



LIVIA
IN
ROME
BRUNA DE LUCA



*Chicken
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*For Bruno and Concetta –
the original Italian love story.*



If there was a law against treating your own daughter like a foreigner, Ma would've been arrested the minute we landed in Rome. First off, she apologizes to the border control officer for my British passport as if I'm a pineapple pizza she's smuggled into Italy. Then, the second we're out of the airport, she turns the hour-long journey to the hospital into one big guided tour – complete with a history lecture on the bus, a trivia marathon on the Metro, and now, as we walk the last stretch, she's still going.

'Look, Livia!' Ma stops for the millionth time, flinging her arms open at an enormous grassy field dotted with rocks and rubble. '*Il Circo Massimo*. Chariot races, gladiator battles, religious parades . . . this is where it all happened.' Her eyes go dreamy and nostalgic as if she witnessed the events in person.

'Wow, Ma! I know you're old, but I didn't think you were ancient,' I joke.

She tweaks my waist, making me jump. 'Don't be cheeky, *signorina*.'

I laugh and push her hand away. ‘Well, get moving and stop treating me like a tourist!’

We’re only a short walk from the hospital now, and the tiny river island in the middle of the Tiber where it’s been squatting for over four centuries – or so Ma tells me.

I grab my wheelie case and step on to a faded zebra crossing, only to lurch back as a horn blasts in my ear and a whoosh of hot, smoggy air whips my hair across my face. Trembling, I peel the strands from my sweaty skin, just in time to see one of my flip-flops bounce into the other lane and a man on a Vespa yelling ‘*turista!*’ at me, as if ‘tourist’ is a swearword.

Ma clamps her hand around my elbow and ushers me across the road as if I’m six instead of sixteen. ‘How about *I* stop treating you like a tourist, when *you* stop behaving like one. This isn’t Scotland, Livia. Traffic moves differently here – you can’t just assume people will stop. You have to make eye contact first.’

A sharp-suited man with a manicured beard is waiting for us on the pavement opposite, having cheated death to rescue my flip-flop. I hop-limp towards him and he holds it out to me with the very tips of his fingers, a chevron tyre stripe right down the middle of it.

‘Your . . . shoe, miss,’ he says in heavily accented

English, clearly deciding I'm a *straniera* – a foreigner – and not one of the chic locals who, I realize now, probably wouldn't be caught dead in flip-flops, even if it is the middle of July. I accept it, burning with embarrassment inside and out.

Ma thanks him, her smile verging on a leer the minute he walks away. 'He is *molto carino*, no? Perhaps he has a son who is just as cute.' She cranes her neck to keep him in her line of sight. 'Would you like me to ask?'

'*Ommioddio*, Ma. Stop, will you?'

Ma can be SO inappropriate. Probably because she has little-to-no human interaction outside of Pa and me. Sometimes I think she set up Caterina's Cat Casa because even *she* knows she's better suited to animals than people.

Pa was too tied up with his wedding shoots to come here with us, which is probably a blessing in disguise. You'd think being older than most of my friends' parents would make them stuffy and old-fashioned, but it's like they try to make up for it by going too far in the other direction. Way too far. Ever since Ma and I booked our flights, she and Pa have been teasing me about all the *bellissimi* Italian boys I'll meet this summer, insisting I'll fall in love and never want to come home – *like all the other foreign girls*. Because that's how they see me. Me! Their own flesh and blood. Foreign.

Well, this is my chance to prove them wrong. On both counts.

I was a little kid the last time I was in Rome, but this city's in my DNA. I know it in the bone-deep way birds know migration routes and salmon swim back to the stream they were born in (and, OK, because I have Google Maps). But mostly, I know it because our house in Edinburgh is a little piece of Italy; the food, the music, the TV channels, the bidet in the bathroom and, occasionally, swathes of home-made spaghetti drying on the clothes horse (only my best friend Isla's allowed round on those days).

My phone signal recovers from its recent stint in the bowels of hell – AKA the Rome Metro in summer – and a message from Isla pops up on the screen. She's sent a selfie of herself and a fluffy Maine Coon captioned 'me and your mum'. I smother a snort of laughter; the resemblance is spot on. Ma's 'embracing her grey', and with her old black box dye fading to orange and her patchy silver roots coming through, she's exactly like the tortoiseshell cat in the photo.

Isla's minding the moggies in their luxury cattery extension while we're away. But even when she's there and I'm here, she's in my head, gushing over boys I know she'd like and, more often, over the glazed fruit tarts in the *pasticceria* windows. I know her

so well; I've got an Inner Isla I carry everywhere.

Another ping. *Have you been to the hospital yet?*

I feel a rush of affection for my friend. Unlike my embarrassing parents, she knows why this trip is so important to me. I haven't seen my Nonna Adelina – Nina for short – since I was six years old, and Isla knows her absence has left a gap in my life – an empty space lurking in the background.

It's no wonder I don't feel like I truly belong in Scotland. There isn't anyone to belong *to*. I'm just stranded on the Isle of Ma and Pa with only a bunch of high-maintenance felines for company.

But Rome . . . I inhale deeply, breathing in the river Tiber's earthy scent, the fug of exhaust fumes and hot tarmac mixed in with the tantalizing aroma of food and coffee. Rome will be different.

Nina's here, just over the arched stone bridge up ahead. And while I'm sorry it's taken a slippery floor and multiple fractures to get us here, I'm kind of glad it happened. A family emergency is pretty much the only thing that would have prised Ma away from her precious cattery during the busy summer season. And now I have a chance to be a part of something bigger – part of Nina's life and the business that's been in our family for generations.