

Los Angeles, California

Sunday Afternoon, February 9, 2003

Adriana walked into the glittering glass-and-steel office complex on Wilshire Boulevard in Beverly Hills. The sign in the lobby, next to a giant statue of the buff and chesty golden Oscar, said it all: I LOVE MOVIES!

Romano Zennelli headed his own production company, Zenn Images. Films were his life. This was his building.

A security guard waved her through to the elevators. The place was bustling with activity. Oscar nominations were coming up; the marketing machine was working around the clock. Her father controlled everything. If he was going to be in on a Sunday, everyone else was expected to be in too.

He was seated behind a vast polished wooden desk in his top-floor office, dressed in a black golf shirt and dark pants. An impressive display of awards, including a real Oscar, sat on the credenza behind him.

Adriana kissed the top of his head and slid a glossy folio onto the desktop in front of him.

He picked it up. "What's this?"

She sank into a low custom black leather couch across from him. "It's Serge's latest screenplay. He'd appreciate it if you could take a peek at it."

He harrumphed and tossed it on top of a giant stack of papers on the floor without even asking what it was about. Bad sign. At least she could tell Serge she'd delivered it. Her father was a charming man when he wanted to be, but during the awards season he was wound tight. "So how's it going, Dad?" she said cheerfully. "Do you have a winner this year?"

He leaned back in his chair, cleared his throat, and raked his white hair with his fingers. His face had the deep-olive natural tan of a Southern Italian, and he gave the impression of being a decade

younger than his sixty years. “We’ve been roasted by some reviewers. Assholes. I’ve got the corporate jet ferrying members of my staff across the country. You know the scene. Parties every weekend and some weeknights. It’s total mayhem until it’s over.”

“Stressful.”

He nodded.

“I forget. When is the big event this year?”

“Nominees are to be announced on Tuesday. The awards won’t be presented until March twenty-third. Everyone’s working the PR.”

The phone buzzed. He answered it, barked a response, and slammed down the receiver, grumbling. “Do I have to make all the decisions around here?”

Adriana checked her watch. “I, ah...I don’t mean to take up your time on this—”

He put up his hand and cut her off. “No problem.” He flashed a condescending smile. “Actually, it’s a minor issue. I’m not sure it’s worth your time. Listen to your father. You can’t make any money on it.”

She stared into his eyes. “Why don’t you simply explain what the issue is? Let me decide if it’s worth my time. I’m a big girl now, Dad.”

“*Bene.*” He slapped his hands on the desktop and got up to join her on the couch. “I first screened a movie at Cannes in May 2001”—he sighed—“a remake of a French film I had acquired, sight unseen, and when I viewed it, I hated it. I thought I had bought a finished film, but the thing was a piece of shit. I wanted it recut, but the group that Chen woman works for refused.”

“Films France.”

“Yes. They insisted it be released before Christmas.”

“The same year?”

He nodded.

“What made it so bad?”

“Too slow, no action, and long. I wanted it cut down, reedited. I told them it needed more tension, a less sappy ending. I even suggested a new voice-over narration by an American star. The director, the pompous ass, refused to listen to any changes whatsoever, so I held it.” He tossed a hand in the air. “That’s the entire story. The Euro fuckers are pissed at me.”

“So much for creative collaboration. Have they threatened legal action against you?”

“Hinted at it. If they do, they won’t get anywhere. I’ll bury the bastards.” He slammed his fist on the armrest. “Then I’ll make sure it’s shown on poorly venues screens, at inopportune times, with no public-relations support.”

“How much did Mark know of this?”

“I explained the situation to your brother, just as I am to you now. He wouldn’t let it go. Said he’d found certain discrepancies in the financing, that we should—” He stopped himself and cleared his throat. “I warned him if he pursued it any further...”

“What?”

He sighed, pinched the bridge of his nose, and then leaned into her face so close she could smell the garlic he’d had at lunch. “You are not going to Strasbourg, Adriana.” He’d kept his voice level, but it seemed to her that it took considerable effort for him to do so. “*Capisci?*”

He rose and went over to the floor-to-ceiling windows.

She frowned. “*Non capisco*. In my opinion, the issue is merely a matter of bringing all sides to the table to negotiate—”

He didn’t let her finish. “*Cristo santo*, Addie,” he shouted, turning toward her, “I’m telling you. It’s not something you should get yourself involved in. My advice is to let it go.” His rant went on for

two minutes while he paced the floor in front of her. When he had finished, his face was red, and spittle drooled from the corner his mouth.

Adriana raised her chin in defiance and cleared her throat. In a calm voice, she said, “Isn’t it clear, Dad, that I am already involved? Mark left me that letter; Sophie Chen has invited me to the table to talk.”

“Didn’t you hear me? I’m ordering you to drop it. Now.” He waved his hand in the air. “Go back to Laguna Beach.”

She got up and shouldered her newly acquired secondhand Birkin.

He followed her as she headed toward the door.

“Addie, *mia cara*.” She felt a heavy hand on her shoulder. “*Ti prego*. Please.” He placed his fingers and palms together and shook them. “Say you’re not going to deliberately defy me.” It was as if a switch had been thrown. Now he was attempting emotional blackmail.

She swung around. “Look, I know you are under a lot of strain right now. We’ll talk again when I get back.” She paused and raised her eyebrows. “Unless, of course, there’s more you haven’t told me.”

He stared at her.

She left the building, angry tears welling in her eyes. If that’s how her father had spoken to Mark, no wonder he hadn’t let it go. Well, neither would she. She checked her watch and climbed behind the wheel. Plenty of time to stop by Rodeo Drive before heading to the airport. A new pair of Jimmy Choos would do wonders to lift her spirits.

Laguna Beach, California

The Previous Friday

Adriana Zennelli sat at her desk glaring at the cat outside her office window.

“Who do you suppose that Siamese belongs to?” she called to Gabrielle, her admin. “It’s creepy how it’s always sitting out there staring at me.” She kicked off her Christian Louboutins, rose from her chair, and walked barefoot over to the window.

The cat gave her a piercing glance then wrinkled its nose, bared its front teeth, and hissed.

“Scat, bad cat,” Adriana snarled, rapping her knuckles loudly against the pane. She stood on her tiptoes and watched as the meezzer, its tail lifted into the air, slinked off and disappeared behind the huge pink bougainvillea bush that swathed the front of the building. “Cats shouldn’t be allowed to roam freely,” she clucked.

Gabrielle stood in the doorway watching. “She has a right to be there.” She grinned. “Besides, I don’t blame her sitting in the sun like that. It’s such a lovely day.”

Adriana gazed beyond the rooftops toward the west. The afternoon sun glimmered off the sparkling blue Pacific Ocean, bathing the coast in a golden light. “It is that.” She sighed and returned to her desk. “But you just watch. She’ll be back in an hour to torment me. I have nightmares about that feline.” She selected a Waterman from the crystal bowl filled with an assortment of designer pens on her desk and glanced at her monitor.

Gabrielle put her hands on her hips and surveyed the messy office. Legal files were strewn on the floor, and piles of documents cluttered the credenza top. The phone rang, and she rushed back into the adjoining office.

Adriana listened.

“Zennelli and Zennelli Law Offices. *Ah oui. Bonjour. Oui, elle est là. Un moment...*” Gabrielle peeked around the corner, an elf-like expression on her face. “France calling.” She pointed to the phone and raised her eyebrows. “Sophie,” she mouthed.

Adriana frowned. Again? What was it about this time? She threw down her pen and picked up. “Adriana Zennelli speaking.”

Sophie Chen started with the usual polite conversation.

Adriana tapped her fingers on the desk and returned *la politesse* with patience. Finally, Sophie arrived at the reason for her call. “I think you should come here to discuss something,” she began.

Here was Strasbourg, France.

“Can’t we simply schedule a conference call?”

“I think *non*. It is imperative that we meet with you in person.”

“Okay,” Adriana said, “but before I agree to make the trip, can you provide me with a bit more information?”

“It involves Zenn Images.”

Her father’s firm. They’d already gone over that. “Anything new happen?”

“Let’s just say the situation is rather untoward.”

At eight o’clock, Adriana was still working at her desk when her cell phone buzzed. She picked it up and smiled. “*Ciao, Serge.*”

“Have you eaten?”

“No, and I’m starving. I only had a salad earlier.”

“Want to meet at Las Brisas?”

“Sure.” She definitely wanted to see him. “I can be there in ten minutes. Order me the house-specialty margarita, on the rocks.”

She picked up her Louis Vuitton bag, spritzed on her favorite Chanel perfume, and shot a glance at the darkened window. She hadn’t seen the cat. Where, she wondered, had it been for the past four hours? She grabbed her keys, locked the office door, and descended the stairs.

Zennelli and Zennelli occupied the entire second floor of the building; an antique store, Joie de Vivre, took up the ground level. A wrought-iron garden set, sculpture, and some paintings spilled from its open doorway onto the sidewalk. The proprietor was just moving the items back inside before closing up her shop.

“Night, Joy,” Adriana called.

“I got in a Birkin on consignment today, Addie.”

“Wow, a Birkin bag! Really?”

“It’s in good shape, too. Interested?”

Adriana nodded. “Definitely. I’ll stop in to see it tomorrow morning.”

Adriana had met Serge Durocher six months before in the South of France. He was in his late twenties, a struggling scriptwriter who, although he hadn’t quite gotten his first break, secretly dreamed of directing movies in Tinseltown one day.

Serge was waiting for her at a table on the outdoor terrace. He stood, put his arms around her shoulders and kissed her. “Our drinks just arrived, *chérie*,” he said as he held her chair. He was wearing a green turtleneck sweater, a light jacket, and gray slacks.

Seeing his handsome face made Adriana feel suddenly less tired. “I’m sorry I’m so late. I was swamped at the office all day. Then a client in France called this afternoon. Well, to make a long story short, I need to make a trip to Strasbourg.” She frowned. “Not that I can afford the time away.”

“When are you leaving?”

She shrugged. “Sunday night, after I meet with my father.”

The waiter brought a basket of chips and large bowls of salsa and guacamole.

When he had left, Serge leaned forward and whispered. “You know what’s coming up on Friday?”

She took a sip of her margarita. “No. What?”

He leaned back and smiled. “Ze day for lovers.”

She laughed. “Oh yeah. The fourteenth.”

He filled a chip with guacamole. “And, the most romantic city in the world is where?”

She furrowed her brow. “What are you getting at, Serge?”

He ate his chip and selected another one. “Why don’t I meet you in Paris for Valentine’s Day?”

She smiled at him. “Lovely thought, I admit, but I’ll probably be back by then.”

“Oh, such a shame.” He pursed his lips. “Just when I was planning to be there.”

“Since when?”

He laughed. “Ah, now, I have your attention.” He leaned forward and whispered, “I’ve got a chance to pitch my script to a French producer.” He leaned back and smiled. “My agent set it up for Thursday morning. I have ten minutes with the guy.”

“Wow. Congratulations!”

He shrugged modestly.

The waiter returned to take their order.

“So your script is in French?” she asked.

He nodded. “I wrote it a couple of years ago. A simple comedy.”

“Is it a translation of the one you recently completed?”

He shook his head. “No, the new one’s in English. A techno-thriller. All action.” He paused and bit his lip. “Your father would love it.”

“I know. You’d like him to take a look at it.”

He nodded. “Or at least listen to my two-minute pitch.”

She sighed. “Serge, we’ve been over this before. I’ll see what I can do. No promises.”

“I need a break, Addie.”

“Tell you what. Oscar season is coming up. My father always gives a pre-Oscar party. A big one. I’ll see if I can get us an invite. There will be producers and editors there galore, not to mention actors and a few influential financiers. You can pitch your screenplay to everyone you meet.” She blew him a kiss. “Sound good?”

He smiled. “I adore you.”

“I know.”

“*Alors*, will you meet me in Paris on Friday?”

She nodded and lifted her margarita. “To Valentine’s Day in Paris.”