

Prologue—Vector

Vector sauntered down the streets of Catania with a confident swagger. Females all around him couldn't help but look his way, and he pretended to ignore them with a disaffected air. He firmly believed that he was the alpha male in that neighborhood, and he carried that presumption around like a badge of arrogance.

He had neither time nor attention to spare for these females, however. A cute, middle-aged American lady of his acquaintance had been speaking lately (and frequently) about taking him back to the Stati Uniti with her, and he wanted to encourage this line of thinking by presenting her with a special gift when he saw her this evening.

Vector had lived his entire life here in Catania, and had never once set foot outside of Sicily. Like many of his generation, Vector was aimless, without ambition or plans for the future. Growing up on the streets of Sicily tended to create such attitudes.

Life was relaxed here.

The miles of coastline were nearly always visible from almost every point on the sloping streets of Catania. The weather was generally mild all year, and today the sun

was warm and bright. Sitting by a street cafe, watching the whitecapped waves that distinguished the cerulean sea from the azure sky above, it was tempting to allow life to carry on around you.

Catania's population was largely made up of two castes: an elderly, retired segment with no goals beyond a daily cup of coffee and a newspaper, and a youthful, unemployed segment with the exact same goals.

Still, something deep inside Vector's brain wondered if there was more to life out there.

Some commotion down by the docks indicated that the daily ferry from Malta was coming in, and Vector decided to go check it out. The ferry usually brought a lot of visitors, including Maltese merchants, to Catania, and there were usually all kinds of interesting gifts available at the docks when it arrived.

Vector hurried down the sloping roads to the harbor. The usual smells of freshly-caught seafood assailed his nose, but he didn't let that distract him from his intended mission.

He looked around for a decent vantage point, a good place to sit and watch people disembark. The combination of the sun and salt water in the breeze was pleasant, and for a few minutes, Vector closed his eyes and just sat there, enjoying life.

Soon enough, Vector heard the faint sounds that he was intently listening for.

Scratching, and squeaking.

He opened his eyes and spotted it. In a pile, stacked up on the wooden slats of the dock, were several sacks of Italian grains and pulses waiting to be loaded onto the next outgoing ferry, headed to Malta.

A small hole had been torn into the corner of one of these bags, and protruding from that hole was a thin, hairless tail about three inches long. Probably fresh off the ferry, the imprudent rodent hadn't even made it to solid ground before getting distracted by the promise of food.

Vector cautiously approached the pile of sacks, not wanting to frighten away the mouse. He needn't have worried, however. The nimble little animal managed to turn its body around and peek its tiny head out of the sack hole, looking straight into Vector's eyes.

There was no fear in those beady little eyes. It would be hard to ascribe a different emotion to the mouse, but it might have been curiosity.

Vector stared back at the mouse, twitching imperceptibly. The mouse crawled out from the hole it had made in the sack and sniffed the air, its tiny whiskers vibrating

as they felt the sea breeze.

Whatever it smelled only emboldened it further. Vector watched with astonishment as the mouse scurried right up to him, and then sat back on its tiny haunches and raised its front paws in the air, as if it was a young child asking for a hug.

Vector had never seen anything like this. With one paw, he batted at the mouse, who fell over but immediately stood up again to face him. Vector pounced on the mouse with both paws next, pinning it to the ground. The mouse didn't seem to mind in the slightest.

Vector liked playing with his food. But this game wasn't any fun.

Frustrated, he bit the mouse in the back of the neck, snapping it instantly.

An old woman sat on a nearby bench, holding a daily cup of coffee and the newspaper. Despite the warm sun, she was bundled up with a shawl around her head, perhaps to keep the light wind from ruffling her hair. She looked down from her crossword puzzle and noticed Vector looking up at her, still holding a dead mouse in his teeth. "Scio!" she muttered, and nudged him away with her foot.

Chapter One

I still vividly remember my first encounter with T. sic. As my luck would have it, I was almost right in the middle of ground zero when it all began.

T. sic is how the public quickly and colloquially referred to *Toxoplasma siculus*. The siculus part of the name, although it sounded like “sickness,” actually meant that it originated in Sicily, which is where I was trying to enjoy some Mediterranean time. Alas, it wasn’t meant to last.

My naturally nomadic lifestyle had led me into a pretty lucrative job. I was ghostwriting for a travel blog; you know, one of those websites that is supposedly maintained by some pretty blonde girl who “just wanted to stretch her legs” so she dropped out of college and now travels around the world all by herself.

I’m not claiming that all of those websites are fake. But it’s obviously an alluring scenario for a wide range of readers. You snatch up a domain name with some variation on the word wanderlust, and suddenly your audience believes that they just have to travel to some exotic locale and they are guaranteed to get laid.

So as it tends to happen, a bunch of extremely ordinary, unattractive, and unadventurous individuals decided to buy laptops and capitalize on that blogging business by hiring models and writers to submit their sexy photos and intriguing articles. For obvious reasons, I was hired for the latter position.

That morning, I was sitting down to breakfast at the Antico Caffè Spinnato that had become one of my customary hangouts in Palermo. My particular writing niche was international cuisine, because more than once my readers had complimented the way I breathed aroma into my dining descriptions. Today I was enjoying one of the Sicilian peculiarities, the brioche con gelato, which was an ice cream sandwich that the locals served for breakfast. The buttery brioche bun was spongy and absorbent, perfect for preventing any of that sweet, creamy pistachio-flavored gelato from escaping...

My attention was torn away from my meal by an argument that seemed to be developing across the street. I have an unfortunate tendency to eavesdrop—I've never been able to control my curiosity—and it seemed like this couple was on the verge of a disastrous division.

“So where were you last night?” the man was demanding to know. From his shirt collar that was unbuttoned halfway down his chest, I took a wild guess that he was Italian. His accent seemed to confirm my suspicion. I looked down at my own shirt and unbuttoned it a little. I wanted to fit in, after all.

“I don't see how that's any of your business!” the woman shouted back at him. The woman both sounded and acted like an American tourist, one who had probably

extended her stay for a few months after meeting an exotic local. Pretty much the exact audience that I was writing travel blog articles for. Even though she was visibly angry, I couldn't help but admire how pretty her face was. Her chin-length black hair framed her scowling face in a rather cute way. Although I would never try to justify her boyfriend's behavior, I could see how he could easily become jealous.

"If you're with me, it's my business!"

"Well, then I don't want to be with you!"

"Fine, have it your way!"

"FINE!"

"You give me nothing but headache, zoccola!" And with that, he stepped off of the curb, directly into the path of an oncoming truck.