**Avery and Margarette II**

“She is no maid,” Avery insisted. “She is Liselotte’s sister.”

 “Half-sister,” Margarette gently corrected him as the three other women were left dumbfounded by this revelation. “My father’s first wife... her mother... died when she was nine years old. He married again... I was born. Liselotte hated me from the first moment, though she hid it from my parents. She would spit in my food when nobody was looking... any chance to hurt me with pinches and slaps that would not leave marks... And then... I was only seventeen when mother and father were killed in a plane crash. My share of my father’s money... He was a wealthy man... He provided for us both in his will... But he thought Liselotte would take care of my money until I was of age... Take care of me. But when I was eighteen... she told me that the funds were gone... bad investments.... I have nothing. I cannot study as I wished to do. I cannot get a job or a home of my own. I must do as she wishes... forever. It has been three years. It already feels like forever. Only this last week... With Avery... He made me feel worthwhile... Feel loved.... wanted.”

“That can’t be allowed!” Talitha exclaimed. “It can’t be legal.”

She looked at her friends questioningly.

“It doesn’t sound like it,” Hillary said, with her diplomatic experience. “I’ve certainly never heard of such a thing in any litigious framework.”

“I don’t care about the money,” Margarette said. “Not really. I just want to be free... To be happy... To make my own choices.”

“There are certainly European laws about slavery,” Marion pointed out. “You must be able to get some sort of help.”

“I will free her,” Avery said. “I will take her from here.”

“That needs a great deal of thought,” Talitha said quietly, noting how Avery held Margarette’s hand – as if nothing could make him let go of it. “For now, you are safe with us. We will take measures in that regard. Both of you enjoy your tea. Later, we will consider where to eat dinner. Then we will talk about what can be done. For now, eat your fill of this afternoon meal, then you look as if a little sleep would do you good.”

Margarette’s ultimate wish was to be free to make her own choices, but she was too weary to do anything but what her new found friends were suggesting. She let herself be taken to Marion’s room where she soon fell asleep in the comfortable queen size bed.

Back on the balcony, the teapot was refreshed and some key matters talked over.

“First....” Hillary said. “Though I am inclined to believe her story... Her pheromones are very much those of a victim, not a schemer... I’m sure we have all heard of what on this world, at least, is called a ‘romance fraud’.”

Everyone had. Marion wondered if she ought to have thought of such a thing. She knew human nature better than her companions. They all, even Avery in the tailored clothes they had bought for him, exuded wealth. They might well be targets, though Hillary, with her wantonness and easy attitude to both sexes, seemed the more likely target.

“I don’t think so,” Talitha asserted.” I read her mind as she was talking to us....”

Avery looked affronted at the idea, but Talitha shook her head in assurance.

“The possibility could not be discounted. We had to know for certain. There was no deceit, only embarrassment at having to tell us her personal problems. I saw a great deal of suffering that she has not even told you, Avery. You have not, I presume, viewed her lower back while you have shared intimate moments with Margarette?”

“Certainly not,” he replied with indignation. “I should never....”

“No, you wouldn’t. And I doubt Lisolette would let her slave-sister wear the sort of couture dresses that would reveal so much of her body.”

Everyone glanced at Hillary, who had any number of such outfits, from daringly skimpy bathing costumes to ball gowns with almost no back to them at all.

“So nobody would ever see a scar in the shape of a....” Talitha had never laundered her own clothes in her life, so she struggled to find the right word. “A hot steam iron... Margarette’s memory of her sister punishing her for burning the hem of a petticoat is etched on her mind, but she didn’t want to share that terrible incident with strangers. She spoke only of pinches and slaps, while reliving horrors in her mind.”

Avery was angry, now, but not at Lady Talitha.

“If she were a man, I would....” Marion could only guess at his intentions. Hillary and Talitha felt it intensely as a telepathic spike that made them both wince.

“Even if she were, I am afraid duels for the honour of a lady are not condoned in modern Europe,” Marion told him. “We must find a less violent way to protect Margarette and fix Lisolette as well as keeping you from breaking any Italian laws.”

“I have a diplomatic passport,” Hillary pointed out. “If there is any law-breaking, I will do it.”

“Well, I hope it doesn’t come to that,” Talitha said cautiously. “For now we don’t need to look much further than how to have dinner, tonight, with Margarette in the party, and without Lisolette finding out.”

That called, not so much for diplomatic credentials, but a practical application of the Haolstromnian pheromones that Hillary had already spread among the hotel staff. Little wonder waiters came at her command. The deputy manager, a Tuscan by name of Alessandro Rocco, summoned to their suite, had what Marion called ‘puppy dog eyes’ in her presence.

“Yes, Madame,” he confirmed. “Fraulein Möller has ordered dinner for one in her suite tonight – her menu including several specific demands such as ‘low calorie oil’ on her salad and gluten free bread rolls with soup at an exact temperature that will be impossible to maintain for a room service order and which will almost certainly lead to a complaint in the morning.”

“Then the restaurant will be relieved of her baleful presence,” Hillary affirmed. “WE will have a table for five at eight, my dear Sandro. By the windows, I think. The view is so delightful.”

The deputy manager assured them that one of the best spots in the restaurant would be theirs and didn’t mind at all being addressed by a diminutive of his name only his mother, some aunts, and his boyfriend ordinarily used. He was firmly Signor Rocco to the hotel staff.

“Excellent. And, while we dine, would you have a chambermaid make up the spare bed in my twin room. Our extra guest will be using it, later.”

If Signor Rosso thought the change of sleeping arrangements for one of the guests was unusual, he didn’t say so. He bowed to the ladies and nodded courteously to Avery as he went about his work.

“Lisolette’s suite is on the same floor as ours,” Avery pointed out. “Are we running a risk of being spotted going out into the corridor?”

“We ARE,” Hillary answered. “But don’t you think a little risk makes life colourful?”

Even though his job was about taking risks for the safety of his principals, Avery didn’t quite agree. Nor did Marion and Talitha. But they put their trust in Hillary’s judgement with only small qualms.

When Margarette woke and heard she was dining with her new friends in the hotel restaurant, she had more than qualms. She was wide-eyed in astonishment at the plan.

She also had some practical issues if she were to be seen in a public place.

“You certainly need a shopping trip,” Talitha told her. “Avery can take you and one of my credit cards to the boutiques of Ravello tomorrow. But for dinner, I hope you won’t mind wearing one of my dresses. We are about the same size and I have several nice things I haven’t even worn, yet. Then we’ll do your hair and make-up.”

In fact, Margarette was a little thinner than Talitha. She had rarely been allowed to eat her fill of any meals and working to her half-sister’s demands was exercise enough.

Wearing clothes no other woman had yet worn, a simple but stylish knee length coctail dress, did a lot for her confidence. Silk stockings and a pair of high heeled court shoes that Marion had not yet worn completed her ensemble. She thoroughly enjoyed having her cosmetics and hair done by the combined efforts of three other women of good taste.

And the look on Avery Ferron’s face when she emerged from the bedroom was worth everyone’s effort.

“Plain, sallow-faced?” Talitha whispered as the two lovers held hands delightedly. “She is twice as beautiful as her sister.”

Marion agreed. So did Hillary who was a woman only part of the time and had no trouble seeing why Avery had been taken with her even in her down-trodden state.

“Don’t be so shallow, Hillary,” Marion told her as they headed down to dinner. “She is a sweet and charming young woman. Looks aren’t everything.”

Margarette was nervous of entering the busy restaurant, open not only to guests but diners of taste and superior bank balances from all over the Amalfi district. The group of four women with only one male accompanying them – the young and handsome Avery – turned some admiring heads as Signor Rocco himself escorted them to their table – on the far side of the room so that they had been in plain sight for several minutes before they sat.

“What if one of those people tells Lisolette I was here?” Margarette wondered.

“First, the way Lisolette behaves even towards people of equal class, I doubt anyone here would be inclined to tell her anything,” Marion pointed out. “And second... The way she has hidden you from view in the laundry room, they aren’t even likely to connect you with her.”

“Especially not dressed so finely and beautifully as you are,” Avery assured her. “I think, even if she walked in here tonight she wouldn’t recognise you.”

“Quite possibly,” Marion said. “But I’d rather not test that theory.”

They didn’t have to, and after initial wariness Margarette warmed to conversation about travel. Though she had rarely enjoyed the fine restaurants, opera houses and theatres of Europe’s great cities, she had been required to accompany her sister to museums and galleries where a ‘companion’ at her beck and call suited her whim. Lisolette couldn’t stop her enjoying what she saw on those occasions.

 Marion had visited many of the same galleries in Florence and Milan, Madrid, Berlin and Athens. Margarette almost forgot her circumstances and there was only one moment when she was reminded of it, when Hillary asked her about her passport.

“You must have one to travel between so many places,” she pointed out.

“Lisolette keeps it,” Margarette answered. “She locks everything in a document case by the bed everywhere we are. If I should try to leave her, I could not go far without her knowing.”

“Then we need to deal with that, as well as your holiday wardrobe,” Hillary responded, but if a plan was forming behind her eyes she didn’t share it.

They dined leisurely, then Avery and Margarette enjoyed a private walk on the terrace before the party returned to their suite. The spare bed in the twin room had been made up and a dressing gown and silk nightdress embroidered with the Villa Cimbrone crest and a complimentary bag of toiletries were left on it.

“Good old Sandro,” Hillary said approvingly.

“So Margarette will sleep with you?” Avery queried. “I mean... In your room.”

“No,” Hillary answered. “You can take my bed. That way you will have no jealous thoughts of me seducing your sweetheart and you may be absolutely sure of her security under your personal care. Besides, there are a couple of things I want to do later. I don’t want to disturb anyone.”

Again, she didn’t elaborate and everybody knew better than to ask.

As it happened, Marion woke about two o’clock and had a fancy for a glass of fresh orange juice that was available in the mini bar in the drawing room. She was pouring the drink when the main door opened and Hillary slipped into the suite. He was dressed in dark clothes and had a balaclava stuffed in his pocket.

“First part of Operation Freedom for Margarette accomplished,” he said and winked.

“Do remember in the morning that Margarette knows you as an elegant woman, not a male cat burglar,” Marion answered.

But Avery and Margarette set off by taxi early the next morning, intending to have breakfast in Ravello. Hillary joined Talitha and Marion for their breakfast on the balcony a little later.

As they were enjoying a second cup of coffee Signor Rocco came to their suite. He reported that Frauleinn Möller had demanded that he call the police to report her sister missing.

“Demanded of me,” he pointed out. “To pick up the telephone and call them herself is beneath her. But it is well that you should know this.”

“It is very well,” Hillary answered him. “Please do not call the police. There is no need since Margarette is not, in fact, missing. She is a grown woman with no mental deficiencies choosing to spend her time in convivial company. There is no crime involved, and nothing to cause notoriety to this hotel.”

“The matter is in your hands, Madame,” Signor Rocco assured Hillary and returned to his morning duties.

Hillary spent twenty minutes changing into a well-cut but unremarkable men’s suit and combing his well-trimmed beard.

He promised to be back shortly.

It was a little over an hour before he returned with a twinkling smile that spoke of mischief done.

“Frauleinn Möller is none too happy with the local Polizia. When a fine looking detective with a smartly combed beard came to see her she fully expected to be taken seriously and a hue and cry raised across the Amalfi coast. But I began with a search of her rooms, finishing with an examination of the document case where the two passports were kept. Margarette’s passport was found to be missing from the case which had not, in the opinion of this Inspector, been forced. The Inspector concluded that the lady had left of her own volition, and as she was an adult and not considered dangerous to herself or others there was no further action the Polizia could take.”

“Where did the passport go?” Talitha asked.

“As Marion noticed in the middle of the night, I brought a cat burglar outfit with me. I broke into the suite and opened the case while Frauleinn Möller snored in a very unladylike way. I think she takes opiates to sleep at night. But that is no concern of ours.”

“So, she believes that Margarette has run away from her, even without any money of her own.”

“That’s the size of it,” Hillary answered. “We need to consider, later, how to enjoy the rest of our stay here at Villa Cimbrone, while ensuring that Avery and Margarette have as much time together and none of us run into Lisolette. I had contemplated an emetic in her breakfast tea, but she would just punish the kitchen staff. I’m thinking about more subtle actions.”

Talitha agreed that food tampering was a desperate last resort, and added that she would like an afternoon in the sauna and steam room.

“That will suit me fine, too,” Marion admitted. “As long as there is no chance of Lisolette being there.”

Hillary declined the delights of those hotel facilities. He planned to make some important phone calls and take advantage of the excellent Wi-Fi.

“I may be able to trip up Frauleinn Möller without resort to non-lethal poisons,” he said. “Though it might take some time to organise.”

Marion and Talitha were used, by now, to a certain inscrutable look on both of Hillary’s faces. They decided to leave him to it.

Later, with Hillary back in female form, they took a taxi to Ravello, where they met up with Avery and Margarette. A very good restaurant was happy to look after all of the bags and boxes from the shopping day while they dined in perfect peace and security.

The next morning, Signor Rocco again joined them on the balcony at breakfast. He had a very broad smile on his face, and Marion thought it was quite natural and nothing to do with any Haolstromian influence.

“We are rid of our least favourite customer,” he reported joyfully. “Our security manager has escorted her to the railway station. I permitted him to purchase a second class ticket to Florence, where she may ask assistance from the German consulate, there. We do not wish to appear cruel to a woman in her misfortune.”

“Misfortune?” Margarette asked, concern on her face, despite every cruelty her sister had inflicted on her.

“There have been financial irregularities which have resulted in Fraulein Möller’s assets being frozen pending investigation by the German tax authorities. We were informed that the substantial bill for her stay here is unlikely to be paid. She has surrendered several expensive pieces of jewellery to the hotel in lieu of payment, so we decided not to involve the local police. We do not usually accept such terms, but she was in great distress and as I said, we are not cruel.”

“Then she can do us no more harm,” Avery said, clutching Margarette’s hands. “You are free... to do what you want to do.”

“I want to be with you,” she told Avery. “Can that happen? I am still penniless and I am in a country to which I do not belong.”

“One problem at a time,” Hillary told them. “Today, we had scheduled a chauffeured limousine to take us around the famous Amalfi Coast Drive - unutterably scenic, with, according to the brochure, stunning views of lemon groves, pine-fringed bays, Saracen towers and pretty villages. A luxury picnic has been ordered from the Cimbrone kitchen, and there will be endless opportunities for us all to look glamorous in new dresses and sunhats as we shop for souvenirs along the Sorrentine peninsula.”

“An excellent programme for the day,” Signor Rocco agreed. “And you will want your window table reserved for dinner?”

They all agreed on that prospect. Yes, there were some issues to overcome, but they could wait for another day.