
Chapter 1

Marina hoped to solve two problems on her mind: her ex-boyfriend's aims and a plan to manage her husband. She couldn't stop agonizing. Overwhelmed by these worries, she had a sleepless night. Her thoughts were in turmoil.

The next day, still in a state of anxiety, she settled in his six-seater plane, waiting for takeoff.

Danilo Dixon-Rose, her new husband, was talking to airport staff on the ground. She watched him through the window of the plane. Engrossed in conversation, he was dealing with the last-minute details for the flight path to the island of Sardinia, in Italy, to their long-awaited honeymoon—a belated honeymoon!

The reason for the delay, Danilo had left her soon after the wedding reception to spend six months in China for an unavoidable work commitment.

Or so he claimed!

So that morning, he had just returned from his lengthy trip abroad, ready to start a fresh new life together.

The wedding had been the social event of the year, attended by the cream of English and Italian society.

Crammed with aristocrats, heads of industry, movie stars and personalities from the world of politics and sports, they had all enjoyed the festivities in the splendor of a magnificent castle that was Danilo's ancestral home. It was a glorious success.

The towering castle, surrounded by beautiful gardens and acres of parkland in the lush countryside of Tuscany, had mesmerized them all.

Though the celebrations had drained her and worn her out, and if she had to admit, bored her, too, it delighted her when it was all over, and more so, when Danilo left for China.

Eager to get rid of him, when he'd taken off, she had sighed with relief.

She wondered what was in store for her now. Her attention returned to her husband outside.

An ideal life ahead? Marina looked at him through the window. *No! If only he were the ideal man for me.* But in her view, he wasn't ideal. Far from it!

Almost six months to the day, his return would change things for her. She knew this time would come. Though, now that it was upon her, she fretted.

Hell, what do I do with him now?

During the months he had been away, they'd talked over the phone, made occasional video calls, but on the whole, her life continued as usual. She had thrown herself harder into her work.

Now, with Danilo back, she was anxious. A real bother! She didn't know exactly what to do. What to expect from him.

Thank God, it's only a short flight, from Florence to Olbia's airport on the northeast coast of Sardinia. About an hour's trip.

She wished to sleep through it.

Florence was already rather warm. At least they were going to a place with a cool sea breeze. So, it pleased her.

A mild climate characterized Sardinia, with a slight rise of temperatures in early May. Breezy and lush, it was a wonderful destination in spring. She could not wait to get there.

She had worked hard during Danilo's absence, to take her mind off her situation. So, she looked forward to three weeks of relaxation on the island, assuming she could concoct a plan to avoid him as much as possible.

Marina saw him re-enter the aircraft. Her husband followed the captain into the cabin. But first, he gave her the thumbs up. They were ready.

She smiled. Tired of smiling, she just needed to sleep.

He grinned back. *Sweet Jesus, hallelujah, a smile!* And as usual, he seemed calm and collected.

Though she remembered the thunderous expression on his face when Francesco had turned up at the party. The result... it was not the smoothest of goodbyes when Danilo left for China.

Marina had not expected Francesco that day. She did not invite him! Yet, her shameless ex-boyfriend turned up at her wedding all the same.

Danilo had been courteous to her old friend Andrea and his new wife, but he drew the line at Francesco. Her husband was furious having her ex-boyfriends at his wedding, and she couldn't blame him. He had known about her string of boyfriends all along. She was sure of it; he never missed a thing. So, when Francesco showed up at the wedding, he caused a bit of a crisis.

Despite her musings, she was beginning to snuggle into her seat. Her husband seemed relaxed too. The past six months eased the memory of the upheaval at the wedding. But she had been nervous when Danilo returned that morning.

Now, ready for the flight's departure, she closed her eyes for a moment when she heard his voice. "We are awaiting instructions from the control tower for takeoff," he said with his usual low, deep velvety cadence to his voice, but his words were businesslike as he returned to his seat next to her.

She nodded and smiled, again.

Jesus, what will I do with him for three weeks? Or, for the rest of my life? Her palms were sweaty with apprehension.

She swallowed hard and took a deep breath, uneasiness creeping up on her. Though she was happy to go to Sardinia, she realized he was with her.

Her new husband would make demands. No doubt! She sighed, but there was nothing she could do about it now.

She had insisted that both their parents join them on the island. They had furrowed their brows at her request.

"On your honeymoon, are you sure?" had been the question from both mothers.

"Yes. It will be fine. You have not seen Danilo for six months," she had assured them both.

Unusually, both sets of parents had agreed to join them in Sardinia for a short weekend. Her husband had shrugged his shoulders when she'd told him earlier.

At least, she would have some company rather than just him, even if it was only for two days.

She had known this day would come for over ten, long years. She grew accustomed to the idea she would marry him.

Marina's destiny was to become Danilo's bride, ever since they were teenagers. Now, at twenty-seven, she was finally his wife. It was a commercial alliance between two influential and powerful families, and so they cemented that alliance with a marriage.

But it had never stopped Marina from enjoying herself. Over the years, she'd enjoyed life to the full. She had several boyfriends under her belt, without a single thought to Danilo.

On purpose! Deliberately! To spite him.

She had a carefree life, an existence full of fun. New boyfriends were coming and going, despite her mother and grandmother's protests and dismay. Though, if you cared for a closer inspection, there was a permanent and underlying sadness to her.

But six months before the wedding, Danilo asked her to remain faithful to him.

"No more games, Marina. It is time now. No. More. Lovers," he had said, staring into her eyes, unflinching, his tone peremptorily velvety and calm. His dark eyes flashed with a deep, warning light.

She could not misunderstand the command in his words and the hint of rebuke! She blushed, not expecting his dictum, but she had no choice other than to promise to respect his wishes.

The promise... they would stay faithful to each other for the rest of their lives. But until then, she had enjoyed her freedom with the utmost discretion.

She had heard her parents talk about her marriage to Danilo for years. Each, an only child, her granny had arranged it with his mother, with their fathers' approval of the financial terms. So the wedding festivities, after years of wrangling, had been a letdown despite the lavish wedding. They became a married couple.

She was now following the last of the preparations through the window before their departure. The pilot was standing by for takeoff. And then, they were off!

Danilo prattled on for a few minutes, getting on her nerves, willing her to admire the view from the sky as the flight progressed, but all she heard was blah, blah, blah... She peeped at him next to her; he sounded relaxed and laid-back. A cheerful thought, given Danilo had been furious at the wedding, she recalled.

She had invited her old friend Andrea, an ex-boyfriend. She had known him since her university days. They had a short fling then, and despite his girlish name, Andrea had been a womanizer all his life until he met Sophie, his new wife.

Marina became a good friend to Sophie, over the last six months, and helped her go through the worst of Andrea's injuries, after the devastating fire that had almost claimed his life.

She comforted him and encouraged the young girl to be strong during these grueling times. She had even given her a hand with Amelia, their baby daughter, seeing them often and being there for them. She loved Amelia; the baby was a delight to her.

In reverse, it also kept Marina from thinking of Danilo's return from China and her own impending doom.

Danilo had been charming to them at the wedding, perhaps because Andrea was no longer a threat to him, now happily married. The same grace he displayed with two of her other exes with spouses.

But when Danilo had seen Francesco enter the wedding hall, he sunk into a somber mood. His face thunderous. "Marina, your ex-boyfriends cannot keep away from you," he'd said. Despite his usual velvety tone, he delivered the words with ice in his voice. The hair at the back of her neck stood on end.

"Boyfriends? Hmm..." she mumbled.

"Yes, your ex-lovers. Even at our wedding!" He went on, with a deep crease on his forehead, "I didn't know you summoned him." Danilo's intense black eyes had a flame in them that could not disguise his frustration.

She gasped when she saw Francesco, who under Danilo's deadly scrutiny, was shifting on his feet. She had not invited him, and she did not want him at her wedding, either, but there he was. One thing was certain, Francesco was bloody persistent! He had become a nuisance for her.

"I don't understand?" she'd lied, her ex-boyfriend's presence a tedious annoyance on her wedding day.

Danilo had known about Andrea and about a few other lovers, too. But how on earth did Danilo know about Francesco? she wondered. She thought her last ex-boyfriend was her secret.

"Please. Spare me the lies. Did you invite him?" Danilo asked her, his nostrils flaring.

"No, I didn't!"

"Well, tell him to leave."

"But—"

"Now, Marina. Tell him to leave. Now. Or I will."

It had not always been like this between them.

Marina and Danilo had grown up together. Their families were old friends, so they had been close then. They had enjoyed each other's company as kids. They had chuckled and joked whenever they were together as children and in their teens.

As teenagers, growing up, Marina adored spending time with Danilo. She enjoyed how he rolled his eyes when she said something silly. She loved the way he talked; his humor made her laugh. His classic good looks enticed her. His boyish grin lit up his face, an irresistible dimple on both sides of his mouth made him so handsome, she could not resist his youthful charm when he smiled.

One day, he began to look at her with desire, and it stirred flutters in her tummy. Even though she was young and innocent then, she could sense his need, his want and her skin prickled every time his eyes settled on her.

She recalled how sometimes their hands touched by accident, provoking a feeling of warmth that sent butterflies scattering in her stomach. One look or a word from him, and her legs turned to jelly, and she looked at him like a god!

She was inexperienced and timid then, and during that summer, she didn't know what it was, but she felt it. A glance from him was a powerful elixir for her senses. It did things to her body, to her soul... things she had never felt before. And she was giddy with love.

A fierce emotion, and in her mind, she would have sworn Danilo felt the same way about her. All throughout that summer, she had believed a platonic, forceful emotion existed between them.

At one point, Marina had thought Danilo was about to reveal his devotion to her. That summer, her heart was skipping in her chest in anticipation, deliriously! She was overjoyed! She couldn't wait. Every one of his actions told her so. She believed in him. He built up her hopes. She felt it in her bones, and she could not wait to hear the words from his mouth... how much he loved her.

But, oh boy, she had misjudged him! *Oh God, how wrong I was! Stupid, stupid girl!* Even now, after all these years, every time she thought of that grim day in her adolescence, she rebuked herself for her foolishness. Thus, she was musing on the aircraft, twelve years later. The infamous day when her world came crumbling down on her.

She was fifteen years old on the glorious summer day that had shuttered all her fantasies of love with him. That summer, she had invited her friend Tessa, from boarding school, to stay at her grandma's villa in Lake Como. Danilo and his parents had visited, too.

It was a happy summer on the dazzling lake. They had spent their days scurrying across the lake on the boat, having fun under the scorching sun. And every day, she was more in love with him.

They bathed, sunbathed, played, guffawed... He was adorable, and he made them laugh. He seemed to know everything about anything, a clever young man. Marina admired everything about him. In her eyes, he had no faults. He was perfect.

The three of them loved each other's company.

Danilo, Tessa and Marina had been inseparable for the entire holiday and they had the time of their life. A carefree youthful joy that was so rare and precious, a magic summer.

That was until, one night, life as she knew it, crumbled around her like a pack of cards.

One terrible night engraved in her memory for eternity!

Tessa had developed an incredible shine to him, could not take her eyes off him and, at one point, began following him like a puppy everywhere.

He was good-looking, even as a young man, with long dark hair. His smoldering, black eyes had a fire in them that captivated, and his sculpted cheekbones of classical elegance made him handsome. There was no one who could resist his dimples when he smiled, which turned him from handsome to gorgeous, like a slender and athletic Greek god.

Reminiscent of the beauty of the marble statue of Hermes she had once seen in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. The difference, Danilo was flesh and blood, and the more alluring for it.

That one night changed her life forever, for, that evening, Tessa took action and to Marina's horror, so did he.

Oh boy... and they did it! Danilo and Tessa! The two of them, shamelessly, repeatedly! In the pool house on the lake, Tessa had wooed him, casting a spell on him and shattering all of Marina's dreams. They had broken her heart irrevocably. She had wanted to die that night. Danilo had betrayed her.

Why? How could she have been so wrong?!

For the rest of that vacation, Danilo and Tessa had been inseparable and at it like rabbits.

Marina had cried herself to sleep every night after that. He had unleashed love in her heart then dashed her hopes miserably. She was going out of her mind. She thought she could not endure it, but she had.

The fling between Danilo and Tessa soon fizzled out after the summer. But not before Marina had suffered the pains of hell.

By then, she despised him with a vengeance.

Even now, there were times Marina could feel the pain anew.

How could he be so cruel? Toy with me like that! The bastard, the scumbag, the wretch, the nitwit!

She closed her eyes and took a deep breath, to calm herself from her sorrowful musings, aware of his presence next to her at that very moment on the plane.

After all these years, she could still hear Tessa's loud panting coming from the pool house. She had nightmares about it! Marina had loathed that summer with all her might ever since, and she hated Danilo savagely for a long time.

It was shortly after that summer, when their families finally settled upon them marrying.

Danilo agreed eagerly despite his betrayal, but she had refused for months until it was time for her to concede. Although she still despised him then, Marina agreed to marry him. Not because her family had forced her to consent, but notwithstanding her loathing for him, she could not bear any other woman to have him.

But she made her demands! The shy girl was gone forever; in her place, a strong-willed young woman had emerged.

"I'll agree to it. But it is implicit," she informed them all. "I'll carry on with my life as it is until our engagement is official, and only when it becomes public news some years from now. But until then, I can do whatever I want and date any man I like, whenever I please; and Danilo has no right to ask anything of me until then. And he can do the same. I don't care."

She sounded calm when she told them, but her stomach was in knots.

He could not ask her for faithfulness until the official announcement. That was her demand, her only way to agree to it. She had put her foot down and would not change her mind. Her obstinacy was unwavering.

After much debate, the families had eventually relented and agreed to it.

Danilo had conceded, too. But she also made a vow to herself.

I, Marina, will be his punishment for life, she promised herself. He wants to marry me? Fine, I'll make his life a misery!

Even as a young girl, she knew what she wanted. But she had never forgiven him for breaking her heart. He would pay for humiliating her for the rest of his life.

Eventually, her abhorrence for him subsided. An indifference replaced it instead, as if a storm had ripped her heart out and drained it of sentiments and emotions that could never return. So, as she grew into a woman, her soul remained empty. A hole no one could ever fulfill, despite many boyfriends.

They had never talked of that incident, about Tessa. Danilo had never said a word about her, and Marina had never asked. She'd never mentioned it and never would. She would not give him the satisfaction!

But since then, they had grown apart, although she had stopped hating him long ago. Her indifference, remoteness and coolness towards him had driven them apart over the years. To the point they became strangers.

Now, married, she knew she would not make him happy. She didn't wish to make him happy! *It would be his punishment. A deserved retribution.* She would make his life wretched, a torture. *He'll regret to be on this planet!* That was her plan. How? She wasn't sure, but it was her plan, anyway.

Her granny told her a thousand times that it was the right thing to do. So, she married him. It was the best option. To be frank, she didn't mind it. She saw what love could do, if unrequited, at her own expense.

Her mother had always loved her father to distraction, and yet she was not happy.

So, Marina would not let love dictate to her again. Not anymore, ever! She did not want heartache ever again. She suffered, once, the torments of hell. She would not make the same mistake twice.

Over the years, she became numb to love. Yes, she had many boyfriends, but nobody got to her heart again. It was just fun, and she selected them well. Only those young men who wanted fun would do for her. No real emotions involved on either side. That's how she preferred it.

So the years had passed, with her taking them lightly. She had many lovers, but no love.

Love was no longer part of her vocabulary. She hated how vulnerable it made her feel, how painful it was for her to see him with another woman. So, she shut her heart to love.

There would never be a second chance for Danilo, married or not! She would not give him one! *No, sir!* That night had rendered her heart worthless forever.

So, she did not mind marrying Danilo after all, a stranger as he was to her now, a man she did not love, or better, she did not love anymore. *He is not a risk to my heart, not any longer.*

It was purely a commercial arrangement, a business transaction. The union of considerable fortunes and nothing more.

Besides, Danilo did not love her, either; she was certain of it. She thought she must have been mistaken all those years ago. *Silly girl!*

How else could she account for Tessa? Danilo never professed his love for Marina, not in words anyway, nor did he ever apologize for what he did with Tessa.

It must have been all in my imagination. What a bloody fool I was, she thought, gazing through the aircraft window following her musings.

Sometimes at parties, women made advances toward him. They admired him, desired him. He hardly had to make any moves. She was well aware of it. Women huddled around him,

piled around him. One, his money and his family name were reasons enough for any girl with ambition. Two, his classic good looks awakened desires in women. He had broken many hearts. Even Tessa continued to pursue him for years, following their short fling.

But he had never embarrassed Marina once their engagement became public news, keeping to their agreement. In earlier years, he had been discreet with his ladies, or at least he tried to be, as much as anyone with his name and fortune could.

Likewise, Marina tried to be discreet with her admirers and her affairs, unless she was in the mood for punishing him... which at times she did willingly, unwavering, on purpose, to hurt him.

Yet, unfailingly, as heirs of prominent families, they could not escape the press for long.

Sometimes, she feared they would never marry, given what she read in the papers on both sides.

So, over the years, they had grown apart and Marina had a puzzle to solve now.

What the hell am I going to say to him. What now?

Did they have anything in common anymore? She was not in a hurry to find out.

As children, it had been fun, but it was all a long time ago, and that part of her life was dead and buried. Marina was not interested now, water under the bridge. They would have to act like her parents.

Her mother had nothing in common with her father, and yet it seemed a happy marriage, for all the wrong reasons. At least on the surface, her parents were the perfect couple, but she knew better. Her mother despised her father's infidelities. Her mother had suffered; her father had broken her spirit. He made her mother's life miserable. But as long as nobody knew, they acted as if they were the perfect couple. So, Marina would have to learn to do the same with Danilo.

She hadn't had a serious discussion with Danilo since she was fifteen years old. As adults, they talked only about pleasantries, general things. They never had sex or kissed each other. For a long time, she couldn't even bear to be near him, anyway, let alone anything else. So, not a sexy and passionate kiss. Ever! Not even when her abhorrence for him subsided.

Marina wondered what would happen in the next few days, now they were married and on their honeymoon. She had to concede that she was nervous. *Sex! Oh, merciful God! How would he approach sex?* He wanted faithfulness too! So he would have to, eventually, she knew it.

'An heir and a spare,' his father repeatedly said, with Danilo conscious of it too.

But she would not be the one to start anything, that's for sure! Let him, if he dares. *The swine!*

Her immediate concern, Marina had to figure out what she would do for the next three weeks. At least until their parents showed up for the weekend. Then, she needed to figure out how to approach the rest of her life with him.

One thing, though, I'll make him suffer. She peeked at him sitting next to her on the plane.

Would she be able to endure it? Would she hate him again?

She frowned. She had loved none of her ex-boyfriends, so why was she making such a fuss about Danilo if she didn't love him? Why was she making everything so complex with him? Well, she had done a darn good job enjoying herself with her past boyfriends. Fun, but no emotions.

Perhaps, I should approach Danilo in the same way as any other lover. No more, no less. Fun, but nothing else.

He'd left her shortly after the wedding, to go to China. A devoted husband would not have done such a thing. So why was she worried about him? She should deal with him like any other man in her life before. *A distraction from boredom. Just fun. Nothing more.*

She realized now that he had left her after the wedding to go to China, to make a point. The work commitment had been just an excuse to make her understand where she stood. He was humiliating her again, to make her pay for having boyfriends despite her commitment to him.

If Danilo wanted to reconcile matters, what a better opportunity than their wedding day, but alas, he had fled.

He had left her!

By his action, he'd sent her a sharp message, loud and clear!

He did not love her and never had!