

# ***Bellino***

**Zin Murphy**

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## Bellino

Sophie curses her God. She curses all the saints she can remember from her convent school days. Then she thanks Our Lady, in the guise of her Portuguese grandmother, for giving her a swarthy skin that can stand the heat of November in northern Italy.

She picks up her pace. *Why does Ev have to schedule meetings so soon after lunch?*

'Hi, Maffy!' Sophie greets a local girl heading slowly in the other direction.

Mafalda shivers and settles herself deeper into her quilted jacket. She mumbles something as she passes, then turns to stare at the back of Sophie's blouse as the Canadian strides off towards her own part of the United Nation International Romance Office campus.

The security system blocks Sophie between the two entry doors. However hard she stares at it, the second door refuses to let her through. Then she remembers the trick, and opens her eyes wide before the scanner. The door hisses and opens. The time display reads 1428.

Sophie clatters up the stairs. She slows down to compose herself as she crosses the open space, mouthing 'Ciao' to any colleagues who look up, then pushes Everard's door, left ajar, fully open and stumbles in.

'Miz Shtok!'

'Stock,' she corrects automatically. 'Mister Coach.'

'Koch,' he corrects. 'As in ... rooster. Siddown, Sophie.' He shifts his bulk in his chair. 'Welcome to our two-person Frumpty Dumpty conference.'

Sophie does not appreciate her boss's humour. She does not consider herself particularly fat. Besides, men appreciate a fuller figure.

'What's new, Ev?'

'Sicily'. Everard fondles his abundant beard.

Sophie has absorbed the northern Italian view of southerners. She pictures people who are swarthier and shorter than herself, but also sensual and shiftless.

Everard's cough interrupts her reverie.

'Well? What do you think?'

'Good human material.'

'Yes, a people that is - a people that are - a people that is already very romantic.'

His eyes are bright, his enthusiasm magnified by the lenses of his spectacles. 'A wonderful stage for our conference.'

'What conference?'

*'Nemici, Amici.'*

'Huh?'

*'Enemies into Friends. A conference on the transforming power of love.'*

'Another one?'

'The first of its kind in Sicily.'

'Who's coming?'

'Tammara Webber, Samantha Young, Sylvain Reynard, Sophie Kinsella...

plenty.'

'And the money? Who's sponsoring it?'

*'Our headquarters in New Orleans, their local government ...'*

Sophie makes a dubious face.

'Look, I'll sort out the sponsors. You just fly down to Sicily and help organise it for us.'

Sophie pictures hard-faced peasants clutching violin cases. She pictures deserts, sandstorms, camels dying of thirst.

'Ugh!'

'My local contact will meet you at the airport, show you round, find the venue, basically do all the work. You just make sure there's no hanky-panky. No funds going missing.'

'Aagh!'

Everard slides a sheet of paper across the desk. Sophie reaches out for it. Everard slams his hand on hers.

*Not again,* she thinks.

'Your on-line tickets.'

Everard raises his eyes from the front of Sophie's sweat-soaked blouse to her fleshy, compressed lips, then to her steely green eyes.

Everard withdraws his hand. He uses it to bring a plastic bottle out of a drawer in his massive desk and place it in front of Sophie.

'You might need this.'

Sophie picks it up and reads the label.

*Maxfactor Sun's Block. Made in Laos.*

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Sophie hates flying. It is comfortable enough, saves time and rough journeys, but it is really damaging to the environment. She catches the shuttle bus to the airport, but has to take a taxi to the shuttle terminus because she has difficulty getting up so soon after dawn.

Everard has told her she is going to like his contact in Sicily. She does.

It is not that young Marti Bellino is especially handsome. With his pointy ears, pointy nose and a chin covered by a rough, pointy beard, he reminds Sophie of a character in a television series from her adolescent years. It is more his sharp, knowing eyes, which seem to glitter when they meet hers. The touch of his fingers on her wrist when she offers her hand electrifies her. He gives off the air of someone who knows exactly what he is doing. His English is perfect, and his manners are almost perfect. Sophie wishes he was old-fashioned enough to have kissed her hand, as she watches him stride ahead with her bags heavy with conference materials. Bellino stops to let Sophie catch up.

'You will love Sicily,' he says. 'It is the most romantic part of Italy.'

'I'm here to work, unfortunately.'

'But is not Romance your business? The world contains no better place for lovers than here. That is our car.'

Bellino is pointing to a white Jaguar parked at an angle in the taxi rank. A man in police uniform is standing beside it, looking carefully around him. He sees them approach, opens the passenger door for Sophie, then helps Bellino load her bags into the boot.

The drive into Catania is short. Sophie is trying to work out how much petrol they have consumed when Bellino pulls up at the hotel he has booked for her. It looks pleasantly modest. So does the portly man waiting in front of the entrance. He shuffles over to the Jaguar, opens the door for Sophie, helps her out and kisses her on both cheeks.

Then he does the same for Bellino. Sophie is taken aback. She has barely got used to greeting habits in the north. She will tell her friends in Canada that it adds a touch of romance to everyday intercourse. Maybe they should try it.

The portly man has unloaded the boot, and follows them slowly into the hotel. He deposits the bags in front of the unmanned reception desk, goes behind it and asks Sophie for her passport. He examines it carefully, with increasing admiration. He shoots a look of enquiry at Bellino. Bellino gives a quick shake of the head. The man's face resumes a neutral expression. He summons a teenage boy, who arrives with the same slow gait, lifts the bags with an effort and accompanies them to Sophie's room on the second floor.

As soon as the boy leaves, Bellino asks if he can use the room's phone.

'So as not to compromise the security of your event. Please give me the final list of guest speakers.'

Sophie obliges. Bellino sits on the bed, picks up the phone and sets to work.

Sophie examines the room. She likes the lack of extravagance.

Bellino is talking fast in an unfamiliar form of Italian. Sophie goes into the bathroom. A notice beside a glass on the wash basin asks guests to save a precious resource by rinsing with mineral water, which they can buy at the Reception Desk. Sophie approves.

When she emerges, Bellino is putting the phone down.

'Everything is arranged to your satisfaction,' he says. 'Fulvio has sorted the venue; Clementina has arranged suitable accommodation for the guest speakers; and Carmine has seen to the catering.'

'Vegetarian, I hope.'

'Including vegetarian. Everything is in order. I have confirmed.'

Bellino swings his legs on to the bed and lays back against the pillows, hands behind his head, smiling.

'I'll need full written details.'

'In due course. In due course.'

'Two copies: one for headquarters in New Orleans, one for the Turin Office.'

'It will be done. You shall have them. Listen, I have something for you. A little gift.' He reaches into the inside pocket of his jacket.

*Oh please, thinks Sophie, not a brown envelope.*

It has the shape of a large envelope, but is covered in shiny red and silver striped paper, tied with thin, bright green ribbon.

As Sophie reaches to accept it, Bellino catches her hand and pulls her toward him. The bed frame and her momentum throw her off balance and she falls on top of him. Sophie sees the packet fall to the floor and feels a hand on the inside of her right leg. She brings her knees together and hears a cry of pain. Bellino looks shell-shocked as she pushes herself off him and gets to her feet, off the bed.

'Don't try that again.'

*'Santa Madonna di Carini, proteggimi dalle ...!'*

Sophie hears an unfamiliar expression. It sounds like "stray gay".

Bellino's aggrieved look dissolves into laughter.

'I am sorry, my dear. But ... a pretty young woman, alone with me in a hotel room. I did not want you to think I was homosexual.'

'Why would I care?'

'In fact. From now on, I shall be as good as gold.' Bellino gets to his feet.

'Do that. Right now, I need a couple of hours' rest. This afternoon I'd like to inspect the venue.'

Pretty ... young ... Inwardly, she sneers. Then smiles.

'First things first. I shall collect you at one o'clock. You will enjoy the best Sicilian food.'

'You know a good restaurant, I take it.'

'I know very many fine restaurants, but nothing can beat home cooking. My wife is expecting us.'

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After lunch, Sophie feels bad. She has eaten enough meat and fish to add two reincarnations to her journey. She could have had an excellent lunch of the many vegetables that Giulia Bellino had presented, but the *polpette di nunnata* fish-balls and the meat-stuffed *falsomagro* roll had also been irresistible, and delicious. Reliving the taste, she feels good.

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The venue is perfect. Carmine and Fulvio show Sophie around it.

The conference hall is big enough to house the maximum number of people they expect to come. Movable partitions can serve as walls to break it down into smaller rooms for group sessions. The interpreting booths have new equipment, and Carmine has hired interpreters to cover all five official languages. There is a catering area on the floor above, and office space on the ground floor. Picture windows on the top floor offer a view of the city and sea. They test the air conditioning. It works, and Sophie insists that it stay on.

Fulvio presents the accounts for Sophie to inspect. It is clear that they have been kept meticulously. The auditors will be pleased. The only expenditure anyone might deem extravagant is on catering. Sophie asks about it.

'If food be the music of Romance, play on!' quips Fulvio.

*Where on earth did he get that from?* Sophie wonders.

They are in a temporary office on the conference floor. Through the window panel, Sophie sees a group of smartly-dressed men arrive. Two are young, one of them dark and squat, the other blond-haired but sun-tanned, with a more athletic build. The third man is tall and thin, grey-faced but silver-haired. Bellino leaves the electricians he has been conferring with and crosses the room to offer his greeting. He kisses a ring on the thin man's hand, yet ignores the other two.

*He didn't do that to me,* Sophie thinks before she can stop herself. *Maybe he is gay, after all.* A feeling in her stomach tells her otherwise.

Bellino and the thin man talk for ten minutes, then the group leaves.

Bellino comes into the office.

'Marcius sends his apologies, Sophie. He does not speak English. He wishes to know about your next big conference.'

'Actually, we've put in a bid to host the International Romantic Congress of Film. They don't come bigger than that. It's our Chief Coordinator's dream. If this conference in Sicily is a success, it'll boost our chances enormously.'

'Do you know who your main rivals are?'

'The main contender is Bombay.'

'Who have we got in Bombay?' Bellino snaps at Carmine. 'Films.'

'Well, Shetty's gone, but Vijay, Santosh and Simran are still around. Plus some new guys.'

'Find out their names and give the list to Marcius.'

Carmine hurries off to make the calls.

Bellino turns back to Sophie.

'I think we can make sure that you win.'

The air conditioning is strong. Sophie shivers.

'Look Marti, let's just make sure that everyone who comes here goes away loving us.'

It is evening when they leave the venue. Sophie is not hungry, but Bellino insists they eat something together.

'Doesn't your wife expect you home for dinner?'

'No. She never expects me unless I call. I usually eat out in the evening. I am a busy man.'

'And if you call?'

'There will be a meal ready when I arrive.'

'How does she manage that?'

'I do not know. But she does.'

Bellino stops at an unpretentious trattoria where he says the food is always good. He wants Sophie to try the sweet and sour rabbit, but she has murdered enough living

creatures for one day. Instead, they have *pasta alla Norma*. Sophie wants to try the local wine, so Bellino orders a *Passopisciaro* chardonnay for her. He sticks to water.

'What do you think of the wine? It is grown on the slopes of the volcano.'

'I like the pale golden straw colour. Hmmm. The nose presents a harmonious blend of orchard and stone fruits with a rapier of citrus, all complemented by a more languid opulence.' She sips. 'The palate reflects the aromatics presented on the nose and delivers the promised richness, but there is a very attractive linear mineral streak which adds focus. This is a very pure translation of Chardonnay. Your choice was good.'

'And our arrangements for the conference?'

'Excellent. Your people are very thorough. My Chief Coordinator will be very pleased.'

'So, everything is in order, then.'

'You've contained the costs very well. In fact, there were more electricians buzzing around the place than appear on the payroll.'

'Oh, they were from the film studio.'

'Film?'

'That is right. At no charge to Uniro.'

'We didn't ask to have the conference filmed.'

'Conference and backstage.'

'What are you talking about?'

'They approached us. They want some authentic background for the key scene in a film they are making.'

'A conference? The key scene? What is this film?'

'The title is *L'uomo privo*.'

'*The Private Man*?'

'No. *The Bereft Man. The Private Man* would be *L'uomo privato*. Already been done. Emidio Guerra's masterpiece. Ours is going to be slower, less action-packed, more arty.'

'Does Everard know?'

'Eh? Ah, your Mr. Koch. Of course he knows. He and I will share the money. A little incentive for us.'

'You can't do that. It's *our* conference, *Uniro's!* Uniro could use that money to spread romance and love.'

'You never even thought about it. So you will not miss it.'

'What about Everard?'

'He and I work together well. We are a good team.'

'It's preposterous!'

'It is business. And for the sake of business, we will offer you a cut. An equal share.'

'Is that an offer I can't refuse?'

'Of course you can refuse.'

'Then of course I refuse.'

Bellino drives Sophie back to her hotel and bids her a courteous goodnight.

Once inside her room, she uses her protected work phone to call the Chief Coordinator's office in Turin. One of Angelopoulos's secretaries tells her he has left. She calls his home. No-one answers. She calls his mobile number. She won't know where he is, but that does not matter. The important thing is that he answer. He does.

'Sophie! How are things in Sicily? Are you having a good time?'

'Yes, everything's fine here. Better than fine. That's why I'm calling. Am I disturbing you?'

'No, no. I was hoping you'd call. Go on.'

'It's just that Everard and the local fixer, a certain Marti Bellino, have come up with this great idea, and I wanted to let you know straight away.'

'What is it? I'm all ears.'

'It's about a film. Has Ev mentioned it to you?'

'A film? No. Tell me more.'

'Well, Ev and Bellino have discovered a film studio here that is keen to film our conference, plus all the back-stage activity, and then use excerpts to give authenticity to a movie they're planning. An art-house movie which features an international conference.'

'They are willing to pay?'

'Yes, quite a lot, it seems. Ev has the details. Ask him.'

'I will. Tomorrow.'

'It's a brilliant idea, isn't it? Ev is so clever. Sometimes he even surprises *me*.'

'OK. I'll congratulate him tomorrow. Goodbye now, Sophie.'

'Oh, hang on, CC. Could you wait till I get back? Gotta make sure it doesn't fall through. And I might be able to up the price if we keep them on tenterhooks.'

'But of course. For our dear friend a bigger contribution to Uniuro's fixed costs, you can ask me to do almost anything. Night-night, now. Sleep well.'

Angelopoulos closes the connection.

Sophie sleeps very well.

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The next morning, Clementina comes to pick Sophie up in a scratched Fiat Punto. She takes her around the accommodation chosen for the guest speakers, the other invitees from afar and the Uniuro group. Bellino's team are all local and prefer to stay in their own homes.

Once again, Sophie finds that the Sicilians have done a thorough job. The accommodation is close to the venue, comfortable and by no means overpriced. The accounts are auditor-friendly and there is no sign of hidden cameras or film crews.

Sophie is hoping for a call from Angelopoulos, but when the phone does vibrate, it is Bellino at the other end.

'Sophie, where are you?'

'At the Hotel Consoli, with Clementina. It's good. Clean and comfortable. Quality elevator music, too.'

'Sophie, I have missed you.'

'Yeah, right. If you think you can win me over to any of your little schemes, Marti, you're wrong.'

'That does not matter, Sophie. I have no little schemes. Now you and I will preview the excursion.'

'The excursion?'

'Of course. The sight-seeing trip for our conferees.'

'Only one?'

'Only one is necessary. For romance, Taormina is more than sufficient.'

'Marti, I'm not interested in romance in Taormina. I just want us to get them there, sighted, fed and back in one piece.'

'Stay where you are, Sophie. I shall arrive in twenty-five minutes.'

He does. In the Jaguar, which he drives fast to Taormina, but not fast enough to avoid being overtaken by a yellow Lamborghini.

'Look at that death-merchant, Sophie. UN plates. It is outrageous.'

'I hope he's one of ours. In United Nation, we're allowed to have fun. Not like that other lot, the United *Nations*, so po-faced and proper they drive around in Tatas and stop at red lights.'

'But Sophie, that shows heightened ecological awareness.'

Sophie feels her pale face redden.

'Yes, you're right, of course. It's just that they studiously ignore us. We have a campus right next door to theirs, in Turin, and they carry on as though we don't exist.'

'That is outrageous!'

'Yes, you're right, Marti. Thank you for noticing.'

Marti notices every move she makes as he walks her through the Victorian folly of flowers known to anglophones as the Trevelyan Garden, as he leads her up to the 2,300 year-old Greek theatre with its views of sea and volcano, as he explains the waves of Greeks, Romans, Byzantines, Arabs, Normans, Spaniards and French who invaded the place before the invention of peaceful tourism.

'Sounds like Toronto, a real melting pot.'

'Troina? That is in the centre of the island. It is very different.'

'To-ron-to. Canada. We have Sicilians as well.'

'You are lucky. But Canadians can be fascinating, too.'

Sophie is staring at the stage area.

'Wait a minute. I've seen this place before. And it wasn't on a postcard.'

'At the cinema perhaps. Are you a fan of Woody Allen?'

'Yes. *Mighty Aphrodite!* The chorus!'

'Aphrodite. What could be more romantic than that? There is something of Aphrodite in you.'



Bellino sees the look on Sophie's face and does not pursue the topic. He even blushes a little.

'And if you are a fan of Hollywood cinema ...'

'Yes! *The Godfather*. Take me!'

Bellino's eyes light up.

'Take me there, Marti! Please!'

Bellino drives the Jaguar flat out up the coast road to Savoca. He halts above it and they gaze down at the village as the afternoon light blazes then fades.

'Tell me the scene, Sophie.'

'Oh, I can just see it. It's coming. The wedding! Appollonia and Michael Coglioni.'

'Corleone. Corleone.' He laughs.

'Oh, it *is* romantic!'

Bellino leads Sophie down to the Bar Vitelli, a café on the edge of the village, where he plies her with almond wine while the proprietor regales them with well-honed stories of when Hollywood came to Sicily.

'Etna?' Bellino offers as they leave.

'Dinner.' The wine is going to Sophie's head, which she wants to keep clear.

Bellino drives them back down the motorway, through Taormina and on a few kilometres to the small town of Giardini-Naxos, where he pulls into a car park outside a restaurant perched on a hilltop overlooking the bay. Flying gravel announces their arrival, and a middle-aged man wearing an apron over a smart shirt and clean trousers comes out to greet them. They are ushered to a table on the terrace. It has a "reserved" notice on it.

'Tonight, this is the Paradise of the Vegetarian,' Bellino declares.

Waiters begin to set dishes before them.

'I think I could manage some fish.'

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