



STUDIES HAD BEEN going well without any setbacks. Kennedy decided to choose English as her minor field of study and hoped it came in handy somewhere down her career path. Perhaps work for an architectural magazine.

Kennedy and Sara put the brakes on their wild night outs to concentrate on passing their classes. She put a word in her father's ears about getting an apartment with her roommate, and bad grades would not seal the deal. Their last major outing was at The Whiskey Bar. A night Kennedy couldn't erase from her memory. She ached for the mysterious hunk she met that evening. It was palpable he was out of her league, but hey, a girl can dream. Many nights she had been tempted to return to the club in search of him. But what were the odds that he'd be there or even recognize her?

She was sure he interacted with women more gorgeous than her daily. Moreover, a man like him would definitely have a woman. She tried to shake away the daunting thoughts haunting her day in and day out. It had been eight weeks, time to move on and forget about the gray-eyed beast.

Sara found love, a young man named Brian. He was a local student at the University of Florence studying Art History, and he sure kept her busy. She spent most of her free time with him, leaving Kennedy behind with her books and wild imaginings of an enigmatic man she might never cross paths with again in this lifetime. She considered acquiring a battery-operated boyfriend to soothe her aches, but each time the thought crossed her mind, she brushed it away. An important project she was working on was due in a couple of weeks, keeping her occupied. A significant part of the assignment, which carried more than fifty percent of the grades, was to conduct a series of interviews with prominent construction firms. She performed extensive research on all construction firms in the country, at least within a 20-mile radius, and settled on three: The Russo Group, Moretti Construction, and Filippo Ricci LLC.

She managed to secure an appointment with the CEO of Moretti Construction for only fifteen minutes. She learned that he was a strong advocate of providing guidance and support to young talented men and women, college students, and even high school students. He believed in fresh ideas and encouraged prospects to follow their dreams by creating opportunities within his firm.

Kennedy's appointment this afternoon wrecked her nerves terribly. She felt undeserving and unprepared for the meeting. Getting the opportunity to meet a CEO didn't come easily. She phoned his office several times a day, not taking no for an answer. His secretary explained that he sets time aside to meet students across the country, and his next opening was in six weeks as he had many ongoing projects. Kennedy did not accept that answer. She continued to pester until she was squeezed in. She had another opportunity to meet the Chief Architect of Filippo Ricci LLC, but that was set for next week.

Standing in front of her full-length mirror, she admired the black knee-length conservative dress she opted for. She pinned a navy blue brooch that complemented the deep blue six-inch stilettos she wore. Her wild curls were done up in a neat, high bun, and she completed her look with light pink gloss. Satisfied with her appearance, she phoned for a taxi, which arrived fifteen minutes later.

The drive from the student housing to Moretti Construction was approximately thirty-five minutes. Upon arrival, she took the elevator to the twenty-fifth floor, an

instruction given to her by the CEO's assistant. She sauntered confidently to the front desk, ignoring the butterflies fluttering at the pit of her stomach. Two stunning young women sat behind a white oak chest-high reception desk. Behind them was the company name in large gold letters.

"Good Afternoon, my name is Kennedy Phillips. I have an appointment to meet with Mr. Fausto Moretti." Kennedy said to both women. One kept her eyes trained on the screen of her computer, while the other, a blonde receptionist with a hot pixie haircut, met Kennedy's eyes with a forged smile. She hit a few keys on her computer before responding, "Of course, Ms. Phillips, we have you down for two o'clock."

She was a little early, an excellent corporate etiquette her father taught her.

She proceeded to make a phone call, lasting only a few seconds, then instructed Kennedy to sit in the waiting area. A comfortable open space with chesterfield leather sofas and an ottoman on the opposite side of the reception desk.

Minutes later, another woman, much older, approached her and introduced herself as Leena in a heavy Italian accent.

"Kennedy, come with me, please." She offered a warm smile. Silently, she followed Leena back to the elevators. They went up two more floors. Kennedy gasped when the double metallic doors slid open onto the twenty-seventh floor. The décor was nothing short of exquisite. Luxurious vinyl tile flooring, gold drapes, and fresh flowers adorned the floor from the sitting area down a broad hallway. Numerous tiny theatrical bulbs illuminated the space from floor to ceiling.

"This office is remarkable," Kennedy admitted to Leena.

Leena smiled stiffly to exhibit her gratitude.

"This way, please," she gestured toward the lengthy hallway.

In the middle, they turned and walked through an open glass door to an empty boardroom.

"Mr. Moretti will be with you in a few minutes." Leena said, "Make yourself comfortable. There's water, tea, coffee, and snacks over there," she nodded toward the back of the room where refreshments were conveniently displayed. Leena walked out, leaving Kennedy alone to fend for herself.

She opted for the middle chair around the large mahogany desk, opened her little briefcase, and fetched the questionnaire she had prepared for him. She set them on the table and crossed her legs. With her hand clasped together on her lap, she took in a deep breath to calm her anxieties. Most of her colleagues, if not all, were not fortunate to score a meeting with a CEO. Who knows, if she played this right, she might secure an internship today. She mused with a taut smile.

"Ms. Phillips," a fine-looking gentleman said as he slid the glass door open, "Sorry for the minor delay, I was stuck in a meeting." He said contritely.

"That's fine." Kennedy stood up, taking his extended hand in a firm handshake.

"Fausto Moretti." He said.

He was tall, and his commanding presence was quite intimidating. Her six-inch heel was not serving its purpose at that moment.

"Kennedy Phillips." She retorted. "I appreciate you squeezing me in. I will only take a few minutes of your time."

"That isn't a problem, Ms. Phillips. It's Ms., right?"

She smiled, "Yes."

"You were quite persistent, my assistant told me. That is a positive trait to have in the corporate world. Keep it up." He gestured for her to take a seat.

"Thank you." Kennedy thought he was handsome. A shame he was already taken. She stole a peek at his platinum wedding band as she sat. She clicked the back of her pen and picked up the questionnaire, she had placed on the table. She learned a lot about him

during the interview. It turned out that his uncle owned several corporations, putting him in charge of the construction sector. All her questions were abundantly answered to her satisfaction.

"So, tell me." He leaned back comfortably in his seat when the interview ended, "What exactly is your area of study and your plans after graduation?"

"Civil Engineering. Designing, construction, and research." She proudly declared. That automated response always made her heart swell.

"Impressive. Most young women avoid this field. Tell you what; look us up after graduation. We are in the process of implementing a new internship program you might find beneficial."

"Most definitely, I appreciate the offer." She was elated but tried not to display how much. Italy might just be home one day. Fausto rose to his full height before her and stretched forth his hand to shake hers. She stood up and accepted it.

"It's been a pleasure to meet you, Ms. Phillips."

"Likewise!"

Her response was confident, and so was her handshake, a gesture she hoped would make a mark on his memory. She understood the importance of having Moretti Construction on her résumé. The doors it'd open for her in the country and around the continent.

Fausto stepped back and buttoned his suit jacket before sliding the door open. He stood to the side, waiting for her to gather her items. Kennedy offered him a nod of thanks as she crossed the threshold and continued on to the elevators. This time she had no escort with her. She pressed the call button and waited. She decided to phone Sara to deliver the good news and brag about her experience. She set her briefcase on the floor beside her and rummaged through her handbag for her cellphone.

The elevator doors opened, and she picked up her briefcase before proceeding, her eyes glued to her phone. She nearly bumped into a man stepping out of the cab. She flinched, stepping back to avoid an accident.

"I'm sorry," she glanced up, and she froze in place. It's him, oh God, it's him. She thought. He was real. Fragments of thoughts chased each other in her mind. He haunted her dreams and filled her thoughts for the last eight excruciating weeks. At some point, she convinced herself he was just a figment of her wild imaginations—a dream. Only a fantasy she dredged up from the pit of her innermost desires. But she was wrong. He did exist, and he was standing right in front of her. She experienced the same heat she felt that night, his trail of cologne lurking in the air around her, and those significant haunting gray eyes boring holes through her.

He stepped out of the elevator, and she took two steps back. He offered a light smile, but his facial expression held a touch of incredulity. *Please recognize me. Please, please.* She implored within.

"We meet again." He lastly said.

Oh, thank Goodness. She let out a breath she was holding.

"Yeah, I—I had a meeting with the CEO."

He appeared to be enjoying the effect he had on her. He studied her warily as if pondering whether to believe her. She hoped he did not perceive her as a stalker of some sort. After a long awkward moment, he asked, "Are you free for lunch?"

His question took her by surprise. She needed a moment to think before delivering her response. She should say no. She wanted to weigh the pros and cons, but she wasn't privy to that luxury of time. The more he stared at her, the more distorted her thoughts became. She contemplated if ditching her afternoon lectures was worth it. This was a no-brainer, silly; this was her second and only chance. She reproached herself.

"Certainly!" She heard herself say.

"Good!" He smiled, revealing his sexy dimples to her.

He pressed the button for the elevator, and it opened immediately, as though it were waiting for her response as well.

"After you." He stepped aside, allowing her to go first.

"Hope you like Italian food?" He said as he pressed the call button to the first floor.

"I don't have a choice, do I?"

"Nope."

When they stepped out of the building, he instructed a man, Kennedy immediately recognized from the club to bring his car around, then ordered him to follow them in another vehicle.

Kennedy strained to conceal her excitement. She couldn't believe this was happening to her. It was not a dream. She could hardly wait to tell Sara all about it.

"I am taking you to one of my favorite restaurants not far from here. I'm pretty sure you will like it." He said as he merged onto the main road.

He could take her to hell, and she'd love it there, Kennedy decided.

His cell phone started to ring. He picked it up from the center console, glanced at the screen and grimaced lightly.

"I need to take this." He excused himself and swiped the screen with his thumb to answer it.

"Hey." His voice was deep and steady. He didn't talk much, he just listened to the ranting caller. Chancing a glare at him, Kennedy appreciated whoever was at the end of the line as it took his attention off her, giving her time to recompose herself and study him carefully. The scent of him aroused a curious sensation within her; a masculine woodsy smell she was sure would linger in her nostrils several days after today. He wore a gray tailored suit and a light blue shirt that heightened his handsome facial features. She thanked the gods that she was well put together when they met again.

The call ended the instant they arrived at the restaurant.

"Sorry about that." He apologized and inserted the phone in the inner pocket of his suit.

A valet attendant opened her door to help her out. Tristan rounded the car and walked ahead, holding the restaurant door for her. Kennedy took in each moment, making sure not to leave anything out when reciting this surreal experience to Sara. Who would have thought her day would end up like this. She knew in her heart, he was going to be a significant distraction in her life. Her instinct gnawed at the very core of her being, yet, she couldn't help but fall for the stranger who had done everything but physically touch her.

Their initial encounter barely lasted five minutes, and he had taken possession of her mind. As they strolled to their seats, Kennedy couldn't help but notice the ladies, both employees, and patrons of the restaurant, chancing glances at him. His presence was just as powerful as the CEO she just sat with. Her self-doubt began to creep in. She was just a plain Jane. Nothing memorable about her or her personality, so why was she here? What did he see in her? Perhaps after this lunch, he will realize they have nothing in common, and her fascination with him would remain an obsession. She shook off the negative thoughts and relaxed in the chair Tristan pulled out for her.

A waiter approached the instant the hostess excused herself. "Bring us a bottle of Château Pétrus," he said to him.

"That's wine," Kennedy said after the waiter walked away to accomplish his mission.

"I hope so. You have a problem with wine?"

"It's three in the afternoon. Don't you have to go back to work or something?"

"It pairs well with the rigatoni pasta meal we are about to devour." He smiled, leaning comfortably into his seat.

"I see." Kennedy fidgeted with her right earring. "May I ask you a question?"

"Go ahead."

"How tall are you?"

Tristan smiled, "last I checked, 6'5."

"That's hot." She smiled.

"How short are you?" probed Tristan.

"5'7."

"Cute."

She laughed, "Compared to you."

"So, tell me, Ms. Phillips, what brought you to this side of town?"

Stunned, he remembered her last name, she spoke with skepticism in her voice, "I'm working on a project that requires me to interview a few construction firms. Fortunately for me, the CEO of Moretti Construction agreed to sit with me."

"Interesting." He studied her face. He knew little to nothing about the beauty before him, but he was inclined to learn more. Why he was, he didn't understand.

"What about you?" She asked.

"Me?"

"Yes, I didn't expect to see you again, let alone literally bump into you."

The waiter returned with the requested bottle and two red wine glasses.

"Let her," Tristan instructed him, and the waiter poured a tiny bit of wine in her glass. Both men watched, waiting for her endorsement.

Smiling, she sampled the wine. The red wine tasted normal to her. She couldn't tell the difference between a \$5 and a \$5,000 bottle, yet she pretended to know the difference. She offered the waiter a nod, "This is good."

He smiled and proceeded to fill her glass before serving Tristan. He placed the bottle in the middle of the table and walked away with a quick bow.

"It's a small town," Tristan resumed, "that is my employer."

He appeared more than just an employee of a construction firm. Kennedy thought with a puckered brow. What was the story behind the two men that accompanied him everywhere? She glanced out the window and realized one of the men standing vigilantly by the entrance. The second was nowhere in sight, but she knew he was somewhere in the restaurant. There was certainly more to him than he admitted.

"What exactly do you do there? An architect, I presume." She tried once more for a more detailed response, even though the enigmatic side of him excited her.

"Do I look like an architect?" He sounded amused.

"Yeah, somewhat."

"What does an architect look like?"

"I don't know. A good-looking man in a suit."

He laughed. "I take that as a compliment. Tell me, where are you from? I can't pin down your accent."

"You are avoiding my questions."

"No, I am not. This lunch is about you. I want to know about Kennedy Phillips."

"...and I want to know about Tristan...?"

He shrugged.

"Really? You are keeping me in suspense."

"It's fun that way." He suggested.

"For you, it is." She rolled her eyes.

The simple, brave gesture amused him.

"My dad is African American, and my mom is German. I was born and raised in Panama."

"Wow? That sounds intriguing."

"Hectic, at times."

"Why is that?"

"That's three complex cultures I need to personify."

"Is your father truly African or black American?"

"Zambian."

"Really? Have you been?" He asked, genuinely intrigued by her revelation.

"When I was young, yes."

"Must have been a great experience."

"I don't remember much, I believe I was eight years old. His mother, my grandmother, passed, and that was when we visited."

"That's it?"

"For us, kids, yes, but he has been many times. He constructed a family estate in Lusaka."

"You have a rich background."

A brief silence followed.

"I thought a lot about you since the night we met." His tone turned serious.

His confession caused her muscles to stiffen, yet it produced an electrifying thrill at the pit of her stomach.

"What about?" Her voice dropped low.

"Everything. Mostly, I chastised myself for not taking your number."

"Can you be specific?" She pushed, and her resolve made him groan within. He relished the passion in her eyes—her curious personality. He had a good read on her. She was nervous, unsure of herself, yet she fought the urge to run from the unknown. That to him was a woman with a fearless spirit.

"What about me kept you captivated?" She added, determined to get her answers.

"Your perfectly shaped oval face, demure smile, light amber eyes, the manner at which they burn with need when they hold mine, those long sexy legs, that red dress...I can go on for hours." He picked up his wine glass and took a slow sip.

Kennedy swallowed.

Suddenly the room felt too small and searing.

His eyes were trained on hers, but she didn't shy away like she usually would. She held his gaze and her breath.

His penetrating gray eyes bored through her to her soul. He was more handsome than she recalled.

"I cannot deny it. You did cross my mind a few times." She admitted. *No, Sir, I thought about you plenty. Day and night. Through rain and sunshine, without ceasing.*

"Just a few?" He cocked an eyebrow, clearly reading her thoughts.

She shied away, picking up her glass of wine, "I need to ask you this, though, because it's driving me insane. Who are those two men we came with? I remember them from the club. Are they your bodyguards? Are you a celebrity?"

He laughed, "No. They are associates."

"Bodyguards." She insisted.

"Yeah, you can say that." He succumbed.

"But why do you need them?"

The server returned with a tray of hors d'oeuvres. An order Kennedy did not remember placing. Nor did he. She remained quiet, watching as he placed a hot plate of Zucchini on the table.

"Here you go, Mr. Moretti. You want the usual?" asked the waiter.

"Yes, two plates of rigatoni with sausage and peas." He turned to Kennedy, "not allergic to cheese or peas, are you?"

She gave him a vague shake of her head. Eager for the intruder to leave them alone, so she could inquire about the name he just called him. He is a Moretti. *Moretti Construction*. That answered most of her questions. However, why did he feel the need to conceal his identity?

"Moretti, huh?" Kennedy blurted out the instant they were alone.

He stared at her for a few beats before reacting, "Will that be a problem?"

"And you failed to tell me this because...?"

"I didn't think my last name was important."

"It is—it should be."

"Why?"

"It's your company."

"My father's." He corrected and watched as her brain connected the dots.

"Same difference. So that makes Fausto your cousin."

"Correct."

"That certainly explains the *associates* looking out for your best interest." She made air quotes around *associates*.

"You should try the marinated zucchini." He cleverly changed the topic of discussion.

"Sure." She stabbed one with her fork.

"Tell me about your family and why you chose to move to Italy?"

"This suddenly feels like a job interview."

He chuckled, "humor me, my lady in red."

She smiled. He was good—a player, most definitely. "Well, they are back home in Panama. My father is in the construction industry, as well. Got a younger sister, Kiara, a dog, Coco, and have pretty much lived a quiet, tedious life to date. I have been here for six months, give or take and loving it so far. Your turn." She said.

"I am a hundred percent Italian." He declared, and she snickered.

"Both parents live here in Florence, but I grew up in Veneto."

"Ah, Venetian." She grinned. She fell harder for him with each passing second.

"You have a thing for Venetian men?"

"History has a thing for Venetian men."

"But love is blind, and lovers cannot see the pretty follies that themselves commit."

"Did you just quote Shakespeare from the Merchant of Venice?" With widened eyes, she asked.

"You did not see that coming, did you?" Tristan laughed.

"No, I didn't." Their eyes locked for a moment, and then she said without blinking, "If you prick us, do we not bleed? If you tickle us, do we not laugh? If you poison us, do we not die? And if you wrong us, shall we not revenge?"

"Shylock. A good one!" said Tristan.

"I knew you'd like that."

He gave a wry tilt of his lips.

"I like you, Ms. Phillips." He leaned forward, picked up the bottle, and topped up her glass with wine.

"Siblings?"

"Yes, two."

"Girlfriend...wife?" She disapproved of her question the moment it slipped out of her lips. Anxiously, she awaited his response.

It did not come right away. Instead, he studied her features for a few beats before responding, "No!"

"I see." She shoved an invisible strand of hair behind her ear and blushed under his watchful gaze.

"What?"

"You are gorgeous." He professed, and when he looked into her eyes, he became uncomfortably aware that this time it was different. She was unlike any of the women he had dated in the past.

"Do you tell that to every woman you meet?"

"You are the only woman I see right now."

"Right!" Her silly heart fluttered—the joys of meeting someone new.

The rest of their conversation over lunch went smoothly. They each shared stories about their families and careers. By the end of their spontaneous lunch date, Kennedy was confident that he'd want to see her again, perhaps a real date. She felt less threatened by his strong alpha male personality. She mostly appreciated the fact that he asked more questions about her life rather than bragging about his when there was much to boast about.

Behind his wealth and charm lay a perfect gentleman with a profound past and a promising future. If she were lucky, she would get the opportunity to know him more. Though one thing continuously bothered her, and that was, beneath his perfect persona resided something mysterious and dark that both piqued her interest and terrified her.

"I will have one of my men take you back to campus." He said behind her as they made their way out of the restaurant. Her heart sank in despair. She nodded without looking back. Once they stepped out, he added, "Have dinner with me tomorrow."

She checked her excitement. A worthy woman must not seem desperate—words of her mother. "You have my number. Give me a call tomorrow, and we will see."

"It's a plan." He offered her a smile.

* * *

It had been an eventful afternoon for Tristan, running into his mystery woman. She was different from the women he was used to dating. Her beauty was subtle, yet distinctive. She had intelligent eyes and an intriguing mind that detained his interest. Pursuing her made him three hours late for his scheduled meeting with Fausto that afternoon. The expression on his face when Tristan walked into his office said everything Tristan needed to know.

"I apologize. Something rather urgent came up. I hope everything went as planned?"

"It did, but we still need to meet with the board next week to sign off on a couple of new projects." Fausto retorted.

"Sounds good." Tristan took the seat across from him.

"So, what was so urgent and more important than this meeting?" Fausto wore a skeptical look across his face.

"Nothing to worry about." Tristan drew his cellphone from his suit jacket's inner pocket and grimaced at the amount of missed calls from his father. He hit the callback button, wondering what could be so urgent. Agostino hardly blew up his phone. Maybe twice, when he was desperate but not over five times. The phone rang several times before he answered.

"Is everything okay?" Tristan probed the moment his father's deep voice reverberated through the phone.

"I need you to come home tonight. Do not notify your brother of this meeting. We may be in more trouble than we originally believed." Agostino firmly stated.

"Alright." Tristan did not protest and clicked off.

"Everything okay?" Fausto said, noticing the deep scowl etched into his features.

"Never been better."

"You should have dinner with Mira and me soon. I am tired of her asking. And heads up, she believes she found you the perfect wife." Fausto shook his head at his wife's desperate attempt to hook Tristan up with one of her snotty girlfriends.

"Is it?" Tristan scoffed quietly.

"She's right, you know? You need to think about settling down soon. You know your old man's essential rule of life. If you want to be in a higher position than you are currently in, you must consider it and soon." He added.

"Ha! We will see about that, Mr. Moretti." Avoiding Fausto's glare, Tristan stood and vacated his office.

His father's words weighed on him throughout the day. How worse could it get? He deduced the meeting with Bernardino, Agostino planned, did not go as intended. For Agostino to summon him and alone, only meant one thing. 'Clean up the mess, Tristan!' What he did best. They are going back to their old ways of settling scores.

* * *

Tristan arrived at his family's manor an hour before his father returned from the office. It was a home that mimicked that of those built in the ninetieth century with a touch of the present, a typical renaissance Tuscan style property, surrounded by beautiful Italian garden of about 3.5 hectares. It was fittingly located thirty-five minutes from downtown Florence and close to the shoreline of Versilia. Twenty-two bedrooms, and fourteen full bathrooms. All the Moretti kids were grown and out of the nest. The residence contained Cosima and Agostino Moretti, nine house cleaners, three drivers, four gardeners, and ten bodyguards. Five housekeepers resided in the main building, and the bodyguards and the other staff members lived in a twelve-bedroom estate located behind the villa. The guards changed shifts every twelve hours.

Tristan enjoyed dinner with his mother before Agostino walked through the front entrance. He appeared strained.

"Join me in the study in ten minutes. I need to make a phone call first." He popped his head into the kitchen and addressed Tristan.

"I hope everything is good? I am tired of resolving conflicts between you two." His mother said to him when Agostino was out of earshot. She picked up a pitcher and filled her son's glass with lemon water.

"It's just business, mother," Tristan assured her and hurriedly finished his meal.

"What is going on?" He asked the instant he crossed the threshold into his father's study. Agostino stared up at him with a baffled look across his face.

"Close the door."

Tristan walked back to the double doors and pulled them closed.

"I had a meeting with Pascoal as discussed. It is still unclear how deep their business relationship runs, but it is not looking good. He danced around every concern I voiced. However, one thing I am sure of is the fact that Amedeo did embezzle money from them. How much? I do not know. I called you here tonight because we have a conflict ahead of us. Amedeo is hiding something. We need to uncover the entire truth and figure a way out and unscathed. Prevent bloodshed, if possible."

Deep down, Tristan suspected it would come to this. What concerned him the most about this dialogue was how frightened his father appeared. His eyes have never held so much fright; it caused a chill to race down Tristan's back.

Here was a man feared by many across the continent. He had never shown this much anxiety, ever, at least not as long as Tristan had known him. A sense of defeat had overpowered him, and that was worrisome.

"So, what exactly are you saying, father?"

"We must uncover all the facts. I will drain the truth out of your brother. What I need from you is to get your men working. Have them dig deeper into the issue and the Bernardino family. They might be able to find something we could use against them, and we will compare notes to ensure we have all we need. I will keep you informed on the outcome of my meeting with Amedeo—and Tristan, do not provoke your brother any further."

Tristan nodded without any objections and stood up. He thought about questioning his father about what truly happened between him and Pascoal but changed his mind. He knew he wouldn't learn anything new, so what was the point?

"I will get on it, father."

As he drove away from the family home, his mind raced with unanswered questions. He fetched his cellphone and dialed Marco's number.

"Are you in town?" He said when Marco answered.

"No, tomorrow."

"Good, meet me at the club as soon as you arrive."

To be safe, he decided not to reveal much over the phone. Face to face would be safer—anyone could be listening. His paranoia was now officially on steroids.