

IN THE HOT TUB

My life is a mess. In dire need of a plan, an overhaul. Clive might never live it down. At one point he was nearer death than life and not because of his age. Because of me and my craziness.

This respite in Bali, the massage and the pampering at Serenity Spa will give us both some space, give me some clarity. I hope. He didn't have to make it easier for me, not after recent events. But he did, bless his kind loving soul.

We had it all. Elegant to a T, we attended galas, fundraising dinners, art exhibitions, concerts arm in arm. World travel as the perfect couple and I was the glamorous wife and good companion. A home full of original paintings, Ming vases filled with flowers, good champagne and a daily woman, I sipped Chardonnay with him in front of our home cinema.

We both had our interests, mine more extensive, more adventurous than his. The prenuptial agreement took care of that twenty years ago. He met me at my exhibition, courted me with passion and I? I was relieved to escape the genteel poverty of a working artist. With time and patience, he won me over.

Yet he accommodated the needs of a younger wife and discretion ruled --- until the opening night party propelled my life down a black hole.

"Go, go, enjoy yourself," Clive said from his sickbed. "Invite that newly-divorced woman. Cheer her up." Ms New-Divorcee snapped up the offer of Clive's opening night ticket. And she left the after-party early with a hot young actress. Who'd have guessed? So there I was on my own with no fixed plans.

"Lorenzo, at your service," a hand slid up my arm, tightening its grip slightly as I hesitated. Feeling his warm breath lightly lift the strands of hair that had escaped onto my bare back, I turned to face him.

"Ciao, Bella," he continued, his luminous dark eyes penetrating mine. My skin tingled and a raw heat crept up the nape of my neck. I had seen and felt that sensation before. Where did I know him from? Yes, he had the lead role, but there was something... I sensed the friction of Lorenzo's body, a slight humidity in his presence. His laughter

washed away my defences as he pulled me out onto the floor. My head spun as I felt myself drawn in by the spell of the latin music, the intimate lighting, the laughter and swaying bodies of the glamorous crowd.

Replenishing my champagne glass, he said, "Try this, you'll love it," and he mixed in a generous dose of cognac. He threw his back and in the spirit of the occasion, so did I.

"I saw your glorious red hair and I was lost," he whispered in my ear. Laughter swelled alongside the clapping and Lorenzo drew me into the centre of the room. Snap! Snap! Was that photographers? At that moment, I didn't care. The room was fireworks and a sea of faces rose up around me. When the music stopped, he leaned over, his eyes glittering, "We were made for each other..."

Rising from his hot tub early the following morning, my head throbbed and my legs gave way. Wrapping myself in a towel, I sat down on the toilet seat. What the hell was I doing? This was going too far.

I peeked around the door. I thought I might grab my clothes and make a dive for it. But there he stood, smiling and holding yet another glass of champagne. He moved closer, a kiss on his lips but I pushed past him, a little too brusquely, "Sorry, Lorenzo! Got an appointment. Early."

"I'll call you a cab," he said, "Can't drive... Can't find my phone. Mind if I use yours?" Anxious to get away, I hugged the towel more tightly and tapped in my password.

I fumbled for my clothes in the bedroom, then dashed to the door. Halfway to the taxi I retraced my steps. Lorenzo lounged, blocking the doorway, his satiny golden torso naked from the waist up. He playfully held my phone aloft, "Not before I get another kiss," he slipped his arms around me, pulling me so close I melted into his muskiness. He slid the phone into my hands as I turned and ran. But not before one last caress.

My resolve ebbed in direct proportion to the throbbing in my chest. I was in trouble.

The following morning there I was, spread all over the entertainment section of the papers. Pictured with Lorenzo. I "lost" those pages then I turned off Clive's phone and "lost" it too. I needed time to think, to call Best Chum. Too late for that. She arrived moments later, burning a trail to my door.

“Give!” she said, “Everyone’s asking.” I steered her inside with the bag of bespoke croissants and shut the door.

“Just a friend.”

“Looks like it,” she winked.

“Who’s that?” Clive called out.

“Oh just Sue. Just stay in bed darling, I’ll bring you the paper,” I shushed BC and told her to keep stumm, I’d fill her in.

My phone vibrated on the table and I jumped. The face lit up. It was Lorenzo. How did he get my number? I could see by BC’s eyes; she smelt a story. I hadn’t counted on his tenacity. That was a first. Later that day I called him.

“Ciao Bella, missing me?” he said.
“You left your necklace behind...”

“Keep the necklace.” It was just a bit of frippery. “Call it a memento. How did you get my number?”

“I called the taxi remember? They wanted your phone number and your address.”

“Well, please Lorenzo, we had a lovely time but please don’t call me again,” and I hung up giving BC the poker-face. The next day a small gift box arrived, the necklace inside. This had to stop. Then came a photograph, “Can I keep this as a memento too?” Lorenzo texted.

“How did you get that?” I typed back.

“Sorry, accident. Tapped on it when looking for the taxi number.”

“We need to talk,” I texted back. My fears for myself and for Clive steeled me to the task. At the same time, I felt ashamed as the hot flame of intrigue enveloped me. Messaging him on the phone, the anticipation of the meeting sent electric waves down my legs. I had to get a grip and yet, I agreed to his request.

“Meet me for coffee, Bella. My shout. We can sort this out. How do you want to do this?”

In the days and weeks that followed, coffee escalated to lunch then afternoon trysts. There was something lightning fast about his love. I explained it away as 'being Italian,' as being younger, as being an artist, an actor. A fever possessed him, the colour rose in his cheeks and his eyes glittered.

I mistook this for vulnerability and it wrenched my heart. I burned for him. Other times, I felt the pulse in my temple race with alarm. My responses swung between feeling flattered by this young beautiful man and wanting to run from him. I was caught.

He wanted me to move in with him and at first I refused. I'd had light-hearted dalliances in the past but everyone had played by the rules. Lesson One: make sure he's attached --- to someone else. Lesson Two: stay away from younger men, in particular.

Then he started sending me yellow roses, yellow for infidelity, for jealousy. They sat screaming on the front doorstep. For a week he sent them with small love notes attached. Each time, I scanned the street then tore up the card and discarded the flowers.

Mornings, at breakfast, Clive frowned his concern from time to time, "Darling, you look peaky. Maybe you should go away, take a break, invite a friend to go with you." While he slept through the night, I arose damp from my rumpled sheets and paced the room.

Then one day, in a fit of weakness or perhaps delirium, I agreed to move in with Lorenzo. Clive stood there as I left, pale and crumpled. He tore at my heart, weeping and asking me to reconsider but he put up no resistance as the removalists drained our home of my presence, of my artworks and the markers of our shared life. I agreed to keep a low profile. For his sake most of all.

It couldn't work. I had misunderstood that what Lorenzo craved was attention and excitement. As a prominent artist and society figure, I was an attractive target. I was his prop and his need was a bottomless pit that could scour the soul.

I tried to stay in the background as his theatrical reputation took off and the media spotlight fell on him. BC and the old gang turned up from time to time at events, sometimes Clive braved it too. But at times like those, his eyes looked dull and his face, drawn.

Lorenzo, however, was on fire, his moods increasingly vitriolic and his beautiful eyes ablaze. The parties grew wilder and he started to forget rehearsals. When I pleaded exhaustion or urged him to fulfill the demands of his work, he flew at me, throwing objects around and then in an agony of remorse he prostrated himself at my feet. One of my major works lay torn and bent on the floor after one of these bouts.

That was when I began to question my own sanity, when the blinders fell from my eyes, when I noticed his habit. *That's where that money went that I'd given him, all that "I'm-a-bit-short-of-cash-today,"* I thought. Unfortunately, I noticed it just before the police raid, with the paparazzi hot on their heels.

According to BC, Clive blanched, shivering when first confronted with the headlines and the Sydney North Shore gossip machine. *Was it really fair to do this to him? I asked myself. We had an arrangement. He was more than generous, more than tolerant. And this was how I thanked him?*

Mortification infested my body and my soul. I was in deep. I had made a complete fool of myself. I had exchanged gentle loving Clive for this man.

Once again my face was splashed across the tabloids, allegations flew. Court proceedings raged, fuelling a bonfire of stories in the trash media, force-feeding an avalanche of sordid details onto our friends and pummeling Clive. In the end, I was exonerated from any role in the matter but an oily layer of smut sat on me like a mantle.

BC came to me; she was our go-between. Clive was willing to have me back. He'd been checking on our man, a clever serial womanizer. Clive had tried many times to contact me but his messages disappeared into the ether. Bless his loyal heart, he withheld reproach, respected my need for space to think things over. He offered to fund an extended stay at our favourite spa resort in Bali on condition I cut all ties with Lorenzo.

I had the removalists evacuate my belongings in Lorenzo's absence. The only evidence of those fetid months were the scrapes and smudges the movers left behind on the doors and walls in their haste to leave.

So this was how I found myself in Bali. *Aaaah, no pressure, no iPhones, no iPads, no computers. No Lorenzo,* I thought. I left no forwarding address. It took weeks, days and

hours to settle my disturbed mind, for his presence was still palpable in the vacuum around my being. And by the sudden sharp stabs of guilt.

As a precautionary measure, I hadn't brought my laptop computer but was soon subjected to daily alerts from the spa's main reception: an appointment here, a session there, transportation arrangements set up. I would have otherwise dreamed through the days of gentle massage and yoga but this new form of in-hotel communication gradually became irksome, requiring prompt responses.

Three weeks in, I began to reflect with calm on my craziness. I felt my face redden as I pictured myself with Lorenzo, as I imagined Clive's confusion and pain. There was nothing for it. I was a responsible adult and it was time to confront the reality of what I had done. And Anna Karenina, I was not. I still had options.

Clive must have had telepathy. The front desk handed me the phone, he was on the line from Australia. He said he missed me, he wanted to come over, that he'd stay at another hotel. His voice was restrained yet there was a note of hope. He said he didn't expect anything, maybe we could work something out. I held the phone for a moment, looking at the ground, my chest constricted.

"Sally, you there?"

"Uh, yes Clive. When are you thinking of?" I braced myself.

"By the end of the week, if that's OK?"

I agreed and turned to go back to my room when Miss Bali, the pristine receptionist called out, "Madame, Madame, hab some message for you." *Oh, not more communiqués*, I thought. She passed across a sheaf of print-outs.

"Madame might find more convenient next time to bring computa?" Miss B said.

I glanced at the sheets of paper. A forest of pages. Then my eye fell on the signature. Lorenzo. Trembling, I rushed to my room and spread them out on the bed. He was asking me if he could come over, swore his love, that he'd do better, he'd stopped the drugs.

The cold stone of anxiety pressed on my head and I realised I was holding my breath. How did he track me down? One thing was for certain: I didn't want to let him back

into my soul and under my skin. Shame and lust wrestled for prime position. I needed an exorcism.

Hands shaking, I emailed him from the main office, under Miss B's raised eyebrows, "Under no circumstances come near me. I'm leaving anyway." My body and soul were about to be sucked down feet-first into a vortex. I had to get away. Right now.

When I cancelled the rest of my booking they didn't like it but a modest financial contribution helped smooth things over. I also left firm instructions that no-one should be told of my whereabouts except for Clive, for whom I left a clearly marked envelope.

My anxieties melted away after a few days of solitude, relaxation and no electronic communication. Clive was coming, bringing with him security and tranquility. On the day of his arrival, I poured myself a chilled glass of champagne and slipped into a perfumed bubble bath with a sigh of relief. Then there was a knock on the door.

"Madame, Madame?" a voice interrupted my reverie, "Got message for you."

"Slip it under the door, thanks."

Later, I got out of the bath and walked to the door. I gasped as I looked down. My hands went limp, releasing the towel onto the ground. An ornate envelope lay creeping out from under the door, its flowery Italian script whispered, "Lorenzo."

Just then the porter knocked, "Madame, a gentleman want to see you." I crushed the envelope in my fist and stood tall, pulling on my bathrobe.

"Sal, Sal, it's me," Clive was leaning against the door, "Can I come in?"

I pulled him through the door, bolted it and buried myself in his embrace. "Sssshhh, my darling, you're not the first," he said later, when I produced Lorenzo's letter. "I tried to tell you. Any way you look at it, he's sure to come to a bad end."