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KEVIN  
KWAN

BY THE  
AUTHOR OF  
CRAZY RICH  
ASIANS

SEX *and*  
VANITY

'Your perfect summer read' DAILY MAIL

# Sex and Vanity

Kevin Kwan (Far Eastern Kindergarten / ACS / Clear Lake High / UHCL / Parsons School of Design) is the author of the international bestsellers *Crazy Rich Asians*, *China Rich Girlfriend*, and *Rich People Problems*. *Crazy Rich Asians* was a No. 1 *New York Times* bestseller and a major motion picture, and has been translated into more than thirty languages.

He lives in Los Angeles and is trying to eat less pasta.

ALSO BY KEVIN KWAN

*Crazy Rich Asians*  
*China Rich Girlfriend*  
*Rich People Problems*

Praise for *Sex and Vanity*

'*Sex and Vanity* is basically your perfect summer read. Set in Capri, New York and the Hamptons, the location descriptions are so evocative you will feel like you're there . . . [A] delicious, delightful romp.'

*Daily Mail*

'A whip-smart homage to EM Forster's *A Room with a View*, but with designer outfits, lavish parties and Instagram.'

*Sunday Express*

'A glitzy comedy of manners with a sweet romance at its heart.'

*Entertainment Weekly*

'Effervescent, grand cru escapism. All the playful Kwan hallmarks are present and correct. *Sex and Vanity* may poke plenty of fun at the moral iniquities of the impossibly wealthy but it's also astute on the racism that can exist within Asian families as well as without.'

*Metro*

'This satirical romp through the gilded lives of the international super-rich is laugh-out-loud funny, with all the crackle you'd expect from the author of *Crazy Rich Asians*, plus a tender love story at its heart.'

*Sunday Mirror*

'*Sex and Vanity* scores high on all intended fronts; the opening half, set in Capri, is bathed in sunshine and sexual tension. The novel reads like travel porn, listing the island's best and lesser-known sights, places to eat, stay and drink.'

*Guardian*

'A humorous and heartfelt look at wealth, love and identity.'

*Time*

‘With a warm love story at its heart, *Sex and Vanity* is also a satire on the rich and privileged that you’ll devour in one gulp.’

*Heat*

‘Love and gossip and glamour . . . oh my!’

*Cosmo*

‘Dishy and delightful, filled with all sorts of bad behaviour performed in couture. But as loose and fun and compulsively readable as they are, Kwan’s novels are also very clearly the work of someone who spends much of his social time paying extremely close attention.’

*The Atlantic*

‘A delectable comedy of manners – the literary equivalent of white truffle and caviar pizza.’

*Publishers Weekly*

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KEVIN KWAN



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*For Capri, the island that feeds my soul,  
and for New York, the city that took me in,  
nurtured me, and changed me forever.*



**From: Isabel Chiu**

**To: lucietangchurchill@gmail.com**

**Subject: la dolce vita**

Lucie!!!

I'm soooooo happy you're coming to my wedding in Capri! Do you know, apart from my family, you're the person I've known the longest that will be there? I can hardly believe we've been friends since I was 13 and you were 7—you were the *only* kid I ever babysat, although I would hardly consider it babysitting since you had to endure repeated viewings of *Roswell* and hearing me moan nonstop about my obsessions. (Remember Nikolai? Ran into him at Erewhon the other day. He's in LA working as a location scout for Lawrence Bender, and he's totally unrecognizable now!)

Anyway, after getting approval from my mom's fortune teller, we've chosen an auspicious day in July to celebrate our nuptials, and Capri, where Dolfi spent every summer of his youth and where his family has deep roots, will be absolutely magical at that time. It's so special to me that you're joining us, and of course I remember your cousin Charlotte and look forward to seeing her too. I can't wait for all of us to be on the island together and for you to meet my friends!

My calligrapher is behind schedule because she was a bit unprepared for the sheer number of guests, but the formal invitations should be done by the end of the month. Be on the lookout for yours!

xoxo,  
Issie

To: Lucie Tang Churchill & Guest  
999 Fifth Avenue, Apt. 12B  
New York, NY 10021

*Mr. and Mrs. Christopher Chiu*  
*request the pleasure of your company at the marriage of their daughter*  
*Isabel*  
*to*  
*Mr. Adolfo Michelangelo De Vecchi*  
*the son of Conte Andrea De Vecchi and Contessa Laudomia De*  
*Vecchi*  
*at the Villa Lysis, Capri, Italy*  
*on Saturday, July 20, 2013*  
*at five o'clock*  
*and afterward at*  
*Villa Jovis*

*RSVP*  
*Isabel Chiu*  
*875 Nimes Road*  
*Los Angeles, CA 90077*

*Capri, Italy, 2013*

The trail was lit by tall flickering torches, but Charlotte Barclay still felt like she could have fallen a thousand times on the pathway. She knew she had broken the cardinal rule that every seasoned magazine editor like herself always adhered to: dress sensibly, not frivolously, when traveling. Staring down at the tattered hemline of her party dress and cursing her decision to wear stilettos borrowed from Olivia Lavistock at the last minute, she felt like she had been stumbling through the woods for hours, although it had only been about fifteen minutes, and when the villa finally came into view, its Ionic columns illuminated in high relief against the dark liquid night, she breathed a sigh of relief.

Patting down her fastidious blond bob—a style that had not altered since her days at Miss Porter’s—Charlotte climbed up the uneven marble steps and entered the terrace overlooking the Bay of Naples, feeling disoriented yet again. The graceful veranda that was empty an hour ago had been transformed in the blink of an eye into yet another banquet space where a lavish midnight buffet was set up, and wedding guests lured from the ballroom were grazing like chic gazelles at the long tables laden with delectable treats.

Charlotte glanced around nervously, feeling as if every single one of those damned Italian *principessas* and *contessas* was scrutinizing her every move. How could the most exquisite wedding

she'd ever witnessed have morphed so quickly into a living nightmare? She saw Auden Beebe pile a heap of lobster ravioli onto his plate, and for a moment she wanted to rush over to him for help. *No, he's the wrong person. He won't quite understand.* The Ortiz sisters were just coming up the stairs. *Absolutely not them.*

When she spotted Olivia perched at one of the high-top bistro tables along the wall, she could finally feel the tension in her shoulders ease. Olivia would know what to do. Olivia would be cool; she was an avant-garde filmmaker. Olivia was English, but she wasn't like the other English here. She lived in LA and had gone to school in Paris, so she'd probably seen some shit in her time. Olivia would help her out of this unthinkable mess.

Charlotte marched up alongside her, covertly grabbing her elbow. Olivia immediately caught Charlotte's look and misread it. "Sure, call me a hypocrite. But after watching you inhaling pasta, focaccia, biscotti, and every possible variation of gluten for the past week, what did you think would happen? This white truffle and caviar pizza is better than wild muddy sex in a Scottish dale with Sam Heughan. You ought to write about it in your magazine."

Charlotte tried to speak but found that her throat was too parched.

"I'm talking about the pizza, not the muddy Scottish sex," Olivia clarified, although Charlotte clearly hadn't been listening to a word she had said. She simply leaned against Olivia, trying to catch her breath.

"Are you okay?" Olivia asked, registering the shell-shocked expression on Charlotte's face for the first time.

"I'm okay . . . but Lucie . . . God help the girl!" Charlotte

gasped, reaching for a flute of prosecco. Charlotte gulped down the drink, and then, slumping against the stone balustrade, she started to hyperventilate.

“What happened to Lucie? Should I get help?” Olivia asked.

“She doesn’t need any help, she’s fine. Actually, she’s not fine. Oh, my poor Lucie. Everything’s ruined! Abso-*fucking*-lutely ruined!”

Olivia frowned, not sure what to make of this outburst. She hadn’t known Charlotte Barclay very long, but they had become thick as thieves over the past week, and Olivia would never have imagined that this unflappably poised woman in her early forties would suddenly, apparently, lose it. “Charlotte, how many glasses of champagne did you have at dinner?” Olivia delicately inquired.

Straightening up and brushing off the stray twigs caught on her Oscar de la Renta gown, Charlotte said furtively, “Olivia, can I trust you? Can I count on your help?”

“Of course you can.”

Charlotte continued. “You know I’m only at this wedding as a favor to Lucie’s family. I’m just the plus-one here, and my only job was to keep an eye on my young cousin. But I’ve failed in my duty. Utterly, epically failed. We should never have come to this wedding. We should never have come to Capri. Jesus Christ, her mother’s going to lose her shit when she finds out! And my grandmother’s going to skin me alive!”

Charlotte buried her face in her hands, and Olivia could see that she was legitimately anguished. “Find out what? And *where* is Lucie now?”

“I don’t know. I don’t want to know. I don’t know how I’ll ever look her in the face again.”

“Charlotte, please stop being so cryptic. I can’t help you if you don’t tell me what’s happened.”

Looking her dead in the eye, Charlotte said, “You’ve got to promise you’ll never tell a soul.”

“I promise.”

“Swear on it. On your mother’s grave.”

“Mother still lives and breathes, but I’ll swear on her life.”

Charlotte exhaled. “When did you last see Lucie?”

“I’m not sure . . . on the dance floor with the bridal party? She was dancing with Sandro, and I thought they looked like such a lovely pair—him with those long Botticelli curls, and Lucie in that gossamer dress, dancing amid all those candles. It looked so gorgeous, I almost wanted to take a picture to remember it for a future scene.”

“Yes, they were dancing. But after the fireworks, I noticed that Lucie had disappeared. I heard that some of the young ones had gone up to Villa Jovis again, so I went up to the ruins looking for her.”

“You trekked all the way up the hill again? In my Viviers?” Olivia reflexively peered at Charlotte’s feet, wondering how obliterated her shoes were.

“This fellow in a golf cart drove me up. Anyway, when I got up there, would you believe what I found? A whole bunch of kids smoking weed in the chapel. It looked like a drug den in Tangier!”

Olivia rolled her eyes. “Charlotte, *please* don’t tell me you are upset because Lucie was doing that. All the kids have been smoking every night behind the pool. That kid whose family owns Ecuador brought a whole trunk bursting to the brim with goodies, so I’m told.”

“Olivia! Do you really think I’m that much of a square? I

went to Smith,\* remember? Lucie's nineteen years old, and I couldn't care less if she wants to get baked as a Pop-Tart. Let me finish! I went through the great hall, and then I climbed up to the watchtower, but I couldn't find Lucie anywhere. I was wandering around those godforsaken ruins lit only by lanterns, and just when I thought I was completely lost, I found a passage leading outside to the cliff walk—that precarious path right by Tiberius's Leap.”

“Dear God, please don't tell me Lucie fell!”

“No, it's nothing like that! I went out to the edge and saw some steps leading down to a little grotto, so I went down and that's . . .” Charlotte paused for a moment, steeling herself. “That's when I saw them.”

“Who is *them*? What were they doing?”

“Olivia, I couldn't believe it. I just couldn't believe my eyes,” Charlotte moaned.

“Let me guess . . . were they doing bumps?”

“Noooo!” Charlotte said dismissively.

“Sacrificing goats?”

“Olivia, it was . . . unspeakable!”

“Oh, come on, nothing is that unspeakable.”

Charlotte shook her head vehemently. “I'm so mortified. Lucie, my poor little cousin, has ruined herself. She's absolutely ruined her life!”

Olivia wanted to shake her. “Charlotte Barclay! Tell. Me. What. You. Saw!”

---

\* Smith College in Northampton, Massachusetts, is considered one of the finest women's liberal arts colleges in America, with notable alumnae like Gloria Steinem, Barbara Bush, and Julia Child. Not that this has stopped the nearby men's fraternities from coining the saying “Smith to bed, Mount Holyoke to wed, and Amherst girls to talk to.”

Looking around again as if she had been caught committing the most cardinal sin, Charlotte leaned toward Olivia's ear and began to whisper.

Olivia's eyes widened. "Who? Whaaaat?! What the fuck?"

"What the fuck is right. I was so alarmed, I couldn't help myself. I blurted out, '*Stop it!*'"

Olivia threw her head back and let out a shriek that sounded like murder.

|

CAPRI

2013



*Dearest Lucie and Charlotte,*

*Our wedding weekend is almost here, and we thought it would be helpful to give you a quick rundown of the festivities so you can better plan your travel schedule (and your outfits!):*

Tuesday, July 16

5:00 p.m.

Welcome cocktails at the Gardens of Augustus  
*hosted by Marchesa Marella Finzi-Contini (Dolfi's aunt!)*

Dress: Informal

Wednesday, July 17

1:30 p.m.

Lunch at Da Luigi Beach Club  
*hosted by Isabel Chiu*

Dress: Beach chic

9:00 p.m.

Dinner at Ristorante Le Grotelle  
*hosted by Dolfi De Vecchi*

Dress: Informal

Thursday, July 18

10:00 a.m.

Hike the historic "Passatiello" path from Anacapri to Capri  
*led by Auden Beebe*

Dress: Walking shoes or hiking boots

9:00 p.m.

Dinner at Il Riccio

*hosted by Constantine and Rebecca Chiu (my big brother & his wife!)*

Dress: Cocktail

Friday, July 19

11:00 a.m.

Excursion to Villa Lachowski in Positano

*led by Mordecai von Ephrussi*

Dress: Informal

7:30 p.m.

Sunset music recital and banquet at the  
monastery of Certosa di San Giacomo

*hosted by the Conte and Contessa De Vecchi*

Dress: Formal

Saturday, July 20

5:00 p.m.

WEDDING CEREMONY

*Villa Lysis*

WEDDING RECEPTION

*Villa Jovis*

Dress: Formal

Sunday, July 21

2:00 p.m.

Farewell lunch onboard the super yacht *Bravo Olympia*

Dress: Resort chic

Please choose to arrive on the day that's most convenient for you, and our wedding coordinator, Gillian (gillian@devecchiuwedding.com), will contact you to coordinate your VIP transfers and arrival to Capri. Of course, we hope you'll be able to make it to all the events, beginning on Tuesday. We are so honored that you're able to take the time out of your busy life, and we can't wait to share every special moment of our wedding week on the enchanted island with you!

xoxo,

Issie & Dolfi



## CHAPTER ONE

### ANACAPRI

#### *Isola di Capri, Italy, 2013*

The midmorning haze cleared a few miles outside of Naples, and from the helicopter, Capri suddenly appeared like a glistening rock, as if the gods had cast a giant emerald down into the middle of the sea. Lucie (92nd Street Y Nursery School / Brearley / Brown, Class of '16) glanced down at the deep blue waters, wondering how warm it was and how soon she could jump in. She loved the feel of ocean water on her skin.

Turning to her cousin Charlotte (Rippowam / Miss Porter's / Smith), she asked excitedly, "What's the first thing you want to do?"

"There's this restaurant, Michel'angelo, which has a spaghetti with fresh Campania tomatoes and burrata that's supposed to be out of this world."

"Yummy!"

"How about you?"

"I'd like to swim in the Blue Grotto."

"Can you swim in it?"

"I don't see why not."

"Hmm . . . isn't it very deep?"

“I’ve swum in the Atlantic and the Caribbean. I think I can handle swimming in a little cave on an island,” Lucie said lightly. She hoped Charlotte wouldn’t be fretting over her safety throughout their trip like her mother would. Thankfully, Charlotte was already distracted by the view out her window.

“Quite stunning, isn’t it?” Charlotte remarked, marveling at the dramatic peaks of the island swathed in clouds.

“You know, Emperor Tiberius thought it was the most beautiful place in the world, so he moved the capital of the Roman Empire here in the first century A.D. Issie’s wedding is going to take place at the ruins of his palace,” Lucie said.

Charlotte smiled. “This is why I love traveling with you. I can always sit back and rest assured that you’ve done all the homework. You’re like my personal Wikipedia and Yelp all rolled into one! Remember that trip to Quebec one Christmas where you mapped out the whole itinerary based on where we’d find the best hot chocolate?”

“I was actually trying to find the best poutine for Freddie,” Lucie corrected.

“Ugh, Freddie and his poutine! I weep for your brother when he loses that teenage metabolism. Jesus, is that where we’re landing?” Charlotte pointed out the window at the helipad atop a majestic hotel with arched terraces.

“Looks like it.”

“That’s not where we’re staying, though?”

“No, we’re at the Bertolucci. I think this is the place where all the celebrities like Mariah Carey and Julia Roberts stay,” Lucie remarked.

“Then I’m glad we’re not staying here! Hotels that cater to celebrities are generally always awful. If you’re not famous, they treat you like pond scum,” Charlotte commented as the

AgustaWestland AW109 made a dramatic swooping turn before landing on the rooftop of the hotel.

Several attendants rushed out to assist with their luggage, while a lady in a stylishly retro white shift dress came out to greet them. Checking their names off a list on her iPad, she said, “You must be Signoras Churchill and Barclay? Welcome to Anacapri! Please enjoy our welcome refreshment.” A crisply attired waiter presented them with ice-cold Bellinis in tall Venetian glasses, while another waiter bore a platter of fresh strawberries dipped in white chocolate.

“Thank you! But you do know we aren’t staying here?” Charlotte said cautiously as she reached for a strawberry.

“Yes, of course. As wedding guests of Ms. Chiu, you are naturally our guests too. Your hotel is in Capri town, and we will send your luggage ahead to the hotel.”

“But is it safe?” Charlotte fretted.

“Don’t worry, signora, your luggage will be very safe with us. Meanwhile, we have arranged your transportation downstairs,” the lady graciously explained as she escorted them down to the lobby, where a magnificently restored candy-apple-red 1950s Fiat cabriolet taxi awaited them in the driveway.

“*Buongiorno!* I take you to Capri—just ten minutes away,” the driver said with a flourish as he opened the door for them.

Making herself comfortable in the car, Lucie commented, “Well, if that was the pond-scum treatment, I want to know how Julia Roberts gets treated when she arrives.”

“Well, maybe they googled me and saw who I was,” Charlotte remarked with nary a hint of irony. As one of the senior editors at *Amuse Bouche* magazine, Charlotte behaved with a distinct entitlement that came from being an employee of the influential magazine and its even more influential parent

company, Barón Snotté Publications. Now, she turned her attention toward the handsome cream-and-yellow-striped linen awning of the vintage convertible. “Wouldn’t it be wonderful if all our taxis in the city\* looked like this? So much better than those ridiculous ‘Taxis of Tomorrow’ that already look so worn out.”

“I don’t think this linen roof would survive one week in the city,” Lucie said, laughing while fingering the fabric and letting her hand dangle out into the breeze. As the taxi made a hairpin turn around the steep curve, she exclaimed, “Oh, wow! Check out the view on your left!”

Charlotte caught a quick glimpse of the cliffside plunging down to the sea hundreds of feet below and gasped, “Sweet Jesus, I’m going to get vertigo! I’m purposely not looking!” She searched around for something to grip on to but found nothing except a chilled bottle of champagne with a jade-green ribbon around it. Tied to the ribbon was a card embossed with their names. “Oh, look, this champagne’s for us! Your friend’s being rather generous, isn’t she? Two first-class plane tickets, the helicopter transfer from Rome to Capri, this gorgeous car, champagne—and you’re not even one of her bridesmaids!”

“Issie’s always been tremendously generous. She was my neighbor back when we lived at 788 Park, remember? She used to pass along her hand-me-downs. She wore many of her outfits only once or twice, and that’s how I got that little—”

“That little white Chanel purse when you were in the third

---

\* Charlotte, like many native New Yorkers, called Manhattan “the city,” since to them it’s the only city that matters. (Charlotte was born at Lenox Hill Hospital, which, for New Yorkers of her generation in the 10021 zip code, was really the only acceptable place to be born.)

grade!” exclaimed Charlotte, finishing Lucie’s sentence. “That’s right. I had forgotten—I thought you knew Isabel from Brown.”

“Not really—she was so many years ahead of me. But she’s always been like the big sister I never had.”

“Well, you are being quite spoiled by your big sis, aren’t you? A week of grand parties culminating in a wedding that I bet will put Kate Middleton’s to shame,” Charlotte remarked in a tone that sounded excited and disapproving at the same time. “How much did you say her father was spending on the whole affair?”

“Issie didn’t say. She’s much too polite to ever tell me anything like that, but I’m sure the wedding will be *everything!*” Lucie said, still not quite believing her luck. Not only was this the first wedding she’d been invited to *as a grown-up*, rather than just one of the kids dragged by default to some family wedding, but this was also the first real trip she’d been on without her mother and brother.

When Lucie first received the ornate hand-engraved invitation, her heart sank when she caught sight of the date: *July 19*. Though she was nineteen and could of course do as she pleased, Lucie, being the dutiful daughter that she was, still deferred to her mother. The third weekend in July was reserved for her mother’s annual fundraising summer gala for the Animal Rescue Fund of Long Island, of which she was president of the board, and she relied heavily on Lucie’s help at the event. It was only after UN-level negotiations that her mother finally relented—Lucie could attend the wedding, with the caveat that her older cousin Charlotte would accompany her. Her brother, Freddie, nicknamed their forty-four-year-old cousin “Madam Buzzkill” behind her back, but Lucie felt that she could handle her cousin well enough, and any little annoyance would be well worth it.

Lucie might have grown up in the same prewar Rosario Candela–designed building as her friend, but Isabel’s life was several notches more glamorous. For starters, her father was a diplomat who, according to the building’s elevator men, hailed from one of Asia’s most successful business dynasties, so the Chiu family occupied the sprawling eighteen-room duplex penthouse, while the Churchills lived in a classic seven on the tenth floor.\* Likewise, the doormen whispered that whenever the Chius went away, it was always via Teterboro Airport, which was a dead giveaway that the family only flew private.

With her striking beauty, effervescent charm, and academic drive, Isabel was easily one of the most popular students at the Lycée Français. When she turned eighteen, she made her debut at Le Bal† in Paris and graced the cover of *Taiwan Tatler*, and by the time she graduated from Brown, she had more than thirty thousand followers on Instagram. Nowadays she worked in Los Angeles for a film production company, and Lucie mainly kept in touch by following her on social media, admiring the places she got to travel to—London for the Frieze Art Fair, Park City for Sundance, Bahia for a party at Caetano Veloso’s—and the cool friends who surrounded her wherever she went.

Charlotte interrupted her reverie. “Tell me the name of Isabel’s fiancé again? The count?”

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\* New York real estate speak for a prewar apartment that consists of seven rooms: a formal living room, a dining room, a separate kitchen, three full bedrooms, and a maid’s room. In 2018, the average median price for a classic seven was \$4.6 million.

† Le Bal des Débutantes, held in Paris every November, is a ball introducing debutantes from around the world. Previous debutantes have included girls from European aristocracy, the children of celebrities, and girls whose parents simply have insane amounts of money.

“Dolfi. His full name is Adolfo De Vecchi. I don’t think he’s a count—that’s his father.”

“And he plays polo?”

“Yes, he’s got a nine-goal handicap. His whole family has been into polo for generations.”

“The polo-playing son of an Italian count marries a Taiwanese heiress. My, Lucie, you’re really running with the international ooh-la-las these days,” Charlotte teased.

Soon they arrived at the town of Capri, which was built high on the mountain overlooking the harbor. Waiting by the bustling taxi stand on Via Roma was an Italian man in his twenties wearing a short-sleeved white shirt and white trousers that appeared at least two sizes too tight. “Welcome to Capri! I am Paolo, from the Bertolucci. Please allow me to escort you to the hotel. It is just a short walk away,” the man said.

They strolled into the main public square, where a gleaming white clock tower stood opposite from the historic Cathedral of Santo Stefano. Four competing outdoor cafés lining the square bustled with chic patrons sipping their cappuccinos, chatting, and people-watching from their bistro tables.

“This is the piazzetta. We call it ‘the living room of Capri,’” Paolo noted.

“You would never find a living room like this in America—everyone is so nattily dressed here!” remarked Charlotte.

As they walked beyond the piazzetta and down Via Vittorio Emanuele, Charlotte’s discerning eye did a quick assessment and she found herself quietly impressed. Capri seemed to embody the most marvelous blend of historic and modern, high and low, simplicity and decadence. Here they were, strolling along a cobblestone street where a humble tobacco kiosk neighbored a sleek boutique selling hand-sewn driving moccasins,

and a shop glittering with the most lust-worthy jewels stood just a few paces down from the rustic gelateria, where the scent of freshly baked cones wafted into the air. “How charming! How charming!” Charlotte kept saying at every turn. “Can you even believe this place exists?”

“It’s glorious,” Lucie replied, relieved that everything met with her cousin’s approval so far. All the same, she couldn’t imagine how anyone—even her extremely jaded cousin—could find fault with this island. She loved seeing the clusters of Italian children running up and down the street laughing wildly, the old grandmas resting their tired feet on the steps of designer boutiques, the impeccably dressed couples walking along hand in hand, bronzed and glowing from their hours under the sun. And no matter where you turned, there was the view—of undulating hills dotted with white villas, ancient fortress ruins commanding every ridgetop, and the sea sparkling in the golden sun.

Charlotte made a dead stop outside a sandal shop, seemingly transfixed.

“We are famous for our sandals, signora. Beyoncé, Sarah Jessica Parker, all the famous stars buy sandals in Capri,” Paolo said proudly.

“If I had Beyoncé’s budget, I’d take that tangerine pair over there. And the gold ones. And the ones with those cute little pom-poms. Hell, I’d take every single pair in the window!” Charlotte gushed.

“You’re welcome to buy me the ones with the pink suede tassels,” Lucie remarked.

“That’s so you! You know, we should get a pair for your mother. Don’t you think she’d like those braided leather sandals? Let’s make a note of this place, please!”

Lucie suddenly caught a glimpse of her reflection in the window and let out a shriek. “Charlotte! How could you let me walk through town looking like this? I look like a cocker spaniel!”

“You do not! You look like you’ve just been on a joyride along the Amalfi Coast, which you have,” Charlotte said with a reassuring smile. She knew Lucie had always been self-conscious about her natural curls and spent half her life straightening her hair. The lucky girl had no idea how ravishing she looked with her long, lustrous locks loose and wild, coupled with that improbably perfect blend of Eastern and Western features. Perhaps that was a good thing—she would have to spend less time fending off all the boys on this trip.

Paolo guided them down a twisting narrow lane, and before long, they arrived at the Hotel Bertolucci, a charming white modernist villa bursting with purple bougainvillea vines along every wall. Stepping into the breezy lobby and taking in the plush white sofas, Solimene ceramics, and gleaming blue-and-white majolica tiles, Charlotte registered her approval. “This is exactly as I imagined! How marvelous is this place? Now I feel like we’re truly on holiday!” They were shown into a tiny elevator, which took them two levels up, and were led down a hallway smartly carpeted in a cream-and-navy-striped sisal.

“We go first to your room, and then I will take your friend to her room,” Paolo said to Charlotte.

“She’s my cousin,” Charlotte corrected.

“Oh? Your cousin?” Paolo glanced reflexively at Lucie in surprise, but Lucie simply smiled. She knew that within the next few seconds, Charlotte would automatically launch into the explanation she had always given since Lucie was a little girl.

“Yes, her father was my uncle,” Charlotte replied, adding, “Her mother is Chinese, but her father is American.”

*So is Mom. She was born in Seattle,* Lucie wanted to say, but of course she didn't.

They arrived at the first room and watched as Paolo twisted a heavy gold-tasseled key and opened the door. The ladies entered the room, and as soon as Paolo drew open the curtains to let in more light, the smiles evaporated from their faces. Lucie glanced at Charlotte in dismay.

"What is that out there?" Charlotte asked, peering out the window.

"It is a cat," Paolo replied, gesturing at the calico sunning itself on a low stone wall.

"I know 'it is a cat,'" Charlotte said, mimicking his accent. "That's not what I meant. Can we see the other room?"

"Of course, it is just two doors down."

Paolo opened the door to Lucie's room, and the ladies peered in. "You like, signorina?"

Before Lucie could reply, Charlotte cut in. "Mr. Paolo, there's been a huge mistake. We need to see the manager. Pronto!"

## CHAPTER TWO

### HOTEL BERTOLUCCI

#### *Capri, Italy*

The hostess tried to show Lucie and Charlotte to a table in the middle of the lunchroom, but Charlotte was having none of it. “We’ll sit *here*, if you don’t mind,” she huffed, shoving her yellow canvas tote bag firmly onto a table by the window as if she were planting the first flag on the South Pole.

The hostess backed away with a shrug as Charlotte continued to fume. “We specifically reserved rooms with ocean views, and now they are telling us we can’t have them because some other guests extended their stay? What a sham!”

“Don’t you think they really *are* booked up because of the wedding?” Lucie wondered.

“Well, that’s not our problem. Those people who overstayed should be moved into the rooms that they’ve pawned off on us. Why should we have to suffer and take the rooms facing that damn cat licking its balls in an alley? And why aren’t the cats on this island neutered?”

Lucie noticed a few people in the dining room look up in their direction and thought she’d better try harder to placate her cousin. “As far as alleys go, it’s a very nice one.”

“There’s no such thing as a nice alley, Lucie. Hobos hang out in alleys, and people go into alleys to do three things: vomit, do drug deals, or get stabbed.”

“Charlotte, I somehow don’t think that’s going to happen here. And the manager did say he would move us the minute another room became available.”

“Just you watch—he’s going to move us on the very last day.” Charlotte took a bite of focaccia from the basket on the table and immediately spat it out discreetly into her napkin. “Ew! This focaccia is soggy. It’s clearly been sitting out all morning.”

Lucie sighed. It was only the first day of their trip, and Charlotte was already kicking up a fuss about everything. She wondered if Charlotte was partly upset because, when she imperiously announced to the manager that she was “the produce editor at *Amuse Bouche*—one of America’s leading food and lifestyle magazines,” he gave her a blank stare, and it had zero effect on their room situation.

“Ma’am! Signora! Over here! Can we have some fresh focaccia please? I want it warm and toasty, do you hear? Warm and toasty! And bring me some *olio d’oliva* and *balsamico*,” Charlotte ordered. Turning back to Lucie, she said, “I can’t believe you’re not more upset. I mean, this is your holiday more than mine.”

“I *am* disappointed, but there’s not much more we can do, is there?” Lucie was always conscious of being born into privilege, and it had been drummed into her from an early age by her mother to “always be grateful and never complain.” She was

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\* Pretentious Italian for “olive oil” and “balsamic vinegar,” which, by the way, only Americans use to dip their bread in. Italians would never be caught dead doing anything like that, preferring to eat their bread plain.

well aware that her room in this five-star hotel, even with the less-than-perfect view, was far nicer than what most people on the planet would ever be able to enjoy, so she was loath to grumble.

Charlotte, however, had a different take on the situation. “It’s an absolute sin to be paying such an outrageous rate for a room that looks nothing like the ones shown on their website. I mean, we haven’t even talked about the decor!”

“What do you mean?”

“It’s absolutely hideous. It looks like a Versace dress exploded all over my room.”

Lucie laughed. “Well, I kind of like the giant gold octopus headboard.”

Charlotte continued to rant. “It’s your first time on Capri, one of the most beautiful places in the world. I’ll be fine, really, but it’s totally unfair that you should be deprived of a room with a decent view.”

Suddenly, they heard a voice behind them. “Miss, excuse me, miss.”

Lucie and Charlotte turned around to see an Asian lady in her fifties smiling at them. She was wearing a fuchsia sarong wrap dress and an enormous black-and-white-striped hat.

“Yes?” Charlotte asked.

“My son and I have rooms that look out at the sea and the Faraglioni rocks. We should swap rooms!” The lady gestured at the youth—a boy of twenty—sitting across from her.

Charlotte paused, momentarily caught off guard by the offer. Who was this curious woman with the flying saucer hat, too much eye shadow, and quasi-English accent? And why would she give up her own rooms? “Um . . . that’s very kind of you to offer, but we’ll manage, thank you.”

“Don’t just manage. If you’re so unhappy with your rooms, you should take ours.”

Charlotte smiled stiffly. “We’re not unhappy.”

“Oh? You’ve been complaining nonstop for the past ten minutes.”

Charlotte felt put out by the woman’s statement. “Well, I’m sorry if we’ve disturbed you . . .”

“You haven’t disturbed me, not really. But if it matters to you and your friend so much to see the sea, I want you to have our rooms. Actually, they are suites—deluxe suites—and they each have a nice living room, a bathroom with a huge Jacuzzi, and adjoining balconies. The view is amazing, I can assure you.”

“Then it really wouldn’t be fair,” Lucie spoke up. She noticed the boy gazing at her with an intensity that she found a little disconcerting. Unlike his dramatically outfitted mother, he was dressed in khaki denim shorts, a black tank top, and Birkenstocks. But the simple nature of his outfit did nothing to camouflage the fact that he was strikingly, almost unbearably handsome. Their eyes caught for a moment, and Lucie felt a strange, almost electrical charge. She quickly averted her eyes back to his mother, who seemed relentless in her campaign.

“Fair or not doesn’t matter to me. We have been to Capri before, and we come from Hong Kong, where our flat overlooks the harbor. And we have a house in Sydney, in Watsons Bay, where we can see whales do backflips, and another beachfront house in Hawaii, in Lanikai. We get to see the ocean till we’re sick of it, so this is nothing to us.”

Charlotte let out a little gasp. The woman turned her attention to Lucie, and she could feel her giving her the once-over. “Are you here for Isabel Chiu’s wedding?”

“We are,” Lucie answered.