

# MY GREAT ESCAPE

It seemed like a scene from a movie: On the last night of her vacation in Rome, she was asked out for a drink by a handsome Italian artist. What could be the harm? Keri Potts, a smart, well-traveled executive at ESPN, was about to find out

As told to Erin Zammett Ruddy  
Photographed by Richard Foulser

Keri Potts, 33, at home in Hoboken, New Jersey.



ON MY LAST DAY of vacation in Italy, a chatty café owner in Rome introduced me to a tall, charming Italian man. He was a local artist, I learned; his name was Marco. Just a day earlier, my friend Lynn and I had sat in a piazza in Florence talking about how hard it is to meet nice guys. It had been two years since my last relationship, and, admittedly, I'd grown a little standoffish with the opposite sex. Lynn and I agreed that I could open up a little more. So when I met Marco, I figured why not talk to him? He joined Lynn and me at our table, along with the café owner, and the four of us shared some wine.

An accomplished painter and a fixture in the community, Marco invited us to see his art studio nearby. Giant canvases—contemporary and dramatic, all done in black, white, and red—lined the walls, and paints were scattered everywhere. It was chaotic and beautiful, and I felt excited to meet such a talented man. He seemed interested in me as well, and invited me for drinks later. I told myself, *Let your guard down, Keri*, and agreed to meet him.

Marco was a bit more boisterous when we met up that night. He drank rum and haggled with a man peddling roses at the bar, then bought me three dozen yellow buds. Ordinarily I would find that oddly over the top, but I just brushed it off as a sweeping, romantic Italian gesture. We flipped through a book of his paintings, and he described the art scene in Italy, noting that some artists are into sex and drugs, but all he needed was art. I said, "That's a good thing, because you are getting no sex-o from me!" He laughed, saying, "I would rather talk with you. You are soft." Then he kissed me.

Marco suggested we go back to his apartment; he wanted to show me the view from his patio, where he did much of his sketching. I thought about it for a moment, then decided, sure. He was interesting and fun, and I felt completely at ease. Plus, I'd made it clear that we wouldn't be jumping into the sack.

His apartment, a sixth-floor walk-up, consisted of just a single room with a bed and TV, a small kitchen with a wooden table, and a bathroom. But the view from the patio was stunning. You could see the top of the Spanish Steps, the

shimmering Roman skyline. Marco joined me there, and we talked about the places we'd traveled, places we still want to go to. It was like a scene from a movie. Just past midnight, we walked to a bar down the street.

At the bar, it got a little harder for me to understand Marco. He talked louder and louder, seemingly in circles. He continued to drink rum while I sipped a Pinot Grigio, and when the bar closed, he bought a bottle to go. I suggested that we go to the Spanish Steps, thinking it would be the perfect way to end the night, but he grumbled, "*Turista, turista*," and led me toward his apartment. I thought, *Come on, Keri, lighten up. It's your last night in Rome.*

When we got upstairs, Marco blasted music—first something in Spanish and then Coldplay—and moved around the apartment frenetically. He dropped a glass, grabbed some candles, changed the music. I stood on the patio, gazing at the postcard-worthy view. I thought, *What an amazing way to end my vacation. What a story to tell my friends.* Marco came out and stood behind me, noting that the views in Rome are better than in New York City. I playfully begged to differ, and he scoffed; there was something nasty in his expression. Then he thrust the bottle of rum toward me. When I refused, he walked away and returned with a glass. I wanted to be polite, so I pretended to sip, but I knew it was time to leave.

I walked into the apartment, placed the glass on the table, and told Marco I needed to head home. He had a small cigar box in his hand and offered me a hand-rolled cigarette from inside, presumably marijuana. "No. No, thank you," I said. Then he came around the table and stood in front of me. Mumbling something I didn't understand, he pulled me toward him and kissed my face hard, biting my lips. It hurt, and I tried to push away, but he held the back of my neck with his left hand, pressing my face to his. At the same time, he shoved his right hand down the front of my jeans, undoing my button in the process. I jerked back, but he put both hands on my lower back, pressing me into him. He shoved his hands inside my underwear, scraping me with his fingernails. >>



I couldn't believe what was happening. "No! No! No!" I shouted. I stumbled and said again that I needed to go. I grabbed my purse and walked toward the door. "It's locked. The door is locked," Marco said. I pulled on the handle and it didn't budge. Starting to panic, I grabbed a set of his keys off the kitchen table and fumbled through them, but Marco stepped toward me. "Those don't open the door," he said, an inch from my face. He had another set of keys that he dangled in front of me then threw toward the bed. "You're not going anywhere," he said. He grabbed the scarf off my neck and put it around his own.

I reached for it, but he swatted me back. "You're not going anywhere," he said again. "I'm not joking." Trying to appear calm, I told him Lynn would be waiting for me back at the hotel. "This is ridiculous," I said. "Please open the door."

The more I tried to reason with him, the angrier he grew. He stood in front of the open patio door and reached for the shutters. It was clear he was going to lock them. A surge of adrenaline flooded my body—it felt like I was going to wet my pants—and I thought, *Oh, my God, I am going to be raped tonight. No one can help me. Oh, my God, this is what it feels like.*

I knew I had to get out to the patio—I remembered seeing another patio about six feet down, which would be my only means of escape. I charged at Marco, throwing myself through the opening, but he grabbed me by my belt and lifted me back inside like I was a rag doll. I'm 5'10" with an athletic build, but Marco was taller—probably around 6'2"—and strong. I felt a sharp pain in my ribs under my right breast as he tried to pull my shirt over my head. I screamed, "No! Get off of me!" so loud, so high-pitched, that I didn't even recognize my voice. Marco kept telling me to "Shush, shush," and every time I'd wriggle out of his grip and run for the ledge, he'd try to drag me back inside. Finally, I thought, *OK, this is going to be a death match.* I wasn't sure if he wanted to rape me or kill me at this point, but it didn't matter. I was not going to go down without a fight. I was not going to go down, period.

I ran at Marco full force with the palm of my right hand and struck him over and over in his face and mouth. I had taken a self-defense class



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in college and remembered that you should always hold your hand that way so you don't break any fingers. Then I pushed him harder than I've ever pushed anyone or anything in my life. He stumbled backward and fell onto the floor. Without hesitation, I ran and leaped over the patio wall, hoping to hit the balcony I'd seen below. But my sweater got stuck on the railing, and I just hung there. As I scrambled to get loose, Marco reached over and grabbed my neck, trying to pull me back up. I squirmed and kicked, and

finally the sweater ripped. I landed on the small balcony below, crushing a potted plant.

I saw Marco turn and go back into his apartment, and I was sure he was coming for me. The only way I could get to an adjacent rooftop was to climb over a rusty, spiked, wrought-iron gate. I hesitated—I was five stories up—but then got a short running start, put my foot on the bottom rung, and swung my body up and over the gate, onto the next rooftop. Then I ran along the three-foot-wide ledge of the building and jumped to another roof, sliding down the mossy terra-cotta tiles until I was staring right over the edge at the street below. I had the fleeting thought that I was going to die, that I would slip and fall, break my neck, and no one—not Lynn, not my parents—would find me.

But I kept going. I jumped down to another roof about 10 feet below. My legs stung when I landed flat on my feet, but I didn't stop. I couldn't. I assumed Marco was chasing me, and I knew he'd have the advantage. I ran from rooftop to rooftop, crawling on my hands and knees at times to stay out of sight, trying desperately to get to street level.

Finally, I wound up on a balcony with nowhere to go next. I knocked frantically on a window there, and a man appeared. He said, in perfect English, "Please be quiet. My son is sleeping." I told him I was so sorry and explained, "I am an American. I have been attacked by a man and escaped by jumping down onto the rooftops. I am injured and need to get home. This man is trying to kill me. Can you please help me?" Thankfully, he understood. He said yes,



he would help, but to hold on for a few minutes.

I waited outside—crouched in a ball—thinking the man was probably calling the cops. But then he appeared again and ushered me inside. “I don’t know where this man is, but the way out of here is down the stairs and through the green doors,” he said. “Push the button to get out.” Then he told me how to get back to my hotel. An older man standing by the door in the apartment handed me a bunch of tissues as I hurried past him. I caught a glimpse of my face in a mirror by the door and saw that I was covered in blood. Marco had punched me in the nose during our scuffle, and I hadn’t realized how bad it was.

I flew down four flights of stairs and ran toward the exit. I remember thinking Marco might be waiting for me on the other side, but what choice did I have? I took a deep breath, buzzed the door open, and ran for my life. I sprinted the four blocks back to my hotel, never looking back. When I reached the hotel doors, I turned around and pumped my fists in the air, Rocky-style. I had done it. I had gotten away from this monster. I ran up to my room and pounded on the door. When Lynn saw my face, she went white. “What happened?” she asked. “Marco just tried to rape me,” I said. “But I won,” I said. “I won.” Then, for the first time all night, I started to cry. We both did.

I was supposed to be on a flight back to the States a few hours later, but I couldn’t go. There is nothing that disgusts me more than rape, and I would have felt like a hypocrite if I didn’t report Marco to the authorities. I was battered and bruised—and still scared he might find me—but I couldn’t let him get away with his attack. So Lynn and I got to work, calling my health-insurance company, my sister, the U.S. Embassy, the hospital, the police, my boss at ESPN. About an hour later, I started shaking uncontrollably. Just before daybreak, we went to the hospital for X-rays (miraculously, nothing was broken) and then to the U.S. Embassy, which helped me start a police report and arranged for an interpreter to meet me at the police station.

The next day, I spent 10 hours with the police and an interpreter, filing a report. At one point, we stood outside of the building where the man had helped me, and I tried to explain how I’d gotten away. The investigators were getting frustrated because I couldn’t remember the balcony in question. Just then a woman walked up. “Are you American?” she asked. “I think my husband let you into our apartment last night.” She let the police into the building and directed them to her balcony.

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(She and her husband also went to the police station to give a statement.) While she spoke to the police inside, I walked up and down the street crying, talking to myself and to God, even though I’m not a churchgoer. But I have to say, I felt a presence when that man let me in off the balcony, and I felt it again when his wife happened upon us in the street.

When the police were finished piecing together the escape route, the lead investigator looked at me and said, “You are Wonder Woman.” Marco was interrogated that day and later charged with attempted sexual assault.

Lynn and I flew home, but the fight was far from over. I hired a legal team in Italy to follow through on the case, and I returned to Rome six months later for an interview with the public prosecutor. I wanted Marco to be punished for what he had done; I thought about how many other women he may have tried this with, and it made me feel sick. So I researched Italian criminal law to better understand the court system. I talked to the U.S. State Department and the Department of Justice about my case. I stayed in constant contact with my attorney, filling out court documents and visiting Italian Embassies in the U.S. to get papers stamped. Fortunately, my coworkers at ESPN were incredibly supportive, giving me the flexibility to finish my mission.

After a yearlong investigation, the public prosecutor decided to boost the charge from attempted sexual assault to sexual assault. She also added a charge of assault, which meant that instead of looking at five years in jail, Marco had the potential to get 12. Ultimately, he plea-bargained, and on April 22, 2010, he received a suspended sentence of 11 months, 10 days, which means he didn’t go to jail. However, he is on probation for the next five years, and if he commits another crime of any kind during that time, he will go straight to prison. He was also ordered to pay all my legal fees, which amounted to about \$10,000.

At first I felt disappointed that Marco wouldn’t be jailed, but now I feel proud of my efforts; I never gave up. A day doesn’t go by when I don’t think of that night. I have a small scar on my stomach where Marco gouged his fingernails into me, and I look at it often. I alternately love and hate that scar. I hate it because it reminds me of what happened, and I love it for the same reason. **mc**

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