



A Taste of Italy
By Lucie Simone

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A Taste of Italy

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Lucie Simone

Dedication

This book is dedicated to every woman's inner "Naughty, naughty girl."
You know you have one!

A Taste of Italy

Chapter One

After spending fifteen sleepless hours being tossed around like a pair of panties in the spin cycle—I had taken the night train from Paris to Florence—all I really wanted to do was take a hot shower and curl up in a warm bed that didn't threaten to heave me over the side every three minutes. So, I was less than thrilled when the stocky hotel clerk guarding the reservation desk told me in her rich Italian that I couldn't check in until 2 p.m.—a mere six hours from now. Unfortunately, the little Italian I knew couldn't help me persuade her to let me check in early.

Pointing to a narrow hallway alongside the sun-soaked kitchen, she rambled off several sentences in her mother tongue. I stared at her blankly. I hadn't a clue what she was getting at until she lumbered around the desk, picked up one of my bags, and hurled it into the hallway. This was where I could store my luggage until two o'clock, I gathered, and nearly cried.

The train ride was bad enough. Now I had an overly-aggressive woman throwing my luggage around as if it were nothing more than a Nerf ball. I gazed at it in wonder. I nearly broke my back lugging that bag up and down the stairs of the Paris Metro, hoisting it onto the night train, dragging it over the cobblestone streets of Florence—which I don't mind telling you are murder in high heels—only to have some Florentine grandma fling it across the room like a shot put. Italian women are obviously made of tougher stuff than L.A. girls.

Lucie Simone

I suddenly started to question what I had been thinking when I planned this whirlwind trip through France and Italy. I had spent the last ten years of my life slaving away in the corporate tax world, climbing up the ladder and fulfilling all my career goals. I had been so focused on work that I barely had time to socialize, let alone take a vacation. Finally, I realized that if I wanted a life, I had to go out and get one.

The first order of business was to find a man, but having been so buttoned-up for the last decade that even my vibrator was feeling deprived, I knew it was going to take a major change of pace to kick-start my love life. I was sick of waiting for a boyfriend to come along, sweep me off my feet, and invite me to Paris on a romantic holiday. I figured it was time I just packed my bags and went in search of my own romantic adventures. Besides, I was going to turn thirty-six in a couple of weeks, and what better birthday present could I give myself than a romp through Europe's most illustrious cities?

Paris, however, was a little less promising than I'd hoped, since half the men I'd met were more interested in borrowing my little black dress than trying to get into my pants. But I still held hope for Florence. Italian men were renowned for their sexual prowess. Surely, I would find at least one heterosexual man willing to romance the pants off me. And obviously all Italian men are tall, dark, handsome living works of art. I mean, Michelangelo modeled his famed David after some hot, young, Italian stud, right? *Carly Simpson*, I said to myself, *you will not go back to L.A. without at least one good European shag.*

I was an exhausted mop of greasy hair in a pair of jeans that had been worn so many times they nearly stood on their own. Any man that would hit on me in that condition really wasn't someone I wanted whispering sweet nothings into my ear. So, I pulled my long black hair into a ponytail and decided I'd take my six-hour layover to find a *lavanderia* and wash my dirty drawers.

Stuffing my fermenting threads into a plastic bag, I headed out into the ancient city of Florence in search of one of modern day society's most wonderful inventions—the laundromat. Unfortunately, Florence didn't appear to be as jam-packed with dry cleaners and fluff-and-folds—you

A Taste of Italy

know, those mom and pop joints where you drop off your dirty goods and come back a few hours later to find them washed, starched and folded to perfection?—as Los Angeles.

I roamed the designer-clad streets of Florence looking like a homeless rag doll for nearly two hours until I finally found a *lavanderia*. Gratefully, the shopkeeper spoke English, so I was spared the added humiliation of trying to pantomime my request to launder my ever-more-repellent clothes in her facilities.

She escorted me through to the self-service washing room where several beige washers, stacked one on top of the other, swished and hummed with sudsy activity. She pointed at a few buttons on the machine I could use and bid me farewell. I shoved my grimy goods into the washer and took a seat on a pink plastic bench that, to my tired eyes, looked as lush as a California king wrapped in Egyptian cotton sheets and a silk duvet. I resisted the urge to sprawl out on it.

I was strangely comforted by the scent of detergent and the soft swish of the warm, soapy water cascading over my clothes. I felt my eyelids droop as the washer hummed and lulled me into a long-awaited sleep. Hopes and dreams of loves and lovers danced around my brain like a stripper in a nightclub. I had been having sexier and steamier dreams with each passing day of my trip—each day that I *didn't* find a lover. My libido was on overdrive, and if I didn't get some satisfaction soon, I was capable of erupting like Mount Vesuvius—endangering every man, woman, and child in a two-mile radius.

A clanging sound stirred me from my catnap, and I lifted one eyelid to find a beautiful, dark-haired man in a pair of faded jeans so tight I could make out every inch of his male anatomy. Pulling some clothes out of a dryer and dumping them into a basket, he nodded in my direction. I felt a prickling sensation in my nipples.

"Buon giorno, signora," he said with a smile.

"Buon giorno," I replied, wondering if I had the courage to actually flirt in a foreign language. My Italian was bad enough on a full-night's sleep, forget about trying to chat up some hottie in a laundromat after trotting across two countries with little more than ten minutes of shut-eye.

Lucie Simone

"E una turista?" he asked.

"I'm on vacation," I answered. *"Sono una turista."* At least I understood what he'd said. Trying to translate into Italian was another matter entirely. Better just to parrot what he'd said. Sister Mary Margaret, my Catholic high school catechism teacher who often claimed my laziness would send me straight to hell, would surely have been disappointed in my efforts to communicate. Although, I imagine if she'd known who was hitting on me, she'd have dragged me out of the laundromat by my earlobes.

He nodded and carried his basket over to a folding table. Delicately, he spread a shirt out on the table, smoothing it out with his hands. I watched him tenderly fold the garment one sleeve at a time, imagining what it would feel like to have him touch me that way. I closed my eyes and pictured him wrapping his strong hands around my hips, pulling me up into his arms and laying me on the table before him.

I crossed my legs and slipped my right hand between my thighs as I imagined him plucking open the buttons of my jeans and fingering the waistband of my panties as he enveloped my lips in a hard, wet kiss. One hand would slip under my shirt and unhook my bra as his lips traveled to my neck. He'd pull my shirt off over my head, and toss it on the floor. Cupping my breasts in his hands, his thumbs would caress my erect nipples. Another wet kiss, and he'd pull my hips to him. I imagined the feel of his penis against my pelvis, and felt my own wetness between my thighs. I shifted on the bench, swaying my hips, pressing my hand into the crotch of my jeans. God, it had been a long time since I'd had sex.

I opened my eyes and found him staring at me. A hot shame rushed through me, and I looked away momentarily. When I turned my gaze back toward him, I saw that he had stopped folding his clothes and was instead studying my body, following the lines of my legs up to my hips. I whipped my hand out from between my legs. Had he known what I was doing?

"Che bella," he said. How beautiful? Was he interested in partaking in my fantasy? *"Mi chiamo Giovanni,"* he said thumping his fingers on his

A Taste of Italy

chest as he stepped away from the table and toward me. "Call me Giovanni."

"You speak English?"

"A little. Enough." He sat beside me and leaned in, dangerously close.

Suddenly I felt as if a rock had lodged in my throat as he placed his hand on my thigh. *Dear God*, I thought, *were Italian men really this forward? Was I brave enough to find out?*

"Uh." I gasped, wishing I had the courage to kiss him. His hand slid further up my thigh. Blood soared to my vagina, and I swallowed hard to dislodge the rock currently taking up residence behind my vocal chords.

"*Giovani!*" roared the shopkeeper, who had apparently just walked in on us. She must have been on Sister Mary Margaret's payroll. God, that woman haunted me!

"Oh, *Mamá!*" Giovanni shouted back at her. The two exchanged some heated words in Italian that I couldn't decipher, although I understood exactly what they meant. Giovanni threw the clothes he had folded into his basket and carried it off, stomping as he went.

"*Mi dispiace, signora,*" the shopkeeper begged. "I'm so sorry. Ah, Giovanni," she sighed, and threw her hands up in the air. "You no pay. Free charge."

"Oh, no. It's okay. Really. He wasn't bothering me."

"Hah! Giovanni bothers everybody! Mostly pretty ladies. And you are pretty lady. He is always getting in trouble. You finish your wash for free. You leave happy, eh?"

"Sí, I leave happy."

Maybe I had just gotten off on the wrong foot, here. Maybe Florence would be the magical kingdom where'd I finally find my prince. Maybe after a short nap in a soft bed, a long, hot shower, and a tall, cold drink, I'd step out onto those cobblestone streets and walk straight into the arms of my very own David.

Lucie Simone

Chapter Two

After having been in Europe for a week, I had gained a greater appreciation of many of my American comforts. Take showers, for instance. In most cases, showers in America are separated from the rest of the bathroom by a glass wall, a curtain, or some other privacy screen. They are also usually big enough to actually bend over in if you happen to drop the soap. I had obviously been spoiled by my tub/shower combo back in the U.S., because in Florence, my shower consisted of a faucet hanging directly over the toilet. My heart sank when I stepped into the blue tiled bathroom of my hotel room and scanned the tiny cubicle for any semblance of a shower, only to find a lone, crusty faucet protruding from the ceiling like an archaic spigot left over from the ruins of a Roman bath.

So, straddling the toilet and trying desperately not to drop the soap into its bowl, I turned on the faucet and waited for the warm gush of water to wash away the dirt and grime I'd carried with me since I left Paris nearly twenty-four hours earlier. And I waited. I pulled on the tap again. Nothing.

After a few moments spent cursing the Florentines and my crappy hotel, a low, grumbling sound emanated from the toilet. A large bubble gurgled up through the bowl, and just as it broke the surface, a torrent of hot, scalding water rained down on my head. I grasped the faucet and swung the handle back and forth trying to regulate the temperature. Mere seconds later—but long enough to have turned my alabaster skin the color of a newborn opossum—the searing heat subsided, and I was soothed by

A Taste of Italy

the warm, gentle stream of water that I sincerely hoped wasn't recycled from the toilet.

After sudsing and scrubbing myself so clean you could eat off my stomach—perhaps some lucky Italian would be doing just that later in the evening!—and blasting my hair with a blow dryer that looked remarkably similar to a vacuum cleaner, I crawled naked into the queen size bed I had explicitly requested in hopes of sharing it with a newfound lover. Thoughts of Giovanni filled my head as I wrapped the blanket tight around my body. A flood of naughty images seeped into my mind before I slowly drifted off to sleep.

* * * * *

A solid three hours and one very racy dream hot enough to embarrass a pole dancer later, I awoke feeling refreshed and raring to find my Italian lover. I put on my favorite bum-hugging jeans and my sexiest spike-heeled boots. Sticking my hand out the window to gauge the temperature, I felt it prudent to top off my outfit with the pink wool coat I'd picked up in Paris for a measly four hundred euro. Ha! Why is it that in Europe I had no problem spending hoards of cash on an item I was very unlikely ever to wear again? Not too many cold nights in L.A., after all. But I was in Europe to be someone else for a while, someone willing to take risks and find new passions, new loves even.

I trotted out onto the streets of Florence and directly into a mob of tourists headed straight for the *Ponte Vecchio*. Swept up in the crowd, I found myself standing on the ancient bridge amongst thousands of dollars of gold and silver jewelry being sold out of medieval storefronts that probably hadn't changed hands in the past several centuries. Cute, adoring couples gazed longingly at the glittering metals in their glass showcases, while I simply gazed at the masses of seemingly love-struck duos before me.

Everywhere I looked, people paired up as if they were headed for Noah's ark and were in charge of repopulating the earth. Italians,

Lucie Simone

Germans, Americans—people of every color and creed all had one thing in common. They were in love.

And me? I felt lonelier in that crowd of lovers than I did back in my empty L.A. apartment. But I refused to give in to my maudlin mood, and trekked across the bridge to the other side of the *Arno* River where, hopefully, I would find a lover of my own. Or at least a good meal. I hadn't eaten anything since wolfing down a stale biscotti upon arriving at Florence's train station that morning.

As the sun set over the lush, green hills surrounding Florence, a cool breeze swept across the river. I wrapped my coat more tightly around my body while I hiked up the sloping hillside toward the famed *Pitti Palace*. The temperature dropped quickly once the sun sank behind the hills, and I found myself yearning for a warm scarf. I popped into a small shop along a narrow street nestled below the *Arno*. Standing behind the cash register was a petite blonde woman wrapped in colorful silk scarves.

"Fa freddo, eh?" she asked.

"Yes, it's cold. I mean, sí, fa freddo."

"Ah, you are American? I love the Americans!"

And our platinum visa cards too, no doubt. *"Yes. I need a scarf. It's suddenly very cold here,"* I complained.

"Ah, I know. Firenze is not so kind in the night."

Nor in the daytime from my experience, but I thought I'd spare her my diatribe, and simply nodded. She led me over to a wall of shelves stacked high with colorful wool scarves. I ran my hand over them. They were as soft as a kitten, and nearly as adorable. I pulled a fuzzy, rose colored scarf from one of the piles and wrapped it around my neck. It felt as if I were being hugged by a litter of puppies.

"Very nice, eh?" she asked. *"Like being in the arms of your lover."*

It was nice, but not that nice.

"I'll take it."

"Perfetto! Twelve euro. You want to wear, or want a bag?"

"I'll wear it," I said, tucking it under the collar of my coat and handing her the money.

"You are going to Saint Mark's, no?"

A Taste of Italy

“No. What’s that?”

“The English church,” she said handing me a flyer with a map on it. “Tonight is the opera concert. I am singing some beautiful arias. I am Helena, the soprano,” she said pointing to her name on the flyer. “You will come, no?”

“Sure,” I said. “Why not?”

Lucie Simone

Chapter Three

After filling my belly with enough gnocchi to stuff a roast turkey, I headed for Saint Mark's English Church. I believed that meeting Helena was no accident. I had to be destined to meet my lover at the church. Why else would I go?

But alas, when I arrived, it became utterly clear that in Florence, as in L.A., opera held very little appeal with the youthful. Aside from Helena, I had to be the only one under the age of fifty there. Although the arias were beautiful, I was terribly disappointed. I only had a few more days to fulfill my fantasies, and I hadn't a clue where to find any single men.

"You like?" Helena said to me after everyone had gathered in the reception room for tea and cookies, which I ate like a wild raccoon, scavenging through the pile for the homemade macaroons.

"Oh, yes. You were wonderful," I said while stuffing a macaroon in my mouth. "Very beautiful."

"*Molto grazie!*" She must have picked up on my disappointment because she then added, "But you are not happy. Why?"

"Oh, I'm just not finding what I'm looking for."

"You tell me. I live in *Firenze* my whole life. I know everything."

"It's kind of silly."

"I don't know this word. What is silly?"

"You know. Like funny and stupid put together."

"Eh?" she said, screwing up her eyebrows.

A Taste of Italy

"Never mind, it's not important."

"You tell me what you want. I will help you find it. I am fantastical guide!"

I pulled Helena over to a corner away from the elderly opera patrons. "I'm looking for a man."

"You give me name, I find him."

"No, I don't have a name. I don't have a man. You see? That's the problem."

"Aha!" she said, her eyes sparkling. "I know what you want. You want to take a little Italy home with you, eh?" she said, making an arc over her belly with her hand.

"No, no, no!" I said, nearly spewing macaroon bits all over her. "I don't want a baby. I just want a little romance, you know?"

"Ah, romance. This, I understand. We Italians are famous for romance. Casanova, you know him? He was the world's greatest lover."

"I don't really want a Casanova. Just someone who makes me feel beautiful, special."

"I understand. Meet me at Club Seven at midnight. You will find Casanova there."

A club? This terrified me. I may have traveled five thousand miles to find romance, but the thought of going into a club packed to the rafters with tiny Italian women in thigh-high boots and skimpy skirts made me want to run for the hills. I was going to be thirty-six in two weeks, for Christ's sake. I couldn't compete with them. And for what? A one-night stand with an Italian lothario, who probably bedded a new tourist every night? But I agreed to meet her there. What did I have to lose?

I had about forty-five minutes before meeting her, so I hiked back to my hotel for a quick sprucing-up. I poured myself into my trusty little black dress, which after a week of eating mounds of bread, cheese and pasta, was quickly becoming my too-little black dress. I stepped into a pair of strappy, black stilettos—also bought for an outrageous sum in Paris—and pinned my long locks up with a few sparkly barrettes that I'd found earlier in the day while roaming the streets with my laundry in tow like some deranged bag lady.

Lucie Simone

Tramping up a dark, narrow street lined with colorful Vespas and other motorscooters, I spotted Helena in the distance. She'd obviously done some sprucing of her own. She had changed into a fiery-red halter dress, and wore her hair in an up-do that looked as if it had been designed by Botticelli himself. She was loitering outside the club, smoking a cigarette and cozing up to a handsome, young Italian man with thick, wavy, black hair, dark eyes, and a wicked smile that made my panties bunch up. Helena eyed me as I approached, and waved me over.

"*Ciao, bella,*" crooned the delicious hunk at her side. He gathered up my hands and kissed them. There was something about the way he said *bella* that made my stomach lurch.

"*Ciao,*" I squeaked.

"*Carlo, questa é Carly,*" Helena said to the man who was currently devouring my knuckles. "Carlo doesn't speak English, but I can translate for him."

"*Piacere,*" I said, pulling my fingers out of his mouth. "A pleasure to meet you."

Helena hustled us inside the club, where we found a booth in a darkly-lit corner. Thank God for that. I felt as if a sack of potatoes had been stuffed down the front of my dress, and a dark spot to conceal my girth was very comforting. Loud, techno music banged against my eardrums as Carlo's hands quickly found their way under my dress. He nuzzled my neck and whispered Italian words into my ear that sounded vaguely similar to what I'd heard in many of the Italian movies I'd watched while planning my trip.

This was all happening way too fast. This wasn't romance. This was flat-out porn. Somehow, having Carlo fulfill my lusty fantasies scared the wits out of me. Sister Mary Margaret's threats of damnation still lurked in my mind.

I pushed Carlo's hands out from under my dress and pressed my ear to my shoulder, edging him out of what was clearly his comfort zone. He pawed at me a few more times, even once sticking his tongue in my ear, but all my wriggling soon made it clear to him that I wasn't ready for

A Taste of Italy

this kind of action. He barked a few Italian words at Helena and scooted out of the booth.

“What’s wrong?” Helena begged.

“He’s too fast. I haven’t even had a drink yet,” I whined.

“*Va bene*. I get you drink and bring Carlo back.” She slid out of the booth and onto the dance floor. I watched her slip through the crowd of swaying, sweaty bodies, and disappear into the masses.

After sitting alone in the booth for about twenty minutes, I finally spotted Helena and Carlo. They were kissing passionately on the dance floor, her left leg wrapped around his hips, his right hand eagerly stroking her thigh. It figured. Perhaps ten years earlier, I would have been able to match Carlo’s pace, but once I’d surpassed the age of thirty, being groped in public no longer had the same appeal. Damn it. When did I become such a prude? I slid out of the booth and through the throng of heaving bodies to the exit. The brisk night air whipped around me, and I knew that the only thing keeping me warm tonight would be my new wool scarf. At least Helena was good for one thing.

Lucie Simone

Chapter Four

Morning found me traipsing through Florence behind a tiny American tour guide named Jane, and several American couples celebrating honeymoons and anniversaries. If it hadn't been for Jane's quirky stories and perky attitude, I think I would have leaped to my death from the top of Brunelleschi's famed *Duomo*, just to avoid the onslaught of PDA that was being thrown my way.

It seems that you never really notice how alone you are until you're in a crowd of happy couples who can't keep their hands off each other. If I'd had anything other than a crusty piece of bread for breakfast—why is it that only Americans believe in starting your day with an actual meal?—I probably would have spent the entire morning hurling the contents of my stomach into the *Arno*. Luckily, though, I managed to survive the three-hour guided walk, and ended the tour slightly less suicidal than when it had begun.

That is, until the rain. Having abandoned any hope of finding the love of my life in Italy, I decided to go see a Shakespearean play on the edge of town. With very little chance of meeting some dashing Florentine who'd steal my heart with a sexy glance, I had resigned myself to the idea of just getting lost in the drama on stage. I had no idea, though, just how far away this theater was from the city center. When it started to rain, I figured it was no big deal. I could handle walking a few blocks in the rain. Of course, for an Angelino who rarely experiences more than one or two inches of rain a year, even a few blocks in the wet stuff can be a challenge.

A Taste of Italy

Throw in a brand new pair of suede sneakers, and my uncanny ability to always walk at least a mile in the wrong direction, and my patience for downpours really dwindles.

By the time I reached the theater, my shoes were so waterlogged I felt as if I'd been swimming in them. With every step I took, water squished between my toes, and I could feel the rain pooling inside my soggy sneakers. The umbrella I'd purchased in Paris proved no match for Florence's gusty winds, yet I still clung to it regardless of how hard the wind tried to knock it out of my hands. I pushed open the door to find an elderly Italian man wearing an argyle cardigan sitting behind the ticket counter. He spoke no English, but understood my Italian perfectly. I, however, hadn't the faintest idea what he was saying. After a lot of confused looks and wild hand gesturing, a tall, blond American man dressed in Elizabethan costume stepped in to clear up the mess.

"Buona sera, signora. Mi dispiaci, ma la programme—"

"In *Inglese, per favore*. I'm American," I snapped impatiently at him.

"Great. I'm so sorry, but we're canceling tonight's show."

"What!" I shrieked. "Why?"

"Well, you're the only one who showed up."

"But I walked forever in the rain to get here. My feet are soaked, my pants are drenched, my umbrella's broken," I wailed as tears spilled from my eyes. "You can't cancel."

"I'm sorry, but we just can't perform for one person."

"Maybe some more will show up. It's only ten to five."

"But even if more people do show up in the next ten minutes, I'm sure it won't be enough. We can't perform for less than fifteen people."

"This is crap!" I cried, and sank to the floor, so tired and beaten down that my legs would no longer hold me up.

"*Signora*, come with me," he said as he lifted me to my feet and escorted me over to a sofa in the lounge. "I'm so sorry to disappoint you. It's just that it costs us so much money to run the show that if only a few people show up, well, it's cheaper just to cancel. "

Lucie Simone

He stuffed a few coins into a vending machine, which moments later produced a piping-hot cup of cappuccino. He handed it to me and sat down on the sofa next to me.

"My name is David. And you are?"

"Carly," I spat, determined not to let him charm me.

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Carly," he said and extended his hand with a warm smile.

"Hardly," I snorted, deliberately ignoring his outstretched hand. "You're kicking me out in the rain."

"Where are you staying? I'll call for a taxi to take you back to your hotel."

"But I don't want to go back there. I want to see a play."

"I know. I'm sorry, but we just can't go on tonight. I'm releasing the cast. Wait here a minute, okay? I'll be right back," he said before swiftly exiting the lounge.

I sat there staring at my cappuccino and feeling like a fool. I came to Europe looking for love, only to find disappointment at every turn. Yes, Paris was beautiful, but without someone to share it with, it just felt cold. And Florence? Florence was just plain cruel, taunting me with visions of happy couples stealing kisses in narrow streets, mocking me with its great love stories, and stomping on my heart as if it were nothing more than a cobblestone in the road.

"Okay," David said when he returned. "Let's see if we can't get you back to town."

He rambled off a few words in Italian to the old man behind the ticket counter and came back to sit next to me on the sofa. He had changed his clothes, and was now wearing a pair of jeans and a deep blue turtleneck sweater. I looked into his eyes and noticed how they shimmered when he smiled.

"Luigi is calling us a cab."

"Us?"

"I'm going to go back into town with you, if that's all right. I'm staying at a *pensione* near the *Pitti Palace*. Where are you staying?"

"At a shitty hotel near the *Duomo*."

A Taste of Italy

David laughed—a kind of knowing, pitying laugh. “It’s so touristy over there. The hotels take advantage of that. Pack ‘em in, and then ignore them until it’s time to collect the dough.”

“I wish I’d known that before I came here. Ha! I wish I’d known a lot of things before I came here.”

“Florence isn’t quite what you expected?”

“You could say that again.”

“Where are you from?”

“Los Angeles.”

“Me, too!” David exclaimed. “Well, technically, I live in Santa Barbara, but it’s pretty close.”

“So, what are you doing here? If I lived in Santa Barbara, I don’t think I’d ever leave.” *Hell, as it was, I rarely left L.A., and it was a pit.*

“Santa Barbara is beautiful, but I love Florence. Our theater company comes here every year. We’ve been doing it for the past five years.”

“Performing for packed houses every night, no doubt.” I couldn’t help but whine. I was still feeling about as welcome as a sewer rat.

“Well, usually, yeah. It’s just the rain. We never do well on rainy nights. And with cars being restricted in the city, you can’t expect many people to trudge way out to the edge of town in a downpour. Why would anyone bother?”

“I bothered.”

“I know. I’m so sorry to let you down.”

“You certainly aren’t the first. Unfortunately, I can’t say that my experience in Florence has been anything but a letdown.”

“You need a proper guide. There are so many tourists in this town that it’s easy to overlook all its beauty and just get caught up in the tourist traps.”

“Are you offering?” I asked as wicked thoughts of mounting him right in the middle of *Piazza della Signoria*—that’s the square in the city center, if you didn’t already know—leaped into my mind. Maybe I’d get my European shag after all.

Lucie Simone

"I'm suddenly free this evening. It would be my pleasure to escort you through this fair city, if you'll have me," he said, proffering his hand and bowing down to me as if I were a princess.

I blushed. "How could I refuse?"

A Taste of Italy

Chapter Five

I placed my hand in his and allowed him to lead me out of the theater, where a taxi was waiting for us. He opened the door for me, and I stepped in, feeling the weight of my rain-soaked jeans against my legs. He plopped down beside me, our thighs touching. I swallowed hard.

"Would you mind stopping at my hotel before we set off on our sightseeing tour? I'm dying to get these pants off." I flushed hotly as soon as the words left my lips.

"Sure," he said, the corners of his mouth turning up slightly.

"I'm just so wet—" *Oh, God.* "I mean, my pants—"

"I understand." He chuckled. "*Signore, guida alla Duomo, per favore,*" he instructed the taxi driver. "He'll take us to the *Duomo*, and we can walk to your hotel from there."

The streetlights flickered as we passed under them, silhouetting our bodies in a rhythmic dance of light and shadow. The sound of the rain pouring down hard on top of the taxi wrapped around us like a fuzzy sweater, and I felt my breath catch in my throat. The vibrations of the car as it rolled over the cobblestone streets teased the familiar wetness swelling between my thighs. I pressed my knee against David's and felt him respond in kind. My heart jumped around my chest like a jackrabbit thumping through a field of wildflowers.

I slid my hand along the side of my leg. My skin zinged with electric shocks as the back of my hand made contact with David's strong, capable hand—at least I hoped it was capable. I felt like a schoolgirl,

Lucie Simone

cautiously exploring and testing boundaries. David didn't resist my touch, and instead allowed his fingers to crawl on top of my thigh. A barely audible sigh passed through his lips. My stomach was doing back-flips.

As instructed, the taxi driver dropped us off at the *Duomo*, and taking my hand, David guided me out of the car. The heat of his palm jolted my wildly pounding heart so much so that I feared it might jump right out of my chest. I breathed a long, slow breath.

"Which way to your hotel?" he asked, giving my hand a slight squeeze before allowing it to fall against my side. He attempted to open up my battered umbrella, but clearly seeing the futility in it, said, "I think we're going to have to run for it."

"This way." I pointed toward a flower shop. "Down that side street."

We both bolted in the direction of the florist's shop as the rain pummeled us relentlessly. My fabulously expensive wool coat was taking a beating, and I was getting soaked from head to toe. For once, the blinking neon sign above the door of my hotel was a relief to see.

"It's here," I said, dashing through the small doorway. I pulled off my sodden coat and pressed the button to summon the elevator.

"I'll just wait here for you," David offered. Rain dripped from his blond hair onto his broad shoulders.

"Don't be silly. You're soaked. You can dry off upstairs. I have a crazy hairdryer that just may do the trick."

"You don't mind?"

"I wouldn't offer if I did."

We climbed inside the petite, early twentieth-century elevator—I was surprised it didn't come with a hand-crank—and an awkward silence filled the space between us as the rickety lift carried us to the fifth floor. Did he have a rabbit jumping around in his chest, too?

The car settled at the fifth floor with a jolt, and I pushed open the iron gate. David followed me out into the hallway while I fumbled in my purse for the room key. I was not staying in a four-star luxury suite with electronic keys. I was staying in a six-hundred-year-old dump with a giant bronze skeleton key fixed to a key chain the size of a saucer. How on earth

A Taste of Italy

could I lose it in a bag so small it hardly had room enough for a tube of lipstick?

“Slight problem.” I sighed. “I seem to have lost my key somewhere along this journey.”

“Check your coat. Maybe you stuck it in your pocket,” he said, taking the wet garment out of my arms. He slid his hands along the sides and squeezed the pockets. “I feel something hard here.” I wanted to giggle at those words but composed myself. “Yes, here it is.” He pulled the key out of the pocket and handed it to me.

David followed me to my room. I pushed the key into the lock and heaved the large door open. He stood in the hallway for a moment, rocking on his heels. He looked as nervous and ill at ease as a cat on water skis. I flipped on the light and motioned him inside the room.

“If I could just borrow a towel?”

“Sure. Come in.” I grabbed one of the scratchy towels hanging in the bathroom and tossed it to him. “I’ll just be a minute.” I took a fresh pair of trousers out from the wardrobe and kicked off my shoes.

“No problem,” he squeaked. He was no less terrified of the possibilities that lay ahead of us than I was.

I slipped into the bathroom and yanked off my jeans, throwing them over the towel bar to dry. My skin was clammy and bearing a resemblance to that of a defrosted turkey. I pulled the hairdryer hose off the wall—who designed that thing anyway, Dirt Devil?—and proceeded to blast my shivering limbs with it. A few quick passes through my hair, as well, and I felt much renewed.

I slid into my fresh denims and opened the door to greet David, who was shirtless and seated on the bed with the towel over his head.

“Oh, dear God!” I gasped and slapped my hands to my face in an effort to cover my gaping mouth. Seeing him bare-chested on my bed, I could hardly control my knee-jerk reaction to his naked flesh. Sister Mary Margaret had left deep gashes in my psyche.

He bounded up, whisked the towel from his head and wrapped it around his shoulders. “My sweater,” he said, obviously trying to explain.

Lucie Simone

"It was soaked through, and I was freezing. I had to take it off. God, I'm an idiot!"

"No. I'm sorry. I'm just—I mean—the bathroom is yours," I sputtered at him as he slid past me and pulled the door closed.

The whirl of the dryer was barely audible over that damn jackrabbit hopping around my chest. I picked up my spike-heeled boots and shoved my feet into them. With trembling hands, I pulled the long zippers all the way up to my knees and shoved my pant-legs down over them. Jesus, I was acting like a virgin on prom night. What was wrong with me? I quickly checked my makeup in my compact mirror and applied a fresh coat of lipstick. I needed to get a grip on things.

The bathroom door swung open and David emerged, somewhat less wet, but no less freaked-out, judging by the fright flashing in his blue eyes.

"I gotta talk to you," he announced.

"Okay," I said, taking a seat on the bed. David stood frozen in the doorway. "Is something wrong?"

"No, no. Nothing is wrong. I'm just a little—"

"Come sit down." I patted the bed.

David obeyed, planting himself about five feet away from me on the other edge of the bed. *Oh God.* Was he a Mormon or something? Was I reading him all wrong? He wiped his hands on the knees of his jeans and cleared his throat. Suddenly I noticed it: a gold band wrapped around his left ring finger. My heart sank.

"David, it's okay. I understand."

"No. I don't think you do."

I leaned across the bed, grabbed up his left hand and pressed the wedding band between my thumb and index finger.

"I think I do."

"No," he said, and wrapped his hands around mine. "I'm not married. Not for a long time." He pulled his hands away. "She died two years ago. Breast cancer. I haven't...uh...you know...in a long time."

"Oh." I let out a breath, feeling like an ass. Here I was in Italy, trolling for a man to satisfy my lust, and I happened to choose the one guy

A Taste of Italy

who was still hung up on a dead wife. *Jesus*, I thought, *Sister Mary Margaret was right when she told me twenty years ago that my wickedness would send me straight to hell.* I couldn't try to seduce him now. "David, we're just hanging out. You're going to show me the sights, right? Nothing more." The thumping in my chest slowed, and I felt the rabbit swoon when a single tear fell from David's eye. God, I wanted to kiss him. I wanted to feel his body on top of mine, the warmth of his skin.

David smiled, took my hand up in his, and said, "I promised to show you a good time."

Lucie Simone

Chapter Six

A few shy smiles, another mad dash through some sideways rain, and we finally found ourselves at a café overlooking the *Arno*. The gray sky slowly turned to black as David and I talked for hours over several courses of pasta, cheese, bread, and wine. I had never felt so comfortable dining with a man before.

Usually, I picked at my food, too nervous to keep anything in my stomach. But with David, I was relaxed. And with all hopes of sex tossed out the window, I felt no need to hold back, and practically licked my plates clean. By the time the dessert cart rolled over to our table, I was so stuffed I feared the buttons on my trousers might just pop off and fly across the table to ping David on the forehead. I praise Jesus for the person who invented stretch denim! Where would modern women be without such fantastic inventions?

When the tiramisu arrived—I decided to split it with David, taking into consideration any possible eye injuries that might result if those buttons decided to flee—David launched into some probing questions that had me wondering if he was interested in showing me more than just Florence’s hidden treasures.

“Why did you come to Florence to find a lover?” he asked. I had confessed to my sinful motivations over a plate of linguini earlier. “Why not Rome, or Venice?”

“Dante and Beatrice. You know their story?”

A Taste of Italy

"Of course. Beatrice. Dante's muse. I've read *The Divine Comedy* many times. Theirs was the great unrequited love."

"I prefer to think of it as the great *unrealized* love."

"You're a romantic."

"Which is why I've failed miserably on my mission here. Romantics have trouble committing one-night stands."

"You've still got a couple days to work on that. Maybe you'll find that one night turns into a thousand."

"No, I'm giving up. I'm not the kind of girl who can...do that. I need assurances that whatever guy lands in my bed will still be there in the morning."

"You had me fooled. I thought you were going to jump me right there in the taxi."

"I was considering it," I prodded, raising one eyebrow at him.

"I hope you don't think I wasn't interested in you," he said before sliding a forkful of tiramisu into his mouth.

I tried to stay focused on the conversation at hand, but I kept thinking of David lying on my bed, his clothes piled in a heap on the floor.

"So, *were* you interested?"

"I never *wasn't* interested. The first thing I noticed about you was your mouth, how plump and red it was, like a fruit, ready to be plucked."

I swallowed the espresso-soaked ladyfinger I had been sucking. My legs seemed to liquefy inside my leather, knee-high boots as David continued.

"Then I noticed your eyes—the flecks of gold scattered throughout. I wanted to kiss you then. But people just don't do that, do they? Kiss total strangers? Well, not unless they're drunk."

"Or on a mission," I said, the words sticking in my throat.

"Yeah, too bad you abandoned that plan. Looks like we're going to have to get drunk."

Lucie Simone

Chapter Seven

One bottle of Chianti later, David and I were feeling less like strangers and more like a couple who'd just enjoyed their third date. The question of whether or not we would actually go through with the ritual third-date-sex was looming large in my mind. Both excited and terrified of the possibility, I clung to his arm as we strolled through the empty streets, which had not only cleared of tourists, but of rain, as well. On the way back to my hotel, we stopped to admire the many statues in *Piazza della Signoria*. Neptune's great fountain, The Rape of the Sabine Women, and the copy of Michelangelo's David—the real one had long ago been locked up tight inside a museum.

As I gazed up into the cold marble eyes that stood watch over Florence, I felt David pull his arm out of mine. A panic rang through my heart. But when I looked into his eyes, I didn't see hesitation or fear. I saw passion and lust as he gathered me up in his arms and kissed me—a kiss that would melt even Sister Mary Margaret's granny panties. His fingers raked through my hair as his tongue explored my mouth. *Thank God for breath mints!* After all the garlic I had consumed, I felt it was seeping out of my pores. But David didn't seem to give it a thought.

"Let's go to your room," he said after unlocking his lips from mine.

"Mmm-hmm," I purred, wet with desire.

We galloped the few short blocks back to my hotel, laughing with the excitement and silliness of the night's turn of events. I pulled David by his belt loops into the small lobby when we reached my hotel. I slammed

A Taste of Italy

him up against the elevator gate and pressed the call button. He peeled off my coat, allowing it to slip to the floor. I pressed my hips against his, feeling his cock stiffen beneath his jeans. I stuck my hand down his pants and gripped him.

What would Sister Mary Margaret think of me now?

A giggle erupted from my mouth.

“What?” David asked with a look of worry on his face. I realized he might have thought I was giggling about the size of his penis.

“I was just thinking about this nun I had in high school, Sister Mary Margaret, my catechism teacher. She told me I was going to go to hell because I was wicked.”

“Wicked? More like bewitching to me.”

The elevator arrived, and I jerked my hand out of David’s pants, pulled him off the gate, swung it open with a clang, and dragged him inside. With a swish of my foot, I kicked my coat into the car. That thing cost me four hundred euro. I hadn’t lost all my senses! He had little to say in the matter as I shoved him up against the wall, kicked my leg behind me, and with a quick glance pressed the “five” button with the heel of my boot, finally getting some use out of all the kickboxing classes I had taken.

“Are you sure you went to Catholic school?” he teased, a coy grin forming on his lips.

He moaned as I pressed my hand onto his bulging crotch. He gripped my hair and pulled my head back, his lips covered mine. Our breathing became hot and loud as the elevator jolted to a stop. I pushed away from him and picked my coat up off the floor.

“You coming?” I asked, kicking the gate open with my boot.

“If you promise me one thing.”

“What?”

“You’ll keep those boots on.”

Lucie Simone

Chapter Eight

Thirty seconds later, I was kicking the door to my room open and pulling David inside after me. I shoved the door closed and flung David up against it, not yet bothering to turn on the light. The moonlight filtered in through the gauzy curtains, highlighting the bed in its soft glow. But I didn't want the same-old, same-old with David. I wanted wild. I wanted wicked!

I dropped my coat and purse to the floor, flicked on the light, and pressed my body against David's. I reached up to stroke his hair with both hands. He wrapped his hands around my back, bent down, and smothered my mouth with his. His tongue darted around my mouth as one hand slid down my back to my butt. He lifted my left leg in an effort to pick me up.

"No," I said. "We do it my way." For once, I wanted to be in charge. I'd spent too many years pleasing everyone but myself. This time, I wanted satisfaction.

"Does your way involve whips and chains?" he asked, arching his eyebrow at me.

"I did pass by a fetish store yesterday," I said. I slid my hands beneath his sweater and lightly pinched his nipples. "Maybe they deliver."

"Oh, that nun of yours was right. You are naughty!"

I pushed away from him. "Take off your sweater," I commanded.

David complied, taking a step toward me.

A Taste of Italy

"No," I scolded, and pushed him back. "I want your back against the door."

"Feisty."

"Just you wait." Since I was about to unleash years of pent-up sexual energy on him, I only felt it fair to warn him.

I kissed his soft, pink nipples, and swirled my tongue around their hard buds. He had nice, firm pecs, and a soft patch of blond curls between them. I ran my fingers down his chest to his jeans, and fell to my knees. I pressed my palm against his crotch, and he moaned, grabbed my hair in his hands, and twisted the strands with his fingers. I unbuttoned his top button, slowly unzipped the jeans and pulled them down to his knees. With his cock practically spilling out of his red Calvin Klein briefs, I rubbed my hand against the soft cotton and he moaned deeply.

"I want you," he whimpered, but I ignored his plea.

"You'll have your turn," I said. I gathered up the fabric of his underwear with my teeth, and pulled them down just enough to unleash his bulging penis.

"Carly, *please*," he begged. "I have to have you *now*."

Again, I ignored him. I placed my lips at the base of his beautiful, hard dick. I grabbed his cock with my left hand and his balls with the other, lightly squeezing both. I felt a flood of liquid between my legs, my clit throbbed. I was aching for him, too. I wrapped my lips around one of his balls and sucked hard. He gasped and jerked against me. I loosened my grip on his cock, slid my lips along its base to the tip, and inserted it in my mouth. My tongue slid around its mushroom head, and I could taste his juices slowly dribbling out. I wasn't ready for him to come yet. I pulled away from him, rose, and walked over to the window.

"I want to see the stars." I unbuttoned my blouse as David stepped out of his pants. "Turn off the light."

He obeyed as I slipped out of my jeans, careful to leave my boots on, as he'd requested.

David approached me, his erection at full salute. I wanted him inside of me, pounding me. I turned away from him, pushed the window open, and felt the cold night air whip around me. I unhooked my bra and

Lucie Simone

allowed it to fall off my body. I felt David wrap around me, his dick hard against my back. He grabbed my right breast with his left hand and squeezed it, pinching the nipple between two fingers. His right hand dug into my panties, and he slid his finger between the folds of my vagina.

“Oh God,” I groaned hungrily. “I want you inside me. Fuck me.”

He stroked my clit, and shock waves soared through me. I leaned forward, one hand on the windowsill, and he tugged at my wet panties. I felt the elastic waistband snap, and they fell to rest at my ankles. I stepped out of them as David slid one of his hands up my back, grabbing my hair. He yanked my head back as he slipped his other hand back between my thighs again. My knees wobbled as he stroked my clit and inserted his fingers into my hole.

“Yes!” I cried. “Give it to me. Hard.”

I was leaning halfway out the window now, staring out toward the marble dome and tower of the *Duomo*, the hills in the distance. My nipples strained against David’s touch as he tweaked and twisted them with the fingers of his left hand. He moved his other hand back and forth between my legs, pressing his fingers on top of my clit. My fingers gripped the windowsill as he brought me closer to the edge of orgasm with each touch.

“It’s my turn to be naughty.” He breathed into my ear, cruelly whipping his hand out from between my thighs. I pulled on his left arm and gasped as he rammed his cock inside my cunt. An explosion of liquid rushed through me. I shuddered while he thrust himself in and out of me, harder, faster, deeper, wetter. He rubbed his fingers against my clit again, and I jerked with pleasure. Spasms of electricity shot through me like a lightning bolt through a storm cloud. David’s pace intensified as his cock rippled inside me. He thrust deeper, harder and was suddenly grunting with pleasure as his semen rushed forth in a crashing wave.

A few moments passed and I felt him slip out of me, felt his grip on my hair loosen, and his hands slide to my hips. He turned my body to face him, scooped me up in his arms, and carried me over to the bed like a bride on her wedding night. He lay me down gently on top of the covers and lay beside me, draping one arm across my body. He nuzzled my neck,

A Taste of Italy

lightly kissing me, and I wanted to tell him that I loved him. But how could I? I'd only just met him a few — albeit heavenly — hours ago.

I rolled onto my side and wrapped one leg over him. His lips moved to my mouth and his tongue glided inside, hot and delicious. I was still wet and sticky from our window fuck, but a surge of juices flooded me again as I felt his penis enter me. Before I knew it, he was above me, one of my booted legs hoisted over his shoulder as he literally fucked me sideways. He gripped my leg tightly, and slammed inside me again and again. I clung to the blanket as his pace grew faster and more furious.

“Oh, God,” escaped his lips as he came inside me again.

He shuddered violently against my leg, and afterward, unzipped the long zipper on my boot. He pulled the boot off and flung it over his shoulder. It hit the floor with a clatter. He ran his hand down my leg to my thigh, pressing my legs open and pushing me flat on my back.

“I'm going to make you come so hard you'll wish you were wearing galoshes!”

My pussy was still moist and aching for him. I just couldn't get enough of him. He bent down and kissed the fuzzy hair that twirled above my vagina. I opened my legs wider, thrust my hips toward him.

“Down, you naughty girl. I'll get there.” He delicately peeled my other boot off and slipped my foot out.

“Yes, now.” I panted. “Give it to me now,” I demanded, raising myself up on my elbows, “or, I'll make you hurt.”

“Hmm. Hurting might be a little fun.”

“Don't tease me, David.” I groaned as he buried his head in my pussy and lapped up the juices now oozing south toward my anus. His tongue flicked in and out of my cunt while he pressed one finger inside my ass. A sensation I had never before felt rang through me as if I had been struck by a bolt of lightning.

“Oh, God,” I cried, clutching at my breasts. “Yes!”

He sucked at my clit, twirled his tongue around it, and then darted back to my hole again. My breath was growing quick and short as two or more—I couldn't even think straight, let alone count, at this point—

Lucie Simone

fingers pulsed inside my slippery pussy. I felt him reaching, searching for something inside me. What?

Zing!

My body twitched and bucked of its own will. My eyelids fluttered, my heart raced, my toes clenched, my fingers gripped at the blanket beneath me.

Oh, holy mother of God!

Moments later, I felt David come to rest on top of my still-trembling body, which was spent and weak, soaked in cum. He kissed me, brushing my hair back. He caressed my breast, tenderly cupping it in his hand and then kissing the nipple.

"You're amazing," he said. "No woman has made me feel like that since—"

"Your wife?"

"Yeah," he said, pressing his head to my chest. "I'm sorry."

"You have *nothing* to apologize for." I giggled, letting him know it was okay for him to feel, well, whatever it was he felt.

"I've been clinging to her memory for too long. It's time I moved on."

I didn't know what to say. I felt it best just to turn him on his back and kiss him again. I laid my head on his chest and listened to him breathe, teasing the blond curls between his pecs with my fingers. He ran his fingers through my hair, gathering it up in his fist, and lifted my head up off his chest—he seemed to enjoy doing that rather a lot—and kissed me.

He sat up and laid his hands in his lap. There it was, glinting in the moonlight. The ring. I reached over, grasped it between two fingers and slowly twisted it. I looked at his downcast eyes, waiting for him to tell me to stop, but he didn't. His hand was limp at first, but as I pulled, he straightened his finger, and the ring slipped off with a mere tug. I folded my fingers around it.

"It's still yours. She still belongs to you."

"But now I belong to *you*."

A Taste of Italy

My heart jumped into my throat, and I felt a slight puff of breath in my chest as if someone were blowing air into my lungs with a straw. I couldn't speak, so I kissed him, the ring still clenched in my fist.

"Let me see it," he said after a moment passed, and I opened my hand. He plucked the gold band from my palm and placed it on the nightstand next to a cheesy romance novel I had brought with me. And he kissed me. Again and again, until our eyes grew heavy and the morning drew near, and we both succumbed to sleep. And for once, I didn't dream of loves and lovers unbound, but of loves and hopes fulfilled.

Lucie Simone

Chapter Nine

"You just have to know where to go," David said, pushing a forkful of *frittata* into his mouth. "Plenty of Italians eat breakfast. I mean, *food*. It's Italy's *thing*."

"All that crappy hotel gave me was a piece of toast yesterday."

After sleeping for a meager hour or two, David and I ventured out into the streets of Florence once again to find a breakfast worthy enough to follow our first night together. He'd chosen a small *ristorante* hidden amongst a maze of crooked and narrow alleyways where many native Italians dined. The rustic diner was packed with boisterous locals gossiping about the events of their lives, and I wanted to shout out to them the story of my adventures in their city.

"I think you should check out of that hotel."

"And go where? Without a reservation? In this town?"

"I know a place."

"Of course, you do. What don't you know about Florence?"

"A lot, I'm sure," he said, sipping from his coffee cup. "But I know one thing for certain."

"And what might that be?" I tried to ask as elegantly as possible with a buttery piece of bread clenched between my teeth.

"I know it wouldn't be nearly as beautiful without you in it."

"You're just saying that so you can get into my pants."

"Never! I know you're a good Catholic girl. I wouldn't think of sullyng your reputation."

A Taste of Italy

“Good, because I’d have to get nasty with you if you tried.”

“I should hope so. What would Sister Mary Margaret think if you didn’t?”

“Oh, she’s certain. I’m going straight to hell. Doomed, I am.”

“Well, if you’re going to hell, might as well have fun on the way down.”

I giggled, and slipped my boot between his thighs. I pressed the toe into his crotch. “I’m more interested in what’s going up.”

David unzipped my boot and slipped my foot out. Peeling open the front of his pants, he placed my foot directly on his growing erection. I massaged his penis with my toes as he gripped the table, edging forward in his seat. After several quick strokes and a few well-placed squeezes, a slight yelp escaped his lips, and he erupted like a champagne bottle uncorked at midnight on New Year’s Eve.

“My God, woman. If you’re going straight to hell, I’m driving the bus!”

He cleaned himself up with a napkin and placed my foot back into the boot.

“So, where are we headed after this?” I asked.

“You leave Wednesday, right?”

“Right.”

“Well, my show only runs Wednesday through Sunday—”

“If it doesn’t rain,” I gibed.

“If it doesn’t *rain*, my show only plays Wednesday through Sunday. So, that means we have two whole days to discover Italy.”

“The whole of Italy?”

“No, just a taste. Starting with Tuscany.”

* * * * *

After filling our bellies, David took me back to my hotel. We packed my things in a hurry, tossing shoes, scarves and everything else I’d bothered to pick up during my trip. David snatched up the romance novel I’d set out on the nightstand the night before, but left his ring sitting

Lucie Simone

there...abandoned. While he carried my suitcases down to the lobby, I ran back to the room and grabbed the ring. I couldn't stand the sight of it there all alone. And he would miss it...eventually. I stuffed it in my pocket.

David called a taxi and piled my luggage into the trunk when it arrived. After a quick stop at his *pensione*, so he could quickly pack a knapsack, we headed off to the train station. David purchased two tickets to Siena, Florence's greatest rival city for centuries.

He booked us into a charming bed and breakfast, where friendly natives welcomed us with warm smiles and provided us with a suite overlooking a garden of roses. The room was small, but cozy. The bed was lush and silky to the touch. The bathroom was spacious—hallelujah!—with a tub for two, and an actual shower with doors and room enough to bend over in.

Bright and sunny, this room would become the first of many we would discover on the days when David's show didn't perform. Year after year, we took just another little taste of Italy.

The ring David wore for so long found a home at the bottom of Rome's Trevi fountain when we returned to Italy a year later on our honeymoon. Now it belongs to Italy.

And Sister Mary Margaret? Well, she still pops into my head every now and then, like when I'm browsing fetish shops back home on Santa Monica Boulevard, but I shake my head, and she dissolves into a pile of black fishnets and white lace handcuffs.

And David twirls the ring around *my* finger.

"Naughty, naughty girl."

A Taste of Italy

AUTHOR BIO

Lucie Simone is a plucky L.A. girl with a sharp wit and an unnatural obsession with her hair, but she's doing her best to leave her locks in the hands of professionals these days; one too many emergency trips to the stylist to "undo" her do has taught her to think twice before picking up those hair shears.

Lucie's other obsession is writing. She has been writing in one form or another (plays, screenplays, short stories, novels) for many years, but has always had the most fun writing about quirky women discovering their inner goddesses--and enjoying a few romps along the way. Lucie has worked in both the advertising and entertainment industries in Los Angeles, from which she gleans many of her kooky characters and hilarious stories.

Lucie Simone

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My Lips Are Sealed by Mia Romano © 2006

Chapter One

Jade Wellington positioned the nail near Austin's fly. Things were definitely going to get messy. Pearls of sweat beaded her forehead as she drew back the hammer.

"Wait! Not there. Move it to the right just a little."

"Here?" Jade tilted her head in the direction of her partner in crime.

"Yes, that spot right there. It's perfect!"

Jade reared back, driving the nail in with the precision of a marksman, then stepped aside to admire her mischievous deed.

She combed her fingers through jagged bangs, closed her eyes, and inhaled a breath of sultry California breeze.

"That should fix him—for *good* this time." He might as well be dead and buried, just like her marriage.

Jade's best friend, Celine, swiped soiled hands across the back of her designer jeans. "I could see this working. I mean, how many women in the town of Cranberry would be willing to fork over this much cash just to get their hands on him?"

Jade stood back, reading the poster she'd nailed to the light pole. She was proud of her cleverness.

A Taste of Italy

"Missing husband—last seen running out of the neighbor's house zipping up his pants. If found, please send a \$500 reward and keep him! Please call 123-6782. P.S.—~~All major credit cards accepted.~~ CASH ONLY."

Celine brushed a newly-perked red curl from her face. "You know, I think marking out the credit card deal was an excellent idea. With so many stolen cards these days, a girl has to be careful."

Jade shifted her eyes towards her friend. "I hate to admit it, but my mother was right in this case. He's entirely too handsome for his own good. As awful as this might sound, I almost wish he was dead." She gave one last look at Austin Wellington's photo on the poster. "One thing's for certain—I should get some interesting phone calls from it. If I'm lucky, my neighbor, Carletta, will pay to keep him, and it will cover part of next month's mortgage payment."

"Hey, he did you a big favor. You just don't realize it yet. Now you can get on with your life the way it should be."

Life. Jade's mind escaped back to her wedding day five years earlier. The same day her mother had voiced her opinion on her only daughter's future.

"I don't see why you're in such a rush to get married, Jade. Are you pregnant? That's it, isn't it? My daughter has shamed me yet again. This is going to be so humiliating in front of the bridge club..."

Of course, she hadn't been pregnant. Austin had made it crystal clear he didn't want children. In fact, he'd even taken extreme precautions during sex by wearing an extra condom. She'd referred to it with a giggle as his "double-coated bullet" right before he'd take aim and fire.

The memory was as fresh as the taste of salty tears now sliding down her cheeks.

Tugging at the tail of her red T-shirt, she pulled it up over her midriff and wiped away the tears in anger. A failure... she was nothing. Perhaps her mother had been right about more than Austin's good looks. She'd been a disappointment to her mother when she'd dropped out of college in the last semester of her senior year to "find herself," only one credit away from her degree. At twenty-eight, she still hadn't found what she was meant to do in life. She'd never live up to her parents'

Lucie Simone

expectations of seeing her in the limelight like her cousin, Sarah, the famous Hollywood screenwriter who made thousands of dollars and didn't depend on anyone. And now she could strike one more black moment in life on her chalkboard of failures.

Spinning on her heels, she spotted the police cruiser parked a block down the street.

Shit, shit, shit, this was just what she needed. Cops were nothing but trouble. She'd secretly dated one in college, only to have the same cop arrest her on a speeding ticket because she had torn the ticket up and thrown it in his face with a few choice words. That had taken place the day after their passionate rendezvous in the backseat of his cruiser.

She was certain this one would find some excuse to arrest her as well. He'd probably tell her she needed some kind of permit to post a sign, or some other lame excuse just to meet his monthly quota.

"Come on, Celine, let's get out of here. I'm a little nauseated."

* * * * *

David Jackson sat in his cruiser observing the entire scene. He reared back with a solid humph spewing from his lips, and pulled the binoculars from his face. No doubt the dark-haired beauty pinning that poster to the light pole was up to no good. Women usually were. Right down to his ex-wife who'd ended up being arrested five years ago for insurance fraud.

This one was definitely going to be seeing him for a similar crime in the future. He was sure of it. Women were trouble, greedy and self-centered. It seemed the prettier they were, the harder they fell. And from the looks of this one, she wouldn't have a chance of surviving even a hint of a tumble. So what had his heart thudding so wildly, and his mind thinking thoughts of taking a good tumble with her in his bed?

He jotted down the license plate number as he watched them. Maybe he'd run a check on it to make sure the car hadn't been stolen. If the woman leaning against the light pole hadn't gotten around to stealing anything yet, she would. He shielded his chest with his hand. Women like

A Taste of Italy

her would reach right in and pluck a man's heart out if they wanted it badly enough. And for some odd reason, he'd be willing to let her have *his* any ole' time she'd want it.

He turned to his partner, Jim Parrot. "So what do you think, Parrot? Want to make a bet on how long it will be before we drag her in?"

Jim reached into the paper bag for his burger. "No way am I betting you, Jackson. The last time I bet you, I had to eat peanut butter sandwiches for a week." He inspected the burger in his hand. "Not that this looks much better." He took a sniff of the burger, scrunched up his face, and slapped a twenty on the dash. "You're on...twenty says you'll have arrested her within a month for something you classify as illegal." He threw the burger back into the bag, balling it up in his fist. "I have a feeling you haven't seen the last of this one, Jackson."

David pulled onto the highway. "I give her one week—maybe less. She appears pretty desperate, if you ask me. And from the expression I saw on her face just now, I'd say she's ready to kill the guy with her bare hands."