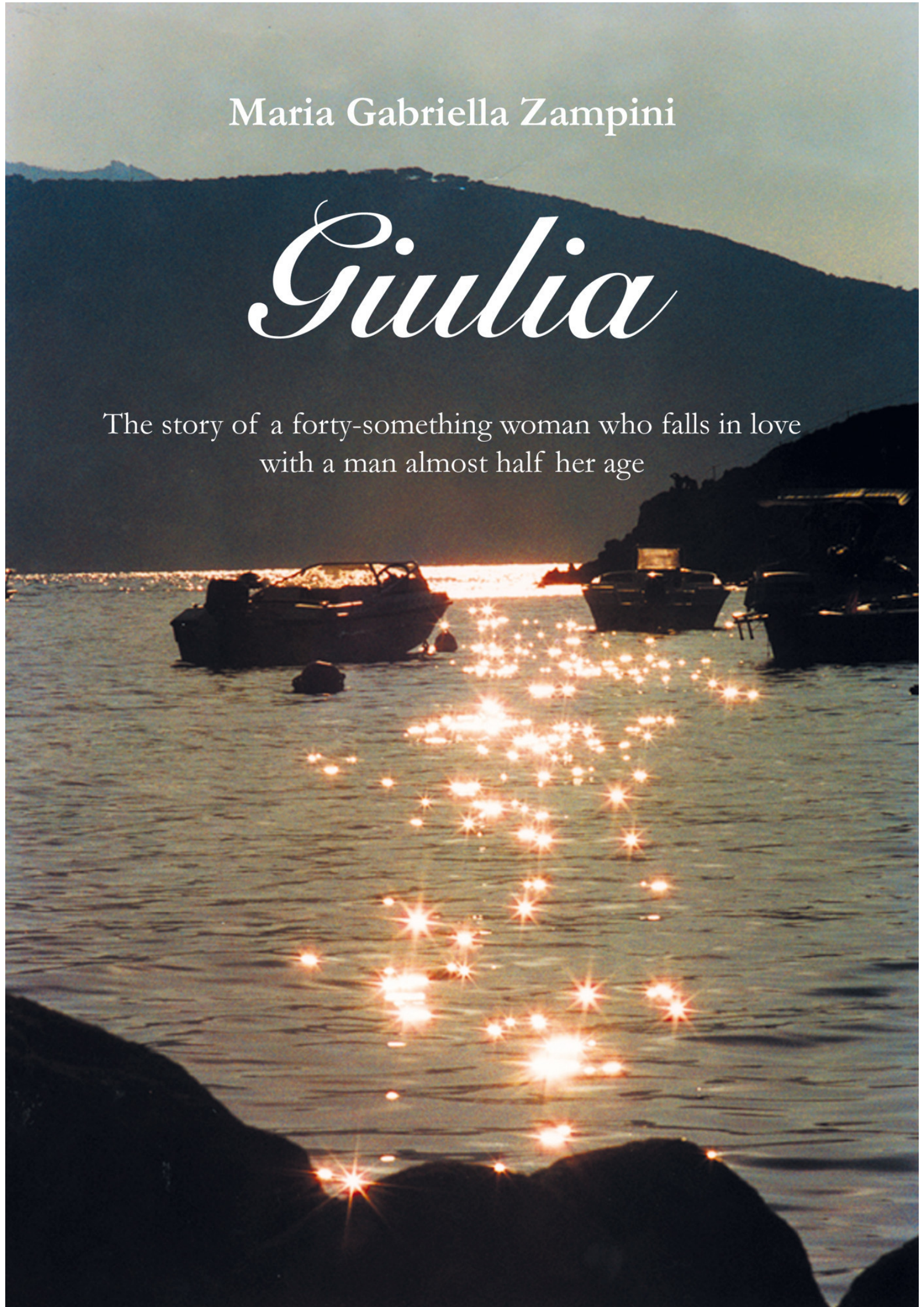


Maria Gabriella Zampini

Giulia

The story of a forty-something woman who falls in love
with a man almost half her age



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A huge thank you to all those who have been so,

so patient

with me. You know who you are!

###Dammit!###

It just wouldn't budge. Giulia turned the key both ways in the lock, put her shoulder up against the door and pushed with all her might. nothing. The damn thing was jammed.

She was a prisoner in her own home at 10 o'clock on a stifling August morning. Great! Giulia had arrived at her lovely little summer house by the sea at midnight after a final, utterly exhausting day at work.

Obviously, there had been no-one there to greet her. It wasn't as if she could expect her sons to forgo a night of clubbing to welcome their mother with open arms!

So, not even bothering to unpack her case, she had collapsed straight into bed, looking forward immensely to a whole month of peace, quiet and doing absolutely nothing, and fallen into a deep sleep. And now this! She gave the door another shove but succeeded only in bruising her shoulder.

"Fine!" she yelled at the door. "You win! I'm on vacation and I'm not about to get mad at anyone, not even you!"

She wandered into the kitchen and started singing to herself as she set about making a coffee.

She had always found that singing helped her to calm down. Some people counted to ten, others rolled their shoulders. She sang, much to the annoyance of whomever she happened to be with at the time. But Giulia figured the door wouldn't mind, so

Her singing had made her husband - well, ex-husband - want to throttle her. He had told her as much on a cold January morning ten years earlier, and that was the end of their marriage. At the time, she had felt like her entire world was crumbling around her, but that was a long time ago. Now, her life was rolling along pretty smoothly: work, kids, the occasional fling, her lovely little summer house by the sea...

She shot a filthy look at the door that was preventing her from doing what she loved the most: climbing down the rocks and watching the perpetual ebb and flow of the waves, filling her lungs with salty sea air and, best of all, plunging into the turquoise sea that had waited patiently for her for a whole year.

She was suddenly distracted by a movement outside the house. It sounded as though something heavy was being dragged away, and then the door flew open.

"Hey there!"

Stood before her bathed in sunlight was a figure with flowing jet-black locks and sparkling eyes of the same intense colour.

"You must be Ale's mamma? I'm Leonardo. Pleased to meet you."

In his early twenties and with a thick Florentine accent, the young man was broad-shouldered and wrapped in a sarong that showed off his lean figure, and he had a tan to die for...

"I had a bit to drink last night, you know how it is, so Ale asked if I'd like to stay here. I must have fallen asleep with my bag blocking the door."

Slept here? But where? Giulia frowned, then decided a smile was the better option and extended her hand.

"Hi, I'm Giulia. And, yes, I'm Ale's mamma."

"Wow, the guys said you were hot but they never said you could pass for his sister!" he said with a cheeky smile.

Giulia sighed. She was always embarrassed when someone paid her a compliment.

“Oh, behave! You do realise that if you give me too many compliments, I may start to believe the hype?”

It was her stock response. She had come to learn that it made people laugh and removed the possibility of any awkward silences. It worked yet again.

“Do you want some coffee? I’ve just made some.”

She poked her head out of the door and was met with an absurd sight: covering the patio as far as the steps leading down to the sea was a row of bodies sprawled out across a load of towels. Giulia reckoned there were at least twenty of them.

She turned questioningly to Leonardo, who chuckled.

“Sorry, I didn’t tell you, did I? Your son bumped into us on the beach last night while we were rehearsing for tonight’s gig. You might have heard us? He started to jam with us and said we could sleep at his place, you’d be cool with it... There’s only five of us, but there were loads of other people around and everyone kind of ended up here!”

So that explained it. Typical Ale: meeting randoms out and about and inviting them back to the house. She was unsure at first. I mean, who were these people lying outside her house? What if they weren’t very nice? But she calmed down when she reminded herself that Ale was a sensible kid who mixed with the right crowd. In fact, she had become friends with them herself and even put some of them up before, but never twenty in one go!

Anyway, they were here now so she had to think of something. She opened the sideboard, located the big cafeti re and put it on the stove.

Meanwhile, Leonardo had grabbed hold of the portable stereo she kept in her kitchen, taken it outside under the awning and started to fiddle around with the buttons. Thirty seconds later, a wave of sound invaded the house.

“Did I mention we do Afro-Cuban music?”

No you didn’t, thought Giulia, but there was no need: it was the only kind of music her son had played over the last couple of years. She was roused by the familiar sexy, pounding rhythm and began to move in time as she poured the coffee into cups of all different colours and shapes that she had laid out on a tray.

She stepped out into the heat of the summer, headed for the marble table in the centre of the patio, doing her best not to tread on any of the sleeping kids, and placed the tray down carefully. She sat on the bench and lit a cigarette.

Leonardo came and sat next to her, lit a cigarette of his own and turned up the volume on the stereo. The youngsters began to stir. There were some grunts, some yawns, some mutterings of “hey, what the fuck?”, and eventually a few dishevelled heads lifted off the floor.

“Leo, what the hell are you doing?” said one, in clear Roman dialect.

“Ah, so they’re not all from Florence!” thought Giulia, admiring the thick mohawk that adorned the head of the boy who had just spoken. The young man glanced over at her sleepily, slowly got his focus and staggered to his feet.

“Oh, err...sorry, Mrs...ermmm..”

“It’s Giulia. Do you want some coffee?”

The boy seemed taken aback as she reached over and handed him a cup.

One by one, the youngsters slowly came round to the persistent beat of the djembes. Giulia looked on, surprised at how many different hairstyles there were. One had a shaved head like her youngest son, one had magnificent dreadlocks like her eldest, another had a rather shaggy mane, and there was one, presumably a girl, who was seemingly just a big tangle of braids. And all that colour! One of the boys was dyed platinum blonde, while one of the girls had flame-red locks interspersed with tufts of electric blue. Giulia felt pretty inadequate with her naturally wavy, long brown hair!

Meanwhile, a stunning brunette had emerged from Ale's room. As soon as she saw Giulia, she blushed, stumbled over and offered her hand:

“Hi, I'm Stella,” she ventured.

It was a pretty embarrassing situation, particularly for the girl. Giulia gave her a big smile and handed her a cup:

“Hi, want a coffee?” Stella relaxed and gratefully accepted the drink.

A tall, willowy girl with close-cropped dyed blonde hair rubbed her big blue eyes and looked around with a sense of bemusement. She turned questioningly to her partner, a dark-haired boy with incredibly neat hair and equally sleepy big blue eyes:

“Was ist das?” she said.

The boy shook his head, rose slowly to his full height of what must have been a good six-foot-two, approached the table, looked Giulia straight in the eyes and said, in English:

“Do you speak English?”

Giulia was a bit miffed. She was Italian, clearly, but of course she could speak English!

“Yes I do,” she replied, keeping her cool and handing out yet another cup of coffee. The boy thanked her with a broad smile, sat back next to the blonde girl and whispered something to her in German.

“Wow”, Giulia said to herself, “quite the range of nationalities this year! Remind me to congratulate you, Ale, if you ever deign to join us!”

With the smell of the coffee infiltrating their nostrils, the boys and girls started to queue up for a cup, rattling off a string of names that Giulia knew she hadn't a prayer of remembering.

“Giampaolo, pleased to meet you.” (the boy from Rome).

“Oh, hi. I'm Alessio.”

“Morning, I'm Benedetta.”

“Hey, I'm also Giulia!” (she wouldn't forget that one).

“My name's Roberta, great to meet you.”

Then there were a couple of Lucas, a Francesco, a Michele, two Valentines and an Edoardo.

Lastly, in English: “Nice to meet you. My name is Andreas.”

And: “Hallo, I'm Simone.” (the leggy blonde).

Suddenly, a voice made itself heard above the music and conversation:

“Morning, guys! This is my mamma, Giulia. She's pretty cool, huh?”

“Son, if I'd waited for you to introduce me, I'd have been waiting all day!” she replied.

As always, Ale hurried over to his mother, gave her a big kiss and ruffled her hair:

“When are you going to go Rasta like me, Mamma?” he asked for what felt like the millionth time.

“You'd look awesome! Like a Marley-esque cougar who showed up to the Summer of Love fifty years too late!”

His words were met with a chorus of boos, and as Giulia, overjoyed that Ale's friends had taken her side, returned to the kitchen to put more coffee on, someone changed the music and No Woman, No Cry came blaring out.

“This one's for you!” yelled Giampaolo, poking his head round the door. “You are one hot mamma!”

It seemed like the kids were only too happy to stick around a while longer.

As Giulia put yet another coffee on, her mind drifted to the beautiful sea waiting for her just a few metres away, but she had no desire to see the motley crew outside her house leave just yet. Leonardo appeared at the door:

“Guys! There's plenty that needs doing in here! Giulia can't be expected to do it all by herself now, can she?”

Within seconds, the kitchen was full of boisterous kids, one of whom went to the sink to wash the cups, another grabbed a dishcloth to dry them, one of the girls (Roberta?) seized hold of a broom and proceeded to drag it around the floor, in between everyone's feet, and someone else did some sweeping of their own, lifting Giulia up into their arms and carrying her carefully outside to the patio.

“You stay here, sit and relax. We do everything.”

Andreas looked at her with his intense blue eyes, made sure she was sitting comfortably on the rattan couch and disappeared back inside.

Giulia closed her eyes and shook her head: “Wow, some guys know just how to push your buttons, don't they?” she thought to herself with a frisson of excitement. “So strong, so tall, dark and handsome...” She snapped out of it, feeling almost ashamed at having such thoughts. “Don't be so stupid, Giulia,” she reprimanded herself, “he's just a nice, polite young man, nothing more.” As she relaxed and stretched her legs out onto the table in front of her, happy that she'd kept herself in check, she saw Andreas out of the corner of her eye, coming towards her with a steaming cup of coffee.

“How much sugar?” he asked, sitting close to her.

“One, thank you.”

He added the sugar cube, took the teaspoon, stirred the coffee and handed it to her.

“Do you want a cigarette?” he asked, producing a pack of Camels from his pocket.

Giulia managed to muster a nod. She was loving all this attention, but wasn't it a bit unusual? Or perhaps she was just imagining things as always. She'd been avoiding suitors for so long that she could no longer distinguish between kindness and flirting! She looked up to the sky, then as she turned towards Andreas for him to light her cigarette, she met his gaze: an ocean of blue she could just drown in...

“Morning, Mamma!”

The cheery voice of her confident fifteen-year-old son, Daniele, brought her crashing back to Earth and her role as a forty-something mother.

“Sweetie!” she cried, knowing full well it would put his nose out of joint, “I see you've managed to join the land of the living! I'm guessing you overdid it a little last night?”

“Maybe a bit,” Daniele admitted freely, “but Ale said I could go down to the beach with him and we had such a good time. We lit a bonfire, loads of people came and began to sing, then loads more people turned up! Have you seen how many friends we've made?”

He was bursting with pride that he and his older brother had been the catalysts for such a memorable evening. Giulia looked at him fondly, well aware how important it was to him that Ale, eight years his senior, treated him as an equal.

“Yeah, a right mess you've got me in to! Just kidding, darling,” she added, seeing the boy's face begin to drop, “you know I love having all these people round!”

It was only then she realised that Andreas was no longer sat next to her. She breathed a sigh of relief, asked her son if he wanted breakfast (of course he did), went back inside and started to warm some milk.

Everywhere was absolutely spotless. The youngsters, now back outside, had done an incredible job.

“If they keep this up, I wouldn't mind them staying here the whole month!” she thought to herself, unaware just how prophetic that was.

It was three o'clock by the time she realised she could wander down to the sea. The kids had taken their many scooters and their not so many cars (including hers) and headed for the most popular beach in the area - the one where it was so crowded it was a job even to put a towel down!

Not that they'd be needing towels; they'd gone to that beach so they could play their instruments and attract a crowd of guys with perfectly chiselled bodies and topless girls in thongs,

which come to think of it was a perfect description of Giulia twenty years earlier! Just swap the djembes for guitars and Lucio Battisti¹ songs!

She carefully rolled up her beach towel and put it in a bag together with a book (she always tried to read something in the summer, because in the winter she was too tired in the evenings and didn't have enough time during the day), a bottle of water, a clip so she could put her hair up and some sun cream. She took one final look around to make sure everything was in its place and strolled over towards the steps that led her down to her beloved rocks.

It was a place Giulia knew so well. Her family had rented the house by the sea every summer for as long as she could remember, and she had always felt happy here, far from the madding crowd.

So when she and the boys' father had decided to buy a seaside property, they had chosen this one. There was no need to cram into a baking-hot car and drive to find a decent beach, and they were safe in the knowledge that the kids would never be too far away.

Summers were good back then. It was quiet, peaceful and calm. Time seemed to stand still. Fun and games in the sea by day, and candlelit dinners by night.

Giulia sighed. Now, the house was quiet and peaceful only because most of the time it was frequented just by a single woman in her forties....no, early forties!

She unrolled her towel and looked around. As usual, the moored boats were bobbing gently up and down, and kids on pedalos were riding over so they could dive in off the rocks; one of them waved at her, and she instinctively looked down to check her swimsuit was on properly.

Giulia wasn't sure why, but she hadn't worn a bikini for ten years now, ever since the split from her husband. At first, she'd hated wearing a one-piece because it meant her stomach didn't get tanned. But then she'd discovered that she could roll it down to her waist, as long as she was certain there was no-one else around and she was far away from prying eyes. Not that that was easy, even in her own little bit of paradise.

She looked down at her shapely long(-ish) legs and flat stomach:

Who exactly are you saving yourself for? she wondered. Who are you keeping in shape for, going to the gym for, trying your best to stay under eight stone for...?

She turned her nose up (just like Daniele) and shrugged her shoulders: I'm doing it for me and to hell with everyone else! I don't need a man to keep in shape! Giulia laid face down on the towel - rolling her swimsuit down was out of the question with all these boats around - opened her book and began to read.

She dozed off.....

Giulia woke with a start, noticing that the sun was setting, there was a slight chill in the air, her back was burnt and Ale was bouncing over to her, shouting:

Mamma, are you deaf? I've been calling you for half an hour!

He sat down next to her and started to play with her hair.

They're nice my friends, aren't they? And they're so talented too! Leonardo's been playing the drums for five years and everyone knows him in Florence, he does a load of gigs. You should hear them play! In fact, they're playing at the Mambo tonight. Do you want to come?

Of course I'll come, and actually, Leonardo had already invited me!

Oh, I see, getting your claws into my friends, eh?

Giulia could see her son was only joking. In fact, he seemed really pleased she'd be going.

Come on then! We need to eat soon because we have to be there at ten!

And you expect me to cook for all your pals? asked Giulia, her brow furrowed.

No, Mamma! Andreas has got it all under control. On tonight's menu is spaghetti alle vongole², sprinkled with grilled mussels and fish. I tell you, that guy is a legend! He's been back and forth between the kitchen and the barbecue for over an hour, and it smells absolutely delicious!

With the breeze starting to drift in off the sea, Giulia shivered and asked:

And who exactly is paying for this banquet?

«Don't worry, Mamma. It's all in hand. We've chipped in five euros each and you don't have to pay anything because it's your house. I've paid for Daniele....well, actually, you have!» Ale replied, bursting out laughing.

Giulia looked at her son proudly. He was so cheerful, outgoing and kind-hearted. Ever since his father had scarpered following the divorce, he had gradually taken on the responsibility of being the man of the house. She put her hands on his cheeks and gave him a kiss before getting to her feet and walking back towards the house arm in arm.

Before they'd even reached the final step back up to the house, their senses were awash with an orgy of smells, sights and sounds. Under the red glow of the setting sun, the barbeque was ablaze, the stereo was on full blast and the kids with their brightly coloured hair were dancing, semi-naked, almost trance-like around the table.

Giulia stopped and looked on in awe, holding on tight to Ale's hand. If she'd had a camera, she would have liked to capture that moment for all of time, but even that couldn't have done justice to every detail of such a magical scene.

Standing out amongst the throng of bodies was the almost God-like figure of Andreas, moving easily between the barbeque and the kitchen, overseeing everything....in complete control.

The girls had decorated the centre of the table with a mass of pink and red oleanders, and dozens of candles were burning bright all around.

«This must be German style,» whispered Ale.

As they walked up to the house, a little of the magic was lost, but the boys were still there, surrounded by the girls with their flushed faces and beaming smiles.

«Now you take a shower.»

Giulia was somewhat startled by Andreas's booming, heavily accented English. She turned towards him, slightly annoyed that he was always taking her by surprise and appeared to have taken it upon himself to tell her what she should and shouldn't be doing! The cheek of it!

«Sorry,» he got in before she could give him a piece of her mind, «I speak little English. Not so good...better tu fai doccia bella?»

How could she possibly be mad at him after that?! Instead, she flashed him a smile,

«thank you, I'll surely take it» and disappeared into the bathroom.

To her surprise, Giulia found that even all alone, standing under the shower, she couldn't wipe that smile off her face.

The Mambo was dazzling with light.

Giulia had never been before, at least not since it had changed name a few years earlier and started to play young people's music.

Back in her day, it was a bit of a dive with just a juke-box for playing music but was known, somewhat incongruously, as Bahia4. She'd head down there with a load of friends, order one drink and a load of straws and stay chatting (or in some cases getting lucky in a dark corner) until the owner threw them out.

And then they'd go to the beach, naturally!

These days, it was brand new and seemed a whole lot bigger. It was really crowded, both on the dancefloor and around the circular bar, and it was difficult to get to the stage where the guys were due to play.

They managed to make some headway but were terrified of damaging their instruments, particularly the long, unwieldy didgeridoo and the bass guitar with its giant amplifier. Exasperated, Giampaolo and Leonardo turned to Andreas:

«Hey, would you mind going to the front? No-one's paying any attention to us, but they can't miss you!»

Andreas smiled and nodded, taking big strides as he moved through the crowds.

Giulia couldn't help but notice how quickly people moved out of the way for him. He towered over nearly everyone else in the place, and those broad shoulders of his commanded respect.

When he reached her, she fell in close behind him, grateful for the protective shield, and he, as if it were the most natural thing in the world, stretched his arms out behind him, pulled her tight against his back and dragged her forward with him.

As they reached the stage, Giulia felt her cheeks start to burn and she squirmed away from Andreas.

“How can I be so stupid?” she admonished herself angrily. “What the hell am I thinking?”

And then: “But, wait a minute, what the hell is he thinking?”

All the usual rules of engagement seemed to go out the window where Andreas was concerned. Giulia had always felt safe with her sons' friends, perhaps even spoiled by them at times, but only as a kind of adopted mother, nothing more. It was different with him.

She looked round to see whether Ale or Daniele had witnessed what had happened, but there was no sign of them; she did, however, clamp eyes on Leonardo, who gave her a knowing wink.

There was at least half an hour to go before the gig. The five band members got their instruments ready, did some sound checks and swapped places dozens of times, while the other kids attempted to hold back the crowd, who were pushing to get as close to the stage as possible.

Giulia was being shoved and pulled in all directions, barged and jostled by youngsters who were seemingly oblivious to everything and everybody around them. Her top was becoming dislodged and her hair was getting caught up in people's buttons and jewellery.

She decided to move away from Andreas, whose protective gaze was getting a bit too much. As the gig started, she slowly moved away to a raised platform a few metres from the stage.

“Mamma, what are you doing over there?” Ale shouted, waving furiously to attract her attention. “Come down here with us - you won't enjoy it from up there!”

Giulia weighed up her options. She wanted to be at the front with all the others, but she just didn't want to be too near Andreas. The voice inside her head was telling her she ought to keep her distance but, my God, that aftershave she had caught a whiff of...

She began to advance towards the stage, castigating herself yet again: “You should be ashamed of yourself! You're old enough to be his mother! So his aftershave got your hormones going? Just take a sedative and go to bed! What's an old woman like you doing in a place like this anyway? By now, most people your age are either tucked up in bed, having a civilised meal out or maybe relaxing to some music in a piano bar. What in God's name are you doing at an Afro-Cuban gig?”

She continued with the argument inside her head as she edged back into the crowd: “But I like Afro-Cuban music. I was listening to this kind of thing before these guys were even born!”

Andreas stood up and pointed to where he had been sitting:

“You sit here, please. I go.”

“I go...where exactly?” thought Giulia as she sat down, but when she looked up he had gone. Vanished into thin air.

The gig was awesome. It lasted a good three hours, with only a few short intermissions, and the youngsters really did themselves proud.

Giulia clapped and cheered, then got up and danced uninhibitedly as she closed her eyes and got lost in the rhythm.

A bit later, someone handed her a welcome chilled glass of rum and coke, and then another....she turned to Ale and shouted to him above the music:

“Thanks, son!”

“What for?”

“The rum and cokes!”

â###Mamma, if I could afford them Iâ##d be drinking them myself!â##

â##So where have they come from then?â##

â##How do I know? Looks like youâ##ve got yourself an admirer!â## Ale winked at her and turned away.

She decided to stop worrying about where the drinks had come from. Worst-case scenario: someone would tell her she owed them the money. She reimmersed herself in the music and thought no more of it.

Eventually, exhausted and dripping with sweat, Leonardo, Giampaolo, Luca, Michele and Edoardo called it a night. Bland dance music came back over the speakers and the band hurriedly started to get their things together. The stage was needed for the podium dancers who would no doubt titillate the guests as the night wore on.

As she helped the band to pack up the remainder of their things, Giulia wondered where Andreas had got to; she realised she hadnâ##t seen him since the start of the gig.

â##Who knows where he went?â## she said to herself. â##But why should it matter to you anyway? Maybe heâ##d found himself a nice young girl of his own age and gone home with her...â## She felt sick at the very thought of it and realised she had fallen for him good and proper. Silly old fool!

The sun crept in through the shutters, hurting Giuliaâ##s eyes. It was roasting hot in the bed and she had a pounding headache.

â##Those damned rum and cokes,â## she thought to herself. â##What the hell was I playing at?!â##

She tried to position her watch so it was in the sun, cursing the indiscernible dark-blue face, and discovered it was.....four oâ##clock! And with the sun streaming in like that, it was hardly likely to be four in the morning!

Giulia groaned as she hauled herself out of bed and trudged into the bathroom. She caught a glimpse of herself in the mirror, and it was not a pretty sight: there were big dark patches under her eyes, the number of wrinkles around her mouth appeared to have doubled and her hair resembled Medusaâ##s on a bad day!

She stepped into the shower, turned on the cold tap only and braved the torrent.

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