

# **A Sweetheart Deal?**

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THIRTY ONE  
Villa Lucci, Pieve Fosciana, Italy

Alda Lucci was entering the kitchen with a bunch of freshly picked wildflowers when the phone jingled. Brushing the dirt from her hands, she picked up the receiver.

“*Pronto.*”

“Alda? Luigino, *buona sera*. It’s a lucky day when I speak to the beauty before the beast. Gianni’s not listening, I hope?”

Hearing nothing coming from the other room, she answered, “No, he’s still napping.”

“Ah leave sleeping dogs, eh? Guess who I’m waiting for...”

“Stefano? Don’t play with my heart Luigino.”

“His plane is due momentarily. We will drive to Lucca today. Promise fulfilled, no?”

“Where? Where in Lucca is he staying?”

“He has a very fine room at Hotel Ilaria. I know, I know, but Gianni insisted. The man can be the devil himself. He enjoys twisting the knife.”

Alda paused.

“Alda? Are you still there? The phone service here is no better than two can and a string.”

“I’m coming to Lucca. Bring Stefano to your office. Not a word to Gianni.”

“Done. Don’t answer the next time the phone rings. I must give Gianni the news. Alda, I beg you, please tread carefully. If Gianni finds out that you and I... I shudder to think. *Ciao bella,*” Luigino said.

Alda waited for the click then raised her voice.

“*Si*, of course I understand, I’d be happy to help out. No, it’s no imposition at all. Then it’s settled, I’ll see you in Lucca. No, no thanks are necessary. *Si, si*, I’ll try to get there as soon as possible Concetta. *Ciao*.”

Alda hung up then bustled out of the kitchen to where Gianni was napping.

The phone immediately rang. Hearing her husband answer the phone, she burst into the room.

“Alda, I’m on the phone with Luigino; can’t this wait? Gianni balked.

“Gianni, *scusi*, but it’s a bit of an emergency. You remember Concetta’s daughter Lia, no? Well she’s needs someone to watch her children in Lucca overnight until noon tomorrow. It’s some family problem she needs to attend to, so I told Concetta I’d be happy to do it, it’s just for a day, you understand. She’s desperate and since...”

“*Si, si*, attend to the *bambini*, just let me conduct my business without any further interruptions, please,” answered Gianni. He dismissed Alda with a wave of his hand.

“*Tanti grazie*, I’ll go pack. Signora Posimato will stop by with your dinner,” said Alda. uncrossing her fingers behind her back before she exited.

Gianni turned his attention back to the phone.

“Luigino, sorry, some silliness with Alda and *bambini*, that woman will travel to the ends of the earth to change a diaper.”

“Thank god that my Bettina flees at the sight of the little ones,” replied Luigino.

“Enough with that. Tell me good news. He arrives when?”

“Any minute now. Adrianna and I are driving him to Lucca. I suggest that you postpone seeing him until first thing in the morning. Let him settle in and more

importantly, let Adrianna weave her spell. I'll tell him you're unavailable due to doctor's order or some such nonsense.

"Ah, Adrianna. Good thinking, lawyer. One look at her perfect ass and Stefano will forget why he's here."

"*Ciao*," said Luigino.

Gianni placed the phone back then reached into his humidor and extracted a maduro double corona. He'd had been saving the Cuban beauty for today.

*Stefano's back on Italian soil*, he thought. Those sweet words were echoing in Gianni's head when the phone rang again.

"*Pronto*."

"Gianni. *Come stai? Va bene?*"

"Dio! Madonna, what a surprise! You old fox, it's been forever. *Merda*, I hope you can hear me Claudio, it sounds like you're calling from China. I'm well, thank heaven. And you?"

"They haven't called the undertaker yet. Gianni? Gianni? Gianni, are you there? I hope you can hear me. If you're up for a visit, I'll drive up later. It's been far too long."

"*Si, si* come up, I'm here alone, Alda's off babysitting so we won't be disturbed. It's been too long, too long, my friend."

"I should be there by five... six the latest. *Ciao*."

"*Ciao*."

Gianni hung up the phone again. He rubbed his palms together in glee.

*Alda's gone, Claudio's coming. Luigino's taking good care of Stefano. The day is turning out exceptionally well. Let's see... what bottle of wine should I uncork? I've got an excellent barolo, and this is the perfect time to open it.*

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Claudio had rung off but a moment when he heard Fabrizzio knock then enter.

*"Capo, you wished to speak to me?"*

"How goes it with Ilaria?" asked Claudio.

*"Va bene, we meet tomorrow in Lucca. Your daughter is being cautious. No fear, by this time tomorrow I'll have her swooning with dreams of fame and fortune."*

Eyeing the young man's chiseled good looks, wry grin and inner confidence, Claudio panicked.

*Good God, he thought, I'm afraid that's not the only thing that will get her swooning. That's the face of a very hungry wolf.*

Fabrizzio continued, "Dio, that's not all. What started out as diversion for your daughter, has all the earmarks of success. Orders from all the major outlets have been flooding in. We... er... you and Ilaria are the next fashion triumph."

"Hah, I knew I had pushed the right buttons. And filled the pockets of the right people."

Pleased with himself, Claudio pulled out a cigarette out and lit it with his Zippo.

He added, "Ilaria and I are not the only successful ones. In recognition of all your hard work, as of midnight you own forty-nine percent of Ilaria's new clothing line. Of

course, my daughter owns the other fifty-one. She is your boss. Of course, I am still in charge. *Capire?*”

Fabrizzio was visibly dazed.

“I... I don't know what to say... *Capo*... you honor me. Of course, I understand.”

“My daughter's many charms and great beauty will seduce the suckers. You provide the Massimo muscle to keep the trades in line. See to it that my daughter is untouched by the slimy end of the business. You protect her at all costs. One more thing: there might be a favor I might require from time to time, *Capire?*”

“*Capisco.*”

“Go prepare for your meeting. If I know my daughter, you will need all your wits about you tomorrow.”

“*Si, Si. Ciao capo.*”

After Fabrizzio left, Claudio picked up the stiletto. He flicked it open, jabbed the air, and said, “Take that, Gianni.”