THE ROAD TO YOU

A SPICY VACATION ROMANCE

ERIKA VANZIN

Edited by
STACI FRENES

To my editor, Staci,
the fearless human who painstakingly restored every em dash I "accidentally" deleted while pretending I knew better.

1

LENA

The morning light filters through my bedroom window, painting the room in soft hues. I blink against the gentle glow, turning over just enough to catch a glimpse of the impossibly blue sky welcoming me.

I'll never tire of this view, with the lush green of the trees peeking out from the property below mine, and the Los Angeles sky stretching bright. A stark contrast with the Minnesota weather of my childhood. Even on those rare, foggy mornings when June gloom sweeps the coastal neighborhoods, the Los Feliz Hills always seem to be spared those cloudy skies.

I stretch, toss the covers aside, and pad barefoot across the cool hardwood floors. Swinging open the French doors to my garden, I breathe in the warm,

jasmine-scented air and smile. It's the perfect weather for morning meditation.Finding this house had been a year-long journey of open houses, bidding wars, and not-so-veiled disappointments. But the moment I stepped inside with my realtor, I just knew. The light, the energy, the way the walls seemed to call my name, I knew it was The One.

A lot of A-list actors and fellow colleagues don't even bother with the house-hunting. They send assistants to weed out the ones that don't meet their requirements, stepping in only at the last minute to sign papers and take selfies in front of their new swimming pool.

Not me. I want to feel the vibes of a place and let its welcoming energy wrap around me like my favorite blanket. Preston, my boyfriend, loves to tease me about it. He calls me a spoiled Hollywood star with an undertone of insecurity. But I think he's just jealous. While I'm sipping tea on my sun-drenched patio, he's shuffling boxes between rentals, grumbling about bad layouts and street noise.

But hey, if a busy, famous director doesn't have time for "mundane things" like finding a home, that's on him. Let him talk while I enjoy every bit of my sanctuary.

After a blissful hour of meditation, I wander into the kitchen, greeted by the quiet humming of a sweet song by Rose, my housekeeper, who stands at the counter with a bowl of colorful, freshly cut fruit before her.

"Good morning, Miss Sinclair," she says when she notices me.

I've asked her a thousand times to call me Lena, but she insists on keeping things professional. I stopped fighting it years ago.

"Morning, Rose. How's your day going so far?"

"Very well, thank you." She sets the fruit bowl and a steaming cup of coffee on the counter in front of where I'm sitting. "If you don't mind, I'll take your dress to the dry cleaner's this morning. I couldn't quite manage to get rid of that stain."

Ah, yes. A splash of red wine now mars the gorgeous, ivory dress, courtesy of Preston's waving hands as he animatedly talked about his latest movie at a party. I'd been hoping to save it from the trash, but hope is fading now. It's a shame. I loved that dress and hoped to wear it again this summer.

"If you want, I can drop it off on my way back from the gym," I offer. "I'll be heading that way anyway."

The suggestion horrifies her. Her eyes widen, and she clutches her chest like I stabbed her.

"Oh, no, Miss Sinclair. Please enjoy your morning. Don't worry about the dress. I just wanted you to know in case you wondered where it went."

I smile, not surprised. Rose never lets me lift a finger when she's around. Sometimes, it feels strange, this change from my childhood, where chores were done by

the whole family. My sister and I grew up washing dishes, folding laundry, and cooking alongside my parents. I come from a middle-class family where both our parents worked long hours to make ends meet, and everyone in the house helped out. Now, the only thing I fold is a yoga mat.

"Thank you, Rose. But you know if you ever need a hand, I'm here."

Her smile softens. "I know, Miss Sinclair." With practiced grace, she wipes down the countertop and disappears down the hall, moving so quietly I half wonder if this house has secret passages.

I finish my breakfast, rinse my bowl, and tuck it into the dishwasher before grabbing my gym bag. As I drive my SUV through the gate, the world shifts from calm to chaos.

A wave of paparazzi invades my driveway with their cameras flashing and their bodies pressing too close to my car. I'm almost afraid I'll hit some of them on my way to the gym.

"What the heck?" I mutter, gripping the wheel as I inch forward, careful not to drive over anyone's foot.

I'm no stranger to the attention. Being a famous actress comes with its fair share of lack of privacy. But this is madness. They're never this aggressive, especially when I'm not filming and just living my life.

I finally break free of the horde, and the roar of

voices fades behind me. My blood pulses in my ears as I glance into the rearview mirror.

What on earth had set them off this morning?

When I finally make it to the gym, the uneasiness from the paparazzi still twists in my stomach. I'm grateful to have a space where I can burn off the lingering worry with a good, sweaty workout. Already dressed in my gym attire, I give Sam at the front desk a quick wave and head straight for the treadmills.

Choosing this gym had been a strategic move. Concealed in a gated commercial complex, it offers a level of privacy that is hard to find in Los Angeles. Only gym members and those working in the offices above have access, which means no lurking paparazzi and no strangers sneaking photos over the lifting bench. The steep membership fee and strict vetting process explain why the place accommodates celebrities and high-profile clients. Here, nobody cares that I'm Lena Sinclair, the Hollywood star.

The main workout room is bright and airy, and rows of treadmills are lined up to face floor-to-ceiling windows. Outside, the murals covering the gray wall are a pleasant, colorful distraction to look at. But my eyes are drawn to the three big TVs hanging above the

windows, all tuned to the same talk show. The hosts lean in close, their expressions practically vibrating with gossip.

I drape my towel over a treadmill and wander to the water dispenser, filling my bottle while trying to shake off the morning's weirdness. That's when I catch the two women by the free weights sneaking glances at me with their heads tilted together, deep in a hushed conversation.

They're not new here. We've exchanged small talk before, and opinions about the yoga classes we attend together. But today their smiles are tight, like I caught them doing something wrong. My skin prickles.

It could be nothing. After run-ins with the paparazzi, I always feel like everyone is staring. I look down to make sure I'm appropriately dressed—leggings, a sports bra, a loose tank top. *Not naked. Not a bad dream. I'm fine*. I reassure myself.

I return to the treadmill, pulling my phone and earbuds from my bag, only to find my phone dead. That explains why I haven't heard from anyone this morning. Normally, I don't check my phone until after my workout. I like keeping my mornings stress-free, easing into the day without the noise of emails or social media. My entourage knows better than to bother me unless it's urgent.

I step onto the treadmill, set it to a light jog, and let my eyes drift back to the talk show. There's no audio,

just the hosts' exaggerated expressions and a montage of clips behind them.

I squint.

The screen flashes to an old interview of Preston and me, side by side, promoting our latest movie. My pulse quickens.

Did I miss a media alert? I need to call Greta, my publicist. She never forgets to keep me in the loop, but maybe something slipped through her busy schedule. Before I can piece it together, the screen shifts, a magazine cover fills the frame, and my heart stutters.

In the upper corner is my headshot—the same smiling photo from my IMDb page. But it's the image beneath it that squeezes the air out of my lungs.

It's a blurry shot, probably taken from a great distance, but unmistakable.

Preston, my boyfriend of four years, is passionately kissing Ronan Kavinsky, the lead actor in his new movie. Preston's hand is shoved down the front of Ronan's pants, their bodies pressed against the side of a trailer.

Everything around me falls away, and my ears buzz with the rush of blood pumping into my body.

The treadmill keeps moving, but I don't. My foot catches, and I lurch forward, gripping the handrails just in time to avoid hitting my face on the hard equipment. My knees buckle, and I hit the emergency stop button, stopping the machine before making a fool of myself.

Breathe, Lena. Hold it together.

The room feels suffocating. The thud of weights, the steady hum of treadmills, and the distant rhythm of pop music blend into a confused noise. My vision blurs with tears, and I force myself to blink. I focus on the polished floor beneath my sneakers. Years of smiling on red carpets and dodging uncomfortable questions teach you one thing: how to hold back tears until you're safely behind closed doors.

I grab my towel and gym bag, slipping off the treadmill as smoothly as I can manage. My limbs feel wooden, and my expression is locked in a polite mask. The women by the weights watch me. Their eyes are a little too wide, and even their whispers cease as they witness my walk of shame.

I nod at Sam as I pass the front desk, my lips stretching into a tight, unnatural smile.

Outside, the sun shines too brightly, and the air is too sharp. I fumble with my keys, slide into my SUV, and slam the door shut. The silence hits me like a wave, and I suck in slow breaths until I'm sure I won't shatter.

But the image is still there, with Preston and Ronan passionately kissing, seared into my mind. I feel my perfect morning, my perfect life, shaking so hard I'm sure it will soon shatter.

I LET TABIA IN AND CLOSE THE DOOR BEHIND HER. THE paparazzi who had swarmed my gate this morning are now more insistent than ever, and I can't shake the fear that one of them might try to jump over the perimeter wall. My hands are shaking as I turn the lock.

Tabia smiles gently before wrapping me in a tight hug. Her soothing hand moves in slow circles on my back, and it's a miracle I don't shatter right there on her shoulder. I pull away and guide her into the living room, collapsing beside her on the couch. A bottle of wine sits on the coffee table with two glasses already waiting.

"Have you heard from your publicist yet?" she asks, picking up where our phone call ended less than two hours ago.

I nod, grabbing the bottle and filling both glasses. I hand one to her.

"Greta called. She said they're already working on damage control." My voice is hoarse, every word scratching its way up my throat.

Tabia's dark eyes study me over the rim of her glass. Concern is taking up every inch of her face. She's searching for a hint of how I'm holding up, but the truth is, I'm numb. I didn't even cry when I got home. I just plugged in my dead phone and sifted through the flood of messages from Greta, switching from shock to management mode without ever truly processing what happened.

Preston cheated on me. And he didn't just cheat, he humiliated me publicly. I can't tell what hurts more: the betrayal or the fact that the downfall of my personal life is plastered on gossip sites for everyone to see.

"That's it? Just 'damage control'?" Tabia's voice tightens, and I can practically see the wheels turning in her mind, ready to call Greta herself and demand more action.

I take a long sip of wine, letting the warm feeling it ignites settle me before answering. "She talked me through all the steps they've already put in motion, and what comes next depends on Preston's response. But basically, I'm supposed to lay low and wait for the storm to pass."

Tabia sighs, and frustration veils her expression. "Did you hear from him?"

Her voice is soft and careful, like she knows the precarious balance I'm clinging to. She should. We've known each other for ten years, ever since I moved to Los Angeles at twenty with a dream of becoming a famous actress. She was my roommate back then, my first supporter through every audition and rejection. She's seen me fight tooth and nail for everything I have, and she knows that when I break, I break hard.

I shake my head, and a fresh wave of bitterness crashes into my chest. "I know he's seen my texts, but

every time I call, it goes straight to voicemail. He won't even give me the courtesy of a conversation."

"What an asshole," she mutters into her glass, her tone low and deadly.

The silence stretches between us. I swirl the wine in my glass and stare at the red liquid catching the light. This morning, I woke up feeling like the luckiest woman in the world. Now, it feels like fate sucker-punched me for even thinking such a thing.

"It doesn't feel real," I admit. "I mean, I saw the pictures, I know it is. But not hearing it from him feels like I'm living someone else's nightmare, not my own."

"Do you want me to call him? I can be scary when I want," she offers, and I know she means it. With her six-foot-tall frame and statuesque beauty, she can be intimidating, especially when she puts on her "model mask," as she calls it. That blank, impassive expression she wears on the runway that can make even the most confident men squirm.

I huff a sad laugh. "He knows your number. If he doesn't want to face me, he won't face you either. That's just him. If he doesn't say it out loud, then it's not real. Nothing is happening."

It's a trait I've never liked about him. That ability to slip into denial and hide from anything unpleasant. I was foolish enough to think he'd change. What a joke.

Tabia scoffs, and her disdain is sharp enough to cut. "Did you know he was into men?"

Coming from anyone else, that question would have stung, but not from her.

"Not a clue." I shake my head. I've replayed that thought in my mind a hundred times since I saw those pictures, but no clues ever stood out. I feel like a fool for that, but I don't even know if there are telltale signs that someone is into both genders. That's not even the point. He cheated, that's the thing I hate, not with whom.

"You know what's worse?" I don't wait for her to respond. The words tumble out before I can hold them back. "Now I'm stuck in this house for the entire summer because every time I step outside, they'll be on me like vultures. I don't even know how to face our friends. What are they thinking? What are they saying behind my back?"

Tabia places a warm hand on my knee, setting her glass down on the coffee table. "Don't worry about what other people think. It's clear as day that he's the one in the wrong. And if your friends can't see that, they're not worth keeping around."

Her reasoning is rock solid, but the ache in my chest doesn't ease.

"And as for the summer," she continues, "why don't you fly to my apartment in Milan? It's empty, and you could use the break. Get away from the paparazzi,

recharge without feeling like a prisoner in your own home."

I let the idea sink into my mind. I can almost taste the freedom. The thought of wandering Milan's streets without paparazzi following me feels too good to be true. I could finally breathe without cameras flashing in my face, without gossip following me everywhere I go.

"I might take you up on that." For the first time all day, I feel something like relief. This could be a way out of this nightmare, and a spark of hope ignites in my chest.

2

LENA

I wake up half an hour before the plane lands, just in time to pull my hair into a messy ponytail and put on a bit of makeup, just in case someone recognizes me. I've done everything possible to avoid attention, from ducking under the back seat of Tabia's SUV driving out of my house to boarding the plane in the plainest sweatpants and baggy T-shirt I could find. Greta will spend the next couple of weeks tipping off the paparazzi with fake sightings of me around Los Angeles, buying me time to settle into my Milan apartment and lay low.

I take a deep breath, trying to rein in the nervousness wreaking havoc in my stomach. It's been six days since the news broke, and the worst part is that I haven't heard a single word from Preston. Not a text, not even a

message through his lawyer or publicist. Nothing. He has tightened security around his set and hasn't even bothered to release a statement to explain the situation.

Every gossip magazine is wildly speculating about the timeline of our relationship. Some say I must have known all along; others suggest our relationship was nothing but a cover for him until he was ready to come out. That accusation stings more than anything else.

Our relationship was real, or at least, it was for me. But now I'm questioning everything. I've spent hours replaying every moment, scrutinizing every touch, every small confession, every kiss that seemed to be too rushed. Maybe he really didn't like me, or maybe he's bisexual and just fell for a man, but I need to hear it from him. I need him to tell me that there was something real between us. After four years, I deserve at least that much.

A flight attendant cautiously approaches me, her sweet smile curving her lips. She's been attentive throughout the flight, helping to calm my raw nerves just enough to fall asleep.

"I don't want to overstep, but I can make sure you get off the plane first," she whispers. Her voice is so gentle that my heart squeezes in my chest. "I'll buy you some time to get through immigration before the rest of the passengers."

My chest lightens a bit with relief. Bless her.

Whether it's solidarity or sheer pity, I'm grateful. I want to hug her, maybe even kiss her for this small mercy.

"Thank you. I really appreciate it. I hope this won't get you in trouble."

She shakes her head slightly, the soft smile never leaving her lips. "I already spoke to the captain. He's on board with it. He makes the rules." She winks before moving on to help another passenger.

I'm not sure what story she spun for him—perhaps that a broken-hearted woman needs a few minutes of respite to disappear before the world swallows her whole—but I don't care. I take this kindness and make the most of it.

When the plane touches down, I move quickly, slipping through the airport with my head down, my sunglasses and ball cap firmly in place, and my heart pounding. I'm lucky enough to snag a taxi without much of a wait. The driver doesn't give me a second glance as I tell him Tabia's address, and I sink into the back seat, grateful for the anonymity.

The soft hum of the radio fills the car with a comfortable blur of Italian words I don't quite understand. It's soothing, this bubble of not knowing, not needing to process anything for a few more minutes.

I watch as the city unfolds outside my window. The landscape shifts from the industrial sprawl around the airport to the mix of tall buildings and single-family

homes on Milan's outskirts. As we draw closer to the city center, the streets grow narrower, the architecture older, belonging to another era.

When we finally pull into the *Brera* neighborhood, I can't help but marvel at its beauty. It's vibrant and a bit bohemian, just as Tabia described. Not the polished, high-fashion glitz of the "*Quadrilatero della Moda*," another Milan neighborhood, where she spends her time when she is here for Milan's Fashion Week, but a place with character. The streets are cobblestone, and the buildings are exquisitely restored. Their facades are a blend of soft pastels and weathered stone. Tiny balconies overflow with flowers—bursts of red, pink, and yellow, thriving in the early June sun.

As I step out of the taxi, heat and humidity wrap around me, making my sweatpants feel even more suffocating. I feel underdressed and out of place among the elegant locals. A couple of women sit outside a corner café, their cocktail dresses effortlessly chic as they sip tiny espressos. To my relief, they don't even glance in my direction.

I pay the driver, drag my luggage to the side of the street, and slip through the massive wooden door that leads to Tabia's apartment building. As it swings shut behind me, it feels like closing the door on the last six days of chaos, betrayal, and endless questions.

For the first time since my world imploded, I have a

chance to breathe. An opportunity to find myself again, far away from the flashing cameras and the ever-persistent rumors.

THE APARTMENT IS SMALL BUT IMMACULATE, A PERFECT mix of modern charm and old elegance. The entryway is paved with a stunning black-and-white mosaic, creating a welcoming first impression. Just beyond it, the flooring transitions to light hardwood, bathing the living room in a warm, inviting glow.

A plush white sectional couch and mid-century wood coffee table sit in the corner, but my attention is immediately drawn to the window—the most unique one I've ever seen. It stretches along the far wall, continuing around the corner and seamlessly connecting the living room to the sleek, modern kitchen. The massive glass panes are divided by delicate white frames, offering a view of the communal courtyard below.

The courtyard is a postcard brought to life. Wrought iron balconies hold draped terracotta pots brimming with vibrant flowers, and neighbors' curtains flutter lazily in the breeze. It's quintessentially Italian with a mix of contemporary design and historical character.

This place is breathtaking.

I drag my suitcase into the vibrant bedroom, which

has bold, flowery wallpaper and rich blue linens, and pull out a few essentials. I settle on a light, floral summer dress and a pair of low sandals, something comfortable for exploring.

The bathroom is a tiny sanctuary. The white marble tiles and brass fixtures make this space so luminous, you almost don't notice there are no windows in sight. The glass-enclosed shower beckons to me like an oasis. One look at it, and I don't even have to think: I strip off my travel-worn clothes and step under the warm spray.

I let the water wash over me, rinsing away the stale airplane smell, the smudged makeup, and the exhaustion clinging to my bones. I take my time, lathering away the remnants of the last few days—the betrayal, the heartbreak, the ache of unanswered questions. Even my legs seem to breathe a sigh of relief as I scrub away the stickiness of those suffocating sweatpants.

Forty minutes later, I emerge from the bathroom with a fresh burst of energy bubbling beneath my skin. Despite the jet lag, I feel more awake and grounded. My stomach growls in a loud reminder that I haven't eaten since…well, I can't even remember. The flight is a blur of short naps and a lot of sparkling wine.

A quick search on my phone reveals a small grocery store nearby. I don't bother drying my hair or applying makeup. I just twist my damp hair into a messy bun, slip

into the dress, grab the keys, and step out into the warm Milan air.

As I wander through the cobblestone streets, I'm captivated by everything around me. The city hums with life. The architecture is a layered history of stone, tiny balconies, and pastel colors. Pale yellow and pink are predominant, but patches of white or stone give this place a relaxing vibe. Each turn offers a new view: a unique café, a woman tending to her flowers, soft music coming from one of the open windows.

I've been to Italy countless times, but never like this. Before, it was always a whirlwind of photo ops, interviews, and tight schedules. This feels different. This feels like I'm seeing it for the first time through the eyes of someone who finally has the luxury of *visiting* a foreign country.

When I reach the grocery store, it's like stepping into another world. Back home in Los Angeles, grocery shopping is a clinical experience with fluorescent lights, endless aisles, and everything pre-packaged for convenience. Here, the store is small and intimate, with wooden crates full of fresh produce, the scent of herbs and ripe tomatoes filling the air.

I find myself smiling at the simple act of bagging my own salad, selecting ripe peaches, and asking the clerk for a few slices of prosciutto. The clerk smiles, and she takes her time to select the best piece of meat, as if time

moves differently here. The kind of tranquility I've only experienced in movies.

But then, as I approach the register, reality slams into me. A rack of gossip magazines lines the counter, and my face is everywhere. My heart drums a heavy, uneven beat. Preston's betrayal is plastered across every glossy cover, our lives dissected by bold, unmistakable headlines. I don't need to read Italian to know what they say.

I knew we were so famous the gossip would spread, but I naively hoped I could escape it here for a little while.

My hands tremble as I place my groceries on the conveyor belt. I focus on the beeping of items being scanned. The girl behind the counter doesn't even glance at me. She moves with practiced efficiency, entirely unaware of who I am or the chaos I left behind.

Relief rushes through me, and I exhale a slow breath.

For now, at least, I am just another face in the crowd, a girl in a floral dress, buying bread and fruit in a quiet corner of Milan.

I UNPACK THE GROCERIES, HUMMING A SONG I HEARD ON the radio in the grocery store, filling the small fridge with fresh produce, and neatly stacking the pantry with bread

and a box of pasta. The kitchen feels even cozier now that I have my supplies for my stay here.

I prepare a simple salad, a meal that requires little thought but can settle my growling stomach. I rinse the crisp lettuce under cool water, chop the tomatoes, and layer thin slices of prosciutto over a piece of crusty bread. The aroma of fresh bread and salty cured meat fills my nostrils, and my stomach responds with another low, demanding growl.

I drizzle olive oil into the salad bowl, add a pinch of salt and a dusting of pepper, and carry my dishes to the kitchen table. The seat faces that incredible window, and I settle in, letting the view soothe me.

Outside, on the other side of the courtyard, curtains billow softly in the breeze. Their slow dance has a hypnotic rhythm that pulls me back to a memory I wasn't ready to face.

I'm suddenly in the middle of the African desert, the sun long gone but the air still warm, carrying the almost absolute silence of this isolated place. Preston and I had taken that trip after the chaos of the film premiere. It was a rare escape where no one knew us, and we basked in almost total solitude.

We had slept in a canvas tent, its fabric flapping gently in the wind. I remember the candlelight casting shadows on his face, the way he looked at me with something I thought was love. We had tangled together that

night, wrapped up in a passion that made us spent, sweaty, and breathless.

The memory crashes over me like a sudden, icy, unavoidable avalanche. My heart breaks open in my chest, and before I know it, hot tears spill over my cheeks. It's the first time I've cried since the news broke, and the floodgates open with a force I can't control.

I cry for every moment of happiness we shared, every kiss that now feels tainted, every promise that now is broken. I cry for the woman I have been with him, the one who believed in us.

Time goes by in a blur of tears and sobs. My salad turns dark and soggy, and my eyes burn with the sting of too many tears. When the sobs finally subside, I'm left hollow, emptied out, as if every tear carried away a bit of sadness, leaving me with nothing inside.

But beneath the ache, something else tugs at my mind like an insistent voice I can't ignore. An unsettling truth rises to the surface, and I can no longer push it away: in four years together, Preston and I never once talked about our future.

Not about a home together, not about marriage, not even a shared pet or a silly what-if about growing old side by side. The realization settles over me like a cold shadow. I've been mourning the past, not the future. Because, in truth, there was never a future to mourn.

A slow, simmering anger replaces the grief. My

fingers curl around the edge of the table, and my breath steadies, each inhale feeding the flame inside me. How dare he? How dare he not only break my heart but vanish without a word, leaving me to drown in speculation and scandal while he hides behind his security and silence?

The rage grounds me. I wipe my cheeks; my skin is raw, but my resolve is taking root in my chest.

No more tears for Preston. *Not one more*.

If he can't acknowledge the shitstorm he created, if he can't even muster a single text or offer an explanation, then he isn't worth my tears. He never was.

I push the soggy salad aside, the last remnant of my breakdown, and stand up. I am not a victim. I refuse to be.

This is my fresh start, my chance to rebuild without the weight of him holding me down. And I'm going to take it.

3

MICHELE

Pain shoots up my leg and slams into my back as Dr. Marini bends my knee. He's the best orthopedic specialist at Italy's top private clinic, but right now, I'd trade him for anyone who could give me a massive dose of painkillers. My teeth grind together, and my knuckles turn white as I grip the exam table's paper-thin sheet. I've been here for half an hour, stripped down to my boxer briefs and a T-shirt, but it feels like days.

He's been poking and prodding me for what the clock over the door says is thirty minutes, but it feels like that damn thing is dragging the second hand through mud. Its slow tick is taunting me, reminding me I'm still stuck in this hell of a place.

"Aren't you supposed to ask if I'm in pain?" I

manage through clenched teeth, trying to inject some humor into this horrible situation.

He doesn't miss a beat. "I don't need to ask," he says, still avoiding my gaze. "Your muscles are stiff, your forehead's shining with sweat, and your grunts are… well, not exactly subtle." He smirks, but his eyes remain fixed on my leg.

Nobody looks me in the eye these days. They're either hyper-focused on fixing me or too scared to deal with my less-than-charming attitude. I get it. It's easier to look at my leg than at the mess I've become. They all think the same thing, they just don't say it out loud: six months and you're still not back? Hell, I'm not even at fifty percent of my previous shape. But hey, at least I can walk, right?

"You can sit up. We're done." He pats my knee like I'm a kid at the dentist, then strides back to his desk.

"How long before he can play again?" Marco's sharp and cold voice cuts through the silence. My agent has never been known for his patience, but today, he's barely holding it together.

I stare at the wall as I pull on my pants, my fingers clumsily fiddling with the sweatpants' string. I don't look at Marco or at the gruesome sight of scars on my leg. There's nothing left to focus on except the stark, white wall.

"We can't say for sure." The doctor's voice is profes-

sional but with a practiced edge of sympathy. "The bone has healed, but the muscle is taking longer to recover."

"It's been six fucking months," Marco snaps, and I wince.

Dr. Marini doesn't even flinch. His attention shifts to me, ignoring Marco completely. I'm the patient, not my agent. "The accident did a number on your leg," he says with a steady tone. "The bone snapped in two places, tore through muscle and tissues, and nearly broke through entirely. It shredded tendons, muscles, and vessels. The surgeons did their best, but the priority was saving your leg…and your life."

I've heard this speech before, but every time it feels like a fresh punch to the gut. They did what they could, but finesse wasn't on the table. It was survival.

"Are you saying they botched the surgery?" Marco's voice is a low growl.

"No." The doctor's jaw tightens. "I'm saying that if they hadn't realized you were *the* Michele Moretti, they'd have amputated. They took risks to preserve your career. Regular patients don't get that luxury."

An icy wave washes over me. I can still hear the crash, the metal-on-metal screech, the sharp, searing pain in my leg that faded to a chilling numbness. Flashes of light, sirens, and voices that went in and out of focus. I was drifting between reality and unconsciousness.

"What can I do to fix this?" My voice comes out hard with an edge of annoyance to cover the fear.

Dr. Marini sighs, and his expression shifts into a mix of patience and pity. "Stick to physical therapy. I'll talk to your trainer and adjust your workload, but beyond that, it's time and effort. You have to push through and wait."

"That's it?" Desperation creeps in, cracking my voice. "I just sit around and wait?"

I'm thirty years old. I should have another ten years on the field, another decade of being the best. But hope is slipping between my fingers. The future I've envisioned for myself is coming to a screeching halt right before my eyes.

"There's an option for surgery," he offers, though he sounds doubtful. "We could address the adhesions causing pain, but it's a gamble. No guarantees the recovery would be quicker, or complete."

He speaks to me like I'm a wild animal ready to snap. "Look, considering the extent of your injuries, you've come a long way. A week after surgery, we didn't even know if you'd walk again, let alone play. This wasn't a clean sports injury. You're lucky even to be talking about going back to the team. Don't take that for granted. Some people don't have that chance."

The reprimand is sharp and necessary to drag me out of my self-pity. It's a reminder that I'm not some entitled

asshole who thinks the world owes him. But lately, this battle feels impossible. I'm drowning, and the surface keeps slipping further away, no matter how hard I fight to resurface.

Out of the corner of my eye, I see Marco shift uncomfortably, his chest deflating. He's not wrong to be pissed—his job is to keep my career alive, and right now, I'm dragging us both down.

"I'm sorry," I mumble, rubbing my hand over my face. The exhaustion is crushing me.

The doctor nods. "I know it's tough. Take the summer to heal, not just physically. Your mental state matters. The right mindset will help your body recover."

Marco sighs, and I know what he's thinking. He's never believed in all this "mind over matter" bullshit, but I'm desperate enough to try anything. What the hell do I have to lose?

We leave the office in silence, our footsteps sounding loud in the empty corridor. Marco moves with a sharp, angry pace, and I trail behind, feeling the weight of the injury in every step.

"Marco, wait!" I grab his arm, spinning him to face me.

He jerks away. "Shut up, Michele. You've fucked this up, and I need to walk away before I say something I'll regret."

"Are you serious?" My frustration flares hot in my

chest. “What, you’re never going to talk to me again? Grow up.”

His eyes flash with anger. “Your contract expired two weeks ago. They aren’t even pretending to negotiate. They’re stalling, waiting for another team to take a chance on you. They won the championship without you. You were out for half of the fucking season. Why would they pay for a player who might never be the same again?”

His words hit like a punch to the gut. For months, he’s been my lifeline, the voice of optimism when all I saw was darkness. Was it all a lie?

“I’ve been with them since I was twenty. A decade, Marco. That has to count for something.”

He shakes his head. “This is business. And right now, you’re a liability.”

I open my mouth, but the truth is a cold, hard weight in my chest. The management’s calls dried up months ago. When they did call, it wasn’t about me, it was about my timeline, my usefulness. Only my teammates still check in regularly. Real friends who saw me as more than a jersey and a paycheck.

Marco’s face hardens. He spins on his heel and walks away without another word.

This time, I let him go.

I WALK OUT OF THE CLINIC, BUT INSTEAD OF HEADING straight to my car and driving home, I take a detour. My feet carry me around the block to the little bar that's become my refuge over the last six months. Franco and his crew have seen it all. Cup after cup of coffee, they watched me as I went from a wheelchair to crutches, and finally, to standing on my own two feet.

They never ask too many questions. Never pry for the gory details of my injury or push for a story to sell to the tabloids. When the paparazzi got too aggressive, Franco himself would push them out the door, armed with nothing but a broom and a dirty dish towel. He treated me like a guy who needed coffee, not a celebrity trying to hold his life together.

I'm not naive. I know I'm a big deal. I'm one of the top football players of my generation, and I have been with the best team in the league for a decade. I'm practically a rockstar in this country. Privacy isn't part of the deal. I can't expect to be left alone, but here, at least, I get a little bit of quiet.

"Hey, Michele! How are you doing?" Franco's cheerful voice pulls me out of my thoughts as I approach the tables outside the bar.

I force a grin. "I can't complain." I'm still walking, right? I'm lucky. "What about you?"

"Counting the days until I can finally retire." He

chuckles, clearing a tiny espresso cup from a nearby table.

"What will I do when you're not here to make my fabulous espresso?" I tease.

He's been here forever. Took over this bar in the nineties and hasn't stopped since. Six in the morning until close, seven days a week, except for the two weeks in August when he and his wife head to Rimini. Same hotel, same beach umbrella, same first two weeks of the month. It's practically tradition.

"Not my problem." He nods toward the younger guy behind the counter, already crafting cappuccinos with the precision of a surgeon. "You'll be just fine."

I chuckle and step inside and breathe in the scent of freshly ground coffee. A genuine smile spreads across my face. But as I approach the counter, a blonde whirlwind with a messy bun spins around, and before I can react, hot cappuccino cascades down my T-shirt.

"Shit!" The burn is immediate and almost painful. My first instinct is to yank my shirt off, but instead, I grab the fabric between my fingers, holding it away from my skin. The cup clatters to the floor, leaving a trail of milk and foam splattered everywhere.

I'm two seconds away from cursing this clumsy idiot when a soft, breathy voice whispers, "I'm so sorry." The words drip with an English accent, so sweet it catches me off guard. Wait, they are actually spoken in English.

I look up and find myself staring into the bluest irises I've ever seen. For a heartbeat, I'm lost. Those eyes lead to a button nose and lips so full and soft they could make a grown man forget his own name. I'm talking from experience here.

"I'm so sorry," she says again, her cheeks flushing. She snatches a pile of napkins from the counter and starts patting my chest, the motion so awkward and clumsy it melts my irritation on the spot.

The stain is beyond saving, a beige disaster spreading from my chest to my sweatpants. But who cares?

"Don't worry." I chuckle, trying to put her at ease. "Let me buy you a cappuccino, unless you'd rather try to squeeze this one out of my shirt."

She looks up at me, wide-eyed, and suddenly, nothing else matters. Not my leg, not the clinic, not Marco's pissed-off expression still seared into my mind. Right now, my world has shrunk to the hope that she'll say yes.

4

LENA

Yes or no? A simple answer to a simple question.

This gorgeous man just offered to buy me a cappuccino after I thoroughly ruined his shirt. Logic says I should be the one offering to pay for dry cleaning, not accepting free coffee from him. And more than that, I shouldn't even stay here. I should turn around and disappear. Lay low, Lena. You have one job this summer: *lay low*.

But how am I supposed to say no when he looks like *that*?

Warm brown eyes, a sharp jawline dusted with the perfect amount of dark scruff, and full lips that appear to be far too easy to fantasize about. I always thought that the whole *Italian men are next-level attractive* thing was

an exaggerated stereotype. But if he's the standard, then yeah, I get it now. This man could convince me to rob a bank, right here, right now, and I'd probably ask which getaway car he prefers.

"Yes," I breathe out, and the smile that spreads across his face is *blinding*.

He says something in Italian to the barista—something deep and smooth that I don't understand but *definitely* wouldn't mind hearing again—then places a firm hand on my back, guiding me toward a small table outside. His touch is light, but it leaves a trail of heat against my skin. The bar is quiet at this time of day. Most people are tucked away in air-conditioned offices, while we sit beneath a large umbrella shielding us from the hot Italian sun.

A gentleman, he pulls my chair out for me like he's done it a thousand times before. It looks effortless, second nature for him. When he takes the seat across from me, he extends his hand with a confident, easy-going smile.

"I'm Michele Moretti. Nice to meet you."

Oh, that voice. It's rich and deep, laced with something that makes my stomach dip in a way that is *very* dangerous.

I clasp his hand way too clumsily, and my fingers are sweaty against his warm palm. "Lena. Lena Sinclair."

The second the words leave my lips, I regret them.

Idiot. I should have just said *Lena*. But it's too late. His eyes flicker with recognition, and my stomach clenches in a grip.

"*That* Lena Sinclair?"

My heart sinks. It was too good to last. I made it fifteen whole days without being recognized, and now my anonymity is over.

Heat creeps up my neck, but I force myself to nod, staring down at my hands. The urge to bolt is strong, but if I run now, I'll make a worse scene.

Instead of an over-the-top reaction, he simply leans back in his chair, studying me like he's debating whether to say something or let it go.

"I'm sorry," he finally says, his voice still smooth but now careful. "I didn't mean to embarrass you. I just prefer to be straightforward. Pretending not to recognize you would feel dishonest, and I'm not that kind of man."

My head snaps up, and my eyes lock onto his. I was bracing for *something else*, the usual fake nonchalance, then the casual request for a selfie, maybe even a veiled attempt at getting more details about my situation. But he just says it like it is. No big deal.

And for some reason, that makes my shoulders relax.

"I'm just not used to people recognizing me *and* keeping it cool," I admit. "Most of my encounters end with a 'quick photo' that's on social media before I even walk away."

His brows pull together slightly, but his lips stay tilted in that barely-there smile. "Would it make you more comfortable if I asked for one?" His voice is teasing. "I could sell it to the gossip magazines. Make a fortune."

I scrunch my nose at him, but my lips betray me with a small smile. "Oh, absolutely. I hear they pay big money for blurry pictures of me covered in cappuccino stains."

He lets out a low, warm chuckle that makes my stomach quiver.

"Trust me, I'm not selling *anything* to those vultures," he says in a firm voice. And for some unexplainable reason, I believe him.

Something about the way he sits—completely at ease, legs sprawled out like he has all the time in the world—makes me settle into my chair a little deeper.

The barista places our drinks in front of us and Michele thanks him before turning his attention back to me. "So, Lena. What brings you to Brera?"

I pause, unsure. Does he really not know, or is he being polite?

"I'm staying at a friend's place for the summer," I say carefully. "She has an apartment nearby and isn't using it, so she offered it to me." I lift my cappuccino to my lips, hoping that's enough to end the subject.

He nods, sipping his espresso in one go like a true Italian. "Unusual choice for a summer getaway."

I tilt my head. "Why's that?"

He shrugs. "Most people go to the coast or the lakes. Milan in the summer is, let's say, *hot*. Most locals escape the city, especially around August. It's only June, but still, not a typical choice for a tourist."

That actually makes sense, considering the streets have been emptier than I expected. But before I can ask more, I see the shift in his expression, the playful curiosity replacing casual conversation.

"So why are *you* here in the middle of a workday?" I raise an eyebrow at him, mirroring his earlier question. "I've noticed people take their jobs *very* seriously in this city."

That earns me a full, head-tilted-back laugh, and I swear I stop breathing for a second.

"Fair enough." He grins, his dark eyes gleaming with amusement. "I had an appointment nearby, then decided to grab a coffee. And, well…" He gestures at his shirt, smirking. "I got a cappuccino too."

He winks. And my stomach does a *whole backflip*.

I press my lips together to stop a smile from spreading too wide. "I really *am* sorry about that. I'll pay for the dry cleaning."

He waves a dismissive hand. "Don't worry about it. A washing machine will fix it."

I hesitate for a second, my gaze flicking to his left hand. No ring. Not that it necessarily means *anything*,

but still. It makes me wonder if there is someone who will wash his shirt while I'm here, having a coffee with him.

Then I remind myself, rings don't mean much, not in my world. And look how *that* turned out.

FOUR HOURS.

That's how long we've been sitting here, lost in conversation, oblivious to the world around us. We only realize the time when the barista, now looking a little sheepish, approaches our table with a hesitant smile.

"We don't make dinner, but I have some sandwiches if you want," he offers.

The bar is empty now, the nearby tables wiped down, chairs stacked. It's obvious he's closing up, but he's also clearly a friend of Michele's and doesn't want to rush him out.

"I'm sorry, we didn't realize it was so late," I murmur, feeling a little guilty.

The man's smile is warm, reassuring. "Don't worry, I'm used to him staying late. He can talk for days if you let him."

Michele lets out a low chuckle. "We appreciate the offer, but I think we should let you go home to your

wife." He pulls out a bill and places it on the table without waiting for change.

After two weeks here, I've learned that Italian coffee is absurdly affordable. What he left probably covers at least four overpriced Starbucks lattes back home. I instinctively reach for my purse to contribute, but before I can even touch my wallet, Michele's hand lands lightly on mine. The contact is brief, but it still sends a jolt up my arm.

"I offered you a cappuccino, and I meant it," he says, shaking his head.

I pause, then murmur, "Thanks."

A silence settles between us as the barista disappears inside. It's not an uncomfortable silence, but it's different, like both of us are waiting for the other to do something first. Like both of us understand the need to leave, but don't want to.

"So…" he finally says.

"So…" I echo.

Something has shifted. The easy rhythm we had all afternoon has been interrupted, as if we stepped outside the little bubble we unknowingly created. There's still so much to say, so much we could ask each other, and yet the words won't come. We've talked about everything and nothing, and it feels like there is a whole world to talk about. Does he feel it too? That unfinished feeling, like neither of us is ready to walk away just yet?

Michele clears his throat, and his tone is almost hesitant when he speaks again. "Okay, this might sound strange, but would you like to have dinner with me?"

I blink, surprised not just by the offer but by the hopeful edge to his voice. A sentiment that mirrors mine.

"Now?" I ask, just to be sure we're on the same page.

He nods. "Unless you have plans."

There's something endearing about the way he says it, like the thought of me having evening plans hadn't even crossed his mind until now.

I chuckle. "I'm here alone. My only plan was watching TV with a cup of gelato."

His lips curve into a slow, confident smile. "I promise you won't regret missing the gelato." He extends his arm slightly in an invitation, not too intimate, just enough to suggest we walk together.

I hesitate only a second before slipping my hand through the crook of his elbow.

As we start strolling toward a quieter street, I glance at the stain still marring his shirt. "Are you sure you don't want to go home and change?"

He shrugs, completely unbothered. "Where we are going, they don't mind if I walk in wearing only my boxer briefs."

I let out a laugh. "Is this a common occurrence? You showing up to dinner half-naked?"

Michele smirks, shaking his head. "No, but they're

used to worse. Believe me. And this?" He gestures to his stained shirt. "This is nothing. Accidents happen."

His casual attitude about it is almost charming. In my world, if I as much as step outside with a coffee stain, the headlines would have a field day.

We reach a tucked-away *trattoria* nestled between a residential building and a covered walkway leading to a small square. Above the door, a wooden sign reads Trattoria Mamma Rosa, and from the terrace above, a cascade of pink, white, and purple flowers spills over, partially veiling the windows. It's intimate and charming, the kind of place only locals seem to know about.

As soon as we step inside, a woman behind the counter looks up and her face lights up when she sees Michele.

"*Ragazzo mio!*" She sets down the bottle of wine she is opening, hurrying around the counter.

I watch as she wraps her short arms around his torso, pressing her cheek against his chest with motherly affection. Michele chuckles, resting a hand lightly on her back, murmuring something in Italian.

The brief exchange is warm and affectionate. Around us, a few tables have turned their attention our way. For a split second, my stomach clenches with nerves. Have they recognized me? But no. They're not looking at me. They're looking at *him*. Maybe because of the stained

shirt? I don't linger looking for an answer, but I'm glad I'm not the one drawing attention.

After a few more words I don't understand, the woman leads us to a corner table. The trattoria is cozy, with butter-yellow walls and old-fashioned tools hanging as decor. It feels worlds away from the upscale, modern restaurants I'm used to. I sigh in relief when I realize I can relax a bit and not think about being perfect in here like I usually do when I go out in Los Angeles.

Michele settles into his chair and glances at me. "Sorry, she doesn't speak much English. She was just asking how I've been."

I smile. "No problem."

Honestly, I've noticed it's rare to find someone here who speaks English fluently, especially the older generations. Most know enough to get by, but deeper conversations are another story.

Michele picks up a menu but doesn't even glance at it before looking at me again. "Do you trust me to order for you? I'd like you to taste a bit of Milan."

There's something almost boyishly eager in his expression, and it's contagious.

"I'd love that," I say. "I've mostly been playing it safe with food since I got here. I'm sure I'm missing out."

His grin is almost triumphant as he orders an *antipasto*: cheese, cured meats, marinated vegetables,

and thin, crispy breadsticks he calls *grissini*. Everything is paired with a bottle of wine.

As he pours us each a glass, his gaze flickers back to me, more curious now. "So…do you always have this much time between films, or did you take time off just to visit Italy?"

I hesitate, taking a slow sip of wine. Do I tell him the truth? He knows who I am. He will notice my face on the magazines for sure, if he hasn't already. I exhale and decide that if he's going to hear about it, I'd rather it be from me than from a gossip column.

"Usually, no. My schedule is packed. But…my ex-boyfriend was caught by paparazzi cheating on me with his male co-star. My publicist suggested I lay low for the summer to avoid fueling more headlines. Hence, my impromptu trip to Milan."

Michele's expression darkens, not with pity, but something closer to disgust. "That sucks. I hope you found out before it hit the magazines."

I let out a humorless laugh. "Nope. I heard it from the tabloids first."

His jaw tightens, and he mutters something in Italian under his breath.

I arch an eyebrow. "What does that mean?" It didn't sound nice at all, especially paired with the disgust on his face.

His lips quirk. "*Che pezzo di merda*." He pauses before translating. "What a piece of shit."

I burst out laughing, feeling the burden lift, as if I've been holding it forever. The knot in my throat, the weight in my stomach every time I talk with someone about what happened, is not as heavy anymore. And for the first time since landing in Italy, I feel a flicker of something I hadn't dared to think of.

Hope.

5

MICHELE

"That *risotto alla Milanese with ossobuco* was something I will remember for eternity." Lena beams at me with a wide smile, and her cheeks flushed from the wine. The way she pronounces the Italian words, with that charming accent, makes my lungs forget how to work.

I knew it this afternoon, but dinner confirmed it. She makes me forget.

For the first time in months, I don't feel like a man whose career is slipping through his fingers. I don't think about the team that cut me loose, the injury that haunts my nights, or the uncertainty clawing at me like a shadow I can't outrun. With her, I forget the pain gripping my leg most of the time.

Maybe it's because she doesn't know who I am. She

doesn't see the baggage I carry, the weight of expectations, or the headlines dissecting my downfall. With Lena, I'm just Michele. No past, no pressure.

"I know! I was stunned the first time I had it after moving to Milan." I chuckle, reaching out instinctively when she stumbles on the uneven cobblestone. She catches my elbow, her fingers gripping tightly as she steadies herself.

It could be the wine, or the late hour, or the sheer absurdity of how easy it feels between us, but I don't want tonight to end. I don't want to go back to my empty apartment, to lie awake staring at the ceiling, drowning in spiraling thoughts that make my nightmares become almost tangible.

"You're not from here?" she asks curiously, looking at me with those big blue eyes that mesmerize me.

It's refreshing that she doesn't know. She has no idea how long it's been since I had a night like this, feeling light and letting my mind rest. It's been years since the last time I allowed myself to be something different than the soccer player, just Michele, and nothing more.

I shake my head, smiling. "No. I'm from a small town in Puglia, in the south."

Her expression softens. "Really? I've heard the south is amazing in the summer. I'd love to visit someday." There's a wistfulness in her voice, like she doesn't believe it's possible.

I wonder why she feels like she can't do something this simple, visiting a place she wants to see. She is already here, and from what she told me, she's staying for a while. Nothing should stop her from doing what she wants.

"It really is," I say. "The colors, the scent of fruit warm from the sun, the way people smile and live slowly like they've got nowhere else to be, it's something else. Even the taste of food is different."

Silence settles between us, but it's not uncomfortable. We walk aimlessly, just enjoying this moment. And I realize I don't want to say goodnight yet.

"Come with me," I say, the words slipping out before I can second-guess them.

She turns to me, brow furrowing slightly. "I…" There's hesitation in her voice, and I rush to reassure her.

"It's a public place. Plenty of people. Nothing to worry about." I wink, trying to put her at ease.

She exhales a soft laugh. "Sorry. I guess I'm just used to men expecting something in return after dinner. And I'm not interested in…that."

My stomach twists. It's infuriating that she even has to say it. It's disgusting how some men treat a meal like it's a transaction.

"They're not men," I mutter. "They're pathetic losers who can't get a woman any other way."

She's quiet for a beat and gazes at the paved street

under her feet. Then she says, so softly I almost miss it, "My ex was like that. He always expected something in return."

I glance at her, but she keeps her head down, shoulders slightly hunched, like she's ashamed. And that pisses me off more than anything. What an asshole

"Look how that turned out," I say, not bothering to filter my irritation. "He didn't even have the balls to tell you he had his dick buried in someone else's ass."

A sharp laugh bursts out of her, and she shakes her head. "You're not wrong."

There's something about the way she looks at me, like she's seeing me differently. She seems surprised that I don't act like the men she is used to, and the idea makes me sad for her. How can someone live always expecting the worst from the people around her? Maybe it's just her recent breakup making her distrusting, but still, it's sad.

"But seriously," she says, shifting the conversation, "where are you taking me?"

I grin. "We're here." I gesture toward a glowing neon sign up ahead.

Her face lights up, and it damn near knocks the breath from my lungs.

"Gelato?" She lets out a delighted laugh. "Are you serious? I don't know if I have room for it after that dinner, but I'll run ten laps around the block if it means I

get to eat some." She giggles, and the sound tugs at something deep inside me.

When we get closer to the outdoor space, she studies the display case like a kid in a candy store, eyes wide as she scans the endless rows of flavors. "Okay, I recognize pistachio, but the others? I have no clue. I need your help."

I go through them one by one, answering every question as she listens, completely enraptured. The woman behind the counter watches us with amusement, probably used to the locals not making a fuss about it, but with Lena, it's all marvel and awe.

She settles on pistachio and hazelnut, her voice stubbornly wrapping around the Italian words. "*Nocciola*," she repeats until she gets it right and orders by herself. Her accent makes the word sound ten times sexier than it should.

We sit outside with our cups, and every time she takes a bite, she lets out a soft, appreciative moan that sends a low hum of amusement through me.

"So," I say after a comfortable silence, "are you actually going to travel around Italy this summer? Or are you planning to hide out until it's safe to go home?"

She exhales, stirring her gelato absentmindedly. "I'd love to. But the paparazzi are everywhere, even here. Trying to visit tourist spots turns into a nightmare fast."

I know it too well. After my accident, they were

relentless, circling like vultures, reminding me every damn day how much I fucked up.

"There are places that aren't swarming with tourists," I say. "And ways to avoid being seen."

She laughs. "Easy for you to say. You live here. You speak the language. I can't even read half the street signs."

"I could go with you," I blurt out. I don't think. I just say it.

As soon as the words leave my mouth, I realize how insane it sounds. I barely know her. She barely knows me.

She turns, watching me with open skepticism. "Is that a serious offer? Because I'm waiting for the punchline."

I rub a hand over my neck, ruffling my hair. "I know it sounds crazy. But if you want, I'd be happy to show you around."

And the thing is, the more I think about it, the more I actually want to. Because I don't have anything to lose. I'm stuck, floating in limbo, with no real direction. And for the first time in months, today felt like a breath of fresh air. It's almost exhilarating thinking about forgetting all my problems and living in the moment.

She tilts her head. "You expect me to travel with a stranger I just met?"

Fair point.

I reach for my wallet, pull out my ID, and hand it to her. "Take a picture. Send it to whoever you trust. If anything happens to you, they'll know exactly who to blame."

She snorts. "Not exactly reassuring. I'd still be dead in a ditch."

I sigh. "You're right. But this is the best guarantee I can offer. You've been with me all day. If I gave you bad vibes, run. Trust your gut. But if you do say yes, know that at any point, if you feel uncomfortable, you can ditch me. No hard feelings."

She studies my ID, then snaps a picture. "I'll send it to my lawyer. If you turn out to be a serial killer, he'll make sure you rot in prison."

I grin. "Fair enough."

And just like that, I find myself agreeing to something completely insane. A spontaneous trip with the most beautiful woman I've ever met.

For the first time in a long time, without a plan or even a vague direction, I don't feel lost.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Writing a book is often described as a solitary journey, but *The Road to You* would never have made it to readers' hands without the incredible people who walked alongside me every step of the way.

To **Staci**, my editor. Thank you for your insight, your precision, and your unwavering commitment to making this story shine. You catch what I miss, challenge what needs growth, and always push me toward my best work. I'm endlessly grateful for your partnership and your care.

To **Annalisa**, my Italian editor. *Grazie di cuore*. Your guidance and passion for language bring my stories to life in a way that honors every nuance. Your support means the world to me, and I'm so thankful for your sharp eye and generous heart.

To my husband, **Dario**, and to all of my family. Thank you for grounding me when I feel lost in words, for cheering me on through deadlines and doubts, and for being my home no matter where the story takes me.

And most of all, to **you**, my readers. Thank you for every message, every review, and every word of encour-

agement. You are the reason I get to do what I love. Whether you've been with me from the beginning or this is your first time stepping into my world, your support is the fuel behind every book I write. I am here because of you, and I don't take a second of it for granted.

With all my love and gratitude,

Erika

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Erika Vanzin is the Italian Amazon bestselling author of the rock star romance Roadies Series.

After traveling around the world with her husband, she settled down in Seattle, enjoying the marvelous Pacific Northwest. She brought from Italy a couple of suitcases, fifteen boxes full of books, and her most successful novels translated into English.

While she is not writing, she enjoys reading books, watching the Kraken hockey games, and working on DIY projects.

Keep in touch with Erika via the web:


facebook.com/erikavanzinauthor


instagram.com/clumsyeki


tiktok.com/@authorerikavanzin


pinterest.com/ErikaVanzin


amazon.com/author/erikavanzin


bookbub.com/authors/erika-vanzin


goodreads.com/erika_vanzin

ALSO BY ERIKA VANZIN

Los Angeles Billionaires Series (Complete Billionaires Romance)

The Producer: Aaron

The Senator: Raphael

The Actor: Harrison

The Broker: Elijah (Novella)

The Mogul: Leonard

Roadies series (Complete Rock Star Romance):

Backstage

Paparazzi

Faith

Showtime

Betrayal