

## **Lava's in the Air**

Perched on the edge of white plastic deck chairs under the olive trees. I am not with my friends, but I can hear the soundtrack. Scenes, so familiar, so vivid, that it plays like a projector propped up in my mind. Cloistered away from banshee shrieks in the distance. Splashing sounds, as skin smacks water. Choking, coughing fits, sputtering like vespa engines. Tilted heads, downing dangerous limoncello laybacks. Makeup-smudged faces. Glow in the dark tans. Gurgling jacuzzi spa bath bubbles. Clinking glasses, champagne foaming over the edges. Everything, everything, erupting. The wedding guests have floated from the long dinner table under the fairy lights, to the dance floor fashioned under the canopy of vine leaves, before making their way through the garden of wonder. Finishing up by falling at the edges of the heated pool, climbing each other's shoulders, still dancing while surrounded by night blooming white flowers.

Here, I hide away out of frame, bedecked in my blood-crimson, floor-length gown, made to mould to my body, bejewelled bodice, layers of high cut tulle, thigh slit meeting my hips. The June air is thick and balmy with a slight breeze. Sweat trails down my back, parallel to two, cape-like train strips billowing behind my shoulders, cascading over the manicured lawn.

The sharp smell of the lemon trees distracts me momentarily. The moon casts a bright, fluorescent white light, like being on stage for a play, spotlighting my tomato-red cheeks. Teetering on the deck chair edge, I am not alone. I grab the negroni in the fancy glass, from this man who is not my boyfriend of four-point-five years, hand on his thigh for balance, so I don't fall face first into the earth. I take a big sip, glass to lips, almost finishing it, and hand the residual bitters back to the man I have stolen away from the wedding dancefloor. Face clenched, eyes closed, before finally releasing what has festered inside of me for 18 months.

‘James,’ I say, a little out of breath, still holding his sweaty hand in tow, before yanking it back to my lap.

‘I have to tell you something...’

‘Oh yeah?’ he says, slightly distracted.

‘I’m...I guess....well you know-’

‘What is it?’ he says, slightly worried now.

‘I’m in love with you.’

Described as ‘an embarrassment of beauty’, nothing could have prepared us for an all-expenses paid trip in a luxury villa for eight days. Don Arcangelo all’Olmo, once an old farmhouse from 1845, originally housed a press and a warehouse for citrus fruits, before it was renovated into a villa. Located in Giarre, a sleepy village off the East Sicilian coast, famous only for a shocking crime in 1980, which awakened Italy from its homophobic slumber and catapulted the nation into its first movement for same sex rights. A Sicilian shepherd stumbled across a 25-year-old man and a 15-year-old boy, their dead bodies found intertwined under a lemon grove, a bullet in each head.

But we didn’t know about this when we floated into the dreamscape setting, nestled between the sea and Mount Etna. Our friendship group had arrived here for our best friend Ella’s wedding. There is just one small problem. We are not entirely sure who she is marrying. We were told to be here for her wedding on these dates. Naturally this has scandalised us all, none more so than Katia, Tabitha and I, who were still waiting for our long-term partners to propose.

We each arrived at different times after surviving swerving Sicilian traffic, knees buckling one by one, like dominoes, as we first walked in, and marvelled at ancient arches and

stone pillars. Rafael, a close friend of the bride's, who had also become our good friend, dropped to his knees in awe. David, our single bachelor friend who had not yet come out as bisexual, had barely made it past the entrance foyer before turning abruptly and walking away with his back turned to us, and not returning. Later, he admitted it was because he was so moved to tears and didn't want us to see this lapse in his usual, goofy demeanor. He was afraid he'd never be bowled over by breathtaking beauty like this ever again.

'But David,' I said, 'that was just the entrance foyer.'

Lava stone steps lead to manicured lawns and a mini olive grove. Situated at a higher altitude, from expansive terracotta terraces, you can see the whole sea spread out like a bath, interrupted only by large expanses of citrus groves. There's also an iconic, glass-blue heatable pool and a panoramic jacuzzi, bordered by flourishing fragrant flowers; red, pink and purple hydrangeas, white roses, and an exotic array of mature trees. The gardens are peppered throughout the villa, designed with 'the ancient Arabic belief that gardens should be a place of delight, wonder and whimsy,' according to the villa's website. So that's why I feel instantly at home here. My fellow Arabs have gently, carefully colonised these lands, but in a good way! Each step on the land, an ode to Mount Etna and our mortality, mockery that it is, volcanic earth pulsating, reminding us; that you, too, will die one day. Don't forget, it threatens.

Bags dropped, running around, tired, jet lagged, Birkenstock sandals clomping along tiles, swerving around pillars, stopping at the actual, literal Renaissance era art on the walls, searching for our designated rooms. The villa is so big, it has a west wing and an east wing, a fact that became a key part of our group's lore. Needless to say, the 'SICILY' group chat is going off.

*Alright, time to retire to my chambers in the West Wing*

*Okay guys, so I know I was joking but it turns out our room actually IS in the West Wing  
Nobody goes to the East Wing if they know what's good for 'em  
Take the gun....leave the cannoli...in the East Wing  
Don't be sleeping on the East Wing, that's where the original art is kept  
That's where the curse is kept too. I've seen Beauty and the Beast, this is not my first rodeo.  
I'm going to walk around in a night gown and a tiny cap, holding a candelabra and saying, ahoy,  
who goes there?! Excited for this development, stay tuned!  
Wait, are we actually staying here in this villa? Like, all of this?!*

‘My God. I understand you now, David,’ I said out loud, mostly to myself, since David had disappeared.

‘I never, ever want to get used to this kind of beauty.’

Two days in, and I am already lounging on the cream sunbed by the pool, asking the staff for ‘*un espresso per favore!*’

‘Oh, good idea Layla...how do you say, another espresso?’ Ryan asked, fully horizontal, reading his chunky copy of *A Little Life*.

‘*Due espressi per favore!*’ I declared triumphantly, from under my giant, floppy lemon hat, holding up my two fingers like the peace sign. With my ethnically ambiguous Lebanese features, I have never blended in anywhere so fast, as if I have always been here, carved into the limestone. We are passing around a pistachio croissant like it's a joint, after we stole it from the decadent daily breakfast.

‘Make that a *tre espresso* por the favour, maestro’ David said, wrangling finger guns and butchering Dante’s Italian.

‘Oh yes, one for me too, please!’ a faceless voice sang out, swaying in a hammock. The staff smiled like they were midway through a lobotomy.

The night of our arrival, I posed for a photo under a lemon tree before the welcome dinner. Cupping the lemon in my hands, wearing a two-toned yellow and rose gold satin dress that hugged my curves in all the wrong places. I hoped no one noticed it was from Zara and not Christian Dior. I’ve lost my voice from a virus I had acquired on the plane to Paris. It left me with a rasping, Godfather-like affectation. I was making offers, I couldn’t refuse. A young guy no older than 20, had inched over to me on the white, wicker outdoor lounge. In a faint Western Sydney accented voice, despite his red hair and pale skin, he explained he was the groom’s son. I perked up. The groom’s son. Finally, a clue.

‘Ah, so nice to meet you! Um, so your dad is....which one?’ I ask, taking a large sip of champagne the waiter handed to me. He let out a sarcastic laugh, ‘heh!’

‘Yeah yeah ‘sif, you don’t know ol’ mate,’

‘Ha, yeah....of course, we’re very...tight. The one with....glasses?’

‘Far out, you’re hilarious, that’s my aunty’s husband’

‘Right, yeah, silly me! He doesn’t wear glasses, I think I need to wear mine! How embarrassing, I should just yeet myself out of here,’ I offered up meekly.

His pencil-thin body turned towards me, face scrunched up in disgust.

‘Woah! Hell nah, no one says yeet anymore, millennial cringe, much?! But you’re still heaps pretty aye, so I’ll forgive ya,’ he elbows me.

I could feel feverish friends trolling me, their eyes following us, little gasps, a phone held up filming this comical case of a young guy with a crush on an older woman. I can overhear their conversation and I want to disappear into the earth.

‘It’s basically like a straight *Call Me By Your Name*,’

‘Ryan, you think everything is *Call Me By Your Name* coded,’

‘*The Graduate* already exists guys.’

I looked up like Princess Diana, meekly averting the gaze of the paparazzi ogling us, and towards my boyfriend who was not remotely interested in what I was doing. I grew flustered, fidgeting, trying to ignore the son, who must find this situation as strange as we do, sure.

‘Is it weird for you, your Dad marrying someone so young...er?’ I ask him.

‘Nah, this is what he does aye, we’re used to it, it’s the cheating on them part that sucks,’ he added, a wide cheeky grin.

Alarmed by this unsolicited revelation, I shuffled away from the mystery groom’s son. I walked over to the champagne table, picking up an ice cold bottle of Bollinger, condensation dripping and slipping from my hands. Will appears quickly and saves the bottle before it falls. I smile shyly at him, as if seeing my boyfriend for the first time. I feel woozy from the wafting, stringent smell of champagne. I did love you once, didn’t I?

Then, the bane of my existence James, joins us at the drinks table. He feels comfortable around us both, since we were all friends before he was invited to this wedding, on account of his being in our dodgeball team. One day, he came up to me while a ball was flying through the air, narrowly missing my head for yet another concussion, as I was prone to experience.

‘Hey Layla, you’ll never believe this, but I think the girl I’m dating - Izzy - is your friend’s sister?’

‘No way!’ I said, in total shock.

‘They said something about us going to Sicily for her sister’s wedding? Will you be going?’

At that exact moment, rooted to the spot, I felt waves of jealousy and anticipation, coursing through me. Anticipation that he would enter my world like this, jealousy that it wasn’t with me. And that’s when I got hit in the head again and had to be hospitalised for a mild concussion. There’s a lesson in this.

‘I see you have an admirer over there,’ James said, returning me to the present moment like a ball to the brain. I turn my head slightly to see the red-headed groom’s son dressed like a chav with a bum bag over his shoulder, thighs like toothpicks, staring at me like a rolled slab of salty prosciutto. I turn back to James and give a golden smile.

‘Well, I only have eyes for one,’ I say seductively, but I don’t move my gaze to Will in time.

We’re ushered to sit on a long table, under an awning covered in climbing leaves, green grapes poking out. A cacophony of cicadas causing chaos all around us. The cream tablecloth has a charming print of pomegranates, lemons and oranges. Course after course arrives; crudo seafood, baked pasta alla Norma, cheesy, gooey lasagne-like consistency of eggplant morsels, and a crumbed swordfish pasta, followed by a gelatinous, sour lemon dessert. Everyone had arrived at the dinner as if they were the main characters in a Lars Von Trier Dogme 95 film, saying the most outrageous thing you can think of and seeing who gets the most offended, like; ‘as a white man, I’m allowed to write about whatever I want!’ and ‘I found out our primary school priest

was a sex offender, and my first thought was, why didn't he abuse me? Was I not a hot child?' mostly all said by Ryan.

They shuffled our seating, so we could sit next to someone other than our partner. And that's how I ended up next to James. My body is hot to touch, the way a bad sunburn reveals itself after a shower. Hands brushing. Leaning over to make fun of everything. The two working class people, embarrassed not by beauty but by all this wealth and the humiliation of being served.

I nudge Rafael to my right, asking him if he's worked out who the groom is yet. He shakes his head ruefully, like a gambling addict who has just lost to the house.

'I thought if I hung out near the bridal suite, I could catch a glimpse, but so far there are three men who fit the description. I'm thinking, maybe he's in his early 50s? I know he's not the bald guy though,' he said, eyes darting, manically. It's an open secret that Rafael's been in love with the bride for the last seven years.

'How do you know that?' I ask.

'I went straight to congratulate him and he said 'thanks chap, it's nice to be acknowledged as the Best Man' ...' he laughed and then sighed.

'Hang in there Raf,' I patted him on the back.

'This whole thing is ridiculous. How do we not know who he is?'

'There are 24 people here, at some point, it's a process of elimination, surely?' he whispered back.

Ryan stood up like he was about to make a toast, but instead announced that he had read this theory on how to cast the perfect dinner party in an article in The Financial Times.



‘Hold on let me pull it up on my phone: ok so there are two types of dinner guests: “characters” and “glues”. Characters are big, animated personalities, who enjoy storytelling and tend to be animated and performative. Too many characters, though, and they compete for attention, throwing off the balance. Glues, on the other hand, are people who are easy to talk to and accommodating. They listen more than they talk and have the ability to make their dinner-table neighbour feel comfortable and heard. They hold the characters together. But if you end up with too much glue - hoo boy - you run the risk of a dull night.’

An argument breaks out about what category everyone falls into, with people getting offended at being called glue. It’s at this point that David, directly across from me, speaks up, like a jolt of inspiration for how to prod the beast.

‘Isn’t it funny how Layla and James are more like main characters but they’re both dating quiet glues,’ he declares, triumphant. Sarah, our 32-year-old widowed best friend who has said little since arriving in the place where her dead husband hails from, fixes the stare of death on his person, because clearly nobody told him about my clandestine crush - since he couldn’t be trusted with the intel evidently. But this unintentional reveal was way worse.

‘Excuse me?’ said Will, looking up as if for the first time, a charred, forked eggplant suspended in mid air.

‘You guys think I’m a glue?’

That’s what he took from that? I thought.

‘Oh nah man,’ David started, like he was back tracking.

‘I was just basing that on how your girlfriend and your mate have been talking all night, almost finishing each other’s sentences,’ he wiggles his eyebrows suggestively. A hush falls over the table. Everyone is staring at us, then over at Will and Izzy who are also, inexplicably, seated

together. Only the sounds of plates placed gently on the table can be heard. Izzy smiles nonchalantly. She thinks her boyfriend and I are just really good friends and she loves that he has female friends. But my Will says nothing, frowning ever so slightly.

‘OH! I forgot my peach!’ Ryan declared, trying in vain, to change the subject.

‘What?’ Sarah said.

‘Someone put a peach on my bed, as if we’re in YOU KNOW WHICH FILM, perhaps to troll me, the only gay. I mean, honestly I probably will use it at some point...YOLO, gotta try everything once.’

‘DUDE, you did not just say YOLO that's a farken millennial cringe aye,’ said the Groom’s Son.

‘That is gross, Ry!’ Sarah cried out.

‘OK, wow didn’t take you for a homophobe Sez, sheesh!’

The conversation between characters flowed again (‘I’ve got toxic masculinity without the masculinity!’ - Ryan) but I didn’t dare look at Will for fear of what would stick to his glue.

The wedding is hazy and blurry, like looking through the lens of 35 mm film. Soft blurred faces adorned in black, designer sunglasses, as if hiding from authorities. The drama is at telenovela levels, since half the wedding party almost missed the ceremony, having gone out on a quest to find large, triangle-shaped, arancini balls. But then it all works out, everyone seated on the dainty white chairs placed whimsically in the garden. Violent violins are playing a dark ballad, seemingly missing the memo of the tone. My best friend walks down the aisle to marry what feels like a stranger. Because he is. We haven’t met him yet. We all strain our necks to see him.

‘Ohhhhhhhh HIM!’ we all say in unison.

‘Excellent head of hair for his 50s,’ Katia shakes her head in impressed disbelief.

Tears trail down my face, not from happiness, but self pity, unsure if it will ever be my turn. We didn’t even know this guy and they’re already married. How many years have I been waiting? And then it’s done. We throw rose petals in the air triumphantly and they float back down, suspended in slow motion.

Later in the courtyard, we mingle for drinks, and soft jazz is playing in the background. Jasmine, lemons and rosemary fuse together with the scent of crackling, roasted tomatoes from the nearby provincial kitchen. Ella throws the bouquet from the stone-pillared balcony and her Dad, who we call Jezza, because he looks like Jeremy Corbyn, catches it. Everyone starts shouting at the same time.

‘No, no, no, this is a cursed outcome!’

‘Chuck it again!’

‘Jezza, what have you done, mate?’

‘Why couldn’t he have this enthusiasm in the UK election?’

This time, Izzy goes up to help her sister not throw it to her dad again. Izzy spots me in the crowd and smiles, seductive and sinister. Oh no. The bouquet comes flying towards my arms, like a missile.

‘No, I don’t want it! Give it to Kati, she needs it more!! They’ve been together for eight years!’ I can be heard saying, as it’s catapulted in my direction, but it’s too late. Head bowed, I am cradling the flowers that Katia has painstakingly picked from the garden, like it’s a baby. Hollering and huge applause follows.

‘Did you just scream out, I don’t want it?’ Rafael laughs.

‘Oh, did people hear that?’ I ask.

‘Yes, everyone heard that’

I wave the flowers triumphantly at Will who turns and looks away.

‘I don’t want it!’ James mocks me, laughing.

But he’s wrong. I do want it.

‘What would you say the Bald Best Man is - character or glue?’ Rafael whispered to me and David. The Bald Best Man is giving a Godfather themed speech while wearing a gangster fedora.

‘He’s like clumpy Clag glue that wants so badly to be Character,’ David saucily whispered back, with the straightest face. I nearly spat out my third glass of prosecco, swaying. Rafael nodded sagely.

‘He really is giving Clag.’

The long wedding table is laid out under the olive trees and the fairy lights. The bride and groom cut the cassata cake, candied fruit over layers of ricotta and amaro-soaked sponge. Ella’s parents are slow dancing, eyes fixed on each other. This starts the dance floor. Danny is spinning Katia around like a professional ballroom dancer. In lieu of marrying her, he simply spins her like a vintage record. Then, Rafael suddenly starts playing piano for a singalong. Elton John’s *Candle in the Wind*. A gift for the happy couple! James appears beside me, his whole face scrunched up in laughter.

‘What is it now?’ I ask, bemused.

‘I wish you could see your face at this moment,’ he says.

‘What am I doing?’ I laugh, because I know.

‘You look like Edvard Munch’s *The Scream!*’ he spat. It’s true, my hands were cradling my suspended-in-a-silent-scream face.

‘Laylaaaaaa this is the anthem of my people! Why are you scoffing at my brethren singing their white hymns!’ James wraps his arm around me and we rock back and forth in laughter at the scene before us.

‘Aren’t you Irish?’ I ask, knowing he never misses a beat to talk about being Irish.

‘Yeah, you’re right, this is actually a hate crime for my people.’

His arm around my neck, a consummation. I look over at our wine-drunk partners, slow dancing to the song, unaware of us, and this inside joke of ours.

‘We have to get out of here,’ I declared to James.

‘But don’t you want to live your life, like a candle in the wind?’ he sings out, stumbling, before being whisked away.

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‘I am in love with you, James,’ I say it again under the trees, in the hiding spot. I feel relieved, as if the only thing in our way was him not knowing (and our partners - minor obstacles, really.)

‘Wait. What? I don’t get it. But...you and Will?’

‘I am aware, ’ I say, a little surprised that his reaction wasn’t an emphatic: ‘me too’.

‘I thought you guys were all good and stuff?’

‘Oh no, not all good! Non!’ I say, pronouncing the second n and standing up, woozy.

‘He doesn’t know what he wants! It’s been years. And I want to get married, while I’m still young! With a long, dramatically cut, lace veil in a Catholic Church with excessive flowers and stained glass windows of the saints! I want a cherubic-faced fat baby!! I want someone who looks at me and sees all the universes. I want to be chosen. I want it all. I want a love I could die for. I want you. I have wanted you, since I first saw you at that Christmas party. I don’t know why. But there was just something about you. And it’s all I can think about, like all the time!’

Wednesdays are my favourite days because I get to see you, even if it's in the context of dodging balls!' I finish my monologue. He lets out a grunt, fingers rubbing his temples like he has a headache.

'Far out, Lay. I mean I'm having trouble with Izzy, too. It's not really a good time for this. Can we talk about it some other time?' he says, as if we are talking about work schedules and not an epic love for the ages.

I felt my chest constrict in my corset. I was struggling to breathe. It had not occurred to me that he might not feel the same way. I had not prepared for that outcome. I felt dizzy.

'No, it's okay we don't have to talk,' I managed to rasp out. 'I'm so very sorry for bringing it up, I'll leave you be, good evening kind sir!' I turned to leave and was pulled back by my ribbon cape, caught on the chair, falling straight into his lap.

'Wait, before you go,' he said, 'well, I should tell you, and I hate to be the one to burst your bubble but, if it's like, a trad marriage and a baby you want, you've come to the wrong place, babe. I don't want either of those things.'

'Yeah, yeah, yeah, I know man, a lot of guys are saying that.'

'No, you don't understand. I don't want it so much, that I even got a vasectomy. Don't tell anyone though. I haven't told Izzy yet.'

I walk back to our room, as the pool party plunders on around me. I ran into Sarah in the hallway between our rooms, tears threatening to fall fast, flooding me. I turn my back to her, holding up my hair and ask for help unbuttoning my dress. She pulls my waist closer to her.

'I did something stupid, Sez' I admit.

‘Yeah, we all saw you running off behind the jacuzzi, your ribbons gave it away. I didn’t know you had it in you!’

‘No, no, it was nothing like that...I just told him how I feel.’

‘Just? That’s somehow worse!’ she laughed, struggling to undo the complex, corset.

‘I know, and it didn’t go well’ I say, feeling myself crack, with each button. The corset was holding me together. And here I was, about to spill out.

‘Well you win some - your boyfriend - and you lose some - your dodgeball crush,’ she laughed. I turned to her, my face wet with tears.

‘No, you don’t get it Sarah, I really screwed up. It was a lot more than that. I think I’m actually in love with him. How does that even happen?’

‘Oh Layla, honey. No, don’t cry over an edgelord communist!’ her voice softens.

‘He was just a way out, to blow up your life and make it easier to leave. But you don’t need someone else to leave. You can always choose a better life for yourself,’ she said, hands on her hips. I hadn’t noticed how puffy her eyes were until now. Had she just been crying?

‘Without a back-up plan?’ I said incredulously, wiping my face, “I’m-32 years-old!”

‘Do you think I got to choose becoming a widow at 31?!’ she said, with a little, gentle force.

‘Listen. You *are* the back up plan. You will always have yourself, no matter what. A life entirely your own is better than one dictated by some guy. Don’t wait for tragedy to force you to see that. He’s not dead. You’re not dead. You are still here. And you are the warden of this prison you’ve created. You can walk out the door, any time. You hold the key!’

‘But what if it just keeps happening? What if I keep meeting guys who don’t care if I live or die, and then I’m on a one-way train to die alone LOL.’

Sarah studied me carefully before she said anything. Her hands squeezed my shoulders. She turned me around again, until I was facing the large, bold crucifix of Jesus at the end of the hallway, continuing her crusade of button detachment.

‘First of all, never say LOL out loud like that ever again. And secondly, well unless you marry someone and then die immediately, we could all die alone. And Layls, if you suddenly got cancer, I would move you into my bedroom and I would care for you, and I would hold your hand as you died,’ she said, the last button liberated.

My dress falls to my hips, naked but for a g-string, I look up, thinking I had seen what looked like the flash of two men running through the lemon groves. And I was right. David and Rafael were doing a nudie run. Sarah’s hand finds mine and she squeezes, ‘never alone!’ she whispers.

The second bouquet fell to me. Not for a fairytale ending. But for an *ending* - to finally choose myself. *I want a love worth dying for*. It wasn’t the East Wing that held the curse. The curse was in everything, everywhere. Every couple in that villa, for those eight, long days, broke up in the six months after. Even the bride and groom. Well all, except for Ella’s parents. The core glue of the party. Makes sense. Love as adhesive. I turn towards my room and see Will standing in the doorway, looking like he has just seen the intertwined corpse of our relationship.