I have a few days to kill in this ancient city...

*... illuminated by torches along the walls, I walk beneath the old vaults toward the hypnotic sound of the drum.*

*Fourteen women are waiting for me in a semicircle. Their sheer white robes leave little to the imagination. They are young, and all of them pretty. I estimate none of them to be older than twenty. Some even look barely of age. Behind them, the blue glow of the holy fire.*

*Two of them walk up to me. Each takes me by the arm, and with smiles on their faces, they lead me to the centre of the circle. From the shadows, young men appear as well now and complete the circle behind us. They too are scantily dressed, but I feel no embarrassment when I see them.*

*A breeze swirls through the dungeon-like room and brushes my breasts ... I shiver and look down, only now realizing that I am completely naked. I am cold ...*

... the water in the bath has cooled down significantly as I wake from this weird dream. No wonder I'm shivering. Stiffly, I clamber out of the tub and warm myself under the hot rain shower. Life returns to my body. With my eyes closed, I take another look at the sharp images of my dream. Curious.

I put on a comfortable bathrobe and walk back into the bedroom, wrapping my wet hair in a towel. In the doorway, I halt. A young chambermaid has unpacked my suitcase and puts all my belongings into the large wardrobe. She doesn't seem to be aware of my presence. I must have slept through her knock before she entered. With the empty suitcase still on the bed, the girl is studying herself in the mirrored wardrobe door, holding one of my dresses up in front of her.

Silently, I watch. She is gorgeous. About twenty-two, I guess, slim, with raven-black hair in an elegant bun. Even this awful hotel maid's uniform suits her well.

'You can try it on, if you like,' I suddenly say.

Her eyes widen. She spins around in terror and immediately starts rattling off excuses in Italian.

I burst out laughing and look at her questioningly.

She then realizes her mistake and switches to flawless English with a charming Italian accent. 'I'm so sorry, madam. I only looked at it. I didn't know you were here. Please don't tell my boss.'

I try to calm her down, but she keeps babbling until I stand right in front of her and put a finger to her lips. 'Don't worry about it. I don't mind!'

She nods, puts the last dress in the wardrobe, and rushes out of the room.

The alarm clock on the nightstand shows 2:22 p.m. Still early, but I haven't eaten anything yet, apart from a snack on the flight, and I'm hungry. I blow-dry my hair, put on some light makeup, and dress quickly. Summer-ready this time, in a bright red dress and open shoes. Less than fifteen minutes later, quite fast by my standards, I walk out of the hotel's main entrance. Automatically, I look up across the street, but the builders on the roof are gone already. I wonder why I feel slightly disappointed.

At the end of the narrow street, I stroll onto the gorgeous Piazza Navona. I scan the terraces. Despite the early hour, people are already eating here and there, probably tourists. I look around and find a free table in the shade of an awning. A young waiter brings me the menu and stays perfectly professional when I order a crab salad at this ridiculous time of day, and a glass of red wine.

Even this early in the season, the famous square is buzzing with activity. Tourists crowd around the many fountains, taking the usual selfies and buying useless, overpriced souvenirs to take home. Less than ten meters away, right in front of my terrace, an artist is doing his utmost to make a larger woman look somewhat elegant for posterity, in the drawing he is making of her.

One of the many pairs of police officers, effortlessly keeping order in the square, looks amused over his shoulder. The hot sun casts long shadows on the pavement, and the mix of sounds becomes a soothing background noise that relaxes me completely.

I feel perfectly fine. Better still, I haven't felt this good in a long while. After my fiancé passed away last summer, I have focused on work and nothing else. I realize this must be the first time since that dark episode in my life that I feel like I'm on holiday. Even though I am in Rome for some specific reason.

I do not yet know the details of my task, so in this moment I am free, and I like that feeling. Thoughts of Patrick make me a little sad. But at least I don't immediately start crying again, and I even enjoy the daydreaming.

Slowly sipping my wine, the afternoon passes. Despite my watery eyes, I feel very content. He feels very close now, and I know for sure he would be so happy for me, to feel warm inside once more. A tear rolls down my cheek onto my lips. With a smile, I wipe it away. What a strange rollercoaster of emotions I am experiencing today.

The waiter brings me my third glass of wine. I try to explain that I didn't order another one, but he points over my shoulder. I turn around and see the maid from the hotel at the bar. I invite her over and, without hesitation, she joins me at my table.

She says she saw me as she walked past the terrace, but I seemed too lost in my thoughts to be disturbed. So she decided to offer me a glass of wine as a 'thank you' for not telling her boss.

Over our wine, the conversation continues, and she tells me her name is Luna. She is twenty-three and studies architecture at one of the universities here. Her parents run a small guesthouse on the coast, in a nearby fishing village. She has to work at the hotel because she is paying for her education herself. She asks what brings me to Rome.

I can't help smiling. 'I actually have no idea,' I say, and I tell her what my granddad asked of me.

Intrigued, she listens to my story of how I was sent on my way. 'So, you're on a secret quest,' she continues, fantasizing. 'I know Professor Berini from the university. He's an archaeology professor. So the quest will be connected to ancient Rome, I presume.'

It's funny that through this random encounter, I already know more than my grandfather told me. Archaeology? I know my granddad has many interests, but this one is new to me. To me, the subject seems a bit boring, perfect for older men, with old books in dusty libraries. But in any case, I'll know more on Monday.

'So, what are your plans for the weekend then?' Luna interrupts the stream of thoughts in my head.

'No plans yet,' I tell her, and I ask if she might have a few tips for me.

She hesitates briefly, but then she says: 'I would love to show you around, to be your personal guide.'

I like the idea of spending more time with her, and I cannot imagine a more pleasant guide, so I ask her what she would want in return for this service.

Her face turns a bit darker, and her eyes look at me with anger. She was not offering this to me for the money. She would just really like to spend the weekend with me.

There is not a single doubt in my mind that she is telling the truth, and I know she is not being kind to me because of money. How do I know that? I haven't got a clue, but there already have been many things today that are a bit weird and out of place.

So I rush to explain to her that I, of course, could not presume she did not want to get paid for it, and that I too look forward to our time together. I do insist, however, that instead of paying her for her services, I will pay for everything during this weekend. After all, she must understand, from the fact that I have a room in the hotel she works at, that I am well off.

She reluctantly agrees. 'On one condition!'

I look at her questioningly.

'You'll need to tell me your name!'

'But of course, I'm sorry. My name is Juliette Starr. Please just call me July. I am thirty-two years old, and I work as a lawyer at my family's company.' In short, I tell her about our shipping company, and about recent changes in my life that made me single again. 'So, where do we go now?' I finish my introduction.

She asks if I would like to spend a night at her parents' guesthouse. She told her mother she would be coming over today, but assures me she can of course cancel that appointment if it is not to my liking.

As it sounds like a perfect start to our weekend together, I accept the invitation and go back to the hotel to grab a few things.

She will not join me, as she fears her boss will see us together. Instead, she will wait for me on the corner of the street, so we can walk to the train station.

While I pack a weekend bag in the hotel room, I get a better idea. One call to the front desk, and it is arranged.

As I leave the hotel again, at exactly 7 p.m., a black open-top sports car is waiting for me, the engine already running.

'Enjoy your evening, Miss Starr,' the hotel doorman says as he opens the car door for me.

I certainly will, I think to myself, without knowing why I am so sure. With a big smile, I take my seat behind the wheel. Very briefly, I feel a doubt creep in. Won't Luna consider this too much bragging when I show up in this car?

Leaving the one-way street and taking a right turn three times, I arrive at the corner, where I see Luna waiting impatiently.

She stares down the street, from where she expects me to appear. I stop the car right behind her and honk the horn. Somewhat annoyed, she turns around. Apparently, she is used to car horns trying to attract her attention.

Without approving it, I can imagine why.

As soon as she recognizes me, her expression shifts from annoyance to a mix of happiness and utter surprise. Still a bit perplexed, she gets in. Only when I ask her where to go does she realize that I have no idea where I am.

Like a professional navigator, she guides me through the extremely busy Roman traffic.

Once outside the city, in between some sporadic route instructions, we resume our conversation. Carefully, she asks whether the hotel was surprised that I checked out for one night.

Calmly, I tell her I didn't even mention that I wouldn't be back today.

Before Luna can ask her next question, I turn off onto a parking area. I look straight into her beautiful eyes and tell her this is important to me. I assure her that I love spending time with her, but this can only work under one condition.

'I am obviously quite wealthy,' I say evenly, 'and I won't hide that from you. But please, let's never discuss money. Between us, that isn't important, okay?'

She nods slowly, and after a few seconds that enchanting smile returns. 'I've never had a rich friend,' she says, 'but I promise I won't take advantage.'

She doesn't need to promise me that. I already know. I steer the car back onto the highway.

'So, no more talk about money, right?' I ask one more time. After she says 'yes', I grab a plastic bag from behind my chair and give it to her.

A bit hesitant, she opens it and looks inside. Immediately, her face turns red again as she looks at me.

I just nod my head and keep focusing on the road. From the corner of my eye, I can see how she slowly takes out the very dress that she liked so much. 'Try it on,' I say with a teasing wink. Before I even finish my sentence, the shirt she was wearing is already on the backseat and I catch myself looking unabashed at her tanned body and naked breasts.

She sees my eyes wandering and, much slower than she could have done, redresses herself. The loud sounds of horns from oncoming traffic indicate I am not the only one enjoying the unexpected view. But we both don't pay much attention to that. With the dress on, she takes off her shoes and removes her shorts from underneath. She then bends over towards me to give me a kiss on the cheek: 'Thank you.'

The dress suits her well, even though it looks quite a bit wider on her body than it does on mine.

With the wind in her hair, she puts her sunglasses back on and looks around. She says we should have exited the highway a few miles ago.

I wait a moment. With no traffic in front of us or directly behind us, and with squealing tires, I make a sharp U-turn. We drive back the way we came. Briefly, images from the movie *Thelma and Louise* pop into my mind. We leave the highway and meander through the green hills. Between the many vineyards, with their exquisite fragrances, and, now and then, dodging a few loose goats, we approach our destination for the evening.

The small village is beautifully situated at the base of a tree-covered hill, where a small river flows into the Mediterranean. The harbour is small, with only a dozen ships moored there. The guesthouse is on the town's central square and has a stunning view over the harbour.

I pull into the parking lot, and many heads lift from their drinks as two summery dressed women step out of this flashy ride. Immediately I hear 'Luna!' as someone recognizes her, and a small older woman comes down from the terrace.

The woman unmistakably has the same eyes as my new friend. Luna kisses her mother and introduces me. She warmly shakes my hand with a smile and leads us inside.

I get a table close to the kitchen door, but it takes at least half an hour before Luna is able to join me. She is clearly at home here, as almost everybody greets and kisses her and will not let her go before exchanging a few words.

'They all want to know who you are,' she apologizes with a smile as she finally sits down next to me. She pauses, then explains that she told them I was a friend who needs to be at the university next week. She did not tell them that I am a guest at the hotel where she works.

I fully understand. Luna's mother brings us a stone pitcher of wine and two glasses. Briefly she speaks with her daughter, looks at me with the most charming but inquisitive smile, and walks back into the kitchen, humming. I look at Luna for further explanation, but to my surprise she has turned completely red again.

With a deep sigh, she tells me why everybody reacts this way. There is something she hasn't told me yet, and it is absolutely not the reason she brought me here. She is gay. So when she showed up with a beautiful blonde woman in an open sports car, that was the first thing on everybody's mind. She quickly adds that she did expect some reactions, but not as extreme as they turned out to be. And she is sorry she brought me into this awkward situation.

I take her hand and tell her it is about time she stops saying 'sorry' all the time. There is absolutely no need for that. I continue: 'It is a compliment that they think someone like me could be the girlfriend of someone as beautiful as you.' I lean forward and kiss her on the lips.

The room drops into almost complete silence. But after an angry look from Luna, they all resume their conversations, maybe even a bit louder than before.

I can't stop smiling and tell her that I have not had such a perfect day in a very long time.

She doesn't let go of my hand anymore and assures me that this feeling is absolutely mutual.

When her mother comes out to bring us some bread and cheese, she sees us holding hands so tightly. We both get a soft kiss on the cheek. Luna turns red again, but there is nothing she needs to explain this time. I understand her mother's affectionate gesture.

Here I am, not even twelve hours in Italy. Hand in hand, looking into the most beautiful eyes. What is happening to me?

The wine glasses are never empty as we sit on the terrace and watch the sunset over the harbour. Luna already knows more about me than many of my so-called best friends back in the Netherlands. We even talk at length about my life with Patrick, his illness and passing.

She holds my hand firmly when she sees me fighting back tears. I already trust her completely and feel utterly at ease in her presence.

Luna also talks about her life, and about her father, how he struggled for a long time to accept it when she told them she liked girls, at the age of fourteen.

In the final half hour, we do not speak that much anymore. There is no need to. We're cuddling up against each other on the wooden bench, a blanket over our legs, watching the final minutes of the sun. Her mother keeps our glasses full.

Every now and then, Luna has to leave our lovely little "bubble", as somebody comes to shake her hand when leaving. But every time she crawls back under the blanket, it feels as if she sits a bit closer. Her head against my shoulder. Her hand in mine.

When the sun has completely disappeared below the horizon and the harbour turns orange, she takes me upstairs. Her mother prepared a room for me, and of course they both insist that I will not pay for it.

I throw my bag on the bed and first follow her to her room. Clearly not a hotel room, but very cozy, and decorated as you would expect from the room of a young student. In one corner is an old-fashioned drawing board, and on the table next to it a computer.

'I'll take a quick shower,' she whispers as she steps out of her dress, which glides onto the floor. 'Will you wait for me?'

My eyes follow her naked body as she walks towards the bathroom door. There she briefly glances back at me before disappearing. In my head the images of today are exploding: the builders on the rooftop, the dream, Luna, the kiss, her body. Whether it is the alcohol at work or something else, I don't care. I step out of my dress too and follow her.

There is a dim light in the bathroom, and I see the shape of her body through the glass blocks of the shower wall. For a moment I stare at that image, and I feel excitement taking over my body.

Silently I walk into the small, steaming cabin. I join her under the warm jets of water and press my body against her back.

She does not react startled at all but simply turns around and starts kissing me. Not a peck, like before. A passionate kiss this time. One that lasts for several minutes. The shampoo from her hair seeps between our naked bodies.

Briefly I think of Patrick and in my mind, I see him looking at us, smiling reassuringly. My attention now is just for Luna.

As our lips finally let go, she looks deep into my eyes, and I see a warm and loving sparkle in hers. Her fingers caress my arms as our bodies are still pressed against each other. Only when the water, from the boiler overhead, starts to cool down, we step out of the shower.

She throws me a towel and together we walk back into the bedroom. There are no words anymore, no talk.

As if that has always been the intention from the start, I crawl into bed next to her. She nestles into my arms and, completely at ease, falls asleep.

For me, it takes much longer. I try to make sense of the day, to give all my thoughts meaning. When I realize that isn't going to work, I suddenly recall the last words my grandfather told me at Schiphol Airport: 'Juultje, don't think too much ... go with the flow. I am very sure you will succeed.'

He asked me to go with the flow. I can't imagine he meant this as well. But why does all of this feel so right and normal? Because it is all but normal, especially for me, yet there is no doubt in my mind. No regrets about stripping for the builders. No second thoughts about my feelings for this Italian girl, nor about her genuine honesty towards me. How can I be so certain of all this?

Here I am. The last time I was in bed with another girl, I was nine and the neighbour girl was ten, during a sleepover at my parents' house. And then that long kiss in the shower. Where does this feeling come from, all of a sudden? Even saying 'yes' to her sweet offer of being my tour guide is already out of character for me, let alone everything else that happened over the last few hours. Yet I know what I do is right. It is no illusion. I don't have a clue how I am able to know that. I hear the calm breathing of the beauty in my arms.

Outside, the engine of a boat entering the harbour. The dark rhythm of this distant sound finally manages to make me fall asleep ...

*... the girls next to me slowly turn me around. We move to the rhythm of the hidden drum, while the circle around me grows smaller and tighter. The white shapes come closer and closer.*

*I can see them all checking me out from top to bottom. But I am not annoyed by this.*

*On the contrary, I notice it even turns me on slightly, especially when I hear the slight increase in the breathing of some of the girls. And underneath the thin cloth, some of the young men are also unable to hide their arousal anymore.*

*Apparently, my excitement is clear to them as well, as the tension grows and the rhythm of the drum gets faster. My breathing joins the increased pace.*

*One of the girls steps forward, out of the group. She must be one of the youngest, I guess, and as she wants to kiss me, I have to bend over to make that possible for her. I lean towards her, and her lips touch mine ...*

## **Saturday, May 2<sup>nd</sup>**

... 'Good morning,' Luna whispers as she kisses me awake. I feel her naked body, still resting against mine. She asks me what I have been dreaming, as my breathing grew faster.

I briefly tell her my dreams of yesterday and today.

Teasingly, she asks me why she isn't in my dream. After kissing me once more, she jumps out of bed and walks into the bathroom.

The clock tells me it's past 9 a.m. already. No wonder, after such a long day and evening. Fortunately, the wine did not make my head hurt, and fifteen minutes later I also get out of bed to get dressed in my "own room". Outside her door, my bag is waiting for me. Her mother knows where I spent my night, I realize with a stab of worry.

Luna comes out of the bathroom, stark naked, with flawless make-up and her long hair in a ponytail.

I point at my bag in the hallway, and she starts laughing.

She sees my worried face and asks if I have any regrets. When I shake my head, she assures me that, in that case, I have nothing to worry about. She gives me another kiss and takes some clothes from her wardrobe.

I go and freshen up too.

Downstairs, breakfast is waiting for us, and the guesthouse is almost as crowded as the night before. The smell of coffee and bread is everywhere. Her mother greets us with a lovely warm smile.

When Luna whispers something in her ear, she walks up to me. She takes my hand, gives me a wink, and kisses my cheek. Then she disappears to the back again, humming happily.

Silently, I eat my lovely breakfast while Luna walks around and entertains some of the guests, talking and laughing. Every now and then I get a wink from across the room, or she joins me for a few minutes and gives me a kiss. I enjoy watching her. She is so very different from me, open, spontaneous, and very good with people. As for me, she is the first new person in over a year with whom I have made a personal connection.

As I calmly drink my tea, Luna finally joins me and eats some fruit as well. I ask her how business is for her parents, as the place is full again this morning.

She leans towards me and whispers that most people in this small village don't earn much money. Her parents organize this breakfast and supper six days a week. They are not making much money from it, and some weeks even end with a small loss. But that is the way it is in this town: we all help each other. 'To be honest, they've really been struggling the last few years,' she concludes softly.

On our way back to Rome, Luna takes the wheel, and I make a few calls home. Erica, my personal secretary for over a decade, immediately senses that something is going on with me. This clever woman hears everything in the tone of my voice. In Dutch, so Luna can't understand, I discuss with her what I want to arrange for Luna's parents. Erica will take care of it and will call or message me as soon as she knows more.

Then she patches me through to my grandfather, who also senses I am not my normal self, but he asks no questions. He has just spoken to Professor Berini, who expects me on Monday, at 11 a.m.

The last person I call is my mother. Even she, whom I normally can't connect with very well, hears from the tone of my voice that her daughter is having a good time in Rome. While she fills me in on the latest boring family gossip, I look at Luna.

Focused and skilful, she drives this fast, black car. The feeling I had yesterday obviously was not just the wine talking ... yikes, I am really falling in love. I can barely recall this sensation from the past. I was sixteen when I met Patrick. But this tickle in my stomach, the desire to touch her, to be with her, to kiss her. Oh yes, I must be in love.

Luna sees me staring at her and recognizes the look in my eyes. Very briefly her cheeks flush, but then I see that sparkle in her eyes again.

At a gas station she leaves the highway and, in the parking area, she leans towards me, whispering: 'I know, me too,' and kisses me eagerly.

I completely forget the world around me and answer her passion.

My mother's voice disappears into the background, and only when she calls my name loudly, three times, do I realize that I am still on the phone with her. 'Sorry, Mum, I was distracted,' I stutter, and I tell her we'll call again later before I disconnect.

I quickly turn back to Luna and resume the kiss. I have absolutely no idea whether it lasted for two minutes or two hours, but when we finally let go of our embrace, I am completely abashed. Waves of desire flow through my body; I am sweating and feel lightheaded. I see the same confusion in my girlfriend's eyes ... and the same longing.

She closes her eyes and takes a moment to regain her composure. Then we resume our ride. My hand rests on her leg, her hand on top of mine. Every now and then I squeeze, or teasingly stroke her skin with my fingertips.

The busy Roman traffic requires a bit more concentration, so I leave her to it. We decide to bring the car back to the hotel first, and on the same corner as yesterday she gets out.

For the last few meters, I take the wheel again. I drop off the keys and my bag at the reception.

While a staff member immediately goes out to return the car to the parking lot, the lady at reception gives me a note with Professor Berini's phone number. He tried to call me twice this morning.

I have more urgent matters to attend to, I think, as a smile appears on my face. So I ask her to call him on my behalf and tell him that I am looking forward to meeting him on Monday at 11 a.m. Then I leave the cool hall again, walking back to the corner of the street.

Luna is on the phone. I sit down next to my newly found love and wrap my arm around her. I don't understand much of her Italian, but I do enjoy the passion in her voice.

Suddenly she turns to me and asks if I would like to see the Colosseum first. I nod, and after a few final words into her mobile phone, she ends the conversation and we get to our feet.

It is a twenty-five-minute walk from Piazza Navona to the mighty Colosseum, but the weather is beautiful and, with her arm holding mine, I have no objections whatsoever to a nice stroll.

She tells me she has just talked to a fellow student. He reminded her of an appointment she had forgotten about. As part of a photography assignment, they had agreed to meet at the Colosseum at 2 p.m. That is why we are walking there first, so she can combine it with meeting him. It will not take more than half an hour, she assures me.

I am fine with it. To be honest, I couldn't care less where we are going at this point, as long as I can spend my time with her.

Along the way, I buy two fruity Italian ice creams, and while licking and talking we pass the famous Forum, strolling toward one of the most impressive remains of the Roman Empire. The centuries-old arches tower high above the heads of the crowd. I have been here once before. Back then, also arm in arm and in love. Apparently, I am only allowed to see this building in that state of mind.

There is a queue at the entrance, but it seems to move along at a nice pace, so we get in line. Luna texts her friend, who is inside already.

In the shadow of the outer gallery, I feel my arms still glowing from the sun. I realize that I have, of course, forgotten again to put on sunscreen. All morning I have been driving and walking in this burning sunlight, and that doesn't go well with me. I take the lotion out of my handbag. I did bring it along, but forgot it anyway.

Luna offers to help me, and her soft hands feel lovely as they touch the skin of my arms. Tenderly, without causing pain to the sensitive skin, she slowly rubs in the fragrant oil while the line moves along.

After the cash desk, we briefly step aside. Carefully, she rubs oil on my cheeks, nose, and forehead. They seem to have gotten quite a bit of colour already. But Luna does not hand me back the lotion yet. Her hands continue their cooling journey over my neck and partly visible shoulders, towards the upper part of my breasts. Despite the fact that we've showered together, this is the first time her hands touch me there, and I cannot suppress a soft sigh.

Her fingers caress a bit further under the brim of my dress than is strictly needed for so-called sun protection. Her eyes look straight into mine, and I can see it has the same effect on both of us. Then she squats down and starts rubbing the soothing oil on my bare legs.

Automatically, I look around to see if anybody notices us. Apparently, nobody is interested at all. Without knowing what we feel for each other, the scene itself is, of course, not that exciting.

Her massaging hands slowly work their way up. And although my dress reaches to right above my knees, her hands travel a bit further than necessary here as well. Teasingly, she touches the inside of my thighs. I close my eyes and feel my body shiver slightly. I hear Luna's amused laughter as her fingers move down again, teasingly scratching my skin with her nails. As she gets up, she kisses me and gives me a wink. 'Too bad I do not need sunscreen too.'

'Hai finito?' a dark male voice says from a few meters away.

Luna runs to greet her friend, who lowers his camera now.

I wonder how many pictures he took of the scene, but I do not worry about it at all. Less than twenty-four hours ago, I would have stormed at him in anger. Now I feel utterly relaxed, and I don't mind how many people can see that I am totally crazy about this cheerful Luna.

He shakes my hand and introduces himself as Carlo. Blonde curls, green eyes, tall and a bit lanky. His appearance is the last you would expect from an Italian man, and it turns out he indeed has a Swiss mother. His English is not very good, but he speaks perfectly German, and that is no problem for me either.

It is a bit complicated translating back and forth between the three languages. At some point, I translate into English what Carlo told me in German, which he might have been better off saying straight away in Italian to Luna. I suggest I take a stroll around on my own, so the two of them can do their thing and we will meet up again later. Luna gives me a quick last kiss and caresses my face before she follows him.

On the ground floor, I watch an exhibit on the multi-year renovation before I climb up the stairs to the first gallery of stands. The sun pours into this perfectly rounded space, and now I fully understand why the Romans invented a kind of tent-like roof to give large parts of the audience some shade.

I love the view onto the central arena, and I notice how very quiet this massive building still appears, despite the large number of people entering its stands each minute. Groups of tourists are everywhere, but the stadium seems far from filled. About half of the arena below has the old wooden floor restored.

In one view, you can therefore see the stone vaults in the shadows below, as well as the sandy arena for gladiators and wild animals that they have recreated above.

On a bench in the shadow of a huge pillar, I sit down and take a sip from the bottle of cold water we bought at the entrance. In the far distance, I can see Luna and Carlo. Her dress, in combination with his tall posture, is unmistakable. She talks, gestures, and gives directions, while he constantly takes pictures, following her lead. I lean against the cold stone and put on my sunglasses. I follow their movements until they disappear into the shade of one of the outer corridors.

Closing my eyes, I try to imagine what will happen tonight. Will she stay over with me? Although I really want that to happen, it also makes me a little nervous. I do not feel tired at all, but still I notice my thoughts wandering off fast ...

*... the girl who kissed me takes both of my hands from my two attendants. Smiling at me continuously, she walks backwards out of the circle. The others diverge in a beautiful choreography and accompany us to a podium: a sort of altar made of shiny black marble. She leads me onto a carved set of steps that allows us to climb up. The stone feels cool under my feet.*

*The others stand around the altar now, and the circle is formed again, only this time they are alternating. Each young woman is holding hands with two young men on either side, and the other way around.*

*On top of the altar are four or five blocks of different sizes. She takes me to the highest one and invites me to sit down. She is taller than me now, and it is her turn to bend over to give me another kiss. Then she lets her gown slide off her body onto the altar and steps out of it. She climbs up and sits astride my lap ...*

... crclick ... the unmistakable sound of a diaphragm. Carlo's camera captures how Luna crawls onto my lap and kisses me awake.

'Dreaming again, mia Julia?' she asks as she takes off my sunglasses.

I just nod slightly and give her a teasing wink. I can see the curiosity in her sparkling eyes, but she understands it will have to wait until we are alone again.

'I like the sound of mia Julia,' I say while the three of us walk back to the exit.

Luna says she prefers that over July or Juliette, and Carlo immediately says he fully agrees with her.

'Actually, mia Luna, I do mostly like the mia-part,' I whisper, which brings back that enchanting smile on her face.

Carlo, who has missed my last remark, wants to say something. Then he sees our blushing faces and wisely decides not to. At the exit we say goodbye to her friend, and he promises Luna to send her all the pictures soon.

We are on our own again, my little Italian beauty and me. Before we go on, we walk to a restaurant on the other side of the busy road. Apart from the crazy traffic in front of us, the location of this place is perfect. In the shade of grapevine-covered pergolas, we have a stunning view of the Colosseum and the ruins of the Forum Romanum.

I tell her about my dream and, just like me, Luna is very surprised that someone can dream in a sort of sequential way. She wonders if, and for how long, it will continue ... and where it will lead.

We eat, drink, talk, and enjoy each other's company. It all feels so familiar and natural. She talks about her family and studies, and I tell her about the bond with my granddad. Every now and then she takes my hand, and occasionally we lovingly kiss. Each and every time, I feel butterflies in my stomach.

Alas, our bubble of paradise is disturbed by her phone. She shows me it is her mother calling, and I understand that, at this weird time of day, she has to take this call. The cheerful Luna of a few seconds ago now sounds serious, and every now and then she briefly looks at me while her mother is talking.

Something is starting to dawn on me, and I quickly check my own phone. Indeed, two missed calls from Erica and four messages. She types that she will fill me in on the details later, by email, but she summarizes what she was able to achieve through our office in Naples. Erica's extensive list surprises even me. Either she realizes how important this is to me, or my granddad has given her some pointers.

I presume I will have some explaining to do when Luna finishes her call. All their overdue bills are paid, there is two years' worth of credit at their regional wholesale store, and there is a trust fund in their name, out of which Luna's parents can now do even more charitable work for their local community.

In any case, her parents will no longer have to worry about their financial future. I sincerely hope Luna does not think I am trying to "buy" her affection. That is not my intention at all. I see tears in her eyes and I really start to worry a little now.

She notices what I am feeling, takes my hand, and gently squeezes it. It has taken Luna quite some effort to get her mother to accept all of this.

When she finally ends the conversation, she lets her tears run freely down her cheeks and nestles comfortably in my arms. I don't speak for a while and let her be. It takes some time before she can talk again.

She sits up straight and looks at me with red, tearful eyes. She officially declares me to be absolutely crazy, but immediately adds that she knows I am not doing all of this to bind her to me. Her mother was not afraid of that either and felt it was genuine, but completely out of proportion nonetheless.

'I know,' I whisper in shame. 'My secretary went a bit overboard.'

Luna smiles. She has no idea how happy I am to see that smile again. We agree that Erica has gone a little too far, but I am very pleased that her parents have accepted my support.

I feel the need to stress to Luna that she must tell her parents it is all thanks to the great work they are doing for their community. The fact that I know about this is, of course, related to my friendship with their lovely daughter, but I want to support them for what they are doing. That is what they have earned themselves, and not through the, by the way truly delightful, kisses of Luna.

She promises to tell them that, apart from the part about her kisses, as they are only so delightful because of the woman she is giving them to. And she immediately spoils me with some more of those.

As soon as her eyes have regained their natural colour and beauty again, we walk to the entrance of the Forum. Luna is a skilful guide. Meandering through the ruins of the once so powerful and rich centre of the Roman world, she leads me to a stone staircase at the south end of the Forum. Via these stairs we climb the first hill of the old city.

A surprisingly green garden awaits us at the top, with a few scarce remains of the imperial palaces. But what is most astonishing is that the lack of large ruins keeps the majority of tourists from making this climb, despite the breathtaking view you have from up here.

I try to visualize how it must have been from the even higher windows, when the nobility still lived here in their luxurious palaces. Behind us: the Forum and the hill with the "Capitol" building. To the left: the Colosseum and the adjacent triumphal arch. A bit further to the south: the most impressive remains of the many aqueducts within the city limits of Rome.

In the distance, we can see the red bricks of the largest bathhouse of ancient Rome: the thermal baths of Caracalla.

Through the trees and over some patches of lawn, my guide leads me to the far southern edge of the small, flat hilltop. Visible foundation stones show the immense dimensions of the palaces that once stood here. We sit down on the grass, leaning against a low stone wall.

In front of us, some thirty meters below, Circus Maximus, Rome's largest racetrack. We see groups of tourists everywhere, but here, at our viewpoint, we are almost alone. Rarely, someone with a camera appears, undoubtedly taking the most stunning pictures.

Luna lies down on her back and rests her head on my lap. Her brown eyes look up at me. My fingers run slowly through her black hair. She closes her eyes with a smile.

My fingers follow the shape of her beautiful face. My index finger touches her lips, and she kisses it gently. Via her chin and down towards her neck, I slowly continue my caressing path, until my finger runs along the perfect curves that the deep V-neck of her dress allows me to see.

Her eyes remain shut, but I see her open her mouth ever so slightly, and I can hear her breathing.

I go back and forth, touching both breasts. Each time I threaten to go beneath the brim of the fabric, her breathing stops and my finger retreats again.

'Tease,' she whispers, her eyes still closed. One hand stretches up to my face.

I take it with my other hand and kiss her palm. Then I softly bite her fingers, one by one. My hand rests between the soft curves of her breasts, and I can feel her heartbeat. I take her hand and place it between mine, to make her feel my pulse as well ... they are beating fast ... but perfectly synchronized.

She opens her eyes and looks deeply into mine.

I want to kiss her, and so much more, although I barely know what I mean by that thought. Of course, I know how intimacy between two women could work, but that is far from actually experiencing it.

'Don't be nervous,' Luna says, guessing my thoughts. 'We have all the time in the world.' She comes up, kisses me, and gets onto her feet. Then she helps me up as well. Taking my face between her soft hands, she looks me deep in the eyes and kisses me again ... and again.

'Ti amo,' she whispers, in between two of the many kisses.

'Ti amo ... too,' I clumsily stutter.

She laughs out loud and drags me along, running over the grass. 'Ti amo anch'io – Ti amo anch'io – Ti amo anch'io,' she shouts, twirling around me until we lose our balance and roll over each other.

I end up on top of her and push her wrists into the soft lawn. Her naughty eyes look at me in defiance. I press my lips against hers. With all the passion that is awakening inside of me and flowing through my body, I kiss her. She answers my kiss with the same fire, and I can hear her moan softly.

Gasping for air, I sit upright and let go of her wrists. We get up, hand in hand, and look at each other. Dresses covered in grass, messy hair, red blushes on our cheeks, and passionate, wild eyes. While giving each other kisses all the time, we slowly make ourselves presentable again.

She asks for the sunscreen once more, and we walk into the shadow of a large olive tree. Especially my face and neck are slowly becoming painfully burned and red. Carefully and diligently, she rubs the cooling lotion over my burned skin. Luckily, my arms and legs are less affected, but of course she is not taking any chances, and I enjoy her attentive treatment.

Getting more and more naughty, she also touches a few areas that absolutely do not need any cream. Rubbing some lotion on the topside of my breast, her other hand supports it from the bottom. Squeezing it and "accidentally" touching my nipples through the fabric of my dress.

Like an electric current, the excitement flows through my body. I feel my nipples getting harder under her teasing and I close my eyes.

Also, when taking care of my legs, one of her hands digresses further and further. As her fingertips softly touch the inside of my thighs, I feel how I automatically open up my legs a little bit, to grant my girlfriend better access. I hear a soft sigh coming from her mouth, as she briefly touches the fabric of my panties.

Goosebumps spread all over my excited body and my knees grow weak. Then she stands up and kisses me.

For minutes, I keep my eyes closed and savour all her kisses until the excitement slowly starts to leave my body again.

Arm in arm, we now stroll down the hill, back to the Forum.

Dusk is already upon us and at this pace I will not be able to see much of the city. But that is the furthest thing from my mind. I think of the night ahead. Where will I be, where will she be? I can't imagine not being together again tonight. I would not want it any other way, but what then?

As if Luna can guess my train of thought again, we sit down on a bench and she asks me what the plans are for the evening. There are a few options. In any case, before dinner she wants to freshen up and change clothes. She has a small room in a dormitory on the university campus, a fair bit outside the city centre.

I want to freshen up as well, but I do not want to let her go; she is too addictive. She smiles and kisses me, assuring me that she will hurry back to me as fast as she can. Then I pop the question that has been on my mind for quite some time now. 'Will you stay with me again tonight?'

She nods, but wonders how to arrange that in the hotel.

I promise her I will take care of it. When she gets onto her bus a few minutes later, I already miss her. She blows me a kiss from behind the glass as the vehicle pulls away.

It feels strange walking back to the square alone. Patrick also pops into my mind briefly. With him, I was together almost 24/7. And suddenly, for the first time, I realize how lonely I have allowed myself to become after his early passing. Now that I have found someone new, I immediately seem to flourish again.

I feel a bit ashamed, realizing how dependent I am on others for my happiness. But for now, I don't care. I am so happy with my Luna. I have no idea where this will lead, or how long it will last. But I want to savour it as much as possible, and if it ends one day, I decide never to accept a long dark period like this in my life ever again.

In my hotel room, I sit down behind my laptop and carefully read the many emails from Erica, smiling at the small personal comments she adds. It is only May, but it is obvious she deserves a super Christmas bonus this year.

I send her a reply, adding a few things I would like arranged for Luna, so my assistant can start taking care of that tomorrow. Less than ten seconds after pressing [send], my cell phone rings.

Erica was catching up on email, working from home, and saw mine come in.

I tell her everything about Luna and my feelings for her, just skipping the dreams for now. She is over the moon and asks if she is allowed to tell my grandfather. She will keep it quiet from everyone else, but 'the old man' is longing for my stories.

Of course, I agree, and we briefly discuss the matters I want her to sort out. As always, Erica understands my wishes completely and assures me that everything will be settled before lunchtime tomorrow.

I realize, however, that tomorrow is Sunday, and today she has been working quite a lot as well, but she dismisses my objections. She will have a few easy months while I am gone, she assures me, and she is more than happy to help out and assist me.

Before I can have some me-time, I'll have to make some arrangements at the hotel as well. I walk downstairs to ask at the front desk whether Marzio is in. He is one of the managers, and I have already spoken with him prior to my arrival. I am relieved to see him at a desk behind a window in the office beside the reception area. He immediately gets up to greet me when he sees me approaching. After I ask for a short private conversation, he leads the way to a small meeting room next to the office. He offers me a drink, and I start talking.

Keeping it as professional as possible, I explain that I need an assistant on my travels for the coming months and that, by pure accident, I have found a suitable candidate among his staff members. Hence my request to terminate Luna's contract with the hotel immediately. Of course, it will be no problem if any additional costs are invoiced to my company, and I end with the request to have a room prepared for her, close to mine.

As he can imagine that she needs to get used to her new position as a guest in this hotel, I ask him to inform the rest of the staff of Luna's new status.

He assures me that he will personally see to it that there will be no gossip from her former colleagues, and he even suggests keeping her contract open and giving her unpaid leave, in case she wants to return to work here after the summer.

I thank him again for the outstanding service, and he walks away to set everything in motion and have it sorted before Luna returns. In the elevator, I realize that I do not have Luna's cell phone number yet, so I can't prepare her for the changes. But I'm sure she will charmingly smile her way through the surprises.

Finally, I get to take the long-awaited shower, but all too soon the water is too painful for the burned skin on my face and neck. Carefully, I treat the sensitive areas with a pleasantly scented ointment, and I feel the energy returning to my tired body. I think of Luna and her perfectly teasing hands. The excitement of the whole day immediately returns, and I quickly adjust the shower water to be a bit cooler. Covering myself in a warm bathrobe, I walk back into the bedroom.

Luna has been gone for over two hours now, and it is already getting quite dark outside. I decide we had better dine here in my room and read through the room service menu. Of course, I do not have much of a clue about Luna's food preferences, but I take a gamble and order a selection of smaller dishes, so we will have a lot to choose from and can eat whatever we like. It will be delivered in half an hour.

Standing in front of the wardrobe, I can't decide what to wear. Shall I keep this robe on, or dress myself up for her, makeup and all?

The bathrobe it is, and I take my time to relax on the bed and turn on some music. Beautiful melodies from one of Wagner's most famous operas fill the room. The baritone's dark voice resonates through my relaxed body ...

*... the young girl presses her naked body against mine and gives me a hug. I feel how the cold makes her shiver, and I too wrap my arms around her. The dark voice of the high priest speaks behind me. The language is foreign to me, but the girl seems to understand his orders and immediately turns around on my lap. Leaning backwards against my chest, she guides my hands to her small breasts. Carefully I hold them and gently squeeze the soft flesh.*

*Another shiver down her spine, but not from cold this time. I feel her body moving slowly and her breathing becomes irregular. My hands still caress her breasts and nipples. But only when her hips start shaking, I do realize that she is playing with herself in this position, on top of my lap. The tone of the dark voice is serious.*

*She obeys and panting and trembling she climbs down from my legs. Slowly she turns around, making eye contact with me again. Then her orgasm makes the strength of her legs start to fade and with a loud bang she drops onto the altar ...*

... the sound of the second bang brings me back to reality. I turn the music down and ask them to enter.

Getting up from the bed, I straighten my robe. Quickly and skilfully, the table is set perfectly, and I leave a nice tip on the cart. Suddenly I feel a hand touching my butt firmly from behind. I turn around in shock. I had not paid any attention to who came into the room, and now I look at Luna's smiling face. Her colleague gives her a lovely wink, and Luna hands her the apron that she has just taken off again.

The door closes behind her, and Luna slowly walks towards me. She loosens her hair. I look in utter admiration at my girl, wearing a skirt and a short top. Not very suitable for walking into the cool Roman evening and night this early in the season. Probably, our thoughts on what we would do this evening have been aligned again. Even before she has walked all the way up to me, my desire is burning, and I only want one thing.

Her hands reach out to me. In one smooth, flowing gesture, the robe drops down onto the floor at my feet. Her wet lips press against mine again, full of desire. Seemingly automatically, my hands glide over her butt and slide her skirt down. She steps out, pushing me backwards onto the bed. Within one second after I land into the soft mattress, I feel her naked body on top of me. Behind her, the top flies with an arc on top of the rest of our clothes.

We kiss, uninhibited and wild. My hands wander eagerly over the curves of her perfect body. Leaning on her hands she pushes herself up to look at me. Her eyes are filled with fire. I feel twice as young, instead of older, in this unknown situation. Despite the longing, a strong feeling of panic takes hold of me. I don't know how to explain this to her, and my brain is working overtime.

'Mia Luna,' I start slowly. 'I don't kn...'

A kiss keeps me from speaking any further. Then she whispers very close to my ear. 'Relax, mia Julia. You worry too much. Close your eyes and relax. Don't speak and let it happen. You are not allowed to move.'

To enforce that last statement, she takes my hands and presses them into the pillow above my head. I obey, close my eyes, and try to relax. But every single muscle of my body is tense and waits nervously for even the slightest next touch. I feel her lips on my neck as her warm voice soothes me and asks me again to let go and relax. Patiently, she keeps kissing my neck, cheeks, chin, and lips, until I finally start breathing more calmly and regularly. Enchanted and at ease, I sink deeper into the soft mattress.

'Good,' she sighs. Her trail of kisses moves from my neck towards my shoulder, slowly moving further down. Her fingers caress me all over.

I feel the tension returning to my body, and all the excitement that has been building up during the last thirty-six hours rushes through me. I cannot hold it back, nor do I want to. With a deep sigh I give in to the pleasure she provides.

While I still tremble and catch my breath, I feel her body twisting herself upwards again. Luna's kiss doesn't stop until the last orgasmic spasms have left my body. I wrap my arms around her neck and am finally able to answer her kiss. I open my eyes and look at her red-hot face. Her eyes are watery and her mouth half open.

To my surprise she says: 'Thank you,' and explains that she realizes very well how new this is to me, and maybe even a bit awkward. She is very happy that I trust her so profoundly already, that I have allowed myself to let go. She also admits being extremely excited right now, but is firm in her decision that we will not do anything more tonight. Her sweet words of love make me melt, and I adore how careful she is with me.

'Ti amo,' I whisper. I mean these words with every fibre of my being.

She nods and kisses me. She loves me too, and there is no doubt in my mind that this is true.

We get up, and my legs are still a bit shaky, but Luna holds my hands and helps me as we walk to the shower together. Not bothering to get dressed again after that, we sit at the table and eat.

The food has slightly cooled down but still tastes amazing. We feed each other some fruit and I open a champagne bottle to toast to our love. Luna tells me what Marzio has told her and asks teasingly if she now has to go to her own room. I look at my messed-up bed and answer: 'Yes, you have to go to your own room ... with me.'

Then she asks me what he meant by her becoming my assistant. I take my time to explain that I have not the faintest idea what I will be doing over the next three months, but that I would love to do it together with her. And of course, I want to make sure she will have enough money after the summer to help her through the next year of study.

She wonders if she just had her job interview. I nod and say she is hereby hired. Leaning towards me, she kisses me and adds with a smile: 'I am kissing my boss.'

## 2 ‘... do as the Romans do’

**Sunday, May 3<sup>rd</sup>**

We both put on bathrobes and leave my room. Luna checks her key card – 412. Her room is right across the square-shaped hall. Like two giggling schoolgirls, we walk into the strange room and switch on the lights. Much smaller, but with a large bed, and that is all we intend to use in this second room anyway. The robes are hung over a chair, and we crawl into bed, naked in each other’s arms.

Her warm voice whispers to me. Sweet Italian words. I sigh and feel intensely happy and content. And tired, very tired. Luna kisses my cheeks, and I tell her one more time that I love her so very much. Then my body glides into a deep sleep again ...

*... two young men quickly climb onto the altar and assist the girl to get down from it. They clearly have enjoyed the view, as their erect penises are unmistakably visible in the flickering light of the flames.*

*From both sides, a young woman now steps up. They seem to be two of the oldest of the group and are very alike in appearances. So very much in fact that I think they must be twins. They help me to get up and guide me to a lower stone. This one is also much longer than the first.*

*Supporting me while I lean backwards, they make me lie down on it. The cold stone makes me shiver and I feel goosebumps all over my skin.*

*Still on either side of me, next to my chest, they undress themselves. In perfect sync, the dresses slide down. From the corner of my eyes, I see two young men, throwing those dresses into the holy fire. In front of my eyes, the twins bend over and kiss each other. Tender and sweet.*

*Without breaking the connection of their lips, they now kneel down. I feel their long hair tickling my belly ...*

... my hand tries to remove the tickling sensation, but then I notice Luna’s hair. By now, the covers have landed on the floor, and my girl is almost lying across the bed, with her head sleeping calmly on my belly, her face turned towards me. I pull a pillow under my head and look at her. With a peaceful smile on her face, she is in a deep sleep. Her breathing is calm and regular. One of her hands rests between my breasts. Softly, I caress the back of it.

A brief little twitch of her fingers, but she does not wake up. Next, I place one hand on her thigh and softly squeeze the warm flesh. She sighs in her sleep. I continue to tease her with tickling movements of my fingertips. For a moment, she appears to be waking up, but she only turns on her back a little.

This is so tempting. Carefully, my hand moves upwards. Tenderly caressing the inside of her thighs. The open space between her legs is narrow and the back of my hand rubs the other leg. I let my hand rest still for a while and look at Luna's face. Still asleep and calm. Regular breathing, no dream apparently.

I move my hand further upwards. The mouse of the hand rests on her thigh, while my fingers play with her. I can tell from her face she is still asleep. The trembling eyelids, however, show that she has started dreaming. I can imagine what type of dream this will be. I press my hand down, with a bit more force now. Pushing her lower body into the soft mattress. The moving of her body becomes stronger, and it takes more effort to not let go and to keep my teasing hand in position.

Her climax comes faster than expected. With eyes wide open, she looks at me, sighs and rolls off my belly onto the bed. I get next to her and kiss her neck, rest my head on her shoulder and caress her still heavily breathing upper body.

'Good morning, mia Luna,' I say, and I softly kiss her blushing cheek. 'Did you sleep well?'

She says that, most of all, the waking-up part has been very pleasant, and she kisses my forehead. 'My naughty boss.'

We stay in bed for a while, kiss each other, and let the day start slow and calm. Then we get up and grab our robes from the chair. I take a look at the bed. Covers on the floor, sheets all messed-up, and a wet stain as proof of her climax.

'It sure looks like it has been used tonight.'

She blushes, then sticks her tongue out, blaming me for the intensity of her orgasm.

We walk back across the hall to my room and take a nice shower together. While we get dressed and put on some make-up, we discuss what we're going to do today. When we finally decide on the Vatican, we take a look at our outfits, which are both way too "revealing" for this destination. So, we change again into more appropriate attire. Luna does not carry many clothes, so she chooses a long dress of mine.

After giving each other the thumbs up, we walk downstairs. Although Luna says 'hi' to some former colleagues here and there, I must admit that all the staff is completely professional. I do not see any looks of suspicion or disapproval. I am sure there will be gossip in private; one cannot prevent that. But there is no apparent envy, and that is a very relaxing thought.

The walk to Vatican City is a short one, but along the way we take our time for breakfast. In a homely little restaurant, where I am clearly the only non-Italian guest, Luna does all the talking. The service is very friendly and the food, but most of all the coffee, is outstanding.

She tells me more about her studies. Next week, there will be the final presentation of this year. After the summer, she starts her graduation assignment. Luna specializes in urban planning, which is unusual, as not many girls make that choice. Her female classmates often choose interior design, so she is mostly surrounded by male classmates. A few of them are quite fond of her, she admits with a smile. They, of course, stand no chance. She did have a boyfriend in the past, but for a long time now she has only seriously dated women.

On the bridge towards the famous Castel Sant' Angelo, we are the only tourists with no camera. We also seem to be the only couple that is not in any hurry. We enjoy everything we see. Luna knows a lot about the city and, of course, the buildings. She talks very enthusiastically and mesmerizes me with her stories, facts, and details. The fact that I am head over heels in love with my guide helps, of course, but I am sure that I would have loved her guidance as a normal tourist as well.

It is very crowded on the broad boulevard towards Saint Peter's Square. As we get closer to the epicentre of the Catholic world, we start hearing more languages around us. Luna points to the long line of waiting tourists on the right side of the square, all wanting to get in. 'It looks like we won't be entering any time soon,' she says.

For a moment, my guide is now being guided, and I take Luna to the left. This is one of the few things I remember very well from my last visit to Rome. Patrick knew his way around, and we walk towards the entrance that is reserved for the higher clergy and some VIP guests. Every tourist is stopped by the Swiss Guard, without exception, and only a few cardinals and a couple coming out of a large limousine are allowed through.

Without hesitation, unlike most tourists who are trying their luck at entering here, I walk up to the guard and shake his hand, while secretly handing him a banknote. Without waiting for his response, whether it is enough or not, I confidently walk on, Luna at my arm. It helps, of course, that we don't appear to be the average tourists.

The guard says nothing, and we are not hindered in any way. Even the next two guards, standing beside the heavily ornate oak door, pretend they don't even notice us and let us pass without a problem.

Once inside, Luna starts giggling like a young girl. She was really nervous to sneak in like that and keeps glancing over her shoulder to see if we are being followed. But of course, there is nothing to see behind us.

The cardinal who entered through this entrance before us briefly looks back at us, then smiles when he sees two decently dressed young ladies. I wonder if he thinks we might be sisters ... or worse, a mother and her giggling daughter. My love calms down a bit and starts lecturing me about all the details of what we see around us.

This huge basilica is absolutely impressive, and for hours we wander past paintings and sculptures. Three times, a priest or nun who works here stops us and asks us a question. Apparently, we stand out from the crowd because we do not rush and walk very slowly. But as soon as Luna answers them in Italian, their concern fades away and they disappear back into the crowd.

We decide to also climb the dome, starting with an elevator to the level of the first balcony. And then, over increasingly narrow stone staircases, further upwards. My stamina clearly needs some attention, as we have to pause a few times at a broader section of the stairs, where others are still able to overtake us. To clear their path, Luna presses herself against me, much closer than needed, but you don't hear me complaining. And when no one seems to be nearby, we kiss each other.

Walking close behind her, I am intrigued by the movement of her gorgeous curves. I realize that, as a good Catholic girl, I am way overdue for a confession. I laugh internally, trying to think of how I would explain my behaviour over these last two days to a priest. No, confession does not seem like a very good idea right now. As a worthy alternative, I choose to kiss Luna's butt, which is so utterly tempting right in front of my nose.

She turns around in pretend anger, saying I am behaving inappropriately in this house of God.

Tired and sweaty, we finally reach the top of the dome, where we enjoy a welcome cooling breeze, as well as a superb view all around.

Luna points out where the famous museum is, the private quarters of the pope, and the replica of the cave of Mary Magdalen at the far end of the papal garden.

Our way down is easier, of course, and before we take the elevator to ground level, we walk onto the roof terrace. From here, we overlook the famous square in front of the basilica. With a sarcastic smile, Luna points at the row of waiting tourists below, which seems to be even longer than four hours ago.

Standing behind her, I wrap my arms around my girl. She grabs my hands tightly, and for a moment we just enjoy each other and where we are. In silence. Two of the hundreds of pigeons are sitting on a ledge, less than a meter away. Against each other. Even when Luna turns around to kiss me, they are not startled and remain where they are. Only when we walk away do they fly off too, one following the other, floating down.

The sound of dozens of bells from the numerous churches all around us tells us it is five o'clock, as we cross the square again towards the city centre some fifteen minutes later. Halfway along the long boulevard, where most people try to find a spot on one of the terraces, we decide to go indoors somewhere for coffee and sweets. Luna makes a few short phone calls and I check my email.

The appointment with Professor Berini has been rescheduled and will be at 12:30 now. Some nosy questions from my grandfather, and of course two emails from Erica, with a few additional questions for Luna, both in English as well as Italian, to finalize her contract. All the usual business mail is missing, as it is of course being intercepted by Erica and sent to others and/or archived.

In a short reply, I tell my grandfather that he has to be a bit more patient for the first report. But he can be assured that his favourite granddaughter feels very happy. I ask Erica to have the contract sent to Luna's parents by courier, when she has received Luna's answers. My love doesn't know it yet; this is where I want to go again tonight.

When Luna puts down her phone, I give her mine so she can answer Erica's questions.

After she presses [send], I ask what she would like as a salary. We did not discuss that at all up to this point.

She feels somewhat uncomfortable answering that, but says it is not the most important thing for her, as long as it is not less than what she was making at the hotel, as that was about what she would minimally need for the next college year.

With a smile, I tell her that I have no doubt in my mind that Erica will more than make sure of that. I then ask her to book us a restaurant and a room for the night, as I do not want to sleep in my hotel tonight. She nods and asks if I have any preferences.

'I would love to eat and stay at your parents' place again. I want to apologize for Erica's actions.'

Luna radiates when she hears this, happy that I want to go back so soon already and that I feel welcome and at home there. She expects me to fail at apologizing, but promises to help me convince her parents that I am her friend, and not just some rich benefactor.

I give her a long, tender kiss before we walk back in the cooling air of the late afternoon. Through narrow alleyways, we reach the hotel.

While Luna takes a quick shower, I give Erica a short call. The poor woman is even busier than normal when I am actually in the office, but she assures me again that this is not a problem at all and that she will get everything sorted first thing tomorrow.

Luna presses her wet naked body against me. I have to resist the temptation, not to throw her onto the bed. Instead, I too take a quick shower and get ready to leave again.

The lukewarm water revitalizes my heated body, and when I walk back into the bedroom, reborn, Luna is waiting there for me, casually dressed in tight jeans and a short top. I choose a less revealing option for myself, and together we walk downstairs.

The same car is already waiting for us outside the entrance. Before I can ask the doorman about this, Luna quickly says she has arranged it. There is still a slight tone of doubt in her voice when she asks me if she did the right thing.

I answer that I love her initiative and that she has understood it perfectly. As long as I don't "hit the brakes", she must not worry about money and do what she thinks is best for us.

With a charming smile, the hotel's doorman opens the car doors for us, and Luna eagerly takes the driver's seat again.