

# Chapter 1

## The Cruise

Hermann Gross booked the most beautiful suite on the cruise ship *Azamara Journey*. He was planning a twelve-day voyage across the Mediterranean and wanted to celebrate his wife's thirtieth birthday and the tenth anniversary of their marriage on the ship. He knew he owed his wife Lucia a lot.

He was an active businessman who was hardly at home. He had made a firm commitment to make the twelve days beautiful for her, to be with her, to laugh and dance, and to make love. He understood her desire to have children, but he no longer wanted any. And he was honest with her. Even before the marriage, he had put her in the picture about it. He already had three children from two previous marriages. As pragmatic as he was, he underwent a vasectomy years ago. Hermann left nothing to chance.

He was a successful commodity trader in Frankfurt and liked to have everything under control. His company, Metallica, was the second largest company in Germany in this trading sector.

He had learned his trade with Phibro in the USA and traded primarily in precious and base metals and ores. But he also traded in crude oil, oil products, natural gas, and commodity-related stocks. He was mainly involved in transit trades, the goods never reaching Germany.

The headquarters of his group was in Frankfurt, and he had branches in all continents. He used to travel a lot around the world, often to Africa and Russia. These were his largest locations. In recent

years, he spent less time on the longer trips but instead often went to London or Amsterdam. These places were, besides Geneva, the most important hubs for commodity trading, and he liked to be present.

He never took Lucia with him. Only to the annual Trading Forum, the “rendezvous” of the world’s largest oil and commodity traders, at the Kempinski Hotel in Geneva, was she allowed to travel with him. There, he needed to have his beautiful, young, and very smart wife with him. He wanted to show himself with her; his ego demanded success and admiration. With Lucia at his side, he was sure of recognition.

He led a life full of tension and responsibility under tough competition. But he already years ago had also found a way to balance his strenuous business life. This “compensation” had cost him his two marriages. When he married Lucia, he promised himself that she would never find out about his visits to the Red House, a brothel in Frankfurt. He reduced his visits to the prostitutes to two or three times a week. For him, the hours he spent with the prostitutes were an absolute diversion from his stressful working days. The girls were funny and amusing, dirty talk was humorous, and he always managed to relax there. He often drank a glass of bourbon, took one of the ladies into a room, or not, and paid cash. Nobody knew about his visits. He was sure he could rely on the discretion of the ladies in the Red House.

He was very fond of his young wife Lucia in his own way; she was a trophy for him. She got everything from him—only she should not ask too many questions.

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Hermann and Lucia flew from Frankfurt to Venice. At the Marco Polo Airport, they took a cab that brought them to the Hotel Danielli. They enjoyed two sunny days in Laguna City, strolled hand in hand through the narrow streets, took a gondola ride on the Grand Canal, ate in small restaurants, and visited some galleries. They also made a detour to Lido before embarking on the Azamara.

In the early evening, the ship departed from Venezia Terminal Passeggeri; and the next morning, they were already in Bari. Hermann

reserved a car with a private chauffeur, and they made a trip for two through the beautiful Apulia. At noon, they stopped at a taverna and ate orange salad and rabbit ragù with delicious polenta, accompanied by the local wine—Primitivo.

They had just finished eating when Hermann's cell phone hummed. He took his phone out of his trouser pocket and quickly looked at the display.

"Lucy, my dear, I must leave you alone for a few minutes. I got a message. I have to get it done." Hermann apologized briefly to his wife.

"Sure, all right. I'll take a walk around the piazza," Lucia replied. Before she could even take the first step, he was already on the phone.

Lucia took a walk across the piazza. It was lunchtime and all stores were closed—only the church was open. She went inside. Her steps echoed in the silence of the small chapel, which was deserted. The rays of the sun, which had found its way in through the narrow windows, brought warmth and light. Lucia stopped for a while between the rows of seats. She felt the silence here differently than in the churches in Milan. There were always people there, whispering softly, but still they were there. Here, she was all alone. She lit a candle for all her deceased relatives and left the church. Across the piazza, she saw Hermann, who looked nervously to all sides.

"Where have you been? I have to go to Frankfurt, immediately. A very important business deal might blow up." He turned to the chauffeur, told him to take him to the airport in Bari immediately, and then to take his wife to the ship. He was upset, tried to make more calls on the way, but the connection in Apulia, on the winding roads, was bad.

"I'm sorry, Lucy, but there's no other way, you have to understand. I'll be back in three or four days. In Marseille or Barcelona, I will be back on the ship with you," Hermann promised.

Lucia sighed deeply and only noted that she was very much looking forward to this trip with him.

"Me too, Lucy, me too. But there's so much money at stake—I have to go back. We will make another trip soon. You have my word."

In front of the airport building, he gave his wife a quick kiss and, while only dressed in shorts and a T-shirt, he jumped out of the car. He wanted to get the next flight to some big airport, Rome or Milan, and from there, to Frankfurt. For Hermann, nothing was impossible.

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The small bus brought the excursionists back to the ship. Lucia enjoyed the Costa Smeralda in Sardinia very much. The green water was warm, inviting for swimming and snorkeling. She remembered the many vacations she had spent there as a child with her parents and her siblings, Chiara and Tommaso. In the late afternoon, she went from one store to another in Cervo but hardly bought anything. She was used to being alone, but not the way she was now. Although Hermann was often away from home in the evenings, she knew he would come. That she now had to spend days alone on the ship did not suit her. She hoped that her husband would keep his word and return soon.

She entered the ship through the security lock and headed for the lift. The first officer approached her and asked her to see the captain. Lucia wondered about this and wanted to know why, but he remained silent and accompanied her to the captain's bridge.

Captain Alessandro Rocca, with a serious face, greeted her. She wondered what was going on. Yesterday, she sat at his table during dinner and everyone had a pleasant evening. Nothing pointed to a problem.

"Please, take a seat, Signora Fontana." The captain cleared his throat and pointed to a high swivel chair. "I received a message from the German Embassy in Rome today." He remained silent for a moment. "Your husband had a car accident," he added.

"What happened?" a concerned Lucia asked.

"I do not know the details of the accident, unfortunately."

"Is he dead?" Barely audible, Lucia brought up the question.

The captain nodded. "My condolences, Signora Fontana. I'm very sorry."

Lucia sat still and lowered her head. Her long, dark-blonde hair fell down across her face. She closed her eyes, pressed her lips together, and

took a jerky breath. The tears came unchecked. The news was a shock to her, but she had not yet realized the significance of what was being said.

Captain Rocca looked at his first officer.

“Signora, do you want to continue with the cruise?”

Lucia looked at him in horror. “No, no way. I must get back as soon as possible.” She remembered that there used to be a night ferry from Sardinia to Genoa or Livorno.

“Could you book me a seat on a ferry and also a flight to Frankfurt, Captain? I would be very grateful.”

Captain Rocca promised to do everything to secure her a place on the ferry. The first officer accompanied Lucia back to her suite and sent a steward to help her pack.

Once in Genoa, she called her parents in Milan. They already knew about it. Her father, Luciano Fontana, was a publisher, a media mogul. He owned several daily newspapers, magazines, and two TV stations in Italy.