

## The Engagement

Present day.

\*Bella\*

"Yes, Mom! My ight got delayed by two hours. There was nothing I could do about it," I groaned, feeling a bit annoyed as my mom, Anna Romano, had been calling me constantly since my ight landed.

"Bella! Honey, the ceremony is starting in an hour. You need to get ready for the party. You can't attend the ceremony wearing the same clothes you wore on the ight. Rosa picked out a beautiful dress for you. You're going to love it," Mom gushed.

"I trust Rosa's taste, Mom, and don't worry! I'll be there for the ceremony," I muttered, rolling my eyes.

"Bella, we're all running late for the engagement ceremony. You know Xavier doesn't like being late," Mom hesitated.

"I know, Mom. You all go ahead and join the ceremony. I'll change my clothes and catch up with you," I assured her.

"Are you sure, Bella? If you want, I can stay home, and we can go together to the party venue," Mom suggested.

"No, Mom. I'm not a little kid anymore, and Florence isn't new to me. You should go. Otherwise, Uncle Xavier will be very angry. After all, it's Vincenzo's engagement," I reminded her.

Yes! Finally, the most notorious playboy and eligible bachelor in Italy and my ex-best friend, Vincenzo Leonardi, was getting engaged today.

Yeah, ex-best friend!

It was because of what happened between us on his twentieth birthday. We couldn't go back to being friends after that. So, I ended my ties with him, even though he tried to convince me that nothing had changed between us. He repeatedly asked for a chance, suggesting we could still remain friends. But I had known him since childhood, and no one understood him better than me. It was just better for me to keep my distance from that infamous playboy who never took anything seriously in his life.

However, if Uncle Xavier hadn't given him an ultimatum, I doubted he would have even considered getting married. He loved his carefree life, causing scandals and making headlines every day.

As soon as I stepped out of the airport, I spotted the car with two bodyguards Dad had sent to pick me up. He was on his way to get me, but I stopped him. They were already running late for the ceremony, and I knew Uncle Xavier wouldn't start without my family. Though my mom and Uncle Xavier were cousins, Uncle Xavier treated my mom like his own sister, and Dad was his best friend. We were like one big family, and us kids grew up together.

However, I wouldn't have returned to this city if it weren't for Vincenzo's engagement.

It had been three years since I had last been in Florence, yet I couldn't remember what had happened on that day. When I woke up in the hospital after the accident, I didn't remember anything that had occurred in the past year, as if that entire year had been wiped from my memory. The doctors advised against trying to forcefully recall the forgotten memories, suggesting that I should let them return naturally and gradually. Their advice proved to be true because whenever I attempted to remember that day forcibly, I experienced a painful headache as if my mind was resisting the recollection. Continuing such efforts felt like my head might explode.

Due to the situation, my parents sent me away from Florence. But I had a feeling that they were intentionally trying to keep me away from the city. They didn't want to talk about that year. I couldn't fathom why they were withholding something from me.

After nishing my medical degree at Stanford, I was getting ready to start working at a hospital in Rome. It was my second choice after Florence. I heard that Vincenzo was in Rome too, managing his family's business. He had come back to Florence to get engaged, and his ancee and her family were living here.

"Ma'am, we have arrived at the Romano mansion," the driver's voice jolted me back to the present, pulling me away from my deep thoughts.

A servant picked up my luggage as I made my way to the empty mansion. My family had already left for the venue. As I entered my room, I noticed a beautiful blue knee-length bodycon dress, along with matching jewelry and footwear, placed near my bed. Glancing at the clock, I quickly headed to the bathroom for a refreshing shower.

After drying myself off, I put on the stunning blue dress. As I gazed at my reection in the mirror, I couldn't believe what I saw. It had been a long time since I had taken the effort to dress so elegantly. I wasn't someone who enjoyed parties or dressing up often. I felt most comfortable in my formal clothes – they were like my best friends. Yet, this beautiful dress had me captivated. It embraced my curves awlessly, reaching just above my knees. I took off my glasses and put on contact lenses.

Then, I applied a light layer of makeup. I used mascara to enhance my lashes and put on some pink lip gloss. I let my blonde curls ow freely over my shoulders, giving them a carefree look. To complete the look, I added my watch and the diamond bracelet that Vin had given me for my eighteenth birthday.

Even though we were not friends anymore, the bracelet held a special place in my heart as it was a symbol of the beautiful memories we had shared. I let out a sigh as a rush of emotions ooded my heart, reminiscing about the times when Vin had worked tirelessly and saved up his own money to buy me that special birthday gift.

I put on the nude pumps with heels that Rosa had picked out for me. At rst, it was a bit of a struggle since it had been years since I had last worn shoes like these. I had gotten used to sneakers while doing community service and providing medical assistance in the village. Taking cautious steps and practicing for a while, I regained my balance and felt more comfortable in those fancy shoes.

With my phone and clutch in hand, I nally left for the engagement venue. The moment I entered the grand hall, elegantly decorated for the occasion, I was greeted by a sea of people. No one wanted to miss the engagement of Xavier Leonardi's youngest son.

"Bella!" Mariya exclaimed as she spotted me. "You look absolutely stunning."

"Thank you, and you look beautiful too, Mariya!" I smiled warmly at her.

Mariya giggled, shaking her head in delight.

Uncle Xavier and Aunt Mia had three children. Maximo Leonardi, their eldest son, was now the maa king, poised to inherit his father's empire. Mariya, Maximo's twin, was born just a few minutes younger than him. She was a famous supermodel and married to Domenic Mancini. Vincenzo, the youngest among the siblings, was known for his carefree and rebellious nature. He was the embodiment of a bad boy, a playboy, and untamed in every sense of the word.

"I hope I didn't miss the ring ceremony," I snorted hesitantly.

"No! No!" Mariya waved her hand dismissively. "Vincenzo's would-be ancee came late. So we are still waiting for the ceremony to start because madam is busy on an engagement photo shoot," she complained, rolling her eyes in exasperation.

I couldn't help but laugh at her animated expression.

Her husband, Domenic, came and wrapped an arm around her. She leaned into his embrace naturally. Domenic gave me a greeting nod with a warm smile. They were truly made for each other.

"Where is he?" I inquired, referring to my ex-best friend and the groom-to-be.

"There!" She pointed, and I turned to look in the direction she indicated.

My heart skipped a beat upon seeing him after such a long time. He stood there, laughing and whispering sweetly into his ancée's ear. He looked genuinely happy, and seeing that sight, a small smile tugged at the corners of my lips.

I took a step closer, observing the boy who had once been my friend but had now transformed into a well-built man. Undeniably, he was the most desirable bachelor in Italy, with his charming looks and a physique reminiscent of a Greek God.

For a brief moment, his gaze shifted from his ancee, scanning the party hall. He trailed his gaze cautiously until it stopped at me. Our eyes locked, and his smile faltered as the deep blue pools of his eyes met mine.

I slowly walked toward him, our gaze never wavering.

"Bella?!" Vincenzo whispered, his eyes ickered with surprise.

"Vin!" A smile played on my lips as I nodded in acknowledgment of his surprised greeting.

"You came?!" he questioned, his eyes narrowing with curiosity and disbelief.

I met his gaze head-on, uninchingly.

"Of course! Just because we haven't been talking doesn't mean I won't be there for your engagement. I'm here to be part of your celebration, Vin," I responded in a voice carrying a hint of challenge.

Vincenzo nodded silently as his eyes never left me.

I turned my attention to his ancée who had been observing our exchange with furrowed brows.

"Hello, Amara! I am Bella, Vin's cousin," I introduced myself with a warm smile.

"Oh! Hello, Bella!" Amara nally smiled as her face brightened with happiness. "Nice to meet you."

"Congratulations on your engagement," I wished, genuinely happy for them both.

"Thank you," Amara blushed, her smile widening as she held onto Vincenzo's arm.

"Hey, Vin and Amara! If you guys are done with the photo shoot, can we start the engagement?" Rosa's voice broke through the chatter, pulling everyone's attention.

She smiled at me, her eyes glinting with affection. Rosa was married to Vin's brother, Maximo Leonardi. In fact, Vin, Rosa, and I had been childhood best friends.

"Yes, we can carry on the photo shoot after the ring exchange," Amara chimed in, her gaze shifting to Vincenzo. He nodded, smiling softly at her.

As Rosa called for the engagement to begin, the family members took their places on the stage. The atmosphere became warm and bright with joyful moods and anticipations.

When it was Vincenzo's turn to exchange rings with Amara, he hesitated for a moment, his eyes locking with mine briey.

"Vin, what are you thinking?" Mariya cheered, her voice lled with excitement. "Put the ring on Amara's nger!"

I saw his jaw clenched before he averted his gaze to the ring in his hand. Taking a deep breath, he nally slipped the ring onto Amara's nger, sealing their engagement.

The crowd erupted in applause, congratulating the couple on their union. My ex-best friend was nally engaged. Everyone was happy and conveying their good wishes to the couple, but Vin's gaze remained xed on me, reecting unknown emotions that I didn't want to understand — and it was better for both of us.