

# PART ONE

## CHAPTER ONE

1975

‘Sofia,’ a little concern seeped into Sister Margareta’s voice. ‘Are you sure you want to be doing this? It’s such a beautiful day,’ she pointed to the heavens. ‘Shouldn’t you be outside doing something more appropriate to your age?’

Sofia smiled. ‘But I love marking the little ones’ books,’ she held the basket up, where about twenty exercise books sat in a neat pile.

‘And I am so thankful that you find the time to help me. I am inundated with all these problems... Mother Superior is under immense pressure. We are not doing as well as we should, and there is even talk of possible closure.’

Sofia’s brown eyes widened in surprise. ‘Oh, I’m so sorry to hear it, I didn’t realise.’

‘Well,’ Sister Margareta gave her a reassuring smile. ‘Whatever happens, it will only be by year’s end as we are committed to all our girls until then. So, at least you will be able to finish your school career in peace.’

‘I thank you for that.’ Sofia gazed at the high convent walls where a creeper tumbled indolently over the thick wall, the cobbled path she had walked thousands of times wound gently round the bend, and the cypress trees stood guard. She felt sad at the possibility that it could all simply end.

‘You know, it is true,’ Sister Margareta continued. ‘When doors close in one place others open elsewhere.’ Reaching the gate, she swung its wide mouth open and with a caress, let her hand run along its weather-beaten wood and metal studs.

‘I had a good time here,’ Sofia sighed. ‘And I always thought that after I qualified I would teach here.’

‘Yes, that was something I was also looking forward to. But those children who will eventually get you have no idea what a blessing you will be to them.’

Sofia dropped her gaze shyly. ‘Thank you Sister Margareta, you have always been encouraging.’

‘I still think you should be swimming or doing something fun,’ Sister Margareta pointed to the basket.

‘This is fun.’ A gorgeous smile spread across Sofia’s face. ‘And it’s hardly hard work.’

‘Okay then, go enjoy your afternoon.’ Sister Margareta held the gate open. ‘And don’t forget to write all those positive little messages. The children love it when you mark their books.’ She laughed. ‘And they are all doing better in English because they want to impress you so hard.’

‘That is sweet.’ Sofia lifted a hand in greeting. ‘Goodbye Sister Margareta, see you tomorrow.’

Turning left, Sofia stopped then walked to the end of the block. Unexpectedly, a boy on a bicycle flipped around the corner, clearly out of control. She screamed, he screamed, and his three friends, all on bicycles, screamed. She threw herself against the wall, dropping everything she was carrying, and within seconds, the exhibitionists disappeared. She sat there a moment, a hand on her chest, feeling her pounding heart. About to get to her feet, she saw a hand outstretched to her.

Glancing up, she recognised the young man she had noticed a couple of times during the last few months in the park across the convent.

‘Are you all right?’ Pulling her to her feet, he gave her a quick appraisal. She was almost certainly from one of the Mediterranean countries. Not what one would call exotic but pretty, with beautiful dark hair and kind brown eyes.

‘Friends of yours?’

‘No, just school kids. Robert Thomas Powell.’ He liked to say his entire name when introducing himself. It made him feel important to carry his two grandfathers’ names.

She watched the blue gaze intently, light hair blowing in the wind, and a nice smile. She placed her hand in his. ‘Sofia Andriotti.’

‘Pleased to meet you,’ he quickly gathered the pile of exercise books into the basket again, grabbed her discarded school bag, and handed them to her. Then sauntering across the street, he got onto his motorcycle and rode away.

Robert leaned against the tree, stretched his lithe legs over the motorcycle seat, and gazed upward. Gnarled branches swayed and nodded in the breeze, revealing intricate web-like patterns against the pale blue sky, as if it were a living puzzle. Quite possibly, this was the last season the oak would stand here. Ancient and decayed, exposed roots gave it a crab-like appearance. Feeling pity for the wasted giant, he pulled a drawing pad from the saddlebag and captured some of its last moments of glory.

A noise across the street interrupted his concentration. Amused, he watched as the same four boys arrived. Five minutes later, the convent’s metal-studded gate swung open, pouring out dozens of schoolgirls. Seeing the boys, they did what girls do to valiant heroes, pretend to ignore them. Robert smiled, understanding the game rules well.

Laughter and giggling floated towards him as some threw him furtive glances. Over the months he had been coming here, a few had been bold enough to start conversations but he had quickly and politely let them know that he had neither the time nor the inclination to support teenage fantasies. As the street became vacant, the boys started spinning and flipping again.

Hearing the gate swing its wide mouth almost shut, Robert glimpsed Sofia slip through the gap and grinned when the boys disappeared at the sight of her. Beyond sight, a woman’s voice said something and both laughed, then, closing the gate, she went about her duties behind its comforting protection. He watched Sofia with interest. Every day, she did exactly the same thing. She stood there a moment, as if she went through her walk home plan mentally, before she tackled it physically.

‘Sofia,’ He greeted days later, as he turned the corner on foot.

‘Hello. Where’s your bike?’ She tried to balance a pile of books under one arm.

‘Hopefully still in the park. May I carry some of those?’

She gave him part of the load.

‘Where’s your basket?’

‘Sister Margareta needed it for something.’ She dismissed with a hand. ‘Robert, right?’

He nodded and fell into step beside her. ‘I’ve never seen you walk home with friends, don’t you have any?’

‘I stay behind to help Sister Margareta. She says it’s part of my training.’

‘Don’t tell me...’

A hint of a smile crossed her lips. ‘I want to be a teacher.’

He sighed visibly. ‘I thought you were about to say nun.’

‘Strangely,’ she told him conspirationally. ‘It never crossed my mind.’

They chatted about nothing in particular and he noticed that she was curious and smart.

‘Do you have brothers or sisters?’ She asked.

‘Two younger brothers, and you?’

‘I have one older brother, Andrea. He and his wife Sarah live in England. But right now,’ she told him brightly. ‘I want to hear about yours.’

‘Charles,’ Robert took a deep breath. ‘There’s a crazy for you. Will try anything at least once and is afraid of absolutely nothing. Before mom died she used to say that he would be the death of her.’

‘I’m sorry.’ She commiserated and placed a finger on his arm.

It felt as if a ladybird had made a pit stop. ‘One gets used to it.’

‘So, was Charles the death of her?’

‘No, she had cancer. Now William... William is a sensitive boy and tragedies affect him deeply; maybe because he lost her so young. He is also very talented, an exquisite poet.’

‘I live here.’

Glancing at the freshly painted house and manicured garden, Robert nodded approval.

‘After helping me carry these books I feel awful that I can’t invite you in, papa’s rules.’ She told him apologetically.

‘Not to worry, my lady.’ He bowed.

She giggled. ‘Thank you, Robert.’

‘Have a nice day and I’ll see you tomorrow.’ Waiting until she was in the house, he returned to the park.

‘Mama is not too bad but papa is strict.’ Sofia said as they sat on the grass.

They had taken to spending time in the park, as it was mostly safe from prying eyes. She had never had cause to dislike her neighbours but one might innocently mention seeing them together. Michael Andriotti was not one for allowing anything he imagined out of his control.

Robert was curious about her family, so she explained how they had immigrated from Greece ten years previously and owned the local grocery store. ‘But,’ she added with a smile. ‘Must be a Greek thing because what he is really interested in is hotels. So he’s saving for his perfect place.’

‘Is that what he calls it?’

‘Yes, but mama doesn’t really want to hear about it because he has a heart condition. She believes pursuit of this reckless idea might kill him.’

‘She might have a point; then again, it’s not as if he would run the place singlehandedly.’

Sofia nodded. ‘Oh but he complains endlessly at her unfairness, and only calms down when Andrea is here.’ Sofia continued. ‘Though, it wasn’t always like that. When Andrea met Sarah – she was holidaying here from England – there were constant fights. Papa wanted to know nothing about her; she wasn’t Greek, couldn’t cook, blonde, too thin, too this and that, the list was endless. Andrea completely ignored him and followed her to London.’

‘How did he take that?’

‘Not well, but we weren’t aware of his problem then. Although, he seems to feel worse when he is not getting his way.’

‘It’s called the martyr syndrome. I ignore it. What do they do?’

She smiled. ‘They run an inn. It’s the Andriotti thing, we love to serve.’

‘Then that also explains why you want to teach.’

‘Sorry I haven’t asked before, but what do you do?’

Robert shifted on the grass. 'Right now, I'm pretending to be an architect.'

'Pretending,'

'I went to University but gave it up last June. That did not go down well with my father. So it's eighteen months down the drain.' He announced sarcastically. 'And he does not approve of what I really want to do.'

'Which is what?' She asked curiously.

'Photography. According to him, it's not a career, and definitely not worthy of a Powell.'

'Yes, fathers are very hard to please.'

'Anyway, let's just leave it because I usually get upset. So, are you an aunty yet?' He teased.

'No. Quite unfairly, papa tells whoever wants to listen that they will remain childless because they refused to follow good advice – his, naturally.' She looked thoughtful. 'If they suddenly announced that she was expecting, he would probably have cardiac arrest. I don't know which is worse, to die of disappointment or happiness. Either way you are still dead.'

'For sure,' he pushed the drawing pad aside and regarded her. Unable to control himself any longer, he reached for her face and very softly let his lips brush hers. She didn't move, her eyes merely following his. As his pulse raced and urged him on, he stroked the soft cheek and let her go. 'I think it's time you went home.'

Sitting behind his desk, Robert swivelled the chair around to stare at the wall. Dozens of girls had crossed his path but none had affected him the way Sofia did. She was innocent, straightforward, and often aroused feelings of guilt as he remembered she was barely eighteen.

Nevertheless, she was like a fever, occupying his mind like no one else, almost driving him insane as he longed to touch her.

'Robert,' Benjamin broke into his daydream. 'Go get me Louw's plans. Broken leg or not this drawing from home is causing unnecessary upheaval. I want those blueprints here, today.'

‘Sorry father,’ Robert glanced at the time. ‘Wild horses would not drag me from what I have planned.’

Benjamin looked as if he were about to explode; however, he asked calmly. ‘Yes, tell me about what it is you do that Powells – where you owe your undivided attention – cannot keep you away from.’

Robert grabbed his leather jacket. ‘Ask someone else. Besides, I had mother’s car taken to the garage and have to pick it up.’

Benjamin acquired an expression of displeasure that would have intimidated anyone else. ‘You dare say no to me?’

‘Why not, it’s the seventies, the age of selfishness, debauchery, and disobedience. Didn’t you know that all kids have gone mad?’ Robert grinned, and waving, disappeared down the corridor.

‘Where are we?’ Sofia stared in awe at the large house.

‘My backyard. We have a guest-house by the pool and Munro prepared something special.’

‘Your butler... what will he tell your father?’

‘Nothing. He was loyal to mother and now is to my brothers and me.’ Accelerating up the driveway, Robert parked the red MG under a tree.

She gasped as she saw the beautifully decorated interior. ‘Should we even be here?’

‘If father can have slob traipsing all over the place, why not us?’ Opening a drawer, he took out a camera and started clicking.

She touched the back of a chair and sat down. ‘Yours?’ She pointed to the walls covered in black and white photographs. ‘They’re wonderful.’

‘Glad I impress someone.’ He gave her a lopsided smile. ‘Which is why they are here and not at the house. It’s my double-edged sword.’

Turning in the chair, she hooked a leg over the side. ‘Explain,’

‘Design is design, right? not where father is concerned. So half my talent is commended and the other half is reviled. I’m so tired of counting discussions, disagreements, and disputes I’ve had since my mother’s death.’

‘So he wants you to design but not with a camera.’ She pointed at the walls again. ‘Pity, you’re excellent. Of course I’ve never seen your other designs.’

‘The problem is that I’m not bad at those either. But this is my dream, the reason why I quit architecture school, but somehow, he bamboozled

me into joining Powells Inc., where I draw every day. And I feel like an animal caught in a trap. But let's leave all the complaining for another day. Today, we are going to have a grand time.' Offering her a hand, he led her to the table Munro had prepared.

Sofia smiled.

Noticing, he asked curiously. 'What are you smiling about?'

'Is this a date?'

He returned the smile. 'Well, I didn't want to label it, but it sort of is.'

The meal was exceptional, and she told him to thank Munro for taking such care to please them.

Robert nodded, and she had no idea how much better everything tasted as he gazed at her. Innocently, she couldn't hide how breathless she felt when their eyes locked and he was finding the exercise quite the aphrodisiac.

Suddenly, she announced, 'Mother Superior finally told us today that the convent is closing at the end of the year.'

'Why?' He gathered a few juice bottles and started mixing two drinks.

'Financially viable, upkeep, expensive, and public schools.' She arched her brows. 'The words I remember from her long speech during assembly.'

'It's not really going to affect you, is it?'

Sofia accepted the drink offered. 'No, I'll be off to teacher's college. It's still sad; I wanted to teach there.'

Holding her hand, he led her to the sofa.

Sipping the drinks in silence, their eyes met with anticipation and promises not yet made. Nervously, she swallowed the glass's contents and stared at its emptiness.

He couldn't understand how such a simple reaction could turn him on. Taking the glass away, he pulled her up with him, leaned over, and kissed her. Just short of twenty-one, he was Valentino in comparison. Dating since seventeen, he had a few years in the art of lovemaking, Sofia... At eighteen, he wondered if she had ever held a boy's hand, but her eager responses were enough to drive any numb male heart crazy. Her eyes so beautiful filled with desire that he couldn't have stopped had a truck crashed through the wall. Leading her to the bedroom, he kept asking if she was okay, if she liked what he did, if he should stop...

‘Never stop,’ her breath was warm and sweet between kisses. ‘Teach me.’

So he guided her into a world where only sensations existed, where neither was in control, where everything became a blur of wondrous delight. He had always speculated why the comparison of girls and flowers but as he gazed into her eyes as she gave herself to him, he thought of orchids. Beautiful white orchids that seemed fragile but could withstand the strongest blizzard. He swore under his breath as he held her tightly in his arms. ‘I’m sorry— No, I’m not, I just wasn’t thinking.’

She closed her eyes, letting the tears escape.

He was startled to hear a sob. ‘Sofia, look at me.’

She turned slowly.

In feather-like gestures, he kissed the tears away. ‘Did you think I brought you here only for this?’

She nodded.

‘I admit; it has been on my mind ever since I laid eyes on you, but it’s not the only reason. Don’t you know that I love you, that only you can make me this happy?’

Her voice came unsteadily. ‘I’m not a mere conquest?’

‘You have got it all wrong.’ He put gentle hands to her face. ‘You are the conqueror for you have vanquished me.’

Robert pushed the motorcycle into the garage and began driving the MG permanently. Benjamin watched with nervous interest and wondered if he was not about to regret having given his first-born the chance he often doubted he deserved. Instead, Robert surprised him, having a commitment to work seldom seen in anyone young. Reluctantly, Benjamin nodded approval, congratulating himself for having exercised patience.

Born to dirt-poor parents in London, Benjamin had left at age fifteen after losing both to some disease he could barely recall, promising to return only after making his first million.

Just able to scrape enough money together to pay for a voyage that took him away from the dreary existence, he found himself on the shores of South Africa. There, he realised that one could make a fortune, if one

knew how; Benjamin Powell did. As he first walked the streets of Cape Town and later those of Johannesburg, he noticed everywhere he went new buildings darting up. Wasting no time, he joined a construction company as a bricklayer, attended night classes, and read every scrap of information possible.

Never spending an unnecessary penny, he had accumulated a small fortune by his twenty-second birthday, with which he started Powells.

A man of power needs a certain kind of woman and he made certain he found the best. Miss Elaine Nichols was not only a beautiful only child but also extremely wealthy – her family having made their fortune in diamonds.

They were married within months and Robert soon made his appearance in the world. Two more sons followed; Charles and William, and Benjamin knew that he had started an empire. Many tried to emulate him, few succeeded, and countless envious at how easy everything seemed for him. Money, power, position; he had them all.

Then tragedy struck. Elaine began complaining of a pain in her stomach but instead of going to the doctor for diagnosis and treatment, she took to consuming large amounts of alcohol to numb it. When she finally collapsed into a coma and died, no one knew if the cancer or the alcohol had killed her.

Subsequently, women came and went through Benjamin's life and he discovered that his freedom had become a target for nubile socialites, the last being more determined than the previous. Stubbornly, he hardened his heart. His sons and their futures mattered, especially Robert's. He needed no woman's interference.

Now, Benjamin watched his eldest son proudly, aware that Robert had over the months become happier and more dashing. Just a pity he had dropped out of Architect School. A Powell with talent and formal education – something Benjamin regretted not possessing – was exactly what Powells needed.

Curiosity growing, Benjamin questioned Robert about his interests, but the more he tried to discover, the more secretive the boy became. "Where the hell does he go?" He wondered until he could contain himself no longer. 'Get me Hamilton.' He demanded from his secretary.

Hamilton was in his mid-thirties, with a talent for getting things done in mysterious ways. He snooped around sites, men's working areas, and didn't shy away from a few dirty tricks to get the boss a contract or two, and he always had papers, files, or folders. 'You sent for me, Mr Powell?'

'Yes.' Benjamin motioned him in. 'From Monday, you will follow my son, Robert.'

'Sir?' Even Hamilton was surprised.

'I have no idea what he does, where he goes, who he sees.'

'Just follow?'

'Take pictures, get names, the usual.' A wave of the hand dismissed Hamilton, his blue eyes glinting displeasure.

Two weeks later, Hamilton had a pile of photographs, a report of intensely researched information, and a giant headache. 'Here, Mr Powell,' he handed over the large envelope.

Benjamin poured the contents onto the desk and picked a photograph. A smile spread on his lips. 'At least he has taste.' Then he picked another. 'What's this?'

'A grocery—'

'I can see that!' Benjamin grabbed the file. 'What's this child's name?'

'Andriotti. When I first heard it I thought it might be Italian, it's Greek.'

'Is there a difference? Is this serious?' Benjamin thundered.

Hamilton pointed to a picture where the young lovers lay in each other's arms. In the guesthouse's bed!

Benjamin was livid. Paging through the photographs, he stopped on the neat white house. 'I doubt the Taj Mahal would impress me right now. I slaved to get out of the gutter, travelled an ocean to make a new life, and now I'm going to let my son drag me back there? Not bloody likely!'

'Just as you succeeded, so have they, Mr Powell. In fact, Mr Andriotti is considering some excellent opportunities in hotels—'

'Hotels?' He ground the word out. 'Leave me, I need to think.'

'So, who is doing what these school holidays?' Robert queried over dinner one evening in March.

‘Father wants to drag us to England.’ The eighteen-year-old Charles told him. ‘I’d rather go to Durban with my friends. The water is still warm.’

‘Me too,’ William nodded.

Everyone knew Benjamin was a workaholic, who went nowhere during the year, unless it involved Powells. The only time he condescended on himself was three weeks over Christmas and only because the construction fraternity closed. However, in the last ten years, he had taken to making trips back to England and developed a friendship with James Dawes, who was quickly becoming one of Europe’s most sought-after architects.

‘Work?’ Robert queried.

‘Not quite.’ Benjamin said, his mind trying to formulate the plan that still eluded him.

‘I’d rather go to Greece. The cost is the same and to be honest, I have no wish to see Janet so soon after Christmas.’ Janet was James’ daughter, who, somehow, tested everyone’s sanity. When younger, her attitude had amused him, now, he found it annoying.

Dreamily, Robert recalled that afternoon. They had spent a crazy time in the guesthouse and he had given Sofia an engraved ring with his personal design of two entwined letters, R and S.

‘So,’ he asked as they tumbled onto the bed. ‘When can I ask your father to start dating you in public?’

‘I will have to be out of school, but I’m not sure about college.’ She knew her father’s views on dating non-Greeks, whom he considered akin to heathens. She was too young and inexperienced to win a battle of wills and there was no way she was going to bring his wrath down on her, because she would never survive not seeing Robert. Then, there was also his heart. She often suspected him of blatantly using it as an excuse to get his way. But whether he did or not, she couldn’t tempt fate.

‘It’s not exactly forever.’ Robert kissed her. He would marry her tomorrow if he could. ‘What are you doing this Easter?’

‘My mom and I are going to visit my sick grandmother. Know where Lindos is now?’ She teased.

‘Looked it up; it’s on an island called Rhodes, near Turkey. I expect there is a hotel?’

‘More than one, why?’

‘Mustn’t forget to give me your address, I’ll make sure I find you.’

She threw her arms around his neck, pulling him down to her. ‘Oh, Robert.’

Gazing at his father now, Robert hoped Benjamin wasn’t about to become difficult. It had been a happy day; he absolutely didn’t want it to end on a sour note.

Making an extraordinary effort, Benjamin hid his rage. ‘What is wrong with Janet? We have known her forever and her father is undoubtedly the best architect.’ He gave Robert an accusing look. ‘Something you should be considering. She is also very beautiful and—’

‘Loaded.’ Charles finished. ‘Father, if you heard a donkey had a penny you would find him attractive.’

‘Are you implying money is all I care about?’ Benjamin blustered. ‘But you can’t deny she is lovely.’

‘And she would be lovelier if she married Robert.’ William joined in. ‘Father, can’t you see he couldn’t care less if she were the queen of Sheba?’

‘Yes.’ Irritation showing, Benjamin waved a hand dismissively. ‘Do whatever you wish.’ In fact, that was probably advisable so he could formulate the plan that would get rid of Miss Andriotti for good.

‘Impressive.’ Benjamin flipped through the designs. ‘I didn’t expect you to draw while on holiday.’

A smile appeared on Robert’s face. ‘I had some free time.’

‘Talent like yours should be encouraged and that is what I am constantly trying to do. Why don’t you go back to school?’ Seeing Robert’s face, Benjamin added quickly. ‘Actually, it’s not school I had in mind. The idea came to me while I was in London. You should go over. Having talent alone is not enough, it needs to be honed, and who better to do that than James Dawes? You should want to be, not good but excellent. Powells is yours but you have to improve it with a formal education, something I never acquired, and James would guide you. Do you know what that means?’

‘Had you suggested it in January, I’d have jumped at the idea, now... sorry father, I can’t.’

‘If your mother were here, she would agree with me.’ Benjamin knew that mentioning Elaine always touched a chord.

‘Perhaps,’ Robert said and left the office.

Benjamin watched his son’s retreating figure, his mouth set in a straight line, the icy blue eyes blazing. Opening a drawer, he took out a photograph and stared at it for a second. Throwing it back into the drawer, he banged it shut.

Robert discovered that having an idea put into one’s head effectively made it impossible to ignore. Just as he saw the benefits of going, he also knew that leaving Sofia was unthinkable, however tempting the offer might sound, or for however short a time. She meant more to him than any job or money. After they married, it would be different. As he could already see their idyllic life.

‘You’re not paying attention.’ She noticed days later.

‘Just thinking about something my father is driving me crazy about.’

Reaching for his hand on the grass, she held it tight. ‘Can I help?’

He told her.

‘England! When?’ An instant sadness appeared in her drowning eyes.

Lifting her face, he wiped the tears tenderly. ‘I can’t go without you.’

‘But it’s your future, Robert.’

‘You are my future.’ Pulling her into an embrace, he held her close.

‘Besides, I’m not saying no, just postponing.’

Busy with homework that afternoon, she recalled Robert’s news. Guilt filled her presently. She wanted him to grab the opportunity, yet she hoped he kept saying no. A black car stopped in front of the house and she watched it for a moment as it was half-hidden behind a bush. Imagining the man was visiting one of her neighbours, she was startled when the doorbell rang.

‘Good afternoon, may I help you?’ She wondered what he would try sell her.

The well-dressed man surprised her. ‘I hope so, Miss Andriotti. I’m Benjamin Powell, Robert’s father.’

‘Oh! Please, come in.’ She told him in confusion. ‘Is something the matter?’

‘It depends. I would also appreciate it if you didn’t mention that I have been to see you. Robert is a trifle emotional lately and I don’t want to upset him any further.’

She had often heard that secrecy was the devil’s playground, which meant that she often felt contrite about hiding her relationship with Robert. As she looked at Benjamin now, she had no doubt that he was about to suggest something she would like even less. ‘Would you like to sit down, perhaps have a drink?’ Whatever her feelings, he was Robert’s father.

‘Nothing, thanks.’ Benjamin made himself comfortable in an armchair. ‘Robert is very talented, but right now he is being stubborn and making an awful mistake. Let me be brutally honest so neither of us has delusions as to what is being discussed. You are holding him back.’

She gasped and opened her mouth to retort.

Benjamin waved her still. ‘I am a man who aspires for distinction and when it comes to my family, I am exacting.’ He rose. ‘Powells belongs to Robert and to one day run it successfully, he needs to broaden his horizons, to learn and grow. He’s doing nothing of the sort here. However, it seems he won’t go anywhere unless you give him permission to do so. You have a hold on him I never imagined possible, something I don’t like but obviously have to accept.’

‘He didn’t listen to me before he met you, came and went as he pleased, but at least spent eighteen months in Architect School. Now, he won’t budge. Is it fair to expect him to give up his future?’ He fixed his cold gaze on her. ‘You think you know Robert but I have been his father far longer and let me tell you what I do know. One day, this exciting romance will become old news. I’ve seen it happen before and it’s never pleasant. What will you do then, when he can no longer stand the sight of you? When recriminations and accusations fly? How can you destroy the best chance he will ever have?’

‘Mr Powel,’ she began as calmly as she could. ‘I never asked and I definitely never told him not to go. He made the decision on his own, even before I knew.’ She announced, highly stung by his insinuation.

‘Come, Miss Andriotti. Women know perfectly well words don’t have to be spoken for men to understand the message. So my question remains, is it fair?’

Neither was what he was doing but that was not going to stop him. ‘Mr Powell,’ she said as she battled with her furious heart. ‘What is it you want me to do?’

‘Tell him to grab this opportunity, for another might not come along. It’s true I have money to do almost anything, but not everyone can receive training under one of the world’s best architects, and that is what he’s refusing. Therefore, do I have your word on this matter?’

He did not offer his hand and she knew that she had no wish to touch him in any way.

After seeing him to the door, she wandered through the house as if dazed. She cried, talked to herself, and although disliking it intensely, agreed with him.

Once she convinced Robert of the advantages, possibilities, and opportunities, there was no turning back. She cried night and day, stopped eating, and became a nervous wreck, but never did she let him see the deep hurt, or that the idea hadn’t been hers. Often, she imagined that her heart had exploded for it felt as if it was having trouble fitting in her chest. But now, there was nothing to do but bear it.

‘I faithfully promise to write and send photographs often. It will be good practice. I’ll try my best to come home after three months, but Christmas is definitely on.’ He gazed at her longingly and saw the brimming eyes. ‘Why do you push me when I have no inclination? I love you so much, it’s breaking my heart.’

‘Just promise that you won’t forget me.’

‘You say the craziest things sometimes, I love you forever.’ He whispered against her face, touching the silky hair and kissing the mouth that could give him so much pleasure.

She waved as he climbed into the car and drove away. How would she survive?

Standing in the elevator, self-consciousness filled her, and tightening the jersey about her, she stared at the pattern on her shoes.

‘Yes?’ The secretary looked at her as she stopped in front of the desk.  
‘Is it possible—?’

‘Hello.’ Benjamin greeted surprised as he appeared in his office’s doorway, then motioned for her to follow him quickly. Sinking into the leather chair, he grinned. ‘So, how may I be of assistance?’

‘Now that I’m here, I feel silly.’

‘No, no, go ahead. What do you need?’

‘Robert’s address. I know he didn’t have one when he left but I expect you might know where he is staying.’ Then it occurred to her. “Robert didn’t know because then I would know.”

His next words confirmed her sense of foreboding. ‘I’m afraid he is not going to be in London for a while. Anything else I can help you with, perhaps some money?’

She saw how utterly phoney everything about him was, seeing the smile of a high priest about to sacrifice a victim at the altar. A blank expression plastered itself on her face as he began to ramble. And had he just offered her money? One thing she knew, this man had no intention of helping her or of bringing Robert back, not even giving her a simple address, for this had been his plan from the beginning. What a fool she had been!

But however smart he was, they were not complete idiots either; Robert had her address. Glancing around the room, she noticed how screamingly expensive everything was. Wide mahogany desk, dark shelves filled with leather-bound volumes, blue silk drapes on the windows and a large painting behind his desk. She would forever associate the artist with this man; she didn’t like either.

Patting his breast pocket, he eyed her with interest, as he was almost certain she had come for a pay-out, and he had already written the cheque, a handsome amount in anyone’s language. He studied her for a second. ‘Robert may not think so, but he has lost interest. There is a young woman in London, Janet; and that is the only union I will support.’ Benjamin’s face became hard. ‘You may not have known it then but the deal is that there will be no further contact. Should you endeavour to do so, this envelope will find its way to your father.’ Opening it, he spread photographs before her.

She stared in disbelief. There they walked, laughed, kissed, and... Her head shot up. 'What about...' she said with difficulty.

'Perhaps you should discuss that with your father.' He frowned, thinking her the most infuriating person he had ever had the misfortune to encounter. There was something that he intensely disliked about her, and it wasn't just that she was foreign. People who cowered and begged were easy to control, Sofia although young, was not one of them. He would never control her, much less Robert if he married her.